

RECENT EXCAVATIONS AT NEWARK CASTLE, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

by

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SUMMARY

Recent research on Newark Castle has begun to throw more light on both the standing structure and the earlier history of the site. This is a summary of the results of three seasons of archaeological excavations from 1992 to 1994 which have located the northern defences and some of the internal buildings of the castle. Evidence of occupation from prehistoric times has been uncovered, as well as an earthwork castle predating the stone building. The further aims of the excavation programme are discussed in the light of these findings.

INTRODUCTION

Commanding the junction of the Great North Road and the Fosse Way, and controlling the river traffic of the Trent, Newark's strategic importance in the Middle Ages is reflected in the high quality of the remaining castle structure which stands in ruins on the western half of the site. A full survey of the 12th century gatehouse and north curtain range has been carried out by Trent and Peak Archaeological Trust sponsored by English Heritage and further work is planned on the remaining structure. The results of this work are to be published shortly (Marshall forthcoming).

In 1989 the Newark Castle Trust was established to encourage research on the castle and to promote a better understanding of this important monument through educational activities and publications. In addition to the site's intrinsic interest, it was felt that a useful contribution could be made towards our knowledge of a small group of comparable 12th century bishops' castles including Wolvesey in Winchester, Hampshire (Biddle 1969), Old Sarum, Wilt-

shire (Clapham and Montgomerie 1947) and Sherborne, Dorset (Bean 1950-5). The main objective of the excavation programme was to investigate the plan of the 12th century castle founded by Bishop Alexander c1135. After the Civil War slighting of 1646, the ground plan of Newark castle was obliterated to an unusual degree by stone-robbing, subsequent rebuilding and a final thorough clearance of the ground associated with landscaping the municipal park, opened in 1889, which still occupies the site. The latter proved to be particularly severe in the northern part of the site, where later medieval archaeological levels have been completely lost.

The documentary history of the castle gives little insight into its plan and pictorial evidence, all post-slighting, is similarly unhelpful. Two geographical surveys sponsored by the Trust failed to yield positive results. Previous excavations (shown on Fig. 1) had thrown light on the eastern and southern defences (Barley and Waters 1956; Courtney 1973; G.P.O. trench watching brief 1975; Samuels 1984), but speculation differed as to the form of the plan (Braun 1935; Barley and Dixon 1977; Marshall 1989). A five-year programme of excavations within the castle grounds was proposed, beginning in 1992 and the results of each season have to some extent determined the objectives of the next. An interim report has been published on the 1992-3 excavations (Dixon, Marshall, Palmer-Brown and Samuels 1994) and another, on the most recent season, is in preparation (Coupland, Marshall and Samuels, forthcoming): this paper seeks to summarise these reports and offers some provisional interpretations. One further season of excavations is envisaged on completion of which, when all the discoveries can be fully analysed, a final report will be published. All the materials from the excavations and copies of the site archives are deposited in Newark Museum.

