

Excavations at Oxford Castle: Oxford's Western Quarter from the Mid-Saxon Period to the Late Eighteenth Century (Based on Daniel Poore's Tom Hassall Lecture for 2008)

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SUMMARY

Excavations and building recording work carried out at Oxford Castle have revealed important new information about Oxford's late Anglo-Saxon origins, demonstrating that the defensive rampart extended around the western quarter of the town. New results suggest that the enigmatic St George's Tower may pre-date the Norman Conquest, and the town's grid of late Anglo-Saxon metalled streets may have extended as far as its west gate, with commercial and domestic buildings laid out along its line. The massive ditches and earthworks associated with the construction of the Norman castle have been revealed, along with evidence for the walls, gates, bridges, towers, and internal structures of the Anglo-Norman and later medieval castle. A group of burials from the motte ditch, dating from the late fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, are probably those of prisoners; some of the remains showed evidence of dissection for anatomical study. Evidence has also been recovered for minor adaptations of the castle during the Civil War, and for the way in which it gradually faded from the urban landscape as tenements encroached on its ditches, and its interior was turned over for use as pleasure gardens, once it had become obsolete.

Between 1999 and 2005 Oxford Archaeology carried out a programme of archaeological evaluation, excavation, and watching-brief work at the site of Oxford Castle, which included the area of buildings used as Oxford Prison until its closure in 1997. The work was in advance of the redevelopment of the site by Oxford Castle Ltd and the Oxford Preservation Trust. A monograph on the results of excavations at the site between 1999 and 2005 is due to be published in 2010, and work on analysing and interpreting the results is still ongoing. This paper is therefore an interim report on those results.

Oxford Castle is situated at the western end of medieval Oxford, on the southern spur of the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace, to the east of the river Thames and to the west of the river Cherwell. The confluence of these two rivers is about 2 km south-east of the castle (Fig. 1). Detailed analysis has been carried out only for particular phases and areas of the site, and the level of discussion below reflects this. The results are presented in five project phases, and concentrate on those phases that seem to shed most light on the development of the town and the early castle itself, as well as an intriguing group of post-medieval burials from within the motte ditch.

PRE-BURH ACTIVITY TO c.911

The development of Oxford is thought to have begun in the mid-Anglo-Saxon period. There is increasing evidence for the existence of a mid-Anglo-Saxon minster here, on the site that is today occupied by Christ Church and Oxford Cathedral, and this would have acted as a focus for settlement, trade, and development.¹ However, evidence for mid-Anglo-Saxon activity in Oxford

¹ Anne Dodd, ed., *Oxford before the University, the late Saxon and Norman Archaeology of the Thames Crossing, the Defences and the Town*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 17 (Oxford, 2003), pp. 17–19.

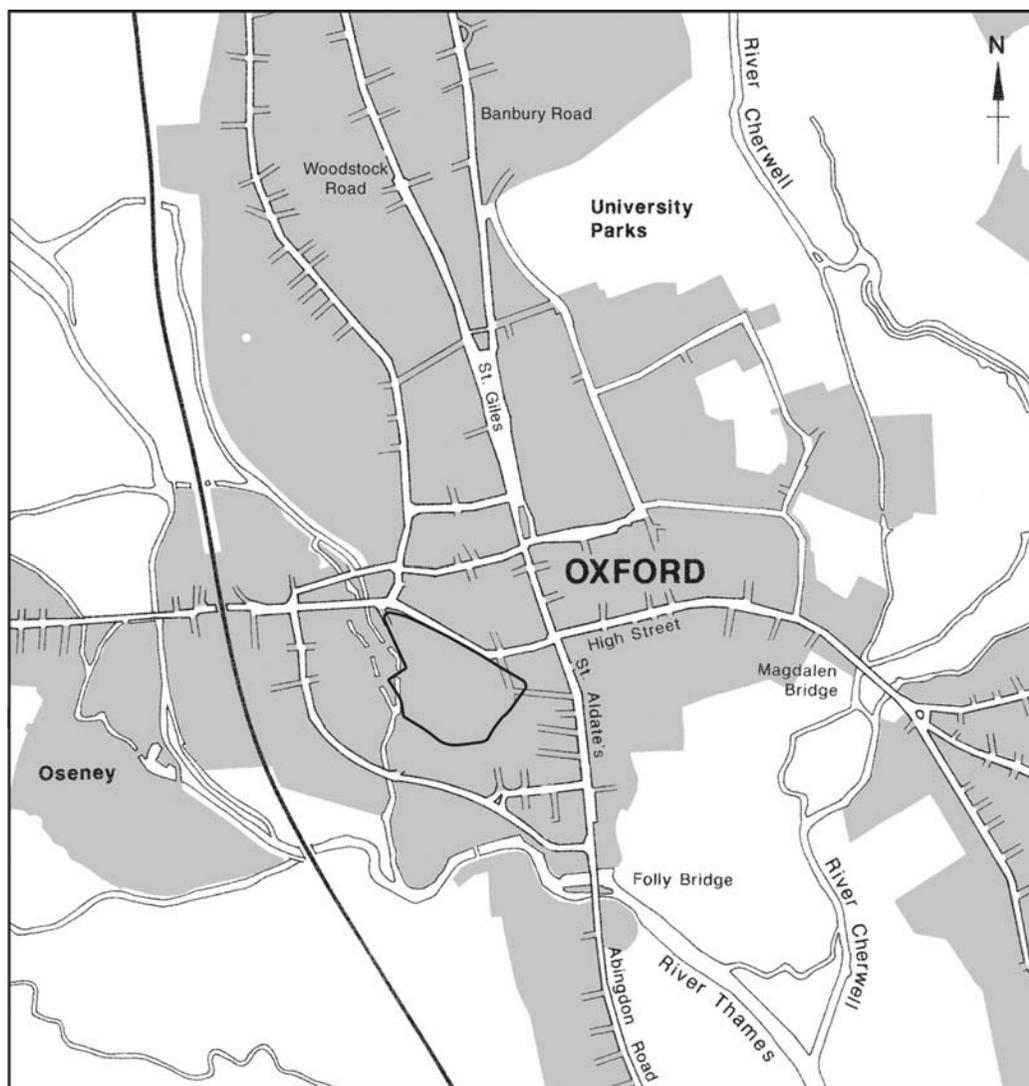


Fig. 1. Site location

remains relatively scarce; most notably there is the river crossing at St Aldate's, seventh-century and later burials at Christ Church, and a ditch below the earliest *burh* street surface at Church Street, now partly covered by Penny Farthing Place.²

Evidence for this early period was also limited at the castle site, but what was seen was indicative of a pastoral landscape. Dung-rich turves within the late Anglo-Saxon rampart (see below) are likely to have been dug from pastureland in the vicinity at the time the rampart was first constructed. A total of twenty-three sherds of redeposited early to middle Anglo-Saxon handmade pottery was recovered from deposits across the site, with pit digging and evidence of possible buildings also found. The best evidence for an early building seen at the castle site was a partially preserved postbuilt structure (see Fig. 3, Structure C1. The position of the postholes has been shown on the figure, but they were, in fact, overlain by a metalled surface). Although direct dating evidence for this building is very limited, it was built and subsequently demolished prior to the construction of the metalled surface that overlay it, which we have interpreted as part of a late Anglo-Saxon street (see below). A network of surfaced streets seems to have been part of the original layout of the town and was probably in place by about 920.³ This would imply that Structure C1 pre-dates the establishment of the street grid and therefore dates from the early tenth century or before. Potentially it is one of the earliest known Oxford buildings. Further support for this comes from the presence in the pottery assemblage from the site of sherds of Stamford ware datable to the period from the mid-ninth to the early tenth century.

