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EXCAVATIONS ON A MID-TWELFTH CENTURY SIEGE CASTLE AT BENTLEY, HAMPSHIRE

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with a contribution by J R Timby

ABSTRACT

Trial excavations on a ploughed-out castle, probably to be identified with a seige castle constructed in 1147, are described. The castle was shown to consist of a motte surrounded by a substantial ditch, and an apparently undefended bailey. A tentative suggestion is made about the identity of the Angevin whose activities precipitated the siege.

Bentley castle (SU 794 463) is one of three castles lying close together on a clay-capped chalk ridge three miles (5 km) west of Farnham (Fig 1). The site was first recognised in 1956 (OS record card SU 74 NE9), and survives today as a low earthwork which is ploughed annually. The name 'Bentley Castle' was given to the site by the excavators; it has no known traditional name.

The principal earthwork is a low mound standing *c* 1·5m above the surrounding ground, and slightly longer on its northwest-southeast axis than elsewhere. It is bounded to the north and west by a shallow depression. From the vantage point of the mound a low, spread bank can be seen running around the west and south sides of a level platform. The bank is continued by a line of chalk rubble which runs around the east side of the platform before petering out against the mound. In all the bank encloses an area *c* 75m east-west by *c* 40m north-south. The ground drops sharply away east and south of the site. Aerial photographs (NMR nos 7946/3/333; RAF 106G/UK/1710/3001) confirm the impression that the site is that of a denuded motte and bailey castle.

About a kilometre northeast lies Powderham Castle, a wooded but slightly better preserved site of apparently the same type as Bentley Castle. Roughly midway between the two, on the crest of the ridge, with commanding views north, south and east is the castle known as Barley Pound (Renn 1968, 100). This is heavily wooded, rendering it difficult to gain an overall impression of the site, which consists of a massive central ringwork with three baileys (Fig 1). A postulated fourth bailey north of the site was destroyed in 1979; however, examination of this before destruction showed that there were no defences such as still surrounded the remaining three baileys, and so there were no firm grounds on which to classify the enclosure as a bailey (M F Hughes, pers comm).

Documentary Evidence

In 1971 D J Cathcart King and D F Renn (King and Renn 1971) published a notice of the discovery of Bentley Castle, and suggested that it and the two nearby sites could be equated with castles mentioned in the *Gesta Stephani.* That chronicle relates how in 1147 one of the companions of Brian fitz Count, at the time a leading Angevin and castellan of Wallingford castle, seized the bishop of Winchester's castle of *Lidelea,* forcing the bishop, Henry de Blois, to lay siege to his own castle by throwing up two castles in front of it, which were garrisoned 'adequately with knights and footmen'. Ultimately intervention by the king recovered *Lidelea* for the bishop (Potter and Davies 1976. 208–11). *Lidelea* is otherwise undocumented, and King and Renn suggested that this seizure may have come at the end of its useful life, and that it was perhaps replaced at about this time by Farnham Castle. Since 1971 the identification of Barley Pound as *Lidelea* has not been challenged, and the results of the excavation (below) have supported this.

