

ORIGINS OF THE NORMAN ‘NEW TOWN’ OF BERKHAMSTED, HERTFORDSHIRE

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Introduction

This report discusses recent work on Berkhamsted (Hertfordshire), combining archaeological and documentary evidence. It suggests that the Norman Conquest may have had a more profound impact both on the origins and morphology of this town than has been previously been recognised. Documentary evidence dating to the thirteenth century makes reference to a ‘great ditch’, possibly representing the town’s medieval urban defences, which have since vanished completely from the topography of the town. Recent archaeological investigations have confirmed the existence of such a ditch, whilst further documentary analysis allows for a reconstruction of the medieval townscape, whose origins owe much to the impact of the Norman Conquest.

Topographical, archaeological and historical background

Berkhamsted today is a modest sized town which, combined with Northchurch, has a population of *c.* 20,000. It lies approximately 40km north-west of London (Fig. 1). It is situated within the Bulbourne valley, whose chalk stream cuts through the Chiltern Hills. The river flows on a north-west south-east axis from Tring Station (NGR SP951122) to its confluence with the River Gade (NGR TL056057), a distance of approximately 13km. The river has been considerably modified in terms of its size and morphology over the course of the last 500 years.

The antecedents of the present settlement of Berkhamsted have never been satisfactorily explained. The earliest settlement in the immediate area is also in the Bulbourne valley, at a site called Cow Roast (NGR SP957103) some 4km north-west of the present town. This dates from the late Iron Age to the late fourth century AD. Evidence consists of a relatively dense concentration of occupation, estimated to be between 20–30ha in extent and extending along a length in excess of 1km along Akeman Street, the old Roman road from Cirencester to London, which has been preserved in Berkhamsted’s present-day townscape as the High Street. It includes numerous small enclosures, trench-built structures, pits, gullies, wells, and evidence for iron ore smelting (HER 4584; 1874). The site has been previously described but there is as yet no formal publication of the excavations undertaken by the local archaeological society in the early 1970s (Holland 1976; Zeepvat 1997; Thompson 2002; Hunt 2004; Harrison

2015). Closer to Berkhamsted, at Dellfield (NGR SP984088) four late Iron Age shaft furnaces were found together with ditches and four cremation burials, which suggests the presence of a settlement in the vicinity (HER 4904; Thompson and Holland 1977, 137–148).

Within the Bulbourne valley, there are two Romano-British villas, one at Northchurch, 300m north-west of St Mary’s Church at NGR SP973093 and the second at Boxmoor (NGR TL038057), a distance of 8km to the south-east (HER 072; 1859; Neal 1977, 3–135). There is also a Roman building close to the castle at NGR TL995086 (HER 2716; Page 1908, 163). On the plateau above the valley there is a third probable villa on Berkhamsted Common (NGR TL004095; HER 1337). Other settlement sites are found at Dudswell (NGR TL966095;) and Gossoms End (NGR TL995083; (HER 1334; 1860; 4860; 6421; Holland 1978, 28–29; 1982, 39–40). More recently, a shallow ditch on the Manor Street site in Berkhamsted was found that contained Roman sherds, suggesting the proximity of another Romano-British site (Cuthbert 2011). Nevertheless, none of this evidence is indicative of a Roman urban predecessor to the present-day town. After the end of the Roman period, there is a hiatus of more than four centuries in the archaeological narrative of settlement in the Bulbourne valley.

A few hand-made early to middle Anglo-Saxon (fifth- to sixth-century) sherds have been found on the west side of Chesham Road in Berkhamstead, south of the High Street (Whittingham 2000, 32). In archaeological terms this is quite sparse, although a single Anglo-Saxon rim from the rear of the Highwayman pub on the south side of the High Street (no. 262) was found in October 2010 (Whittingham *pers. comm*), which suggests the possibility that other evidence for the pre-Conquest period might yet await discovery.

Berkhamsted is first recorded as a place-name in the late tenth century, but by then it was clearly a town of considerable importance: it was here that the principal Anglo-Saxon leaders and Bishop Ealdred submitted to William of Normandy and offered him the crown in AD 1066 (Garmonsway 1954, 200; Gover *et al.* 1970, 27). At this time Berkhamsted was held by Robert, Count of Mortain, one of the most powerful men in England. He was the younger brother of Odo, bishop of Bayeux and half-brother of William the Conqueror, who raised him to Earl of Cornwall (Golding 1990, 119; Tillyard 2002, 40; Rex 2011, 140). It is possible that a motte-and-bailey castle was constructed almost immediately – which would be in accord with the usual Norman practice of constructing a rapidly built military installation/strong point in strategic and potentially vulnerable parts of the country – although no references to the castle survive

