Ampthill Castle Community Archaeology Project

Henry VIII's castle in Ampthill Park was investigated by a team of archaeologists and volunteers in July 2009. The excavation also discovered some evidence of a previously unknown Saxon presence on the site.



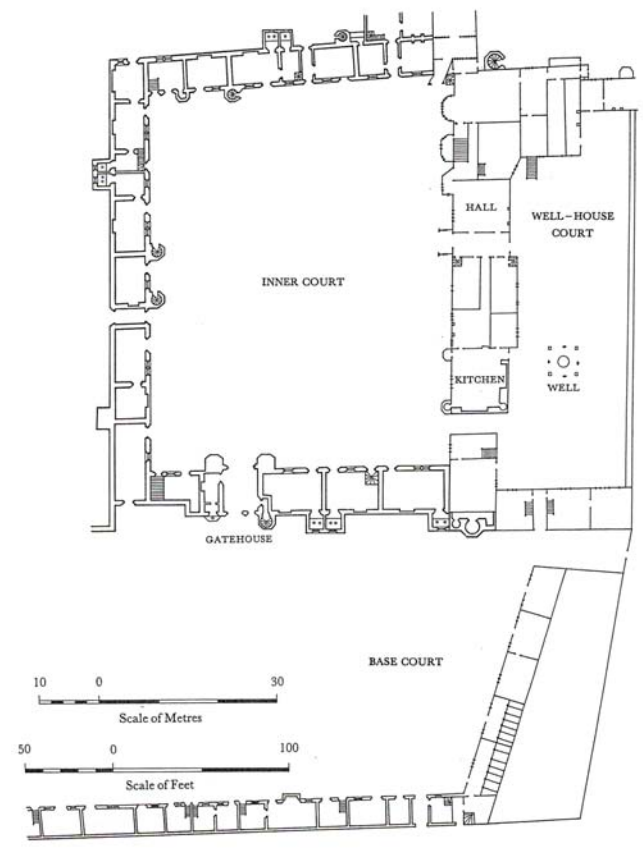
Martin Oake, Central Bedfordshire Council Archaeologist, gives a talk at the public open day held on the 25th July 2009

The excavations were sponsored by Ampthill Town Council and The Greensand Trust with funding from Awards For All and English Heritage. The project was undertaken with the assistance of the Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society (ADALHS), The Greensand Trust and the local community. It was overseen by Northamptonshire Archaeology and managed by Central Bedfordshire Council Archaeologists.

Lord Fanhope (Sir John Cornwall), who built the castle in the early 15th century, was married to Henry IV's sister, Elizabeth, the widow of John, Duke of Exeter. The castle was built from the spoils of the war in France. Ampthill Castle was a fortified stately home, built as a palatial residence, rather than a defensive castle and was described as a "sumptuous building". The estate was such an attractive acquisition, with its wooded park and elegant position, that, in 1524, Henry VIII purchased it so that he might enjoy "marvellous good health and cleanness of air". Katherine of Aragon resided there during the divorce proceedings of 1533. Henry planned to visit in the company of Anne Boleyn, and the accounts from 1534 record repairs and alterations carried out "against His Majesty's coming".

Work continued in 1536 with new windows in the King's chambers; retiling of the Great Hall and the south and the east wings; wall plastering in the base court and the erection of a new kitchen wing. A bowling alley was built in 1537. Pointing of the brickwork was undertaken in 1539, and the gutters, drains and privies were repaired the following year. In 1542 Ampthill was formally constituted an "Honor" by Act of Parliament and various royal estates in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire were annexed to it.

The castle received less attention after Henry's death and it is uncertain whether his son Edward ever visited, although he did visit Brogborough nearby. Minor repairs were undertaken in 1552, but in 1555 it was reported to be in "sore decay". No further work took place until it was surveyed for Elizabeth I in 1567 as part of a proposal for renovations. This work never took place. James I undertook some restoration work at the castle in 1605 when looking for a suitable country lodge from which to go hunting and hawking. This short-lived scheme was also abandoned, and in 1649 the parliamentary surveyors reported that the house was "totally demolished".



