

CHILTERN CASTLES
 THE CONQUEROR'S FLANK MARCH ROUND
 LONDON IN 1066

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THE Mesopotamian deserts are still seamed with the erratic trench-lines which record the ebb and flow of the armies of 1914-18.

Other ages and other lands have seen the passing of great armies imperishably recorded in the earthworks which they constructed along their route.

During the Middle Ages in this country, it was not customary for soldiers to fight behind *linear* earthworks, useless against that outflanking cavalry charge which has passed away for ever from the battlefields of our day. The earthwork *enclosure* was the fortification of the early Middle Ages in this country, especially in that simple form which we call to-day the Castle.

English castles are of two main types. There is the simple enclosure of ditch and rampart (or, occasionally, a broad low mound) which is the private residence of the Norman lord—the Country House of the eleventh and twelfth century. There is also the castle consisting of a small ditched and ramparted enclosure having attached to it a lofty conical mound—called a “*motte*”—provided as a combined watch-tower and place of refuge, should the enclosure at its base be taken. These more formidable structures are called by archæologists “*motte-and-bailey* castle.” They are clearly more business-like than the *motte-less* residential castles, and were apparently erected for purely military purposes.

Motte-and-bailey castles in this country are of two main classes. Most important of these is the series of great castles erected by the Conqueror and his chief men very

soon after the Conquest. Such are Windsor, Warwick, Rockingham, Huntingdon, York, Oxford, and so on. These great fortresses have large and lofty mottes, and their baileys would accommodate a considerable body of troops if necessary (although their peace-time garrisons may perhaps have been but a half-score or so).

In addition to these first-class fortresses, however, there are a number of smaller editions of the great motte-and-bailey castle scattered throughout the country. Their mottes are less formidable than those of their mightier brethren, and a garrison of a dozen men and their horses would find the accommodation of the bailey very restricted. They would offer no shelter to the smallest army. They are thus not permanent strongholds for the policing of the country, but would seem to have been erected during some campaign for the purposes of that campaign only.

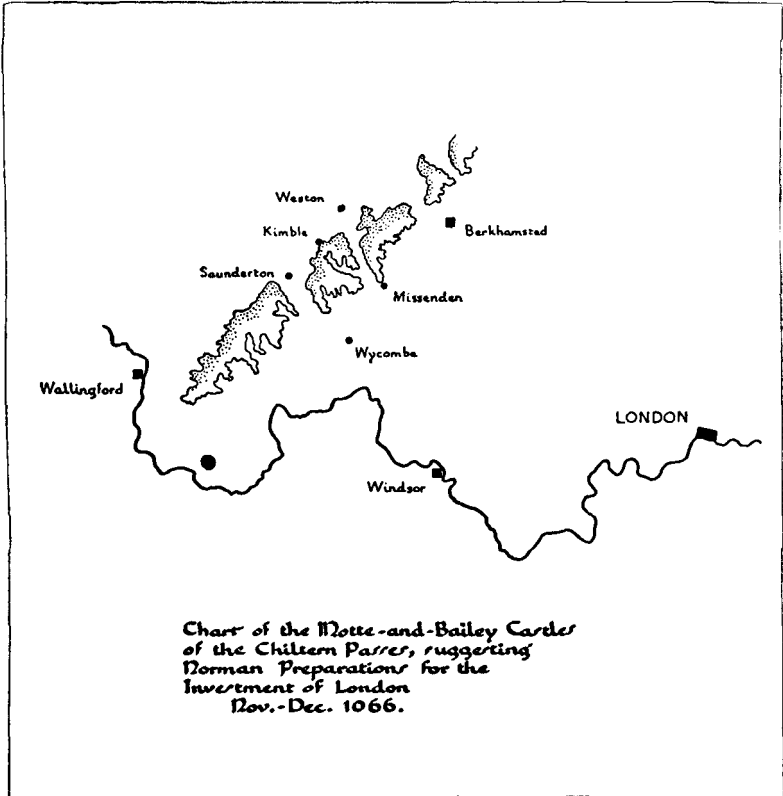
(Castles on an intermediate scale may belong to the period of the Anarchy, their builders hoping for the permanency of their robber strongholds.)

