

# **MARSHWOOD CASTLE DORSET:**

**a Level 1 survey**

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DORSET**

**A LEVEL 1 SURVEY**

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County: Dorset  
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## Introduction

Marshwood Castle lies in Marshwood Vale in the extreme west of Dorset at about 30m OD. It is two miles to the south-east of Marshwood village.

## Previous descriptions and interpretation

Marshwood Castle was described by the RCHM in 1952 (Fig 1):

‘The Earthworks consist of a roughly rectangular moated enclosure with outer enclosures on the S and parts of the E and W sides. The main enclosure has remains of an inner rampart at the NW angle and along most of the N side. The moat has been much filled up and is now only wet in two places; the rampart, at its highest point, rises 10ft [3m] above the present bottom of the ditch. In the SW angle is a mound or motte, now much damaged and rising about 8ft [2.5m] above the level of the enclosure. On it stand the remains of a rectangular Tower (40ft [12.2m] x 29¼ft [9m]) of coursed rubble, with internal quoins; the external face has been removed but the walls were from 6 to 10ft [1.8-3.0m] thick; there are remains of a former opening in the N wall, which still stands to a height of 14ft [4.3m]. In the NW angle of the enclosure are traces of the walls, uncovered in 1839, of the former Chapel of St Mary, which seems to have been a building of about 24ft [7.3m] wide; it became ruined in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There is an outer bank to the moat at the SW angle and outer enclosures have remains of banks and ditches’ (1952, 156-7).

Three years later the OS Investigator commented that ‘the moat cannot be said to be filled in and is as shown on OS 1:2500 plan, averages 25.0m wide & 1.5m deep and there is now (February) some water in the bottom throughout most of its course.’ He also drew attention to some confusion over the siting of the chapel (NMR: SY 49 NW 1, Authority 3). Norman Quinnell noted the existence of a causeway approaching the castle from the north-west, consisting of an agger 6m wide and 0.5m high, with intermittent flanking ditches about 2m wide and 0.4m deep (NMR: SY 49 NW 5).

As descriptions these statements still stand, with minor qualifications (see below).

The castle was also discussed by Bartelot, who had ‘carefully explored’ the site in 1892; he believed that the castle was the head of the Mandeville family’s Barony of Marshwood and that it had declined after 1264 when the barony was forfeit (1944, 70-1). The standard interpretation was first given in the third edition of Hutchins’ *History of Dorset* where the remains were noted as ‘probably a Norman keep tower’ (1863, 263). This was followed by Renn, who describes a ‘low motte within rectangular moated enclosure with concentric outer enclosure to the South-West. The motte carries the stamp of a rectangular keep of coursed rubble’ (1968, 240). Cathcart King concurs (1983, 127). The assumption arising is that Marshwood Castle is, if not a motte-and-bailey, then a motte and ‘keep’ within an enclosure, of Norman or 13<sup>th</sup>-century date and belonging to the Mandeville family who held the Barony of Marshwood from 1205 to 1264. Only Pevsner demurs, stating that it is not

a real castle but a manor house, though the connection to the Mandeville family is accepted (Newman and Pevsner 1972, 271-2).

