Archaeological Watching Brief at Snodhill Castle Snodhill, Peterchurch Herefordshire March - August 2016

Report No. 16/166

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OASIS REPORT FORM

PROJECT DETAILS	*OASIS* molanort1-263442
Project title	Archaeological Watching Brief at Snodhill Castle, Snodhill, Peterchurch, Herefordshire, March - August 2016
Short description	MOLA carried out an archaeological watching brief during preparatory and remedial works at Snodhill Castle, Peterchurch, Herefordshire. The works were carried out in such a way as to minimise disturbance of the site and any areas of intrusive work were recorded.
Project type	Archaeological Watching Brief
Previous work	None
Future work	Unknown
Monument type and period	Early 13th-century keep and associated walls
PROJECT LOCATION	
County	Herefordshire
Site address	Snodhill Castle, Snodhill, Peterchurch
NGR	SO 32267 40379
Area	1.5ha
PROJECT CREATORS	
Organisation	MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology)
Project brief originator	Historic England, Alistair Coey Architects 2016
Project Design originator	MOLA Northampton
Director/Supervisor	Huw Sherlock
Project Manager	Huw Sherlock
Sponsor or funding body	Alistair Coey Architects
PROJECT DATE	
Start date	March 2016
End date	September 2016
BIBLIOGRAPHY	
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at Snodhill Castle
Snodhill, Peterchurch
Herefordshire
March - August 2016

ABSTRACT

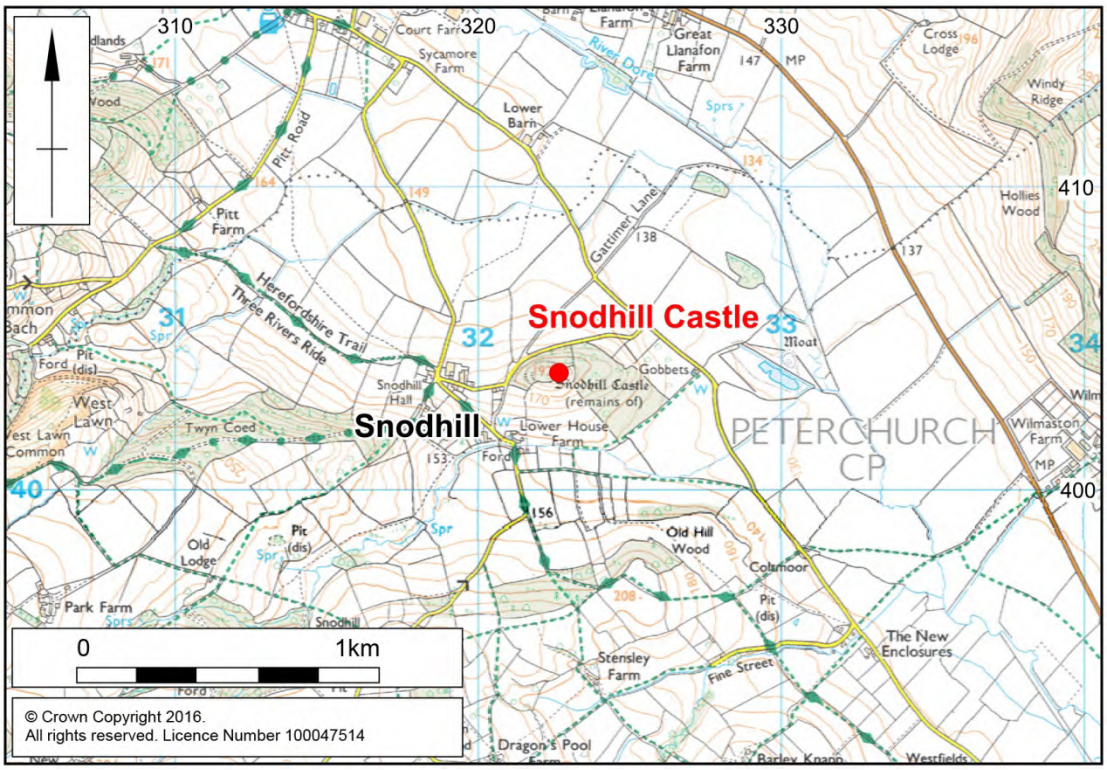
MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) carried out an archaeological watching brief during preparatory and remedial works at Snodhill Castle, Peterchurch, Herefordshire. The works were carried out in such a way as to minimise disturbance of the site and any areas of intrusive work were recorded.

