

Bletsoe Castle – evolving interpretations

Wadmore 1920 was the received orthodoxy about Bedfordshire castles, assuming 'Castle' meant just that, before the development of critical medieval archaeology in the mid-20th century. His plan usefully shows the earthworks on the ground and how he misinterpreted them. **Baker 1978** was a critique of Wadmore, using then new research showing the range of medieval defensive sites and identifying early post-medieval garden archaeology. **Lowerre 2005** took the analysis much further, grappling at a detailed level the difficult problem of identifying within Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire what was, and what was not, a 'castle' site existing in the decades immediately following the Norman Conquest of 1066. His succinct contribution is the gazetteer entry in the published version of his doctoral thesis.

Wadmore 1920

Wadmore wrote at a time when historical interest was focused on what we would now describe as 'high status' sites, with relatively little awareness of the next tier down – medieval moated manorial sites – and hardly any of later medieval and 16th / 17th century 'garden archaeology'.

Beauchamp Wadmore, 'Earthworks of Bedfordshire'. Bedfordshire Standard Newspaper Co. (1920)

BLETSOE.

THE CASTLE.

JUDGING from the strength of the great fosse which at the present encloses a more or less rectangular area with rounded corners, the rectangular outer bailey, and the large area enclosed within the out-lying ramparts to the north-east, this Castle must have been of some strength and importance.

An Elizabethan mansion stands in the centre of the space contained by the great fosse. I am disposed to consider that the earth that formed the central island has been used to fill up the fosse at the south-east corner, from the fact that the present level of the enclosed area is much about the same as that of the surrounding land. Assuming this to have been correct, it would appear that the central island was of no great height. Across the fosse to the north-east there is an enclosure with a shallow fosse, forming no doubt a pleasure, probably of much later date.

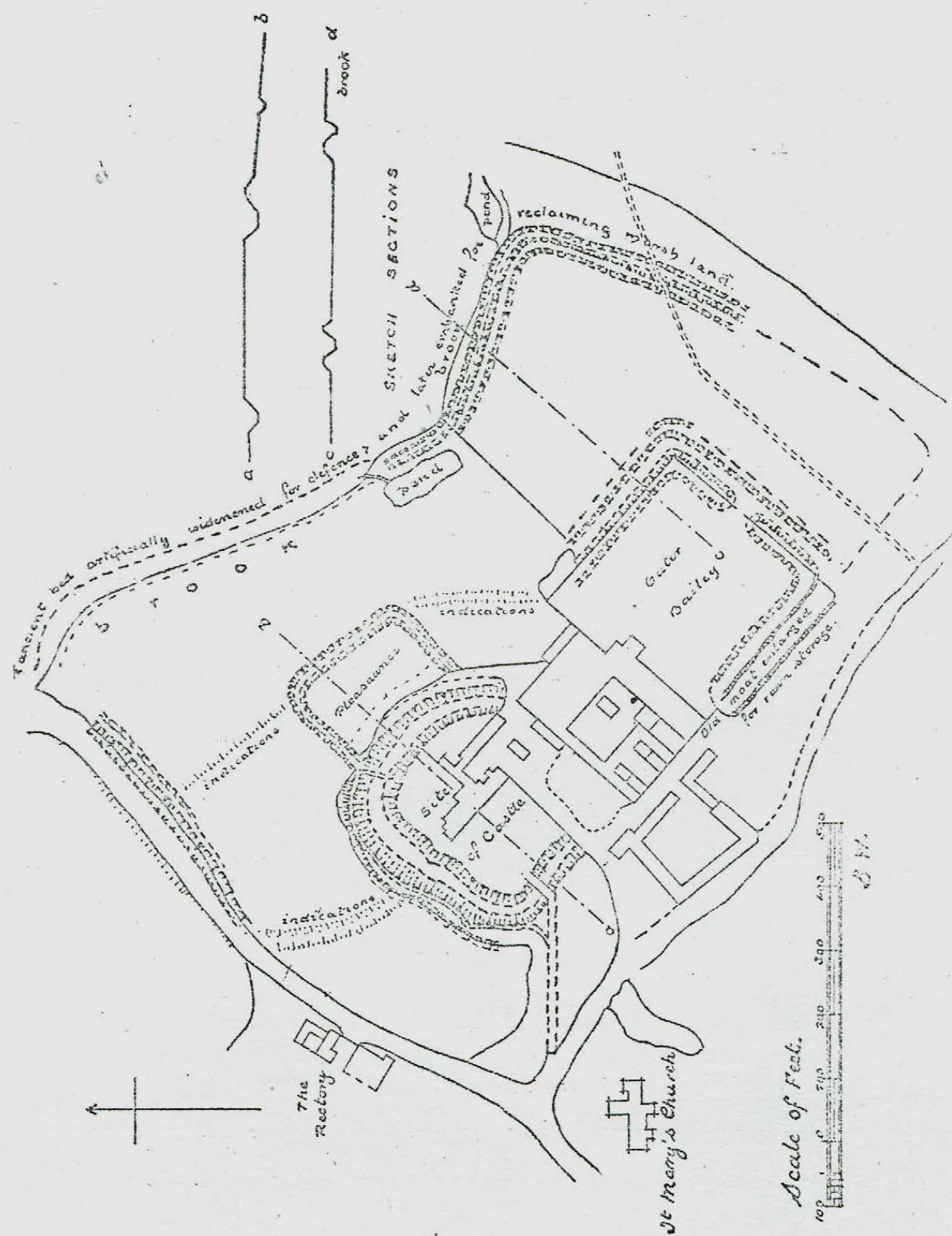
On the south-east side there is a strong rectangular outer bailey with ramparts, parapet and fosse.