EVIDENCE FOR THE LATE ANGLO-SAXON TOWN, c.911–1071 (Fig. 2)

Defences

It is assumed that Oxford's defences were constructed at the turn of the tenth century. The town must have had fortifications by the period 914–19, when it appears in a list of West Saxon and Mercian defensive centres (or *burhs*) known as the Burghal Hidage, and there is no strong evidence for fortifications prior to that time.⁴ A large earthen bank or rampart, up to 15 m wide, was observed in at least three locations along the southern part of the castle site (Fig. 2). It was of very similar size and form to the town rampart identified during earlier excavations at St Michael's St, the Church of St Michael at the Northgate, and at New College.⁵ The bank was constructed directly upon natural gravel, the circuit presumably having been de-turfed to define the line and provide turves for construction. It was constructed from redeposited gravel, loess, topsoil, and turves. The primary deposits consisted of turf lines between dumps of soil. Micromorphological analysis demonstrated that the turves were rich in dung. A ragstone retaining wall had been constructed against the southern face of the bank in at least two phases and was again very similar in appearance to that seen at the Northgate. The wall was faced only on its southern, outer side and had a rubble core. It is worth noting here that the presence of medieval Oxford ware pottery (Oxfordshire Fabric OXY) within the construction cut of the wall, a feature that can be demonstrated to be stratigraphically earlier than the eleventh-century castle, must lead to a re-evaluation of the earliest date of manufacture for the pottery, previously thought to be c.1075.

² Angela Boyle, 'Excavations at Christ Church Cathedral graveyard, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), pp. 337–68; T. G. Hassall, C. E. Halpin, and Maureen Mellor, 'Excavations in St Ebbe's, Oxford, 1967–76: Part I: Late Saxon and medieval domestic occupation and tenements, and the medieval Greyfriars', *Oxoniensia*, 54 (1989), pp. 81–110.

³ Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pp. 26–9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–22; 31–2.

⁵ D. R. P. Wilkinson, 'Excavations at 24A St Michael's St, 1985', in Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pp. 140–52; B. Durham, C. Halpin, and N. Palmer, 'Oxford's northern defences: archaeological studies, 1971–82', *Oxoniensia*, 48 (1983), pp. 13–40; Paul Booth, 'Excavations on the line of the city defences at New College, Oxford, 1993', *Oxoniensia*, 60 (1995), pp. 205–24.



Fig. 2. Plan of mid- and late Saxon archaeological features and the presumed layout of the town's western street plan

The rampart at Oxford is generally similar in construction to those seen at Wallingford, Hereford, Cricklade, Wiltshire, and Lydford, Devonshire, where the defences were seen to be, or assumed to be, constructed from turves.⁶ At Hereford, Cricklade, and Lydford the ramparts were also faced by stone walls, whereas at Wallingford and at Wareham, Dorset, walls were seen on the crest of the rampart.⁷

It has been suggested that the rampart at New College may have formed part of an eleventh-century eastern extension of the *burh*, possibly as a result of renewed Danish attacks.⁸ However, the existence of a later extension to a primary fortified *burh* has proved difficult to reconcile with other excavated evidence, in particular the consistency in the construction and appearance of the rampart, and the earliest Anglo-Saxon street surfaces, throughout Oxford.⁹ The presence at the castle site of a stone retaining wall similar to that seen at St Michael at the Northgate, and a street surface almost identical in nature to the earliest surface seen at Church Street and elsewhere, lends weight to the theory of a town built in one phase, rather than with extensions to east and west. On the southern side of St George's Tower two burials were cut into the rampart and were carbon dated to c.1000 AD (see below). It seems likely that the rampart was constructed at least a few decades before the eleventh century, in order for part of it to cease functioning as part of a defensive circuit and instead form the outer limits of a cemetery.

The western edge of the *burh* has always been uncertain, but we can now show fortified defences, buildings, and other widespread evidence of domestic and commercial activity, and road surfaces extending as far as St George's Tower, at the western end of the site.

St George's Tower and the Westgate

The origins of St George's Tower have always been the subject of debate, as John Blair discussed in the Tom Hassall Lecture for 1999.¹⁰ Like the pre-Conquest tower of St Michael's at the Northgate, thought to have been constructed between 1010 and 1060, St George's Tower is constructed from local Corallian limestone and contains Norman Romanesque features. However, St George's Tower differs markedly from St Michael's, primarily in its sheer size and bulk.¹¹ It is possible that St George's Tower formed part of the Norman castle constructed in 1071, but a single, massive stone tower does not seem to belong within the outer defences of an earth-and-timber castle. The entrance into the tower is formed by a Romanesque arch, defined by Taynton ashlar limestone blocks resting on chamfered impostes within the east wall. Ribbing extending from the impostes is similar in shape to the ribbing seen on the belfry windows of St Michael at the Northgate and is characteristic of decoration seen in Anglo-Saxon architecture. John Blair has commented that a pre-Conquest date for St George's Tower is looking increasingly possible as a result of OA's investigations. He has suggested that the tower was perhaps the product of Norman influence,

⁶ N. Brooks, 'Excavations at Wallingford Castle, 1965: an interim report', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 62 (1965–6), pp. 7–21; B. Durham, T. Hassall, T. Rowley, and C. Simpson, 'A cutting across the Saxon defences at Wallingford, Berkshire, 1971', *Oxoniensia*, 37 (1972), pp. 82–5; R. Shoemith, *Hereford City Excavations, 2: Excavations on and close to the Defences*, CBA Research Report 46 (London, 1982), p. 90; C. A. R. Radford, 'Excavations at Cricklade, 1948–63', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 67 (1972), pp. 61, 101; D. M. Wilson and D. G. Hurst, 'Medieval Britain in 1965', *MedArch* 10 (1966), p. 168.

⁷ D. M. Wilson and D. G. Hurst, 'Medieval Britain in 1966', *MedArch* 11 (1967), pp. 262–319; RCHME, 'Wareham west walls', *MedArch* 3 (1959), p. 126.

