



Rethinking Pleshey Castle

New discoveries from old records

Today Pleshey Castle stands in a little-known village in rural Essex, but it played an important part in medieval history and its impressive earthworks represent one of Britain's best-surviving examples of a motte-and-bailey castle. A recent project by the Chelmsford Museums Service, working to publish Steven Bassett's excavations of 1972-1981, has transformed our understanding of the castle and provided new insights into its character and development – as [Patrick Allen](#) explains.

Around five miles north-west of Chelmsford in Essex we find a classic example of a motte-and-bailey fortification. Pleshey Castle offers invaluable insights into constructions of this

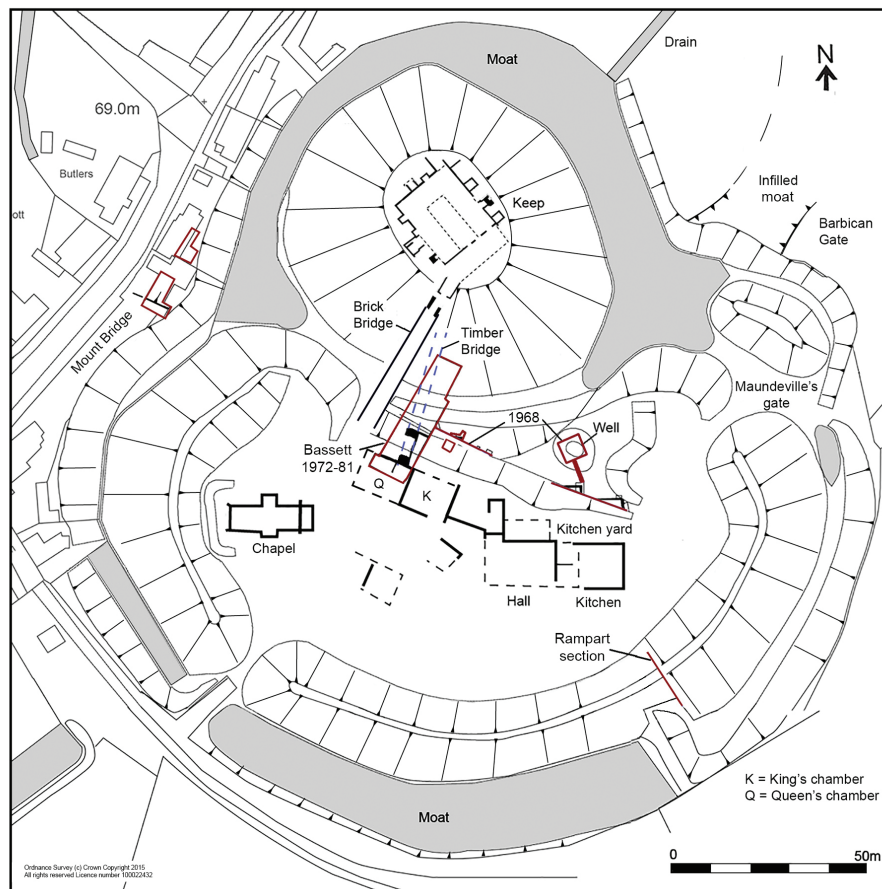
kind, as – while all of its buildings have long been demolished (apart from the late 15th-century brick bridge over the motte moat) – its medieval earthworks have survived intact thanks to their never having been rebuilt in stone.

Its motte is original, dating from c.1100, while the ramparts of the south bailey are largely the result of refortification that took place in 1167. A second bailey to the north of the motte is now buried beneath the modern village, but its original

ABOVE & INSET

Overlooking the remains of Pleshey Castle in Essex. The aerial photo shows the motte and south bailey; the dashed white line marks the outline of the north bailey, while the medieval town enclosure bank can be seen top left.

PHOTOS: Chelmsford Museums Service (inset); David, Creative Commons CC BY-SA 2.0 (main image)



