Field investigation at Newhall Tower, Newhall, Cheshire

By Michael Fradley¹

Introduction

A detailed earthwork survey was undertaken of the site believed to be Newhall Tower, a castle documented from the 13th century south-west of Nantwich, Cheshire (Fig. 1). The fieldwork was undertaken in two short periods between March and May 2009. In addition to confirming the medieval date and probable composition of Newhall Tower, the survey also identified features of settlement development potentially stretching from the Roman period to the present. On a less positive note the survey recorded that the central mound of the medieval site, that is the site of the tower at Newhall itself, had been partially levelled in 2007.

Background

Prior to the recent identification of Newhall Tower the site had only been known through documentary records

beginning with its first mention in 1275 (King 1983, 69). The settlement of Newhall had itself been absent from the Domesday record of 1086, occurring for the first time in 1227 as 'Newhall in the Woods' (Dodgson 1971, 101). Despite the continued recognition of the site of Newhall Tower itself into the 16th century, the availability of suggestive cartographic records and the preservation of the earthworks themselves, the location of Newhall Tower had until recently remained unknown.

At present Newhall is a hamlet set along the A530 road which links Whitchurch (Shrops.) and Nantwich (Ches.). During the 20th century the handful of farms and isolated houses that formed the settlement has been supplemented by a number of small housing developments along the roadside, as well as the more dramatic expansion of the former Newhall Mill site on the east side of the A530 which now houses an extensive factory complex. This largely dispersed settlement form appears to mirror the medieval layout. The site of Newhall Tower was identified within this minor settlement following the

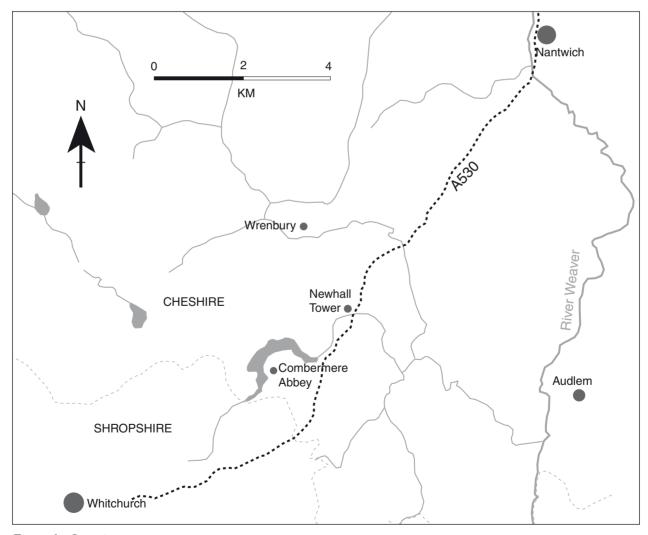


Figure 1 Location map

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analysis of aerial photographs, with a number of major earthworks identifiable on the west side of the A530 in the vicinity of Newhall Mill Farm (Fradley 2005). This initial identification was provisional and so a decision was made to confirm and extend understanding of the site through a measured earthwork survey.

The Earthwork Survey (Fig. 2)

The surviving earthworks were surveyed at 1:1000 using a Leica GPS rover, with the survey drawing subsequently graphically amended and completed by hand.

Potentially the earliest earthwork identified consisted of the ditch on the western edge of the survey just off a N–S orientation (a), aligned slightly toward NNE–SSW. This stretch of ditch survived for a length of about 130m, with a width of 25m and a present depth of about 1m. At its southern end this ditch was cut by the larger, deeper ditch (b) of a redirected water course known as 'Newhall Cut' of probable medieval date (discussed below), and was not visible continuing south in the adjoining field, although the latter was under intensive arable cultivation in which earthwork survival would not be expected. At its northern end the ditch turns 90° to the east for a distance of some 50m before itself potentially being cut by a second redirected stream course (c). This L-shaped section of ditch is set on a distinct orientation from the layout of other features on the site interpreted as part of the medieval Newhall Tower complex and can be convincingly argued to pre-date those features. Several linear features measuring between 15m and 100m in length survive on the east side of this ditch section which mirror its principal N-S alignment and could therefore be argued to be contemporary or related elements.

