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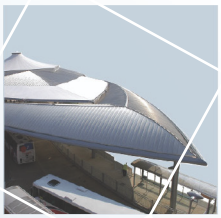
Report № 2007

An Archaeological Watching Brief at Castle Acre Castle, Castle Acre, Norfolk

NHER 3449



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Ben Hobbs

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Location:	Castle Acre Castle, Castle Acre
District:	King's Lynn and West Norfolk
Grid Ref.:	TF 8182 1505
HER No.:	3449
SM No.:	21441
Client:	English Heritage
Dates of Fieldwork:	3–5 November 2008

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken to monitor the repair of a large erosion scar and a smaller scar in the outer bailey mound of Castle Acre castle. The base of a flint and mortar wall had been uncovered by the erosion damage, along with the upper deposit of the bailey mound and the base of a possible buttress. Five pieces of architectural stonework were retrieved from the mound during the repairs along with a smaller piece of worked stone. A fragment of calcined flint and an animal bone were also recovered.

1.0 Introduction

The archaeological watching brief had been commissioned by Monument Warden Robin Bain on behalf of English Heritage to monitor remedial works on part of the outer mound of Castle Acre castle (Fig. 1). The castle has an upper and lower ward covering an area of approximately 2.8 acres. In addition to the substantial remains of the upper ward, remnants of a flint and rubble curtain wall survive on the northern and south-eastern earthworks. Much of the walls and the upper ward was robbed for stone in the 18th and 19th centuries.

On the eastern side of the castle is a crescent-shaped area with separate banks and moat identified as the barbican. This was linked to the main part of the castle by flint walls crossing the moats at the north-western and southern ends (Fig. 1). A depression in the bank to the south of the barbican – now used for access to the castle – is thought to indicate the position of an outer gateway, although no excavation has been undertaken to confirm this (Coad and Streeten 1982).

The area of the castle monitored in this archaeological watching brief lay at the north-eastern corner of the eastern defensive barbican mound where erosion, both environmental and human, had created a large scar on the face of the mound (Fig. 1). The scar was approximately 15m long from the top of the mound to the bottom of the outer castle ditch, where eroded soil and stone from the scar had built up into a raised tongue of soil to a depth of approximately 1.2m. The width of erosion was greatest at the top with a maximum width of 1.6m, narrowing to around 0.50m towards the base of the mound. The greatest depth of erosion was 0.82m.

A second, narrower scar was apparent on the opposite side of the ditch to the mound (Fig. 1). This was no wider than 0.40m and the eroded depth was approximately 0.25m. Several bones had previously been exposed in this smaller scar and had been identified as possibly being part of a human foot. The bones had been reported initially to the local police and then to a representative of English Heritage, David Kenny, who had them removed from public view.