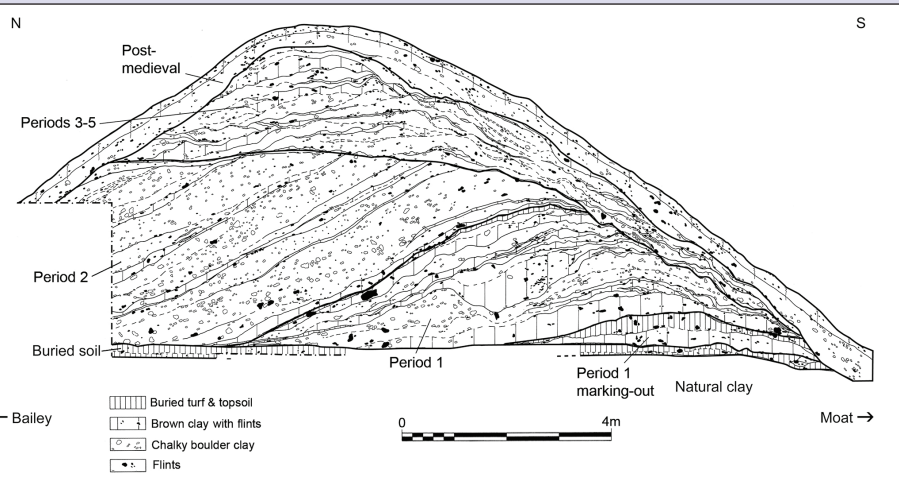
LEFT This plan of the castle shows the keep and buildings in the south bailey, with excavation areas and sections in red.

BELOW LEFT A section through the south bailey rampart shows how its earliest incarnation, as constructed c.1100 (Period 1), still survives at its base. Period 2 reflects the boundary's enlargement and refortification after 1167.

As for when construction began, tree-ring dating of a timber from the north bailey palisade provides a date no earlier than 1083, so a construction date of c.1100 seems entirely plausible. This would link the castle's creation not to Geoffrey II de Mandeville, but to Geoffrey I – a logical conclusion, as the core of his extensive estates lay in mid-Essex and Pleshey is close to his chief manor of Waltham (now Great Waltham).

It is also becoming increasingly clear how the fortifications developed; Chelmsford Museums Service has been revisiting unpublished reports from an excavation that Steven Bassett undertook immediately to the south-east of the brick bridge in 1972-1981. Interestingly, a section that he recorded through the outer rampart confirms that the south bailey was also part of the original construction of the castle – that is, Pleshey had two baileys from its inception. Within this rampart (which was dated to the later 12th century by previous excavations, headed by Philip Rahtz, in 1959-1963), Bassett also found traces of a smaller, earlier rampart that had been built up in two stages, suggesting an initial temporary earthwork which was completed after a short interval.

As for later developments, historical accounts record that in 1157-1158 Henry II returned the de Mandeville lands to Geoffrey III, on the condition that he dismantle the defences of his castles. Then, in 1167, Geoffrey's younger brother William II de Mandeville was given permission to refortify. There is good archaeological evidence for a large-scale restoration of the castle defences after this date, following ➔