A section of a road surviving in the form of a hollow way (d) running N-S was recorded in the south-eastern section of the survey area which formed part of the original road through Newhall prior to its diversion in the later 19th century. This interpretation is supported by the surviving tithe map (Fig. 3; NA: IR 30/5/285) which clearly shows the road on this course; this earlier doglegged route was necessitated by the presence of a large mill pool and was altered following the drainage of the latter feature. The section of road at Newhall is about 14m wide, 0.6m deep and survives for a distance of 50m, at its southern end being partially cut by a large pit about 30m in diameter which almost certainly post-dated the abandonment of the road. The Newhall tithe map makes it clear that in the earlier 19th century the road cut through the site of the large enclosure before running out

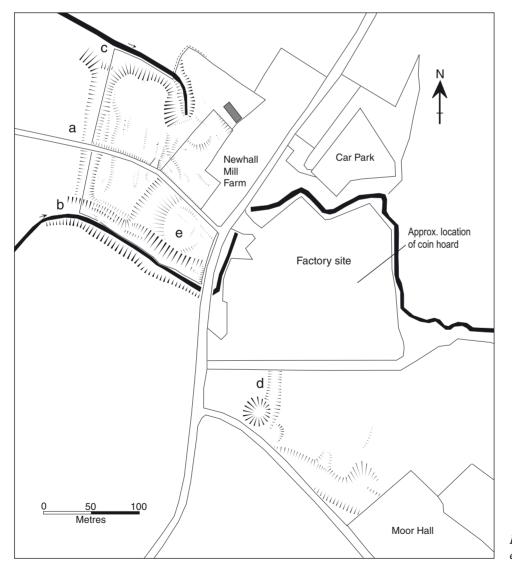


Figure 2 Newhall earthwork survey.

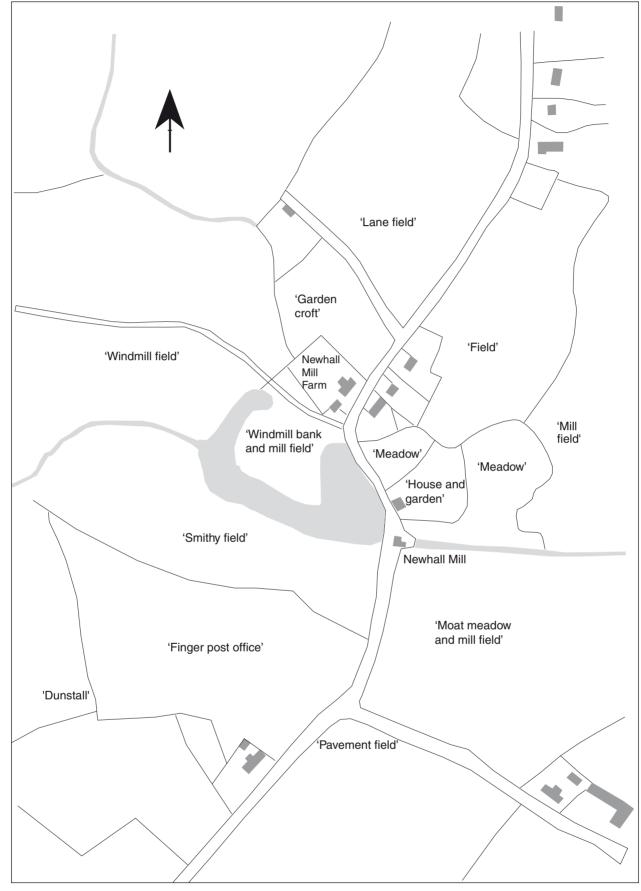


Figure 3 Newhall as depicted on the tithe map

of the site towards its southern end where it took on the alignment recorded in the survey.

