Wallingford: The Castle and the Town in Context

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Aerial view of Wallingford Castle © TWHAS

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Neil Christie

Abstract
Although the aims of the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project were centred on the early medieval to late medieval townscape, excavation trenches at the castle in particular revealed many traces of post-medieval, Civil War-period activity, notably two likely cannon/ gun emplacement platforms, each signifying extensive logistical operations. These works have partly masked the medieval archaeology but are a very important element of the last phases of use of the castle, with repercussions for its structural fate. This paper outlines the archaeology revealed in the project and finds from earlier interventions.

Introduction

The prominence and extent of the castle earthworks at Wallingford give rise to two main impressions: firstly, the bulk and scale of medieval input here, reflecting the investment of royalty and high elites in the defensive and courtly structures that dominated the town and its immediate hinterland across the full medieval period; and secondly, the dramatic and extensive repercussions of the mid-17th-century Civil War, which saw the definitive slighting of the castle, leaving the complex almost totally shorn of standing masonry remains. Other papers in this volume have explored facets of the medieval castle and its history and archaeology, but in this and the previous contribution (by Judy Dewey) the castle's final burst of notoriety and military activity in the Civil War will be assessed, again seeking to draw together the material and textual sources. As will be seen, both sets of data offer excellent scope to 'read' much more of the value of Wallingford Castle in this post-medieval context.

Civil War archaeology at Wallingford

The Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project, while focussed on teasing out the archaeology of Wallingford across the early medieval to late medieval periods, inevitably encountered a variety of features and changes of post-medieval to modern date that have masked, damaged or even removed the earlier deposits. Thus in the Bullcroft, not just the impact of the suppression/dissolution but also subsequent land and property ownership – with structures reused, materials robbed, units demolished, open spaces imposed – have largely removed all visible trace of the former religious complex of the Holy Trinity Priory; and yet extensive geophysical survey has enabled sub-surface mapping of the complex and precinct, signifying its presence in the south of the Bullcroft zone, although thick rubble/demolition deposits and spreads have prevented close pinpointing of the church and cloister, even if test-pitting has started to provide a few small windows on the 'lost' remains (see Pedgley, this volume, and discussion in Christie and Creighton 2013, chapter 7).

Comparable is the image on some levels for the castle complex. Its own 'dissolution' relates, as noted above, to the fall-out after Wallingford's extended resistance in the Civil War and to a determined effort to cancel out any future military revamping of the former royal site. Here, the extensive earthworks of the castle motte, bailey, and defences as well as spaces beyond the castle zone to the north, have been denuded of visible stonework, their heights presumably levelled or 'smoothed down' in many instances. The documented sale of materials, the subsequent sale of the grounds, creation of a private mansion, then 19th-century landscaping – such as with tree-lined avenues (see Figure 7.48) – combined with the much more recent division of the castle complex into the open Castle Meadows space (now managed by Earth Trust, formerly The Northmoor Trust, on behalf of the South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) – www.earthtrust.org.uk/Places/Communitymeadows/Wallingford-Castle.aspx) and the Town Council-owned Castle Gardens, have all impacted on and effectively 'blurred' many parts of the buried archaeology (see full discussion by Dewey, Chapter 7 above).

Geophysics at the castle site

The broad open spaces of the castle have afforded scope for an almost unique exploration – in an English context – through sub-surface survey of the whole of an urban castle complex. A substantial and highly rewarding programme of geophysical survey was thus undertaken as part of the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project in the Easter seasons of 2008 and 2009 in the Castle Meadows, in 'suburban' space to the north-west, and in the Castle Gardens to the south-west, mapping a total area of *c.* 3 hectares. Further mapping through resistivity was then completed by TWHAS in 2009 and 2010 under Gerard Latham, extending coverage down to the junction with the Queen's Arbour in the east, close to the riverside (giving in total nearly 5ha of coverage). The Queen's Arbour and, to the north, the King's Mead had been explored by resistivity survey as part of the Pilot Project in 2003, the key result being the presumed medieval quay feature or formal walkway (see Christie and Creighton 2013, chapter 6). A final survey component was Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR), carried out in April 2010 on a sector of the inner bailey and on the presumed 'barbican' to its west, indicating deep deposits of robbed or *in situ* masonry features on the line of the medieval defences (see below).

