# Was there a Castle at Calne?

**Reseach and fieldwork from Calne in Wiltshire**

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**O**ver two days in May of 2010, John Oswin, Owen Dicker and other members of BACAS and WANHS (Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society) carried out a geophysical survey to see if we could find any evidence of structures in Castle Fields in Calne.

Four 20m x 20m grids were aligned across a flattened platform that had been artificially scarped. Using resistivity, magnetometry, GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) and a resistance profiler we were able to obtain readings from these surveys which indicated that there was significant disturbance under the topsoil. When the detailed results were analysed, the interpretation confirmed that there were indications of a curved ditch and possible stone structures in the main area. One of these features was large and circular, and had the appearance of being a round tower (*see Figures 1, 2 and 3*).

## Castles and Tower Houses

The word 'castle' has been loosely assigned to many large structures built in the past. For instance, Iron Age hillforts are often called castles, e.g. Barbury Castle and Maiden Castle. Some were arguably defensive structures but they were certainly not castles and many could not have sustained permanent occupation.

When, in AD43, the Romans arrived as conquerors, different building styles and techniques were introduced. Timber forts were erected in preference to earthen ramparts. As the occupation lengthened, stone replaced timber as the material of choice in the construction of dwellings and defended sites.

After the fall of Rome, the withdrawal of the legions and the subsequent invasions of Britain from the north-east by Angles, Saxons and Jutes, many technologies, including building in stone, were lost. As the Anglo-Saxon era progressed, however, construction in stone began again. Historians once considered that all stone buildings erected at this time were ecclesiastical but excavation has



**Figure 1 right**
**Resistivity survey of Castle Fields in Calne**

**Figure 2 far right Magnetometer survey of the same area**
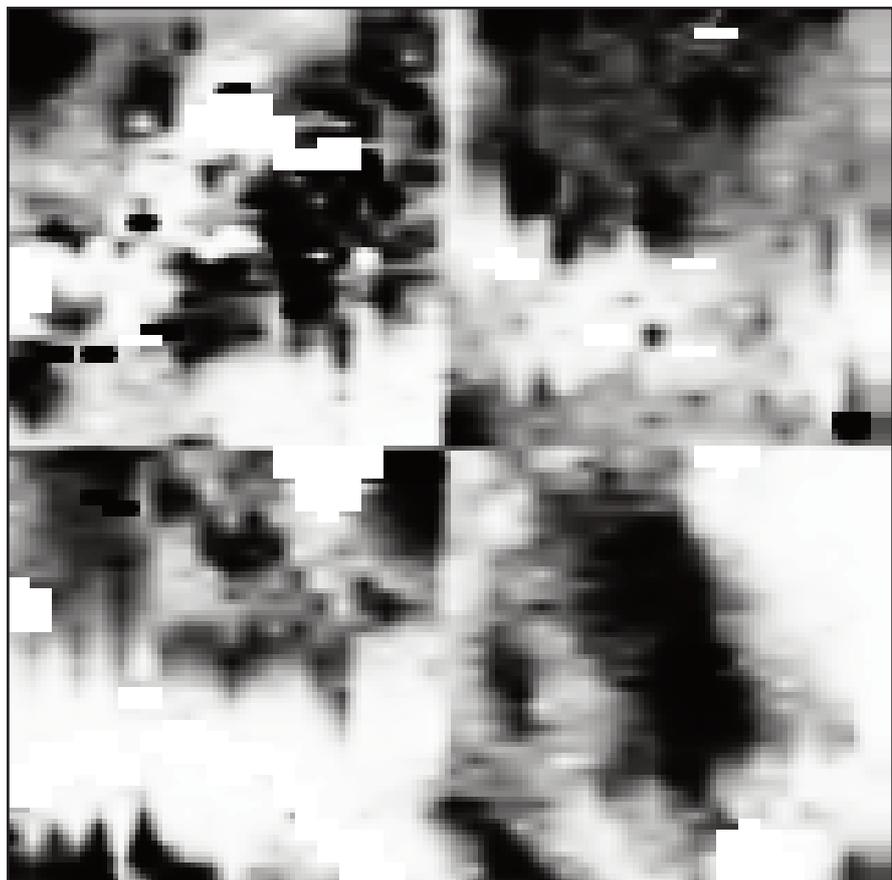
revealed secular constructions of stone, such as the two-storey tower or, possibly, house at Lower Brock Street in Winchester, cAD800, or that at Sulgrave in Northamptonshire, with walls approaching two metres high, built cAD1000 (Bailey 1983; Higham 1992).