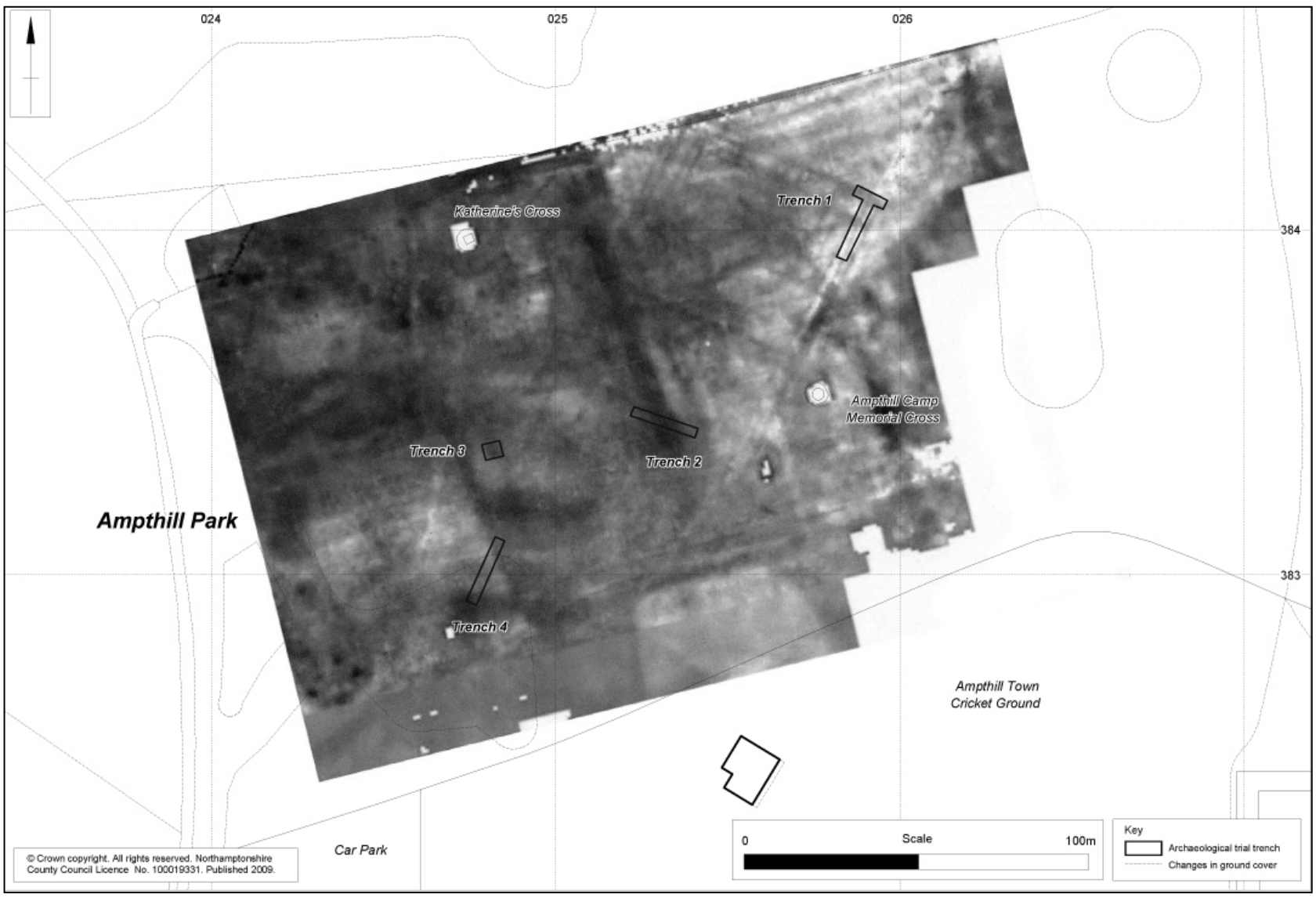
Ampthill Castle, surveyed c1567

Earthworks that may be associated with the castle remains can still be seen at Ampthill Park around the area of Katherine's Cross. These earthworks lie within an area designated as a Scheduled Monument, protected by law. It is owned and managed by Ampthill Town Council.

