

# TOTNES CASTLE TERRACE WALLS AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT



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### SUMMARY

*The garden terracing on the town side of Totnes Castle motte appears from documentary sources to date from the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century, soon after the castle ditch on this side of the motte was infilled. Changes to the pattern of terraces are recorded in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological observations made on the area of the 1999 landslip generally confirm this date of origin and 18<sup>th</sup>-century development. The presently surviving terrace walls show signs of repeated patching and rebuilding, the most extensive and recent repairs dating from the 1970's, when the Ministry of Works demolished standing structures, and repaired or consolidated many of the walls.*

### Documentary Background

The following is a summary of documentary research recently conducted by Dr Anita Travers (Travers 1999; full copy enclosed, together with preface by Anita explaining what she has covered to date, and what other documentary sources might yet exist):

The castle moat or ditch is mentioned as a property boundary in medieval town deeds dating from c1224/8, 1396, 1399, 1433, 1453, 1462 and 1468. The deed of 1396 mentions '*the messuages of the ditch of the castle*' behind properties fronting High Street, which may suggest that some houses already stood within the ditch, (?squatter occupation), although the precise meaning is not entirely clear. Houses within the ditch cannot have been permanent since the Totnes Court Rolls record that in times of war and necessity, water was channelled into the moat from the area of the old West Gate well into the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Watkin 1914-17, 641; the West Gate formerly stood close by the High Street properties in question).

In 1548, there were stables fronting Castle Street '*beside the castle ditch*', and in 1554 a tenement next to the 'Castle Dike', which suggests that the ditch was at that time still at least partly open.

The following two references suggest that the infilling of the ditch and enclosure of plots extending across it took place from the mid to late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Each of the new plots was referred to as '*Castle Ditch*', for which a 10d rent soon became standard, the same rent continuing well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These rents for plots on what was formerly the castle defensive ditch are taken to mean that the ditch had been infilled, or very largely so by this time.

i) A rental of 1555 refers to '*Mr Yeo for the Castle Ditch enclosed 4d*'. Gardens are mentioned, but with no specific location. In this rental, which may not be complete, this is the only reference to the ditch, but it would imply that it was filled, and enclosed, and in the tenure of one man. But in comparison with later rents of 10d each it would seem a small rent for the whole area of the ditch, so it may be that Mr Yeo had been the only one to enclose his segment of ditch at that date.

ii) The next surviving manor rental, of 1590/1, refers to Richard Bogan for the Castle Ditch enclosed, 4d, suggesting he succeeded Mr Yeo. He held other 'grounds' adjoining the castle for 1d. But then follow the names of eight tenants paying, out of their dwelling houses, for the Castle Ditch, 10d each. Stephen Shute paid 10d for *'two Castle Ditches'*. These houses approximate to 73 - 59 High Street.

Eveleigh's manor rental of 1642 is significant in the history of Totnes because he includes all information available to him about former ownership and occupation. Local historian C F Rea transcribed it and annotated it with additional information including where possible present house numbers. A section of the rental, under High Chief Rents, is devoted to *'Castle Dike Rents'*, at a uniform 10d a year. Nine messuages are described as *'Under the Castle Southward'*, identifiable with 75 to 59 High Street and 15 Castle Street. One of the earlier documents included in this rental dates from 1629 and relates to what is now 71 High Street. It clearly shows that the area of the former ditch and the motte side, extending in places up to the wall of the keep, had by this time become developed largely as garden plots with small enclosures and animal houses, although one 'new house' is mentioned standing adjacent to part of the Castle Wall. The plots were used for various purposes including pig rearing, young tree planting (ash and apple), and for cropping wood from old pollarded trees of oak and ash.

