

Excavation at Castle Street, Luton: The site of Robert de Waudari's Castle?

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SUMMARY

A small excavation in advance of development at the former Luton Bus Depot in Castle Street, Luton, produced evidence of a ditch of defensive proportions. Previous observations and documentary sources suggest that this is likely to be a part of Robert de Waudari's castle which was built in 1139 and pulled down in 1154.

INTRODUCTION

The former Luton Bus Depot was located between Chapel Street and Castle Street to the S of Luton town centre (TL 090 207, Fig 1). As part of the planning process prior to redevelopment of the site for residential use, an archaeological evaluation (Coles 2002) followed by the excavation described below were carried out during the summer and autumn of 2002 by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd.

The site lies at approximately 120m above OD, and is located on an area of glacial sands and gravels with an underlying geology of Middle Chalk (BGS 1992). The original ground surface sloped downwards moderately steeply from E to W towards the river Lea in the north. Ground to the east is relatively level.

The evaluation revealed that most of the site had been severely truncated during construction of the bus depot but trenches in a small portion of the eastern side of the site contained archaeological features. At the time it was thought that a recut ditch (1 and 2) and a gully (3) were located. Ditch (1) contained a single sherd of medieval pottery of 12–13th century date whereas ditch (2) contained two sherds of possible Bronze Age pottery. Gully (3) produced one sherd of possible Roman pottery. It was thought that some if not all of these deposits related to the site of a castle recorded in the Borough Sites and Monuments Record.

Following the advice of Bedfordshire County Council's County Archaeological Officer, Luton Borough Council requested a further phase of archaeological excavations to excavate and record the deposits revealed prior to their damage or destruction by new groundworks. The site code is CSL 02/73, and the finds and archive will be

deposited with Luton Museum with accession number 2002.313.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Luton's recorded history begins as early as AD792 when it is referred to as *Lygetun*. Domesday Book (1086) calls it *Loitoin* (Mills 1991, 228) and it was a royal demesne (Williams and Martin, 1992, 562). The place-name itself means 'farmstead on the (River) Lea' and combines the Celtic river name with the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) *tun*. There are documentary references to a castle on or near the site excavated and whose presence is remembered in the name of *Castle Street*. Robert de Waudari came to Luton as a mercenary for King Stephen and had land granted to him. In AD 1139 he built a wooden castle for the war against Matilda but this was pulled down fifteen years later in 1154 under the terms of a truce. A second castle was built by Fulk de Breauté in 1221 close to the modern centre of Luton, to the north of this site. Deeds for properties on Castle Street refer to the mound on which Holly Lodge stood as being the 'castle mound'. A mound was present in this vicinity prior to construction of the bus depot earlier in the last century and was traversed by steps (J Dyer, pers. comm.). One of the boundaries of the property was believed to include the castle ditch (Austin 1927).

In 1963 during the construction of *The Luton News* printing works on the eastern side of Castle Street a ditch was observed surrounding a raised area thought to be a bailey. The bailey was raised '3 or 4 feet' (c. 1 m) above the surrounding land and the ditch was 10 feet (c. 3m) wide and of an unknown depth. The inner and outer edge had been lined by post holes which supported wooden posts of a double stockade (Dyer *et al.* 1964, 55). No pottery or other dating evidence was found. These observations were carried out on the eastern side of Castle Street, between Holly Street and Kelvin Close, and appear to have located two sides of a ditched enclosure which returned in the direction of the former bus depot (Fig 1). It was assumed that these features belonged to Robert de Waudari's Castle and that the motte was located where Holly Lodge once stood.

