

# The Wallingford Burgh to Borough Research Project

by Oliver Creighton, Neil Christie, Deirdre O'Sullivan and Helena Hamerow

## Wallingford, Oxfordshire

In August 2002 the first full field season of a new archaeological research project was undertaken in and around the town of Wallingford, located alongside the Thames in south Oxfordshire. Titled The Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project, the proposed five-year programme aims to bridge the traditional gap between the late Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods through detailed archaeological study of a highly significant historic townscape and its hinterland. The town is justly renowned for its surviving Saxon burh defences and the complex and extensive earthworks of a Norman and later castle imposed into the north-east quarter of the urban space. Its riverside position, overseeing a ford across the Thames, gave Wallingford a strategic role at the Wessex-Mercia border; the river and local communications routes also allowed Wallingford to prosper as a royal centre after the late eleventh century. Decline was only consequent to the growth of Reading abbey and town to the south and of Oxford to the north and due also to changes in the role and navigability of the river.

The preservation of town rampart and castle earthworks in association with a substantially medieval street pattern makes Wallingford of central importance in examining the nature of late Saxon town planning and Norman urban castle building, and yet there are minimal archaeological data available with which to investigate this. Excavations have been undertaken previously in the 1960s on the town's west gate ramparts, across the former north gate (later buried by extensions to the castle earthworks), and within the castle inner bailey. These excavations identified excellent preservation of archaeological deposits, revealing tenth-century and later buildings and deposits and cob-built structures. Unfortunately, of these excavations, only those at the west gate have been published. Further, no detailed archaeological assessment or mapping of the defences and castle site has previously been conducted. To these previous excavations can be added a series of watching briefs and other evaluations that provide tantalising glimpses of the town's development and material culture. However, no attempt has so far been made to synthesise and contextualise this work. Similarly, there are many questions relating to Wallingford's origins and context yet to be clarified or even examined: the presence of early Anglo-Saxon inhumation and cremation burials immediately outside the south-west defences of the town (discovered in the 1940s) raises the question of site status prior to the burh; the nature of the scattered Roman finds in and around the town remains to be addressed; and the environs of Wallingford before and after the burh foundation remains largely obscure.

Wallingford offers an unique opportunity to understand an evolving townscape and its rural setting in a crucial period of European historical transition. Late and post-

medieval shrinkage of the urban area has resulted in the outstanding preservation of the burh/borough defences and castle earthworks; in addition, substantial areas of open intramural urban space (c. 0.8 sq.km) survive (Bullcroft/Kinecroft), including the area of the lost Norman priory of Holy Trinity. These spaces particularly offer scope for tackling questions of later Saxon and earlier Norman town planning, whilst the castle earthworks enable fresh questions to be raised concerning the impact of Norman castle-building on the urban space, economy and population. The unsurveyed town ramparts further offer a near unique opportunity to observe the format, role and evolution of urban defence. Finally, the surrounding landscape offers much potential for analysis through detailed field walking and geophysical survey combined with air photo study and re-examination of findspots (notably Anglo-Saxon and Roman materials).

The Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project will comprise an integrated research programme, combining academic and professional expertise with community archaeology, and accessing a wide variety of archaeological, topographical and documentary sources. The project has been designed in conjunction with several local partners. These include: The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society and Wallingford Museum; The Northmoor Trust (the environmental agency responsible for the management of the castle site); Wallingford Town Council; South Oxfordshire District Council; and the County Archaeology Service. The project management team is headed by academics from three universities with specialisms in early medieval urbanism (N. Christie, Leicester); Anglo-Saxon settlements (H. Hamerow, Oxford); castles (O. Creighton, Exeter); and medieval material culture (D. O'Sullivan, Leicester). It is also fully supported by previous excavators at Wallingford, Prof. N. Brooks, R. Carr and T. Rowley, including access to their archives. Collation of archival data (NMR, SMR, watching brief data, etc.) and liaison with local groups and preliminary analysis of the castle zone were undertaken in 2001.

A pilot field season of geophysical and topographic survey of the Anglo-Saxon *burh* fortifications and Norman castle at Wallingford was undertaken in August 2002. As noted, systematic study of these well-preserved and well-known monuments has hitherto been lacking. In the public park known as the Bullcroft, which occupies most of the north-western sector of the Anglo-Saxon burh, resistivity and gradiometer survey were carried out to locate primarily the 'lost' site of the Norman priory of Holy Trinity – this significantly twinned with the castle in the northern half of Wallingford and these two units suggesting the relative availability of open or less built-up urban space there. Systematically demolished in 1522, no above-ground features exist of the priory, and twentieth-century recreational landscaping has further modified the zone. Nonetheless, resistivity coverage has

