

Archaeology at the Wilderness, 12th June 2019.

The Wilderness, near Mitcheldean, has been known as such since time immemorial. For the purpose of our current archaeological project our story starts in the 17th century and the acquisition of the Wilderness site in 1641 by Richard Colchester. Richard was a lawyer, the seat of the Colchester family was at the nearby Westbury Court (today a National Trust property and one of very few Dutch water gardens in Britain).

Richard Colchester died in 1643 and the estate passed on to his son, Duncombe. Duncombe was also a politician and seemingly a very colourful character. He fought for the king at the siege of Gloucester in the August of 1643 and was knighted for his efforts after the restoration in 1674.

In 1655 Duncombe married Elizabeth Maynard, daughter of Sir John Maynard who would have a big influence on Duncombe's political and religious ideals. It was around this time that Duncombe built a home at the Wilderness, maybe an escape from the hustle and bustle at Westbury Court.

Little, if anything remains of the original building that was named Hill House. It passed through a couple of generations and was rebuilt by Elizabeth Colchester in 1824. There is, possibly, a section of the original building to be found at the south west end of the building we see today.

By 1884 the house was being used a sanitarium for women from Barnwood House Hospital in Gloucester and by 1919 was in use an isolation hospital. It went on to see action as a geriatric hospital and then in 1968 was acquired for use as an outdoor field school.

And thus it remains today, celebrating 50 years of amazing outdoor learning.

As one element of this 50th anniversary we are running a research project to try and get a glimpse into the life of the Colchester family and the house they built to enjoy the phenomenal views that we still appreciate to this day. Our task for the day - could we locate a footprint or the tiniest of clues of the original building?

To do this we conducted some geophysical survey, specifically resistivity. By sending a weak electrical current into the ground we can identify areas of strong resistance (ohms), maybe indicating a wall or pathway, and weak resistance, maybe a watery ditch.

Our first task was to lay out a 20x20 m grid. There is a crafty method to achieve a perfect square using some help from Pythagoras. Every archaeologist will be able to tell you that the length of the hypotenuse within a 20m square is 28.28 metres, because they lay out a lot of 20m grids! From there it is simply a matter of measuring.

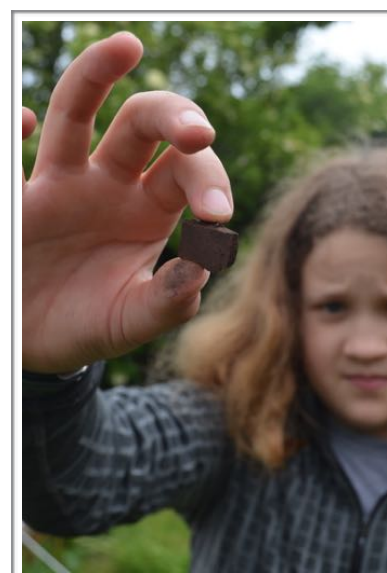


Preparing the grids

With the grids in place, it was time to get surveying. This is a complex procedure involving walking up and down, relentlessly all day. At every metre, we just stick the probes on the end of the frame into the ground and listen for the beep. We can then read off the resistance, in ohms, on the display. We don't need to trouble ourselves with remembering the figures, the box of electronics does everything for us.



We have learnt in our lessons that voles can be an archaeologists friend when it comes to stratigraphy and dating. Moles are also friends of the archaeologist. It is always worth giving a mole hill a little kick, you never know what their burrowing can excavate! And during this session we found half a dozen pieces of post medieval pottery - very encouraging.



And the results.....



Fantastic. We kept meeting a narrow area of high resistance (bottom right hand side) suggesting maybe a path between the two gates and the route we think the staff would take walking to and from the house from Mitcheldean. But it seems a little narrow, could this be a bit of a wall?

On the left hand side we seem to have just touched another area of high resistance and a significant feature in the centre. Could this be the remains of a more formal garden? Or is it modern drainage? The bright area at the foot of the image we know to be drainage.

The next stage of this project will be (subject to the landowners permission) to dig a couple of test pits and see what archaeology can be found. We have dates in the diary next month to do this.

And in terms of future geophysics, we simply have to survey the left hand side of the gardens.

We hope, by the 3rd August, our Wilderness celebration day, to have more to tell and display about the Colchester family and the archaeology of the Wilderness Centre.

This was a fantastic day, we had perfect archaeology weather - damp and miserable, and lots of enthusiasm. Thank you to Tony Roberts from Archaeoscan, MYP 1 and 2 for doing all the work and the friendly and helpful support from the people at the Wilderness centre.