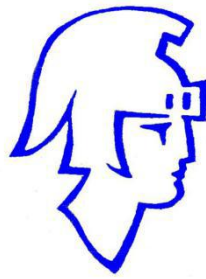


Wirksworth Archaeological Society



Annual Report 2021



and Archaeological survey of Meadow Croft field, Wirksworth, Derbyshire

Anton Shone
21st December 2021

Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Co-ordinator's Annual Report

Progress during the past year

The report for the previous year took us to the end of December 2020. We have been overtaken once again by the current epidemic in 2021, which has had a slowing effect on fieldwork and a very delaying impact on research during the year. These are unfortunate difficulties which have presented themselves and I am most grateful for the efforts of both our Members and Friends in helping us in such challenging times.

I give notice that the AGM of the Society will take place on Monday the 17th January 2022 at 7pm. The AGM will take place by video call using Zoom, a final notification will be issued nearer the event for members to join if they wish.

For the most part our work during the year has been centred around the Meadows in Wirksworth and the summary report which follows deals with this in more detail. In the background Bill Bevan, our President, has been preparing a bid for funding from the Heritage Lottery, aimed at providing sufficient funds and expertise for us to look in much more detail at key areas of the town with a specific aim of getting to the bottom (once and for all) of how old Wirksworth really is and what its origins really are. This bid will be submitted in the New Year. We have also looked at and reported on occasional research and finds such as a note on Wirksworth's Victorian civic activities in February; the Roman pottery found at Miller's Green in April and an eighteenth century guide stoop found posing as a farm gate post at Alderwasley in September.

Financial and membership matters 2021

Balance brought forward from 2020		£ 68.80
Income		
Subscriptions and Donations	£255.00	
Expenditure		
Insurance	-£171.20	
Safety Equipment	-£ 40.00	
Research, documents and aerial photography	-£ 72.00	
Balance carried forward to 2022		£ 40.60

We have 17 members.

In conclusion

In looking forward, our focus for 2022 will continue to be the Meadows, with the kind permission of Wirksworth Town Council. Research work is also continuing on the Roman road network around Wirksworth and we still have smaller matters of fieldwork not related to the Meadows, held over from last year, which we may or may not be able to achieve in 2022 given the current circumstances.

I trust all those who have taken such an active interest in our work will continue to support us and I thank you all for your engagement and efforts on our behalf this year: may you all be safe and well.

Interim summary: Meadow Croft field, Summer Lane, Wirksworth, Derbyshire, DE4 4EB
Grid Ref: SK 2849 5374

Introduction: The Meadows and surroundings in old records

The Meadows was originally a much larger field than now: most fields around the town were walled into smaller units by different owners and by the Enclosure Acts. “Meadows” is first mentioned as “Meadow Wall” in 1420 (Cameron, 1959). In this case it is not known whether “wall” refers to an actual wall or it may be a dialect corruption of “well” (originally meaning spring). It was first mapped in 1821 and then occurs regularly in maps of Wirksworth. The first Tithe Award of 1837 calls it Meadow Croft, this would have differentiated it from the Great and Little Meadows, which were where the Yokecliffe estate now is.

Summer Lane, to the south side, is first recorded as Summer Way in 1420 (possibly a corruption of Sumpter, the driver of pack horses); The Warm Brook, as le Warmbroke in 1395; Yokecliffe as Zyelcliff in 1415 (perhaps originally Yeldcliff, that is to say sloping cliff). Gate House, although its listed building status says “dating from the seventeenth century”, is first recorded in a marriage settlement of Helena Gell in 1553 but is implied as being owned by John Feyrne in a probate of 1550. The current one appears to be two rebuilds later and the original may not even have been in the same place. Looking at the maps, the grounds of Gate House give the impression of being encroachment on the Meadows and this appears to be so, there being a court case in the Wirksworth Court Leet in 1558 against John Wigley, who appears to have done this by enclosing part of the Meadows on the north side near Hopton Lane and West End, once called Marten Ash Green. He was a serial offender and had also been brought before the court for blocking Pittywood Lane, Broadmeadow Lane (now extinct) and the “Queen’s Highway to Hopton” (Hopton Lane).

We can see on the 1821 map, which follows, that Meadow Croft held an avenue of trees in 1821, today there are Linden trees (Lime trees) lining the location where we are carrying out our examination, these trees are not originals, the modern ones having been planted within living memory (an elderly gentleman walking past, pers comm) after the old ones were cut down about 70 years ago.

