

Excavations at the Motte & Bailey Castle of South Mimms, Herts. 1960-1967

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by

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The early history of the exploration of this site (TL 230026) and the scanty documentary evidence that suggests its identification with the castle that Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex, was authorised to build in 1141, has been discussed by D. F. Renn in an earlier Bulletin no 10, to which the reader is referred. This account takes up the story in late 1959, when the North Middlesex Archaeological Research Committee decided to excavate the castle motte. The work was facilitated by the welcome confirmation that Renn's survey, published in the Bulletin, was accurate, and could confidently be used to plan the excavations.

THE MOTTE

Five seasons' work (1960-1964) has enabled a considerable amount of information on this structure to be obtained. As it stood before evacuation, the motte rose as a truncated cone about 10-12 feet above the level of the adjacent bailey. Its base diameter was about 110 feet, that of the summit 65 feet. The mound was a very complex structure, whose stages of construction and details will now be described.

The builders stripped the turf from the natural loam overlying the chalk subsoil, and the base of the motte was defined by a penannular clay and flint bank about 20 feet wide and 4 feet high, some 100 feet in external diameter. A gap for an entrance about 10 feet wide faced towards the South.

Within this enclosure, off-centre towards the North, an almost rectangular flint footing was laid on the loam. It was 35 feet square externally and varied in width from 2 to 3 feet. Its construction varied considerably, but usually showed signs of slotting to fit a 9-inch square sleeper beam. The footings on the East and West sides were laid slightly higher than the other two, presumably to facilitate the fixing together of the main sleeper beams without cutting their ends. On the South side was additional rough stonework, designed to buttress an entrance passage leading out through the side of the motte. The angle to the vertical of this stonework suggested that, at least for its lowest 3 feet, it had rested against timberwork sloping inwards. at about 80°. The analogy of surviving mediaeval timber belfries leads to the conclusion that the rectangular foundation supported a tall, square, inwardly tapering timber-framed tower, standing up to about 65 feet in height from the ground.

Finds from the floor level of this structure include much coarse pottery and small amounts of fine glazed Saxo-Norman ware (Stamford ware and other types), iron objects, viz., nails, two arrow heads, a pick-axe head, a pricket candlestick and a large buckle, bronze-work, viz., a finger ring, decorative half-round section strip and part of the gilt foot of a candlestick; two small pieces of sheet lead. They may be evidence for a leaded roof. Some internal plaster rendering, an inch thick, suggests a degree of comfort and finish in some upper chamber.

The entrance passageway extended 25 feet from the south face of the tower to the point in the side of the motte where it emerged. There were signs that here there had been a suspended floor. It was presumed that there had been gates at this point, for traces of the floor stopped abruptly in a straight line. On the clay and flint bank, it appeared that a vertical timber palisade or shuttering had been raised. The space between this timbering and the tower had been systematically filled by the upcast from the encircling ditch, and the tip-lines showed clearly how this material had been laid to minimize the pressure on the internal tower and passageway, and to facilitate even settlement.

THE MOTTE DITCH

This was sectioned at two points where it had become completely filled in. At the first of these, it appeared as a V-section ditch, 33 feet wide and 15 feet deep. The slope of the inner face was around 40° of the outer, 80 Cut into solid chalk, it constituted a formidable obstacle. The fill had come almost exclusively from the motte, showing that this had once been very much higher than it at present stands. The second section was cut opposite to the entrance passageway into the motte. Here the ditch was significantly smaller 25 feet wide and 12 feet deep. Here, too, its section resembled a lopsided V. In the face of the inner slope was a wide, deep slot, doubtless for a bridge support. Between the inner lip of the ditch and the inferred position of the entrance 1:0 the motte was a dilapidated flint structure, probably the remains of another bridge support. The smaller scale of the ditch here may have been to facilitate its bridging, but it is noteworthy that at this point the builders had run the outer lip of the ditch into the edge of a sand and gravel-filled solution hollow in the chalk. The steep outer face can be seen from the copious early silting to have been unstable where the chalk was discontinuous, and an unsuccessful effort may have been made to avoid this feature.

The ditch fill here included a thick deposit of broken pottery, which had been thrown in from the outer lip. While large amounts of debris were falling into the ditch from the direction of the motte. This furnishes some evidence for the deliberate destruction of the castle and its contents.

THE BAILEY ENTRANCE

The location of the main castle gateway at the obvious place, where a gap in the bailey bank still exists, was established, though no details were recovered. It was observed that, no doubt due to subsequent cultivation within the bailey the chalk subsoil, which lies within a foot of the surface by the outer lip of the motte ditch, is here buried to a depth of at least 8 feet. Soil creep has in many places completely covered up the inner face of the bailey bank.