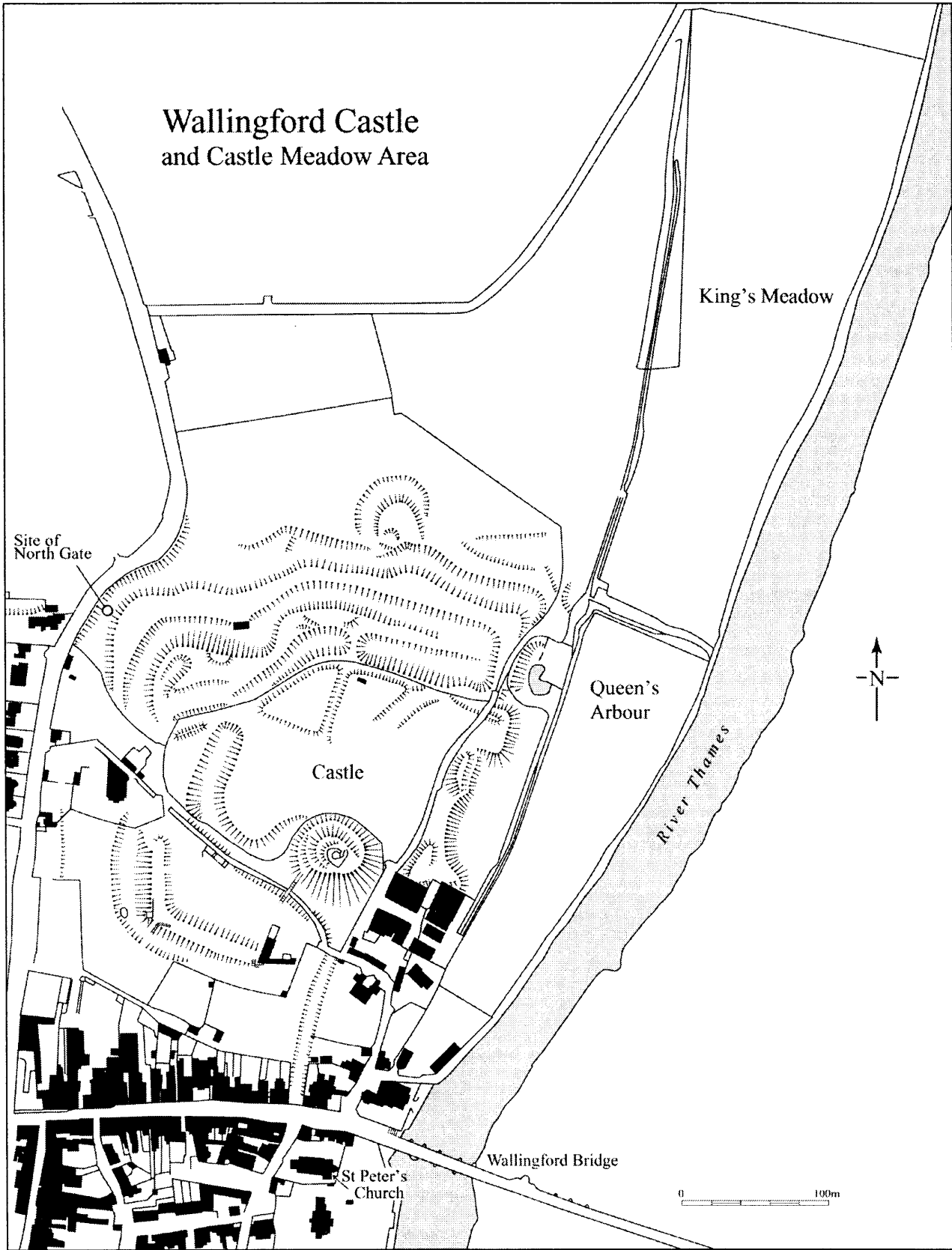


Figure 17: Wallingford Castle Meadows area, showing the Norman and later castle superimposed into the north-east quarter of the Saxon burh.

