

INVESTIGATIONS AT CODNOR CASTLE, DERBYSHIRE

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SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Channel 4's Time Team at Codnor Castle, Derbyshire, a Scheduled Monument. The fieldwork comprised geophysical survey, earthwork survey and six evaluation trenches.

The results of the geophysical survey were inconclusive, mostly due to the later industrial use of the site, however, the earthwork survey identified three phases of construction and expansion of the castle complex. Six evaluation trenches were excavated: three in the lower court to examine the approaches to the gatehouse, and three in the upper court to explore the rear of the extant gatehouse and to trace the curtain wall.

The evaluation has demonstrated the extent, character and condition of the castle and has shown that despite the later industrial use, substantial and important medieval remains survive below ground. Analysis of the finds suggests that the masonry castle was probably established in the early 13th century and continued in use until the 16th or early 17th century.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2007 geophysical and earthwork surveys and evaluation trenching were undertaken at Codnor Castle, Derbyshire, by Channel 4's *Time Team* television programme and local archaeologists. The following report summarises the results and more detail may be found in the assessment report (Wessex Archaeology 2008). The site lies approximately 2 miles north-west of Heanor and 6 miles south-east of Alfreton, centred on NGR 443360 349980 (Fig. 1). The castle and associated earthworks, a Scheduled Monument (No. 21376), lie on the East Pennine Coal Measures (British Geological Series, Sheet 125). The site lies in undulating grassland at a height of approximately 130m OD.

Very little archaeological work has been undertaken on the remains of Codnor Castle. It has been suggested that a number of archaeological investigations were conducted in and around the castle during the late 19th century, but no records of these have been found. Previous standing building and geophysical surveys have been undertaken on the castle (Wessex Archaeology 2008, 3).

The village of Codnor is mentioned in *Domesday Book*, and the castle may have begun life as a Norman motte and bailey fortress (Meeks 2002). Today all that survives is a three-storey chamber block, with fragments of lodgings built against a curtain wall, flanked by rectangular turrets. There is an upper and a lower court divided by a curtain wall, with a twin towered gatehouse and round angle towers. In the lower court is a length of curtain wall with a projecting garderobe turret and a 17th century farmhouse built with stone from the castle.