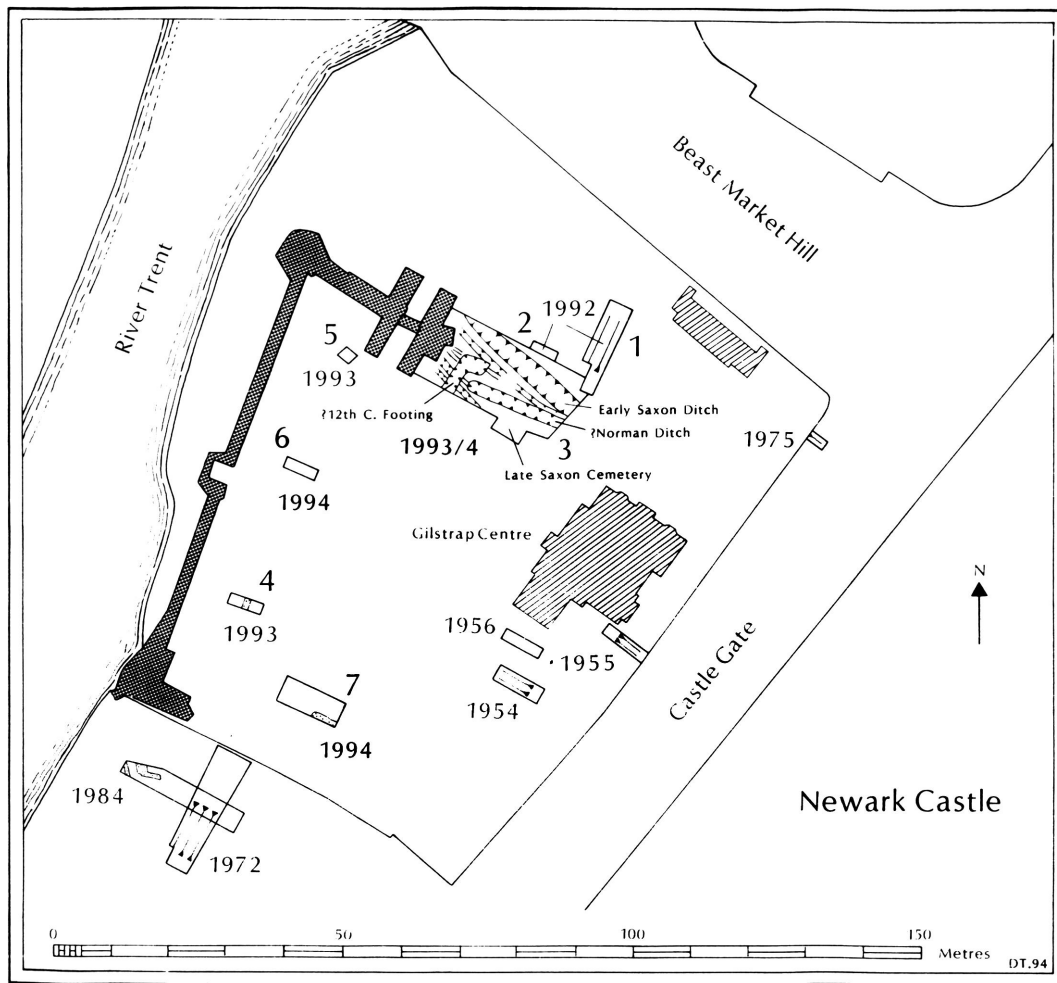


FIGURE 1: Newark Castle: Areas excavated 1954 to 1994. Stippled areas show above ground masonry remains: hatched areas indicate more recent buildings.

EXCAVATIONS 1992-4

THE 12TH CENTURY CASTLE

During the first season Area 1 (Fig. 1) was excavated to establish the line of the northern defences and, also, to explore the possibility of a 12th century double ward plan. A stub of the north-east section of a stone curtain can be seen attached to the eastern side of the gatehouse, apparently running off at an angle (Plate 1), and Braun (1935) conjectured that this wall formed an acute salient north-east corner to an otherwise square plan, encompassing the entire site in a single ward. The eastern defences were later defined

during excavations (Barley and Waters 1956) which located a ditch and rampart skirting Castle Gate, but found no clear evidence of a stone curtain wall, although the ditch was further glimpsed when a G.P.O. trench was dug in the pavement outside the north-east entrance to the castle gardens in 1975. Barley and Dixon (1977) noted a 19th century reference to a tower foundation east of the gatehouse (Trollope 1871: Blagg 1906), from which they concluded that the north curtain would have taken a more direct line towards Castle Gate. It has also been suggested that the castle may have consisted of a western ward defended in stone and an eastern, outer ward surrounded by a rampart and ditch (Marshall

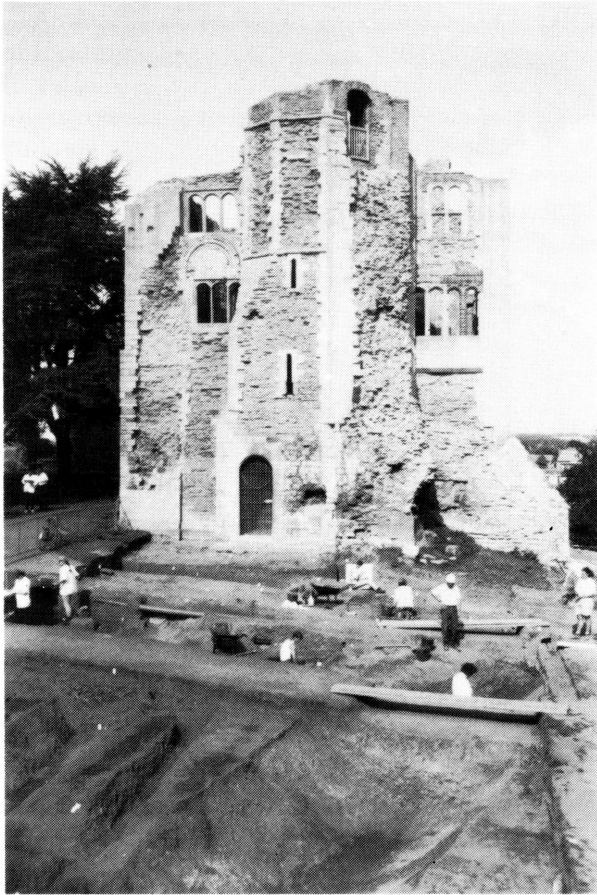


PLATE 1: View of Area 3 looking west towards the gatehouse of c. 1135.

