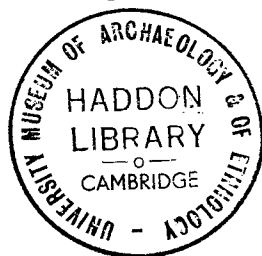


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Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

OCTOBER 1934—OCTOBER 1935



VOLUME XXXVI

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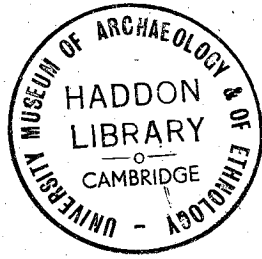
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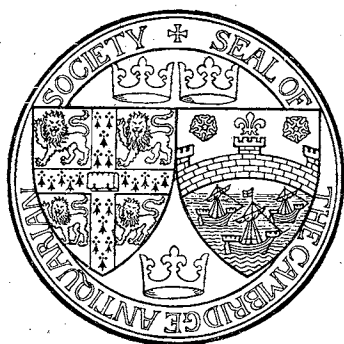
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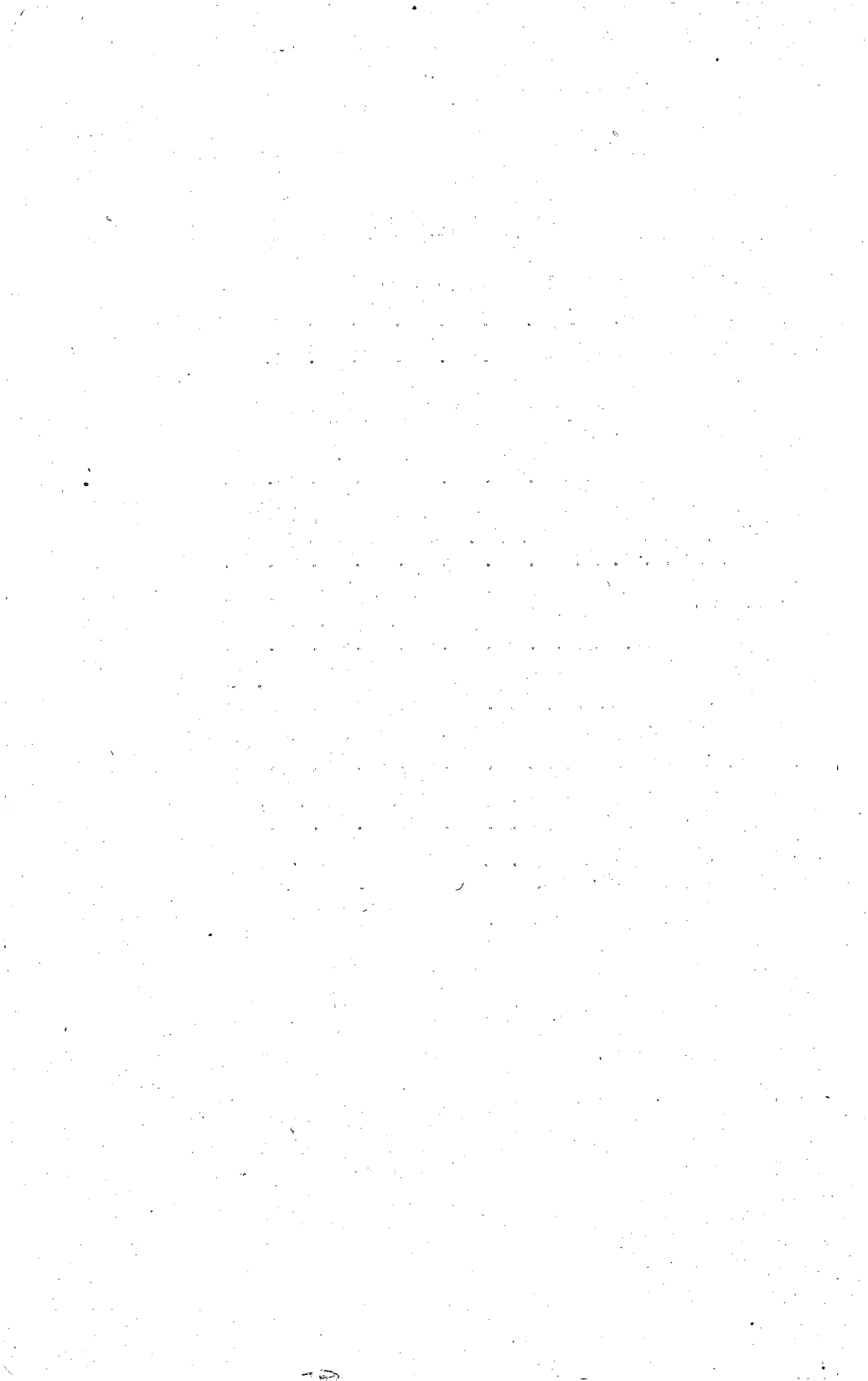
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PLATE I