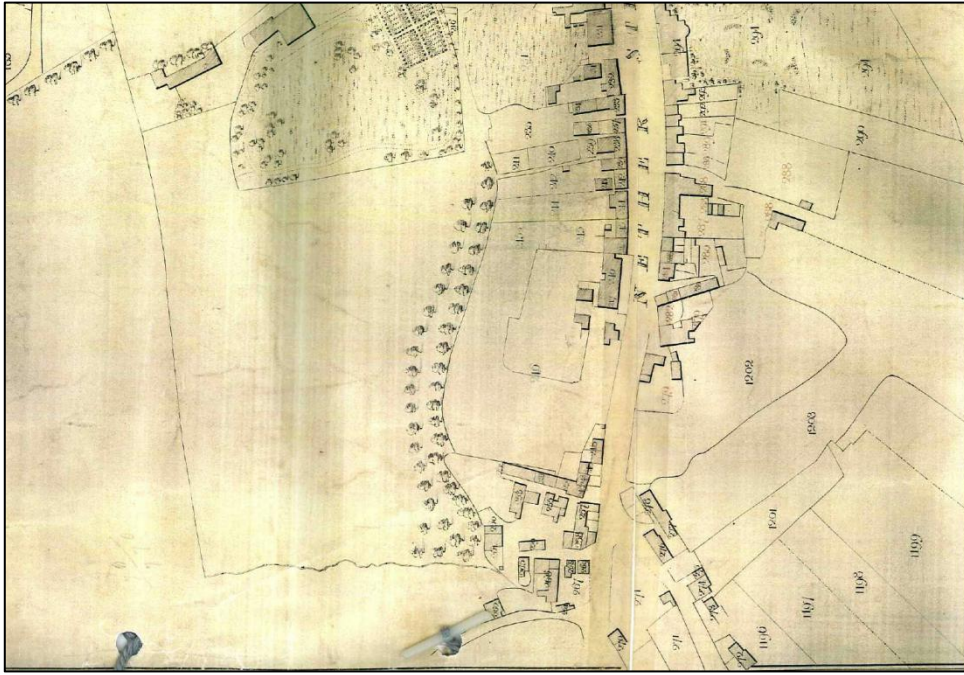
The garden of Gate House in its south-east corner has an entry not apparent in the 1821 map, which is now a ruinous gate with a concrete lintel and this apparently gave access in later years to the Gate House stables from Hammonds Court and the (possible) ropewalk which may have been located along the path below Waltham House. This access may be the origin of the local myth that a road or lane ran between the avenue of trees in the Meadows: “The Causeway”. This is now the name of the street towards Gate House from Market Place, but which in 1821 was called “Gatehouse Street”. Archaeologically, there is no road or lane in the trees of the Meadows.

Also in 1821, St John’s Street was called Nether Street. We had first thought that “Nether Street” was the older name of this street, but this is not the case, over 100 years before 1821, it was called St John’s Street and this must be its correct name: Our attention was kindly drawn by Lyn Murray to two documents in the Gell archive at Derbyshire Record Office. The first, dated 1712, is a Feoffment (a deed) giving John Holloby the rent of a house in St John’s Street. The second dated 1795 gives a lease to John Toplis of a cottage in Wirksworth “near Nether Street, formerly known as St John’s Street”. In the 1790 and 1821 maps the street is called Nether Street, but by the 1841 census it had reverted to St John’s Street again (also St John Street or even John Street, in different documents). This is rather baffling, not only that there should be such to-ing and fro-ing with the street name, but also because we do not at this present time know of any reason why it should be called St John’s Street. The only church in Wirksworth of any age is St Mary’s and none of its chantries were called St John’s, as far as is known. *Where, then, is the “St John’s” of St John’s Street?*

Returning now to the archaeology of the Meadow Croft field, we have summarised, in the report which follows, our surveys and fieldwork to date. In many respects the archaeology of this field is very exciting and hugely interesting for the history of Wirksworth. The archaeology is much busier than we expected but the field has never been examined before and with the exception of occasional property and place-name references to it, is rather a blind spot in our understanding of the town. Wirksworth, like many of the towns of the Peak District, has never, until the last few years, been archaeologically examined in detail.

Map regression: the earliest maps

North



Meadow Croft in the 1821 Duchy of Lancaster map, the oldest map showing part of the field

