

An Earthwork Survey at Torpel Manor Field (Cambridgeshire)

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Introduction

This note reports a detailed analytical earthwork survey of the deserted medieval site of ‘Torpel Manor’ in Bainton CP, in the City of Peterborough (Cambs). It sets out a description and basic phasing of the earthworks recorded as they stand at present.

An analytical earthwork survey was conducted in November 2012 at the site of Torpel Manor Field (TF 1115 0541), a medieval ringwork fortification located in Bainton civil parish in the City of Peterborough authority. This work forms the starting point for a suite of HLF-funded historical and archaeological research at the site by a local community group in conjunction with staff from the University of York and University Centre Peterborough. The site has been under the ownership of Langdyke Countryside Trust since 2009, but has not previously been subject to any substantive research.

The survey area consists of a single field presently under pasture, measuring roughly 3.4ha in area. Its boundaries are marked by fencing and hedges with some sections of rubble stone banks beneath. The modern parish boundary between Bainton and Helpston runs down the east side of the field, as does the former Roman road known as King Street (Fig. 1). Earthwork preservation in the survey area itself is very high, with a relatively low level of modern interference or agricultural improvement, other than a small paddocked area at the north end of the field. This is in stark contrast to the surrounding fields, which have been mostly levelled by agricultural improvements. An exception is the area of Lawn Wood, a copse of trees which lies just west of the field, and which contains the ruins of a substantial stone building, possibly of the fourteenth century, which has variously been interpreted as Torpel’s late medieval manor house or a hunting lodge (Peterborough HER 01766).

Background

The site represents the best surviving example of a medieval fortified manorial site in the Peterborough area, and it was designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1997. The site is believed to have formed the core of the post-Conquest manor of Torpel, which was one of the largest in the Soke of Peterborough. The manor’s holdings comprised the greater part of the villages of Ufford, Bainton and Ashton, and extended into Maxey, Barnack, Helpston and beyond (VCH 1906, 533). Although Torpel itself is not mentioned in Domesday Book, Roger, a likely ancestor of the Torpel family, held twelve hides from the Abbot of Peterborough in 1086 in Milton, Pilton, Wadenhoe and Woodford (VCH 1930, 129). By the reign of Henry I (1100–1135), Roger de Torpel also held twelve hides of the abbey for the service of six knights’ fees, as well as land in Lincoln

and further afield from both Peterborough and the king. By the thirteenth century, the lords of Torpel were major players in the region, holding land in Ufford, Pilton, Maxey, Cotterstock, Glapthorn, Northborough, Bainton, Helpston and Southorpe (VCH 1906, 533). Torpel was the residence and most important possession of the family. By 1198 it featured a deer park which survived until the mid-sixteenth century, and in the mid-thirteenth century a royal grant allowed the manor a weekly market on Thursday and an annual three-day fair on the feast of St Giles. In the earliest description of the manor, in 1276, there was a capital messuage, a mill and a fishery (VCH 1906, 534–35).

Although much is known of Torpel’s medieval history, the archaeology of the manor and its landscape is not understood. Torpel lies close to other villages of early foundation and significance, such as Stamford, Barnack, Maxey and Peterborough, and further research at the site has the potential to contribute particularly to our understanding of the late-Saxon and Anglo-Norman character of landholding, settlement and landscape in the Soke of Peterborough. The project has the potential to build on archaeological explorations of the middle and late-Saxon settlements at Maxey (Addyman 1964) and Stamford (Mahany et al 1982), as well as the recent comprehensive digital mapping of the landscape of historic Northamptonshire (Partida et al 2013). A better understanding of the site and its development also has the potential to illuminate wider considerations of land use, trade and elite power in the medieval period. The situation of the site and the region on the juncture between the ‘midland’ and ‘ancient’ zones of medieval agriculture, and its location near to significant medieval land resources of meadow, heath and fenland makes Torpel a key case study through which to examine the development of settlement and landscape in the Middle Ages, and its relationship to the adjacent villages and the fortified manor.

Survey Method

The field survey was undertaken by Dr Michael Fradley and Dr Steve Ashby on 16–17 November 2012, in good but overcast weather, utilising a Leica differential GPS unit. Earthwork features were observed visually by the surveyors and recorded using the dGPS, and the downloaded results were drawn up and annotated by hand at 1:1250 scale, incorporating some readings taken using hand-and-tape methods. The final survey model was then drawn up using Adobe Illustrator.

The objectives of the survey were to better characterise the topography of the site, to construct a tentative chronology for the features recorded, and to inform the planning of future work, which is to include geophysical investigation on the site, and wider landscape survey (fieldwalking and test-pitting) beyond the scheduled area.



Figure 1 Location of the survey area (Google Earth, 52°35'04.05, 2006. Composed by Aleks McClain and Steve Ashby).

Results

In what follows, the description of the earthworks will be broken down into three basic phases of activity, based solely on the available earthwork evidence, although settlement development on the site was in reality almost certainly more complex (Fig. 2).

Phase 1

The first readily identifiable phase of activity visible on site was the construction at the south end of the site of a large, flat-topped mound, c.2–3m higher than the surrounding ground level (Fig. 2). The mound is partially surrounded by a relatively shallow ditch, measuring 6–10m wide. This appears to be the remains of a fortification, apparently built in a ringwork form.



