

Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Progress Report May 2026

Work is currently taking place to progress Trial Trench 4, which is initially composed of Test Pit 9 but intended to be developed into a three metre Trial Trench. At the moment we're continuing work on the Test Pit to identify what materials and contexts are in it. In the April report, it was noted that one of the objectives of this Test Pit was to determine if the archaeology found in Test Pits 7/8 reaches the surface as predicted (in Test Pit 9) given the suspected gradient of the feature being examined. This is the case, context 009, composed of a rising grey streaky redeposited clay with small lenses of soil and gritty ashy patches, is present in Test Pit 9 at 80cm depth at the north end, which is almost exactly where it should be (we're only working in a sondage on the east side in order to understand the stratification at the moment).

This context of redeposited grey clay with soily and oddly level gritty ash patches is the formation of the seating bank. The bank may also contain gravel as a construction material, so far we have only mentioned gravel in terms of the terrace packing, but gravel occurs at the same depth in some of the auger samples. At Silchester the seating bank was composed of dumps of clay and gravel, for which Fulford (1989) felt that the construction rose in level layers, that is to say if you put a sliced loaf on its end, the slices can be laid on top to build up the height of the loaf. (They're not dumping clay and gravel randomly). This method of construction where the materials to build up the seating bank are layered and then compacted in phases by walking on them (the Romans have no mechanical equipment) is why the Context contains these small lenses of walked-in material (the small patches of gritty ash and soil). This method of walking-in compaction was still in use for the construction of dams in the Georgian and Victorian periods. Eventually it was replaced for compaction by horse drawn rollers and then by mechanical equipment with the invention of the steam road roller in 1867 (Brown, 2025).



Test Pit 9 sondage running south to north showing dip and rise

The south end of context 009 is cut by a dip (context 012 - fill; context 013 - cut) which might represent one of a number of possibilities, these include:

1. The truncated cut of a medieval ditch running west-east across the rise of the archaeology, however, although parts of this field originally sloped in more than one direction, the fall at this point is to the north, this suggests that a drainage ditch is unlikely because it runs the wrong way.
2. The cut of a beam slot which might in the past have held a timber beam (now completely lost) and this possibility needs to be examined further (as with the ditch possibility) by continuing the Test Pit in a southward direction to see where (or if) context 009 rises on that side.
3. A.N. Other feature to be determined.

The fill of the cut contains brown (fawn) sandy clay patches, amounts of soil, more gritty ash as well as small amounts of pebble, chert etc. More of this feature is to be examined. Finds in the soil over the cut included a sherd of a smooth orange ware of a wholly unknown type and date (possibly burnt); a base sherd of Cistercian ware, perhaps from a Tyg drinking cup; a sherd of Midland Yellow Ware:

both of which represent Tudor or slightly later ages (Laing, 2014). This cut fill contained no finds except what may be the remains of some extremely degraded nail heads as little more than iron staining in the context of the fill of the cut, as identified during the dig by archaeologist Penny Jackson.



1: Unknown smooth orange ware.
2: Base sherd of Cistercian Ware.
3: Body sherd of Midland Yellow Ware

The frequent presence of handmade nails at this site has been noted in previous reports and where these are pretty much intact their dating is likely to be medieval or post medieval (Nelson, 1968) that is before the advent of machine made nails. The level of degradation and the staining might imply something older than this and requires utmost care in examination.

References

Brown A, 2025, The Legacy of Puddle Clay Dams, Commission Internationale des Grandes Barrages, DOI: 10.1201/9781003642428-45, pp398-411

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Nelson LH, 1968, Nail chronology as an aid to dating old buildings, History News (USA), Vol 24, No 11, pp1-12