

Moated sites near Westbury

Summary of a survey of three moated sites, a frequent yet often under researched feature within the landscape

In 2012 the Bath and Camerton Society, along with the Westbury Heritage Society and members of the U3A (University of the Third Age), undertook a geophysical survey at three Medieval moated sites in Wiltshire within close proximity to the town of Westbury, – Penleigh, Brook and Bratton Moat.

The aim of the overall project was to investigate whether there was any remaining evidence of structures on the central platform which could include a hall, as well as ancillary buildings, such as those at Brome, Suffolk, Caldecote Manor, Hertfordshire, Ellington Thorpe and Cambridgeshire (Wilson 1985: 36-39). The interpretation of the

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results was aided by the support of Dr John Oswin and historic building consultant Dr Richard Haddelsey, a specialist in late medieval timber-framed buildings. All three sites are protected monuments and required consent from English Heritage to carry out the geophysical survey. As such, a Section 42 license was required for each of the sites. The following article summarises the findings.

Moated sites – an Introduction

Medieval moated sites survive as a frequent feature within the landscape in many parts of England, but the term is deceptive because their classification as a moat can vary in function. The first classification of moats as a separate category of monuments was made on a number of 19th Century studies of earthworks, and in 1901 the Earthworks Committee of the Congress of Archaeological Societies created a classification of moated sites (Aberg 1978:1).

As archaeological sites, moats predominantly consist of three parts: the moat itself, the surface of the area enclosed by it, and an earlier surface under the platform derived from up cast from the moat, including evidence of the remains of land use before the moat was constructed, such as cultivation or remains of earlier buildings. These moated sites generally consist of one or more ditches, which may or may not have been water-filled. Water-filled moats performed a number of purposes including: assisting drainage; serving as a fishpond, although moats were often accompanied by separate fishponds; providing water for animals; and supplying a source of water if fire broke out in the timber buildings it surrounded.

Figure 1
Reconstruction of a moated house - Penleigh Moat. M Charlton 2012.



It has been suggested that the earliest phase for the construction of moated sites took place between the 12th and 14th Centuries, with the heyday for moat building being the first half of the 14th Century (Platt 2010: 118) and then again during the 16th and 17th Centuries with the renewed fashion for formal gardens (Creighton 2009: 88). If a moat is Post-Medieval then it may also have formed part of a formal garden layout along with associated fishponds, suggesting that it may have been constructed in order to keep out herbivorous animals such as deer, from causing damage to domestic gardens (Wilson 1985: 20).

The Moated Sites Research Group (MSRG) listed some 5,300 moats in England, according to Aberg in 1978, with this number having increased from the original survey by Emery and Roberts who published 3,574 (Aberg 1978: 1). The largest number of recorded moated sites are found to date in Essex with around 547, the county of Wiltshire is recorded as having 37 moated sites, whereas the smallest number recorded was in Northumberland as having only one.