All the fosses, with the exception of that surrounding the pleasure, must have contained water.

On the north-east the land falls to a streamlet, which has its rise close by, and I think it not unlikely that the bed of the stream may have been widened to accentuate the defences of the outer enclosure, which are considerable.

In the neighbourhood, enclosing the village, there are at intervals small ponds which look like the remains of fosses, but it is not possible to trace them with any certainty nor to connect them with the work. They remind one forcibly of Bury Hill, Thurleigh, only a few miles distant.

THE CASTLE, BLETSOE.



Compare 25th Ordnance Survey Sheet VII. 2.

Baker 1978

"Other (Bedfordshire) sites have some features of the castle, but these may be either imitative or surviving relics in a later medieval reordering. ... At Bletsoe Castle there is also a massive main ditch, but neither a motte nor a ring motte is enclosed by it, yet the excavated earth must have gone somewhere. The word 'castle' is not recorded until the 17th century, and the earliest reference to fortification of any kind is the licence to crenellate gained by the Pateshull family in 1327. ... Bletsoe Castle suffered a grander (post-medieval) transformation. The property was acquired by the St John family in the late 16th century. They built a probably quadrangular mansion enclosed by the major ditch. One wing now survives though much altered after a fire in the 19th century. The construction of a 16th century mansion on a site formerly occupied by a medieval manor and perhaps by a castle certainly left its mark. the main ditch may have been enlarged on the south-west, it was certainly filled on the north-east, and a rustic bridge placed across it, presumably as an entrance to a gap in a range now missing. Various yards for domestic and farming purposes were defined, as listed in a survey of c1624. To the north-west the area described by Wadmore as the outer bailey of the medieval castle is elaborate formal gardens, typical of the early 17th century, surrounded by a terrace wall and outer ditch."

Baker now considers it is a more open question whether the present Bletsoe Castle building was originally one side of a larger quadrangular mansion or merely had a gatehouse at the end of the bridge across the moat facing the existing range.

David Baker, 'Mottes, moats and ringworks in Bedfordshire'. Chateau-Gaillard IX-X (1982), 35-54.

Lowerre 2005

"Bletsoe Castle is a strongly ditched rectangular site. The earliest reference to any sort of fortification at Bletsoe is a 1327 licence to crenellate. The sixteenth-century owners modified the site extensively, constructing a large mansion within the main ditch, as well as a variety of other associated yards for both domestic and farming purposes. If there were any structures at Bletsoe which could have been considered a castle, they are long since gone. The site is more likely to have been a later medieval moated site than a Norman-era castle."

Andrew Lowerre, 'Placing Castles in the Conquest – Landscape, Lordship and Local Politics in the South-East Midlands, 1066-1100'. British Archaeological Reports British Series 385 (2005), 217.