

Marches Archaeology

Hopton Castle, Hopton Castle Shropshire

Report on an Archaeological Evaluation

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Archaeological Consultants and Contractors

Marches Archaeology

**Marches House
6 High Street
Clun
Shropshire
SY7 8JB**

Tel:- 01588 640976

Fax:- 01588 640796

e-mail:- archaeology@marches.plus.com

For:-

**Sula Rayska
Hopton Castle Trust**

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**Hopton Castle, Hopton Castle
Shropshire**

NGR: SO 366 779

A report on an archaeological Evaluation

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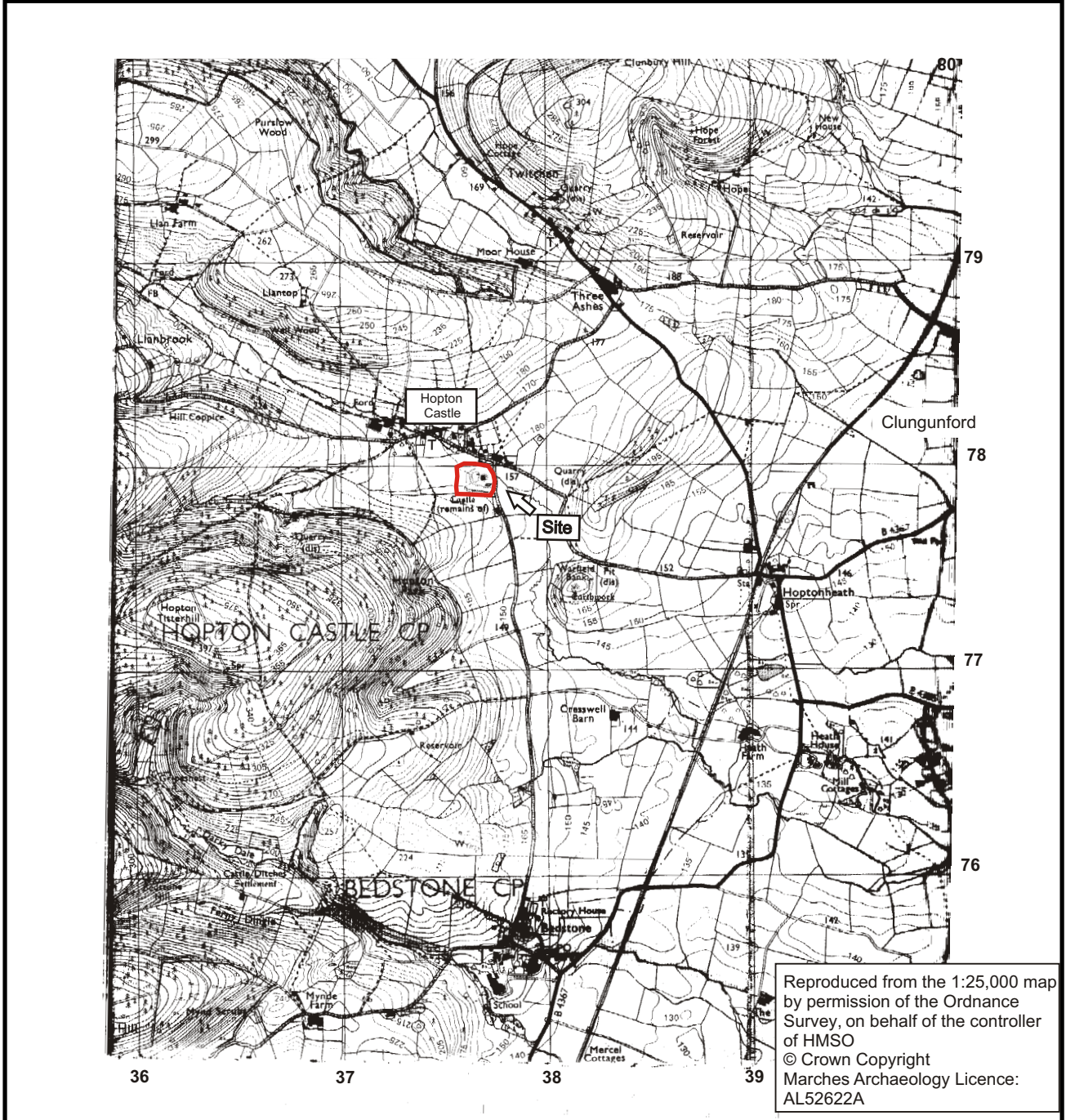
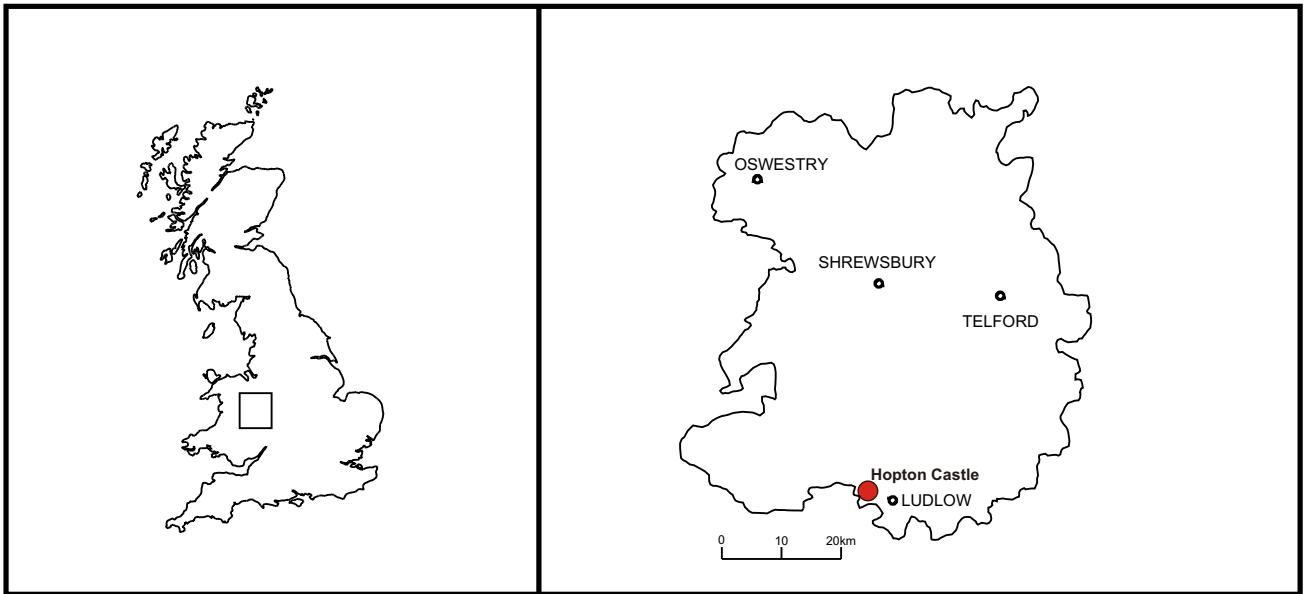


