

# Earthen Castles, Outer Enclosures and the Earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly Castle, Oxfordshire

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## SUMMARY

*Background information on castles in Oxfordshire and the nature of Norman earthwork defences provides a prelude to the main part of this report, which is concerned with the castle at Ascott d'Oilly in the parish of Ascott-under-Wychwood. Following a brief summary of the documentary history and previous archaeological work on the site, the results of a survey of the earthworks undertaken in 1999 are presented. The nature of the large outer enclosure is considered, and provisional checklists of settlement enclosures attached to castles elsewhere are provided. The significance of Ascott d'Oilly Castle in relation to two similar sites in the same parish is also discussed.*

The village of Ascott-under-Wychwood has the unusual distinction of containing the remains of at least two, possibly three, earthen castles of motte-and-bailey or tower-and-bailey type. This report describes the results of a survey of an area of earthworks surrounding the manor house and farm at Ascott d'Oilly<sup>1</sup> which included one of these castles. The nature and significance of the site will be assessed on the basis of the interpretation of the survey, set against current knowledge of comparable sites elsewhere in the country. The survey was commissioned by the Wychwoods Local History Society and was undertaken by members of the Society under direction of the writer over a period of four days in October 1999. A version of this report was first published in the Society's own journal, *Wychwoods History*,<sup>2</sup> and it is offered here in slightly modified form for wider circulation, with their consent.

## CASTLES IN OXFORDSHIRE

The close proximity of the castles at Ascott has no direct parallel anywhere else in Oxfordshire. Indeed, castles do not at first sight appear to be a particularly common feature of the Oxfordshire landscape. Information collated from the County Sites and Monuments Record and published in 1986 produced about 30 examples within the bounds of the modern county, of which nine were classed as motte-and-bailey castles, six as simple ringworks, and two as developed or elaborated ringworks, with the remainder mostly fortified palaces or manor-houses of 13th-century date and later.<sup>3</sup> The multiple functions of

<sup>1</sup> The spelling of the place-name has almost as many variants today as has been the case in the past. The first element of the name can be spelt with one or two final 't's or a final 'e', and I have adopted the form 'Ascott' as used by recent editions of the Ordnance Survey. The Norman suffix is variously spelt d'Oilli, d'Oilly, Doilly and d'Oyley. I have preferred a form which is close to the original name but is Anglicised enough not to jar on the eye or tongue.

<sup>2</sup> C.J. Bond, 'A Survey of the Earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly Castle, Ascott-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire', *Wychwoods History*, 15 (2000), 4-35.

<sup>3</sup> C.J. Bond, 'The Oxford Region in the Middle Ages', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), 135-59. Castles and moated sites are discussed briefly in the text on pp. 147-51 and plotted on Map 17.

the SMR at that time dictated an inclusive rather than exclusive indexing policy, so that total includes several earthwork sites whose date and character remains unproven and several later medieval manor-houses which may have had little more than nominal defences. Cathcart King's gazetteer published in 1983, which employed rather stricter definitions, listed a total of 21 castles in the pre-1974 county.<sup>4</sup> Oxfordshire's average of one castle for every 35.7 square miles pales into insignificance compared with densities of one castle in less than 10 square miles in Welsh border counties like Herefordshire or Monmouthshire. Nevertheless, Oxfordshire is typical of its own region, where the five adjoining counties show densities between one in 29.9 square miles (Buckinghamshire) to one in 42.6 square miles (Berkshire). In fact, in a league table of 51 English and Welsh counties based upon Cathcart King's data, Oxfordshire stands surprisingly high, in about 22nd place (its precise placing depends on whether various marginal categories, such as late medieval tower-houses, are included). It has nearly three times the density of castles to be found in Norfolk or Anglesey. Although remote from any frontier, and without any castles of the first rank, its total is inflated firstly by the number of 'adulterine' castles thrown up during the anarchy of 1139-48, when the upper Thames valley was a major theatre of war; and secondly by the number of manor-houses fortified by crenellation licences in the later Middle Ages.

#### THE NATURE AND DISTRIBUTION OF MOTTE AND BAILEY CASTLES

The motte-and-bailey was a distinctive form of earthen defence used in England from a couple of years after the Norman Conquest up until about the end of the 12th century. At one time this form of earthwork was widely believed to be of Saxon origin, and it was not until the second decade of the 20th century that its post-Conquest date became firmly established and accepted.<sup>5</sup> By definition a castle of this type contained two essential elements: the term 'motte' derives from an Old French word meaning hillock or mound, while 'bailey' also derives from an Old French word meaning 'enclosed court'. The motte was the main strongpoint, an earthen mound which was originally associated with a timber or stone tower. Mottes can range very widely in size, but are commonly between 3 m. and 30 m. in height, and from 30 m. to 90 m. in diameter. The bailey was a larger, more or less flat, area providing more room for domestic and ancillary buildings. For protection this was surrounded by an outer ditch, and a bank originally surmounted by a timber palisade, later sometimes by a stone curtain wall. Both terms were being applied to castles in 12th-century texts.

The nature of the motte-and-bailey received renewed attention during a project to investigate the origins of the castle in England undertaken by the Royal Archaeological Institute in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> It had generally been assumed that the motte was a primary feature of military strength in its own right, a solid mound of earth on top of which a wooden

<sup>4</sup> D.J. Cathcart King, *Castellarium Anglicanum: an Index and Bibliography of the Castles in England, Wales and the Islands* (2 vols. 1983).

<sup>5</sup> The pioneer works which definitively established the Norman date of the motte and bailey were J.H. Round, 'The Castles of the Conquest', *Archaeologia*, 58 (1902), 313-40, and E.S. Armitage, *The Early Norman Castles of the British Isles* (1912). See also A. Hadrian Allcroft, *Earthwork of England* (1908), 400-52, and A. Hamilton Thompson, *Military Architecture in England during the Middle Ages* (1912).

<sup>6</sup> A brief summary of the aims of the project was outlined by Brian Davison in 'The Origins of the Castle', *Current Archaeol.* 5 (Nov. 1967), 129-30 and 'The Origins of the Castle in England: the Institute's Research Project', *Archaeol. Jnl.* 124 (1967), 202-11. Some key papers which appeared in *Archaeol. Jnl.* 134 (1977) were reissued with an introduction by A.D. Saunders under the title *Five Castle Excavations: Reports on the Institute's Research Project into the Origins of the Castle in England* (Royal Archaeol. Inst. 1978).

palisade surrounding a timber tower would be constructed (several examples of mottes with palisades and towers are shown on the Bayeux Tapestry). Obviously there would be some problems with settlement of the earth, but Brian Hope-Taylor's excavation at Abinger (Surrey) in 1949 had demonstrated that some mottes were constructed in precisely that way. In the case of Abinger the first timber tower had been dismembered when the motte had slumped beyond the point where it was of much value, the motte was then raised, and a new timber palisade and tower built on top.<sup>7</sup> However, John Kent's excavation at South Mimms provided an alternative model, demonstrating that an earthen motte could be thrown up around the lower part of a timber tower constructed on the original ground level, rather than the tower being built on top of the mound. This meant that the mound was secondary to the tower, not a primary feature in its own right. The excavation at Ascott d'Oilly, which will be described further below, provided a close parallel in stone for the ground-level timber tower at South Mimms.<sup>8</sup> It was also demonstrated at Castle Neroche (Somerset) and Golpho (Lincs) that mottes could sometimes be added to pre-existing ringworks, and this probably also occurred at Winchester.<sup>9</sup> The Royal Archaeological Institute's project challenged the prevailing doctrine that the motte-and-bailey was a familiar Norman form of castle simply imported into England in 1066. It concluded that there was no evidence for mottes being used in Normandy before 1066. It concluded, moreover, that there was no evidence for mottes being an original feature of any of the castles constructed in England during the first couple of years after the Norman Conquest (Pevensey, Hastings, Dover, London, Winchester, Exeter). It suggested that the first fortifications used by the Normans in England did not differ significantly in form from existing defensive enclosures or ringworks already being used by the Saxons, Welsh and Irish. It suggested finally that the motte might have been a new invention following the widespread rebellion of 1068, designed initially to enable the Normans to dominate the larger centres of hostile Saxon population within the towns. These conclusions sparked off considerable controversy, and not all of them have stood the test of time.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, further work in France has now produced both documentary and archaeological evidence for the existence of mottes well before the middle of the 11th century, and renewed arguments have been put forward for a pre-1066 origin for several mottes in Normandy.<sup>11</sup>

As a class of earthwork, mottes and baileys are very numerous. It is difficult to produce definitive totals because of the number of marginal cases, but Cathcart King's gazetteer lists over 760 examples in England and Wales, that total including mottes-and-baileys, solitary

<sup>7</sup> B. Hope-Taylor, 'The Excavation of a Motte at Abinger, Surrey', *Archaeol. Jnl.* 107 (1950), 15-43; also 'The Norman Motte at Abinger, Surrey, and its Wooden Castle', in R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford (ed.), *Recent Archaeological Excavations in Britain* (1956), 223-49.

<sup>8</sup> J.P.C. Kent, 'Excavations at the Motte and Bailey of South Mimms, Herts., 1960-1967', *Barnet & District Local Hist. Soc. Bulletin*, 15 (1968). Brief interim reports have appeared more accessibly in *Medieval Archaeol.* 5 (1961), 318; *ibid.* 6-7 (1962-3), 322; *ibid.* 8 (1964), 255.

<sup>9</sup> B.K. Davison, 'Castle Neroche: an abandoned Norman fortress in south Somerset', *Proc. Somerset Archaeol. & Nat. Hist. Soc.* 116 (1972), 16-58; G. Beresford, *Golpho: the Development of an Early Medieval Manor, c. 850-1150* (Eng. Heritage, Archaeol. Rep. 4, 1987); M. Biddle (ed.), *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages* (Winchester Studies, 1, 1976), 302-5.

