

# **An Archaeological Overview of Weoley Castle, Birmingham**

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## **The Site**

Weoley Castle is a fortified, medieval manor-house situated four miles to the southwest of Birmingham city centre in the parish of Northfield within the historic county of Worcestershire (National Grid Reference SP 02158275). The surviving ruins consist of a stone curtain wall with square towers and the foundations of internal buildings, all surrounded by a wide moat. No trace of a documented outer bailey survives above ground.



**Fig. 1: Aerial view, looking north of the castle after post-war consolidation (Scan 009c)**

## **The Project**

By the beginning of this century the castle was on the Monuments at Risk register. This provided the impetus for an extensive project, the **Weoley Castle Development Project**, which was jointly funded by Birmingham City Council, The Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage. The principal aims of the project included the consolidation of the standing fabric, the development of the castle as a community and educational resource and a re-assessment of the surviving finds and excavation records. This last strand of the project formed the basis of **An Archaeological Overview of Weoley Castle, Birmingham**, undertaken by Barbican Research Associates, managed by Stephanie Ratkai and monitored by Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

## **Site History**

In the early medieval period the manor formed a part of the estates of the de Paganel, and de Somery, Barons of Dudley. Excavation has proved that a large timber hall stood on the site in the 12th century with surrounding ditch, bank and palisade. Somewhat later a well-built, ashlar, stone hall was constructed in the north-eastern part of the enclosure with a

wooden kitchen to the south. The kitchen is notable for the excellent preservation of its timbers due to waterlogging. It was a weather-boarded structure connected to the stone hall by a raised causeway with timber pentice. The kitchen is probably one of the best preserved, excavated, timber buildings of the period.

In 1264 Roger II de Somery obtained a Licence to Crenellate. This resulted in rebuilding at Dudley Castle under Roger III de Somery and John de Somery and it is probable that the construction of the stone defences at Weoley belongs to this period also. All the earlier buildings within the ditched enclosure were sealed by upcast from the excavation of a new, large moat and the castle defences completely rebuilt in stone. Excavations from before the Second World War and from 1955 to 1962 have effectively uncovered nearly all of the outlines of the stone buildings. The resulting plan can be usefully compared with a survey of the site, dating to 1424, listing the buildings and their function.

Weoley Castle passed from the Barony of Dudley on the death of John de Somery in 1322, when the estates were divided between his two sisters. His sister Joan (and her husband Thomas de Botetourt) retained Weoley as part of her moiety. In the early 15th century the castle passed from the Botetourts, to the Berkeley family, although a series of disputes and a superfluity of claimants meant that this was not a smooth transition. Alterations to the defences in the form of well-constructed turrets, circular and octagonal, and buttresses indicate the continued appreciation of the site as a high-status dwelling – which the finds collection confirms.

The life of the castle as an aristocratic residence came to an end in the early 16th century when the castle was sold to Richard Jervoise, a wealthy London merchant. It remained in the Jervoise family until the 19th century, although during the entire Jervoise tenure it had been sublet to various individuals. Excavations suggest that those buildings remaining were increasingly used as farm out-buildings during this period.

### **Results of the Project**

A wealth of archival and artefactual information exists for the castle, most of which has not been studied since the early 1960s. Records for the pre-war excavations, which were never published, were destroyed by fire in the Second World War, although a substantial photographic archive survives. The loss of the paper record has left a large collection of well-preserved, but largely unprovenanced, artefacts and pottery.

Excavations between 1955 and 1962 also produced significant amounts of material. Some of this has been published but the greater part has not. Records from these excavations have survived but they are incomplete and details of the excavations can only be partially reconstructed. Nevertheless the 'overview project' has revealed a wealth of information of regional and national importance.

### **The site itself**

The pre-war excavations were conducted by G. M. Bark for Birmingham City Council (see fig. 2) and were effectively a wall-chasing exercise, concentrating on clearing overgrowth and excavating within the moat to expose the exterior of the red-sandstone

curtain walls with fine ashlar towers and buttresses. Within the interior, overburden was removed to medieval surfaces in order to expose wall footings which allowed the excavator to interpret each building in light of information from the 1424 survey. The locations of the hall, solar block, kitchen and chapel were all convincingly demonstrated.