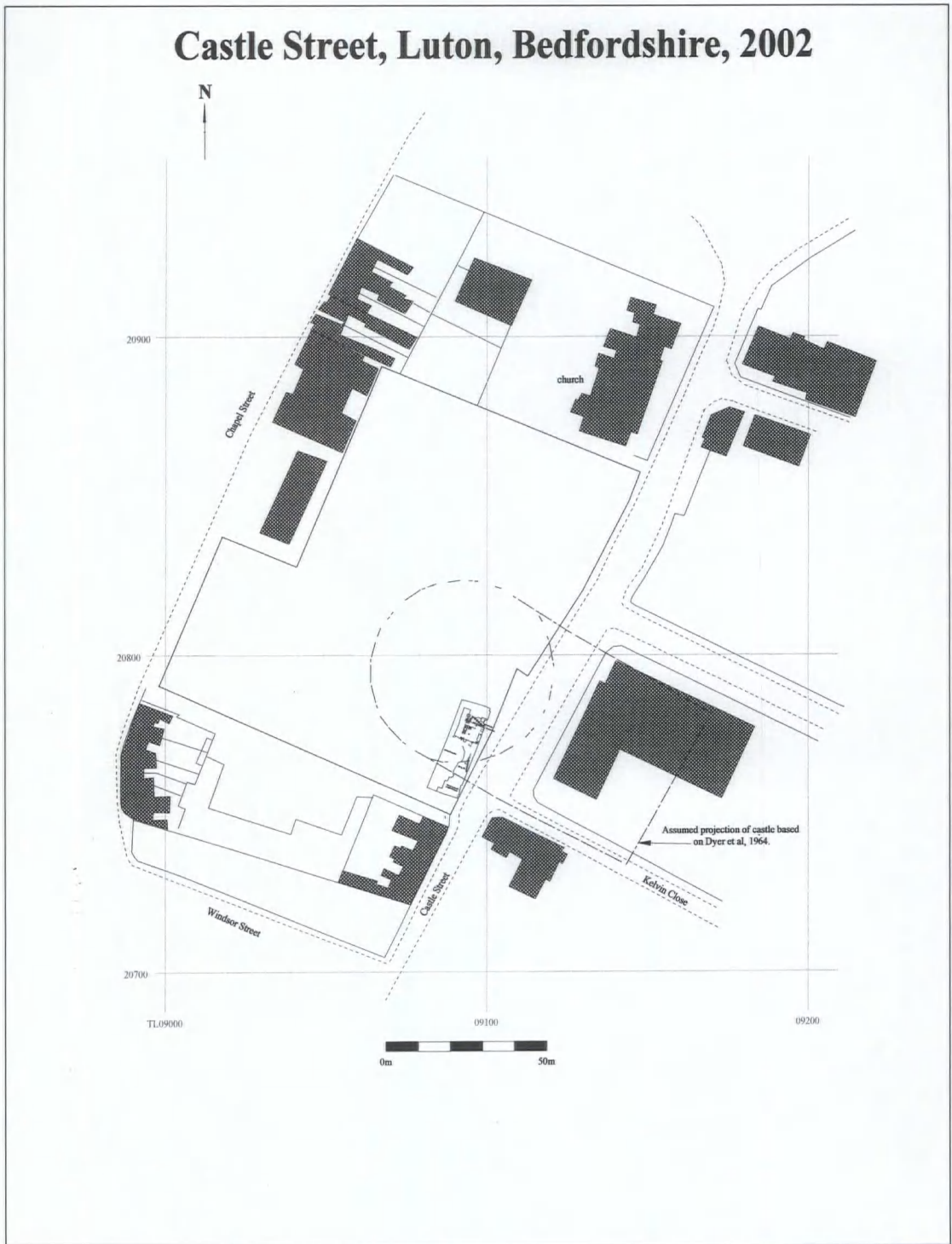


Figure 1 Plan of site in relation to previous observations

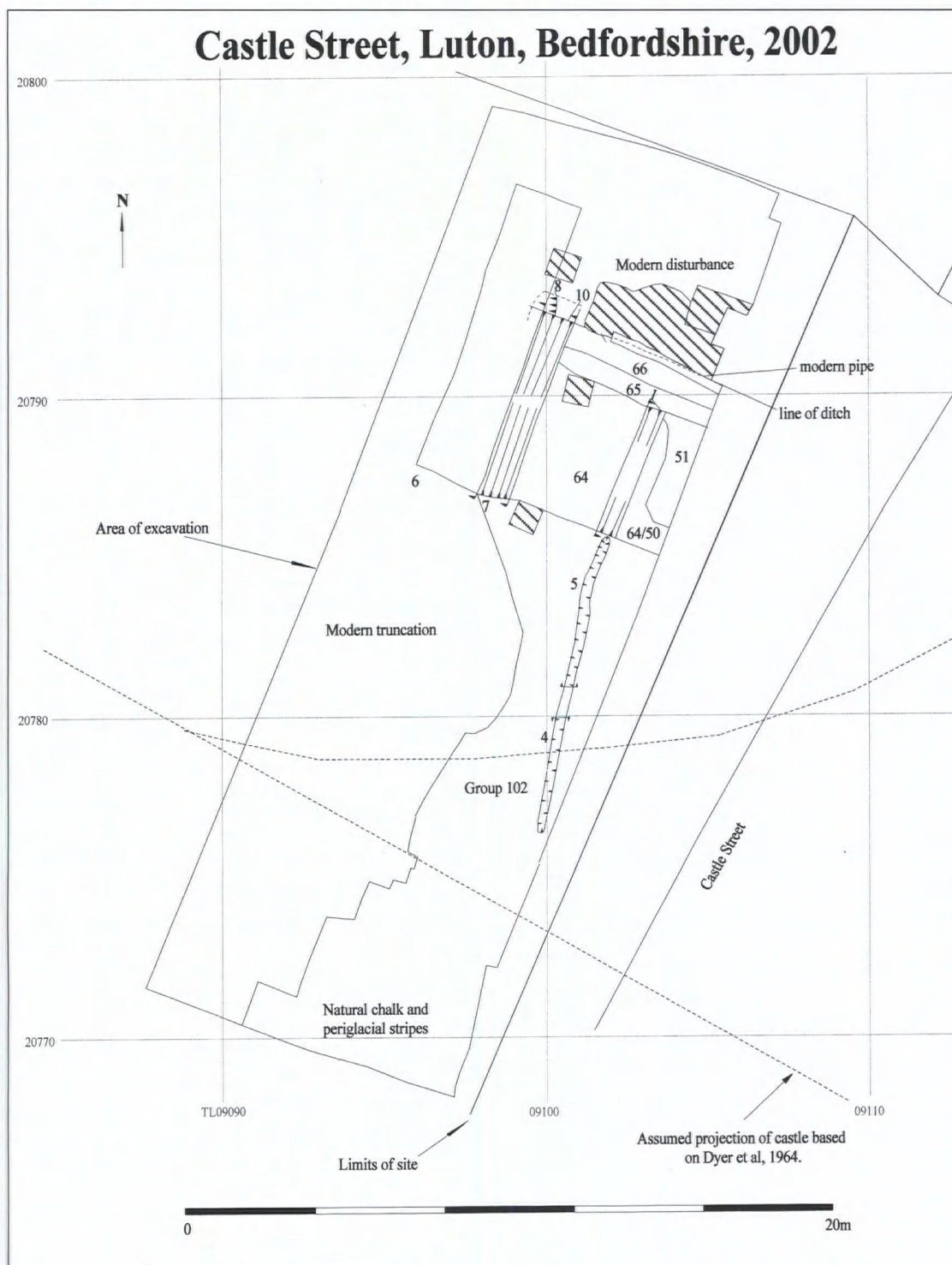


Figure 2 Plan of excavated features

THE EXCAVATION

An area of 300 sq m was stripped of 0.8m of overburden by machine under archaeological supervision to expose archaeological deposits located during the evaluation (Fig 2). The machined surface was cleaned by hand but no further archaeological features were found within the area. This relocated the deposits revealed in the evaluation trenches and located an additional pit (8).

THE ORIGINAL CASTLE DITCH (101)

The two ditches comprised a recut (100, excavated as slots 6 and 7) of the original ditch (101, excavated as slots 9 and 10). Neither ditch terminated within the excavated area. They were aligned NW-SE, and had been truncated by modern disturbance to the W, but continued beneath Castle Street to the E. Two slots were excavated and showed that ditch 101 was 6.10m wide and 2.90m deep and cut the natural chalk (Fig 3).

The infill comprised seven layers (60-63, 68, 70-75). The primary fill was a brownish white clayey chalk (75), which slumped from the NE edge. Fill 71/63, a yellowish-brown clay, is the only deposit that slumped from the SW side and is sealed by 74 a pale brownish-white chalk layer. Layer 72/61 comprised a mottled brown clayey chalk layer whereas subsequent layers (73, 70/62, 68) were all whitish-brown silty clay deposits. Fill 73 contained two pieces of 12th-13th century sandy ware and deposit 68/60 produced one piece of 12th-13th century pottery.

