

A Moated Mound at Abingdon, Berks.*

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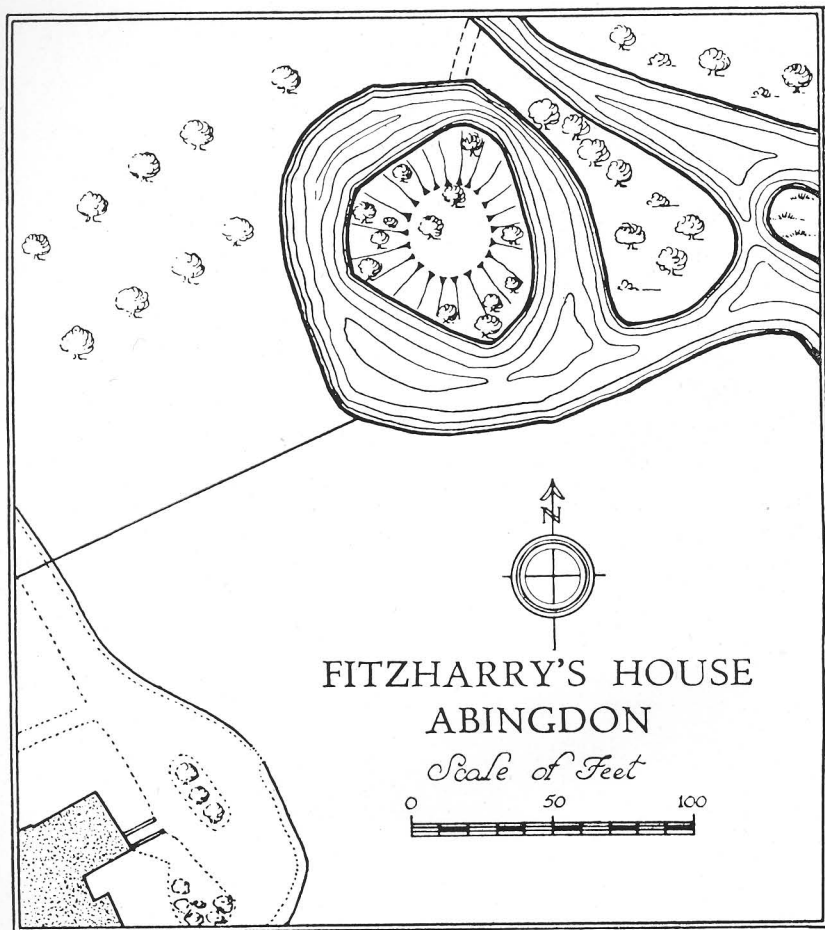
ABOUT 80 yds. to the north-east of an old house known as "Fitzharry's" on the northern outskirts of the town of Abingdon is an early Norman moated mound in a good state of preservation.¹ The mound is formed by the upcast of the encircling ditch and is covered with trees; it is roughly circular in shape, the axis from north to south measuring about 78 ft. and from west to east about 68 ft. At present the mound stands up about 10 ft. above the ordinary water-level. The moat is still (except in times of drought) filled with water supplied by an adjacent streamlet, an arm of which formerly appears to have entered the moat on the northern side. This entrance has since partly silted up but is plainly discernible. After flowing through the moat, the water rejoined the original stream at the south-east corner. The exit and the intake form at present only one channel. Originally there were separate channels. The mound and moat duly appear on the Ordnance Survey plans of 1875, and to the east is a tongue of land which may have served as a rudimentary bailey; in its present state it is roughly pear-shaped and much smaller than most of the known examples of the Norman bailey. On the further face of this tongue the streamlet surrounding it widens out considerably. Originally both the mound and the tongue were entirely enclosed by water, which, pursuing its course, descended through the town and fell into the Thames at Abingdon Bridge. On its way the streamlet served till recent times as a parish boundary.

Defensive earthworks of the moated mound type were common throughout the country in the years after the Conquest, but only occasionally are the uses to which they were put attested by written evidence. Definite historical references to the mound at Abingdon in 1247 have recently come to light and are of considerable interest.

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¹ Examination of the site and publication of the plan by permission of the present owner of the estate, General Sir Charles Corkran, K.C.V.O., C.B.

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The property afterwards known as Fitzharry's was before the Domesday survey (although not there mentioned) part of the land allotted to one of the thirty military knights imposed on the Abbey by the Conqueror between 1071 and 1084. The name of this foreign knight was Oin (or Owen), and there is definite evidence that he was present with other knights at a ceremony in the Abbey church in 1107.² The extent of his fee was the usual five hides, of which about two were at Hull in Warwickshire, and three hides at Abingdon. In due course the Abingdon land became a manor of itself and also a separate tything. In addition Owen held as tenant at will a small parcel of the demesne land of the Abbey in the neighbouring village of Drayton. It is practically certain that Owen as an alien and stranger in the midst of an unfriendly population was about 1071-84 the maker of the earthwork as a place of defence for himself and followers. Since Owen possessed only a small area of land, his retainers and dependants were probably few in number, which may explain the inferior size of the work.