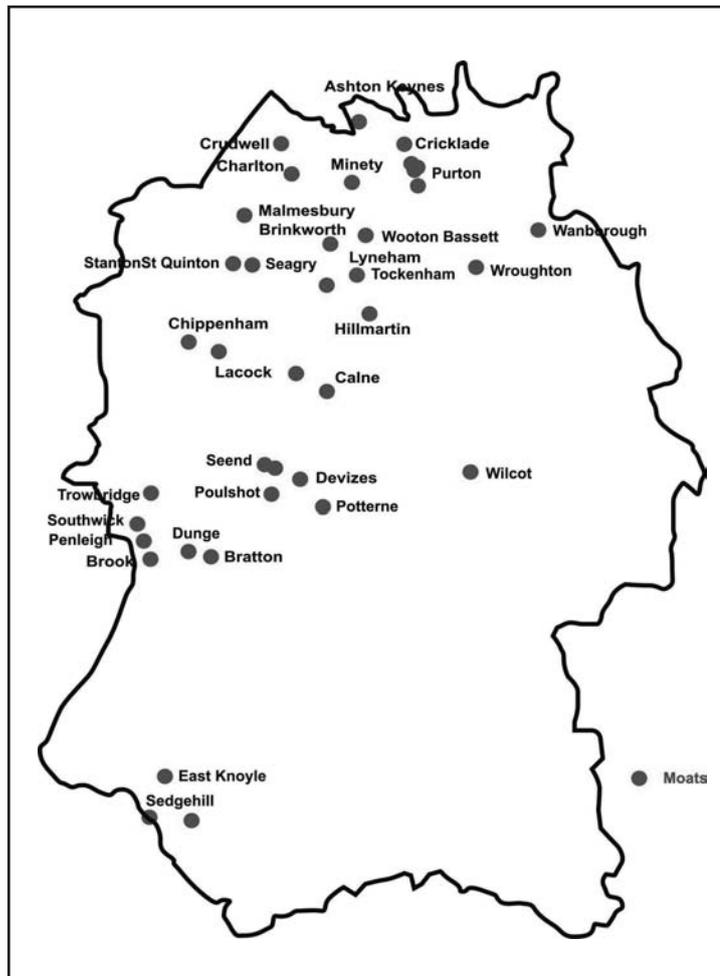


Figure 2
Map showing the distribution of moated sites in Wiltshire.

The sites under investigation still retain the actual moat and platform and were surveyed as part of the project in order to provide any evidence of internal features which would help to suggest a purpose for their construction. All three moated sites were surveyed using a Bartington 601-2 dual fluxgate gradiometer, as well as both the TR/CIA and the Geoscan RM15D twin probe resistance metres, with the additional use of the profiler and radar at Penleigh and the use of the radar at Brook.

Bratton - The Results

The site under investigation lies within the village of Bratton near Westbury, Wiltshire centred on ST 90998 52726 (See Figure 3 overleaf).

The moat is on the very northern edge of the village, at the bottom of the slope, next to the road to Steeple Ashton. It is located on gravels and clay drift overlying the Gault Clay below the chalk and greensand of the northern edge of Salisbury Plain, on the southern side of Trowbridge Vale (BGS sheet 281). Such soils are considered to be good for retaining water. The total area was encompassed by four grid squares of 20m each. The magnetometry was unresponsive. The resistance survey clearly distinguished the moat from the inner platform and showed the platform to contain a structure. This structure appeared as timber slots rather than masonry, although the actual wooden structure itself may have been supported by a stone footing as found in the 1946 excavation undertaken by students of Salisbury Diocesan Training College at St. Boniface College, Warminster.

The structure is about 20m north – south by 8m across, with curved ends, although the curvature may be a result of the collapse of the footings of the gable ends. The west wall was clearly apparent, but not the east side. There also appear to be post holes inside the structure, which may have represented wooden props for supporting a roof (See Figure 4 overleaf).

