

## The Mote Hills, Elsdon

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An analytical survey of this Early Norman timber castle (located at NGR NY 938 935) was recently commissioned from Heritage Site and Landscape Surveys Ltd by the Northumberland National Park<sup>1</sup>.

A full consideration of the castle's earthworks and the landscape of which they form part is in preparation and so it is not the intention of this brief note to institute a detailed review of previous studies, to exhaustively dissect the palimpsest into its individual components, to configure these into their chronological context, or to offer any kind of commentary upon the castle's strategic or administrative roles<sup>2</sup>. Yet, it has been thought desirable to place both the plan and profile before a wider audience - and in doing so, to highlight certain features of the earthworks that have been either overlooked or possibly misinterpreted in the past.

The Mote Hills appear to be more unusual than is generally acknowledged and it may be that the idiosyncrasies that the earthworks exhibit betoken a more complex structural history than can be readily deduced from analytical drawings alone. Such can offer, strictly, no more than an accurate representation of the sum of the site's overall development. Earlier phases in the castle's evolution may be obscured or wholly concealed by later modifications and the complete sequence of development may only be recoverable through careful excavation.

In order to grasp something of the timber castle's architectural character towards the end of its life, it is necessary to consider and closely examine the earthwork's principle constituents. This is simply a reductive exercise. It does not imply that the features selected are genuinely independent elements in their own right; but it is a recognition that certain constituents have long been isolated as common components in the design of many Early Norman military structures. These analogues can be used to amplify the evidence presented at Elsdon.

The plan discloses that the Mote Hills are made up of four elements: a ragged ring-work, a motte, a bailey and an encircling ditch-system.

The vestiges of the ring-work are located upon the summit of the motte which dominates the southern sector of the site. This attests a supercessionary relationship; but both are probably to be understood as being of one build, as there is no suggestion of an intervening berm and the profile of their external scarps is everywhere consistent. The timber defences which the ring-work originally supported can be assumed to have once described a complete circuit, but the line of the earthworks is interrupted

by both a broad, sloping passageway in the south-south-east and a prominent V-shaped gully at the west lip of the motte. The former is deeply cut and plainly encased a timber gateway which controlled access from a bridge that spanned the adjacent segment of ditch; but the gully would appear to be a secondary feature whose origin post-dates the abandonment of the castle. It may result from an episode of stone-robbing, treasure-hunting or even coal-exploration - all of which are known to have been visited upon the motte in later periods.

Irregularities in the elevation of the ring-work's crest strongly suggest that the timber fighting platform which was erected upon it was not set at a consistent level. This must have been partly conditioned by the fact that the ground surface which it encloses rises from south to north; but it may also reflect a perception of the circuit's differing vulnerability to attack. A brief flight of steps may well have been constructed immediately north of the secondary cutting, where a short scarp lying at right angles to the earthwork boosts its crest to a higher elevation. Another may have been required at the west side of the gateway in order to mitigate the difference in height that obtains between the adjacent earthworks, while more may have been built wherever the crest of the ring-work now appears to undulate unusually.

Access to this fighting platform may have been gained by another flight of steps whose position is now marked by the long slope that denotes the line of the inner scarp on the north-east side of the ringwork. This is the sector where the crest is at its broadest. A faint, amorphous hollow is found immediately north of this putative accensus. Its significance is uncertain, but its location perhaps implies that it could be connected in some way with the castle's superstructure. A low earth bank is found to its east on the outer perimeter of the earthwork, while another fragment of the same kind lies beyond a patch of semi-active erosion to the south. Their presence suggests that a low linear earthwork may have originally run around the whole circuit of the ring-work and it seems likely that this would have marked the outer limits of the curtain<sup>3</sup>. Erosion of the motte's upper flank has presumably led to its loss elsewhere, but there is no reason to suppose that this has otherwise seriously distorted the overall plan of the ring-work's perimeter. The variations in the width of its crest are probably a genuine feature of the design and it may not be chance that the earthwork seems to describe a circuit made-up of a series of straight lengths, whose outline recalls a polygonal plan.

