

TOTNES CASTLE

An Archaeological Desk-based Assessment



by
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TOTNES CASTLE, DEVELOPMENT OF VISITOR FACILITIES AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT

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Summary

The site of the proposed visitor facilities straddles the presumed line of the Norman castle defences, and therefore extends across an area of high archaeological potential. It is recommended that all proposed footing and service trenches more than 0.1m deep be excavated by hand before construction work begins. If the footprint of the new building is to be reduced by more than 0.1m, then this may also require part or full excavation by hand.

The Project

Stewart Brown Associates were commissioned by R. Harding of English Heritage to undertake an archaeological desktop assessment of the site of the proposed visitor facilities.

Archaeological Background

The area lies in an area of potentially high archaeological significance on the junction of the inner and outer castle ditches (Fig. 6), and possibly including the site of a gate from the castle into the town.

History

The castle is a particularly fine and well-preserved example of a large, early Norman motte-and-bailey castle. The impressive Norman earthworks survive much as they were constructed, almost certainly by Juhel, a commander in William the Conqueror's army, soon after the Normans swept through the South West in 1068. Originally, the castle would have been crowded with wooden buildings, and protected by earth and timber defences which were later replaced in stone. The stone shell keep crowning the motte, or massive earth mound, was built in the early 13th century and extensively reconstructed about 100 years later, when a new stone wall was erected around the bailey, or enclosure at the foot of the motte.

The traveller and writer Leland described the castle in about the year 1538, when he noted that 'the castle wall and strong dungeon (shell keep) be maintained', but that the 'lodgings of the castle (in the bailey) be clean in ruin'. There were episodes before this when the castle had been neglected and fallen into disrepair, doubtless because many of its later medieval lords had interests elsewhere, and frequently left the castle unoccupied, and in the care of a constable. Even as early as 1273, it was said to contain certain houses in poor condition, including a hall, chamber, and chapel, as well as partly broken down walls on the motte; and in 1326, the king commanded that the castle and its fortifications be made good. In 1463, and again in 1471, certain tenants of the lord were compelled to repair the crenellations of the castle, whilst little or nothing was done to the residential buildings in the bailey. In 1466, a local man was summoned for felling trees growing on the castle moat, which suggests that the outer earthwork defences were not maintained, and had become overgrown. By the 16th century, if not before, the castle would have looked much as it does today. The historian Lysons states that it was occupied

during the Civil War, and that in 1645 it was gutted on the approach of Sir Thomas Fairfax towards Dartmouth.

In 1764, the ruined castle was bought by the Duke of Somerset, whose family, the Seymours of nearby Berry Pomeroy Castle, had owned it temporarily once before. In the 1920's and 30's the castle was open for cream teas and tennis, the tennis court occupying the flattened area at the centre of the bailey until the 1950's. The Second World War saw evacuees camping in the bailey. The granite pillars which presently stand to either side of the castle entrance come from the Fruit Market House which was built in 1611 next to Totnes Church. Other pillars from this building now form part of the loggia built in 1897 in front of the 16th-century Guildhall.

Archaeological investigations were carried out at Totnes Castle in the years between 1950-53 by the late Stuart Rigold, who excavated the interior of the shell keep, and opened trial pits in the bailey. His work has helped us understand the history and structure of the castle much better.

Cartographic evidence

Figs. 3-6 show historic maps relating to the site, together with coloured overlays showing other relevant information.

Potential Survival

The site straddles the presumed course of the castle ditch, extending on its west side onto the berm flanking the inner rampart. Historians have in the past postulated a gateway on or close to this area, leading from the castle into the town (see eg Figs. 1 and 2). The west side of the site lies close to the presumed line of the stone curtain wall which replaced an earlier timber wall surrounding the bailey in the early 14th century. In the 15th century, the earthwork defences appear to have been neglected and become overgrown. From this time onwards, it is possible that buildings erected by townspeople may have encroached upon the castle ditch and banks. The present site is almost flat, and appears to have been purposively levelled, possibly to form a platform for the construction of a house, or perhaps for laying out a garden, either in late medieval times or later. The archaeological potential can thus be summarised as follows:

- 1/ Remains of the Norman earthwork defences, comprising ditch/moat, and banks;
- 2/ Remains of a possible Norman or later medieval gateway through the castle wall, and associated bridge or causeway across the defensive ditch/moat;
- 3/ Remains associated with the construction and/or demolition of the medieval stone curtain wall around the bailey;
- 4/ Building remains of medieval and/or post-medieval date.

