

TOTNES CASTLE LANDSLIP 1999

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
AND RECORDING



by
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February 1999

TOTNES CASTLE NORMAN MOTTE - LAND SLIPPAGE JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1999 – ARCHAEOLOGY- INTERIM REPORT

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SUMMARY

A land slip took place on the weekend of the 16th Jan 1999 within an area of post-medieval garden terracing which extends around the south and west sides of Totnes Castle motte. The slip and ensuing safety works revealed a series of original constructional layers for the motte dating from the early Norman period, together with an underlying claysoil deposit 0.2-0.3m deep, the surface of which must represent the late Saxon/Early Norman ground level before the motte was erected. The constructional layers of the motte comprise compact yellow and grey clays laid in roughly horizontal bands. The motte face rises at a gradient of approximately 45 °, evidently its original angle. The construction deposits were archaeologically cleaned and recorded within a 1m wide strip extending down the motte slope. Two sherds of late Saxon/Early Norman chert-tempered pottery were recovered from slumped clays on average 0.2m deep immediately overlying the original face.

The late Saxon/Early Norman deposit underlying the motte contains domestic refuse including animal bone, charcoal and pottery. It produced three more late Saxon/early Norman chert-tempered pottery sherds. The layer has a compacted stony surface and overlies at least one earlier archaeological feature cut into the underlying natural clay.

The sequence represented by these newly revealed deposits appears to span late Saxon and early Norman times, and is not only crucial to the understanding of the castle's origins, but also of considerable importance to the study of Totnes town's development. Nowhere else in the town has recognizable stratigraphy of this date been exposed.

The archaeological project background

Stewart Brown Associates were contacted by English Heritage (Francis Kelly) on the 18th of January and asked to respond quickly in order to monitor emergency safety works which had already begun (organized by Gerald Bird, E.H.). There was at the time a threat of further slippage which could have endangered houses below the motte, so the remaining soil overburden overlying the slip plane and some unsafe lengths of terrace retaining walls were removed.

The area of slippage/collapse is shown in Fig. 1, together with 19th- and 20th-century walls removed for safety reasons, and earlier wall footings uncovered by the removal of topsoil and slump material. Fig. 3 shows a photographic aerial view of the castle made into a postcard sometime before 1936; the area of collapse has been indicated (thanks are due to James Bellchambers for this find). Fig. 4 shows an extract of a survey made of the castle in 1962, with additional coloured areas indicating plots acquired by the Ministry of Works from individual owners, and the dates of

acquisition. Fig. 5 shows the castle plan with the possible extent of the original moat or ditch surrounding the motte, together with the area of collapse.

Monitoring and Excavation (Figs. 1 and 2; Plates 1-4)

The emergency safety works were undertaken by a local firm, who were asked to co-operate with the archaeologists, and recover as many finds as possible as they progressed. The works were monitored archaeologically by Stewart Brown and Aidan Matthews. Site visits were made on the 18th, 21st, 22nd, 25th, 26th, 29th of January, and the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 9th, and 12th of February. Written observations were made and drawn and photographic records produced. Archaeological contexts (walls, layers etc) were identified so far as possible, and finds from them kept separate. Finds recovered from the topsoil (context 1) during emergency works by the contractors were also kept. The contractors began removing soil at the top of the slip, then moved down the slope. As the slip area was cleared, the exposed surface beneath was cleaned and recorded archaeologically.

It soon became apparent that the existing terrace walls, which are bonded variously with off-white lime mortar, ash mortar, or cement, date largely from the late 19th and 20th centuries. Some however represent re-facings and repair of earlier, earth-bonded walls which appear from the finds associated with overlying slump material to have suffered at least partial collapse and slippage as early as the 17th or early 18th century. The terrace walls were founded on narrow steps cut shallowly into the motte slope, none being founded to any appreciable depth apart from the 3.75m tall wall at the bottom of the slope, the footings of which extend into bedrock, well below the level of the adjacent yard surface to the rear of the houses fronting Castle Court. The earliest terrace wall of which evidence survives in this area had fractured and subsided, one section of it having slipped fully 2m down the slope (Figs. 1 and 2, wall 7 and slipped wall fragment 19; plate 3). Part of the footings for this wall was overlain by mid brown claysoil slump material (context 6) which produced a sherd of 17th- or 18th-century Chinese porcelain.

Extensive areas of this post-medieval mid brown clay slump material still survives on the slope. It appears to represent slumping of the earliest soil associated with the garden terraces. The soil was probably carried up the slope to the terraces from elsewhere since its composition suggests that it was not derived from the underlying constructional clean yellow and gray clays (below). The soil also produced sherds of 17th- and 18th-century Totnes type pottery (as well as a medieval coin which must be residual in this context – a poorly preserved, clipped, long cross silver penny; see Finds, below).

