

Digging for evidence of Bourne Castle

by REX NEEDLE

On Monday 8th April 1861, the Rev Edward Trollope, an eminent antiquarian, arrived in Bourne by train to make arrangements for a major event that was to become a talking point in the locality for many years to come and still has a resonance today.

He was honorary secretary of the Lincoln Diocesan Architectural Society, an organisation which held its annual meetings at various towns around the county and in the summer of that year, Bourne had been chosen as the host venue due mainly to the enthusiasm and encouragement of one of its members, local chemist Robert Mason Mills, founder of the town's aerated water business, who was fascinated by local history.

Trollope, who had been educated at Eton and Oxford, was an energetic writer and researcher, and at that time Rector of Leasingham, near Sleaford, although in later years he was to become Bishop of Nottingham. The annual meeting was the society's biggest event of the year for members and their wives and he had come to Bourne to make the preliminary arrangements and to liaise over the various sites they should visit.

These included Bourne Abbey, the ruins of the Valli Dei (Vaudey) Cistercian Abbey in the grounds of Grimsthorpe Park, the temple of the Hospitaller Knights at Aslackby and the site of Bourne Castle. Unfortunately, the only remains of the latter were a few bumps and hillocks in a field off South Street, now the Wellhead Gardens, and so it was arranged that a superficial dig would begin as an added attraction although it would appear that this would consist of nothing more than lifting off the surface soil in an attempt to reveal the foundations or any remaining stonework, if indeed it did exist (**See ref 1 down below**)

Trollope himself had misgivings because he wrote: "A small mound, the faint traces of an inner and outer moat, and a few crossbow slits inserted in an adjacent modern building [the Shippon barn], are now the sole remaining remains of the old castle of Bourne and its adjuncts but these are still sufficient to invite enquiry as to what was the character of the stronghold that once rose from this little grassy plain."

The society could not afford prolonged and detailed excavations and neither were they planned and it was intended that the search would take place only over a few days to coincide with the meeting that was fixed for Wednesday and Thursday, 5th and 6th June 1861.

By Saturday 11th May, a working committee had been appointed and was busy finalising the itinerary, the prospect of the castle excavations now exciting great interest because at that time it was reputed to have been the home of the Saxon kings and, more importantly, birthplace of Hereward the Wake, son of the Earl Leofric and his wife Lady Godiva. **(See ref 2 down below)**

Two sub committees were formed, one to superintend the arrangements at the Town Hall from where the events would be directed and the other to take over the management of the railway goods warehouse in South Street which was being converted for use as a museum and lecture hall and it was also within easy reach of the site of the proposed excavations. By this time, the programme for the two-day event had been provisionally drawn up and it was so varied and interesting that a large gathering was anticipated and every hotel and boarding house in the town was booked up.

The local Rifle Corps was recruited to hold a parade through the town on the first day, Wednesday, and after marching to the Abbey Church for a service, everyone gathered at the castle site for a lecture on its history, although admission was by ticket only. There was a brass band to provide music and visitors later moved to the temporary museum to inspect the displays and hear lectures on various topics.

There was a public tea on the first day and a dinner on the second and as the organisers anticipated, both events were crowded. Excursions were also arranged for visitors to see all of the important sites and historic buildings in the town and surrounding villages using a succession of horse-drawn carriages leaving at regular intervals from the Town Hall and all were busy throughout the two days.

Excavations had begun the week before with the objective of laying bare some of the castle foundations for the benefit of visitors and it is therefore worth remembering that the team for this examination consisted of little more than a few men with shovels and when the event was over, the soil was replaced. The dig therefore does not appear to have been a significant attempt at archaeological investigation, rather a sideshow or entertainment for members and their wives **(See ref 3 down below)**.

Yet the findings have been chronicled with some importance and are still quoted today as the main source of evidence for the existence of Bourne castle with walls three feet thick, a gatehouse, towers, courtyard, keep and an inner bailey, with a speculative plan by an artist, James Fowler, based on a drawing by a local enthusiast, Robert Parker of Morton, which has been reproduced many times since as proof that this was indeed a castle of great dimensions covering some eight acres. The specifications and features identified by the excavations,

however, were little different from those mentioned in previous accounts of the castle, none of which have ever been verified and all containing many inaccuracies (**See ref 4 down below**)

Certainly, the wild theory that the castle was the home of Saxon kings and birthplace of Hereward the Wake has since been discounted because no such building is recorded in the Domesday Book, the great land survey of 1086, at a time when accuracy in every detail of a district was legendary. (**See ref 5 down below**)

The debate therefore continues over the nature of the building that once stood on this site, whether it was merely a fortified manor house, a Norman stronghold or, as many people prefer to believe, a castle of Disney-like proportions with battlemented towers, a drawbridge and moat. As there are no plans for a detailed excavation using modern techniques, then perhaps we will never know but that may be a fortunate circumstance because no one would wish to abandon a tradition as popular as this.

NOTE: This article was also published by The Local newspaper on Friday 9th October 2015.

Notes from NTH

1 - it's now a fact that removing the top soil would have been sufficient to see the remains of the stone foundation beneath the surface).

2 - this interest was because of the author Charles Kingsley who wrote a fictional story about Hereward the Wake which became a very popular story of its time)

3 - it matters not whether it was qualified archaeologists or a few men with shovels. The important bit to take out of this is that the foundation walls had been discovered no matter who made the discovery).

4 - as of date no information has been put forward listing out the inaccuracies which had been stated)

5 - the domesday book was never used to document existing castles. Castles were only mentioned if new ones were built resulting in farms being destroyed which meant a loss of income therefore needed to be accounted. So it matters not whether there was no mention of a Saxon stronghold in the Domesday book. However, the origins of a Saxon castle came about from the Ingulph Chronicles which has come to light to be a forgery, although, forgery may be a bit harsh considering that it may have been reproduced after being destroyed