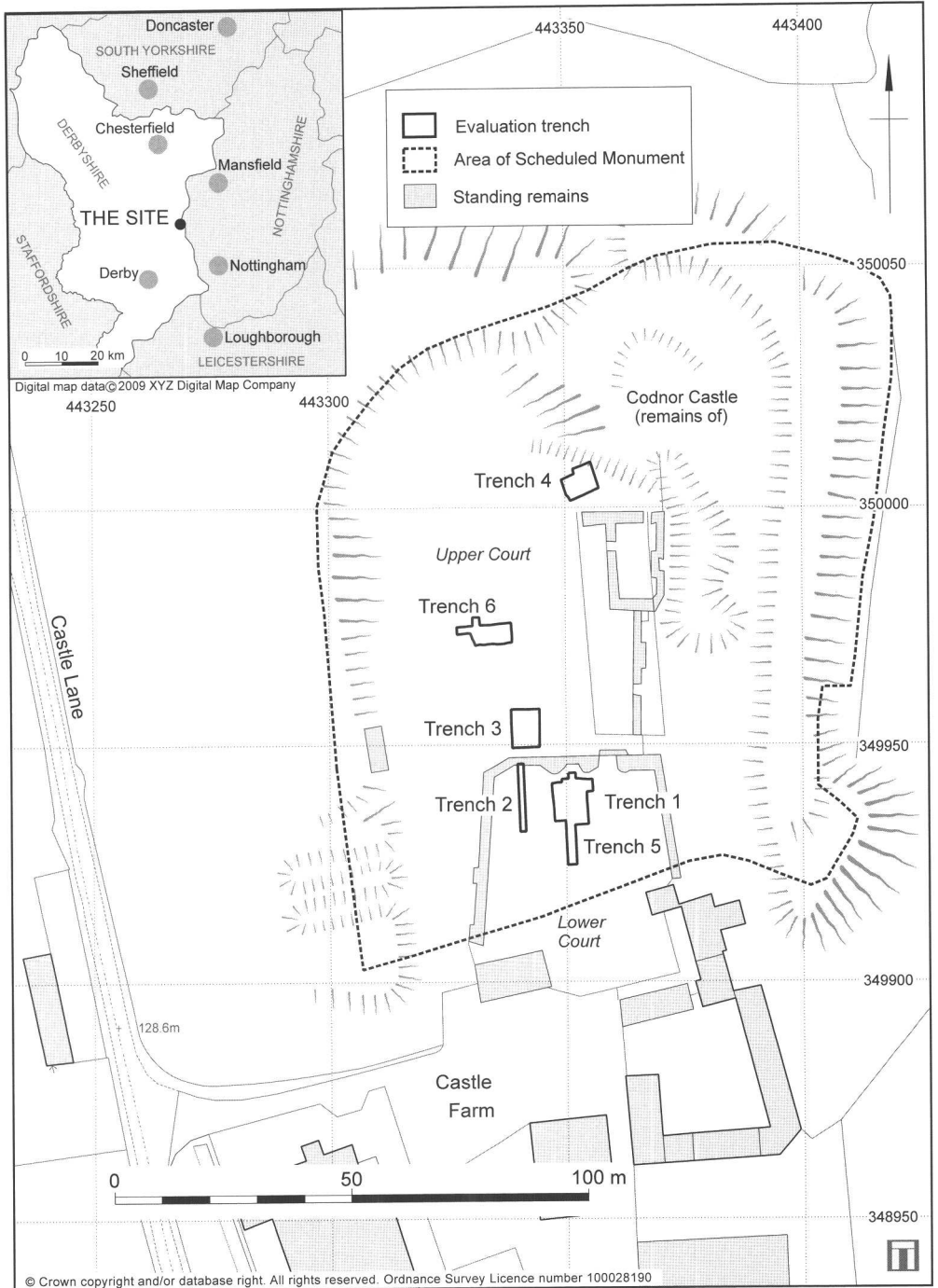


Fig. 1: Codnor Castle, site location and trench positions.

The exact extent and layout of the Castle has never been known. Sketches from the 18th century hint at an impressive, if ruined, complex of buildings. Part of the curtain wall in the upper court has been dated to *c.* 1200 (when the castle became the seat of the Lords Grey), and the southern court seems to have been a later addition to the castle, but it is probable that the castle evolved from at least the early 13th century onwards (*ibid*).

The aims of the *Time Team* fieldwork were to determine the extent, date, character and condition of sub-surface archaeological remains and to provide data to help understand the growth and development of the castle and East Midland castle sites in general.

RESULTS

Geophysical Survey

The results of the geophysical surveys (GSB 2007) largely revealed anomalies associated with past coal mining. Archaeological remains, walls and other features associated with the castle were also identified but the later disturbance makes some of the results difficult to interpret.

Earthwork Survey

The earthworks appear to indicate that the site consists of at least three main phases. The earliest phase comprised a rectangular, ditched enclosure measuring *c.* 100m north to south by 80m. The ditch averaged 14m in width and was of variable depth, ranging from nearly 2m where it has been cut into the slope, to being barely traceable. At the south, its line is visible as a low broad hollow across the southern courtyard of the castle, and the south-east corner can still be identified amongst the later disturbances east of the courtyard wall. The platform enclosed by the ditch, which has been levelled onto the slope, would have originally measured *c.* 70m north to south by 50m, and its size and shape appear to have been retained throughout the evolution of the site.

The second phase was marked by the addition of the courtyard to the south, probably complete by the 14th century at the latest. Although there is evidence from the *Time Team* excavation that the original rectangular enclosure ditch at the south remained open, the site had clearly expanded beyond this enclosure and this ditch formed part of the entrance arrangements. To the west of the southern courtyard a track runs between the courtyard wall and the field to the west. A scarp which separates the two is probably the western scarp of a ditch which was added to continue the original west ditch of the earlier enclosure southward.

