

Progress Report September 2021

Work has continued in the Meadows during September and perhaps it would be useful to summarise progress so far and those things we think we know about our interesting building and its features.

The building itself:

1. Appears to have stone and clay foundations as well as a clay floor, plus having evidence of stone walls and a stone roof, in terms of the collapsed material around it, which includes stone roof slates (sandstone) and nails.
2. The dimensions are that the interior of the north wall is 4.3 metres to the point at which it has been cut on the east side by a Victorian sewage pipe. We do not currently believe it could have been much longer because of the Causeway Ditch which also runs on the east side. This probably represents a major boundary of the town. Our building is outside the boundary and perhaps 150 metres from where we guess the south gate of the town may perhaps have been. The west wall has been somewhat robbed at its south end (and so has any turn to where the south wall may have been), but the interior cannot be more than 5 metres because the clay platform which the building has been constructed on ends at that point and changes to soil.
3. The building has a clay floor which is partly of rammed grey-brown clay, that is to say the floor itself, this overlays the natural fawn clay of this part of Wirksworth which gradually merges to grey shale bedrock. A clay floor would be perfectly adequate given the age of this building and may have had straw lain on it to make it warmer and dryer to walk on: that is to say beaten or threshed straw, hence why your house still has a thresh-hold at your door.



The west wall, respectively looking north and south, showing the channel

So far so good. However, there are some unusual things about our little building and we need to say what we think about those things.

4. We have now come to a tolerable view of the pottery sequence, we have over 150 sherds of medieval pottery. The pottery sequence begins with middle Saxon handmade pottery sherds and these tend to be, uh, a bit scrubby, or to speak plainly, middle Saxon pottery from say 650AD to about 800 is not very well made. These sherds are from below the structure, so were most likely already there and they are residual. The pottery from the contexts of the building proper run from the late Saxon Age, perhaps 950AD to 1250 or a bit later, but do not appear to stretch beyond 1300. We have compared this with a local pottery collection dated 1200 to 1600 and there is only some overlap at the end of ours and the beginning of theirs. I am also most grateful for the efforts of John Wheeldon and Chris Cumberpatch in relation to the pottery. In short, the pottery sequence might suggest that this building is a late Saxon building which continued through to the Norman Age, that is to say maybe 150 years either side of the Norman Conquest. The pottery sequence does not stretch into the fourteenth century and the lack of pottery of later medieval dates suggests this part of the Meadows had become a quiet backwater by then, with our building a collapsed ruin in it.

In many respects this Saxon date is extraordinary, to have some remains of this particular age: they are not terribly common. Yet, to use a well-known local saying, “Wirksworth was a town when Canterbury was a village and Liverpool was a swamp.” We have a charter calling us a town from 835AD and we should not be surprised to find something of the Saxon period here, beyond anything there already is in the church.

5. This brings us to the real surprise about our little building, given its age. It has a water supply. Running down the west side of the building is a stone lined channel and this not only runs into and out of the site (so far) but serves a little covered duct which runs on the inside of the north wall of the building and which turns somewhat before it is cut in the eastward direction by the Victorian sewage pipe mentioned earlier. The operative and extraordinary word there is “inside” .



The east end of the water supply duct  
(The metre rod and the trowel are inside the building)

This, then, summarises the current state of our work. We have not yet reached a conclusion about what the building is being used for, but we feel that our first guesses, that it was a cottage or a forge are not correct. Stone buildings of this age tend to be related in some way to church or monastic activity and we need to do some more work on that line of enquiry.

Although the weather is deteriorating, we will continue for the present and we wish to see if another stone spread to the south-west of our building is another structure or just some random tipping.

I am most grateful for all our helpers and interested visitors, including, today, a couple who had come on the train from Duffield to see us: our first tourists!