

TOTNES CASTLE  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF  
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SUMMARY

*In April 2002, an archaeological investigation was opened following the appearance of a void in the turf just outside the shell keep at the top of the Norman motte. The investigation revealed a 19<sup>th</sup>- or 20<sup>th</sup>-century stone-built water tank, as well as the remains of two earlier walls that are probably associated with another post-medieval structure built against the medieval shell keep wall. The two walls may have formed part of an outbuilding erected on the garden terraces that have existed in this area since the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century, or possibly a house known from documentary evidence to have been built against the castle wall in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.*

THE PROJECT

It was known that a water tank existed on this part of the motte since 1999, when a deep exploration borehole associated with engineering works broke through its slate stone capping 0.4m below the ground surface, and encountered 1.6m depth of standing water (Brown and Gent 1999, 6). In April 2002, the void above the tank was reported by Arthur McCullum, (EH Engineer). The tank had by then drained of water and its capping was collapsing. Ian Morrison (IAMHB) contacted Stewart Brown Associates by telephone and commissioned an archaeological watching brief to be undertaken during the intended emergency works that were to expose the nature of the subsidence, and subsequently correct the problem by stabilizing the area. The excavations and stabilization works were carried out by Quadron contractors under the supervision of Dennis James (EH South West).

In addition to the tank, the excavations revealed two earlier rubble stone walls, one on its north side, which formed a shallow underpinning for the medieval shell keep wall, the other extending southwards at right angles to the shell keep along the east side of the tank. Two further small excavation trenches were subsequently opened to the north and south of the tank in order to establish the extent and if possible the date of the latter two walls.

Archaeological observations and measured sketch drawings were made of the tank and walls, together with a photographic record.

## DESCRIPTION (Fig. 1)

### 1/ **The water tank**

The water tank has a quadrilateral plan (not quite rectangular; Fig. 1) and is 1.6m deep (measurement taken from the present ground surface in 1999). It is built partly of stone and partly of brick. The lower parts of its walls are built of local stone rubble bonded with ash mortar, with an internal cement render lining. At the top of these walls (0.4m below ground level), there was a slate stone capping, the slates supported by a number of re-used iron bars and other pieces of scrap iron. Above this level the walls are built of brick, also bonded with ash mortar, but not rendered. A square brick pillar rises through the middle of the tank where it helped support the slate capstones. The brick capping walls, pillar, and slate stone capping may possibly represent secondary additions to an earlier stone-built tank.

### 2/ **Two earlier post-medieval walls**

On the north and east sides of the tank are two earlier walls (Fig. 1; walls 2 and 3). That on the north (wall 2) is abutted by the water tank wall, and is faced and limewashed. It is built of local stone rubble bonded with off-white sandy mortar, and is 0.4m deep (the bottom of the wall was exposed by the removal of part of the water tank wall). The wall follows approximately along the line of the shell keep wall and projects from beneath its base by a distance of 0.16m at the east end, diminishing to 0.05m further west. The wall appears to continue more than 3.6m to the west since Trench 2, uncovered very similar masonry bonded with identical mortar projecting 0.16m from beneath the shell keep wall, although here, the facework showed no traces of limewash. The wall certainly extends beneath the shell keep wall (for an unknown distance), which would suggest that either the wall predates the shell keep, or that it was inserted at a later date in the manner of underpinning.

The precise physical relationship with the original shell keep wall is difficult to determine since the shell keep facework has been extensively repaired, if not entirely rebuilt, probably sometime in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is however a physical relationship that can be seen between wall 2 and wall 3, showing that wall 2 abuts wall 3. Since wall 3 projects radially almost at right angles from the shell keep wall, and was still standing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (it is shown on the 1888 O.S. map), it is much more likely to be associated with the post-medieval garden terracing on this side of the motte, rather than dating from the medieval period (the garden terracing is discussed in 'Totnes Castle Terrace Walls', Brown and Matthews, 1999).

Wall 2 would therefore appear to have been inserted beneath the shell keep wall in order to underpin it, possibly because the ground level outside the shell keep had been reduced by gardening activity, thereby exposing the keep's footings (Stuart Rigold's report of the 1950's shows that these are shallow), or perhaps because a building with a floor level lower than the present ground surface had been erected against it. If the latter is true, then wall 3 may well have stood as one of the building's end walls, whilst wall 2 would

represent the slightly later insertion of underpinning beneath the keep wall. Indeed, patches of very similar mortar to that bonding wall 2 were observed pressed into the rubble facework of wall 3, which is otherwise bonded entirely with clay. Moreover, wall 2 does not extend eastwards beyond wall 3, suggesting that the two walls formed two sides of the same structure (Trench 3, opened 1.2m to the east of Trench 1 exposed clay-bonded rubble of different character to that of wall 2, at a lower depth - 0.36m below present ground surface. This might also explain why wall 2 had been limewashed at a level lower than the present ground surface, and possibly why the water tank was sited where it was - precisely within the north-east corner of the postulated building.