The third phase was represented by changes evident in the earthworks to the east, which indicate that, although the main building complex was still mainly confined to the original enclosure (with the addition of the southern courtyard and ancillary buildings), the site had spread out from its original core, represented by a series of enclosures and earthwork terraces. It is clear that the site had evolved, or was in the process of evolving, into a courtyard complex surrounded by a network of ornamental gardens before its demise in the mid 16th century. In the field at the west, a number of regular, low earthworks are likely to be the remains of orchards, paddocks and kitchen gardens etc. Although some may be quite late in date and of minor agricultural interest, others

fit in with the overall axial pattern of the site and its structures and are likely to have formed part of this expansion.

Evaluation Trenching

Trenches 1 and 5 were located to examine the approaches within the lower court to the gatehouse between the lower and upper court (Fig. 2). In Trench 1 a substantial moat with a masonry revetment on its northern side was recorded whilst Trench 5 uncovered a roughly metalled surface comprising local sandstone cobbles abutting a masonry revetment towards the northern end of the trench. Trench 1 was then enlarged to expose the full width of the moat and the revetments or drawbridge supports on both sides. Trench 2 was excavated across the moat to examine its form and alignment and its relationship with the curtain wall of the upper court.

The moat was immediately to the south of the entrance to the upper court and was approximately 6.5m wide and 2.70m deep with vertical, masonry revetted sides. The shape of the base is unknown as the full depth was only established by augering because of the excessive depth of the feature. The southern revetment was traced for 2m, but continued beyond the eastern and western sides of the trench, it was 1.20m wide and built of regularly coursed, roughly faced local sandstone (skerry), bonded with a pale yellowish brown mortar. The northern revetment was 5.90m long, 1m wide and over 2m high with returns to the north at approximately 45° and was of similar construction to the southern revetment. To the west, in trench 2, the moat was approximately 9m wide with steeply sloping, slightly irregular sides. The northern side of the moat was 3m to the south of the wall of the upper court, approximately the same distance as the northern revetment. Although very little of the moat in trench 2 was excavated, augering established that it was 2.50m deep here.

The earliest fill of the moat revealed was pale grey silty clay with sparse stone and charcoal inclusions; this was over 0.50m thick and was overlain by over 1.5m of later deposits. No finds were recovered from this deposit and excavation halted when it was suspected that it sealed possible waterlogged timbers. Small quantities of charcoal, coal and hammerscale were recovered from this fill. Most of the overlying deposits were excavated by machine in *c.* 0.05m spits and the resulting spoil carefully scanned for artefacts. In addition to a gold noble of Henry V (1413–1422) that was probably deposited prior to *c.* 1470, a fairly large assemblage of 15th–16th century pottery was recovered, along with small quantities of early post-medieval (16th–17th century) pottery from the uppermost fills.

The three trenches excavated in the upper court were targeted on the gatehouse (trench 3) and on anomalies identified by the geophysical survey (trenches 4 and 6). Although most of archaeological deposits in trench 3 had been removed by a later quarry, a short length of *in situ* masonry wall, including a probable threshold, survived. This wall was traced across the whole 5m width of the trench. It was 1m wide and comprised roughly faced local sandstone in irregular courses, bonded with pale yellowish brown sandy lime mortar with a rubble core. A probable threshold, 1.25m wide, was exposed in the eastern side of the trench; this indicated that the medieval ground level was approximately 126.30m OD, with the eastern end of the exposed wall standing up to 0.50m above this. This was assumed to represent the northern wall of the gatehouse, suggesting that it was approximately 4.5m from north to south. The

