

Castle Yard, off Bayley Lane, Coventry

Introduction and Objectives of Study

Castle Yard lies within an area of Coventry believed to have been the site of a Norman castle. The objective of this study is to consider whether evidence of the existence of the castle could be obtained by carrying out an archaeological excavation of the site. More specifically, if it is concluded that excavation would be worthwhile, which part of the yard should be excavated and what type of remains could be located there.

Site Examination

Castle Yard (Grid Reference: SP 335 789) is an open area of about 400m² bounded by St. Mary's Hall to the east, the backs of properties on Bayley Lane and Hay Lane to the north and west, respectively, and buildings with access from the yard to the south.

The central area of the yard is a lawn with paving slabs covering the remaining area. The most modern building (c1990) is in the south east corner has been built adjacent to Caesar's Tower. Behind this building the ground has been terraced with a drop of about 3m down to the level of the back of the Council House on Earl Street. In the north-west corner is a stepped entrance to the rear of post-war buildings on the site of the Baptist Chapel which stood on the corner of Bayley Lane and Hay Lane. On the west side of the yard are the backs of 16th century buildings on Hay Lane. On the north side are the backs of Nos. 22 (early 16th century) and 23 (early 18th century) Bayley Lane. The whole of the east side of the yard is the west wall of St. Mary's Hall. The entrance from Bayley Lane is between No. 22 and the Hall and is about 3m wide. The buttress at the entry is wider at the base perhaps to increase the width for easier access of vehicles.

The shape of the area bounded by Bayley Lane, Earl Street/High Street and Pepper Lane and bisected by Hay Lane is very typical of the shape of a Norman motte and bailey castle in which the bailey would be defined by the area enclosed by Bayley Lane, Earl Street and Hay Lane and the motte by Hay Lane, Pepper Lane and High Street. The fact that the latter area includes the highest point in the city (~90m above sea level) is consistent with this.

Documentary Evidence

Documentary evidence referring to the existence of a castle in Coventry appears in Charters of the Earls of Chester dating from 1144 onwards to the early 13th century. (3) Stephen is said to have destroyed the castle c1150 but it must have been rebuilt as Charters relating to the castle date from the second half of the 12th century. Sometime before 1250, the Earl of Chester moved his seat to Cheylesmore allowing the castle to decay and the land let into tenements. (4)

References to the castle ditch (le Casteldich and fossatum castelli) occur in deeds from the 13th century with several documents referring to tenements on Earl St. with land extending north to the ditch.

A ditch, referred to as the Red Ditch occurs in 13th century deeds and appears to have remained a prominent feature until the 16th century. For example in 1586 a property in Little Park Street was described as adjoining the Red Ditch next to the fountain and in 1329 there

was a curtilage extending from Podecroft to the ditch called the Rededich. In 1410/11 three cottages in Broadgate, just north of a tenement near the Red Ditch were described as lying between the street and a stone wall: behind them and parallel to them was Derby Lane. (4) This may refer to the remains of the castle curtain wall. Properties on the east side of Much Park Street have also been described as having land extending east to the ditch.

The castle bakehouse was conveyed in the early 13th century. In the 1280 Hundred's Rolls, there were two ovens in the Earl's half of the town and in 1348 a grant to the Priory refers to a bakehouse being north of Earl Street. Finally, it appears in the Pittancer's Rental of 1411. At this time the building, called "Castelbachous", was described as an appurtenance of the tenement on Bayley Lane adjacent to St. Mary's Hall. It would appear to have been situated behind Bayley Lane but included a gate and free entry for carts and fuel from Bayley Lane between St. Mary's Hall and another tenement. (3) Five deeds of the early 14th century also describe property in Bayley Lane adjoining the lane leading to the castle bakehouse. (15)

The first St. Mary's Hall was constructed between 1340 and 1342 and enlarged between 1394 and 1414. Details of the first building on the site are not known but a deed of 1392 mentions the hall, the tower, three shops and an entrance gate with a room above. It has been suggested that the three shops faced Bayley Lane and were built over the filled in castle ditch. (11) The builders of the first hall are believed to have used part of the castle site and some of the worked stone from the decaying building. More specifically, it has been suggested that stones from the ruined castle were used for the building of the south wall of the kitchen and Caesar's Tower and, also, that the tower's foundations could have been those of a structure belonging to the castle itself. (4)

The name of Bayley Lane (le Baylylone in the 13th century) may come from the word "bailey" suggesting that the lane may have followed the line of the ditch of the Earl's castle. Hay Lane (Heylone in 1384) may also derive from the Latin word meaning a fence or ditch although it could equally come from the Old English *heah* meaning high as the lane is close to the highest point in the area.