At the foot of the slope was another layer of slump material (45) incorporating much yellow clay which appears to have eroded from the original constructional layers. This produced a large group of pottery sherds dating from c. 1720-50 (see Finds below). A rubbish pit which had been cut through the slump material, but which was probably open when the slump material was accumulating, produced another large group of pottery sherds dating from the same period. The large volume of pottery from these contexts, all of the same period, suggests that the terraces in this area were extensively remodeled in the early 18th century (documentary evidence shows that

terraces already existed on the motte by the early 17th century; also that several plots of land were converted into two gardens c.1742; below).

Where the brown slump material had been removed by the contractors, another, much earlier slump deposit was revealed. This comprised a layer of mixed yellow and grey clays up to 0.2m deep (context 44) which had become water-saturated. This marks the principal horizon, or plane, at which the recent land slip took place. It was agreed with the E.H. Engineer Arthur McCallum that a strip 1m wide should be cleaned down the face of the motte slope in order to expose and investigate the nature and condition of the original constructional material beneath. After removing on average 0.2m depth of slump material, a layered series of clean, compact yellow and grey clay deposits was exposed (Fig. 2, contexts 30-37). The clays contain few inclusions apart from occasional charcoal flecks, and appear to have been dug from natural geological deposits in the immediate area (the higher end of Totnes town is known to have been built on natural clay deposits very similar in nature; pers comm James Bellchambers). The only finds so far retrieved from the slump layer are two sherds of late Saxon/Early Norman chert-tempered pottery, suggesting that the slumping took place soon after the motte's construction. If this is indeed the case, then it seems likely that primary slumping on the motte was followed by a long period in which the slope stabilized (probably assisted by vegetation), until the 17th or early 18th century when clearance, construction of the terraces, and cultivation prompted fresh slumping.

The Late Saxon/Early Norman Horizon

Beneath the series of clay constructional deposits of the Norman motte lies a 0.35m deep layer of mid brown, aerated, stony clay (context 38). This contains numerous charcoal flecks and lumps, animal bone, and pottery sherds, clearly domestic refuse. Archaeological cleaning of its exposed section produced three more late Saxon/early Norman chert-tempered pottery sherds. The layer is stony throughout, but has a pronounced stony surface, presumably trampled prior to the construction of the motte. The layer overlies and infills at least one earlier (?Saxon/?Early Norman) archaeological feature, a square-bottomed trench-like feature 0.2m wide and 0.3m deep cut into the underlying natural clay (Plate 4). Whether the layer and feature are associated with the Saxon town of Totnes, or with the first occupation of the castle site, before the motte was erected, is an intriguing question. The layer also overlies a band of orange gravelly clay up to 0.2m deep which may possibly be an archaeological deposit (context 39), although it could be natural in origin. Beneath this is a stony layer with a purple colouration (context 40) directly overlying bedrock. The latter stony layer is probably natural in origin.

Survey and Recording

The existing topographical survey undertaken in 1986 is an accurate record which requires only limited alteration in a few places. Other surveys, profiles etc. drawn in 1962, and 1970-1973 also provide information useful for archaeological purposes (Fig. 6).

A plan has been made of all the terrace walls in the area of the land slip, including the newly exposed footings of early walls which collapsed in the past (Fig. 1). A section (Fig. 2) has been compiled from the 1986 survey and a new survey made of the motte

side following the land slip. In addition, the section shows archaeological deposits observed during the safety works undertaken by the contractors.

Photography

A photographic record was made in b/w, colour print, and colour transparencies, for use as archive material, report illustrations, and for internal E.H. and publicity purposes.

Initial Assessment of the Finds (identification by John Allan)

Late Saxon/early Norman

Three sherds of chert-tempered coarseware were recovered from the Late Saxon/Early Norman brown stony clay layer (38) immediately below the motte construction layers. Two of these cannot be more closely dated than from between the 10th and early 13th centuries. The other has red-coloured surfaces, and is of a type thought to go out of production in the 12th century. As a group, the three sherds are consistent with a date in the Late Saxon/ Early Norman period. Dating would probably be improved if further pottery sherds could be recovered, especially wares originating from the late Saxon kiln at Exeter ('Bedford Garage' ware).

Two further sherds of chert-tempered coarseware (10th-early 13th century) were retrieved from the primary slump material (44) on the motte slope.

Medieval

A coin was found in the brown post-medieval slump material. The coin is a long cross silver penny dating from after about 1300AD, to judge from the depiction of the king, who appears to be wearing a bifoliate crown. The coin has been clipped on two sides, and is so badly worn that it cannot be more closely identified at present.

[the coin was cleaned and conserved by Gill Nason, A.M.L.; coin description and identification by Barry Knight, A.M.L.]

No medieval pottery finds have so far been recovered from the clearance of the motte side.