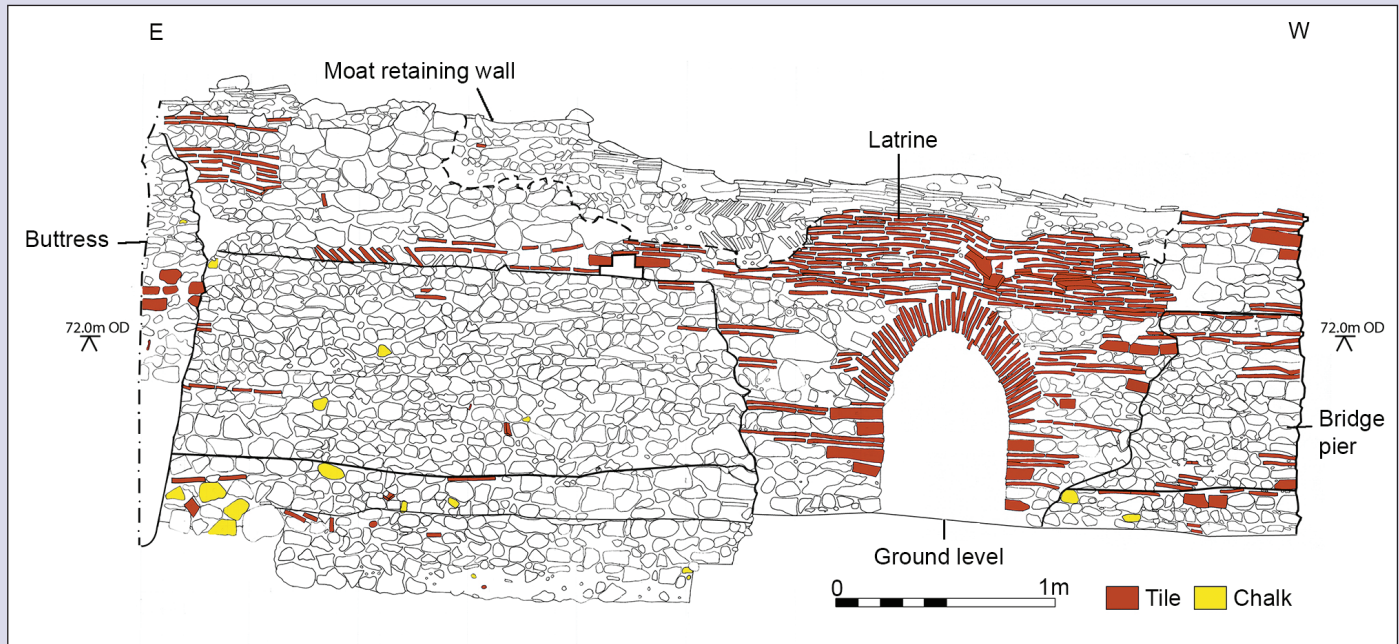


outline can still be seen in Pleshey's semi-circular street plan, and in 1988 was confirmed by excavation. Its defences were levelled in the 13th century and replaced by a much larger town enclosure, whose earthworks still surround the modern village.

Previous descriptions of the castle had assumed that the north bailey was part of the original castle and the south bailey added later – but recent reassessment of all available evidence has transformed this picture completely.

THE CASTLE'S EVOLUTION

What can we unpick about the castle's origins? Its earliest documentary reference comes from 1143, when Geoffrey II de Mandeville surrendered all his lands, including Pleshey Castle, to King Stephen. Yet scientific research suggests the site is much older. Analysis of topsoil buried beneath the motte, and a calculation of the rate of its formation, suggests that the castle was completed 30-40 years after the Norman Conquest.



the same plan as before. Bassett's excavation uncovered clear signs of a comprehensive clearing out of the moat during this period, and sections recorded by both Bassett and (earlier) Rahtz show the south bailey rampart being massively enlarged at the same time.

This, though, was the last major improvement to the castle defences. Its earth-and-timber fortifications provided sufficient protection against local insurrection, but the castle was not defensible against a major attack, and during the civil war that followed King John's rejection of Magna Carta it changed hands twice. On Christmas Eve 1215, Pleshey Castle was seized by a detachment of the king's army, and in the winter of 1216/1217 it was recaptured by the rebel barons – both times it was surrendered without a siege. The castle was militarily outdated. After it was inherited by the powerful de Bohun family in 1227/1228, it became increasingly important not as a fortification but as their main residence and the administrative centre of a great aristocratic estate.

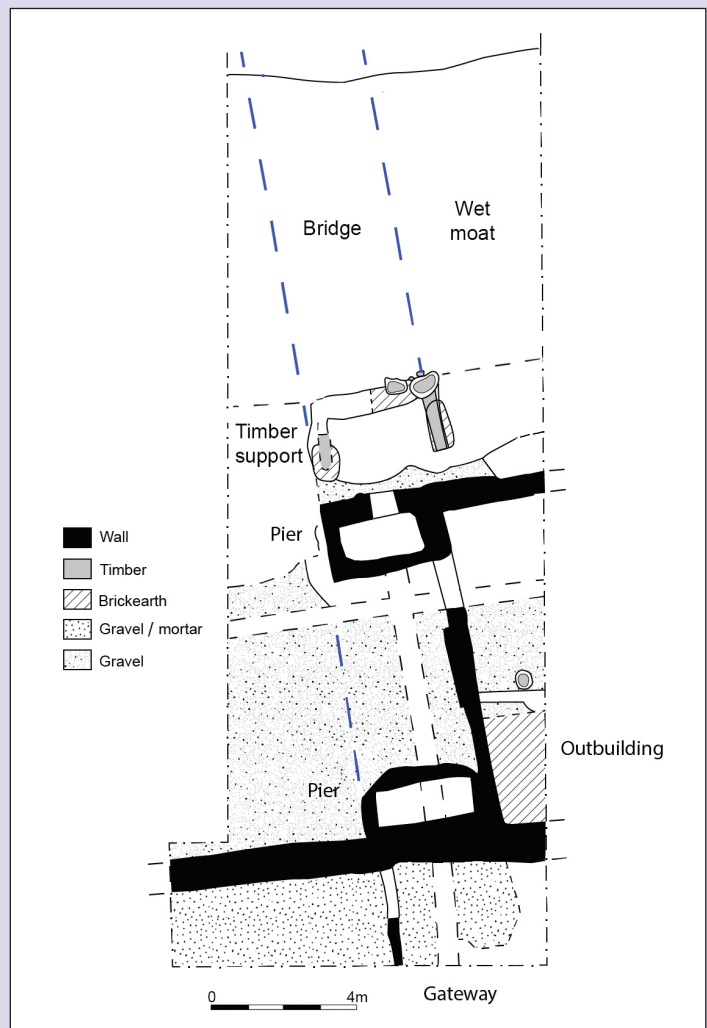
BRIDGES AND BAILEY BUILDINGS

Between Pleshey's refortification in 1167 and the late 14th/early 15th century four successive wooden

“The castle was not defensible against a major attack, and during the civil war that followed King John's rejection of Magna Carta it changed hands twice.”