Documentary evidence (the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) exists for a third building at Calne in which members of the Witan (Witenagemot or 'supreme council') met in AD978. During the meeting the upper floor of the structure collapsed and all present fell, with the exception of Archbishop Dunstan, who was supported by a beam. Thus, it was believed, validating his point of view.

Following the Norman conquest the first 'real' castles were built. Initially they were timber towers and palisades on man-made mounds known today as Motte and Bailey constructions. A second early form of Norman defensive structure was 'ringworks' (enclosures). Both forms were held mainly by private individuals. Norman castles were often sited on former prestigious or defensive locations such as Iron Age hillforts, Roman forts and Anglo-Saxon high status settlements. Goltho in Lincolnshire and various Burhs (fortified towns) being examples of Anglo-Saxon antecedents (Kenyon 1991; Higham 1992).

In 1138 Henry of Blois, Archbishop of Winchester, built a masonry keep (tower), as stone began to replace the earlier timber structures. By the beginning of the 13th Century few castles remained simple enclosures bounded by ditch and palisades (Kenyon 1991; Wood 1965; Gravett 2009).

Moated sites, the natural successor of smaller earthwork castles, developed between 1275 and 1325. A moat is defined as a broad flat-bottomed or U-shaped ditch that enclosed a platform of land on which a castle or large house was built. In most cases the ditch was filled with water, but at a few sites on hilltops or slopes the ditch was never meant to hold water (Wilson 1985; Steane 1985).

The Tower Houses that evolved in the 13th Century were compact, fortified and several storeys high. There are many in Scotland, Northern England and Ireland but fewer to the south in England. Pounds argues that in England, Tower Housesare poorly documented, some have been destroyed and some await discovery (Pounds 1994).
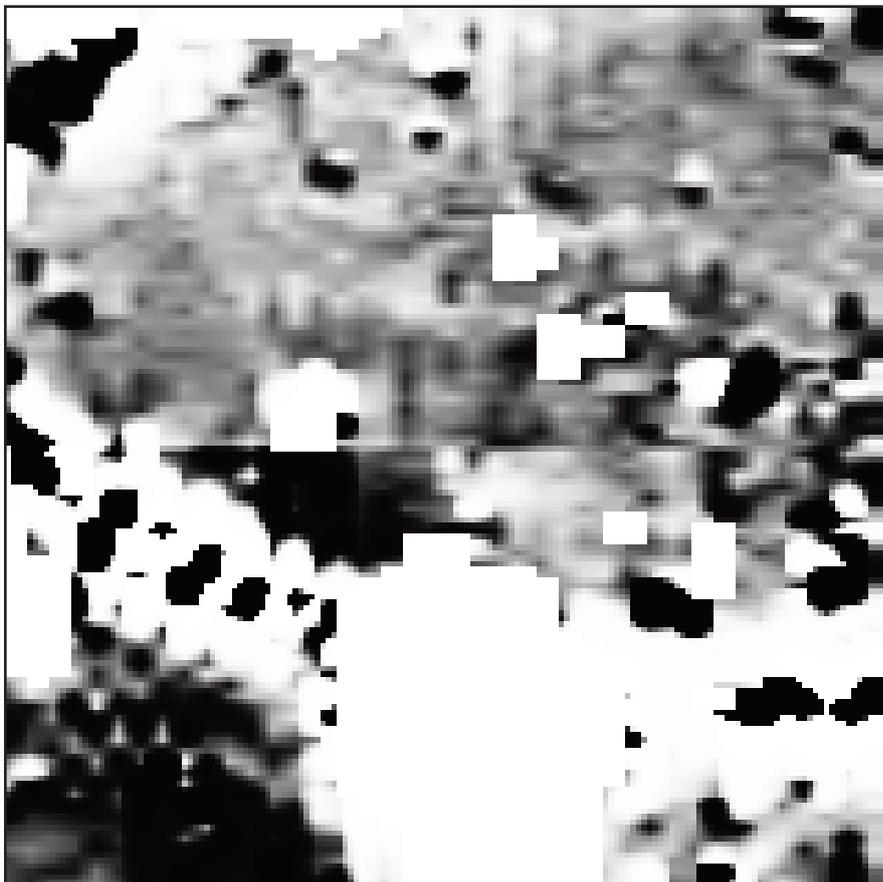
During the 14th and 15th Centuries a new socio-economic class, later to be termed 'gentry', with aspirations to nobility, arose bringing with it new waves of castle building such as at Nunney, Somerset (1373) and at Wardour, Wiltshire (1393). French nobles, captured during the Hundred Years War (1337-1458) and subsequently ransomed, furnished not only wealth for their captors but also continental designs for impressive new castles. Although from the mid-13th Century the King's permission to add battlements to a building (a licence to crenellate) was mandatory, some less law-abiding castle owners avoided compliance (Creighton 2003).