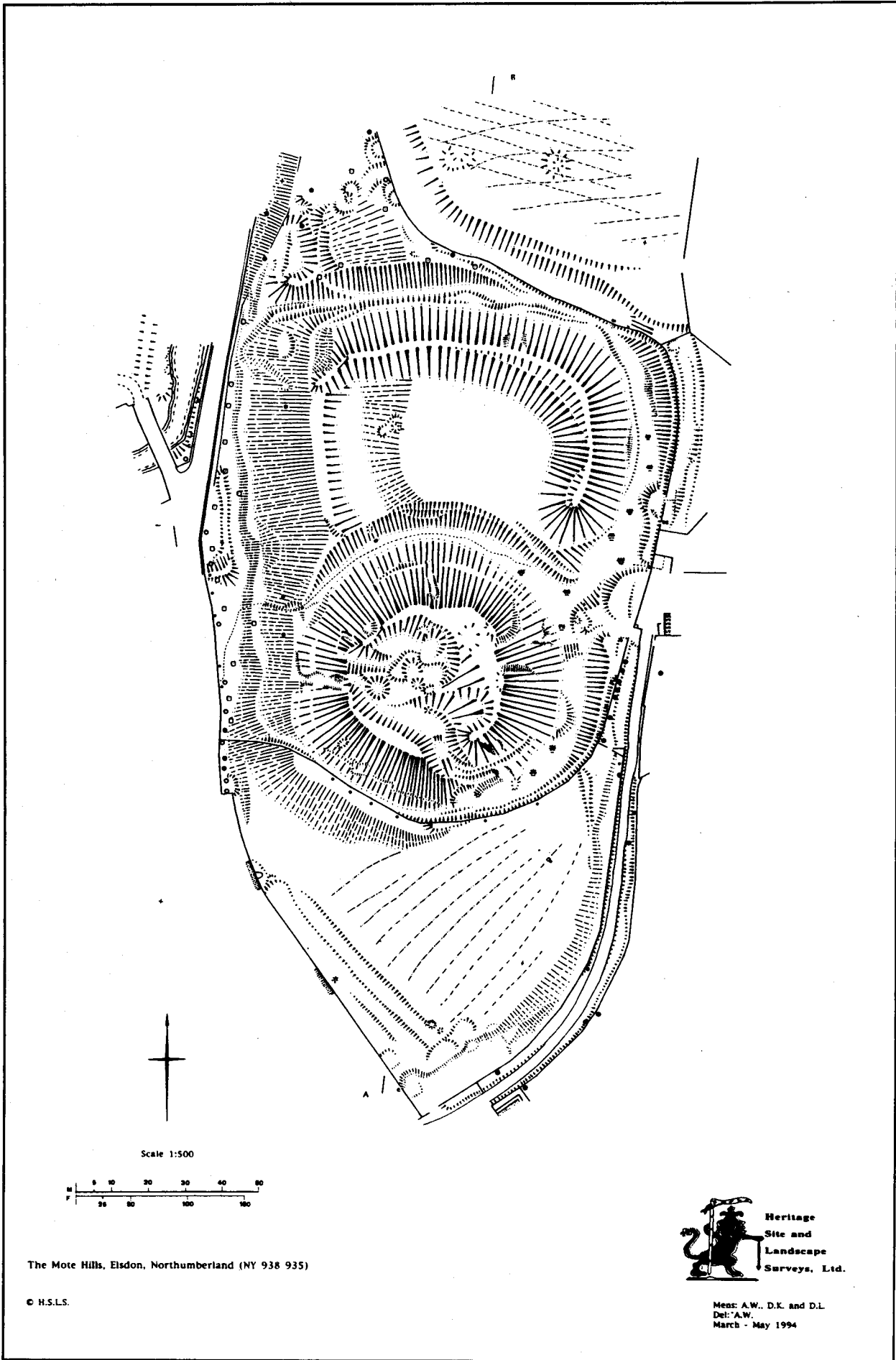


Fig.1. The analytical survey (HSLs Ltd). See opposite for key.