(Photo. by Dr Gavin Reid)

Fig. 1. Burwell Castle.

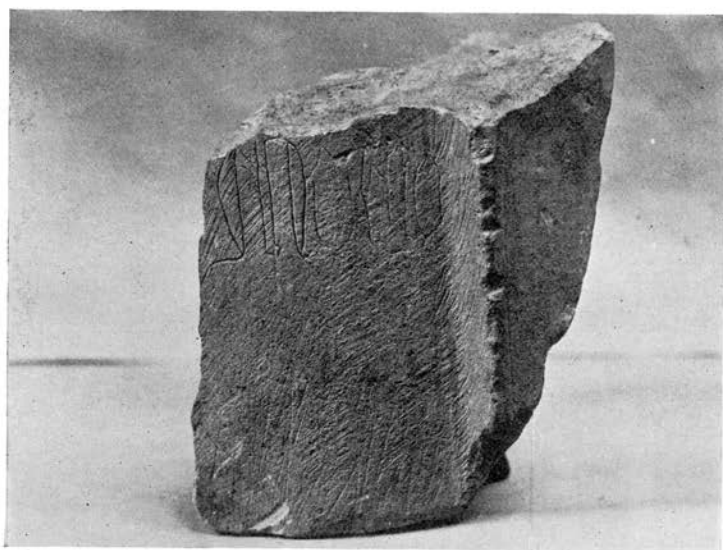


Fig. 2. Stone with graffiti.

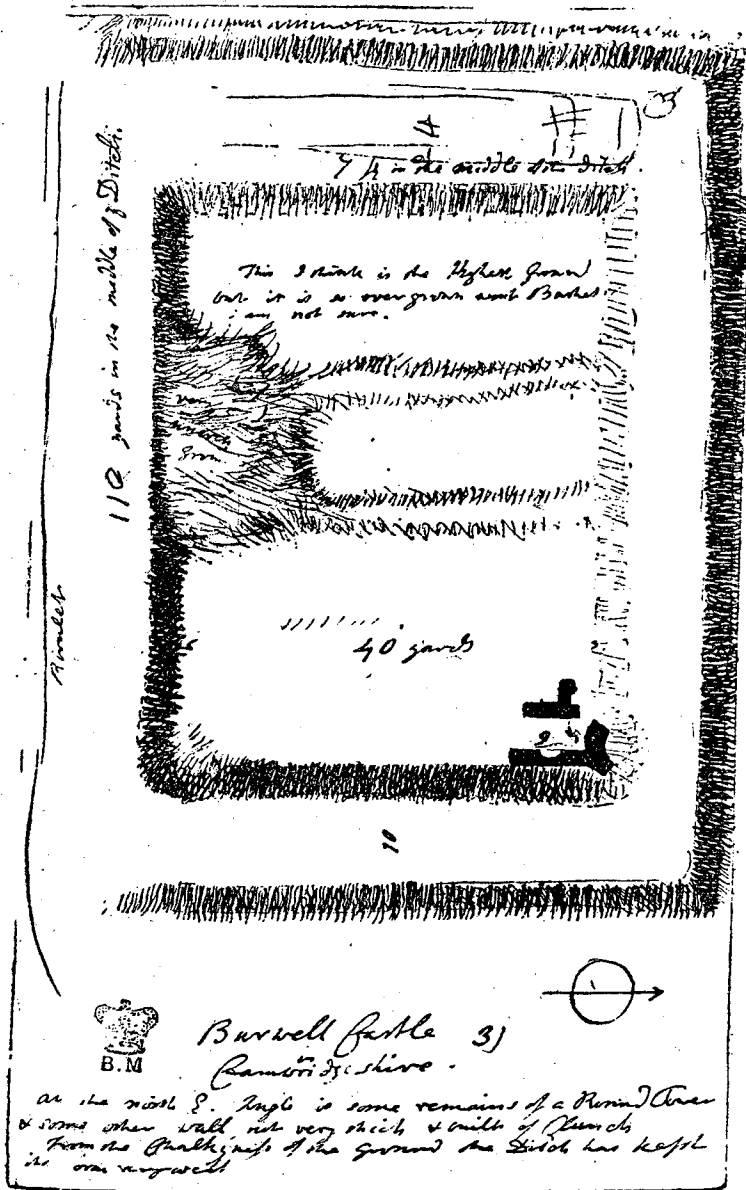
EXCAVATIONS AT BURWELL CASTLE, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

