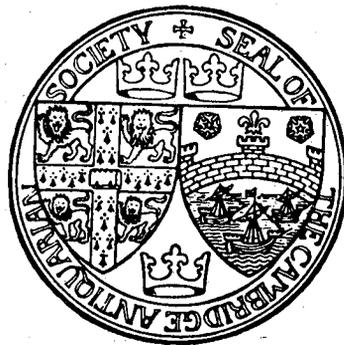

Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume LXXX

for 1991



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Contents

Cambridge Castle Ditch Tim Malim & Alison Taylor	1
Hawkers and Falconers along the Ouse: A Geographic Principle of Location in some Serjeanty and Related Holdings Virginia Darrow Oggins & Robin S. Oggins	7
Wisbech Barton's Farm Buildings in 1412/13 David Sherlock	21
Royal Visits to Cambridge: Henry VI to Henry VIII Graham Chainey	30
King's College Chapel Delineated Graham Chainey	38
A Relict Garden at Linton, Cambridgeshire A.E. Brown & C.C. Taylor	62
John Chapman's Maps of Newmarket C.P. Lewis	68
Archaeological Excavations at Godmanchester (A14/A604 Junction) Gerald A. Wait	79
King's College Chapel: Additions to the Side-Chapel Glass 1991 Hilary Wayment	97
Field-work in Cambridgeshire: November 1990 – June 1991 Alison Taylor	119
<i>Index</i>	123

Cambridge Castle Ditch

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Tim Malim & Alison Taylor

Summary

A 10-m-wide steep-sided ditch was found surrounding the castle mound approximately 10m out from the base of the motte. This ditch was waterlogged and over 4m deep. As such it seems probable that a spring-line keeps the ditch wet, and thus the ditch originally would have made a water-filled moat. Although other ditch cuts of lesser proportions were discovered further out from the motte, and were probably of more recent origin, it is very probable that the main ditch was a contemporary feature of the Norman motte. However, no firm dating evidence was obtained, which may be a consequence of cleaning out and re-use by Edward I and Oliver Cromwell.

Introduction

The land immediately south-west of Cambridge Castle mound, lying between the motte, the backs of numbers 10–20 Castle Hill, and St Giles' Church, covers an area of approximately 1500 square metres. This area began to be developed in March of 1989 to provide hostel accommodation for students of Clare College, and a site so close to the Castle promised considerable archaeological potential. It has often been surmised that a ditch surrounded the Norman motte, and documents record Edwardian and Cromwellian ditch digging. Thus, when the garage that had been occupying the site was demolished, an archaeological watching brief was organised by the County Archaeologist, Alison Taylor, to run for two days in advance of construction work. A mechanical digger and full cooperation were given by the contractors, Coulson and Son Limited, and rapid archaeological recording work was carried out by David Haigh and the author.

Constraints of time and space meant that

only two narrow trenches could be dug to investigate the site, and these were positioned as nearly as possible straight out from the Castle mound in the hope of hitting any ditch at right-angles (see Fig. 1). They were the width of the machine's bucket, approximately 1.5m wide.

The first trench (Trench 1) ran from the back retaining wall of a demolished garage building south-westwards for 14m towards the back of No.20 Castle Hill. Although a deep ditch was found, access to the rest of the site necessitated termination of this trench before the southern, and outer, edge of this ditch was found.

The second trench (Trench 2) ran south-south-westwards for 26m from the back retaining wall of a storehouse at the southernmost point of the castle mound towards No.10 Castle Hill.

Trench 1 (see Figure 2)

Made-up ground surface at the northern end of Trench 1 stood at 14.69m O.D., some 12m below the top of the motte, and the trench remained level throughout its 14m length.

Four metres out from the north end of Trench 1 the beginning of a steep-sided ditch cut into marl was found. By 7m, the base of the ditch had gone beyond the reach of the digger, i.e. over 4m deep.

The basal deposits of our trench, but not necessarily of the ditch, were black silt and organic debris. At the northern edge of the ditch and southern end of the trench, large lenses of redeposited marl could be seen. This redeposited marl may be from the collapse of the ditch sides, and this would suggest that the southern end of our trench was getting close to the southern edge of the ditch.