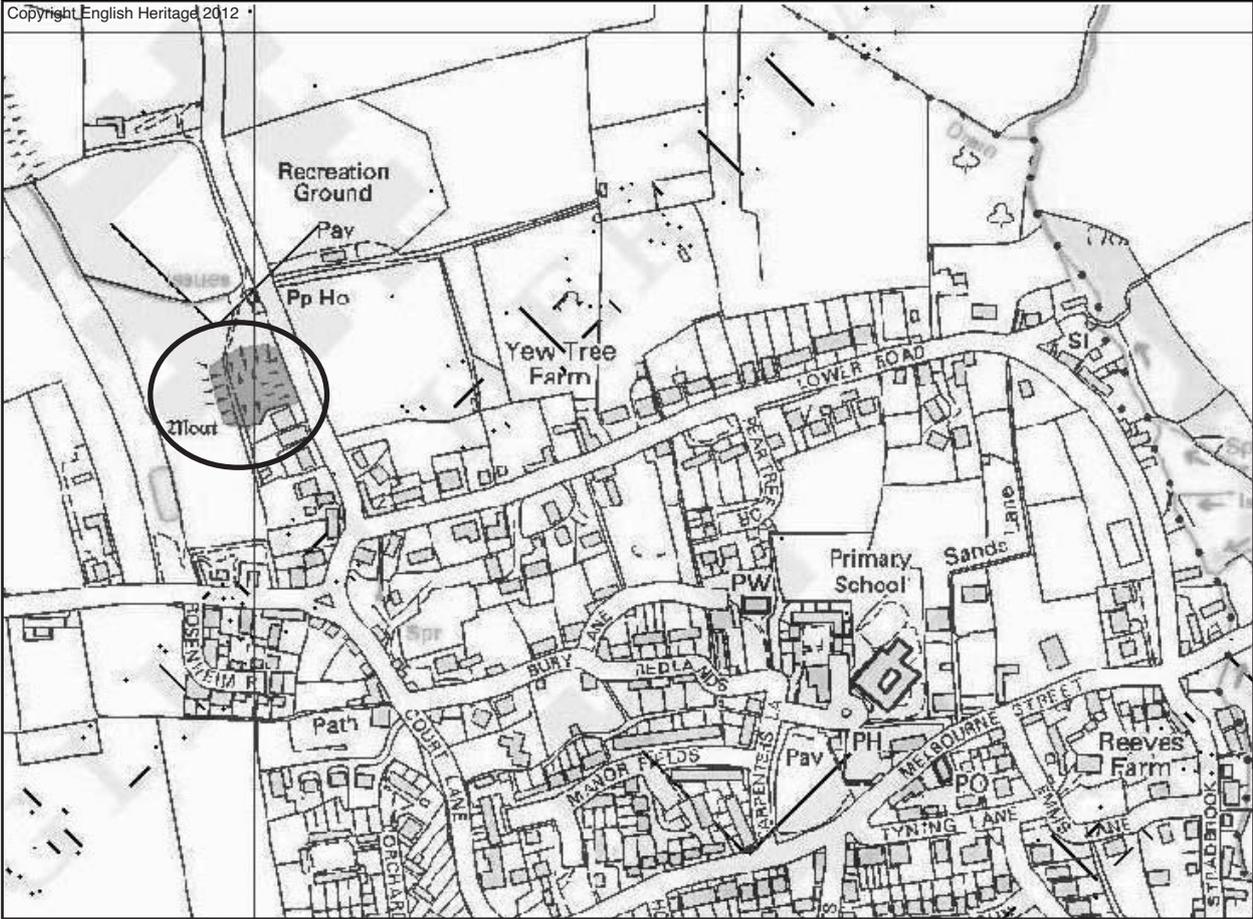