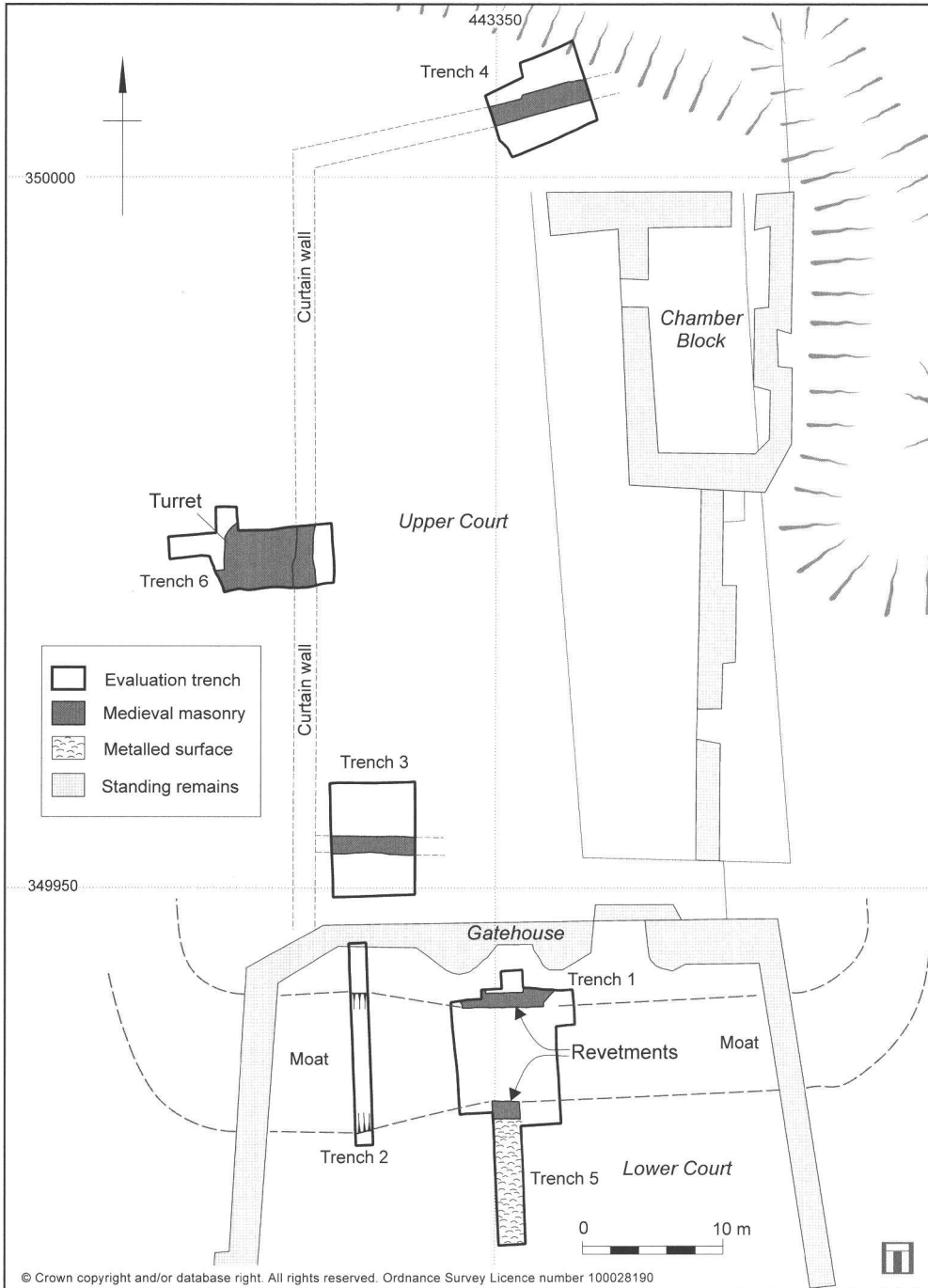


Fig. 2: Codnor Castle, excavated features.

small assemblage of pottery recovered from the various deposits representing the abandonment, partial demolition and collapse of the castle's fabric included Stamford ware, datable to the late 11th to mid-13th century and 17th century yellow ware. It therefore appears that the earlier medieval pottery is residual, although it does demonstrate activity at the site by at least the mid-13th century.