⁴ By T. C. LETHBRIDGE, B.A., F.S.A.

For many years scholars have been anxious to investigate the moated site at Burwell which is known to antiquaries as Burwell Castle and to the rest of the world as Spring Close. To-day there is little sign of masonry to be seen, if we except a few places where cattle have slid down the sides of the raised area and exposed traces of walling; but rather over a century ago there was enough visible for Kerrich to draw a rough plan¹ (part of which is shown on Fig. 1), which is now in the British Museum. Largely owing to the enthusiasm of our members Dr Louis Cobbett and Dr Charles Lucas, it was decided in 1935 that excavations should be undertaken on the site, and the Society is indebted to Mr Mason, the owner of the site, for permission to carry out the work.

Burwell Castle is a rectangular "island" surrounded by an enormous moat (Pl. I, fig. 1). The island site is aligned with its longer axis east and west. The east and west ends are raised somewhat above ground-level, while the middle is left lower. The whole area is very uneven. Outside the moat on the north side is a great mound, about the same length as the longer side of the island, and so placed as to overlook the island, or motte, itself. A similar but shorter mound is found outside the west end of the moat. From this mound a wide shelf projects into the moat to within a few feet of the island. Similar but less noticeable shelves are placed along the two longer sides of the island, but project from it and not from the farther side of the moat. Until recently a piece of clunch walling rose to a height of some 8 ft. at the east end of the island, and would no doubt be there still had not some ingenious person thought of testing the village fire hose against it; it collapsed soon afterwards with great noise, causing considerable alarm and

¹ Dr W. M. Palmer provided us with this piece of evidence.



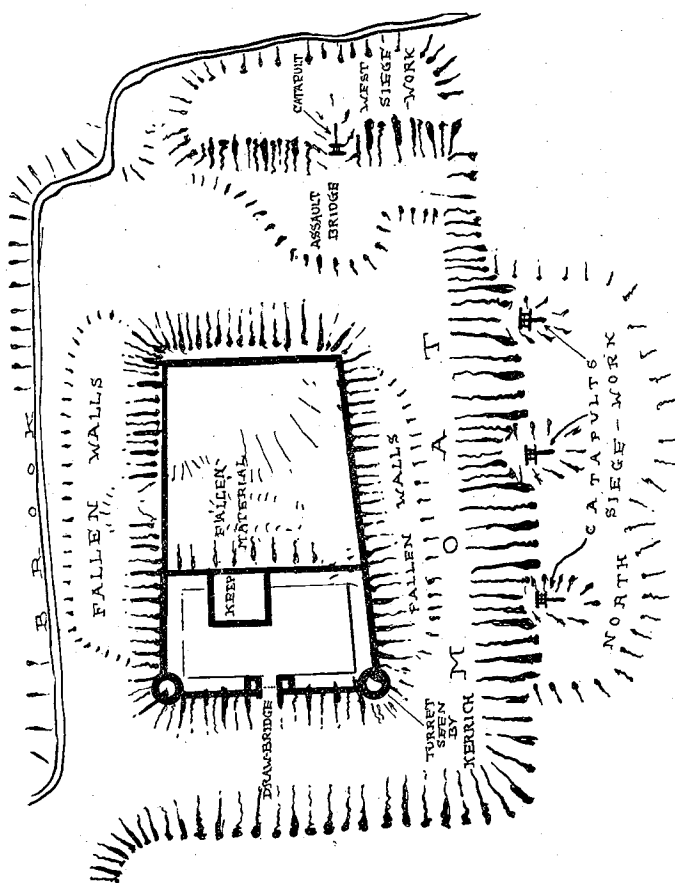


Fig. 2. Suggested interpretation of the site, before excavation.

despondency to the inhabitants of Spring Close Cottages nearby, and probably in De Mandeville Cottages as well.