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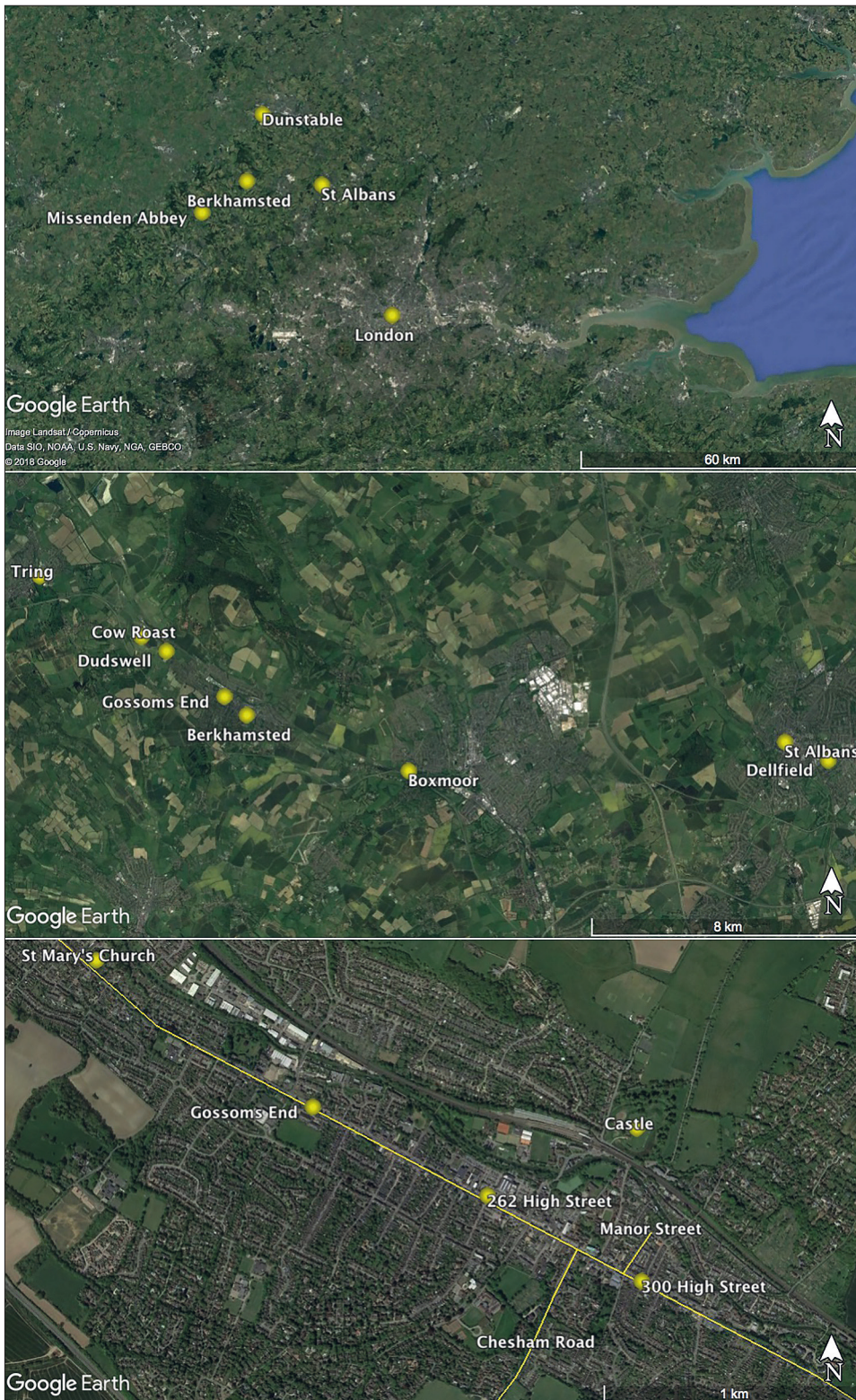


Figure 1 Location of Berkhamsted and sites mentioned in the text.

that predate the early twelfth century (Davis 1976, 110–111; Remfry 1998, 9; Slater 2004, 30).

The motte that survives today is c. 55m at its base and c. 14m high (Peers 1948), and is probably an enlarged version of the original mound (Fig. 2). It was built on previously unoccupied ground on the north side of the Bulbourne valley, at the junction of a dry valley close to five natural springs, beside the road from Dunstable, some 600m north of Akeman Street. The location of

the castle appears to have been chosen for strategic reasons, away from existing settlement. The pre-existing administrative centre of Berkhamsted lay adjacent to the minster church of St Mary, which was situated 2.2km further west (Fig. 3).

In the twelfth century, Berkhamsted castle came into royal hands, which it remained until the sixteenth. To this period belongs one of the more interesting charters of Missenden Abbey relating to Berkhamsted, which



Figure 2 Berkhamsted motte taken on 2 February 2014, looking north. Photograph by J.R. Hunn.

was first noted over thirty years ago (Doggett and Hunn 1985, 27). This referred to a grant made in c. AD 1225 by Richard son of Symon to the abbey of a tenement and rent which lay between the land held by Robert Runifar and Elueneuweie (Elvyneway, now Chesham Road) and a *magnum fossatum* ('great ditch') (Jenkins 1955, 47, no. 334).³ This intriguing reference raised the possibility that Berkhamsted, like for example St Albans (where an irregular defensive circuit is known to have existed from at least AD 1142) may have been surrounded by a 'great ditch' (Hunn 1981; Saunders and Havercroft 1978, 33–39). The remainder of this brief paper explores this notion in more detail.

