

Wirksworth Meadow Croft: Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Update January 2021

This report summarises work completed before the recent lockdown. We are not undertaking fieldwork at the present time.

Here is an abstract of an 1821 map of Wirksworth, the earliest to show Meadow Croft field. I have added some annotation. Documents periodically record the Meadows, the earliest reference in a document being to "Meadow Wall", in 1420, in the Gell archive (Cameron, 1959). Summer Lane is first mentioned in the same archive: Summer Lane, as Summer Way in 1420 (possibly a corruption of Sumpter, the driver of pack horses); The Warm Brook, as le Warmbroke in 1395; Yokecliffe as Zyelcliff in 1415 (meaning taxable area of land). Gate House, although its listed building status says "dating from the seventeenth century", is first recorded in a marriage settlement of Helena Gell in 1553. Looking at the map below, the gardens of Gate House give the impression of being encroachment on the Meadows and this appears to be so, there being a court case (Derbyshire Record Office) in the Court Leet.



The Court Leet of Wirksworth in 1588:

“The jurie appointed doo present that John Wigley of Wirksworth hathe set one wall on a place at the end of the said towne called marten ashgreen by reason whereof there is a pcell (parcel) of the quenes comen of Wirksworth encroached and enclosed by the said John Wigley and also the waye of the quenes tenanntes of the said town to a place called under yorkeclyffe estopped, therefore the jurie appointed doo set a payne that the said John Wigley do on thysyde the next lete remove the said wall upon payne of himself.”

John Wigley was a serial offender, he had also been brought before the court for blocking Pittywood Lane, Broadmeadow Lane (now extinct) and the Queen’s Highway to Hopton. The above case also tells us that the Meadows had originally been regarded as Wirksworth Common. Common land was where the poorest people of a town could graze their animals, obtain wood for fires and bracken for bedding.

We can also see on the map that Meadow Croft held an avenue of trees in 1820, today there are Linden trees (Lime trees) lining the location where we are carrying out our examination, these trees, for the most part are not originals, the modern ones having been planted within living memory (an elderly gentleman walking past, pers comm) after the originals were cut down about 70 years ago. The garden of Gate House in the south-east corner has an entry not apparent in the 1820 map, which is now a ruinous gate with a concrete lintel and this apparently gave access in later years to the stables. This access may be the origin of the local view that a road or lane ran between the avenue of trees which gave access to Gate House stables: “The Causeway” - which is now the name of the street to Gate House, which in 1821 was actually called “Gatehouse Street”. Whilst it would be possible to ride a horse along here, there is no archaeological evidence of any substantive post-medieval road surface. The Causeway place-name at this location is reputed and may have perhaps in origin have referred to being able to walk along the top of the culvert drain which runs by the boundary wall and is now deep below the modern ground surface, but wasn’t in the past. One of the historic meanings of causeway is “footpath” it also sometimes occurs as “horse causey” or “bridge causey”



Site of the current archaeological dig, looking south along the eastern boundary of the Meadow Croft

The major work we have done at this location is exploration of the feature which runs along the eastern boundary of the Meadow Croft and is composed of a ditch. This ditch has proved to be very interesting and its interpretation opens up a valuable discussion about what the ditch is for.

The ditch is some 12 metres wide and is composed of a shallow ditch about 6 metres wide and a deep ditch 6 metres wide. The shallow section is some 1.10 metres below current ground level and the deep ditch is some 2.65 metres below current ground level, these depths are probably not far from the correct original depths relative to the known edge of the ditch. The shallow section goes down in a fairly gentle way but the deep ditch drops almost vertically into a U shape, with a flat bottom of shale substrate.

Finds in the shallow part of the ditch indicate it was cut, or re-cut, in the medieval age, with Burley Hill and other similarly dated pottery in the bottom, of between 1201-1400. It was not possible to hand examine the bottom of the deep ditch due to flooding but auger samples and probing were used. The whole ditch is covered by post civil war domestic tipping, with datable materials including pottery and clay pipe bowls taking us back to about 1660. The deep ditch, where it is not overlaid by the culvert drain which is built on it, has a layer of these types of materials which then overlays a stonier fill of the deep ditch. This lowest fill of the deep ditch is a much grittier dark organic soily fill and contains stone, small chert, small pebble, gravel and bone, this type of material might also possibly imply a small watercourse ran down the bottom of the ditch. In sieving this fill four sherds of pottery were found which may be before the Burley Hill ware of the shallow ditch and these include a sherd of shelly ware which might be Saxo-Norman or earlier, as well as a sherd of black gritty ware of a type we have already found on the ditch edge: Noting that ditches, while in use, are cleaned from time to time, so what was in the ditch may have been cleaned out and dumped at the edge.



The ditch trench being dug out.
The pink items are the fall arrest system



Example finds from the post civil war domestic tipping:
Brown glazed wares and seventeenth century slipwares, after 1660



Finds from the deep ditch fill:
Saxo-Norman and medieval pottery sherds of about 1200, or before

This brings us to an issue: what is the purpose of this surprisingly large ditch? There are a number of possible reasons for this ditch being here, its location clearly suits the contour, it is at the bottom of the escarpment which runs up to St John's Street. In consequence, when we undertook our examination of the garden of number 42 a few years ago and found the edge of the ditch on the garden side of the boundary wall, we felt it might be a burgage or domestic boundary ditch (we had only found three metres of it at the time). However we now know its 12 metres wide and composed of a shallow and a deep ditch.

