

THE NORMAN CASTLE OF SOUTH MYMMS

BY C. LEE DAVIS

BETWEEN four and five years ago the writer of this article had his attention drawn by a member of his family to some earthworks at South Mymms. These earthworks lie for the most part in a small wood, which is surrounded by gently sloping cornlands, and is situated in an area of roughly triangular shape bounded on the west side by the Barnet-St. Albans road, on the east side by the Hatfield by-pass road, and having as its base the Middlesex and Hertfordshire border as it runs alongside North Mymms Park.

To get any clear idea of the lay-out of the place at first sight was not easy; a great deal of the area is covered by trees and shrubs, and, to add a complication, there is a huge chalk-pit immediately adjacent. On going over the ground, however, this much was evident, viz., that here was an area, roughly oval in shape, surrounded by a single fosse-and-rampart earthwork defence, and that within this area and in the north-west part of it was a mound some 25 ft. to 30 ft. high, with a top of saucer shape.

These main features undoubtedly pointed to a stronghold of the Norman motte-and-bailey type, and search was made for references to these significant remains in county and local histories. None, however, was found, and it looked as if there was no record in existence. But ultimately it appeared that the earthworks had been located in the autumn of 1918 by the late Mr. G. F. Cruikshank, F.S.A., and the late Mr. A. F. Major, F.S.A., while they were investigating the course of Grimm's

Dyke, and the following had appeared in the Reports of the Earthworks Committee of the Congress of Archaeological Societies of 1919 and 1920 respectively:—

1919. "MIDDLESEX.—South Mimms. The recent cutting down of a hedgerow has disclosed a sunken way, hitherto unsuspected, leading to an earthwork on Warren Green Farm in this parish, which is planned though not accurately in the 25 in. O.S. map, but is not marked as a camp in the 6 in. map. It appears to have been a Norman work of the mount and bailey type, and is protected on the W. side, including the angles N. and S., by an enormous chalkpit. The entrance on the N., approached by a narrow causeway between the chalkpit and the fosse, is flanked by two mounds, which no doubt bore gate-towers. The mount rises a little to the E. of this, and the sunken way, running up from the S.E., enters the fosse at the S.E. corner and curls round into the enceinte just E. of and immediately under the mount. A cart-track crosses the work N. and S., but its approaches through an unprotected gap in the southern defences and by a causeway over the fosse on the N. are evidently not original entrances. The original entrance, with its causeway and protecting mounds, is hidden by trees and not easy to find. It is not shown in the 25 in. map, nor of course is the recently revealed sunken way. There is apparently no record of a castle on this spot, and it is not noticed in local histories."

1920. "MIDDLESEX.—South Mimms. The last Report contained a description of an earthwork on Warren Gate Farm in this parish (not Warren Green). We regret to learn that the sunken way leading up to the work, which was recorded as a new discovery, has now been ploughed up and filled in."

Rather surprisingly the matter was not followed up after the 1920 Report, and in fact appears to have been completely forgotten.

At the later time previously referred to, however, the existence of the remains was brought to the notice of several archaeologists, including members of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, and a visit was paid to the site. It was then agreed that the earthworks were undoubtedly those of a Norman castle of the motte-and-bailey type, that the date of the building of the stronghold appeared to be quite a late one, and that the original buildings were probably all of wood.

Subsequent surface investigations were carried out mainly by members of a local Society, the Mill Hill Historical Society (of which the Editor of our *Transactions* is Chairman), and these investigations disclosed some features of considerable interest.

The site lies rather less than 200 yds. to the west of the Hatfield by-pass road and is approached by a rough path across a cornfield. Making a tour of the enceinte, the first thing seen as one approaches is the north-east section of the rampart; in fact, this is clearly visible from the road (see Illustration No. 1). The enceinte consists of a single rampart and fosse. Naturally the rampart has been worn down and the fosse partially filled up in course of time, but the following would appear to have been the approximate average measurements:—From top of rampart to bottom of ditch—26 ft.; from bottom to outer edge of ditch—10 ft.; from top of rampart to outer edge of ditch—35 ft.

Working round the enceinte in the opposite direction to the hands of a clock, one comes first to a gap in the rampart and a rough causeway over the fosse. This, however, is evidently just a break-through made for farming operations and can be ignored. Going still further round (and into the wood) till one gets to the west side, there is to be seen another causeway. This leads to the entrance flanked by two mounds—or, rather, heightened and thickened portions of the ramparts—which is referred to in the Earthworks Committee's Report of 1919. This, it is contended, was the one original entrance, and Illustration No. 2 gives a view of it taken from the outer end of the causeway. This photograph was taken in the winter; in summer-time, at any rate, the spot is by no means easy to find, as the 1919 Report remarks.

