

## HOBS MOAT ANCIENT MONUMENT

Hobs Moat, three miles north of the town centre, is one of the finest medieval moated homestead sites in the country. It was given to the people of Solihull in 1937 as a public amenity, but in recent years it suffered greatly from the effects of the twentieth century. It was for this reason that in 1985 it was chosen as the subject of a Community Project.

The government-funded project had four principal aims:

- the conservation of the monument and its preservation from further destruction
- the creation of a public amenity
- the giving of work in a time of high unemployment to otherwise unemployed local people
- the understanding of the history of the site by a programme of archaeological investigation and historical research

The work of the project proceeded by means of landscaping and archaeology. The landscaping team cleared the site of rubbish and reinstated the earthwork's magnificent, but much eroded, ramparts. The archaeology team investigated the monument by a series of archaeological techniques, and by historical research.

In 1988 the project came to an end having completed all four of its functions. At the same time the Borough Council provided money to establish a permanent exhibition to feature the impressive medieval site.

These three models, based on the findings of the Hobs Moat Community Project, constitute that exhibition.

## THE MODELS

Three models of the site have been constructed, showing various aspects of the earthwork. The first ( ) is a model of it as it really is, without trees, groundcover and so on. This is the geophysical shape of the earthwork. It was constructed using the thousands of readings of heights above sea level collected by the project during a three year survey of the earthwork.

Based on this is the second, larger model ( ). This is intended to show the earthwork in the later Middle Ages, somewhere around the time of its abandonment. The earthwork looks much like it may have done even as recently as the late nineteenth century, and water can be seen in the northern part of the moat ( the only part which ever held water ), and a few trees are dotted about. A scene such as this would have greeted Sir William Dugdale in the seventeenth century. The building, people and animals have been added to suggest the appearance of the earthwork in the Middle Ages - they are not historical. Neither is the suggested appearance of the manor house building - the Project did not excavate this area, leaving it for posterity.

The third model is of a section through the earthwork itself. This is what the archaeologists encountered as the excavation progressed. At this point they found an earlier earthwork in the heart of the present rampart, and beneath that they found the original ground surface. It was in this fossilised soil that they found the piece of evidence giving the earliest date for the entire earthwork - a piece of distinctive medieval pottery.

## WHAT IS HOBBS MOAT?

Hobs Moat is an earthwork, which means it is made of earth. Earthworks are common objects throughout Great Britain and are the physical remains of structures made by man for defence, living or religion. They range - as they appear today - from anonymous hummocks in fields to vast constructions covering dozens of acres: the hillfort in Dorset called Maiden Castle is a splendid and well-known example of this second type.

Hobs Moat is of the type called a moated homestead site. Particularly common in the West Midlands and the Forest of Arden region, the Solihull area at one time boasted upwards of sixty such sites. But Hobs Moat is an unusually fine and exceptional example of one; it is many times the size of the next nearest example - indeed it is one of the finest and largest in the country. This was one reason for continuing interest locally and by specialists in the site.

## THE KNOWN HISTORY OF THE SITE

The first record we have of Hobs Moat is found in 'The Antiquities of Warwickshire' by Sir William Dugdale, Warwickshire's most famous historian. He visited the earthwork at some time in the middle of the seventeenth century and published an account of what he had been able to discover. Saying that he found 'a large Moat.....whereon they say a Castle long ago was situate, though nothing be left thereof.....' and that it had 'grounds.....at least a mile in diameter.....' he linked the site with the manor of Ulverley and recorded the tradition then current among the country people that the moat, with its park, had been the home of the de Odingsell family. Partly on documentary grounds, but also because of local belief, he regarded them as founders of Solihull in the Middle Ages - a statement in which there is some kind of truth. However, it is perhaps more probable that the de Odingsell family did a great deal to expand the burgrave town in the Middle Ages, rather than actually found it.