Although now a largely open space, tree cover and especially the high and steep slopes of rampart ditches made the programme of total geophysical (resistivity and magnetometer) survey an often challenging task for the teams. However, the resultant plots (with an underlying grid of 20 x 20m squares, with readings taken every metre) are excellent and enable, alongside the detailed topographic earthwork survey work led by Michael Fradley (Chapter 3 above), a more secure formulation of the castle's phased development, including its post-medieval uses. Key has been recognition of the arrangement of defensive and defining ditches and banks and a questioning of how far we can trace in these both pre-castle *burh* rampart lines (i.e. how directly did the castle bailey northern line reuse the late Saxon barrier) and post-Civil War efforts to delete the defensive apparatus. Additional hopes were to identify areas of potential survival of buried stone features within the bailey spaces and to correlate some of these with documented castle components.

What stands out from the plots (see Figure 15.1) is the legibility of the curtain wall lines, suggesting that masonry elements are still extant below the present pasture land; this interpretation was, as noted above, reinforced by the targeted GPR assessment. Of particular note in our interpretation of the plots was the substantial pair of projecting towers or bastions on the northernmost rampart line, each accompanied by a surrounding ditch and with a further likely outer ditch detected as a curving anomaly to the north. The scale of these outworks suggested something larger than medieval towers, with the assumption drawn