Post-medieval

Two large groups of early 18th-century pottery finds were recovered from foot of the slope, one from a large area of slumping material (45), and the other from an associated rubbish pit which was cut through the slump material, but which must have been open when the slumping was taking place.

Context 45 (slump material):

Totnes coarsewares, including large bucket handled pitchers;

Donyatt wares, including slip and copper green glazed jug and cup;

Dutch bricks (buff and red);

Bristol or Staffordshire press moulded slipware dish with feathered decoration.

Date range of group – 1720-50.

Context 46 (pit):

Dutch bricks (buff and red);

Chinese porcelain;

White, salt glazed stoneware;

Westerwald stoneware tankard with decoration including part of the name G(eorge),
ie after 1714;

Plain English delft;

Bristol or Staffordshire press moulded slipware dish;

Donyatt coarsewares;

Totnes type coarsewares;

English bottle glass.

Date range of group – 1720-50

Context 2:

English gray stoneware with white engob slip;

Clay pipe fragment;

Coarsewares.

Date range of group – 1700-40.

Context 3:

Clay pipe stem 17th cent

Local coarsewares 17th or 18th century

Bristol or Staffordshire press moulded slipware dish;

Date range of group – early 18th century

Context 6:

Clay pipe fragment c. 1650-80;

Westerwald stoneware tankard, mid-late 17th century.

Date range of group – late 17th or early 18th century.

Context 13:

English bottle glass, 1690-1750.

Context 1 (dark, organic topsoil):

Totnes type 17th-century ridge tiles and coarsewares, including a cup (first known
example of this form);

North Italian dish, Graffita tarda, Pisan type;

Delft, probably English, c. 1700;

Delft, possibly Portuguese, hand painted;

Delft, possibly jar, early 18th-century;

Plain delft chamber pot;

Westerwald stoneware tankard;

Pill pot, 19th-century;

Chinese porcelain, 18th-century;

?Low Countries yellow and green glazed earthenware;

English punchbowl, 18th-century;

Clay pipe bowl, 1690-1720, Exeter type (Bartholomew Street kiln);

English bottle glass wine bottle, local or possibly Bristol, 1740-60;

19th-century transfer wares;

Late 19th- and 20th-century bottles.

Initial documentary research [kindly provided by Caroline Hayman, Totnes Museum Archivist, and Louis Irwin, Curator]

Selected Examples

1/ From *Totnes Priory and Medieval Town* by Hugh Watkin

1466AD To distrain John Beerd to satisfy the Lord for trespass for lopping the oaks, ash trees, and cornel trees belonging to the Lord growing upon the moat of the castle of the Lord against the peace of the Lord King.

This shows that at least part of the banks of the castle ditch were overgrown with trees in the mid 15th century.

2/ It appears from notes and transcripts made by a local historian in the 1920's (Mr Windeatt, the local Grammar School headmaster) that the earliest surviving deeds and leases relating to properties fronting onto High Street and backing onto the south side of the castle motte date from the mid 16th century.

a) The earliest, a lease of 1554 records a tenement 'on the east of the castle dike, and on the west of the King's Street leading towards Dartington', now part of the Castle Hotel. This shows that there was then still an open ditch ('dike') between the motte and town, and that at least one property occupied the outer rim of the ditch, fronting to what is now Castle Street.

b) Lease of 1629 by Sir Edward Seymour of Berry Castle to Richard ?Auryatt of Totnes, Shoemaker

All those plots of land or parcels of the Castle Ditch of Totnes...one garden of about ½ acre, but now parted into 4 plots, and a pigs house erected on one of them and a little inclosure is made to the same, and also a new house is lately erected next adjacent to part of the Castle Wall on the north part, and unto the said pigs house on the east part upon other of the said little plots of land, and one little plot of garden lieth next adjacent to the ?Aw house of the said Richard Auryatt situated on the east part thereof, and on the south part thereof is situate the ?Aw house of one Richard Norris, being the inheritance of one William ?Boquas, Gent, and next above the said recited little garden plot there is another garden parcel of the said Castle Ditch and adjacent to the same and is also divided into several little walks and now are in the occupation of one Elizabeth Dotting, widow

And one other of the said demised little plots is enclosed on the NW part a little new postern gate is made up by the said Richard Auryatt to pass in and out from each to other, and two of the little garden plots before demised are divided in the lower and ?Souther parts of the same by another little garden plot now in the occupation of the said Richard Norris and is parcel of the said Castle Ditch, and there is one other plot of the said demised plots which lieth above the E plot of garden, between the said E plot and a garden, between the said E plot and a garden plot in occupation of the said Elizabeth Dotting, wherein the said Richard Auryatt hath planted young Ash trees. And one other of the said demised little plots of garden doth lie next under the Castle

Wall wherein there are certain young apple trees planted by Richard Auryatt and is enclosed and parted from the other parts of the Castle Ditch lying on the W and N parts of the said last recited plott where these ?sland certain old pollard trees of oak and ash.....

c) A deed of 1742 between John Taylor Lord of Totnes and Mr Disting of Dartington, Yeoman, records several plots of land converted into two gardens, part of the Mount adjoining to the castle of Totnes, together with a certain plot lying on the west part of the said plots, and a certain other plot.....which said two several plots are surrounded with walls and bounded on the E. and S. with other plots of the said Mount, now in the possession of.....

