

Excavations in Trowbridge 1986-1987

Wiltshire

Interim Report



Online archive report
scanned from paper copy

EXCAVATIONS IN TROWBRIDGE 1986-1987

AN INTERIM REPORT

by Susan M. Davies and Alan H. Graham

30012

W132

EXCAVATIONS IN TROWBRIDGE 1986-1987: AN INTERIM REPORT

Introduction

Plans for the extensive redevelopment of the centre of Trowbridge instigated the need for evaluation and recording of the archaeological deposits in an area of the town thought to have been the site of the medieval castle. The existence of an early medieval castle at Trowbridge has long been known from documentary sources (Rogers 1986, *inter alia*). It is first noted in 1139 when it is recorded that the castle withstood a siege by the soldiers of King Stephen, during the Anarchy Period wars which followed the death of Henry I in France. References continue into the post-medieval period, though the castle is described as being ruinous by 1540 (Leland). No visible trace of the castle now remains, but its position dictated the layout of the medieval town which grew up around it and is still discernible in the street plan of modern Trowbridge. In particular, Fore Street from the Town Bridge eastwards, follows the line of the castle's northern defences (fig. 1). Generally, the street plan suggests a motte and bailey type castle which in the 12th century would have been largely earthworks. Use of stone is however possible, and documentary references do seem to suggest a stone castle on the site at some stage, but probably not as early as the 12th century.

Excavations in 1977 for Wiltshire County Council on the south side of Court Street (Canham *et al* in preparation) discovered a thick layer of dumped clay, which was thought to be the base of the castle motte. Underlying this clay was a small church and graveyard dating to the 11th and early 12th centuries; the first archaeological evidence for the manor of *Brictric* recorded in the Domesday Book in 1086.

The recent work comprised a small evaluation trench in April 1986 across the postulated line of the outer bailey's western defences (Smith 1986). This was followed up in October and November of that year by two evaluation trenches sited within the outer bailey (fig 1 Trenches A and B). Larger scale excavations started in December, investigating areas of the outer bailey and its defences, Trenches C, D, and E; and the inner bailey and possible motte, Trench F. The excavations, completed in May 1987, confirmed the existence of a motte and bailey castle, defining the line of the outer bailey defences on the north and west, and the position of the inner bailey defences. In addition, all the trenches produced structural and artefactual evidence of the manorial settlement which pre-dated the castle, and in Trench F early Saxon buildings were located, suggesting that the origins of the medieval settlement may have been as early as the 6th or 7th century AD. Traces of prehistoric structures in Trenches E and F showed that the plateau on which the castle was constructed, had attracted settlement from the earliest times.

THE PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS

The area of the excavations lies on the western end of a plateau of relatively high ground overlooking the valley of the River Biss. Six areas were opened up (fig.1); the modern overburden (tarmac/concrete etc) was removed by machine and the underlying archaeological deposits excavated manually. Trenches A and E lay in the north-eastern part of the site, within the castle's outer bailey; trenches B and D were sited in the north-western part of the site, the former inside the outer bailey, the latter butting up to the defences on the north side and crossing their line on the north-west. Trenches C and F form a complete strip some 5m wide, broken only by the line of Court Street, from the valley of the River Biss (outer bailey defences) south-eastwards across the relatively high ground of the cornbrash plateau (outer bailey) to the higher knoll south of Court Street (inner bailey), which was the focal point of both the castle and the earlier settlements.

The excavated evidence is discussed below by major period. As yet no artefact or environmental analysis has taken place and as a result many of the details of interpretation may eventually be modified or refined at a later date. The overall stratigraphic sequence will remain unaltered.

The Prehistoric Period

Traces of prehistoric land use were found in Trenches E and F. In trench E a row of fairly shallow post-holes, underlay the remnants of a prehistoric soil, itself lying at the bottom of a medieval or later agricultural soil deposit. Flint and chert flakes and sherds of grog-tempered pottery found in the prehistoric soil suggest a date in the Middle Bronze Age, perhaps c. 1500 - 1300 BC. There was no trace of any parallel or associated row of posts within the trench, and the row would seem to have been part of an enclosure rather than a house structure.