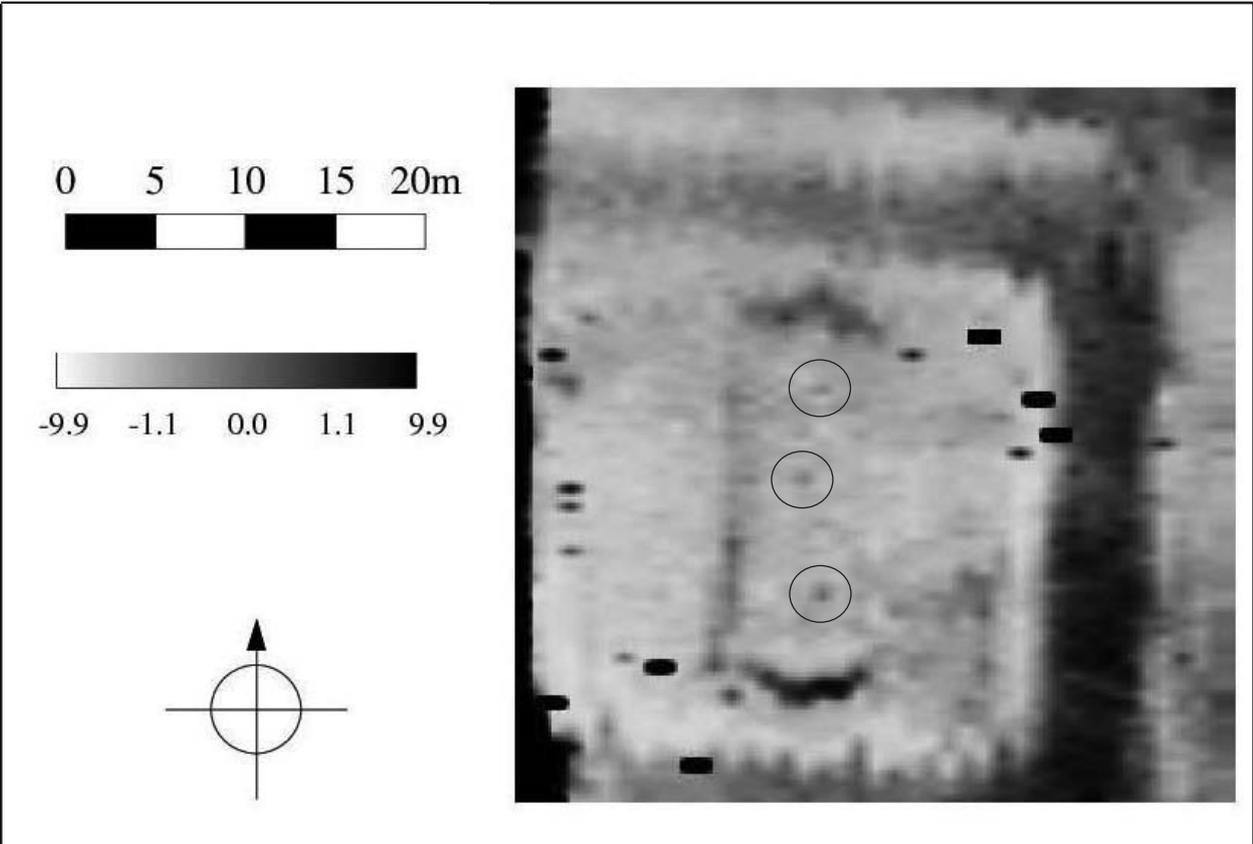


