

*An Archaeological
Walk through Castle
Bytham*



*South Kesteven Community
Archaeology Walks*



Heritage Lincolnshire working with SKDC

Introduction

Castle Bytham lends its name to one of the most important ancient river systems in Britain for the study of very early human occupation. Evidence of a major river that flowed over 500,000 years ago was first identified in a quarry in Castle Bytham and this now extinct system is now known to archaeologists as the Bytham River. Stone tools made by early humans who gathered wild foods and hunted in this river valley have been found in several places along the course of the former valley. The valley itself is no longer discernable in the present land formations having been obliterated by the ice sheets of the Anglian glaciation over 400,000 years ago.

The transition from a hunting and gathering way of life to one of settled farming is thought to have developed in this part of the country around 3,500BC. The communities that developed these early agrarian landscapes used pottery food vessels and grew hulled wheat, barley and flax; while sheep, cattle, goats and pigs were domesticated and exploited for protein. Little evidence of these prehistoric farmers has been located in Castle Bytham, the earliest find in the village being a Bronze Age arrowhead from around 2500 – 750BC. This lack of finds may be a product of the lack of detailed survey in the area or it could be that the area remained heavily wooded until later in the prehistoric period.

By Anglo Saxon times the area is known to have become a centre of settlement. An Anglo Saxon burial (explained in more detail below) was found in Castle Bytham in the 19th century while the first documentary evidence of a settlement here is from the great Domesday Book compiled, (in Lincolnshire in 1085) to give King

William I a full survey of the taxable holdings of the old Saxon kingdom. The survey recorded that *West Bintham*, (the *Castle* prefix was added later), was previously held by the Saxon Lord Morcar but had now been awarded largely to a new Norman Lord called Drogo. Interestingly the survey records three iron forges and seven foreigners in the village – historians have seen this as evidence that the large motte and bailey castle in the village was under construction at this time; foreigners, principally the French, were often engaged in such works. During the reign of King John the castle was leased to William de Colvile (from 1180 to 1216) who was eventually dispossessed after a power struggle between King John and the barons led to the signing of the Magna Carta. The castle and village was then awarded to William de Fortibus who had backed the tyrannical king. With the death of John in 1216 the new King Henry III ordered the return of the property to its previous owner. Fortibus resisted this and is recorded as having used the Castle at Bytham as a power base from which to dominate the surrounding settlements and countryside. The king eventually marched an army to Bytham in 1221 and laid the Castle to siege with engines of war for up to two weeks before overrunning its defences and employing miners to weaken its defences and pull down its keep. Restored to the castle the Colviles rebuilt the castle and were in residence at Bytham until 1369. The Castle's last known occupant was Lady Alice Basset (grandmother of Henry V) who lived in the village during the late 15th century. It seems to have fallen into ruin some time in the 15th century, most likely used as a quarry to provide stone for the village as it recovered from the horrors of the Black Death.

1 Our walk begins at the church of St James on the southern slopes of the valley of the River Tham that runs through Castle Bytham. Like many English parish churches it occupies a commanding position above the village emphasising the centrality of the Christian church over the past 1000 years of this country's life. In medieval England the church's dominance of society was shared with the political ruling class. Often in medieval settlements we see the dominance of the church buildings is mirrored by an equally imposing castle or manor house. Examples in Lincolnshire include Lincoln, Tattershall and Castle Bytham.

The earliest datable architectural feature of the church is the north arcade, which is in the *Transitional Norman* style of about 1200 placing its construction during the tenancy in the village of William de Colville.

Much rebuilding of the church can be seen to have taken place during the mid 14th century. During this period there was a great increase in the number of foundations of *chantries* as the rich sought to guarantee the passage of their souls into heaven by the saying of prayers for their souls at specially designated altars often within churches. This may have been of particular concern to the heirless Colville line and would have been a factor in the granting of £10 by Lady Alice Basset to the church to heighten the tower and furnish it with bells and 100 shillings for the establishment of a chantry chapel in the north transept.