Many archaeologists have visited Burwell Castle, and the mounds on the north and west sides have specially interested them. After the remains of Berkhamstead Castle had been interpreted with great skill¹ the lessons learnt from it were applied at Burwell. It became obvious, when once it was pointed out, that the mounds were siege-works with catapult emplacements, and that the shelf at the west end of the moat was an assault-bridge to gain access to the island under cover of the catapult bombardment. The two shelves along the flanks were no doubt fallen walls. There could hardly have been a better example of the value of field observation and common sense, and we were all very pleased with our interpretation of the evidence (Fig. 2).

Besides the wish to test the correctness of these ideas, there were other reasons why it was desirable to excavate the site. One of the most appealing was the hope that we might find a quantity of pottery which would be datable with some accuracy, for it was thought that since the castle was almost certainly one of those built by Stephen to blockade Geoffrey de Mandeville there would have been no need for it to be occupied after Geoffrey's death. Another inducement was the possibility of finding datable military equipment at the place where the assault-bridge came closest to the island, and in the bridge itself for that matter; for we felt sure that Geoffrey would not have scrupled to build into it the corpses of his men who were killed there. There was also the question whether the castle had ever been completed, for it seemed hardly likely that Stephen would have stayed by it long enough for this to have been done, or that Geoffrey would have delayed a moment longer than he was obliged to before attacking it.

I do not propose to give an account of what has been recorded of the life and, as some would have it, the villainies of Geoffrey de Mandeville, once Earl of Essex, and the most powerful baron of Stephen's realm. The great historian

¹ J. Murray Kendall, "The Siege of Berkhamstead Castle in 1216" (*Antiquaries Journal*, vol. III).

Round, who has earned the lasting praise of archaeologists by exploding the belief current in his day that motte-and-bailey castles were Danish burhs and showing that they were the work of the Norman conquerors, wrote a book about Geoffrey de Mandeville,¹ and it is no business of mine to try to elaborate it. Briefly, therefore, the story so far as it concerns Burwell Castle is this.² In the year 1142 or 1143 Geoffrey fell from power, fled from Stephen, and seized the Isle and Abbey of Ramsey. From this security he continually sallied out with a large force of mercenaries and volunteers to ravage the king's possessions. Stephen "caused castles to be built in suitable places, and, placing garrisons in them to overawe the marauders, he went elsewhere to attend to other affairs" (*Acts of King Stephen*); but, as soon as he had left them and gone to other parts of the country to deal with the troubles which were continually breaking out all over his unfortunate land, Geoffrey's raids began again, and he "ravaged the whole country, sparing in his cruelty neither age nor condition". Geoffrey, however, was unlucky, and having been wounded by an arrow shot by a "low foot-soldier" died at Mildenhall in 1144. The *Ramsey Chronicle* and the *Chronicle of Gervase* say that it was at Burwell that he was wounded,³ the *Acts of King Stephen* only that it was at one of the castles built by Stephen to keep him in order. His death was no doubt a relief to the people of Cambridge, whose town he had sacked.

Of the castles which Stephen is said to have built in this crisis, only one is mentioned by name, and that is Burwell. It may, of course, be conjectured that Cambridge Castle, Thetford, and Huntingdon were reconditioned at this time; he had apparently recaptured the Isle of Ely from the rebels, and we can assume that the castle at Ely was in his hands.

¹ J. H. Round, *Geoffrey de Mandeville: a Study of the Anarchy* (1892).

² The story is to be found in the following Chronicles: *Acts of Stephen, King of England and Duke of Normandy*, trans. T. Forester (Bohn, 1853); *Gervase of Canterbury: Chronicle of the reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, ed. William Stubbs, (Rolls Series, 1879); *Roger of Wendover: Flowers of History*, trans. J. A. Giles (Bohn, 1849); *Chronicle of the Abbey of Ramsey*, ed. W. Dunn Macray (Rolls Series, 1886).

³ *Chronicle of Ramsey*, p. 331; *Chronicle of Gervase*, p. 128.