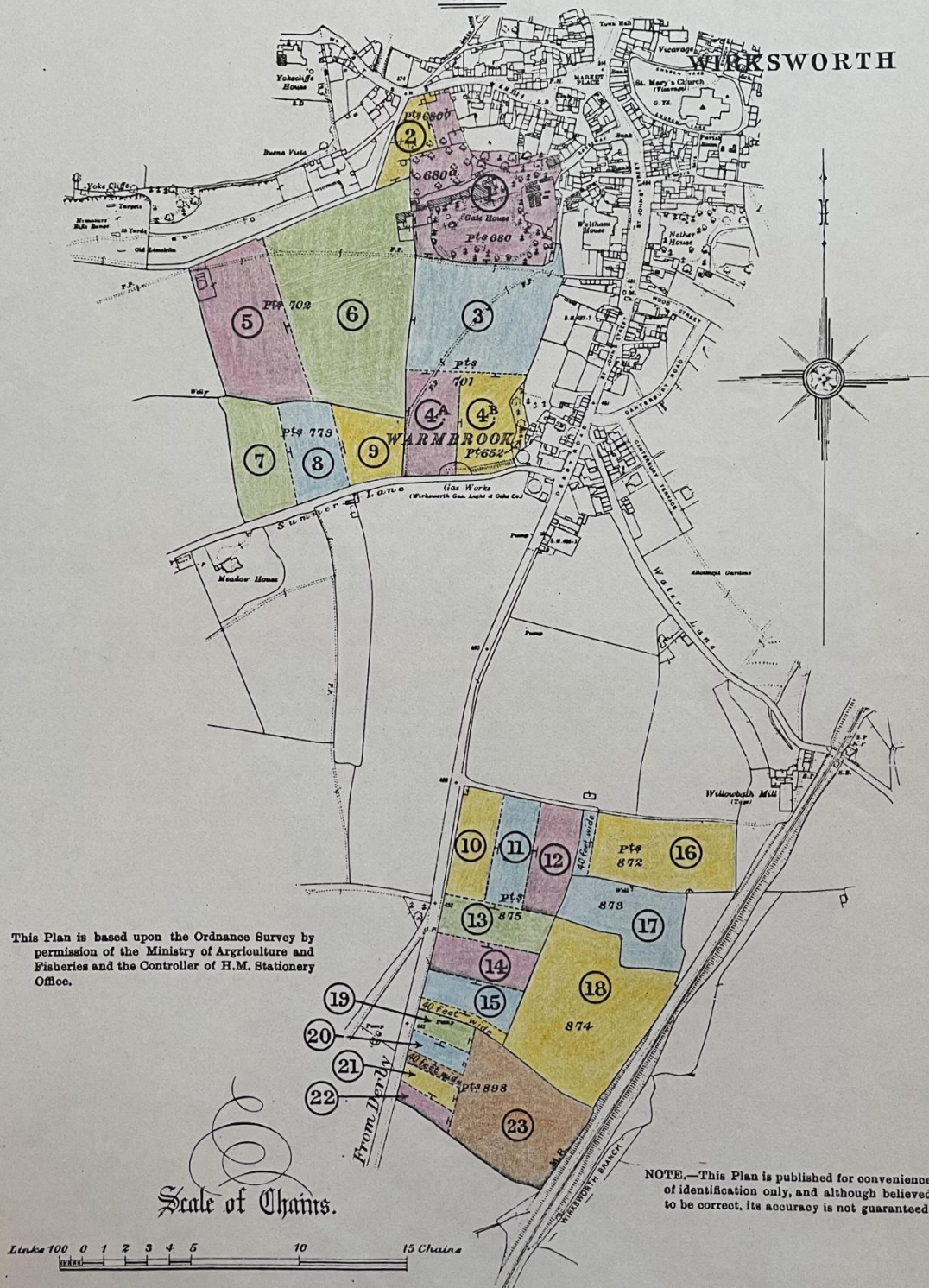
North



Meadow Croft in the 1836 Township of Wirksworth map, the first map showing the whole of the field

Plan OF GATE HOUSE PROPERTY, WIRKSWORTH.

