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CASTLE STREET, BERKHAMSTED

How OLD are the Castle Moats?

The natural springs which helped to defend Berkhamsted Castle in the Middle Ages are functioning once again. For the first time for several years, water has filled sections of the moats, adding to the interest of what is unquestionably one of Hertfordshire's greatest historical attractions. Visitors who expect to see drawbridges and baronial halls and battlemented towers may say harsh things about the fragments of the 7-ft. thick curtain walls that still remain, but the chief source of interest is surely the vast system of earthworks which endure as a monument to the engineering skill and industry of our mediæval forebears.

Saxon, Norman . . . ?

No one can say exactly how or when Berkhamsted Castle originated. A stronghold may have existed on the site in Anglo-Saxon days, and the place was certainly of some importance at the time of the Norman Conquest. A document of that period refers to the "fossarius," whose duty was to superintend the earthworks. Whatever additions and alterations were made to the buildings in the arena—and they will be the subject of a later and fuller article in this series—it seems certain that "Tower Hill" was thrown up and the great ditches scooped out before the end of the 11th century. The earthworks were even more complex than we are able to picture to-day, for portions of the outer defences were destroyed when the railway embankment and the road to the park gates were made. The pond on the west side of that road was originally part of the outer moat. Thus it will be seen that the Castle was completely encircled by two moats, although no embankment was necessary on the south side of the outer moat, for the reason that it merged into the Bulbourne swamp, itself an obstacle of no mean military value.

A Brook from The Park

The oft-made claim that the Castle "commanded" the Berkhamsted valley may be disputed, but the site was ideal for a fortification which relied largely upon water defences. Not only were

By "Beorcham"

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there ample springs in the moats and contributions from the brimming Bulbourne, but a long-forgotten brook trickled along the valley of the park and fed the outer moat through a gap on the Common side.

The present hard winter suggests that the normally formidable water barriers must have been ineffective in severe frosts. Invaders would have had a "walk-over" in every sense of the term!

Last Line of Defence

With the primitive implements available it must have taken years to raise the shell keep, excavate the ditches, and throw up the steep banks and massive bastions. The main entrance was near Castle-street bridge, where visitors who had forded the Bulbourne found a barbican of stone and the first of two bridges that crossed the outer and inner moats. Excavations have often revealed fragments of the massive oak timbers of the drawbridges.

The shell keep, 60-ft. high and probably the oldest feature of the earthworks, was originally an island in the inner moat. The last place of refuge in the event of siege, it was strongly fortified. The handsome stone-lined well, for ensuring water supplies in the event of the moats no longer being accessible, may still be seen on the top of the mound.

A Fortnight's Siege

Only once were the defences of Berkhamsted Castle put to the test. That was in December, 1216, when Prince Louis, the French Dauphin, hoped to receive the Crown of England as the prize for leading the Barons to victory. But the Berkhamsted garrison, loyal to a man, raised the drawbridges, and the Frenchman's army, encamped on White Hill, daily propelled huge stones against the Castle with such good effect that the damage was not repaired for many years.

The garrison was not content with defensive tactics alone. Twice they raided the enemy, seizing chariots and provisions and carrying off a banner as a trophy. The camp was thrown in utter confusion just as dinner was being served, and the barons were disarmed as they sat at table!

Surrender

But after a fortnight's siege the gallant defenders received orders to surrender. The date was December 20, and something of the Christmas spirit must have been prevailing, for the garrison were spared their lives, goods and houses. And they had the last laugh, for the cause of the rightful king prevailed and the French Dauphin went back to France—without the English Crown.