The surviving earthwork section of this road would seem to have been in use from at least the later medieval period given its close relationship with the site, and in particular the mill pool which is documented from at least the late 14th century. According to the Tithe map the road crossed the dam of this pool (CRO: D4059/15; NA: IR 30/5/285). At the southern end just beyond the survey area, the road would have crossed a broad stream course some 30m wide (discussed briefly above), which appears to have been one of the water sources diverted into the survey area, presumably to feed the mill pool and the moats of Newhall Tower. Interestingly, a small building platform survives on the eastern side of the road measuring 6m by 13m at a position just before it crossed what would have been a redundant stream course once Newhall Tower and mill had been established. One reading of this position may be that this structure was built relative to the existence of a water course, and must therefore predate its diversion and therefore also the construction of Newhall Tower. A medieval or even earlier date could therefore be assigned to this structure. Two further terraces are also visible further east alongside the former water course, although these are less well defined and may have been tracks down to the stream for livestock.

One of the most prominent earthworks within the survey area had been a large circular mound (e) which had first attracted attention when it had been identified through the analysis of vertical aerial photographs (Fig. 4; Fradley 2005). Unfortunately this element of the site has suffered heavily from later development, most recently the partial levelling off of the mound in 2007. This is a great loss as the mound appears to have functioned as an important central element within the earthwork complex, and seems likely to have been the

site of Newhall Tower itself. What had previously been a clear, defined monument is now a number of low broad scarps that give only a vague indication of the position and form of the monument. From these surviving earthworks and the available aerial photographic evidence it is possible to suggest that at its crest the mound had a diameter of about 45m, indicating a very substantial structure. To the north-west a section of the moat ditch survives; the outer edge of the moat was rectilinear in plan, aligned NE-SW and contrasts with the circular form of the central mound. The moat at this point is 30m wide and around 0.8m deep. It is difficult to assess the form of the moat to the south as this section has clearly been deepened, probably in the later 19th century. The Newhall tithe map indicates that as well as a moat to the west and south of the mound, an extensive moated area existed to the east which had a dual function as a millpond for Newhall Mill which is also documented during the medieval period. There was therefore an integral link between these two elements, in addition to which the road through Newhall crossed the head of the mill pool along the crest of the mill dam itself.

The most marked event of the post-medieval period to impact on the form of the site has been the conversion of Newhall Mill from water to steam power in the later 19th century. The result of this action has been to completely alter the form and layout of the settlement. The mill pool and surviving moats of the Newhall Tower site were drained, and it appears that the level of both Newhall Cut and the stream course on the north side of the survey area were lowered to improve the local drainage systems. This alteration in drainage will have impacted on the survival of waterlogged material on the site, and it is unlikely that any deposits will remain in the surviving portions of the castle moat. Following the removal of the mill pool and the abandonment of its dam over which the old road passed, the primary road running through the settlement



Figure 4 The castle mound from the west in 2006, prior to levelling

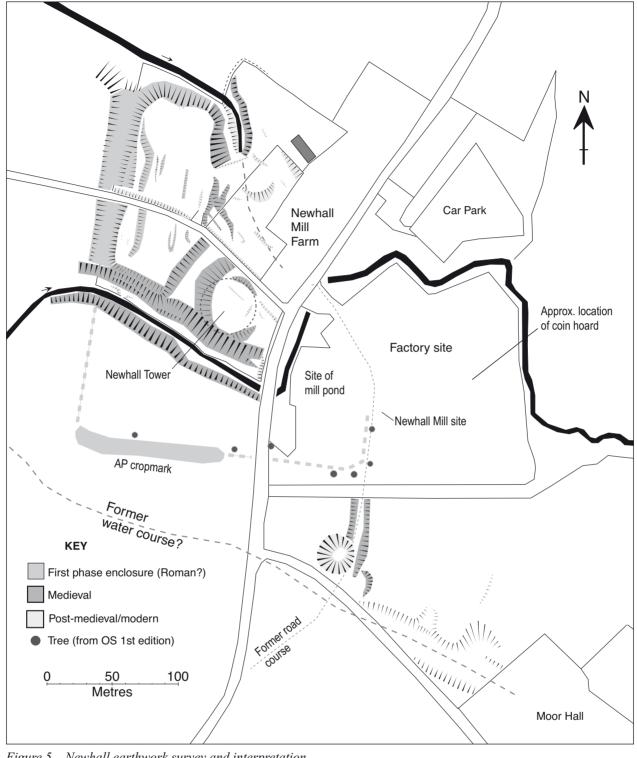


Figure 5 Newhall earthwork survey and interpretation

was shifted westwards over the former mill pool site in order to remove the sharp bend that had previously been necessitated by the crossing of the mill pool dam.

