

Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Progress Report March 2025

Work continues at the site at Ian Avenue and certainly today was a perfect digging day, after a long, cold and wet winter.



Wirksworth Archaeological Society members at the dig day

The Test Pit has received initial shuttering as we are more than a metre deep and it has also acquired some fall protection and a hedgehog plank. Staff were issued with helmets for the work as well as some particularly fashionable blue tabards. Today's work finally saw us reach the lower horizon of the builder's rubble (the bottom of it) after a seemingly never-ending struggle to get through an entire estate's worth of the terrible stuff.

The horizon at the bottom of the rubble appears to be a short layer of mixed soil and materials including a little Victorian grey tile and a piece of cast iron drain pipe of the

same period. This is directly on top of a context of surprisingly black organic soil, clean of finds. We've only augered about 25 cm depth of this so far, but it may overlay more clay.



Test Pit 7 showing horizon between Victorian context and black organic soil

Our next work will be to investigate the black organic layer, which will be extracted and sieved for pottery or other small finds in order to attempt to date it, as we have been caught out before by the rubble here, by the tipping and general modern materials, mixed in with older items (e.g. medieval pottery) all piled up by the bulldozer from when the estate was built in 1963. None of this may sound particularly exciting, but getting past the rubble at last is a genuine step forward.

Things lost and found

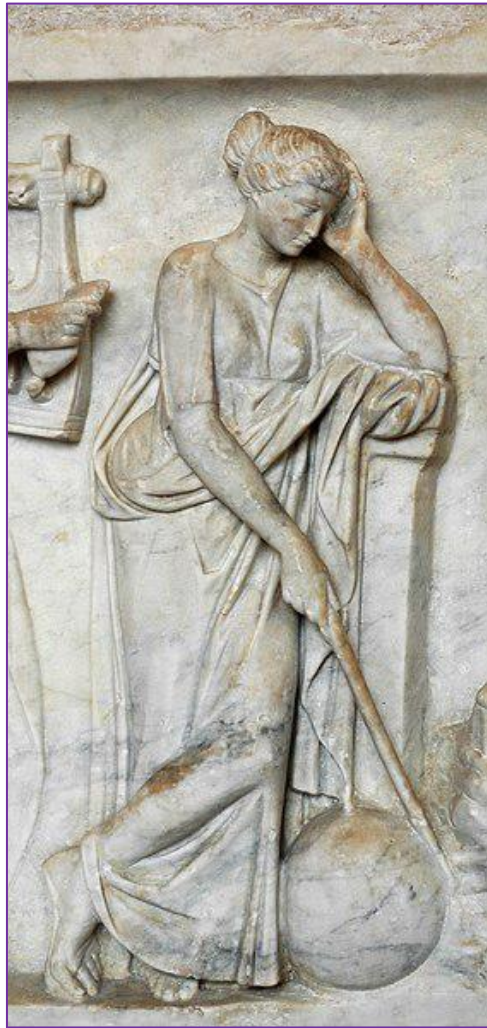
It is some 18 years since the Society undertook a dig in the north-west corner of the Great Hannage, that is now the Anthony Gell School playing field. This examination found no standing archaeology but did produce a range of pottery and other finds from the Roman period to the present day.

One of these finds was a seal matrix, perhaps from a swivel desk seal of 19th century date, found in the dig in February 2008. They were used to seal wax on letters. We first thought it was a piece of child's plastic until we discovered it was made of quartz and could cut glass. This was sent to the British Museum to see if they could provide any more enlightenment, but they promptly lost it. However, 17 years later, the Museum contacted us to say they had found a seal matrix of the Muse Urania, the daughter of Zeus, was it ours and did we want it back? It was duly returned to us, though without them being able to provide any more information than we had provided them with in the first place.



The seal end and its imprint

Here is a better picture of her:



Urania, Muse of Astronomy, pointing to a globe with a compass. Detail from the “Muses Sarcophagus” representing the nine Muses and their attributes. The sarcophagus is made of marble, Roman, from the first half of the 2nd century AD, was found by the Via Ostiense and is now in the Louvre Museum, Paris.

In fact there are many different images of Urania, but the similarity between the one in the Louvre Museum and the seal is striking. Although the Louvre was first opened in 1793, its collections developed much more in the 19th century. Did they make and sell seals as souvenirs, we might wonder, indeed did a Victorian visitor to Paris from Wirksworth buy one and come back with it? We can't answer that question but it would be a rather pleasant thought and happily we've found it again