

Update July 2020 - Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Archaeological Investigation of the Meadows, Wirksworth

Introduction

This investigation has been long planned, but held up by the current pandemic. The government gave permission for individual based archaeology to start again from the 7th of May 2020.

This investigation is being carried out with the kind permission of the owners, Wirksworth Town Council. It took place on the 11th and 17th of July.



The Meadows looking towards St Mary's church, undated photo courtesy of Phil Richards.

We are operating under difficult conditions and there are no public events planned of any kind at the present time. These difficult conditions are made more severe by the state of the Meadows itself, this is not the grassy field of wild flowers lovingly remembered by our long standing residents (see above picture): it is three acres of ground where the weeds choke the flowers, where the stinging nettles and thistles are shoulder high and where the brambles, thorn and tussock grass are so out of control that you cannot walk in any part of the field where once our children played and our respected elders walked in quiet enjoyment. Indeed, there are parts of the field also strewn with rubbish. This means that we cannot get in safely to measure the boundaries with the tape nor carry out the simplest survey work until the weeds die back in the winter. However, we cannot stand still and we have begun to look at Area A of the field (just out of view on the left of the above picture), which is better known to Wirksworth people as "the Tump", where friends used to play football when the Meadows was mown by George Milward.

The archaeology:

Test Pit 1: SK 2851 5375; 35m east of W Boundary Wall; 58m south of Gate House west footgate (satellite data).

The Lidar Survey of the field carried out last year, using satellite imagery, suggested that the Tump gave the impression of being a building platform, that is to say a slightly raised area where there might have been, for example, a barn. Certainly there are no buildings shown in the field on any map going back as far as 1821. Therefore if the Tump was a platform, whatever had been on it was not present since then.

Our best estimate of the size of the field, pending detailed measurement is that it is about 18,700 square metres. We have put in a single 1 metre test pit:

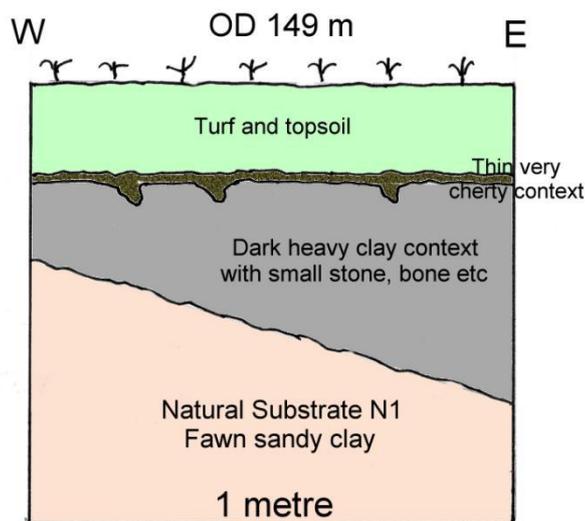


Test Pit 1 with topsoil removed, the small dips in the picture are the marks possibly left by medieval ploughing, they run south, south east, that is the direction of the fall of the field towards the Warmbrook.

In addition to the difficulties of the location and the current times, the test pit contained very heavy dark clay. Those of you who have clay in your gardens will recognise that for us to examine it using just trowels, is donkey work. Two volunteers undertook this examination over a seven and a half hour time-scale: that is to say this single test pit took 15 staff hours to examine. Archaeology is a slow business.

So, to the interesting things.

Is the Tump made by human endeavour? Yes, it is. Under the possible medieval ploughing lies a depth of dark heavy clay which serves to level the natural ground. Here it is shown in a diagram:



Test Pit 1: section diagram of materials

At the moment, we only know that the Tump is created using dark heavy clay, we do not know yet if any building was on it, we cannot tell that from doing a metre of work. We do know that the clay shows indications of having been ploughed over and these plough marks are probably medieval, modern ploughing would have been much more invasive. Therefore the heavy clay fill is before the probable medieval work. This brings us to the date. The normal method of dating something is by finds. In the entire test pit there is only one datable find, but a rather unusual one. This is a sherd of pottery which lay in the join between the natural substrate and the heavy clay. The heavy clay, by the way, must have been laid after the soil or turf overlaying the natural substrate was stripped, there was no intervening organic layer, only a very thin residue of chert between the two.

The pottery

The pottery is highly unusual, we believe it to be a sherd of Mica Dusted Ware, it has a kind of golden sheen which the mica gives it. It was found with a bobbly item which looked like a small button, but which we think is a boss from the mica dusted ware.



Mica dusted ware and boss

Mica dusted ware comes from Gaul, possibly the Seine Valley and dates from before 100AD, although some variations of it were later produced in Roman Britain possibly from around St Albans. If the ware and the boss are from the same vessel, it may look like this:



Mica dusted vase from Trimontium
(Inchtuthil Legionary Fortress, Scotland)

We need to make some enquiries to check this against the example shown above and have contacted our colleagues in Scotland about theirs. The purpose of the mica dusting was to give the vase a golden metallic sheen so it would look like gold or bronze, the vases were popular with Roman military officers and are a fine tableware: it might have some food in it or it might have flowers in it and be sat in the middle of the dining table of the garrison commander. Almost 2,000 years later, perhaps the commander of the Wirksworth Army Cadets also has a nice vase on their dining table.

Conclusions so far

Provisional dating of clay levelling of the Tump: first century Roman Britain to early medieval; Function: not yet known.