

19 November 2022

MERDON CASTLE, NEAR HURSLEY, HANTS

Observations on the Historic Architecture

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report was commissioned by Simon Goddard at the Goddard Partnership in order to inform the conservation work currently in progress at Merton Castle.
- 1.2 The document discussed the historic architecture and upstanding architectural remains. It is not concerned with below ground archaeology, which was not examined during my visit.
- 1.3 Merton Castle is a Scheduled Historical Monument, Statutory Listing No. 1019123, first listed 9 October 1981. The list entry may be viewed on [Merton Castle, Hursley - 1019123 | Historic England](#)
- 1.4 The author visited the site with Simon Goddard on 4 October 2022. This report is based on visual observations made during that visit. No survey work or intrusive investigation was undertaken.



Figure 1. Engraving of Merton Castle after Sparrow, published 20 Aug 1785 by Samuel Hooper, in Warren's *History of Hampshire*, ii. 27

2 Location

- 2.1 Merdon Castle is located to the west of Winchester, approximately one mile north-north-west of the village of Hursley.

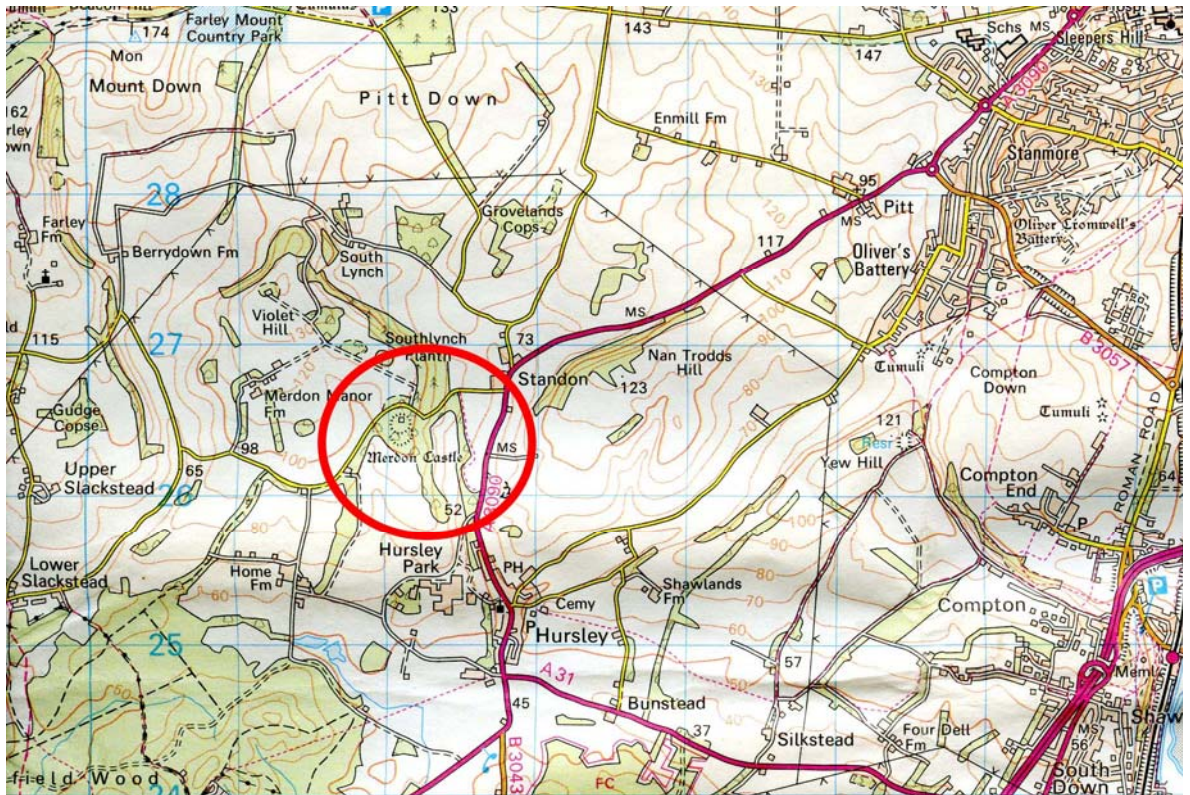


Figure 2. Location of Merdon Castle. Crop from OS Landranger Map 185.



