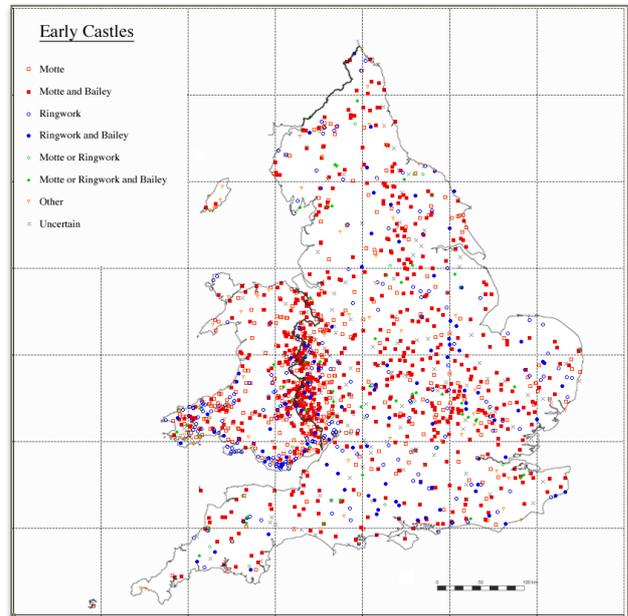


Minor Castles

Some thoughts and comments by Philip Davis

The large number of earthwork and timber castles on the border between Wales and England can be clearly seen on distribution maps. Many of these castles are small and some are very small. Other small timber castle dot the rest of the country, although very few exist in the east of England. This essay attempts to describe these small castles. The essay uses as a 'typical' example a Norman castle built in England next to the Welsh border. It also attempts to describe the sort of person who would have built and lived in such a castle; However, these were not generally literate people at this time and they are not well documented in historical sources so much of what is written below is supposition. Please do feel free to let me know of any errors, your opinions or any other comments you may have. This essay is really designed to provoke thought in an area where little study has been done rather than to be a definitive statement.

The 'typical' castle of a minor lord¹ would have been built, with forced, unskilled, saxon labour, in the years directly following the Conquest², on the site of the already existing Saxon Thegn's manor house, markedly increasing the existing defences of that site either with an embankment to make a



ringwork³ or, possibly more typically⁴, by adding a motte. The size and height of such castle earthworks does depend on the quality of soil they are made from. In areas with good deep sub-soil it is possible to build large mounds with the simple iron clad wooden spades available with relative ease but in areas with little soil mounds might well be made of piles of river pebbles and boulders



Clungunford Motte, Shropshire

held together with clay. There is some evidence that ringworks were more likely to be built in areas of poor soil⁵. Pre-existing natural glacial mounds or prehistoric or early Saxon burial mounds might well be adapted by digging a deep ditch around them and if this was done the castle might move away from the original saxon manorial centre. What appears to be a defining characteristic of the castle was a ditch deeper than one man could dig and throw the soil clear from, which in practice probably means greater than 2m deep (although in marshy areas it was not always possible to dig such ditches). For these small castles ditches this deep rarely survive; ditches tend to fairly rapidly fill in and often all one can see today for evidence of a ditch is an area of slightly more lush grass with lots of molehills around an eroded motte.

Another characteristic of the castle was an outer wall with a wall walk. The palisade of the outer walls would have been made from rough hewn oak timbers and split oak planks (Timber other than oak may have been used but oak would always be the preferred material because of its strength and relative resistance to rot). Internal building would have been made from somewhat finer hewn oak timbers (possibly reused from the saxon hall) and wattle and daub, with roof of thatch, perhaps later replaced with stone slates. The castle would be sited in the village close to the church⁶. The labour would have been forced using the legal pretext of the existing saxon legal duties of burghal hideage and would have involved 1000-2000 man days⁷ of work (A small village could build a small castle in one summer month). Because of the expense involved in the regular re-digging of deep ditches and of replacing the rotten timbers of the palisading the castle would have been abandoned for a manor house in the 13th or 14th century. To maintain the link with the status involved with the place this manor house would be on the site of, or very close to the site of, the castle and would generally be moated. The manor house would probably still be mainly timber but would probably have sill walls and somewhat finer details⁸. If the family continued to thrive, as many did, this manor house would have had a major upgraded or rebuild at some point in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries and these remains may well survive today, with later alterations. Indeed the ancestors of such minor knights may also survive as the local squire (until recently still the local Justice of the Peace -

local judge- and likely to have been an officer in the local militia), although in modern times increased social mobility has reduced the number of family so closely linked to a particular area. The site may well be associated with other signs of high status, or important sources of manorial revenue, such as fishponds or water mills (Although deer parks would be well beyond the means of such minor tenants.).

