

Oakham Castle Community Archaeology Dig Info Sheet 1

Visit daily 18th – 29th April, 10am – 4pm*; Dig Open Day on Sunday 22nd April, 11am – 3pm

What are we doing?

Over two weeks at the end of April 2018, University of Leicester Archaeological Services in partnership with Rutland County Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund are carrying out an archaeological excavation in the inner bailey of Oakham Castle. The excavation gives volunteers an opportunity to take part in a unique archaeological project which hopes to uncover more about the castle's history.

In 2012, Channel 4's Time Team excavated several trenches at the castle. Two revealed tantalising glimpses of buildings which we want to explore further.

North-east of the hall, Time Team found a stone wall which dated to the 13th or 14th century, but they were unable to say more about it. Is this part of a building mentioned in an account of 1340? If so, what type of building is it?

West of the hall, evidence of further buildings was found. These appeared to be much later, dated to the 15th or 16th century. Added work, as part of the castle's recent restoration, suggests that these are detached ancillary buildings next to the hall. Could they be the castle's Great Chamber or Solar block?

In both areas, by finding Time Team's trenches again and opening larger areas for investigation, it is hoped that we can make more sense of these structures, and make exciting new discoveries about the castle's history.

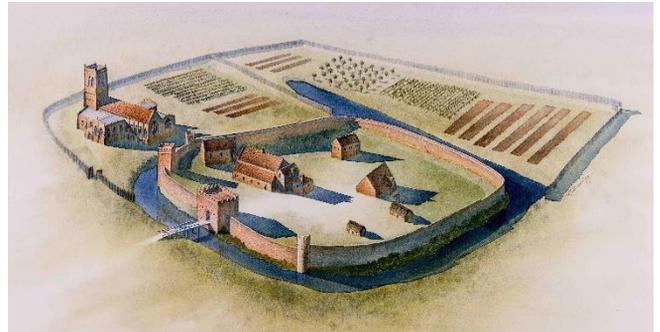
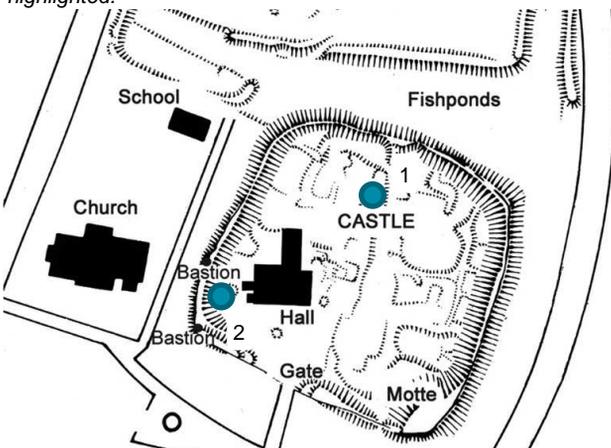


Above: The Great Hall at Oakham Castle.

Right: looking south across the 1956-7 excavation of the castle's kitchen by a local schoolmaster, John Lewis Barber. The kitchen's flagstone floor survives in the middle of the photo, with the castle gateway top right.



Below: Key features of Oakham Castle, with the excavation areas highlighted.



Above: Oakham Castle from the south-east as it may have looked in the 14th century. Artwork: Phil Kenning

Oakham Castle: A Brief History

The original motte-and-bailey castle was probably established in 1075 by William the Conqueror. A hall is mentioned in 1086 but this is not the building we can see today. In 1130 the castle was given to the Ferrers family and around 1180, Walkelin de Ferrers began rebuilding it in stone. He also built the Great Hall, which is considered the finest example of its kind in England.

Surviving parts of the castle include the remains of the 11th-century motte and inner bailey, the late 12th-century hall, parts of the 13th-century stone curtain wall, and the outer bailey known as Cutts Close.