Figure 3. Aerial view of site (castle in red ellipse). *Google Earth*

3 Background History

- 3.1 As the name Merdon suggests, with its suffix *-dun* (hillock or mound), the origins of Merdon Castle are to be found in the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, with the construction of a hillfort on the south-facing slope of the downs north of what is now the village of Hursley. The DoE statutory listing defines Merdon as a ‘univallate’ hillfort, i.e. surrounded by a single ditch and bank.
- 3.2 In the second quarter of the twelfth century Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester 1129–71, built a motte and bailey castle within the bank of the earlier hill fort. This was one of several castles constructed by the bishop at the time of the impending civil war between Henry I and the Empress Matilda, c.1138.
- 3.3 The castle appears to have been slighted at the accession of Henry II, when Bishop Henry wisely sought voluntary exile at Cluny, but is thought to have remained an episcopal residence until at least the fourteenth century.

4 General topography



Figure 4. Lidar Image of Merdon Castle, from <https://www.hampshire-history.com/merdon-castle/>

- 4.1 The general topography of the area is well shown in the Lidar image (Figure 4).
- 4.2 The deep ditch surrounding the site is still particularly apparent on the north side, though much obscured by vegetation. This includes some mature trees which contribute greatly to the charm of the site. However, the dense undergrowth of briars and nettles hinders the understanding of the monument.
- 4.3 Within the ditch, the inner area comprises the usual bipartite arrangement of motte (to the north) and bailey (the southern part of the area), comprising about 3.4 hectares in

total. ‘Motte’ is something of a misnomer in this context, as the area concerned is more or less flat, albeit higher than the bailey.

- 4.4 The main entrance to the castle is now on the east side of the bailey, where a cart track enters the area, running in a curved path on the south side of the motte.



Figure 5. Present entrance through the ring-work, looking NE within the bailey.

THE GATEHOUSE

5 The gatehouse—introduction

- 5.1 The largest surviving architectural element is a rectangular building on the north side of the site. This has in the past occasionally been referred to as a ‘tower’, but although it appears to project forward of the line of the curtain wall, the clear evidence for a passageway through it shows that it was a gatehouse or ‘gate tower’.
- 5.2 It cannot be the main gate into the castle area as it rises above the steep slope of the castle ditch, and the passageway is far too narrow. It appears to be a secondary entrance i.e. a postern gate. Given that it is on the edge of a ditch a drawbridge must be a possibility, though no evidence for this has so far been observed.



Figure 6. Gatehouse from south.

5.3

Interpretation of the building is made more challenging because of the major loss of primary surfaces, both external and internal, resulting from deliberate robbing of facing masonry, frost action, and collapse—notably the loss of the south-west corner of the structure. Apart from a few tiny fragments, almost all that survives is corework, for in some areas the upstanding elevations appear to be up to a metre back from the original wall faces. The form and position of features such as vaults, doorways, windows, stairs has to be worked out from fragmentary remains, or from the way the corework has eroded.



Figure 7. Gatehouse from the south-west. The south-west corner of the building appears to have been totally lost.

- 5.4 The reasons for the loss of the south-west corner (weakening because of an internal stair within the side wall, and a possible doorway at ground level) are discussed more fully below. To check the location of the original south-west corner a small trial trench had been excavated by the contractors at the intersection of the extrapolated line of the west and south walls (Figure 8).
- 5.5 This revealed what might be flint corework, but it also included what looks like a fragment of brick, which would be inconsistent with twelfth-century work. The excavation needs to be enlarged, and to penetrate the flintwork to check the mortar type.



Figure 8. Excavated possible flint corework at extrapolated SW corner of the building.

6 External walls and relationship to curtain wall

- 6.1 The gatehouse is abutted by the remains of the castle's curtain wall on either side (Figure 9), and projects slightly forward of that line.
- 6.2 The best preserved external masonry occurs near ground level towards the east end of the north front of the gatehouse, protected from the prevailing wind. There are no indications of facing ashlar here, and the flintwork looks as though it was intended as the actual facing of the building (Figure 10). It seems just possible that the exterior of the building—perhaps only that part that projected beyond the curtain wall—were of rendered flintwork. Excavation at the foot of the wall might clarify this.



Figure 9. East face of gatehouse, oblique view south, showing possible springing of curtain wall (behind scaffolding standard).



Figure 10. Possible original external wall face: the lowest 4m of north external wall, towards the NE corner of the gatehouse. Above this level (top half of photo) the facing has slumped away.

