

## WATCH HILL, BOWDEN

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### Location

Watch Hill (SJ 748 860) consists of a roughly triangular area of gently-sloping land, with a large circular mound at its apex. Only traces of the ditch which once marked its outer boundary can be seen today, though a deep, well-defined ditch still encircles the mound itself. The site lies at the confluence of the River Bollin and a small tributary stream (Fig 1). The A56, a Roman road in origin, runs to the west of Watch Hill, and the medieval Bowden Lane runs eastwards from this road alongside the River Bollin to the mound, skirting its base. Watch Hill lies on boulder clay, with alluvial deposits around the river, overlying a bedrock of Keuper waterstones. It stands at an elevation of approximately 23m OD.

### Documentary Background

Watch Hill formed part of the extensive and long-lived barony of the de Masseys, and it seems likely that one of the de Masseys was responsible for its construction. They held the barony of Dunham, which included the towns of Dunham, Bowden, Hale and Ashley, from the Conquest for about 260 years (Ormerod 1819, 520). In 1173, Hamon de Massey held his castles of Dunham and Ullerwda (or Ullerswode) against Henry II. As the site of neither castle is known with certainty, there has been a tendency by some historians to identify Watch Hill with one or the other of them.

Dore (1972, 148) identifies Watch Hill as Dunham Castle, but the size of the motte (less than 20m in diameter at the top) argues against this. An alternative site for Dunham Castle is probably to be found beneath the present Dunham Massey Hall, where there is a circular mound adjacent to the moat at the north-west corner of the house, often quoted as being the only visible remains of Dunham Castle (Ormerod 1819, 406; MacKenzie 1897, 171; Swarbrick 1925, 54). However, this mound also appears to be small for a baronial castle, and it could in fact be a product of 18th century landscape gardening, while the remains of the

castle itself lie beneath the present hall.

There appears to be general agreement that Ullerwda Castle is to be found in the Ringway area of Hale: either at Castle Mill SJ 800 838 (Ormerod 1819, 308; Renn 1968, 336) or at Castle Hill SJ 807 836 near Ringway Airport (Dore 1972, 146-7). Watch Hill would therefore appear to be neither Dunham Castle nor Ullerwda Castle, and without such identification has no documentary background.

### Circumstances of the 1976 excavation

As can be seen from the plan (Fig 2), the site has the appearance of a motte-and-bailey castle. Limited excavations were carried out by the North Cheshire Archaeology Group, directed by one of the authors (BJ) in order to ascertain whether Watch Hill was in fact a motte-and-bailey castle and to try to determine its date. Four trenches were opened: T1 on top of the mound; T2 in the ditch on the east; T3 in the ditch on the west, where its junction with Bowden Lane forms an entrance to the site; and T4 just beyond the outer, faintly-defined ditch marking the edge of the bailey.

