

## EXCAVATION ON ST. MICHAEL'S HILL, MONTACUTE

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### *Introduction*

In June 1989 a trial excavation was carried out for the National Trust on St. Michael's Hill, Montacute, (ST 4935 1699), in advance of the installation of a lightning conductor for the tower on top of the hill. A trench 30 metres by 0.5 metres was excavated by hand to an average depth of approximately 0.6 metres.

The trial trench revealed part of a masonry wall from a previous building on the site, and a layer of rubble that may represent earlier demolition material resulting from the destruction of the medieval castle that once occupied the site.

Examination of the foundations of the existing eighteenth-century tower revealed traces of earlier walls, re-used for the tower foundations. It is possible that these walls, together with the wall uncovered in the excavation, form part of an earlier building on the site.

### *Background*

The earliest known structure on the summit of St. Michael's Hill is the castle built after the Norman Conquest by Robert, Count of Mortain, which was in existence by 1086. There are some indications that the hill may have been occupied before the Norman Conquest (Aston & Leech 1977, 104; Toulmin Smith 1964, 157-8), but there is no definite evidence of buildings pre-dating the castle. Together with Dunster, the castle is one of only two Somerset castles mentioned in the Domesday Book (National Trust, n.d.; Aston 1982, 123). It is thought that the castle may have been built of stone (National Trust, n.d.), but this would be very unusual for such an early castle.

A manuscript from Waltham Abbey records the legend of the finding of a miraculous cross buried on top of St. Michael's Hill, which Tovi, a local lord, took to Waltham, Essex (Dean 1975). A church was built to house the cross, the foundations of which have recently been traced (Huggins 1989, 140), and gave rise to Waltham Abbey. The cross continued to work miracles, although it failed to prevent the Normans winning the Battle of Hastings, where apparently "holy cross" was invoked as a battle cry.

It is thought that the siting of the Norman castle at Montacute on the findspot of the cross may have been a deliberate insult to the defeated English (*V.C.H.* 1974, 212). The castle was besieged briefly in 1086, during an English revolt (*V.C.H.* 1911, 180), the records of which give the first firm evidence of buildings on the summit of the hill, but presumably the castle quickly lost its strategic importance because it was given to the nearby Montacute Priory, founded by William, Count of Mortain, (Robert's son), c.1102.