It will be seen that a survey of the little motte-and-bailey castles remaining in this country might throw some light on its mediaeval military history, especially as in some cases they may be found occurring in obvious groups.

The group forming the subject of this paper is that which may be found in the Buckinghamshire passes of the Chiltern Hills. A map of these castles is appended. If a line is drawn from London to Buckingham and thence to Oxford, the area enclosed between it and the Thames is clear from motte-and-bailey castles except for those shown.¹ It will thus be appreciated that the group is a very definite one.

Let us follow them across the map from south-west to north-east. (On the right bank of the Thames are the two great strongholds of Windsor and Wallingford, first-class fortresses which do not belong to the type which we are considering.)

They appear to follow the line of that ancient cross-country route known as the Icknield Way. The Way has two separate courses through the area we are



The dots represent the main ridge, and the enclosing lines are along the 600 ft. contour.

considering. The prehistoric trackway meanders along the hill-side, keeping approximately at the 450 ft. contour, while the Roman road runs on the level ground beneath the escarpment, sometimes a mile distant from its more ancient predecessor. The mediaeval villages are nearly all between the two roads.

If we follow the Way north-eastwards from the Thames until we are about fifteen miles from Wallingford, we shall come to a point where the hills are broken by the wide gap in which stands the little town of Princes Risborough. A long mile this side of the town, however, is the tiny village of Saunderton, the church of which stands in the bailey of the first of our series of motte-and-bailey castles. To the south-east of the church is the much-denuded motte, beyond which is the site of a large outer bailey added subsequently to increase the accommodation of the castle.²

It will be seen from the map that this castle efficiently blocks the north-western end of the Risborough gap. If we turn through this towards London, we shall in eight miles reach the town of High Wycombe, where are the remains of another castle guarding the south-eastern end of the gap. The motte may still be seen on the hillside about a furlong to the north-east of the church. It is known as "Castle Hill" and probably once had a bailey on its southern side next Castle Street. This bailey, however, has almost vanished, and the motte has been all but destroyed, apparently deliberately.³

If we return to the Icknield Way and continue along it towards the north-east, two miles from Princes Risborough we shall come to the twin villages of Great and Little Kimble (Domesday "Chenebella"—said to be derived from Cunobelin). The ancient Way here climbs up the hillside for a space, and, just above its highest point, a lofty spur of chalk has been carved into the interesting little motte-and-bailey castle known as "Kimble Castle" or "Cymbeline's Mount."⁴ There is no through gap at this point, but just behind the castle is the head of a deep coombe piercing the hills from the south-east side. From the upper end of this coombe, two trackways cross the cols on either side of the castle, one leading to Ellesborough and the other to Monks' Risborough.

Kimble Castle has a small barbican bailey in addition to the original enclosure, but the site must have been absolutely waterless, and another castle has been constructed at the foot of the escarpment a quarter of a mile away, close to Little Kimble church. This castle was afterwards enlarged by the addition of an outer bailey. Its motte, like that of Wycombe, has clearly been deliberately "sighted," and the whole earthwork is much damaged.⁵

Two miles further on from Kimble is the important gap of Wendover. On Bacombe Hill, the projecting spur to the south of the town, there are some indications that the summit has been scarped to form a motte. A long mile north of Wendover, however, close to the church of Weston Turville, midway between the two Ways, stands another motte-and-bailey castle. It is in very good condition and has been enlarged with a second bailey.⁶ It appears from the map that this castle was constructed to block the north-western end of the Wendover gap.

Six miles from Wendover towards London, another small motte-and-bailey castle stands on the hillside above the village of Little Missenden. The earthwork of both motte and bailey remain clearly visible, though much damaged by the plough. The site is known as "Castle Tower" (the ancient name for motte was "tower").⁷

It will be seen that this castle would help to hold the south-eastern end of the Wendover gap, and also the end of the long coombe leading to the passes guarded by the castle at Kimble.