Some 70m to the south in Trench F, a square setting of four post-holes was excavated; all the posts cut deeply into the cornbrash and formed a structure just under 2m square. The few sherds of associated pottery are of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date, well in keeping with structures of this type found elsewhere. Four-post structures, often interpreted as grain stores, are not uncommonly found on major defended sites, such as hillforts like Danebury in Hampshire, but they also occur in smaller enclosed sites of the same period. The occurrence of such a structure at Trowbridge suggests that there may be a major late prehistoric site on the plateau underlying the castle and medieval manor. Since the site was chosen for defensive purposes in the 12th century, it would have been equally appropriate for that use more than 1500 years earlier. The relatively limited scale of these excavations can only hint at the evidence for what must have been a well-organised rural landscape in the later prehistoric period.

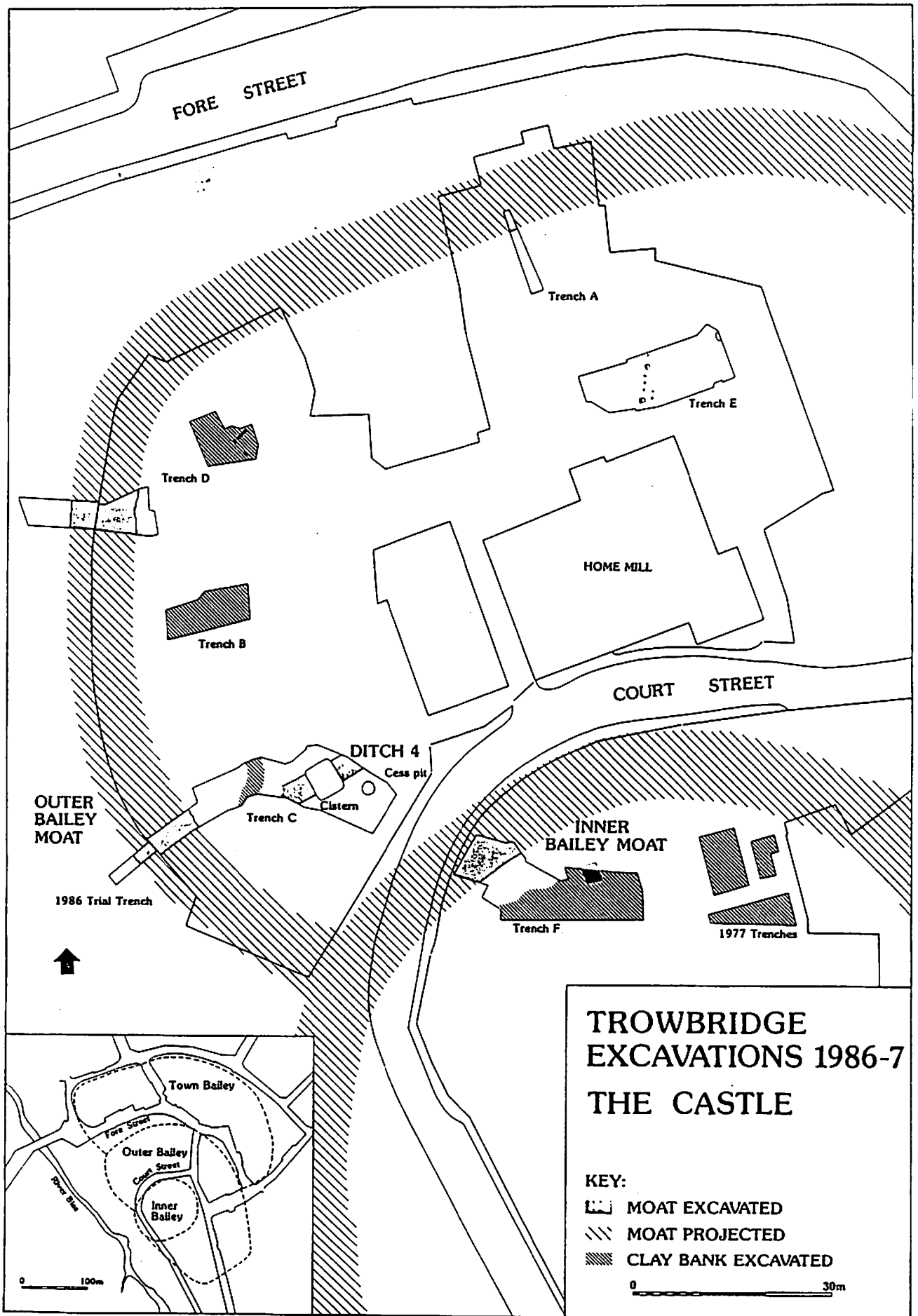


fig.1

The Roman Period

Though no features could be assigned to this period, several artefacts of Roman date were found. These included coarse pottery, amphora, and fine tableware and mortaria imported from the Late Roman kilns in Oxfordshire and a fine copper-alloy decorated strip brooch, probably dating to the 2nd century AD. All the artefacts were found in late medieval contexts, but their relatively unabraded nature suggests that there may well have been occupation on the site between the 1st and 5th centuries AD.

The Saxon Period

Traces of two buildings were found in Trench F, on the highest part of the plateau overlooking the valley of the River Biss. One structure was a small sub-rectangular building, 4.5m by 3.5m, with a sunken floor of clay at least 0.3m below the contemporary external ground level. Central to each end was a post-hole to support the ridge pole for the roof. Fine loam on the floor of the structure, probably an occupation layer, contained slivers of bone and small sherds of undiagnostic pottery. A single clay spindle whorl and a hone stone lay on the floor; clay ring-shaped loomweights from the fill of later graves which cut the building may also originally have lain on its floor. Small buildings of this type are often associated with weaving equipment, and it is perhaps likely that they represent small workshops rather than domestic dwellings. They are classic Anglo-Saxon structures, found in many areas across south-eastern and central southern England and the Midlands. They can be dated as early as the 5th century AD, but continue in use well into the 8th century if not later. The date for the Trowbridge example is perhaps more likely to lie in the 6th or 7th century, but must remain uncertain until further analysis is carried out.