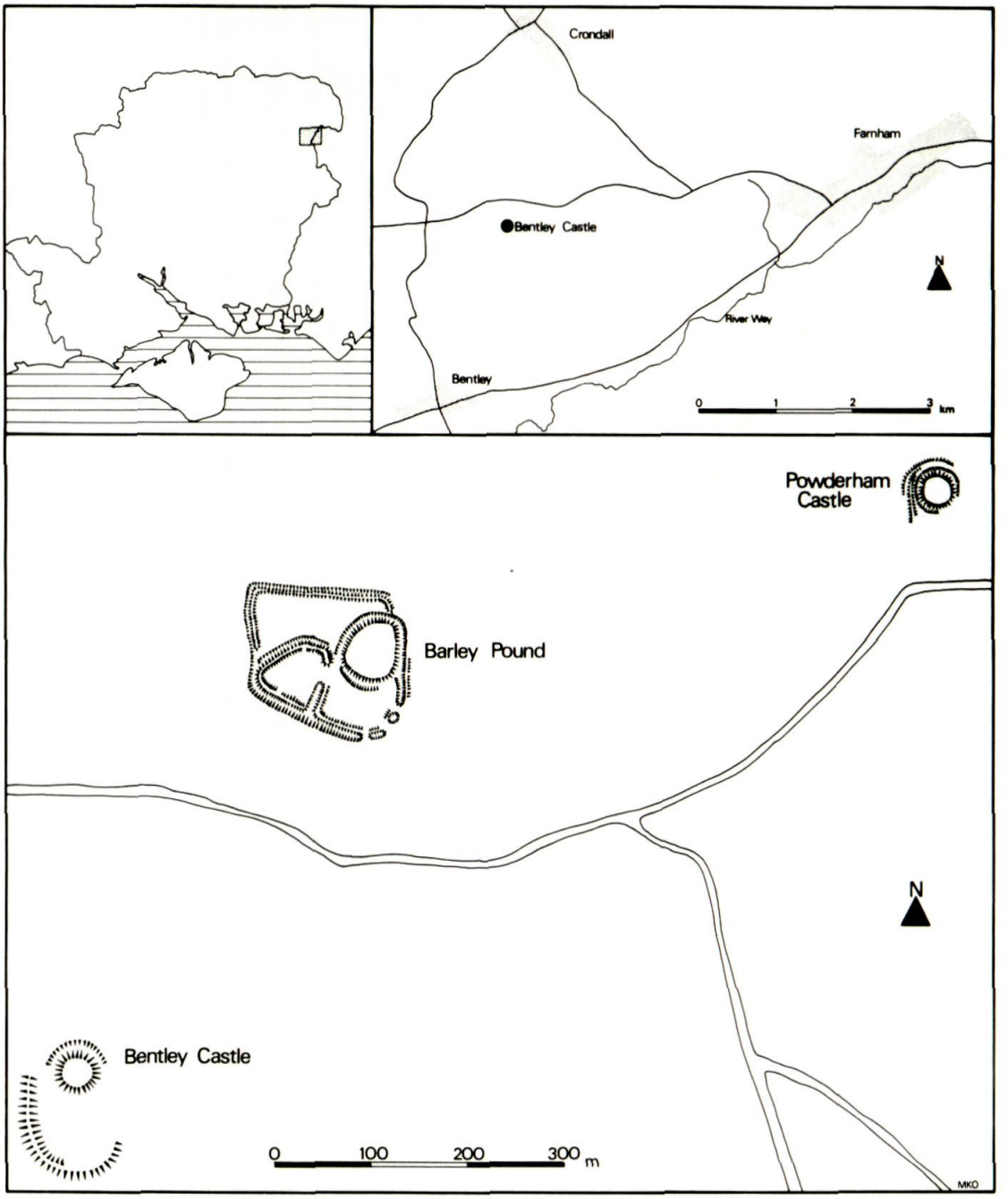

Fig 1. Location of Bentley Castle.

