

# Pirton. The Bury

## 1: Introduction

The village of Pirton occupies a low spur of the higher Barton Hills to the south-west, with clear views across Bedfordshire and the Hitchin Gap to the north and east and on the spring-line which defines the northern edge of what has been termed the Icknield Zone. After almost a century of declining population, Pirton is once more a growing community, attracting largely prosperous outsiders whose place of work remains elsewhere. To accommodate this influx of people, new housing has been built in the village, especially to its north, which obscures the former focal point of the village, an area known as *The Bury* which includes the parish church, a large castle mound called *Toot Hill*, with a bailey surviving as earthworks to the east, and a number of other earthworks. About two-thirds of *The Bury* is a protected Ancient Monument.

The death of many trees as a result of Dutch Elm Disease during the 1970s and 1980s has led to the clearance of *The Bury*, and particularly of *Toot Hill* with the result that the latter can now be better appreciated as a motte. The Parish Council decided in 1987 that an information board would enhance the value of the area as a local resource, and it was partly with this in mind that a team of surveyors from North Herts Museums Archaeology Section undertook a survey of *The Bury* in January and February 1988. The results of this survey have overturned several long-held assumptions about the site, and answered a number of problems while opening up further possibilities for research.

Because of the size of the area to be surveyed (over 4.5ha) it was decided that the quickest method would be to produce scale drawings in the field at 1:500 by means of an offset survey. Two base lines were laid out at right angles by theodolite, using wooden pegs spaced at 50m intervals except in one instance where the presence of the deep pond known as Blind Pond or Blindman's Pond made the location of a peg impossible. The field was thus divided into four unevenly sized segments. Grid north was determined as 321°30' magnetic using a prismatic compass.

It was decided to tackle the smallest quadrant - to the south-east on the survey grid - first, partly because its relative lack of features and small size would help the team members familiarise themselves with a new surveying technique without appearing too daunting. Progress was slow at first. It proved very difficult to persuade the surveyors that they were to survey along both sides of an offset line, and the idea that the site was divided into 50x50m "boxes" by the grid, each of which had to be surveyed separately and once only as in a triangulation survey, was very firmly implanted in most minds. Progress remained slow during the survey of the second quadrant and was not helped by bad weather and illness. Suddenly, however, during work on the third quadrant the concept of offset surveying seemed to make more sense to the team, and within a week the measuring was completed.

## 2: Features

The most obvious feature of *The Bury* is a wide (average 15m) and deep (<1.7m) hollow running roughly East-West which bisects the field; at its eastern end is a pond (known as Larkin's Pond), and the bottom is waterlogged eastwards from here as far as the point at which the linear cut containing Blindman's Pond meets the main hollow at right angles. West of this point the hollow is not as deep, and this is due to infilling during the 1960s when a sewer was laid immediately south of the hollow. G L Evans' description of this part of the "ditch" as being five feet (1.7m) deep, six to seven feet (2m) wide and having a V-shaped profile suggests that some infilling had already taken place.

A few metres to the west of Blindman's Pond a section was excavated through the northern edge of this hollow in 1955 with results which surprised and discouraged the excavator [G L Evans] who, having expected confirmation that the linear hollow was part of the mediæval defences, discovered early Romano-British occupation to its north apparently post-dating the formation of the hollow. Analysis of the excavation records shows this to be a mistaken deduction, and it is now clear from limited documentary research that the hollow was in use during the early nineteenth century as a roadway, called Lad's Orchard Lane. All earlier accounts<sup>2</sup> of The Bury have assumed that the lane followed the line of the mediæval defences, either of an outer bailey or of two subsidiary baileys.

The present survey coupled with the excavation records demonstrate that this is not the case. The road appears to have been closed during the first half of the nineteenth century since, although it is shown on the Enclosure Map, it is indicated only as a field boundary on the 1867 impression of the Ordnance Survey 1" map first edition. The western half of the hollow way was partially filled in during the 1960s following the installation of a drain immediately to its south<sup>3</sup>.

The cut which contains Blindman's Pond - usually taken as part of the mediæval defences, either as a division between two southern baileys or as an outlet for water from the motte ditch to an outer bailey ditch - does not appear to have been in existence in 1811 when the Enclosure Map was drawn as it is ignored on this. Nor is it shown on the undated small-scale map in Seeborn's *The English Village Community* published in 1883. The early date of this map is indicated by its inclusion of Lad's Orchard Lane, closed before the 1867 edition of the Ordnance Survey 1" map on which the pond does, however, appear.