Figure 3
Map showing the moated site at Bratton.

Figure 4
Bratton moat Resistivity survey results.



Brook - The Results

The site described here is in the middle of the West Wilts Trading estate, to the north of Westbury Station, in the parish of Heywood and is centred on ST 857 528. (See Figure 5)

The Brook moated site was subject to geophysical survey by magnetometer, twin-probe resistance and ground-penetrating radar. Of these three techniques, resistance proved the most beneficial. A proportion of the central area of the platform within the moat appeared to be covered with a 'hardcore' base, and a small rectangular structure was evident. Magnetometry suggested the presence of small enclosures and post holes at the northern end of the platform. Parts of the site were still under dense scrub in spite of a major campaign of clearance. This limited the area available for survey, and may thus have limited the amount of useful information which could be gleaned from the site.

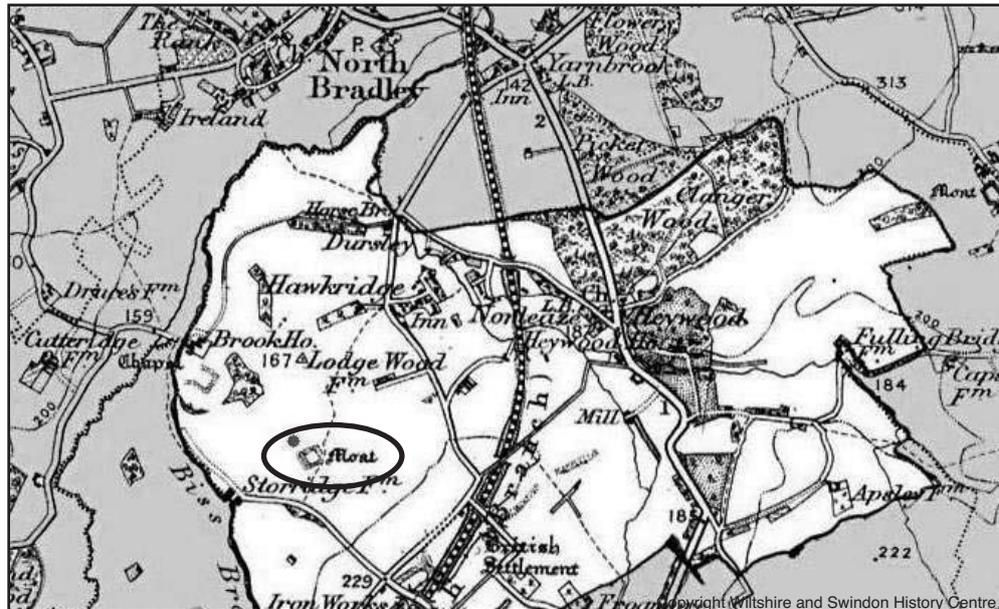


Figure 5
Map showing the Brook moat on the 1898 Ordnance survey map. Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre.

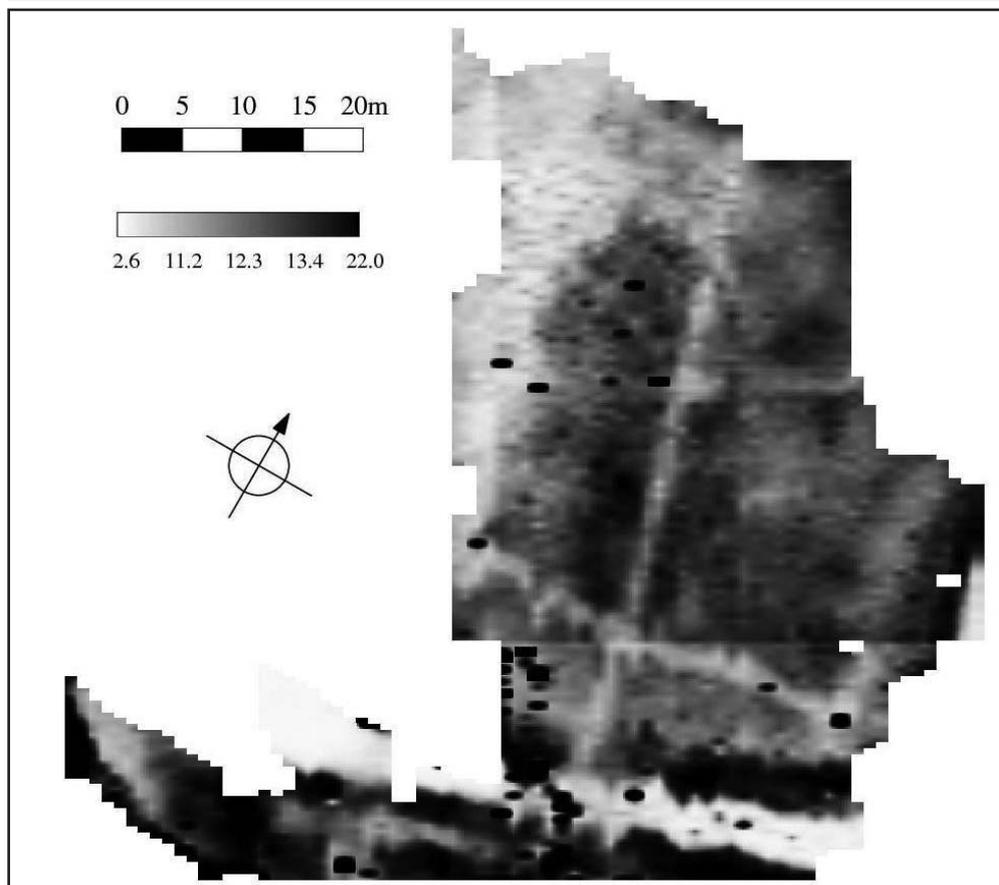


Figure 6
Brook Results
criss cross white lines are almost certainly more modern drainage features, lower section of image showing a possible curtain wall, the black noise in the middle represents a possible spread of rubble.