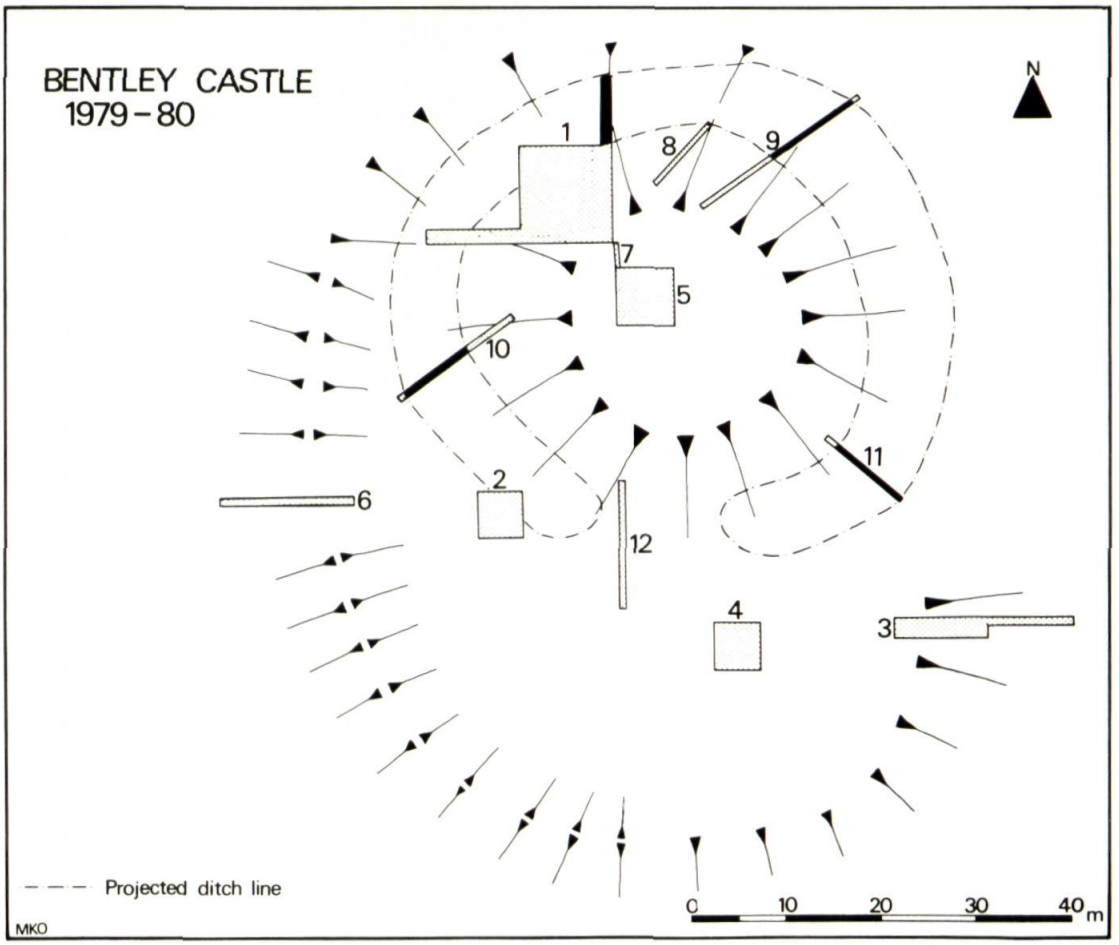

Fig 2. Bentley Castle. Site plan, showing excavated trenches.

The Excavation

Excavation was directed by the author for the Bentley Castle Excavations Committee. There were three primary objectives of the work: to assess the true form of the castle, to see whether any trace remained of timber structures, and to examine the effects of regular ploughing on the earthwork. Two short seasons of excavations took place; three weeks of mainly manual excavation in September 1979, and a week of recording following the mechanical cutting of several trenches in September 1980. The work was funded largely by Hampshire County Council, with additional financial assistance from the Department of the Environment and the Department of Archaeology of Southampton University.

The Motte (Fig 3)

Two areas (1 and 5) on the northwest quadrant of the mound were excavated by hand down to the uppermost undisturbed archaeological levels in 1979. In all an area of *c* 150 square metres was opened. The eastern 2m of trench 1 and the western 2m of trench 5 were both hand-dug to natural, and this north-south section through the mound was continued by an 8m long machine-cut section running north

