

SCARBOROUGH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AN EXCAVATION AT CASTLE HILL HOUSE, BROMPTON

By Trevor Pearson and Marie Woods



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NGR SE 94542 82195

Contents

1. Introduction
2. The site and its setting
3. Historical & archaeological background
4. The 2017 excavation
5. Conclusion
6. References
7. Acknowledgements

List of text figures

1. Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale map of Brompton published in 1928
2. The location of the two trenches
3. Overhead view of the excavation showing the principal layers exposed
4. View of postholes F1004 and F1006
5. View of Trench Two looking south

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1. Introduction

Between 5-7 May 2017 the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society (SAHS) undertook a trial excavation in the rear garden at the rear of Castle Hill House in the village of Brompton-by-Sawdon, near Scarborough (NGR SE 94542 82195). The excavation followed on from fieldwork previously undertaken in the adjoining pasture field to the west. The field has statutory protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Scheduled Monument number 1021268) on the grounds that it preserves the remains of a fortified house which is the origin of the name 'Castle Hill' (record accessed in January 2018 at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1021268>)

In April 2014 the Brompton Local History Society commissioned a geophysical survey of the field from James Lyall of geofizz.biz. The survey located buried walls and other features relating to the visible earthworks, and was extended into part of the garden of Castle Hill House (Lyall 2014). In April 2016 the SAHS undertook an earthwork survey of the field to provide the first detailed record of the visible remains (Evans *et. al.* 2016).

The 2016 earthwork survey concluded that from the visible remains and the results of the earlier geophysical survey the field does not appear to preserve the remains of a castle, but is more likely to be the site of several small agricultural buildings with adjacent yards. However, Thomas Hinderwell writing at the end of the 18th century described seeing the foundations of an ancient building on Castle Hill and repeated a local tradition that the hill was believed to be the site of a stronghold of the Northumbrian Kings. His description seems at odds with the shallow building remains visible in the pasture field. This led to the conclusion that there may have been other structures on Castle Hill visible as earthworks at the end of the 18th century that have since been lost through development. The opportunity was taken to test out this theory and look for traces of other buildings away from the pasture field. The owners of Castle Hill House expressed their interest in the search and agreed to allow a trial excavation to take place in their garden.

2. The Site and its Setting

Castle Hill is on the east side of the village formed by a natural spur of limestone bedrock and gravel which falls away steeply on the south and west sides. The north and east sides of the hill are far less pronounced as the spur merges into the general south-facing dip slope of the Tabular Hills. The hill would have formed a distinctive landmark when viewed from the lower ground to the west and south before the expansion of the village of Brompton. It lies at the north end of a route leading across the Vale of Pickering (Ings Road) which connects Brompton with Sherburn on the south side of the Vale. Apart

