

Hallaton Castle: The finest motte and bailey castle in Leicestershire

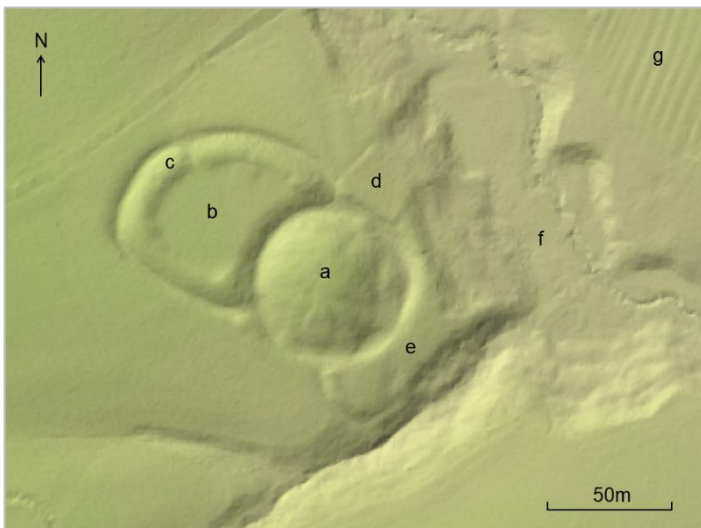
Mathew Morris

A quarter mile west of the village of Hallaton are the little known but exceptionally well-preserved earthworks of Castle Hill (SP 77979 96709), today considered to be the finest surviving example of a medieval motte and bailey castle in Leicestershire (Historic England 1992).

The castle was built in the bottom of a valley on a flat promontory overlooking the confluence of two branches of the Medbourne Brook. Its main elements include a ditched motte and an adjoining bailey enclosure. The motte is still a large conical earth mound approximately 50m in diameter and 7.5m high from the bottom of the ditch with a 20m wide summit platform. The encircling ditch is up to 8m wide and 3m deep. To the north-west, a horseshoe shaped bailey encloses an area of about 60m by 30m. It is surrounded by an earth rampart up to 2m high and an outer ditch 5m wide and 2m deep. A break in the rampart on the north-west side of the bailey, opposite the motte, may be the position of an entrance. Additional enclosures to the north and east of the motte take advantage of the space between the castle and the top of the steep banks down to the stream (Hartley 2018). North of the motte is a rectangular enclosure measuring 35m by 25m surrounded by a ditch, whilst to the south another curving bank and ditch project south for 40m isolating a second area.

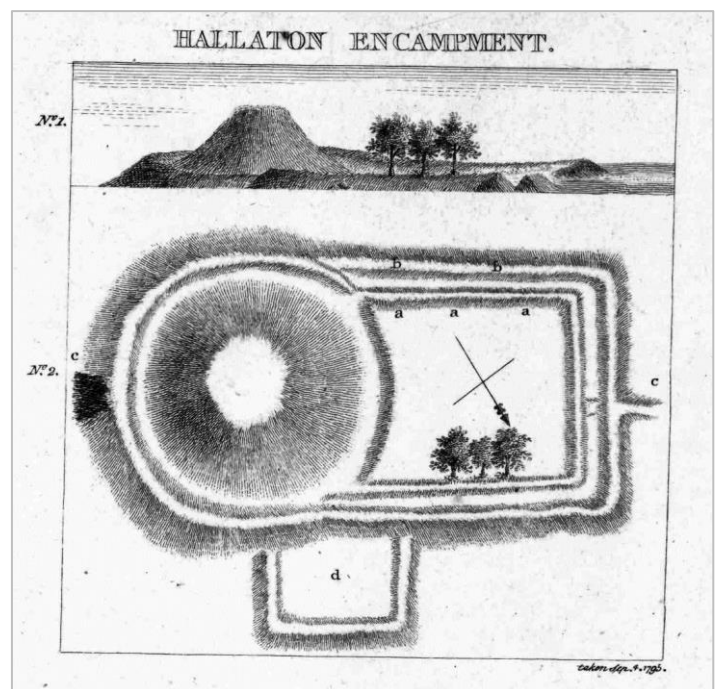


Hallaton Castle from the south. Photo: Historic England.