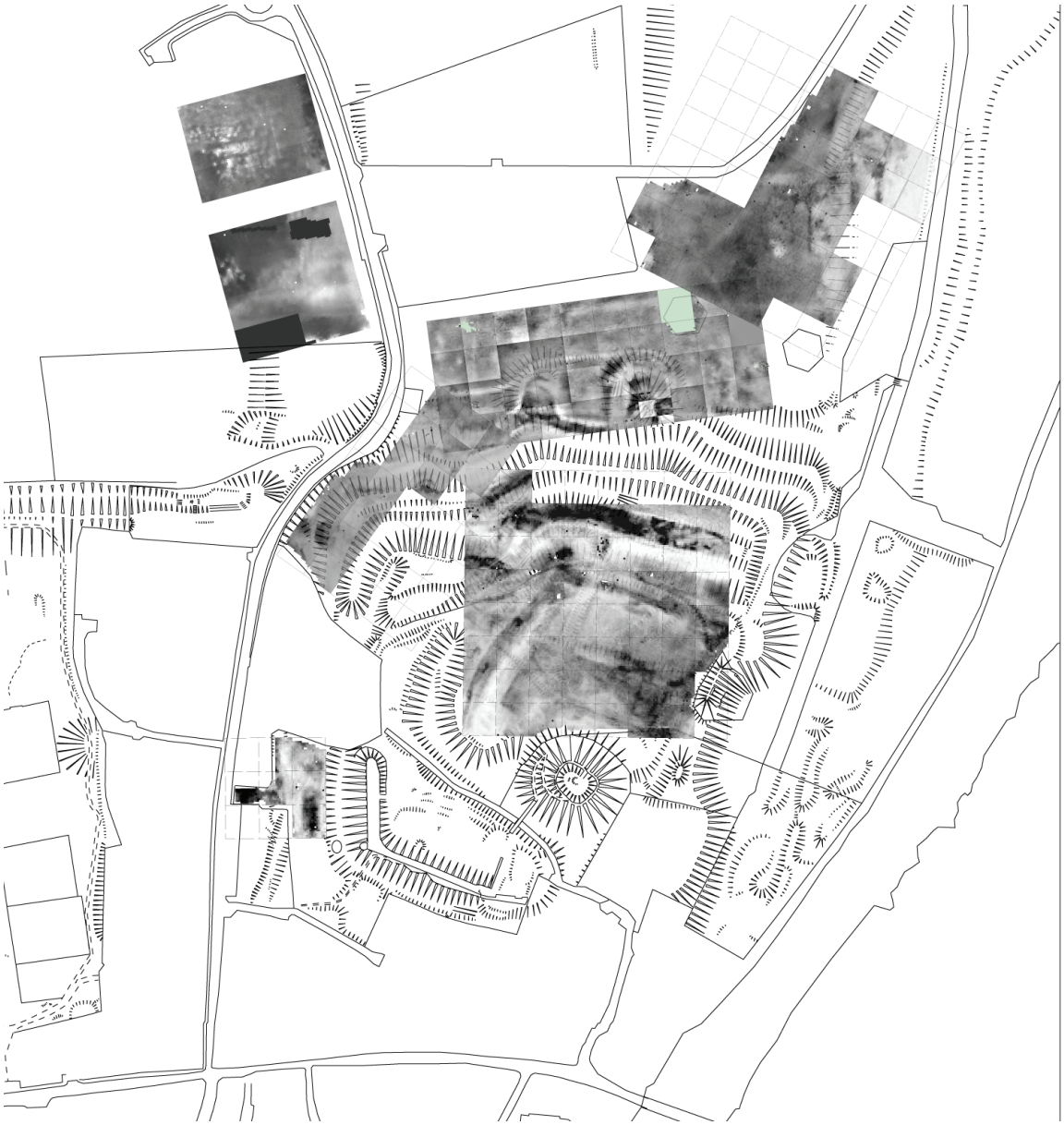

Figure 15.1 Composite resistivity plots for all areas surveyed in 2008–09 in the north-west zone of Wallingford (castle inner bailey, Castle Meadows, Castle Gardens and Wallingford School playing fields) imposed over revised castle earthwork survey by Michael Fradley. (Note: Image excludes 2003 resistivity surveys in Queen's Arbour and King's Mead by the riverside) (Image: TWHAS, Wallingford Burh to Borough Project.)

that they might relate to Civil War period reinforcements and extensions to older features here. As discussed below, the Project's Trench 1 targeted the archaeology of the westerly tower.

Trench 1 – Castle Meadows

An excavation trench of 20 x 10m was thus opened in July 2008 at the front end of one of the large projecting tower spaces of the castle north circuit in the centre of Castle Meadows (see Figure 15.2). Excavation rapidly confirmed the presence of a large north-facing artificial platform, surrounded by a substantial ditch (Figures 15.3 and 15.4). The earliest deposits comprised a homogenous series of medieval layers and dumped upcast from periodic cleaning or re-cutting of the castle ditch, these containing 12th- to 14th-century pottery; these deposits were sealed by the later platform but also cut by the ditch set around this to west, north and east. The platform itself was identified just 0.20–0.30m below the ground surface. Of 0.50–0.60m