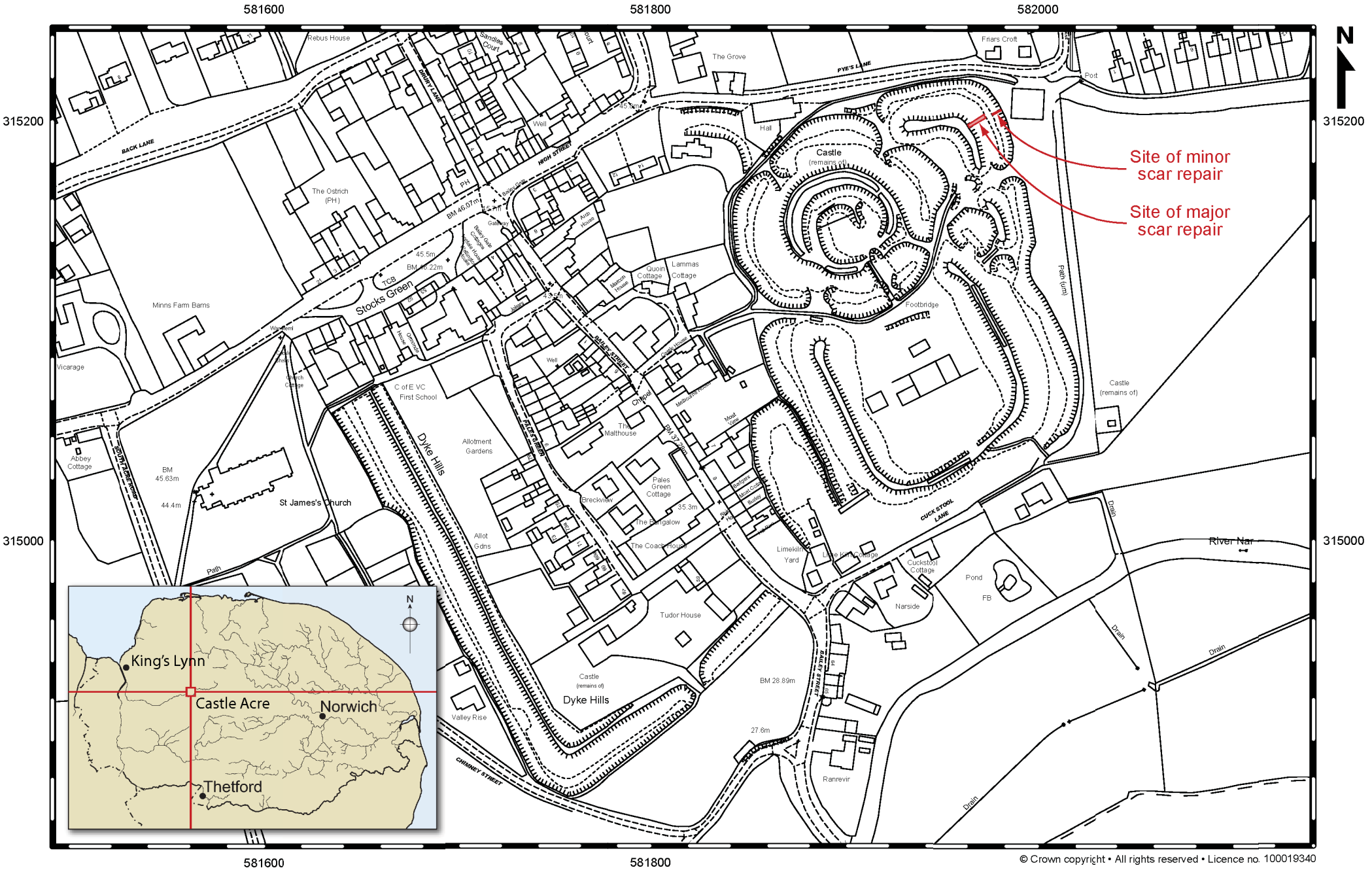

Figure 1 Site location

The bones are now held by English Heritage. Subsequently a survey of the affected part of the mound was carried out by English Heritage to aid in the determination of the necessary repairs.

This archaeological watching brief was undertaken to fulfil a planning condition set by English Heritage and in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: CNF41966/Y).

The site archive is currently held by NAU Archaeology and on completion of the project will be deposited with Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards.

2.0 Geology and Topography

The site lies just to the north of the valley of the River Nar at an elevation of approximately 40m OD. The underlying solid geology is mainly Lower and Middle chalk with some Upper chalk in the north of the parish. Above the upper chalk are deposits of boulder clay, mainly Lowestoft and other Anglian tills. The soil landscape of the parish is composed mainly of chalk scarp to the south with a large tongue of Good Sands intruding in from the north (Funnell 2005).

The subsoil exposed on the mound was a purposefully deposited make-up layer (02). It was a friable light grey-brown sandy silt containing numerous small particles and lumps of chalk and occasional flints. The overlying topsoil was a mid-brown sandy silt with an average thickness of 0.30m, containing moderate to frequent small pieces of chalk and occasional flint (01).

