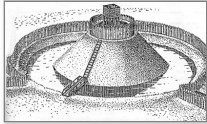




The Norman Castle at Abinger

... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive 2000

Conflicting expert opinion about the notable mound of earth near Abinger Manor had existed for generations until 1949 when Edward Beddington-Behrens, who lived at the Manor called in the Surrey Archaeological Society. The Society team led by Mr. Brian Hope-Taylor discovered the truth. The following is a precis of an article written by Mr. Hope-Taylor shortly after the excavation.



When the Normans invaded England in the 11th. century their cavalry overran the country. Their castles held it. These fortresses were made of wood and erected in the campaign

that began in 1066. They could be built quickly to provide strong points from which the invaders could keep watch on the surrounding countryside. All that remains of these castles today are the great flat-topped mounds of earth on which the wooden structures stood.

These castles typically surmounted a fortification that combined two elements, the "motte" and the "bailey". The bailey, a relatively large area in which the garrison was lodged, resembled the primitive defensive stockade; it was surrounded by a deep ditch, the earth from which was heaped in a rampart along the inner edge and topped by a sturdy fence or palisade. The motte was a steep-sided mound of earth, heaped up from a formidable ditch that encircled it. On its flat top stood the castle proper.

The remains of a structure uncovered at Abinger in 1949 showed a close resemblance to the castles pictured in the Bayeux Tapestry. Mr Brian Hope-Taylor and his team were led to the conclusion that the really distinctive element of the motte was not the mound but the tower. The Abinger tower occupied a considerable portion of the small motte top. It was boarded from top to bottom. The excavations suggested this picture of the tower but could not confirm the aboveground details. However, further studies including clues provided by the Bayeux Tapestry and a carved stone capital from the original Westminster Hall (dating from a

generation after the Conquest) found confirmation that details of the upper portion of the tower were of the same type as the stilted tower excavated at Abinger.

A tall free-standing tower needed deep corner-post holes for stability, and the posts must fit tightly in their holes. Using only pick and shovel, it is impossible to dig a hole which is both narrow and very deep. The concrete-setting of posts was not known by the ancient builders, nor did they have pile-drivers capable of driving tall posts into the ground.

Stabilisation of the tower might have been by heaping the excavated earth from a ditch inwards around the corner posts. Success will encourage the throwing-up of mounds around the tower as soon as it was built. Eventually the tower would be supported by temporary framework while ever-bigger mounds heaped-up and rammed solid at their base. Clearly the higher the mound and deeper the ditch the more formidable the defensive position of the tower.

The Bayeux Tapestry, a remarkable embroidery made soon after the Conquest, in its highly conventionalised form confirms this type of building and stilted-tower as it shows a castle under construction at Hastings with workmen shovelling up earth to support corner posts.

The almost globular cooking pots of a well-fired sandy ware found at the base of the motte and other evidence characteristic of the period 1080-1140 convinced Mr. Brian Hope-Taylor and his team from the Surrey Archaeological Society that Abinger motte was built towards the later part of that period - about 1100 AD.

A reconstruction of the wooden castle at Abinger from the article by Mr Hope-Taylor on his work with the Surrey Archaeological Society. The original caption says "The bailey, although characteristic of this sort of fortification, is conjectural; no traces of it survive at Abinger, possibly because of centuries of plowing. A typical bailey enclosed residential structures and other buildings. At Abinger the bridge, supported by an underwater causeway, could be removed in case of attack"

| [Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News, February 2000](#)