The post-war excavations were undertaken by Adrian Oswald for Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries (see fig. 3) and consisted of a sequence of trenches and test pits which were sometimes expanded to create larger areas of excavation. To the west the excavations revealed, the bakery and a granary occupied and modified throughout the later life of the castle. In the eastern part the excavator intended to explore the earlier medieval deposits and was fortunate to find, at the base of deep trenches, that waterlogged deposits preserved significant elements of the structural timbers intact allowing of detailed re-construction of the earliest timber hall, slightly later kitchen and ancillary buildings.

Oswald also worked on significant moat deposits, left undisturbed by the pre-war excavations, revealing not only an interesting sequence of deposits and associated finds but also the well-preserved remains of two timber bridges; the main bridge leading to the Gatehouse in the northeast and, to the east, a lesser bridge crossing the moat from a postern gate in the curtain wall.



Fig. 2. G.M. Bark excavating pre-war in the northwest corner of the castle, looking east (Scan 916c)



Fig. 3 . Adrian Oswald excavating iron window grill in the north-east corner of the castle (Scan 595c)

### **Excavated architectural details**

Reports on the loose architectural stone, the roof tile, decorated floor tile and painted window glass, show the castle to have been well appointed. The floor tiles, dating to the 14th century, were from the chapel and consist of larger than average sized tiles with encaustic decoration. The only parallel for these can be found at Maxstoke Priory. The painted window glass, again dating to the early 14th century, finds its closest parallels in Merton College, Oxford. A small fragment, with painted lion paw, appears to come from a heraldic design showing the de Somery coat of arms (or, two lions passant azure). This can be directly paralleled by excavated glass from Dudley Castle and by a complete example in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow. Roofs were evidently of lead, and of ceramic tile made in Birmingham. The tiled roofs were surmounted by 'horned' and crested ridge tiles, and by decorative finials (see fig. 4).

A mysterious category of finds was composed of small pieces of slate, roughly the same dimensions and shapes as the surviving window glass fragments. These had been painted with linear designs in orange, red, yellow and white. They are at present unparalleled but may represent practice pieces for glass painting or may even have been used in repairing

broken damaged panels. Within the excavated stonework were gargoyle-headed water spouts and other decorative details suggesting architecture of considerable embellishment. An iron window grate with associated wooden shutter and stone surround (see fig. 3) was excavated from the northeast corner of the moat suggestive of a violent collapse of at least a part of the nearby tower.



Fig. 4. Architectural detail. Left - a red sandstone gargoyle-headed water spout from the pre-war excavations (Scan 271). Right – ceramic roof furniture.

There was also architectural detail from surprisingly late in the castle's occupation. Eight fragmentary fluted pieces appear to come from a columnar chimney dating to around the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century and paralleled at Lacock Abbey and Burghley house. It is possible that the chimney was built under the patronage of Richard Jervoise, sheriff of London and member of the Somerset circle, who took possession of Weoley in the 1530s.

### **Artefacts**

An impressive collection of artefacts, nearly all of which have been completely conserved, survives.

Although in general the finds are typical of high-status castle sites, they contain several rare items such as a tin communion cruet (fig. 5), a copper alloy netting needle and silver



inlaid shears. The site is remarkable for the number of complete or near complete artefacts which have apparently been discarded into the moat. Amongst these are a number of copper alloy skimmers, copper alloy tankards, pewter flatware and a pair of gilded rowel spurs (fig. 6). The significance of the discard of complete but undoubtedly recyclable items seems thus far to have been unremarked.



Fig. 5. Pewter communion cruet (Scan 228)

Waterlogging in the south-east corner of the site and in the moat has also favoured the preservation of organic materials including shoes and other leather items, a wooden bagpipe chanter and bucket, and possible basketry.

An extensive collection of medieval coins and tokens were also recovered from the site. The study of these did not form part of the project brief. It seems clear that there must have been a counting-house on the site and the loss of so many coins finds an echo in the

discard of good-quality metal artefacts.



Fig. 6. One of a pair of gilded rowel spurs from the moat

### **The Pottery**

The stratified pottery falls into two distinct groups; that associated with the timber moated manor (Periods I-III) and that associated with the backfill of the moat of the stone castle. There are some inconsistencies in the stratigraphy and pottery seriation for the first three periods of occupation, so it has not been possible to construct a totally reliable development of pottery use in the 12th and 13th centuries. Nevertheless, this has been more than off-set by studies in pottery function, pottery distribution across the site, pottery sources and by comparison with pottery assemblages in the Bull Ring, Birmingham.