After Weston Turville, there are no more castles, but at Aston Clinton the two Ways meet the ancient Akeman Street, turning along which towards London we shall soon reach the great motte-and-bailey castle of Berkhamsted. This is not one of the small castles, such as we have been meeting along the Icknield Way, and is obviously no outpost fort such as are its sister castles

of Missenden and Wycombe. While it stands at the head of its pass, and appears to form part of the series of Chiltern castles, both in scale and in site, it seems different from the other five pass-protecting castles.

The map and description of the above series of castles clearly show that, at some time between the Conquest and the abandoning of the motte-and-bailey type of castle a century later, the Chiltern Hills between the Thames and the Berkhamsted pass have been turned into an efficiently fortified barrier. The main line of forts was apparently spread out along the Icknield Way, each pass being protected by a castle, and each having an outpost castle at the end nearer London. Each outpost could communicate with the line itself by beacon. Wycombe could be seen from Saunderton, and Missenden could signal to either Kimble or Weston via the beacon on Bacombe Hill at Wendover.

Who could have prepared this "Hindenburg Line" along the Icknield Way, against, apparently, aggression or penetration from the capital? And why does the system change when the Berkhamsted pass is reached, and the line advanced and consolidated in the great castle there?

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In the November of 1066, the Conqueror's advance on London had been completely held up by his failure to carry London Bridge. It is quite clear that he then turned westwards along the right bank of the Thames, eventually crossing the river at Wallingford.⁸ By this time he must have been fairly sure of the country between the Thames and the south coast. When he crossed the river he was in new country. If he advanced along the Icknield Way, he would have a good route for his army, and his London-ward right flank would be protected by the forests of Chiltern and Middlesex, unsuitable country both for traversing and foraging. If he made the Chiltern barrier secure against possible attack from the

capital, he could set his men to forage and subdue through the fertile plains of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. At the same time he would be cutting-off London from the north and possible assistance therefrom.

Is it not possible that this is the source of the Chiltern Castles? As the army approached the Akeman Street, may not the news of the intended surrender of the Londoners have come to the ears of the Conqueror, causing him to discontinue his frontier system and advance towards the capital until a suitable spot could be found where water and food existed in sufficient quantity for him to concentrate his army to receive the submission of the Etheling in the shadow of a great Norman motte?

The bailey of Berkhamsted Castle is as large as any of the great royal castles of the eleventh century. Its plan is unusual, being an irregular oval instead of the usual rectangle, suggesting that the castle was erected rather hurriedly. A few days only were required to construct these earth and timber castles. That at York took a week, and it would hardly have taken as long for the Army of the Conquest to dig the ditches and raise the motte and ramparts of Berkhamsted. There does not seem to be any particular reason for a castle of such size to have been erected at Berkhamsted—unless it was to provide a suitable venue for the surrender of 1066.⁹

The series of Chiltern castles described above may be due to coincidence or may be the result of a campaign other than that suggested above. The subject, however, is surely worthy of consideration. Possibly the investigation of this and other groups of earthworks may help to solve problems of English mediaeval history which have eluded the legitimate historians.

Not the least valuable of our historical documents is the Great Roll of the Soil.

NOTES.

1. See the introductions to the *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments's Report for Buckinghamshire*.
2. *R.C.H.M., Buckinghamshire (South)*, p. 276. No plan given, but sketch plan in Allcroft's *Earthworks of England*, p. 477.
3. *R.C.H.M.*, p. 197. No detailed plan given, but site indicated on Town Plan.
4. *R.C.H.M.*, p. 139. Plan given.
5. *R.C.H.M.*, p. 167. No plan given, but sketch plan in Allcroft, *v. sup.*, p. 476.
6. *R.C.H.M.*, p. 316. Plan on opposite page.
7. *R.C.H.M.*, p. 234. No plan given, as earthwork is very much denuded. The castle is shown on the 25 in. O.S., but the plan is poor, and not very accurate.
8. William of Poitiers.
9. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that the surrender of London took place at Berkhamsted. The mention that the event took place "within sight of London" has led some to suppose that the village of Little Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, which, although hardly within site of the capital, is on higher ground than the more important town in the Bulbourne valley, was the site of the surrender. It is presumably possible to argue this point indefinitely, but I would suggest that the existence of the very large castle in an otherwise unimportant place may assist the claims of Great Berkhamsted.