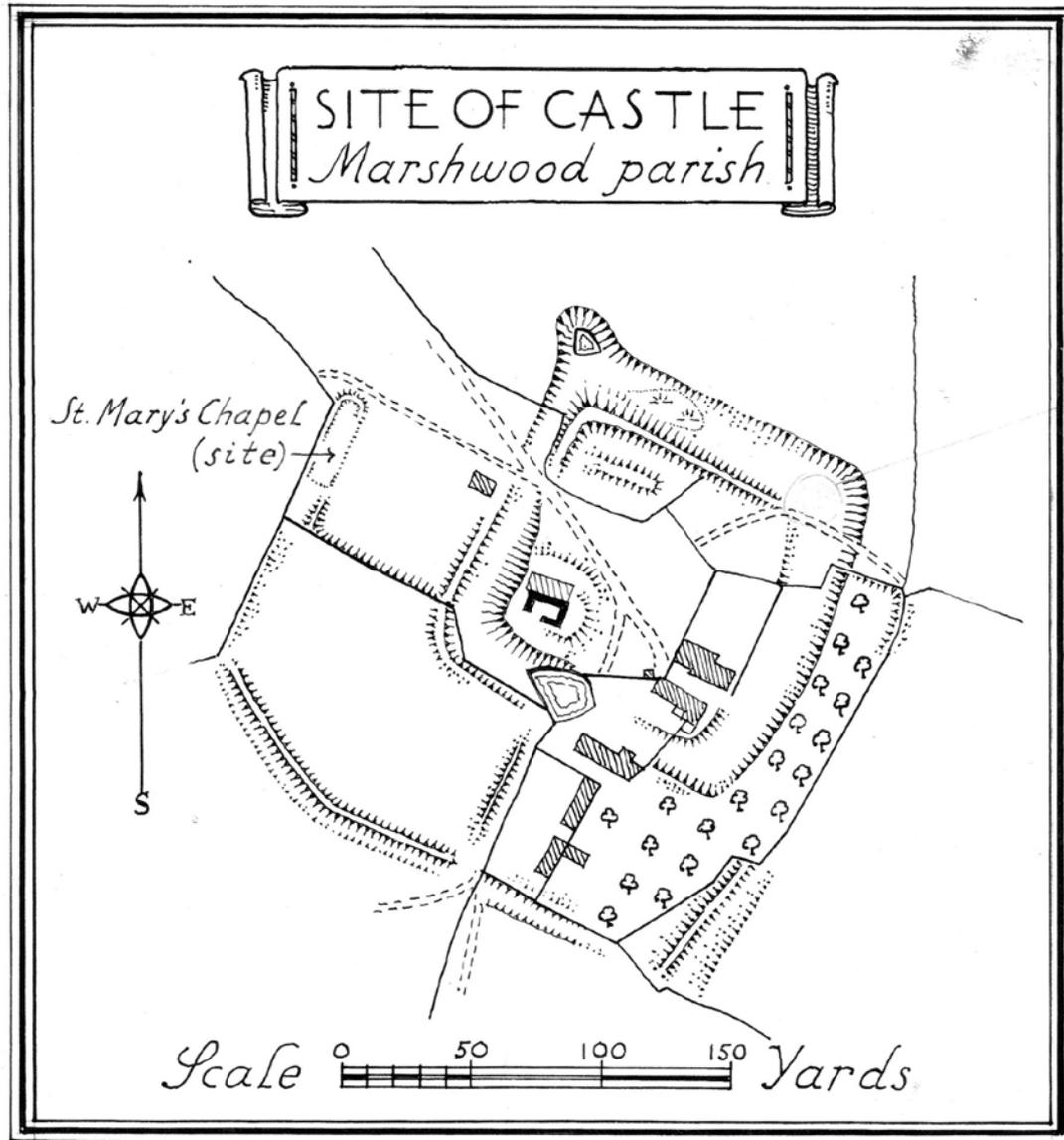


Fig 1: RCHM plan of Marshwood Castle, 1952 © Crown copyright.NMR

### Re-evaluation

A field visit in July 2005 and study of the (very few) available sources and aerial photographs suggested that a reinterpretation of the site is overdue. Understanding hinges on the identification of the slight mound and building in the south-west corner of the moated enclosure as a motte and a keep, and on the wider landscape setting. Field observation suggests that there is a question as to whether the building is standing *in* the mound rather than *on* it. The mound could have been piled around the building; alternatively, the mound might consist of collapsed material from the building.

