



Historic England

Earthwork and Timber Castles

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to earthwork and timber castles, including sections on ringworks, mottes and baileys. A brief chronology (11th to 14th centuries) is included. Castles were the expression of power and of wealth, tempered by and combined with the over-riding need for security, and their development is touched upon here. Earthwork castles have associations with medieval parish churches, villages and towns, and strategic river crossings, ports, main roads, or high ground. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading

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Front cover

Castle Rising, Norfolk. A massive ringwork protects William d'Aubigny's fortress-palace of the 1140s.

Introduction

Of all historic buildings, the castles of England are some of the most familiar. They were the homes and power-bases of the most influential families, and many of them have been occupied for several hundred years. Less familiar, however, are the predecessors of these grand medieval buildings. The earliest castles in England were not built of stone but had substantial earthwork defences (Figure 1), and their buildings were made of timber. Many of these early castles were rebuilt multiple times and are thus barely traceable beneath their later replacements. Nevertheless, about 700 of these earthwork castles still survive.



Figure 1
British Camp, on the border of Herefordshire and Worcestershire. This early medieval ringwork castle was set within the defences of an Iron Age hillfort, already over a thousand years old.

They take two main forms: the ringworks – which are simple enclosures with an outer ditch and an inner bank – and the mottes, which are flat-topped circular mounds. A simple addition was a bailey (or, occasionally more than one): a subsidiary area, enclosed by a bank and ditch, within which the ancillary buildings of the household could be held secure, and through which access to the motte or the ringwork could be gained.

The earthwork defences of mottes and ringworks were strengthened by timber palisades and towers; these have long since decayed, and the appearance of these sites today gives little impression of their effectiveness as fortifications (Figure 2).

There is a great deal that we still do not know about the origin of the castles in England and in France in the 11th century (Figure 3) but social conditions had given rise to powerful families, the existence of which greatly facilitated the establishment of castles, for a castle was a visible manifestation of personal status and authority.



Figure 2
Acton Bank, Lydbury North, Shropshire. A rare example of an entirely levelled castle, here revealed as a crop mark. The dark circle marks the ditch round the motte; thinner lines define bailey enclosures.

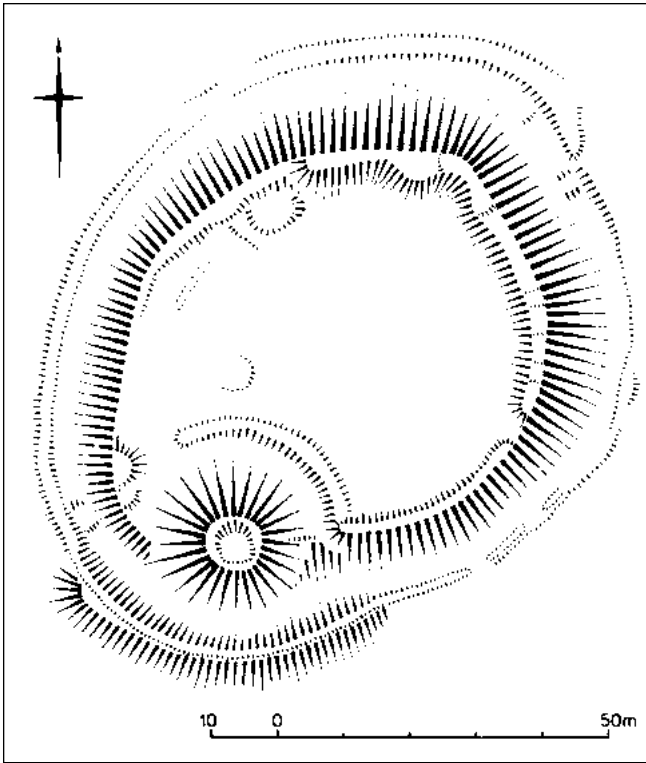


Figure 3
Bury Castle, on the southern fringe of Exmoor. Not unusually for an earthwork castle, when, and by whom it was built, is uncertain.

Immediately after the Norman Conquest, these earthwork and timber strongholds were rapidly built across the face of England, in a variety of strategic positions, and proved to be very effective as a means of subjugation and control.

It seems that some defended enclosures – very like the ringworks – date from before the arrival of the Normans in 1066. Thereafter, on both sides of the Channel, there was an explosion of castle-building, initially in earth and timber. The eventual decline of this tradition of simple castles is less easy to document, but the construction of mottes may have continued in the north as late as the 14th century.

1 Ring Works

These substantial but simple earthwork enclosures – about 20 to 50m across and generally circular – were the earliest Norman castles in England (Figure 4). They were defined by an outer ditch, the soil from which was used to form a large inner bank. As such, many ringworks have more of a prehistoric quality than a medieval one. It is often only the scale and the relative sharpness of the earthworks that distinguishes these castles from their prehistoric predecessors.