The size and layout of at least some of the plots changed and developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1742 we hear of *'all those several plots of land now 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 now in the possession of Mr Samuel Tolcher, all of which premises lie on the north part of the messuage now in possession of William Butland, tailor, and others, as tenants of Richard Disting purchased sometime since of Nathaniel Jellard which two several plots are surrounded with walls and bounded on the east and south with other plots of the said Mount, now in possession of Sam Tolcher, apothecary, by demise made to him by John Taylor, and on the west with other part of the said Mount, now or late in possession of Jonathan Warring, as tenant to John Taylor, all of which plots are now Richard Distings or his undertenants, for the term of 2000 years at a rent of 6s 8d.'*

The Totnes historian C.F. Rea drew a sketch plan of the plots in the 1920's as an aid to help him identify their former owners (Fig. 2).

Plots 1 and 2 he associated with house No 71 High Street (Fig. 4 shows plots 1 and 2 as belonging c. 1967 to Foale, of 71 High Street)

Plots 3 and 4 (mentioned in the document of 1742 above) he associated with house No 69 High Street (Fig. 4 shows plot 3 as belonging c.1967 to Hutchinson of 69 High Street, and plot 4 as belonging to Tozer of 63 High Street).

Plots 5 and 6 he associated with Tolcher of 63 High Street in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 4 shows plot 4 as belonging c.1967 to Tozer of 63 High Street).

Plots 4, 5 and 6 were in the hands of Tozer of 63 High Street by 1923.

### Conclusion

It would seem therefore that up until the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, the successive lords of Totnes and its castle maintained control of the castle defences, including the ditch which existed between the motte and town properties, keeping the area largely clear of development. The deed of 1396, which mentions '*messuages of the ditch of the castle*' behind properties fronting High Street, presumably relates to temporary dwellings, perhaps squatter occupation. From the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards deeds, leases and rentals refer to plots extending across the ditch and up the motte side which were attached to town properties fronting High Street and Castle Street. The plots changed hands, were merged and adapted for various purposes in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The research by C.F. Rea in the 1920's and Anita Travers in 1999 charts an initial outline of the details of ownership and leasehold of the plots up to the present, as well as of the town properties to which they were attached.

### Existing Surveys of the Terrace Walls

Ordnance Survey maps show the terrace walls as they existed in 1887, 1888, 1889, 1906 and 1933. Fig. 1 shows the surviving walls on the motte, as surveyed by M.J. Rees and Co. Ltd. between 1985-7. This plan is accurate and agrees fairly well with earlier O.S. plans, but does not include some walls shown on the previous surveys (eg the 1888 O.S. map; Fig 3), presumably because these had by then been reduced to ground level and been covered over by vegetation. Some of the walls which are missing from the 1980's survey are still just visible as stumps through the present grass cover, and could be added to the survey if their tops were uncovered by de-turfing.

A limited surveying exercise was carried out recently by Stewart Brown Associates on the area of the 1999 landslip (see our previous report, Brown and Matthews February 1999, Fig. 1). The survey was conducted in order to plot surviving remnants of excavated terrace walls, and to create a profile of the original motte slope, together with a section through the deposits on the slope which had to be removed for safety reasons.

### Dating of the surviving walls

The great majority of the presently surviving walls appear on the earliest O.S. map of 1888, so must date from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. One or two of the walls seem from map evidence to have been erected at a later date, so belong to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1).

### *Property boundary walls*

Some of the property boundary walls extending back from High Street and Castle Street, ie radiating away from the foot of the motte, almost certainly date from the late 16<sup>th</sup> or

17<sup>th</sup> century when the properties were enlarged by taking in land formerly occupied by the castle ditch (see Documentary Background, above). One of these walls, that dividing Nos 69 and 71 High Street became more fully exposed than before when the landslip occurred to the rear of No 71 in January 1999. It is clear from archaeological observation that this is the earliest wall surviving in this particular area, dating quite possibly from the late 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. The wall continues onto the motte side, rising across the slope at an angle for a distance of some 3.5m, although originally it extended further (Brown and Matthews 1999, Fig. 1). In this particular case at least, the property boundary wall was constructed so as to take in not only the area of the former castle ditch, but also the lower slope of the motte.

