

Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Progress Report September 2026

Work during September focussed on filling a gap between Trial Trench 4 and Trial Trench 2 to ensure we didn't miss any critical archaeology. This work confirmed what we know of the garden at this point. In removing the overburden however, a sherd of Roman amphora was found and although out of its proper context, its really interesting. We continue to find pottery of all ages in the overburden and mostly this pottery tends to be domestic or common types: bowls, cups, jugs etc.

The sherd of amphora looks like this:



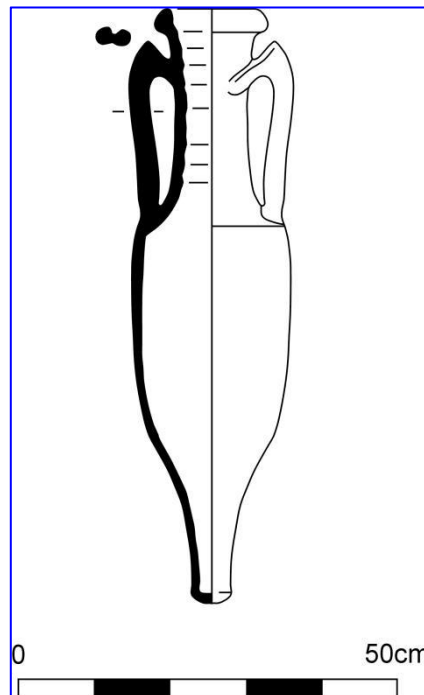
Amphora Sherd: Top left - exterior; Top right - interior, discoloured by contents;
Bottom - sherd break showing quartz grains

Amphoras (Amphorae) are commercial food and drink containers, such as for wine, olive oil, nuts or dried fruit and have been extensively studied, with the University of Southampton having produced a valuable catalogue of them. Tall cylindrical

ones tend to be for liquids and there are also big round fat ones which tend to be used for nuts, dried foods, flour, etc.

The story of our amphora

The sherd we have is from a tall cylindrical amphora that looks like this, they are about 80cm high, so they would stand a bit higher than your work desk:



University of Southampton: Dressel 16 Amphora

This type of amphora was made at Frejus in Provence in the south of France, by the Mediterranean coast, and they were made during the first and early second centuries.

What's it for?

Having noted that the tall ones were often used for liquids such as wine or olive oil, it's known that the ones from Frejus often contained Fish Sauce. Fish Sauce is a kind of condiment which was the ketchup of the Roman world, it was used extensively in cooking and to add as a topping to all kinds of dishes. It's made from fermented fish and was so smelly while it was being made that a Roman law

apparently existed banning making it in town limits. It was possible to get different grades: the top quality Garum was the everyday sauce and Allec, a kind of paste, the leftovers, was sold cheaply. It occurs in this recipe for meatballs (burgers and sausages) in Apicius (late 4th century):

Isicia omentata: pulpam concisam teres cum medulla siliginei in vino infusi. piper, liquamen, si velis, et bacam myrtam extenteratam simul conteres. pusilla isicia formabis, intus nucleis et pipere positis. involuta omento subassabis cum caroeno.

Pound minced lean meat with the crumb of fine white bread soaked in wine. Grind together pepper, fish sauce if you wish, and a myrtle berry with the seeds removed. Shape small patties, placing pine nuts and whole peppercorns inside. Wrap them in caul fat and lightly grill with caroenum (reduced sweet wine).

What's it doing here?

It's no surprise to find it here in Wirksworth, if our view of the current archaeological site proves to be correct. We should expect to find food production and hand food stalls at public gatherings, in the same way as you would find a burger van at modern events. A curiosity of its finding is that our current work is on the south side of the site and if this amphora and its contents of Fish Sauce were associated with a food stall (for example) one might expect those to be on the north side of the site between the town and the amphitheatre, because that's where you would get the most passing trade at an event. However, if we scratch our head a little there might be an explanation for it being on the south side.

If you go to an outdoor event, a carnival or a festival, you might not take your own food, because you would reasonably expect there to be food stalls, vans and carts selling things like drinks, hand food and takeaways. In short, you would expect a burger van and even if you couldn't see it you could smell it. We might conjecture, then, that our find is on the south side of the site because the prevailing wind in Wirksworth is from the south west. Putting a hot food cart on the south side would

mean that the aroma of your food would waft across the site and a lot of people would take in the aroma and think "Oh, I need that for lunch".

How did it get here?

Another strand of this story is how this amphora and its Fish Sauce got from the south coast of France to Wirksworth.

We know, from the history of Roman lead mining, that lead was a seriously important product in the Roman world and much of the Roman lead production was exported from Wirksworth and the Peak District to other parts of the empire by boat to be used for making things such as plumbing and tools. This trade route was by river barge down the Derwent and the Trent to the Roman port of Peturia, that is Brough on Humber near Hull, where the lead ingots were transferred to sea-going ships for the journey to Rome or other parts of the empire (Shone, 2019).

What has never been known is what the return cargo was. For shipping to be profitable and worth the effort and risk (of being shipwrecked) there would have to be a cargo in both directions - lead outgoing and something incoming. This is perhaps the first time an incoming cargo may have been considered for the Peak District, that is to say amphora - food and drink. One of the questions we might ask the Museum at Hull (if we ever have the time) is what else was found in archaeological digs at Peturia besides lead ingots - did they find any amphora?

The dig continues

Work at the site will proceed with Trial Trench 2 being expanded northwards. We continue to make small finds and the trench continues to produce unusually dressed stone.

Amphora Technical information

Type and sherd weight

Dressel 16 tall cylindrical amphora; sherd weight 127 grams

Origin and date

Frejus, south of France, Roman city of Forum Julii; First and early second century (to approx 150AD)

Thickness and body part

23mm thick, body sherd from just below the handles, slight rim remains and slight thumb sized carination around the sherd

Diameter of the amphora

A diameter of about 20-23cm

Pottery fabric

Its fabric has inclusions of ill sorted (random) white quartz grains (this means they're very small but have different sizes up to 1mm), it also contains tiny slivers of brown and black mica and little dark red iron spots in a fairly fine clay matrix

Pottery colour

The pottery fabric colour is buff. In Munsell colour code 10YR/8/4

References

Apicius C, late 4th century, Apicii librorum X qui dicuntur De re coquinaria quae extant accessed on 25.09.2026 at

<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Apicius/home.html>

Colchester Archaeological Trust, 2026, Just one fragment of Roman amphora, but with a story to tell, Colchester, CAT, accessed on 17.09.2026 at

<https://catuk.org/just-one-fragment-of-roman-amphora>

Dearne MJ, 1990, The Economy of the Roman South Pennines with particular reference to the lead extraction industry in its national context, Thesis, University of Sheffield, pp72-73

Peacock D and Williams DF, 1986, Amphorae and the Roman Economy: an introductory guide, London, Longman, p17, p117

Shone A, 2019, Navigation of the River Derwent in Roman and Medieval times, Wirksworth Archaeological Society, pp7-8

University of Southampton, 2014, Roman Amphorae: a digital resource, York, Archaeology Data Service, accessed on 16.09.2026 at https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/amphora_ahrb_2005/details.cfm?id=76