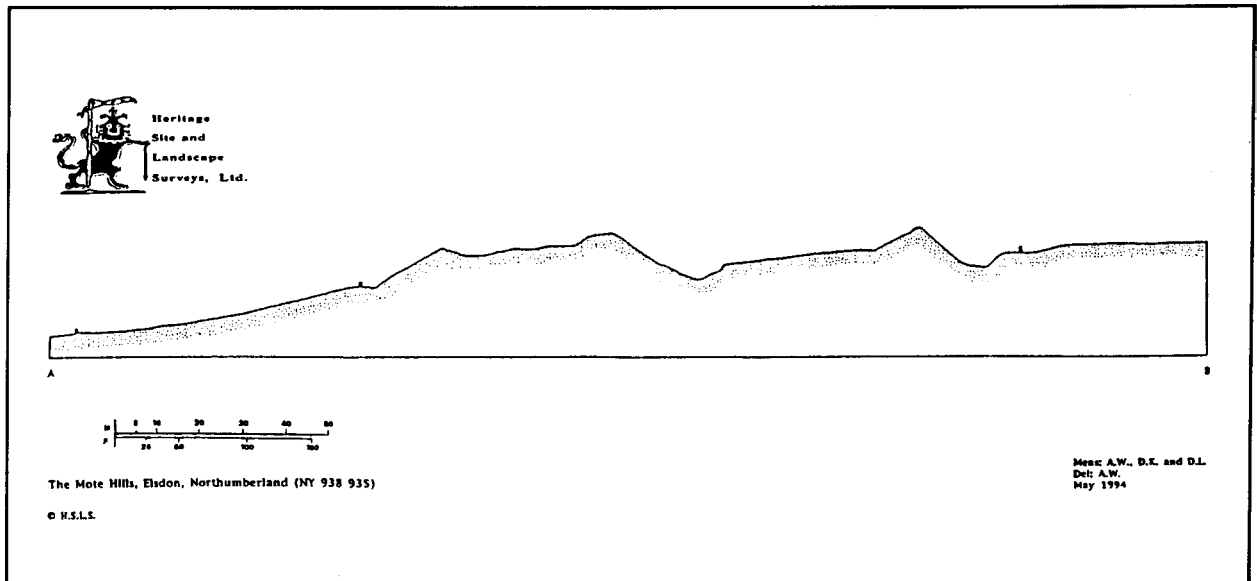


Fig. 2. The profile across the earthworks reveals the degree to which the original ground surface was modified (HSL S Ltd.).

### Key to Fig. 1.

Natural Scarp		Saturated ground	
Induced Scarp		River	
Isolated Boulder		Rig and Furrow	
Drain		Culvert	
Water Pipeline (Buried)		Stopcock	
Galvanised Water-Trough		Drystone Wall	
Post and Wire Fence		Gateway	
Wicket Gate		Stone Heap	
Sheep Creep		Isolated Post	
Mature Tree (Alive)		Mature Tree (Dead)	
Stump		Isolated Thorn	
Cage (Sappling)		Cage (Without Sappling)	
Building		Trackway	
Electrical Transmission Line (Post)		Cable Anchorage	
National Grid Reference Co-ordinate			

The configuration of the ring-work clearly determined the measure of the internal space; but it also seems to reflect something of both the way that this was used and the character of the internal buildings that it enclosed.

The interior can be divided into two terraces, which are linked by the road that passed across the bridge and through the portals of the timber gateway. This road appropriates the western sector of the southern terrace; but a long, gently inclined talus to its east perhaps conceals the site of a rectangular building that was enfolded between the south-east terminus of the ring-work and the long slope to the north. The talus is almost certainly made-up of material eroded from the adjacent scarps. It appears to be undisturbed.