Before leaving the churchyard look for the two medieval stone coffins just outside the porch, and the stone built house just to the east known as 'The Priory'. The central open hall of this building dates to the mid 15th century and internally the roof

timbers still retain timbers blackened with soot from the open central hearth.

2 As we leave the churchyard it is worth noting one of Castle Bytham's remaining public houses. *The Castle Inn* (formerly the *Three Tuns*) is a 17th century building which has been raised and altered in the 19th century. The steep roof pitch of the original thatched roof can be seen in the gable end.

3 Climbing Station road we pass three blocks of brick built terraced housing. These were built to house workers for a small railway yard at the base of the nearby cutting. The Bourne to Saxby line was built in 1898 and closed in 1959 (slightly in advance of the main reorganisation proposed by the 1963 Beeching report).

4 Just behind the railway line is the Castle Lime Works Quarry- a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest. Preserved in the quarry face is a complete record of the Upper Lincolnshire Limestone formation. The rich ammonite fossils it contains provide the dating evidence for the strata that formed in warm shallow seas during the Middle Jurassic period about 170 million years ago.



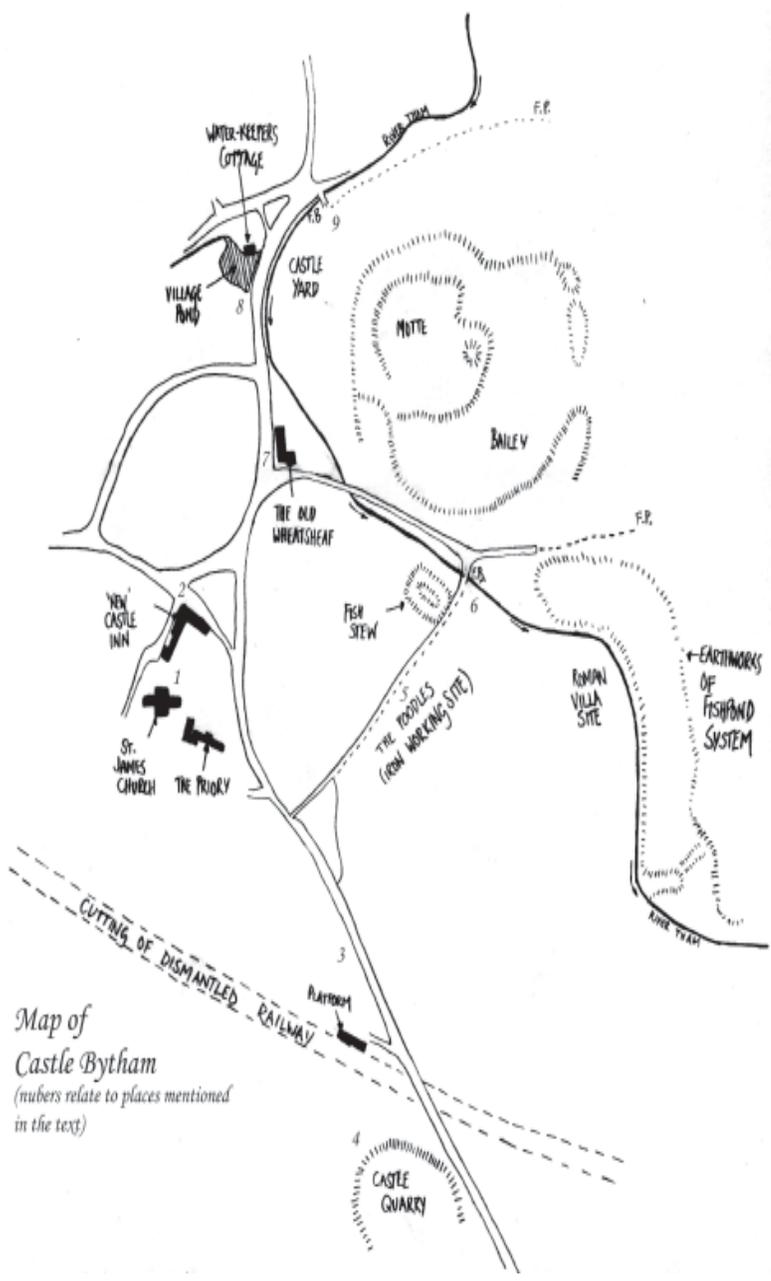
Bronze Age arrowhead similar to the one found at Castle Bytham