The second structure lay further to the west in Trench F, and is not necessarily contemporary with the one described above. Its position is suggested by a number of shallow post-holes, only one of which penetrated into the cornbrash, and may have supported one end of a ridge pole. The plan of the post-holes suggests a sub-rectangular structure some 6m long and 4m wide, though its southern half had been destroyed by a later ditch.

Both structures seem likely to have been part of a much larger settlement, and their construction may mark the beginning of the period of permanent settlement on the site of Trowbridge which has continued unbroken to the present day. The settlement may have been founded by some of the earliest Saxon immigrants to this part of what was later to become the Kingdom of Wessex. It is clearly important that this aspect of the town's history is investigated further.

The Saxo-Norman Settlement

Evidence of this period was found in all trenches excavated. At the time of the Domesday Book the manor was in the hands of the Saxon *Britric*, but very soon afterwards it passed into Norman ownership, eventually forming part of the estates of Humphrey de Bohun, who built the castle documented in 1139. The excavated evidence suggests a fairly dispersed rural settlement, with properties divided by boundary ditches, and cottages scattered among fields and garden plots. Its focus was probably around the small stone church and graveyard, located on the highest part of the site (fig 2)

The church itself was partially excavated in 1977, and the recent work lay to the west of it. In Trench F however, the western limits of the graveyard were located. Two rows of graves were found, extending across the line of an earlier ditch (Ditch 1), which could have formed the original western limit of the cemetery. A second ditch (Ditch 2), ran along the southern edge of the graveyard and continued westwards beyond it. This had become largely infilled by the time the graves were dug, and some graves cut into its fills; it remained visible however, as a slight hollow until the deposition of the clay layer in the 12th century which formed the base of one of the castle's earthworks. Ten skeletons were excavated, six adults, three children and one infant, and the graveyard was apparently well laid-out in orderly rows. No evidence for coffins was found, and burial in a simple shroud seems likely, though some graves were lined around the sides with flat stone slabs. Almost invariably the adult skeletons showed signs of arthritis, reflecting the harsh life of the rural community.

In Trench F, west of the graveyard, four large post-holes were found, forming a rectangular setting, c. 2m by 3m. Their size suggests that rather than a contemporary domestic structure, they may have been part of the defensive line of the 1139 castle, respecting and enclosing the church and graveyard, rather than obliterating them, as did the earthworks of the later castle (see below, The Medieval Castle).