The road wends up to the northern terrace which is denoted by an approximately square outline framed by the adjacent scarps. The ground surface is a little disordered by later delvings, but there can be no doubt that these scarps demarcate the site of a tower. This was the centrepiece of the castle.

The motte is known to be made-up of a high admixture of glacial sands<sup>4</sup>, yet it is quite plain that the superstructure it carried must have demanded a compact and stable foundation. This could have been achieved by erecting the tower upon the old ground surface concealed below the motte and then piling up the earth around it; but however deep the foundations, the discovery of two fragments from an inscription which must have originated from the Roman fort at High Rochester (c.1715 AD)<sup>5</sup>, provides a strong indication that the tower was probably raised upon a solid masonry foundation<sup>6</sup>. Only the necessity for substantial quantities of stone could have justified its conveyance over such a long distance. There are now no visible traces of any stone-work within the ring-work, but there are reports which suggest that the neighbouring farmhouse of High Mote was constructed from raw-materials that were obtained from the castle<sup>7</sup>.

It has already been noted that the flanks of the motte are much weathered. The long, broad, shallow gullies that disfigure the motte's western, northern and eastern flanks mark where this has been most active in recent times. The rank, grassy sward which blankets the earthworks and is now largely unbroken, conceals the depredations caused by the heavy tread of cattle; but several sheep-paths can be readily detected as slender, intermittent terrace-ways running about its circuit. Those to the east of the timber gateway are especially clearly etched into the slope. However, the narrow terrace that runs concentric with the ditch on the north flank of the earthwork, probably marks the original ground surface. This may have borne a palisade whose primary purpose was to retain the make-up of the motte. A similar terrace may denote a continuation of its line on the west flank of the earthwork.

A sub-rectangular bailey lies to the north of the motte. It is defined by a broad, low bank on the west and by a massive linear earthwork on the north and east. There is no trace of any kind of defensive structure along the perimeter of the motte's ditch, but the western embankment probably supported a curtain and fighting platform

analogous to that which was seemingly constructed upon the crest of the ring-work. The little scarp found at its southern terminus may even represent a counterpart of the fragmentary bank noted upon the outer perimeter of that feature. The northern end of the western embankment appears to be overlain by the tail of the massive earthwork surrounding the remainder of the enclosure. The crest of this rampart climbs rapidly and only begins to level-off once the eroded north-east angle is turned. There can be little doubt that the curtain and fighting platform continued their course unbroken and flights of steps must have been built to ease this steep ascent. The marked change of angle below the crest of the inner flank of the earthwork was probably a device to ensure its stability; while the broad berm lying beyond its outer face diminished the possibility of the inner lip of the ditch collapsing under its great weight.

The entrance to the bailey is marked by the narrow gap that exists at the south-east corner of the enclosure, between the terminus of the earthwork and the outer edge of the motte's ditch. This must have been protected by a stout timber gateway which would have been reached by a bridge positioned at the confluence of the ditches; but it seems probable that the curtain at least, would have been continued southwards to the palisade encircling the foot of the motte. A similar arrangement could have obtained in the west, but this seems less likely. Instead, the curtain may have been taken down the slope marking the outer lip of the ditch and only then run across to tie-out at the motte's palisade.

The interior of the bailey is virtually featureless, although a natural west facing scarp cuts across the enclosure from north to south. The remnants of an abandoned fox-earth are to be found near its crest and faint trails can be observed radiating over the adjacent ground and then climbing the inner flank of the northern rampart<sup>8</sup>. There is nothing to indicate that the ground has ever been cultivated; but excavations elsewhere suggest that a dearth of surface features does not necessarily correlate with an absence of buildings<sup>9</sup>. Numerous timber structures could have clustered within the enclosure and yet have left no surface trace.

