

CASTLE GREEN AND CASTLE HILL PUBLIC OPEN SPACES

From time immemorial, the grassy earthwork immediately to the west of the church has been known to villagers as “Castle Hill”. Despite the obvious inference that a castle must once have stood there, the origins of this fortification were lost in the mists of time. This all changed in 1960 when archaeologist Brian Davison chose the site for investigation during the final year of his archaeological degree at Belfast University. Weeks of patient excavation and recording, followed by more intensive work through to 1976, revealed that there had indeed been stone buildings and fortifications on the site dating from early Norman times. More importantly, one of the largest Saxon wooden manor houses yet excavated was found under the later works, close to the boundary of the site with the church. The site history revealed by these investigations is detailed at the end of this note.

This important site, now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, has been purchased for the village by the Parish Council, funded by contributions from a number of parish organisations together with public subscriptions. Together with the adjoining Castle Green, purchased in 2004, it forms a valuable public open space in the centre of the village, under the management of the Castle Green Sub-Committee of the Parish Council.



Through the generosity of successive owners of Castle Hill, generations of children have made for its short but steep slopes after every snowfall. Now that the site is in public ownership, this traditional activity continues to be permitted but the status of the area as a Scheduled Ancient Monument precludes the use of the hill for anything other than this type of informal recreation.



The Castle Hill site is shown in red and the Castle Green site in blue: both are now in public ownership

A HISTORY OF THE CASTLE HILL SITE

Sulgrave Castle Mound was partially excavated six times between 1960 and 1976. The excavations indicated that the Norman Ringwork visible today had been established on top of earlier Saxon buildings. These were of manorial stature and dated from about 970 AD.

Norman occupation began soon after the conquest in 1066 and continued during the 11th Century. The site was abandoned by 1140 AD.

THE EXCAVATIONS

In 1960, archaeologists from Queen's University, Belfast were investigating the early development of Norman castles and Sulgrave (one of several local "ringworks") was chosen for excavation.

Saxon buildings were discovered buried beneath the Norman earthworks, so five further excavations were carried out between 1961 and 1976.

Interim reports were produced but it was not possible to publish a full detailed Excavation Report at the time.

In 2005 Sulgrave Castle Archaeology Group obtained funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund's Local Heritage Initiative to assess the finds and documents, create a complete paper and digital archive and prepare the material for publication so as to reach as wide an audience as possible.

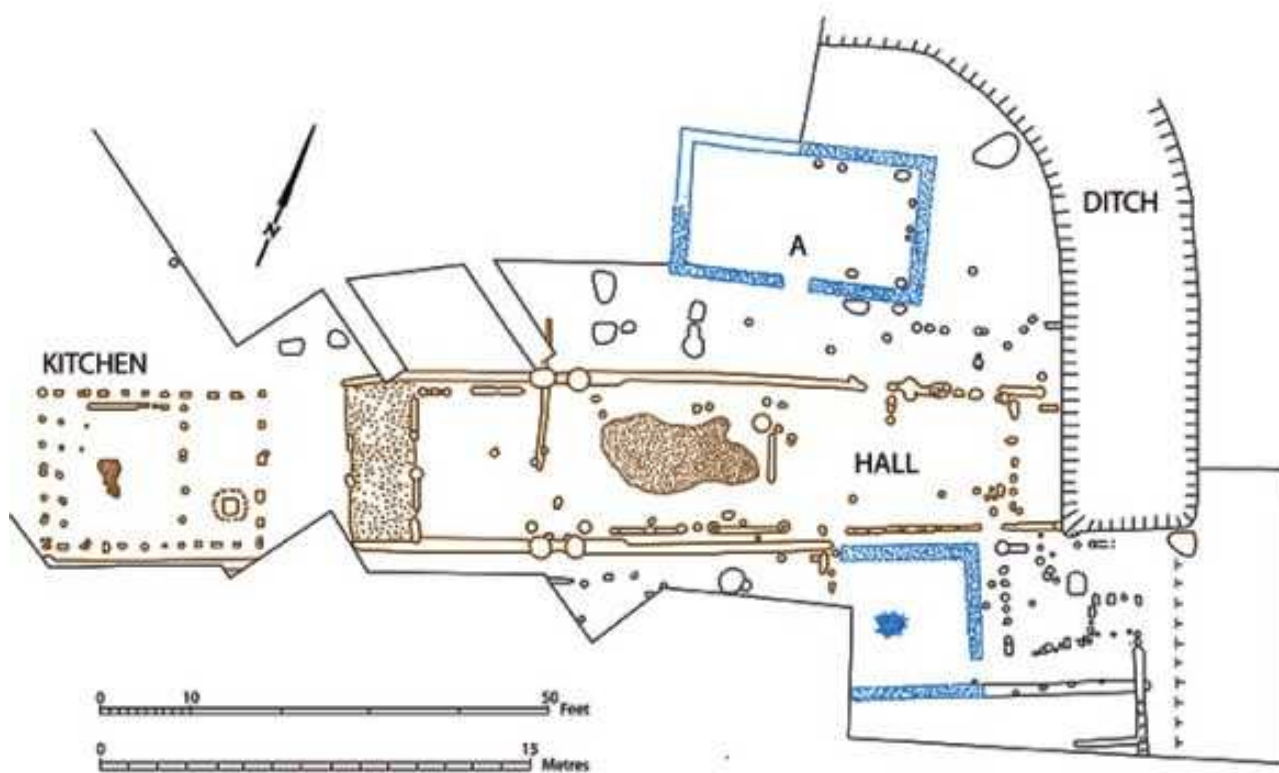
In addition to the detailed Final Excavation Report, work on which is ongoing, the project includes the production of a leaflet, a pack of children's workcards for guided visits by local school parties and the deposit of copies of the material with the Northamptonshire Records Office.