ABOVE This elevation shows the northernmost pier base of the late 14th-century bridge and the retaining wall to its east (the lower stonework) that shored up the moat. It was rebuilt in the late 15th century as a latrine with an arched outlet.

RIGHT At the south end of the timber bridge (its late 14th-century foundations are shown on this plan) was a gatehouse whose upper space has been identified as the 'Queen's chamber' described in building accounts.



IMAGES: Iain Bell (© Chelmsford City Council Museums Service)

BELOW A reconstructed plan of the keep, with added stair tower, fireplaces/chimneys, and latrines.

bridges spanned the motte moat. Traces of these trestle structures were recorded by Bassett, as well as in a small trench excavated by Elizabeth and John Sellers. The final development of the south end of the bridge consisted of two stone pier bases. They would have supported box-frame timber uprights and, in front of these, a wooden structure holding the massive raked timbers that carried the central span of the bridge over the wet part of the moat.

These strong foundations were needed at the bailey end of the bridge to support the greater load there from the bridge's superstructure, whose walkway would have sloped steeply from the motte down to the bailey. Meanwhile, the elevation of the outer face of the northern bridge pier shows its solid construction and its continuation to the east to form a retaining wall for the moat. This pier was reworked to create a latrine in the late 15th century, when the wooden bridge was replaced by a brick one; evidence of this change still survives in the form of an inserted arch and changes to the upper stonework.

What of other structures? As mentioned earlier, all of the castle's buildings have long been demolished, but it is possible to piece together some clues. A plan of the buildings that were present in the south bailey from the 14th century onwards can be reconstructed using evidence from Bassett's excavations and a 1960s parchmark survey by Elizabeth and John Sellers. Furthermore, the function of some specific buildings can be identified thanks to Pat Ryan's study of the surviving mid-15th-century Duchy of Lancaster building accounts for the castle (see plan on p. 41).

We are able to locate the chapel at the west end of the bailey, which was excavated by Rahtz in 1959-1963. To the east, the hall is easily identifiable, with its adjoining kitchen, pantry,

and buttery. On its north side, storehouses were ranged around a kitchen yard that was accessible from the main gate immediately to the east. To the west of the hall was a range of large private chambers at first-floor level, above a wardrobe and other storerooms. These were a 'revealing chamber' (audience chamber) and, at the west end of the range, lay the 'King's chamber' and, beyond it, the 'Queen's chamber'. This relates to the period 1421-1483 when Pleshey became part of the Duchy of Lancaster, the private estate of the Lancastrian kings, and was granted to three successive Queens of England: Catherine of Valois, Margaret of Anjou, and Elizabeth Woodville, the wives of Henry V, Henry VI, and Edward IV respectively.

Bassett's excavations also recorded at the south end of the bridge part of a stone-built gatehouse, whose

upper chamber can be identified as the Queen's chamber in the building accounts. The gateway and the room to its west, possibly a guard chamber, were surfaced in gravel and mortar, but material found in the demolition rubble indicates that the Queen's chamber above was much grander, with a floor of Penn-type decorated tiles, painted plastered walls, and leaded glazed windows.

Bassett's investigations date the completion of the building range along the north side of the bailey to the late 14th century. These buildings would have been constructed by the de Bohuns and completed by Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester (the youngest son of Edward III), who married Eleanor, the elder de Bohun heiress. It is she, as Duchess of Gloucester, who would have occupied the Queen's chamber in its initial guise. ➔

