It appears to be increasingly accepted that the use of a number of more or less rectangular earthworks in Powys can be dated to the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. These include Cwrt Llechrhyd, Mathrafal, Nantcribba Gaer, Old Mills Moat, Plas-y-Dinas, Buttington, and New Radnor. Of these, only Cwrt Llechrhyd was at all securely dated (A.D. 750–1040) and only Mathrafal had any substantial quantity of historical documentation relating to the site.

The dating of Cwrt Llechrhyd was established by a radiocarbon determination on charcoal from beneath the bank of 1130±60 B.P. This would suggest a date range for the sample of c. A.D. 750–1040 at the 95% level, allowing for the age of the timber. On this basis it was suggested that Cwrt Llechrhyd and the morphologically similar sites in Montgomeryshire to the N. were 10th-century Welsh forts imitating English burhs or earlier Mercian forts associated with Offa’s Dyke. The existence of the latter has yet to be demonstrated and the sympathy expressed for a 10th-century date was based on the assumption that the charcoal ‘suggests tree-clearance immediately prior to the construction of the bank’; we see no reason to accept this assumption and feel that the status of the radiocarbon date as a terminus post quem should be retained until there is firm evidence to the contrary.

Pryce’s summary of the historical context of Mathrafal highlights the way in which the site is mentioned in legal documents as comparable with the other Welsh courts of Aberffraw and Dinefwr. At present it is only from Aberffraw that there is any archaeological evidence indicating the possible layout of the court and it is significant that it may have had a rectilinear enclosure. The principal bank and ditch at Aberffraw are post-Roman, yet are not more precisely dated. However, Pryce’s analysis demonstrates that Mathrafal’s alleged pre-eminence as a seat of the Princes of Powys is in fact related to 13th-century Welsh propaganda probably inspired in part by the contemporary importance of Mathrafal as the site of a Norman castle (and, later in the century at least, a manor), but also perhaps as a result of its location near Meifod, the dynastic burial-ground of the Welsh rulers of Powys.

The site at Mathrafal consists of a rectilinear enclosure in the NE. corner of which stands a motte beside the River Banwy (Fig. 3). In 1985 two out of the four trenches excavated at Mathrafal in 1929–30 were re-examined and the relatively inconclusive nature of those results led to an intensification of the research with detailed topographical and geophysical surveys being conducted in 1988. On the basis of this, excavation of an area of c. 325 sq. m. forming a 5 m. wide strip from the W. side of the rectilinear enclosure to its centre was undertaken in 1989. This demonstrated that the rectilinear enclosure consisted of a sequence of banks and ditches which cannot have begun earlier than the 13th century if assumptions about the use of medieval pottery in mid-Wales are correct. The first phase was provided with a small enclosure in the SW. corner and a later phase, probably the last, was accompanied by a house in the NW. corner which remained the site of a farm to the end of the 19th century. A sequence of curving inner ditches with associated bank or rampart within the rectilinear enclosure may be interpreted as the defences to the castle bailey. The radiocarbon determination based on charcoal from the initial silting of the later of the ditches of 540±60 B.P. would suggest a date range for the sample of A.D. 1290–1450 at the 95% level. This has to be seen in the light of the re-excavation of trench C within the area of bailey immediately S. of the motte (Fig. 1). A radiocarbon determination from a deep deposit of carbonised brushwood lying on the old ground surface gave a reading of 700±60 B.P. (A.D. 1220–1400 at the 95% level). This may represent clearance for the construction of the motte and bailey castle, or its destruction. A castle certainly existed at Mathrafal by 1212 as it was seized in that year by the Welsh and subsequently recaptured and burned by the English. The structural sequence continued with the dumping of large quantities of boulder clay over this steeply shelving area of the bailey to make an artificial, flat surface on which there were further
Mathrafal, Powys. Showing excavated areas: Trenches B and C (re-excavated in 1985) and location and extent of 1989 excavations.
signs of burning. The levelling of this part of the site need not be contemporary with the use of the motte and bailey castle, and may have taken place during the currency of the rectilinear enclosure. The date from the ditch may indicate the time by which the bailey’s defences had ceased to be of use. There is therefore no archaeological evidence of structures or artefacts of a pre-Norman date at Mathrafal, which is consistent with Pryce’s interpretation of the written sources.

There can be little doubt about the importance of Mathrafal as a manor from the late 13th century onwards: from the first mention of the property it occurs in every Inquest post mortem until the 16th century, along with (at various times) Parc, Buttington, Talgarth, Tafowlers, Lydham, Greenhall, Plas-yn-Dinas in Montgomeryshire, Kersey in Suffolk and Pontesbury in Shropshire. Of them all, Mathrafal is the only manor which remains in the ownership of the lords of Powys throughout the medieval period. Consequently, there is every reason to believe that the rectilinear enclosure at Mathrafal should be viewed as a typical medieval manorial earthwork. If the outer enclosure at Mathrafal were appropriate for a manorial complex of the lords of Powys, it may be significant that there are similar earthworks at Buttington (now lost) and Plas-yn-Dinas; Trewern is mentioned in the Inquests post mortem as a hamlet belonging to the lords of Powys and there is a large earthwork enclosure to the N. at Old Mills. Close to Parc, aerial photography has revealed a square enclosure with a single entrance (PAR 2599). Significantly a number of these sites, including Mathrafal, were listed by Musson and Spurgeon in their discussion of the similar moated site at Cwrt Llechrhyd. Of those listed all but Cwrt Llechrhyd could be identified with manors of the Lords of Powys, although it should be noted that Nantcribba Gaer is morphologically totally different to the types of enclosure under discussion and the identification of the nature and extent of that at Buttington is far from certain.

The rectangular enclosure at Mathrafal can be seen as an entirely new layout of medieval date. In making such a bold architectural statement it may have been desirable to level whatever remained of the bailey’s defences. The dating evidence suggests that the outer enclosure sequence began after c. 1200 and before c. 1400. The new layout and whatever structures that were erected within it, presumably lying in the NW. corner, were deemed to be appropriate for one of the principal manors of the medieval lords of Powys, and similar enclosures typify the centres of their other manors in Montgomeryshire. The archaeological evidence seems in accord with the interpretation of the written sources and hence it would seem that any association of this site with pre-Norman secular power is false. In the light of this, the identification of similar rectangular enclosures as pre-Norman should be re-assessed.

G. J. ARNOLD AND J. W. HUGGETT

NOTES

2 Musson and Spurgeon, op. cit. in note 1, 104–07.
3 Ibid, p. 102.
5 Musson and Spurgeon, op. cit. in note 1, 102.
6 Ibid, 107–08.
7 Ibid, 106–02.
8 Pryce, op. cit. in note 4.
9 Edwards and Lane, op. cit. in note 1, 18–21.
10 L. Alcock, Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons (Cardiff, 1987), 166.
13 Arnold and Huggett, op. cit. in note 4.
14 Ibid.
ANOTHER 'PROTO-KEEP' AT WALMER, KENT (Fig. 4)

In 1992 I wrote a short article entitled 'Keep or Country House? Thin-walled Norman 'Proto-keeps' prompted by the discoveries at Castle Acre, Norfolk, and Bletchingley,

![Plan of ruin known as the 'Old Manor House']. Reproduced from *Archaeol. J.* 126 (1969), courtesy of the Royal Archaeological Institute