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

The medieval walled town of Castle Acre lies in the valley of the River Nar on its north bank. The river winds its way across the open chalk landscape of west Norfolk and the settlement lies at the point where the river was crossed by the main north–south Roman road in the area, the Peddars Way (NHER 1289).

Prehistoric activity within the valley is evidenced by clusters of barrows to the east and west of the castle on sites, overlooking the river, and also isolated barrows to the south of the site and a Bronze Age ring-ditch to the north (NHER 33815). There is also evidence for prehistoric activity from within the area of the town, at Little Lane and Back Lane (NHER 25927), and Bronze Age tools, occasional sherds of pottery and struck flint have been recovered from the general area. Apart from the Peddars Way, there is little evidence of Roman activity here: a coin hoard (NHER 16574) and sherds of Roman pottery (NHER 29186) have been found.

There is more evidence for a settlement here in the Saxon period and by 1066 a sizeable settlement is assumed to have existed. An Early Saxon cemetery (NHER 3781) lies to the west of the parish on the boundary between Castle Acre and West Acre (Housman 1895) and within the area of the town there is Middle Saxon evidence at the site of the priory and Late Saxon activity at the castle. The Late Saxon settlement appears to have lain in this area, but was supplanted by the building of the castle. Domesday Book shows that Late Saxon Acre was of some size and the estate was then held by a Saxon freeman, Toki.

After the Conquest, William I distributed land to William de Warenne, including the estate at Acre, where a town was planned and built adjacent to a defensive site. Acre became the centre of de Warenne's estates in Norfolk and *c*.1070 he built a fortified country house or 'proto-keep' here for the purpose of overseeing his lands and controlling the road trade. This building was later developed into a major walled keep and bailey in the mid-12th century, the building of the outer curtain walls is also likely to date from this time, a period of civil unrest in the country (Cushion and Davison 2003).

Between 1087 and 1089 de Warenne founded the Cluniac Priory (NHER 4096) as a daughter-house to his own foundation at Lewes, Sussex. It was thought to be initially situated within the defences of the castle, but was thereafter moved to its present position to the south-west of the town (Wilcox 1980). The parish church of St James (NHER 4068) lies immediately to the west of Dyke Hills, east of the priory. It has a blocked Norman window but was largely rebuilt during the medieval period.

Although royal visits are recorded in the 13th century, the castle appears to have declined in importance from the late 14th century and may have been abandoned with the grounds left for grazing (Coad and Streeten 1982). The castle passed through various hands and was most recently in the possession of the descendents of Sir Edward Coke, who acquired it in 1615, and the site was passed to the Department of Environment in 1971 by the Earl of Leicester.

Meanwhile, although diminished, the town itself continued to function. By the 15th century a new marketplace was established outside the walls along Stocks Green, the old marketplace at Pale's Green subsequently being built over. The market continued to be held into the 17th century (Cushion and Davison 2003).

Several archaeological evaluations and watching briefs have been carried out in Castle Acre in the recent past. Several antiquarians explored the castle grounds in the 19th century, but the only documented modern investigation of the castle itself has been the excavations of the upper ward carried out between 1972 and 1977 by Coad and Streeten after the site's acquisition by the Department of Environment (Coad and Streeten 1982).

4.0 Methodology

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during remedial works on the outer castle mound. The Brief required that an archaeologist be in constant attendance during all groundworks in the specified area.

The contractors from an English Heritage-approved landscape management company started the repairs to the main erosion scar by cutting five sets of slots across the scar for the installation of wicker hurdles to retain soil infill (Fig. 2). The slots were dug approximately 1m apart in the upper half of the scar and were 0.15–0.20m wide. They were cut into the face of the scar to an average depth of 0.10m. The ends of the slots were cut 0.40m into the edges of the scar to provide additional support for the hurdles, each cut being about 0.70m deep.