The ditch-system surrounding the earthworks was not simply the source of the raw-material that was used in their construction, but also a defensive circuit in its own right. Its course is still boldly defined, although it is everywhere much silted. The segments lying to the north-east of the motte and adjacent to the eastern scarp of the bailey's rampart, are now waterlogged. This quagmire is drained by a narrow, open channel that conducts the surplus run-off to the edge of the steep natural declivity overlooking the gorge. The principle source of the water seems to originate in an old well which was once situated on the crest of the outer scarp of the ditch, a little to the north of the site of the bailey's bridge<sup>10</sup>. However, the saturated ground is also replenished by a constant trickle of water that emerges from a broken pipe-line within the south-east corner of the new plantation to the north of High Mote farmhouse. The segment of ditch lying to the south-east of the motte is also a little marshy, but for the most part this sector is isolated and protected from the

quagmire to the north by an earthen dam that effectively prevents seepage.

The development of this quagmire is a very recent phenomenon, as it interrupts the line of a road that was constructed when the slopes to the north of the farmhouse were enclosed, c. 1730 AD<sup>11</sup>. This road is well preserved as a terrace-way at the western margin of the field lying to the north of the earthworks and it entered the castle's ditch-system at the north-east corner of the bailey. A drystone revetment which retains the scarp of the berm below the eastern rampart, is to be linked with this innovation. Analogy suggests that it once supported a hedge and this would seem to be confirmed by the remnant of a low earthen bank that continues its line a short distance to the west of the bailey's north-east angle. At a later date, the course of the road in this sector was shifted immediately to the east of the ditch-system.

This 18th century road originally linked with the present lane that leads from the farmhouse to the village; and the original approach to the castle from the south,

could well be preserved in its course. However, there are no visible traces of hollowing proximate to the sites of either of the castle's bridges and the depth of the lane leading south of the farmhouse seems to owe more to later engineering than to mediaeval or later traffic. In fact, the course of the lane may have been partly influenced by the bed of an ancient sike, of which traces are perhaps still to be observed a little to the north-east of the farmhouse<sup>12</sup>. Ramps extant upon the outer scarp to the south of the confluence of the ditches, mark the line of later trackways that led westwards into the bailey and southwards along the ditch-bottom about the south-east arc of the motte. It is possible that the indented, rectilinear scarp found immediately below the site of the ring-work's bridge marks the location of a post-Anglo-Norman building.

There is nothing to indicate that the outer perimeter of the ditch-system was strengthened by artificial defences. The low earthen bank underlying the stone wall on the south and east sides of the castle, supported a hedge that was set in the post-mediaeval era and it is significant that



*Plate 1. The huge scale of the castle's earthworks in relation to the later tower, the churchyard and the village is emphasised in this Tim Gates aerial photograph (ref TMG 14739/90) taken in May 1993 for the Northumberland National Park Authority.*

the lip of the natural scarp to the north-west of the earthworks appears to be wholly undisturbed. The crest of the steep, natural scarp on the south-west side of the motte has plainly been levelled, but this may post-date the introduction of the post-mediaeval hedge as no trace of its bank can be detected along the greater part of its line.

The Elsdon Mote Hills are often cited as the finest surviving remains of a motte and bailey castle in the county. The recent findings not only appear to confirm this, but also suggest that the earthworks may be even better preserved than has been generally appreciated. Moreover, the results of the field-work clearly highlight how much additional information can sometimes be elicited from even the best known of sites, when such are subjected to the rigorous techniques of analytical survey.

## Notes

1. The survey was undertaken for H.S.L.S. Ltd. by A. Welfare, D. Kear and D. Landers.

The help and advice of the following individuals and institutions is gratefully acknowledged, but the opinions expressed in this report are those of H.S.L.S., Ltd. None amongst those to whom we are indebted should be held responsible for either any errors of omission or inaccuracies of fact:

His Grace, The Duke of Northumberland; L. Allason-Jones; R. Arthur; K. Blood; M. Bowden; P. Frodsham; F. Herbert; C. Hewison; J. Hewison; M. Hoy; J. Jackson; M. Jarrett; C. King; S. Purvis; H. Scott; P. Southern; C. Renton; D. Robinson; S. Rushton; C. Shrimpton; H. Welfare, E. Williams and L. Zienkiewicz.