Evans reports<sup>4</sup> a tradition that Blindman's Pond was drained with a pump-engine and suggests that his layer ② is the detritus from this and that the mounds (including the "rampart" through which he laid his trench) are spoil from the original digging of Blindman's Pond, which would explain the presence of Romano-British pottery in the "rampart", his layer ③. It may well be that the pond was dug at some point during the mid-nineteenth century in an attempt to drain the bailey ditch which it almost joins to the north.

Parallel with the Blindman's Pond cutting is a long and narrow (<2m wide) hollow which runs from the pond in the junction between the motte ditch and bailey ditch to the edge of Lad's Orchard Lane; its regularity gives the impression of having been cut by machine and it probably represents a further unsuccessful (or unfinished) attempt to drain this pond. Evans does not mention this very obvious feature in his report, and it is possibly later in date than his excavation and contemporary with Hitchin Rural District Council's abortive attempt to fill the moat in 1957.

At the eastern end of Lad's Orchard Lane is an S-shaped hollow running roughly southwards which puzzled the earlier writers although Evans arrived at the correct conclusion. The Victoria County History gave up with trying to explain it ("slight remains of a work whose exact design is difficult to trace"), although the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments sought evidence for a fourth bailey (!) in this, and Aylott thought it the water outlet for the moat system<sup>5</sup>. It is in fact shown by the 1811 enclosure map to be the line of a road connecting Walnut Tree Road and Lad's Orchard Lane; when this short stretch of lane went out of use is unclear, but it was probably closed at the same time as Lad's Orchard Lane and the road straightened to form its present line.

In The Bury south of Lad's Orchard Lane there are a number of low banks which appear to represent property boundaries; most are distinct although the easternmost is very low and worn. Some correspond to boundaries marked on the nineteenth-century maps, but others do not and had clearly gone out of use by the time of the Enclosure. In all, sixteen enclosures can be distinguished in this area. A number of building platforms can also be recognised, two of which have solid foundations immediately below the turf which can be traced with the tip of a ranging pole and which show as slight discolorations in the vegetation.

One of these corresponds to the position of a building shown on nineteenth and early twentieth-century maps which was deliberately burned down for fire practice in the 1920s or 1930s; a photograph of this in the Pirton Society's book<sup>4</sup> shows it to have been a thatched cottage and in all probability timber-framed. The filled-in well of this property is also identifiable where the filling has slumped exposing part of the brick lining, and to the north a steep-sided sub-rectangular hollow could have been a pond, although it is outside the boundary of this property as visible on the ground and as shown on the maps.

In an adjacent property the Enclosure Map shows three buildings of which two had been demolished by 1881. These cannot be located on the ground at all, demonstrating the problems of locating former buildings without excavation, especially if they were timber-framed without brick foundations.

In addition to the property boundaries there is a hollow running south from a partially-filled pond which appears to be an overflow drain for the pond; the Victoria County History plan marks this as the water outlet for the moated system, although this is based on the mistaken belief that the hollow way was part of the defences. It possibly originated as an attempt to drain water from Lad's Orchard Lane, which may well have been abandoned eventually because the lane became permanently waterlogged. Immediately east of this is a second hollow which runs between two properties before turning east; this looks very like a narrow lane or alley giving access to the backs of properties facing onto Lad's Orchard Lane as well as Walnut Tree Road. There is no trace of this on the nineteenth-century maps.

In the south-western corner of The Bury are two platforms and several hollows, none of which correspond to features extant in the nineteenth century. One appears to be a house platform facing Hitchin Road (formerly called Mudwall Lane), while the other is a large platform set well back from Walnut Tree Road and separated from it by a hollow. It is separated from the property on Hitchin Road by another hollow, which perhaps represents a second track or alleyway: the line of this can be traced through the gardens of 13, 11 and 9 Hitchin Road as far as number 7, which has been built on its line. The 1978 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map shows part of this line as the boundary of the garden of 13 Hitchin Road, which has since been extended, and it probably represents the original boundary line of properties on Hitchin Road.