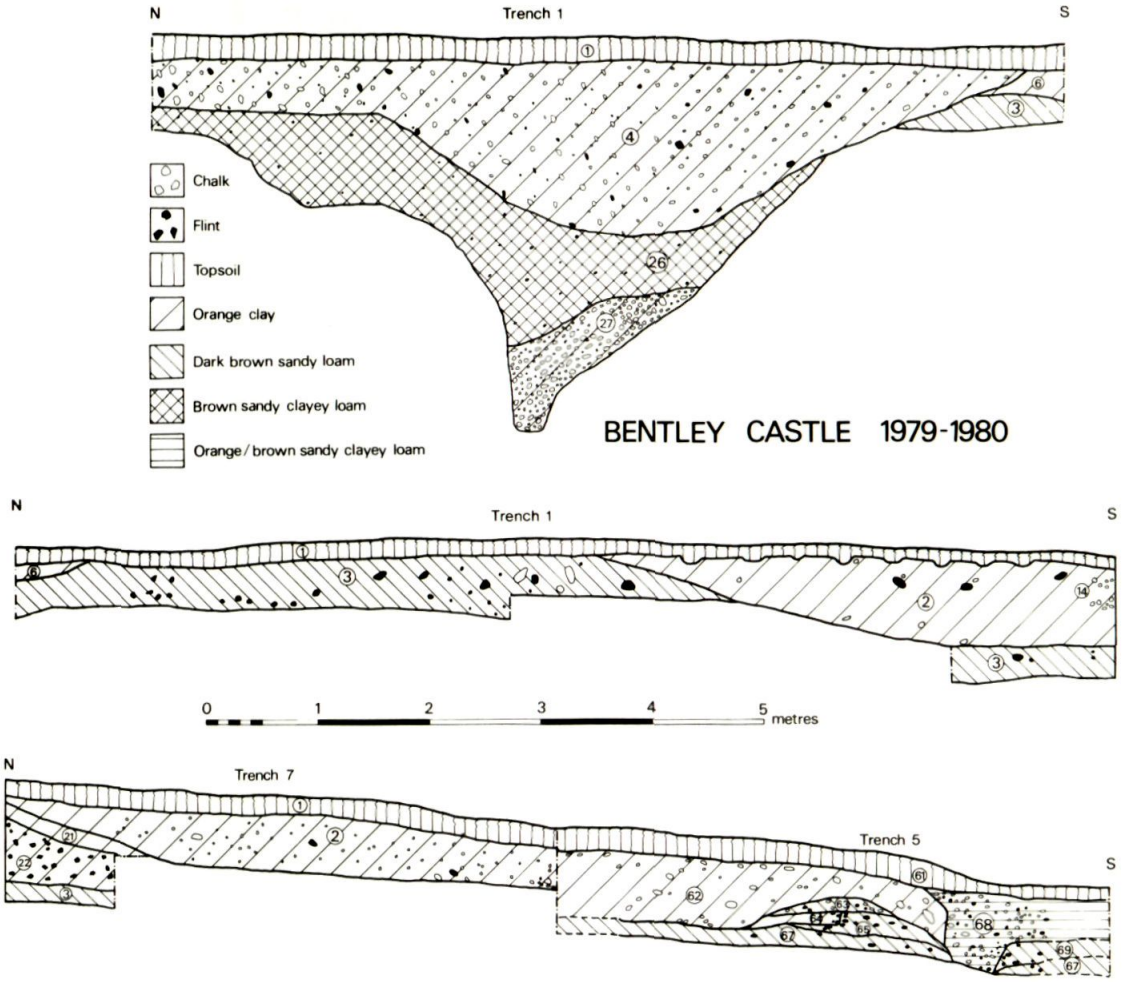

Fig 3. Bentley Castle. Section through the motte and ditch, view east.

from trench 1. The results obtained from these were elucidated by a series of machine cuts made in 1980, trenches 7–12.

In each trench the mound could be seen to consist of a dark brown, light silty loam with flints (3, 67) sealed by a layer of orange clay (2, 6, 62, 68), which had a 0.2m deep topsoil sealing it (1). Both the dark soil layer (*c* 0·5m) and the orange clay (0·6m) were deepest on the northern side of the mound and thinned out east, west and south. The mound survived to its maximum depth, of 0·9m, in trench 7. In this trench the generally simple stratigraphy was slightly more complicated, several possible dump layers appearing (63–5). The stratigraphy of the east face of this trench (not illustrated) was less complex than the west. Nowhere, despite careful cleaning of the surface, were any traces found of any structure that might have once surmounted the mound.

The Ditch (Fig 3)

This was sectioned by trenches 1 and 8–11. Trench 8 was not extended across the full width

of the ditch. In trenches 1, 9 and 10 the ditch was almost identical, 6–7m wide and 2·8m deep, with a rounded V profile. In trench 7, on the southeast of the mound, the ditch was the same width but only 1·6m deep. No trace was found of the ditch in trench 12.