The earth and rubble infilling of the water tank contained large quantities of broken sheet glass, suggesting demolition material from a greenhouse. Possibly the latest use of the postulated building was as such. The water tank could also have been associated with such a use.

### *Finds*

All the objects produced by the excavations were of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century date. None were kept.

## DISCUSSION

The water tank is clearly of post-medieval date, and may have been constructed as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> or even 20<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of wall 2 beneath the shell keep wall can be interpreted in only two ways: either it is the outer side of a shell keep wall that is earlier in date than the present early 14<sup>th</sup>-century one, or it represents post-medieval underpinning. The latter seems much more likely, since wall 2 does not continue to the east of the area, and abuts wall 3, which is very unlikely to be medieval in origin. It should be emphasized however that the recent excavations were limited in extent and depth, and that 20<sup>th</sup>-century deposits and intrusions are both numerous and deep in places, so interpretation gained from this short watching brief must remain tentative for the present.

If walls 2 and 3 are indeed post-medieval in date as suggested above, and once formed parts of an outbuilding associated with the garden terracing, then both must date from after the terraces began to be constructed in the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Brown and Matthews 1999). In this context, there is an interesting documentary reference from a rental dating from 1629 that mentions a 'new house' standing adjacent to part of the castle wall (*ibid.*, p2). Such a building may have undergone many changes of use in subsequent centuries, perhaps becoming an animal house, shed, or greenhouse. Many such outbuildings are known to have stood on the terraces throughout post-medieval times up to the 1960's.

## References

- Brown, S. and Gent, T. 1999 'Totnes Castle Motte: Archaeological Watching Brief and Evaluation', unpub. report to EH.
- Brown, S. and Matthews, A. 1999 'Totnes Castle Terrace Walls', unpub. report to EH.
- Rigold, S. 1954 'Totnes Castle. Recent excavations by the Ancient Monuments Department, Ministry of Works', *Rep. Trans. Devon Ass.* **86**, 228-56.