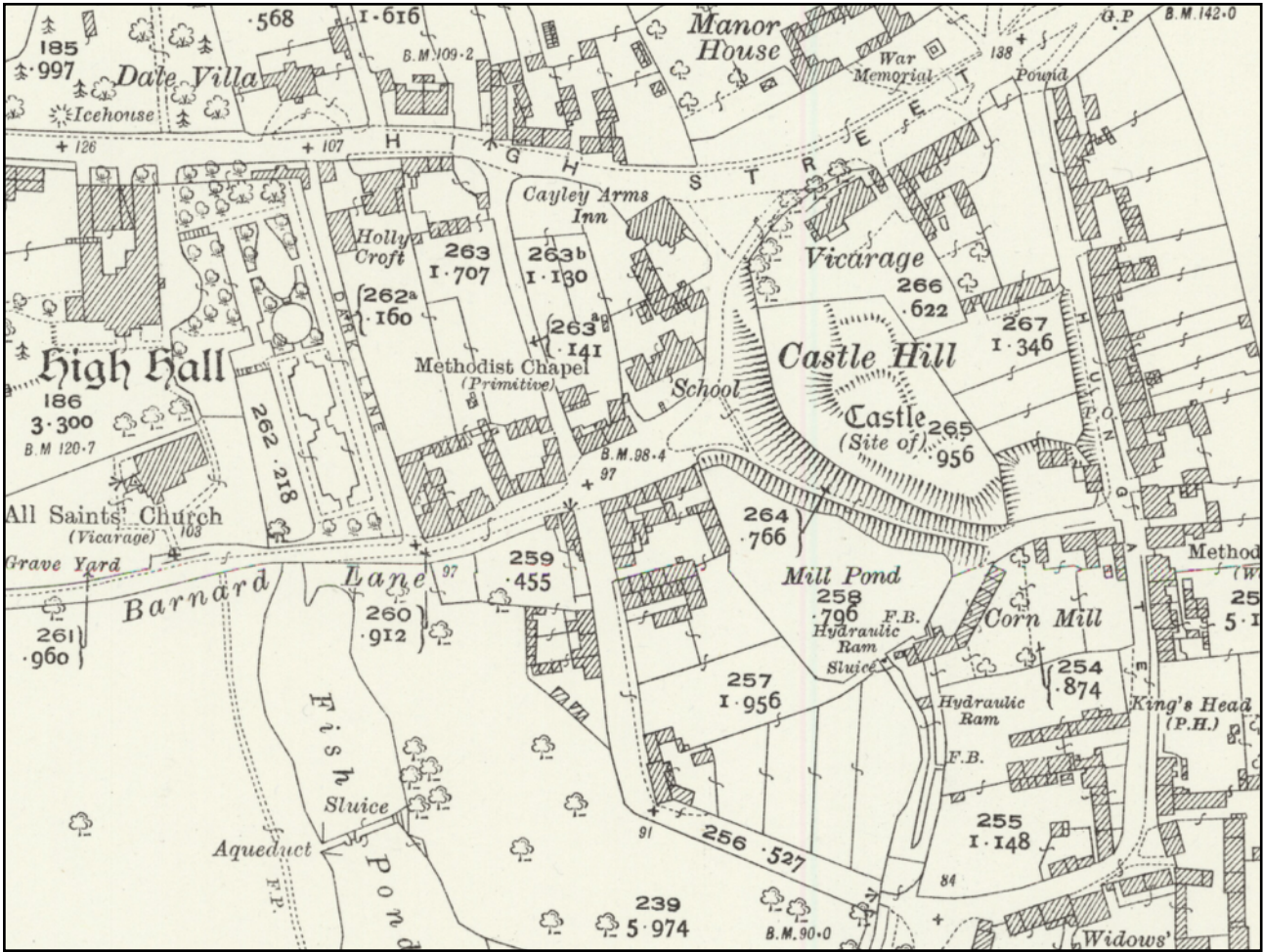


Figure 1. Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale map of Brompton published in 1928 showing Castle Hill and the site of the excavation in what was then the garden at the rear of the vicarage. The 2014 geophysical survey and 2016 earthwork survey was in the field labelled as 'Castle (site of)'. Map reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

from the pasture field containing the earthworks, the rest of the hilltop is divided between private properties fronting Hungate to the east and High Street (A170) to the north. Buildings existed on the north side of the hill by 1850 whilst the rest of this development took place in the late 19th or early 20th century. A mill pond fed by a spring lies at the south-west foot of the hill while a disused gravel pit - now part of a garden - eats into part of the south side of the hill.

Castle Hill House fronts on to the south side of the main Pickering to Scarborough road (A170). The building was constructed around 1825 (Evans pers. comm.) and is shown on the First Edition 1:10560 Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1850 (Ordnance Survey 1854) where it is named as Hill House. In the 20th century the building was Brompton's vicarage and is now divided into two properties, Castle Hill House being the east of the two. The garden at the rear of the property is mostly given over to lawn with flower and vegetable beds around the sides and several outbuildings along the east boundary.

3. Historical and Archaeological Background

As a village settlement Brompton dates back to at least the 11th century where it is recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086 as part of the Royal manor of Falsgrave. The only detailed analysis of the layout and development of medieval Brompton was published by local historian John Rushton in two volumes of the Transactions of the Scarborough and District Archaeological Society (Rushton 1963 and 1964). Rushton speculated that Castle Hill may indicate the site of one of the two manors mentioned in the Domesday survey which was held by the Vescy family in the 14th century. He notes that the site had not been excavated and speculated that the pasture field, which he calls Castle Close, probably only represented part of the original castle site (Rushton 1964, 28).