Recent archaeological discoveries

There is no other mention of a 'great ditch' in documentary sources, nor any discernible evidence surviving in the town's topography. There the matter remained until September 2010 when a 0.29ha area was re-developed for housing in the centre of present-day Berkhamsted (Fig. 4).

Of this development area 0.11ha was excavated by ASC Ltd (Cuthbert 2011; OASIS Archaeol 2–71501; HER EHT 6921). Apart from a late Bronze Age paleo-

channel and Romano-British ditch, the majority of the archaeology consisted of a variety of domestic and industrial features dating to the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries. Pre-dating this activity was a substantial ditch [187] that crossed the site on a NNE–SSW axis of which approximately 13m was exposed in the excavation (Fig. 5). If due allowance is made for the reduction of ground level in the post-medieval and later periods, then its original width would have been c. 7m and its depth about 2m, possibly more.

Two segments were excavated across the ditch (nos 105 and 163, Figs 6–7). Of the four sections (in the two segments), three – both E–W sections in segment 163 and the north facing segment of no. 105 – were drawn and recorded, identifying numerous fills and recuts. These will be briefly described and illustrated in sequence from north to south.

Section 060 (Segment 163) is the northernmost section in segment 163 and faces southwards (Figs 5–6). Here the recorded ditch was 6.5m wide (WNW–ESE) and 1.5m deep (below the reduced ground level). Pottery from this section dated to between the mid-twelfth and mid-fifteenth centuries.

Section 036 (same as machine-dug section 059 at less than 1m distance; Segment 163) was located south of Section 060 (Figs 5–6). Here the ditch was narrower at c. 5.4m, but still 1.5m deep (below reduced ground level). In section 059, four re-cuts were identified. The lower

³ A second version of this grant, of broadly similar date, occurs further on in the cartulary (no. 360).

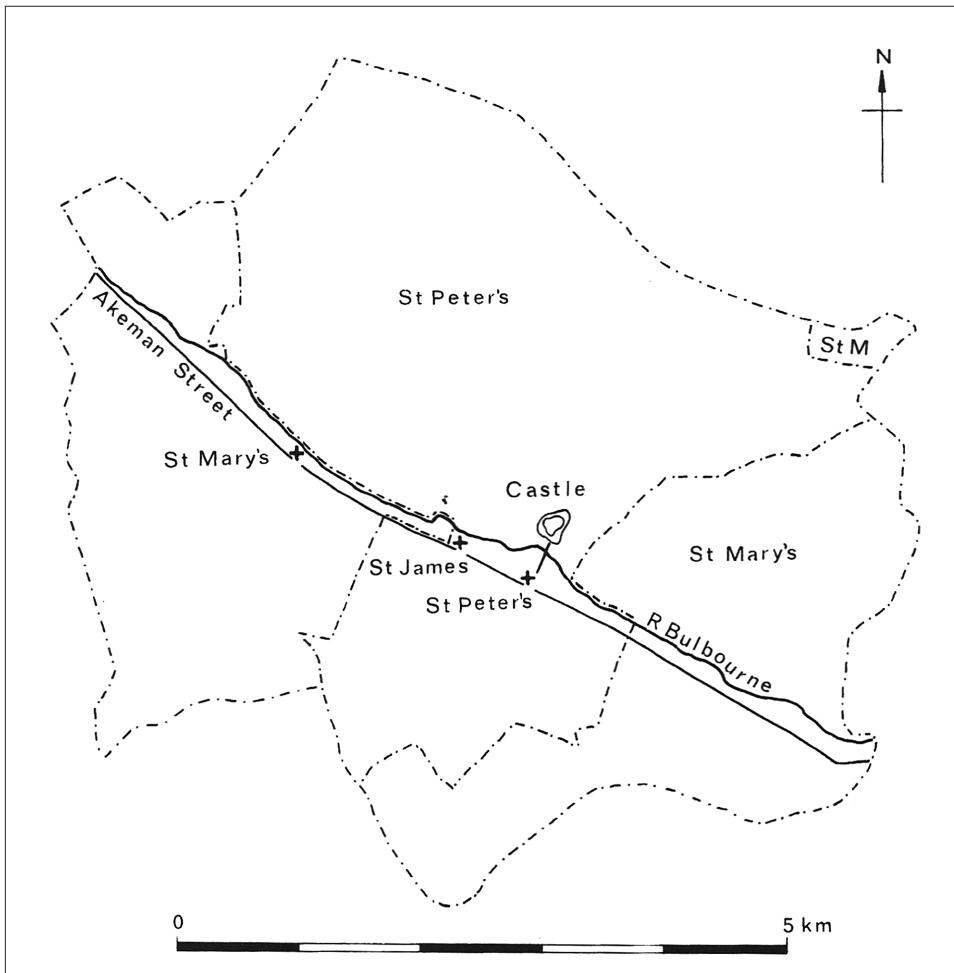


Figure 3 The later parochial boundaries of Berkhamsted and churches mentioned in the text. Figure by J.R. Hunn.