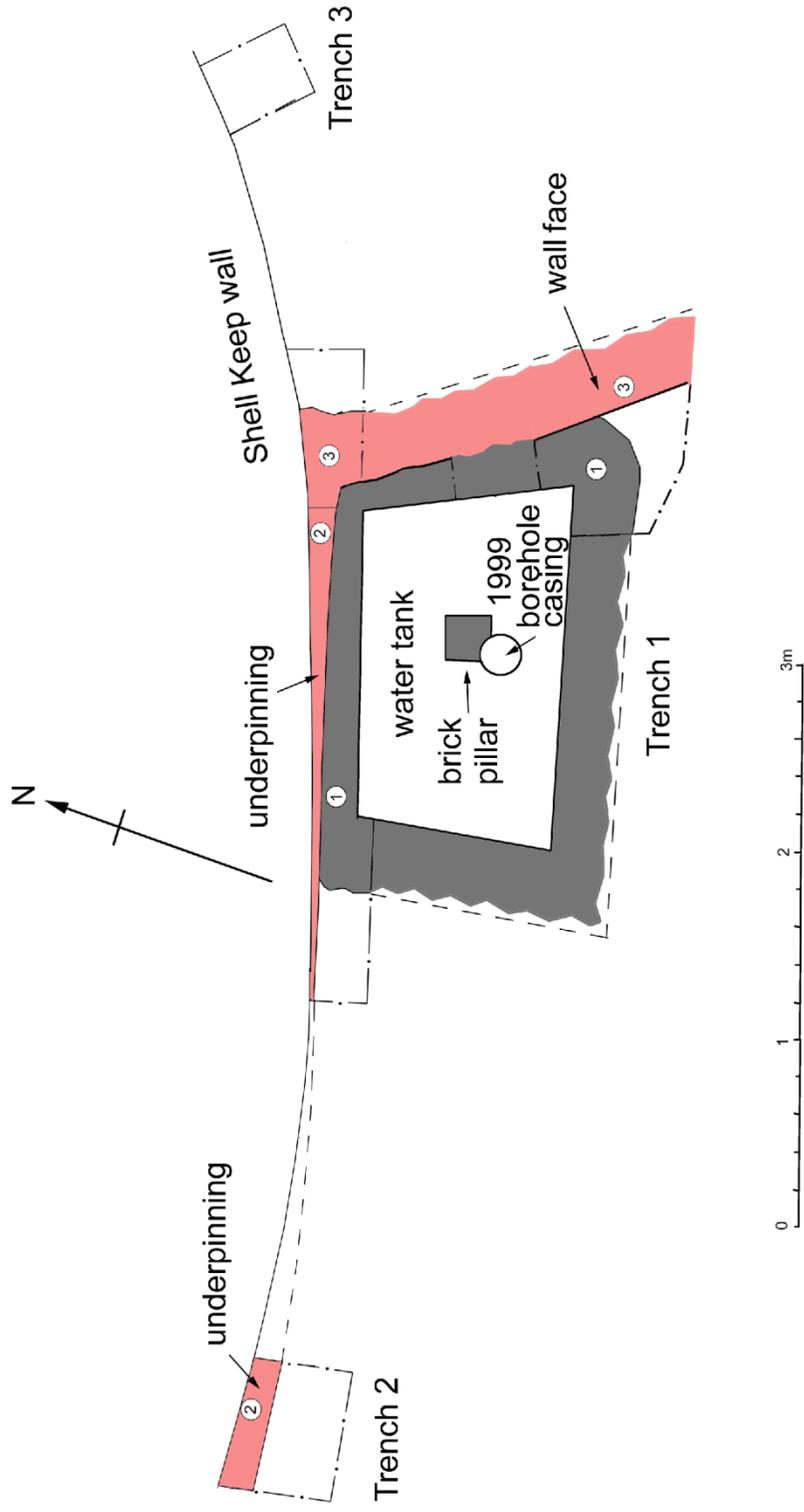


Fig. 1 Plan showing excavation trenches, water tank and post-medieval walls

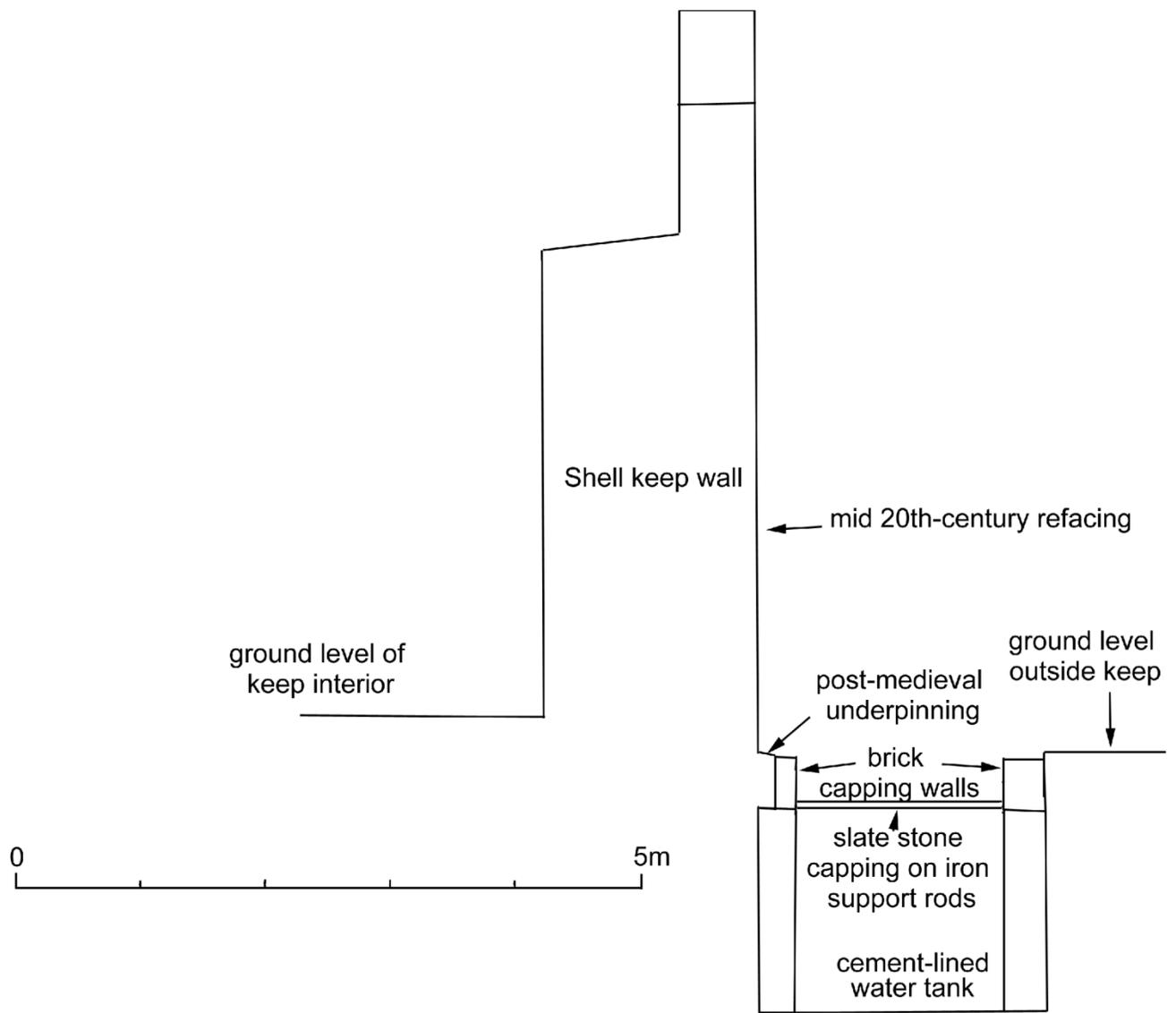


Fig. 2 Profile through keep wall and water tank