

Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Progress Report July 2025

Work continues at our dig site at Ian Avenue where the removal of builders rubble from the Trial Trench has been our main task recently and is now complete: we are down to the original field surface as it was in 1963, before Ian Avenue was built.

This field surface is the point at which, in any other open field, we would normally begin to look for any archaeology. The depth of rubble is because the builder of Ian Avenue bulldozed almost everything left over into this garden (it was the last house to be built) on top of a clay raft he had sealed the surface with. This rubble consists of every kind of material, clay, soil, stones, gravel, bits of tarmac, Marley roof tile, modern and handmade brick, modern bits of metal, screws, bolts, modern and handmade nails, plastic; pottery of all ages and dates from the Roman to your granny's Blue and White china dinner service; random glass, bottles and so on. None of the ancient things should be there, nor should any of the unexpectedly large amounts of dressed stone we are finding be amongst this material.

In digging out the final rubble this week, a sherd of a pilae, that is a Roman floor tile, was found. This shouldn't be in the rubble either.



Sherd of Roman floor tile found in Trial Trench 2

We have also been taking auger samples of the materials the field is composed of. The field (upper context) itself is about a metre depth of fine black organic soil. This is highly unusual, we have dug many places in Wirksworth in the last 20 years or so and normally the upper context depth is little more than 30 cm, such as in the Meadows. Below a metre of of this black organic soil here is another context of streaky grey, silty, fine clay wash down, containing unusual amounts of degraded organics and small fingernail-sized charcoal bits. Generally we would regard these two things as being the product of stubble burning, but once again it should be nowhere as deep as it is here, another half metre to the limit of the auger (and so not to its final depth). We have also not reached the natural bedrock or substrate yet, this is also unusual. If this site were really an untouched field we would have found it already.



Trial trench 2 with additional shuttering being constructed

The stubble burning indications and their unusual depth, would perhaps lead to the implication that stubble is being burnt off this field at regular intervals over a very long period of time, but without small finds (and the soil is clean of finds, unlike the rubble on top) we can't attempt to date what's going on. More digging and sieving will be needed.

This has led to some background research about the field name and this is also exceptionally problematical. Prior to the construction of the Oat Hill housing estates at Ian Avenue, Ecclesbourne Close and the Hawthorns, this field was named in the Tithe Award Map as “Warmbrook Land”. The reason this is a problem is that it only occurs there, it doesn’t occur in any earlier documents or rentals, yet the field next to it, called “Hanging Close” occurs regularly documented as far back as 1500. In the 1848 Tithe Award the field was owned by George Greaves of Doncaster, perhaps he inherited it from someone more local. We’re looking at the sixteenth century Gell rentals to see if these can perhaps enlighten us. The only other indication of the field name is that a plot next to what is now Derby Road, was in 1709 called “Short Oat Hill”. However it misses the field we’re looking for.

Oat Hill is, of course, the name of this general area on both sides of Derby Road and at least tells us that oats were grown here. This was a staple of the Wirksworth diet, that is soft Oat Cakes, or more correctly for Wirksworth “Oat Bread”. Around Wirksworth there is also “Barley Acre”; Corn Close (it means wheat, not sweetcorn); Banelond Hill (Bean hill); Ryefield and Orchard Close (probably apples, pears and other native fruit). Pillow Butts also means Oat Archery Field (Pylets or Pillas Oats: these were the native species used for oat bread, but also, apparently, used as an ingredient to strengthen beer). There was also a Cows Close, Milking Close (so milk, butter and cheese), Wetherwick (this means Sheep keeping, so lamb and mutton), Leys (usually for the keeping of pigs, they were quite near the Swinemarket) and a Fishpond Flatt (anyone know what fish are in the Ecclesbourne? - not to mention the Derwent) for those interested in the local food production and people’s diet.

Anyway this is the current state of progress, which I commend to you while you are munching your buttered oatcakes and drinking some hair-raisingly strong beer.

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