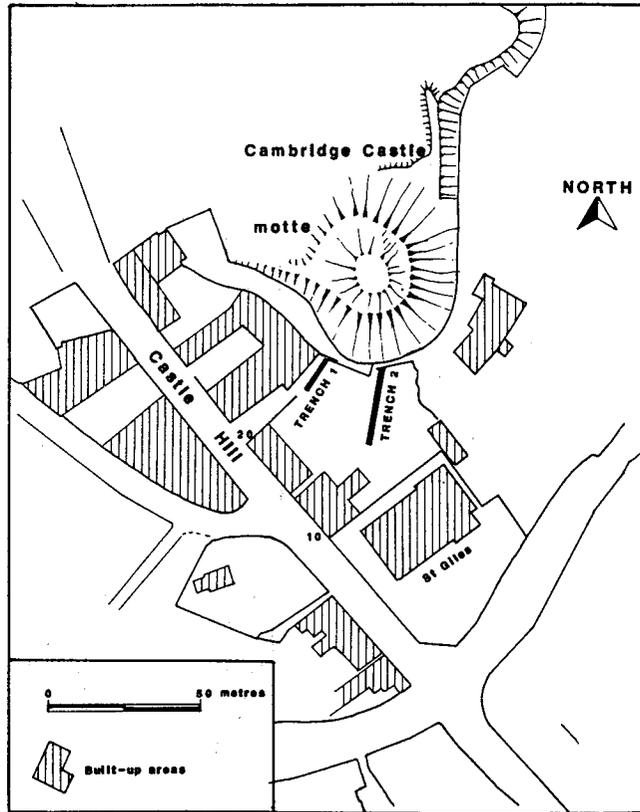


Figure 1. Plan of excavation.

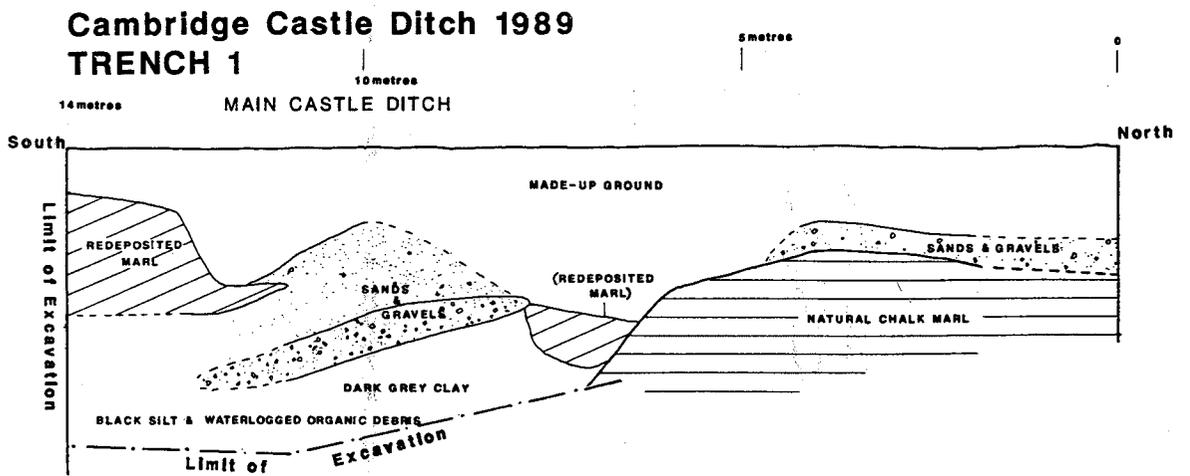


Figure 2. Cross-section of Trench 1.

A grey silty clay lay above the dark basal silt deposits over much of the central part of the ditch, and butted against the redeposited marl lenses. A layer of gravel topped by a layer of sands and gravel covered the lower deposits, and modern make-up sat above these layers.

Finds from the various fills were mixed with brick and Victorian ceramics even in the basal deposits.