Recommendations for further archaeological work and research

1/ Archaeology

a) Archaeology to assist the planning of Engineering works

A site meeting took place on the 17th Feb. 1999 between Stewart Brown Associates, Francis Kelly, and E.H. Engineers (A. McCallum). It was agreed that the water-saturated slump material overlying the original constructional layers of the motte would have to be removed for engineering reasons, and that planning of future engineering safety works would greatly benefit from extending the area of archaeological assessment beyond the existing 1m wide strip, so that the nature and condition of the original constructional material beneath could be evaluated across the slip face.

The time available before engineering works begin offers a rare opportunity to examine such a series of early Norman constructional deposits more extensively and in more detail. The late Saxon/early Norman deposit underlying the motte represents a remarkable, hitherto unique survival in Totnes. Further investigation of the layer would be of great value, especially should more finds be recovered. Samples will be taken from the layer for environmental study.

b) Should further removal of soil or old masonry from the motte side become necessary for safety or other reasons, then further archaeological monitoring and recording will be required.

c) An archaeological assessment will be required once the proposals for engineering works, consolidation, and safety measures have been drawn up. The future works are very likely to involve further clearance of overburden and at least some excavation for new drains, footings for new retaining walls etc. This cannot be quantified at present since proposals for the forthcoming works have not yet been fully considered. The archaeological costs will be proportional to the extent and nature of the works.

2/ Documentary and Background Research

The aim of further research is to establish the historic development of the terraces and retaining walls and their relationship to town plots.

The area presently affected by slippage (including the area extending to the top of the motte) covers ground known to have been associated in the 1960's with 4 separate town properties (as shown on the 1973 plan). The total number of individual plots on the motte bank (extending to either side of the affected area) was 7 at that time.

3/ Conservation Plan

It is strongly advised that E.H. prepares a conservation plan for the future maintenance and management of the monument.