## Discussion

At the time of writing this paper, research and fieldwork (geophysics and excavation) have failed to produce a definitive answer to the question, 'Was there a castle in Calne?' This article will consider the question from a mainly archaeological standpoint, with the occasional use of documentary evidence.

As intimated in the paragraphs above, there were two main reasons for building castles: defence and status. The Medieval period was a lawless and turbulent one, the borders of England were assailed from without, and competition for dominance ravaged all levels of society within. What little documentary evidence exists indicates that Calne may have included royal estates (Crowley 2002) which, in the late Saxon period, became administrative and judicial centres, arguably reason enough to postulate the existence of a status-claiming castle in Calne. Circumstantial evidence in the form of place names locates the castle on top of a steep sided promontory with a river flowing at its foot from the north-east to the south and west.

Approximately half way up the south face of the slope is a ditch that may have been dug in the Iron Age as part of a promontory fort defence. Excavation in 2010 produced Iron Age pottery; sherds of like date were previously found in the vicinity. This excavation also discovered part of a Roman building together with Roman pottery, further indicating multi-period use of the site.

The villa regia, the administrative centre, is believed (Haslam 1984) to have been sited across the river from Castle Hill; it is possible that it, too, occupied the hill-top position. The excavation produced some Anglo-Saxon potsherds and a bone knife handle arguably dating from this period.

There is a second ditch enclosing the summit of the hill that could be an example of a Norman 'ringworks' of which there are a further eight in Wiltshire (Higham 1992). It has been noted above that early Norman castles re-used former Iron Age hillforts, Roman forts and high-status Anglo-Saxon sites. Here there are potentially all three.

Other, possibly contentious, evidence is based on Calne being given the right to hold two markets and fairs, one for the King's Manor and the other for the Church. These grants resulted in two triangular market places gracing the town. One, the Green, believed to be for the Church was sited southeast of the 11th Century church; the second to the northwest of places now known as the Strand, the High Street and Market Hill. These grants are understood to date from the reign of King John (1199 -1216) (McMahon 2004). The Green has a spatial relationship to the church, but Market Hill has no connection to areas of Calne with place names that include the word King or, given Haslam's premise, to the presumed site of the villa regia. Conversely, the second market area is close to the site of this excavation.

It is also conceivable that a dry-moated house stood here, on Corallian limestone, a porous rock that would have made water retention virtually impossible. As noted previously, not all buildings with pretensions to being castles had licences to crenellate. Should, however, such a structure already have been in place by the 13th Century there would have been no necessity to apply. The foregoing is based largely on archaeological research from other sites and areas. It also covers some circumstantial evidence for the likelihood of there having been a castle in Calne. Fieldwork together with more documentary research may yet provide the definitive answer.

**Figure 3**
**The enhanced intrpretation of the combined magnetometery and resistivity results showing a curved ditch and two possible stone features, the larger having the appearance of a round tower**

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