1 INTRODUCTION

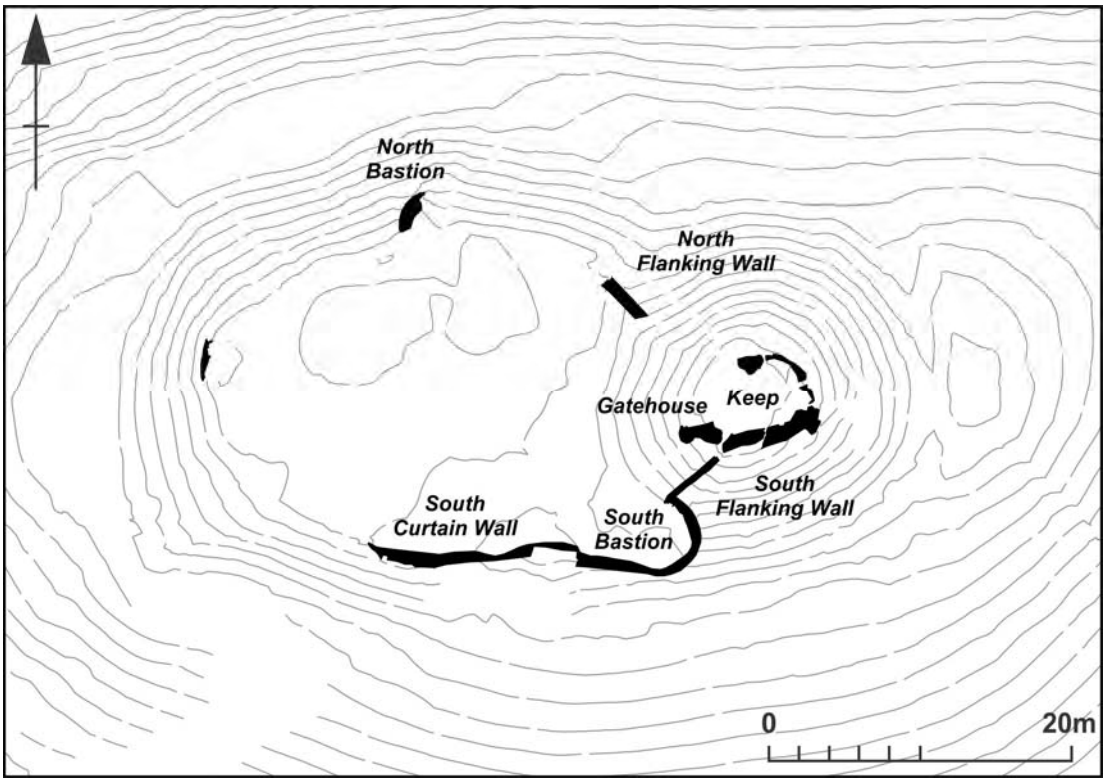
MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) was commissioned by Alistair Coey Architects to undertake continuous archaeological monitoring and photographic record of works at Snodhill Castle, Peterchurch, Herefordshire, as part of a wider programme of repair, remediation and stabilisation works to the Keep and associated structural remains (Figs 1 and 2, SO 32267 40379). This work is in response to a specification setting out the requirement and extent of archaeological recording (ACA 2015) and follows an agreed Written Scheme of Investigation (MOLA 2016). The fieldwork was carried out between March and August 2016.

The Castle is located to the east of Snodhill and occupies a prominent natural hill which is currently wooded and overgrown. The early 13th-century keep and walls are ruinous and survive as standing remains at the crown of the hill which slopes away in all directions. A road named The Castle encloses the site to the north and agricultural fields are present all around. The River Pitt Dingle and an unnamed river flow in an east-west direction to the north and south of the castle and the River Dore passes to the east.

MOLA is a Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) registered organisation. This report has been prepared in accordance with the current best archaeological practice as defined in the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for archaeological watching brief* (CIfA 2014) and the Historic England (HE) procedural document *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)* (HE 2015). The work complied with an approved Written Scheme of Investigation (MOLA 2016).



