



Pirton Castle

In north Hertfordshire there are only three castle sites: these are at Great Wymondley, Therfield and Pirton. All are the early 'motte-and-bailey' type, with the largest and most clearly visible in the landscape today located at Pirton. It is a very significant site and has never been fully excavated. It is also a Scheduled Ancient Monument known as 'Toot Hill'.

After the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the victorious Norman King William First distributed land and villages to his loyal followers. He gave Pirton, then probably a thriving village with fertile farmland and woodland, to the Norman Knight Ralph de Limesy. In the 2nd century, during the lawless times brought about by the reigns of King Stephen and Queen Matilda, Ralph de Limesy's grandson was probably the person who initiated the building of the motte-and-bailey castle to protect his family's land. However, there is no documentary evidence that the family ever lived in the village or the area – they were probably absentee landlords.

The 'motte' is an earth mound often surrounded by its own ditch. At Pirton, the high, steep-sided motte with ditch, partly dry and infilled, partly wet all year round can still be seen and climbed, although much of it has a covering of trees and scrub. The view from the top today is impressive: one can easily see the line of the Chilterns with Telegraph, Deacon and Wilbury Hills, all of which are traversed by the Icknield Way Path. The towns of Hitchin and Letchworth are visible to the south-east, whilst to the north, one looks out towards the valley of the River Ivel and the Greensand Ridge of mid Bedfordshire.

From the top of a 12th century wooden watchtower normally erected on the 'motte', one would have been able to see and hear even more clearly than today, thus helping to control the area and prevent any surprise attacks.

The 'bailey' is the flat land around or adjacent to the 'motte' and this in turn is also surrounded by a bank and outer ditch. At Pirton there may have been an inner and an outer bailey. Considerable sections of ditches – some wet, others dry, still remain today. Within the bailey stood the 12th century village with its houses, cottages, stables, workshops, yards, wells and often a church or chapel.

At Pirton, the Bailey Field still contains the 12th century church of St Mary. There are also many raised platforms representing the foundations of timber –framed buildings of different sizes, in between which are broad and narrow channels – the paths and roadways of the early Mediaeval village. All these 'humps and bumps' in the grass of Bailey Field can be seen clearly from the top of the motte – and felt when following the footpath across the field.

In the 1950's, George Evans, then Curator and Librarian at Hitchin Museum, dug several trial trenches across the Bailey. He found thick grey pottery fragments which were identified as the rims of Saxo-Norman bowls and jugs. [These pottery fragments used to be on display in the Archaeology Gallery at Letchworth Museum but a new museum for North Hertfordshire is under development in Hitchin.]

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