During the digging of the quarry in the 1850's there were two significant archaeological discoveries – a 'barbed and tanged' arrowhead from the Bronze Age (2200-750BC) and a Saxon burial. The Saxon burial was richly provided with grave goods now held in the collections of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The collection includes: a silver gilt *annular* (ring shaped) brooch set with four

garnets and highly decorated; a bronze *pennanular* (broken ring) brooch; a bronze ring and pin; over 20 green and blue glass beads; and 2 pendants - one fashioned from a large beavers tooth and one made from jet with 2 perforations. Unfortunately for archaeologists these discoveries were made during the mid nineteenth century when archaeological practice was in its infancy and the context of these discoveries was destroyed forever with the quarrying of the site.

5 There is strong evidence that this part of Lincolnshire was an important early centre of iron production. Walking back down the hill along Station Road a small public footpath runs down towards the castle across the field known as Cinder Hill. Much burnt material and slag, residue from the smelting of iron, has been discovered here. At the bottom of the valley in the field to the right, (known as Pode Hole Field or 'The Poodles'*) is thought to be the site of a Roman villa. This interpretation is based on finds of tesserae (the clay blocks used to make mosaic floors), Roman pottery and building materials. The site is recorded as having been excavated by a local farmer in the 1930's but the present writer has been unable to locate any records from this work. These sites, along with the Domesday Book reference to iron forges, serve to emphasise the long history of metal working in the parish. Other early iron working sites in the parish are to be found at Iron Stone Corner to the north of the village, in Mill Field to the east of the village and along the banks of the Tham below the castle. In addition to suitable sources of iron ore in South Kesteven it is thought that the extensive woodlands in this part of the county would have been managed for the production of the charcoal necessary for the smelting process.

**The field name 'Pode Hole' is most often found in wet valley floors and marshy wet locations. It is thought to relate to a place where toads and frogs could be found.*



Map of
 Castle Bytham
 (nubers relate to places mentioned
 in the text)

6 Along the floor of the valley lies an extensive and exceptionally well preserved system of earthworks. The most obvious to the walker is the rectangular hollow with a raised central platform in the field to the left known as the "*Fish Stew*". The system continues downstream with a long kidney shaped embankment which now encloses the modern cricket field. These earthworks represent an extremely well preserved example of an extensive fish rearing system and are protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Such earthworks are notoriously difficult to date as they have usually been remodelled over many years as practices and demands changed, although they are very likely to have a medieval origin associated with the nearby castle. The earliest possible reference to these pools is from the 1316 record of Margaret de Colvile's widow's portion and dowry, which included a *Magnum Vivarium* (Great Fishpond). In their present formation the complex has been compared to the modern 'Dewbish System' for breeding carp. The fish would be spawned in the 'Fish Stew' where the raised central area would create an area of warm water to facilitate this). The fry would then be moved through a series of sluices into a shallow nursery pond where they would feed on algae, the growth of which would be encouraged by the dumping of manure and compost into the pond. Finally the growing fish would be transferred to the main lake (where the cricket pitch is) before harvesting. The entire process would take place on an annual cycle with the winter set aside for maintenance of the ponds, which would need to be cleaned and lined with clay to ensure a watertight seal.

Fish farming was an important source of revenue for the landed classes in early medieval England and fishpond complexes can be found around many medieval manors, abbeys and castles.