Hazel spars were driven into the base of the scar and the end slots to a depth of around 0.15m and willow withies were woven between the spars to create a hurdle. The upper ends of the spars were cut off level with the profile of the

mound. Soil was then removed from the scar erosion spoil at the base of the mound and replaced behind the hurdles. Additional topsoil was brought in to restore the mound's profile and turves were laid on top of this. Finally, a temporary green plastic mesh was laid over the turf to retain the underlying soil and protect the grass during growth.

The small scar on the ditch side opposing the mound was repaired by driving three sets of five short hazel wands approximately 0.50m apart into the scar base with one hazel wand laid laterally across the top of each set. Topsoil was then infilled into the spaces between the sets of wands and levelled to the profile of the ditch. The hazel wands were spaced so that the area where the bones had been found remained undisturbed.

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal-detector. All metal-detected and hand-collected finds were retained for inspection, other than those which were obviously modern. No environmental samples were taken.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NAU Archaeology pro forma. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour and monochrome photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

General weather conditions were good despite occasional low cloud. Access to the site was from the nearby public car park. Footing on the mound and particularly the scar base was precarious, but manageable.

5.0 Results

The exposed sides of the scar exhibited two main deposits. A moderately compact mid-brown sandy silt topsoil (01) with an average thickness of 0.30m and which contained frequent small particles of chalk and many grass roots (Figs 3 and 4). Beneath this, with a thickness between 0.50m and 0.20m, was a compact light grey-brown sandy silt (02) containing frequent small chalk pieces and particles and moderate to frequent small flints (Figs 3 and 4). These deposits were the upper makeup of the bailey mound, exposed and weathered by the erosion damage.

The slots cut across the exposed base of the scar produced no artefacts and revealed no new archaeological evidence, revealing the same material exposed by the scar. Five pieces of architectural masonry were found together in a slot on the northern side of the scar, located approximately 5.2m from the top of the slope. Four pieces of the masonry were of a honey-coloured Caen stone with one fragment of worn, but worked, clunch. Several of the pieces had tool marks and one had possible graffiti incised on it. No other finds of archaeological interest were recovered from the works on the scar.

Already exposed at the top of the scar was an approximately 2m long and 1.5m wide area of medium to large flints and clunch lumps set in a hard but brittle lime mortar (03) (Figs 2, 3 and 4). The flint seemed to be to be irregularly knapped pieces, while the clunch lumps showed no signs of working. The eastern side of the exposed flint construction ended with a straight edge of flints and lumps of clunch which appeared to have been chosen for their flat faces rather than having been cut deliberately. As the final slot for the wicker hurdles was located along this edge it exposed the base of the edge of the north–south stonework and evidence for mortar rendering (04).