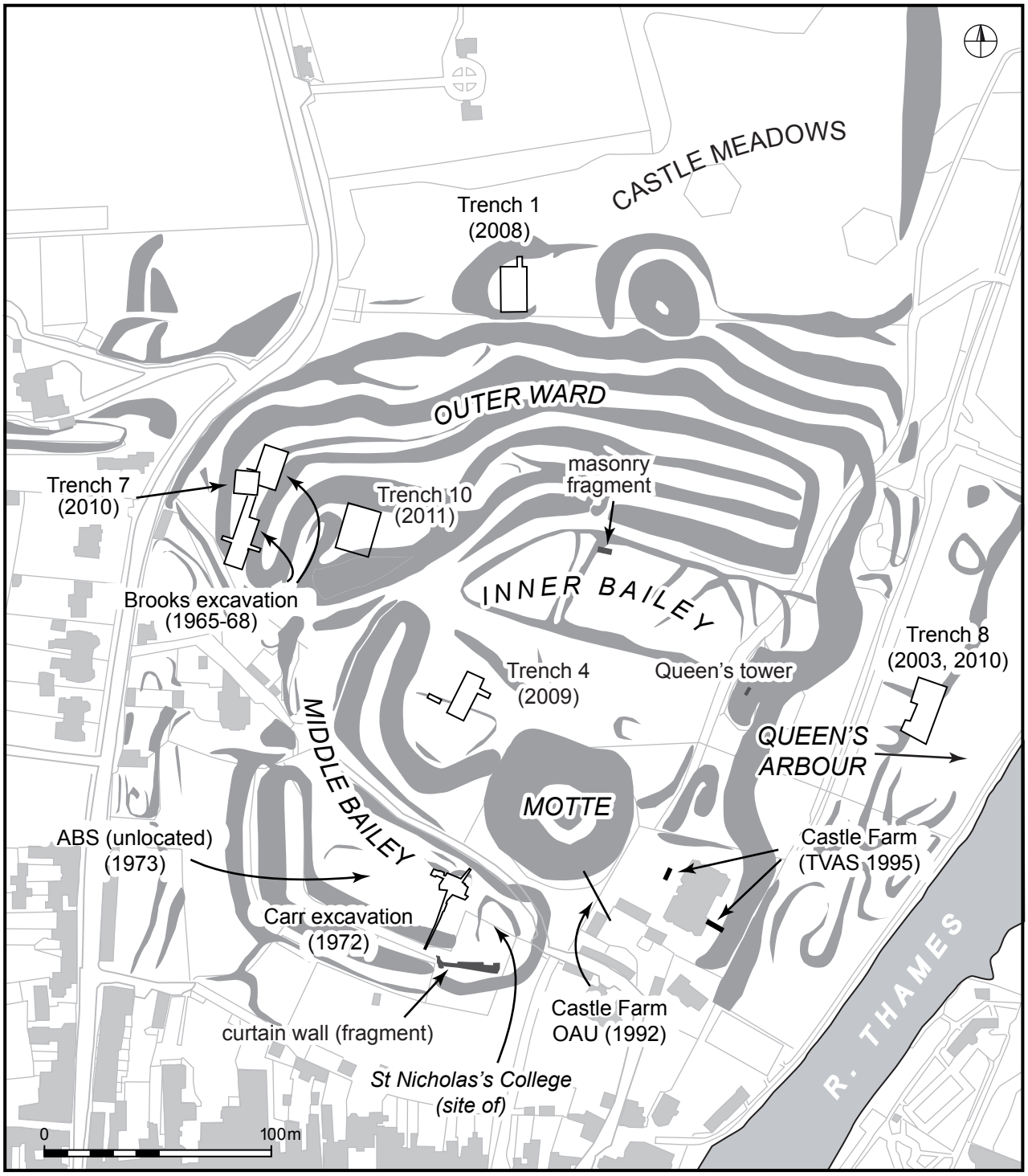

Figure 15.2 Map of the castle zone at Wallingford, identifying locations of all archaeological interventions, including the Burh to Borough Research Project trenches 1, 4, 7, 8, 10 (Image © the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project).

Figure 15.3 Trench 1 – the north-western angle of the Civil War bastion feature (Image © the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project).

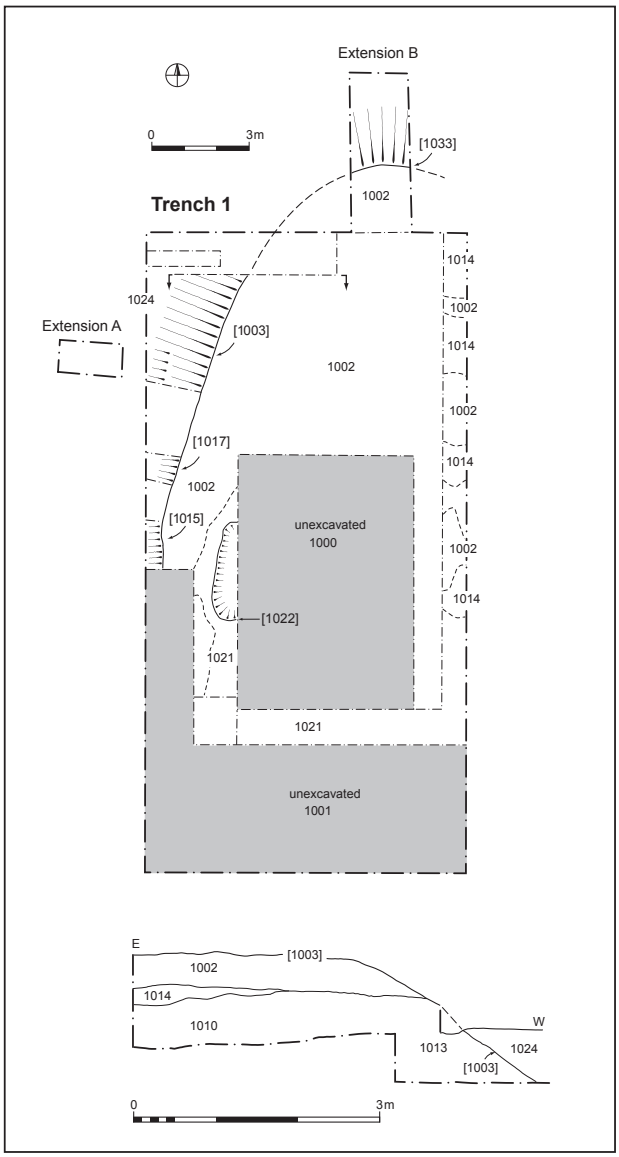

Figure 15.4 Plan of Trench 1 showing plan of excavated bastion platform (Image © the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project).