Ringworks can be divided into two basic forms: a full ring, broken only by a single entrance; and the ‘partial ringwork’ for which the ditch was cut – and the bank thrown up – across a

promontory, the angle of a river terrace, or a narrow neck of land, so as to make best use of the natural defences. Ringworks were economical in construction and were often adapted from earlier structures such as Iron Age hillforts, and even from Roman amphitheatres. Their simplicity was a factor that enabled the fashion for castles to spread so quickly across Britain.

Excavation has revealed that some of the encircling banks were revetted with timber posts: these were also used along the passage to the single gate, or along the rampart so as to construct a fighting platform. Domestic buildings, also of timber, stood within the enclosure.



Figure 4

Englishcombe, Somerset. A late 11th or 12th century ringwork castle of the de Gournay family. Such a site, relatively short-lived, long since abandoned and little if at all disturbed, will have enormous archaeological potential.

2 Mottes

These simple mounds were also formed from the spoil thrown up from an external ditch, although some of them were economical adaptations of natural knolls or of prehistoric burial-mounds. Some seem to have had their structure strengthened by a ring of posts that retained the soil.

The profiles of mottes vary: some are steep-sided – the classic inverted pudding-basin shape – others are relatively low and broad. The choice of design probably reflected the type of timber tower or hall that had been chosen to stand on the top (Figure 5). Some mottes (such as Aldingham, in Cumbria) seem to have been made by filling-in the centre of a small ringwork, and then heightening

it, but this sort of complex history can usually only be revealed by excavation. As with the ringworks, access across the ditch was gained by a causeway or over a wooden bridge.

The defences of some mottes, and of some ringworks, were enhanced by cutting back the surface of a natural knoll or a promontory so as to strengthen the defences (for instance, Warden, in Northumberland, and Barrow Mump, in Somerset). This ‘scarping’ also tended to render a simple site more dramatic – especially when seen from lower down a slope – and may have been intended to add cachet by making a small stronghold more threatening and dramatic.



Figure 5
Excavations at Hen Domen, near Montgomery, revealed the archaeological complexity of a simple earthwork. Here the inter-cutting sequence of motte-top halls is investigated in 1991.

3 Baileys

Mottes, and some ringworks, had an outer enclosure – a bailey – attached to them (Figure 6). These were usually constructed in the same way as a ringwork – an internal bank and an external ditch – but some may have been no more than a timber palisade, traceable now only in excavation. Some baileys that were less massive than the motte or ringwork to which they were attached have been more vulnerable to damage by ploughing or by later development; these baileys may now be barely apparent in the landscape.

The bailey enclosed a variety of timber domestic buildings: a hall, a kitchen, stables and stores, and so on. In rare examples a second bailey (Figure 7) was provided; it is possible that these may have had a separate function, serving perhaps as corrals for livestock in times of trouble. A timber palisade probably crowned the bank of the bailey, as on the ringwork.



Figure 6
Pickering Castle, North Yorkshire, as it may have appeared in the 12th century.



Figure 7
Castle Rising, Norfolk: an earthwork castle that was provided with two baileys.

4 Location and Function

The site of a castle was often chosen to control a strategic location, such as a pass or a river-crossing. Many of the prime sites had been selected, for similar reasons, for their prehistoric and Roman predecessors, and these earlier earthworks were simply adapted as outer defences. Other castles were established in the administrative centre of an existing block of land ownership, or were pivotal in a particular pattern of settlement.

In some cases, however, the earlier political and social landscape was ignored entirely in order to establish a new centre of power (Figure 8). A castle constructed within an existing settlement may have been a conscious expression of the domination of the local English population by a new Norman lord. Elsewhere, the same outcome was achieved by the establishment of a new town (Figure 9) outside the castle gate (for instance, Warkworth, Northumberland), or the wealth of a castle might attract a new settlement, less formally established, outside its gate.



Figure 8
Skipsea Castle, near Hornsea, on the Yorkshire coast. A large earthwork motte reusing an Iron Age mound rises from what is now lush pasture. In the Middle Ages this was a large mere (lake); a causeway gave access to the castle.



Figure 9

Skipsea Castle. Peter Dunn's reconstruction gives an idea of what the castle may have looked like in its heyday; the causeway approaches from the right. The king ordered the destruction of the castle in 1221 after its owner revolted.

There is no evidence of any clear difference in status between mottes and ringworks, and the choice as to whether to build one or the other seems to have been largely a matter of personal preference. Geology may also have played a part: mottes in some areas being more common on land covered by glacial drift, which was easily worked. Where an existing building (or a group of buildings) was to be retained, this could sensibly be done by constructing a ringwork round it, or by enclosing it within a bailey.

In the new social hierarchy of Norman England, the families below the grandest of lords would have felt in need of the security that a new castle provided.