7 Interior layout

- 7.1 The building is rectangular on plan, with the longer axis running north-south. Within massive walls, now represented only by flint and rubble corework, are two main elements separated by a comparatively narrow north-south spine or partition wall: a passage in the western half, with further rooms above, and a large room in the eastern half, again with rooms over. The latter was accessed only from the interior of the castle.
- 7.2 The surviving openings, between these two divisions and to the outside, and the evidence for vaulting—discussed more fully below—shows that the building comprised three storeys. The level of the ground floor is concealed below up to two metres of debris from the collapsed masonry, but the level of the first floor may be determined and it seems that the first floor over the gate passage was somewhat higher than that over the eastern half of the building. The first-floor rooms seem, however, to have been vaulted at the same level. How the block was roofed is unclear. There might have been two parallel ridges running north-south with a valley on the line of the spine wall but this is pure conjecture.

8 The entrance passageway

- 8.1 The most obvious component of the building is the through passage running from north to south. This opened through the north wall, where it was flanked by long projecting buttress-like features, the westernmost of which has parted company from the main wall and moved towards the ditch.
- 8.2 The outer face of the entrance arch has suffered from the collapse of the wall face and no vestiges of the rebate for the door, or the outer facing masonry, are visible. It seems that up to a metre of the internal wall thickness has been lost.

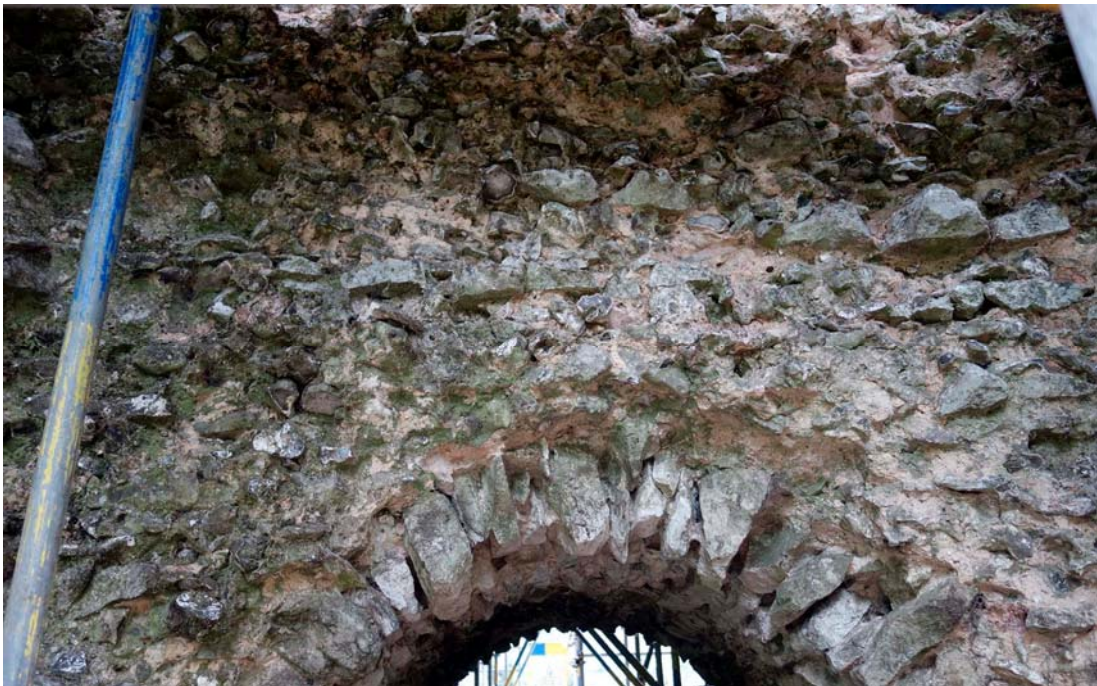


Figure 11. Masonry above north end of entrance passage.



Figure 12. Entrance arch seen in section, showing voussoirs.

8.3

The door would have opened inwards, towards the passage, in the normal way, and when closed would have been secured by a timber draw-bar. The draw-bar socket survives on the west side, now almost at ground level owing to the considerable depth of build-up (1.0 to 1.5m) at the north end of the passage.



Figure 13. Draw-bar socket on west side of entrance.

8.4

Within the north end of the passage, the soffit of the entrance arch through the thickness of the outer wall comprises thin voussoirs set in pink mortar (Figure 14).

Given the obvious loss of the masonry of the entrance doorway, there can be little doubt that the arch itself was also faced in ashlar, which has been totally robbed. To suggest that the visible corework was simply rendered is untenable. The question might be totally resolved by a small excavation within the passage, to determine the original side wall lines.