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The Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society were granted a licence to conduct a geophysical survey at the castle site. The survey showed features that appeared to correspond with the 1567 plan of the castle and indicated that the site was more complicated than was previously shown by the earthworks.



Geophysical resistance survey by Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society

The results of the survey prompted the development of a project to undertake more intrusive investigation of the site. Four trenches were placed to target different features indicated by the survey.

Remains of the castle were discovered in Trench 2. These consisted of substantial stone wall foundations that were aligned north-west to south-east and were separated by approximately the same distance as those depicted on the 1567 plan. It is thought that they were external walls for one of the building's wings. A chalk formation level was overlain by clay floor surfaces between the walls and formed a bedding layer upon which tiles may have been laid. Several fragments of late medieval green-glazed decorated floor tile were recovered during excavation. The walls and the floor tiles had been robbed away.

Overlying the structural remains were large accumulations of demolition debris that comprised mainly fragments of roof tile. Much of the good quality building materials, brick and stone, was probably taken away and reused in the town during the 17th century.

The most complete structure present was a red brick base for a fireplace (*see photograph below*). The bricks were typical of late Tudor manufacture, handmade, of slender width, unevenly fired and non-standard in size. The hearth was one course thick with the bricks set on end, lengthwise, and mortared together. The north side had three courses of the brick chimney remaining and would have abutted one of the exterior stone walls. The rear of the hearth had been lost to robbing. The surface of the brick showed scorching towards the centre.



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During excavation many small artefacts were recovered, including those pictured below.



1 Jetton, German (Nuremburg). This is a trading token struck by Hans Kravwinckle. Legend illegible. Date: 1580-1610.

2 Sewing ring. Hand punched with indentations and used during embroidery to protect the user. Date: late medieval to 16th century.

3 Copper alloy bell. Made from sheet metal with a pellet inside. The strap loop is for suspension as a clothing ornament. Worn from the post-Conquest medieval period to the 16th century.



Also of interest was a fragment of decorated masonry (shown above) found in the topsoil in Trench 3. It is from the quarries at Totternhoe and has motifs depicting Christian iconography scratched into the limestone. The stone is chamfered on one side and might have been external decorative dressing on the castle building.

Excavations in the remaining three trenches proved surprising since none of the remains in Trenches 1, 3 or 4 could be positively related to the castle. Instead, these trenches revealed evidence for an earlier period of occupation, with some of the features and deposits probably dating to the Saxon period.



Saxon features in Trench 1

In Trench 1, the corner portion of an enclosure ditch or foundation cut for a timber palisade was excavated. It was narrow with sharp, near vertical sides and a flat base. Subdivisions within the perimeter were also excavated.

In Trench 3 soil layers from medieval levelling were removed to uncover a deep pit that was several metres across. At the base of the pit was a small hearth. This feature may also be Saxon.

Trench 4 revealed a sharp drop off in slope. The southern edge of the hilltop had been artificially landscaped, probably in the 19th-20th centuries. At the northern end of the trench a broad and deep ditch was investigated. The date of the ditch is not certain, but it is possibly earlier in date than the castle.

The excavation also revealed traces of more recent activity. During the Great War the site was used by the 3rd Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment. There were more than thirty wooden barrack huts and ovens for the cookhouses. Amongst the excavated finds were spent ammunition cases, military buttons and clinker.

Detailed analysis of the remains recovered during the excavation is currently in progress.

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