Fig. 1: Location of site

Hopton Castle Shropshire

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Summary

A 4m x 4m trial trench was excavated in the centre of Hopton Castle tower through a deep deposit of collapsed and frost shattered rubble to a maximum depth of 2.1m. At the base of the deposit a mortar floor in very good condition was discovered.

1 Introduction

An application has been made to various bodies for grants to consolidate the remains of the Great Tower at Hopton Castle. The site is situated at NGR: SO 366 779, 10 miles west of Ludlow (Figure 1).

The site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (ref: County Monument 23).

As part of an initial phase to be able to accurately cost the full project limited initial works were commissioned.

Marches Archaeology were commissioned to excavate a trial pit in the centre of the tower.

2 Archaeological and Historical Background

Hopton Castle has a long and somewhat notorious history. Built in the late 11th century by the de Hopton family the original castle comprised a small motte with an inner bailey to the west and a large outer bailey to the south. The insubstantial earthworks were enhanced by wide wet moats. Around 1200 a rectangular keep was built on the mound, and rebuilt in the early 14th century. Mike Salter (1988: 38) considers that elements of the earlier tower still exist such as the 'typically Late Norman corner buttresses' and that all openings appear to be 14th century or later. Current thinking (Richard K Morriss *pers.com*) is that the existing structure dates to the 14th century, built in the style of 12th century castles of this type. The Castle was occupied until 1644 when it was wrecked and abandoned after a Loyalist siege. The tower was constructed from sandstone and mudstone measuring 13.7m by 11.7m externally. The height and arrangement of windows, fireplaces and arches indicates that the two storeys were both living rooms so the later tower at least appears not to have had dark storage at basement level (Salter, M 1988: 37-38). A large sandstone slab protruding out from the walls by the entrance on the north side of the tower appears to be a surviving remnant of floor from the later c14th century re-build. As part of the main project a full documentary study will be commissioned.