PIT 8

One of the upper layers (61) of ditch 101 was cut by pit (8). This in turn was cut by the later ditch recut (100). The oval pit contained a brownish cream clayey chalk (69) and was 1.70m x 0.40m wide and 0.45m deep. It contained three sherds of pottery dating to the 12th-13th century.

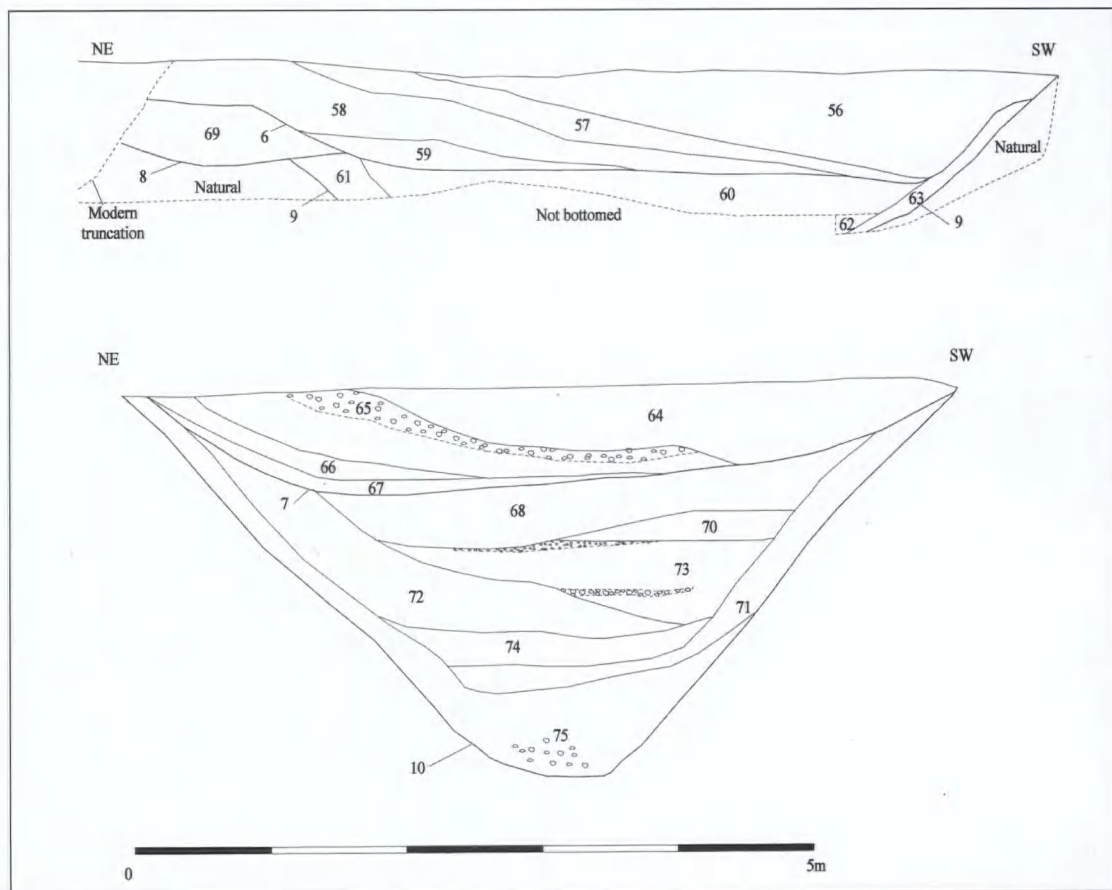


Figure 3 Ditch Sections

DITCH RECUT 100

This ditch was slightly narrower in width than the original ditch and was 6.00m wide but only 0.80m deep. It contained four fills 56/64, 57/65, 58/66, and 59/67. The primary layer 59/67 was a mottled light brown and white silty clay chalk layer and contained one piece of possible Bronze Age pottery, which was residual. This was sealed by a light brown clay (58/66) and which also contained one piece of probable Bronze Age pottery. A white brown clayey chalk layer (57/65) lay above 58/66 and below 56/64, which was a brown clay (Fig 3). As for the original ditch, the infilling had largely originated from the north eastern side