Broadgate has its origin in the broad gate to the castle which is referred to in charters of the earls of Chester and deeds. The wording of the deeds implies that the gate survived at least until the 13th century. It has been suggested (8), from the 13th century boundary descriptions, that the gate may have been very near the west end of Pepper Lane.

The Earl's charters also refer to a chapel belonging to the castle. (3) The Church of St. Michael is believed to have been originally the site of a Norman chapel. Often chapels were located inside the bailey of a castle.

Archaeological Evidence

In 1974/5 excavations (8) were carried out on the east side of Broadgate, in an area bounded to the north by Trinity Churchyard, to the east by Derby Lane, to the west by Broadgate and to the south by Pepper Lane. They revealed the north-west corner of a ditch heading south towards Greyfriar's Lane and east towards St. Michael's Tower. The ditch was found to be 6.5m deep by 7.2m wide and had been filled in by the end of the 13th century. This was assumed to be the castle ditch and thus established the north-western limits of the castle. In 1885 an investigation was carried out to determine the cause of St. Michael's tower being out of perpendicular with the top being about 1m off centre. A 7m deep shaft sunk at the north

west corner failed to reach rock and it was assumed that the north west buttress had been built on the edge of a quarry. This could, however, be the castle ditch. The tower was constructed around 1379 so the ditch must have been filled in before then.

Excavations on the west side of Bayley Lane in 1988 (16) revealed the possible ditch of the castle overlain by 15th century bronze working site and from the 17th century a series of industrial hearths. The ditch was 8m wide and cut into the natural sandstone bedrock. Extending the line westwards would take the ditch along the north side of Earl Street.

When the former site of the Baptist chapel, on the corner of Bayley Lane and Hay Lane, was developed in 1990 (15), a watching brief discovered a ditch with 12th century in-fill. This ditch, which was about 8m wide, ran north-south along the east side of Hay Lane turning at almost a right angle to go east along the south side of Bayley Lane. It was concluded that nos. 9, 10 and 10a Hay Lane and 22 and 23 Bayley Lane were built over the ditch as was the Baptist chapel.

Excavations were carried out in Castle Yard in 1988 and 1990. (15) The main conclusion reached was that a building partially uncovered in a trench next to and to the west of Caesar's Tower was for some time a portion of a tenement known in 1410/11 as the castle bakehouse. Beneath this lay two ovens in an earlier building assigned to the period c1250 to c1300. This building appears to have been burnt down with the later timber framed tenement being constructed directly over the building. Although there was very little evidence of earlier occupation, it was suggested that an earlier bakehouse relating to the castle itself could be below. An earlier exploratory trench across the entrance from Bayley Lane found foundations of 19th century outhouses over a 14th century stone pavement which was probably the entrance to the yard.

Architecturally the inside of the St Mary's Hall kitchen contains features normally found on the exterior of a building. This suggests that it could have been a separate stone building which was linked to the hall and Caesar's Tower by the insertion of timber framed constructions. (11) The walls of the kitchen lie at an angle of about 10° to the north-south alignment of the hall which supports this conclusion. The wall is also not parallel with the north wall of Caesar's Tower which also suggests that they were built separately.

J.B. Shelton's work may also have revealed evidence of the castle ditch which was not recognised at the time. For example, excavations in Pepper Lane revealed what was believed to be a quarry worked to a depth of 7.3m at the Library. Also, on the corner of Derby Lane and Pepper Lane a large stone building was found at a depth of 3.1m. He suggested that stone from the castle gate had been used for its building as several arrow slits had been used in the construction.

Building redevelopment on the west side of Much park Street (1970), the Law Courts (1980/1 and 1986), Little Park Street (1981) and the Polytechnic Library (1978) revealed the line of the Red Ditch running in an east-west direction south of Earl Street, crossing Much Park Street then turning north under the Polytechnic Library.

Very little archaeological evidence for a Saxon town in Coventry has been found although the Old English origins of the name suggest that some form of settlement existed before the Norman castle and the Priory were built.

Map Evidence

Details of Castle Yard are depicted on maps from 1610 (5), 1748/9 (6), 1807 (12), 1851 (13) and 1902 (14). In 1748/9 a building was joined to the south wall of Caesar's Tower and was attached to a range of buildings to the west to Hay Lane. These buildings were still present in 1851 but the one adjoining Caesar's Tower had been demolished by 1902.

The present area of Castle Yard appears to be free of buildings at least from 1610 onwards and perhaps from c1450 (15). For much of this period there was access from both Bayley Lane and Hay Lane.