<sup>10</sup> R. Allen Brown, 'An Historian's Approach to the Origins of the Castle in England', *Archaeol. Jnl.* 126 (1969), 131-48, to which is appended a reply by B.K. Davison.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, M. de Bouard, 'Quelques données françaises et normandes concernant le problème de l'origine des mottes', *Château-Gaillard*, 2 (1964); M. Fixot, 'Les fortifications de terre et la naissance de la féodalité dans le Cinglais', *Château-Gaillard*, 3 (1966), 61-6; M. Deyres, 'Les châteaux de Foulques Nerra', *Bulletin Monumental*, 132 (1974), 7-28; J. Decaens, 'De la motte au château de pierre dans le nord-ouest de la France', in G. Meirion-Jones and M. Jones (eds.), *Manorial Domestic Buildings in England and Northern France* (Soc. of Antiq. Occas. Papers 15, 1993), 65-81.

mottes where no evidence for a bailey survives, and mottes-and-baileys overlain by later stone castles, but excluding ringworks, ringworks-and-baileys and other earthwork sites.<sup>12</sup> The distribution map produced by Derek Renn shows that mottes are most heavily concentrated in the Welsh borders (where King's gazetteer allocates 70 examples to Shropshire and 66 to Herefordshire), along the coastal fringe of south Wales and in Dyfed.<sup>13</sup> Oxfordshire is not an area with a high density of mottes, but the post-1974 county includes examples at Ascott Earl, Swerford and Hinton Waldrist, with further probable and possible examples elsewhere in Ascott-under-Wychwood, and at Over Worton, Lew and Faringdon, in addition to the castles at Oxford, Wallingford and Ascott d'Oilly, which are of motte-and-bailey form but which included masonry components from an early period.<sup>14</sup> The classification of individual sites may at times be debatable. Some mottes, for example, may have been removed entirely, or obliterated by later works. At Deddington the existence of an early motte can be deduced only from a rounded projection on the east side of the inner bailey; it was reduced when a stone curtain wall was built over it in the early 12th century.<sup>15</sup> Conversely at Middleton Stoney what appeared to be a motte turned out to be the collapsed rubble from a stone tower;<sup>16</sup> here the illusion of a mound was due solely to collapsed debris, and there was no indication that the tower had been deliberately encased within a mound as occurred at Ascott d'Oilly.

#### ASCOTT D'OILLY CASTLE: THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The documentary record for Ascott d'Oilly was investigated and reported as a background to the archaeological investigations undertaken by Joep and Threlfall in 1946-7.<sup>17</sup> Little new work has been undertaken since, but it may be helpful to summarise briefly what is known of the history of the site. The meaning of the settlement name, 'eastern cottages', shows quite clearly that Ascott developed as a subsidiary settlement within the great royal estate of Shipton-under-Wychwood, and was named in relation to the estate centre.<sup>18</sup> When Ascott was first recorded, in the Domesday survey, it already comprised two separate villas. The Ascott d'Oilly estate can be traced back to the six hides held by Robert d'Oilly, castellan of Oxford, in 1086. It was held of him by one Roger, quite probably his close friend Roger d'Ivry. The Ascott Earl estate comprised four and a half hides held by Ilbert de Lacy under Bishop Odo of Bayeux.<sup>19</sup> The Domesday survey gives no indication of a castle on either vill, though on its own this is not necessarily conclusive, since castles were regarded as items of expenditure rather than of taxable income. Castles are named or implied in only 48 places in the entire survey, 27 of them in boroughs.<sup>20</sup> Many other castles, Oxford among them,

<sup>12</sup> King, *op. cit.* note 4.

<sup>13</sup> D. Renn, *Norman Castles in Britain* (1968), 16, Map D.

<sup>14</sup> Bond, *op. cit.* note 3, pp. 147-9.

<sup>15</sup> H.M. Colvin, *A History of Deddington, Oxfordshire* (1963), 13-14; R.J. Ivens, 'Deddington Castle, Oxfordshire: a summary of excavations, 1977-1979', *S. Midl. Archaeol.* 13 (1983), 35-41; and 'Deddington Castle, Oxfordshire, and the English honour of Odo of Bayeux', *Oxoniensia*, xlix (1984), 101-19, esp. 108-11.

<sup>16</sup> S. Rahtz and R.T. Rowley, *Middleton Stoney: Excavation and Survey in a North Oxfordshire Parish, 1970-1982* (1984), 57-65.

<sup>17</sup> E.M. Joep and R.I. Threlfall, 'The Twelfth-century Castle at Ascott d'Oilly, Oxfordshire', *Antiq. Jnl.* 39 (1959), 220-9.

<sup>18</sup> M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, pt. ii (EPNS xxiv, 1954), 335-6.

<sup>19</sup> J. Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book: Oxfordshire* (1978), 28.25, 7.61.

<sup>20</sup> References to Domesday castles were first collected in Sir Henry Ellis, *A General Introduction to Domesday Book* (2 vols. 1833), i, 214-40; see also Renn, *op. cit.* note 13, pp. 27-33; H.C. Darby, *Domesday England* (1977), 313-17.

were certainly in existence before 1086, but find no mention in the Domesday record.

Roger d'Ivry was exiled and his possessions forfeited in William Rufus's reign, and Robert d'Oilly then appears to have granted Ascott d'Oilly to the Bishop of Lincoln, from whom his younger brothers Guy and Nigel held it for the term of their lives. By the 1120s it was in the hands of Nigel's son, Robert d'Oilly II, and there is no further indication of the bishop holding any interest in it. Robert d'Oilly II remained in the service of King Stephen during the Anarchy.<sup>21</sup> Soon afterwards the manor came into possession of another branch of the family, with several successive generations bearing the name Roger, whose precise relationship to the main line is unclear. It seems likely that the castle was built by Roger d'Oilly II, who had been a member of Stephen's household in 1135, but may then have changed sides, since an individual of this name was with Matilda at the siege of Winchester six years later.

Robert d'Oilly II had granted a manorial chapel at Ascott d'Oilly to the canons of St Frideswide's shortly before 1130, when a confirmation locates it within the *curia* of Roger d'Oilly, a term which has no particular defensive connotations. However, a subsequent acknowledgement of the canons' rights by Roger d'Oilly and a confirmation by Henry d'Oilly dated somewhere between 1150 and 1160 both describe the chapel as being *in castello de Escot*, the first clear reference to the existence of the castle.<sup>22</sup>

There is no indication that the defences of Ascott d'Oilly castle were maintained over a prolonged period. Many castles of the Anarchy were dismantled under an agreement reached between King Stephen and Henry Plantagenet in 1153, but the pottery evidence from Ascott d'Oilly suggests that it was probably occupied for a little longer than that. The most likely context for its demolition may have been after the Assize of Northampton in 1176, when Henry II ordered the complete destruction of all castles which had been held against him during the rebellion of 1173-4.<sup>23</sup> At precisely the same time Roger d'Oilly III was fined 200 marks for transgressions against the Forest Law and had his estates sequestrated for debt. The Pipe Rolls of the later 1170s record expenditure on the demolition of several castles elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Although a certificate of 1212 still refers to the manorial chapel 'in the castle' at Ascott, this appears to be quoting from earlier documents or hearsay, and cannot be taken as evidence that the castle was continuing to function as such. By 1229 the St Frideswide's cartulary has reverted to the earlier wording, '*capella site in curia de Escote*',<sup>25</sup> and there is no later reference to the chapel after the Hundred Rolls of 1279. Some time before 1268 the manor was leased to Bogo de Clare (d. 1294), who is unlikely to have been resident except perhaps occasionally when in attendance at the court in Woodstock, and the d'Oillys passed from the scene.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> G. White, 'Continuity in Government', in E. King (ed.), *The Anarchy of King Stephen's Reign* (1994), 119n, 120n, 123.

<sup>22</sup> *The Cartulary of the Monastery of St. Frideswide at Oxford* (ed. Rev. S.R. Wigram), i: *General and City Charters* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. 28), no. 8, p. 13; no. 15, p. 21; ii: *The Chantry and Country Parish Charters* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. 31), no. 951, p. 208; no. 1009, p. 241; no. 1010, p. 242.

<sup>23</sup> W. Stubbs (ed.), *Select Charters and other Illustrations of English Constitutional History* (8th edn. 1948), 178-81, esp. p. 180, clause 8.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the purchase of 100 picks is recorded in 1177-8 for the demolition of Benington Castle in Hertfordshire: *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the 23rd Year of the Reign of King Henry II* (Pipe Roll Soc. 26), 144.

<sup>25</sup> *Cartulary of St. Frideswide*, ii, no. 1019, p. 247; no. 1022, p. 251.

<sup>26</sup> *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Comm.), ii, p. 731.

Ilbert de Lacy's Domesday estate subsequently descended to the Despensers, Earls of Winchester, from whom the manor of Ascott Earl acquires its distinctive suffix. This name is first recorded in 1316 (in the Latin form *'Ascote Comitis'*).<sup>27</sup>

#### ASCOTT D'OILLY CASTLE: PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

Notice of the earthworks of what appeared to be a small motte and bailey castle near Manor Farm at Ascott d'Oilly was first published in 1907 (Fig. 1).<sup>28</sup> The site was selected for a research excavation by Martin Jope in 1946-7, partly because the documentary evidence suggested a limited period of occupation in the mid to late 12th century and there was a need for pottery closely dated within this period to help date other sites elsewhere; and partly to gain a better understanding of the nature of small earthen castles. The excavations revealed that the 'motte' was in fact a pile of clay mounded up around the lower stage of a square stone tower while the tower itself was under construction. This would have given the visual impression of a tower standing on a mount, but it did in fact rest upon the original ground level, on a low natural swell of clay rising above the gravel of the Evenlode valley. At the time this principle of construction had not been recognised elsewhere, though other examples have since come to light, for example at Farnham, Wareham, Lincoln, Totnes, Aldingbourne and Lydford.<sup>29</sup> The tower at Ascott was 10.7 m. square, with walls of roughly coursed local liassic rubble 2.4 m. thick, with ashlar quoins of Taynton stone (Fig. 2). From the dimensions of the footings it was estimated that this could have stood to a height of around 20 m. The excavation revealed the stub of a rubble abutment against the south end of the west wall of the tower, almost certainly the base of an external timber stair, and a latrine sump outside the north-west corner. Internally its walls were plastered at basement level. The tower was then deliberately demolished to within 1.8 m. of its footings, probably around 1180, and the mound was smoothed over to its present shape. The demolition debris consisted of much rubble not worth salvaging for use elsewhere, and contained mortar, domestic window glass, nails, arrow-heads, a gilt-bronze strip and a horseshoe, together with much mid to late 12th-century pottery. Bones of both red and fallow deer were also present in significant quantity, giving some substance to the accusations of offences against Forest Law laid against Roger d'Oilly in 1175-6 (Ascott lay within the bounds of the Royal Forest of Wychwood during the 12th century, though most of it was excluded from the contracted bounds in 1300). The mound was surrounded by a ditch cut into the natural clay, which

<sup>27</sup> *Inquisitions and Assessments relating to Feudal Aids... AD 1284-1431*, iv, 65. Hugh le Despencer, earl of Winchester, had forfeited the manor by 1326, when it was in the king's hands: *Cal. of Fine Rolls*, iii (1319-27), 427.