Some mounds are clearly too small to have had a building large enough for a family to live in on them. These mounds are often described as having a 'watch tower' on them but I personally don't see how a manor too small to have a proper castle could afford to mount a permanent watch. It has also been suggested that isolated mounds without baileys may represent unfinished castles (Kenyon, 1990 p. 4). I find this unconvincing since it would make more sense to start building an enclosure, if only to protect the timber and tools, rather than starting with the motte. I feel it more likely that these small mounds and their small towers were basically symbolic and represent lordship and dominion in an area where allegiances to Norman lords and even their English predecessors was uncertain. However, they could have had a function as a safe place for valuables and as a retreat during raids (although fleeing into the hills would have been a much safer action, if time allowed). Presumably the residential house and farm buildings would have been close by, but with only an unditched palisade as a defence, and as these buildings would have been timber, or possibly even cob (Mud and straw), they do not survive.

Small castles, which were common in the welsh marches but fairly rare elsewhere, would, to our eyes, probably appear crude, uncomfortable and cramped. To contemporary peasants, living in cob houses, it would seem, with its outer timber walls, an imposing building. Certainly some saw these buildings as oppressive⁹. The manorial court would be held in the castle. This would have been a meeting of the lord and the peasants with the larger land holdings and would mainly have been a meeting to arrange agricultural affairs although the occasional minor crime would be tried. The tenant, although he got the land because of his military prowess and responsibilities, produced his main revenue from farming the land effectively and was, therefore, a farmer



and the castle was his farmhouse, where he stored his equipment, seed, grain etc.

As a military man he would, of course, have weapons, armour and horses (To be considered a knight (*miles*) probably at least two war horses, stallions or geldings. These would, at this time, be small, certainly smaller than the modern horse ridden by the pictured re-enactor^{9a}) all of which were expensive and needed safe housing. As a minor knight his equipment might be old, second hand or captured with dents and repairs, in some cases his equipment might be so poor as *for him to be considered a sergeant (serviens)* and he may not have had a war horse, although he even the poorest such tenant would have had a riding mare. He might be impressive to his peasants but to major nobles the details would show his relatively low status. He may well have a squire, who would be the son of another local knight. His own sons would, after the age of seven or so, go to live with another local knight where they would learn the manly arts away from the 'weakening' influence of their (english) mothers. The eldest son would become a squire for another knight, if he was lucky a knight of higher social status, the

second son may become a quire monk or a cleric and other sons might become sergeants¹⁰ or household servants in major houses and castles¹¹. Apart from his squire he might also be able to call on a few of the local youths to act as foot soldiers for him when he was required to do service or when there was raid to be made into Wales, a potentially profitable exercise, even if the loot was just some old armour and a few head of cattle.

From the paucity of remains found at the Hen Domen excavations it seems that even fairly wealthy and powerful marcher families lived surprisingly frugal lives, described by Philip Barker as "all year round camping" and "very close to that of the hard simple life, spent chiefly in the open, and with few social graces".¹² For the minor knights the situation can only have been more basic with a life of a simple diet of coarse bread and potage (the one pot stew of whatever was around), probably only slightly richer in meat than the villeins he lived next to, eaten from wooden dishes in an unlit house with only a basic camp fire for heating.

The other major concern of such a knight would be arranging suitable positions for his sons and marriages for his daughters. This meant meeting with and entertaining other local knights and lords. Entertaining meant feasting which could be expensive. Generally for a knight of this status most of this type of 'networking' must have taken place in the household of the local baron and would usually be arrangement with other knights of similar status and the occasional hope of a lucky break when an alliance with a higher status family could be made. Although this was a status conscious society there was room for merit to be rewarded and a dynamic minor knight who had particular skills as a warrior, diplomat or otherwise might well be seen as a worthy candidate; the greatest example of this would be [William Marshall](#). However, for most knights the effort put into developing their children's futures would have resulted in little change to their status and would have been a slow, sustainable drain on their income.