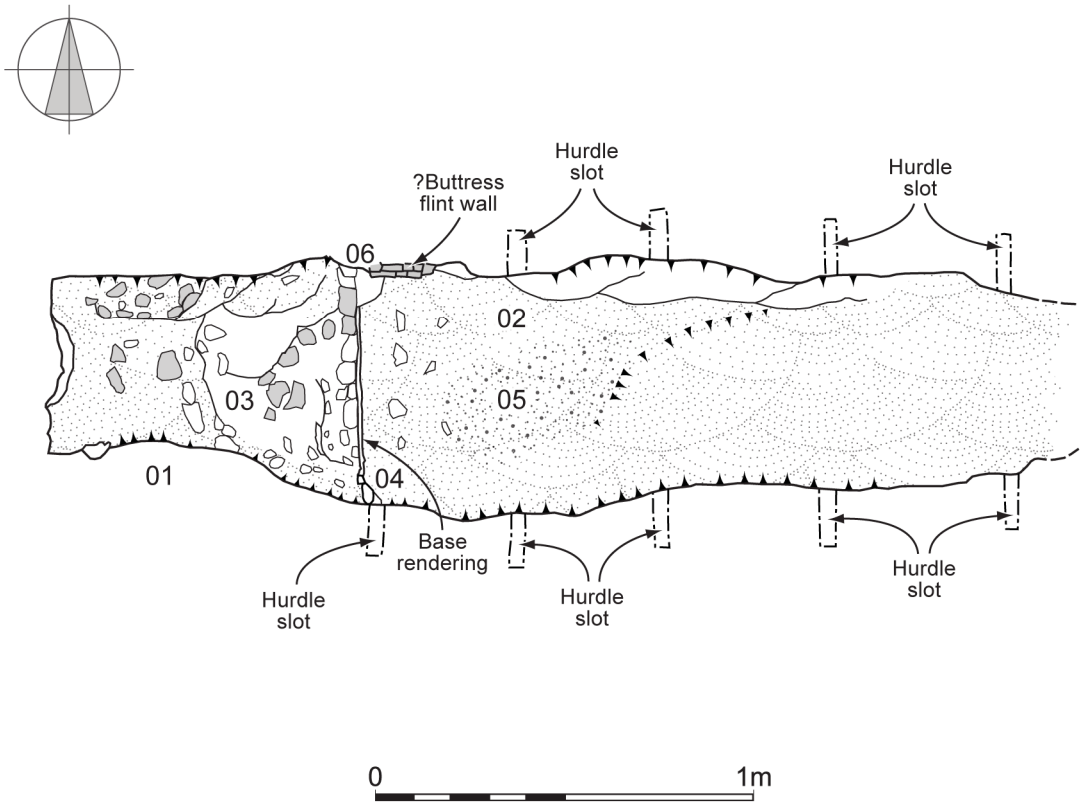

Figure 2 Plan of erosion scar

Approximately 0.80m to the east of the edge of the wall base, in the middle of the scar slope, was an irregular area of chalk (05) measuring 0.80m wide by 1.2m long (Fig. 2). This area differed from the remainder of the scar base in that it contained a greater proportion of chalk lumps and was more compacted than the surrounding soil.

At the northern end of the stone edging the hurdle slot exposed a facing of flint (06) 0.50m wide and 0.60m deep running east–west and set at a 90° angle to the exposed wall footings (Fig. 2). The width of the northern flint facing was not able to be determined from the small amount of excavation undertaken. These flints also appeared to have been chosen for their natural flat faces and were set into a similar lime mortar to the other flintwork. No blocks of clunch were observed within this stonework.

The final phase of the works involved the excavation of the erosion spoil from the bottom of the scar and its use to infill the gaps between the wicker hurdles. This was achieved by a bucket chain lifting the spoil to the appropriate site. The material consisted of light to mid-grey-brown sandy silt and contained frequent lumps of chalk and moderate flints, similar to or the same as the mound make-up deposit observed within the scar. Also present at the base of the scar were numerous small loose flints and several small lumps of clunch, some stained green, likely to have been washed out of the soil by the erosion.