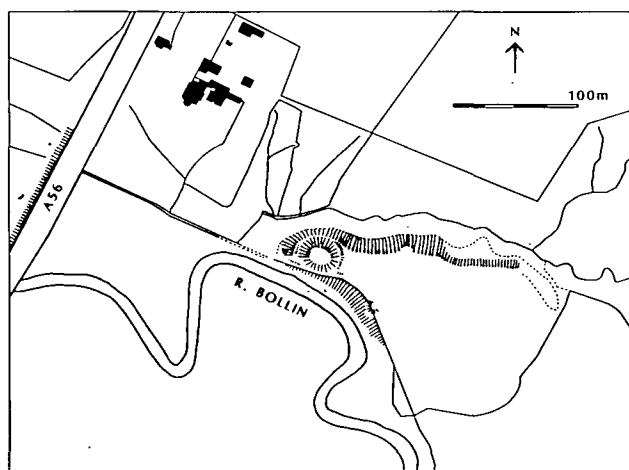


Fig 1 Watch Hill : site location

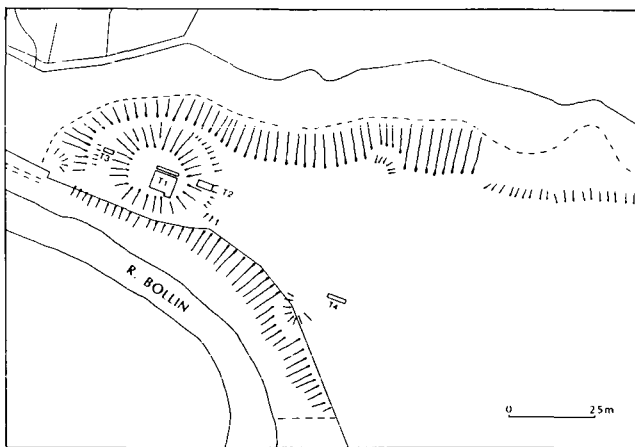


Fig 2 Watch Hill : site plan

It was hoped that these trenches would reveal features concerned with the fortification and construction of buildings on the site, and also that dating evidence might be forthcoming from one or all of them. The hot weather of the summer of 1976 made digging, especially of clay, very difficult; therefore clay features could not be fully excavated. This was the case with T2, the trench in the motte ditch.

#### Results of the excavation

Two of the trenches, T2 and T4, proved to be archaeologically featureless. In T2, the difficulty of excavating clay may have been a factor, and in T4, plough action may have destroyed any archaeological evidence, as it had already obliterated the outer ditch. As might have been expected, the trenches at the top of the mound and at the entrance were the most rewarding in terms of archaeological evidence.

T1 (Fig 3): finds from the topsoil seemed to indicate a recent campsite on the top of the mound. After the removal of the topsoil, burnt clay patches (3) could be seen in the natural clay surface. The most significant feature was found at the centre of the trench. It consisted of a yellow clay mound (5) with a spread of humus, roots and charcoal on the north-eastern side (6). In the centre was a burnt area containing what seemed to be two intercut post-holes. One of these appears to represent a tree root; however a section through the other one revealed a post-pipe, 320mm wide and 480mm deep, containing brown sand (15). Around the yellow clay was an area of pink clay at least 250mm deep. The other large feature on the plan was a clay-filled pit (12) surrounded by sand, which may be a post-hole.

A section in trench T1 (Fig 4) showed the motte to consist of a dump of red-brown clay with pebbles of varying sizes, overlying yellow clay containing pebbles and small sandstone fragments. These overlay a deposit of brown sand with small pebbles. A turf line was visible at a depth of about 2m below the top of the mound, beneath which was natural sand.

T3 (Fig 5): this trench revealed a trackway running through the motte ditch entrance. The medieval Bowden Lane runs eastwards alongside the River Bollin, and skirts around the base of Watch Hill.

It may be a branch of this lane which was uncovered in T3. The trackway was heavily worn by wheel ruts, 1.7m apart. Unfortunately, no dating evidence was recovered.

#### Discussion

A lack of dating evidence from the 1976 excavations made it impossible to assign the construction of the motte-and-bailey castle to any particular period or event. However, the excavations showed that certain structural features - post-holes and possible hearths, for example - still survive on the motte, and suggest that further excavation may reveal the existence of buildings either on the motte itself or within the bailey.

From the topography of the site (Fig 2) it is clear that the builders of Watch Hill chose this place for its defensive qualities, with the River Bollin on the south side and the marshy valley of its small tributary on the north. This valley may even have been flooded in the medieval period, so that an enemy could approach only from the eastern, bailey side. Watch Hill overlooks the Watling ford: where the Manchester-Chester Roman road forded the Bollin. This undoubtedly continued to be an important routeway in the medieval period, and the purpose of the castle may therefore have been to guard a vital river crossing near the border of the de Masseys' land. It may indeed have functioned quite literally as a watch tower in times of danger. Judging from its size, it could have been built in a very short period of time, possibly in response to a threat of a temporary nature, after which it was no longer needed. The idea that Hamon de Massey may have built the motte to defend the borders of his barony before or during the rebellion against Henry II in 1173 is an attractive one. But because of the lack of documentation concerning Watch Hill, it may be that further archaeological investigation will be required in order to try to answer some of the questions about the site's origin, function and date.