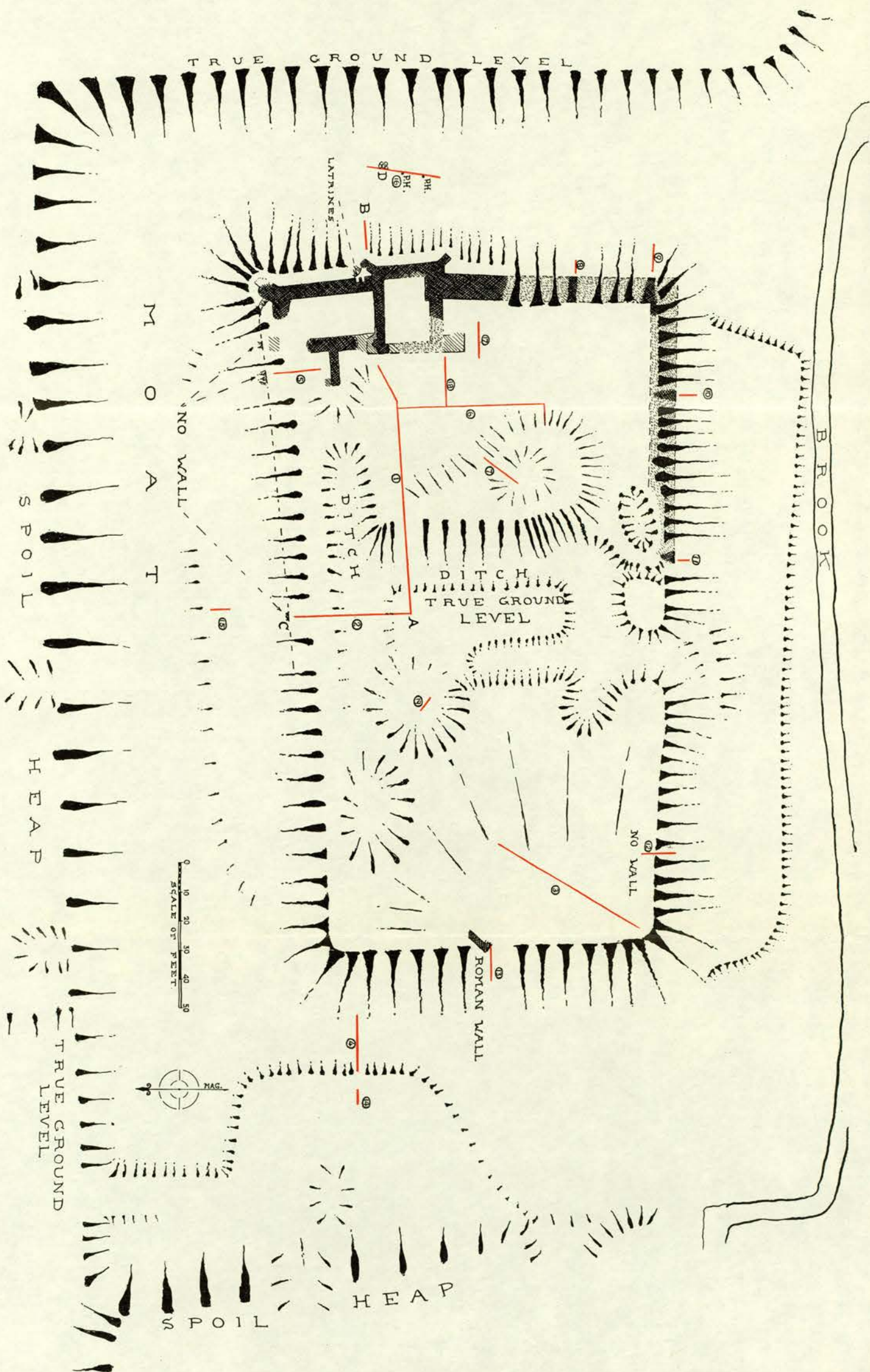
Burwell was being built. The only other castle which may have been constructed at this time, and which would certainly have been a check on Geoffrey's movements, is the castle at Rampton. This is always said to have been a stronghold of the De Lisles, and no doubt the land belonged to them; but it is the only local castle which shows the same peculiar features which we will presently notice at Burwell.

Geoffrey was, therefore, being ringed in to the south, east, and west; whether it was found necessary to garrison Wisbech Castle, Freckenham, or Weeting, we cannot tell, but this was probably done; I have not as yet studied the situation farther north. It is evident, then, that if he was to carry on his revolt and feed his men on looted cattle he must break this ring; and, if we read the story aright, this is what he tried to do.

