EXTRACT FROM ENGLISH HERITAGE’S RECORD OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

MONUMENT: Caxton Moats: a medieval moated site and associated fishponds and warren, 750m north west of Caxton Hall

PARISH: CAXTON

DISTRICT: SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE

COUNTY: CAMBRIDGESHIRE

NATIONAL MONUMENT NO: 27190

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE(S): TL29465868

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

The monument, known as Caxton Moats or ‘The Moats’, is situated in the base of a small valley some 700m west of the A1198 at Caxton village, on the south side of a green lane between Caxton and Eltisley (Eltisley Lane or Caxton Drift). The monument includes a group of three contiguous moated enclosures arranged in an inverted ‘L’-shaped plan, with associated water management features, fishponds and warren earthworks. The most elaborate enclosure occupies the angle of the ‘L’ at the north west corner of the group. This rectangular island, which is orientated east to west and measures approximately 75m by 45m, is surrounded by a broad flat-bottomed ditch measuring up to 18m in width and 2.5m in depth, and water filled to a depth of about 0.5m. Raised rectangular platforms occupy the east and west ends of the island, standing about 1.5m above the level of the centre and taking up about two thirds of the available space. Fragments of Roman pottery, 12th and 13th century wares, daub and wall plaster have been found here (brought to the surface by rabbits), indicating the below ground remains of substantial medieval buildings and perhaps some earlier occupation. A counterscarp bank runs around the outer edge of the ditch on all but the southern side of the island. This varies between 8m and 15m in width, and between 0.4m and 2m in height, lowest on the western side where it has been affected by a modern farm track, and highest along the northern arm, where it has been enlarged by upcast from a broad water-filled ditch along its northern side. A break in the line of the outer bank and ditch near the centre of the northern arm is considered relatively modern. Access to the island is thought to have originally been provided by one or more bridges. A slight rectangular depression extending south from the water-filled ditch on the northern side towards the centre of the island may indicate the position of one such structure, and there are slight traces indicating the position of a second bridge spanning the centre of the southern arm of the moat. The southern enclosure is similar in size, bounded by the southern arm of the moat to the north, and by a dry, ‘V’-shaped ditch averaging 12m in width and 2m in depth, around the remaining sides. The eastern and western arms of this ditch are aligned with those of the northern island. The interior is level with the central area on the island to the north and with the surrounding ground surface. There are numerous slight undulations indicating buried features related to the period of occupation, although a shallow rectangular pit located towards the centre and accompanied by a circular mound of upcast.
soil, is thought to be relatively modern. A broad causeway spanning the centre of the western arm of the ditch is also considered to be a modern addition, since traces of the original ditch scarp remain visible where it has been infilled. Access here is also thought to have been by bridge, both from the island to the north, and across the centre of the southern arm where a slight depression on the edge of the island corresponds with a shallow hollow way approaching the island from the south.

The third enclosure lies to the east of the northern island, separated by the counterscarp bank along its eastern arm. This island, measuring about 25m square, is considerably smaller than the other two although the surrounding water-filled ditch is almost equal in size, averaging 12m in width and 1.8m deep. The ditch is supplied by a narrow channel cut through the counterscarp bank at the north eastern corner of the northern moat. A second channel, now partly blocked, extends from the north western corner of the small moat to join the eastern end of the outer ditch alongside the counterscarp bank on the north side of the main enclosure. Both channels would have been controlled by sluices, the buried remains of which may still be preserved in the scarp and silts. Low counterscarp banks flank the northern and southern arms of the eastern moat, created by upcast from the creation or clearance of the ditches. The island itself is not raised.

A narrow leat meanders to the south east from the north east corner of the small moat. This channel is now largely dry, having been superseded by more recent drainage ditches which carry the Eastern Brook (a tributary of the Bourne Brook) around the northern and eastern sides of the site. The channel is thought to have formed part of the original course of the brook, adapted to serve as an outflow after the course was diverted upstream to feed the moats. It is included in the scheduling apart from a short section at the south eastern end which has been altered to join the modern field drain.

A rectangular enclosure, part of a medieval warren (although frequently referred to as 'The Asparagus Beds') lies towards the southern end of the leat, extending WSW towards the south eastern corner of the southern moat. This measures some 80m in length and 20m wide, defined by a low bank and shallow external ditch around all but the northern side. A raised platform, 0.4m high, extends along the northern side of the enclosure covering three quarters of its length from the eastern end and half its width. This is contained by a low bank to the south west and south east, with a narrow break in the centre of the longer, south western side. Four low pillow mounds (artificial breeding places for rabbits) remain clearly visible along the length of the platform, two of which are circular and approximately 5m in diameter, the other two cigar-shaped, 4m in width and between 6m and 10m in length. A fifth mound, at the western end, is less well defined. In addition to providing a well-drained site for the pillow mounds, the enclosure (probably augmented by fences) was intended to prevent the warren stock from straying to the south; an area which formerly retained a pattern of ridge and furrow resulting from medieval ploughing. The warren enclosure was superimposed over part of the ridge and furrow, which was surveyed in the late 1960s, and its alignment appears to have been determined by that of the earlier earthworks. Only a small fragment of the pattern of cultivation earthworks now remains, barely visible, to the east of the enclosure. This will retain an archaeological relationship with the enclosure, and is included in the scheduling.