The depth of ditch infilling, presumably of late medieval and later date is unknown, as is the depth of post-medieval and modern overburden.

Mitigation Strategy

Area a

The proposed perimeter concrete strip footings for the new visitor building are to be sunk to a depth of up to 1.6m. In view of the high archaeological potential of this area, it is recommended that the trenches for these be dug entirely by hand before the footings are laid.

If the area surrounded by the footings is to be left untouched, then it requires no further archaeological input. If this area is to be reduced by **more** than the depth of the present turf, then the excavation of the above mentioned trenches will comprise an adequate archaeological evaluation of the area. However, the results of the evaluation may prove to be of sufficient importance to merit further archaeological excavation of part or all of the footprint of the proposed new building.

Areas b, c, f, and g

These service pipe trenches are likewise to extend across ground of high archaeological potential, and similarly should be excavated by hand before construction work begins.

Area d

The removal of existing stones from the retaining wall next to Castle Street requires an archaeological watching brief.

List of Plates:

Plate 1 The site looking north.

Plate 2 The site with the keep in the background.

Plate 3 The adjoining property to the east of the site, looking east.

Plate 4 The site looking south-east.

Sources:

Devon County Council SMR

Devon Record Office

Westcountry Studies Library

Totnes Museum Resource Centre

Publications:

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Fig.1 A reconstruction of the castle showing a tower and gate approximately in the area of the proposed development.



Fig.2 A reconstruction by Alan Sorrell showing a tower and gate to the north of the proposed development.