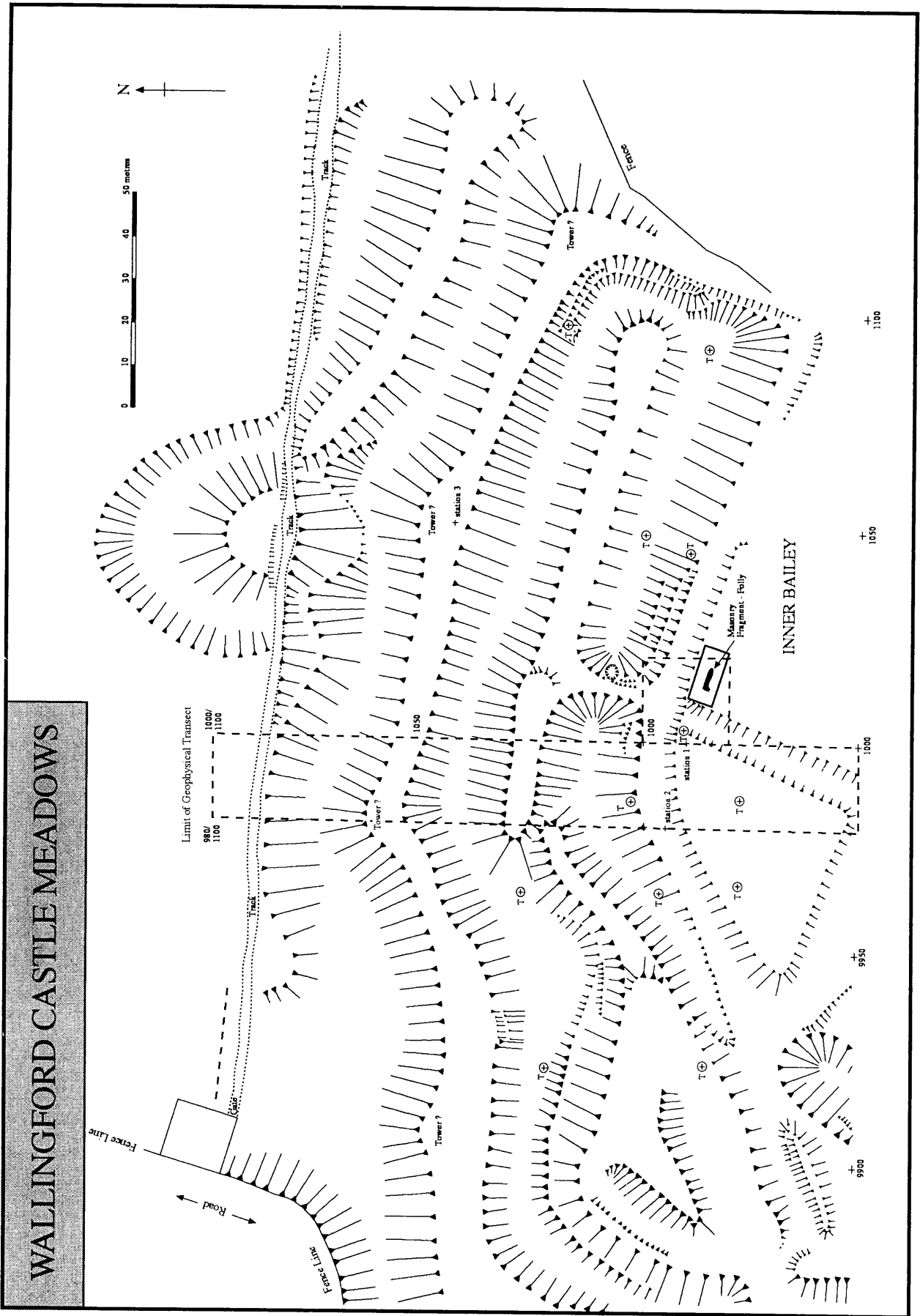


Figure 18: Preliminary topographical survey of part of the Castle Meadows area, showing the north bailey defences and associated landscaping.

produced valuable indications of the likely priory site, suggesting a putative building complex re-using the former burh as part of an associated precinct. Intensive survey will be required in 2003 to determine both form and extent more precisely. Interestingly, topographic survey also suggested residual traces of ridge and furrow across part of the Bullcroft zone, suggesting agricultural exploitation in association with, or more likely post-dating the monastic site.

The open area of the Bullcroft extends fully to the ramparts of the *burh* and medieval town (these in part terraced and modified internally and on the summit, but with ditch and bank exceptionally well preserved otherwise, particularly on the town's north flank); sections were surveyed using a Total Station demonstrating a maximum extant depth of 7m from bank top to visible ditch bottom. Resistivity survey was directed also at seeking traces of possible later Saxon town planning previous to the imposition of the priory. Here too valuable results were achieved, with potential traces of N-S and W-E lanes and possible intramural tracks; house plots can also be suggested, although these zones likewise require more detailed scrutiny in 2003. Interpretations are of course tentative, since the extent and nature of works and buildings associated with the priory are unknown. Most importantly, however, the surveys indicate the Bullcroft to be a zone of much fruitful archaeological potential.

The second principal area of study in 2002 comprised the Castle Meadows – the complex and extensive earthworks preserved north of the damaged and truncated motte (the areas south-west are heavily damaged through

landscaping and to the south-east by the intrusion of buildings). Detailed Total Station topographic survey of the earthworks in Castle Meadows was designed to clarify the structure and configuration of the Norman and later castle, and to re-assess the traditional view of a triple rampart/wall defensive organisation with Civil War reinforcement. In brief, the complexity of landscaping can be seen to reflect an extended history of site usage extending from late Saxon (*burh* rampart) to castle imposition and castle growth to Victorian ornamental landscaping. Reuse, manipulation and redesigning have in places confused the medieval earthworks, although a major finding was the identification of earthwork evidence for medieval landscaping including the extensive use of water features and managed access lines. The topographical analysis was complemented by resistivity and magnetometry survey of a 200 x 20m N-S oriented transect through the inner bailey and castle defences, to test the visibility and clarity of sub-surface features and to check on the disposition of the possible triple defensive works.

Work planned for the 2003 season will include further geophysical and topographical survey of the castle complex within its urban setting, the open space and ditch-and-rampart defences of the Kinecroft in the town's south-west zone, and the site of a suggested Anarchy-period siege-work on the east bank of the Thames. More detailed geophysical investigation will be made of key zones of the Bullcroft to clarify the presumed priory zone and Saxon units. In addition, a first phase of landscape study will commence, linked to the re-analysis of Anglo-Saxon findspots (e.g. cemeteries at Long Wittenham and Abingdon).