

THE SITE IN CONTEXT

Moated Sites in Oxfordshire - An Introduction (Fig. 2)

In Oxfordshire much work still remains to be done on moated sites and the following brief description is based on an unpublished initial survey produced by the author for the Oxfordshire County Sites and Monuments record⁵ in 1976, and upon a draft report on moated sites by James Bond.⁶

Moated sites are the commonest type of medieval earthwork and may enclose, or partially enclose, anything from a town to an open space. However, the majority of moated sites were dwelling places, falling down the social scale from the baronial castle to the freeman's assart homestead.⁷ As many similar structures went unmoated, but the presence of a moat provides a convenient method of recognising these sites on the ground.

The reason for the construction of moats cannot readily be assigned to any one factor, although it is generally agreed that their ultimate inspiration probably stems from defensive earthworks such as ringwork castles.⁸ The height of moat construction, between the years 1200 and 1325, coincided with a period of increased criminal activity and social unrest, and security would certainly have been a factor in the decision to moat a house.⁹ This would have been particularly pertinent in the case of new farmsteads in isolated assarts.

It has been suggested that moats were constructed to aid drainage, but generally their siting suggests that moat builders sought out those areas with a ready supply of water. Another explanation for their construction is that they were status symbols, dug in emulation of the moated castles of the great lords. This helps to explain the incomplete and partial nature of some moats, which appear simply to be intended to give the impression of being moated. However, in the final analysis the decision to moat a site would probably depend on a combination of factors rather than any particular one.

Moats are first recognised as appearing in this country in the second half of the 12th century. The period 1200-1325 was the apogee of their construction. This was followed by a period of decline which may have been due to the depression of the economy. The expense of maintaining moats would also have militated against further construction, together with the fact that they restricted the area into which the curia could expand. There was a slight revival of moat digging in the post-medieval period, together with a modification of existing earthworks, particularly as features of formal gardens. These can sometimes be confused with medieval moats.¹⁰

At the time of writing a total of 96 moated sites have been noted within Oxfordshire, of which 75 can be identified with reasonable confidence, with a further 21 doubtful sites. This figure does not include 10 moated castles and 6 moated monastic sites or granges.¹¹

The distribution of moated sites reflects the underlying geology of the county (Fig.2). There is a particular concentration at the foot of the scarp slope of the Chilterns, which appears to be taking advantage of the spring line. This phenomenon has been recorded in other counties, notably Essex.¹²

In the Oxford clay vale the greatest concentration of moats is in the valley bottoms, particularly that of the river Windrush. Conversely, the numbers of moats on the Cotswolds, the Corallian ridge and the Chilterns is correspondingly small, owing presumably to the difficulties of excavation and water retention on limestone and chalk. However, the geology was not an absolute determinant of location and, if the desire for a moat was great enough, could be overcome.

The location of the sites with regard to other settlements indicates that the majority, c. 48%, were located in a village and close to the church, with a further 23% associated with deserted medieval villages. Approximately 28% were what may be described as isolated, that is more than 0.8 km. (0.5 mile) from the parish church.¹³

An attempt was made to see if there was any correlation between the occurrence of isolated moats and areas where assarting was taking place. The results would appear to suggest that the occurrence of homestead moats at sub-manorial level, built by freehold tenants in areas of recent woodland clearance, was relatively limited in Oxfordshire. This may have been due to the fact that one of the largest areas of known assarts, Wychwood Forest,¹⁴ was situated on limestone. The relatively large percentage of moats within villages and close to the church is suggestive of seigneurial sites.¹⁵

Where it was possible to determine the size and shape of the moats the majority appeared to be single, quadrilateral enclosures in the range 0.3-0.8 hectares (0.74-1.97 acres). This shape also predominates in Worcestershire¹⁶ and Essex.¹⁷ However, recent survey work by C.C. Taylor in Lincolnshire has shown that investigation in the field often reveals a more complex pattern of earthworks than may be discernible from a map.¹⁸

A small proportion of moated sites in the county are known to have more than one island, and Hardings Field is an example of this. Concentric moats are also rare and where they do occur they need not be contemporary with each other. For example the triple moats at the Park Lodge, Beckley Park, would appear from documentary evidence to have been excavated in at least two phases.¹⁹

A number of sites, approximately 18%, appear to be incomplete. However, it is virtually impossible to tell without excavation or geophysical survey whether this was due to later infilling of part of the moat or whether they were not completed.