Fish can be easily salted and stored, making them an excellent food source and well worth the effort involved in farming them. Land based livestock would normally be slaughtered before winter as feed stocks dwindled, so by the end of the winter fish would become an increasingly important source of protein. The high point of medieval fish farming is thought to have been the 12th century. An earlier date for the fish farm than 1316 may be implied by the record used by John Wild in 1871 when he stated that after subduing the 1221 rebellion King Henry, *"learnt that the Bytham rebels had a quantity of salt fish stored in St Leonard's Priory ... [and] ordered the bailiffs of Stamford to seize, and place in safe custody, till he gave them further orders about it."*

The system at Castle Bytham is likely to have produced a quantity of fish in excess of the Castle's own needs and so any surplus may well have been stored close to a major market such as Stamford where it could easily be traded.

7 Walking back onto Castle Gate we pass the former Wheatsheaf public house, now a private residence. Above the right hand window is a carved stone panel depicting a wheatsheaf. The area to the front of the house was the former site of the medieval village market cross, where business transactions made at the market would have been formerly sealed. Castle Bytham's market was first granted its licence in 1247 and would have been critical to the economic life of the settlement.

8 Further along Castlegate on the left is the ancient and beautiful village pond. The pond is fed by water which runs down the hillside where Water Lane is sited. The small stone cottage at the waters edge formerly housed the 'Water Keeper' of the village who was in charge of the sluice that controls the

discharge of this water into the stream that runs across the road. The management of the water systems around Castle Bytham is critically important as until relatively recently the valley bottom was prone to flooding whenever the Tham burst its banks. It is difficult to tell whether use has ever been made of this pond to drive a watermill – the technology needed is far older than that of using wind as a power source. At the waters edge can be seen part of a cobbled path where sheep were once taken for drinking.

9 There is a small footbridge leading into the land around the base of the Castle (the fortifications themselves are on private land). There are about 600 Motte and Bailey castles like this one in the country; most were built with great speed soon after the Norman Conquest. The Bayeux Tapestry illustrates one being thrown up at Hastings immediately after the battle. The motte or mound is the most conspicuous feature here and is built on the tip of a natural spur. Despite the huge quantity of earth moving necessary, historical records show that these castles were often constructed in a week or less. It is known that forced labour was often used. Around the motte, to the rear of what we can see