<sup>28</sup> W. Potts, 'Ancient Earthworks', in *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 321-2.

<sup>29</sup> M.W. Thompson, 'Recent Excavations in the Keep at Farnham Castle, Surrey', *Medieval Archaeol.* 4 (1960), 81-94 and 'Excavations in Farnham Castle Keep, Surrey', *Château-Gaillard*, 2 (1967), 100-5; D.F. Renn, 'The Keep of Wareham Castle', *Medieval Archaeol.* 4 (1960), 56-68; N. Reynolds, 'Investigations in the Observatory Tower, Lincoln Castle', *Medieval Archaeol.* 19 (1975), 201-5; S.E. Rigold, 'Totnes Castle: recent excavations', *Trans. Devonshire Assoc.* 86 (1954), 228-56; T.C.M. and A. Brewster, 'Tote Copse Castle, Aldingbourne', *Sussex Archaeol. Collections*, 107 (1969), 141-79; A.D. Saunders, 'Lydford Castle, Devon', *Medieval Archaeol.* 24 (1980), 123-86. See also M.W. Thompson, 'Motte Substructures', *Medieval Archaeol.* 5 (1961), 305-6. At Aldingbourne the base of the tower was of high-quality ashlar, and at Lydford the building of the mound blocked the lower windows in the tower; in these two cases, unlike Ascott d'Oilly, the mound was clearly an afterthought rather than part of the original intention.





Fig. 1. View of Ascott d'Oilly Castle from the south-east, 1999. The low earthen motte encasing the tower is visible to the right of the manor house.



Fig. 2. The outline of the stone tower encased by the motte, photographed in 1980; subsequent tree growth has now obscured this view.

contained fragments of waterlogged brushwood, oak timbers, an oak roofing shingle and hazel nuts. The ditch did not completely encircle the mound, but was left uncut on the south-west, towards the bailey, to provide access up towards the external stair.<sup>30</sup>

Although the attention of the excavators was concentrated upon the tower, they noted beside it 'remains of a bailey and contemporary paddocks' and 'many ditches which divided the crofts of the medieval village, and the land around the d'Oilly manor into paddocks... [some of which] seem to be of the 12th-century... and such are not unusual features associated with mound and bailey earthworks'.<sup>31</sup>

Joep also undertook a survey and analysis of the manor-house standing to the south-west of the tower, which he envisaged as standing within the bailey. The eastern part of this house dates mainly from the 16th century and the western part from the 17th century, but both portions incorporate fragments of a medieval building complex which must be seen as the successor to the Norman castle. The most articulate remains survive in the east gable end. This is built of roughly-coursed rubble with a clasping buttress of two stages at its southern corner and a pair of angle buttresses of two stages at the north, all of Taynton stone. An ashlar plinth runs along the base of the wall and around the buttresses. The jambs and part of the arch of a large pointed window spanning both modern storeys are visible both externally and internally. All this appears to be of early or mid 13th-century date. Joep surmised, surely correctly, that this window was too big for the documented domestic chapel, and must have served the hall.<sup>32</sup>

The location of the chapel remains unknown. Could it be equated with the tower in the motte, the only other surviving early stone building? Certainly there is a tradition of turriform private chapels from before the Norman Conquest, exemplified by the Saxon towers at Barton-on-Humber in Lincolnshire and Earls Barton in Northamptonshire where, in both cases, naves were added for parochial use at a later date. Joep and Threlfall quote a post-Conquest reference in the chronicle of Meaux Abbey (Yorkshire), where a chapel was contained within the upper floor of a timber tower on a motte. However, the documentary sources for Ascott seem to point to the existence of a manorial chapel twenty or thirty years *before* the castle was built, and it is difficult to reconcile this with the archaeological evidence that the tower and motte were raised at the same time.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE 1999 SURVEY

The basic form and extent of the earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly had long been known from the small-scale sketch plan, plotted from aerial photographs, which accompanied Joep and Threlfall's report. The outline of the earthworks is also shown on several editions of the Ordnance Survey 1:2500. These plans show the tower and motte partly surrounded by a ditch, with a broad round-edged platform beyond to the south-east. A ditch connecting with that of the motte runs along the north side of the farm buildings. Joep's map shows this beginning to turn southwards at the west end of the long range of buildings on the north side of the farmyard, and he seems to have viewed this as the boundary of the bailey. Beyond that there are extensive outworks to the west, with banks and ditches forming a rectangular area some 220 m. by 160 m., subdivided internally by further ditches. Joep refers somewhat indiscriminately to 'paddocks' and to the 'crofts of the medieval village' in this general area,

<sup>30</sup> E.M. Joep & R.I. Threlfall, 'The Twelfth-century Castle at Ascott d'Oilly, Oxfordshire', *Antiq. Jnl.* 39 (1959), 219-73. A brief preliminary report also appeared in *Oxoniensia*, 11-12 (1946-7), 165-7.

<sup>31</sup> Joep and Threlfall, *op. cit.* note 17, Map 1, pp. 219, 239.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 270-3.



and it is difficult to work out which he thought was which. However, he was also able to demonstrate from considerable finds of pottery that there was extensive occupation in the 12th and 13th centuries beyond the bounds of the large rectangular earthwork enclosure, around the west end of the village to west and east of Corner House Farm and to the south on either side of London Lane. His plan shows a further rectilinear outline of ditches extending beyond the railway to the south. Leaving aside these last-mentioned, the major earthworks extend into four modern land parcels and cover an area of approximately 9 ha. Field-names are not especially informative. The fields containing the outer enclosure are called 'The Old Orchard' (north of the farm drive) and 'Fro' Court' (south of the farm drive).<sup>33</sup>

Despite the early recognition of the significance of these earthworks, they had never been surveyed on the ground until 1999. Field visits carried out in the 1970s and 1980s for Oxfordshire Museum Services had shown that the earthworks were more complex and included far more subtle details than were shown on any plans currently available. It was decided, therefore, that a much more detailed survey was needed, for two reasons: firstly, to provide a better record of the earthworks as they survived in 1999 as an insurance against any future unforeseeable threat or damage; and secondly to see if any fuller interpretation was possible through more detailed recording and in the light of general knowledge of sites of this class which has accumulated since the late 1940s.

#### METHOD OF SURVEY

Members of the Wychwoods Local History Society had developed some experience of earthwork survey on smaller sites locally,<sup>34</sup> but this was by far the largest and most ambitious survey attempted by the Society to date. It was decided to employ once again the methods used on previous occasions, dividing the entire area into a grid of 30 m. squares using fibron measuring tapes, marking the corners of each square with ranging poles, marking 10 m. points along the main axes with canes, measuring in the top and bottom of each break of slope within each square by means of offsets, and then depicting the relief by means of graduated hachures. Groups of three people were allocated to each pair of grid squares, two to measure and one to draw. As each group finished drawing its allocated pair of squares it was moved on to the next pair available, whether or not they were immediately adjacent. At the end of each day each board was checked against the earthworks on the ground. No significant errors or discrepancies in measurements were expected or found, but there were inevitably some differences in emphasis due to individual drawing styles. The end-of-day inspection provided an opportunity to annotate the field drawings where necessary so that variations derived from the work of many individuals could be adjusted. All squares drawn during the day were brought together each evening and transferred to a master plan, which has provided the basis for the final drawing published here (Fig. 3).

Experience has shown that this method has several advantages. The procedure is easy to understand, and most people, even if they have never surveyed anything in their lives before, quickly grasp the basic principles. The equipment required is minimal, none of it is

<sup>33</sup> Field names from the 1838 enclosure map and names collected from oral evidence by Ascott-under-Wychwood Women's Institute in 1977 are stored on overlays to the record maps of the Sites and Monuments Record; see C.J. Bond, 'Oxfordshire Field-names: a progress report on the county survey', *Oxfordshire Local History*, 1 (4) (1982), 2-15.

<sup>34</sup> C.J. Bond, 'Earthworks at Lower Farm, Upper Milton, Milton-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire', *Wychwoods History*, 4 (1988), 4-13; and 'A Medieval Fishpond at Bruern Grange', *Wychwoods History*, 6 (1991), 36-50.