The only indication of the ditch on maps is a symbol in the middle of Little Park St. on Bradford's map (6) which is presumed to be the iron grating which was first erected over the ditch in 1443. (4)

Norman Castles

After the Conquest, virtually every Norman baron raised some sort of defensive structure to secure his newly acquired lands. The first castles were hurriedly constructed of earth and timber and most conformed to a basic plan; that of the motte and bailey. The motte was a large conical mound with a flat top mostly raised by digging a deep ditch around the site and heaping up the resulting soil. The bailey was a simple enclosure with its own ditch. Motte and bailey castles came in a variety of configurations but the most common was a single mound and enclosure, with the motte at one end of the bailey and separated from it by its ditch. Both mound and enclosure were defended by the ditch and an earthen bank behind the ditch, topped with a timber stockade. Within the bailey were the buildings necessary for the running of the castle including the hall, kitchens, barns, workshops, stables and the chapel. The entrance to the bailey was by means of a strongly defended gate, fronting a bridge over the ditch.

Once the initial urgency of the Conquest subsided, the timber defenses of motte and bailey castles were gradually replaced by stone. While the Norman castle changed its principal building material, its layout remained essentially unchanged. The motte and bailey gave way to the keep and bailey. The keep took two forms; the shell keep and the tower keep. The shell keep was the simplest being formed by replacing the timber palisade around the motte with a high stone ring wall. Most shell keeps were, therefore, circular or ovoid in shape. Living and service quarters were built against the inner face of the wall around a small central courtyard. Most tower keeps were built in the 12th Century and was generally, though not always, rectangular in shape. They had thick walls and could be as high as 45m as at Colchester. In either form, the keep, like the motte, remained the focal point of the castle.

The area encompassed by the castle bailey was typically up to 2 to 4 acres with only a few exceeding 5 acres; for example Lincoln (~6 acres) and the Tower of London (~7 acres).

Discussion of Evidence

The documentary evidence points quite conclusively to there having been a castle in Coventry in the 11th and 12th century with some physical remains surviving into at least the

13th century. The original castle was probably a motte and bailey design constructed of timber. It was probably rebuilt in the mid 12th century and could have been a more ambitious construction with stone buildings and possibly a stone curtain wall.

The area encompassed by the Red Ditch is too large to define the extent of the castle. It is most likely that the Red Ditch was a town defense and not associated with the castle. The area defined by Bayley Lane, Pepper Lane, High Street and Earl Street is about 2.5 acres which is within the normal range of a Norman castle of the period. It is also about the same size as the castle at Hartshill which was owned by the Earls of Chester and constructed about the same time. This motte and bailey castle, which has a length of about 150m and a maximum width of about 80m, has a stone chapel within the bailey.

It is usually presumed that the area defined by High Street, Hay Lane and Pepper Lane was the motte or keep section of the castle. If, however, the gate to the castle was from this side then it is not consistent with the usual entry to a Norman castle being into the bailey.

The ditch along the east side of Hay Lane has been suggested as separating the motte from the bailey. The fact that it turns east at the junction with Bayley Lane indicates that it does not join up directly with the corner of the ditch found near Broadgate. The section of ditch found on the west side of Bayley Lane is not orientated in the right direction to join up with the section running to the south of Bayley Lane. It could, however, run west to connect with the Hay Lane section at the junction with Earl Street.

In spite of these uncertainties, it can be concluded that Castle Yard lies within the area surrounded by the castle ditch and probably within the bailey of the castle. After the demise of the castle, it is probable that the yard was used as an area for loading and unloading goods for the bakehouse and other business and remained in part free of buildings.

The bakehouse discovered in Castle Yard appear to post-date the demise of the castle and cannot, therefore, have been the actual bakehouse serving the castle.

The south wall of the kitchen range of St. Mary's Hall is very likely to be connected with a building of the castle period and Caesar's Tower could be a restored part of the castle or built on the foundations of a castle building.

Conclusions

The castle ditch would appear to have been 7-8m wide and originally ran east-west across the northern section of Castle Yard and be at least partially underneath the buildings fronting onto Bayley Lane. The wall of the castle bailey would have been sited inside the area encompassed by the ditch therefore would have ran east-west across the yard behind these buildings. If the original wooden ramparts had been replaced by a stone wall, there may still be evidence of the remains of the foundations underneath Castle Yard. Allowing for the berm, the north face of the wall would have been about 10m south of Bayley Lane and may have been up to 3m thick.

The only point where the possible location of this wall are not covered by buildings is the entry between St. Mary's Hall and 22 Bayley Lane. An excavation trench at this location at an appropriate distance south of Bayley Lane should reveal whether the castle ditch does extend that far and whether there are any foundations of a wall present. The discovery of evidence

of the castle wall would be a significant step forward in providing additional evidence of the location of the castle.

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