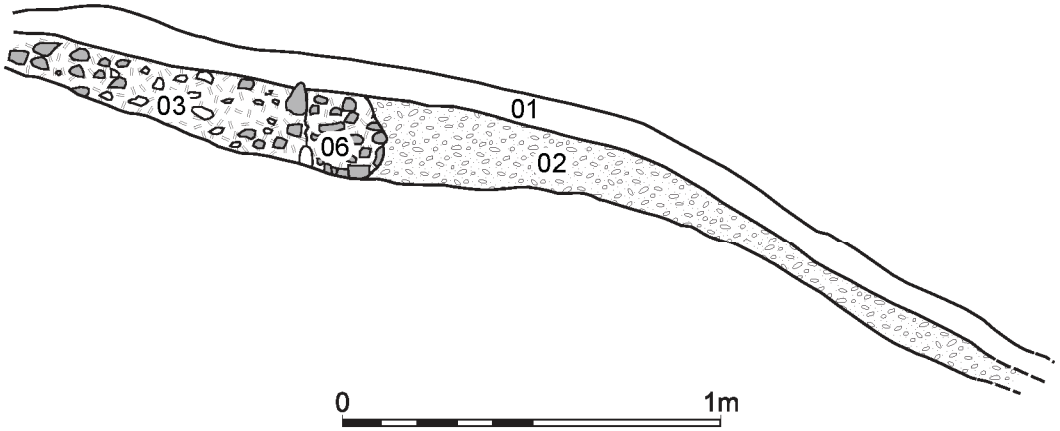

Figure 3 South-facing section of erosion scar

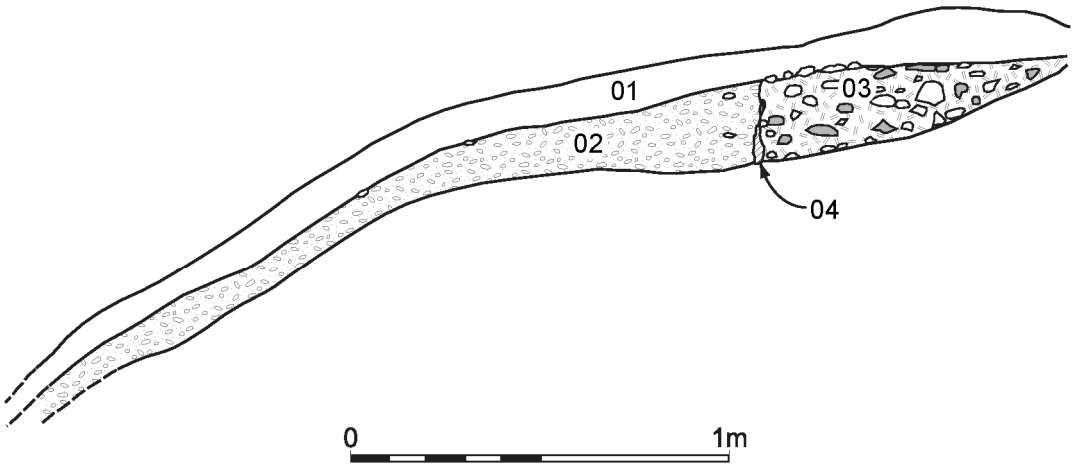

Figure 4 North-facing section of erosion scar

All spoil was observed and metal-detected both in the excavation and the re-deposition on the scar, but little of archaeological interest was observed. One fragment of possible worked clunch, a piece of calcined flint and the scapula of a cow were recovered from the spoil.

The secondary scar opposite the mound was not affected by any excavation, the only disturbance being the vertical insertion of short hazel wands to retain the infilled soil of the repair. This course of action was determined after dialogue with David Kenny of English Heritage, the consensus being that a non-intrusive method of repair was a suitable policy. Consequently no artefacts were recovered and no further evidence for the presence of bones was revealed.

6.0 The Finds

6.1 Worked Stone

By Neil Moss

6.1.1 Architectural Masonry

Five pieces of architectural masonry were recovered from Castle Acre castle (Plates 1–5). The total dry weight of the assemblage was 32kg. Four pieces of worked stone from context (02) were of limestone, most likely to be Caen stone [WS001–04]; the remaining piece was clunch, a local chalky limestone [WS005]. All pieces were stylistically characteristic of Romanesque masonry construction techniques. Tool marks survive clearly on all pieces except for [WS005].

A single piece of ashlar [WS001] is damaged along one edge, but has shallow, incised, curved lines on one face (Plate 1). These are likely to be graffiti.

Two pieces [WS002–03] are similar, plain door jambs (Plates 2 and 3).

One piece [WS004] is more difficult to interpret, it has damage to all faces except one, which has a square mortice hole cut into it (Plate 4). The mortice shows the same axe tooling as the rest of the assemblage and must be considered to be part of the original working of the stone.

One piece [WS005] is an ashlar block, damaged and with less well defined tooling (Plate 5). Clunch is a soft stone and not suitable for major structural applications or exposed positions.

6.1.2 Other Worked Stone

A small fragment of soft clunch measuring 50mm x 30mm x 20mm with two angled sides and a flat upper surface was found in context (02). Three sides of the fragment are relatively smooth and it appears to have been worked. No further information can be offered as to its former function or provenance other than it was recovered from the same context as the worked masonry described above.