GULLY 102

This feature was aligned N-S and terminated just short of the lip of ditch 101. It was 9.40m in length, 0.30m wide and 0.15m deep. Despite its near full excavation (90%) and sieving of soil samples, no further finds were recovered to add to the single sherd of Roman pottery found during the evaluation. It is possible that this feature is of Roman date but its association with, and apparent respect for, the large ditch (101) suggests that it might be of medieval date but containing residual material

FINDS

POTTERY

Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 18 sherds with a total weight of 213g. The majority of the pottery was early medieval, although a single sherd of St. Neots-ware, of late Saxon or Saxo-Norman was also noted, as were four small sherds of a crude, flint-tem-

pered ware which appears most likely to be prehistoric.

Where appropriate, the codings and chronology of the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series were used, as follows:

B01: *St. Neots ware*, 9th – 12th C. 1 sherd, 6g.

C01: *Sandy ware*, 12th – 13th C. 3 sherds, 147g.

C03: *Fine sandy ware*, 12th – 13th C. 2 sherds, 22g.

C03A: *Fine sand and flint*, 12th – 13th C. 5 sherds, 7g.

A fine dark grey fabric with few visible inclusions. Highly abraded, with surfaces missing, is of possible Roman date (1 sherd, 1g).

A fabric tempered with moderate to dense angular white flint up to 2mm probably of Bronze Age date (6 sherds, 30g) was also noted.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1.

All the pottery was plain bodysherds, with the exception of a single sherd from the rim of a jar in feature 10, context 73. The form and fabric are typical of the early medieval traditions of the region. The presence of the St. Neot's ware sherd may be evidence of pre-Norman occupation, but the material had a use-life which extended into the post-conquest period, and thus may be contemporary with the medieval wares.

STRUCK FLINT

Steve Ford

A small collection of 15 struck flints were recovered. It is possible that one or two pieces are accidental by-products of the ditch digging in Medieval times but the majority are clearly of prehistoric date. The collection comprises 12 flakes, a scraper, a possible scraper and a spall. Two of the flakes may have been retouched and one, with a heavily crushed striking

Group	Cut	Fill	Roman		Flint		B01		C01		C03		C03A	
			No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt
	8	69											3	2
100	1	50											1	1
100	2	51			2	13								
100	6	58			1	1								
100	6	59			1	5								
100	7	64			2	11	1	6			1	10	1	4
101	10	U/S							1	44				
101	10	68									1	12		
101	10	73							2	103				
102	3	52	1	1										
		Total	1	1	6	30	1	6	3	147	2	22	5	7

Table 1 Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

platform is from a broken hammerstone. None of the pieces are closely diagnostic and only a broad date range of Neolithic through to the end of the Bronze Age can be suggested.

ANIMAL BONE

Sian Anthony

A single piece of well preserved cow mandible (8g) with no teeth *in situ* was the only bone recovered. It came from ditch recut 100 (7, 66).

METALWORK

Sarah Coles

A single iron object (80g), probably part of a horse-shoe, was found during the evaluation in ditch recut 100.

CARBONIZED PLANT REMAINS

Seven 40-litre samples were sieved for the recovery of small artefacts and charred plant remains. These samples contained a very little wood charcoal but no other charred plant remains, nor artifacts

CONCLUSION

The fieldwork described above has confirmed the extension of deposits to the western side of Castle Street following the observations made during the building of the Luton News printworks on the eastern side of the Street in 1964. Despite the severe truncation of the ground during construction of the bus depot, the project has allowed the investigation of the remaining archaeological deposits, their characterisation and dating.

The earliest material from the site is of prehistoric date with six sherds of possible Bronze Age pottery and 15 struck flints, all of which were residual in later features. Other than pointing to prehistoric occupation somewhere in the vicinity little else can be said about this material.

The single Roman sherd of pottery would also be dismissed as of minimal interest were it not that it is the only datable find from gully 102. Although this gully respects the line of the main (medieval) ditch and the sherd could easily be residual, it is possible that it is of Roman and not medieval date as believed.