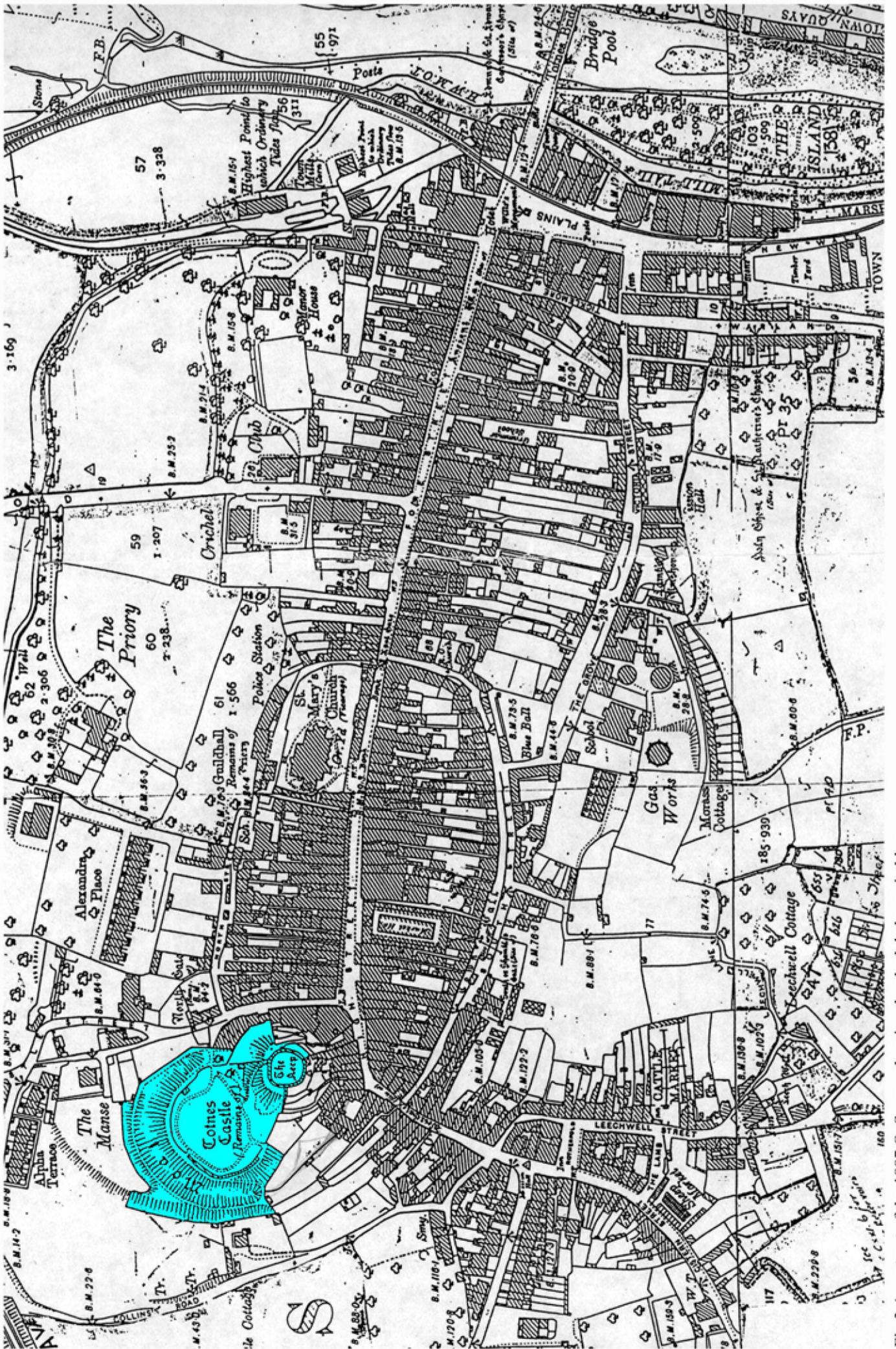


Fig.3 An extract of the 1887 O. S. map showing the sheduled area in blue.

