

Our Castle, Our Town

An investigation into the archaeology of Castle Cary's Castle site

Matthew Charlton

In 2011 BACAS took part in a community project undertaken by Castle Cary Museum with the purpose of exploring a selection of historic sites in and around the town of Castle Cary.

Using a number of non intrusive surveying methods including geophysical survey and aerial photography, the aim of the project was to develop the interpretation of some of the town's historic sites, including the town's castle site. A geophysical survey was undertaken at three sites, including the Castle site, the later manorial site, and a small survey 2 km south west of Castle Cary, at Dimmer. The focus of the article will be the main castle site centred in the town (see Figure 1) which will provide a brief history of the site, followed by the results of the survey and subsequent interpretation.

Location and Topography

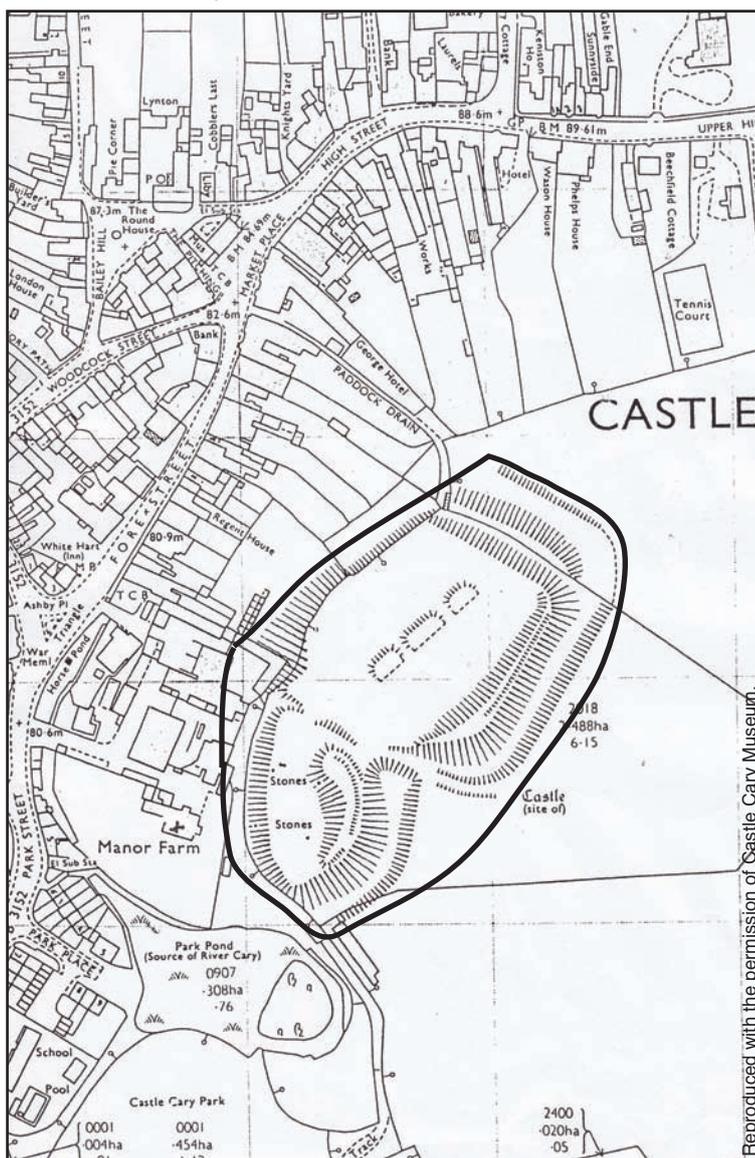
Castle Cary is a small town in south east Somerset, lying within the Jurassic belt of geology, approximately at the junction of the upper lias and the inferior and upper oolites. Building stone is plentiful, and is orange to yellow in colour. This is the source of the River Cary, which now runs to the Bristol Channel via King's Sedgemoor Drain and the River Parrett, but prior to 1793 petered out within Sedgemoor.

The site occupies a natural spur formed by two conjoining, irregularly shaped mounds extending from the north east to the south west. The ground gradually rises to the north and, more steeply, to the east, and falls away to the south. The outer bailey is situated on the larger mound which is located on the north side of the inner bailey.

Background

The site is a Medieval motte-and-bailey castle occupying a natural spur overlooking the source of the River Cary, possibly constructed to guard the county's borders with Wiltshire and Dorset, and to control the county's systems of transport, communication and supply (Prior 2006).

It has been suggested that the first phase of the castle was an earlier ringwork which was built not long after the Norman Conquest (Leach & Ellis 2010). The positioning of the castle may also have tied into an existing Romano-British or Saxon site, as a common location for the building of these castles was to utilise earlier phases of defence (Creighton and Higham 2003). The foundations of the Norman keep were excavated in the 1890s, and it was suggested that the lower mound had been built up after the construction of the keep



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Figure 1
Map of Castle Cary.