North of Lad's Orchard Lane the earthworks are more complex. At the western end there are more property boundaries and platforms, although these are generally less clear than those to the south. The series of boundaries is interrupted by the cut containing Blindman's Pond and the hummocky ground to its west, which is probably connected with its construction. At the extreme eastern end of the lane there is a large platform facing Walnut Tree Road and a group of other, smaller mounds. A hollow runs behind the large platform parallel to Walnut Tree Road, and like those in the south-eastern part of The Bury, probably represents an alleyway or path between properties. Nine properties can be identified with certainty, while the probability that the disturbed ground west of Blindman's Pond conceals a further boundary pushes this number up to ten.



The northern part of the field is occupied by the southern half of the Bailey. This has been much altered by large quarry pits which Evans attributes to the digging-up of tree-stumps (p.5), but they are much too large and deep for this to be their true origin: they may be connected with the coprolite-digging known to have been frequent in Pirton during the post-medieval period. These have obscured the course of the outer ditch, especially as they become water-filled during wet weather. The internal bank has also been systematically levelled. It was initially assumed that this work had destroyed any internal features of the bailey, but detailed investigation showed that this was not in fact the case and that enough survives to allow a tentative reconstruction of subdivisions which may represent individual properties.

Part of the bailey is now within a private garden [12a High Street], and although the bank and ditch have been marked by the Ordnance Survey, the internal features which are preserved here largely unobscured by later quarrying are ignored by them. Furthermore, the gardener was able to point out where he had discovered "brick and stone foundations" following the collapse of an apple tree during the hurricane of October 1987'. It was therefore decided to locate the various features by means of a prismatic compass survey as this would involve no damage to the lawns and no inconvenience to the owners of the house.

The garden contains part of the bailey bank although the ditch has been filled in this area. Older plans show a mound to the north of the bank which has now been destroyed; this seems to be part of an outwork to protect the entrance to the bailey, indicated here by a change in the alignment of the bank, a break in the defences which appears to be original and the end of a hollow running southwards between the churchyard and one of the probable internal enclosures. There is also a low bank running roughly parallel to the northern bailey bank which forms the boundary of one of these enclosures and a large subrectangular hollow which appears to be a pond. A second, more irregular hollow at the south-eastern corner of the garden is more like the quarries which have been dug into much of the bailey. The description of the foundations discovered by the gardener sounds more like a post-medieval than medieval structure, but whatever stood here - probably a house - had been destroyed before the enclosure map was drawn early in the nineteenth century.

The line of the bailey defences can still be traced in the churchyard, although the bank has largely been levelled and the ditch filled: where graves have been cut into the ditch fill, the weight of the memorials is causing them to sink and lean. There are no indications that a smaller churchyard enclosure once existed, so it is possible that - apart from extending northwards across the defences during the nineteenth century into a small field called Long Close - it either still follows the medieval boundary or that this has been destroyed by later grave digging.

At the point where the bailey meets the motte, the motte's ditch has been filled; this had already occurred by the time of Robert Clutterbuck's account in his *History of Hertfordshire*<sup>9</sup>. That a ditch did once exist here is borne out by the slumping of its fills. It has been asserted that the material used to fill the ditch was quarried from the top of the motte, thereby creating the hollow in the top of the mound and even that the barrow-run used for the process can be discerned<sup>9</sup>. There is no justification for this or for the assumption that the hollow is evidence that the motte is unfinished<sup>10</sup>, as it provides an additional defence for the tower. Nor is there any reason to believe that the motte is based on an earlier mound, as the Pirton Society's book suggests picking up on Seeborn's unsubstantiated claim that "*These mounds in the neighbourhood of churches may be much older than the Saxon conquest*"<sup>11</sup>. The present survey indicates that this is a typical earthwork castle of the eleventh or twelfth century.

A second attempt to fill the moat was made by Hitchin Rural District Council in 1957 by the dumping of refuse in its the north-western corner was abandoned when the local museum pointed out that the site had been listed as an ancient monument since 1931. No attempt was made to restore the site to its former condition, however. The resilience of the mound to destruction is demonstrated by the fact that although a V-1 rocket fell on it on 24 September 1944, it was the church and a group of houses in Bury End which sustained all the damage<sup>12</sup>.

To the west of the motte there are traces of a second bailey which is now almost completely destroyed. Running westward from the southern side of the moat there is a short stretch of ditch which has been filled as it enters the garden of 9 Bury End, where there are further signs of deliberate infilling. A similar hollow runs north-westward from the moat towards Crabtree Lane. Earlier in this century water still flowed into this ditch from a moated complex and pond north of Crabtree Lane, destroyed to build the houses of Docklands (ironically, these houses are now plagued by damp)<sup>13</sup>. Other discussions of the site have seen this as nothing more than a supply channel for the moat, although Aylott's typically fanciful interpretation is nearer the truth here<sup>14</sup>.