Groups of two or more moats sometimes occur in close proximity. This may be the result of one site going out of use and being replaced or it could indicate that the moated areas served different functions. One example of this can be seen in Oxfordshire at Curbridge where there is a group of three physically separate moats: Black Moat, Caswell House and Lower Caswell Farm.

At Chalgrove there are two moated sites; the excavated site at Hardings Field and the remains of an earthwork at Manor Farm, Mill Lane. The excavated and the documentary evidence indicates that both sites were seigneurial. Hardings Field moated site belonged to the Barentins while that at Manor Farm appears to have been held by the de Plessis (later Bereford) family.²⁰ In such cases of contemporary

moated sites serving the same purpose but held by different families, the secondary site was probably the result of imitation and the desire not to be outdone by one's neighbour.

There has been limited excavation on moated sites in Oxfordshire at Lilley Farm, Mapledurham,²¹ Moat Cottage, Kidlington,²² Manor Farm, Kingham,²³ and Manor Farm, Chalgrove.²⁴ The excavation of the site at Hardings Field, Chalgrove remains the most complete of any moat to date in Oxfordshire.

Village Topography and Geology

The village of Chalgrove, in Ewelme Hundred, Oxfordshire, lies some 15.30 km. (9.5 miles) to the south-east of Oxford and 5.64 km. (3.5 miles) to the north-west of Watlington, which is the nearest market town. The name Chalgrove means 'at the chalk or limestone pit',²⁵ and the village lies near the foot of the scarp slope of the Chilterns in the valley of the river Thame. This is a relatively low-lying area: Chalgrove village has a maximum elevation of 72.7 metres O.D. (238.52 feet) at its eastern end, falling to 64.1 metres O.D. (210.3 feet) at its western end, and is situated on Gault clays at the south-western end of the Vale of Aylesbury. The Gault is drained transversely by many small streams and its surface is further interrupted by patches of gravels and outcrops of Upper Greensand.²⁶ One of these many unnamed streams meanders around the south-west side of the village and has deposited an approximately 400 m wide band of alluvium over the Gault clay. The natural drainage has been considerably interfered with by the construction (believed to have been in the 18th century), at the north-west end of the village, of a dam across the stream to provide a head of water to drive an overshot water mill. The result of this is that the village is prone to flooding.

At the south-east end of the village a cut has been taken off the stream, which is controlled by a sluice gate. This man-made water course runs parallel to the north-east side of the main street before joining the stream at the north-western end of the village.

Although the Chalgrove area has not yet been covered by the soil survey of Great Britain, the Vale of the White Horse has been, and the soils of the Thames series, being derived from a calcareous clay alluvium, probably form the closest parallel to the soils of Chalgrove. This soil group is one of ground water and gley soils which tend to be poorly or very poorly drained and are mostly under permanent meadow grass.²⁷

Archaeological Setting (Fig. 3)

Little is known of pre-medieval Chalgrove. There is no known prehistoric settlement in the parish although there have been isolated finds. A Neolithic polished axe was found approximately 1.3 km. (0.8 mile) to the north-east of the village²⁸ and an Iron Age coin less than 0.8 km. (0.5 mile) to the north-east.²⁹ A few very abraded Iron Age sherds were also recovered during the course of the excavation.

There is some evidence to suggest a Romano-British settlement to the west of Manor Farm, Mill Lane, both from the presence of crop marks and a scatter of

Romano-British pottery.³⁰ The excavation at Hardings Field produced several coarse Romano-British sherds³¹ and one Romano-British small find.³² In the south of the parish, the field names Stratford Meadow and Stratford Furlong, together with a straight length of hedgerow for about 1.4 km. which points towards the Roman town of Dorchester on Thames, suggest the presence of a Roman road.³³