⁸ Tom Hassall, 'Topography of pre-University Oxford', in C. G. Smith and D. I. Scargill, eds, *Oxford and its Region: Geographical Essays* (1975), pp. 29–36; Tom Hassall, 'Archaeology of Oxford City', in Grace Briggs, Jean Cook, and Trevor Rowley, eds, *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*, Oxford University Department for External Studies (Oxford, 1986), p. 122.

⁹ Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pp. 21–5.

¹⁰ John Blair, 'The Tom Hassall Lecture for 1999: Later Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire, 700–1100', *Oxoniensia*, 65, pp. 1–6.

¹¹ John Blair, 'Date and context', in Brian Durham, 'St Michael at the Northgate tower survey, 1985–6', in Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pp. 162–3.

or even a Norman master mason at work in the town, in the years leading up to the Norman Conquest.¹²

During the excavations two late Anglo-Saxon burials were found on the southern side of St George's Tower and the former site of the eleventh-century church of St George in the Castle. The burials cut into the late Anglo-Saxon rampart and were disturbed by the construction trench for the later Anglo-Saxon retaining wall. The two burials were carbon dated to between 949 and 1028. It is therefore likely that the burials confirm what has long been suspected – that St George in the Castle, founded by Robert d'Oilly in 1074 as a college of secular canons, was on the site of an earlier Anglo-Saxon church.¹³

Life in the burh

A detailed view of life in late Anglo-Saxon Oxford was revealed buried beneath the massive ramparts of the Norman castle, and therefore exceptionally well preserved: a row of structures fronted a probable road within the C-Wing excavation, and cellar pits and associated refuse or cess pits and quarry pits appeared to lie either side of a road within Area A (Fig. 2). Other isolated features revealed across the site provided further evidence for a well-populated western quarter.

Cellar pits. Four flat-bottomed vertically sided cellar pits were revealed within Area A, and three similar pits were observed in the eastern part of the site. Structural features (beam-slots and postholes) and lime or chalk surfaces were present at the bases of some. All the pits had been rapidly infilled and were tenth-century or eleventh-century in origin. Any evidence for associated superstructures had been removed by later activity. Daub was recovered from within the pits, making it likely that they were lined with wattle and daub.

Cellar pits were common in late Anglo-Saxon Oxford, as well as in towns such as York, Thetford, Chester, London, and Wallingford, and may have been the earliest type of post-Roman building designed specifically for use in an urban environment.¹⁴ It is likely that the cellar pits within the castle site lay beneath buildings on commercial plots, with the cellars designed for storage of produce. Their position is often indicative of the presence of a road on to which they fronted and from which trading could take place. Cess or refuse pits were located in close proximity to the cellar pits, containing environmental evidence that mostly comprised burnt and some mineralized material, indicative of mixed refuse rather than primary sewage.

Postbuilt structures and a possible road (Fig. 3). At least three postbuilt structures (C1–C3) were observed in the vicinity of a metalled surface at the C-Wing site. No cellar pits were recorded, perhaps suggesting domestic (that is, non-commercial) buildings, but the C-Wing site is low lying and may have been unsuitable for cellars. Structure C1 was overlain by the metalled surface and therefore pre-dates it (see above). The most complete identified structure (C3) probably represents the western end of a large hall, with an annexe and loft to the west; the annexe measuring 5 m by 5 m wide. Part of a building, or possible further extension (C2), lay to the west and cut through the metalled surface. The surface probably formed part of a street running parallel to the town's south-western defences (Fig. 2). Although the possibility that the surface formed part of a yard cannot be discounted, its construction was identical to surfaces thought to form part of the primary Anglo-Saxon street grid seen at Castle Street during St Ebbe's excavations in the 1970s and at Church Street.¹⁵ Unlike the surfaces at Church Street and Castle Street, the C-Wing surface was not regularly resurfaced, although some evidence of repair was apparent. It is likely that the street was laid out at the same time as the surfaces elsewhere in the *burh*, but formed a relatively minor route along the rear of the southern defences.

¹² John Blair, personal communication.

¹³ *VCH Oxon*, 4, p. 381; D. F. Renn, 'Burhgeat and Gonfanon', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 16 (1994), pp. 177–98.

¹⁴ Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pp. 40–1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256; Hassall, Halpin, and Mellor, 'Excavations in St Ebbe's', pp. 121–5.

