

2011 Archaeological Excavations at Mount Bures



2011 excavations on the summit of Mount Bures, looking east

Analysis of the 2011 excavations showed that despite damage from unrecorded informal digging in the 19th and 20th centuries, archaeological evidence of medieval date does still survive on the motte summit. This has shown that the main medieval use of the motte (mound) was as a lookout post during the civil war between King Stephen and Matilda in the mid 12th century. The excavations have also revealed new information about how the motte was built and what went on around it, before and after it was built.

In August 2011 the first official archaeological excavations on Mount Bures motte were carried out, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of the Managing a Masterpiece project. More than 70 members of the public from the local area excavated 40 square metres on the summit of the motte and nine smaller trenches in fields and properties nearby, under the direction of Access Cambridge Archaeology (University of Cambridge) led by Dr Carenza Lewis, well known from C4's *Time Team*.



General view of the 2011 excavations on Mount Bures, looking west



Trowelling on the motte summit

The absence of cut features on the motte summit which could have held the foundations of large timber buildings such as a defensive tower or lord's residence suggests that if there was a timber structure on the top of the motte, this must have been small with little or no sub-surface foundations. Just 11 sherds of pottery were found in the 40 square metres excavated on the motte top: four of these were modern ironstone china of 19th or 20th century date (possibly associated with the previous unrecorded excavations on the site) while a further sherd dated to the Roman period and was residual in later layers. The other six sherds were medieval in date, comprising five sherds of Early Medieval Sandy Coarsewares (12th - 14th century) and one of Hedingham Fine Ware (late 12th - 14th century). The scarcity of archaeological finds indicates that the motte was not

permanently occupied or manned. All this, combined with its unusual height (10m) and its prominent location providing superb views for miles in all directions, suggest it was used as a lookout post in the medieval period, rather than as a residence, military storehouse, prison or defensive retreat. The medieval motte may have been built by enlarging a pre-existing burial mound, as Bronze Age (1500-800 BC) pottery and struck and burnt flint was found in excavations nearby.

The 2011 excavations, along with surface examination of the sides of the mound, indicate that the medieval motte was built as a series of tiered concentric circular layers which were reduced in diameter as the motte increased in height. These layers were mostly made up of the sandy gravel sub-soil naturally occurring in the immediate area, which was methodically removed from around the base of the motte to create the deep ditch which surrounds the mound. The 2011 excavations (including a sondage into the backfill of a very deep earlier unrecorded excavation) showed that the loose sandy fabric of the mound was stabilised by building a retaining ring of clay around the mound perimeter, and by carefully levelling every load of spoil before the next was added.



Sondage into the motte summit showing its construction of levelled layers of sand and flint gravel

Mottes (usually associated with defended enclosures called baileys) were commonly built by lords in England between 1066 and 1154, notably in the wake of the Norman Conquest (1066) and during the Anarchy of King Stephen's reign (1135-54). Pottery found in the excavations on Mount Bures motte indicate that it was built in the early/mid 12th century (c. 1100-1150 AD), not immediately after the Norman conquest as has previously been assumed. During the 1135-54 Anarchy, many short-lived unlicensed castles were built for which no documentary records survive. When Henry II (1154-89) became king, many such castles were demolished or demilitarised as he reasserted royal control over his kingdom.



Trench 2, excavated west of the motte during the first week of the 2011 excavations

Ten other trenches were excavated in 2011, sited immediately around the motte and in the nearby village. These included eight 1m² 'test pits' and two longer trenches. There is no evidence for medieval occupation north, east or west of the motte of the sort which would indicate the presence of a bailey in any of these areas. Linear features here appear to be the remains of lynchets of a field system of probable Iron Age and Romano-British date. Within the present village, the only test pits which produced medieval pottery in volumes likely to indicate settlement in the vicinity were those near the present railway crossing and c. 300m to its east (along Old Barn Road). In both cases, the medieval pottery was the same 12th - 14th century Early Medieval Sandy Coarsewares as was found on the motte, although

a single, very small (2g) sherd of Ipswich Thetford-type Ware (mid 9th - late 11th century) was found in the pit off Old Barn Road. The present village thus seems mostly to post-date the motte, although with only a small number of pits dug in the village, it is impossible to be certain about this. The medieval 'village' probably comprised a handful of widely spaced cottages or farms.