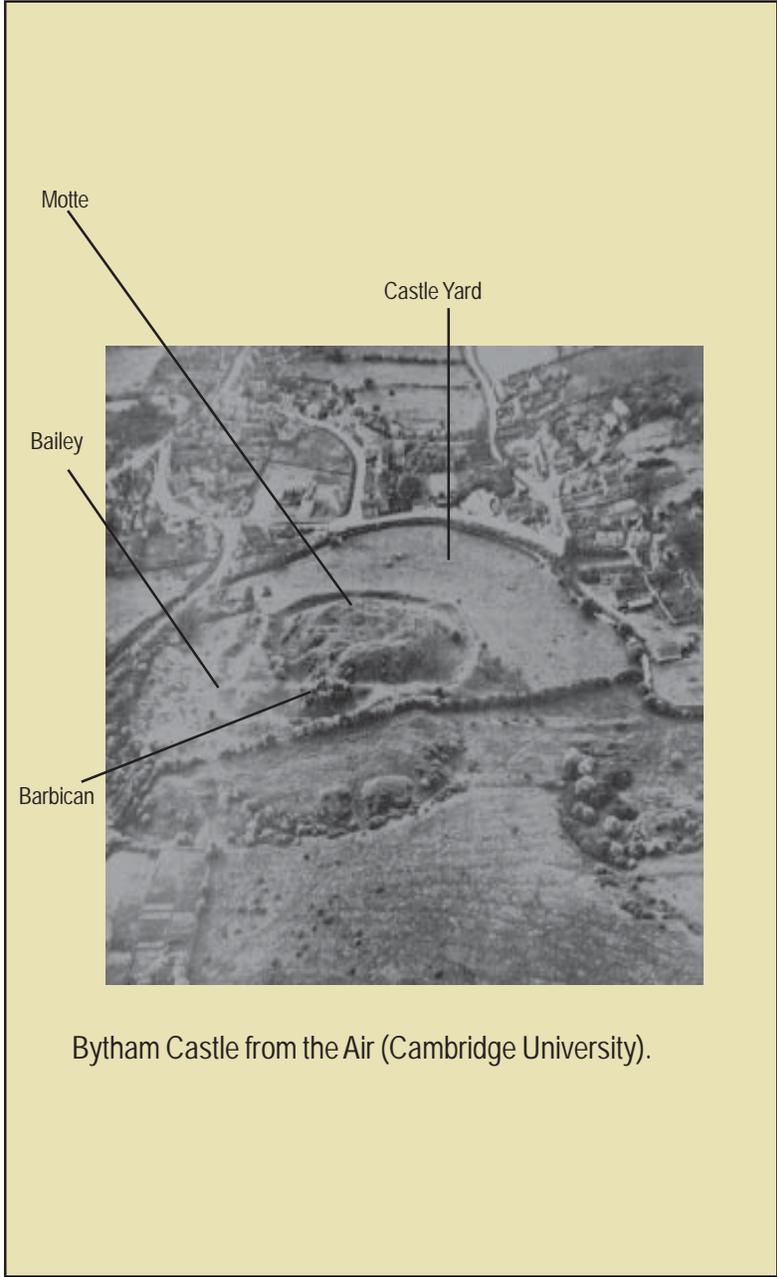


Norman Conquerors build a Motte at Hastings

from the footbridge, lies the remains of the bailey, an enclosed area of raised ground where the lumps and bumps visible from aerial photography suggest the earth-covered remains of buildings. The bailey seems to have contained an inner and an outer courtyard

and the buildings would have included domestic, agricultural and service buildings such as stables, barns, brew-houses and lodgings. The entrance to the bailey is via a causeway across its enclosing ditch, and further bumps in the land surface suggest the presence of the buried remains of a gateway. It is thought that in the first instance Norman mottes were topped by raised wooden platforms. Later these were often replaced by more permanent stone built towers. At Castle Bytham the remains suggest a four sided wall at the top of the motte surrounding a stone tower. Between the motte and bailey and no doubt protecting the causeway between the two is a further enclosed circular mound that has been interpreted as the remains of a hexagonal tower or barbican. The area between the present water course and the castle is the area known as Castle Yard. Two causeways cross this area which is thought to have served as contained further ponds, serving both the defensive and symbolic purposes of separating the castle from the rest of the village.

The castle itself was archaeologically excavated early in the 19th century. The excavations showed the survival of stone structures below the now earth covered mounds and indicated at least two periods of destruction by fire – one of which no doubt related to the siege of the castle in 1221. Motte and Bailey castles were essential military works in the initial conquest of England after 1066 and survived for the next few hundred years as centres from which the feudal overlords of the country were able to dominate and exploit the surrounding medieval landscape. By the 14th century they were becoming increasingly outdated and those which did not survive as elite residences fell into disuse and collapse as the increasingly centralised state that characterises the later Middle Ages began to emerge.



Bytham Castle from the Air (Cambridge University).

Acknowledgements and further reading

This walk has been developed by the South Kesteven Community Archaeologist. Information sources consulted include,

Castle Bytham parish files and SMR: Heritage Lincolnshire
The Historic Sites of Castle Bytham: Richard Foers 2000
Castle Bytham Village Trail:
Castle Bytham Conservation Area Guidelines: LCC
List of Buildings: Department of the Environment
Report into Iron working sites in Castle Bytham: David Smith, 2002
A Gazetteer of Early Anglo Saxon Burial Sites: Aubrey Meaney, 1964.
The Buildings of England, Lincolnshire: Nikolas Pevsner, 1967
The History of Castle Bytham: Rev. John Wild

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