Site location Fig 1



Contour map of the castle Fig 2

2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The aims and objectives of archaeological monitoring as set out in the site specification document (ACA 2015) were as follows:

- The area of historic walls/structures is sensitive and may contain archaeological artefacts and early construction. The site work will be monitored by an Archaeologist under the direction of the Conservation Architect (CA). Monitoring of work will be carried out and should any artefacts or historic features be exposed, The Main Contractor must contact the Conservation Architect immediately.
- An archaeological inspection may ensue whereby an excavation licence will be required for all archaeological excavations. Work may be interrupted during this monitoring process.
- An investigation will involve monitoring excavations and sifting exposed spoil material. The aim of the work by the archaeologist will be to record and interpret the deposits and any other archaeological features exposed during the course of any excavation. A written report will be prepared by the Archaeologist, illustrated by photographs and illustrations of the finds. No excavation will be permitted without notification to the CA and Archaeologist.

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Snodhill Castle, a Grade II* listed site, is described as being of a “Shell Keep” type and dates to the early 13th century. It is described by Historic England as follows:

> *The monument includes the earthwork, buried, and ruined remains of a shell keep castle, occupying a spur of high ground overlooking the River Dore, near the head of the Golden Valley, and east of the settlement of Snodhill. The shell keep was constructed on the site of an earlier motte and bailey castle, which is believed to have been established in the 11th century, and included a motte on the summit of the spur, with a bailey to the west and an outer enclosure extending eastwards below the level of the bailey. It is recorded as being in the hands of the crown in 1195-7, and was restored to Robert de Chandos in 1197. The keep dates from around 1200, and some remodelling of the masonry defences was carried out by the Chandos family in the 14th century. In 1403 it was ordered to be held against Owain Glendwr.*
>
> *The manor and castle of Snodhill were granted by Elizabeth I to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who sold the estate to a branch of the Vaughan family. When they sold it to Thomas Prosser of London the castle was ruinous, and Prosser moved into a nearby house known as The Court. The remains of the motte and bailey castle include an earthen motte mound, which is roughly oval in form, and has a maximum diameter of 35m. The motte is steep sided and c.3.5m high, and is defended to the east by a c.20m stretch of dry ditch which is up to 5m wide and 2m deep. A path up the west side of the motte now leads to the ruinous gateway of the shell keep, and was probably the original access to the motte's timber tower. East of the ditch the ground drops away steeply before levelling out into a roughly triangular area defined by artificial steepening of the hill slope, a feature which is most clearly visible around the north east and south east quarters. The enclosure thus defined would have been further defended by a timber palisade around the top of the scarp slopes. The sub-rectangular bailey was formed by terracing the natural hillside to the west of the motte, and measures roughly 25m east-west by 18m transversely. Below this terrace the bailey is surrounded to south, west and north by a second level terrace, which has a maximum width of c.10m on the western side. A slight causeway is visible leading from this terrace up to the bailey terrace in the south west quarter, which may represent the original access to the castle.*
>
> *Below the outer terrace the already steep slope has been artificially scarped to the north where it drops away through a wooded area to the road beyond. Roughly one third of the way down this slope, on the north side of the eastern enclosure, is a series of rectilinear fishponds aligned east-west and terraced into the hill slope. The three ponds are contained by an earthen bank up to 1.5m high. They measure roughly 25m x 8m, 30m x 10m, and 35m x 10m, the smallest being the most easterly. The fishponds are separated by earthen banks forming dams which will originally have housed sluices. These dams are roughly 10m and 15m wide, and survive up to 1m high. The western end of the largest fishpond is formed by a substantial earthen bank up to 3m high, with an opening at the north west corner of the pond which was probably an outlet channel running past the west end of the east-west retaining bank. The density of vegetation in the pond makes the exact relationship of*

these features unclear, however it is likely that this outlet also housed a sluice, evidence for which will survive buried within the earthen banks. The cracked surface in the bottom of the ponds suggest they are still seasonally wet and were probably spring-fed. As well as providing a food supply for the occupants of the castle, these fishponds would have been a further indication of the high status of its owner.

Downslope of the fishponds the hillside is crossed by a number of roughly level track ways, which will have provided access to the ponds and perhaps to the castle itself. The most easily visible of these appears as a terrace running east-west for some 200m, passing immediately downslope of the retaining bank of the fishponds and continuing down to the modern road. At the foot of the slope to the west of the bailey, outside the intermediate terrace, is a platform with scarped sides, with the earthwork remains of at least two structures built into its western end, near the modern access to the castle from the road. The scarp which defines this platform can be seen continuing south east through the adjacent pasture field, eventually becoming indistinguishable from the steep natural slope around the southern side of the castle hill.