3 Scope and aims of the project

At this stage the trial pit is only to establish the depth of rubble that has collapsed onto the floor of the tower and establish the nature and significance of the deposits.

An archaeological evaluation aims to “gain information about the archaeological resource within a given area or site (including presence or absence, character, extent, date, integrity, state of preservation and quality) in order to make an assessment of its merit in the appropriate context, leading to one or more of the following: the formulation of a strategy to ensure the recording, preservation or management of the resource; the formulation of a strategy to initiate a threat to the archaeological resource; the formulation of a proposal for further archaeological investigation within a programme of research” (Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluations).

The objectives of this evaluation, based on the above stated aim, are to establish:

- the depth of the rubble deposits
- the nature of the floor
- the presence/absence of any significant deposits on the floor.

4 Methodology

Fieldwork

After the clearing of vegetation one trench was excavated measuring 4mx4m at the surface, positioned at the centre of the castle tower (Figure 2). Due to the unstable nature of the rubble deposits and because the rubble was at least 0.5m higher at the south west corner, the sides of the trench were cut at an angle of approximately 45° for the first metre depth, increasing to near vertical at the base (see Transect Figure 3). The base of the trench, at a maximum depth of 2.1m, exposed an area of approximately 1m².

Due to access problems all excavation was by hand over four days between 6/08/05 and 22/08/05. The spoil was stored within the tower. On completion of the fieldwork the trench was left open but the base was covered with polythene and a layer of sand to protect it from rain and further collapse of masonry.

Relative heights of the top and bottom of the trench and the remnant of floor by the castle entrance were measured.

A sample of artefactual material recovered from excavation was retained.

The recording system included written, drawn and photographic data. Context numbers were allocated and context record sheets completed. A plan (Figure 2 Scale 1:20) a sample section (Scale 1:10) and a north/south transect (Figure 3 Scale 1:10) of the trench were drawn. A photographic record was made using black and white negative and colour transparency film. A number of digital colour reference photographs were also taken.

Office work

On completion of fieldwork a site archive was prepared. The written, drawn and photographic data was catalogued and cross-referenced and a summary produced. The sample artefactual data was processed, catalogued and cross-referenced and summaries produced. After an initial assessment all unstratified non-diagnostic artefacts were discarded. Further dispersal of artefacts will be in line with the collection policy of the recipient repository and will be documented in the archive. The evaluation did not warrant the production of a site matrix.

5 The Evaluation findings

The trench (Plate 1) was filled entirely with rubble derived from the original fabric of the castle (mudstone and sandstone blocks and fragments), the later tower including early post-medieval brick fragments and other building materials such as occasional modern bricks and concrete probably brought to site during recent (20th century) remedial works. Five distinct layers could be discerned. The uppermost layer [1001] was 0.57m deep and comprised of frost shattered mudstone and sandstone rubble of various sizes, medieval and occasional modern bricks in a dark brown soil matrix. Pottery finds included sherds of plain white ware, white ware with blue transfer pattern, two sherds of stoneware with a light brown external glaze and white internal glaze and one sherd of salt glazed sewer pipe. Also present were pieces of brown, green and light blue bottle glass and a small quantity of animal bone. All finds were either 19th or 20th century. Below this was an approximately horizontal layer of much more substantial but irregular mudstone blocks [1002].

Layer [1002] was 0.23m to 0.3m thick, typically two or three 'courses' thick (maximum thickness of blocks 0.1m-0.15m) and more apparent on the west, south and east facing sections of the trench. The layer was not considered to be part of the tower floor as gaps between the mudstones revealed another deposit below of post-medieval brick rubble, smaller frost shattered mudstone fragments and occasional flecks and more substantial patches of mortar in a dark brown soil matrix [1003].

Layer [1003] proved to be 0.89m thick and only the presence of mortar and generally smaller fragments of frost-shattered mudstone distinguishes it from layer [1001]. There were no finds in this layer.