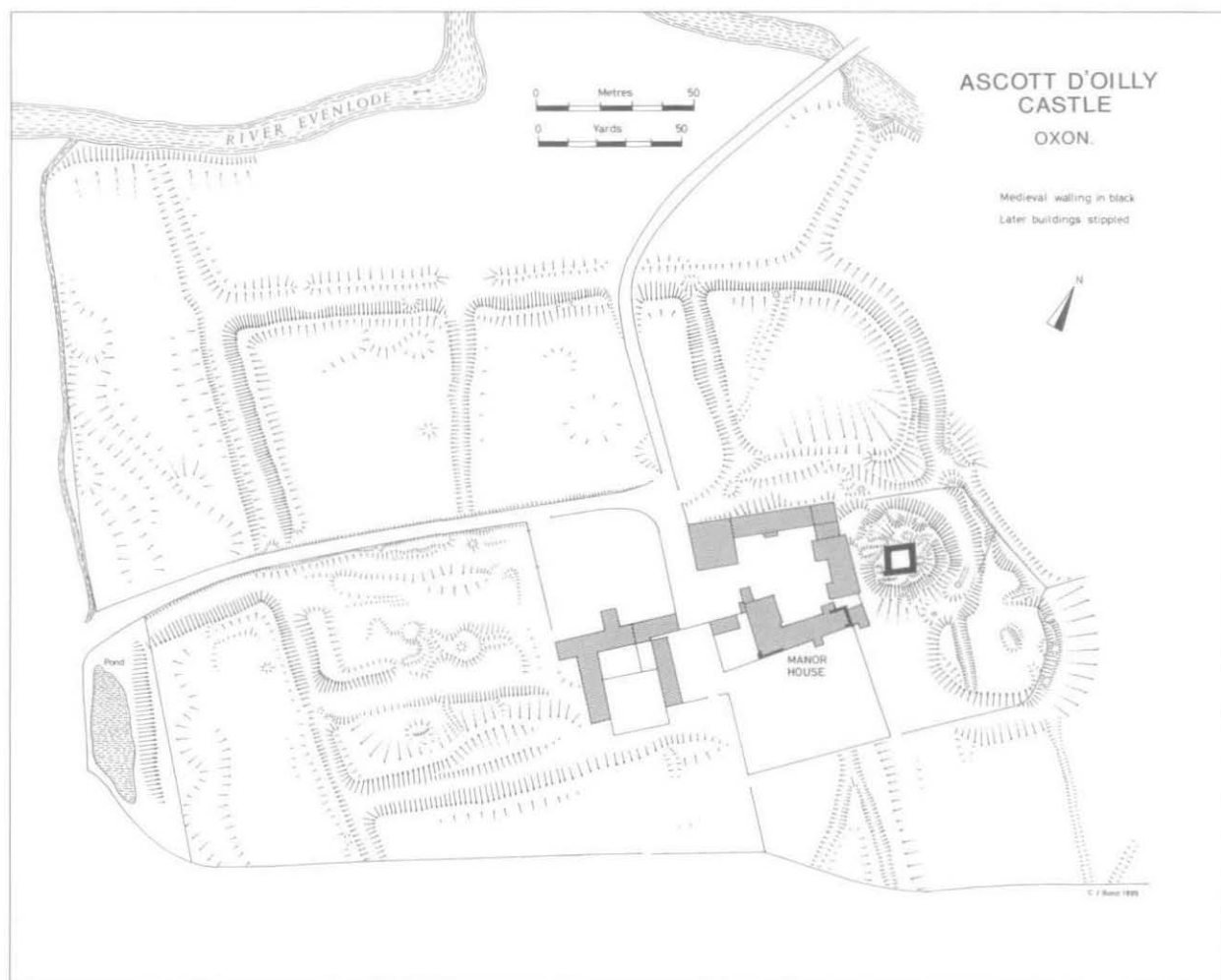


Fig. 3. Plan of earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly Castle surveyed by the Wychwoods Historical Society in 1999.

prohibitively expensive, and it is well within the means of any local group. The method is particularly well suited to surveys undertaken by groups comprised of individuals of varying experience, since each square can be treated as a self-contained task, and each party can take as long as it feels it needs in its own square, without holding up progress elsewhere. Above all, it is self-checking. The ranging poles, if correctly positioned, should line up perfectly through both 90° and 45° from any grid intersection, and so the slightest error in laying out the grid very quickly reveals itself.<sup>35</sup> Equally, any error of measurement within a square shows up the moment the drawing of that square is placed alongside its neighbours.

While this method lacks the absolute precision of instrumental survey, and professional surveyors may not regard it as entirely respectable, it is, nevertheless, entirely adequate for the type of site under consideration here. Earthworks, by their very nature, are not sharp-edged features with precise limits. Individual determinations of where the top and bottom of a slope begin and end can often vary quite legitimately over a metre or even more. Where such margins are involved, a grid laid out by direct measurement and sighted alignments provides a perfectly satisfactory framework.

### INTERPRETATION OF SURVEY

Two basic questions arise on any earthwork site: how old are the earthworks, and what was their purpose? In the case of Ascott d'Oilly the identification of the castle and the definition of its date and purpose were already well established, but how does it compare with others of similar date? There were also questions about the nature and function of the outer enclosure. Was it earlier than the castle, contemporaneous with it, or a later addition? Was it a large outer bailey, an enclosed peasant settlement which may be the predecessor of the present village, or some sort of livestock compound? Was the perimeter earthwork merely a boundary, or a flood defence, or did it fulfil a defensive role?

It was not expected that the survey would necessarily produce definitive answers to any of these questions. Earthwork survey by its very nature is limited to the recording of the ground surface, which on any settlement site tends to reflect most strongly the final periods of occupation. It has often been demonstrated that apparently simple and straightforward earthworks conceal complex, multi-period archaeology. However, there are three ways in which the surveying process can help to elucidate the nature of sites:

- (i) By identifying patterns, shapes and profiles which can be compared with other sites, the date and purpose of which may be better known;
- (ii) By providing evidence for a relative chronology of elements within the site, where it can be shown that one earthwork feature overlies, or is intersected by another;
- (iii) By incidental discoveries, such as the recovery of pottery or other finds from molehills or other disturbances.

The last of these can be passed over quickly. The outer enclosure produced very little direct dating evidence, apart from a few scraps of early medieval pottery collected from molehills. These do not necessarily date the earthworks, but they do indicate a period of occupation which is compatible with our understanding of the site derived from other strands of evidence.

<sup>35</sup> The accuracy of the procedure of setting out the grid was put to the test at Ascott because the position of the house and farm buildings in the middle of the earthworks meant that the grid had to be carried right round them over the surrounding fields through a full circuit of 360 degrees. Around a perimeter of some 1.5 km. the accumulated error by the time the grid was brought back to its point of origin was just 8 cm. At the scale of the final drawing such a tiny error simply disappears.

In comparison with the general size range of mottes, that at Ascott, with a diameter of 30 m., lies right at the bottom end of the scale, and this perhaps reflects its status as a secondary and subordinate feature to the stone tower; but some question remains over the location and extent of the bailey. Jope felt that the present manor-house and farmyard lay within the bailey, largely on the basis of the ditch along the northern side of the farm buildings and the stair abutment being on the south-west corner of the tower. This is perfectly reasonable. However, Jope makes no suggestions about the rounded flat platform to the south-east of the motte. The new survey showed that this itself had an outer ditch, not shown on the earlier plans, and the possibility must be considered that this was a supplementary bailey, or even the earlier main bailey. Certainly it is limited in extent – little more than 30 m. in diameter in either direction. However, though its enclosing ditch encompasses an area little greater than that of the motte, its lower, flatter summit is quite big enough to contain a 12th-century hall. Two features were recorded inside this platform, a deep trench orientated from north-west to south-east cutting off a narrow south-western portion, and a hollow with a partial, slightly raised rim within the larger portion. Initially the possibility was entertained that the latter feature might actually be part of the foundations of a small building, but its size and slightly irregular outline probably points more prosaically to the fall and removal of a large tree at some stage in the past.

Between this putative small bailey and the motte, the ground dropped away to a hollow within which a flat stone capped a well. A short distance to the north another stone marked the beginning of a culvert curving round within the ditch of the motte. The ditch became quite deep around the northern side of the motte, but it could not be traced at all west of the well on the south. There seems no obvious reason for the construction of the 13th-century manor-house to have obliterated this much of the motte ditch quite so completely, so it may always have been open on this side to a second, larger bailey, as Jope had suggested.

The ditch north of the farm buildings may be, as Jope implied, one arm of the ditch of this larger bailey. However, the new survey opened up a further possibility, in that the general line of this ditch was seen to continue westwards beyond the present farm entry and garden, reappearing as a slight but persistent depression along the southern side of the present farm drive, and then becoming a much stronger feature with a prominent platform to the south in the final 40 m. before it was intersected by the cutting of the pond and then the modern road between the station and Ascott Bridge. This depression fairly neatly bisects the large outer rectangular enclosure, and it may well represent a street serving village crofts on either side. The present more elevated farm drive in from the road represents its successor, on a slightly different alignment.

Having said that, it has to be conceded that there is no sign whatsoever of any medieval building foundations on either side of the suggested early street. Although the present farm drive overlies the northern frontages, it is not wide enough to have obliterated all traces. However, it must be remembered that in the early Middle Ages, even in areas like the Cotswolds where stone was plentiful, peasant building tended to be in timber. Stone peasant buildings do not generally appear before the late 12th or 13th centuries.<sup>36</sup> If the focus of settlement was already shifting towards the present village by that time, as the pottery distribution implies, there may never have been stone houses here at all.

Although it is quite common to find no clear earthwork trace of peasant buildings on deserted medieval village sites, croft boundaries do often show up as ditches, if not as wall

<sup>36</sup> M. Beresford and J.G. Hurst (eds.), *Deserted Medieval Villages* (1971), 93, q.v. for further references; M. Biddle, 'The Deserted Medieval Village of Seacourt, Berkshire', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi-xxvii (1961-2), 70-201; R.H. Hilton and P.A. Rahtz, 'Upton, Gloucestershire, 1959-1964', *Trans. Bristol and Glos Archaeol. Soc.* 85 (1966), 70-146.

foundations. Can such features be detected at Ascott d'Oilly? The northern side of the outer enclosure is cut into three blocks of roughly equal size by two prominent ditches, which run back from the 'street' front more or less at right-angles to break through the northern boundary bank and terminate in its outer ditch. In fact the two side ditches are not quite parallel, so the westernmost enclosure is broader at the northern boundary and the central enclosure is broader at the 'street' front. All three enclosures contain some unevenness of surface, though no obvious patterns can be discerned. The two side ditches are deeper and wider than mostcroft boundaries, and perhaps should be interpreted as lanes giving access through the boundary bank to the meadows beyond. Each of the three northern enclosures would have sufficient space for at least a couple of crofts, perhaps subdivided by fences which have left no trace; these details are, however, purely speculative. For the moment, the interpretation of this outer enclosure as an early village site is no more than a working hypothesis, and other possibilities will be considered in the following section.

South of the 'street' the earthworks are much more complex, though still with an underlying rectilinearity. The ditches perpendicular to the 'street' which were noted to the north are not mirrored by similar ditches to the south. Instead the main part of the south-western quarter of the outer enclosure is bisected by another ditch parallel with the 'street' and slightly over half-way towards the southern boundary of the enclosure.