The actual holder of the fee in 1242 was one of Owen's direct descendants, Hugh Fitz-Harry, and in that year the Abbot sent this man as envoy with two clerics to convey to Henry III. the contribution of the monastery in aid of the royal crossing to Gascony.³ A few years later the land was regained for the Abbey by purchase from Fitz-Harry. The circumstances attending the transaction have been left on record by one of the monks—probably Walter the Prior.⁴ The narrator himself had a personal share in the preliminary negotiations, and was an eyewitness of the incidents that happened on Michaelmas Day, 1247, when, according to the bargain made, seisin of the purchased land was to be given to the Abbey. By this date the moated mound, if it ever had been used as a place of residence, had long been given up, and the lord's residential demesne consisted of a compact area of about forty-five acres on the edge of and within the Abbot's vill of Abingdon. The rest of the manor was scattered about in the common fields outside the town, the

² *Chron. Ab.* ii, 100.

³ *Cal. Pat.* 1232-47, p. 281.

⁴ *B.M. Cott.* Julius A. ix, 6. 166.

pasture lying near the banks of the Ock, a mile or so away. In the (translated) words of the narrator of 1247, there had been erected on the demesne "a roomy and pleasant mansion fittingly embellished with meadow and pasture, streams of water, abundance of fish-ponds, thick woods and a variety of buildings." The narrator was careful also to point out that there was then in existence on the mound:—

quedam domuncula, aquis et profundo fossato circumvallata, in qua possent pauci viri contra plures se diu defendere . . . majorem pre ceteris locis circumjacentibus habens libertatem.

The word *domuncula* would here seem to imply a building on the moated mound, capable of being used for defensive purposes.

The Prior's story (as abbreviated) continues:

the lord of the Fitzharry's fee had as a special privilege, the right of impounding all animals found straying in the fields of Abingdon against the custom and to exact competent satisfaction for damage done; and that the knight Fitz-Harry taking the opportunity derived from such power, was a heavy oppressor and unjust extortioner both of his neighbours and strangers. In consequence all the people of the country round held him in hatred. At length the divine goodness turned the heart of the tyrannical knight, who having first put on his shoulder the sign of the Cross, attached himself to the Order of Templars and put all his lands up for sale. Rumours having thereupon spread about in the Court of the King, many nobles and powerful men, especially Richard Earl of Cornwall (whom all the English had feared more than their king) vied with each other in attempting to procure the land. Seeing this, the brethren of the Monastery formed a plan to acquire it for the use of their Church, and although excessively burdened with debt, they succeeded in making a bargain to purchase it for not much less than 1,000 marks; and as an additional consideration promised that the Abbey should provide a chaplain to celebrate divine service for the knight for a space of ten years, and should grant his son two monks' corrodiaries for life. But since the Convent had not so large a sum of money at hand, they promised to pay the knight 300 marks at the Feast of St. Michael of that year (1247) when they were to receive seisin of the land; and for the balance they were to hand over to him in pledge their vill of Shippon until the Easter next following, on condition that if the money were not then paid, the vill should remain in the hands of the knight and his assigns for ever.

The arrangement thus arrived at seems to have been put into writing and regularly ratified by the corporal oath of representatives on both sides. When St. Michael's Day came, Walter the Prior with certain of the brethren went to receive seisin,

but the knight intending as it seemed that their purpose should be frustrated, had prepared on the day a great feast in his house for very many knights and magnates, seeking by all means possible that seisin of the land might be postponed to the morrow contrary to the agreement entered into. The monks, however, fearing the injury that might be occasioned by delay, sent the Rector of Wytham, a man skilled and circumspect in secular affairs, to reason with the knight, and the dispute went on from morn till night.

It may be assumed from the prominence given to the moated mound in the Prior's narrative that during these discussions the knight and his friends, with the object of guarding against forcible eviction by the Abbot's servants, had betaken themselves to the building on the mound, the Abbot's representatives and the crowd of onlookers remaining on the other side of the deep ditch. The importance attached by the Abbey, not only to obtaining actual physical possession of the land but also of obtaining it on the agreed date, will be noted.

The Prior's story goes on that :

At length, about the hour of vespers, in face of a great crowd of people of both sexes who gathered to hear and see what was happening, the Rector paid to the knight 300 marks on account and with moderation caused him to be removed from the mansion to the Manor of Shippon with all his household, and the meal which he had prepared for himself and his guests. Full seisin was then given by the knight, and both he and all those who were there were expelled, never to return. When all this had been done the Abbot and Convent for greater security, procured at great expense that the sale should be carried into effect by a Final Concord in the King's Court.

This Fine is dated 4 May 1248 and is still preserved at the Public Record Office.⁵ The Manor of Shippon was less than a mile distant. The narrative concludes with the explanation that the Abbey raised the purchase money with difficulty within the space of two years, although in straits they did not receive any money at usury but sought it by loans from friends.

As well as the knight Owen, about twenty-nine other foreign knights were (to comply with the conditions imposed by the Conqueror) put in possession of similar parcels of the Abbey lands, but nothing so far has transpired to show whether any of them constructed similar defensive earthworks.

It is possible but unlikely that the following observations by Leland⁶ may have been intended to refer to the mound, viz. :

There were, and yet appere, 2. Camps of Men of Warre by *Abbandune*. The one is *Serpenhil* a Quarter of a Mile by Este Northe Est oute of the Toun in a Fote way to . . . [blank] . . . Here, as it is sayde there comonly, was a Battayle betwyxt the *Danes* and the *Saxons*. Parte of the Trenches of the Campe be yet seene.

The name *Serpenhil* has passed out of memory. In the Domesday period there is a solitary example of its use in the form *Scerpenhylla* as a synonym for the hamlet of Shippon.⁷

⁵ Feet of Fines, Case 8, File 16, No. 1.

⁶ Hearne, vii, 65.

⁷ Cott. Claud. C. ix, f. 189 b.