Figure 2
Community geophysics in action.

in the late 11th or early 12th Century. Trenching in the outer bailey failed to locate any remains of a curtain wall (Gregory, 1890). The castle was besieged by King Stephen in 1138, and again in 1153.

Excavations in the area of Manor Farm (SMR 11632, 11639, 11640) located further baileys of the castle suggesting that the inner and outer baileys were of one phase. A section of the ditches showed evidence of what appeared to have been deliberate backfilling, possibly as early as the 12th Century. One of these ditches was later re-dug to provide one side of a moat around the later Manor House (SMR 11641). It was thought that after the second siege in 1153, the castle was possibly demolished as a result of the destruction of baronial strongholds following the uprising, and some of the stone used in the construction of the new manorial centre immediately to the west, overlaying the former castle ditch. The new position of the manorial site may also have been more accessible and easily integrated within the new urban development (Prior 2004).



The object of the survey was to investigate and identify archaeological activity within the scheduled area (*marked in bold see Figure 1*) in both the inner and outer bailey, offering a fresh interpretation of this important monument within the town of Castle Cary. Very little is known about the outer bailey except for a series of earthworks, which may either represent building platforms or post-Medieval pillow Mounds. The survey took place over a three day period, with participation from Castle Cary Museum, as well as members of the local community (*see Figure 2*). The area was surveyed using fluxgate gradiometer and twin-probe resistance, augmented with resistivity profiling and Ground Penetrating Radar.

Results

Due to ferrous interference, the magnetometry results revealed little of significance, although some anomalies in the outer bailey may be of archaeological origin, possibly pits or large post-holes. The resistance survey was very informative, revealing a number of substantial stone structures in both baileys (*see Figure 3*). In the inner bailey a massive foundation was revealed approximately 20m across which correlates closely with the dimensions and description of the remains of the keep investigated in 1890 (Gregory 1890). There are also indications of external projections which could be buttresses. Resistivity profiling suggests the walls may be up to 4m thick and 2m in depth. This feature has an overall ground plan with strong similarities to the contemporary stone keep/fortified hall at Castle Rising in Norfolk. Like Castle Cary, Castle Rising is set within massive earthworks defining an inner and outer bailey.

The walls in the outer bailey demonstrate the presence of substantial structures, although their function and date remain uncertain. The plan suggests one or more rectangular structures, aligned south west – north east, which correspond with the earthworks within the outer bailey. These are set within a larger, walled rectangular enclosure with a gap along the north west side, interpreted as a curtain wall. The alignment of this enclosure and the rectangular structure does not coincide with that of the earthworks defining the south east side of the outer bailey defences and they may not be contemporary. The location of the enclosure wall, set to the rear of the bailey bank, would also argue against this feature being a curtain wall contemporary with the castle. Resistance profiling suggests these walls are less substantial than the keep.

It may be that the Norman castle builders chose a location for both its tactical and practical advantages, and were aware of the symbolic importance of a particular site and its prehistoric history, such as Old Sarum and Malmesbury. Evidence of this nearby activity can be seen from the excavations by Leach



Figure 3
The resistance survey results.
 and Ellis on Manor Farm between 1999-2001, which discovered a primary phase of Romano-British activity and a lime-burning kiln. 150 sherds of Romano-British pottery were also discovered, as well as a finely modelled bronze figurine of a *lar* which may have come from a nearby villa site (Leach 2010). The evidence of Romano-British activity in the area at Ansford and the finds from Manor Farm may suggest a temple or villa nearby (Richardson 2003). This may also suggest that the site at Castle Cary was chosen as it marked a continuing religious focus from the Romano-British period (Prior 2004).

Observations

The geophysical survey has added considerable new data to the internal layout of Castle Cary castle. The structure within the inner bailey (see Figure 3) can be confidently identified as the keep/fortified hall investigated in 1890 (Gregory 1890). The structures within the outer bailey are more problematic. Their alignment and location in relation to the bailey earthworks strongly argue against them being contemporary. It is possible they represent a stone successor to the main castle structure prior to the construction of the Manorial complex to the west. With regards to evidence of a curtain wall, it is worth noting in this respect that despite excavation across the outer bailey bank, Gregory failed to find evidence for a curtain wall (ibid.). Although the excavations by Peter Leach found evidence of a 10m section of wall with no evidence of a foundation trench, which was set upon a natural sand surface. The wall ran north east – south west with a width of between 1.5 - 2m, which may indicate either part of a curtain wall, or a possible building relating to the castle period. Further investigation would be required of the section of wall excavated by Peter Leach before a decision could be made as to its continuation as a curtain wall enclosing the inner bailey. It is possible however, that the enclosure itself could have been constructed from earth and timber, leaving little trace today above ground.

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Figure 4
An interpretation of the site from the geophysical survey results.



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