North of Court Street, evidence of settlement probably contemporary with the church and graveyard was found in all trenches. All the trenches contained a thick layer of fine dark brown loam, generally stone-free and homogeneous, above the cornbrash (or prehistoric soil remnants); this was the medieval cultivation soil. It contained pottery and bone, the domestic refuse of the village dumped on the fields or garden plots during manuring. In Trenches B and D this soil was covered by the clay earthworks of the later castle. The western edge of the settlement may have been defined by Ditch 3, which ran north-south along the top edge of the slope down to the valley of the River Biss. In Trench C this ditch turns south-west, perhaps following the natural contour of the plateau edge. Post-holes to the east of this ditch in Trench C could indicate the position of a building, as could post-holes, a low earth bank and hearths in trench D. There is also evidence for iron working in this area, in the form of an iron bun from the base of a small furnace. Trench E produced a small number of pits considered to pre-date the castle only on the basis of the associated pottery. In contrast Trench

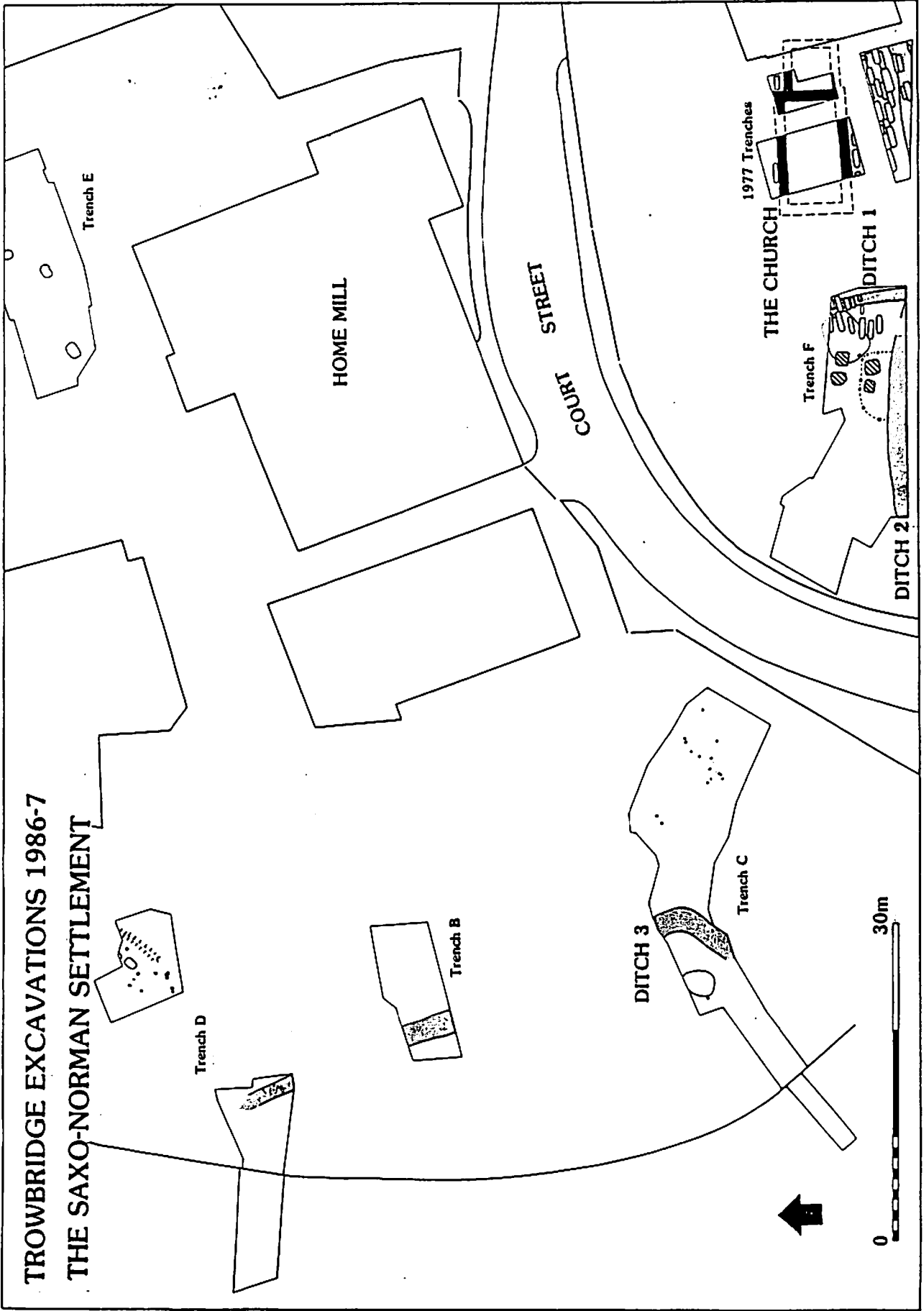


fig.2

B and the western end of Trench F produced no evidence of structures, indicating the scattered nature of the settlement.