The main feature on the site, is a V-shaped ditch over 6m across and nearly 3m deep, clearly of defensive proportions. That the feature is unambiguously of medieval or later date rules out the possibility that

it is a prehistoric ceremonial monument such as a Neolithic henge or a defensive feature of some other, earlier period. The convergence of various strands of evidence, including the size of the ditch, its date, the historic documentary references and the more recent references to the presence of a mound, can be taken to confirm that this feature is indeed a part of an Anglo-Norman castle, most probably the ditch surrounding the bailey. That the line of the ditch observed in this excavation does not match the projection on Figure 1 (based on Dyer *et al.*, 1964) need not cause undue concern given the conditions under which the previous observations were made, and the uncertainties over projecting the precise line in any case. There can be little real doubt that the ditches recorded in 1963 and 2002 were parts of the same plan.

The typical form for early Norman defensive works is known as a 'motte and bailey'. This consisted of a steep, artificial mound (motte) surrounded by a ditch, and with an adjoining larger flat area (bailey), also usually ditched. Both would also be provided with a palisade and often a rampart would flank the ditch. The motte was a defensive strong-point, usually more-or-less circular, whilst the bailey was usually more rectangular and housed stables, smithies, and stores. Many mottes were intended only as temporary fortifications (for example, several shown on the Bayeux Tapestry were clearly not permanent) but many were also originally, or were quickly replaced by, stone keeps. In these cases the bailey might become a focal point for the surrounding settlement and a town's development could be profoundly influenced by the lines of the bailey. In other instances the castle was sited purely for defence and had little influence over the development of the settlement under its protection (Laing and Laing 1996).

The infill of the original ditch (101) and the subsequent recut (100) are mostly derived from the north-eastern side and suggest slumping from a mound or rampart located there. The infill is not uniform and comprises thick alternating bands of silt followed by chalk. This could represent different origins of the mound/bank material with the silty deposits reflecting the slump of turves which formed a core, with the chalk reflecting slump from the upcast from the construction of the ditch.

It is tempting to assign the infill of the ditch to the documentary reference to the castle being pulled down in 1154. The meagre dating evidence from the fills is insufficient to provide firm support for this date, but certainly does not contradict it. The discrete

nature of the banded fills suggests that this is a product of periods of natural slumping rather than deliberate slighting and backfilling in a single episode, when a more homogenous fill might be expected. That such a large ditch had become infilled so quickly such that it was subsequently cut by a pit also of medieval date perhaps points to a catastrophic and rapid collapse of a bank or mound following the removal of a retaining structure. Unfortunately no evidence was recovered for a retaining structure such as a revetment or palisade, as the relevant adjacent areas of the ditch had been disturbed by modern development.

The subsequent recut (100) also of medieval date, ceramically indistinguishable from the original, is puzzling. Despite a width almost as great as the original ditch it was much too shallow to be considered a replacement defensive structure. Its function therefore is unclear. It is possible that this feature is a property or field boundary and that by this time the remnants of the castle had become a convenient setting-out point in the landscape. Assuming the motte survived, perhaps the bailey had already become a conspicuous element in the local topography, worth-redefining, even if it had lost the necessity for defence.

Despite the short life recorded for Robert de Waudari's castle, and the lack of evidence recovered here beyond the ditch, it should not be assumed that a timber castle (assuming that this is what it was) was necessarily *intended* to be short-lived or was in any sense inferior to a stone one, at least originally (Higham and Barker 1992). However, in this instance, it may well have been intended primarily as a campaign fort rather than a lasting visual symbol of lordship, or the lord's residence: the location seems inconvenient (as tacitly attested by the relocation when a new castle was built) and the context of building suggests it was a stop-gap measure. Recent archaeological attention has been increasingly directed at the elements of castle-building and the functions of castles *beyond* defence, but it is worth recalling that defence was their *primary* purpose

(Thompson, 1995). Sites such as this, abandoned very quickly after construction, emphasize this point, and a recent call (Coad, 1994, 221) to study such abandoned sites as closely as the more obviously 'successful' castles is welcome. Although the evidence here is meagre, it is a start.

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