

## The Motte and Bailey Castle at Aldford by Bevis Sale and Rich Turner

This substantial set of earthworks is the best surviving example of a Norman Castle in Cheshire. Though large in size, they are typical of the many motte and bailey castles which survived throughout England and Wales. Their original aim was to provide protection for the new Norman landlords who had taken over the Saxon manors. They continued to be built well into the 12<sup>th</sup> century and especially during periods of civil unrest which racked England during this period. When plotted on a distribution map they also seem to have another function. There is a great concentration of these castles throughout the Welsh Marches from Cheshire down to Gloucestershire which provided a well defended informal frontier between England and Wales (Renn, 1968). Husain (1973) has gone further and suggested that the castles at Shotwick Park, Trueman's Hill Hawarden, Dodleston, Pulford and Aldford were built as an outer defense to Chester, but without accurate dates of construction it is difficult to defend this argument.

The two principal earthworks at Aldford, the motte and the bailey will be described separately. The motte contains a very large area for a non-royal castle (1280 sq.m). The motte top is sub-rectangular and almost flat, except for mounds of rubble in the south-eastern and north-eastern corners. The motte was formerly tree covered and shallow pits where stumps were removed are just visible and there is one irregular pit showing sandstone rubble. Therefore it seems unlikely that there was not a central tower or donjon to the motte as its collapse or foundations would have left a raised entre'. It is more likely that the hall and chambers of the lord or the manor were arranged inside curtain wall. Parts of the core of this wall are exposed just below the crest of the motte on the southern and eastern sides. It is of mortared rubble, typical of Norman buildings. This seems to have been confirmed by F. H. Thompson (1960) who saw an irregular excavation of 1959, when two local boys dug a trench across the eastern edge of the mound. This revealed a tumble of masonry in which a wall face was visible. There was also found a stone piscina, probably Norman in date, 8 ins. Square, and with a central perforation (now in the Grosvenor Museum). In planning the site it was felt that the curtain wall may have had bastions or half-moon towers at the corners. Such a bastion may survive intact in the southeastern corner. A 17<sup>th</sup> century plan of Shotwick Park may show similarities with Aldford. On the south side of the motte, part of the slope has been quarried away.

The motte is still surrounded for over half its circuit by a substantial ditch, with an average width of 40m. The ditch is 5.8m deep at its maximum but here must be an unknown depth of silt in the bottom. The material excavated from the ditch has been used to raise the motte and a bank around the outer edge to add to the defenses. The sides are precipitous and the circuit seems to have been complete and held water until sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The building of Woodhouse Farm in 1867 and the laying out of the garden seems to have led to the removal of the outer bank from the west of the motte, but not altered it in any way.

There is no evidence of a bridge or other crossing between the motte and bailey as must have existed in all such castles. (See plan of Pleshey Castle, Essex, Brown 1970, 58) The ditch is deep and wide. And any bridge, be it wooden or stone, would have been a considerable engineering feat.

The bailey is triangular and includes an area of 4250 sq. m. The boundary ditch is well preserved between the motte and bailey and down the eastern side. The western arm is less complete and heavily overgrown, and the south side is much more fragmentary. Much of the ditch must have been filled when the present church was built in 1866. The north aisle is directly over the ditch and subsequent slumping has caused some structural problems. The inner edge is visible around the southwestern corner and a short stretch in the southeastern corner survives but is choked with trees and used as dump for rubbish from the churchyard.

The defenses for the bailey are less formidable than those to the motte. On the eastern side the ditch has a depth of up to 2.5m made greater by upcast banks of ditch fill on either side. The internal bank would have had extra fortification, probably a wooden palisade. The central area of the bailey appears sunken, being surrounded by upcast banks. It has no features except some faint ridge and furrow of a later field system, and a footpath on a slightly raised causeway which has cut its way through the bank on either side of the ditch. Ormerod (1819) states that a manor house of the Ardernes was built in the bailey, based on its field name, Hall Croft or Hall Yard. No traces of a substantial building are visible and it is much more likely to have been built on the top of the motte where earlier structures could have been incorporated.