The material culture of the Saxo-Norman settlement seems to have been frugal: the excavated deposits all contained ceramics, but almost invariably these were plain coarse, cooking vessels. Few sherds of the more decorative, more prestigious, glazed tableware and pitchers which were current at the time were found. Metal objects were few, the most common being small triangular-bladed iron knives and horseshoes. No coins were found. The animal bones suggest that a wide range of animals, both domestic and wild were exploited for food, draught-purposes and clothing. Sieving for environmental remains and small bones or artefacts, also produced numerous fish remains. Overall the evidence is consistent with a small, rural hamlet.

The Medieval Castle

The main outline of a motte and bailey castle emerged from the excavation (fig 1). In Trench F, a layer of clean clay up to 1m thick was found, corresponding to the layer found in the 1977 excavations. It seems most probable that this was the base of a clay rampart around the inner bailey, rather than the base of the castle's motte. To the north of this, adjacent to Court Street, the edge of the Inner Bailey Moat was located. This was at least 5m wide (but only the south edge was found) and over 2.5m deep. Its proximity to Court Street unfortunately prevented full excavation. This moat, part of the defensive line separating the inner and outer baileys, would have been the quarry for the clay with which the earthworks of the Inner Bailey were constructed. The defences of the outer bailey, north of Court Street, were examined at the western ends of Trenches C and D, as well as in the April evaluation; traces of the moat were also found at the north end of Trench A. The Outer Bailey Moat was c. 10m wide, with steeply-sloping sides and was 3.5m deep (from the modern surface) in Trench D. The moat was a formidable obstacle, strengthened by being situated at the bottom of the slope from the cornbrash plateau down to the valley of the River Biss. The clay excavated from the moat was heaped up along its eastern side, infilling and covering the line of Ditch 3, to form the defensive bank on which a timber palisade probably stood. The base of this clay rampart was found in Trenches B, C and D, indicating a base width for the bank of at least 12m. The clay bank survived to a maximum thickness of 1m, and the sloping back of it was only recovered in Trench D, overlying earlier settlement features. Later terracing and levelling of the site have destroyed evidence for the original height and detailed construction techniques of the castle's earthwork defences. But the overall rise from the base of the moat to the top of the defences, enhanced by the natural slope of the land, must have been at least 15m.

There is little trace of occupation or buildings contemporary with the castle defences. Two post-holes and a length of stone wall built into the back of the rampart in Trench D could represent structural elements of the defences, or more probably, a building butting up to the rampart. Other features, probably contemporary with the castle are more

enigmatic. In Trench F, a substantial 'V' shaped ditch was found, Ditch 4; over 2m deep, this ran parallel to the Inner Bailey Moat but it is not known whether the two features were contemporary, forming parts of one defensive system. Ditch 4 had been deliberately infilled with stone rubble, originally interpreted as the footing for a substantial wall replacing the ditch, and this possibility still remains. Contemporary with the infilling of this ditch was the digging of a large, rectangular hole, 4m x 5m and almost 2m deep, across its line. This may have been a water cistern, intended to be fed with ground water seeping along the line of the infilled ditch. Originally it had been covered over with a timber floor, the charred remains of which were found collapsed into the base of the hole. The subsequent backfill contained pottery dateable to the 12th and 13th centuries, indicating that it was contemporary with the castle. A fragment of a stone wall footing above this backfill may have been part of a building within the outer bailey, during a later period of the castle.