The later pottery from the moat was described by the original excavator as having come from three distinct groups, the remaining moat fills having been mostly sterile. Although it was possible to allocate some of the pottery to these three groups (the south-east corner, the north-east corner and the area around the North Tower), it was not possible to reconstruct these groups in their entirety. However, it is clear that the moat fills date from the early 14th century through to the early 16th century. The downgrading of the castle after its purchase by the Jervoise family is clearly visible in the ceramic assemblage, the latest pottery in the moat being cistercian ware, probably dating to c. 1480-1525, with

17th-century and later pottery seemingly associated with one area of the site, which is thought to have been an agricultural building.

The pottery assemblage is notable for several reasons. There are Continental imports from France, Spain and the Rhineland. Continental imports are not common in the West Midlands and the medieval French whitewares found at Weoley, including a Rouen-type jug (fig 7), are extremely rare. Another rare item is a distilling base and aludel (both more or less complete) which were found together in the Moat. The base was found to contain traces of mercury and this ties in quite nicely with a mercury jar (of unknown provenance) found on the site (see fig. 7).



Fig. 7. A—distilling apparatus found within the Moat. B—Rouen-Style jug associated with the demolition of the first stone hall c 1260. C- Mercury Jar found during Oswald's excavations but exact provenance unknown



The assemblage also produced examples of medieval London-type ware. This is extremely significant since Deritend Ware jugs, which were made in Birmingham in the 13th and early 14th centuries, are either direct copies of London-type ware or were made by immigrant potters from the south-east working in Birmingham. However, to date, no London-type ware has been found in central Birmingham, and the Weoley sherds are the one direct link between the two wares.



Fig. 8. Deritend Ware Jug with white slip decoration and roller stamping, from the pre-War excavations

More generally, the pottery from the Moat indicates a number of non-local sources such as the Welsh Marches and the East Midlands, which seem to mirror the familial and seigneurial connections of the Lords of Weoley Castle.

### **Overview**

In summary, there are still many aspects of the castle that deserve further investigation and interpretation. The castle seems to have served not just an economic function for the collection and storage of produce from the manor but appears also to have been used as an aristocratic residence of some substance.

### **What next?**

The project was completed in August 2011. The wider dissemination of the project results was not part of the project brief but they clearly deserve to be brought to a wider audience. The first step to accomplish this will be the storage of all the reports and catalogues on ADS and details will be posted on the Barbican website when known. However, the ultimate aim is to synthesise the project results into a separate volume.

*An Archaeological Overview of Weoley Castle, Birmingham* consists of the following reports.

### **Archaeological Archive**

Weoley Castle – an appraisal of the surviving Archaeological Archive by Stephen J. Linnane

Weoley Castle – the reduced archive, 2.0 Pre-war Excavations

Weoley Castle – the reduced archive, 3.0 Post-war Excavations, 3.1 The Trenches

Weoley Castle – the reduced archive, 3.0 Post-war Excavations, 3.2 The Moat

Weoley Castle - the reduced archive, 3.0 Post-war Excavations, 3.3 The Western Interior

Weoley Castle – the reduced archive, 3.0 Post-war Excavations, 3.4 Periods I-III

Weoley Castle - the reduced archive, 3.0 Post-war Excavations, 3.4.7 The Wooden Kitchen

### **Ceramics**

Weoley Castle: A Reappraisal of and Report on the Pottery by Stephanie Rátkai

Appendix 1: Early Cooking Pot Fabrics

Appendix 2: Deritend Ware

Appendix 3: Iron-Poor Wares

Appendix 4: Iron-Poor Fabrics: Whiteware

Appendix 5: Sandy Micaceous and Micaceous wares

Appendix 6: Late Medieval Wares

Appendix 7: Midlands Purple Ware and Later Fabrics

Appendix 8: Cistercian Ware

Appendix 9: Regional Imports

Appendix 10: Continental Imports

**Small Finds**

An appraisal of the portable finds from Weoley Castle, Birmingham by Quita Mould

Weoley Castle: small finds catalogue by Quita Mould

**Structural Finds**

Weoley Castle: The Ceramic Building Material by Stephanie Rátkai

Weoley Castle: The loose architectural stones, an assessment by Dr. Richard K. Morris

Weoley Castle: The decorated window glass by Stephen J. Linnane

Weoley Castle: The Medieval Floor Tiles by Stephen J. Linnane