1



2

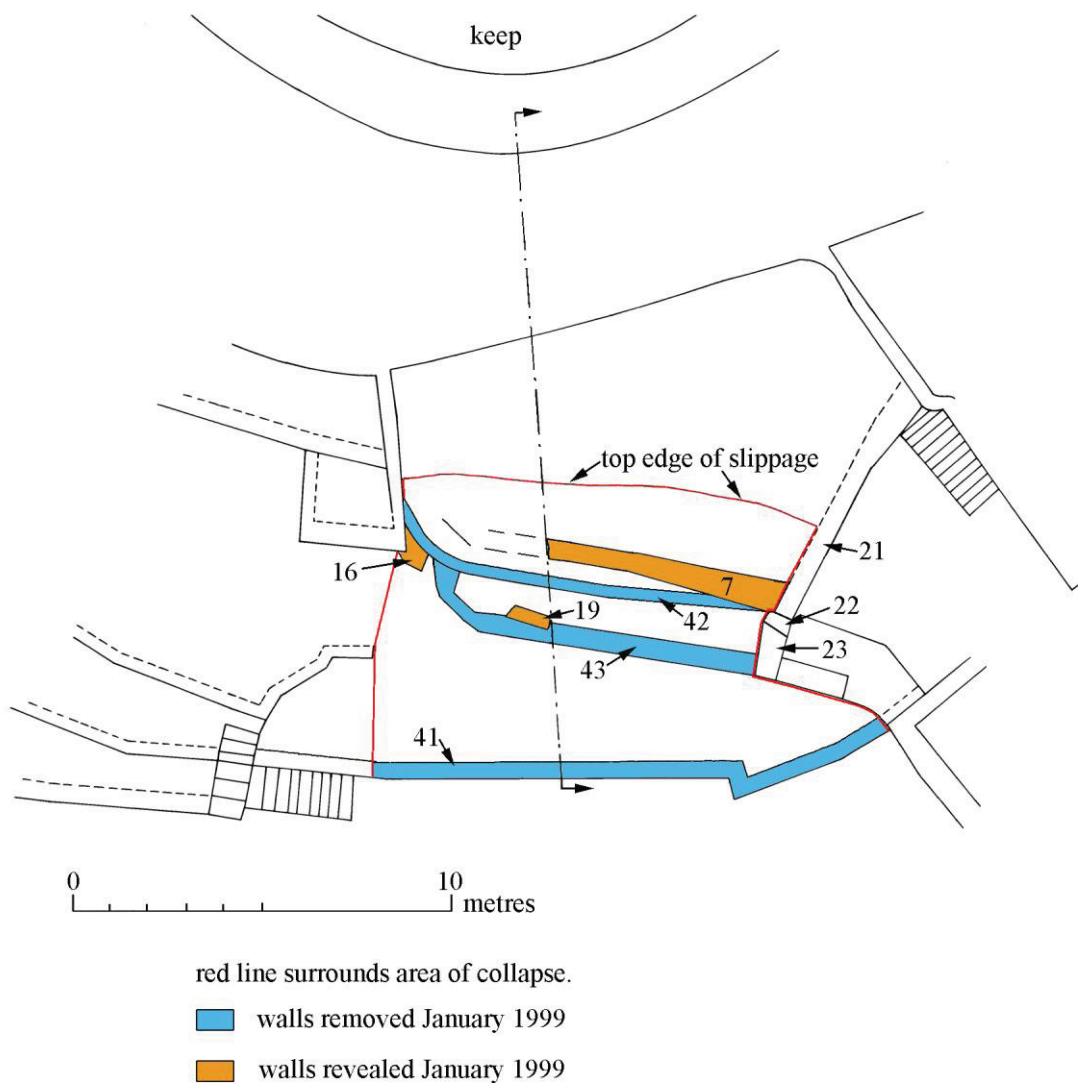


Fig 1 plans showing 1. location and 2. walls in area of collapse.

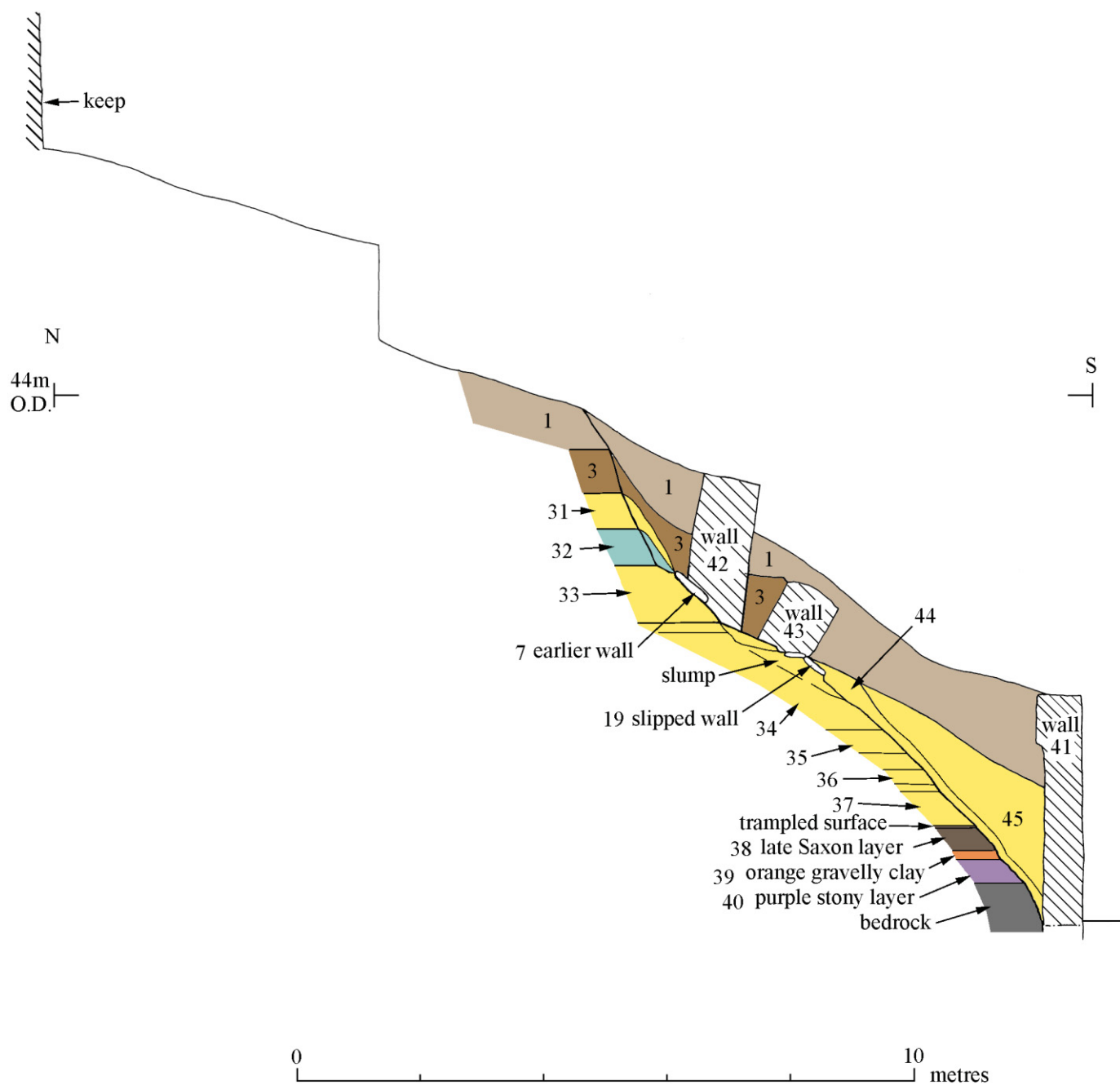


Fig 2 Profile showing original motte and subsequent walls and slumping.