The outer enclosure is defined around the whole of its northern and western sides and part of its southern and eastern sides by a substantial bank, standing a metre or more high in places, with an external ditch (Fig. 4). What was the purpose of this perimeter earthwork? Was it merely a boundary between village crofts and the meadows and fields? Was it a flood defence, keeping the waters of the Evenlode away from the settlement area? Or was it defensive, protecting whatever lay within the area as part of the outer defences of the castle? It may, of course, have served a combination of all three functions. Lest the bank and ditch be thought too slight for defences, it must be remembered that the present appearance of earthworks is not a wholly reliable guide to their original form, the general tendency always being towards a reduction in magnitude. Banks invariably become degraded by erosion and ditches will always silt up. At Ascott d'Oilly (and at similar sites like Kilpeck) the top of the banks of the outer enclosure can never have risen much more than a couple of metres from the bottom of the ditches, yet they are significantly more impressive than the boundary banks which encompass many other deserted medieval villages. Higham and Barker have forcibly made the point that where there was defensive intent, it was the vertical walls of wood or stone which crowned the bank, rather than the earthworks themselves, which were intended to daunt the attacker. The processes of natural erosion of ramparts and, in some cases, the deliberate dismantling of the walls or palisades which stood on them, will often make it difficult, even on excavated sites, to assess the magnitude of the original barrier.<sup>37</sup>

Some earthworks were noted beyond the bounds of the outer enclosure. The western boundary ditch continued northwards down to the river, reinforcing the idea that the inner bank may have served at least partly as a flood defence; it also continued to the south, where it was almost immediately intersected by the railway. Jope's map shows it continuing beyond the railway then turning eastwards round a right-angled corner to form part of the boundary of the outer paddocks already mentioned. Part of a second ditch also belonging to these paddocks was recorded running south-eastwards from the walled garden south-east of the manor-house, again intersected by the railway. Insufficient time was available in 1999 for further investigation of these peripheral earthworks beyond the railway, but they give the

<sup>37</sup> R. Higham and P. Barker, *Timber Castles* (1992), 196-7.



Fig. 4. Bank and ditch of the outer enclosure on the north-west side, 1999.



Fig. 5. Bounds of the outer enclosure and flood drain photographed from the north during the winter of 1980, when the ditches were holding water.



impression of belonging to agricultural closes or paddocks adjoining the settlement, rather than being part of the settlement area itself. A further ditch, broader and deeper than the paddock ditches, ran from the north-eastern corner of the outer enclosure due north down to the river, again perhaps serving as a floodwater escape channel (Fig. 5). Finally, at the westernmost extremity of the survey area, between the outer enclosure boundary and the pond and stream, a continuous series of very slight, curved hollows was recorded. The present course of the stream, running directly alongside the hedge, is very obviously artificial, and these features would appear to represent the original stream course.

There is no reason to expect all of the earthworks surveyed to be of precisely the same date, and in some areas they clearly were not. The trench intersecting the small bailey south of the motte has every appearance of a subsequent disturbance (there is a curiously similar trench bisecting the bailey at Bishopton in County Durham, also of unknown origin). The very irregular nettle-covered hummocks immediately north of the farm buildings appeared to be a product of relatively recent dumping of spoil. The north-eastern subdivision of the outer enclosure is cut by a slight bank and ditch on a diagonal alignment pointing roughly in the direction of the suggested flood channel beyond, and this looks like a pipe trench. In the western part of the outer enclosure the somewhat irregular area of earthworks in the centre of the paddock south of the farm drive appeared to include some dumping, but its position accords quite well with a group of buildings shown as surviving on the 1838 enclosure map. The building plans shown on this map appear somewhat schematic, by comparison with its depiction of those that survive, but there are hints on the ground of the old street being diverted into this area, as the map appears to show. Finally, one real 'red herring' was recorded: the very slight, ruler-straight ditch marked by a line of parched grass and nettles at the south-eastern limit of the survey area, running south-eastwards from the bailey ditch, was recalled by Mrs. Gripper as the line of a recent temporary fence controlling the grazing of horses.

Ascott d'Oilly was, throughout its short life, a small, and not especially formidable castle. Compared with many other contemporary sites, its defensive works were of no great strength. The present survey has done nothing to counteract that view. However, two questions relating to it are of particular interest: what was the nature of the large rectilinear outer enclosure to the west? and why should there be two, or possibly three, similar earthwork castles in such close proximity?

## THE OUTER ENCLOSURE

Two fundamental questions must be raised about the outer enclosure to the north and west of the present manor house: (i) when was it constructed – is it earlier than the motte and bailey, contemporaneous with it, or a later addition; and (ii) what was its purpose? These questions are interdependent, and it is difficult in discussion to divorce the one from the other. It has already been suggested that the outer earthwork may have been a quasi-defensive feature around a small group of crofts attached to the castle, but are there parallels for this, or alternative interpretations? To attempt to provide answers we have to combine the intrinsic evidence derived from the ground survey with the study of parallels elsewhere.

The first possibility is that the outer enclosure was something much earlier than the castle. Motte and bailey castles were occasionally partly built over prehistoric enclosures, either through the unconscious coincidence of shared siting requirements, or through a positive decision to reutilise the older defences; examples can be recognised at Herefordshire Beacon on the Malvern Hills, and probably also at Nether Stowey (Somerset) and Elmley Castle (Worcestershire). Similarly Roman forts were reused at Portchester, Cardiff, Carisbrooke, Pevensey, Burgh Castle, Tomen-y-Mur in Maentwrog (Merioneth) and Colwyn

Castle in Glascwm (Radnorshire).<sup>38</sup> However, nothing about the location, shape or character of the earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly supports any speculation that the Norman castle deliberately reoccupied a visible prehistoric or Roman site.

Could the outer enclosure be of Anglo-Saxon date? It is inherently likely from the habitative place-name that there was some form of settlement at Ascott-under-Wychwood before the Norman Conquest. There is limited evidence elsewhere in Oxfordshire that a minority of nucleated villages, or parts of villages, were surrounded by a well-marked, possibly even defensive, perimeter in the late Saxon period.<sup>39</sup> Is it possible that the outer enclosure at Ascott already surrounded the village before the castle was built? It is well known that many castles were superimposed over pre-existing settlements, causing disruption to older streets and buildings. This is best documented in towns, where the impact was greatest. Pounds recognises 48 cases where a new castle was imposed by William the Conqueror or his followers over a pre-existing town.<sup>40</sup> The Domesday survey records considerable destruction of property (166 houses at Lincoln, 98 at Norwich, 51 in Shrewsbury) resulting from this process.<sup>41</sup> Locally we have the Domesday record of eight properties (*hagis*) being removed from the north-eastern quarter of Wallingford to make way for the castle and the archaeological evidence of extra-mural settlement beneath the castle at Oxford.<sup>42</sup> The same process also sometimes occurred in villages, for example at Burwell in Cambridgeshire, where King Stephen ordered the construction of a castle in 1144 during his campaign against Geoffrey de Mandeville. Here aerial photographs clearly show a line of crofts destroyed to make room for the new castle, being partly overlain with spoil tips from the excavation of the ditch. In this case the castle lost its *raison-d'être* after de Mandeville was killed in an assault upon it in August of the same year; it was never completed, but the parts of the village affected by its creation were never reoccupied.<sup>43</sup> Another probable example is at Yelden in Bedfordshire, where a motte and bailey, constructed before 1173-4, appears to occupy the site of about five earlier crofts.<sup>44</sup> Later medieval instances also occur, for example at Braybrooke in Northamptonshire, where the elaboration of the old manor-house into a castle under a crenellation licence of 1303-4 and the expansion of an associated set of fishponds first documented around 1200 cut right through part of the older settlement.<sup>45</sup> Topographically the best clue to the superimposition of a new castle over an older settlement is the blocking or diversion of roads, as is evident at Castle Street in Oxford and Castle Street in Wallingford. At Ascott d'Oilly the castle stands on the edge of the village enclosure, the line of the suggested early street is not conclusively disrupted by it, and although the motte ditch straddles the line of the bank and ditch of the village enclosure, the curvature in the north-eastern corner of the latter, contrasting with the rectilinear pattern at its western end, strongly suggests that the bounds of the outer enclosure were designed from

<sup>38</sup> King, *op. cit.* note 4, i, pp. 162, 190, 192, 204, 277; ii, pp. 407, 459, 473, 507.

<sup>39</sup> C.J. Bond, 'Medieval Oxfordshire Villages and their Topography: a preliminary discussion', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Medieval Villages* (1985), 101-23, esp. p. 115, where the deliberately noncommittal term 'core areas' was adopted.

<sup>40</sup> N.J.G. Pounds, *The Medieval Castle in England and Wales: a Social and Political History* (1990), 57ff., 207ff.

<sup>41</sup> H.C. Darby, *op. cit.* note 20, p. 295, where all examples are quoted.

<sup>42</sup> E.M. Jope, 'Late Saxon Pits under Oxford Castle Mound: excavations in 1952', *Oxoniensia*, xvii-xviii (1952-3), 77-111; T.G. Hassall, 'Excavations at Oxford Castle, 1965-1973', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 232-308.

<sup>43</sup> RCHM Cambridgeshire, ii, *North-East Cambridgeshire*, Fig. 44, pp. 41-2; C. Taylor, *Village and Farmstead* (1983), 167-8.

<sup>44</sup> M.W. Beresford and J.K.S. St. Joseph, *Medieval England: an Aerial Survey* (2nd edn. 1979), 156-7.

<sup>45</sup> RCHM Northamptonshire, ii, *Archaeol. Sites in Central Northants*, 11-13.

the outset to link up with the castle defences. While none of this evidence is decisive, on balance it points towards the outer enclosure being secondary to the motte and bailey, rather than preceding it.

If, as seems likely, the outer enclosure is more or less contemporary with the castle, its possible function merely as a livestock enclosure must be considered. Derek Renn in 1959 suggested that some large ditched enclosures attached to mottes were intended simply for the safe keeping of cattle, putting forward as examples Alderton (Northants), Hailes (Glos), Hawridge Court (Bucks.) and Topcliffe (Yorks.).<sup>46</sup> This suggestion cannot be ruled out entirely. However, the substantial boundary banks and internal subdivisions at Ascott seem of greater magnitude than necessary for the performance of this function.

Many mottes have more than one attached bailey, and at Ascott d'Oilly the outer enclosure may be simply a large outer bailey, either contemporary with, or a later addition to, the castle. Outer baileys vary enormously in size, character and purpose; indeed, there is no clear threshold between outer baileys and associated village or town enclosures. Outer baileys usually contained stables, smithies, workshops and gardens directly connected with the needs of the lord's extended household, but they enter a rather grey area when they also contain dwellings for servants, retainers, grooms and necessary craftsmen, and in some cases for tenants owing military services, quarters for visitors, courtroom, and pound for livestock. It was not uncommon for an outer bailey which was initially conceived as an intrinsic part of the castle in due course to pass out of the lord's direct control and to develop as a separate community.