A good case can be made for including the pond which used to exist by Great Green until the end of the nineteenth century into the defensive system which would have run from the channel along the line of the later Crabtree Lane, turning southwards in the vicinity of the Old White Horse pub (now the Motte and Bailey), taking in the pond before turning eastwards near the junction of Bury End and Great Green and rejoining the moat via the partially-filled stretch of ditch still visible. If this interpretation is correct - and there can be no certainty without a resistivity survey of the area in question - then the bailey earthworks must have gone by the seventeenth century at the latest, since the houses in Bury End which stand on the line of the ditch are of that date.

### 3: Discussion

The date of construction of the castle is unknown: the Pirton Society states that it was built by either Alan or Gerald de Limesy, son and grandson respectively of the Domesday tenant of Peritone, and dismantled in the reign of Henry II<sup>15</sup>, but this appears to be pure conjecture, and the fortifications could date from the period of the Conquest as well as of the Anarchy. It has sometimes been claimed that the taller, conical mounds such as Toot Hill are of eleventh century rather than twelfth century date, but the evidence is inconclusive. There are certainly no grounds for believing that a mound existed on the site at an earlier date.

Derek Renn suggests that the Pirton Motte and Bailey were built during the anarchy, together with Therfield, Anstey and Wymondley. Certainly, excavations by Martin Biddle have indicated a mid twelfth-century date for Therfield, while the 1955 excavations at The Bury have produced twelfth-century pottery, such as developed St Neots wares, but no obviously eleventh-century sherds. Although the excavation of a small part of the bailey cannot be considered representative of the whole, this does perhaps confirm a date in the mid twelfth century for the development of this part of the bailey, at least.

There is a fairly large number of earthwork castles in this area, other examples existing at The Hills (Meppershall), Cainhoe (Clophill) and Great Wymondley, and it may be that control of the communications route through the Hitchin Gap was the reason for this concentration. If the dating suggested by Renn is correct, control of the Chiltern scarp and of the routes through it may have been of importance during the Anarchy of Stephen's reign.

The existence of two baileys on either side of the mound is rather unusual although not unparalleled, but much easier to accept than the four or five possible baileys the earlier accounts postulate. The western bailey was perhaps original and replaced or augmented at a later date by the larger, eastern bailey; possibly the two were contemporary and the smaller bailey contained the Lord's residence while the larger was for his retainers.

The settlement earthworks south of the castle are very regular and give the impression of deliberate planning. Since these earthworks respect the castle defences, it seems reasonable to assume that they date from a period when the castle was in use, and work elsewhere has indicated deliberate replanning of villages during the late eleventh to twelfth centuries, which ties in well with the date of the castle.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> G L Evans, unpublished typescript report of excavations undertaken in 1955, not dated. Letchworth Museum archive.
- <sup>2</sup> Victoria County History, *Hertfordshire* (1908) 2: 117-118; G Aylott "Pirton Castle" *E Herts Arch Soc Trans* (1908-9) 4: 1-4; Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Inventory of the Monuments of Hertfordshire* (1910): 162-3; G L Evans *op. cit.*; D F Renn, *Medieval Castles in Hertfordshire* (1971): 21
- <sup>3</sup> Personal communication to KJM by Mr Baines of Pirton Parish Council, January 1988.
- <sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*
- <sup>5</sup> VCH *Herts* (1908) 2: 117; RCHM *Inventory* (1910): 162; Aylott, *op. cit.* 3.
- <sup>6</sup> J Wayne (ed.), *A Foot on Three Daisies* (1987): 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Personal communication to KJM January 1988.
- <sup>8</sup> R Clutterbuck, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Hertford* (1813-27) 3: 115
- <sup>9</sup> Aylott, *op. cit.* 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Renn, *loc. cit.*
- <sup>11</sup> Seabohm, *The English Village Community* (1883): 434.
- <sup>12</sup> J Wayne (ed.), *A Foot on Three Daisies* (1987): 30-31.
- <sup>13</sup> Personal communication to KJM by an elderly resident of Walnut Tree Lane, January 1988.
- <sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.* 2,
- <sup>15</sup> Wayne (ed.), *A Foot on Three Daisies* (1987): 2.

KJM February 1989  
North Herts Museums

# GREAT BURY, PIRTON