TOTNES

DEVON

SURVEYED
BY
C. BRAUND AND H. HEARN
1842

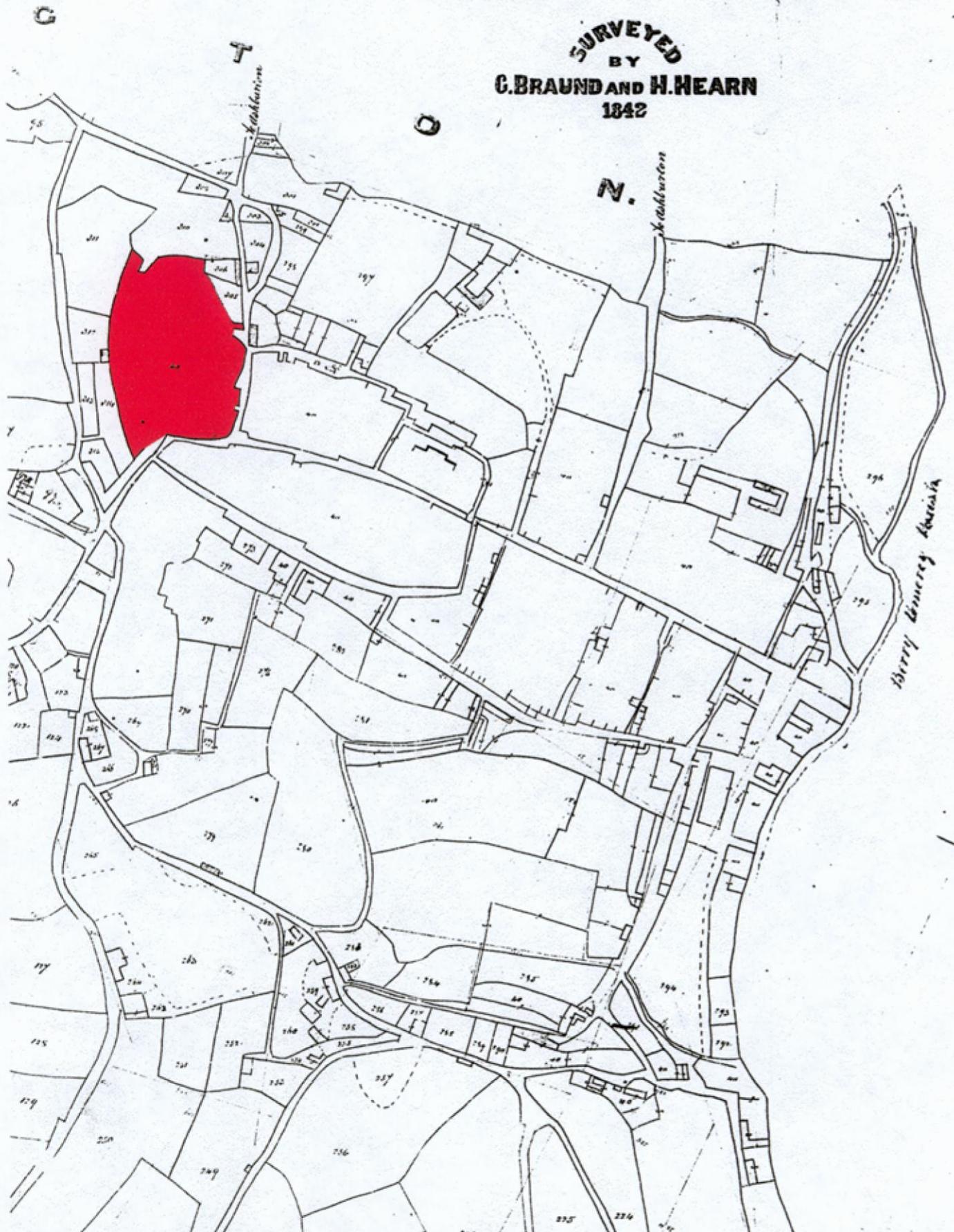


Fig.4 An extract of the 1842 Totnes tithe map with the site of the castle show in red.

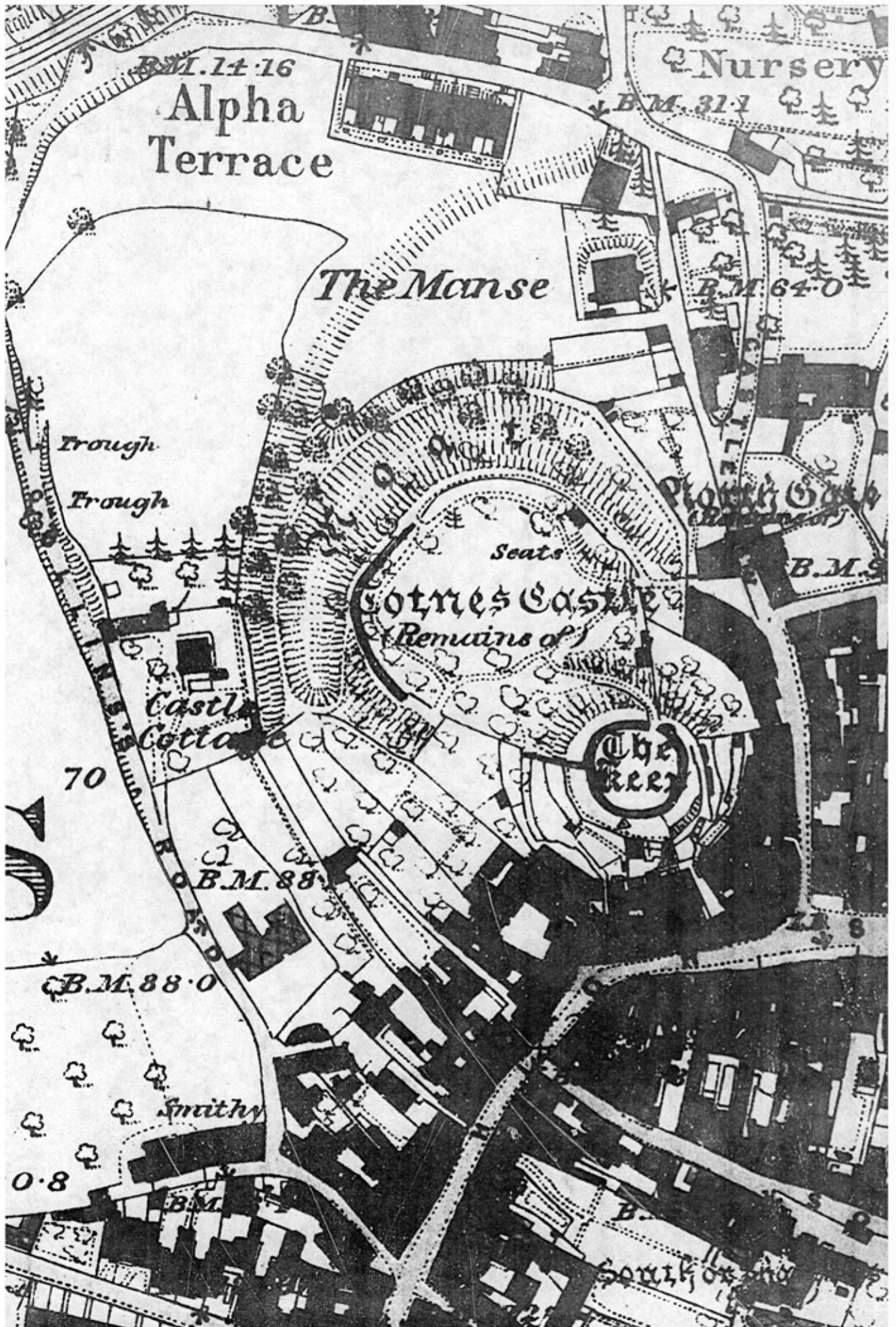


Fig.5 An extract of the 1889 O. S. map.