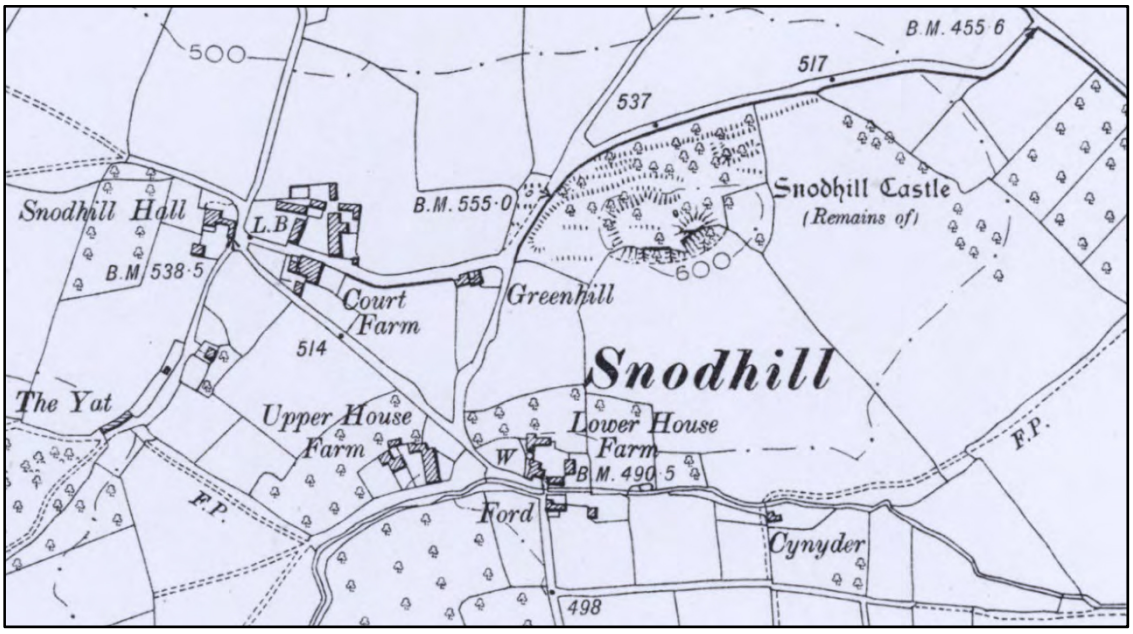
The standing remains of the shell keep are Listed Grade II, and include the ruins of an irregular ten-sided keep of stone rubble construction. Its external plan was an irregular ten-sided polygon, with a gateway in the west side flanked by two circular towers. A stone curtain wall followed the line of the bailey and ran up the motte to join the keep at its north west and south west corners. On the southern side the south west circular tower remains standing to a height of c.3.5m. The tower retains the jambs of the outer and inner doorways, a portcullis groove and the corner of a pointed archway above, and a slot for the drawbar of the inner door. A low stretch of wall connects the tower to another tall section of masonry which has a small square headed window at basement level. A later buttress survives in this angle, while round to the north and north east only low portions of wall survive to show the outline of the keep.*

Contemporary with the keep is the bailey wall which replaced the original timber defences. The southern stretch of this wall survives at a low level to the south. The eastern end was demolished in the 14th century and a new wall erected with a circular bastion at the south east angle, where the wall runs down the side of the motte. This later stretch survives almost to its full height and is ashlar faced. Parts of two square headed recesses can be seen inside the remains of the bastion. The western and northern stretches of bailey wall are represented, for the most part, by a bank within which the masonry foundations will survive. At the north angle of the west section a block of masonry with dressed quoins survives, while at the north west angle of the northern section, part of a 14th century bastion stands to a height of c.3.5m. Some 2m inside the bank which marks the northern bailey wall is a second roughly parallel bank, which may represent its original line, or one side of a building within the bailey itself.

Evidence for further structures within the bailey will survive as buried features. At the foot of the causeway up the west side of the motte is a depression c.5m across with a bank on its north and north-west sides, which may represent the foundations of a guardhouse defending the gateway above.

Snodhill Castle is one of a concentration of medieval defensive monuments at the head of the Golden Valley, and forms part of a chain of similar examples strategically placed above the River Dore. Its nearest neighbour is the motte and bailey castle at Dorstone, 1.5km to the north-west, with Urishay Castle some 3km to the south. Both these monuments are scheduled separately. The monument is a notable landmark. All fences round the monument are excluded from the scheduling, but the ground beneath them is included.

(www.historicengland.co.uk, Listing ID 1172756).