For Sale by Auction by
MESSRS. KNIGHT, FRANK & RUTLEY,
1924

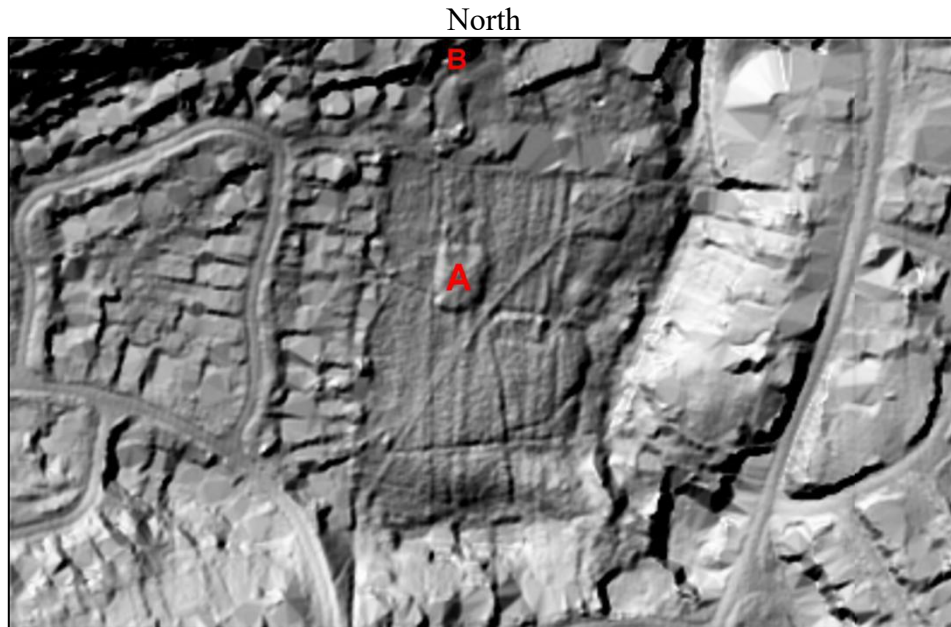


MESSRS. KNIGHT, FRANK & RUTLEY,
Auctioneers and Estate Agents,
20 HANOVER SQUARE, LONDON, W. 1
90 PRINCES STREET, EDINBURGH;
78 ST. VINCENT STREET, GLASGOW; and
41 BANK STREET, ASHFORD, KENT.

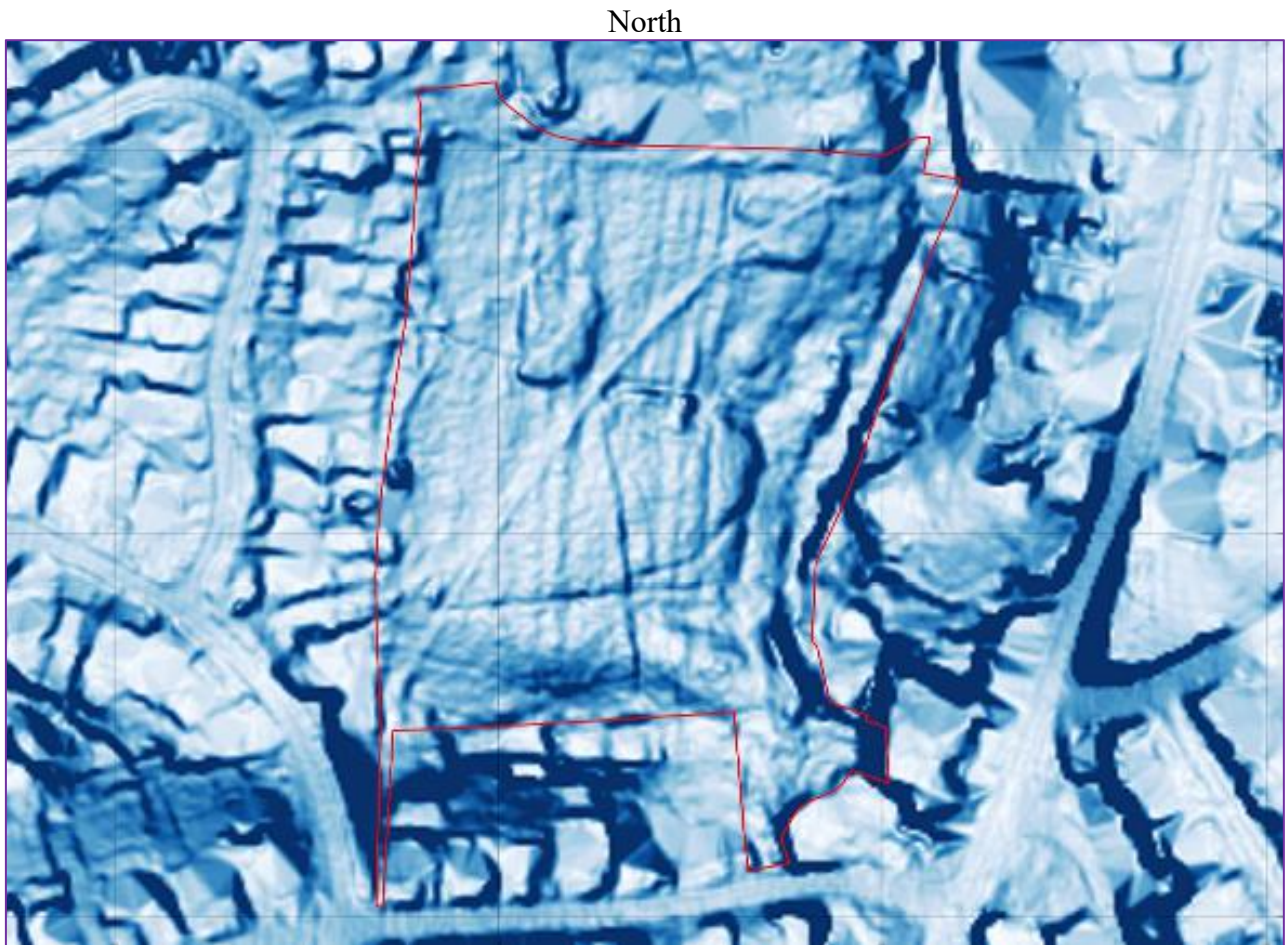
Martin, Hood & Larkin, Photographs, 61, Newport St. W.C.