The principal alterations to the survey area during the 20th century have been the gradual redevelopment of the northern stream course as a covered culvert and the levelling of the castle mound in 2007. The channelling of the stream course as a culvert, principally during the latter half of the 20th century, has had a significant impact on the area west of Newhall Mill Farm. Although there

may be traces of earlier features within this area it can largely assumed that the remains in this area relate to landscaping of the ground surface during this period of activity. The former Newhall Mill site was redeveloped as a dairy in the mid-20th century during which time a large medieval coin hoard was identified and partially recorded, the implications of which will be discussed below. It was subsequently converted to an industrial bakery in the late 20th century whose continual expansion has encroached extensively over the site, presumably with a negative impact on sub-surface deposits.

The levelling of the Newhall Tower mound itself is a regrettable event (Fig. 5). Following the closure of the former farmstead of Newhall Mill Farm one principal farm building was converted to residential use and a number of others demolished to the north. The former farmhouse was sold, as was the field to the south containing the mound, with the latter being purchased by a developer who levelled the mound (Michael-John Parkin Pers. comm.). The mound appears to have been bulldozed from west to east, infilling what remained of the moated area to the east and creating a level area between the former mound site and the A530. Scarps were recorded on the mound site, apparently relating to this event. It is possible that deep archaeological deposits within the mound site itself may have survived, as would the evidence from the moats to both the east and west. Road widening of the A530 road between 2006 and 2009 has also caused the removal of several masonry fragments including two apparent pillar bases that formerly stood on the kerbside east of Newhall Mill Farm (John Parkin Pers. comm.).

Discussion

It has been argued above in the analysis of the earthwork survey that the wide ditch section on the west side of the site may represent one of the earliest features recorded, whose interpretation can be taken forward in combination with other sources of evidence (Fig. 5). Previously published aerial photographs appear to show a section of a linear feature as a cropmark in the arable field south of this section of the survey area which was originally interpreted as part of the outer circuit of Newhall Tower, though this conjecture is now challenged by the evidence of the more detailed earthwork survey (Fradley 2005, 93-7). This cropmark runs on the same alignment as the E–W section of ditch at the northern end of the survey area, and its western end begins to curve northwards at the exact point that it would need to turn to continue north and join the surviving earthwork section of ditch. The line of the cropmark can be seen continuing on the 1st edition 25 inch Ordnance Survey map as a number of surviving trees, which themselves are the remnants of a former field boundary still extant on the earlier Tithe map of 1842 (NA: IR 30/5/285; Fig. 3). At the eastern end of this line a turn further northwards is suggested by the route of the former medieval road, indicating that the road may have followed the line of this earlier feature. The north-eastern section of the enclosure cannot be reconstructed on the basis of the present evidence having been heavily encroached upon by subsequent development, although given the regularity of the monument it can be proposed with some confidence.

What this appears to indicate is the course of four sides of a large rectangular enclosure defined at the very least by a wide ditch, measuring roughly 270m by 220m. However, it is accepted that another reading of the evidence might suggest that the cropmark to the south is an unrelated feature, and that the surviving earthwork ditch always turned eastwards on being joined by the two water courses to the north and south. These latter features may have been deepened subsequently as part of drainage works, hence giving the impression that they are later features cutting into the earlier earthwork. It would appear however that the two water courses that currently run through the survey area are man-made diversions. At what point they were diverted is currently unknown and possibly a key to understanding the site; previously the site stood at the confluence of two stream courses that ran to the north and south before joining east of the site. Analysis of aerial photographs shows subtle traces of a former water course to the south of the large enclosure, and the broad earthwork of this course was recorded in the south-eastern section of the survey area. There is less tangible evidence for the former route of the water course to the north, and an original course may be expected further northwards. The present steams converge immediately east of the A530 road and continue eastwards as a watercourse known as the 'Salesbrook'.

