

# Tout Hill Close, Peterborough

By Donald Mackreth

Tout Hill Close lies north of Peterborough Cathedral Precinct, between Peterscourt and St. Mary's Court. City Road forms its northern boundary. Virtually all the northern half of the site has now been destroyed to accommodate the basement of a new office block. The site was chosen for excavation because of its proximity to the Cathedral where seventh-century occupation may be presumed. Moreover, it was almost the last open space left in this part of Peterborough outside the Precinct and it seemed to have been unoccupied for several hundred years. There is also good evidence that the *burh* founded under the influence of Saint Aethelwold lay to the east of the then monastery until it was removed in the twelfth century to the west side where the modern town centre is.

It was not known whether there would be any substantial archaeological remains on the site and, with limited time and labour in the depths of winter, the objectives were simple: what was the nature of the occupation, if any; when did it start and end; was there any evidence for the earliest days of Medeshamstede and for the tenth-century *burh*.

The main excavation (fig 12) covered a large part of the southern side of the proposed office block. Within its confines all soil had to be removed to a depth of over 2 metres. At the east end many pits were identified, and it was during the excavation of these — and in the attempt to find natural — that we realised that there was very extensive pitting. A machine-cut trench across the site, outside the late building described below, showed that it was extremely unlikely that any natural had been seen on the ground surface. The sections revealed a minimum of 33 pits, many of them large, which had effectively cut away nearly all the natural above a cornbrash base. When the office block basement had been excavated by the contractors, the dense mass of pits was seen to spread beyond the edge of the hole in all directions. It is not an exaggeration to say that there could not have been less than 1,700 pits in all.

There was some evidence for timber buildings, but pit-digging, as well as the limitations of time, prevented any plan from being recovered. Apart from a few sixteenth- or seventeenth-century pits at the east end, all the pits were mediaeval. There was the distinct possibility that many, if not most, were Saxon or Saxo-Norman. Samples were taken of the pits in the sides of the machine cuts, but the results, from the point of view of pottery, were disappointing. In 40% there was no

pottery or only a few Roman sherds, 30% had some shell-gritted sherds, and the rest contained ordinary mediaeval wares. 70% of the pits were in theory undatable or contained sherds belonging very probably to Saxo-Norman times at the latest. With the paucity of sherds there can be no certainty that some of the shell-gritted pottery is not later than, say, the twelfth century, although the absence of other wares may be significant. It is possible to argue that there is evidence for intense early use of the site. The absence of Stamford ware in the bulk of these pits is remarkable. There is also a lack of sherds which characterise the Middle Saxon sites at Castor.

The evidence for the *burh* being sited east of the monastery is thin, but consistent. Martin de Bec (Abbot, 1133-55) is said by Hugh Candidus to have changed the position of the monastic gate, the hithe and the market place. The original parish church of Saint John's, however, stood at the east end of the monastery until the fifteenth century, when it was re-sited in the market place. Before the bridge was built in 1308, the river was crossed by a ford east of the monastery and the way into the present town was along the line of City Road. The main road to the north was until last century a direct continuation of the road over the ford. Eyre's map of 1791 reveals what looks suspiciously like a colonised market place and a circuit road which may mark the line of a ditch, both lying east of the Cathedral. Unfortunately, a great deal of this hypothetical *burh* must have been destroyed when St. Mary's Court was built.

Tout Hill Close produced no good evidence for major occupation during the thirteenth, fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Only at the end of the Middle Ages was there any extensive development. A large house was built, of which only part of an eastern range, with a courtyard to the west and two closes to the east, was uncovered. Room 1 had plastered walls and an earth floor. Room 2 had been remodelled and once had a flagged floor and what appears to have been a tank in the north-west corner. There was no evidence for fireplaces or hearths and the room may finally have been used as a barn: the pitched stone area inside the east entrance may have been for carts. Rooms 3 and 4 had no surviving floors; but Room 3 had a drain leading from it to a main north-south drain, which ran across the courtyard to the west, through Room 5 and out, possibly, to the ditch on the south. The dating evidence for the building was sparse. It could have been built at the end of the fifteenth century and occupied into the seventeenth. The