Penleigh - The Results

Penleigh lies to the west of the town of Westbury on Penleigh Farm, Westbury, centred on ST 861 509. It is situated within the district of West Wiltshire, and lies 5km from the Somerset border between the towns of Trowbridge and Warminster. The town lies on historic north-south and east-west trade routes, now respectively the A350 Chippenham to Poole road and the lowland route along the northern edge of Salisbury Plain.

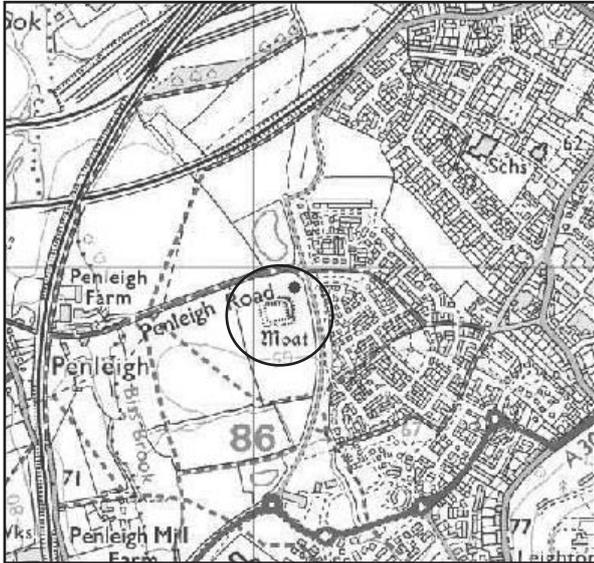


Figure 7
Penleigh moat in Westbury.

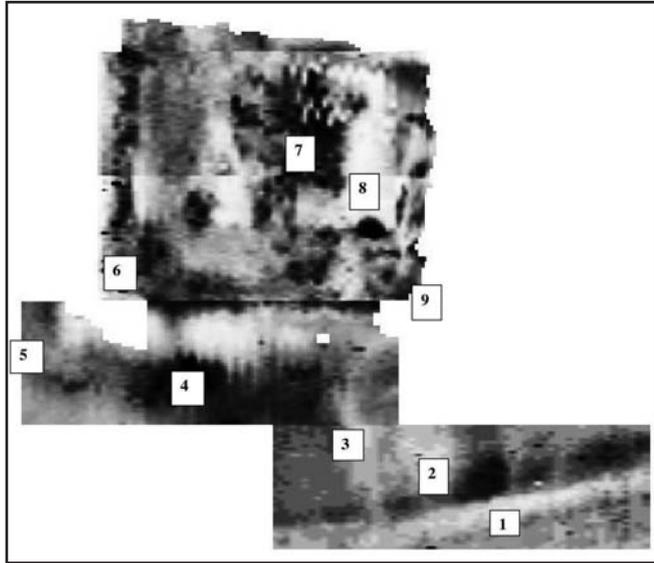


Figure 8
Penleigh moat geophysics results.

Results from Penleigh provided evidence of a double moat, with the inner moat immediately surrounding a building towards the north of the enclosed platform. The outer moat appears to have been revetted. The platform also has a smaller, sub-circular structure at its south-east corner. To the south of the moat is a watercourse, a building and a small enclosure. There is a connection between the watercourse and the moat, which appears to cut through the enclosure. There is no definite chronological evidence. Supplementary surveys using radar and resistivity profiling indicate that the footings of the building enclosed within the moat are shallow, extending only to about 0.5m. There is a strong recommendation that the twin-probe resistance survey be extended to cover a greater area around the outside of the moat.