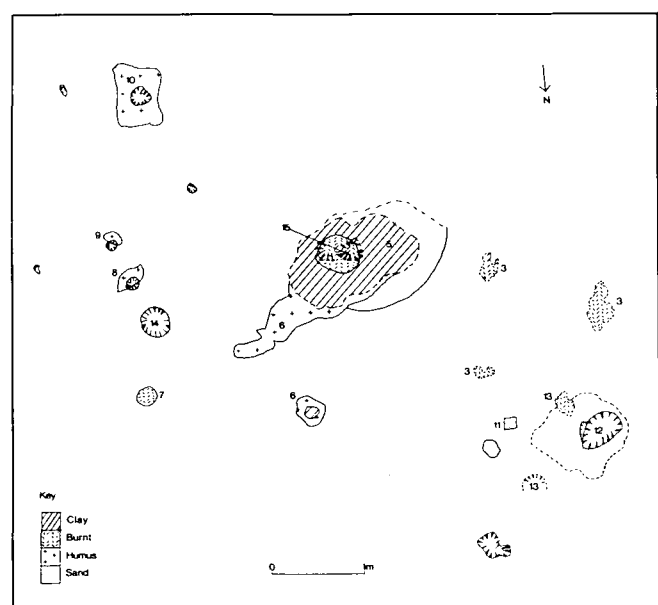


Fig 3 Watch Hill : plan of trench 1

### The Future of Watch Hill

Watch Hill is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, so its future is reasonably secure. At the present time however, the motte is greatly overgrown with trees, many of which are dead or stunted. In addition, the footpath running beside the River Bollin is beginning to cut into the side of the motte, causing erosion. The appearance and condition of the site could be considerably enhanced by a programme of tree-felling to remove dead and stunted trees, thus revealing the motte more fully, and by consolidation to prevent further erosion of the motte. It would even be possible to construct a wooden bridge over the ditch between the motte and the bailey. This well-preserved motte-and-bailey castle would then become fully accessible to the public and would form a valuable addition to the Bollin Valley Trail.

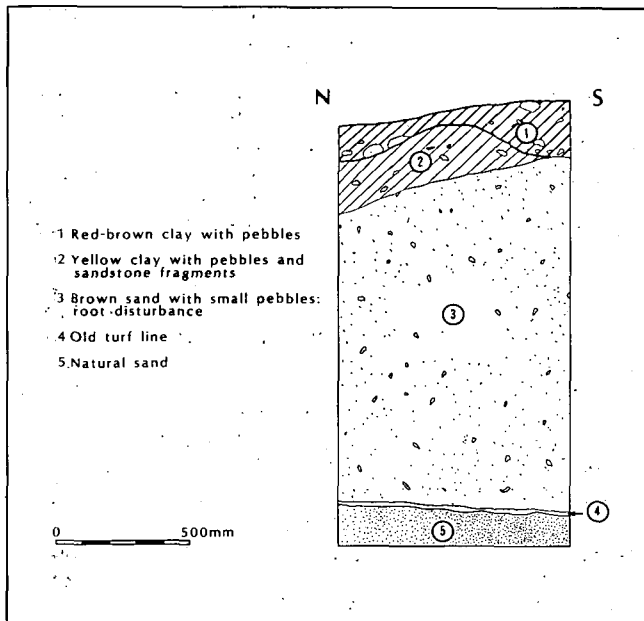


Fig 4 Watch Hill : section through mound, trench 1

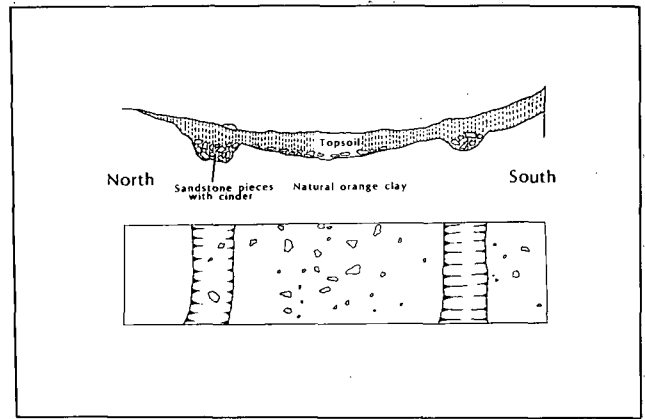


Fig 5 Watch Hill : section and plan, trench 3

### Bibliography

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