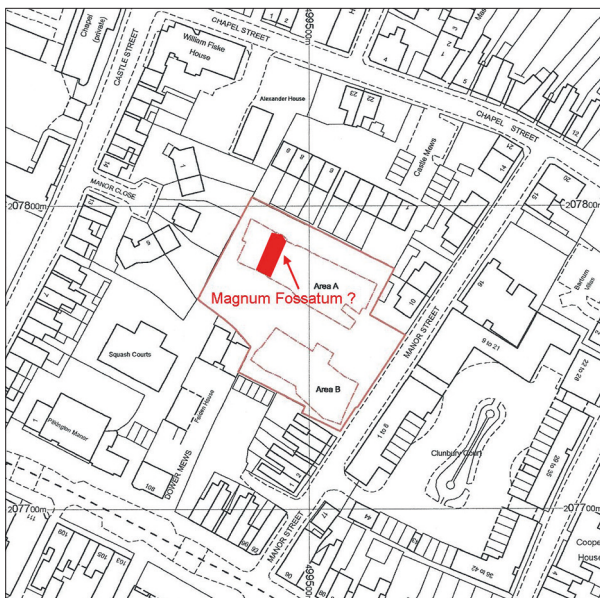


Figure 4 Location of the Manor St excavation. © Ordnance Survey maps reproduced with the sanction of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Icknield Archaeology Ltd licence number: 100055496. Figure by J.R. Hunn, after Cuthbert 2011.

fills contained no finds/pottery. All other fills except the upper fill (72) contained varying quantities of pottery dating to between c. 1140 and 1350. The upper fill (72) = (155) contained similar pottery as well as a number of fragments of roof tile, with one sherd dating to between 1600 and 1650 (Whittingham 2011). An environmental sample was taken from the lower fills (labelled <16> in Section drawing 059 in Fig. 6), which yielded fragments of cattle bone, charred grain, a small bird, a toad/frog and fish bones, as well as a single sherd that possibly pre-dated AD 1140.

Section 044 (Segment 105) was situated just over 3m to the south of sections 036 = 059; Section 062 was a result of the widening and deepening of Section 044 (Figs 5, 7). Here the ditch was more than 6m wide and 1.7m deep and revealed at least two, possibly five re-cuts. Section 062 was the most illuminating of those recorded across the ditch. The primary fill (181) consisted of a grey-green, soft silt that contained organic remains but no datable artefacts. Subsequent fills contained similar pottery to that found in Segment 163, dating to between c. 1140 and 1350. Environmental samples taken from waterlogged fills in the second re-cut [184] contained evidence of seeds that were indicative of disturbed/waste ground, hedgerow/woodland and wetland plants as well as animal bones (cattle, sheep/goat, hare, frog/toad) and molluscs (Whittingham 2011).