The earliest published description of Castle Hill comes from the Scarborough historian Thomas Hinderwell writing towards the end of the 18th century. As was noted above, in his History of Scarborough published in 1798 he notes a local tradition that the Brompton had been the residence of 'Northumbrian Kings' and in connection with this mentions the foundations of an 'ancient building' visible on Castle Hill (Hinderwell 1798, 303). While any connection with the kings of Northumbria is likely to be spurious, Hinderwell's brief reference to Castle Hill suggests the existence of more obvious and substantial building remains than exist today.

Castle Hill receives passing reference in several local guidebooks in the 19th and 20th centuries but these sources do not add any substantial or new information. There is also a curious story about the murder of a young lady at the castle during the Crusades (Brierley 1896, 63). Published in a literary magazine toward the end of the 19th century, the story tells of how the daughter of the lord of Brompton castle was mistakenly killed by her lover newly returned from the Crusades as she climbed out of a window at the castle. The article gives no indication of the origin of this story and it is most certainly entirely fictitious, but does say of the castle that 'all traces of the structure appear to have been removed from its site'.

Brompton is included in l'Anson's list of castles in the North Riding (l'Anson 1915, 332). He refers to 'what would certainly appear to be a mutilated motte, and signs of the presence of masonry foundations ; but until the site is excavated it is impossible to say anything definite'. In referring to the remains of a motte, l'Anson equates Brompton to a common type of Norman castle notably constructed in the late 11th and early 12th centuries where the main defence was provided by an artificial hill called a motte on which a wooden tower was constructed to act as the last line of defence. There is nothing on Castle Hill today that looks remotely like the mutilated remains of a motte. The most prominent earthworks in the pasture field are barely over a metre in

height and are far too small to be identified as the remains of a castle motte. We can also be confident that we have not lost any substantial earthworks since the time that l'Anson wrote. Large scale Ordnance survey mapping at 1:2500 scale published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries show a series of linear and sub-rectangular earthworks in the pasture field which broadly match those recorded in the 2014 and 2016 surveys (Ordnance Survey 1891-2; 1928).

4. The 2017 Excavation

The excavation consisted of two trenches. The first and principal trench (Trench 1) measured 6m x 1.5m aligned approximately east-west towards the centre of the lawn 27 metres from the rear wall of the property at an elevation of 40.7m above Ordnance Datum. A second trench (Trench 2) measuring 1m x 1m was excavated 8m to the south of Trench 1, to investigate the continuation of a feature encountered in that trench.⁴