One obvious reading of such a large regular feature could be that it represents the remains of a Roman military fort. Relating this interpretation directly to the earthwork evidence is not entirely conclusive. Overall the form of the enclosure is highly suggestive, but the circuit is not complete and questions can be raised over why it has survived as sections of earthwork, cropmarks and post-medieval field boundaries. It is possible that the earthwork section of ditch survives because it was reused within the medieval Newhall Tower complex; the surviving ditch is significantly wider than other local examples of Roman forts and may have been widened in the medieval period. However, the size of the conjectured fort has an interesting parallel at Rhyn Park in Shropshire on the Welsh border near Chirk where a second phase of fort of the late 1st century which could form part of a contemporary chain of forts measures 224m by at least 244m, its eastern arm having been lost to erosion. Set within a wider landscape context the presence of a fort at this location would appear to be linked to its position on the midpoint of a communication route between the fort and small town of Whitchurch (Mediolanum) and the contemporary salt production centre at Nantwich for which there is a growing body of evidence for large scale production and associated settlement (Anon 2002, 62; Reid 2004; Jones and Webster 1968). The last two sites are positioned 15km apart with Newhall set equidistant between them, which could lead to speculation of a previously unrealised chain of military sites if we were to presume that an early fort site at Nantwich is yet to be identified. The Newhall site could equally represent some form of practice camp, although ultimately this area falls beyond the scope of the present report.

The possible identification of the Roman fort has had a direct impact on the interpretation of Newhall Tower which now appears to have been a far smaller complex than previously asserted. Interestingly, while the medieval castle was erected in the centre of the putative redundant Roman fort, it appears that only a small element of the fort's defensive circuit may have been utilised, so that while the site itself had retained some importance as a central place the defences of the fort itself had become largely irrelevant. Instead two water courses that previously ran to the north and south of the fort were diverted, although not necessarily contemporaneously, in order to feed a large moat in the centre of the site. This diversion represented a massive economic investment which would have undoubtedly had a mixed impact on hydrology and settlement further east as these water courses fed on towards the River Weaver. It is not clear if both streams were diverted contemporaneously, and one may potentially have been a later post-medieval addition designed to increase the capacity of Newhall Mill. The form of both cuttings has also seemingly been altered and deepened significantly, particularly in the later 19th century when the mill pool and moats were drained.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the large body of water retained on the east side of the moat functioning as a mill pool was constructed at the same time as Newhall Tower itself, although a mill is recorded from the 14th century. The aesthetic use of large bodies of water adjacent to high-status sites such as castles is an increasingly identifiable phenomenon, and so it may well be a primary feature of the medieval site (Johnson 2002, 19-54). The castle itself appears to have consisted of a large central round tower surrounded on at least three sides by a moat which was entered from the north. An earlier road may also have been diverted at the time of the castle's construction to cut obliquely through the former fort site, bringing it close to Newhall Tower itself and crossing at the head of the mill pool along a bridge over the mill dam. This may have been an intentional device designed to draw travellers to the very doors of Newhall Tower before admitting privileged visitors or turning away those less esteemed. A similar process of redirecting an earlier road to enhance the spectacle of a castle has also been tentatively identified as part of ongoing fieldwork at Wallingford (Oxon.). Equally, movement around the mill pool and across the mill dam would have provided a dramatic view of the castle tower, at times imposingly reflected in the large body of water, although this would have paled in comparison to the mere-side setting of nearby Combermere Abbey whose proximity will be discussed below.

The form of the mound of Newhall Tower could imply a mid- or later 12th century date. Its large circular form is highly suggestive of a cylindrical tower or donjon, a form of building evident in the later 12th century and early 13th century (Brown 1954, 52-4). Early forms of cylindrical tower may have been constructed as early as the mid-12th century, for instance New Buckenham in Norfolk which appears to have been built soon after 1138 (Brown 1984, 45). In the past large quantities of masonry had been recovered from the stream course south of the mound during land management activities (John Parkin Pers. comm.). It is not clear if any form of outer enclosure existed on the northern side of the tower, and there is no earthwork or topographical evidence to suggest such an enclosure. What earthworks have been recorded in this area appear to relate to the building of a culvert and infilling of the former stream area in the 19th and 20th centuries. Documentary evidence records that a chapel dedicated to St. James, linked to the hospital of St. Lawrence in Nantwich and the Malbank family who held the original barony of Nantwich, is recorded and is likely to have been housed in this area (VCH 1980, 186). It is possible that if the ditch on the west side of the site was widened during the medieval period it may have formed a second, more secluded court of the Newhall Tower complex.