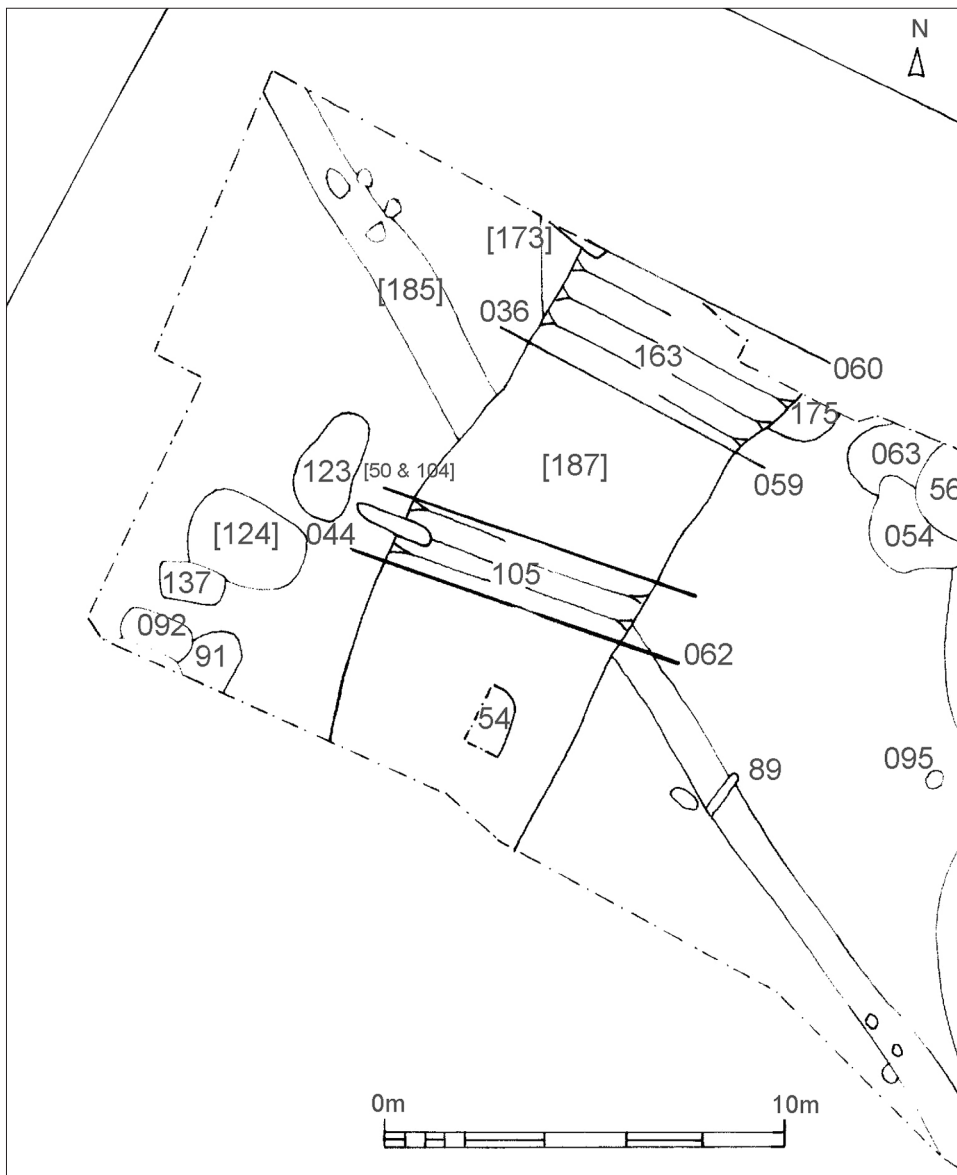


Figure 5 Plan of excavated section of ditch [187]. Figure by J.R. Hunn.

It is a matter of regret that only a short section of the ditch was revealed (less than 13m), but it seems to have been orientated on a NNE–SSW axis (Figs 4–5). If due account is taken of the truncation of the upper levels of the ditch (between 0.6 and 0.8m), then a width of over 7m and depth in excess of 2m is quite feasible. The base of segment 105 was recorded at 100.17m AOD. The bottom of the stream bed of the river Bulbourne near the bridge in Bridge Street was 99.75m. The level of the river Bulbourne varies depending on the season and the amount of precipitation, so a depth of between 0.2 and 0.6m would explain why waterlogged deposits were found in the ditch. Besides, it is likely that water levels in the medieval period would have been much higher, if only to have driven the five water mills that are known to have existed at that time.

Evidence for slumping fills on the west side of the ditch may indicate that the upcast – presumably a bank – was located on that side (Cuthbert 2011, 14). Whether the bank was of ‘dump form’ or comprised some sort of timber-faced structure is uncertain.

A radiocarbon sample was taken from primary fill (181) in Section 044, which contained organic deposits in a matrix of pale grey-green silt. This gave an uncalibrated date of 919 ± 20 (SUERC 41862 – GU28422), and a calibrated date range of AD 1034–1165 at an accuracy of 95% (Rackham *pers. comm.*). This suggests that a late eleventh-century date for the construction of the ditch is possible, which would fit with the earliest plausible date for the pottery from the overlying fills, which was dated to the mid-twelfth to mid-fourteenth centuries.

When the ditch went out of use is equally difficult to ascertain. There is no mention of this feature in the mid-fourteenth-century manorial ‘extenta’ (NA: SC11 271), but that does not mean it no longer existed as a visible boundary feature. The most recent find from the upper fills dated to the seventeenth century. Perhaps more significant, however, is a series of domestic pits – [91], [92], [124], [123], [50] and [104] – containing pottery dating to the early fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, which seem to cut the area where the bank would have been to the west of the ditch (Fig. 5).