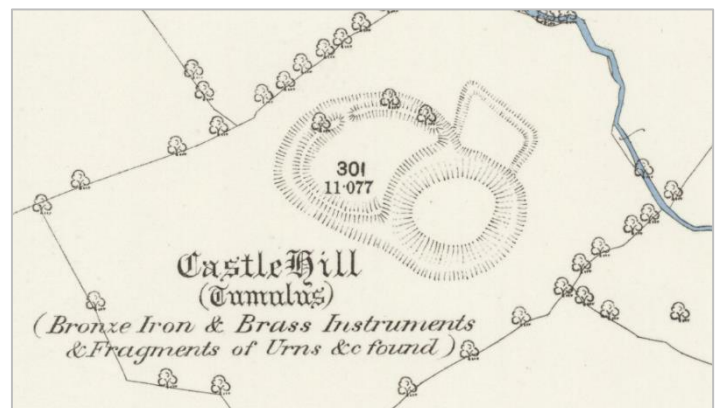


Digital terrain model showing the key features of the Hallaton Castle site: a) motte, b) bailey, c) possible entrance, d-e) outer enclosures, f) possible quarrying along the Medbourne Brook, g) ridge-and-furrow. LiDAR Source: 1m DTM, Environment Agency, 2019.

Hallaton Castle has not always been seen as a medieval castle. In 1798, the antiquary John Nichols provided a detailed description and a drawing of the site in the second volume of his *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* in which he attributed the 'Castle Hill encampment' to the Saxons. Thompson (1866) believed it was an early Norman castle but in the late 19th century, Ordnance Survey maps described it as a tumulus (an earth burial mound), reflecting the more commonly held belief that Castle Hill was two superimposed monuments, a Roman camp and a British burial mound, which were adapted into a castle by the Saxons or the Normans (Hill & Dibbin 1882). This was a period when the origin and form of castles was still fiercely debated and earthworks like Hallaton Castle were not readily recognised as medieval in origin.



Engraving of the 'Hallaton encampment' by John Nichols, taken on 4 September 1795 (Nichols 1798, plate 102). Source: University of Leicester Special Collections.



Hallaton Castle shown as a 'tumulus' on an 1886 1st edition 25" Ordnance Survey map (Leicestershire XXXIX 14).

The first excavation on the site was in 1877 when Henry Dibbin, a railway engineer building the Great Northern and London and North Western Joint Railway through Hallaton, set out to prove the earthwork's Roman or British origin

(Dibbin 1876, Hill & Dibbin 1882). Dibbin sank two shafts through the motte and dug a number of pits in the bailey – the hollow in the motte's summit marks the location of one of Dibbin's excavations. No evidence of a wooden palisade, stone wall or a tower was found on top of the motte but Dibbin did produce a detailed account of the mound's construction.

The original ground level was reached 17½ ft (5.3m) down. It was covered with layers of peaty soil and brushwood, and some of the branches still had visible axe marks. Above this was a 4ft (1.2m) thick layer of clay, gravel, and ashy refuse. This reportedly produced pottery, animal bone and iron and bronze 'implements', as well as fire waste and a remarkable collection of organic material anaerobically preserved within the motte, including pieces of leather shoes, wooden bowls, a wooden shovel, squared stakes and part of a ladder. The last 10-12ft (3-3.5m) of the motte was clean, somewhat gravelly yellow clay with large pebbles and boulders. On top was a hard chalky stratum 15 inches (0.4m) thick.

The pottery was identified as a mixture of 'Roman', 'Saxon', 'Danish', 'Norman' and 'British' but this must be treated with caution. Modern analysis of similar ceramic assemblages from excavations elsewhere in Leicestershire suggest that antiquaries were prone to misinterpret material that was 11th or 12th century in date as much older.

The investigation of the bailey, or 'camp', allegedly produced 'abundant evidence of Roman tenure', notably iron working including melted iron ore, crucible fragments, dross, and burnt stones surrounded by charcoal which may have been furnace sites or hearths. These suggested that iron was being both smelted and wrought on site. No buildings were found but pottery was comparable with that