6.1.3 Discussion

It is possible that these pieces of masonry could have come from one of the early structures within the earthworks of the castle, although this cannot include the West Gate which dates from the late 12th or early 13th centuries and is therefore too late to be the source.

The masonry was located within the earthworks to the north-east of the site in the vicinity of the barbican. It is possible that they are derived from former walls located here, from demolition debris of the buildings of the upper ward or from the eastern gatehouse associated with the barbican.

Plate 1 Worked stone WS001. Scale 10cm.

Plate 2 Worked stone WS002. Scale 10cm.

Plate 3 Worked stone WS003. Scale 10cm.

Plate 4 Worked stone WS004. Scale 10cm.

Plate 5 Worked stone WS005. Scale 10cm.

6.2 Flint

By Lucy Talbot and Sarah Bates

The site produced a single burnt flint weighing 653g from context (02) (Appendix 4). The piece appears not to have been knapped, but retains traces of mortar implying a fragment of architectural stone, possibly of primary construction or reused material. The piece is undiagnostic and un-datable, but was retrieved from a medieval context and may be demolition debris originating from the flint and mortar wall once standing on the castle mound. The heat required to subject parts of the flint to calcination would have been considerable and may indicate either prolonged heating or relatively sudden application of very high temperatures.

6.3 Faunal remains

By Julie Curl

A single cattle scapula was recovered from context (02) (Appendix 5). It is in good condition although some wear is evident on more fragile edges. The scapula blade is from an adult animal and shows cut marks from removal of flesh and attests to the use of this animal for meat.

7.0 Conclusions

The erosion of the eastern bank of the barbican had exposed the base of what appeared to be a fairly substantial wall at the top of the bank, the western edge of which was not identified. The area of flint and chalk in mortar construction ended to the east with a relatively vertical face that showed traces of rendering at its exposed base. Excavations in the 1970s by Coad and Streeten measured the base of the curtain wall on the northern side at *c*.2.6m wide, a figure which compares favourably with the amount of wall exposed during the current work.

Adjacent to the north of this construction was a face of flint in mortar, set at an angle of 90° to the base of the wall. Little of this face was exposed by the works on the scar and it could not initially be determined what this represented. Possible interpretations were a buttress or the edge of a previously unknown tower overlooking the east of the barbican. Buttresses with similar flint foundations set into the bank were located by Coad and Streeten along the northern curtain wall and this seems the most likely interpretation if, as is likely, the style of the curtain wall around the upper ward extended to the barbican.

A 6m-long trench was excavated across the eastern side of the barbican bank by Coad and Streeten in the 1970s, but revealed little evidence for any substantial stonework, merely a few flints on the crest of the mound presumed to be robbed remains of a wall (Coad and Streeten 1982, 190). However, there is no record of the direction of this trench and it may well have been dug parallel to the top of the bank, thus missing the wall exposed during the current works.

An engraving by Samuel and Nathanial Buck from *c*.1738 depicts the view from the south of the castle and appears to show remains of walls, or rubble, along the top of the barbican's eastern bank. It would be logical, therefore, to suggest that on the outer spur of the castle, as on the rest of the monument, substantial defensive walls once existed.

The scar erosion showed the top 0.50m of the make-up of the bank. The Coad and Streeten excavations were extensive in the exposure of the bank's composition and, although it is clear that there were at least six phases of construction, the material used – chalk rubble and soil excavated from the castle ditches – was fairly consistent throughout.

The lack of artefactual evidence from the spoil of the scar disturbed by the works was disappointing, but the recovery of the pieces of architectural stone from one of the hurdle slots was fortunate. The ashlar masonry has been identified as Caen stone, the presence of which is intriguing when compared to the masonry previously found at the castle. In both the construction and demolition debris within the banks the predominant limestone is Barnack stone. The presence of the Caen stone may imply that it came from the earliest incarnation of the castle, the country house or 'proto-keep'. This was built in the late 11th century and is possible that the Caen stone, so indicative of substantial Norman architecture, would have been be incorporated into de Warenne's manor. When the main building was re-modelled and the defences extended in the mid-12th century the stone may have been incorporated into the earth banks.