The excavation was begun by making a trench across the moat between the assault-bridge and the island (Fig. 3, no. 4). It was soon seen that the moat had no muddy fresh-water deposit in it at all, but was filled up with 3 ft. of peat and a layer of chalky material which looked like rainwash off the motte. A single piece of tile lay on the floor of the moat, but was much too recent to have belonged to the castle. The absence of a fresh-water deposit in the moat made it clear that it had not held water for any length of time. A trial hole was now cut on top of the assault-bridge (Fig. 3, no. 14). This proved to consist of unmoved chalk rock, as I might have guessed had I given it more careful thought, for it was covered with typical downland turf and flowers, very different from the lush vegetation in the moat itself. A very little work had now exploded part of our original theory; not only was it plain that there had been no attempt to fill up the moat here, but it seemed that a large portion of the floor of the moat had never been dug out.

Attention was now turned to the shelf along the north face of the island. A short trench (Fig. 3, no 15) showed that this was not formed by fallen walls but was unmoved chalk rock also. Some mortar and rubble had been thrown into the moat at the outer side, but the shelf itself was bare.

Fig. 3. Plan of excavations at Burwell Castle. Trenches are marked



A cut into the side of the island, up the scarp, and over the top (Fig. 3, no. 2), failed to yield the slightest trace of the curtain wall that we had been led to expect at this point. We had, then, found another large area of moat which had never been completely dug out, and failed to find a necessary part of the fortification. It began to appear highly probable that Burwell was one of those things which we are warned never to expect in archaeology, namely, an unfinished work. The siege-works were now examined in a new light, and it at once became clear that they were nothing more than dumps of spoil from the moat which had never been spread or carted away, probably because there had been no time to do so before Geoffrey arrived. The catapult emplacements were the gullies up which planks had been laid for workmen to wheel or carry the rubble as it was dug out of the moat (Fig. 5).

It was now thought advisable to explore the island itself. A section was cut across the eastern mound or motte (Fig. 3, no. 1 A-B, and Fig. 4). A ditch was found on its western face which was largely filled with tiles and a few blocks of dressed clunch, but there was a considerable quantity of Romano-British pottery in it also. This ditch is probably continuous with one which appears from beneath the northern spoil-heap on its farther side (Fig. 5). It is probably Romano-British in date. The motte was found to consist of a thick layer of humus, with one of chalk rubble above it laid upon the old surface soil. The old surface soil contained numerous Romano-British potsherds together with bones of ox, sheep, and pig, and also roof tiles and much fallen wall-plaster painted white, red, and black. We were clearly on the site of an extensive Romano-British building, but as it had nothing to do with the castle we did not try to find out more about it. In the moved soil above this were many Romano-British potsherds, but also many fragments of pottery of the kind that we have been calling Norman and Late Saxon;¹ they are probably from the manor belonging to the Abbey of Ramsey, whose land had been used for the site of the castle. Among these sherds

¹ One unglazed rim-fragment is very similar to one from Flambard's Manor, Meldreth (*Proc. C.A.S.* vol. xxxv, p. 103, Fig. 4, no. 6).

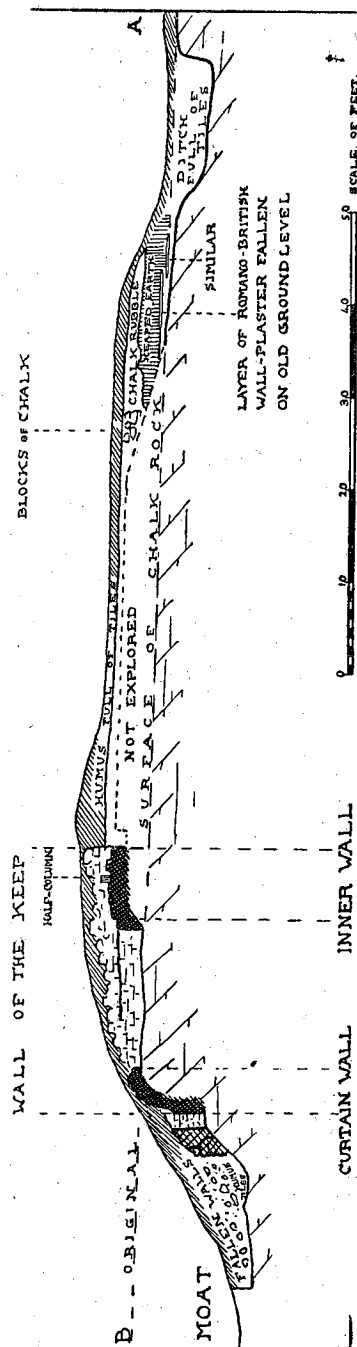


Fig. 4. Burwell Castle: Section A-B.