Trenches 4 and 6 were targeted on two areas of high resistance in areas assumed to be in the vicinity of the northern and western curtain walls. Trench 4 revealed the northern curtain wall; trench 6, the western curtain wall and a turret, although here the high resistance anomaly was probably due to a later industrial feature. The 6.7m length of the east-west aligned northern curtain wall in trench 4 was 1.50m wide and built of roughly faced local sandstone in irregular courses with a rubble core, bonded with pale yellowish brown mortar. Only the foundations and a single lower course survived.

Trench 6 recorded the north-south aligned western curtain wall; this was similar to the northern curtain wall. Abutting the western side of this wall were the remains of a circular turret or tower. This was of similar construction to the curtain wall and was approximately 5m in diameter externally and 3m internally. On the northern internal side, a small hearth, approximately 1.20m wide, had been cut into the turret wall and lined with bricks. The bricks were of similar dimensions to those noted elsewhere within the castle and are assumed to be of late 15th or 16th century date. Also within the turret was a possible occupation deposit, very dark grey sandy clay with localised heat reddening and abundant charcoal inclusions. This was not excavated, but appeared to have been broadly contemporary with the hearth.

Features and deposits relating to the later garden and industrial use of the castle were encountered in most trenches. In trench 1 two square masonry settings were found cut into the upper fills of the moat and a similar setting was found in the same stratigraphic position in trench 2. The function of these is unclear and no datable finds were recovered.

Most of trench 3 was occupied by a large irregular quarry-like feature cutting through the rubble and mortar deposits that represent the demolition, robbing and collapse of the southern wall of the upper court. Very few finds were recovered from the fill of this feature, but the dark sandy loam fill, with common coal and local stone inclusions and its stratigraphic position suggest an industrial origin. Of more certain industrial origin was a subcircular feature in trench 6 that cut through the western side of the turret and the overlying demolition or robbing deposits, which probably represents a bell pit or mine shaft for the extraction of coal or ironstone.

In trench 4 two masonry features, comprising low, circular retaining walls, constructed of reused worked local stone and brick, were recorded abutting the southern and the northern side of the curtain wall. The function and date of these features is uncertain and they could be interpreted as being either industrial or garden related.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation, whilst not extensive, has recovered much important information about the construction and development of the castle. Despite the later industrial use of the area, substantial and important medieval remains survive below ground.

The extent of the upper court has been demonstrated by the identification of the northern and western curtain walls; the court was approximately 60m from north to south and 30m wide. The moat, which was between 6.5m and 9m wide to the south of the upper court, can be clearly seen as a substantial earthwork around the western, northern and eastern side of the upper court.

Although no datable features or deposits associated with the original construction of the castle were recorded, architectural features visible in the upstanding walls and the general finds assemblage confirmed that it was probably built around the beginning of the 13th century. The walls of the lower court are later in date, as they have been built across the original moat. It therefore appears that the castle evolved gradually to its final form, rather than as a series of major rebuilds, although the earthwork survey identified three phases of earthworks associated with the construction and development of the castle. The dating of the later deposits associated with the castle suggest that it fell out of use towards the end of the 16th or in the early 17th century.

Substantial parts of the masonry castle survive below as well as above ground. In the upper court, these are generally sealed below up to 0.50m of probable quarrying debris and earlier demolition deposits. Possible waterlogged deposits in the base of the moat could potentially provide important evidence for the medieval environment and economy of the castle. Little or no industrial disturbance was recorded in the lower court and it is possible that the remains of internal buildings or structures could survive in this area. Any future excavations at Codnor Castle could usefully target these areas, especially the possible waterlogged deposits in the base of the moat.

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The project archive is currently held at the offices of Wessex Archaeology under the site code CCD07 and WA project code 65306. It will in due course be deposited with the Derbyshire Museums Service.

Julie Gardiner and Lorraine Mephram commented on an earlier draft and the report was edited by Philippa Bradley. Elizabeth James drew the figures. Finds were identified by Dr Chris Cumberpatch (pottery), Lorraine Mephram (other finds), Dr Martin Allen (gold coin) and Dr Chris Stevens (environmental remains).

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