The northern side of the pillow mound enclosure is bounded by a broad channel, or hollow way, ascending the slight slope from the east towards the southern side of the southern island. This is thought to have provided the main approach in the later period of occupation. The triangular area between the pillow mounds and the moats (enclosed by the hollow way, the moats themselves and the old outflow leat) is though to have served as the grazing area for the warren, or warren pasture. Various channels may have been taken from the streams flowing through the valley to supply water to the moats, and the low-lying moats themselves may
have tapped the spring line. A channel which entered the south western corner of the northern moat (now replaced by a conduit beneath a modern farm track) led from a small group of fishponds some 10m to the west, which in turn were fed by narrow channels extending north towards the course of the Eastern Brook. The southern pond remains waterlogged. This includes a main channel orientated broadly east to west and measuring about 30m in length and 8m wide, with two rectangular extensions to the north, one in the centre, the other at the eastern end. The eastern extension joins the outflow leading to the moats, and is linked to a roughly circular pond (now dry) which was originally fed by a largely infilled channel extending a short distance to the north. A low rectangular building platform and a number of slight undulations and hollows remain visible immediately to the south of the fishponds, and are thought to indicate a cluster of buildings and the remains of other activities related to their use.

The moated site may have originated in the 12th century as the seat of the de Scalers family, the descendants of Hardwin de Scalers to whom Caxton was given by William I. The northern island is thought to be the earliest part of the complex. The arrangement of platforms and the scale of the moat have been compared with the rectangular motte at Burwell Castle near Newmarket, which is known to have been built in the mid 12th century, during the period of civil wars known as 'The Anarchy'. It has been suggested that the two sites were contemporary, both built on the orders of King Stephen around 1143 as part of a series of fortifications intended to contain the rebellion of Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex.

The earliest clear documentary reference to the site, however, dates from 1312, when it was occupied by a dower house of Lady Eleanor de Freville. The expansion of the complex, with additional islands, fishponds and warren may be a reflection of this later period, and it remains possible that the elaborate appearance of the northern island resulted not from a need for defence, but to create a more prestigious dwelling reflecting the status of the later inhabitants.

All fences, fence posts and gates are excluded from the scheduling, although the ground beneath these features is included.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

Around 6,000 moated sites are known in England. They consist of wide ditches, often or seasonally water-filled, partly or completely enclosing one or more islands of dry ground on which stood domestic or religious buildings. In some cases the islands were used for horticulture. The majority of moated sites served as prestigious aristocratic and seigneurial residences with the provision of a moat intended as a status symbol rather than a practical military defence. The peak period during which moated sites were built was between about 1250 and 1350 and by far the greatest concentration lies in central and eastern parts of England. However, moated sites were built throughout the medieval period, are widely scattered throughout England and exhibit a high level of diversity in their forms and sizes. They form a significant class of medieval monument and are important for the understanding of the distribution of wealth and status in the countryside. Many examples provide conditions favourable to the survival of organic remains.

Caxton Moats is one of the most elaborate and best preserved moated sites in Cambridgeshire. The group of enclosures illustrates a sequence of development from a small site, possibly defensive in character, to a large complex reflecting the wealth and social standing of its inhabitants. The islands will contain buried evidence for structures and other features related to this development and character of this occupation through time. The ditches surrounding the islands will retain detailed evidence for the water management system, and the waterlogged silts in the base of the ditches will contain artefacts relating to the period of occupation, and environmental evidence for
the appearance of the landscape in which the monument was set.
The fishponds and warren associated with the moated site provide further
evidence for its economy and status. Both represent artificial means of
ensuring constant and sustainable food supplies, the one requiring pools of
fresh water in which to cultivate, breed and store fish, the other involving
the construction of purpose-built mounds in which the rabbits would breed and
from which they could easily be culled. The tradition of constructing
fishponds reached a peak in the 12th century whilst the practice of warren
building originated in the same period, following the introduction of rabbits
from the continent. Both features tended to be the province of the wealthier
forms of secular and religious settlement; in addition to their contribution
to the settlements’ economy, also serving as indications of status.
The warren earthworks adjacent to the moats are well preserved. The
arrangement of the platform and enclosure demonstrates the means by which the
warren was contained and kept dry, and the mounds themselves will retain
buried features of their design including evidence for the artificial tunnels,
nesting boxes and drainage channels created to ensure the success of the
introduced colony. The area surrounding the mounds, including the warren
pasture to the north, will contain further evidence related to its use such as
the buried traces of fences, and traps for the warren stock and unwanted
vermin. The fishponds, although partly infilled, similarly retain visible
evidence of the manner of their use and will contain buried evidence for the
sluices and dams used to regulate the water supply and manage the stock. Both
features contribute to our understanding of the character of the settlement at
its height, complementing the documentary evidence for its purpose in the
early 14th century.

SCHEDULING HISTORY

Monument included in the Schedule on 7th September 1950 as:
COUNTY/NUMBER: Cambridgeshire 20
NAME: Caxton Moats

The reference of this monument is now:
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NAME: Caxton Moats: a medieval moated site and associated fishponds and warren,
750m north west of Caxton Hall

SCHEDULING REVISED ON 19th November 1996