1989), and if this were the case, the tower foundation might mark the turning point of the eastern wall of the stone ward. This would line up with the western defences of the Old Borough as defined by Todd (1974, 28: 1977, 41), so the eastern, less substantially defended, ward would lie within the perimeter of the town. During excavations of another stretch of the castle's southern ditch, substantial foundations of part of a stone tower were revealed near the river (Samuels 1984). This aligned with the plinth added to the south-west tower of the castle c. 1300 and was probably part of a town watergate of a similar date.

Area 1 failed to locate either the tower recorded by Trollope or north-east curtain, but revealed the castle ditch. Area 2 was cut in an attempt to find the line of the stone curtain, but undisturbed ground was en-

countered. If the wall continued for any distance a change in angle must have occurred much closer to the gatehouse. The excavation of the moat went no deeper than a 17th century recut, no doubt made during the Civil War re-fortification of the castle, and its northern extent and depth were not established. A collapsed limestone wall found in the bottom of the recut was thought to belong to a building on the outer edge of the ditch rather than part of the castle structure. The last remnant of the castle bank on the south side of the ditch was represented by a thin layer of red clay, which would accord with the discoveries of Barley and Waters on the eastern defences. This sealed a shallow, flat-bottomed cut of dark earth in the natural sand which contained six rectangular post-holes containing fourteen sherds of 10th century pottery.

In 1993 Area 3 was cut to establish more certainly the line of the curtain wall eastwards from the gatehouse and also to investigate the clear evidence of pre-Conquest occupation which had been revealed in 1992. The pre-Conquest element of the site proved to be so substantial that this area was re-opened the following season.

The only substantial part of the red clay rampart which survived was adjacent to the east wall of the gatehouse tower, underneath the stub of curtain wall which sat directly on it. Apart from two courses of pitched Lias stones, set herring-bone fashion, the compressed clay formed the foundation of the wall, suggesting that it was well compacted before the wall was built. By contrast the walls of the gatehouse itself stand on a deep foundation trench with three courses of pitched Lias stones and a raft of large horizontal Lias slabs (Plate 2). Unfortunately 19th century landscaping proved to have been so severe over the whole of Area 3 that most of the rampart had been removed, surviving only as a thin spread of red clay, covering the whole area and forming the upper fill of a palisade trench (see below). However, taking into account the line of the moat found in 1992, it would seem that the northern defences were contained within the modern castle grounds and, turning southwards in the area of the park entrance, linked with the fragments of ditch found in the 1975 GPO Trench and by Barley and Waters in 1953-5.