In Norman times that bailey would have contained the less important manorial buildings, These could have included barns, stables, cowhouses, houses for retainers and even a chapel. On excavated sites of motte and bailey castles, these are nearly always of timber with a short life and in constant need of replacement or repair (see work at Hen Domen, Montgomeryshire in particular). Outside the bailey are the edges of a rectangular pond whose function and date is unknown.

## **The History of the Site**

There is no direct mention of Aldford in the Domesday Book, but part of a scattered holding of Bigot de Loges took the name of Aldford in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was described as waste in 1086. The first owner to take the name of Aldford was Robert de Aldford (died 1184), and it seems he built or certainly refortified the castle in stone just before the reign of Henry II (1154-1189).

The previous reign of Stephen (1135-1154) was known as the Anarchy when central control of the country broke down. England was a land of feuding barons and petty rivalries. There was an enormous growth in castle building of which Aldford may have been one. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has the following entry for 1137.

“And they filled the whole land with these Castles. They surely burdened the unhappy people of the country with forced labour on the castles. And when the castles were made they filled them with devils and wicked men.”

On Robert’s death, his land and his only daughter, aged two, were given to Robert Pipard (Christie 1887). It seems that when she grew up she married Sir John Arden who succeeded to the estate after 1209. In the charter confirming his fee, he was granted as Lord of Aldford the following amongst his privileges; “free duel in his court and ordeal by fire and water.”

The first direct reference to the Castle de Aldford is in 1276 (Dodgeson, 1968) probably over 120 years after it was first constructed. The castle and manor of Aldford remained in the Arderne family until 1464, when it passed to the Stanleys by marriage. The last of the Stanleys to hold the property was the remarkable Sir William Stanley of Holt. Called “the richest commoner of his day”. He was a brilliant political maneuverer who accumulated vast holdings of land in Cheshire and North Wales, including many houses and castles. Most of these favors were granted by Henry VII in thanks for his and his brother’s help in bringing him to the throne. But his glittering career was ended by his execution for treason by the same king in 1503. All his wealth and estates passed to the crown. It was purchased by Sir William Brereton who was himself attainted and beheaded in 1546. For the next two centuries it was variously rented, leased and litigated over. It seems likely that any house or castle would have fallen into decay and much of the stone been robbed for other buildings. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it had passed to the Grosvenor family in whose estate it remains.

There is some evidence of later use of the site. The motte, whose local name is Blobb Hill (modern English dialect for a bubble, rounded lump or blister) was planted with trees as a landscape feature to be seen from the Aldford approach. A lonesome pine and an oak tree stand alongside the eastern arm of the bailey ditch. These trees must be over 250 years old and planted as parkland trees. It appears that the motte and bailey ditch was water filled, and the trees formed an avenue. Within the bailey ditch is a collapsed brick and stone structure. Still standing earlier this century, it formed an arch or a short vaulted room, with stone steps leading to the entrance from down each side of the ditch. Its purpose is unknown, but it may have been a cistern house or even a bathhouse.

There are fewer estate maps of Aldford than elsewhere on the Eaton Estate. The earliest is of 1728 by Thomas Badeslade which shows only a superficial outline of the castle, not even differentiating between motte and bailey. The church and churchyard are both outside the bailey ditch. This church, which had rectors from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, can be seen in early engravings. The castle may have had its own private chapel for in the 13<sup>th</sup> century there was probably no village church. The Lords of Aldford paid for the living at St Bridgets in Chester up to 1224. A map of 1798 shows the motte and bailey more accurately and implies that the motte ditch and the eastern and western arms of the bailey ditch were filled with water. Both motte top and the southern arm of the bailey are tree-covered.

Both maps imply that the medieval village of Aldford was on either side of what is now School Lane. Towards the end is a more triangular open space. Aldford had a market in medieval times and the right to hold three annual fairs, and this space may have been the marketplace.

Almost no archaeological interest has been shown in this very well preserved site. It has been a scheduled ancient monument since 1984, but the only recorded archaeological excavation was the unofficial trench dug by two schoolboys in 1959. It is reported that earlier in the century a prize cow was buried in the motte ditch which will be a puzzle for future archaeologists. The well-preserved earthworks and the large size of the motte make this a site of considerable interest. Its proper long-term management and its display as part of the history of the village of Aldford would bring it to the attention of a much wider audience.

## **Bibliography:**

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