

## Update July 2023

Currently there are delays in obtaining landowner permissions for the fieldwork which we had planned to do this summer. However, we hope to be on site during August.

## Note on the Borough and Burgesses of Wirksworth

### Introduction

In Maurice Beresford's famous book "English Medieval Boroughs" written in 1973, Wirksworth is listed as a borough but has one of the shortest entries: "circa 1200: Burgage mentioned". Beresford was interested in compiling a list of all those towns in the middle ages which were considered boroughs in England - the major towns of their day. The mentioning of burgage (a plot of land usually with a house at one end) or burgesses (the electors of a town) was a way in which he determined which towns qualified. Medieval Derbyshire only had six boroughs, these were Ashbourne, Bakewell, Castleton, Chesterfield, Derby and Wirksworth. By comparison, Staffordshire had twenty two.



**A market stall of the Middle Ages, merchants were often burgesses**

Geneva Library MS fr 160 f82r Brunetto Latini, the Tresor

### Searching for the borough of Wirksworth

In the 1980s Barry Joyce, from the Civic Society, had persuaded Alan Carter of the Norwich Survey to walk around Wirksworth to consider the layout of the town and in particular any plan evidence for it being a borough. His provisional conclusion was that there were a number of factors that suggested a planned layout, not least the burgage like plots on the west side of the principal street - St John's Street - the generous width of this street and the way roads radiate off from its southern end, suggesting a boundary line at that point.

In archaeological work the Wirksworth Archaeological Society undertook in 2015, it had been concluded that St John's Street in Wirksworth was indeed composed of burgage plots (strip plots with a house or workshop as the street facade and a garden or more workshops behind). It was felt that these dated from soon after the Norman Conquest and which had formed the layout of St John's Street through the Middle Ages to the present day, with changes in buildings and the plots they took during that time, particularly in the Georgian Age, when Waltham House and Nether House had been built by combining several smaller plots.



### Map regression of St John's Street, Wirksworth (called Nether Street in 1821)

Boundaries and houses: In black 1821 Duchy map; in red 1709 Gell map; in blue 1806 Enclosure map.  
 Modern plot widths in blue (metres).  
 Modern house numbers in black.  
 Red numbers are rent plot numbers in the 1709 map.

### Searching for the burgesses of Wirksworth

Beresford's account reporting that Wirksworth had been one of the medieval boroughs of Derbyshire was based on a charter from Tutbury Priory. On investigating what this charter said, it was found that Robert de Ferrers, then Lord of the Manor of Wirksworth, had given the income of a burgage plot in Wirksworth, rented by Matilda, daughter of the priest of Wirksworth, to the Priory. The charter was undated but the time frame can only be between 1260 and 1266 when Robert was in sole control of his own manors. The charter had also mentioned that these properties were formerly held by Brun de Colonia of Echam (probably Oakham) and this would suggest that the burgage existed before the time frame of the grant.

If this is correct, then Matilda is potentially the only burgess of Wirksworth for whom we have a name at that time. A comparative issue occurs in Ashbourne where Walter Palmer is the only named burgess at the same time.

The burgesses are important because they represent, in effect, the important citizens of a town and are often its local electors, in terms of what we would now regard as the town's council. However, both in Wirksworth and in Ashbourne, the burgesses disappear after the time of Robert de Ferrers and this has baffled the historians of both towns. It was suggested that even though the de Ferrers had held over 200 manors, the number of boroughs they held was much smaller, indeed, only eight de Ferrers boroughs were identified by Maurice Beresford.



**Well-dressed townspeople of the middle ages**

<https://sites.google.com/a/guilford.edu/life-and-money-in-medieval-europe/the-rise-of-the-middle-class>

Nevertheless these eight de Ferrers boroughs could be compared for clues about what happened to the burgesses of Wirksworth and Ashbourne. In both cases the records of the royal manors which occurred immediately after Robert de Ferrers refer to "Free Tenants by charter", these appear to be the burgesses.