area of collapse

Fig 3 The castle from the air taken before 1936.

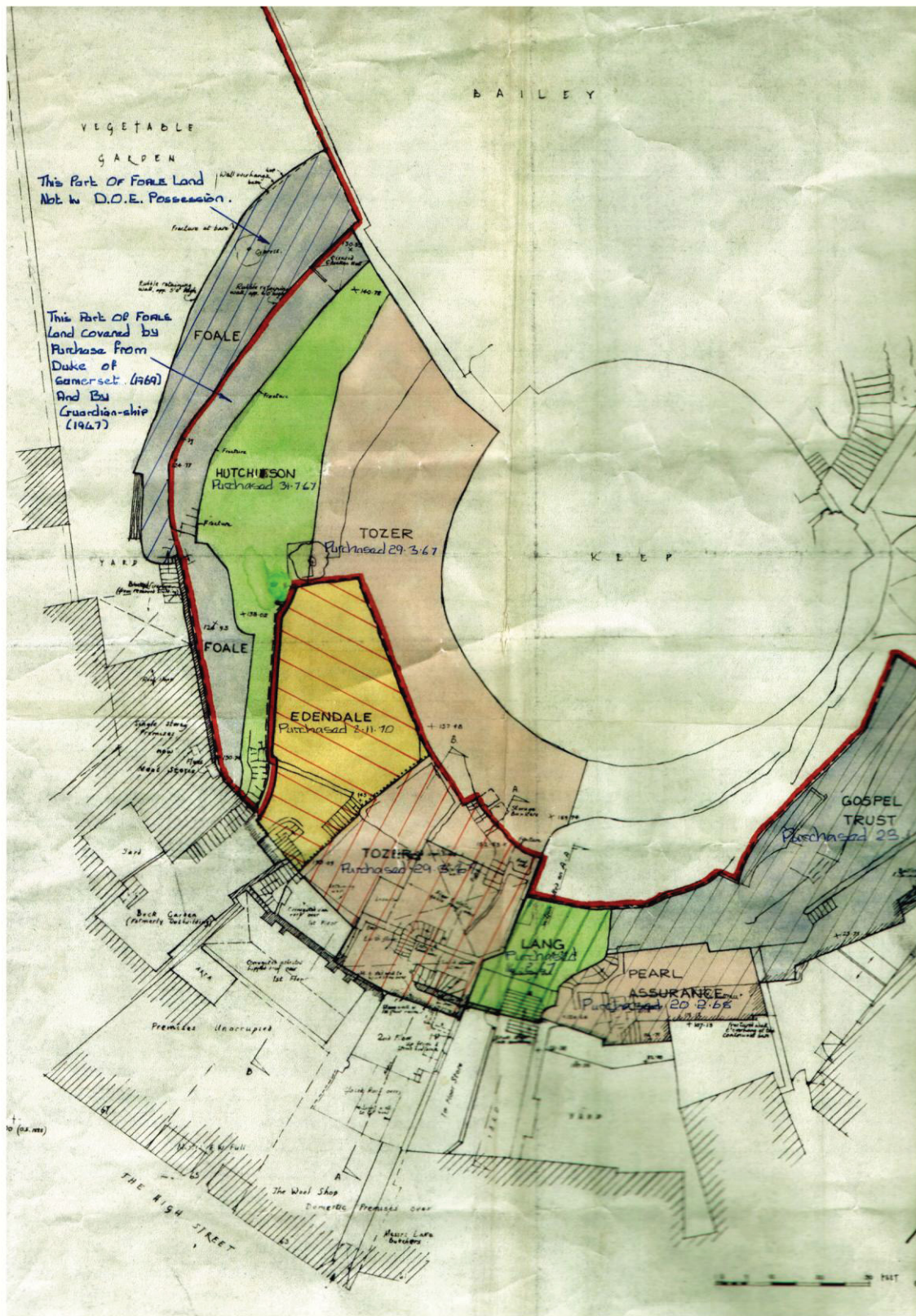


Fig 4 An extract of a survey of Totnes Castle from February 1962.