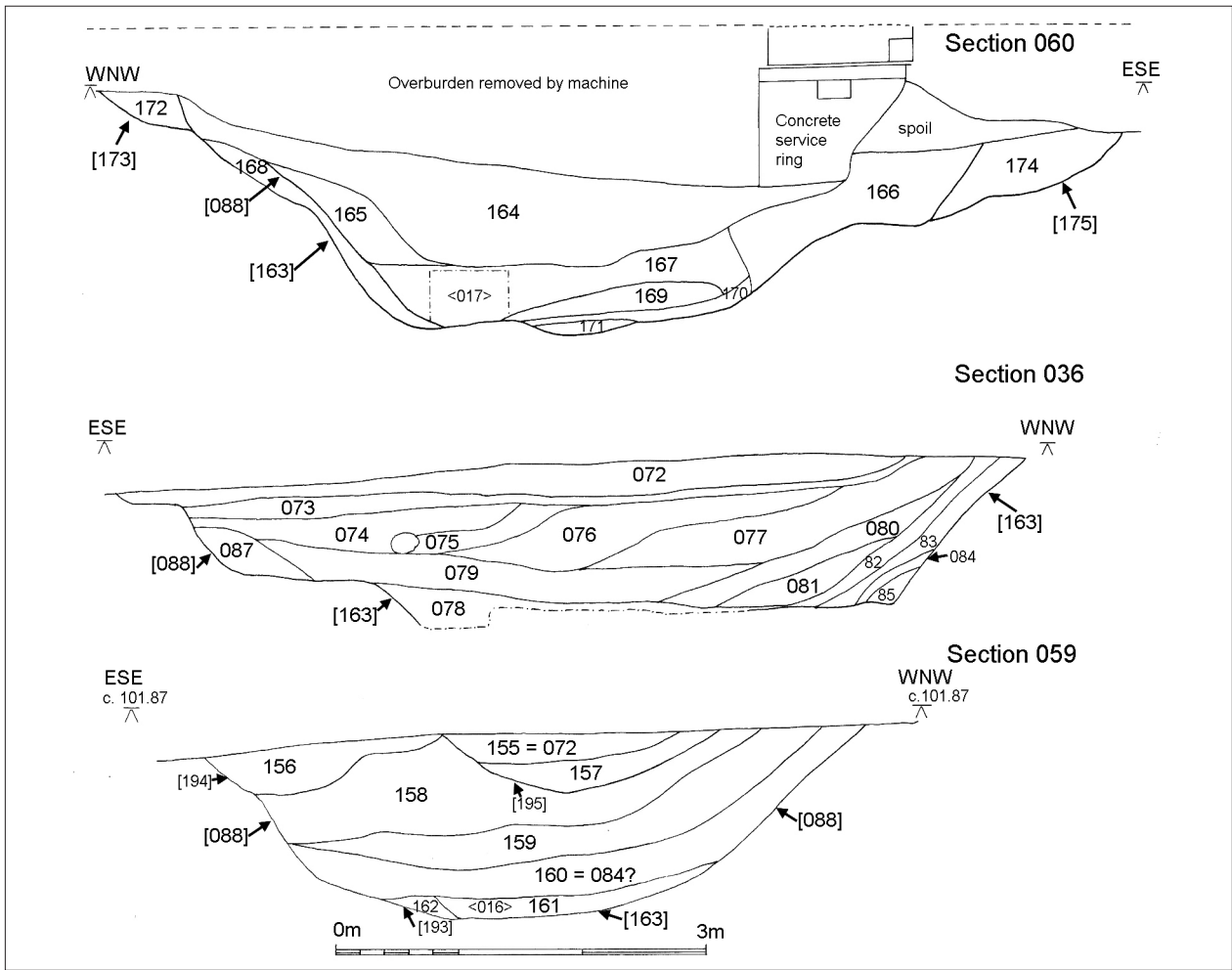


Figure 6 Section drawings across Segment 163 of the 'great ditch'. Figure by J.R. Hunn.

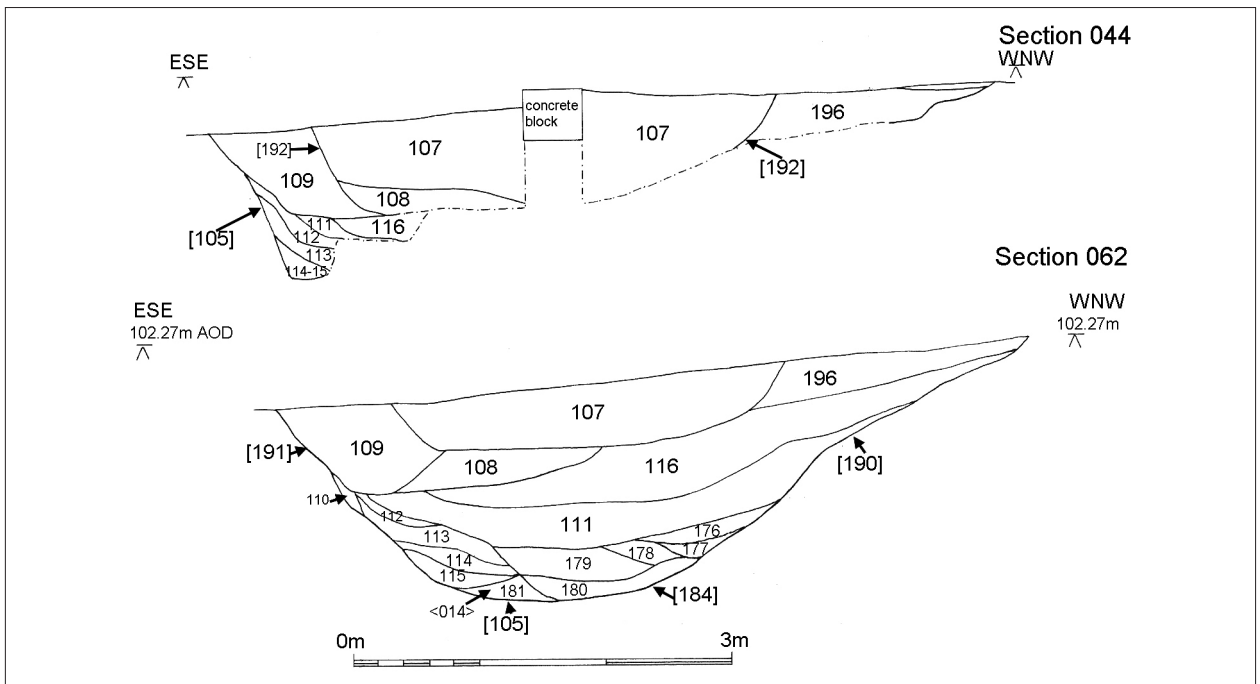


Figure 7 Section drawings across Segment 105 of the 'great ditch'. Figure by J.R. Hunn.