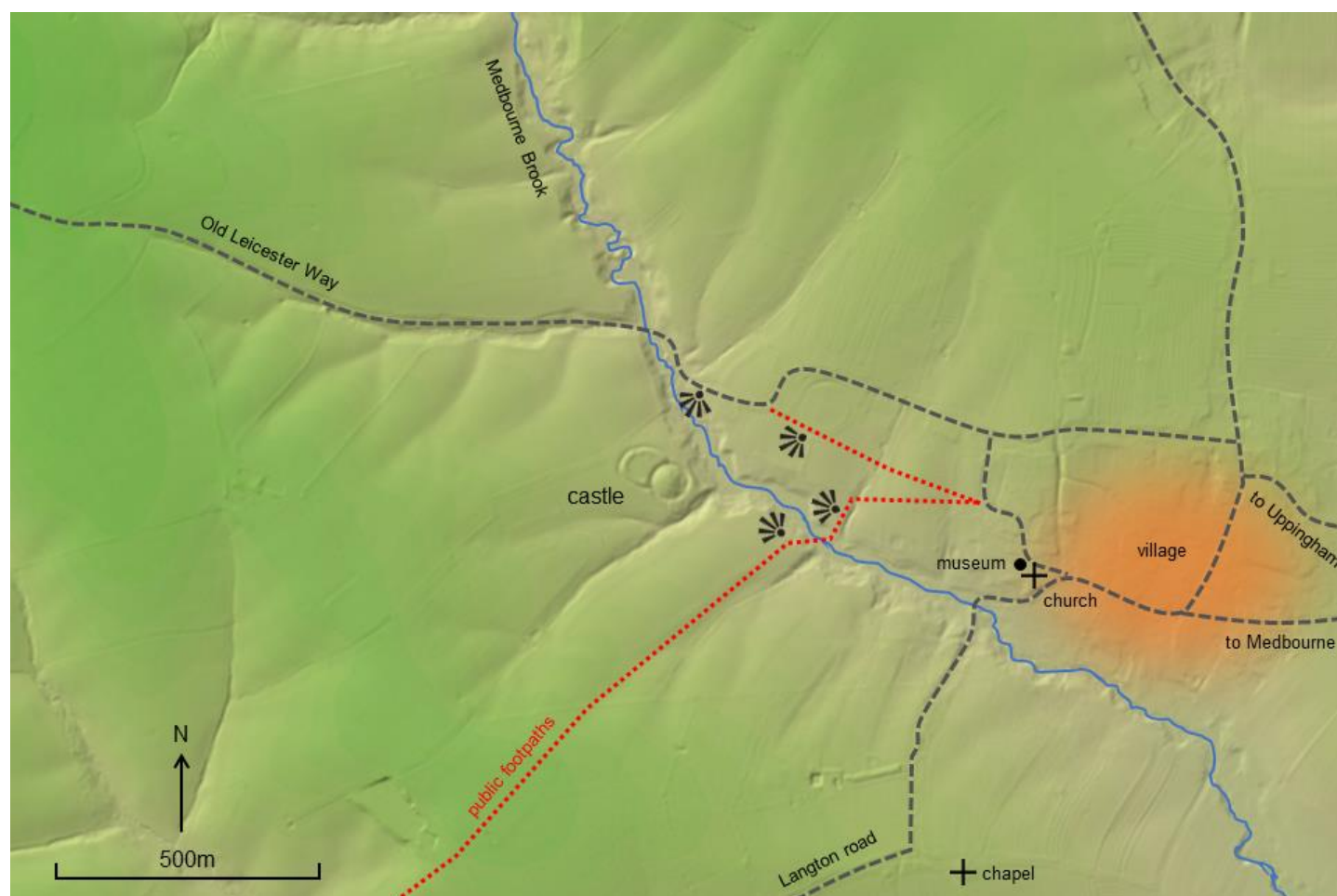
in the motte and also included wares of the 18th and 19th centuries, thought to have been introduced to the site through cultivation after it was abandoned.

Dibbin concluded that the motte was not a burial mound but was more likely built as a fortification by the Normans. He remained convinced, however, that the bailey was much earlier, either a prehistoric or Roman camp which was repurposed in the post-Roman period and that Castle Hill was a '*grand old monument of probably many savage struggles between the confused races of our wild and brutal forefathers*' (Hill & Dibbin 1992, 76).

Following Dibbin's excavations the motte and the bailey continued to be viewed as two monuments (in 1889, GT Clarke argued that the motte was a Saxon fortification imposed on a Roman camp) and it was not until the early 20th century that it was viewed as a single site, wholly of medieval date (Armitage 1912, Hamilton Thompson 1912). More recent archaeological work has been limited. The castle was granted statutory protection as a Scheduled Monument in 1924. Limited excavation in the bailey in 1943 produced four sherds of pottery, two of which had a pale green glaze which was identified as 'Norman', but no other work has been done (Leicestershire HER ref. MLE1628).

Even today little is known about the castle. Given its isolated position in relation to the village, the lack of evidence for stone defences and its lack of documentation, some writers have described it as a short-lived, adulterine (unlicensed) refuge (Hoskins 1970, Cantor 1978), built in the mid-12th century during the anarchy of King Stephen's reign (AD 1135-54). Unfortunately, this assumption has focused solely on the castle itself and has failed to consider its setting in the wider landscape.

Digital terrain model showing the castle in its wider landscape setting. LiDAR Source: 2m DTM, Environment agency, 2016.



Castles were not built on blank canvases. The village at Hallaton with its surrounding fields was already a long-established settlement of around 26 households at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 (Powell-Smith 2011) and the construction of a castle within this traditional landscape must have had a profound effect on the local area. Physically, the castle permanently removed 3 acres of land from cultivation and would have used up valuable time and resources in its construction. As well as its physical dominance, it was a symbol of colonisation and oppression by the new Norman rulers and its builder was also making a very conspicuous personal statement about his wealth and lordship. As such, the castle had to be built on the most appropriate site within the geographical constraints that this lordship offered (Creighton 1998).