Trench 1

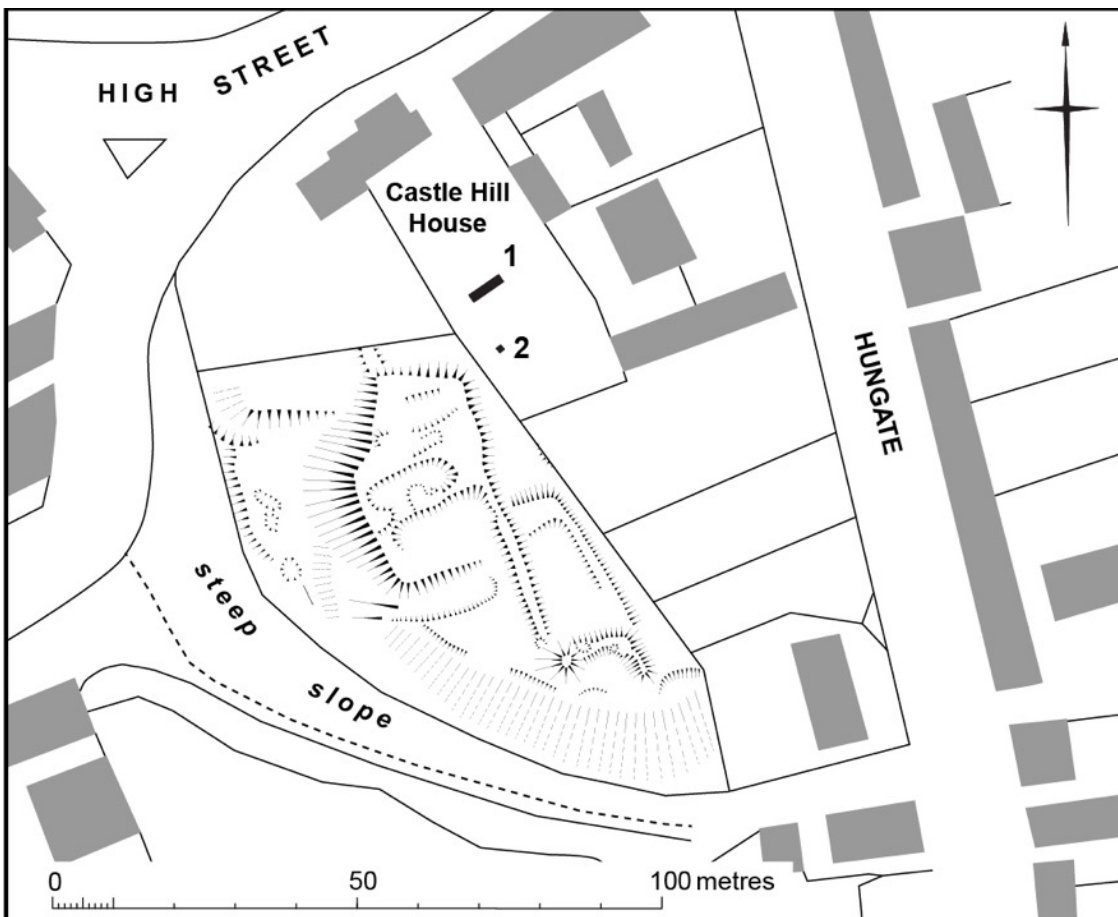


Figure 2. The location of the two trenches in the garden of Castle Hill House with the earthworks surveyed in 2014 in the adjacent pasture field.

Removal of the turf revealed a 0.5m thick deposit of a dark-brown gritty loam across the whole of the trench (layer 1001) representing the build up of subsoil through centuries of farming and latterly the use of the site as a garden. The finds recovered from this deposit consisted of a number of sherds of post medieval pottery dating from the 18th and 19th centuries along with a greater quantity of medieval pottery fragments. Many of the medieval sherds have a dark orange – light orange fabric, with a distinctive dark green lead glaze, suggesting they date to 14th and 15th century. Several fragments of medieval glazed ridge tile and possible floor tile were also recovered from this layer. A decorated clay pipe stem from layer 1001 was of more than passing interest. The stem is inscribed with “Gambier a Paris m.m Depose” which is a reference to the clay pipe manufactory set up by Jean Gambier in 1780 in Givet, in north-east France. The factory closed in 1926. It is likely that this stem dates between 1780 and 1790, although further research is required.