Discussion: the medieval urban defences of Berkhamsted

The discovery of a large ditch to the south of the High Street is potentially critical to a proper understanding of the development of the early town. That it might relate to the castle in the form of an outer bailey was first suggested by the project officer responsible for the excavations, Martin Cuthbert, but at the time it was met by a degree of scepticism. However, subsequent documentary research by the authors has reinforced the potential validity of this observation and tentatively located the course of the ditch, which is what the discussion will turn to now.

Close rereading of another charter in the Missenden cartulary, dated to *c.* 1200–1229, also suggests that the castle had an outer bailey which extended much further to the south. The entry reads:

Gilbert de Melchesham grants Hosmundo clerico and heirs and homage for ½ mark of silver payment for this messuage ‘in baillio castelli de Berkhamstede’ that Walburtus held, namely that lying between the land of Helueredi Hewe and land of Milonis Coci with all its appurtenances (Jenkins 1955, 48, no. 335).

In yet another charter, dated to *c.* 1225, it would seem that the messuage referred to lay in Castle Street, located to the south of the surviving motte and to the west of the excavated ditch (Fig. 4) (Jenkins 1955, 49, no. 337).

A closer look at the historic parish boundaries sheds further light on the situation. Fig. 3 depicts the parochial boundaries of the manorial territory of Berkhamsted. The situation was unique – at least for Hertfordshire – in that the territory was sub-divided into two distinct parochial areas, with the (later) parish of St Peter separating the parish of Berkhamsted St Mary – the minster church – into eastern and western portions. The authors have argued elsewhere that this sub-division may already have occurred in the pre-Conquest period (Doggett and Hunn 1985, 23).

Of particular note is a thin rectangular projection going eastwards into St Peter’s parish from the western portion of St Mary’s Berkhamsted parish, bounded on its south side by Akeman Street and on its north side by the river Bulbourne, measuring no more than *c.* 490m in length and between *c.* 100–200m wide. Its eastern end was located only *c.* 200m from the secondary church of St. James.

The question is, what accounts for this clearly defined shape and exclusion from the adjacent parish of St. Peter? It was clearly designed to include something of significance within St Mary’s parish. It is conceivable that it may have been located at the epicentre of a late Anglo-Saxon settlement cluster. If this were so, it is possible that the projected shape of the boundary may have been due to the need to include existing dwellings within its territory for fiscal and/or congregational purposes. This is a more likely explanation for this unusual tongue-shaped protrusion than, for example, the inclusion of additional tracts of agricultural land, and strongly suggests an early settlement core existed within this area.

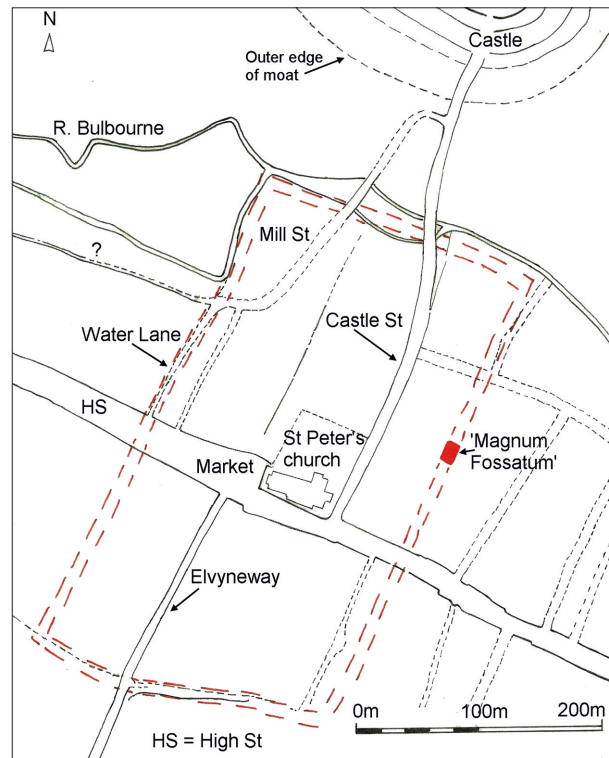


Figure 8 Possible course and extent of ‘great ditch’. Figure by J.R. Hunn.

That a later medieval settlement core also existed in this area is supported by recent work by Hunn on a manorial ‘extenta’ dated to *c.* 1357 (NA: SC 11 271), which has placed the location of more than half of the fourteenth-century burgesses’ holdings – and possibly all of them – in the Castle Street area. At this time, the principal concentration lay to the south of the castle between Castle Street and Frogmore lane/Benethenstre (now Mill Street) (Fig. 8). There were other dwellings in the vicinity of the churchyard of St James, and some along Elvyneway (now Chesham Road) (Hunn in prep.). Of particular interest as well is a reference to a croft called ‘Oldeburgh’ beside the churchyard of St James in the mid-fourteenth century (NA: SC11 271: 5a/1/8). This would seem to suggest an earlier, possibly pre-Norman settlement location, and therefore possibly supports the conclusion based on the analysis of the parish boundaries discussed above.