Outer enclosures were also quite deliberately created with the intention of establishing within them new market settlements or boroughs dependent upon the castle. The expanding economy of the early Middle Ages encouraged many lords to attempt to combine defensive and commercial functions on the same spot. The Domesday survey shows that this process was already under way well before the end of the 11th century, with castle-boroughs at Old Rhuddlan (Denbighshire), Ewyas Harold, Clifford and Wigmore (all in Herefordshire), Tutbury (Staffordshire), and possibly also Trematon (Cornwall). Outer defensive circuits which were clearly intended to give some protection to these embryonic boroughs can be detected at several of these places (see Appendix A). The planting of new boroughs alongside castles continued to be employed as a means of colonising hostile territory in Wales, where the policy initiated by the Normans at sites like Pembroke culminated in Edward I's chain of castle-and-town foundations at Flint, Rhuddlan, Conway, Caernarvon and Beaumaris. Sometimes the town defences were contemporary with the castle, sometimes they came later. The same process was also employed on many sites in England. Well over thirty examples are known of small boroughs established within extended outer defences of castles. Some of these, like Launceston (Cornwall), Castleton (Derbyshire), Clun (Shropshire) and Framlingham (Suffolk) continue to flourish as small towns today. However, the association of defence and commerce on the same site was not always a happy one, since the two functions have quite different siting requirements: the best defensive positions are those with limited access, on hilltops or surrounded by water or marsh, whereas the best market sites are easily accessible from all directions. In consequence, a significant proportion of Norman urban promotions in outer baileys subsequently failed (Appendix A). The same problems

<sup>46</sup> D. Renn, 'Mottes - a Classification', *Antiquity*, 33 (1959), 106-12, esp. p. 111. The mound and associated features at Alderton now seem more likely to represent the remains of a prospect mount and formal gardens, a class of earthworks which archaeologists had hardly begun to recognise in 1959 - see RCHM *Northants.* iv, 61-2.

continued to affect many later ventures, and examples of 13th-century castles accompanied by failed towns can also be recognised, especially in Wales: for example at Dryslwyn and Old Dynevor (Carmarthenshire), Old Denbigh, Castell-y-Bere (Merioneth), Skenfrith and Whitecastle (Monmouthshire), Dolforwyn (Montgomeryshire) and Cefnlllys (Radnorshire).

Normally a market or borough promotion adjoining a castle, whether ultimately successful or not, would leave some trace in the written record. There is no indication whatsoever that the d'Oillys ever attempted this at Ascott. However, there are numerous other cases where the castle embraced an adjoining village within a circuit of outer defences. Although such places may never have had any borough or market pretensions, they are often morphologically indistinguishable from places that did; and they have to be seen as part of the same process of regulation and replanning of settlements after the Norman Conquest. In the words of Pounds, 'During the first century of English feudalism the village was often intimately linked with the castle, being enclosed by a ditch, rampart and palisade, and forming, in effect, an outer bailey... It is doubtful, however, whether such enclosed villages continued to be created after 1154, except in frontier regions'.<sup>47</sup>

If, as is suggested, the Ascott d'Oilly earthworks do represent a castle with an outwork formerly containing an associated village which has since become deserted (Fig. 6), the site has no clear parallels anywhere else in Oxfordshire. The outer eastern enclosure attached to the castle at Middleton Stoney might at first sight appear to fall into this category, though it is more ovoid in shape, smaller than the Ascott enclosure (1.5 ha.), and with much slighter boundary works. However, the Middleton Stoney enclosure contains only faint traces of ridge and furrow, and a single archaeological trench produced post-medieval pottery from a layer cut by the ditch.<sup>48</sup>

In other parts of the country, however, a wide variety of surviving, contracted and deserted non-urban villages attached to castles and enclosed by earthworks which range from substantial defences down to slight boundary banks can be recognised. No comprehensive survey of such sites has ever been undertaken, but a provisional list containing over thirty certain or probable examples is offered here (Appendix B). Some of these provide quite close parallels for Ascott, notably Kilpeck in Herefordshire, though there the castle earthworks are much more substantial and the village earthworks slightly more extensive and certainly clearer.

On present knowledge the distribution of enclosed villages attached to castles reveals significant concentrations in certain parts of the country. The biggest group is in the Welsh borderland, an area which also contains a relatively large concentration of castle-bailey boroughs. In a region where insecurity was endemic throughout the early Middle Ages, this comes as no great surprise. It is more difficult to see any obvious rationale behind a second substantial concentration in the eastern region of England, though again this area contains some castle-bailey boroughs. A few examples can be recognised in the north, which can presumably be explained by the ever-present threat from the Scottish border. Outside these regions, however, only a handful of scattered examples can be recognised, including Ascott d'Oilly itself.

Like most assessments of the distribution of archaeological sites, this one is undoubtedly skewed by the extent of past survey, in particular by the work of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, but also by the pioneer surveys of individuals like Beauchamp Wadmore in Bedfordshire, working at a time when many sites may have been better

<sup>47</sup> Pounds, *op. cit.* note 40, p. 205.

<sup>48</sup> Rahtz and Rowley, *op. cit.* note 16, pp. 6-9, 68-9.

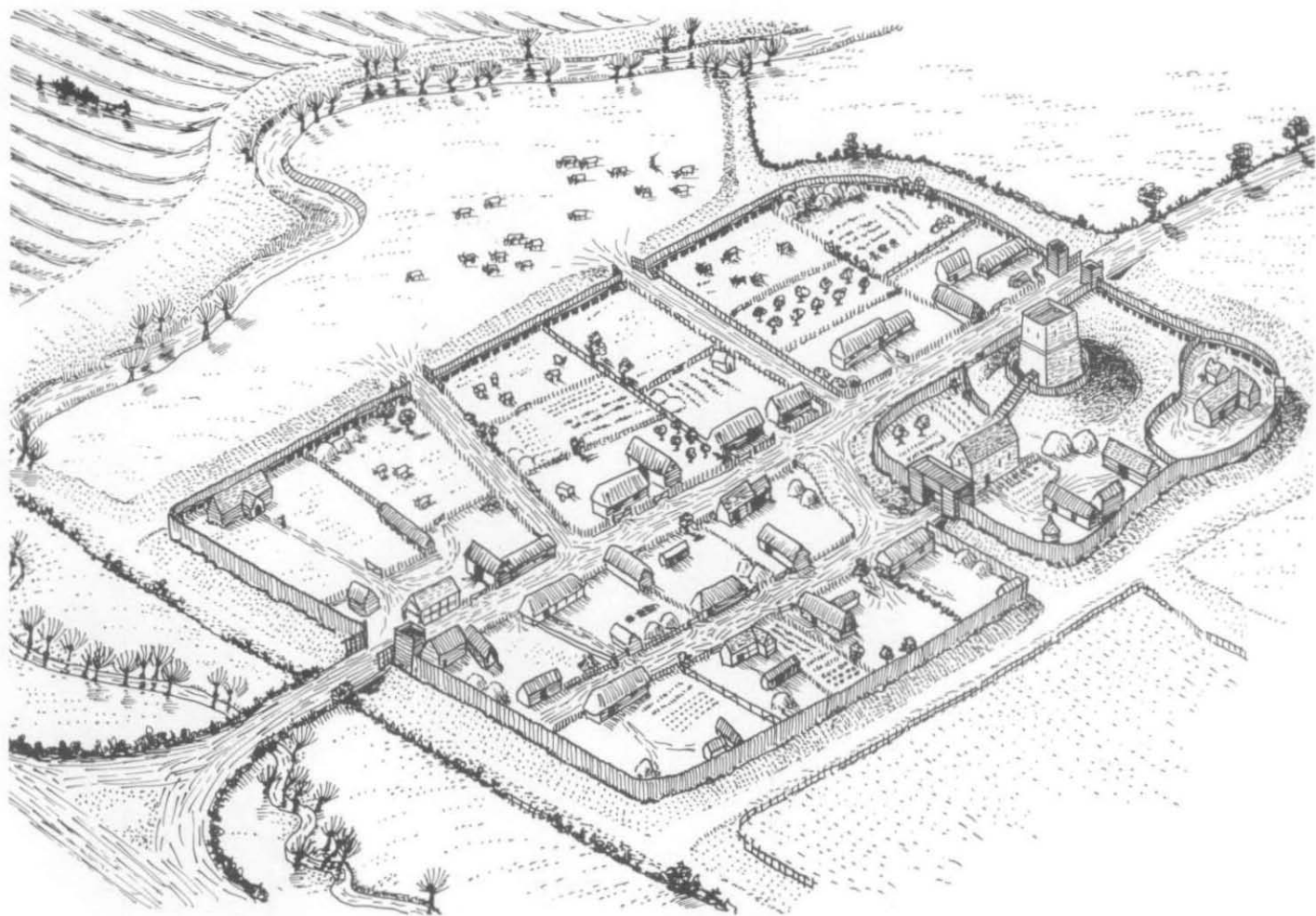


Fig. 6. Speculative reconstruction of Ascott d'Oilly *c.* 1170, depicting the outer enclosure as a village attached to the castle. There is no direct evidence for the precise location of peasant buildings, and many other interpretations of the earthworks are possible.

preserved than they are today. It is probable that many more examples of defended villages once existed than can now be recognised: village enclosure boundaries have always been more vulnerable to destruction than castle earthworks, both because of their slighter nature and because the pressures of later settlement expansion and development were more likely to overwhelm them. It is no accident that the best examples of outer village enclosures occur in cases where the village has itself either contracted or become deserted.