As with the mound the stratigraphy was generally simple and consistent. The lowest layers, 1·1 to 1·4m deep in trenches 1, 9 and 10, were a well mixed brown coloured soil with stones (26–7). These were sealed by between 0·4 and 1·0m of orange clay (4), clearly dumped from the mound. This in turn was sealed by material indistinguishable from the topsoil although again disturbance of the upper 0·2 by the plough could clearly be seen.

The Bailey (Fig 4)

Two trenches were excavated across the bailey perimeter.

Trench 3, on the middle of the eastern side, was dug by hand, and revealed a degraded bank of chalk rubble in clay. It remained 0·1 to 0·3m deep and was spread across *c* 2·5m; the bank had probably been only *c* 1·0m wide originally. It had apparently been revetted at the back by a rough chalk wall which itself was built on top of a shallow 0·5m wide gulley. There was no ditch in front of the bank; a machine cut was made to confirm this unexpected observation.

A second trench, 6, was cut by machine across the west side of the bailey perimeter. Here the bank could be seen only as a thicker, darker topsoil layer; again there was no fronting ditch.

Two squares, 2 and 5, each 5m square, were carefully dug by hand within the bailey to examine whether there were any traces of buildings. No evidence was found of structures, and only in trench 3 west of the bailey bank, at the bottom of the topsoil, was a group of medieval sherds found together.

Roman Occupation

A considerable quantity of residual Roman pottery (below, 'The Pottery') was recovered during the excavations, particularly from the dark soil layer sealed by the motte. A large number of small, abraded pieces of Roman roofing tiles (*tegulae* and *imbricis*) were found and two small pieces of probably Roman glass were recovered from the topsoil. No structural features were found. Field walking indicated that there was a greater concentration of Roman material in the vicinity of the castle than elsewhere in the field, but this may be due to disturbance caused by the construction and destruction of the motte and bailey. It therefore remains conjectural whether the material derives from a Roman building in the immediate vicinity of the castle or from the substantial Barley Pound villa 1km to the north (*V C H Hants* **1**, 305).

Discussion and Conclusions

The excavations, although limited, allow several conclusions to be stated with some certainty. Firstly, the castle can be classified as a motte and bailey, not a ringwork and bailey as suggested by King and Renn (1971, 303). It appears likely that, in the absence of any evidence for a timber superstructure, the main feature of the castle was the motte ditch which enclosed the part of the motte outside the bailey but not the part adjacent to it, and which petered out within the bailey. The motte itself was apparently formed by topsoil or turf first being piled around the edge of the interior, this being capped in turn by clay excavated from the ditch. Calculation of the original height of the motte depends on an assessment of the motte's original form, but on the assumption that the spoil from the ditch was spread evenly across the interior, a mound *c* 1·2m above ground level would have been produced, giving a rise of *c* 4m from ditch bottom to motte top. There is some indication, however, that the motte was more substantial on its northern uphill side, facing Barley Pound, than elsewhere.

To the south the bailey was apparently delineated rather than defended by a bank about a metre wide and perhaps about the same height, constructed on the east of chalk and clay and on the west probably by stacked turves. The bailey is a fairly level platform on an otherwise gradually sloping site, and it is possible that this was produced or accentuated by removal of material to produce the surrounding bank.