THE SAXON SETTLEMENT (C.950 - 1070 AD)

The size and layout of the Saxon buildings suggests that their owner was a Thegn - a man of local importance who was expected to possess at least 5 hides (600 acres) of land, a Chapel, a Hall and a Kitchen. The re-used Saxon doorway in the present church tower suggests that this chapel may have been where the church now stands.

The Thegn's imposing buildings would have been surrounded by workshops and stables. The whole area would have been enclosed by a boundary wall and ditch, with a large gateway to emphasise the Thegn's high status.

Throughout the late 10th century and early 11th century this part of England was subject to Viking raids. This could account for an unfinished attempt to fortify the site against attack.



Plan showing the extent of the excavated area and the Saxon buildings and boundary ditch discovered beneath the Norman Castle mound. The Thegn's original timber house and kitchen are shown in brown. Later stone buildings are shown in blue.



Doorway leading from the courtyard into the Saxon stone building A (coloured blue on the plan).

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Artists's impression of how the Saxon buildings may have appeared.

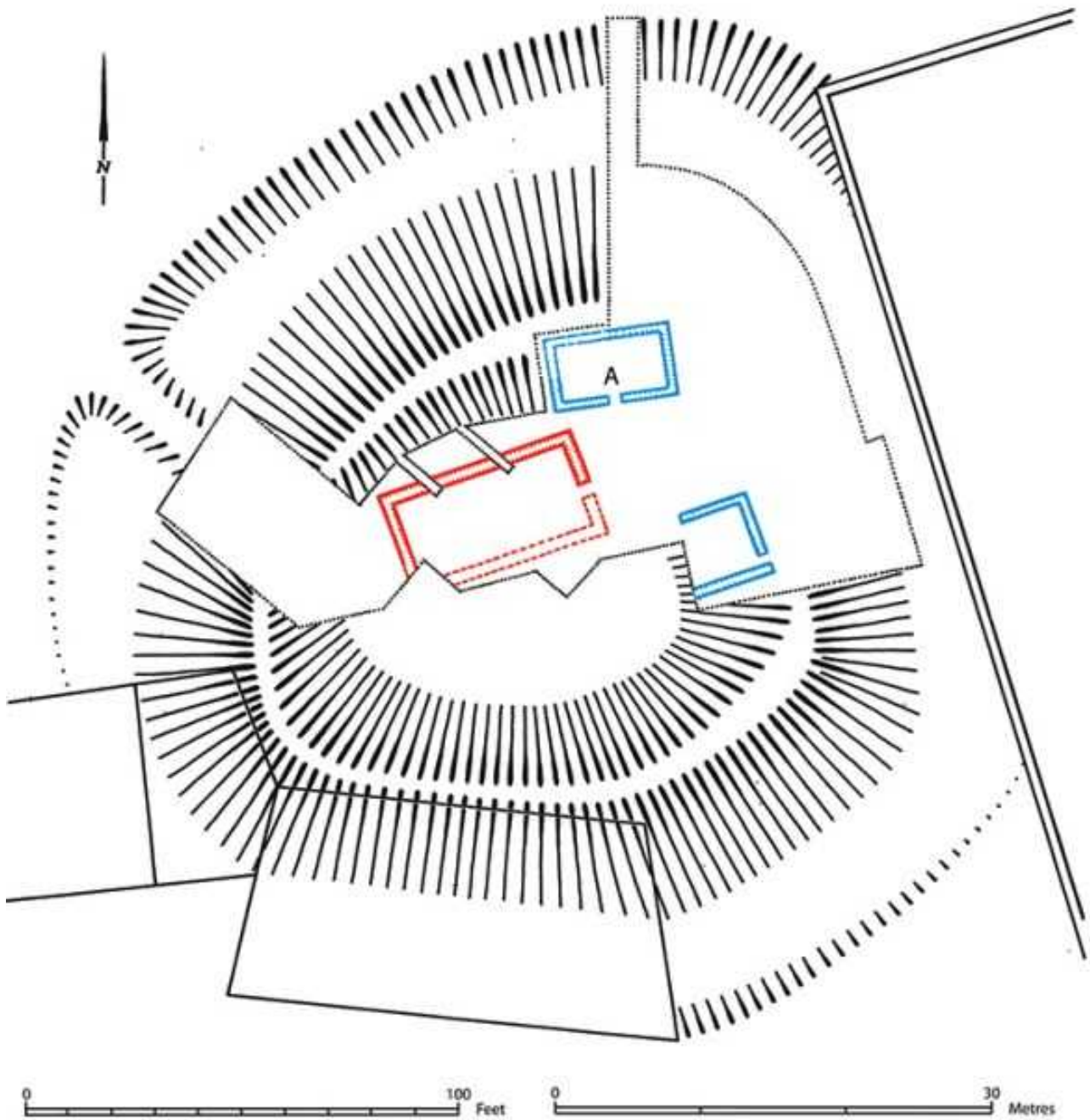
NORMAN OCCUPATION (c.1070 - 1140 AD)

After the Norman conquest in 1066 contemporary records show that the Thegn's lands were given to Ghilo de Pincquiny, a Norman knight. He raised a rampart 2.5 metres high around the site, perhaps to dominate the Saxon population but also for protection from other Normans. He demolished some of the Saxon structures but retained some stone buildings and added a new stone Hall where the Thegn's house had stood.

Later in the century new timber buildings were erected and the rampart was widened and raised by a further 1.5 metres. It is not clear whether this was done for Ghilo or for his son but the cause may have been the outbreak of war after the death of William the Conqueror in 1087 AD.