Beneath this deposit was another near horizontal layer of mudstone blocks [1004] similar to, but less substantial than, layer [1002]. The layer was only 0.05m-0.10m thick with only 1 or 2 'courses' of irregular mudstone blocks. As with layer [1002] above, gaps between the mudstone revealed another deposit below [1005].

Layer [1005] consisted of a dense concentration of post-medieval brick fragments in a mid reddish cream coloured mortar matrix. The reddish colour was derived from the fragmented bricks. A small amount of soil in this deposit was probably introduced by root action and the presence of some charcoal fragments near the bottom of the deposit could signify the buildings destruction in the mid 17th century. One piece of non-diagnostic clay pipe stem and one sherd of Staffordshire slipware (light creamy red fabric with a mid red external slip and dark brown internal glaze) were found near

the bottom of the deposit. Although slipware of this type could date back to the 17th century around the time the castle was abandoned, the very dark brown glaze is generally later in date (c19th or even 20th century). The layer was 0.36m thick and immediately below this at the base of the trench was a mortar floor [1006].

The mortar floor [1006] is in excellent condition. It is a mid grayish cream colour and is both flat and hard mixed with a mudstone aggregate. It shows no signs of degradation due to weathering or damage from falling masonry at least in the area exposed. The rubble and soil deposits above it have in fact protected it from weathering and the lack of soil in deposit [1005] means that the floor surface has not been broken up by root action. It is likely to be a lime ash floor rather than a gypsum floor as gypsum quickly dissolves on contact with water. Even so this is a fortuitous survival and appears to be the only example of a surviving ground-level lime ash floor in the whole of Shropshire.

6 Discussion

The objectives of the evaluation were fulfilled. The depth of rubble above the floor of the castle was ascertained to be 2.10m at the southwest corner of the trench decreasing to 1.56m at the northeast corner (assuming that the floor revealed in the center of the trench was horizontal throughout).

The floor itself was found to be a mortar floor strengthened with mudstone aggregate. Such floors are quite typical of buildings across this period. The mortar floor does not preclude the possibility of a basement as they have been employed on upper floors resting on straw and supported by wooden beams (a number of examples of lime ash flooring at 1st and even 2nd levels still survive in the Lichfield area for example). However, the level of the castle floor was measured and found to be 0.53m lower than the remnant of stone floor by the castle entrance. It is extremely unlikely that the castle had any under-floor storage of any type as this would have to be sunk deep into the motte, potentially undermining the castle foundations. Additionally one would expect that after the collapse of the roof and upper floor any wooden support for the mortar floor would soon have rotted and collapsed into the basement taking the floor with it.

Significant deposits were absent on the floor in the area exposed. The post-medieval brick rubble, clay pipe stem and Staffordshire slipware sherd in the lowest deposit resting on the floor might date the abandonment of the castle and/or the initial stages of decay, but have no bearing on the dating of the floor itself.

7 References

Salter, Mike *The Castles and Moated Mansions of Shropshire*. Malvern 1988

1 Archive

The archive consists of:

- 1 Trench record sheet
- 6 Context sheets
- 2 bags of ceramic and glass finds
- 1 Trench Location Plan
- 1 Transect drawing
- 2 Photo record sheets
- 1 Black & white film
- 1 Colour slide film
- This Report

The archive is currently store at the offices of Marches Archaeology awaiting transfer to a suitable repository.

