

Update February 2014: Section Trench 1

At the beginning of February our section trench (upper levels) contained; Topsoil: redug sticky fawn clay; on top of dark grey heavy lumpy clay containing modern materials, china, bits of coal, brick and mortar etc; then demolition rubble, large handmade brick and powdered mortar on top of, and seemingly adjacent to, several more large building stones. Our working hypothesis at this point was that the stone appeared to be the first action in a tipping episode whose purpose seemed to be to build up the level of the lower garden.

We also had four small shards of mediaeval pottery about 12th century from Test Pit 1, but these were not stratified. The whole of Test Pit 1 was badly mixed up, possibly due to Victorian gardening or even more recent work. In no case would these shards help us with dating anything without stratification and the worst case scenario is that they were not even indigenous, but brought in perhaps with some new topsoil from somewhere else.

Up to the start of February our working hypothesis was that we had a tipping episode to level the garden - they tipped in some stone first and then they tipped in a vast load of brick, tile and mortar demolition rubble afterward. This hypothesis, we think, is not correct.

The reason it is not correct is that none of the stone in the bottom of the trench is broken and much of it is sitting on the natural substrate - some on a sort of diagonal line, with the stones placed on edge. That is to say it was there before the demolition rubble, and therefore what we are probably seeing is the likely result of a stone robbing episode. The stone was there already and they hauled out as much as they could, moved some around that they didn't want and then filled the resulting voids and holes with the demolition rubble. The stone, by the way, is large building stone, and some of it is partly dressed and squared off with unusual tooling marks.



East end of section trench. Wall remains on left. Edge laid stones some running diagonally.

The width of the spread of this stone appears to be some two and a half metres from the back edge which is butted up against and cut into the clay substrate of the hillside, to the front edge, which has been largely robbed. The back edge resembles a revetment wall and was probably left in place by the stone robbers because taking it out would have resulted in the collapse of the bank behind it.

In front of the two and a half metre stone spread there is only a thin amount of brick and mortar rubble, no more than a few centimetres, the dark grey clay layer is much deeper and here are also several large shards of broken orange-red tree pots of the kind we found in Orchard House garden next door and which were post mediaeval. These tree pots were used up against the south facing wall of the Orchard garden for the nurturing of fruit trees and the ground there had been dug over to sink the pots in front of the south facing wall. In this case the wall would have been west facing.

At this point (21st February) we received a copy of a report of the excavations of the Roman city wall at Leicester, and this has changed our view of what may be in our section trench.

At Leicester, the entire line of the wall had been badly robbed, nothing was left above ground level, only the unmortared foundations were left, about 2.9 m wide, of a spread of stone laid in a roughly herringbone pattern (i.e. diagonal) some on edge and with some voids in the packing clay between them.

The defensive sequence at Leicester is:

Rampart (the bank at the back of the wall) 5m wide
Wall foundations 2.9m wide, (robbed wall considered 2.5m wide and 5m high)
Berm (level ground in front of wall) 2m wide
Inner ditch 7.5m wide
Berm (level ground between ditches) 1m wide
Outer ditch 10.6m wide

Now, IF we have the remains of a defensive wall in our section trench, then the proof of it would be in its relation to the rest of a defensive sequence, because otherwise we would simply have a collapsed rather heavy garden terrace wall in the trench.



The “ditch” in the Meadows. Ian’s boundary wall on the left in the trees.

Also, you will note that immediately beyond Ian’s boundary wall in the Meadows (see January report) there is what appears to be a ditch: a ditch seemingly 10 metres wide. This ditch is however an assumption - the owners are not terribly amenable to us digging it - it simply looks like a ditch. But there is enough distance in Ian’s garden for there to be a second ditch between our section trench and his boundary wall. Therefore our urgent task is to see if such a second (i.e. inner) ditch exists and this is now our most urgent priority. If there is a ditch then we have a defensive sequence, if there is no ditch, then this is unlikely and the stone in the trench is a garden feature.

Continuing work

The stratification of the west end of the trench doesn't really exist in timing terms, all the material appears to have been turned over and some of the sticky fawn clay, which in theory is natural here, has been dug out and dumped on top of the demolition layer. That said, the demolition layer does appear to thin out the further we get from the stone walled area and the composition of it seems to change to a more white ashy kind of mortar by the time we get as far as Test Pit 3. The material above it continues to be various clay, some of it dark grey and heavy with post mediaeval pottery in it also charcoal and demolition brick, tile, more mortar, and more bits of tree pots. A shard of blue and white china was found towards the bottom of this sequence of dark clay. Below this layer are some patches of a sandier browner clay which are redeposits, in which was a probable mediaeval shard. It is quite thin, only 2mm with a mid grey core, a fawn gritty back and an almost eggshell glazed grey front. It's a bit greener than the image.



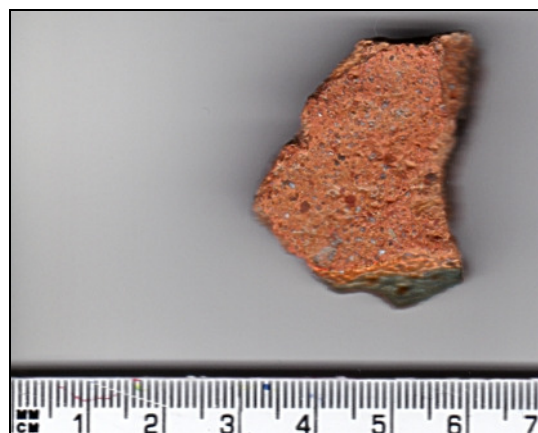
Mediaeval eggshell glazed shard

At the west end of the section trench, where we have now reached and incorporated Test Pit 3, we have worked our way down to what appeared to be another substrate, of mid grey clay, under the demolition and redeposit layers.



W end of section trench in progress showing depth of mid grey clay layer

We found that this clay contained bits of charcoal, roots and tiny gravel, as well as within it a shard of unglazed grey-core orange rough fabric coarseware (2m from the wall and 1.25m down, in the clay itself). I am not prepared to stick my neck out on dating it, but its default date is mediaeval.



Micaceous oxidised orange shard

The significance is that it tells us that the mid grey clay in front of the wall feature is not natural (the natural is fawn coloured anyway) and is therefore likely to have been put there. Currently, we are 4.5 metres from the back edge of the wall and working our way down the hill away from it. The rate of progress is 1 metre every 2 weeks and the remaining distance between the current end of the section trench and the final place where there would be enough space to fit in a 7 metre ditch within Ian's boundary, is 3 metres.