

November update

## Roads, villa and quarries

In our previous report we dealt with the unusually substantial road which exists in Hag Wood on Longway Bank, the former turnpike from Wirksworth to Whatstandwell. We considered, that, if Roman as we believe, this road would perhaps have some destination on the east bank of the Derwent or should at least pass some known find sites and that there appeared to be no major ones. To recap from the previous report:

“We have found that there are no pre-turnpike maps of (for example) Crich and what few Roman finds there are from that village are unenlightening. South Wingfield has much the same issue and of the small fort at Pentrich (“Castle Hill Camp”) no east-west road is known to cross Rykniel Street there, at this present time. Indeed, carrying on in a generally easterly direction there is precious little before you get to the Roman site at Farnsfield and then the vexillation fortress at Osmanthorpe.”



Section of the road found at Hag Wood

However, there have been some further small finds in North Wingfield recorded in the PAS database and my particular attention has been drawn to the recently discovered Roman site between Ridgeway and Buckland Hollow, that is the “suspected” Roman villa at Heage, which yielded over 3,000 small coin forgeries (Barbarous Radiates) of the AD 280s.

Given the nature of the finds of building materials at that site, a villa was suggested (though not yet proven) and a particularly fascinating piece of the jigsaw was that the sandstone roof tiles found there were the same as the sandstone roof tiles found at the Scow Brook villa site at Carsington. These tiles are of a sparkling red-pink stone which was so characteristic that it was possible to identify the quarry they came from as that in Wyver Wood at Belper Lane End. This latter quarry adds yet another Roman industrial site to those which lie between Milford and Alderwasley near Wirksworth: it takes to 21 the number of find sites in that specific area, an intensity of activity which is extremely pronounced and which also informs us to look for the road or roads which serve these many Roman sites.

## Long Lane

Long Lane is the “known” Roman road from Little Chester to Holditch at Stoke on Trent via Rocester. It is classified Margery number RR 181 after one of the most famous recorders of Roman roads, Ivan Margery, whose book about Roman roads in Britain from 1973 was considered the definitive work at the time. Yet there were no examinations of it, it was Roman by repute only. Finally, in October last year, some work was done and is reported here: <https://historicensland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1462649>. It is useful to have had this road confirmed, it is rather different in construction to many of our sections, being about 5 metres wide of pebble in clay, with side ditches. It also seems to correct a misconception that it turned on the outskirts of Derby to run south-east to join Rykniel Street near St Mary’s Bridge and so cross the Derwent there rather than take a direct easterly line to Little Chester. The reports about it suggest it did continue in a direct line. Yet, a word of caution from our own experience: Roman roads may

have different phases which result in partial changes of alignment or diversion, they are not necessarily fixed in time and location for the entire 400 years of the Roman province of Britain and may have been rebuilt on slightly different alignments from time to time. Margery gave The Street from Buxton the number RR71a, something I knew, but he also felt its destination was Wirksworth, something I didn't know.

### **Oat Hill - An amphitheatre or not?**

I have been asked (quite reasonably) if we can be any clearer about what we suspect may be a Roman amphitheatre on aerial photographs of Oat Hill in Wirksworth from 1950. Unfortunately we can't be any clearer at this stage, for a number of reasons.



Oat Hill 1950. Parch marks of an oval feature between Water Lane and Derby Road

The photograph is seventy years old, it cannot be improved upon and the entire area has been developed since then, we cannot see the field as it was before it was covered in houses and industrial units. Yes, we may be looking at a Roman amphitheatre but we may be looking at other things. The other possibilities might be:

A. That it represents a "Sacred Pool" used for votive deposits from the late Iron Age - early Roman period. This was the error made at Frilford (Marcham by Abingdon) where an amphitheatre often quoted on websites appears to have been associated with a temple complex. The site is complicated and was first identified as a possible amphitheatre in 1987, it was then thought to be a sacred pool for several years because it tended to flood and it had various finds of religious nature associated with it. However, the most recent excavation reports by Oxford Archaeology again regard it as an amphitheatre.

B. That it represents a Palisaded Enclosure of late Bronze Age or Iron Age date, that is to say a defended enclosure, some of these are quite well known in Derbyshire, such as that at the Holmes on Tideswell Moor, yet our parch mark has a certain regularity to it, uncommon in palisaded enclosures, which may be only roughly circular or random other shapes depending on the topography of the location being defended. In addition it is not on a plateau or crest, it is overlooked and in the northern lee of Oat Hill and would be difficult to defend.

C. That it represents a neolithic Henge Monument such as those at Arbor Low or the Bull Ring at Dove Holes. This may be rather more creditable than a palisaded enclosure, as the henge monuments we know of do demonstrate some similar features in terms of a circular or oval shape and perhaps two opposing entrances which may show in our parch marks. Yet, for this to be the case we might expect, so close to a town, for there to be the memory of it - even the Bull Ring is known as a Henge Monument from James Pilkington's work about Derbyshire of 1789, where he records the removal of its internal standing stones. An amphitheatre would have no standing stones and in Wirksworth, the tendency when looking at earthworks would be to shrug your shoulders and think "lead mining" if you applied any thought to it at all.

D. That it represents something we don't know about but should have. For example: "That's where they used to put the circus when it came to town", so the suspected parch mark is actually because the big top was there and they've only just left to make more money with clowns in, er, Belper. In short, someone knows something we don't. In archaeology this is called the Auld Scottish Golf Course Theory. (No, don't even get me going about that).

It is possible there may be other alternatives and I am open to suggestions about what those might be, but it is also perfectly possible that this parch mark is in indeed what it appears to be: a Roman amphitheatre. If so, we will have our work cut out to confirm something which has been so profoundly damaged by development in recent years.

I can at this point give you no further clarity, we have a major plan to address the archaeology of Wirksworth in general and this will take time and a lot of money, we are currently obtaining quotes and expressions of interest in order to apply for grants. Bear in mind it has taken 12 years of hard work for us just to prove the Roman road network of the town: for us to give you an amphitheatre may take just as long, or not at all, if we are wrong... the parch mark in our 1950 photograph might just have been a nice neat oval old quarry.



An impression of the Roman amphitheatre at Silchester. By Pete Urmston © Historic England.