Figure 14. Soffit of entrance arch, looking north-east.

- 8.5 The scaffolding of the entrance passage did not permit record photography of its side walls but it could be seen that they too consisted of rubble core work, denuded of its ashlar facing. The vault which they supported is no longer in place; stripped of its ashlar blocks the corework would not have survived.
- 8.6 In the east wall of the passage, i.e. the spine wall between the two ground-floor rooms, is an opening into the adjacent room (Figure 15, left) Again, this opening has been stripped of ashlar.
- 8.7 There is another possible drawbar socket on the south side of the opening—again the huge loss of masonry means that there are no good indications of the original width of the doorway, the position of its rebates, or even which way the door opened.



Figure 15. (left): Doorway linking entrance passage and adjacent room. (right): Possible draw-bar socket.



Figure 16. Head of doorway in spine wall.

8.8

As already noted, the south-west corner of the whole gatehouse appears to have been lost, so the west wall of the entry passage is correspondingly truncated (Figure 7). Less drastic loss to the end of the spine wall means that there is no surviving evidence for the south end of the entrance passage, or whether there was another doorway there.

- 8.9 The vault over the gate passage has vanished leaving no evidence, as previously noted, but its approximate level is indicated by a double line of pale limestone (? chalk clunch) blocks on the inner (south) face of the north wall of the gatehouse. Similar features occur elsewhere in the gatehouse, as we shall see; they are not wedge-shaped, and they are set more or less flat. I interpret them as remains of the floor treatment *above* the actual vaults. They cannot reflect the vault itself, as they are flat, not in the form of an arch; assuming the passage was barrel-vaulted, it would have ended in a tympanum above the entrance doorway, but the loss of facing masonry means that none of that has survived.
- 8.10 The survival of these blocks results from the construction sequence. The vault would have been turned as the side walls arose; the blocks comprising the floor were then laid, and when the facing masonry above floor level was laid the edges of the floor were trapped beneath the masonry skin, being revealed when the facing was stripped away. It is just possible that the two blocks comprising a second course in the corner were part of the inner facing masonry.



Figure 17. Row of chalk blocks on inner face of north wall of gatehouse, above the entrance doorway, here identified as deriving from the first floor over the gate passage.

- 8.11 At what by estimation is the same level, embedded within the west face of the spine wall at its south end, i.e. at its former junction with the south wall of the gatehouse, are two further blocks which, it is argued, also derived from the stone floor above the vaulted gate passage (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Looking SE at south end of spine wall, at former return of south wall of the gatehouse.

9 The ground-floor room in the east half of the gatehouse

- 9.1 To the east of the north-south spine wall is a second ground-floor space of roughly the same size as the passage in the western half of the building.
- 9.2 Interpretation of this room is again made difficult because of the loss of facing masonry together with the stonework of features such as doorways. It is suggested below that it might have been a guardroom.
- 9.3 The north internal wall face is completely plain. What is now exposed, though vertical, is clearly corework originally behind facing ashlar, rather than masonry that was rendered. This is shown by the distinct banding corresponding to the courses of facing masonry; as each course (or perhaps two courses) of facing masonry was laid,

the corework was packed behind it, then brought level with the top of the ashlar. This produced a distinctive banded effect.



Figure 19. North internal wall face of eastern half of gatehouse at ground level showing banding of corework.

9.4

The loss of the facing masonry both on the end and side walls means that most evidence for the vault of the eastern ground-floor room has been lost. That the room was vaulted is however shown by the survival of a few blocks of masonry in the east wall, near the north-east corner (Figure 19, right, Figure 20).



Figure 20. Blocks on inner face of east wall of gatehouse, identified as remains of the floor of the first-floor room.

- 9.5 Below this line of stones (again, probably chalk) the way the corework arches forward result from the vault that undoubtedly underlay the first floor (Figure 20). The vault was probably a plain tunnel (barrel) vault, though the periodic projection of the corework might possibly hint at transverse ribs.
- 9.6 In the south-west corner of the same room (the first-floor room in the eastern half of the gatehouse) another isolated block possibly relates to the same floor level (Figure 21). Initially this was taken to be a surviving element of facing masonry, but that is inconsistent with the corework on the same plane below it, given the good evidence that the gatehouse was faced internally throughout. Any doubt on this point would best be resolved by a levels survey.



Figure 21. View SW into corner of first-floor room in E half of gatehouse showing isolated block ?from floor in the corner of the room.