The other area where clear archaeological evidence for medieval domestic occupation was found was immediately south of the church, where one test pit revealed animal bone and 11 unabraded pottery sherds (totalling 203g in weight), associated with a large cut feature, probably a post-hole from a substantial building. The evidence from this pit was tentatively interpreted, (given the size of the post-hole and its location close to the church and near the motte and present hall) as indicating the presence of a medieval hall. The pottery mostly comprised the same 12th - 14th century Early Medieval Sandy Coarsewares, as found elsewhere on and around the motte, but also included a single sherd of Ipswich Thetford-type Ware (mid 9th - late 11th century. Another test pit immediately west of the churchyard also produced animal bone and seven sherds of Early Medieval Sandy Coarsewares, again attesting to the presence of domestic settlement in the immediate vicinity.



1m² test pit near Mount Bures Church with some of the pottery produced from the post hole within it



It has been suggested that a bailey (an enclosed, defended yard containing residential and ancillary buildings associated with the motte) may have lain in the area now occupied by the churchyard. There is no historical or archaeological evidence for this, but the suggestion is not unreasonable and is made on the grounds that (a) most medieval mottes are associated with at least one bailey (b) the churchyard is the most likely place as it is on level ground and includes the present parish church, whose graveyard may have concealed the earthworks of a bailey and (c) there is no evidence whatsoever for any bailey elsewhere around the motte, where traces of such a feature would be expected to be visible in the un-built upon land. Although there is today a scarp around the edge of the churchyard which might represent the denuded remains of a bailey bank, this may equally be due to the raising of the ground surface in the burial ground. The 2011 excavations did not produce any definitive evidence for a bailey in this area, such as a ditch or bank, but the presence of undoubted domestic occupation contemporary with the motte immediately adjacent to the church does suggest this is the location of a seigniorial manor/church complex linked to the motte. This thus gives some support to the suggestion that there may have been a bailey here. Whether or not this actually did exist, however, remains unproven.

Taken together, the 2011 excavations revealed the use of the motte site in different ways extending over several centuries. Prehistoric use of the area certainly included activity in the Bronze Age which may have involved the construction of a burial mound. This was succeeded by a field system which included arable cultivation in the Iron Age and Romano-British period. There is no evidence for the use of the area in the Anglo-Saxon period is unclear, but some sort of settlement, probably a manorial site, was established in the medieval period, probably as early as the eleventh century and possibly fairly soon after the Norman Conquest. This was probably associated with a church or chapel, and possibly some very small village settlement as well. Other contemporary settlement lay away from this site, dispersed at some distance along lanes in the landscape. In the twelfth century, probably during the Anarchy of Stephen and Matilda when a lack of effective royal control of warring factions threatened the security of all, a substantial motte was built adjacent to the manorial complex (perhaps enlarging the pre-existing remains of a prehistoric burial mound), Defences built at this time may, just possibly, also have included a bailey enclosing within it the manorial site, the church and any other contemporary settlement. With or without a bailey, this very prominent motte would have looked highly defensible while also providing a good strategic lookout post. It was not intensively used, with no large keep or

watch tower on top of it; although a small, timber-framed look-out structure may conceivably have surmounted the mound. It did not continue in use after the 12th century, although must have remained a useful vantage point. From the 19th century, the motte became an object of antiquarian interest although, with no surviving documentary evidence, an elusive one, until the 2011 excavations provided answers to least some of the uncertainties about the history of this unusual and impressive monument.

Carenza Lewis MA ScD FSA (Excavation Director), August 2011.

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A break from digging in the welcoming barn dig HQ, where tea and coffee was always ready when needed and 'Doughnut Fridays' were much enjoyed



The 'Managing a Masterpiece' team thanks the volunteers at the end of dig BBQ, fortuitously taking place during the only rainstorm of the dig fortnight

One young visitor finds the dig handout less easy to digest than anticipated...



Ida Mc Master, local historian and previous owner of the motte site, has willing help to see the excavations on her first visit to the motte summit for more than twenty years