



The Reign of Stephen and Matilda 1135-54

In 1143 England was in a state of anarchy. Henry I had died leaving his only living child Matilda as heir to the throne of England, but she was usurped by her cousin Stephen of Blois. Eighteen years of fighting between them meant that the barons could join whichever side suited them at the time, or use the opportunity to fight their own battles.

In Cambridgeshire, the most troublesome of barons was Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex, once one of Stephen's most powerful supporters. He made a base in the Isle of Ely, which the fens made almost impregnable, and his forces raided fen edge villages and towns such as Cambridge.

Stephen ordered castles to be built around the fens to surround Geoffrey, demanding land and workers from local landowners. Fortifications were generally shortlived and some, such as that at Burwell (where Geoffrey was mortally wounded), were never completed.



A typical 'anarchy' castle



Burwell castle was purchased by Burwell Parish Council in 1983 and is managed for the benefit of the people of Burwell. It is a scheduled ancient monument. Please do not leave litter, light fires, or disturb wildlife. Metal detectors, horse riding and motorbikes are not permitted. Take care to avoid accidents as the Parish Council can take no responsibility for any injuries.

An Information Pack about Burwell Castle has been produced to accompany this leaflet. Please contact Burwell Parish Council for details.

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Local Heritage initiative



Heritage Lottery Fund

DEFRA
Department for
Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs



The Countryside Agency



Cambridgeshire
County Council



Nationwide

BURWELL CASTLE

Cambridgeshire



Archaeological Field Unit



Burwell Castle today. Front cover shows the castle in 1953

The name Burwell, first recorded in 1060 as Burcwell means 'spring by the castle', but interestingly the only castle known to be associated with Burwell, to date, is the Anarchy Castle built by King Stephen 83 years later in 1143. It could be that the castle referred to is in fact a much earlier Iron Age fen-edge fort.

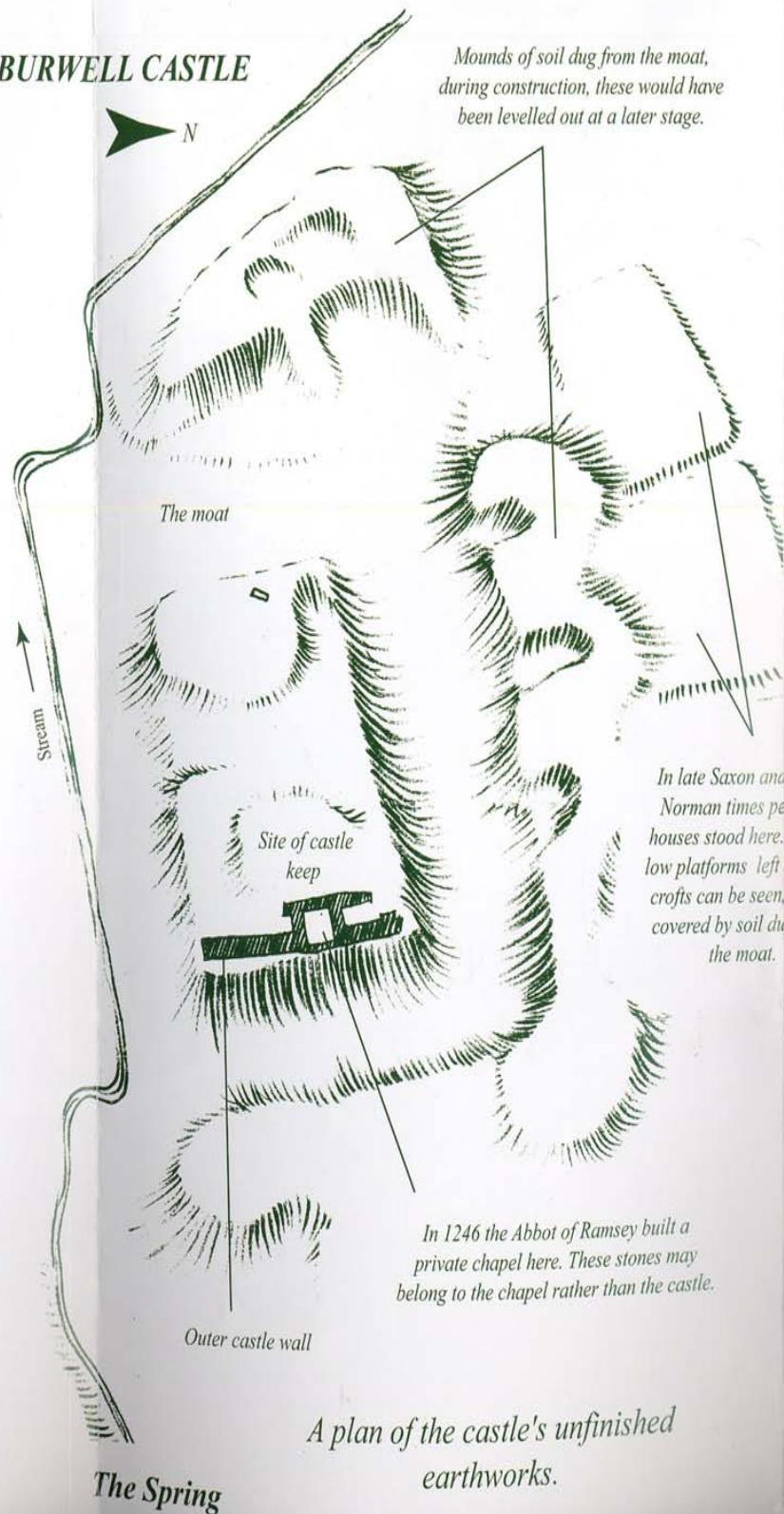
Prehistoric tools have been found in and around the area but evidence of occupation at the Burwell castle site itself dates from the Roman period in the form of a fine Roman villa. The choice of this particular site was probably influenced by its fen edge position, the presence of the spring and the availability of a local population who could be utilised to work the villa's estate.

The name Burwell could also refer to an early Saxon centre or 'burgh', a possible location for which lies on the area of land between High Street and Mandeville where St Mary's church is located (and where the spring emerges from the ground).



Courtyard garden of a

BURWELL CASTLE



Mounds of soil dug from the moat, during construction, these would have been levelled out at a later stage.

The moat

Site of castle keep

In late Saxon and early Norman times peasant houses stood here. These low platforms left by their crofts can be seen, partly covered by soil dug from the moat.

In 1246 the Abbot of Ramsey built a private chapel here. These stones may belong to the chapel rather than the castle.

Outer castle wall

The Spring

A plan of the castle's unfinished earthworks.

Early Christians frequently utilised and rededicated existing sacred sites and festivals, and the fact that early Roman Christians chose to use the waters from this spring for



Roman Lead Christening vat found nearby

baptisms could hint at the nature of the site's earlier religious significance. The spring's long standing status as a sacred site would also have determined the location for St Mary's church close-by.

Burwell castle is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and is protected under the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act. The monument is managed for the benefit of the archaeological remains and nature conservation..

During the spring and summer the grassy chalk banks of the earthworks are bright with flowers - the yellow of cowslips, birdsfoot trefoil, lady's bedstraw and greater hawkbit, the purple of lesser knapweed and the blue of wild clary. The flowers attract many butterflies such as Red Admirals, Painted Ladies, Gate Keepers and Common Blue.

The most common plants in the moat are reed sweet-grass and great willow herb. There is a stand of bulrushes and some less common marsh plants.



Dog-rose