

# **SOUTH MYMMS CASTLE**

**November 1957**

**Barnet & District Local History Society**

**Bulletin no 10**

by D.F. Renn.

Although the earthworks are shown on several large-scale maps of the 19th century, the recognition of the site at South Mymms as a motte-and-bailey castle was only made in 1918. In that year the castle was rediscovered by G.F. Cruickshank and A.F. Major during their field survey of Grim's Dyke, and its nature recognised by A.H. Allcroft.

The castle stands on a low chalk spur overlooking the clay vale to the S.W., about one mile from the church and village, and immediately adjoining the works of the Barnet Lime Company. The Nation Grid Reference is 52/230025.

The castle consists of a kidney-shaped enclosure (or bailey) about 390 feet by 350 across, surrounded by a bank over 20 feet high above a ditch 20 feet wide. There is a large circular mound (or motte) 27 feet high in the N.W. corner of the bailey, with a flat top 70 feet by 50 feet across, partly surrounded by a ditch 20 feet wide. There are traces of a causeway across this ditch, and an original entrance on the S.E. side of the bailey. A 193 A aerial photograph showed enclosures to the west and south; the western enclosure has been destroyed, but some ploughed-out traces of the southern enclosure remain. This may not be another bailey, but merely old field boundaries, the banks being formed of large flint nodules removed from the areas of cultivation.

A track passed through the main axis of the site to a ford of the Mymmshall Brook and along a tributary towards Little Heath. The possible Roman origin of this track has been discussed by Mr. G.J. Gillum in Bulletin No.9- Another track ran along the chalk ridge towards Hatfield and passed several 13th century churches and the early 14th century homestead moat at Welham Green (See Bulletin No.5).

These motte-and-bailey earthwork castles were introduced into England by the Normans. Many were built immediately after the Conquest, but the civil war of 1136-54 also saw their erection in large numbers. The banks were palisaded in wood, and the motte crowned with a timber tower, either built on wooden piles (as at Abinger in Surrey, Archaeological Journal CVII) or on stone sleeper-walls (Anstey, Hertfordshire). Where occupation was prolonged, wood was often replaced later by stone.

## **HISTORY**

The lack of any local record or tradition of a castle at South Mymms may be accounted for by its relatively isolated position and probable short occupation. On the other hand, there is a certain amount of circumstantial evidence. In 1086

"Mimes" was part of the estate of Geoffrey de Mandeville. His son, Geoffrey II, granted the church of South Mymms to Walden Abbey in 1136. In 1141 the Empress Matilda granted Geoffrey de Mandeville a charter.

"et praeterea concedo illi ut castella sua habent stent ei et remaneant ad inforciandum ad voluntatem suam..."

*(And I further grant that he may fortify such castles as already exist and remain in his hands. )*

In order to regain Geoffrey's support, Stephen was forced to go one better, and granted.

"et praeterea firmiter ei concessi ut possit firmare quoddam castellum ubicunque voluerit in terra sua quod stare possit ..."

*(And I have also granted that he may build another castle wherever he wishes in his territory.)*

This grant was particularised by Matilda's charter of 1142.

"Concedo etiam eidem -Gaufredo quod novum castellum quod firmavit super Lviām stet et remaneant ad efforciandum ad voluntatem suam. Concedo etiam ei quod firmet unum castellum ubicunque voluerit in terra sua sicut ei per aliam cartam meam concessi et quod stet et remaneant ..."

*(I grant that Geoffrey may fortify his newly- built castle on the Lea. He may also build a castle wherever he wishes in his territory as was granted in my other charter.)*

The castle on the Lea was probably that near Bow Bridge since all other known castles on the river are of earlier foundation. Geoffrey was constable of the Tower of London, as well as Earl of Essex.

It is suggested that South Mymms was the other castle referred to. Its purpose becomes apparent if one climbs the ridge behind the castle: beyond lies the rich chalk vale of St. Albans, with the early Norman tower of its abbey clearly visible. Geoffrey was casting his eyes on the abbey's land and treasures but did not yet dare to make an open attack. His castle was hidden in a remote spot behind the ridge, midway between the main roads, Ermine Street and Watling Street, "the royal ways" over which the King had special powers.

But Geoffrey de Mandeville soon overstepped the mark and was summoned to a conference with Stephen at St. Albans in September 1143. There he was forced to surrender his principal castles and, after a period of guerrilla warfare from the Fenland, he was fatally wounded at the siege of Burwell Castle in Cambridgeshire in August 1144. The de Mandeville lands were confiscated by the Crown, although subsequently restored to the family by Henry II. There is a detailed account of his life in *Geoffrey de Mandeville* by J.J. Round.

The reference to the destruction of a propugnaculum ( *A bulwark, a rampart, a defence, a protection*) near the Abbey of St. Alban in 1152 (*Gesta Abbatum Monasterii S. Albani, a Thomas Walsingham I, p. 122*) is usually taken to refer to the earthwork at Kingsbury, but it is just possible that it refers to South Mymms: there are no other castles nearby. If not destroyed then, the derelict site should have been razed under the order of the Assize of Clarendon of January 1176 for the destruction of all unlicensed strongholds.

## **DISCUSSION**

The distribution of castles around London shows a significant blank, representing the lands of St. Albans Abbey, between the Chiltern group beyond Berkhamsted and those near Braughing. Many of the latter are "adulterine" castles built by the supporters of Geoffrey de Mandeville. They extend south-westward from his great stone keep at Walden along the open ridge to Benington, where a keep modelled on Walden was built

by Roger de Valoignes before 11A2. As pointed out above, the castle at South Mymms was strategically placed for an attack on St. Albans.

There are lines of retreat through the woodland of the Hertfordshire-Essex border, either by way of Hatfield to Walden, or through Enfield to London.

A wide study of motte-de-bailey castles in England and Wales by the writer has permitted some attempt at their classification. This study awaits publication elsewhere and cannot be discussed at length here. Class Be2, to which South Mymms belongs, is characterised by a squat flat-topped motte standing within the ditch of a kidney-shaped bailey. Other dated members of the class are: -

- (i) The castle at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, may go back to the 11th century but was remodelled when the Romanesque church was built shortly after 1139.
- (ii) Tomen y Rhodwydd, Llanarmon yn Ial, Denbighshire, was built in 1149 and destroyed eight years later.
- (iii) Castell Pencader, Llanfihangel Ioreth, Carmarthenshire, was built in 1145 and destroyed in the following year.

The suggested parallel of Richard's Castle, Herefordshire, does not bear close examination. The motte there is a large cone, situated on the point of a natural spur and completely dwarfing the triangular bailey. It was probably built by a Norman favourite of Edward the Confessor and is mentioned in Domesday Book. The several members of this group are widely scattered about the country, but the limited evidence of date is consistently in the range 1139-49.

It is much to be hoped that this castle (scheduled as an Ancient Monument, AM 18/6846) will be scientifically excavated. As the site is on chalk, the remains of post-holes and the old surface-level should be quite clear, and any bone or metal objects should be preserved by the alkaline soil.

Too much must not be expected from a site occupied for such a short time, but it may produce some pottery. Surface finds of Norman pottery have been made at Aldenham, Barnet and Elstree, and groups excavated at Anstey and Hertford; at present these sherds can only be roughly dated by comparison with pottery from elsewhere in England, and evidence for the date of local developments is so far lacking.

*This publication reproduced with kind permission of Barnet Museum. Mike Allen 2023*