THE BAILEY BANK

No complete section of this was attempted, owing to the feature uncovered at the point examined. A floor level, cut away at the inner face of the bank was found. This had evidently been part of a building destroyed when the bailey was constructed. It was bounded on the North side by a well-made curved wall, of flints backed by tiles. Debris from this building had been piled against the foot of the bailey bank; it included peg-hole roof tiles, bronze and iron door studs, and large square floor tiles, some of them decorated with incised ornament. The best-preserved example shows a rampant wolf flanked by the remains of three lines of Latin inscription. It is thought that these remains formed part of earlier manorial buildings, demolished when the castle was constructed.

LATER OCCUPATION

The upper levels of the fill of the motte ditch contained pottery, oyster shells and a reckoning counter. This deposit was of 15th century date and was evidence of the later domestic use of the bailey. It is possible that this area was already the site of the manorial warren attested in the following century. It may be, however, that it is to be connected with the working of nearby chalk pits.

CONCLUSIONS

The structure and finds are consistent with the assumption that South Mimms Castle was built by Geoffrey de Mandeville on his manor of Mimms. It may, therefore, be properly related to the document ascribed to 25th July - 1st August 1141, by which the Empress Matilda, among other favours, permitted him to keep the new castle he had built on the River Lea, and to build one other wherever he liked. Geoffrey surrendered all his castles to King Stephen, probably in October 1143. Since the court at which he was seized was held at St. Albans, it may be inferred that the castle of South Mimms, Geoffrey's nearest possession, would have been an early target for the king's men. The demolition and destruction deduced from the second ditch section may be dated to this occasion. That the castle was so well appointed and contained such numerous finds need cause no surprise. Geoffrey no doubt planned for it a more ambitious role than fate allowed, and his seizure at St. Albans prompts the suggestion that he may actually have been residing at South Mimms immediately before his debacle.

The date and function of the building revealed beneath the bailey bank is more problematical. Pottery finds from its floor level do not differ significantly from those from the castle motte. It is therefore unlikely to be much earlier in date. South Mimms was merely a berewic at the time of the Domesday survey of 1086. It had a church by 1136 and was certainly a manor before Geoffrey de Mandeville's fall. I have suggested elsewhere that its achievement of manorial status was the consequence of severance from the parent manor of Edmonton by the enlargement of Enfield Chase from the Domesday parcus to its full mediaeval extent. The date of this event cannot be exactly determined, though I consider that it took place not later than 1136. The creation of the manor was presumably accompanied or followed by the erection of new manorial buildings. Our building, destroyed in 1141, with its curved stone footings, decorated floor tiles, tiled roof and heavy studded door, may well have been part of such a complex. There is no particular reason to consider the building a church, but if it were one, the suggested date and context would remain unaffected.