The 0.70m depth at which the stone was found, however, appears to be too late in the bank's construction sequence to have come from the initial enlargement of the defences. Much of the architectural Barnack stone found by Coad and Streeten was located in a layer of demolition debris between 1.8m and 2m below the surface of the bank (Coad and Streeten 1982, 150, fig. 6). Deposits above this and nearer the surface were found to contain later medieval and post-medieval pottery.

It is clear that the Caen stone had been deposited at a later period than that of the majority of the demolition debris. Certainly could be derived from the 11th-century early residential structure. There is little wear and weathering on the edges of four of the masonry pieces, which suggests that that it has been buried or otherwise protected from accidental damage. It is possible that the masonry represents a few of the last surviving elements of the early Norman building not needed for the construction of the final building of the re-modelled 'keep' in the upper ward. It is likely that the stones were later incorporated into the defensive banks when they were finalised.

Alternatively the masonry may have come from another building entirely and been imported to the site. The only other architectural building of note in the near vicinity at the time of the rebuilding of the castle was the priory church to the west and this was reportedly faced largely with Barnack. The Cluniac priory was apparently at first to have been sited within the outer defences of the castle, but it is doubtful that this is the source of the stone for the construction, for the construction of the priory is unlikely to have progressed far before it was relocated to its present site due to lack of space (Wilcox 1980, 231–2).

As the five pieces of masonry found were close together at 0.70m depth in one of the hurdle slots, in a space measuring approximately 0.40m by 0.30m, it must be surmised that they were all deposited at the same time. It is possible that there may be other deposits of masonry within the upper phase of bank construction and any future remedial work on the mound to a similar depth may encounter similar examples.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Robin Bain and David Kenny of English Heritage for their support and information concerning the work at the castle mound. Thanks also go to contractors John, Archie, Cecil, Will, Ben, John and David from Hardy Landscaping Management, Framlingham, for their co-operation and interest during the watching brief.

Architectural masonry was processed, examined and described by Neil Moss. The finds were processed and recorded by Rebecca Crawford and Lucy Talbot. The animal bone was assessed by Julie Curl. The report was illustrated by Michael Feather and edited by Richard Hoggett.

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Appendix 1a: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
1	Deposit	Topsoil	–
2	Deposit	Castle bank make-up	Medieval
3	Masonry	Wall base	Medieval
4	Masonry	Wall base mortar rendering	Medieval
5	Deposit	Compacted chalk	Medieval
6	Masonry	?Buttress base	Medieval

Appendix 1b: OASIS feature summary table

Period	Feature type	Quantity
Medieval (1066 to 1539AD)	Wall	1
	Earthwork	1

Appendix 2a: Finds by Context

Context	Material	Quantity	Weight (g)	Period
2	Stone	6	3,239	Medieval
2	Animal Bone	1	394	Undiagnostic
2	Burnt Flint	1	653	Undiagnostic

Appendix 2b: NHER Finds Summary Table

Period	Material	Quantity
Unknown	Flint	1
	Animal Bone	1
Medieval (1066 to 1539AD)	Worked stone	6

Appendix 3: Worked Stone

WS	Context	Category/Form	Stone type	Period/Date	Notes
001	2	Ashlar	Caen	11th–12th	Graffiti
002	2	Jamb	Caen	11th–12th	
003	2	Jamb	Caen	11th–12th	
004	2	?	Caen	11th–12th	Mortice
005	2	Ashlar	Clunch	11th–12th	

Appendix 4: Flint

Context	Total by context of fragment count	Type	Quantity
2	1	Burnt	1

Appendix 5: Faunal Remains

Context	Weight (g)	Qty	Species	Comments
2	394	1	Cattle	Scapula with butchery marks