So far the only archaeological evidence of Saxon occupation in the village has been one large sherd, found approximately 170 m. to the west of the church in 1977.³⁴ The church of St Mary is the only definite surviving medieval building in the village. The earliest architectural feature, the south arcade of the nave, can be dated stylistically to the late Norman period. This suggests that the present church was in existence in the reign of Henry II (1154-89) if not slightly earlier.³⁵ The chancel is renowned for its almost complete set of wall paintings of the mid 14th century, rediscovered in the 1850s.³⁶ Set into the floor of the chancel are some mid 15th-century brasses of the Barentin family.³⁷

Manor Farm on Mill Lane is a timber-framed building which on architectural grounds dates to the late 15th century,³⁸ and small scale archaeological work supports this date.³⁹ Until recently there was a pentagonal moat, which was partially open to the rear, to the north-west of Manor Farm house and farmyard. This moat was largely destroyed and backfilled in 1977 when the previous owner of the site created a trout pond. Although no medieval pottery was recovered, the Romano-British material mentioned above was found.⁴⁰ This moated site lies approximately 550 m to the north-west of the excavated site at Hardings Field.

Langley Hall, which was situated 150 m to the south-east of Manor Farm, has also recently been demolished and was an early 16th-century building.⁴¹ Other than these, the rest of the buildings in the village, the majority of which (until recent 20th-century development) were strung out along the High Street, appear to be post-medieval.

As well as the two moated sites in the village there are other earthworks still extant. At the very north-western end of the village, just beyond Marley Lane, there are what appear to be the remains of village earthworks,⁴² while in the field adjacent to and south-west of the church there is a further set of earthworks.⁴³ Some of these may represent village earthworks, although they are not very convincing as such. They include the boundary bank of a former road which survived in part as a footpath to the church. One boundary ditch turned to join one or possibly two heavily silted linked ponds.⁴⁴ These latter earthworks may have been associated with a fish pond which was in the field to the north-east, Pond Ditch Close, and which was also adjacent to the excavated site.⁴⁵ This fish pond was backfilled in the 1960s when the whole field was levelled up to make a playing field, but it survives as a crop mark. There is a green lane, Frogmore Lane,⁴⁶ between Hardings Field and Pond Ditch Close which continues as a footpath to the nearby deserted medieval village of Little Holcombe, in the adjacent parish of Newington.⁴⁷

The present village plan calls for some comment. It consists of two roads: High Street, which is the main axis, and Mill Lane, the lesser axis. Both of these are remote from the church and this might imply that settlement has moved. Unfortunately, most of the land and fields surrounding the church have either been

built over or are badly disturbed. However, there are indications that this may originally have formed the village nucleus. The road system shown on the 1822 map (Fig.1) to some extent indicates a convergence on the church. This comprised Church Lane, to the east and still in existence, and Frogmore Lane by Hardings Field, with its branch off to the church which was mentioned above. Two cottages were also shown next to the church. The presence of the possible village earthworks south of the church together with a sherd of Saxon pottery further suggests that this was the nucleus of the village. The pre-moat remains in Hardings Field, whether they represented part of the ancillary buildings of an early manor or were simply peasant cots, reinforce this idea. It is suggested that the area around the church may represent the village before its reorganisation into two equal and self-contained manors in 1233 and that the settlement around Mill Lane came about as a result of the split. R.A. Dodgshon has recently drawn attention to the importance of symmetrical 'township splitting' in the development of British villages and field systems and has noted that it seems to be common in Oxfordshire.⁴⁸

Many of the properties which front onto the High Street appear to have been built on furlongs which had been taken out of cultivation. This may be a planned element associated with the division of the village into two manors, or possibly a third element representing expansion at a later date. The stream which runs parallel to the High Street has all the appearance of a mill leat. A millstone was found at the back of the present Post Office, the only building in the village which actually straddles the stream.⁴⁹

The parish of Chalgrove today contains two deserted medieval villages. Rofford, in the extreme north-west of the parish, appears to have been a hamlet whose manor was held by the Barentins.⁵⁰ This site was partially destroyed in 1959 and medieval pottery was recovered.⁵¹ Warpsgrove in the north-east of the parish may have been set at one time in its own parish as it appears to have had its own church.⁵² By 1453 no inhabitants were recorded in that village. Warpsgrove was partially destroyed by the construction of the airfield at Chalgrove.⁵³