in thickness, the platform comprised a compacted, but friable light grey clay laid deposit containing fragments of chalk. Within and below the clay deposit were numerous consistent small dumps of sand and gravel; at the northern end of the trench the gravel-sand deposit formed a clear preparation and levelling deposit up to 0.4m thick. A long north to south section, 0.75m wide, was cut through the platform along the east edge of the trench to provide a cross-section through the alternate layers of orange gravely sand and grey clay used in its construction. Variations in the patterns of levelling and laying down of preparation material indicated either different construction phases or, more likely, the operation of different work teams. The platform was defined on its west and north sides by the surrounding ditch; the presumed return of the ditch on the east side lay outside the trench, and the castle's outer ditch marked the south edge of the platform (Figures 15.3, 15.4). This angled ditch was up to 2m deep but was of unknown width, although on the basis of the geophysical plot the width may be in the order of 5m. Several segments were excavated through the inner part of the ditch fills which revealed a lower fill of sandy clay similar to the grey clay of the platform itself, and clearly derived from its slumping; early post-medieval finds were recovered from this as well as some residual medieval pottery. Given that the upper ditch fills contained 18th- to 19th-century finds, we should presume that the ditch will have remained visible as an earthwork feature until quite recently (it is now barely visible on the surface). The total size of the platform, which had a U-shaped plan, was thus 20–25m long from north to south and *c.* 12m wide from east to west. Despite close examination of its surface, the only features cut into the platform surface were a number of small animal burrows and tree-root holes; no clear trace was found of any postholes to support any standing structure.

In terms of ceramics, almost 550 sherds (total weight 4.01 kg) came from Trench 1, the majority being medieval and post-medieval in date. The noted platform overlay sealed medieval deposits with materials from the 10th to 13th centuries, while finds from the platform itself and its slumping intriguingly featured a few residual finds (a 5th- to 6th-century organic tempered ware sherd, 10th-/11th-century St Neots type ware and 10th- to 11th-century limestone sandy ware, plus cooking and jug sherds of the 12th and 13th centuries of local and Oxford production). Otherwise the platform and related contexts yielded early post-medieval material including 16th- to 17th-

century German stoneware and 17th- to 18th-century red earthenware. While the latter quantities were limited, this relative dearth is perhaps not surprising if this is recognized as a defensive and military feature of occasional usage and not a fixed point of habitation generating long-term rubbish deposits.

The evidence overall supports the hypothesis that the platform formed part of a defensive gun emplacement. In and below subsoil and over and on the surface of the clay rampart was a high number of clay pipe fragments (520), including bowls, that would fit a mid- to later 17th-century date; in total *c*. 1.6 kg of clay pipe fragments was recovered, the bulk from the uppermost (topsoil and subsoil) contexts. Almost no finds derived from the clay fill itself or the lower sand and gravel make-up, suggesting that the building operations were fairly rapid. While some post-medieval ceramics were found these were limited, as were more modern sherds; as noted, the general lack of other finds over the area support the idea that this was a short-lived structure, certainly not one that saw any lengthy occupation. What is important to recognize is that the construction of the platform, requiring the importation of clays, sand, gravel from the river area or other nearby sources on a substantial scale, testifies to considerable effort by a large number of people, and it would make sense if it was a military force that built it. It seems in fact to have been one of an array of bastions on the outer northern flank of the castle, designed to help protect the castle from a northerly enemy approach.