There is no evidence as to whether any part of

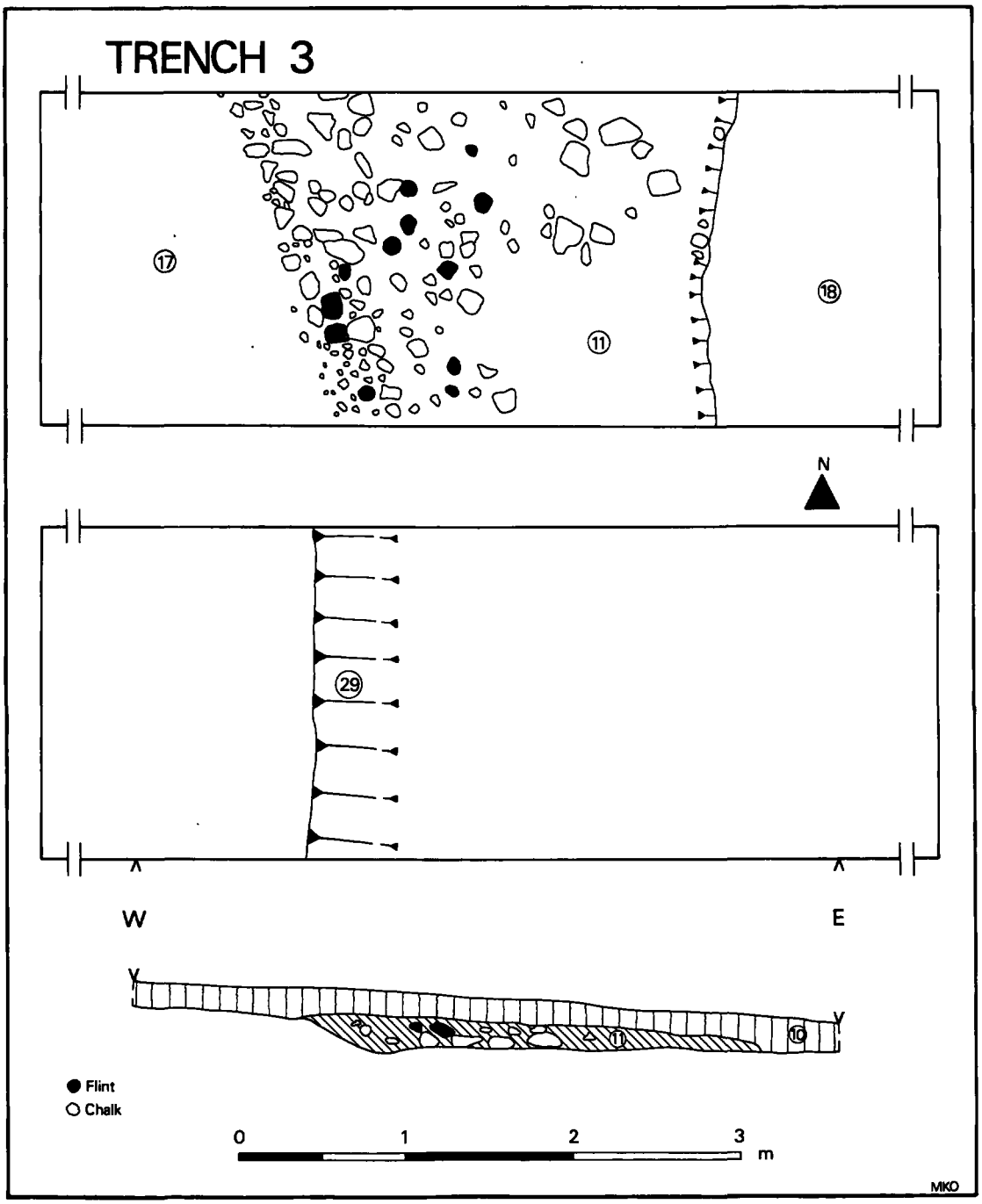

Fig 4. Bentley Castle. Plan and section of the bailey bank.

the castle was surmounted by a timber superstructure, and the destruction of the upper part of the motte and almost all the bailey bank makes it unlikely that future excavation would provide any. As the castle was primarily an offensive structure, probably hurriedly constructed to provide a base for mounted pickets, there would have been no need to supply the castle with substantial defences, so both the known historical background and the lack of archaeological evidence suggest that no permanent buildings were constructed to house the occupying force. It seems likely that the bailey perimeter merely delineated an area where tents were pitched and horses tethered. It seems likely that the main function of the motte was to act as an elevated look out point that could have formed a defensible strong point if an aggressive force threatened.