A particular specialised function can be identified for a number of small and simple castles built close to a larger and more powerful one, especially perhaps during the Anarchy of the mid-12th century. These seem to have been siege-castles: the base for an attacking force that would have been designed to emphasise the attackers' determination to the defenders of the larger stronghold (and thus to intimidate them), and to deny them reinforcements and supplies. Less heroically, a siege-castle also potentially provided a bolt-hole in the event of any counter-attack. Examples include the motte and bailey known as The Rings, just 300m from Corfe Castle in Dorset, and two earthworks flanking Barley Pound, in Hampshire.

5 Chronology

There has been surprisingly little excavation of early earthwork castles, but from the evidence that we do have it seems that the ringworks – so economically constructed – may have developed slightly before the motte became popular in the late 11th and the early 12th century. Some ringworks, such as Liddel Strength, in Cumbria, are known to have had mottes superimposed upon them.

The construction and occupation of mottes seem to have continued as late as the 14th century, but by that time, increasingly, many castles had been rebuilt in stone – although the defences of the bailey often continued to be made of earth and timber, long after a stone keep had been built.

6 Development

On the summit of a motte stood a timber tower; this may often have been prefabricated and seems to have been a substantial construction, analogous with a church tower, with complex bracing to give it structural strength. The tower over the main gate to the bailey would not have been so tall but would still have been a massive structure. The timber uprights were supported on stone pads or were dropped into deep post-holes. Cobble foundations carried wooden ground-plates for the ancillary buildings in the bailey.

The use of prefabricated timber elements – especially economical in the construction of temporary siege-castles – meant that castles could be abandoned or demolished but that their components could be reused elsewhere.

Castles were the expression of power and of wealth, tempered by and combined with the

over-riding need for security. As such, their design – especially of those belonging to the upper echelons of society – could undergo rapid change as fashions waxed and waned. Stone keeps were introduced (in London and Colchester) during the reign of William the Conqueror. Elsewhere the timber halls were rebuilt in stone, within the earth-and-timber defences, from the late 11th century onwards. The defences might not be strengthened in stone until well into the next century, or even as late as the 14th century.

This transition can be very difficult to unravel without excavation. In some mottes, for instance, it has been shown that massive stone basements (invisible on the surface), lying deep within the earthwork, supported the stone keep. Elsewhere, the later robbing of the stone for other buildings has left a castle with the appearance of its earlier, timber phase.

7 Associations

In many instances, an earthwork castle survives next to a medieval parish church, a combination that symbolises the patronage, power and centralising influences of local magnates, and which provided for the security of those same landowners in this life and the next (Figure 10). Villages and towns grew up, or were deliberately developed beside castles, benefiting from the

wealth and power of the lord. This, in turn, supported the church which continued to develop long after the small earthwork castle beside it had been abandoned. Many urban centres had a castle which was directly linked to the town defences. Elsewhere, castles were sited to have strategic control of river crossings, ports, main roads, or high ground.



Figure 10
Burton in Lonsdale, North Yorkshire. Castles were administrative centres, as well as military bases. This castle was the centre of the honour (lordship) of Burton, which covered the north-west corner of the West Riding of Yorkshire.



Figure 11
Clun Castle, Shropshire. Clun is an example of a castle which was an important aristocratic power base for several hundred years. Its complex earthworks and masonry remains reflect that.

Great lords continued to live in great castles (Figure 11), but as social and economic patterns changed, the lesser nobility and influential local landowners moved into more convenient accommodation. Some of these new residential complexes were defended by walls or a moat, but this was more against civil disorder and criminality than any armed force.

The distinctive shape of mottes, in particular, meant that some of those that survived as

earthworks were later adapted to form features (especially prospect mounds) in picturesque landscapes. In the Second World War, many earthwork castles were selected as the site for a pill-box, or for trenches dug by the Home Guard. Later still, the Royal Observer Corps – also appreciating the strategic positions that the Normans had chosen – occupied some of these simple earthworks, creating within them observation posts that were manned throughout the Cold War.

8 Further Reading

The only general and extensive account of earthworks castles is *Timber Castles*, by Robert Higham and Philip Barker (1992).

A full gazetteer of all of the castles in England (including those of earth and timber) is provided in *Castellarium Anglicanum* by D J Cathcart King (1983).

An overview of the whole subject of Norman Castles – especially of their development in stone – is the subject of Derek Renn, *Norman Castles in Britain* (2nd edn, 1973).

In England there is no regional summary to compare to the comprehensive and high-quality

treatment to be found in the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Glamorgan (vol. III, Part 1a) Major Secular Monuments: The Early Castles from the Norman Conquest to 1217* (1991). This gives an idea of the full range of earthwork castles.

The strategic role of early castles is the central theme of Stuart Prior's book, *A Few Well-Positioned Castles: The Norman Art of War* (2006).

For the function and symbolic importance of early castles, see Charles Coulson, *Castles in Medieval Society* (2003).

9 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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