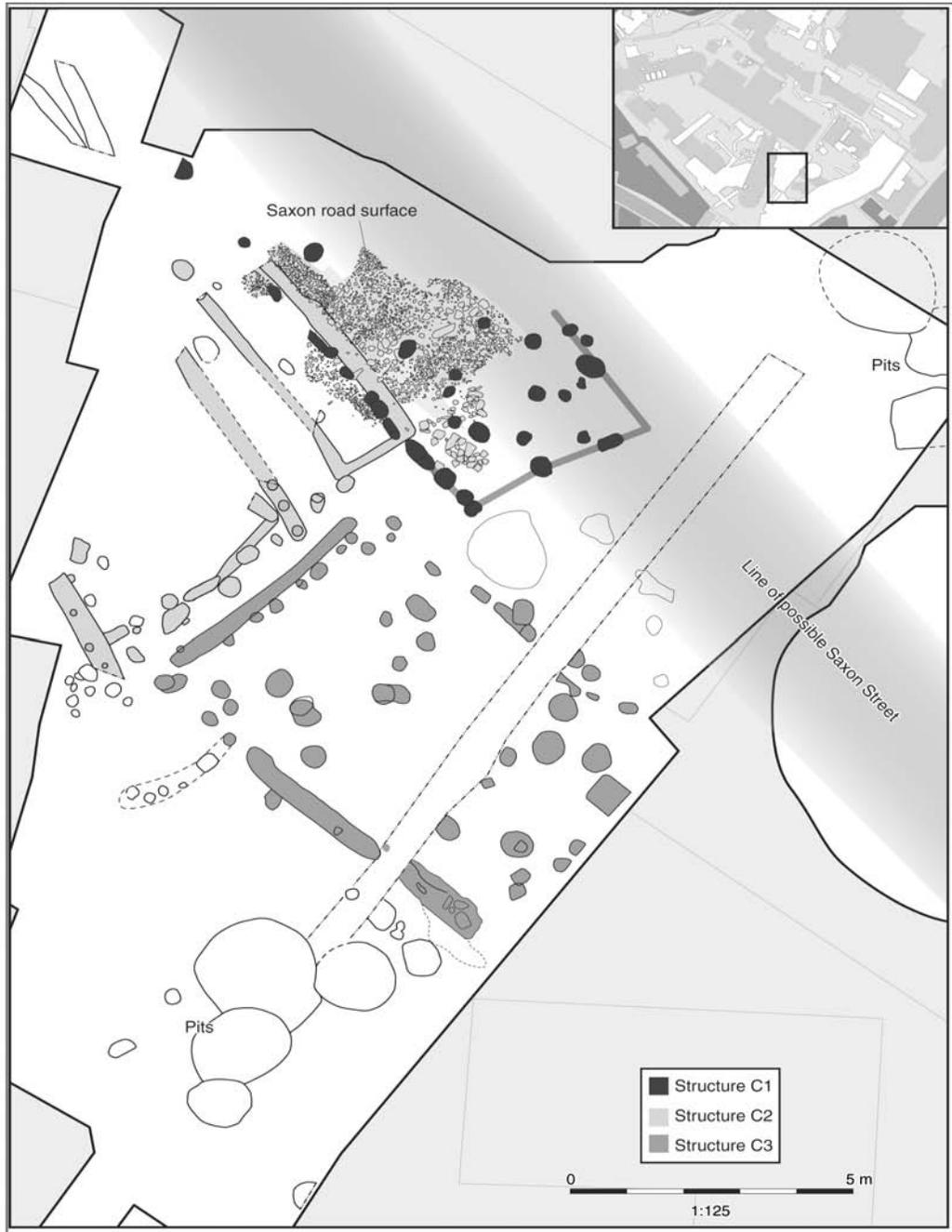


Fig. 3. Mid- and late Saxon timber halls at C-Wing

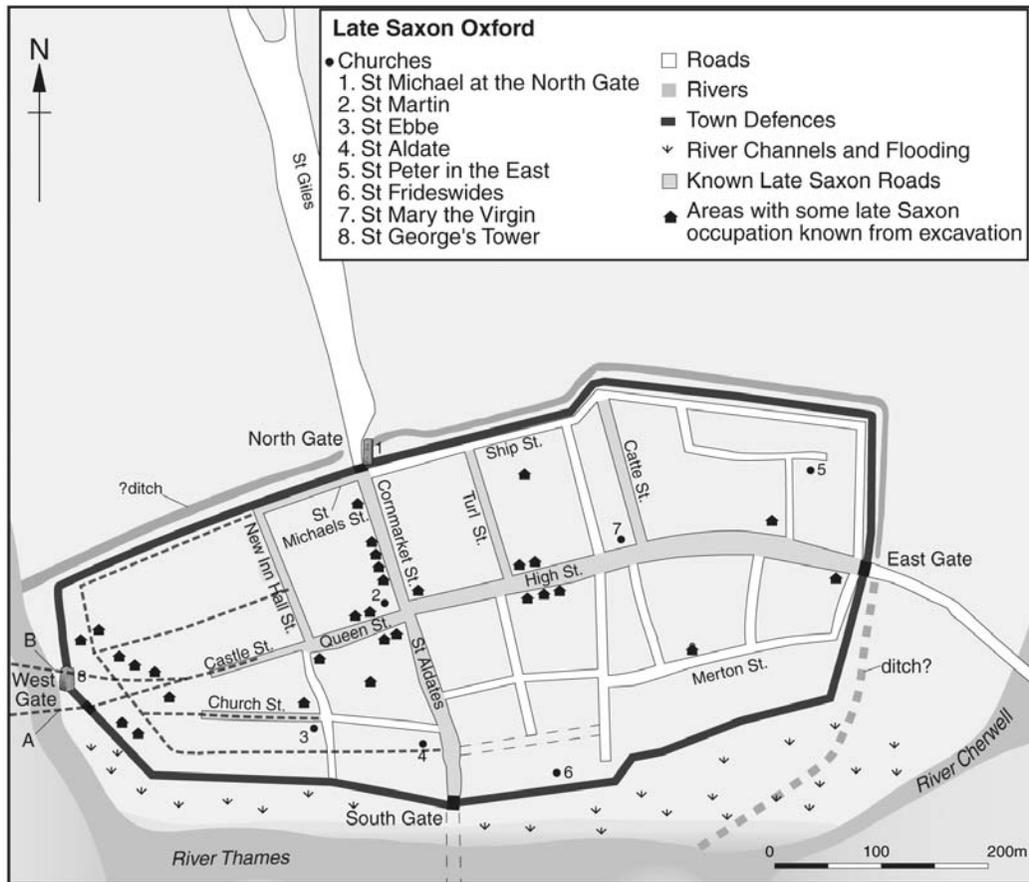


Fig. 4. Revised plan of the late Saxon *burh* showing the presumed layout of the town's western street plan

A layer of soil overlay the road surface and postholes within Area C, as well as the 'tail' of the rampart, showing that the buildings and road went out of use some time prior to the construction of the Norman castle's ramparts in this part of the site.

By examining the position of the late Anglo-Saxon pits and postbuilt structures it is possible to suggest a street plan for the western end of the *burh*. Two possibilities remain for the position of the town's west gate at this time – Route A, which would place the gate immediately to the south of St George's Tower (Figs 2 and 4) and in line with Osney Lane, or Route B, which requires the main east-west street to deviate north from its line and pass to the north of St George's Tower, where the castle's west gate was later to lie.

Material evidence. There was little evidence of people's occupations amongst the material remains, but Paul Blinkhorn's analysis of the pottery assemblage has identified a clear distinction between ceramic evidence from the tenth- and eleventh-century assemblages. The tenth-century ceramic assemblage is the largest Anglo-Saxon group to have been excavated in Oxford in recent years, and St Neot's ware was dominant (84 per cent of the assemblage by weight), with relatively few sherds of the local shelly-limestone late Saxon Oxford ware (Oxfordshire Fabric B) common on ninth- and tenth-century sites elsewhere in the town. Cotswold-type ware (early medieval Oxford

ware, Oxfordshire Fabric AC) dominated the eleventh-century pre-Conquest assemblage (87 per cent by weight). Maureen Mellor has previously observed this pattern at the castle and also noted that eleventh-century sites along the central market streets tended to favour either St Neot's ware or Cotswold-type ware.¹⁶ Both Mellor and Blinkhorn see this as reflecting cultural preferences among the people of the town, Maureen Mellor suggesting a link with the presence of Danish settlers, and Paul Blinkhorn (in his current study of the Oxford Castle assemblage) suggesting a link with the cultural orientation of the population towards either Mercia or Wessex.

THE NORMAN CASTLE 1071–1216 (Fig. 5)

The Motte Ditch

In 1071 Robert d'Oilly constructed a castle in the western part of Oxford, thought to comprise an earthen mound (motte) and surrounding ditch, connected to a moated bailey. Over 30 m of the defensive ditch at the base of the motte was excavated within Area A. The motte ditch and the bailey ditch were originally fed by the Castle Mill stream, which still runs along the western edge of the castle site. The maximum excavated width of the motte ditch was 9 m, likely to represent only half of its original total width. In general, the ditch was about 5.5 to 6 m deep, with sides at about 45 degrees.