An account of the castle in 1340 describes the following:

"At Oakham there is a certain castle, well walled, and in that castle are a hall, four rooms, a chapel, a kitchen, two stables, a barn for hay, a house for prisoners, a room for the gate-keeper, and a drawbridge with iron chains. The castle contains within its wall an estimated two acres of ground. The same is called the manor of Oakham. Outside the castle is a garden, and fish ponds and a moat."

Today, the only buildings that we know about for certain are the hall and the kitchen.

By the 16th-century, residential use of the castle had ceased and by 1521 an inquest said *"there is at Oakham an old castle, all ruinous... the hall is in the best state of repair, and old fashioned."* The hall continued to be used as a court house, however, which protected it up to the present day.

Blocked doorways in the east wall of the hall provide clues to the location of the service range and excavations in 1956-7 found evidence for a buttery and pantry, and a detached kitchen block.

More recently, as part of the Restoring Oakham Castle project, vegetation has been removed from the ramparts revealing large areas of the castle's 13th-century curtain wall.

Below, left: Time Team excavate a building west of the Great Hall. **Right:** Recent restoration of the castle has revealed its 13th-century curtain wall.



Oakham Castle Community Archaeology Dig Info Sheet 2

Update: 21/04/2018

Trench 1 (north trench) - the story so far...

With our first week of digging drawing to an end, we are starting to make some exciting new discoveries at Oakham Castle. Work so far has focused primarily in Trench 1 to the north-east of the Hall.

First, turf and topsoil were removed with a mechanical digger. This revealed that various earth mounds within the trench area were large piles of rubble, presumably from the demolition of a nearby building.

The topsoil is full of finds dating to the late 17th, 18th and 19th centuries – pieces of clay tobacco pipe, pottery, china, animal bone, iron nails, copper buttons, a bone knife handle and part of a jar lid for Crosse & Blackwell Anchovy Paste (c.1839). This 'rubbish' was probably dumped here by the people of Oakham after the castle had been abandoned, the site becoming a convenient place to dispose of refuse.

The building rubble probably dates to the early 17th century, when George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham levelled the ruins around the castle.



Above (l-r): Post-medieval finds – copper buttons, a bone knife handle and part of the lid of a Crosse & Blackwell Anchovy Paste jar.

Our team of volunteers are now removing this rubble and exposing the walls of the underlying building. A wall Time Team's found, orientated broadly north to south continues half way into the trench before turning east at right-angles, marking the corner of a building. The rubble contains dressed stone, roof slates and large quantities of broken glazed medieval roof tiles. Soil beneath the rubble is producing medieval pottery of 12th-14th century date, with later 15th and 16th century pottery types largely absent.

This would suggest that the building had fallen out of use before the 15th century, becoming derelict perhaps 200 years or more before its ruins were finally demolished in the 17th century.

So far, the archaeological evidence supports historic sources which describes the castle "in a poor state, suffering from neglect and lack of maintenance" in 1388, and "all ruinous" in 1521.



Top right: Part of a glazed medieval ridge tile with a decorative crest.

Right: Pieces of stone tracery, including part of a large arch, and broken roof slates found in Trench 2.

Far Right: Time Team's wall, at the northern end of Trench 2, is uncovered.



Above: A mechanical digger removes turf and topsoil from Trench 1.

Below: Part of a substantial stone wall, first discovered by Time Team, is found beneath a thick layer of rubble left behind following the building's demolition.



Trench 2 (west trench) – a work in progress...

Work in Trench 2 has only just begun but already we have identified that this area of the castle, west of the Hall, is covered in a thick layer of rubble. Some of this has probably fallen from the castle's curtain wall whilst the rest has come from the demolition of other castle buildings. During the removal of the rubble, we found several pieces of stone tracery, probably from the arch of a medieval door or window. A wall found by Time Team's wall, at the northern end of our trench, has also been found again and we now have evidence for the opposing wall of the building. Our focus in the second week will be to learn more about this building and look for evidence of earlier buildings beneath it.