The British Library, Boston Spa; The Central Library, Newcastle upon Tyne; The John Cowen Library, The Department of Archaeology, The University of Newcastle upon Tyne; The Department of Western Manuscripts, The British Museum; The Library of The Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle upon Tyne; The Library of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne; The Museum of the Society of Antiquaries and of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne; The National Library of Aerial Photographs; The Northumberland Estates; The Northumberland National Park; The Northumberland Record Office; The Robinson Library, The University of Newcastle upon Tyne; The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (Newcastle) and The Royal Geographical Society, London.

2. There are a great many references to the Mote Hills and the following simply represents a selection of those that offer a reasonably comprehensive overview:

ARKLE, T., 1879-81 Elsdon Mote Hills *The History of the Berwickshire Naturalists Club* 9; 538-542.

HUNTER-BLAIR, C.H., 1944 The Early Castle's of Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 22; 116-170.

HUNTER-BLAIR, C.H., 1947-49 Elsdon. *The History of the Berwickshire Naturalists Club* 31; 40-47.

KING, D.J.C., 1983 *Castellarium Anglicarum: An Index and Bibliography of the Castle in England* 2: 232.

The castle was scheduled as an Ancient Monument on 28 November 1932 (County No. 84; National No. 21039).

There is currently no public right of access.

3. A greater length seems to have been mapped in 1848 (Vide. Arkle, T. (1879-81, supra; pl. 1)).

4. ARKLE, T. (1879-81, supra; 540).

5. WARBURTON, J., [1716] *A New Map of the County of Northumberland*, etc.

COLLINGWOOD, R. G. AND WRIGHT, R. P., 1965 *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain I*. Inscriptions on Stone. 417. [No. 1265] (Oxford)

6. Several commentators have suspected that the Roman stone presage masonry structures upon the summit of the motte:

HEADLAM, C., 1939 *The Three Northern Counties of England*. 329.

GRUNDY, J., MCCOMBIE, G., RYDER, P., WELFARE, H., LINSLEY, S. and PEVSNER, N., 1992 *The Buildings of England: Northumberland*. 268. (Harmondsworth)

JACKSON, M.J. 1992 *Medieval Castles of England 3. Castles of Northumbria: A Gazetteer of the Medieval Castles of Northumberland and Tyne and Wear*. 59-61. (Carlisle)

Analogy favours a timber tower raised upon a masonry foundation.

7. ARKLE, T. (1879-81, supra; 541).

8. ROWLAND, T.H., 1991 *Medieval Castles, Towers, Peles and Bastles of Northumberland*. 40 (Warkworth)

9. BARKER, P., 1988 Hen Domen. *Current Archaeology* 10; 137-142.

HIGHAM, R. AND BARKER, P. 1992 *Timber Castles*. (London)

10. ARKLE, T. (1879-81, supra; pl. 1).

11. - 1803 Journal of the House of Commons From June the 15th, in the First Year of the Reign of King George the Second, to December the 15th. 1732, in the Sixth Year of George the Second 21; 346, 348, 353, 361-2, and 390.

ROBERTSON, J. [-] A Map of Elsdon Common in the County of Northumberland, of which Charles Francis Howard Esqr. is Lord. Divided in the Year 1731 by Virtue of an Act of Parliament, etc. [Ms, with Schedule of Allotments] (Copy of 1805, by John Bell - NRO: QRD 3/1).

12. The farmhouse at its head would seem to have been established by the turn of the 16th/17th centuries AD. (Inf. J. Hewison).