There is need for much more work on the castle. Virtually nothing is yet known of the bailey, its buildings or defences, and the pre-castle phase of the site requires further elucidation. Meanwhile, it remains to emphasise the importance of the work already done. Thorough examinations of even parts of early castles are few, and it is even rarer for so much structural detail to be recovered and so many finds made. The excavation can without exaggeration be claimed to have contributed to the study of castles as a whole, and not merely to our knowledge of local history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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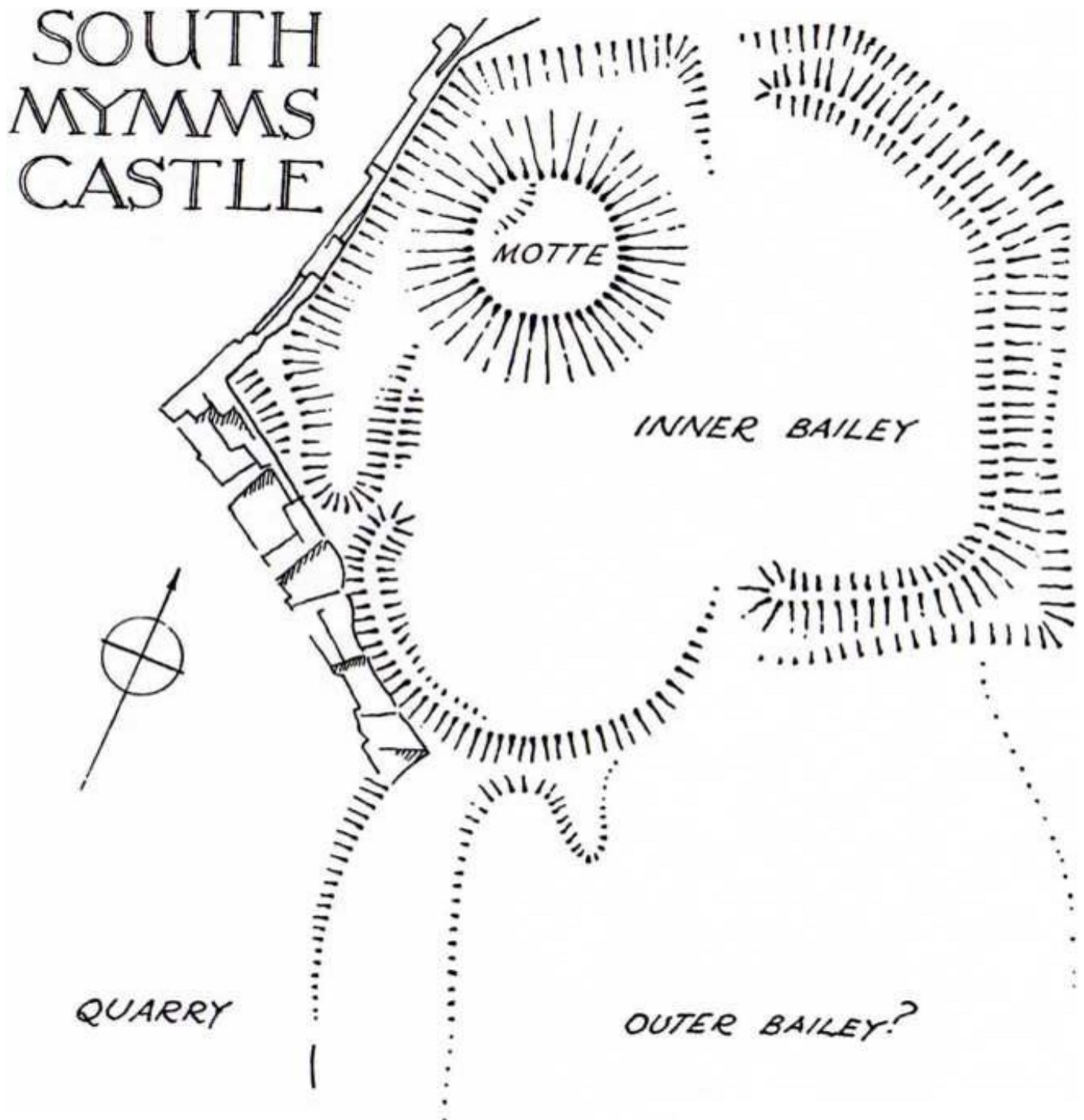
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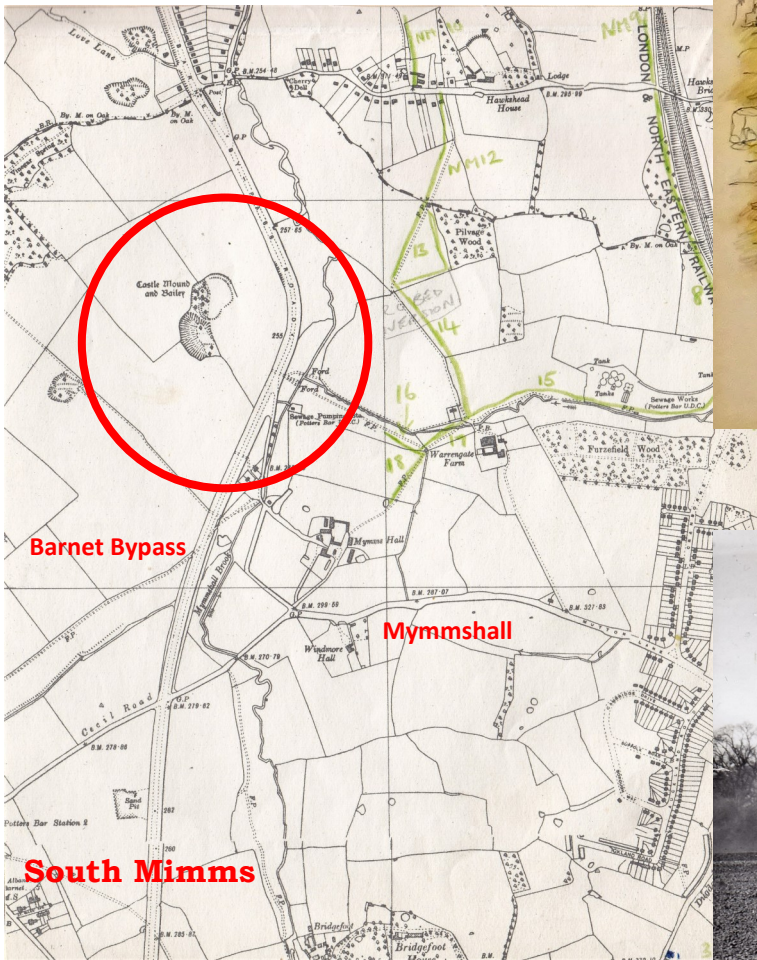


SOUTH MIMMS, MIDDLESEX. STUDENTS FROM NORTH LONDON SCHOOLS AT WORK ON THE EXCAVATION OF THE 12TH-CENTURY EARTHWORK CASTLE.
 This summer, during the second season of a five-year programme, students and girls from North London grammar schools have been helping in the excavation under the direction of Dr. J. P. C. Kent, of the British Museum, of Geoffrey de Mandeville's short-lived earthwork castle of A.D. 1140.



Part of decorated tile recovered in the 1960s

The 1960s castle dig.



Artists impression of how the castle may have looked.



The castle site all that remains today