Whatever demolition or slighting of Bentley castle occurred at the end of the seige was apparently at most only superficial. In all the sections across the ditch, the lower layer was a metre-deep accumulation of blown or washed plough soil with few coarse components. Clearly this took many years to accumulate. Only then was there a concerted effort to level the mound, which was pushed into what would still have been a substantial surrounding ditch. When this took place is unknown, although agricultural improvement would provide a suitable motive. The nonchalant attitude displayed to the continued existence of a seige castle, capable of being made offensive with very little effort, adds weight to King and Renn's contention that at the time of its seizure *Lidelea*'s active life was at or near its end.

The fate of the 'companion' of Brian fitz Count is not recorded in the *Gesta,* but as *Lidelea* castle was surrendered by him to the king or bishop of Winchester he would presumably have been at their disposal. Neither does the *Gesta* give his identity, and this will never be certainly known. A possible candidate can, however, be suggested. Of the many surviving letters written by Gilbert Foliot, abbot of Gloucester and later bishop of Hereford and London, two concern his relative (*parenti*) Roger Foliot (Brooke *et al* 1967, nos 29–30). The first letter, dated 1144×48, was to Henry de Blois. It is a plea for clemency on behalf of Roger Foliot, a knight of Brian fitz Count, who was being held at the bishop's castle of Merdon by William of *Cheisnei,* presumably the castellan. The letter states that Roger's father never held more than half-a-hide of land, and that Roger himself owned nothing but his arms. To remove these and his horses, Gilbert states, would mean that Roger would lose everything that he had. The probability is very strong that Roger and his father were members of a cadet branch of the Foliots of Chilton Foliat, Wiltshire (Morey and Brooke 1965, 42, 50). The second letter, written perhaps after the first letter had proved unfruitful, was to Geoffrey (III), prior of Winchester (occ 1139×53). This letter does not give the background detail that the first does, but the tone and plea are the same (Morey and Brooke 1965, 47). Gilbert asks Geoffrey to intercede with the lord of Winchester (Henry de Blois) to secure the resease of Roger Foliot, held in prison in distress and poverty.

Clearly, as the letters can only be dated approximately and because the nature of the offence that Roger committed is not recited, the link, if any, between him and the 'companion of Brian fitz Count' of the *Gesta* must remain conjectural. It is a tantalizing possibility that they were one and the same.

The Pottery (J R Timby)

The excavations at Bentley castle produced approximately 4·7 kg of pottery. The material was generally abraded and fragmentary. Of the total quantity recovered 4·6 kg consisted of residual material, Roman in date; thus the number of diagnostic sherds attributable to the medieval period is very small. Due to the general similarity in fabric type and the technique of manufacture (ie, wheelmade) in both the Roman and medieval periods, it has been necessary to place the material into three categories – Roman, early medieval and date uncertain.

Roman

The bulk of the Roman material was derived from Trench 1, context 3, but residual sherds were present in most of the other contexts containing pottery. These mostly consist of grey,

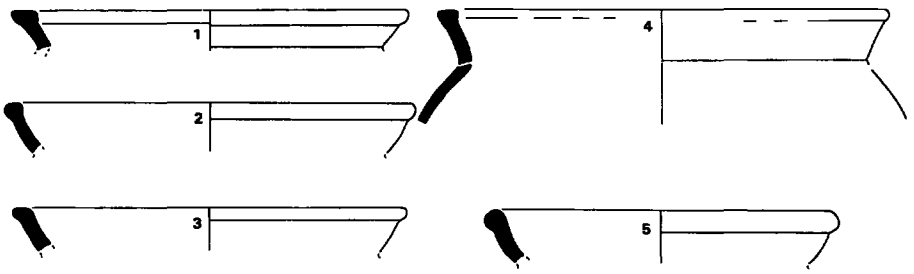

Fig 5. Bentley Castle. Pottery, scale 1:4.

buff-brown and grey black sandy coarse wares with a few abraded fine wares. The majority of the coarse wares are local in origin, products of the Farnham industry, in particular the Alice Holt kilns to the immediate south of the site. A wide range of forms is represented including the following types: jars (cordoned and necked, various rim forms beaded, flat topped); cooking pots (everted and 'cavetto' rimmed types); flange dishes; bowls; lids. These range in date from the late first century AD through to the latter part of the fourth century AD, the emphasis being towards the later period.