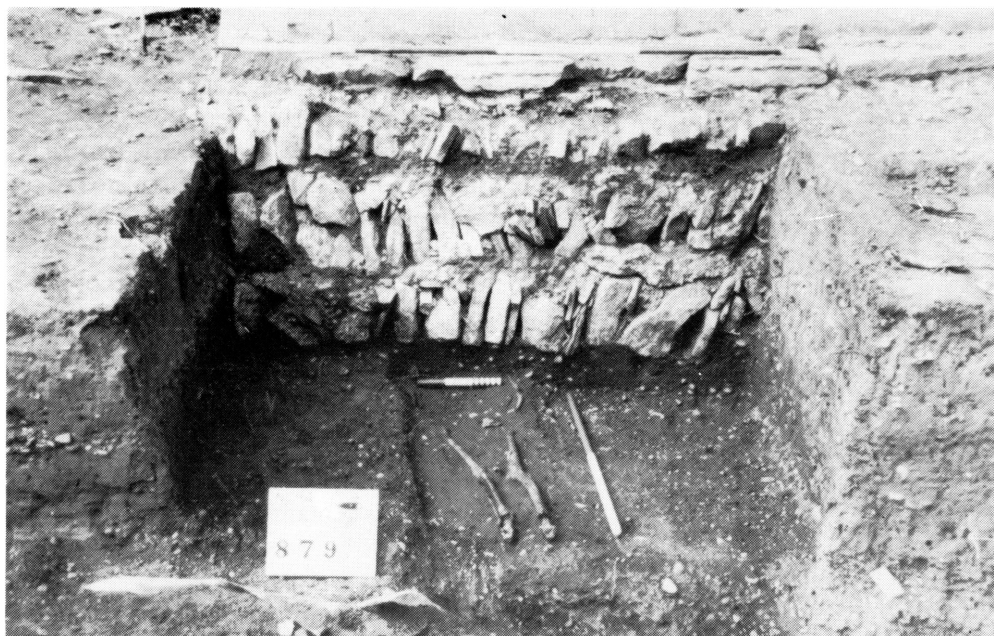


PLATE 2: Gatehouse foundations overlying a late Saxon burial.

Since both the stone curtain wall and its foundation had been removed, there was no indication of whether the wall followed the line of the ditch. About 4.4m from the gatehouse a massive L-shaped robber trench was found in the southern part of Area 3, its main leg running north-south into the southern baulk. Some surviving pitched Lias foundation stones of the same type as those on the surviving castle structure were found *in situ* in the bottom of the trench and the pottery recovered from it was consistent with stone robbing having occurred by the early 19th century. Although the intervening stratigraphy between this feature and the remnant of rampart and curtain against the gatehouse has been lost, it was taken to be all that remains of a cross wall between two wards as postulated by Marshall. In this case the short east-west arm of the structure would have cut into the already existing rampart, which would form the foundation of the corner. However during the 1994 season, the southern end of the wall did not appear as expected in Area 7 in the southern part of the site (Fig. 1). Either the wall changed direction or stopped short, or some alternative interpretation of the feature in Area 3 must be found. It is possible that it represents the eastern side of an earlier stone gatehouse of an otherwise earth and timber castle, although this interpretation also presents problems: the evidence is discussed in

more detail below.

In 1993 Area 4 (Fig. 1) was cut primarily to test whether later medieval archaeological levels had survived better in the southern half of the castle site, and this fortunately proved to be the case. The cutting was positioned to pick up the eastern line of the halls range which is known to have been built against the western curtain wall towards the end of the 13th century. This was revealed, along with a series of floor surfaces.

Areas 5 and 6 (Fig. 1) were excavated to assist Newark and Sherwood District council with their management proposals for the site. Area 5 investigated the nature of a late medieval blocking of the original entrance to the undercroft under the northern hall. This was done to facilitate plans by the Council to re-open the undercroft to the public. The blocking was uncovered, along with a robbed out access staircase leading from the south-west corner of the gatehouse. Area 6 investigated a sudden slump in the ground surface which was a potential hazard; in fact it had been caused by water run-off into an old tree hole.

As described above, Area 7 was opened in the hope of locating the southern end of the stone cross wall found in Area 3 but no sign of it was found. However, lower courses of the north wall of a thin walled stone building with a chamfered doorway were discovered in the eastern part of the cutting. The building probably belongs to Bishop Alexander's castle and it had been truncated and the doorway blocked, apparently during the late 13th to early 14th centuries, when a series of courtyard surfaces containing large quantities of kitchen refuse had built up outside. The most dramatic feature revealed in this cutting, however, was the remnant of an earlier earthwork, discussed below.

EARLY NORMAN CASTLE

As has been seen, the red clay rampart in Area 3 must have pre-dated, possibly by some decades, the north-east section of the curtain wall whose foundations it formed. A series of four post-holes were orientated on the alignment of the later wall indicated by the curtain stub, and these were interpreted as a timber lacing for the rampart. One post-hole contained a pot sherd dated to the mid to late 11th century. About 4m to the south, and following the same alignment, was a V-shaped trench with a square sectioned cut in the bottom. The sharp profile of the ditch suggested rapid back-filling and it was interpreted as a palisade trench, the upper fill being the same red clay as the rampart. At the west end the ditch terminated with a butt end suggesting an entrance, and here it had cut a late Saxon burial. The fill of the trench contained a large number of Saxo-Norman pot sherds dating from the first half of the 11th century. As the rampart alignment ran parallel with the palisade trench it is likely that they were part of the same design: the centre of the rampart was laced with timber posts, with a more substantial revetment at the back supporting a wall-walk. The available evidence suggests a date shortly after the Conquest. A complex of post-holes, ditches and gullies between the butt-ended palisade trench and the gatehouse tower may indicate the possible existence of a wooden gatehouse, but further stratigraphic and artifact analysis is required before this is confirmed. The way in which the palisade trench ends just short of the robber trench might also be significant. Eleventh century stone gatehouses of simple plan are known at Richmond

(Yorkshire), Exeter (Devon) and Prudhoe (Northumberland), and it is possible that this is another at Newark, but in this case rebuilt on a grander scale during the 1130s. However the apparent continuation of the rampart in front of it detracts from this interpretation.

