

Excavations at the Mount

summary by Steve Taylor

Excavation of 'The Mount' a moated works at Cheswick Green near Solihull, was undertaken between 31st August and 1st October, 1973, on behalf of the Greaves Organisation! In 1953 T. L. Jones of the Ministry of Public Building and Works had excavated on the site which consists of an irregular area of little more than an acre, surrounded by a bank and water-filled moat. Jones trenched the area immediately within the SW entrance sectioned, the eastern bank in two places, attempted to section the moat and, revealed a small rough area of stone rubble (interpreted as a floor) in the north-eastern angle of the embankment. Gullies and what may have been the traces of timber structures existing before the construction of the embankment were found. Jones concluded that the defences were put up in the fourteenth century or later but offered no credible theories, as to their purpose.



In the 1973 excavations it was decided to concentrate on stripping as much as possible of the area within the embankment in order to find what may have been the nature and date of any buildings on the site.

No attempt was made to investigate the moat, this was scarcely possible within the limits of available finance and could, in any case, have yielded little or no information about the purpose of the earthwork. Jones work on the embankment made further investigation of this feature unnecessary, Various areas on top of the bank were excavated in order to see whether or not there had been a timber palisade; no trace of any such palisade was found. Also no attempt was made to investigate the pond occupying part of the area, but this would seem to date in its present form from the seventeenth century or later.

The area within the embankment was as far as possible cleared of bracken and undergrowth, and the modern topsoil and leaf mould removed mechanically.

This stripping showed two large areas containing much ash and charcoal, one to the north-west of the entrance and the other to the north-west of Jones, 'floor' (which still remained in situ). This latter area proved to be a large oval of charcoal and burnt soil up to one foot thick in the centre and tailing away towards it's edges. In it were found fragments of medieval pottery, the latest of which were probably of fourteenth or fifteenth century date. Below the eastern side of this area of burning was a spread of red and yellow clay which represented slip and erosion from the embankment; below this displaced rampart material the original pre-fortification soil continued under the ramparts and contained a few sherds of mainly early medieval pottery.

Bellow this buried soil level, and cutting down into the otherwise undisturbed subsoil beneath, were two shallow gullies dating from the pre-fortification use of the site. The floor, discovered in 1953 was resting on the pre-rampart soil; no dating material was found underneath it and it is impossible to be certain whether this feature dated from before or after the building of the embankment. The fact that it lay immediately adjacent to the large burnt area that in part overlay the rampart material, may perhaps indicate that if it was indeed a floor, the building of which it was

part dated from after the construction of the embankment; or indeed from after the embankment had fallen into disrepair.

The second area of burning, immediately inside the south-west entrance, was investigated with similar results save that only three tiny and abraded pottery fragments were found. Again the area of burning was roughly oval in shape, and again the pre-fortification soil was traced running under the embankment, part of the original face of which was cleaned and exposed at this point. The only features located at this end of the site were a gully dating from after the burning, a small slot earlier than the burning but otherwise of uncertain date, and a pre-fortification gully already sectioned by Jones; none of these produced dateable material.

The rest of the interior of the Mount was where possible troweled down and investigated; there was no sign of occupation debris or buildings and the only features traced, including a large ditch four foot in depth running from north to south across the site, were definitely modern in origin.

Conclusion. Taken in conjunction with Jones' work, the recent excavation

leads to the following conclusions:

1. The site was definitely in use before the bank and ditch were constructed, but there is no conclusive evidence of habitation or building on the area at this period.
2. On the evidence of the handful of potsherds found, the fortifications were in existence by the late mediaeval period; the date of their construction is less certain.
3. The two areas of burning could well be interpreted as casual charcoal burning taking place in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, and making use of the sheltered position afforded by the embankments. The fact that this burning in parts overlay a considerable amount of eroded bank points to the bank being neglected and in disrepair at this time. If the rough 'floor' discovered in 1953 dates from this phase, it could perhaps be the remains of a hut associated with charcoal-burning activities.
4. It is the opinion of the writer that the Mount is a medieval construction and that (unless one indulges the current archaeological fashion for buildings on wooden sills leaving no detectable traces, and inhabited by people who used no pottery) there were no original buildings within the area of the embankment so that, indeed, the Mount was not 'inhabited'.

The reasons for the construction of such a substantial earthwork without internal buildings can probably never be known. Its unusual form makes one feel that the Mount was a 'one-off job' constructed for a particular purpose, which purpose may perhaps have ceased to apply before the project was finished.

By the latter part of the mediaeval period the rampart was in disrepair and the interior was used on occasions for charcoal burning activities; again there are no indications of any regular occupation of the site.

Work in 1953 and 1973 has resulted in a virtual total excavation of the interior of this site and one must with regret record the fact that its archaeological potential would appear to be exhausted.

(S. J. T. 3rd October, 1973)

Note:

Excavations at the Mount, Cheswick Green, Shirley by To L. Jones, Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments, (Ministry of Works,) appeared as a paper in the Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society, Volume 71. (1953).