Figure 2 Results of earthwork survey, with interpreted phasing overlays (composed by Michael Fradley). Features labelled 'A' and 'B' are referred to in the text.

The early form of the ringwork has been masked by subsequent development, particularly its redevelopment and extension on the east side of the monument (to be discussed below, in Phase 2). The original castle would have been embanked with a rampart, and traces of the banks on the east side of the first phase of the castle survive as levelled earthworks, between which the entrance to the original structure has been recorded (see Fig 2; Phase 1: A). The internal features otherwise surviving in the interior of the mound are likely to date to later phases of occupation, although early and pre-castle phases are likely to survive archaeologically as sub-surface features. The ringwork was surrounded by a ditch which again survives as an earthwork on all but the east side of the castle, due to the extension and infilling of the ditch on that side.

An enclosed court or bailey may have been constructed on the north side of the ringwork, although its form and extent can only be conjectured. To the south-west and south of the ringwork are the remains of a double-ditch; the outer ditch measures c.6m wide and may have continued north, connecting up with the surviving portion of a substantial (c.8m wide) ditch situated about 60m north of the ringwork. It is unlikely that these large ditches relate to one of the later phases, as there is no other evidence of substantial boundary ditches being created in these periods, and instead ditches were apparently infilled at this time. The internal features surviving in this area relate almost certainly to later occupation, but again earlier activity may survive archaeologically as sub-surface features.

Phase 2

The castle ringwork was heavily redeveloped in this phase of activity, where much of its embankment was levelled (possibly infilling the interior), and a roughly rectangular extension was constructed on the east side

of the earthwork. The ringwork ditch was infilled on the eastern side and not replaced, indicating that substantive defensive boundaries were no longer required, and from this stage the site may no longer have been viewed as a castle in the strictest sense (and it is notable that no 'castle' name survives for the site). It is likely that the internal earthwork arrangements of the ringwork were laid out in this phase of activity (Phase 2: A); these appear to have consisted of a row of structures on the west side of the platform, and at least one structure on the south side, overlooking an open, central court.

A more substantial development seems to have taken place in the possible bailey area to the north, where a large group of buildings were laid out around a court, with a second possible court to the west. These features do not have the appearance of a peasant settlement attached to the manor of Torpel, but are rather characterised by a more formal arrangement that would suggest they constitute part of a high-status complex, possibly linked to estate management. The complex includes the earthworks of a large rectangular structure, possibly a barn, on the east side of the central court (Phase 2: B). This may even be a structure associated with 'Torpel House', an elusive building only recorded in 1624, by when it was in considerable disrepair (PRO E178/4335 [22 James I] 1624–25).

Phase 3

A number of the internal arrangements listed under phase 2 may potentially link to phase 3; at least occupation of structures and habitation zones continued. This final phase is marked by the construction of a large enclosure bank on the north side of the ringwork, roughly following the line of the modern field boundary, although the bank has largely been lost under arable cultivation on the north side. There is no clear evidence of an inner or outer ditch, although such a feature could have been infilled.

The bank overruns features in the possible bailey to the north, including its outer ditch, but the old ringwork still appears to be a central part of that enclosure. Only in the partially separated sub-rectangular section of the enclosure to the east of the ringwork is there clear evidence of internal features, but these do not form a readily identifiable complex that would indicate function; they include a small ditch or hollow-way leading south of the survey area. In the northern section taken in by this enclosure are a number of very slight earthwork features (Phase 3: A). These may be so eroded as a result of a period of subsequent ploughing in this area, but more likely they predate the creation of enclosure of this area, and could even pre-date the identified phase 1. They are therefore of significant interest, and will be a focus for future research. The function of the enclosure itself is unclear, although the lack of internal features may suggest a use in stock control.

Implications and Potential for Further Work

The detailed survey of the Torpel site has allowed important steps to be made in the interpretation of the site. The first of these is to confirm that a first major phase of occupation saw the construction of a ringwork castle. The enclosure itself was relatively large, although there is little evidence that its defences were monumental. Subsequent developments saw its apparent downgrading as a castle, in the context of continued use as a high-status centre. This situation is confused somewhat by the final phase of development with the creation of large, apparently open enclosures around the original ringwork, but which may be linked to large-scale stock management.

There is, therefore, significant potential for further non-invasive survey. Geophysical survey will further clarify the form, nature and extent of settlement across the site, as well as potential pre-castle features. It may also enable the layout of the original castle bailey to be identified as a buried feature. There is a suggestion that the earthwork complex at Torpel encroached upon the line of the former Roman road to the east of the site. No evidence of road-like features was recorded, although

any such phenomena are likely to lie beneath the bank of the phase 3 enclosure that runs around the eastern perimeter of the site. However, looking at the overall course of the road, it is perfectly feasible that the road always passed east of the site, and that the accumulation of small changes in course over the medieval and post-medieval periods may be responsible for the road's current appearance, rather than any diversion around the Torpel site. A programme of geophysical survey is planned for the site, together with fieldwalking in adjacent fields (to be undertaken under the direction of Mr A. Hatton, University College Peterborough), and archival research is ongoing under the direction of Frieda Gosling's History Research Group. There is also scope for further work examining the substantial masonry structure in Lawn Wood, which cropmark evidence suggests sits within the bounds of some form of moat or ditched enclosure. An Interpretation Centre has already been opened onsite, and ongoing research will feed into this facility in order to communicate results with the local community.

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