If we can assume that a settlement core existed in this area from the pre-Conquest period (when the parish of St Peter was probably created) to the fourteenth century, all situated to the west of the excavated ditch section, it seems likely that this ditch demarcated the boundary of the settlement area. Combining the various sources, it then becomes possible to tentatively reconstruct the shape and size of the ditched area, as shown on Fig. 8.

It is assumed that the excavated ditch, which had a bank on its west side, was a portion of the eastern side of an outer bailey or enclosure associated with the Norman castle. It is likely to have included the eastern extremity of the tongue-shaped protrusion of land between the river Bulborne and Akeman Street (now the High Street), where an early settlement core has been postulated. If St

Peter's church and the market were located centrally, it may have roughly followed the line of Water Lane at its western end. The river Bulbourne may then have formed its northern boundary, in which case it must have been joined to the castle either by a single causeway or by a tongue of land between what is today Mill Street and Castle Street.

If this interpretation is correct, then this outer bailey would have been approximately 400m NNE–SSW by c. 230m WNW–ESE in size, enclosing an area of about 9.2ha.⁴ This would have made this enclosed area two to three times the size of the medieval castle. At least three gateways into the enclosed area (in addition to a crossing to the castle) may have existed: two on Akeman Street/High Street coming from the east and west, and one to the south on the road leading to Chesham. The construction of such an enclosure would have had an important impact on the development of the town, which is what the final section of this report will turn to now, but only further observation and excavation can prove or disprove this proposed interpretation.

The foundation of the town: a proposed model

At the time that William of Normandy was offered the English crown at Berkhamsted in 1066, the settlement probably had several nuclei. This is suggested by an eleventh-century grant by Robert Count of Mortain of the 'churches' of Berkhamsted and the castle chapel (*ecclesias de Berchamstede, et capellam castris*) to the Abbey of Grestein in Normandy. The original document is now lost, but a charter of Richard I survives, confirming the existence of the earlier charter (Caley *et al.* 1830, 1090–1092).

The principal settlement was probably located in the vicinity of St. Mary's Church (as stated above, the minster church) and manor, with a secondary settlement 1.5km WSW in the vicinity of the chapel/church of St James. Here, excavations on the site of the Old Post Office (300 High Street) in 2012–2013 revealed a sequence of burials from the mid-eleventh to the mid-fifteenth centuries (Maher 2014), suggesting this may have been a new foundation in the eleventh century. A tertiary settlement may also have existed in the vicinity of Chesham Road/ Elvyneway (Hunn 2000).

The castle was constructed east of the chapel/church of St James in a location chosen for its strategic advantages, situated at the mouth of a dry valley that adjoined the Bulbourne valley and surrounded by a series of natural springs. This probably occurred during the Conquest period, in accord with the usual Norman practice of constructing rapidly built military installations in strategic and potentially vulnerable parts of the country (Davis 1976, 110–111).

Subsequent to this, the principal driving force in the creation of the 'new town' was Robert, Count of Mortain, who according to Domesday Book already held Berkhamsted in 1066, and still held it in 1086. During this period, the town suffered considerable economic decline: in 1066, it was worth £20, but by 1086 it had apparently declined in value by 20%, to only £16

(Williams and Martin 2003, 378). This marked decline in value after 1066 implies that something had happened to have a negative impact on the financial affairs of the local community, possibly indicating some sort of re-organisation or re-settlement. It is possible that the cutting of the *magnum fossatum* was part of the reason for this; an interesting snippet of information is provided by a reference in Domesday Book to a *fossarius*, often translated as a 'dyke-builder' (though perhaps a more accurate translation might be 'engineer'), who held half a hide of land in 1086 (Morris 1976, section 15.1). Certainly, the reference to the holding of half a hide suggests a permanent presence rather than a transitory one.

A defensive circuit attached to the castle would have provided both security and status for the site of the new church, the new market place and the burgage plots for the principal inhabitants of this new town, in return for which the new burghers would have assisted their seigniorial lord in the fiscal and judicial administration of his new foundation. Although the precise date for this foundation remains unclear, evidence suggests that Robert de Mortain pursued a strong strategic and commercial policy for all his estates in Normandy and England, which also included Pevensey to the east and Cornwall to the west (Golding 1990, 124–143). This, in combination with the evidence discussed here, as well as the possible pre-Conquest date for the foundation of yet another church in Berkhamsted (that of St Peter, whose current form dates back to c. 1200), strongly suggests that the historic core of Berkhamsted owes its origin to a Norman foundation of the late eleventh century. It is hoped that further research will shed more light on this suggestion.

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⁴ If the Mill Street and Castle Street 'tongue' was included then the area might have been as much as 10ha (24ac).

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