Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Progress Report October 2026 End of season

As you will have gathered from the colder weather outside, we reached the end of the season with the final dig day in October having to be cancelled due to high winds, rain and perishing temperatures. Today (7th November) was really a housekeeping day to winterise the trench, check measurements and catalogue some of the worked stone which has been collected from the dig during the season. This season has been quietly successful even though we continue to keep a low profile due to this being a private garden. I hope to give a talk to Members and Friends during the winter to illustrate how we're getting on, perhaps at the Wellspring Church Hall in Wirksworth and perhaps to include a site visit for those of you who are interested, subject to a separate notification. I particularly thank the Beacham family for their kind help, patience and much tea; as well as Site Archaeologist Tom Hough, Head of Archaeology at Brindle and Green; and all our dedicated dig team, for their hard work and persistence.

Things we have learned this season:
Firstly, there is a continuing background of Roman pottery from the site, much of this is from the overburden, but that isn't untypical and we're aware of the similarities with recent work at Derventio, Roman Carlisle and at other sites such as those in Colchester. Yes, we got excited about an amphora sherd, mentioned in the previous Progress Report, but this is because it represents non-domestic activity and has an interesting story to tell (the excitement of Fish Sauce!)



Pottery sherd of (Dressel 16) Roman Amphora

Secondly, our collection of dressed stone has increased during the season and includes examples of wall stone, quoin stone, voussoirs (arch stones) and even a sill stone from a gate or door, but also some really unusual ornamental stones. When we began this dig we didn't really pay enough attention to it (because you often find miscellaneous stones at digs) and a number of these were just returned to their respective test pits because we thought they were random or had been "brought in", yet mostly these stones are undamaged: had they been brought in they would have been damaged in transport and in dumping and they're not. The nature and range of this worked stone suggests it belongs to the site, indeed its not domestic or agricultural, but from an important and decorative building.



Examples of dressed and ornamental stone from the dig

Perhaps 90% of the stone is a fine grained beige sandstone, with the rest being a white limestone. The sandstone is perhaps from Pittywood, about a mile to the south-west of the archaeological dig, via (the now defunct) Pittywood Lane and lower Summer Lane. Pittywood has the same characteristics of being a Roman ground-delf quarry site as Pitholes Plantation at Wiggonlea Farm near Sandyford, about three and a half miles south-east of Wirksworth (Palfreyman and Ebbins, 2018). A comparison of the stone from the dig and the wood may be possible and would be of significance.

Thirdly, we're in the south seating bank and we know this from the sequence of archaeology: the contexts lie in the correct stratification for what we would expect from the structure of a seating bank (compared to other known examples) and we

also have stepped terracing in context 9, the clay of the seating bank. In so far as we know now where the 1963 estate builder bulldozed the ground in the garden, this gives a truncation (where the top was cut off) of the seating bank about 10 metres from the south end of Trench 2, this implies that more of the seating bank has survived than we had thought this time last year. We believe the arena wall lies forward of Trench 2 under yet more overburden, perhaps two metres from where we are and under a hedge which runs the length of the top of the slope of garden.



Trench 2 with its fencing and shuttering in the north-west corner of the garden



North end of the trench showing the distinct colour change in the contexts between the overburden and the intact archaeological stratification

In normal circumstances two metres in a flat field would be nothing to deal with, we could whip the top off, take a look and go home for a glass of the Co-op's somewhat inferior Chardonnay, all in "just three days". Here though, the builder has given us a hard time: the depth of the overburden is significant and we are compelled to move forward at a glacial pace. It takes a world of patience. On the other hand, although the builder has done this, as well as cutting the top off the feature, some of it is preserved under what the builder has dumped and, in so doing, they have done us a service. The dig will continue in the Spring.

References

Anon, 1806, Wirksworth Enclosure Award 1802 and Map 1806, Derbyshire Record Office, D163/20/1, D2962/5/1 and Q/RI 107

Anon (Wirksworth Local Board), 1836, Plan of the Township of Wirksworth, Derbyshire Record Office, D2962UL

Cameron K, 1959, The Place-names of Derbyshire, Cambridge, University Press, Vol 2, p417

Colchester Archaeological Trust, 2026, Just one fragment of Roman amphora, but with a story to tell, Colchester, CAT, accessed on 17th September 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

Fulford M, 1989, The Silchester Amphitheatre: The excavations of 1979-85, London, Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, Britannia Monograph Series No 10, pp13-15

Holbrook N, 1998, Cirencester Excavations: the Roman Town Defences, Public Buildings and Shops, Cotswold Archaeological Trust, part 2, pp35-98, accessed on 10th December 2025 at https://cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/publication/cirencester-the-roman-town-defences-public-buildings-and-shops/

Hutchinson S, 1709, The Wirksworth Map of the Gell Estate, Derbyshire Record Office, D258 M/18/6

Jones GDB, 1969, Excavations at Carmarthen 1968, The Carmarthenshire Antiquary: Transactions of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society and Field

Club, Trafodion Cymdeithas Efrydu Hynafriaith a Natur yn Sir Gaerfyrddin, Vol V, pp2-5

Little JH, 1971, The Carmarthen Amphitheatre, The Carmarthenshire Antiquary: Transactions of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society and Field Club, Trafodion Cymdeithas Efrydu Hynafiaith a Natur yn Sir Gaerfyrddin, Vol VII, p58-62

Palfreyman A and Ebbins S et al, 2015, Excavation at a suspected Roman villa at Heage, Derbyshire, 2011-2013, Derbyshire Archaeological Journal, Vol 135, pp41-81

Palfreyman A and Ebbins S, 2018, Iron Age and Roman Quern Manufacture in the middle Derwent Valley, Derbyshire, Derbyshire Archaeological Journal, Vol 138, pp14-38

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

Thomas I, 2019, Delving along the Derwent: a history of 200 quarries and the people who worked them, Llandysul, Gomer Press, p14-18

Tithe Commissioners, 1837, Tithe Map of Wirksworth, Derbyshire Record Office, D2223 A/PI 32 and

Tithe Commissioners, 1848, Tithe Map of Wirksworth, Derbyshire Record Office, D2360/3/12a and copy at D4996/6/18

Tyers PA, 2021, Potsherd: an atlas of Roman pottery, Rossington Bridge Roman Black Burnished Ware, accessed on 25th April 2026 at https://potsherd.net/atlas/Ware/RBBB1

University of Southampton, 2014, Roman Amphorae: a digital resource, York, Archaeology Data Service, accessed on 16th September 2026 at https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/amphora_ahrb_2005/details.cfm?id=76

Wacher J, 1995, The Towns of Roman Britain, London, Routledge, 2ed, pp49-61 and p391

Wilmot T, 2008, The Roman Amphitheatre in Britain, Stroud, Tempus, pp62-91