The removal of layer 1001 exposed the upper surface of what we believe to

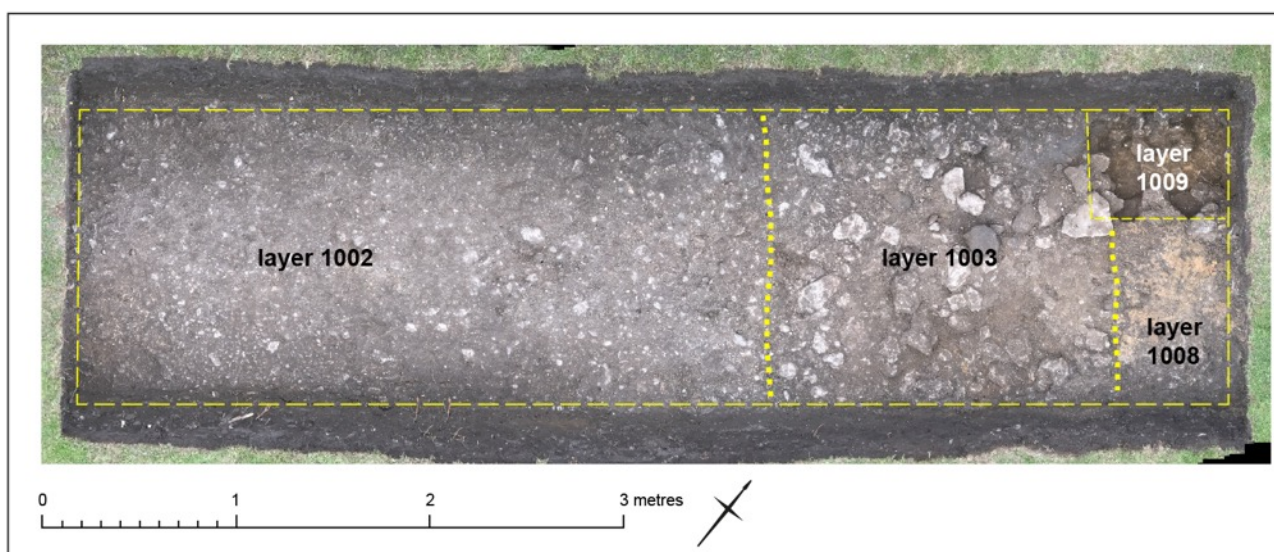


Figure 3. Overhead view of the excavation showing the principal layers exposed.

be undisturbed medieval deposits. The decision was taken to only remove a small part of the stratigraphy in a sondage positioned in the north-east corner of the trench to leave these deposits intact as much as possible.

Across the west half of the trench was a compacted stony layer in a grey loamy soil (layer 1002). This was interpreted as a yard surface. The layer was not excavated but two fragments of medieval pottery and several pieces of animal bone were found among the stones during cleaning of the surface.

At the same level as layer 1002 across the east half of the trench, was a deposit of large stones in a loose loamy soil (layer 1003). In the south-east

end of the trench there was a distinct orange/brown gritty deposit (layer 1008) containing flecks of mortar with very clear edges where it met layer 1003. This layer was not excavated.

Two small post holes cut into layer 1003 at the north-east corner of the trench (Features F1004 and F1006). Both postholes were quite shallow and filled with a brown loamy soil (layers 1005 and 1007 respectively). In addition 5 large fragments of pantile were recovered from layer 1005 which presumably served to pack the wooden post sited in F1004. Both features were presumably connected with activities in the garden and therefore of no great age.

A small sondage measuring 1m x 0.5m was excavated to a depth of 0.3m into



Figure 4. View of post holes F1004 (towards the top) and F1006 (below) in the north-east corner of Trench One.

layer 1003 at the north-east corner of the trench removing postholes F1004 and F1006. This revealed below layer 1003 a compact orange/brown sandy deposit containing quite large angular stones including one large stone with mortar attached to it (layer 1009). A fragment of medieval jug handle with a distinctive rope-style twist was found whilst excavating layer 1003 in the sondage. From the quality and type of glaze this piece could well be Scarborough Ware and therefore date to the period 1200-1350. Further fragments of ridge tiles were also recovered from this layer in the sondage.

Layer 1009 was not excavated but cleaning the deposit brought to light a sherd of coarse pottery with a blackened exterior which was very different in appearance to the fine quality medieval glazed pottery recovered from overlying deposits and may be much earlier in date - possibly Anglo-Saxon.

Trench Two

This trench was excavated to ascertain if the possible floor or yard surface in Trench One (layer 1002) extended to the south. In the event, no trace of the stone surface was found.

Beneath the turf was the same deposit of dark brown loam as layer 1001 in Trench 1 which similarly contained fragments of medieval and post-medieval pottery. This was removed to a depth of 0.5m to expose a layer of stony rubble in an orange/brown soil (layer 2002) and a slightly more sandy deposit (layer 2003) at the same level in the south-west corner of the trench. This was removed in a sondage to a depth of 1m from the ground surface. Several fragments of plaster were recovered and one flint microlith of probable Mesolithic date and around 11,000 years old.



Figure 5. View of Trench Two looking south showing stony rubble layer 2002 with layer 2003 exposed in the sondage at the south-west corner.