In the late 11th century, Hallaton was part of a compact estate of adjoining manors including, from south to north, Hallaton, Keythorpe, Goadby, Rolleston and Billesdon, which were spread along the 'Old Leicester Way' (now the Goadby Road), an arterial route of communication between Leicester and the Hallaton/Medbourne area (Liddle 1983, Creighton 1998). Before 1066 the estate was held by a Saxon thegn called Toki (son of Auti) but by 1086, William I had granted it, along with the rest of Toki's estate, to the Norman baron Geoffrey Alselin. Alselin's new barony was centred at Elvaston in Derbyshire and Laxton in Nottinghamshire (where a castle was constructed) with demesne manors in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. Satellite manors in Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, and Northamptonshire were subinfeudated, with the Leicestershire estate granted to one of Alselin's vassals, a man called Norman. Sometime after 1086, the estate passed to the Peverel family before it eventually escheated to the Crown, following the forfeiture of the honour of Peveril in 1155. Afterwards, the estate was broken up (Lee & McKinley 1964, Powell-Smith 2011, PASE 2016).

It is within this political geography that the castle at Hallaton was built. Of the five manors making up the estate, the Domesday Survey suggests that Hallaton was the only place to have the requisite level of space and local resources to build a castle (i.e. a large enough local workforce, land which could be taken out of agricultural use and a large area of woodland from which the castle timbers could be sourced). Iron production in the castle's bailey also suggests that it was sited to control an industrial process and the broken ground along the Medbourne Brook east of the castle may indicate areas of quarrying of ferruginous limestone, sandstone and mudstone (ironstone) which outcrop along the stream banks (Hoskins 1970). Further proof of the castle's manorial function can be seen in the extra enclosures to the north and east of the motte. These are clearly non-defensive and are probably agricultural in nature, such as paddocks for livestock or garden plots (Creighton 1998, Hartley 2018).

From the east and the south, the steep banks of the two streams magnify the earthworks of the motte and the bailey rampart but to the west and north-west the castle is overlooked by higher ground, leaving its defences flawed. Its physical control of its surroundings is also imperfect. Its dislocation from the village meant it could neither overawe nor protect the settlement. Indeed, the bailey is shielded from the village by the motte, suggesting a physical and metaphysical stand-off between the lord and the local community (Creighton 1998). The castle also overlooks the 'Old Leicester Way', particularly to the east after it fords the Medbourne Brook, but the road remains over 100m away,

beyond the furthest range of the short bow used during this period, making it difficult to control traffic moving along it (had control of the road been a primary motive, siting the castle 150m further north would have been more effective).

In choosing the site, the castle's builder appears to have deliberately compromised some of its defensibility for accessibility and visibility. The castle may not have overawed the village, but it would have provided an overwatch of its environs, a constant presence in the landscape especially to villagers working their fields. Access to the Old Leicester Way also appears to have been important. As an estate centre and an ironworking site access to agricultural land, the village, water from the stream, and proximity to quarry sites and the local road network would have all been key factors when deciding the most appropriate site. Visitors and goods from the rest of the estate to the north, as well as from Leicester, would have also reached the castle first, without having to travel through the village.



The castle from the south-east, the earthworks enhanced by the banks of the stream. Photo: author.



The castle from east, overlooked by higher ground. Photo: author.



The castle from the south, hidden in the valley. Photo: author.

This may explain why visibility from the Old Leicester Way appears to have been carefully thought about. From other approaches, through the village from Uppingham or Medbourne, or along the Langton road, views of the castle are largely blocked until you are less than a quarter mile from it. Looking down on it from surrounding high ground it is almost hidden in the valley but travellers moving down the road from the north-west would have first caught a glimpse of the castle half a mile away as they crested the ridge and looked down towards Hallaton. The castle would have been quickly lost from site again as the road dropped down into one of the tributary valleys of the Medbourne Brook and it is not visible again until after the road has crossed the stream and turned south along the east side of the valley. From this vantage the ramparts, palisade and buildings would have presented a sudden dramatic outline against the sky. As the road climbed gently up towards the village the castle was fully revealed across the valley as a physical and conspicuous manifestation of consumption and lordship.

Hallaton Castle was built in the late 11th century as a new administrative centre for Geoffrey Alselin's Leicestershire estate. It was built of earth and timber and was probably abandoned in or before 1155, before it was rebuilt in stone. This would explain its remarkable preservation. Its siting was both a pragmatic and a staged choice by its builder, who was more interested in the physical symbolism and the psychological impact the castle offered than its practicality as a strongly-defended refuge.

Visiting the castle: There is currently no public access to the castle but it can be viewed from public footpaths nearby.

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Hallaton Castle reconstructed to show how it could have appeared when approached from the north-east. Photo: author.

