

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at
Kirby Muxloe Castle, Kirby Muxloe
Leicestershire (SK 523 046).**

John Tate

For English Heritage

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) on behalf of English Heritage during the installation of one new external graphic panel and plinth. No previous archaeological work had been undertaken on the site and no structures had been built on the site other than Kirby Muxloe Castle in the late 15th century. The watching brief revealed an undated layer that is possibly associated with the either the construction of the Castle, or occupation prior to the construction. The intervention was too small to be able to interpret the archaeological deposit fully. The site archive will be held by Leicestershire County Council, Heritage Services Section, accession number X.A106.2007.

1 Introduction

1.1 This document provides details of the results of an archaeological watching brief by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) carried out on the site of Kirby Muxloe Castle, Kirby Muxloe, Leicestershire (SK 523 046) on behalf of English Heritage.

1.2 The site lies to the east of the historic core of Kirby Muxloe, which lies outside and west of the city centre of Leicester.

1.3 English Heritage proposed to install one new external graphic panel and plinth (A2 in size) by excavating two holes by hand for the upright supports.

2 Site Background

2.1 The settlement of Kirby is mentioned in the Domesday Book and place name evidence suggests that it has Danish origins. Kirby has been referred to as Chereby within the Domesday Book, and subsequently as Carbi, Cherebi, Kirby in 1235, hereby in 1254, 1271 and 1289, and as Kirkby in 1296 according to Nichol's Victorian County Histories (1811:622). Kirby Muxloe at this time was one of the bailiwicks or sub-divisions of the manor of Desford. The Muxloe was eventually added, perhaps to distinguish it from Kirby Bellars or to emphasise its growing importance, *muchle* or *muckel* meaning greater or more. The Muxloe family lived three miles away at Desford and this ties in well with Kirby being a bailiwick of Desford.

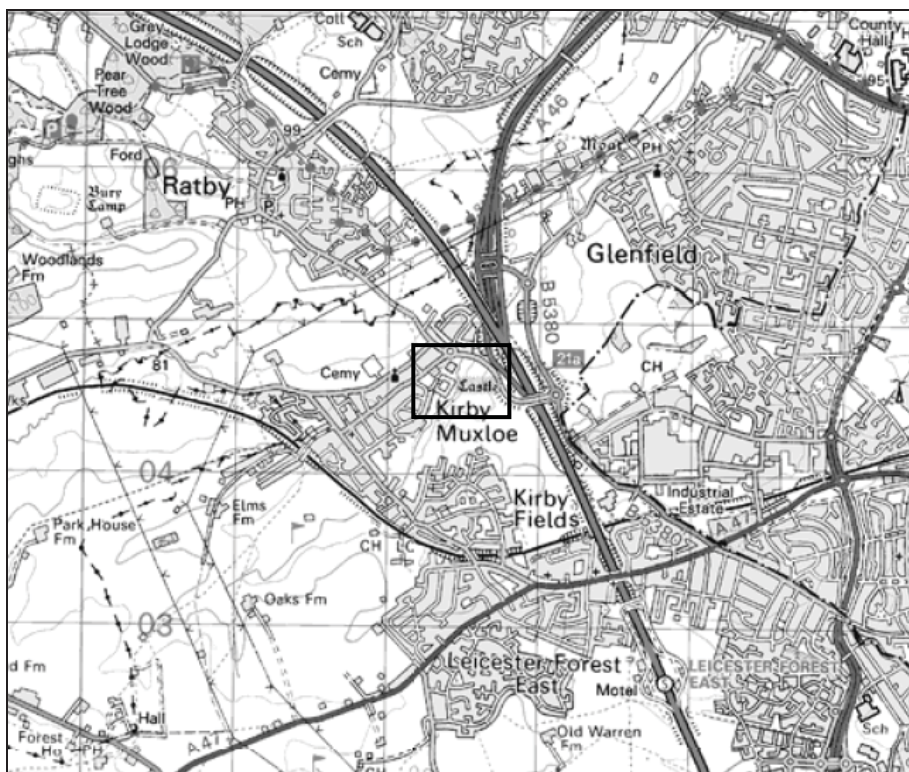


Fig.1: Site Location (Scale 1:25000)

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2.2 There are five Historic Environment Record (HER) entries for Kirby Muxloe Castle (**MLE201**, **MLE202**, **MLE203**, **MLE204** and **MLE11083**). These relate to the manor house located on the site prior to the construction of the castle, the castle itself, the drawbridge and the moat. The castle itself is a grade I listed structure and one of the earliest brick-constructed buildings in the Midlands. The details for **MLE11083** are as follows:

‘Ruins of castle. Begun 1480 for William, Lord Hastings, who was beheaded June 1483 leaving most of the construction incomplete. Narrow red brick with diapering and figured ornament in blue headers; some stone dressings. No roofs. Rectangular courtyard plan with towers projecting at corners and centres of each side. Surrounded by a moat. Only gatehouse at centre of north west side and west tower ever neared completion; remainder survives only in plan marked by foundations and low base walls. Foundations of earlier manor house are visible in courtyard. Gatehouse is of 2 storeys, with chambers flanking central entrance, large chamber above, and octagonal corner towers. To either side are the beginnings of spur walls of side ranges. Chamfered stone plinth with stone gunports above; chamfered stone string at first floor level. Large central gateway of moulded stone with 4-centred arch and ashlar panel above, all recessed behind slot for portcullis. Remainder of lower storey is blind on north front. Upper storey has 2 stone mullion and transom windows to main chamber each window with pair of arched lights in rectangular moulded surround. Central blind rectangular niche in carved stone surround, flanked by initials WH in blue header brick. Upper chambers of towers have single lights with arched heads and moulded surrounds. Walls of towers carry blue header motifs including a sleeve, a ship and a man. Courtyard front of gatehouse has 2-light stone windows flanking stone archway, and fragments of upper windows. Towers on this side have doorways with 4-centred stone archways to spiral

staircases lit by single lights with depressed arches and double chamfered brick surrounds. Staircases have fine helical brick vaults. Lower chambers have brick barrel vaults, with vaulted garderobes in north towers. Inner doorways have depressed arches of chamfered brick. Similar surrounds to fireplaces. Upper part of north east tower converted to dovecote. West tower is 3 storeys high with taller square turret projections on north east and south east sides, the former with spiral staircase. Plinth, gunports and strings as on gatehouse; also battlements. Stone windows with arched lights, each chamber with a 2-light window to either north west or south west, and single lights to remaining sides. Scheduled Ancient Monument No 3. In care of English Heritage. (DOE guide, Kirby Muxloe Castle, by Sir Charles Peers, 1957 and 1983). Year of construction: 1480.'

(Parker, 2006)

3 Archaeological Objectives and Methodologies

3.1 Archaeological Objectives

3.1.1 The main objectives of the watching brief will be:

- i) To identify the presence/absence of any archaeological deposits.
- ii) To establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the proposed ground works.
- iii) To record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground works.
- iv) To produce an archive and report of any results.

3.2 Methodologies

3.2.1 The holes were hand excavated by Rivermeade Signs using a post-spade 0.2m wide in level spits under continuous archaeological supervision.

3.2.2 All plans were tied into the Ordnance Survey National Grid.

3.2.3 All work adhered to the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*.

4 Results

At c.10.5m south-west of the moat bridge and c.3.5m north-west from the moat, an area of 0.25m by 0.52m was de-turfed.

This revealed a topsoil of a mid-brown friable clayey sand with rare small rounded stone (1). At a depth of 0.1m from the present ground level a probable subsoil of a mid-reddish brown firm-friable sandy clay with occasional charcoal, crushed red brick, crushed sandstone, sandstone fragments c.50mm, slate c.20mm, small rounded stone and small angular stone was observed (2). This layer was 0.18-0.23m deep, sloping from the north-west to the south-east. A cow tooth was recovered from this deposit.

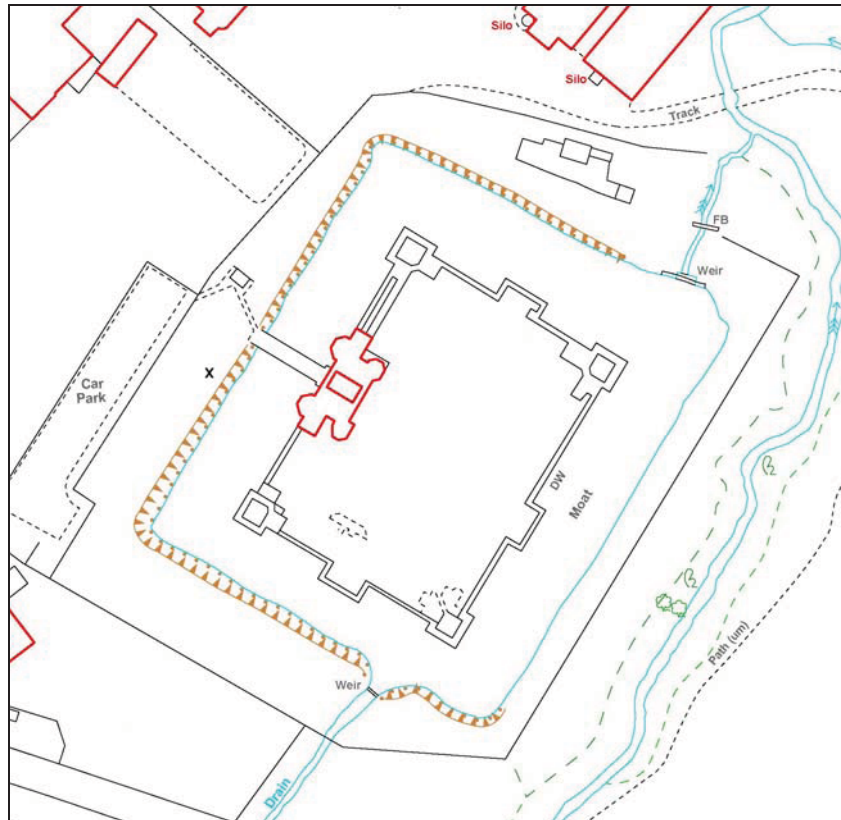


Figure 2 – Plan of Kirby Muxloe Castle showing the location of the display board (marked with an 'x'). Scale *c.*1:1650