To explain the geophysics results in detail:

- 1 A water channel, which may be later in date than the moat, or may be a water feed to it.
- 2 This water course has a revetment on its northern bank. The wall of this revetment curves round to the north and back to form a trapezoidal enclosure, possibly with a more substantial feature at its south-western corner.
- 3 A water course heads north to connect this southern water course with the moat. It appears to break through the revetment and enclosure, so may well be later. Alternatively it may be feeding the moat.
- 4 A large stone feature on the southern bank of the south part of the moat appears to be the footings of a substantial building.
- 5 A wall appears to go on from this building west and then north, apparently forming an outer revetment, although there is insufficient length surveyed to allow a definitive statement.
- 6 There also appears to be a revetment on the internal side of the moat, certainly going round most of the platform.
- 7 The principal feature on the platform inside the moat appears to be the masonry footings of a substantial building. The footings are approximately 15m square, and there is further stonework to the south of it.
- 8 This building seems to be surrounded by its own moat: we appear to have a moat within a moat which is not obvious on the ground. The stonework to the south of building (7) may be a bridge to cross that small moat.
- 9 There appears to be a small (5m diameter) sub-circular building in the far south-east corner of the platform, and there is a central stone feature, possibly a column support. This might be a dovecote.

The later 1793 map of Penleigh shows the moated site south of the original drove way, and its moat still surviving within the field now called 'Court Garden'. Both of these names now suggest the earlier association of medieval manorial complex and within it a garden feature of some description. Documentary evidence makes it quite clear that gardens were found in close association with the majority of medieval residences, and that these gardens typically formed part of an inner core of aristocratic space (Creighton 2009: 90). The use of a moat would serve to keep out wild animals such as deer, (Wilson 1985:20). It should be noted that gardens were not only for those with wealth. Peasant plots also supported the household diet supplementing their diet of pottage with vegetables such as leeks, cabbages and turnips and from the 14th Century onwards, crops such as flax and hemp could provide a valuable source of income.

It was not only the planning and design of medieval domestic buildings that helped to display social status, but also the design and arrangement of garden spaces which reflected hierarchy, in which these gardens became an outside extension to the house impressing the social values of the individuals and their position within society, which could be viewed by others (Creighton 2009: 90-91).

Desertion of moated sites took place before the 17th Century for a number of reasons, such as the abandonment of a nearby settlement which ceased to exist, or the possibility that a moated site was either no longer needed or simply not fashionable (Wilson 1985:55).

Discussion

After the church, it was the medieval manor house which would normally have been the most substantial building in a village often constructed on a mound or platform and marked by one or more moats (Wilson 2000: 42). As well as the hall, other buildings such as a kitchen, chapel and auxiliary structures serving the main complex, would have also been surrounded by a moat (Hunter and Ralston 1999: 255). However, it should be noted that the platforms or mounds themselves are not always associated with manor houses, as they can cover a range of other uses dating from the Prehistoric, to Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. These earthworks may also be attributed to a range of past uses ranging from burial barrows, rabbit warrens, archery butts and long abandoned dove houses (Aston 1985: 14-15), and the moats themselves may also surround monasteries, monastic granges, farmsteads, chapels, medieval hospitals as well as windmills (Wilson 1985: 7).

A further study of the topographical and geographical location of the moated sites in Wiltshire should at some stage be undertaken in order to establish evidence of any wider patterns which may indicate reasons for the position of these sites within the landscape. This should be carried out before these sites are destroyed by modern ploughing and modern building work. Two of the three sites under investigation although scheduled, have been encroached upon within the last few years through modern development, which has removed the potential for geophysical surveying around the sites themselves, which may have provided evidence of associated buildings. Wiltshire is rich in prehistoric monuments which have been studied since the seventeenth century, yet the medieval period in the county of Wiltshire has received far less attention (Aston 1992: 5). Hopefully, with the help of societies such as the Bath and Camerton Society, the Westbury Heritage Society and the U3A, projects such as the above have and will continue to contribute towards our understanding of these often forgotten monuments.

Acknowledgements

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