is one with a spot of glaze on it and another with greenish yellow glaze similar to a sherd found at Flambard's Manor, Meldreth (see *Proc. C.A.S.* xxxv, 101); it is useful to have this scrap from a sealed deposit of known date, for hitherto this glaze has been thought to be no earlier than the seventeenth century. Numerous tiles lay all along the surface of the chalk rubble, but as these are not yet datable they were of little value to us; several were of Collyweston slate. When we neared the eastern side of the motte, however, we began to find pieces of window glass. An extension of the trench on its southern side (Fig. 3, no. 6) produced a great quantity of this, also part of the leaded framework which had contained it. The glass was in bad condition; it is mostly plain white glass with curves or rosettes painted on it in brown or dull red paint. There are a number of parallel-sided slips of red glass, others of bright green, and a single piece of cobalt blue. These slips are mostly about 2-3 in. long and $\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide, and are worked into shape in precisely the same way as a flint implement, not cut with a diamond. Their discovery was rather surprising, since one would hardly expect to find stained glass windows in a castle which was so far from completion that the moat was unfinished and the curtain wall not completely built. I suspected that some later building had existed on the site, and this was confirmed by Dr Palmer, who told me that there was in existence a request from the Abbot of Ramsey in 1246 asking the Bishop of Ely if he might consecrate a private chapel in his manor of Burwell.

The trench then reached clunch walling, which was explored as far as possible, though most of it was reduced to the footings. The curtain wall was revealed along the whole east face (Fig. 3, nos. 8, 9, and Fig. 5) and found to be from 5 to 8 ft. thick. Built of clunch, it has an outer facing of flint nodules and a thick covering of cement. A section 21 ft. long, flanked by two buttresses, which projects from 3 to 4 ft. into the moat, was doubtless intended to serve as a bridge-head. The outline of a small keep or gatehouse can be traced behind it. In the thickness of the curtain and partially screened by the northern buttress were the outlets of two garderobes (Fig. 6). Had the fire brigade not been so energetic with their

hose it might have been possible to trace these further. Nothing but tiles was found in the moat below. The curtain wall was built on the chalk rock, apparently on a step; I did not, however, wish to damage it by cutting through it. No turret was found in the north-east angle, where we had been led to expect it from Kerrich's plan of the castle (Fig. 1); instead the remains of another buttress projected from the corner; we could not learn more from it as the curtain stopped at this point and was not found anywhere on the north face. We were able to trace it, however, all along the raised side of the island on the south till we reached the lower piece in the middle (Fig. 3, nos. 10 and 11). It could not be found anywhere round the western raised area. About the middle of the western face Romano-British walling and a rough floor of pebbles, bones, and potsherds were found, covered by the rubble thrown up to form the motte (Fig. 3, no. 13). This building could easily be explored at some other time.

A long diagonal trench running from the south-west corner of the motte showed no signs of building (Fig. 3, no. 3). It is, in fact, highly probable that the motte here was still in the dump stage when operations on it were suspended. There can be little doubt, I think, that the builders intended to fill up all the space between the eastern and western mounds with the chalk which was to have been dug from the two shelves on the north and south. As I read the evidence so far obtained, the eastern end of the moat was completely dug and the curtain wall either completed or nearly so when Geoffrey arrived. It must have been a miserable moment for the commander of the garrison when he learnt of Geoffrey's approach. His castle was unfinished, his moat was dry, and a great heap of rubble overlooked his partly levelled courtyard. He must have been a good soldier, however, and I wish that his name had been preserved.