#### THE OTHER CASTLE SITES IN ASCOTT-UNDER-WYCHWOOD

The earthworks of a second motte and bailey lie within the bounds of the hamlet of Ascott Earl, which makes up the western portion of the present village (Fig. 7). The site lies some 840 m. south-west of the motte at Ascott d'Oilly, and was recognised for the first time by Jope and Threlfall.<sup>49</sup> This is somewhat larger than the Ascott d'Oilly site, but in much poorer

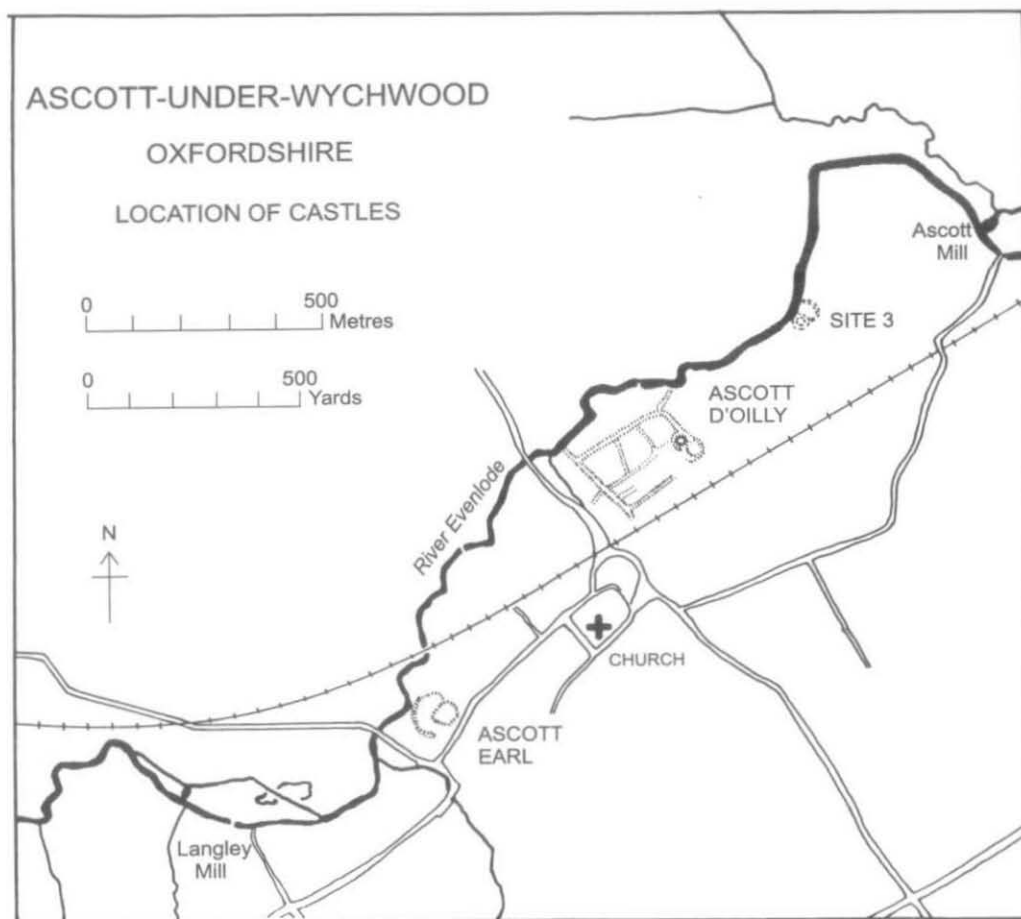


Fig. 7. Location of castle sites in Ascott-under-Wychwood.

<sup>49</sup> Jope and Threlfall, *op. cit.* note 30, pp. 222, 238-9.



condition. The motte has partly been flattened, but still stands up to 3 m. above its ditch, and there is a kidney-shaped bailey to the west. A small excavation in 1956 produced about 70 sherds of pottery, and the absence of any glazed ware raised the possibility that it could have had a slightly earlier period of occupation and abandonment than Ascott d'Oilly, though the evidence from such a small-scale operation could not be conclusive. A sketch plan of the earthworks was published by Mick Aston in 1972, following the cutting of a drainage ditch through the bank of the bailey.<sup>50</sup>

A third possible site has since been suggested from the evidence of vertical aerial photographs taken in June 1961, which show a very distinct and characteristic figure-of-eight cropmark near the river some 360 m. to the north-east of the motte at Ascot d'Oilly (Fig. 7).<sup>51</sup> A hedge running down towards the river deviates significantly around the ditch of the putative motte. This hedge seems to mark a significant change in the landscape, being followed by a sharp rise in ground level. To the west the valley land was within the Evenlode flood plain and was used as meadow; but the air photographs show the ploughed-out ridge and furrow of former open field strips beginning immediately east of the hedge. Just as the hedge line deviates around the 'motte', the ridge and furrow equally significantly respects the 'bailey', an almost circular enclosure immediately north-east of the motte. The site is almost precisely the same size as the motte and bailey at Ascott d'Oilly itself. However, if this was a motte and bailey, unlike Ascott d'Oilly and Ascott Earl, it seems to have been totally isolated from the rest of the early medieval settlement pattern. Field-names around the site are uninformative: Wagmore or Wagmoors to the west, Upper and Lower Wagmoor, Over Railway and Down Field to the east. The field is regularly under crop, and the nature of this site awaits final determination.

It is not unusual to find more than two or three earthwork castles in fairly close proximity in the same parish or township in Wales, or the Welsh borders, or the north of England, but it is relatively unusual in the midlands and south. Why should there be two, maybe even three, motte and bailey castles in the one village? The most likely circumstance, and the one which certainly accounts for two of the castles at Ascott, is that they were on different manors in different ownership. The documentary evidence discussed earlier clearly points to this. However, this leaves the third site unaccounted for, and if this is genuine two possible reasons for it can be envisaged:

(i) The third site might be a short-lived product of some particular conflict rather than anything intended as a permanent stronghold or residence. A number of close juxtapositions of earthen fortifications elsewhere appear to be a product of sieges during the reigns of Stephen and Henry II. At Exeter a separate ringwork 270 m. away from the castle, built during the 1136 siege, has recently been rediscovered and excavated.<sup>52</sup> Wallingford Castle was besieged by Stephen on three occasions, in 1139-40, 1146 and 1152-3. On the first occasion two siege-castles were raised, one of which was swiftly overthrown. A new work was erected in 1146 in full view of Wallingford. The building of two more siege-castles is recorded in 1152, including a substantial work at the end of Wallingford Bridge. One of the sites recorded can fairly certainly be identified with the now destroyed earthworks known as Stephen's Mount at Crowmarsh Gifford, immediately beyond the end of Wallingford Bridge on the Oxfordshire bank of the river. During the 1153 episode a siege-castle at Brightwell, 3 km. away, was destroyed by Henry Plantagenet. Mark Spurrell has recently suggested that

<sup>50</sup> M.A. Aston, 'Ascott Earl', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, 2 (1972), 30, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Fairey Aviation Surveys Ltd, 6125 / 10-051.

<sup>52</sup> I. Hope, 'Exeter', *Current Archaeol.* 141 (Dec. 1994-Jan. 1995), 348.

earthworks at South Moreton and Cholsey may also be connected with the 1146-53 sieges.<sup>53</sup> At Oxford two mounds on the north side of the castle moat, known in the 17th century as 'Jews Mount' and 'Mount Pelham', are said to have been thrown up by Stephen during the siege of 1142.<sup>54</sup> At Huntingdon the earthworks of a siege castle thrown up by Henry II in the 1170s have been identified some 350 m. west of the castle.<sup>55</sup> At Corfe (Dorset) a ringwork and bailey some 400 m. south-west of the castle seems likely to be a product of Stephen's unsuccessful siege in 1139.<sup>56</sup> Carenza Lewis has recently suggested that the motte at Stake Farm, some 200 m. from the motte of Castle Hill at West Chelborough (Dorset), may also be a siege-castle thrown up late in 1139.<sup>57</sup> Other possible examples are listed by Renn, who estimated an optimum distance of 180-275 m. between siegework and castle.<sup>58</sup> There is clearly some variation in tactical use amongst these works. Those closest to the besieged castle generally seem to have been built with the most aggressive intent; those more than a bowshot away are more likely to be associated with longer-term blockading, intended to protect the besiegers and to prevent the arrival of supplies or reinforcements; while those at a greater distance probably fulfilled more of a neutralising operation, conceding ground around the castle, not posing any direct threat to the garrison, but inhibiting any raids out into neighbouring territory. Superficially the spatial arrangement of the three sites at Ascott most closely resembles the situation at Barley Pound in Crondall (Hants), probably identifiable with the Bishop of Winchester's castle of 'Lidelea', where two siege castles were built in 1147: here the earthworks of Bentley Castle lie 400 m. to the south-west and those of Powderham Castle 550 m. to the east.<sup>59</sup> At Hamstead Marshall (Berkshire) the juxtaposition of two mottes 115 m. apart with another uncompleted motte 830 m. away has been discussed by Desmond Bonney and Chris Dunn, who incline towards the interpretation of one of the two in close proximity as a replacement for the other, but the more distant uncompleted motte as a siegework.<sup>60</sup> The basin of the upper Thames was certainly a significant war zone during the Anarchy, but no specific documentary record of any conflict or siege at Ascott is known, and the isolated and low-lying position of the third site probably argues against this function here.

(ii) The more likely hypothesis is that the third site was not directly contemporary with its neighbours, but was a temporary and short-lived predecessor abandoned in favour of one of the other sites (presumably Ascott d'Oilly, that being the nearer). The gazetteers of Renn and Cathcart King contain many cases where an early motte-and-bailey was apparently superseded by a later one on a better site nearby: the replacement of the small motte of Bryn-y-Castell by the larger motte in Knighton (Radnorshire) and the abandonment of

<sup>53</sup> M. Spurrell, 'Containing Wallingford Castle, 1146-1153', *Oxoniensia*, lx (1995), 257-70; see also C.F. Slade, 'Wallingford Castle in the Reign of King Stephen', *Berks. Archaeol. Jnl.* 58 (1960), 33-43, and D.J. Cathcart King, 'Wallingford - the Siege Castles', in *Castellarium Anglicanum*, ii, 566-7.

<sup>54</sup> A. Wood, *The Antient and Present State of the City of Oxford* (ed. J. Peshall, 1773), 167.

<sup>55</sup> S. Inskip Ladds, 'Ancient Earthworks', in *V.C.H. Huntingdonshire*, i, 281-314.

<sup>56</sup> RCHM Dorset, ii (1), 96-8.

<sup>57</sup> C. Lewis, 'Paired Mottes in East Chelborough, Dorset', in M. Bowden, D. Mackay and P. Topping (eds.), *From Cornwall to Caithness: Some Aspects of British Field Archaeology: Papers presented to Norman V. Quinnell* (BAR, Brit. Ser. 209, 1989), 159-71.

<sup>58</sup> Renn, op. cit. note 36, pp. 108, 110.

<sup>59</sup> D.J. Cathcart King and D.F. Renn, 'Lidelea Castle: a suggested identification', *Antiq. Jnl.* 51 (1971), 301-3; P. Stamper, 'Excavations on a mid-12th century Siege Castle at Bentley, Hampshire', *Proc. Hants Field Club*, 40 (1984), 81-9.

<sup>60</sup> D.J. Bonney and C.J. Dunn, 'Earthwork Castles and Settlement at Hamstead Marshall, Berkshire', in Bowden, Mackay and Topping, op. cit. note 57, pp. 173-82.

Hawcocks Mount in favour of Caus Castle (Shropshire) (here the connection is demonstrated by the name of the older site, a corruption of 'Old Caus') may be quoted as examples. Similarly, where the military functions remained important, an earthen castle might be superseded later on by a stone one, for which a new site might be selected: in this way Hen Domen was replaced by Montgomery Castle, Castle How motte in Westmorland by Kendal Castle.