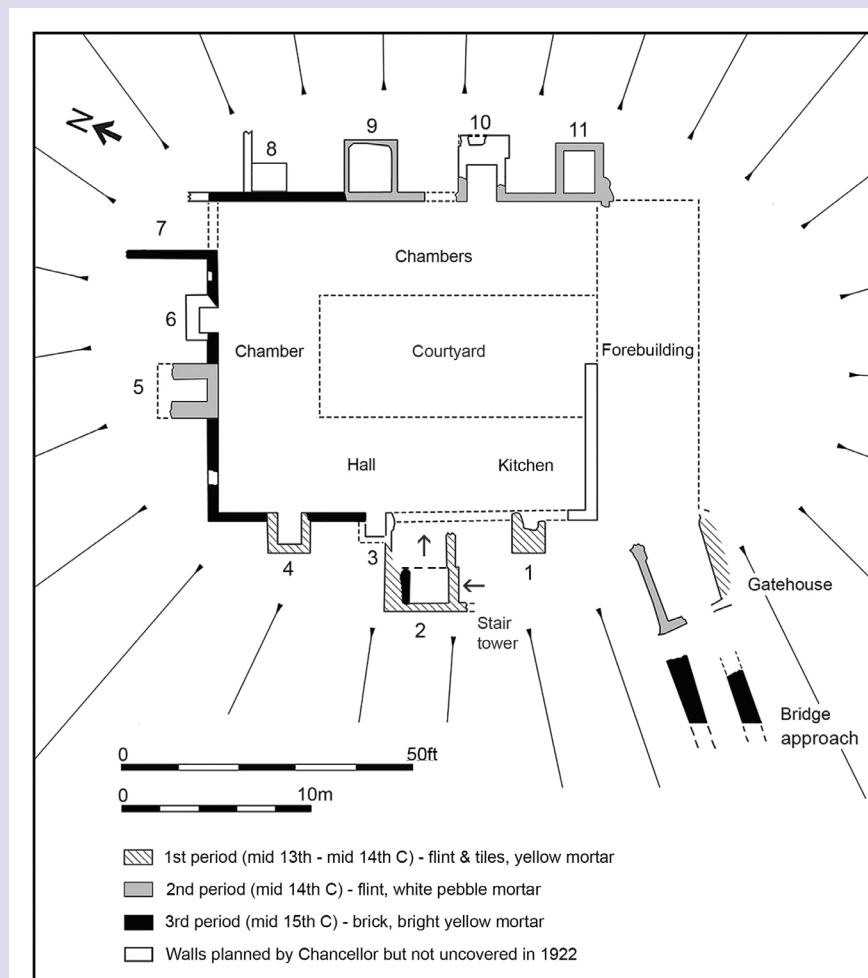


IMAGE: Iain Bell (© Chelmsford City Council Museums Service)

EXPLORING THE KEEP

Our project also reassessed the results of the excavations focusing on the castle keep in 1907 and 1921-1922. There the original excavators were puzzled by the 'extreme thinness of the walls', but we suggest that they should be interpreted as facades built around a timber-framed courtyard structure. The keep's great hall has been located using its description in the building accounts, while the other ranges are thought to represent chambers with 'en suite' accommodation, each with a fireplace and a privy (which survive as rectangular projections that are, respectively, open to the interior and enclosed).

The chamber next to the high end of the hall would originally have been that of the lord and lady, with the other chambers assigned to family members or important guests. By the mid-15th century, though, the building accounts describe the hall as the 'strangers hall', suggesting that by

BELOW Most likely built in 1477-1480, this brick bridge is the only structure relating to Pleshey Castle still standing. It represents the culmination of the keep's final renovation, carried out on the orders of Margaret of Anjou.

that date the keep may have become guest accommodation. There appears to have been some duplication of facilities, with late medieval halls present in both the keep and the south bailey, but this may reflect private and public areas of the castle.

The final renovation of the keep – carried out on the orders of Margaret of Anjou and described in detail in the building accounts for 1458-1459, where the keep is referred to as a 'tower' – was finished in brick. The accounts also record that 29 oaks were felled for the work, and that most of the money was spent on employing carpenters – confirmation that the keep was mainly built in timber, as suggested above. Two earlier periods of flint facades and additional structures are dated to the mid-13th/mid-14th century and the late 14th century respectively (by comparison of mortar types with well-dated structures recorded in Bassett's excavations). No doubt the stone and brick facades made an essentially timber structure look more impressive.

The renovation of the keep was completed by building the brick bridge over the moat, probably in 1477-1480,

according to Pat Ryan's study of the building accounts. This was 20 years after the work on the keep itself – perhaps the works were delayed by the Wars of the Roses (1455-1487). The brick bridge is one of the earliest of its type in Europe and, with its wide span, was a very advanced design for its time. By the mid-16th century, though, the castle had become derelict, with the motte mound used as a rabbit warren. It was sold by Elizabeth I in 1559. Ironically, the brick bridge was preserved only because the Duchy of Lancaster surveyors recommended that it be retained to maintain access to the warren. Today, it stands as one of the few elements of the castle surviving above ground. Analysis of excavated evidence has enabled us to add much more colour to this picture, and to reconstruct Pleshey Castle's appearance once more. ■

Acknowledgements

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PHOTO: Chelmsford Museums Service