The conjecture as to the former existence of gate towers is open to question; the probabilities appear to be in favour of a substantial gate and palisades only.

From beyond this point it is only possible for some



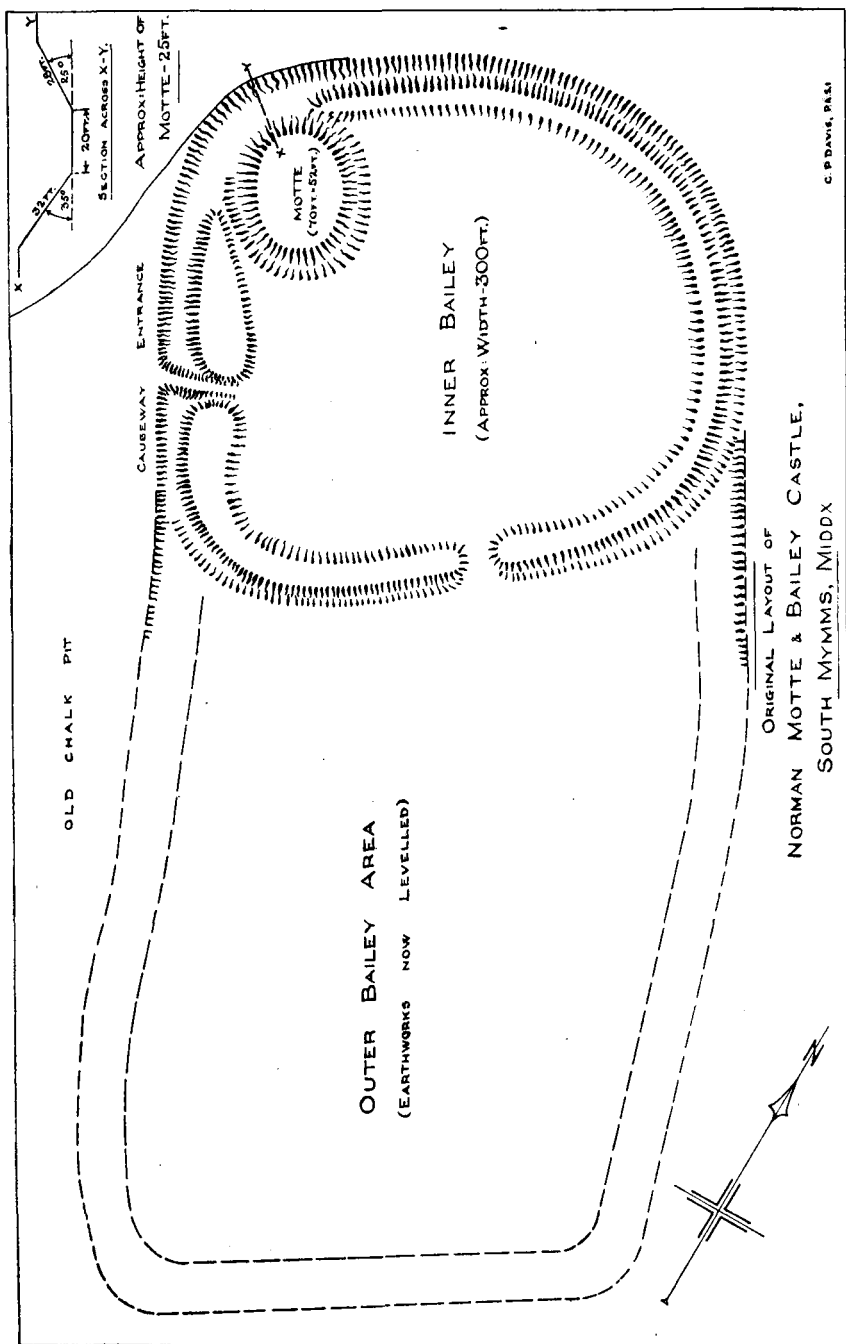
NO. 1. RAMPART



NO. 2. CAUSEWAY ENTRANCE



No. 3. CHALK-PIT



little distance to follow the enceinte by proceeding along the top of the rampart, as at this spot the workings of the old chalk-pit have cut into the fosse, and there is an almost precipitous drop of some 80 ft. to the bottom of the pit. Illustration No. 3 was taken in the chalk-pit; the spot in question is among the trees high up in the background. This pit is undoubtedly very old, and the tenant farmer of the surrounding land, who knows the whole neighbourhood well, states that he is decidedly of the opinion that the flints for South Mymms Church came from it, as he is not aware of any other place near from which suitable flints could have been obtained.

