

Update May 2019

Roman quern making and brooch finds

Querns at Alderwasley and other locations

In the recent volume of the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal (2018), fellow Archaeologists Alan Palfreyman and Sue Ebbins reported on their work in identifying quern making sites around the Derwent Valley, including those at Alderwasley. Querns are small millstones used to grind corn (grain that is wheat, rye etc) by individuals and were used from the Iron Age, through Roman Britain to the medieval age. Milling gradually became communal with the development of watermills and then windmills: by Norman times individual milling was no longer common, you had to take your corn to the manorial mill. Quern making relied on the availability of suitable stone, in the Derbyshire case this was Ashover Grit. At Alderwasley, Palfreyman and Ebbins investigated a site at Pitholes Plantation near Street's Rough and found extensive evidence of Roman quern making - querns in various stages of dressing and broken querns in the local field walls and at the site in general.



Example of a broken Roman quernstone found in a fieldwall

Pitty Wood, Wirksworth

This led us to consider Pitty Wood in Wirksworth and we note that the place-name as "Pithey" (Pit enclosure) is recorded in 1415 (Cameron, 1959), the implication is that the pit(s) of the Pit Hay are at least that old. Although Pitty Wood and Rough Pitty Side are on private land, there are various roads and footpaths through the area and some walking of these will take place to look at field walls and buildings to see if there are any querns there. The north side of Pitty Wood is limestone (and hence a lead mining location) and the south side is Ashover Grit. Anecdotal evidence from talking to local people, who have spent their time in the woods in the past, suggests perhaps 20 pits varying in size from 2-3 metres up to 10 metres in diameter of unknown depths. The caveat (we do lots of caveats) is that the pits of Pitty Wood might not be for quern making and might not be Roman, of course. However, this is another item on the list for attention.

Roman brooches

In addition to their work on querns, Palfreyman and Ebbins report on Roman Brooch finds around Alderwasley (Whitewells) and provide dating of them within the evidence available. For example, a disc brooch from there is felt to date from perhaps 250 to 300 AD, this brooch looks somewhat similar to the disc brooch which Neil found at West End.



Disc brooch from West End, Wirksworth (Neil Gilbert)

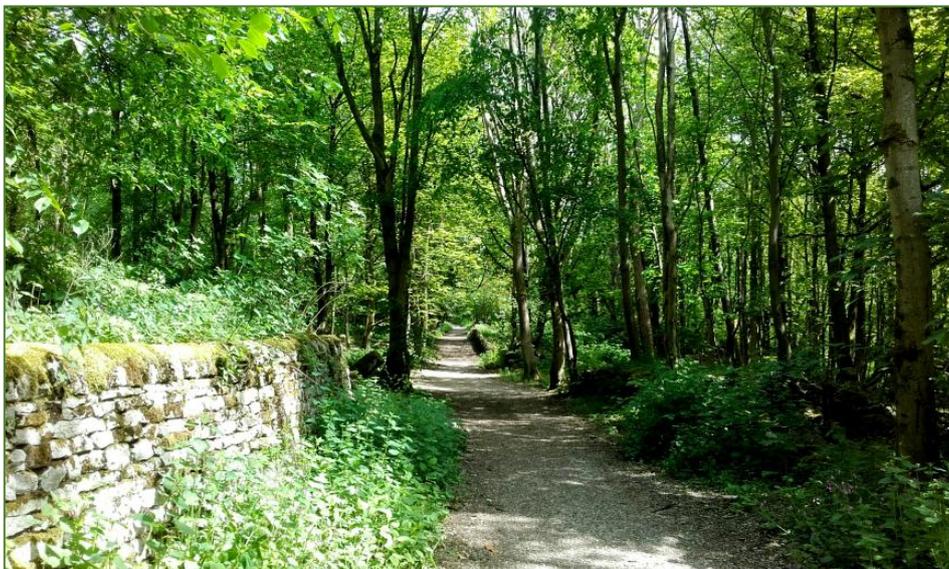
Fieldwalking

Pratthall Lane and Gorsey Bank Road additional note

Last month we field walked Pratthall Lane and Gorsey Bank Road in Wirksworth, although neither revealed anything new or unusual. Recent Lidar cover (a kind of terrain mapping) shows a short length of road apparently joining these two lanes on the east side of the former Toplis Quarry at Gorsey Bank, I can offer no easy explanation of why this should be so except as another diversion for pack horses or animal movements around Wirksworth to avoid paying tolls through the town. It is gratifying that we are beginning to get Lidar mapping of Wirksworth but it is still of not very high quality.

Old Lane

This month we field walked Old Lane from its junction on Derby Road to the National Stone Centre. Old Lane might be of Roman origins and appears to perhaps represent a route from Wirksworth to Cromford and then possibly to Chesterfield via Matlock Green. We undertook fieldwork on Old Lane and Dark Lane in 2017 but did not walk the southern end. We have now done this and there are no new finds. This section of road appears to be (with the exception of a diversion at Old Lane bridge) the same as shown in a 1632 map of the road.



Old Lane looking north east in the grounds of the National Stone Centre

Old Lane at its southern end is covered in tarmac and modern limestone chatter and the section through the National Stone Centre grounds has had a drain dug through the middle of it for almost its

entire length. There were no finds except a few brown glazed earthenware and salt glazed stoneware sherds. The fieldwalls are predominantly limestone. There are a couple of ruinous rough limestone buildings near the road with some gritstone quoin corners. Lead mining remains are very obvious, particularly near the junction of Old Lane with the original Middleton Road and quarrying and lime burning as well as other industrial activities are documented throughout the National Stone Centre grounds.

Small Archaeologists

Wirksworth Junior School pupils are currently studying the Romans and we were asked to provide some "actual Roman pottery" from Wirksworth which their teacher could bury and they could dig up. We have been happy to do this and we look forward to a new generation of archaeologists helping us in a few years time!

Wirksworth Origins

In so far as we have had a strategy of finding lost Lutudarum through our efforts in assessing the Roman road network of the area, this has been fairly productive. We now have as comprehensive an understanding of which local roads may be Roman and which may be medieval (or other) as we have ever had.

This being so, it is time to turn to a more significant effort for Wirksworth town itself. For this we are considering a new approach, which Bill Bevan has suggested be called "Wirksworth origins". In summary we intend to look, with all the modern resources which we can use, at the area of the historic centre of Wirksworth around St Mary's Church, the churchyard and nearby open spaces.

To do this we may have to re-organise ourselves, to write a supervising document and to find enough money and staff to pay for a major effort. We believe this may have to take place over a three year period in order to get grant support. This effort would have to involve ourselves and other local organisations as well as have professional help. This is a major change but it reflects our successes up to now and our determination to find out exactly why Wirksworth is here and why it became such an important place.

References

Cameron K, 1959, The Place-names of Derbyshire, Cambridge, University Press, vol 2, p417

Palfreyman A and Ebbins S, 2018, Iron Age and Roman Quern Manufacture in the Middle Derwent Valley, Derbyshire, Derbyshire Archaeological Journal, vol 138, pp15-38