Whether this excavated platform/bastion actually saw much in the way of military action is questionable, and the absence of many Civil War musket balls and other munitions is surprising in that such were recovered in a few other trenches opened by the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project, including the Queen's Arbour by the riverside. The clay pipe debris could most likely be interpreted as anticipatory smokes, by soldiers tensely waiting to see if conflict would call them into action. It is likely that it was the North Gate that was the core focus of assault and these supporting bastions may have been as much for show as actual use – indeed, it is important to recall how the extended Civil War siege of Wallingford was far more of a blockade than a pounding of artillery from both sides (see Dewey, Chapter 14 this volume).

A final element to note from the Trench 1 excavation was the collection by Leicester University geologists of samples of material from the platform surface for microfossil examination (published in Wilkinson *et al.* 2010). In brief, these samples provided two valuable pieces of extra information about the platform's construction: firstly, the presence of specific types of seeds and fruits suggests a deposition of the materials in either summer or autumn (e.g. hazel nut, black nightshade, poppy); secondly, the samples contained a rich microfossil assemblage of ostracods and foraminifera, which allowed the platform material to be provenanced: it can be argued that the royalist garrison had imported Glauconitic Marl from contemporary and active quarries on the east side of the Thames in the Crowmarsh Gifford area where it occurs but is obscured beneath more recent superficial deposits, or else from fields to the north of the castle – as identified in project excavations in Wallingford School Playing Fields (see Christie and Creighton 2013, 240). It was also shown by the geologists that, when compacted, this deposit will have formed a durable, almost road-like base, eminently suitable as a gun platform.

Defending the North Gate: results from Trench 10

A further excavation (Trench 10) under the auspices of the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project was undertaken in July/August 2011 to examine the prominent earthwork on the north-west corner of the castle site, a space tentatively associated with the 'barbican' or the fortified formal entrance into the inner bailey from the North Gate – a proposal based on location, height and prominence (see Figures 15.2 and 15.7). The geophysical survey here, combined with GPR assessment, had indicated likely masonry survival at depth at the lip of the 'barbican' earthwork, and at least one potential built structure in its southern sector. Trench 10's location was thus sited to test some of the archaeology in the eastern half of the space and to pinpoint part of the defensive component and of the built unit. While a trench of 20 x 15m was planned, this was reduced on both north and east once we recognized that proximity to the slopes on each side would weaken the stability of the exposed trench edges; this unfortunately curtailed chances of tracing directly any of the postulated medieval circuit masonry.

The results of the excavation (see Figure 15.5) were different from what was anticipated, adding less to our understanding of the medieval castle but more to our understanding of the mid-17th-century Civil War changes wrought on the castle spaces. Initial machine clearance included supervised slot cuttings down to recognizable archaeology in the northern half of the trench; much shallower clearance was required in the southern half, here coming down to scattered rubble deposits and a possible building. The latter survived as a set of crude walls, reusing older material, both chalk and sandstone, some well cut and others roughly worked only, and with limited bonding traces; in addition, clear traces of any internal surface or floor were lacking. The walls here overlay relatively shallow rubble and mortar spreads, whereas a more consistent and large rubble spread was traced to the north and north-west of the 'building'. Most probably the rubble relates to a phase of demolition or levelling, which was subsequently covered by imported sandy silt deposits, which featured noticeably mixed ceramic finds of 11th- through to 15th-century date. One possibility is that the material had been re-deposited here deliberately from clearance of the inner bailey ditch.

The archaeology of the northern half of the trench revealed an even more substantial and diverse remodelling of the site. Two main deposit types were identified in the various north-south excavation slots, generally running as alternate angled bands laid from south to north: orange brown sandy gravel bands set over or overlain by firm, green-grey or brown-grey marl deposits (see Figure 15.6). The thicknesses of these deposits varied – from substantial

Figure 15.5 View looking east of Trench 10 after excavation, with rampart and related construction levels to left, and rubble spreads to the right (Image © the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project).

Figure 15.6 Trench 10 - photograph of the exposed make-up to the Civil War platform, consisting of the angled lines of marl-clay interleaved with sandy gravel deposits extending to the medieval rampart, a trace of which is exposed in the far right of the trench (Image © the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project).

