

## Wirksworth Archaeological Society

### Progress Report November 2024

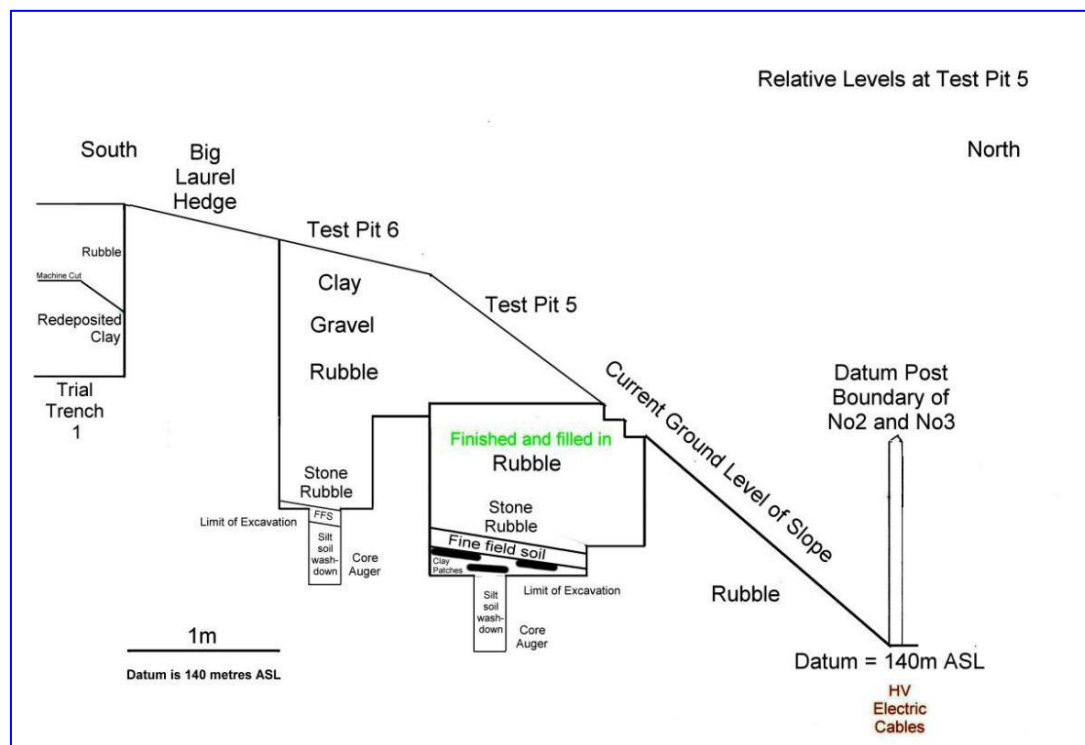
We have done all we can in Test Pits 5 and 6: we cannot find the wall we have been looking for. There are reasons why this might be the case:

1. We're wrong - no wall exists or ever existed because we have misinterpreted the oval crop mark (pattern) on the RAF aerial photograph of Wirksworth from 70 years ago before the field was built on and there is no structure or building here to be found; or its something else that we don't yet understand.

Alternatively,

2. We're not wrong but we're either looking in the wrong place or the wall did exist and has been robbed of its stone to build other things and we can't find it because we can't trench across it as we would do if this was a flat field. The real problem though is the rubble, as you can see from the diagram, the rubble is two metres deep on the slope in Test Pit 6, we can't dig deeper than two metres (because our insurance only permits two metres: in any other place this would be plenty deep enough) but the archaeology here, if it exists under the original field surface, is deeper than that - we just can't get to it and its not been for want of trying.

Anyway its not yet possible to say which reason is the right one. The aerial photograph is not the only evidence, there are two later photographs showing banking in the field and a wall was indicated on a Levels Plan for Ecclesbourne Close from 40 years ago. This suggests that its perhaps more probable that we just can't find it because of the depth of builders rubble on top of it.