Other boundary walls separating the High Street and Castle Street tenements are probably later in date, being associated with either subsequent division of the properties (eg Nos 65 and 67 High Street were formerly one house divided into two sometime in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; as reported in 1923 by C.F. Rea; see Travers 1999) or later amalgamation into larger holdings (eg the Castle Hotel property appears to have been formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by merging five buildings including 16 Castle Street, but has since been divided again into three; Travers 1999).

#### *Revetment walls at the foot of the motte*

The tall revetment walls which extend along the curving foot of the motte, and which presently delineate the rear of the High Street and Castle Street properties, probably also have their origin in the late 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, although these likewise have clearly been altered or rebuilt in places, quite possibly more than once. The course followed by these walls is staggered at numerous points, probably reflecting former divisions between properties (eg the tall revetment wall to the rear of the Gospel Hall built on Castle Street in 1924 on the site of the old Castle Brewery is staggered at two points, indicating that two former properties became amalgamated). It is therefore difficult to establish clear, long-standing historical associations between individual lengths of these revetment walls and the existing properties on High Street and Castle Street which have undergone boundary changes since the walls were built to their rear.

The earliest O.S. maps show a number of buildings extending back from the street frontages as far as the revetment walls, which must therefore have acted as part of the structure in some manner. Some of these buildings appear from map evidence to have been small 'back blocks' separated from the street frontage buildings by small courtyards serving as light-wells. Back blocks in Totnes date largely from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, and are often connected to the front blocks by galleries (Laithwaite 1984, 75-86), so it would not be surprising if remnants of such an arrangement survives behind at least some of the present High Street and Castle Street properties.

Other buildings appear to have been erected lengthwise alongside the revetment walls (eg the Castle Brewery on Castle Street, and the long building to the rear of No 71 High Street, which became first a sweet factory, and by 1962, a meat store (Fig. 3).



### *Garden terraces and walls on the motte*

Documentary sources show that garden plots existed on the motte side by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Documentary Background, above). The plots must have been terraced in order to be workable, so terrace walls of this date certainly existed once. Archaeological observations made during the emergency removal of soil on the area affected by the landslip of 1999 showed that here, at least one wall of 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup>-century date had collapsed leaving behind only its lowest course of footings. The wall was then rebuilt on a new line close by (Brown and Matthews 1999, Fig. 1, wall 7 replaced by wall 42). The same exercise investigated Wall 43 which at its east end had a rubble and clay core with a facing of rubble set in white mortar. The facework could be original but may alternatively represent a later re-facing. Further to the west along the same wall, it was clear that the masonry had been entirely rebuilt with rubble set in ash mortar throughout, probably in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

Documentary sources relate changes to the layout of at least some of the garden plots in 1742, when several plots were converted into two gardens (Travers 1999, 69 High Street). There may well have been other such occasions when the layout of the plots was altered but not recorded. If so, then the existing terrace walls would probably have been affected, and perhaps new ones built.

This pattern of frequent change can probably be extended to apply to the whole area of garden terracing on the motte. Certainly the present terrace walls to either side of the slip area show signs of numerous alterations of different periods, the most recent and extensive being the work undertaken by the Ministry of Works in the early 1970's, when standing buildings were demolished, and many walls were patched and re-pointed using grey cement pointing. Some walls appear to have been at least partly rebuilt at this time.

To unravel the detailed development of the walls and terracing pattern would require a time consuming and invasive archaeological exercise.

### Sources and references:

Brown, S. and Matthews, A. 1999 'Totnes Castle Landslip 1999. Archaeological Watching Brief and Recording', Internal Report to English Heritage.

Laithwaite, M. 1984 'Totnes Houses 1500-1800' in Clark, P (ed.) *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns*.

Travers, A. 1999 'Totnes Castle. Terracing on the Motte; a documentary historical study', Interim Internal Report to English Heritage.

Watkin, Hugh R, 1914, 1917, 1917, *History of Totnes Priory and Medieval Town, vols I, II and Index*. The Author, Torquay.