Landscape and Historical Analysis

It has been largely assumed that Newhall Tower was a 13th-century construction of the Audley family who were the landowners at the time it was first documented in 1275. The Audley family originated in Staffordshire with a dynasty that can be traced back to a minor King's thegn of the pre-Conquest period, but had succeeded in rising to prominence once again during the 12th century (Thomas 2003, 124-5, 136). A more detailed analysis of the evidence for Newhall could suggest a significantly earlier date, placing its construction in the context of major developments in the 12th-century landscape and prior to its acquisition by the Audley family. In 1133 Combermere Abbey, a Norman Savignac house which later merged with the Cistercian order in 1147 (Poulle 1994, 159), was established by the Malbank barons of Nantwich 2km south-west of the Newhall Tower site, an act which appears to represent a major element in the recolonisation of this area. Interestingly a surviving copy of the grant states that the monks would have access to all the woods held by the Malbank family with the exception of the Forest of Coole Hill (later the site of Newhall Little Park, one of two medieval parks linked to Newhall Tower), suggesting the area was already utilised in this earlier period as a hunting landscape by the latter family (CRO: D4059/15). The manor of Newhall may have been established at the same time by the Malbank family, being carved from the edges of the large manors of Aston, Acton and Audlem (VCH 1987, 354).

This provides an interesting context for the establishment of Newhall following the establishment of Combermere Abbey, a reforming house that would have required physical seclusion from the outside world. The foundation of the monastery represented a major investment for the relatively minor baronage of Nantwich who may in contrast have felt the need for a visible reward for their spiritual investment. In this situation the construction of a tower at Newhall may have allowed the Malbank family a position from which they could maintain a visual link with their new secluded house, albeit at a significant distance, as it slowly emerged from the 'wilderness' of its surrounding mere. It has been argued that where two parks exist the smaller may have performed a more aesthetic role (Creighton 2009, 135–9), although it is not clear if this is the case at Newhall.

The Audley family were less substantial benefactors of Combermere Abbey than their predecessors. They directed their attentions to the establishment of a daughter house of Combermere at Hulton Abbey in Staffordshire around 1218–9 (Klemperer 2004, 4). There is therefore a less convincing context for their establishment of Newhall Tower in this later period, although it was maintained as the centre of their Cheshire holdings and utilised for its hunting resources. Interestingly, documentation from 1363 refers to Newhall alongside the Audley estates centred on Redcastle in Shropshire and their principal residence at Heleigh in Staffordshire in which only the latter two sites are recorded as castles (NA C143/344/7; Klepmerer 2004, 197). In other late 13th-century documentation, however, tenancy agreements exist in which military service was to be provided at Newhall Tower (Ormerod 1819, 203). It does appear that in contemporary eyes Newhall Tower was considered distinct from other castle sites, although caution should be applied in reading too much into the sparse surviving documentation.

The lifespan of Newhall Tower does not appear to have continued beyond the 14th century. The smaller eastern deer park was mortgaged by James de Audley in 1358 although it was later regained, suggesting that its relevance as a hunting location was diminishing (Anon 1933, 18). Newhall Tower does not occur again in the historical record after this date until Leland records that only the moats remained in the 16th century, and again a little later in 1586 when local jurors identified the former 'Tower Court' site as then being marked by a clump of trees (CRO: D4059/24). The original Audley line died out in 1385 and was succeeded by the Touchet family with a smaller portion descending to the Fitzwarin Earls of Bath; although the Audley title was retained the abandonment of Newhall Tower itself may be linked to this dynastic change and the split in the manor holdings (Wedgewood 1906). Manorial accounts dating to 1387-8 record payments to carpenters and labourers for the reconstruction of the manor house, including its outer enclosure and dilapidated gatehouse, as well as the pigeon house and elements of Newhall Mill, clearly demonstrating that the new Touchet line had a direct role in the management of its Newhall holdings (CRO: D4059/15). It is also clear that new work related to timber structures with no mention of Newhall Tower itself, while in general the manorial accounts give a picture of Newhall as a subsidiary site to Heleigh Castle where much of Newhall's produce was sent, including fish and swans in expectation of a visit to Heleigh by Richard II (CRO: CR72/9; D4059/15).