Discussion

The excavation surpassed expectations with the discovery of intact archaeological remains immediately below the subsoil in Trench One. As the decision was taken to suspend excavation to preserve these deposits it makes it difficult to be certain what they represent. The first point to make is that the amount of medieval pottery found from above these remains and from the small areas excavated makes it almost certain that they are medieval. The stone surface layer 1002 at the west end of Trench One is more likely an external yard rather than an internal floor level because it is fairly rough in appearance. The more stony deposits at the east end of the trench (layer 1003) and in particular the distinct band of more compact orange grit (layer 1008) and the stones revealed in the sondage (layer 1009) suggest there may be a substantial wall at this end of the trench, presumably a building contemporary with the yard surface. The recovery of fragments of medieval glazed floor tile and a ridge tile fragment, if from this same building, suggest it was of some importance and richness.

The discovery of a Mesolithic flint, while interesting because of the enormous time scale it represents, is not actually all that surprising as the Vale of Pickering and its immediate hinterland are known to have attracted occupation in the early Mesolithic period. This is well known from the famous site at Star Carr some 5 miles to the east excavated in the 1950s and again more recently by York University. Mesolithic people were hunter-gatherers and microliths like the one found in Trench Two were used to form the points of spears and possibly arrows used in the hunt and so must have easily been lost.

5. Conclusion

The excavation, though limited in its extent, has nevertheless established that an important medieval building once stood on the part of Castle Hill now forming the garden of Castle Hill House. It is too much of a leap in interpretation to suggest that this is evidence of the castle that has given the hill its name as there is nothing else in this area to indicate the site was ever fortified. However in the light of these discoveries it is now easier to accept that Thomas Hinderwell could well have seen the remains of an 'ancient building' on Castle Hill. While it seems unlikely that the earthworks in the pasture field would have grabbed Hinderwell's attention, it seems that there could well have been other earthwork remains on the hilltop at the end of the 18th century to excite his interest if we are correct in interpreting the remains found in this excavation as part of a substantial medieval building.

There is no certainty that the earthworks in the pasture field are connected with the remains unearthed in the garden of Castle Hill House. One possibility

is that if the earthworks in the pasture field are agricultural buildings they could have formed part of a much larger complex with the more substantial building suggested by the excavation at its centre. Alternatively, the earthworks may belong to a later phase of activity after the large building and whatever was associated with it had gone out of use and been demolished. One way to resolve this question is to undertake trial excavations in the pasture field to look at how the archaeology there compares with what we have discovered in the adjacent garden.

Finally, the excavation has focussed attention again on the importance of Castle Hill in the development of the village of Brompton. Not only does it dominate the east end of the village, it now seems to have been the site of an important building. The hill stands at one end of a potentially important north-south route across the Vale of Pickering while the main east - west route between Pickering and Scarborough skirts across the north end of the hill. However, this route may not have existed before the 18th century and before that the main east -west route may have been further south along what is the fairly minor Barnard Lane, which is shown on the 1928 Ordnance Survey map (see Figure 1) and which is now called Church Lane (Evans 1992 figure 2e). This lane is bordered by the parish church of All Saints on the north and aligned on the centre of Castle Hill to the east and so relates to two of the most important features of the village. Castle Hill therefore may have been a focal point in the layout of the village until the creation of the turnpike road in the 18th century pushed the east - west route through Brompton further to the north to the line that is now called High Street.

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7. Acknowledgements

Chris Evans from the Brompton Local History Society first encouraged the SAHS to investigate Castle Hill and obtained permission from Mr and Mrs Deehan for the trial excavation in their well-tended garden. Mr and Mrs Deehan are thanked for their interest in our work and for giving permission for the excavation. The excavation team consisted of Jan and Martin Bland, Gareth Davies, Chris Evans, Mark Franklin, Stephen Gandolfi, Chris Hall, Rob Noble, Trevor Pearson and Marie Woods. Chris Hall and Trevor Pearson supervised the excavation and Marie Woods reported on the finds. Chris Evans is thanked for giving the date of Castle Hill House. The excavation was located on the Ordnance Survey National Grid to an accuracy of 10-20mm using a Trimble R10 GNSS satellite receiver through the auspices of Marcus Jecock from Historic England.