The primary fills of the motte ditch contained pottery dating from the tenth or late eleventh century and dumped waste from eleventh-century shoemaking. The pottery and leather dates demonstrate that the motte ditch was allowed to silt up almost immediately after initial excavation, with no evidence of regular scouring out. The west gate of the castle was revealed *within* the line of the motte ditch, off Tidmarsh Lane (see below), and at this stage it is still unclear whether the motte ditch ever fully encircled the motte.

The Motte

The base of the motte was revealed within the Tidmarsh Lane site (Fig. 5) as steps cut into the natural gravel, below the assumed level of the medieval occupation horizon, the steps measuring between 0.2 m and 0.5 m high and over 0.2 m wide. Recent excavations in advance of repairs to the motte demonstrated that it was constructed in two main stages: layers of gravel capped by an alluvial-clay stabilizing layer, followed by further dumps of gravel, and a final consolidating capping of Oxford clay. The material, which included Oxford clay, was clearly derived from the excavation of the surrounding motte ditch.

The Bailey Ditch

The bailey ditch was only partially excavated and only the upper, post-medieval fills were removed. The most detailed excavation took place on Paradise Street, in advance of the construction of new student accommodation for St Peter's College (Fig. 5). The south-western part of the castle moat was revealed, curving from the south-east to the north, but the base of the moat lay beyond the limit of excavation and was not reached. The southern edge of the moat was seen to be retained by a roughly hewn ragstone wall, which was reinforced with clay 'puddling' that contained pottery dating from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

Ramparts

The ramparts defining the castle's bailey were very well preserved, particularly at the south-east, in places surviving only 0.1 m below current ground level. The rampart survived to a height of

¹⁶ Maureen Mellor, 'The Saxon and medieval ceramic finds from the town sites', in Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pp. 342–3.

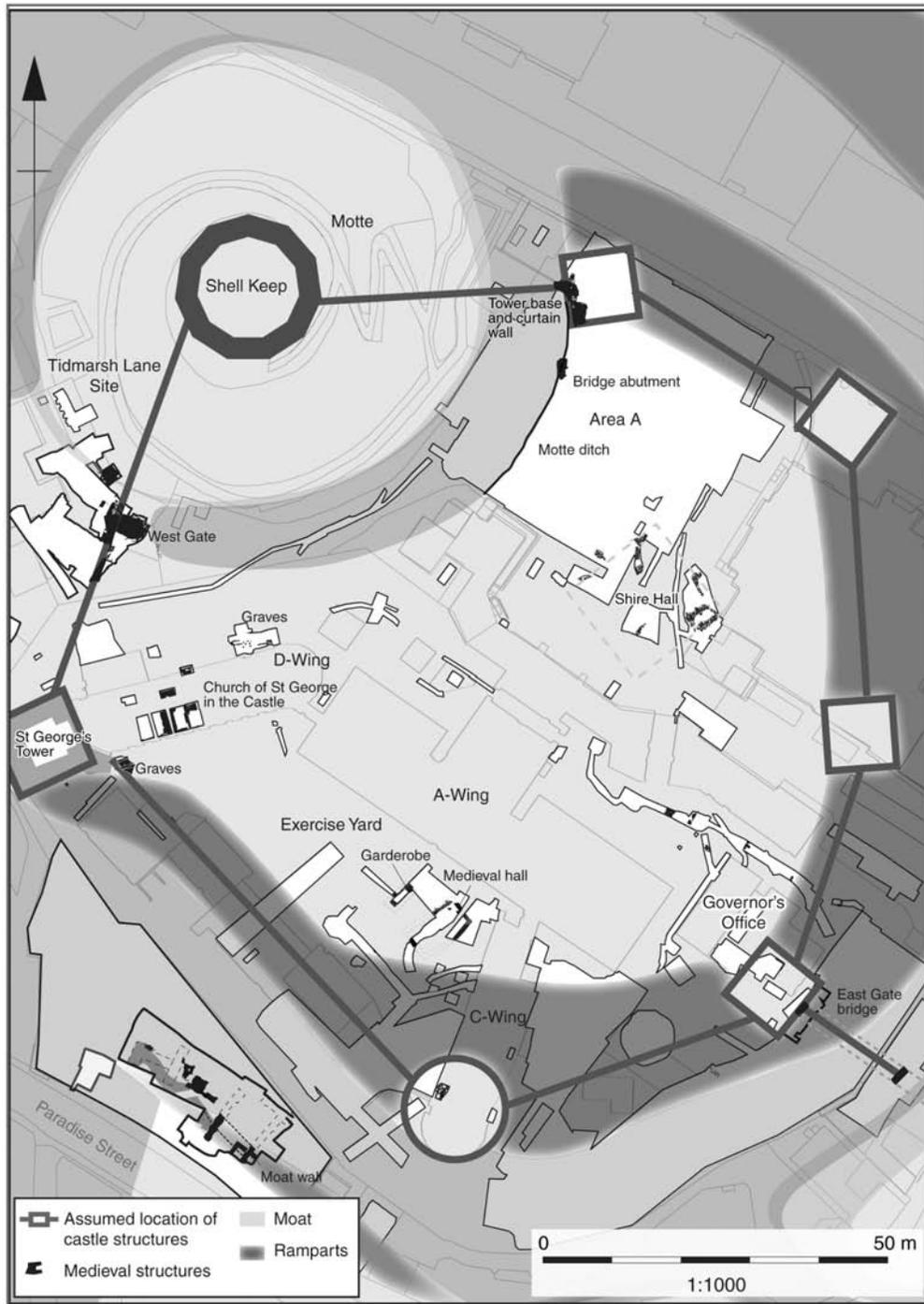


Fig. 5. Plan of medieval archaeological features and structures

3 m and would have been up to 45 m in width where it turned at the south-east ‘corner’ of the bailey. Like the motte, the rampart was constructed from the material produced by digging the surrounding ditch. The rampart’s core comprised bands of gravel and silty clays, each measuring between 0.1 m and 0.5 m thick. These banded deposits were then capped by a consolidating layer of Oxford clay, generally between 1 m and 1.6 m thick. Again a stepped construction process was evident, with steps cut into the face of the Anglo-Saxon rampart as the line of the ditch and rampart crossed it at roughly 90 degrees. This process clearly provided a ‘key’, which prevented slumping of the deposits forming the new rampart.

The Bailey Area

The only evidence from this phase of activity within the bailey itself was extensive gravel quarries and cess pits.