The overall plan of the site suggests that the building is an angle tower, one element of a quadrangular castle, or at least a very large manor house, standing within a broad moat. This raises questions over the dating of the site

and therefore its connection with the Mandevilles. Such a quadrangular castle is more likely to be of 14<sup>th</sup>-century or later date. Indeed, consideration of the wider landscape setting of Marshwood Castle, on low-lying ground in the angle between two streams, slightly overlooked by a ridge to the north-west (the current and arguably the original direction of approach), suggests parallels with now familiar 'water castles' such as Bodiam and Ravensworth (Everson 1996; 2003, 27-9). Indeed, as Wilson points out, the claylands of Marshwood Vale have always been sparsely inhabited 'though surface water is abundant' (1974, 79). At approximately 70m x 80m the moated island at Marshwood is considerably larger than that at Bodiam, though smaller than the less regularly shaped Ravensworth. The moat at Marshwood is about 130m on each side while that at Bodiam is much wider in relation to the island, measuring about 160m x 110m overall. The moat at Marshwood was relatively dry at the time of the site visit but aerial photographs taken in February 2005 (e.g. Fig 2) show the northern arm to be wet; indeed, this appears from the air to have been re-excavated to form ponds recently. If the interpretation suggested here is valid, Marshwood Castle as we see it today might be the creation not of the Mandevilles at all, but of a later owner. These included: William de Montacute, Earl of Salisbury; Lionel, Duke of Clarence; and the Mortimer Earls of March (Hutchins 1863, 260, 262; VCH 1908, 140-1). If this is accepted, it creates a new question – where was the 13<sup>th</sup>-century residence of the Mandevilles? Was it on this site or elsewhere in the barony?



*Fig 2: aerial photograph of Marshwood Castle from the north-east, February 2005 (NMR: 23820/004) © copyright English Heritage*

The causeway noted by Quinnell (above) is important because it enables some degree of reconstruction of one approach to the castle, a highly significant element in the design of late castle landscapes (see, e.g. Everson 1996; 2003, 26). The approach from this direction, the north-west, conceals the castle until the crest of the ridge is reached, at which point it would be revealed rising out of its moat, and possibly more expansive areas of water if the purpose of the outer enclosure banks was as dams. The route may even have been directed around these so that the final approach would be from the

south-west. Bartelot was interested by another route, a cobbled track that he identified, 'which runs due east from what was the castle entrance for a considerable distance, and then turns due south along the narrow lane which is also paved with stone' (1944, 71). This lane led to an old quarry that Bartelot believed to be the source of the stone for building the castle. This cobbled track is not now readily identifiable and no eastern entrance to the castle is obvious, but the route to the south would lead not only to the quarry but, perhaps more significantly, to the parish church at Whitchurch Canonorum, with its important medieval shrine (Wilson 1974, 79) and holy well (NMR: SY 39 NE 20).

Another important element of the landscape setting of Marshwood Castle that has not been considered by previous commentators is that it stood within a deer park. This park, one of several in Marshwood Vale, was in existence by the early 14<sup>th</sup> century and was not disparked until sometime between 1553 and 1583 (Wilson 1974, 76-7). By 1357 the park had become royal property. The close connection between castles as high status residences and deer parks is well established (see, e.g. Everson *et al* 2000, 104-6; Herring 2003; Creighton 2002, 188-93 *et passim*).

A question that must be addressed, if it is accepted that the surviving medieval building is not a 'keep' but one of four angle towers (with an unknown number of interval towers and gatehouse(s)), is why this one alone survives to any extent. One possibility is that this tower was retained as a hunting lodge after the demise of the castle; it may be significant that the present day farm is called 'Lodge House Farm', not 'Castle Farm'. It could even be suggested that this episode was the occasion of the lower part of the tower being encased in a mound, as an act of creation of an archaic symbol of lordship – the motte that ought to mark the ancient Barony and Honour of Marshwood (the only Honour in Dorset (Hutchins 1863, 260)). A similar suggestion has been made in the case of Lydford Castle (Creighton 2002, 72). Alternatively, it is possible that the castle was never finished and that this tower was all that ever existed in terms of upstanding masonry.

Another question concerns the location of the Chapel of St Mary. The RCHM plan places it at the north-west of one of the external enclosures with its apsidal end to the NNE, an unlikely orientation for a chapel. The OS located the chapel within the north-west angle of the moated enclosure, where a substantial elongated mound is orientated WNW-ESE (Fig 3). The description in Hutchins (1863, 263, 265) suggests that the OS location is correct, as indeed does the RCHM description – it is the RCHM plan that appears to be in error. Unfortunately no further information about the excavation of 1839 has been found. Marshwood was a chapelry within the parish of Whitchurch until at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century and a chapel is mentioned in 1240 (VCH 1908, 13). The present church was built in 1840 (Hutchins 1863, 263).