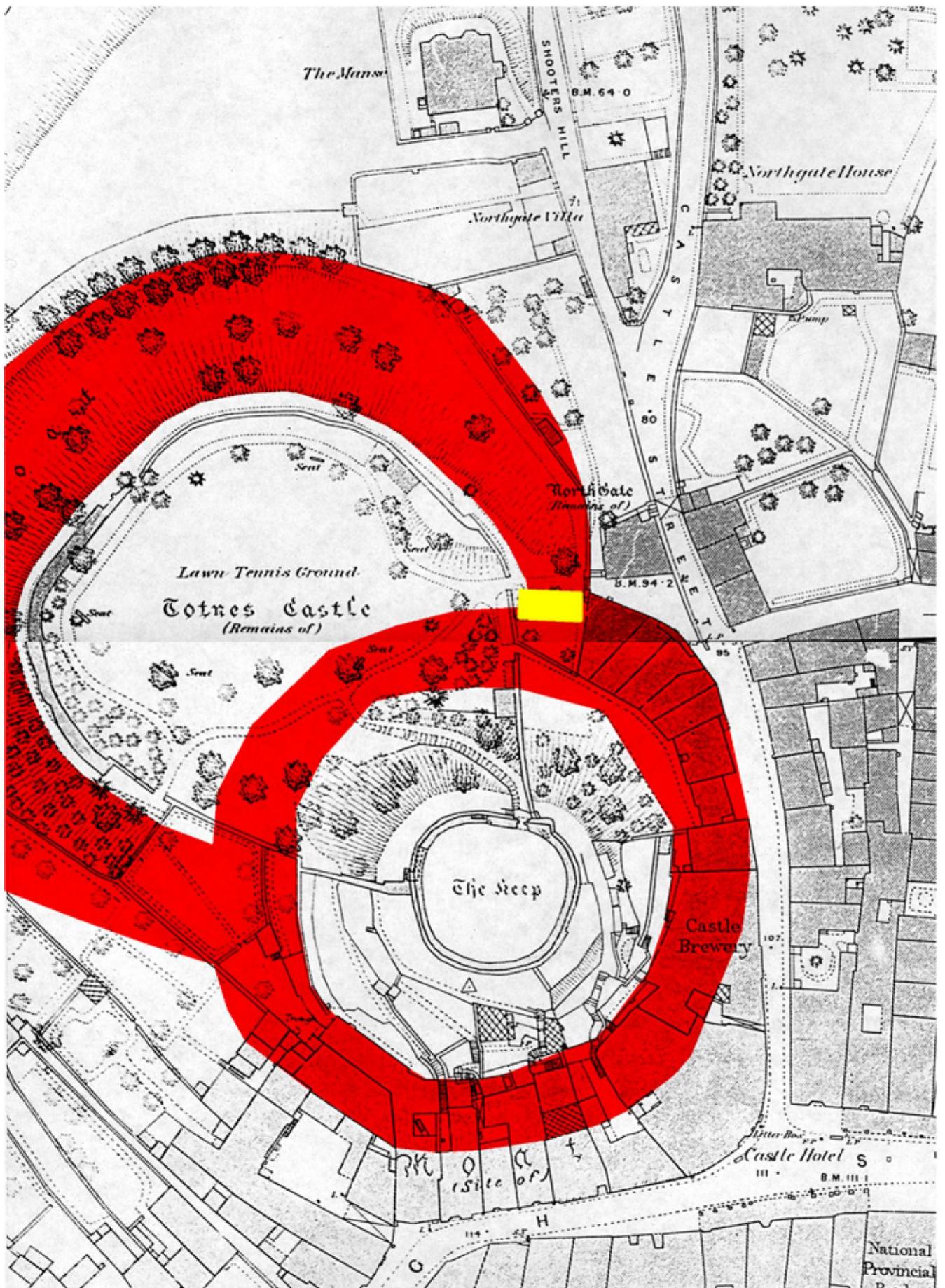


Fig.6 An extract from the 1:500 O. S. map. The approximate position of the moat is in red and the proposed visitor facilities in yellow.