The modern garden boundary wall, which dates from after the English civil war, runs down the centre of the deep ditch and where it bounds number 40 St John's Street, shows indications of having been raised from its original height by a considerable margin, probably due to the rising ground level as the ditch was being filled on the Meadow Croft side by the domestic tipping after the civil war. This tipping continued until the late Victorian age, that is presumably until modern refuse collection was begun by the Wirksworth Urban District Council after 1894.

There are other locations where archaeologists have carried out recent work on ditches. An example is the assessment of the King's Ditch in Gloucester, carried out by Archaeological Research Services of Bakewell.



The King's Ditch in Gloucester, examined in 2019
(Kind permission of Archaeological Research Services)

The Gloucester ditch is also an example of a ditch in two parts. The upper shallower part being a medieval re-cut of a deeper U shaped Roman ditch. The Gloucester ditch is considered to be a town and burgrave boundary ditch. It is 4 metres wide and was originally just over a metre deep. In comparison, the Wirksworth ditch we have examined in Meadow Croft field is 12 metres wide and over 2.5 metres deep. The size of the Wirksworth ditch leads to an impression that we are perhaps not dealing with a burgrave or boundary ditch but a defence.

We also note that the garden side of the ditch (the east side) contains large quantities of demolition building stone, this is less present on the west side of the ditch, for which there may be two explanations: Firstly, that the stone was tipped into the ditch from the east side (and/or) secondly, that the construction of the garden wall which is 3 metres high and the culvert which is also stone built, was undertaken by extracting stone already tipped into the ditch. If this were indeed so, the ditch must have had quite large quantities of stone tipped into it once it became disused.

Records assembled by Philip Davis, which now comprise a large and wide-ranging website about medieval fortifications state that there were some 279 proven or probable urban fortifications (town or village walls or bank and ditch defences) in England and Wales. Of those, it is thought that only 11% survive substantially (such as Chester, Exeter, Hartlepool). Of the rest, a few have fragmentary remains (such as Bolsover and Castleton) but a very large proportion (such as Chesterfield, Nottingham and Leicester) are completely gone, even if some documentary or archaeological evidence for them exists. In some cases (and this appears also to be true of continental towns such as Trier) a defensive wall or bank was demolished into its own ditch, or the ditch gradually silted up (Cirencester) and had things tipped into it (Holbrook, 1998). We have now to consider whether this is what is going on here and how to confirm it.

References

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Appendix 1: Dating the ditch

We cannot date the deep ditch as we were not able to examine the bottom of the ditch due to rapid flooding and it being impossible to bring in machinery because it is overlain by the garden wall and the culvert drain in a tight space. Four sherds of pottery were extracted by auger (see above picture), they may perhaps be before the Burley Hill ware of the shallow ditch but this isn't certain.

In terms of the shallow ditch, the bottom context (layer) comprised various medieval pottery of Burley Hill types and splash glazed wares whose date range is essentially 1200 to 1400, probably representing when the shallow ditch was cut or re-cut. The ditch seems to have remained in a stable state (that is it was occasionally cleaned) between that time and then its disuse as a feature after the English Civil War, when it became a large midden for tipping.

Passing observations about medieval activity.

We note that Wirksworth returned to being a royal manor in 1266 having been "recovered" (in rather dubious circumstances) from the deFerrers. This coincides with a burst of royal activity in the Peak and it might just be the case that work coincided in Wirksworth associated with this activity.

1266. Wirksworth returned to being a royal manor and was given to Edmund 1st Earl of Lancaster, the younger brother of Edward (the First), the following year.

1269. After being briefly recovered by the deFerrers, Wirksworth irrevocably became royal again.

1272. The church had a new vicar appointed by the Dean of Lincoln who had been given the church in about 1100.

1273. King Edward visited the Peak District, stayed at Peverill Castle and hunted in the Forest of the Peak.

1274. Letters Patent were issued releasing Edmund from debts in the Wirksworth Wapentake.

1275. The King's mines at Wirksworth were granted to Robert del Don (presumably as contractor).

1279. Grant made to Edmund swapping the towns of Wirksworth and Ashbourne and also Wirksworth Wapentake for the castles and counties of Cardigan and Carmarthen. It is not clear what this grant was formalising but it appears to legally give Edmund the very profitable town of Wirksworth instead of an unprofitable castle in Wales. As with many documents about Wirksworth's history this needs more consideration, Wirksworth at the time was making a profit of the (current) equivalent of £160,000 a year for Edmund, on the market, two mills, in rents and *not including* the lead mines.

1281. Two "unknown men found killed in Lord Edmund's sheepfold in Wirksworth Parke".

1288. Inquisition Quo Warranto into the operation of the Barmote Court, which described it as being "of great antiquity".