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Gerard wrote that 'little doth nowe remaine at Merswood worthie the Honour of the Place and the Owners of it, the Parkes being disparked, the Names dispersed, and the House onlie able by Ruines to shew it hath been such' (Coker 1732, 14). However, enough remains at

Marshwood to form an understanding of the Castle as an important example in the growing number of recognised ‘water castles’ of the later medieval period.

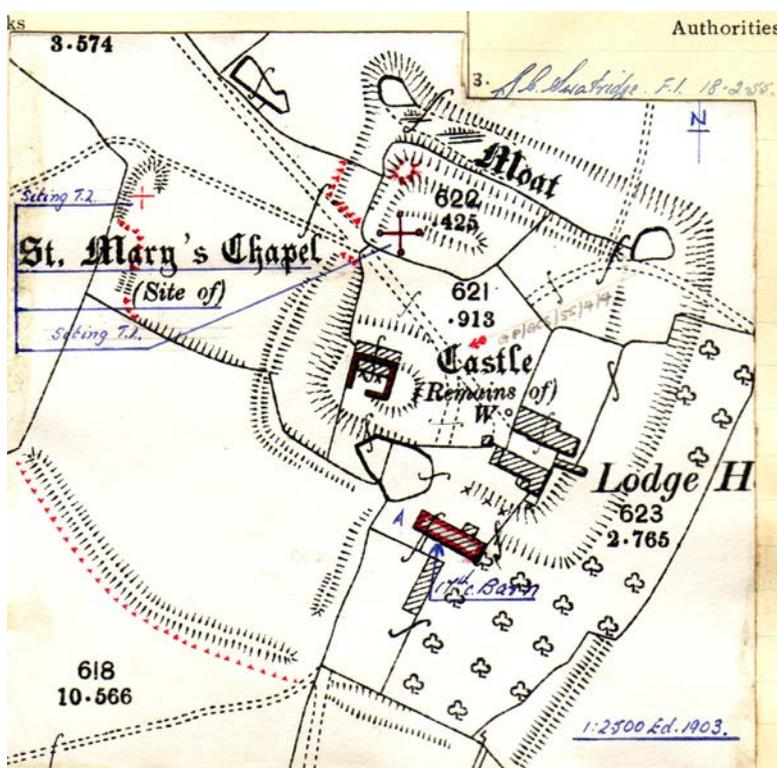


Fig 3: OS Antiquity Model, highlighting the discrepancy over the site of the chapel © Crown copyright.NMR

### Statement of significance

On the assumption that it is a motte-and-bailey castle with a poorly preserved stone ‘keep’, Marshwood Castle is of considerable local and regional significance but of rather limited national significance; earthwork castles of this type are relatively numerous and this is not an outstanding example. However, if the re-interpretation offered here has any validity the case is changed. ‘Water castles’ and designed medieval landscapes are relatively rare nationally and particularly so in South West England (Everson 2003, 24, 31-2). Therefore, despite some encroachments and damage, this site has considerable potential and its apparent significance is much enhanced. The defining features of this site are not narrowly focused on the mound and tower, but are all the earthworks, including those in the fields beyond the main moated enclosure. These are particularly vulnerable to damage. Any opportunity to examine the castle further, especially by detailed excavation, should be taken in order to:

- test the validity of the hypothesis put forward here
- provide dating evidence
- address the question of whether the castle was ever completed and
- obtain data on the use of the site (social, economic, symbolic) not only in the medieval period but before and since.

Consideration of the castle in this way might lead to radical change in understanding of the whole historic landscape of the Vale of Marshwood, within which this is a site of central importance. The possible connection of the castle with figures of national standing in the late medieval period might further enhance the significance of the site.

### **Acknowledgements**

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