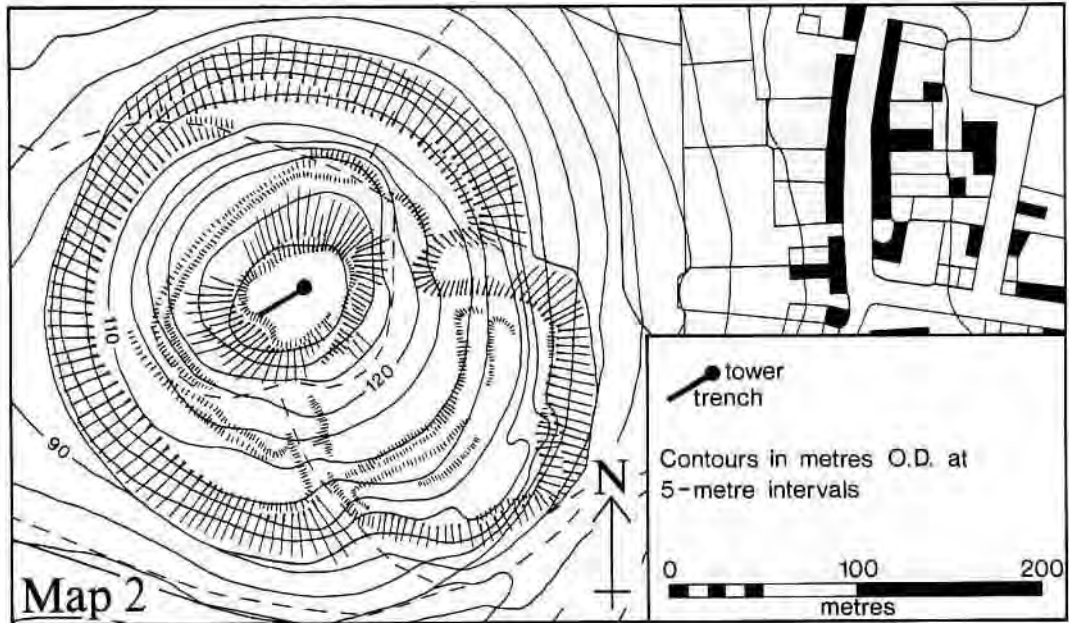
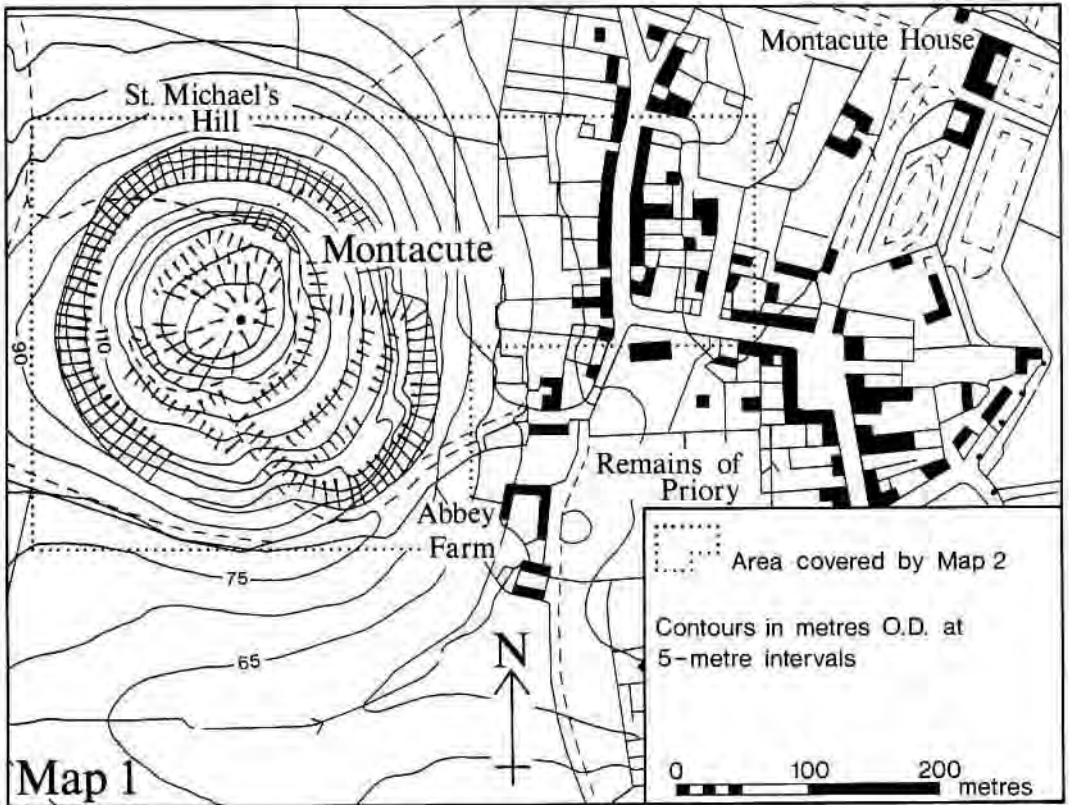


Fig. 1 Maps showing the location of St. Michael's Hill, Montacute, and the position of the recent excavation trench.

A stone chapel is known on the site, which, according to Camden, was newly constructed after the demolition of the castle (National Trust, n.d.). The chapel was in existence until at least 1630 (Bates 1900, 98), but it is not clear whether the chapel originally formed part of the castle, or was built from demolition material from the castle (implying that the castle was indeed built of stone), or even if the chapel was built some time after the demolition of the castle.

At some time between 1630 and 1760 the remains of the chapel disappeared, and the site is now occupied by the folly tower built in 1760.

### Results of the Excavation

A trench 30 metres long and 0.5 metres wide was excavated to an average depth of approximately 0.6 metres, using hand tools. At this depth a heterogeneous layer of rubble was visible covering the bottom of the trench. This rubble appeared to relate to the demolition of previous buildings on the site. Consequently, the decision was taken not to proceed deeper with the trench, since further excavation in such a narrow trench would destroy archaeological evidence without providing the opportunity for proper observation and recording.

The excavation revealed part of a mortared masonry wall, and a layer of rubble of varying density was encountered along the length of the trench. The layer of rubble produced finds of animal bone and pottery. Despite evidence of animal and root disturbance, which might be expected to introduce contamination, the pottery was found to be consistently early medieval in date, and it therefore seems possible

