

## Wirksworth Archaeological Society

### Progress Report May 2021

Work has continued in the Meadow Croft field during May, although it has been held up by some poor weather earlier in the month. A delayed members dig day took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May and I am most grateful to all who attended to continue the work.



**The examination trench looking west on 22<sup>nd</sup> May**

The colour balance has been enhanced to bring out the features.

The north wall of the building runs up the centre of the picture, the exterior/outside is on the right in a slightly yellow colour and this is the natural fawn substrate. The interior floor of the building is on the left in a slightly pink colour. The corner of the building turns just below the red fall arrest bags at the top.

This is one of the most interesting structures we have examined. It is quite a modest building, but some effort went into its construction in a number of ways. Firstly, a fairly level platform was made for it by cutting away at the gentle slope of the ground, which, at this point, rises towards the north west. This levelling was apparently accompanied by a small revetment wall on the west side, to stop the ground falling back into the building and to prevent the west side of the building getting wet: we need to examine the north side to see if there is a similar revetment there. At present this revetment wall partly overlays a small ditch.

Secondly, once the ground had been made fairly level, the building was constructed using very large but mostly random limestone perhaps from the Yokecliffe and some re-used worn dressed sandstone taken from a previous building, whose source and location is not known to us at the moment. Both the foundations of the north and west walls are made in this way, there is no mortar, the wall foundations are wide at approx 80 cm and held together with soil and clay. There is only a single course of this still remaining on the north side but three courses on the west side. The rest of the walls, judging by the fallen material, were built up using stone of various kinds, generally smaller and often flatter than the wall foundation stones. On top of this was a stone slate (i.e. sandstone) roof nailed to roof timbers, as we have large amounts of collapsed small broken sandstone sherds and nails. Stone roofs were used by the Romans but then didn't recur for most buildings until quite late in the Norman age. The example given in the link below, for Hangleton, tells us that in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century their domestic village buildings were roofed with thatch, stone or slate. The same may be true of Wirksworth but roof stone may have been much more prevalent in Wirksworth due to its ease of availability locally. For example, in the much later Tithe Map, there are two locations named as "Slate Pit" fields, one near Wigwell at Hag Wood and one on the south side of Prathall Lane; there may be others which we don't know about. One of these might possibly be the source of the sandstone for the roof of our building. There is no natural slate in Wirksworth, these pits would be of splittable sandstone.



**Sherds of broken roof sandstone showing nail holes**

The sequence of disuse of this building is also quite interesting. The fallen stone roof had collapsed in a north-east direction and much of this fallen material overlays the north wall of the building and the possible yard or road surface on the east side, there is very little of the collapse on the south or west side. Additionally, examination of the sequence of contexts at this point shows us that the collapse overlays a thin layer (perhaps 1-2cm) of slightly darker organic soil which is lying directly on top of the original clay floor. This organic layer suggests that the building was disused for a time before it collapsed. Given that we know

the depth of organic leaf mould which overlays the fill of the main ditch here, we had previously examined, is about 15-20 cm and has developed over 120 years since tipping in the main ditch stopped, this implies that the period of disuse in the building might only have been 10-15 years, quite a short period, before the roof fell in.



The 1 metre pole laid on the clay floor of the building in the interior north west corner, showing the north side wall foundations.

At the moment we are unsure of the size of the structure but it is quite modest and we are test pitting around the main trench to identify its actual extent.

In general we continue to find medieval pottery from the period 1200-1400 although we have also found what appears to be residual or disturbed sherds of Roman and Saxon wares. We had hoped to find some securely datable pottery when we examined part of the clay floor this weekend (29<sup>th</sup> May) but the floor was entirely find free. On the other hand it is considered that the interiors of domestic buildings often have very few archaeological finds because people keep their houses clean. This doesn't mean to say we have anything more than a tentative view of what this building is - we haven't finished doing it yet. Our next immediate task will be to try to confirm its size and perhaps where its doorway was.

In probing around the feature there appears to be an extensive spread of stone or solid material going off into the field in a south-west direction and we will have to test pit this to discover what it is. We don't yet know if we have a single isolated structure here on the east side of the Meadows or whether there are other structures along with it. In addition, a walkover survey of the area south of the dig site may possibly have identified the location of the sough tail (outfall) of the Warmbrook Sough and this will have to be test pitted as well. In short, we have much to do and the dig is tremendously interesting and rather surprising.

Archaeologically speaking, small buildings, whether they are domestic, agricultural or industrial are rather under-represented in the historical record but a small building at Hangleton might be of interest for further reading:

<https://www.wealddown.co.uk/buildings/medieval-building-hangleton>

In many ways, the Hangleton building and what happened to its village is illuminating in dating terms and in the identification of reasons why there was a peak of activity and population between 1275 and 1315 and then a huge decline in population (over 40% depending on location) in the middle of 1350s due to the black death. In our current circumstances the comparison is thought provoking.

We can't exclude at present that this is some other kind or date of building, perhaps even connected to lead mining, such as a coe, bearing in mind the suspicion of the sough tail nearby.

For those of you with acres of time to spare, here is quite a detailed look at issues of lead mining history and remains:

<https://www.aditnow.co.uk/documents/Personal-Album-176/Lead-Legacy-Report.pdf>

The Meadow Croft field is an excellent and increasingly interesting site, whose features have been previously unknown and which we hope will throw a tremendously useful light on a number of aspects of the history of Wirksworth.

The date of the next members dig day will be circulated shortly.