St George’s Graveyard

Six burials were revealed at the base of St George’s Tower. The graves overlay the two Anglo-Saxon burials mentioned above, with evidence of burial rites characteristic of both pre- and post-Conquest practice. A small quantity of late Anglo-Saxon pottery was recovered from the grave fills, although this may have been residual. The burials comprised three neonate skeletons, one of which was placed within a stone cist, a juvenile skeleton of 4 to 5 years of age, and two adults, one of them identifiable as female aged 20 to 25 years. Unworked ragstone head-supports or ‘ear muffs’ were placed to either side of their heads. The burials were aligned WNW–ESE, the same orientation as the church of St George in the Castle, and it seems certain that they were buried in the accompanying graveyard.

Four NE–SW aligned graves were revealed during the reconstruction of the St George’s crypt stairs further east. The inhumations comprised three female skeletons placed within stone cists, the most notable of which was an individual aged between 25 and 35 buried in a cist with a head niche; the bones of a full-term foetus were present within her pelvic cavity. A child aged between 10 and 12 was also recorded in an adjacent grave, placed in a ‘sleeping’ position with its hands below its head, and its knees flexed. Two further grave cuts were also observed to the west, but were not excavated.

In general, the graves were placed in straight rows. The high proportion of infants may be a result of the close proximity of the burials to the church, as children were often buried under the eaves of churches in Saxon and early medieval Christian cemeteries, so that the water running off the ‘holy’ roof would bless them.¹⁷

The dating evidence for this group of burials is limited. They have been described here with the Norman phase of activity at the castle, but it remains possible that they may have been buried in a graveyard associated with the probable late Anglo-Saxon church at the site.

THE LATER MEDIEVAL CASTLE, 1216–1577 (Fig. 5)

Defensive Castle Buildings

Walls and towers. The castle’s curtain wall was identified in three separate locations – at the northernmost part of the excavated motte ditch, at the base of St George’s Tower stairwell, and at the base of the south-western side of the motte (see west gate below). In each location the wall was up to 2.2 m wide and constructed from coral ragstone blocks, bonded and rendered with a gravelly sandy mortar. It was probably constructed in the twelfth or early thirteenth century, when the castle was thought to have been re-fortified in stone.

¹⁷ Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England, 1066–1550* (London, 1997); Tony Waldron, *St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, Lincolnshire: a Parish Church and its Community, 2: The Human Remains* (Oxford, 2007), p. 128.



Fig. 6. Christ Church plan of the castle (1615)

There was evidence of towers at a number of locations. A large and substantial rectangular foundation abutted the southern side of the castle curtain wall, on the north-eastern edge of the motte ditch, measuring about 4 by 2 m. A large section of masonry was also revealed below the floor of the southern end of C Wing. The masonry was constructed from limestone blocks and a sandy mortar, but no faces were seen. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that the masonry formed part of the foundations of the 'round' tower, known from eighteenth-century maps and views of the castle. Most recently one of the ten sides of the twelfth- or thirteenth-century shell keep was revealed during the reinstatement work on the north-east slope of the motte. The wall was constructed from Corralian ragstone and rough-hewn limestone fragments and measured about 2 m wide.

Bridges and gates. A possible bridge abutment was revealed on the outer edge of the motte ditch, at a point roughly central to the adjacent bailey. It was trench built into the side of the motte ditch and constructed from a course of unworked coral ragstone, and is likely to be thirteenth century in date. Approximately 2 m to the south of the bridge's likely alignment, a N–S aligned oak beam was recovered from the motte ditch. The timber was over 2 m long (neither end was seen) and 0.25 m by 0.2 m in section; it was roughly squared, but had no other evidence of working. It seems likely that the timber and the abutment are evidence of a bridge between motte and bailey, structures which can clearly be seen on depictions of castles on the eleventh-century Bayeux Tapestry.

On the eastern edge of the site the foundations for another, more substantial bridge abutment were cut into the clay capping of the eastern rampart. The foundations measured over 4 m long and 1 m wide and were constructed from unworked coral ragstone. A similarly constructed pier base for the bridge was partially exposed 15 m to the east of the bridge abutment, in the centre of the bailey ditch. The abutment and pier base were obviously part of the bridge that led to the east gate of the castle, most clearly shown on the Christ Church map of 1615 (Fig. 6).

The west gate into the castle was revealed between the south-west part of the motte and St George's Tower (Fig. 5). Two sections of the curtain wall and a probable gatehouse survived. A rebate for a draw bar was evident within a section across the southern part of the castle wall; the recess extended more than 2 m into the core of the wall and was remarkably similar to one visible in the northern door jamb of St George's Tower. Abutting the eastern faces of the curtain wall were two rectangular structures, representing the base of a probable gatehouse with a central opening. It is likely that the gatehouse was added shortly after the curtain wall in the twelfth or thirteenth century. There is strong cartographic evidence for a gatehouse at this position: most significantly the gate was recorded by Daniel Harris, governor of the prison in the eighteenth century, and published by Edward King.¹⁸ The area is also marked 'Site of Castle Gate' on the 1878 Ordnance Survey plan.

Internal Castle Buildings

The Church of St George in the Castle (Fig. 5). Excavations beneath D Wing exposed the likely foundations of the medieval church of St George in the Castle. Dating evidence was scarce, but the exposed walls were constructed in a similar manner to the well-dated twelfth- or thirteenth-century castle structures elsewhere; they were formed from unworked limestone and ragstone blocks with either no discernible bond or a decayed lime mortar. It is possible that the walls related to post-medieval structures, such as those shown in eighteenth-century illustrations of the site. However, the exposed footings were sufficiently substantial to make a medieval date more likely. The transept wall shown on Harris's 1794 plan of the church was revealed, 1.95 m wide, and surviving to a height of over 2.15 m. The wall was contiguous with the foundation of the southern wall of D Wing, which must have formed the original southern side of the church itself. Following

¹⁸ Edward King, *Vestiges of Oxford Castle* (London, 1796).

general ground reduction on the north-western side of D Wing, the foundations were seen to be of similar construction. It therefore seems likely that the current foundations of D Wing are the original wall of the nave of St George's.

Shire Hall (Figs 5 and 6). The footprint of a rectangular NW–SE aligned stone structure, measuring over 13 m wide, was recorded immediately to the west of County Hall. Unfortunately excavation was limited, but the exposed walls were of the same characteristic medieval build and were centrally placed within the bailey, at roughly the point where cartographic evidence suggests the presence of the Shire Hall or Sessions House (Fig. 6). This is where the famous 'Black Assize' took place in the sixteenth century, and it has generally been assumed that this was the main hall of the castle. A possible hearth was evident against the internal face of the northern wall.