With the death of Geoffrey the need for the castle was gone. It was, as we have seen, never completed, and it made so little impression on the minds of the local people that it is not even remembered as a castle, and the traditional name of the place to-day is Spring Close. The same is true of Rampton, where the same signs of incompleteness and undispersed

DIAGRAM
OF
GARDEROBE
EXIT

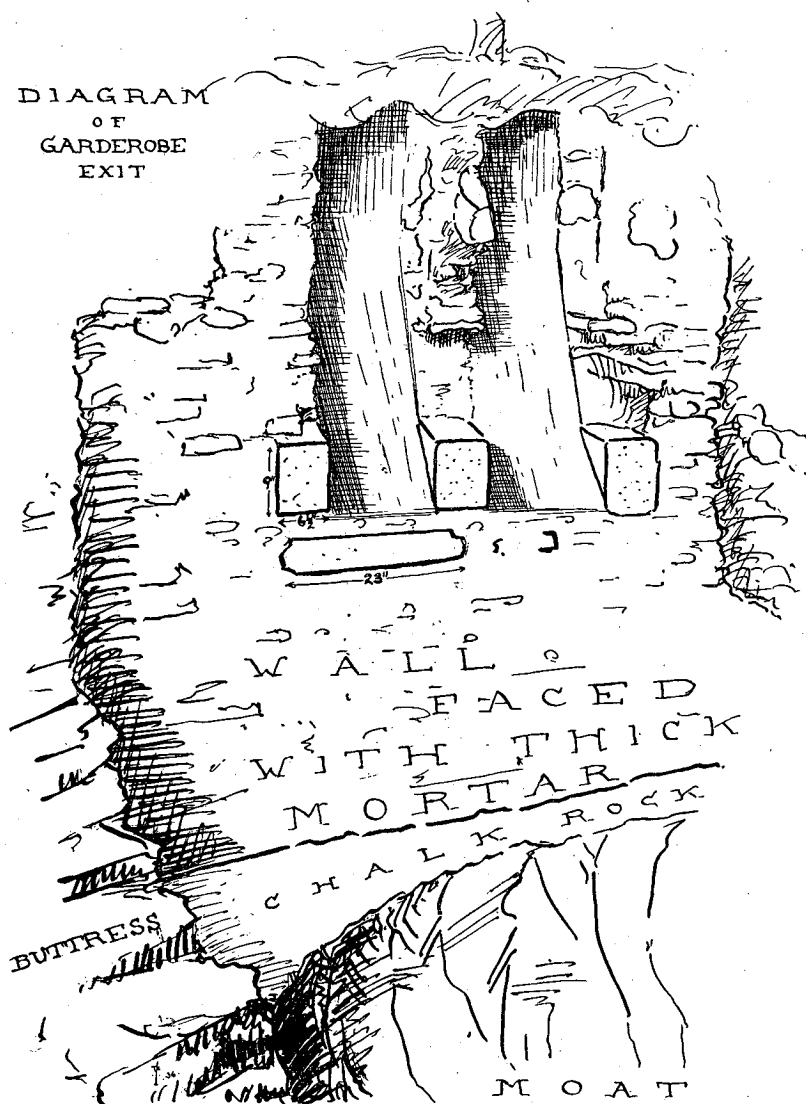


Fig. 6.

spoil-heaps are to be seen; had Rampton been for any length of time the "saucy castle" of the De Lisles, it would surely bear some more military name to-day than "The Giants' Graves".

Mounds near the western side of the eastern raised area were conjectured by some people to be the ruins of the keep. It already seemed, however, that the keep, if so it can be called, was on the curtain wall itself. Two cuts were made in these mounds, which were shown to consist chiefly of mortar and rubble, evidently builders' dumps (Fig. 3, nos. 6 and 7). On one heap, however, lay a piece of dressed clunch with a well-cut graffito (Pl. I, fig. 2); this has been kindly examined by Professor Minns, who reads it as MARIA, and suggests a fourteenth-century date for it. It probably came from the Abbot of Ramsey's chapel referred to above, as did another block, with part of a window-frame cut in it, which bears a mason's mark XO. Whether the gate-house of the castle was afterwards the manor-house, and where the chapel was, I cannot say; but I feel that the curtain wall, incomplete as it is, must have belonged to Stephen's castle, and the gate-house is an integral part of the same construction. A trench opposite it in the moat (Fig. 3, no. 16) revealed two post-holes which at some period no doubt formed sockets for bridge supports; but at another period stepping stones were used to cross the marshy bottom of the moat (Fig. 3, no. 16 D).

Very little medieval pottery was found anywhere except beneath the rubble of the motte. Nearly all the potsherds found, like the pieces of stained glass, are too fragmentary to be satisfactorily illustrated; but they are preserved, with the rest of the material found, at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, and may be examined there.

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