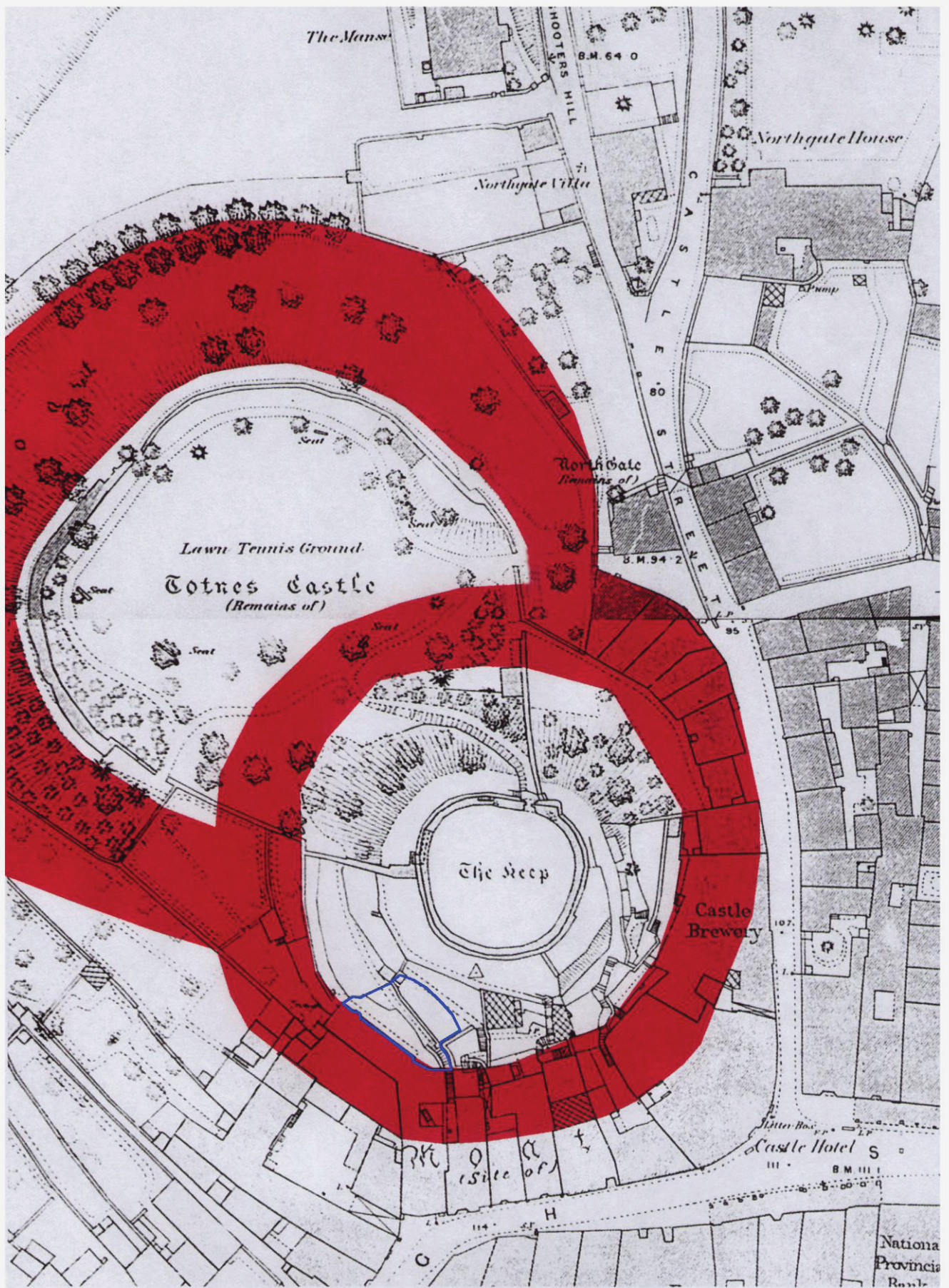


Fig. 5 An extract from the 1:500 O.S. map. The approximate position of the moat is in red and the area of collapse surrounded in blue.