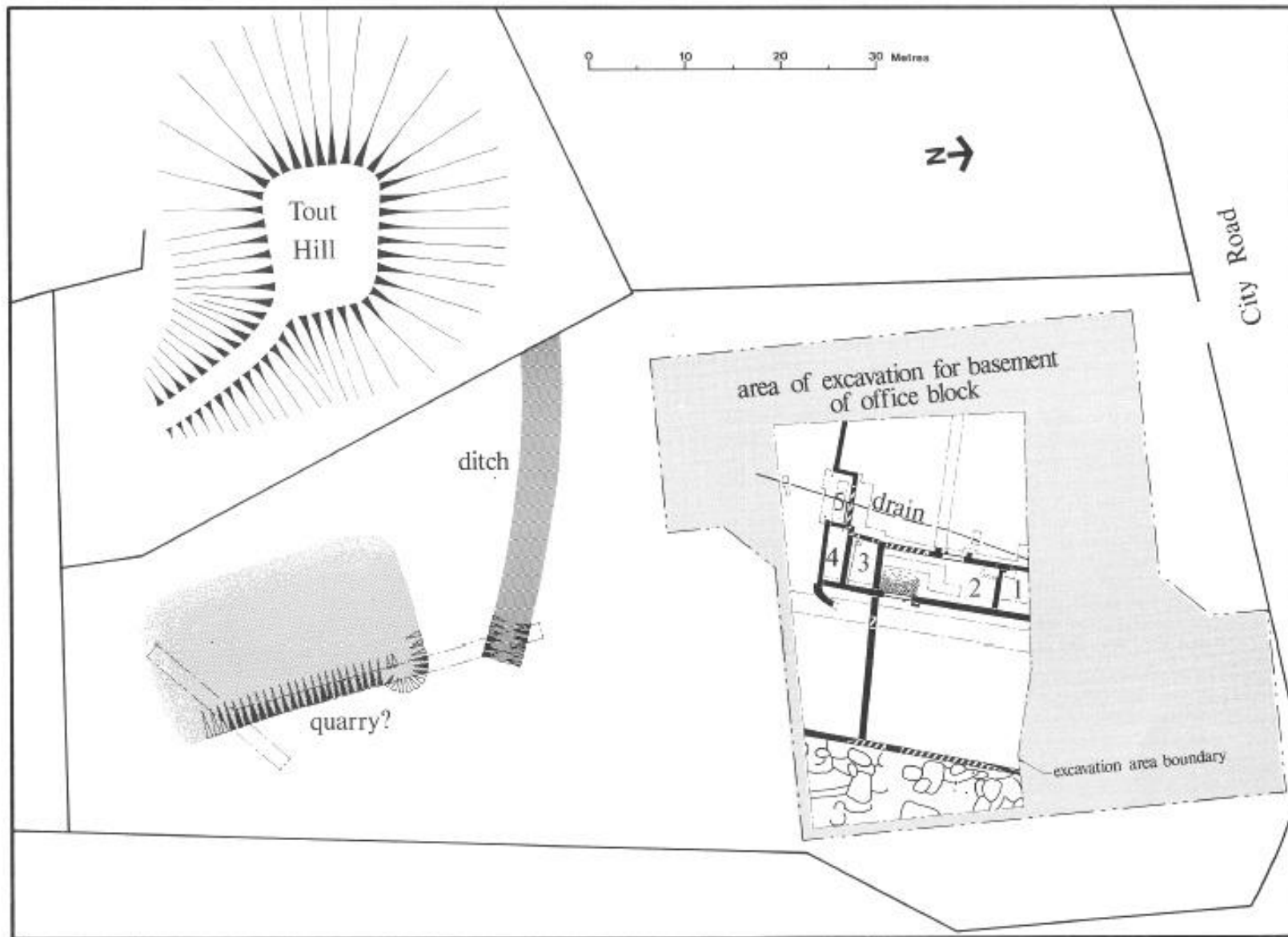


Fig 12 The mediaeval site at Tout Hill Close, Peterborough

structure could originally have belonged to the monastery, but no record of a building here seems to survive.

South of the main site two trenches were laid out in the hope that some sign of the seventh-century settlement might be found. In this respect the results were entirely negative. The cornbrash here was at a higher level and its overburden of sand and gravel was largely intact up to the modern turf. What was completely unexpected was a large ditch and an even larger hole to the south of it. The lower part of the ditch may have been deliberately filled, but most of its contents had slowly accumulated over some centuries. The line of the ditch to the west showed as a very slight hollow into which the machines used for digging the trenches tended to sink.

The ditch line looks as if it could skirt the mound in the eastern end of the Dean's Garden. This mound is Tout Hill and is traditionally the castle built in 1070 by Thorold, the new Norman Abbot. If the ditch is to be associated with the motte, it is presumably part of the circuit of the bailey. However, no sign of a rampart was found. The siting of the castle is interesting; for, if it was Thorold's work, it was placed to counter any approach from the north. It may have been intended to overawe the *burh*, which may have lain to the east of the monastery. In 1069-70 William was ferociously suppressing a rebellion in the north; Hereward, just before Thorold's arrival, had destroyed by fire the conventual buildings and the town; and the Danes were involved in the north and the Fens. The castle, in Norman eyes, was a necessity.

The large hole south of the ditch is much more of a problem. Where the ditch had only cut into the cornbrash, the hole appears to have penetrated the stone down to the heavy clays beneath. It is of such a size that it may well have been a quarry. If so, only the monastery itself would have had the resources to create it. The hole had been deliberately filled with a mixture of sand and gravel and some cornbrash and

blue clay. Since the ditch had been allowed to remain open through the Middle Ages, but the putative quarry had been deliberately filled and contained no purely mediaeval pottery, it should be earlier than the castle and its fillings should be associated with the castle's creation. If this was the case, the siting of the castle here was of such importance that the labour involved in filling the huge hole was of no consequence.

The only useful pottery from the quarry was recovered from a turf line which sealed the lower parts of the hole and which was in turn sealed beneath the deliberate filling. There was a little glazed Stamford ware and some other wares which best fit a tenth- or eleventh-century date, but are not more closely datable in themselves. It looks as if the hole had been abandoned for some time before the castle was built. The main early monastic works known for which a quarry would have been needed are the building of the monastic church after 963; the building of the Precinct wall between 992 and 1006; the rebuilding of the conventual buildings after 1070, finished by 1116; and the rebuilding of much of the monastery after the fire of 1116. If the castle is Thorold's work, then the quarry must be Saxon. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the castle was not built or altered during the Anarchy; Hugh Candidus mentions troubles at this time, but deliberately avoids talking of them.

For a site which had no known potential, Tout Hill Close proved to contain much of interest, and it is to be regretted that more work could not have been done on the various aspects of early Peterborough glimpsed here. I am grateful to the Peterborough Development Corporation, especially Mr L. B. Campbell, to Miss C. Mahany and Mr J. G. Hurst for their comments on pottery, and I am happy to acknowledge my great debt to Canon J. L. Cartwright and Mr H. F. Tebbs for their knowledge of the history of the town.