6-inch Ordnance Survey map of the Castle, *c*1900 Fig 3

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

4.1 The Gate

An oak-built gate, located adjacent to Castle Road at the south-western edge of the site, was lifted in order to carry out repairs and restoration works with the aim of its reinstatement. The gate comprises three horizontal oak rails between oak posts, with iron strap hinges to the hanger post. The gate is strengthened by the use of looping iron bars which are affixed to the inner face of the rails (Fig 4). The southern gate post curves inwards and an iron rod spans from here to opposing corner to further strengthen the structure.

Following the removal of the gate, the flanking posts were mechanically lifted using a small lorry crane. The hanger post broke off during removal due to rotting at ground level and was partly left *in situ* (Fig 5). The stop post was successfully lifted intact and can be seen to comprise a length of tree truck, shaped and squared only above ground level and buried to a depth of 1.45m. The visible, shaped portion is 0.2m in width to a height of 1.15m. It is evident that the post was placed into a prepared posthole rather than having been driven into the ground. Although not seen, it is likely that the hanger post is of a similar style.

4.2 Compound and Access Track

From the gate a 10m length of track was created, running to a small, fenced, site compound for the siting of a welfare cabin. This required the cutting back of undergrowth but no associated intrusive works. The area was covered in a semi-permeable membrane and gravel to protect the ground from damage by traffic (Fig 6).

In addition, an access track was created to enable the transportation of materials to the top of the site via a track-powered barrow and tracked dumper truck. In order to prevent damage to the ground, particularly in wet weather conditions, bog matting and wooden planks were laid down along this route (Fig 7).

4.3 South Curtain Wall

The south curtain wall is approximately 25m in length, rising to a height of 1-2m from the bailey surface, and is approximately 5m in height at its southern side. The wall is constructed of rubble masonry and large areas of collapse have been noted. A 3m long void was noted in the condition survey (Fig 8). This void undercuts the wall to a depth of 0.5m and was an area targeted for remediation and stabilisation. The west edge of the wall had also partly collapsed and was subject to mediation works (Fig 10).

The condition of these areas was photographed prior to any works and the areas were cleared of loose material under archaeological supervision. Cement sole plates were placed on sheets of membrane to act as the base of timber props (Figs 9 and 10). This process involved minimal intrusive work to the underlying soil.

4.4 Removal of Ash Tree

A mature, near dead ash was growing on and into the south bastion wall, and a tree surgeon was employed to remove it (Fig 12). A watching brief and photographic record was maintained during the process. The felling was accomplished with no additional damage to the masonry, although it is likely that, following the eventual rotting of the embedded roots, further consolidation work will be required (Fig 13).

4.5 Gatehouse Scaffold

To enable transportation of material to the keep a scaffold stair was constructed up the western side of the motte and was angled into the remains of the gatehouse (Figs 14-17 and 21). Construction of the scaffold necessitated the excavation of 18 flat bases for each of the footings posts. The excavations were to a maximum width of 0.25m and the maximum depth of excavation was 0.3m. The majority were excavated only into the topsoil which was an orange-brown sandy loam. Where subsoil was encountered it consisted of a paler orange-brown sandy soil with pea gravel and occasional angular stones.

4.6 Keep Scaffold

The keep is constructed of rubble with masonry facing and survives to an internal height of 6m. The remaining structure is affected by burrowing and erosion and several sections are designated as being at risk

The south-east side of the keep required the installation of a timber prop, for which a non-intrusive pad was constructed. In addition, a scaffold was erected between the interior and exterior of the structure to enable access for the consolidation work (Figs 18 and 21). This required minimal excavations on the external slope in order to provide level pads for the six scaffold posts. The maximum depth of excavation was 0.2m and all excavations were within topsoil.

5 CONCLUSION

Preparations for the essential stabilisation and repair works to the keep were carried out in such a way as to ensure minimal disturbance to the site and all works were carried out under continuous archaeological supervision. No archaeological artefacts were recovered.