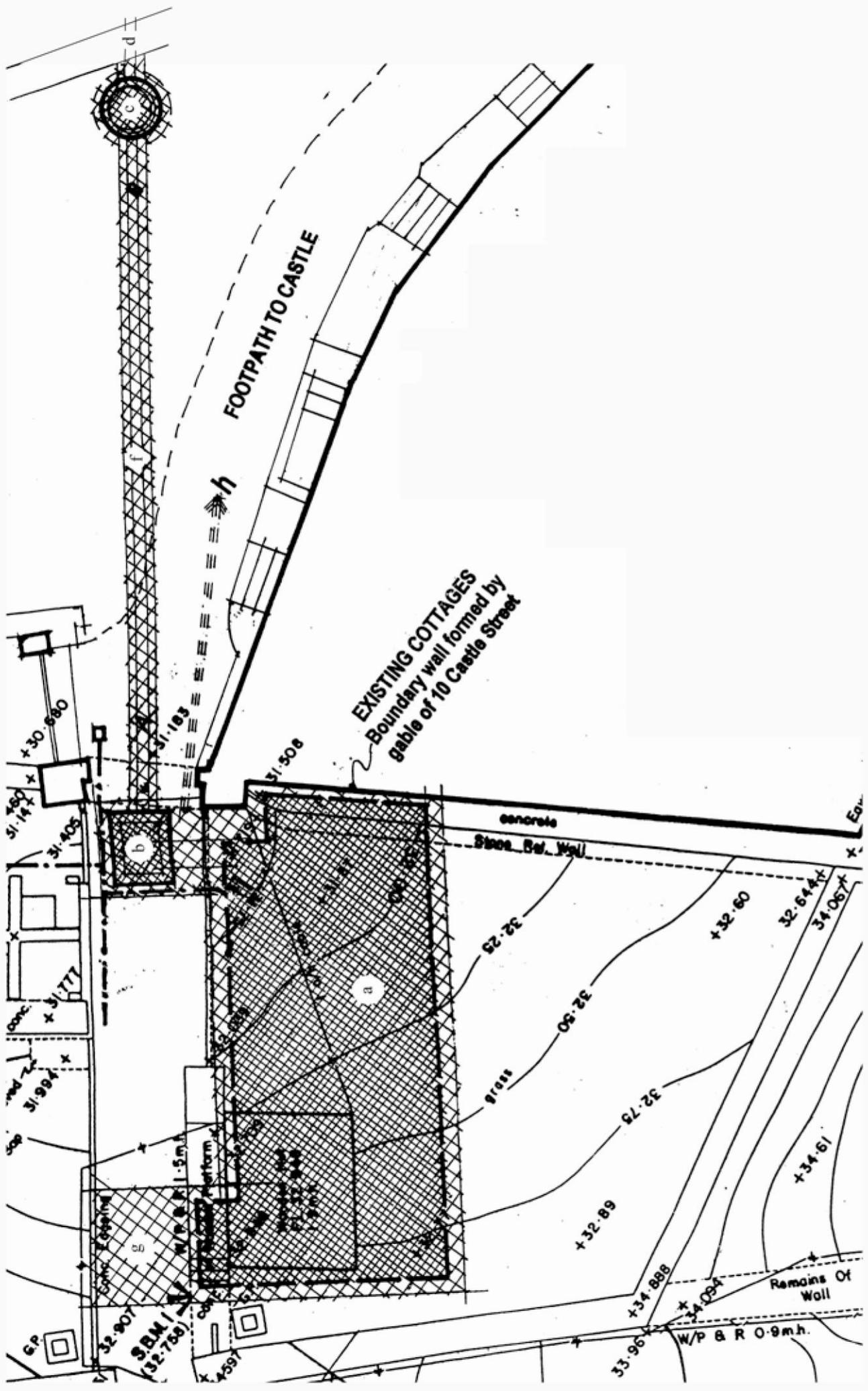


Fig.7 Ground disturbance plan copied from Samwell Locke Architects DRG No. AM13/28



Plate 1 The site looking north



Plate 2 The site with the keep in background, looking south.



Plate 3 The adjoining property to the east of the site, looking east



Plate 4 The site looking south-east.