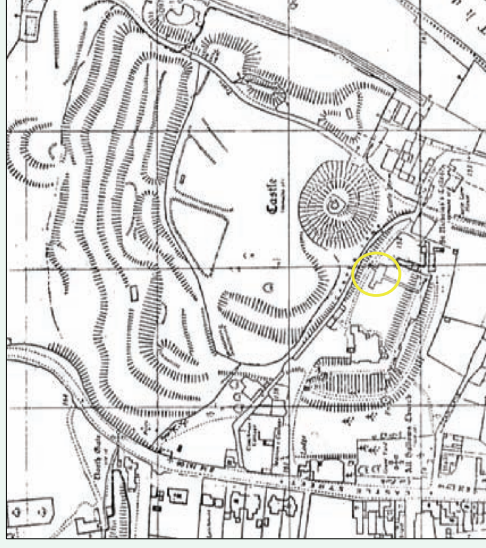


THE WALLINGFORD BURH TO BOROUGH RESEARCH PROJECT

INVESTIGATIONS AT WALLINGFORD CASTLE - 1972

Wallingford Castle: a brief history

Wallingford Castle is, on many levels, a surprisingly overlooked castle of national importance, due in part to its lack of upstanding keep or curtain structures. Yet the powerful and only partially obscured remnant earthworks, set into the north-east corner of the late Saxon *burh* town, exploiting sections of the *burh* defences, belong to a fortified complex of high medieval note. The motte and bailey castle, which is the core of the defensive works, was built by William the Conqueror shortly after the Norman invasion of 1066 and selected for its strategic strengths at a key crossing of the Thames – where William I himself crossed to march on London. The motte (now eroded and partially shrouded in tree and bush cover) may well have overlain a previous high status Saxon palace. For 400 years after its foundation Wallingford was recognised as one of the country's major castles, and consequently underwent several refurbishments and considerable expansion.



The castle in war and peace

The castle saw action in the Anarchy of the 1140s when it was held by Brian Fitz Count for Matilda. The treaty which ended the war was signed there by Stephen and Henry. King John made use of the castle on many occasions and in the 14th century the Black Prince also lived there. From the 15th to the 17th centuries it was almost derelict, but in 1642 it was garrisoned by King Charles at the threat of the Civil War; although it withstood a protracted siege, in 1646 it surrendered, as the last Royalist stronghold. After a short period as a prison the defences were slighted on Parliament's order in 1652; robbing of materials was substantial in subsequent centuries, to the degree that only small patches of bailey wall survive and none of the keep. The site as a whole saw landscaping in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but the scale of the defences and the value of the site to the town of Wallingford have ensured the overall survival of its evocative and complex remains.



The castle and cob kitchen excavations, 1972
This was an excavation of six weeks' duration in summer and winter 1972 directed by Bob Carr for the Dept of the Environment and the Architects' Benevolent Society, before the Society's building of an old peoples' home – whose final design was not available until a week before the excavation began, and proved to be totally different from that expected, meaning that the area investigated merely covered the planned garden of the home (This now demolished). The excavation, sited across the deep lane immediately south-west of the motte, offered the chance of trying to date the castle's outer ward which was created within one of the southern outer ditches. The aim was also to find a sequence of buildings running through from a pre-castle date to the 17th century. Below topsoil and Victoriana were pits filled with general post-medieval rubble, perhaps resulting from the slighting of the castle ramparts and buildings in 1652. The only extant Civil War remains related to a stone wall and scarp found in the section cut across the defensive bank of the outer ward.

Above left: Location of 1972 trench. Above far left: air photograph (courtesy of the Environmental Agency) of Wallingford castle. Bottom left and below: views of the excavation in progress and the cob kitchen. Bottom right: metal finds from the excavations



The covering layer

The earliest phase was a bank of hard packed gravel, held in place by timber revetting, containing 12th-century pottery. Between this and the stone wall was an infill of sand and subsoil covering the whole outer ward to a depth of 2 meters, probably the product of an enlargement of the outer ditches. This layer contained much 12th- and 13th-century pottery and is of high value since it helped bury and preserve a set of medieval structures which immediately pre-dated it. Of these, the best preserved and accessible was a presumed kitchen or cook-house, which was half-excavated, and which comprised three rooms, whose walls still stood 1.80m high.

The cob building

This was a building of cob, a common medieval technique, where mud is puddled up with straw to give it cohesion, and then moulded up into a thicker mixture, able to stand on its own, and trimmed to shape when nearly dry. There were no timber impressions on the crest of the walls, which all seem to have been load-bearing; the internal partition walls were supported by large vertical timbers bedded into the fabric of the wall; fragments of roofing tiles were found to suggest the building was not thatched. Oddly no traces of window openings were recognised. Hearths were present in all three rooms, and furniture was indicated by stake holes in the floor. Noticeably, the floor level was sunk 10cm by constant cleaning, and the walls patched and altered in several places, all indicating an extended life across much of the period c. AD 1150-1225. When filled in, timbers and tiles were carefully removed for reuse elsewhere. The filling in also saw lots of pottery, animal bones and metal finds deposited in the site.

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