- 9.7 Comparing this evidence with the line of blocks noted on the north wall of the entrance passage, it appears that the first floor level of the room over the eastern half of the gatehouse was slightly lower than that over the passage. There was therefore a step at this level between the two halves (Figure 22).



Figure 22. View WNW at corework of step through the spine wall at first-floor level. The line of chalk blocks in the north wall, visible through the doorway, defines the higher first floor level over the gate passage.



Figure 23. South elevation of gatehouse showing (right) the doorway into the eastern ground-floor room.

9.8

The south wall of the east half of the gatehouse is reasonably intact (Figure 23), but again consists only of corework, all facing masonry of the wall, and the ashlar of the central doorway having been completely lost.



Figure 24. Inner face of south wall of eastern half of the gatehouse.

10 The rooms at first- and second-floor level

- 10.1 We have noted the evidence for stone floors over the gate passage and over the ground-floor room in the eastern half of the gatehouse. There were first-floor rooms over each half of the building, linked by a doorway through the spine wall. Astonishingly the corework of the arch of this doorway survives (Figure 25 and Figure 26).



Figure 25. Remains of doorway between first-floor rooms, looking north-east.



Figure 26. Remains of doorway between first-floor rooms, looking north-west.

10.2

The first-floor rooms appear also to have been vaulted, with a stone floor to the second-floor rooms above. Thus, high in the north-west internal corner are blocks set in the corework similar to those observed at lower level which I interpreted as remains of the first floor (Figure 27). As with the latter floor, the supporting vault has vanished, leaving only the floor blocks trapped within the corework.



Figure 27. View north at level of second floor room over the gate passage, showing chalk blocks embedded in the corework of the inner face of the west wall.

- 10.3 The banded effect in the corework, reflecting the courses of the vanished facing masonry (see para. 9.3, above) was also observed on the inner (south) face of the north wall of the east half of the gatehouse at first-floor level, confirming that the rooms were ashlar faced. It is reasonable to suppose that this also applied to the first and second-floor rooms over the gate passage—in other words, that the building was ashlar faced throughout.



Figure 28. North wall of eastern first floor chamber. Banding of corework.

- 10.4 The core work at the top of the gatehouse comprises mainly random rubble, probably discarded from the building process (Figure 29 and Figure 30), and it seems that by the time construction reached this level supplies of flints were running short.



Figure 29. Inner face of top of north wall of gatehouse western half.



Figure 30. Inner face of top of north wall of gatehouse eastern half.

11 Access to the upper floors

- 11.1 The south end of the west wall of the gatehouse appears to have been lost, as noted above. This may partly have been caused by the weakening of the wall which contained a feature that the Project Surveyor, Simon Goddard, plausibly identified as a stair vice, leading up from first to second floor level.
- 11.2 The surviving remains (Figure 31) consist of a flat platform at the same level as the first floor (as defined by the embedded chalk blocks in the side walls discussed above) and the concave ghost of the north side of the vice, stripped of its ashlar.



Figure 31. Remains of stair vice in the west wall of the gatehouse, leading from first to second floor level. The flat area (centre of photo) stained by earth is identified as the bottom of the vice.

11.3 No evidence was seen for access from ground to first-floor level, and it is interesting that the vice did not start at ground level, with exits to the upper floors. There would scarcely have been room for a straight stair either in the narrow gate passage or the adjacent ground-floor room. A straight access stair either against the curtain wall or the gatehouse itself is one possibility—or there might have been a stair vice within the collapsed south-west corner of the gatehouse.

11.4 As we have seen, the two rooms at first-floor level were linked by a doorway; and it is likely that there was a similar doorway in the spine wall at second floor level.

12 Other features at first and second floor level

12.1 No evidence for windows lighting the first or second-floor rooms over the gate passage was seen. It is highly likely that there was a single window on the secure, south side, matching the adjacent window to the first-floor chamber in the eastern half of the building.

12.2 Apart from the remains of the stair vice on the west side and the doorway through the spine wall, no other significant features were observed in the upper rooms over the gatehouse.

12.3 Rather more features of interest were seen within the eastern half of the building. Here the south wall had survived, and the sill of a window was observed (Figure 32), whose level was consistent with the first floor as defined by the surviving chalk blocks already discussed.



Figure 32. Plan view of sill of window of first-floor room in east half of gatehouse, north at top.

12.4 The other significant feature of this first-floor room is what looks like a niche in the east wall (Figure 33).



Figure 33. East wall, first-floor level. Niche feature (beneath scaffolding walkway).