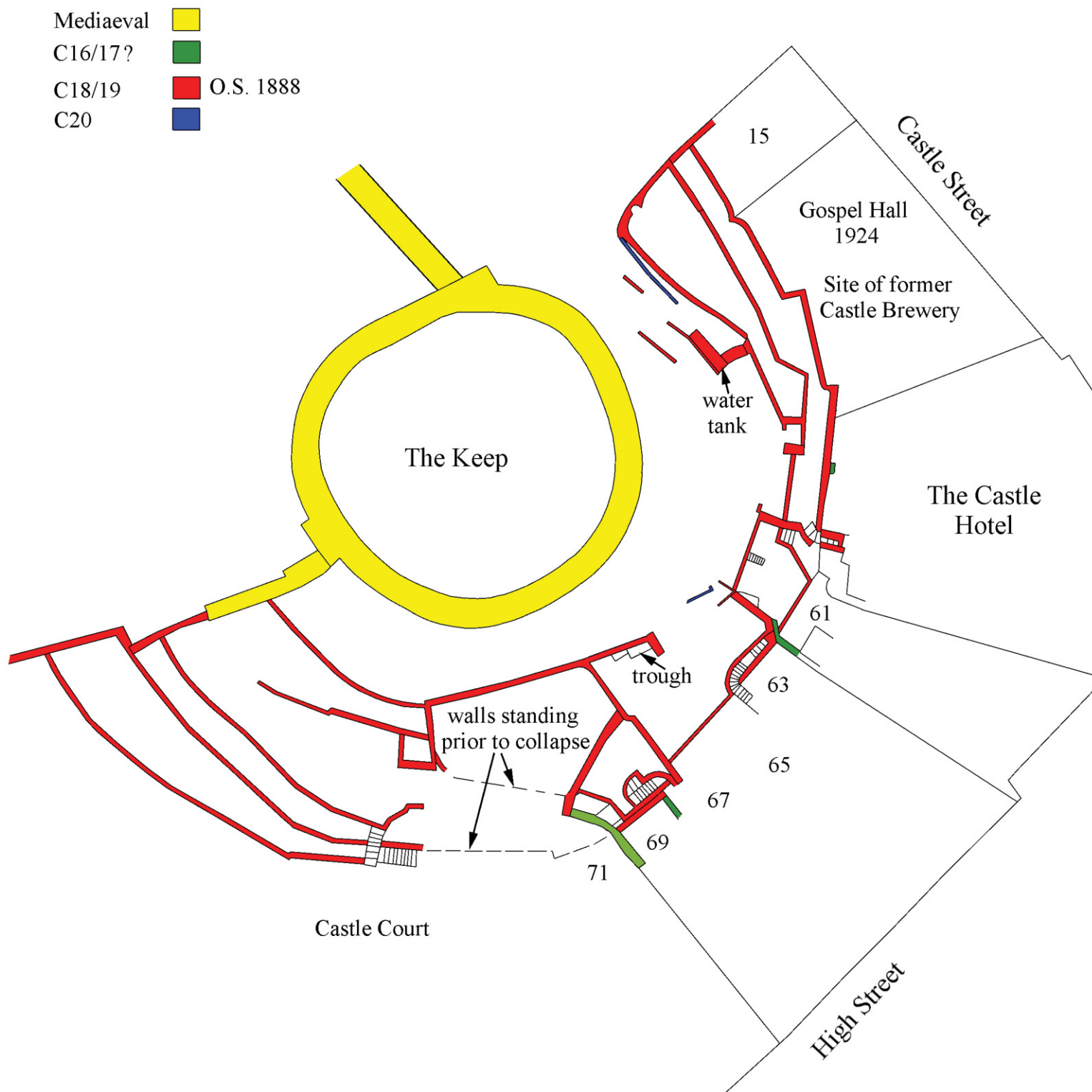


Fig 1 A plan showing existing walls on the motte and their approximate dating.  
Based on survey by M.J. Rees & Co. 1985-87. Scale 1:400.