Figure 15.7 View from the west of the north face of the elevated 'barbican' zone, explored in Trench 10 in 2010 (Image © the Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project)

sand-gravel fills at the north-west end of the trench over 1m deep to thinner angled deposits of 20–30cm thickness. The slot sections all indicated that these were careful episodes of alternative laying of preparation and construction deposits (quite possibly by different work gangs, as suggested above also for Trench 1), angled to run up to the north end of the 'barbican' prominence. There were minimal finds from within these deposits, indicating a rapid process of preparation and construction. The sources for the materials are to be determined, but each could be local – whether from river gravels or from local fields. Excavation at the north-east corner of the trench in fact uncovered the angled (sloping southwards) remnants of a rampart formed of dark reddish brown silt, comparable to the build of the late Saxon rampart excavated by Brooks and in Trench 7 of the Burh to Borough Research Project. Only 1.2m length and 0.6m depth of this construction was revealed since the trench depth at this corner and the relative weakness of the trench edges (due to the presence of the fairly loose sand-gravel layers) made it dangerous to continue without shoring. Most probably this rampart trace forms part of the line of the late Saxon and medieval defences, quite possibly with a stone wall front added and maintained from the 10th/11th century. The later sand-gravel and marl deposits were thus designed to run up to the back of this rampart and wall in a systematic process of reinforcement and raising of the ground level behind. The rubble spreads and soil deposits in the south half of the trench could then be seen to represent a rearward securing and stabilizing of the ground. The noted built structure appears to overlie this levelling work but it was not possible to determine its date or function; certainly it was not something of quality, beauty or durability, however, and perhaps it was storage space or a shelter contemporary with the marl-clay platform to its north.

Problematically, no secure surface survived to cap the raised levels on the 'barbican', except for a thin trace in the northern end section; nonetheless, we can draw on the levelled platform surface identified in Trench 1 to the north as a direct comparison. A few fragments of clay pipe and occasional post-medieval pot and some bone were recovered from the uppermost marl-clay deposits, though in no way do these match the levels of finds made in Trench 1.

The interpretation proposed is that Trench 10 revealed major re-working of the presumed castle barbican structure, with a massive importation of materials to elevate and reinforce what was perceived as a major defensive position. The sand/gravel and marl/clunch deposits in fact match the Trench 1 Civil War bastion construction methods to the north of Trench 10 in the Castle Meadows (see above), but have here been carried out on a much bigger scale, with many metric tons of imported building materials. Trench 1 was more securely dated by the high number of clay pipes from the top of the platform, and the relative absence of such material and comparable surface at Trench 10 can easily be explained by a deliberate slighting and clearance

of the bastion, pulling down the remnant facing stone wall and dragging down the top skin and flanks of the imported platform and materials. Potentially the debris from this is reflected in the stepped character of the earthwork on its western flank (Figure 15.7). Nonetheless, some clay pipe was recovered (30 fragments), many of which appear likely 17th-century in date, but with later finds too.

One can stress the very elevated setting of this barbican site (Figure 15.7) – deliberately raised higher for the Civil War conflict – and its highly strategic position in sight of the North Gate and controlling what we should assume was still the main entrance-way into the actual castle core (where, we can assume, was housed the entrenched garrison). It is valuable to re-quote the reference made in the documents of 1643 to the newly established defensive dispositions: 'They have made very strong workes about the castle, and a double drawbridge at the entrance to the castle and two drakes [guns] planted there upon one carriage'. Potentially also, the substantial infill of the inner bailey ditch to the south-east of the barbican earthwork belongs to the Civil War works, perhaps undertaken in order to facilitate the drawing up of cannon or 'drakes' to this site. If correct, we have here notable archaeological testimony to the substantial works undertaken by the garrison and other labour to re-fortify Wallingford Castle; it offers a clearer recognition of not just strategy but, as importantly, the physical logistics to build and equip these positions. At the same time, the limited material culture we have gathered up puts us into some contact with the human presence that manned these stations; however, the restricted character of this material meanwhile helps us visualize far less a town, castle and garrison under constant siege but one which may have seen a much patchier series of confrontations – verbal as much as military.

