

Update August 2014: Ditch

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The examination at 42 St John Street has continued throughout August with the gradual expansion of Test Pit 4 into another section trench. The purpose of this work is to determine whether a ditch exists at the bottom of the garden and extends into what visually is a ditch on the other side (the west side) of number 42's boundary wall, that is to say in the Meadows.



The possible ditch in the Meadows, looking south

The importance of this determination cannot be understated. If the remains we found in our first Section Trench (of the foundations of a wide, large wall) represent only a garden feature, there is unlikely to be any ditch associated with them: a garden feature would simply be that, in this case simply an unusually large garden terrace wall. However, the wall foundations remain unusually extensive, and so if a ditch exists forward of them then the balance of probability would be that we would be looking at a defensive sequence consisting of a wall and a ditch.

The initial results from Test Pit 4 starting on the 20th of August are that there does seem to be a ditch at the bottom of the Test Pit. There was a change in the substrate from natural shale to large gritty stone rubble. It took some time to locate the actual edge between the two, but the edge lies at 3 metres 10cm from the boundary wall and is 2 metres below the current garden surface. On the one hand we have context 110 (a possible Roman context awaiting pottery results) and the natural substrate of fawn clay N1 overlaying shale bedrock N2. On the other hand we have re-deposited fawn clay with red streaks overlaying a layer of gritty dark grey rubble stone with attached mortar fragments. So there are various kinds of stone in this layer apparently piled into the feature, which we take to be a ditch. A possibility, therefore, is that when the wall was demolished, it was first robbed of its best stone (for other buildings and walls) and then the wall core, which would have consisted of various stone rubble mortared together, was destroyed and dumped into the ditch. This

would also account for a thin spread of powdered mortar between the two features overlaying what we regard as the berm of the wall: it indicates the direction of the demolition.



Test Pit 4 (Section Trench 2)

Natural shale substrate on the left, stone rubble on the right.

At the moment much more needs to be done before we can be certain what we have found and this may take some time. So our results so far cannot be regarded as anything other than tentative and are subject to a range of caveats. We need, amongst other things, to see if the layer of rubble stone and mortar (context 111) goes under the boundary wall, that is to say the boundary is a later feature and the rubble stone does indeed represent the fill of a ditch. If this is the case what we would have is as follows:

1. A rampart (the back of a fortification wall) of an unknown width consisting of a natural heavy cold fawn clay into which has been cut the wall running from the east side of the back of the wall towards St John Street and the upper garden.
2. The wall remains themselves, which are limited and fragmentary, consisting of a robber trench filled with (post medieval/modern) brick and mortar and some 3.5 metres wide with a limited remains of the foundations, in the form of a curious diagonal pattern of large stone laid on their edges. However, 1 metre forward of this was a further spread of mortar with a single stone (stone S5) which might have escaped the stone robbing and indicate that the 3.5 metres is an underestimate. Perhaps this may mean the wall may have been up to 4.5 metres wide.
3. A berm (a level space) 8.5 metres wide, covered in medieval pottery, whose function is to prevent the wall being undermined or falling into the ditch and to give a working space for repairs to the wall to be carried out.
4. A ditch, some of which is within the garden, but over the boundary wall, visually mostly in the Meadows, totalling at least 15 metres wide, and perhaps wider than this.

It is important not to jump to conclusions, however, and the caveats are many, including that the work is not finished, that other things and other explanations may emerge, and that we are still awaiting an important pottery assessment. Work continues.