Sketch looking west of trial trenching on the slope of the site

The site does also have large amounts of both unworked and dressed stone in it. This is really unusual for a site which was supposed to be just an empty field before all the houses were built, it should have no stone in it at all, although there is a rather weak argument to say the stone might have been brought in from elsewhere (this would cost money to do, why would you?). Here is a picture showing some of the stone:



Stone from the Test Pit

1. A random stone, for comparison with the two others
2. This one is a possible arch stone (vousoir), its wedge shaped and neatly cut
3. This one is dressed to be apparently leaf shaped and has a broken off curved section at end A, as if it was from a sculpture or bas relief of something.

What is interesting is that we keep finding these dressed stones on the site in the various test pits. Bear in mind the late Saxon cottage in the Meadows was built out of some rough old gathered and robbed stone and the stone was only around and near the building, it wasn't spread randomly throughout the Meadows. The dressed stone here is a fair quality stone, its decorative. We're looking for a possible building on this site and if it was an important building it would maybe have decorated stone. Our real problem is we can't date stone, unless we find it with something we can date (e.g. pottery in a "secure context").



Test Pit 6 in progress

There were some finds from the final examination of Test Pit 6: three sherds of pottery, two of which are medieval gritty ware of a date range 1050-1250, these were from the core augering. I note we had also medieval pottery from the core augering of Test Pit 7 too. A further sherd of pottery came from above the stone rubble context of Test Pit 6 and this sherd is an oddity, it resembles Roman Derbyshireware but it cannot be inherent to the modern rubble - its contamination in the sense of being intrusive in the wrong place - you don't get Roman pottery in modern places unless something has been messed with (in this case the 1963 builder has messed with the original field surface to build a house and garden).



Mule shoe plus sherd 1 from rubble and sherds 2 and 3 from core augering.

Finally, and this time from under the stone rubble, on top of the core augering, was a horse shoe. In fact its actually a mule shoe, which is why it has long pointy ends (Sparkes, 1976). It can't be dated except that it is in the original pre-1963 field surface. It is perfectly possible that whoever owned the field before the houses were built kept a mule. This would be a bit rare though, a pony or a horse maybe but a mule would be slightly unusual. Therefore the shoe is perhaps older (Georgian or Victorian). Mules were commonly used for transporting goods around from ancient times up until late Victorian times because they were sturdy, after which they gradually fell out of use with the coming of the railway and the motor lorry, though they're still used in very remote parts of the world for transporting goods in mountains and places with no roads. The field could have been used as a green where a pack mule herd could rest and the mules watered (from the Warmbrook which ran here in olden days on the south side of Water Lane), if they were delivering goods to the town or en route to another place, it would be a convenient field for them to stop at and graze on the grass.

This report then, represents the end of the digging season and except for some backfilling and tidying, this is likely all we will do for this year before winter weather sets in.

To summarise what we have been doing this season:

The assessment of this site originated in a study of aerial photographs of the town of Wirksworth, undertaken by the Society on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019 when a stereographic pair of aerial photographs RAF\_541\_551\_rp\_3176 and 3177 taken by the Royal Air Force on the 4<sup>th</sup> June 1950 had been received, which showed an unusually large oval crop mark on land that had been an open field in 1950, between Water Lane and Derby Road, towards the south end of the historic medieval town core. This field had subsequently been built on with

two housing estates, a tape mill and a clothing factory and by 1993 was entirely covered by development.



Crop mark between Derby Road and Water Lane in 1950

We considered that this unusual oval crop mark, which we have been trial trenching this season, could only represent a very limited range of archaeological features (and little else). It is large, at about 60 metres on its long axis and about 45 metres on its short axis. This size might therefore suggest we are looking at a possible amphitheatre (generally these are of Roman date). However, in no way can this be regarded as definitive unless we can find and correctly date any archaeological remains, in particular an arena wall. The site is exceptionally difficult, the most difficult we have ever worked. In the years since the photograph of the crop mark was taken (1950) the entire site had been gradually built on, there are no more than three limited and tightly constrained places where we can look for remains and two of those are in locations where the amount of builder's rubble used to level house gardens in 1963 and afterwards (as we now know) is extreme. The final possible location may be the subject of work next season if the landowners permission can be obtained.

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