The eight known de Ferrers boroughs listed by Beresford (and there may be others) with the dates of their charters in brackets, are:

Agardsley Newborough	(1263)
Ashbourne	(before 1266)
Bolton	(1253)
Chorley	(about 1250)
Higham Ferrers	(1251)
Tutbury Newborough	(1141)
Uttoxeter	(1252)
Wirksworth	(before 1266)

Of these eight boroughs, the only charter document to have survived is for Bolton which Farrer (1911) reported as follows: "At the beginning of 1253 William de Ferrers, Earl of Derby, then lord of Bolton, by his charter made the town a free borough, and granted the burgesses certain liberties. Each burgess was to have an acre of land, measured by the long perch of 24 ft., and to pay 12*d.* a year. A reeve was to be chosen each year by the burgesses from among themselves, and pleas were to be heard in the local halmote or portmanmote. The burgesses had rights of turbary, and might take timber from the grove between the great lane and the land of the church; they were to grind corn (wheat) at the lord's mill to the twentieth measure, but if they were kept waiting more than two days might take their corn elsewhere."

Although most of this group of borough charters are focussed to date around the 1250s and this could also be the case for Wirksworth, the archaeological finds (e.g. pottery) from St John's Street suggested an earlier date, this being so, the earliest known charter date in the list is for Tutbury in 1141, consequently Wirksworth might have some equivalence to that date rather than the spate of 1250 charters, as both Tutbury and Wirksworth are known to have existed as towns by the middle Saxon period and Tutbury's charter was for a new borough - an addition to the town. This fits for Wirksworth both with the archaeological finds as well as the morphology (layout) of the town, as the older part of Wirksworth around St Mary's is not laid out in burgage plots but in insulae (islands of buildings).

We had said that the de Ferrers burgesses disappear to be replaced by the royal "chartered free tenants", but the actuality of borough management must have been the same and continued. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the rent of some land at Wigwell was being paid to the "men of Wirksworth" in the thirteenth century - this implies a corporate body and in Ashbourne the position is clearer: In 1277, in the process of complaining to King Edward 1st about a bread oven run by the Hospital of St John at Yeaveley, they reminded the king that Ashbourne was a royal borough.

### **Rents and the number of burgesses**

Interestingly, the de Ferrers 1253 Bolton charter gives the rent each burgess has to pay, that is 12 pence (a "shilling") a year. At Wirksworth, we don't know how many burgesses there were while it was a de Ferrer's borough, but we do know that the "free tenants by charter" when it had become a royal borough, paid a total of 24 shillings in 1297 (Wiltshire, 2019). Given the slow pace of inflation in those days, this might represent 24 burgesses / free tenants, making the (not unreasonable) assumption that 1 shilling is a comparable amount for a burgess to pay at the time in any location, except perhaps London.

Only a short while later, in 1314 in Wirksworth, the free tenants were paying 68 shillings, possibly implying the town had seen another burst of development (again any impacts of inflation are minor at this time) - is this therefore a potential 68 burgesses? We have to bear in mind that the purpose of burgage creation was development, town expansion and thus intended to increase the landowner's income from rents and tolls (such as market tolls).

Both in 1297 and 1314, this rental income from the free tenants is quoted only for the Royal Manor, but by then the town had been split into 3 manors - the Royal Manor; the Holland Manor and the Dean of Lincoln's Manor. The two latter were smaller than the Royal Manor, both being about half the size, but these would also probably have had

their Free Tenants originating as burgesses from the de Ferrers charter. Some of the free tenants of the Holland Manor were paying large rents indeed in the 1314 accounts. We cannot yet identify, but nor can we discount, that if the Royal Manor had a conceptual 68 Free Tenants in 1314, that this might even represent only half the total number for the whole of Wirksworth. Beresford also reports numbers of burgesses for various boroughs in other parts of England and in some of these cases where better documentary evidence has survived, the numbers are stated as those within the borough itself and those in the surroundings (Totnes had 95 in the borough and 15 outside). The numbers of burgesses (in the absence of a definitive document so far for Wirksworth) is an interesting question and would be the potential subject for further research, bearing in mind that not only does the national population vary (for example, the population of England in 1300 was considered to be about 5 million, but a century later, following the black death, was perhaps half that) but so too do local populations vary and the number of burgesses in the major towns of the middle ages such as Wirksworth vary considerably throughout the middle ages as a town's economic success and its population fluctuated.

## References

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