The gate, prior to lifting Fig 4

The hanger post, showing the shaped and unshaped portions of the timber Fig 5

The compound access with protective membrane Fig 6

Protection of the access track by wooden boards Fig 7

The south curtain wall prior to installation of props Fig 8

The south curtain wall with props installed Fig 9

The west edge of the south curtain wall prior to works Fig 10

The west edge of the south curtain wall with props installed Fig 11

The ash tree, prior to removal Fig 12

The masonry, following removal of the ash tree Fig 13

The slope to the gatehouse prior to erection of scaffold Fig 14

The completed scaffold Fig 15

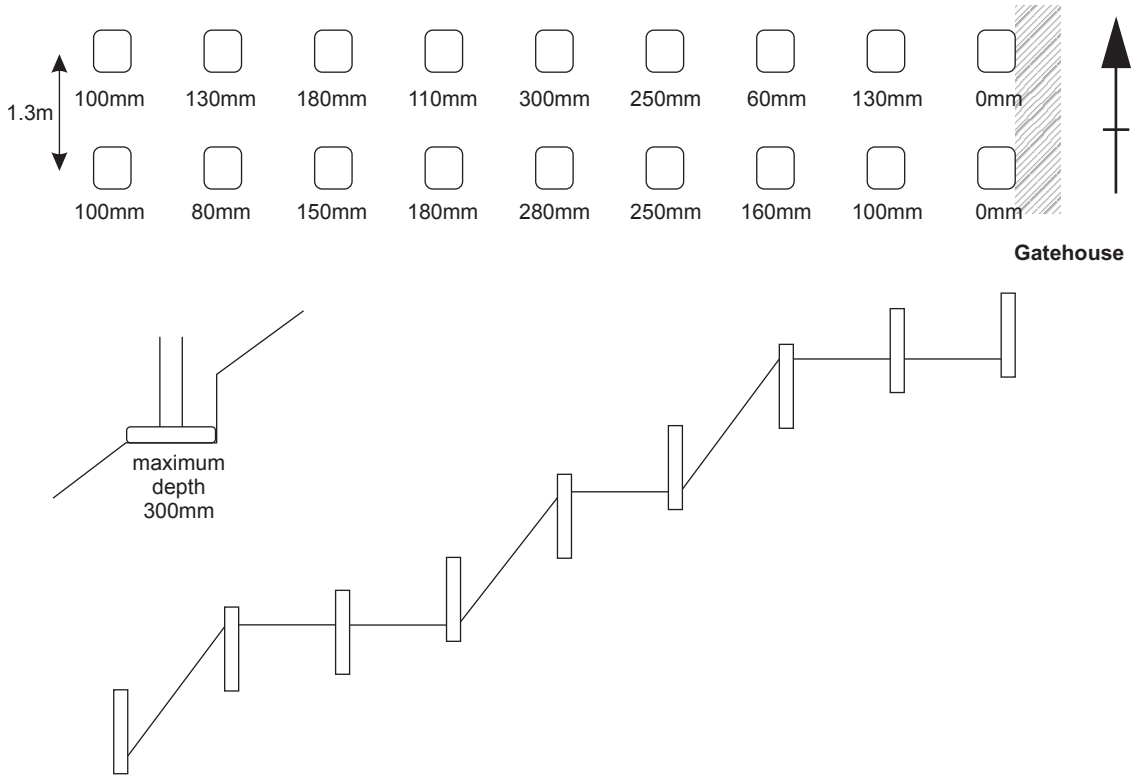
Detail of shallow excavations for the scaffold post pads Fig 16

Detail of the stratigraphy within the scaffold area Fig 17

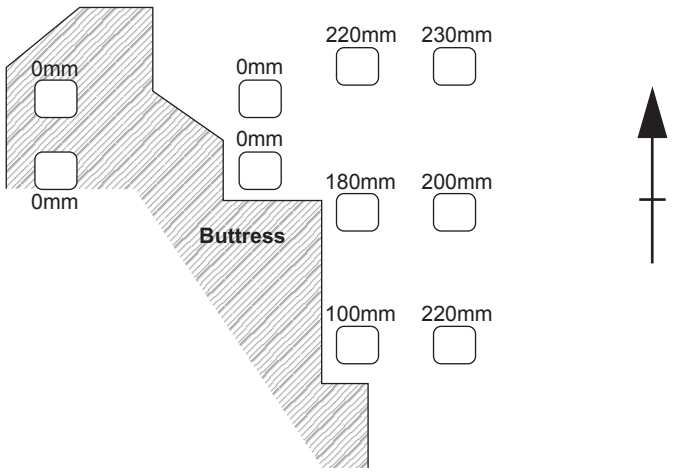
The south-east side of the keep Fig 18

The Keep scaffold Fig 19

Detail of the scaffold post pads Fig 20



Scaffold to Gatehouse



Scaffold to Keep

Not to Scale

Schematic representation of the scaffold post arrangements and depths of excavation

Fig 21

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