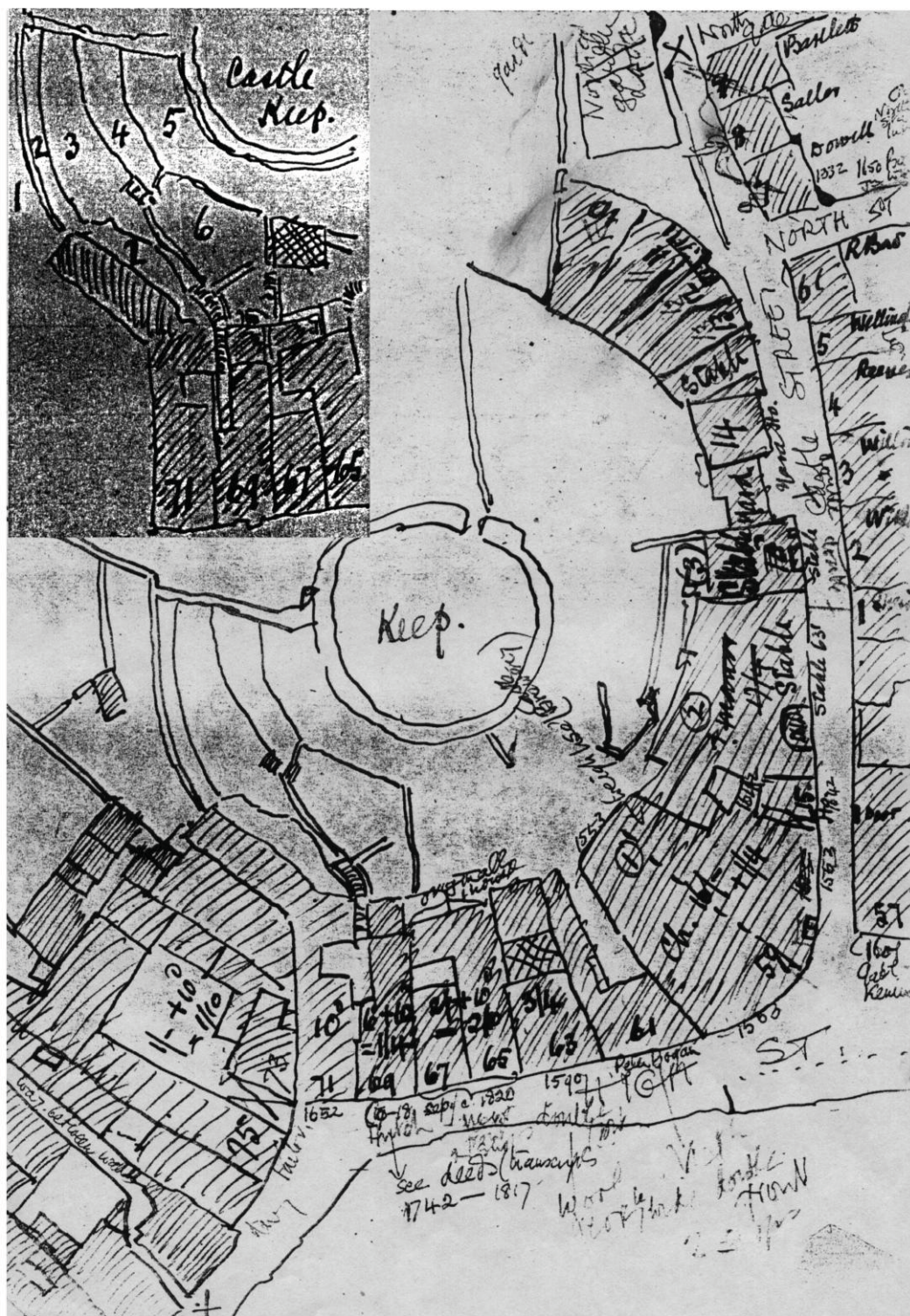


Fig 2 Sketch plans drawn in the 1920's by C.F. Rea.