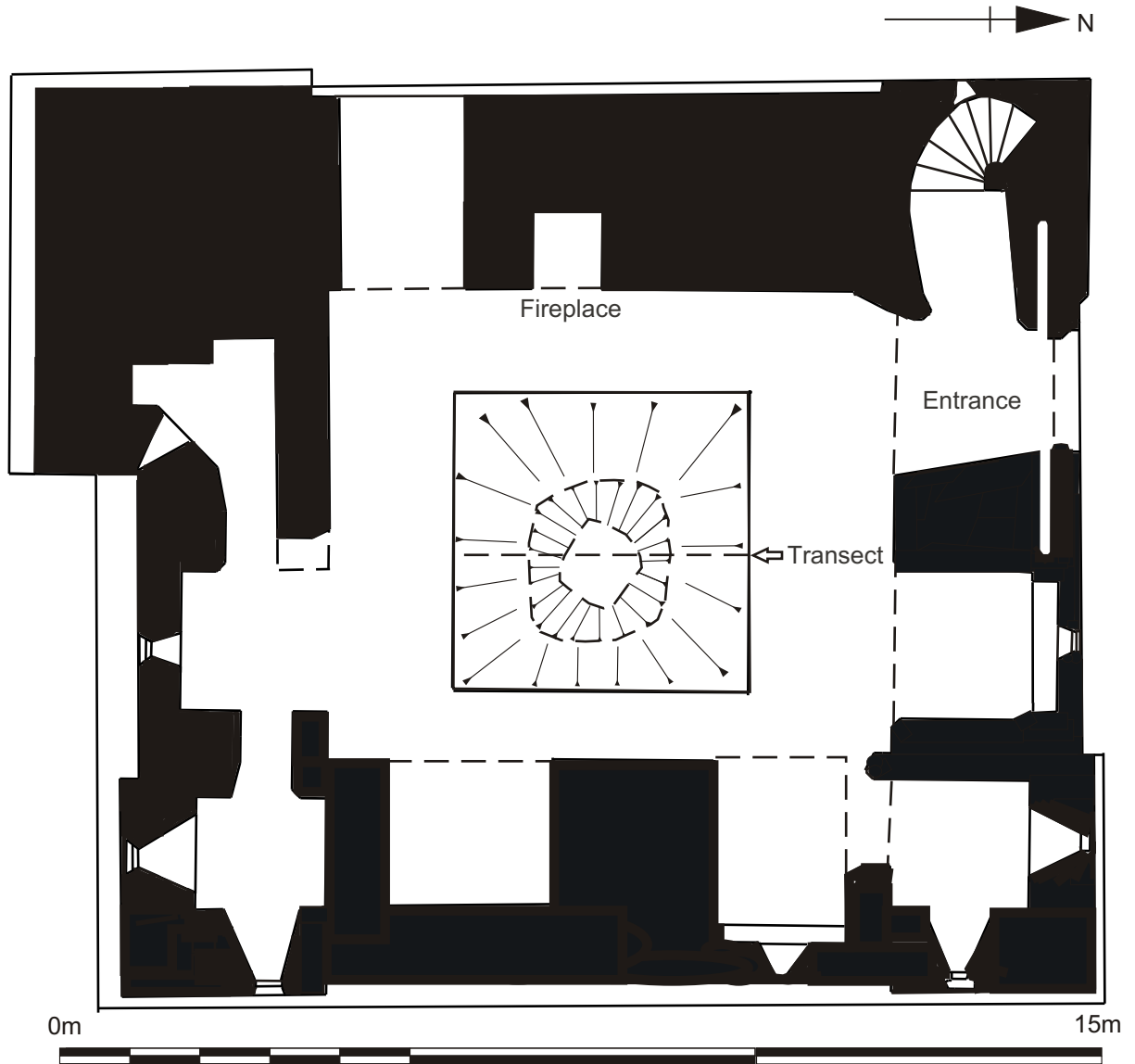


Fig. 2 Plan of castle, after Salter (1988), showing trench location

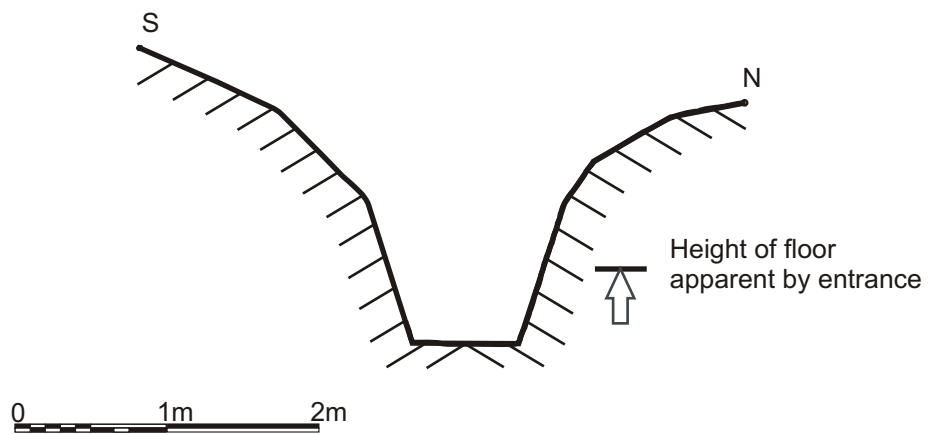


Fig. 3 Transect of Trench



Plate 1 Base of trench showing mortar floor (scale 1m)