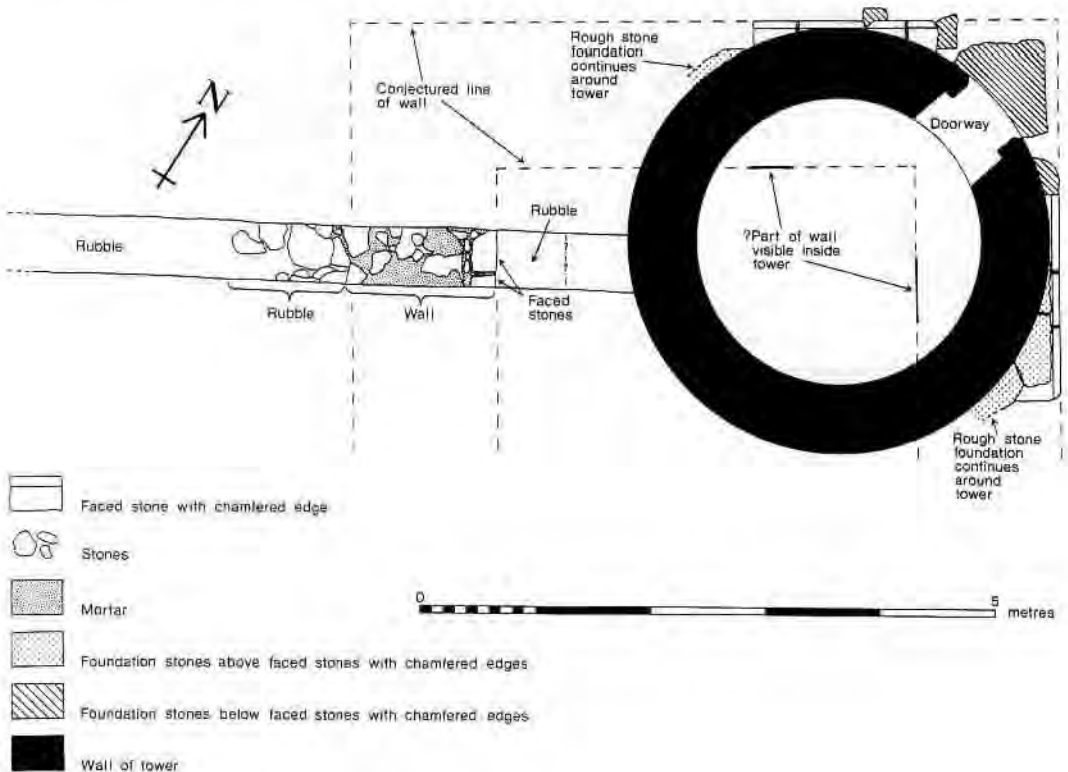


Fig. 2 Plan of part of excavation trench and tower on St. Michael's Hill, Montacute, showing the position of earlier wall foundations.

that the rubble forms part of a layer of *débris* resulting from the demolition of the eleventh-century castle, which could have been constructed of stone, or from the demolition of the chapel.

Within the rubble layer was an area of relatively clean blue clay. This clay has not been derived from the weathering of the rock of which the hill is composed, and must therefore be a deliberate deposit, although its original purpose is unknown.

One part of the layer of rubble appeared to be more dense, with a higher percentage of stones, giving the appearance of a bank or mound of rubble. There was no indication that this represented any form of structure, and it is more likely to be a particularly stony area within the general rubble layer.

The mortared masonry wall survived one course deep, and appeared to have been constructed on a rubble foundation. This wall is almost certainly later in date than the rubble layer. Close examination of the base of the existing tower revealed masonry in the tower foundations that seems to belong to the walls of an earlier building (see Fig. 2).

### *Discussion*

The wall revealed during the excavation belongs to a previous building on the site. The width of the wall was not certain because its western face was obscured by rubble and may have been robbed, but one course of facing stones was still in position on the eastern side. The wall appeared to be on a rubble foundation, and is most likely to be later than the demolition layer of rubble.

Examination of the foundations of the existing tower revealed two stretches of wall which are out of character with the rest of the tower masonry, and which seem to represent walls of an earlier rectangular building which were used as the foundation for the tower. The line of these walls was most clearly seen in the alignment of the dressed stones with chamfered edges on the exterior of the tower.

It can be seen from Fig. 2 that there is a reasonable possibility that the earlier walls beneath the tower and the excavated wall form part of the same rectangular structure, the corner of which was re-used for the foundation of the existing tower. From what is known of the history of the site, these walls are most likely to form part of the medieval chapel, but the limitations of this hypothesis should be borne in mind. Because of the narrowness of the trench, the exact alignment of the wall is not certain, and there is no positive evidence that it forms part of the same structure as the walls visible in the foundations of the tower (and which presumably pre-date the construction of the tower, since it is not usual to build a circular tower on rectangular foundations). There is no evidence of the date of these walls, or even that they are contemporary. The walls need not belong to the chapel, but may be part of a previously unknown building. These problems can only be resolved by geophysical survey and/or further excavation.

The full archive report and the finds from the excavation have been deposited in Somerset County Museum, Taunton, accession no. 207/1989.

### *Acknowledgements*

Thanks are due to David Bromwich for his assistance in the research into the history of St. Michael's Hill.

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