Other archaeological findings

Briefly, one can note a small number of other excavations on the castle site which provide further insight into the nature and extent of its 17th-century re-fortification: these include Carr's 1972 intervention in the middle bailey, which was shown to have been (re-)enclosed with a stone wall at this time, and a Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) evaluation south-east of the motte in 1995, which revealed built-up ground from the same period (see Christie and Creighton 2013, 173, 195, 215; Ford 1995). In the 1960s Nicholas Brooks undertook excavations at the site of the town's former North Gate, destroyed when the castle's outer rampart was created in the 13th century. In his trenching (Trenches D2 and D3) he recognized deep, tipped deposits of brown-orange gravel with clay which lay close to the turf line and which contained some pieces of clay pipe, tile and post-medieval pottery (see Christie and Creighton 2013, 98). These deposits filled part of the old ditch here and should, as recognized in our project trenches, relate to a levelling and raising of the ground to create a platform. Brooks also traced two 30cm square postholes cut to a depth of at least 1.5m, which he suggested formed part of the setting for an observation tower behind the gate/rampart. An alternative reading of the postholes is that they might have anchored 'cannon baskets' or 'gabions' (cf Harrington 2004, 34–37). Finally, the nearby Trench V cut by Brooks' team in 1968 down the slope of the castle/barbican bank to the east of the North Gate trenches offered interesting data for this final castle phase: Brooks' unpublished notes claim that he could see a demolition of the residual castle wall at this point prior to the sieges; he argued that the Royalist garrison probably pulled down the already ruinous malmstone (chert) walls as they would be an inadequate defence against Cromwellian artillery; instead they then built up new earthen ramparts (see Christie and Creighton 2013, 98).

Loss, damage and potential

A final point to draw from the discussion of the two main Project trenches (1, 10) and from other noted work is that we should now recognize that, at least in the case of the 'barbican' site and potentially in other sectors of the castle site, the defensive occupation and re-workings by the Civil War garrison can be viewed as substantial in terms of the importation of building materials – sands, gravels, clay, timber, turves – drawn from the vicinity. This on one level means that the medieval, full castle deposits can lie deeply buried beneath these 17th-century works, perhaps between 1.0 and 2.0m down; on another level this has protected some of this earlier archaeology, although we should expect that, as hinted at in the rubble deposits in Trench 10, on occasions removal and demolition of some medieval components may have been part of the strategy of construction and entrenchment. At the same time we can see also now that post-Civil War slighting of the defensive bastions has 'blurred' our reading of the underlying earthworks and created a different artificiality to the whole. Nonetheless, we might expect that the garrison's strategy was often to select to reinforce set or key points in the older castle apparatus – i.e. pre-existing tower stations and gateways – meaning that this Civil War 'masking' may not be everywhere. Even so, the physical retributions in the aftermath of the siege and conflict did more than enough to cancel out many other sectors of the former castle site.

Conclusions

Wallingford Castle can now feature prominently in the list of sites where archaeology has illustrated physically how medieval fortresses were re-fortified 'roofless bulwarks' during the mid-17th-century English Civil War (Harrington 2004, 36). Other important case-studies include (in Scotland) Huntly and Tantallon, (in Wales) Caerphilly and Montgomery, and (in England) Corfe, Beeston, Dudley and Sandal (*ibid.*, 36–59; Crossley 1990, 113–117). A significant point of difference with the re-fortification of Wallingford Castle in the conflict is the absence of characteristically arrow-headed bastions (those on the north side of the castle being U-shaped), which awaits explanation.

It should not escape our attention that the two short, sharp bursts of violent military activity that punctuate the

long and largely peaceful history of Wallingford Castle – in the mid-12th and mid-17th centuries respectively – have some salient features in common. Both sieges occurred within the context of prolonged civil wars, with the castle held in both cases as an outpost to a much wider loyalist heartland. Both were protracted events with little evidence that the fortress was directly and seriously assaulted – a fact which tells us as much about the essential psychology of medieval and early modern warfare as it does about the castle's physical strength. And both periods of resistance resulted in major episodes of slighting – in the mid-12th century of multiple siege-castles that were erased from the landscape, and in the mid-17th century of Wallingford Castle itself. In the case of the latter, while parliamentarian slightings are usually viewed as fiscally and militarily inspired initiatives, one should also bear in mind the often under-estimated political and symbolic undertones of these operations (Rakoczy 2007; see also Thompson 1987, 138–57). Certainly, however, the Civil War slightings denuded Wallingford Castle of the majority of the standing fabric which for so long had given this complex such prominence in the English medieval landscape. Potentially, of course, future research may add further to our understanding of Wallingford's Civil War roles and its castle's ultimate fate.