Further evidence of an earlier earthwork castle was revealed in 1994 in Area 7 where the foundation of the stone building proved to be no more than a series of well compacted clay and gravel tip layers up to 1.30m thick. The stratification of the layers and their extent suggests this is most likely a levelled motte and the pottery it contained was again consistent with a building date in the second half of the 11th century. Beneath it was dark soil containing Saxo-Norman pottery and the footings of a building associated with scattered ashlar blocks. Barley and Waters also found Saxon-Norman buildings buried beneath the eastern rampart.

THE SAXON CEMETERY

Several Christian burials orientated east-west and without grave goods were found in the southern part of Area 3. Numerous disarticulated human bones were found in later features and in Area 5 it was noted that the undercroft staircase cut through another two burials. This, and a brief 19th century documentary reference to the disturbance of at least 100 graves on the site (Bailey 1853-5), suggests that the cemetery was large. Several of the burials were in stone slab cists and others had cists around the skull (Plate 3). At least 4 stone slabs set vertically in Area 3 were probably grave markers. Stratigraphically the burials were thought to be late Saxon and this was confirmed by radiocarbon dating to the mid 10th to mid 11th centuries. An east-west ditch seemed to form the northern limit of the burial ground. The presence of the cemetery, taken in conjunction with the existence of a Saxon stone building beneath the putative motte in Area 7, raises the possibilities of a church, monastic settlement or manorial enclosure beside a church. A substantial ditch was uncovered in 1972 outside the south curtain wall (Courtney 1973) but further than expected from the castle. The dating evidence related to a recut, but the excavator noted a distinct curve and suggested that the feature might have been re-used from an earlier period. A large ditch with a similar



PLATE 3: Human burial with cist around head, from late Saxon cemetery.

curve, characteristic of high status monastic enclosures of the period (suggested by Dr. J. Blair), was found towards the northern edge of Area 3. This had been little damaged by later activity and could be traced across the complete width of Area 3 (Plate 4). A great deal of Saxon domestic pottery, some loom weights and two fine pairs of tweezers were found in it dating from the early Saxon period through to the 11th century.

EARLIER OCCUPATION

A complicated sequence of ditches underlay the cemetery and was badly disturbed by later features. Two ditches contained early Saxon pottery, some of which was similar to that from the Millgate Saxon Cemetery (Kinsley 1989) and another contained only Roman pottery. These were explored as fully as possible during the last season and are still undergoing analysis. In addition there was considerable artifactual evidence of earlier occupation. Roman pottery was found re-deposited in many of the Saxon ditches and it is possible that two north-south gullies which are stratigraphically early, but heavily disturbed by later features, are of Roman origin. A Corieltauvian copper stater was found in one of the

grave fills and a significant number of Neolithic and Bronze Age worked flints in the primary fill of the northern-most of the early Saxon ditches. A small quantity of Bronze Age pottery was found in disturbed hollows at the north-west corner of Area 3. Sufficient earlier material has been found to show occupation on the site but later activities have removed most of the associated features.

CONCLUSIONS

The excavations have shown that the castle site was a focal point of Newark at least from the late Saxon period, and probably earlier, as predicted by Todd (1977, 47). In view of its geographical position, which certainly accounts for the Norman commanding of the site, this is hardly surprising. Traces of earlier Roman and prehistoric settlement are tantalising and inconclusive but have significantly raised the probability of finding earlier settlement around Castlegate and the riverside.