The castle was, therefore, fundamentally a status symbol. It showed the knight was a military man, his prime legal function. It showed he had a status which meant his children could achieve suitable positions and matches. It showed he was the local lord with power over the local peasants. In day to day



function the castle was fundamentally a house and a farmhouse at that. However, it was not without military function. Although these small castles never had permanent garrisons in the event of a raid from Wales¹³ the knight, his squire and a few locals could have defended the castle and the village valuables like money, seed grain, ploughs etc. for the short period these raids generally lasted. There were also at times seen as a strategic defence and in 1224 the small mottes of the Vale of Montgomery were ordered to be strengthened to resist the welsh (One of the very rare occasions when this type of castle is mentioned in historical records.)¹⁴

Further Reading

The best text on earthwork and timber castle is undoubtedly *Timber Castles* by Robert Higham and Philip Barker, however this tends to look at major timber castle built by significant barons and little is written about minor castles. A much condensed version of the book can be found as an essay in Robert

Liddiard (ed), 2003, *Anglo-Norman Castles* (Boydell Press) .

Some essays have been written by notable authors about minor castles, in the context of their relationship with major baronial castles. 'The Origins of the Honour of Richmond and its Castles' by Lawrence Butler (1992, *Chateau-Gaillard* Vol. 16 pp. 69-80) and 'Castle Guard and the Castlery of Clun' by Fredrick Suppe (1989, *Haskins Society Journal* Vol. 1 pp. 123-34) are both also reprinted in *Anglo-Norman Castles*.

¹A knight holding a manor, as a tenant, from a baron (including the king) for military service. Generally this would be the only manor held by that knight and the manor was supposed to provide sufficient income to allow the knight to fulfil his military responsibility (usually 40 days service in wartime equipped with a horse and full armour). Some small manors were half 'a fee' or even smaller and a tenant of such a small manor might be a sergeant providing 40 days service with less armour and without a war-horse (although possibly having a riding mare.)

²Richard Eales, 1990, *Royal Power and Castles in Norman England* in C. Harper-Bill and R. Harvey (eds) *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood III* (Woodbridge)

³Either an embankment around the area of the castle or a general raising of the site by 2-4m to form a 'ringmotte'.

⁴If castles were much more common than surviving remains suggest then most of these lost castles must have been ringworks, or very low mottes, easily converted into moated houses and have been not been recognised as having a 11th century existence as a castle.

⁵Jack Spurgeon, 1987, 'The castles of Glamorgan: some sites and theories of general interest' *Chateau Gaillard* Vol. 13 pp. 203-26 and essay in *Castles in Wales and the Marches*

⁶The Church would have original been founded by the Saxon thegn, and may have been largely of timber construction, but would, at some point in the 12th century, have been rebuilt in the Norman style in stone.

⁷N J G Pounds, 1990, *The Medieval Castle in England and Wales* (Cambridge) pp. 18-19

⁸H E Jean le Patourel, 1973, *The Moated Sites of Yorkshire* (London)

⁹*The Anglo-saxon chronicle Laud Chronicle* 1086 "He caused castles to be built which were a sore burden to the poor"

^{9a}Matthew Bennett, 1995, 'The Medieval Warhorse Reconsidered' in Church, Stephen (ed), *Medieval Knighthood* Vol. 5 (Boydell) pp. 19-40

¹⁰The term sergeant could have several meanings such as a poorly equipped knight providing a 'half' fee, however, here I'm think of a paid full-time soldiers. Equipped with armour and swords but not with war horses.

¹¹In major houses even quite menial work was done by people of 'good' birth. The common people did not work in major houses except, perhaps, in the most miserable of tasks such as cleaning out latrine pits. see Mark Girouard, 1978, *Life in the English Country House* (Yale University Press)

¹²Robert Higham and Philip Barker, 1992, *Timber Castles* pp. 344-7

¹³Or from the bands of robbers that roamed the country; or from another local lord with whom there had been a falling out.

¹⁴David King and Jack Spurgeon, 1965, 'The Mottes in the Vale of Montgomery' *Archaeologia Cambrensis* Vol. 114 pp. 69-86