Survey and Assessment Work

When we were kindly asked by Wirksworth Town Council to look at the Meadows to see if there were any areas of archaeological interest, this was based on a Lidar (satellite) image:



Where A shows a possible building platform
and B marks the former site of a warm spring in the Gate House grounds



Lidar image overlaid with the modern ownership boundaries of Meadow Croft Field (“the Meadows”).

In the Lidar image the path which runs diagonally through the Meadows from the town towards Summer Lane can clearly be seen, as well as what appeared to be a building platform to the north-west of the path,

known as “The Tump”. This feature (“A”) has been investigated and we have not been able to find any building remains on it, no (pre-modern) finds were identified from it that were datable and only a single residual sherd of Roman pottery came from under it. In talking to local people it was even suspected from personal comments that the Tump might have been the result of random dumping from the construction of the Yokecliffe Estate in 1971. Efforts were made by the Society to collect old photographs but none are exact enough to show the Tump. On examination the entire Tump feature seems to be composed of a dark grey, almost black clay which lies on top of the natural field surface. We are not able to confirm it as an archaeological feature.

Not apparent on any of the aerial or Lidar images are the below-ground remains of both a major possible defensive earthwork (the Causeway Ditch) and the foundation remains of a late Saxon building next to it, in the east side of the Meadows near the boundary wall with the back gardens of St John’s Street. In so far as these features were below ground they could only be identified through fieldwork and this has been taking place over two digging seasons, that is the summer of both 2020 and 2021 albeit in difficult and restricted circumstances due to the Covid epidemic.

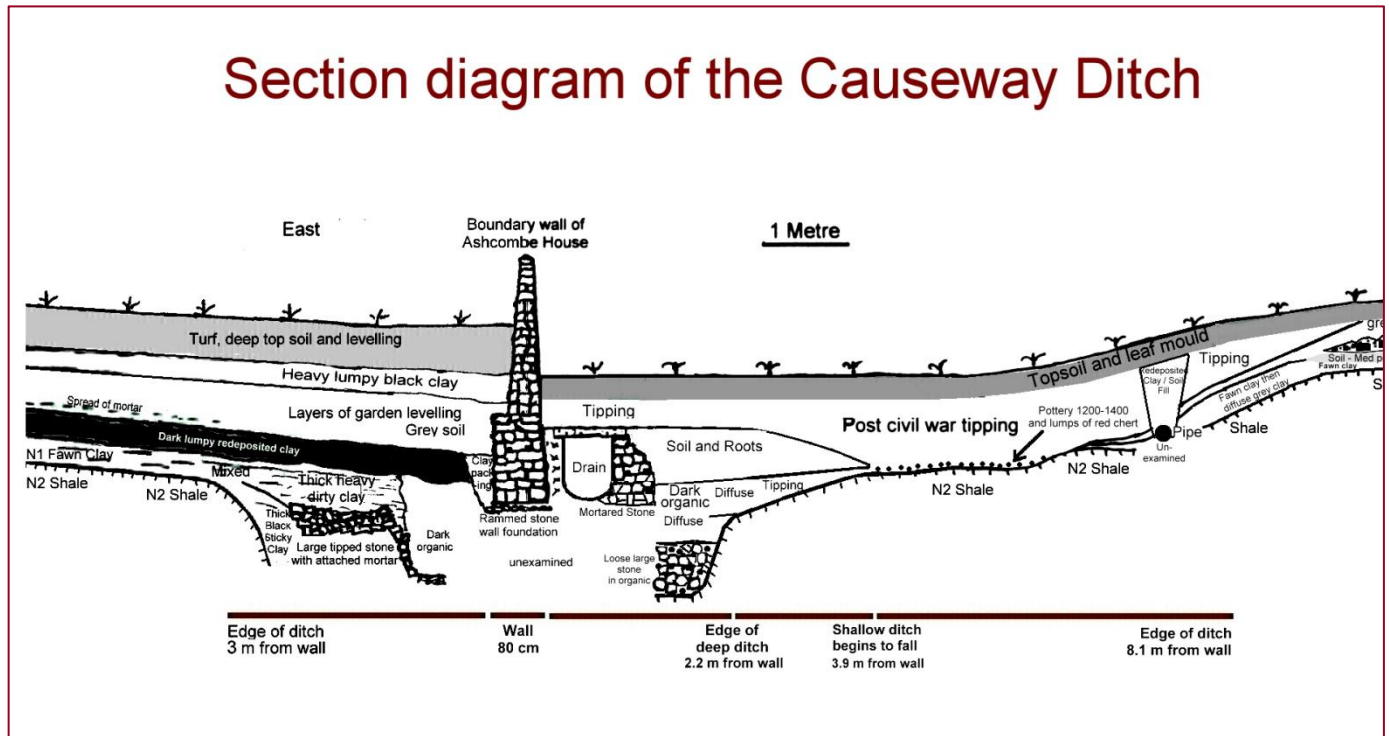
In many respects the late Saxon date of the building remains is extraordinary, because structures of this time are both uncommon in themselves and even rarer in the national archaeological record. Yet, we do know that Wirksworth was an important Anglo-Saxon centre. A charter dated 835AD calls Wirksworth a town; St Mary’s church is an important ancient Christian site, with the Wirksworth Slab dating from somewhat after 750AD and, because it is unweathered, must (conceivably) have come from inside a church standing at that date. A Northumbrian Sceat coin of King Eadberht (737-758AD) also having been found in Church Street (Roman coins are known from Yokecliffe). Later, Domesday Book of 1086 lists Wirksworth as a Royal manor with the second largest population in Derbyshire. We should not be surprised to find something of the Saxon period here.