## CONCLUSIONS

The survey described here has provided a fuller and more detailed plan of the earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly than previous records of the site. A possible small bailey immediately south-east of the motte and tower has been recognised, which could be the predecessor of the main bailey containing the extant 13th-century building remains to the west. Despite the absence of visible building platforms within it, the large outer enclosure extending north and west of the manor-house and castle seems most likely to represent the semi-defensive boundary of a short-lived village site attached to the castle, either planned at the same time or developed shortly after its foundation, but then abandoned or removed to the site of the present village. Whereas fieldwork and examination of comparative evidence offers hypotheses and provisional interpretations, however, in the long term a fuller understanding of the site would only become possible through excavation.

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## APPENDIX A: NORMAN EARTHWORK CASTLES WITH FAILED TOWNS IN OUTER ENCLOSURES

(for references see bibliography at end of appendices)

### *Cardiganshire*

Old Kidwelly: Earthwork defences of early 12th-century borough adjoining castle enclosing 3.2 ha.; part later walled (Beresford, p. 541; Renn, pp. 214, 217; King, pp. 55-6; Brown, pp. 134-6)

### *Cornwall*

Trematon(?): Domesday Book records transfer of market from St. Germans to the Count of Mortain's castle (Beresford, pp. 411-12)

### *Essex*

Pleshey: Motte and bailey founded by William de Mandeville in 1174, large outer circuit of town defences, markets and shops flourishing into 16th century; still a village (Beresford and St. Joseph, pp. 222-3; Beresford, pp. 435-6; Renn, pp. 280, 287; King, p. 146; Brown, pp. 183-4)

*Flintshire*

Old Rhuddlan: New borough with 18 burgesses recorded in Domesday, linked with motte and bailey castle held by Robert of Rhuddlan under Earl Hugh of Chester; excavated Norman borough defences on a different alignment to both the Anglo-Saxon defences and those of Edward I's town (Quinnell and Blockley, pp. 14-16, 210, 214-16)

*Glamorgan*

Kenfig: Burgages first recorded in 1140s. Castle ruined, adjoining town site overwhelmed by sand dunes (Beresford, p. 555; Renn, pp. 211-12; King, p. 164)

*Herefordshire*

Clifford: 16 burgesses were attached to the castle in 1086 (Atkin, p. 103)

Ewyas Harold: 2 *mansurae in castello* in 1086 (Atkin, pp. 103-4)

Richard's Castle: Domesday Book records 51 people within the *castellaria*, 23 within the castle itself; 103 burgages recorded in 1304. Oval area east of motte and bailey, enclosed by earthen defences; excavation in 1962-4 showed these to be added c. 1200 (RCHM *Herefs*, iii, pp. 172-3; Beresford, pp. 451-2; Renn, p. 293; Curnow and Thompson; Brown, pp. 196-7)

Wigmore: Domesday borough by the castle. Two banks with outer ditches running north from the castle may have enclosed the settlement (RCHM *Herefs*, iii, pp. 205-9; Atkin, p. 104; Renn, pp. 345-7)

*Leicestershire*

Belvoir(?): Castle and adjoining priory founded by Robert de Todnei c. 1076, with possible small town attached (Beresford, pp. 461-2)

*Norfolk*

Castle Acre: Motte and bailey with square settlement enclosure to south-west containing two roughly parallel streets and cross-lanes, representing a decayed early borough. Church outside western borough defences, present market place overlies northern defences (Renn, pp. 86-7; Aston and Rowley, p. 141; King, p. 306; Brown, pp. 73-5)

New Buckenham: Castle and adjoining grid-planned new borough laid out c. 1146-56 by William de Albany. Still a village (Beresford and St. Joseph, pp. 226-8; Beresford, p. 467; Renn, pp. 121, 145; Brown, pp. 58-60)

*Shropshire*

Caus: Motte and bailey established by 1140, market charter acquired by Robert Corbet in 1200, 34 burgages in 1300, town in terminal decline by 1540. Line of town defences clearly visible, but interior now empty (Beresford, pp. 480-1; Renn, pp. 139, 147; Higham and Barker, pp. 200, 237; Brown, pp. 82-3)

*Staffordshire*

Tutbury: Domesday Book records 42 traders *in burgo circa castellum*; there are clear traces of a small settlement enclosure to the south of the motte and bailey (Wheatley, p. 207; Renn, p. 335)

*Yorkshire*

Skipsea: Motte and bailey built before 1098 by Drogo de la Beuvrière, castle borough attached before late 12th century (Beresford, pp. 514-15)

## APPENDIX B: EARTHWORK CASTLES WITH ATTACHED VILLAGE ENCLOSURES

*Bedfordshire*

Arlesey: Ringwork and baileys with additional village defence (Wadmore, pp. 57-8; King, p. 4)

Bletsoe(?): Castle with large outer bailey or village enclosure (Wadmore, pp. 153-4; King, p. 5)

Cainhoe: Large oval enclosure with vestigial bank and ditch south-west of motte and bailey containing extensive earthworks of deserted village (Brown, pp. 69-70)

Meppershall: Motte and two baileys with large square village enclosure, two sides of which form parish boundary, including 12th-century church (Wadmore, pp. 109-19; Renn, pp. 217, 242; King, p. 6)

Thurleigh: Motte with wet moat, village defences attached (Wadmore, pp. 129-30; King, p. 7)

Totternhoe(?): Motte and bailey with large rectangular enclosure to south-east (Wadmore, pp. 139-40)

Yelden(?): Complex motte and bailey with adjoining deserted village earthworks, outer bank probably not defensive (Wadmore, pp. 145-6; Brown, p. 236-7)

*Cambridgeshire*

Castle Camps: Ringwork with two successive baileys, the inner of which is overlain by the parish church of the adjoining deserted village, which is itself at least partly surrounded by a slighter outer bank (Taylor)

*Durham*

Bishopston: Motte and bailey within extensive deserted village earthworks (Renn, pp. 101, 111)

*Essex*

Ongar: Large well-preserved oval village enclosure partially surrounded by bank and ditch to south of motte and bailey, including church (RCHM *Essex*, ii, pp. 53-4; King, p. 146)

*Gloucestershire*

English Bicknor: Motte and bailey with outer enclosure on north side including the church, further partial ditched enclosure beyond that containing the rectory (Maclean; Renn, p. 184; King, p. 181)

*Hampshire*

Ashley: Ringwork with embanked outer enclosure around northern and western sides, including the church (Renn, pp. 94-6; King, p. 189)

*Herefordshire*

Ashperton: Oval moat with weak rectangular ditched area including church to east (RCHM *Herefs*, ii, pp. xxvi, 3; King, p. 202)

Eardisley(?): Large outer enclosure, but present village lies beyond it (RCHM *Herefs*, iii, pp. xxix, 52-3; Renn, pp. 180-1; King, p. 205)

Kilpeck: Well-preserved earthworks of deserted medieval settlement within an embanked rectangular enclosure immediately north-east of the castle. The village enclosure is bisected by a holloway, and includes the church (RCHM *Herefs*, i, pp. 158-9; Renn, pp. 216-17; King, p. 207; Brown, pp. 136-8)

Longtown: Rectangular outer enclosure east of motte encloses part of village, but excludes church (RCHM *Herefs*, i, pp. 181-4; Renn, pp. 224, 231)

*Hertfordshire*

Anstey: Large motte and bailey with ditch of possible rectangular village enclosure to west; it is not clear whether this included or excluded the church immediately south of the castle (RCHM *Herts*, pp. 35, 37; Renn, pp. 90, 95; Brown, p. 38-9)

*Benington(?)*

Pirton: Motte with church enclosed in bailey and traces of outer village enclosure to east, south and west (RCHM *Herts*, pp. 162-3; Renn, p. 280; King, p. 220)

Therfield: Motte and bailey with traces of fortified village enclosure west of parish church (RCHM *Herts*, p. 218; Renn, p. 321)

*Lincolnshire*

Bourne(?): Possible outer village enclosure west of motte and bailey castle (Renn, p. 113; King, p. 260)

Castle Bytham: Signs of bank around village adjoining motte and bailey (Brown, pp. 76-7)

Kingerby: Motte and bailey in centre of deserted village, the western part of the village more regularly planned within a rectangular enclosure surrounded by intermittent bank and ditch, not obviously of defensive character (Everson, Taylor and Dunn, pp. 35, 146-9)

*Norfolk*

Mileham: Motte with inner and outer bailey, attached rectangular enclosure surrounded by bank and ditch, once believed to be Roman, but containing shrunken village earthworks and producing 12th- to 13th-century pottery (Brown, p. 158)

*Northumberland*

Wark-on-Tweed: Motte and bailey with traces of rectangular village enclosure on south and east (Renn, p. 339; Brown, pp. 221-2)

*Oxfordshire*

Ascott d'Oilly: Rectangular outer enclosure with internal earthworks extending south-westwards from castle. Present settlement and church outside the enclosure

*Shropshire*

Holdgate(?): Motte and bailey with outer enclosure to east and more extensive deserted village earthworks to south, bounds defined by a considerable, if somewhat disjointed, terrace (Medieval Village Research Group Annual Report no.31 (1983), pp. 9-11)

More by Lydham: Oval outer enclosure of castle with deserted village earthworks. Church and present village outside the enclosure (Higham and Barker, pp. 232-3)

Pontesbury: Ringwork castle with traces of bailey and village enclosure (Barker)

West Felton: Church and part of village within sub-rectangular enclosure east of motte (Aston and Rowley, p. 120)

Whittington: Multiplication of outer banks south of castle (Renn, p. 345; King, p. 432)

*Staffordshire*

Castlechurch by Stafford: Massive motte with two baileys and a less strongly fortified outer enclosure containing earthworks of a rectilinear-planned village; church just outside village enclosure (Darlington, 1991 & 1992; Higham and Barker, pp. 19, 289-93)

*Suffolk*

Haughley: Motte and bailey with traces of outer enclosure which includes the church (Renn, p. 201; Brown, pp. 128-9)

*Yorkshire*

Barwick-in-Elmet: Motte in centre of oval bailey with large oval village enclosure to east (Renn, pp 101-2; King, p. 513)

Whorlton: Ringwork and bailey west of church, with large village enclosure to east (Renn, p. 345; King, p. 528)



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