Cellared hall (Fig. 5). A large stone, cellared building was cut into the internal slope of the Norman ramparts in the southern part of the site (A-Wing exercise yard). The building measured 4 m wide and 8 m long and was constructed from limestone and ragstone blocks. A possible garderobe pit was identified to the west of the cellar. The walls survived to a height of 1.4 m, and the cellar was infilled with demolition dumps dated by pottery to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. The pottery included a near complete double-waisted Brill/Boarstall knight jug, which appears to be unique. The cellar was probably beneath a large building or hall, and it is clear that this structure went out of use by the fourteenth century, a period when repairs to castle structures were becoming less frequent. A hall is recorded as ruinous at the castle in 1331, and it is feasible that this refers to the same building as the cellared hall found here.¹⁹

The Castle's Ditches

The motte ditch began to silt up from the twelfth century, and was seen to be filled with dumps of waste and rubble – perhaps derived from the partial collapse of the northern tower or curtain wall. The outer bailey ditch was also allowed to silt up, but efforts were made to maintain the flow of water. It is likely that a cobbler or cobblers lived in Paradise Street: amongst the dumped waste within the ditch were fifty-three nearly complete shoes and a large proportion of shoe parts dating from the late fifteenth century through to the 1540s.

THE CASTLE AND GAOL, 1577–1785 (Fig. 5)

The Ditches

Tenement plots were observed backing on to a stone-lined channel at the base of the bailey ditch, within the B-Wing excavations. This canalization of the moat would have allowed water from the Castle Mill stream to continue flowing around the castle, providing water and possibly fishing stock to the properties along Paradise Street and Castle Street. These plots are depicted on the 1615 Christ Church map (Fig. 6), and the boundaries are also evident on the 1878 OS map. The Christ Church map was originally drawn up as a result of the dispute over these tenements encroaching into the castle site owned by Christ Church. Cobbled yard surfaces defined the limits of the plots, which presumably were terraced to counter the steep gradient of the infilled castle ditch. The largest plot was 13 m wide at its southern extent, with the medieval castle bridge pier base lying within the yard. Backyard activity in the form of garden soils, planting trenches, and pits was also evident within the silted-up fills of the bailey ditch at Paradise Street.

¹⁹ 'Oxford Castle, a Heritage survey' (OA TS report, 1996).

The Prisoners

Following silting and partial backfilling, the motte ditch was used for burials. The methods of burial and demographics of the skeletal assemblage suggest that the individuals buried here were executed (and possibly diseased) prisoners from the castle gaol. The castle would always have functioned as a gaol, but in 1531, by act of Parliament, became the common gaol of the county. Most of those buried in the ditch were young men, interred within shallow graves, up to 0.6 m deep, or placed directly on the fills of the moat and covered. Many of the graves were crudely dug; some graves were too short for the burials and feet were often found in a vertical position.

A total of sixty-two articulated skeletons was found. The precise dating of these is difficult, but pottery and clay-pipe evidence suggests that burials in the ditch began in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and continued there for some two hundred to two hundred and fifty years. It is unlikely that any of the burials had coffins, but pins were recovered from many of the graves, suggesting that burial shrouds were being used.

There were three main phases of burial, the earliest appearing to date from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and comprising thirteen male burials. The graves broadly followed the alignment of the motte ditch, and most individuals lay with their heads to the south-west. The burials were at the base or along the eastern edge of the infilled motte ditch; the grave cuts on the motte ditch sides were most likely designed to stop burials rolling down the side of the ditch. In general, the skeletons were supine and placed in extended positions, indicating some degree of care in their burial. However, as one skeleton lay on its left side, and the arms of a second skeleton were raised above its skull, it is feasible that some individuals may have been thrown into the ditch more casually. A further group of twenty-eight similar burials suggests that disposal of bodies into the ditch continued into the seventeenth century, with further evidence of individuals who may have been thrown in. Amongst this group a grave containing two or possibly four individuals was evident, the individuals comprising two adolescents aged between 12 and 18 (one of which was likely to be male) and two females in their 30s.

Several of these people were buried with their hands placed together over their stomachs or hips, possibly a result of having their hands tied during execution. Others did not appear to have tied hands, but their hands were clenched, which can be a result of hanging.

Three burials had been dissected post-mortem. In one case a dissected skull and cervical vertebrae were excavated (the head had been removed at the fourth vertebra), and it is assumed that the torso may have been disposed of separately. Two skeletons had elements of their skulls placed within their rib cages. One was a fragmentary skull that had been sawn along a line just above its base, while the second had been sawn along its temples, both vertically and horizontally.

A second, distinct phase of inhumations comprised fifteen W–E or E–W aligned graves, displaying a relative lack of intercutting and perhaps representing a more formal cemetery. As with the earlier burials, some of the individuals were prone or lying on their sides, and four had their heads lying to the east. Of note was skeleton 6641, a 12- to 18-year-old individual placed in a prone position, with the legs flexed and bent back, and the hands placed together under the chest. It is likely that both hands and feet were bound. Three of these burials were placed in a single grave, the group comprised a possible male and a possible female, aged 35 to 45, and an adolescent male, aged between 15 and 18. The right hands of two of them were clenched, one of them gripping a silver button.

A final phase of burials comprised three NW–SE aligned inhumations, perpendicular to the moat. Two of the individuals were aged between 15 and 18 and the third 18 to 25. The burials were overlain by dumped silts and stony rubble that contained early eighteenth-century clay pipes. It is likely that following the Murder Act of 1752, which made the dissection of executed murderers compulsory, the castle moat ceased to function as a cemetery, and the skeletons of dissected prisoners were retained by the dissectors, presumably within the university. Although executed criminals other than murderers may still have been buried within the moat, the infrequency of