Fieldwork: Possible Defensive Ditch

The next examination work, after the Tump, was based on a feature found in the gardens of the west side of St John’s Street in 2014 (reported in Shone, 2016) which was thought to be one side of a large ditch and this was separated from the Meadows by the garden boundary wall of the houses there. It had never been possible to examine the Meadows side of the boundary wall until the Meadows came into the ownership of the Town Council. Therefore this was the next feature to be examined and several issues emerged. The ditch is not visible on aerial photographs because of trees.

1. Hard against the boundary wall (on the Meadows side) runs a seventeenth century culvert drain, which may be fed from old lead mine workings around the former Yokecliffe Rake. The culvert still runs but its connections are unknown, so we are making an assumption about where the water running in it comes from, it may drain something else.
2. Some 8 metres from the boundary wall runs a Victorian sewer pipe, this is thought (on personal comments) to run from Gate House and may also be fed from a drain which is known to run under the footpath on the north side of the Meadows next to the boundary wall of the Gate House grounds.
3. The ditch itself, called, for convenience, the Causeway Ditch, proved to be of considerable interest because of its size. It is huge, at about 12 metres wide and over 3 metres deep. This is much bigger than you would need as the boundary of a garden or even a simple town boundary. The boundary ditch of Gloucester, called the “Kings Ditch” and examined in 2019 by others, was only 4 metres wide and 1 metre deep. Consequently, the Wirksworth Archaeological Society suggests this has the potential to be an ancient defensive boundary. The ditch is overlain by about a metre of tipping which dates from after the English Civil War. This tells us that the ditch was a major feature before 1660 or so and the ditch is composed of two levels. A shallow level at 6 metres wide and 1 metre deep is a cut which is certainly medieval and dates from the late thirteenth century, a period when Wirksworth appears to have been subject to considerable Royal intervention. A deeper level, is also 6 metres wide but more than 3 metres deep, that is so deep we could not get to the bottom and still work in safety with the the equipment then available to us; because of

this we are not able to date the deep level, what little pottery was extracted by augering appears to point at a pre-medieval date.



We note the anecdotal Causeway place-name here and we are often told that there was “a road to the back of Gate House” along the line of the ditch, but there is no archaeological evidence of a road of any kind.

It is the opinion of the Society that this ditch has the potential to be an ancient defensive earthwork of the town, but the only mechanism available to us to confirm this would be that we would have to find the same feature at another location around the town (that is to say in a conceptual defensive circuit). There is every reason to suppose such a defence work should exist if we take the view that Wirksworth was present as a town before Viking incursions in the 870s.

Fieldwork: Saxon building or possible group of buildings

Examination of the ditch continued to its very edge in order to properly record it and a line of stones was discovered forming part of a structure. The Society excavated the area around the structure to identify it and this has now revealed part of the foundations and remains of a building. It appears to have stone and clay foundations, a clay floor, stone walls and had a (sandstone) stoned roof. Around the building was a wide spread of fallen stone, which is believed to be part of the collapse of the building, there were also sandstone slates and nails lying over the foundations. In addition, although much of the stone is local rough limestone, there are a number of large pieces of dressed gritstone, possibly taken from the remains of another building nearby.