Trench 2 (see Figures 3 and 4)

Made-up ground surface at the northern end of Trench 2 was at 14.19m O.D. and the trench sloped down 30cm to the South over its 26m length.

The main ditch was found to begin its cut through the natural chalk marl at 5m from the northern end of Trench 2. It was steep-sided and its southern edge re-emerged at 14m to finish with its highest point at 14.5m south of the castle mound.

Maximum reach of the mechanical digger was 4m and the ditch was not bottomed. Basal deposits were a black silt with organic debris, including fibrous vegetation remains and small branches. A battleship-grey silty clay lay above, and 3 sherds of coarse Romano-British pottery were found in this deposit. On the north side, a lens of redeposited marl butted against the clay. Above these deposits there was Victorian or more modern ground make-up, and a ceramic pipe had been put in along the top of the redeposited marl lens. No cut for this was visible in the make-up layer.

During the excavation, water seeped in from the sides of the ditch. This spring-line indicates that the ditch, though sited on the top of a hill, would have held water and provided a strong defence.

At 17m the natural chalk marl reached its highest point, before gently sloping down to the south beneath deposits showing evidence of at least three ditches, with several other possible features cut into the fills of these.

The most important features between 17 and 26m seem to be either three ditches of different phases, or one ditch with recuts on the south and north of its fills.

The earliest ditch is represented by a gently sloping profile about 8m wide at the top. This ditch was not bottomed at 2.4m depth but lenses of redeposited marl with gravel above could be seen as the fill of this ditch. The gentle slope and great quantity of displaced marl suggests that this ditch was originally steeper in profile and narrower. It probably remained open for a considerable length of time, thus allowing the sides to crumble away and redeposit themselves at the base and up the

lower sides of the ditch. Gravel had been tipped on top of the central section. Two later ditches, each about 1m wide and 2m deep, cut into the gravel and secondary marl deposits filling the earlier ditch. At a level around 1.2m below the surface, the southernmost ditch of this later pair was visible as a band of grey silt with gravel, but the northern one seemed to have round grey patches cutting into its creamy-grey silt and gravel fill. These patches may be post pipes of a fence line set in the ditch.

No dating evidence was found for these features.

Conclusion

The work at Clare College Hostel confirmed the presence of a substantial waterlogged ditch encircling the castle mound. Subsidiary ditches with several phases were detected further out, but none of these features could be reliably dated. It is reasonable to believe that the width, depth and steepness of the main ditch would have functioned as an effective defensive barrier and should be seen as confirmation of a defensive ditch contemporary with the Norman motte. However, this ditch appears to have filled rapidly with water-borne deposits of silts and clays, and with organic debris that did not break down and decay. The outer ditches may also date to the same period, but it seems more likely that they reflect a change of use of the area at a later date, with the ditch, and/or possible fence, marking off the site of the main ditch and the castle mound. A much wider and well-shored excavation trench would be needed to supplement this present information.

Historical Note

Allison Taylor

When William I travelled south in 1068 after subduing the English in the north, he made sure that all the important towns, especially county towns, remained in his control by building motte and bailey castles in the most strategic places. These castles relied on mounded-up earth for their strength, and were therefore quick and cheap to build (the first castle at Hastings, for example, is said to have taken two weeks), especially when labour was supplied by an army and a subjugated population. Wooden palisades stood on the bailey banks, and on top of the mottes stood wooden towers. Such timber work might be replaced later with stone which was more resistant to attack. Water-filled moats would have been valuable additions to the defences.