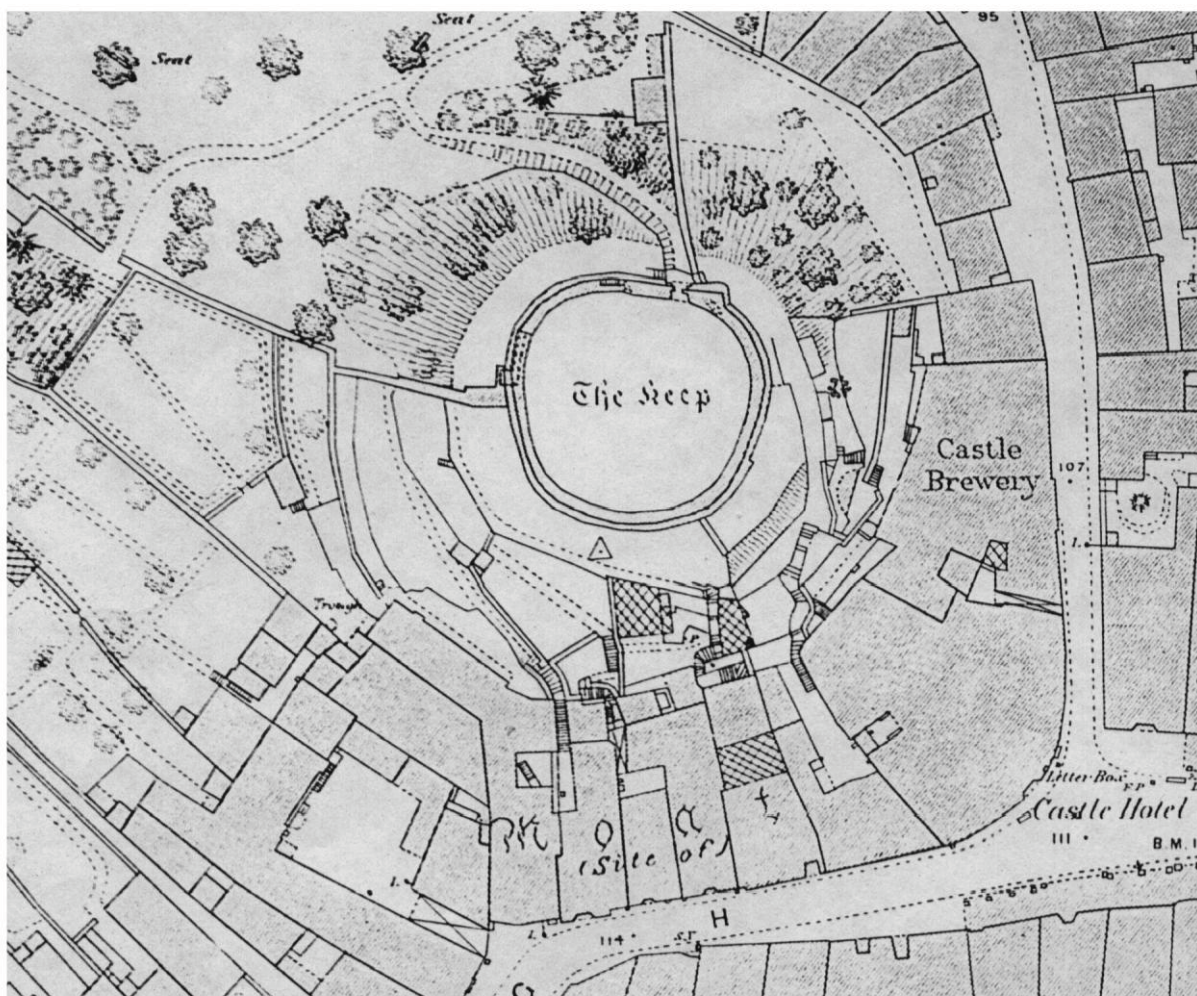


Fig 3 1888 O.S. map



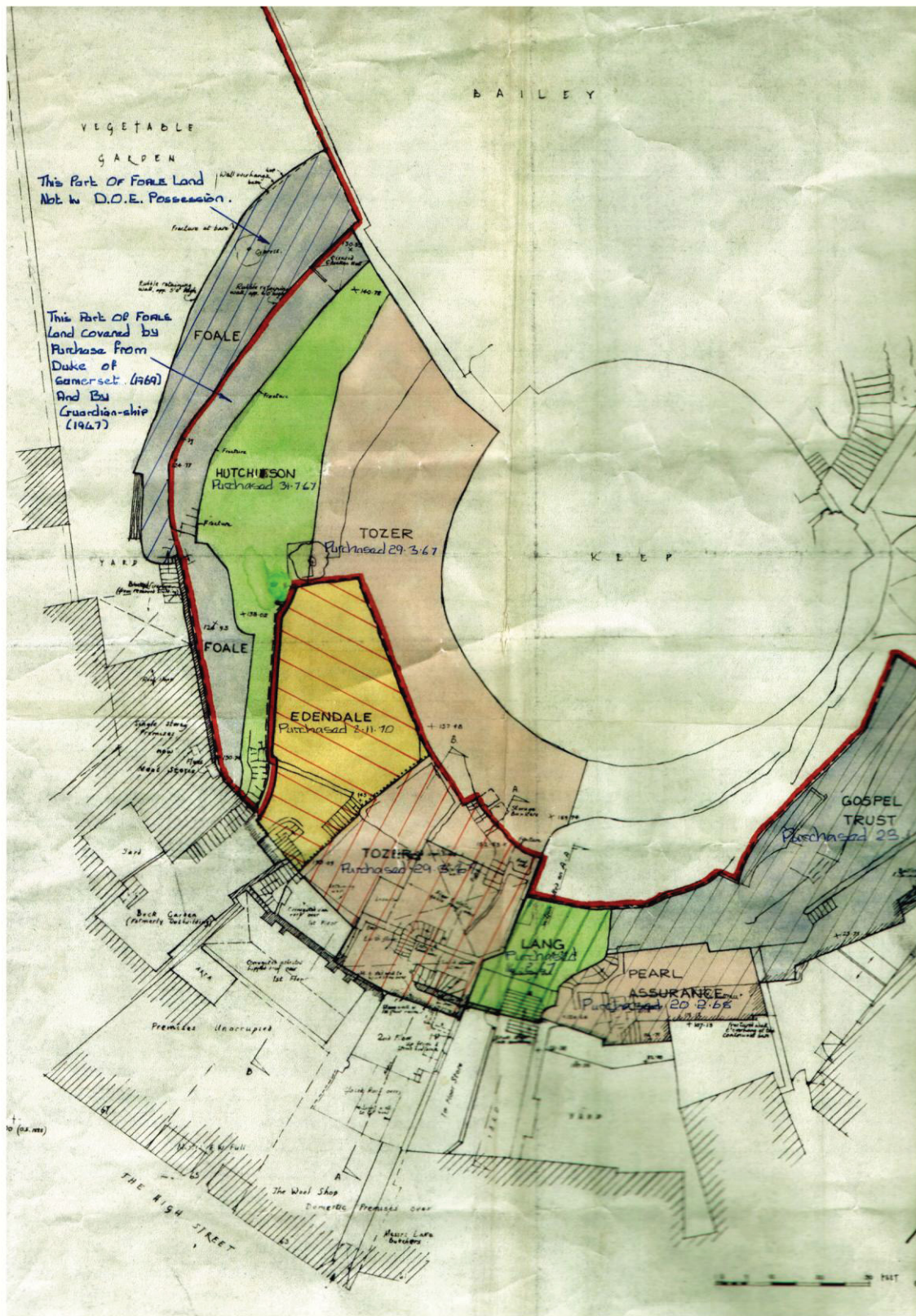


Fig 4 An extract of a survey of Totnes Castle from February 1962.





Plate 1. Late C16/17 property boundary wall dividing Nos 69 and 71 High Street. Rubble construction with clay bonding



Plate 2. Tall revetment wall behind Gospel Hall. The alinement of which existed before the chapel. Substantially rebuilt in the 1970's.





Plate 3. Remains of back block behind No.63 High Street with steps leading onto motte (left).



Plate 4. Garden terrace wall heavily repointed in 1970's.