From the excavated evidence, a number of general points about the castle can be made. Almost certainly there was more than one period of construction; the 1977 excavations produced a coin, which has been dated as not earlier than 1141, stratified beneath the clay of the inner bailey, to the south of Court Street. This may suggest that the major earthworks of the castle as defined in the recent work, were not constructed until some time after the siege of 1139. The nature of the castle of the 1139 siege remains therefore obscure. One possible trace was the setting of four large posts excavated in Trench F; these were substantial enough to have been part of a defensive palisade pre-dating the clay bank of the inner bailey. There is no archaeological evidence that the castle was ever rebuilt in stone. Indeed, within the area of the outer bailey the excavations produced very little evidence of occupation, in the form of pits or post-holes, that is likely to have been contemporary with the castle. It is possible that by the middle of the 13th century, though the castle remained as a dominant feature in the landscape of the developing town, its usefulness as a stronghold was limited, and as a castle it became rapidly obsolete. The few sherds of pottery from the excavated parts of the moats suggest that they may have been infilled by the middle of the 14th century, and documentary references support this.

The Post-Medieval Period

In 1540, the castle was noted as *ruinous*, and as early as 1306 parts of the castle ditches were being leased, presumably for building. The post-holes and pit found in Trench E, and dating to the later medieval period (fig 1) could well be associated with developing burgage plots along the south side of Fore Street, rather than with the occupation of the castle. The pit contained sherds of a decoratively glazed pot of Spanish manufacture, dating to the 15th century; again, as easily reflecting the wealth of the town's merchants, as of any occupant of the castle. In general however, on many of the areas excavated there was little evidence of substantial activity until the construction of the mills and cottages in the 19th and 20th centuries. Trenches A and E, however, produced evidence of pits and buildings from the late 15th to 19th century,

mostly fronting onto Fore Street, and perpetuating the lines of burgage plots laid out at an earlier date. Cobbled layers in Trench F overlying the truncated clay of the medieval castle imply early post-medieval yards, complementary to evidence found in 1977. The relative slightness of post-medieval activity has done much to preserve the deposits associated with the castle and earlier settlements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The evaluations and excavations were made possible by grants from the developers, Hunters Tor Securities Ltd.; English Heritage; West Wiltshire District Council and Wiltshire County Council. The developers also provided office and hostel accommodation. The Trust is grateful to Glen Simmons, of Hunters Tor Securities, for his assistance and interest; Michael Hunt sorted out practical details and provided necessary help and advice. The Trust would also like to thank Stephen Blades (WVDC), Ron Pybus and Roy Canham (WCC) for their hard work and support; much of the success of the project is however due to the enthusiasm and support of the late Bob Smith, whose guidance and interest is sorely missed.

The work was initially directed in the field by Roland Smith, with Derek Grieve as supervisor. In 1987, the work was directed by Alan Graham, with Claire Richards and John Wilson as supervisors, who ensured good progress and just about coped with the Wrecking Crew (you know who you are!), who survived the rigours of the winter and produced some good results.

REFERENCES

- Canham, R., in preparation, Trowbridge Castle Excavations 1977.
Rogers, K., 1984, *The Book of Trowbridge*, (Buckingham).
Smith, R.J.C., 1986, Excavations in Trowbridge 1986, unpublished Trust for Wessex Archaeology interim report.

FUTURE WORKS

It is clear that the area of prime importance in all periods of activity from the later prehistoric onwards, is the area to the south of Court Street - the inner bailey of the castle and the underlying settlements preserved by the castle's earthworks. It is in this area that crucial evidence of the nature of the focal point of the castle, the keep, should survive. The knoll is also the focus of the pre-castle manorial settlement with its church and graveyard; and of perhaps more importance, the unexpected early Saxon settlement with its sunken-floored buildings and post-built structures. The finding of the four-post structure, so often associated with later prehistoric defended sites, is equally important, and its contemporary landscape requires investigation.

It is intended that as large an area as possible should be examined, concentrated initially in the area adjacent to the pre-castle church and its graveyard, to obtain the complete plan and layout of the cemetery. Further excavation would examine the extent, nature and density of settlement at various periods across the top of the plateau. Original proposals for large-scale work will be modified slightly in view of what is now known about the extent of damage to the archaeological deposits from warehouse construction, petrol tanks and other modern structures, but remain substantially the same.



Wessex Archaeology Ltd registered office Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP4 6EB
 Tel: 01722 326867 Fax: 01722 337562 info@wessexarch.co.uk www.wessexarch.co.uk



Wessex Archaeology Ltd is a company limited by guarantee registered in England, company number 1712772. It is also a Charity registered in England and Wales, number 287786; and in Scotland, Scottish Charity number SC042630. Our registered office is at Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP4 6EB.