In the period 1387-8 huntsmen also visited Newhall three times from Heleigh to make use of the parks, and horses and cereals were occasionally imported from the Audley's centre at Redcastle in Shropshire. It appears therefore that Newhall Tower was replaced in the late 14th century by a timber-built complex, although this was enclosed in some form and retained a number of earlier structures including the gatehouse. It is also possible that some of these structures may have occupied the circular mound where Newhall Tower had formerly stood. The moat surrounding the mound survived into the 19th century as is made clear by the tithe map (Fig. 3) at a time when the adjacent watermill was still in service. The tithe map also makes numerous references to windmills in the vicinity of the mound, implying that it may have been used or misinterpreted as a windmill mound at a later date. The size of the mound and its surrounding moat make it improbable that the circular mound could have originated as windmill mound rather the Newhall Tower site as argued above. Later court rolls indicate that in time the manor house was abandoned and the manorial court moved to the nearby Newhall Cross inn which had apparently been extant since at least the 14th century (CRO: D4059/15). The chapel of St. James survived into the 16th century before its abandonment alongside the Cistercian house of Combermere during the Dissolution (VCH 1980, 186). Newhall itself came into the hands of the Cotton family based at the former abbey site at Combermere in the early 17th century, and would remain in their hands into the 19th century.

The Newhall Coin Hoard

One final element of the medieval settlement that warrants discussion in the light of the survey results is the large late 12th-century coin hoard recovered east of the survey area. In 1939 during the development work at the Newhall Mill site during its conversion to a dairy, a large coin hoard was discovered in what was identified as the former mill race (Thompson 1960). The coins were reported to have been contained in a wooden box which rapidly disintegrated following its exposure and only a hand-full were apparently retained of an approximated 1,000–2,000 coins with the majority left on site. The finds only came to public light and declared Treasure Trove in the 1959, with analysis of the 97 retained suggesting a deposition date in the mid-1190s with coins derived from a range of mints. It is difficult to be certain of any of the 'facts' purporting to this hoard including their context. Did the hoard really come from the mill race? It would after all continue in service for nearly 800 years after the supposed deposition date.

Redevelopment of part of the site in 1983 without archaeological monitoring and only a limited metal detector survey did not result in any further findings although did identify the brick-lined 19th century conduit, with the hoard generally believed to lie in the western part of the site beneath a store room (CRO: D7158). Despite these issues the find of this hoard is highly suggestive of an important conflict or event in this period, which tantalisingly occur at a date at which we know that the male line of the Malbank dynasty was failing and its lands had come to the hands of the three surviving daughters of the last baron. It also provides further suggestive evidence that the Newhall site had already been developed as a noble residence. How and why such a sizeable hoard derived from such a wide geographical area came to be deposited on the edge of the Newhall Tower complex must for now remain a point of speculation.

Conclusion

The detailed earthwork survey of the Newhall Tower site has been instrumental in developing a new narrative of medieval settlement development in an area of southern Cheshire that has received little sustained research of its medieval landscape. It is regrettable that a key element of the site has been intentionally demolished at such a recent date. Despite these circumstances the survey has provided an effective benchmark and possible model for the settlement's development, including an interesting relationship between an early Savignac abbey and its patrons. There is substantial scope for future research to build on this work, for example to characterise settlement history in the vicinity of the castle, particularly around Newhall Mill Farm as the possible focus of the later medieval manorial centre.

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Abbreviations

CRO: Cheshire Records Office, Chester.

NA: The National Archive, Kew.

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