- 12.5 This is at the wrong level for a hearth, and in any case there are no signs of a flue. It does not continue through the thickness of the wall, and the floor is solid, so it is not a garderobe.
- 12.6 At the bottom of the enclosing walls of the niche are two courses of Quarr stone ashlar blocks (Figure 34), and these are of importance as dating evidence. Quarr stone was used locally in the late eleventh/early twelfth centuries, but supplies began to run out in the first half of the twelfth century. The fine diagonal tooling, and narrow joints (Figure 35) are also typical of early twelfth-century work, notably that of Bishop Henry of Blois to whom is attributed the construction of Merdon Castle.



Figure 34. Rear of niche, east wall of first-floor room of eastern half of the building.



Figure 35. Tooling of masonry at rear of niche.

- 12.7 Such are the features of the upstairs rooms. There are no hearths, and no garderobes, and this has implications for their interpretation.

13 Interpretation of the Building

- 13.1 There can be no doubt about the principal function of the building, which was as a gatehouse. Its position and the modest width of the entrance passage shows that it was not the main gate of the twelfth-century castle. It was a postern gate. It is inconceivable that the gateway was accessed, as today, by a path running obliquely up the final slope, so a drawbridge over the ditch must surely be postulated even though the loss of masonry on the gatehouse means that there is no physical evidence for this.
- 13.2 One would expect the gate to be manned, and the ground-floor room in the east half of the gatehouse is best identified as a guardroom. It was entered mainly via a door on the south side, but there was also access through the spine wall into the gate passage.
- 13.3 The upper rooms were probably intended as accommodation for the guards. If so, it was fairly rudimentary. There is no evidence for heating or a garderobe. However, the loss of internal wall facing might mean that an internal stack or stacks rising through the building could have left no trace.
- 13.4 It would be expected that the garderobe would be on the curtain wall, or on the north side of the gatehouse, but the lack of access doorways is problematical.

THE CURTAIN WALL

14 Surviving length of the curtain wall

- 14.1 A length of what appears to be the curtain wall survives on the west side of the motte. The area is below trees and the wall surface is mostly concealed by vegetation, but the contractors cleared a small area where a building that was thought to be a possible garderobe had been identified (Figure 36).
- 14.2 The feature consisted of a wall projecting east from the face of the curtain wall, part enclosing a rectangular stone-lined pit. It appeared to be the remains of a square building constructed against curtain wall.



Figure 36. Small building constructed against inner face of curtain wall.

- 14.3 It was apparent that there were two phases of building. In fact, the surviving north side of the building had been constructed against the curtain wall after a considerable amount of the latter wall had been lost to erosion or deliberate robbing, possibly of stone facing (Figure 36, right).
- 14.4 A post-medieval date for this secondary feature was suggested by the survival of a brick fragment in the abutting wall, just above ground level (Figure 37).



Figure 37. Brick embedded in flintwork of abutting north wall of the square additional building.

THE WELL

15 The well – introduction

- 15.1 A supply of fresh water was essential to a medieval castle. Merdon was, as we have seen, constructed high up a hillside, so water could only be provided by means of a deep well. This was dug towards the south side of the low motte.
- 15.2 Access was provided by means of what originally was presumably a flight of steps running from the south. This area was completely obscured by brambles at the time of my visit (Figure 38).



Figure 38. Path or steps down to the well, looking north, with gatehouse in background.

- 15.3 The well itself appeared to be completely blocked, but probing has ascertained that a temporary blocking of recycled iron strapwork had been crudely inserted.
- 15.4 The well had been investigated in the nineteenth century, though the bottom was not reached; and I understand that since my visit the shaft is now accessible.



Figure 39. Looking down into well from SSE.

- 15.5 The masonry surviving at the top of the well in an arc on the north side is significant. It now consists of three courses of finely joined Quarr stone blocks, with diagonal tooling, though this treatment may have continued higher, the present top of the well being crudely formed of loose brickwork.



Figure 40. Remains of upper well lining, looking north.



Figure 41. Remains of upper well lining (detail).



Figure 42. Quarr blocks with graffiti.

- 15.6 The ashlar masonry is typical of the early twelfth century, and there is no doubt that the well was a primary feature of the twelfth-century castle.
- 15.7 Modern features here included graffiti (Figure 42), probably not earlier than the nineteenth century on stylistic grounds. A small brass bell, possibly a sheep bell, was discovered in the upper fill of the well (Figure 43).



Figure 43. Small bell, recovered from upper fill of well.