Wirksworth Archaeological Society

Progress Report May 2024

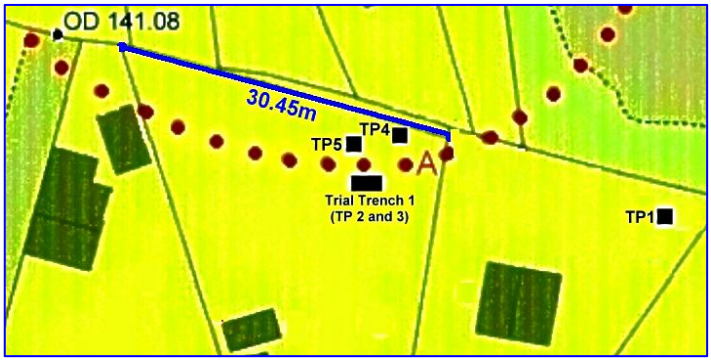
Following an interminably cold and wet winter, work restarted at our site at the north end of Ian Avenue, with the kind permission of David Beacham, on the 5th May. This initial work was mainly about clearing the site, measuring and removing rubble. I am aware that some members and friends of the Society would like to join us for this dig and I will contact people who are interested presently.

The difficulties of working this sloping, constrained, rubble-covered site cannot be overstated. Under the trees the slope is composed of vast amounts of 1964 builder's rubble, from when Ian Avenue was built. In order for us to reach any of the potential archaeology here, typically we have to take out a cubic metre of rubble from the top of a single metre test pit: in plain English we have to remove a ton of rubble by hand to just get to the pre-1964 surface, the site is impossible to access by any kind of machinery. On the other hand work has not been without progress. We know that the feature we are looking for should be made up of three components: a built clay bank with an overlay of gravel, behind a metre wide wall, with silt soil in front of the wall and probably over it.

Currently then, Trial Trench 1 (from last season's dig) contains deposited clay and the Test Pit 4 core samples contain silt. The significance of the silt is that it tells us we are in front of the wall, whereas the clay is behind it. Test Pit 5 is still at the rubble removal stage. If we are correct and we have narrowed this down properly, the distance we have to dig between Test Pit 5 and the Trial Trench is 2 metres 45 centimetres. This sounds lovely and easy to examine (if it were a nice flat open field it would be) but it contains a steep slope, tons of builder's rubble, a pack of trees and a huge hedge. TP 5 is located at the place where there are the least trees and a small gap in the hedge.

***

Work continued in unusually sunny conditions on the 25th May for Test Pits 4 and 5. Test Pit 4 again contains vast amounts of "builder's activity", in this case mainly redeposited light brown clay, patches of ashy soil, modern brick, Marley roof tile and bits of tarmac which overlays a context of clean fine silty soil. This soil represents ground level before Ian Avenue was built in 1964. All the rubble dates from 1964 plus household garden tipping after that date and finally leaf mould soil on top, as the slope is now wooded with trees and hedges. Due to the slope of the ground here, the silty soil was initially only reached by using the core auger, but was later dug out to see if the layer had any further finds in it.



Plan of Test Pits at the dig site at the north end of Ian Avenue.
The red dots at A are the titular line of the crop mark in the 1950 aerial photograph

The fine silty soil, about 20cm deep, contains small finds including bits of clay pipe stem, bits of old glass, china and bone. The very bottom of this context contained a very thin but very pronounced element of charcoal bits in the silt. This silty soil is to expected, the ground here was a field called Short Oat Hill in 1709 (Long Oat Hill was on the Pillar Butts side, west side, of Derby Road). By 1837 the field had changed hands and become “Warmbrook Land” which name it appears to have had until 1964 and was a meadow (half of it is now Ian Avenue and the other half is Ecclesbourne Close and The Hawthorns). Under the silty soil was more clay which couldn’t be examined due to the depth. Test Pit 4 has now been backfilled.

Site of Test Pit 4 with the slope levelled neatly after backfilling, looking east

This brings us to Test Pit 5. The same difficulties apply and the test pit is further up the slope. Again we have large amounts of builders rubble and again the pre 1964 ground surface is below this.

Test Pit 5 showing the layers (contexts) of rubble, looking south.

There is a much clearer differentiation of builders activity in Test Pit 5. Immediately below the leaf mould, there is a layer of tarmac debris, which is a characteristically black colour. Under this, as you can see in the photograph, is a layer of mixed clay, which is a light brown beige colour and below that is a grey gravel on top of the brown soil of the (apparently) original field surface.

Let's just consider what's going on here. The last thing that happens is that the tarmac debris is tipped down the slope, this might be from the 1964 build or it might be from later if the household removed a tarmac drive, for example.

Then there is the clay and the gravel. Now, as it happens, these seem to be upside down, for example, the gravel contains Marley roof tile sherds which are at the bottom. In the Trial Trench, where the garden levels out, there is some gravel on top of clay. What seems to have gone on here is that there was presumably a layer or pile of gravel in the garden which the builders have thrown roof tile on top of and this has then been bulldozed over the edge of the slope (so what was on the top is now on the bottom). The gravel is strange, it contains pottery sherds of light bodied brown glazed wares and black glazed wares of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as both modern and handmade nails. On the one hand these wares might represent some kind of contamination in modern gravel, on the other they might represent that the gravel is somehow older than it appears to be. We need to open a test pit away from this one (probably towards the west boundary) or core auger, to see if the gravel occurs at the same height on the slope, as this might tell us whether what we have in Test Pit 5 is simply a pile of contaminated builders gravel bulldozed down the slope or whether the gravel was actually there before Bob the Builder did his work. The question is more important than it seems, because the archaeological feature we are looking for should, in fact, contain clay and gravel. In the meantime, we will expand Test Pit 5 into a Trail Trench so we can work down to the field surface. Currently, a core sample into it has brought out fragments of mortar and stone, which do not appear to occur in the other core samples.

The examination will continue in due course. I am, as ever, most grateful for the hard work and persistence of our diggers and for the kind supplies of tea and interested support of the household.