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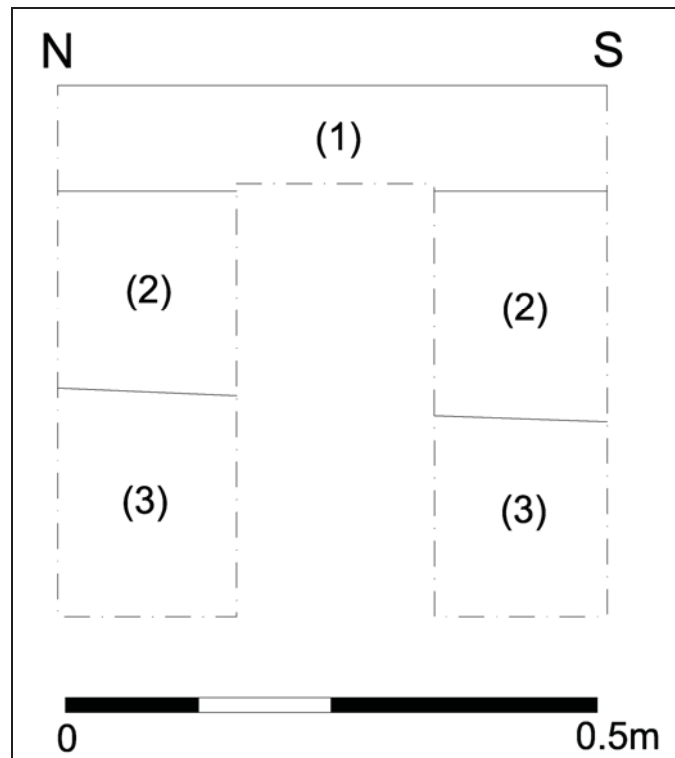


Figure 3 – Sketch section of the layers observed within the intrusion.

Below this, an archaeological layer was revealed. It consisted of a light mid-yellowish red firm sandy clay with frequent charcoal, slate fragments *c.*50mm, sandstone fragments *c.*50mm, occasional small and large rounded stone, rare crushed red brick, sandstone and iron panning (3).

The sandstone observed in contexts (2) and (3) was of an identical colour to that of the sandstone dressing in the window frames and gateway to Kirby Muxloe Castle.

Consultation with the English Heritage Inspector of Ancient Monuments resulted in the decision to continue excavating the post-holes, considering layer (3) may be encountered wherever the display was placed in the immediate area, and the fact the holes were already half dug. This would therefore reduce further intrusions into any potential significant deposits.

Layer (3) was observed for the remainder of the post-holes to an overall depth of 0.5m. Therefore intrusion into this layer was between 0.17-0.22m.



Plate 1 – The new postholes.



Plate 2 – Section in southern new posthole.



Plate 3 – The first visitors to use the display board!

5 Discussion

Due to the size of the intrusion made for the display stand, any interpretation here of the deposits that were encountered is tenuous and open to debate.

The nature of layer (3) is reminiscent of medieval clay flooring or a make-up material. The presence of the same coloured sandstone and red brick flecks to that found in the Castle, along with slate fragments is suggestive of structural remains. It is possible that the layer is associated with the construction of Kirby Muxloe Castle, or any form of robbing that may have occurred of the superstructure since then. The clay may be re-deposited natural substratum from the construction of the moat with building construction material mixed in. Alternatively, the presence of a clay floor could be evidence of a building that once existed here prior to, or contemporary with, the construction of the Castle.

The quantity of charcoal within the layer could suggest occupation, although there are alternative interpretations.

The presence of the cow tooth recovered from the probable plough-soil or sub-soil (2) is consistent with the statement on the new display board that the Castle was ‘...left to ruin during the 16th century. The site was eventually occupied by a farm.’

6 Conclusion

Whatever the true interpretation is of layer (3), it does highlight that there are archaeological remains on the edge of the moat.

7 Acknowledgements

I would like to thank English Heritage for their assistance and co-operation on site (Sarah Tatham and Angela Simco). Patrick Clay, managed the project, and the fieldwork was carried out by the author, both of ULAS.

8 Bibliography

Parker, M. 2006, *An Archaeological Desk-based Assessment for Land behind 14 Barns Close, Kirby Muxloe, Leicestershire (SK 451 304)*. ULAS Report No 2006/029

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