Another example of the influence of the de Odingsell family on Solihull is the parish church which developed greatly under their influence - and which had, among other things, a chantry chapel added to it to commemorate members of the family ( the chapel of St. Katherine ). Like Hobs Moat the church is a very large construction, perhaps somewhat out of keeping with much of its later history.

## THE EXCAVATIONS

A very small portion of the earthwork was excavated - around 4%. Archaeology is a process of destruction, and the excavated layers are lost forever. At Hobs Moat it was important merely to sample the layers to find out what the earthwork is. For this reason the manor house site itself was not excavated - this has been left for posterity.

Three areas on the moat platform were excavated - HM1, HM2 and HM3.

HM1 showed an organic layer - a dark, silty deposit containing charcoal - above the glacial material which underlies the earthwork. This was the product of human activity, and the layer contained potsherds and pieces of broken tile. Above this and cut into it were beam slot and post hole remains of a subsequent building which, on chemical analysis, may have been a byre. Late in the medieval history of the site, it was thought by the archaeological team to have represented a time when the earthwork was in decline.

The early layer was probably associated with a building which was outside the area under excavation.

HM2 was the section through the earthwork 'defences'. The least destructive way of gathering a great deal of information about an earthwork - how it was built, when it was built, what it was, when it was abandoned - is to excavate such an area.

The excavation showed two earthworks, one, earlier, concealed by the earthwork you can see today. Both earthworks were of very similar construction.

The early earthwork, like the later one, consisted of an area of land ( we do not know how big or of what shape ) surrounded by a ditch, itself delineated on either side by a bank, one outside and one inside.

The banks of neither earthwork - which in the case of the present earthwork attained the scale of ramparts - carried any form of breastwork; neither were they reinforced in any way internally, which is perhaps surprising. There is a suspicion that the profile of the early earthwork was maintained in some way by a retaining mechanism dismantled at the end of its life. There is some evidence, too, from elsewhere, that the present earthwork had some sort of timber facade on its eastern, entrance, side - say, a frontage to make it appear to visitors more like castle.

Other than this both earthworks were simple but very extensive structures with the present Hobs Moat a truly massive replacement for its forerunner.

No evidence was found in HM2 for the date of abandonment of the site, but from beneath the soil under the first earthwork came some distinctive 12th/13th century pottery - giving the date for the beginning of construction on the site.

HM3 was sited in a gap in the internal rampart some 20 metres from the main entrance. The archaeological team wanted to know what the purpose of the gap was.

Beneath the upper soil layers the archaeologists found a rubble spread which seemed to have formed the base for an ephemeral structure associated with use of the gap. Nothing of the structure remained, but as this is the most southerly point at which water lies in the ditch, it was concluded that this was possibly its purpose - to collect fresh water, perhaps by means of a bucket hoisted out over the ditch.

The rubble spread was derived from the layer below, which concealed an earlier building destroyed when the present earthwork was built. On a different alignment, over half the ground plan of the building survived, and its northern, apsidal end had been used to reinforce the later earthwork. One complete side, with a door threshold halfway along its length, could be seen, and this, with its apsidal ( semi-circular ) counterpart, made it the most unusual structure discovered at Hobs Moat. Clearly it was a very important building, built by at least two highly skilled masons, but as to what its purpose was we have little idea. Certainly it was a building of quality - perhaps it was a gatehouse for the first earthwork, or living quarters for an important person, or, bearing in mind its semi-circular northern wall, perhaps it was a chapel.

No dating evidence was found for this early building but it seems to be associated with the first earthwork. From above the rubble spread derived from it comes our best piece of evidence for the date of the abandonment of Hobs Moat - a sherd of late 13th/early 14th century decorated 'green glaze' pottery ( part of a flagon ). From this layer too comes something more exotic - a dress dagger with semi-precious malachite inlay.

## THE DE ODINGSSELL FAMILY

The de Odingsell family were knightly adventurers who came from Oudinghsela in Flanders. The first of the family was Hugh, who was associated with the government of King John and who, possibly as a result of this, was married to Basilia de Limesi in or before 1213, and received as a result half of the de Limesi barony.