The dimensions of the building, as evidenced by the surviving north and west walls, is approximately 4 metres by 5 metres. Much of the east side had been dug away by the Victorian sewage pipe. Overall, the building would have been about the size of a big modern living room.

The building has been dated from associated pottery, which runs from approximately 950AD to 1250 or a little later, but does not appear to stretch beyond 1300. The pottery suggests that the building originated in the late Saxon period and continued to the early medieval, a date range approximately 150 years either side of the Norman Conquest.

This brings us to the real eye-opener about the building. It has a water supply. Running down the west side of the building is a stone-lined channel that serves a little covered culvert on the inside of the building's

north wall. The operative and extraordinary word here is “inside”. This is quite astonishing for its time and suggests that the building was not domestic. Indeed, in the late Saxon age most stone buildings were built by the church, even the Lord of Manor would only have had a timber hall.



Late Saxon building foundations and water channel in the Meadows, looking south

Work will continue to try and identify what the building was used for. For the understanding and comfort of the Town Council, when we say such structures are most likely church related this might mean only a limited number of things: A small out-church or chapel, perhaps used as a grange or farm; A monastery, being aware that such features would be quite small, providing for perhaps 10 or 12 monks or nuns at most; Or, a hospital, being aware that it is only very, very recently that Saxon hospitals have been identified archaeologically and they barely occur at all in the national record. We currently make no judgement which.

Potential archaeological issues

Notwithstanding the Saxon building excitingly identified, here are the aerial photographs taken of the Meadows which might indicate other things. Note: these are historic photographs, taken in the past by the Royal Air Force and may show features that have not survived since. Secondly, each photograph is different, this is because they were taken at different times of year, in different positions of sunlight and with different crops or heights of grass in the fields: so revealing or obscuring features in different ways.