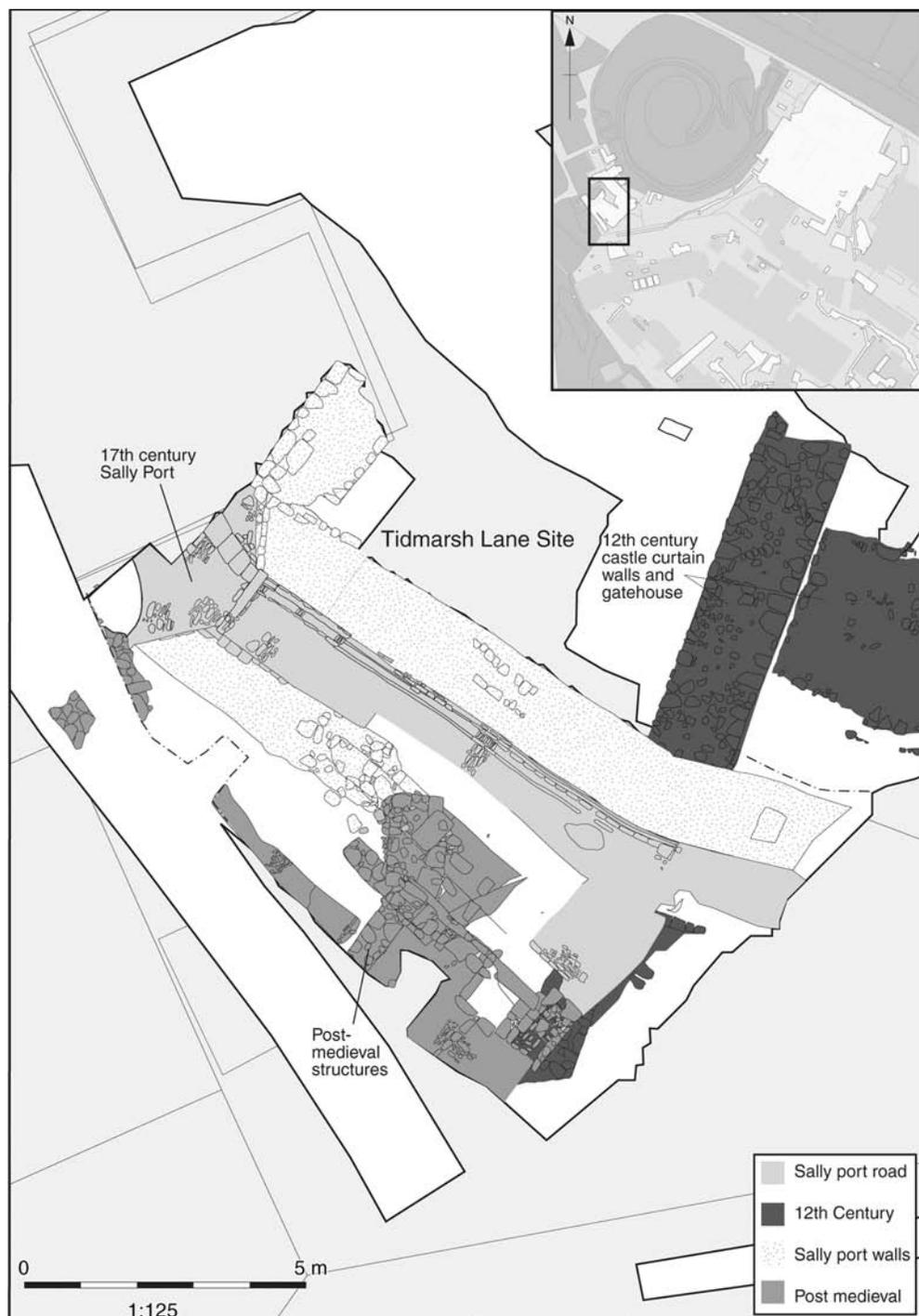


Fig. 7. Seventeenth-century sally port and the castle's west gate

executions at Oxford Castle in the eighteenth century – there were only fifty-six recorded between 1700 and 1800²⁰ – would have led to the cemetery falling out of use.

Once the ditch had ceased to function as a cemetery, the bailey area was landscaped and made into formal gardens. A clay-lined ditch was excavated around the motte, and probably formed a water-filled garden feature. Taylor's plan of 1750 shows the castle's bailey area overgrown with trees, and it is likely that these formed part of this garden. Several paintings, most notably Rooker's late eighteenth-century depiction of the area, show the felling of these trees prior to the construction of New Road in 1769.

Castle Structures and the Civil War

Evidence for the remodelling of the ramparts during or after the English Civil War was observed within the C-Wing site, where seventeenth-century pottery was recovered from the upper parts of the Norman rampart. A similarly dated defensive ditch was also recorded at the base of the Norman rampart. The remains of the shell keep on the motte were also remodelled, perhaps enabling the tower to be used as a gun platform.

The ashlar face of the western medieval gatehouse was robbed in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and a new gate or sally port constructed (Fig. 7). The structure comprised a 0.9 m wide, 1 m long, stone tunnel and cobbled road within an earth bank. The northern wall and road continued to the south and formed part of the main seventeenth-century road through the castle. The western end of the sally port was constructed from limestone ashlar blocks, which were angled to form a splayed entrance – the ends of the walls being at about 65 degrees. It is likely that the ashlar blocks were reused from the robbed chamfered faces of the medieval western gatehouses. It is most likely that the sally port was constructed as part of the Civil War refortification of the castle. Later surfaces within the sally port demonstrate that it continued to be used as an access following the end of the Civil War, and two short sections of wall in the vicinity of the castle west gate, shown on Loggan's plan of 1675, are probably to be associated with the excavated structure.

CONCLUSIONS

The programme of post-excavation analysis and preparation for publication of the results of the Oxford Castle excavations is still under way, but the preliminary results reported here demonstrate the range of valuable new information that has resulted from this work. Earlier excavations by E. M. Jope and Tom Hassall showed that late Anglo-Saxon occupation extended as far west as the castle site, but the extensive programme of work made possible by the closure of the prison has enabled us to understand much more of its form, sequence, and context. The discovery of the rampart and its facing wall on the castle site has enabled us to complete the circuit of the late Anglo-Saxon defences, demonstrating beyond doubt that the rampart enclosed the western quarter of the town. Our preliminary results suggest that the rampart was built around an area where settlement of some form already existed, and provide valuable new evidence to contribute to the debate about whether the *burh* was enlarged during the eleventh century. St George's Tower has long been one of the most enigmatic early structures in Oxford, but the recent excavation and building recording work provides new key evidence for its possible pre-Conquest origin as a structure associated with the late Anglo-Saxon defences. The discovery of another, very probable, element of Oxford's earliest street grid provides further evidence for understanding the relationship between early streets, gates, and occupation.

The upstanding Norman motte is a well-known local landmark, but until the present excavations there had been relatively little evidence for the location, nature, and dating of other elements of the castle. The size and scale of the massive moats and earthworks associated with the

²⁰ M. Davies, *Oxford Castle from Dungeon to Dunghill*, Oxford Towpath Series (Oxford, 2005), pp. 129–33.

Norman construction has been confirmed, as have the location and form of later elements of the castle, such as its curtain wall, towers, gates, bridges, and buildings within the bailey interior. A particularly important result has been the demonstration that the D Wing of the prison was built on top of the foundations of the vanished Norman church of St George in the Castle, preserving its shape and alignment. The excavation of numerous burials of executed prisoners from the motte ditch has shed light on the later functioning of the castle as the county gaol and the rough justice of the time, as well – unexpectedly – as casting an oblique light on the early development of the study of human anatomy at the university. Some new evidence has also been recovered for specific alterations made at the site in the context of the Civil War.

Evidence has also been recovered to enable us to study the way in which this massive and dominating medieval feature was allowed to fall into disrepair and disuse as circumstances changed, and it became militarily and politically obsolete during the later medieval and early post-medieval period. Tenements encroached on to the bailey ditch, and the castle interior was for a while transformed into a pleasure garden. Its subsequent conversion to Oxford Prison has formed the subject of a campaign of building recording not covered in detail in the present article, but due to be incorporated into the final report on the works, scheduled for publication in 2010.