In addition to the coarse wares there are 13 sherds of abraded samian including a possible late first century AD example of a cup (Dragendorff form 27) and one sherd of New Forest colour-coated ware.

Medieval

Very few Medieval sherds were recovered and unfortunately, with the possible exception of Trench 3 context 10, these could not be stratigraphically separated from the Roman wares. The only form that can be placed with certainty into this category is the cooking pot represented by five rims, three slightly sagged bases and four sherds of scratch marked ware. The fabrics are generally hard and sandy and produced on a wheel. Frequent inclusions of rounded quartz and occasional ironstone are visible macroscopically. In addition to the sand-tempered fabrics there are a few unfeatured sherds with angular flint tempering.

Noticeably absent are examples of shell-tempered ware which have been found in twelfth century contexts from Guildford, Surrey (Streeten pers com) and examples of glazed ware. The typology of the cooking pot rims would accord well on present evidence with a date in the first half of the twelfth century. The similarity of fabric type with the earlier Roman wares would suggest some continuity of potting activity in the area and thus a local origin for these wares. The tradition of scratch-marked ware is a widespread one and examples have been found all over Wessex and as far east as Reigate, Surrey (Turner 1971). The date range for these wares is generally from the late eleventh century to *c*1300 AD, when examples were still being manufactured in the Laverstock kilns (Musty *et al* 1969).

Description of sherds

Trench 1 (3)

1. (Not illustrated). A rimsherd in a light orange sandy ware. Form and date uncertain.
2. (Not illustrated). One bodysherd of scratch marked ware.

Trench 3 (10)

3. (Fig 5.1). Everted rim from a cooking pot, diameter 21cm. Dark reddish-brown exterior and interior surfaces. Fairly coarse sandy fabric with frequent grains of rounded quartz.
4. (Fig 5.2). A rimsherd from a cooking pot, diameter 22cm. Moderately hard sandy ware, light greenish-grey in colour.
5. (Fig 5.3). A rimsherd from a cooking pot, diameter 21cm. Medium grained sandy ware. Patchy light grey and orange-brown exterior surface, light grey interior and a

greenish brown core.

6. (Not illustrated). A rim fragment in a grey sandy ware. Form and date uncertain.
7. (Not illustrated). Basesherd from a cooking pot. Characterised by a slightly sagged profile and scratch marking on the exterior wall. Dark grey-brown sandy ware with a lighter pinkish-brown interior.
8–13. (Not illustrated). Six basesherds with similar profiles in a variety of sandy wares.
13–15. (Not illustrated). Three sandy ware, scratch-marked bodysherds.
16. (Not illustrated). Bodysherd with two lightly impressed thumb impressions, possibly from the base of a jug. Orange-brown, flint tempered sandy ware.

Trench 5 (2)

17. (Not illustrated). Rimsherd from a bowl, diameter 18cm. Dark brown-black exterior, buff interior in a dense sandy fabric. Date uncertain.

Trench 5 (1)

18. (Not illustrated). Rimsherd from a ? cooking pot, diameter 24cm. Pale brown, very hard sandy, finely micaceous fabric. Slightly finer than former examples. Date uncertain.
19. (Not illustrated). Basesherd in a similar fabric to no. 18.

Miscellaneous: From the east side of the Bailey

20. (Fig 5.4). Everted rim cooking pot, diameter 24cm. Dark brown slightly pinkish fabric with a dark brown exterior and a reddish-brown interior surface. Hard, dense sandy ware. Shoulder sherd in an identical fabric, probably belonging to the same vessel.
21. (Fig 5.5). Rimsherd from a cooking pot, diameter 19cm. Dark grey-brown sandy ware.
22. (Not illustrated). Rimsherd in dark grey-brown sandy ware. Form and date uncertain.

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The finds and excavation archive have been lodged with the Hampshire County Museum Service, reference number A 1983.8.

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