Cambridge Castle Ditch 1989 TRENCH 2

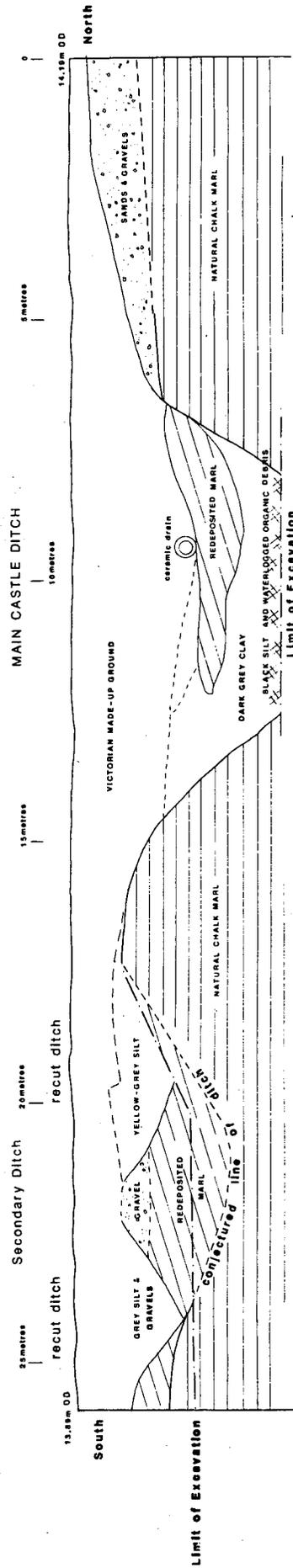


Figure 3. Cross-section of Trench 2.



Figure 4. Cambridge Castle Mound from south-west, showing position of Trench 2 in front of the mott. The Castle ditch is the deep part of the trench at its far end, with the chalk-marl in the foreground showing the southern edge of the ditch. Photograph by David Haigh.

Cambridge Castle was built in a typically strategic position on a local high point with wide views all around. It controlled not only the town but also a vital river crossing. Twenty-seven Saxon houses were removed for the construction of a four-acre motte and bailey castle, which was situated on the site of Iron Age and Roman Cambridge. Traces of a berm below the summit suggest that there was an apron wall around the keep. Apart from its military purpose, the castle served as a jail, administrative centre and court-house, and in theory should have housed the king if he visited Cambridge (although royalty seems to have preferred the greater comfort of Barnwell Priory). As a protection to Cambridge, the castle seems to have been fairly useless. When threatened by rebellious barons in King John's reign it immediately surrendered, and its presence did not stop Geoffrey de Mandeville's army sacking the town in King Stephen's reign. In the late 13th century, it was rebuilt by Edward I on a grand scale in stone. Most of the stonework was removed in Elizabeth's reign, but the earthworks were brought back into

military service by Oliver Cromwell, who cleared away fifteen houses and added four angular bastions to the defences for cannon emplacements. He also seems to have cleaned out all the ditches to a considerable extent. At the north end of Magrath Avenue, for example, machine trenching during the 1989–90 construction of the Granta Housing block (Rex Cinema site) found that the 17th-century ditch was at least 5m deep. The section of the Castle Ditch described in this article was probably also cleaned out by Cromwell, which would explain the lack of medieval finds. The moat north of the motte was filled in with rubble between 1801–7 when a new jail was constructed, and the bailey was lowered and levelled. In 1842, the last remaining (south-western) gateway was pulled down to make way for a court-house. What remains of the Norman and Cromwellian earthworks are protected as scheduled ancient monuments, but continuing development crowds up to and obscures them, while erosion and subsidence pose serious problems for the future.

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1 The Editor welcomes the submission of articles on the history and archaeology of the County for publication in the *Proceedings*, but in order to avoid disappointment potential contributors are advised to write to the Editor, to enquire whether the subject is likely to be of interest to the Society, before submitting a final text. The Editor, if necessary with the advice of the Editorial Committee, reserves the right to refuse to publish any papers even when an earlier approval of the subject has been given.

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Contents

Cambridge Castle Ditch

Tim Malim & Alison Taylor

Hawkers and Falconers along the Ouse: A Geographic Principle of Location in
some Serjeanty and Related Holdings

Virginia Darrow Oggins & Robin S. Oggins

Wisbech Barton's Farm Buildings in 1412/13

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A Relict Garden at Linton, Cambridgeshire

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John Chapman's Maps of Newmarket

C.P. Lewis

Archaeological Excavations at Godmanchester (A14/A604 Junction)

Gerald A. Wait

King's College Chapel: Additions to the Side-Chapel Glass 1991

Hilary Wayment

Field-work in Cambridgeshire: November 1990 – June 1991

Alison Taylor

Index