Proceeding further round what is the south and south-east section, one comes to the third and last gap in the enceinte. This gap has been the cause of some speculation, as it was contended, on the one hand, that such a stronghold would probably have only one entrance, and on the other hand, it was asked why the line of the rampart and fosse curved slightly inwards on each side of the gap if that was no part of the original work. Ultimately the problem was solved in a most interesting manner. A slight ridge in the ploughed land was noticed leading out from the enceinte at about the middle of the section just referred to, and, on a photograph being taken from the air by the courteous assistance of the Royal Air Force, the outlines of an outer bailey were disclosed (see Illustration No. 4). From this it became obvious that gap No. 3 was the way from the inner to the outer bailey.

Going still further round, there is a curious flattening-out of the outer bank, but this was revealed by the aerial photograph as the spot where the line of the outer bailey joined that of the inner bailey on the other side.

The plan of the whole lay-out of the place can now be given (see Illustration No. 5). It should be understood that the enceinte hitherto referred to is that of the



No. 4. AIR PHOTO



No. 6. MOTTE



No. 7. (FOSSE SLOPE OF MOTTE ON RIGHT)

inner bailey; that of the outer bailey has been completely destroyed and levelled, and except as photographed from the air, its area appears to be just a cornfield.

Now for the interior. Entering the inner-bailey area by the original causeway and entrance, one finds the motte on the left-hand side. Round its base is a depression in the ground, which is the only trace visible of the inner fosse that surrounded it; its slopes rise steeply, and its present height is about 27 ft. Its top (slightly raised at the edge, but otherwise flat) is roughly oval, having, approximately, diameters of 70 ft. and 52 ft. respectively. At one spot some of the chalk and earth has broken away and fallen into the fosse on the outer side, but for the most part the mound is intact except for surface weathering. Indeed, it has stood through the centuries surprisingly well, possibly because of the presence of large flints in the chalk. The mound is not easy to photograph because of the trees, but Illustration No. 6 gives a fairly good idea of it. (The small mound on the left is a potato clamp.)

The fosse on the outer side of the motte is wide and deep. The slope from the top of the mound to the bottom of the fosse (at an angle of about 35°) measures 32 ft., the width of the fosse is 20 ft., and the slope on the opposite side is 28 ft. (at an angle of about 25°). These are the present measurements, the ditch being, of course, partially filled in. Illustration No. 7 was taken along the bottom of the ditch at the point in question, and shows the slope up the mound on the right. It is suggested that the foot of the wooden gangway to the top of the motte was hereabouts, and it will be observed that this is against the part of the motte farthest from the entrance.

There is one query about the earthworks outstanding, for there are slight traces of a bank running out nearly at right angles to the former outer bailey. This, however, seems to end by the by-pass road, and it is

doubtful whether anything further can be discovered about it in the absence of excavation. It may be that it was part of an extra enclosure which was never completed.

What was the history of this stronghold? Well, nothing is known with certainty, but it is conjectured that it was built by that notorious ruffian, Geoffrey de Mandeville the Second, the reasons advanced being: (i) that, as already mentioned, it appears to be of late date; (ii) that it was in the territory ruled by Geoffrey; and (iii) that Matilda gave Geoffrey a charter in 1142 which, among other things, granted him permission to build a castle anywhere in his fiefs. If South Mymms is the said castle, it probably had only a short existence, as Geoffrey died in 1144.

In view of Geoffrey's marauding habits it may be significant that the old road from Barnet to St. Albans is less than a mile away. An ancient trackway, forming part of the Middlesex and Hertfordshire county boundary runs through North Mymms Park about half a mile away, and goes into the Barnet-St. Albans road by the Park gates. There is a well-worn track through the Park woods from the direction of the Castle leading into the county boundary trackway, and it is possible that this may have been used by the occupants of the Castle; but the plough has destroyed proof of this conjecture.

The "sunken way" referred to by the Earthworks Committee has only, in the writer's opinion, a fortuitous connection with the Castle. The deserted inner bailey would make a very useful sheep and cattle enclosure, and it is suggested that the "sunken way" was merely a much-worn cattle track to the Mimshall Brook, which was resorted to for watering purposes.

Though there are numerous Norman-castle earthworks scattered over the country, those of South Mymms are exceptionally well-preserved, and there is nothing else of the kind equal to them within a short distance

from London. At the time of the writing of this article efforts are being made to have the site scheduled as an ancient monument, and they certainly deserve to succeed. It is also much to be hoped that at some time or other a chance will occur for some excavations on the spot. The chalk lies only a little way below the surface in this neighbourhood, and conditions are favourable for finding post-holes, etc., and so adding to the rather sparse information at present available as to Norman palisade defences and wooden castle buildings.

Note.—Since the writing of the above the scheduling of the site as an ancient monument has, fortunately, taken place.