Ghilo's son died in 1130 AD and the excavations showed that the castle had been abandoned by around 1140 AD. The de Pincquiny family had extensive estates throughout the area and Sulgrave may have become redundant.

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Plan showing the extent of the excavated area, the steep banks and the ditch of the Norman castle, the re-used Saxon buildings (shown in blue) and the new Norman one (shown in red).

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Artist's impression of how Ghilo de Pincquiny's Norman Castle may have appeared.

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FINDS

A large quantity of broken pottery and animal bones was recovered. Pottery shards can help to date the archaeological layers and fragments of animal bones reveal changes in the inhabitants' diet. Small finds such as the coins and personal items shown below indicated the status and life style of the inhabitants.



Illustrations of a few of the many artefacts recovered during the excavations are shown above, including a brooch derived from the Agnus Dei Saxon coinage, a small bone comb, a coin of Ethelred II (AD 978 - 1018), glass beads, a bone whistle, a bone awl and a pair of iron spring shears (not all at the same scale).

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Excavations in progress 1976 (above). A segment of the north side of the ringwork has been carefully removed. The outline and earth layers of the rampart can be seen, as can the stone walls of the Saxon building that was buried inside it. Modern cottages in Magpie Road are visible in the background.

[See here for an extract from the Domesday Survey](#) completed in 1086 on the orders of King William the Conqueror, in which it is recorded that the Saxons Hugh, Landric, and Otbert rented land at Sulgrave from Giles (Ghilo de Pincquiny)

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