

EXTRACT FROM ENGLISH HERITAGE'S RECORD OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

MONUMENT: Motte and bailey castle, fishpond and associated earthworks, SW of Isfield Church

PARISH: ISFIELD

DISTRICT: WEALDEN

COUNTY: EAST SUSSEX

NATIONAL MONUMENT NO: 12776

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE(S): TQ44281803

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

This unusual motte and bailey castle occupies a low-lying area at the former confluence of the Rivers Uck and Ouse. It comprises a low mound or motte surrounded by a circular moat, a ditch leading eastward from the moat, another dog-legged ditch leading north-eastwards and a broad east-west ditch and bank defining the northern edge.

The site was made defensible by the diversion of the River Ouse and the creation of an island 200m by 112m on which the castle was located. This diversion involved the digging of a channel 13m wide between two natural meanders of the rivers on the NE and NW sides. Within the island, another channel was cut taking water from the Ouse around the circular motte and out to rejoin the main stream of the river. In so doing, the island was raised above the level of the floodplain and was divided into a western inner bailey and an eastern, much larger, outer bailey. The central feature of the castle was the motte, which measures 22m in diameter and is raised 1.4m above the level of the surrounding land, or 3m above the base of the surrounding moat. The motte is stepped on the eastern and southern sides owing to a landslip in relatively recent times.

On the southern edge of the castle is the site of a rectangular fishpond, 23m by 10m in size and with a drainage leat on the SW side. The dog-legged ditch is interpreted as a later addition to the monument since it is both deeper and more steeply embanked than the other channels. Its purpose is unclear, but it may be connected with the artificial lake created to the north, to which the 1.6m high bank alongside the east-west channel belongs. The post and wire fencing around the site is excluded from the scheduling.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

Motte and bailey castles are medieval fortifications introduced into Britain by the Normans. They comprised a large conical mound of earth or rubble, the motte, surmounted by a palisade and a stone or timber tower. In a majority of examples an embanked enclosure containing additional buildings, the bailey, adjoined the motte. Motte castles and motte-and-bailey castles acted as garrison forts during offensive military operations, as strongholds, and, in many cases, as aristocratic residences and as centres of local or royal administration. Built in towns, villages and open countryside, motte and bailey castles generally occupied strategic positions dominating their

immediate locality and, as a result, are the most visually impressive monuments of the early post-Conquest period surviving in the modern landscape. Over 600 motte castles or motte-and-bailey castles are recorded nationally, with examples known from most regions. As one of a restricted range of recognised early post-Conquest monuments, they are particularly important for the study of Norman Britain and the development of the feudal system. Although many were occupied for only a short period of time, motte castles continued to be built and occupied from the 11th to the 13th centuries, after which they were superseded by other types of castle.

The example at Isfield is unusual in its lowland siting. It illustrates an alternative defensive strategy to the high motte and, because of the absence of later disturbance of the site, it retains high archaeological potential.

SCHEDULING HISTORY

Monument included in the Schedule on 8th January 1964 as:

COUNTY/NUMBER: Sussex 245

NAME: Medieval earthworks south-west of Isfield Church, Isfield.

The reference of this monument is now:

NATIONAL MONUMENT NUMBER: 12776

NAME: Motte and bailey castle, fishpond and associated earthworks, SW of Isfield Church

SCHEDULING REVISED ON 09th May 1991