The late Saxon and early Norman use of the site has proved to be especially interesting. During the late Saxon period there are indications of a high status complex, possibly a monastic enclosure. The Saxon

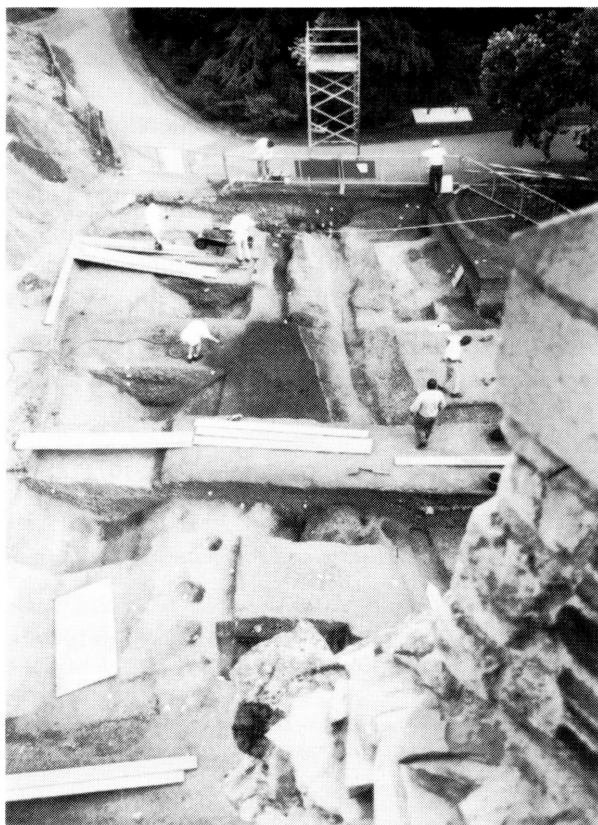


PLATE 4: View of Area 3 looking east from top of gatehouse - the curving Saxon ditch lies to the left and the V-shaped palisade ditch to the right.

and Medieval defences of Newark have been discussed recently by Kinsley (1993, 56-8), including the unusual illustration published by Dickinson of the so called "north gate" in Bargate (reproduced *Transactions of Thoroton Society* 97, front cover). As he comments, this has the appearance of an Anglo-Saxon porticus arch and seems to indicate the position of a Saxon church. It is unlikely to be the church attached to the castle site cemetery, but the phenomenon of multiple churches associated with monastic complexes at this date has been well documented. How far the Saxon ditches extended towards Castle Gate (the Fosse Way), and whether they enclosed a larger area east of that route towards the Market Place is not known.

The evidence now available suggests the first

Norman use of the site imposed a motte and bailey castle on the land shortly after the Conquest. This was previously unsuspected as the first documentary reference to the castle occurs during the reign of Henry I. The first arrangement seems to have consisted of a motte at the southern end of the castle grounds with a rampart along the eastern and northern perimeters. The castle entrance may always have been on the north side, and perhaps the natural river cliff was utilised to the west. Norman castles were constructed at a similar date in this region at Lincoln and Nottingham, and given the strategic importance of the site, it is not surprising that an early castle should be planted at Newark. Examples of mottes built over Saxon buildings are known from Domesday Book, including Lincoln and Norwich (Brown 1970, 51) and from excavation at Goltho, Lincolnshire (Beresford 1987). The usurpation of the cemetery, and by implication a church, may contribute to an explanation of the peculiar situation whereby, until the 19th century, Newark Castle and land on the west of the river was a detached part of East Stoke parish (Rogers 1974, 21).

Bishop Alexander's castle of c. 1135 therefore appears to be a remodelling which retained the perimeter plan, without the north-east salient proposed by Braun, but which substantially altered the interior. Despite the apparent absence of the southern end of a cross wall, the double ward design, in keeping with other contemporary bishops' castles, still seems to be the most likely interpretation of the robber trench in Area 3.

The excavation programme has not been directed towards investigating the internal arrangements of buildings within the castle. Additional survey work may reveal much more about the standing structure, but can throw no further light on the internal lay-out of lost buildings: further excavation is the only positive answer. It is clear that Bishop Alexander shared the aspirations of contemporary bishops such as Henry of Blois at Winchester and Roger of Salisbury at Sherborne and Old Sarum in constructing fortified palaces, and the massive scale of his remodelling of the castle is entirely in accordance with his reputation.

FURTHER WORK

A further season of excavations is planned and it is hoped to concentrate on the lay-out of the 12th century castle's south and east defences and their relationships with the early Norman castle. Also to attempt to establish the nature of the late Saxon occupation on the southern half of the site. In the future the town defences on the south side of the castle, glimpsed at Cuckstool Wharf (Samuels 1984),

also warrant further investigation to see how they relate to the castle. Work on the south side of the north-west section of the north curtain, next to the gatehouse, may be undertaken in connection with re-opening the original entrance to the undercroft. This would give more insight into the 12th century building which seems to have abutted the North Range at this point. It is hoped to achieve a more complete picture of the 12th century castle, its predecessors and its subsequent development.

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