He almost certainly lived at Long Itchington - where the senior branch of the family lived subsequently - but in 1238 he was succeeded by his sons Gerard and William. Gerard inherited his father's lands, making him Overlord of, among other places, Ulverley (Solihull) and Maxstoke, and William became his tenant in both these manors. It is perhaps from this time that the history of Hobs Moat begins - probably as a replacement for an earlier homestead, perhaps the same as the demesne farm implied in the Domesday entry for Ulverley.

As a professional military man William was an important figure in the government of King Henry III. He was called to arms on many occasions in the king's service and he campaigned for the king in Ireland and Wales. He was, for a time, Constable of Montgomery Castle, and the chronicler Matthew Paris called William, in the fourteenth century, a miles strenuus, Latin for a vigorous soldier. Aside from this, he was an entrepreneur in the way of the 'new men' of the thirteenth century and he did a great deal to expand the new burgage town of Solihull; from his time we read of him having established a market for the town and an annual fair on the feast of St. Alphege and applying for a licence of . He certainly contributed to the parish church and established the chantry chapel of St Katherine for the repose of the souls of his parents with priests to pray for them in perpetuity.

William died in 1264, leaving two sons, William, later referred to as Sir William, and Nicholas to inherit his lands. The former in due course, like his father, established a military reputation and rose, eventually, to very considerable eminence, becoming at the end of his life Justiciar of Ireland, effectively Viceroy, with power of life and death over all the King's subjects. He died in 1295 in Ireland in unknown circumstances and was followed one month later, in May, by his only son Edmund, again in Ireland. With Edmund the branch of the family associated with Ulverley, Solihull and Maxstoke came to an end (at least the male lineage), and it is probable that it was now or soon after, with the death of Sir William's widow, Ela, or his daughter, Margaret, given as her share of the family settlement the newly created manor of Olton, that life at Hobs Moat comes to an end.

The de Odingsell family persisted in a junior branch established at Forshaw, descendants of Nicholas, brother of Sir William until the fifteenth century. The senior branch, the descendants of Gerard at Long Itchington, continued even longer, remaining lords of the manor until Elizabethan times, but apparently in much reduced circumstances. Dugdale tells a pathetic story of the last de Odingsell in extremes of penury and debasement almost dying on the street were it not for the hospitality of a commoner.

With that their story ends. But there is a possible footnote. The name Ansell is common enough in this area. It is said that it is a variant of Odingsell, so perhaps contact with a minor branch of the local family is unbroken even down to our own time.

## THE FINDS

Most of the finds from Hobs Moat are of a domestic nature - hardly surprising in view of the small scale of the excavation. The Middle Ages was, for most people, a somewhat drab time in the history of our islands and culture, and even the highest individuals - in the thirteenth century - lived in conditions which would strike us as impoverished. This was true even at Hobs Moat, the home of the Lord of the Manor.

Several varieties of coarse cooking pottery are common on the site, and this was made locally, of the clay which abounds in the area. More exotic pottery occurs as well. Fine wares, these were imported and came from places such as Nuneaton and Stafford and further afield: their occurrence tells of the wealth of those that purchased the vessels.

Occurring occasionally is a find which would strike us in the present time as mundane - coal. In the Middle Ages the transport of coal must have presented formidable difficulties, and the fact that it does occur on the earthwork suggests that the road system was working, perhaps rather better than we might have imagined. What was its use, what was it there for? We do not know. It is difficult to think of the Lord of the Manor as having a coal fire, and it is not possible to think of the coal as having been used in a smelting process ( this use did not occur until the Industrial Revolution ). For the time being the oddity is a mystery.

Other finds from the earthwork included several bronze rings, pieces of iron, part of a small dress dagger, worked flint, tiles and, from later times, clay tobacco pipes. Few of the non-ferrous metal finds can be exhibited owing to the acidic nature of the soil which has made the objects very fragile.