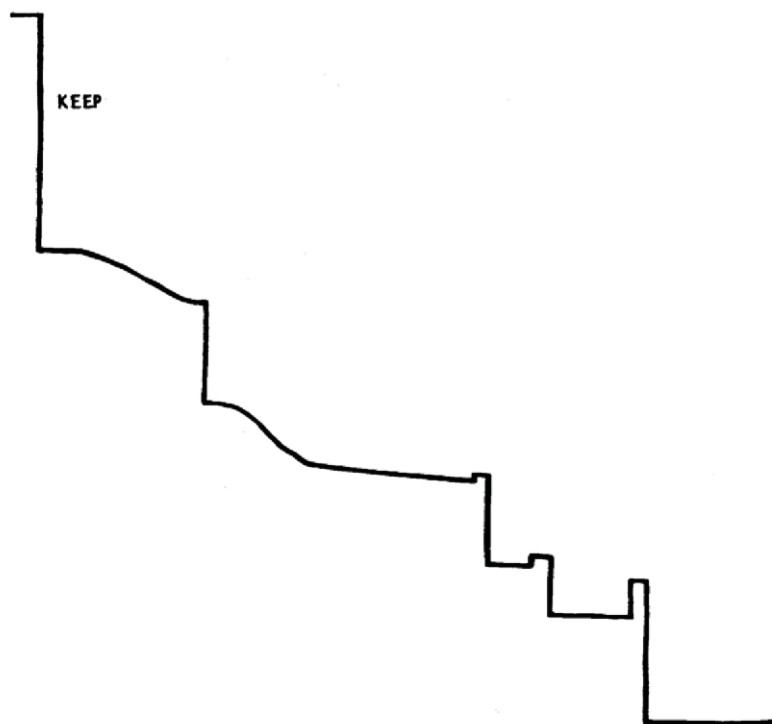
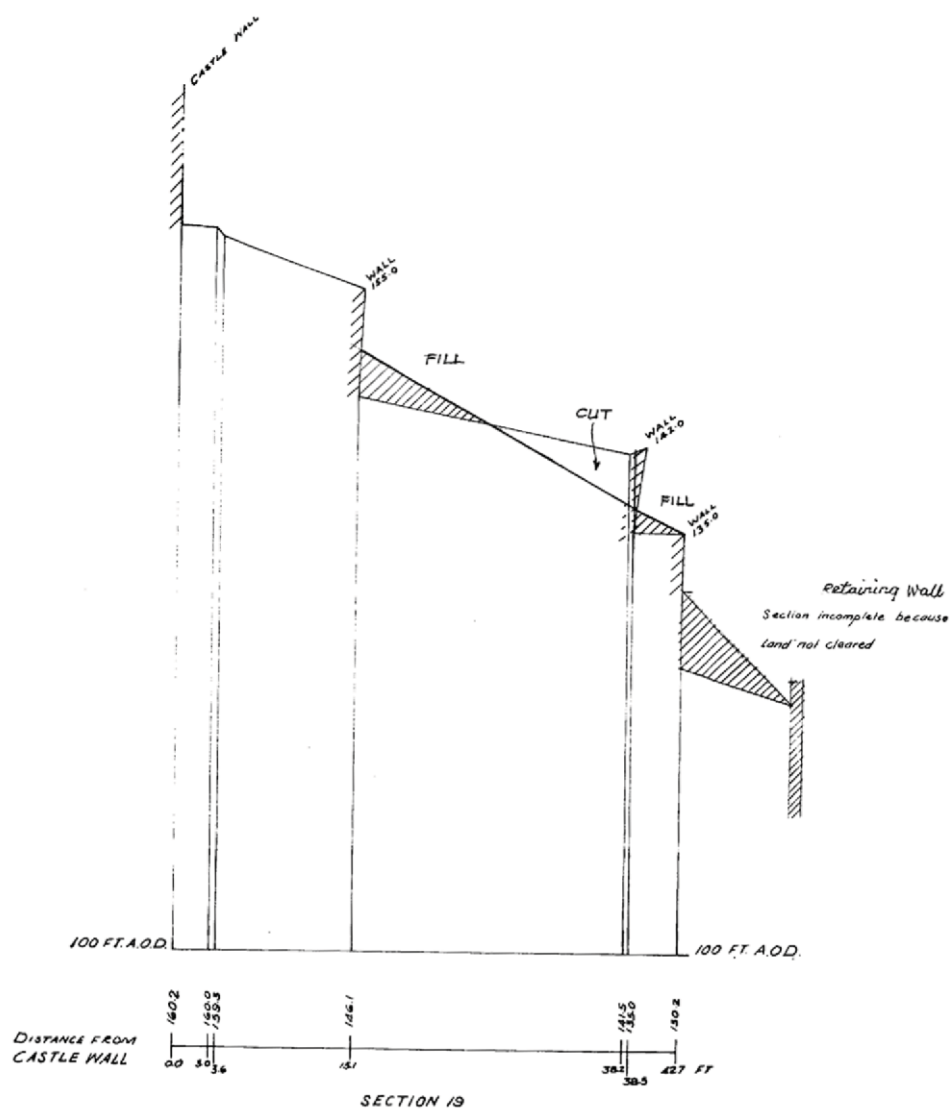


Fig 6 Two profiles through the motte, in approximately the position of fig 2, top made 20/10/69 and the bottom March 1962. Not to scale.



Plate 1 The site before excavation.



Plate 2 The site after the soil removal.



Plate 3 The site after clearance.



Plate 4 A section showing the level of the motte's construction (indicated by arrows).