1. The Meadows and surroundings in 1945



2. The Meadows and surroundings in 1945 with possible features highlighted in red



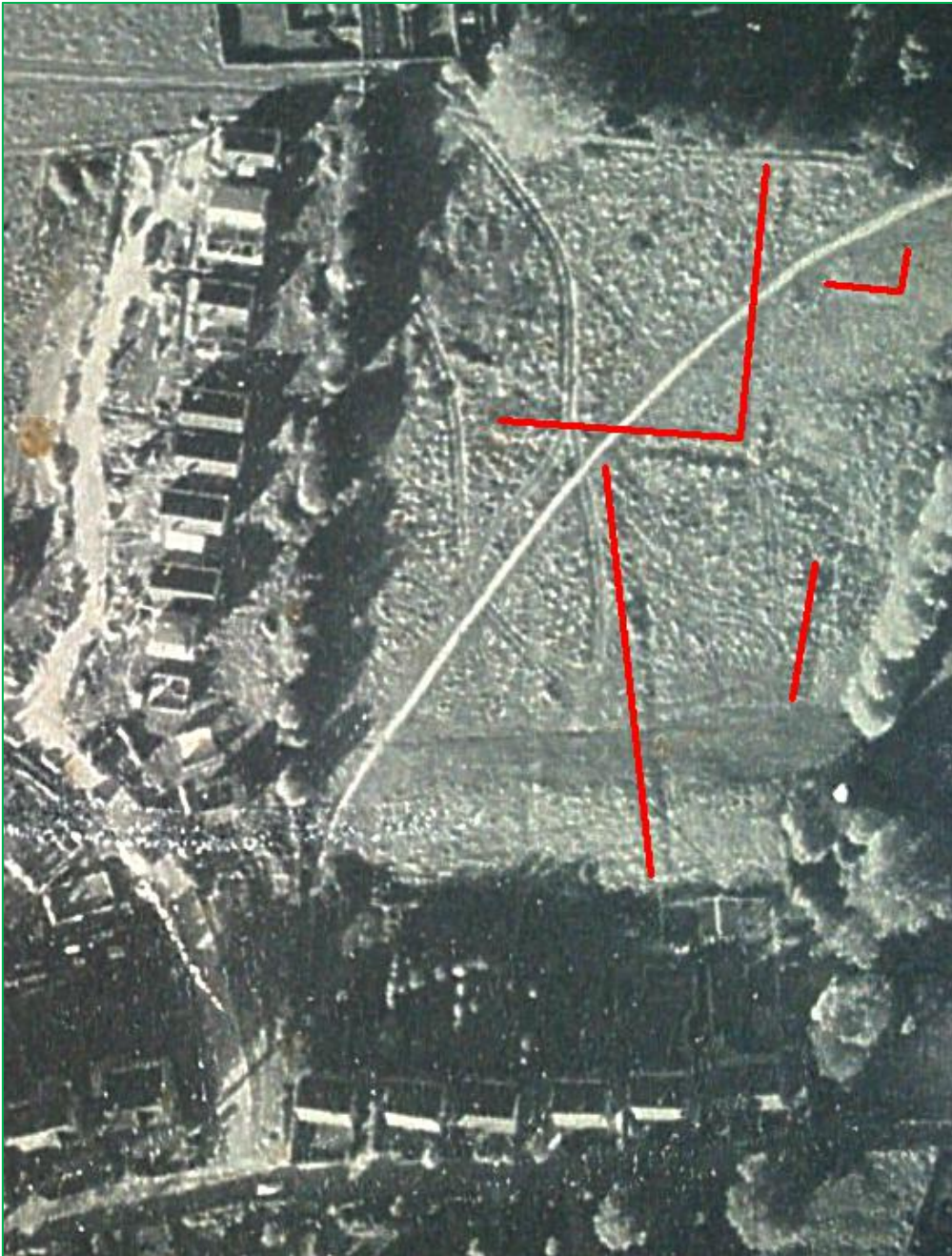
3. The Meadows and surroundings in 1950



4. The Meadows and surroundings in 1950 with possible features highlighted in red



5. The Meadows in 1971 with the Yokecliffe estate being built



6. The meadows in 1971 with possible features highlighted in red

Where features are highlighted these have not yet been investigated and many simply appear to be enclosure ditches requiring on a single intervention to check what they might be. Finally, we may wish to examine and record the central path itself in order to determine its age. It is known that there is a missing lane “Broadmeadow Lane” and the path might be its relict. Broadmeadow is now the cricket ground.

A composite plan follows, combining all the known archaeological and historical features from the Lidar, the aerial photographs and discoveries during the survey. Items already noted are the Tump; the Causeway Ditch and its overlaying seventeenth century culverted watercourse; The Saxon building and its further possible extents (in yellow shading); the central path running north-east / south-west through the field.

Other features:

1. Possible ditch or relict field boundary
2. Possible enclosure ditches in U-shape
3. Circular feature on Lidar
4. Small L shape ditches
5. Small circular feature on Lidar



Composite plan of possible archaeological and historical features in Meadow Croft field

- 6. Further small circular feature on Lidar identified at ground level
- 7. Possible drainage ditch feature
- 8. Possible small drainage ditch
- 9. Square enclosure, possible building remains
- 10. Very small square enclosure, possible building remains.
- 11a and 11b. Features beyond the Meadows boundaries on aerial photos (between Derby Road and Water Lane). Small square feature (1945) and large elliptical feature (1950) since destroyed by development.
- 12. Possible sough tail of the Meadow Croft Sough (change in grass/flora composition)

Note on features 11a and 11b

These features show incidentally on the aerial photographs, they are not in the Meadows but nearby, between Derby Road and Water Lane, this area has since been completely developed with housing and other buildings, at Ecclesbourne Avenue and The Hawthorns.

Feature 11a of the 1945 photograph is not possible to identify, it is a small square crop mark about 10 metres in both directions, it could have been almost anything. It no longer exists.

Feature 11b of the 1950 photographs is far more unusual, it is too large to be a barrow and appears hemispherical, specifically elliptical, that is to say the shape of a lemon: the wrong shape for a Bronze Age ring-bank, for example. It is about 60 metres across its long internal axis and about 40 metres across its short internal axis, given the measurements taken from the two 1950 aerial photographs. In the later 1971 aerial photograph, the site had already been partially developed, but on the north side of the feature there appeared to be a crescent-shaped bank, about 15 metres from the inside to the outside. Were this the case the whole way round, then the external dimensions of the long axis would have been about 90 metres and the short axis about 70 metres. There are limited things this unusual shape and size suggests, had it been an archaeological feature. Hart (1984) notes the Neolithic henge monuments at Arbor Low and the Bull Ring at Dove Holes: these are similar in size and shape but each held a central plateau known to have contained standing stones, no such stones are known from this feature in Wirksworth and had this been the case one might have expected them to have attracted attention and antiquarian record being next to the town. Other potential types might be as a small Iron Age hill fort, such as Harthill Castle Ring, but the feature here in Wirksworth is rather too regular compared to these and it lies in the lee of Oat Hill, somewhat sheltered from the prevailing wind, hardly a commanding position for a fort of any kind. This leaves very few viable alternatives, the final one for its size being that it may have been a banked amphitheatre. The size, shape, location and surroundings have some similarities to the Roman amphitheatre at Carmarthen. However, the site here has been wholly destroyed by modern development and regrettably we may never know.

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