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Bledisloe Excavations, 1964

by A. Dornier
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By ANN DORNIER

THE SITE

BLEDISLOE Tump (nat. grid. ref.: sh. 156 : 683082) is situated on the west bank of the Severn, on the end of a spur of land between the 100' and 200' contours, and overlooks a gully in which there is a natural spring (see plan 1). It has a commanding view over a stretch of the Severn, but the land continues to rise to the west of it (see inset plan 1, and diagram 1). A sunken way, leading from the west to Awre and the river, passes within a short distance of the mound. The natural subsoil is Keuper Marl.¹

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

There are no known contemporary references to the site. Antiquaries have erroneously described it as a burial mound.²

It presumably lay within the tithing of Bledisloe which, at the time of Domesday Survey, was held by William Fitzbaderon, and which formed part of the manor of Awre, although the Survey suggests that it was coming to be regarded as a distinct holding: 'there are three members (i.e. Purton, Etloe, Bledisloe) separated from the manor, which were and ought always to be within it; as the men of the county say'. During the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries it was in an area which was periodically in dispute, due to the attempts of various kings to include the west bank of the Severn, north of the confluence with the Wye, within the Forest of Dean and thus under royal jurisdiction.³ A charter of 1155, granting all Henry I's demesne between the Severn and the Wye, included Awre as a separate item, which suggests that it was not afforested at this date,⁴ and possibly it may still have included the Bledisloe holding. Royal encroachments seem to have taken place—until they were halted, and to a great extent reversed, by the Forest Charter of 1217; but it is uncertain whether Bledisloe had been

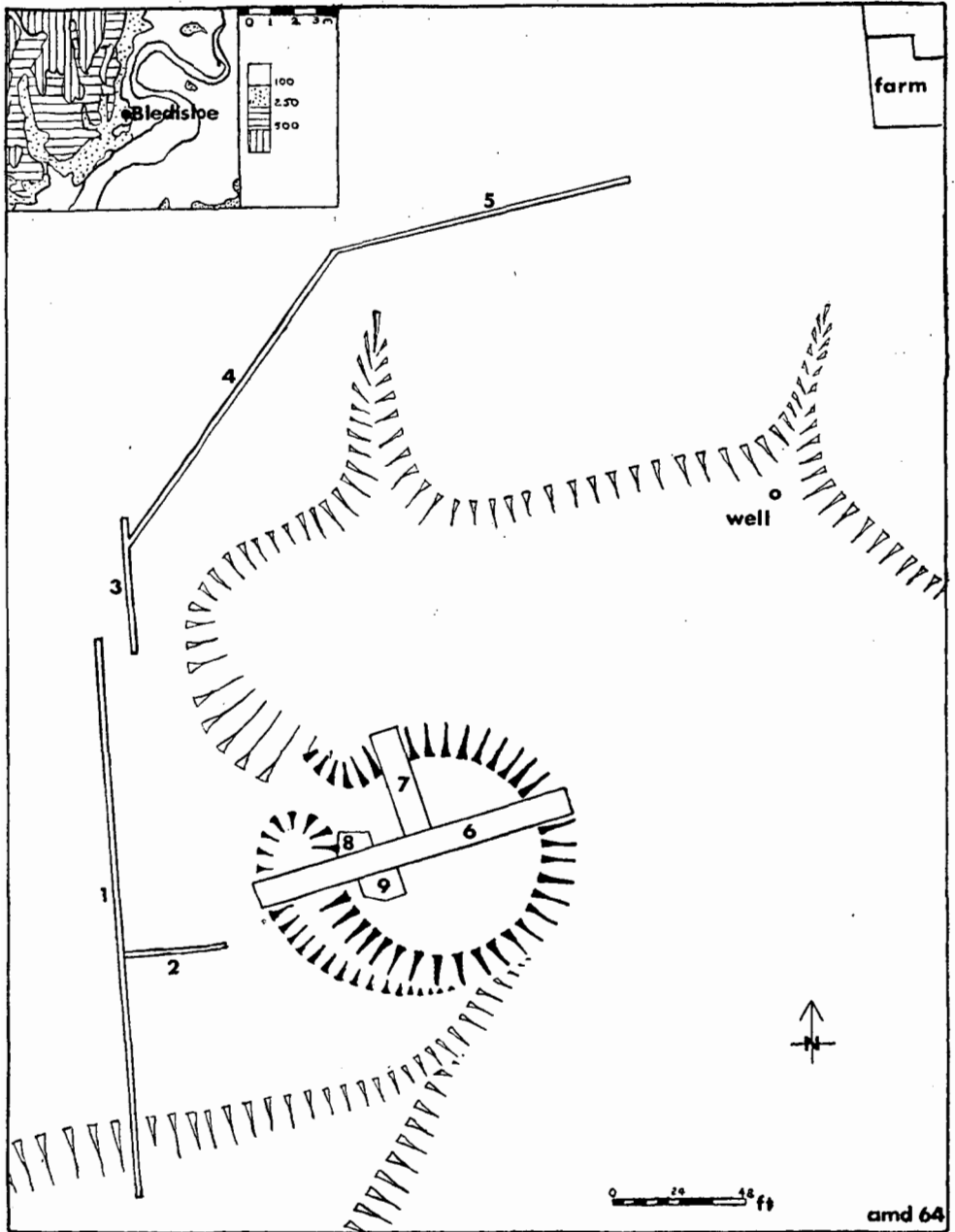
¹ DSIR British Regional Geology: Bristol & Gloucester District, p. 38.

² S. Rudder, *A New History of Gloucestershire* (1779), p. 248. 'loe' has been taken to mean burial mound, but it may just refer to a natural spur; in the same area are Etloe, Hagloe and Botloe where no earthworks exist, as far as one can see.

³ C. E. Hart, 'The Metes and Bounds of the Forest of Dean', *Trans. BGAS*, LXVI, pp. 166 ff.

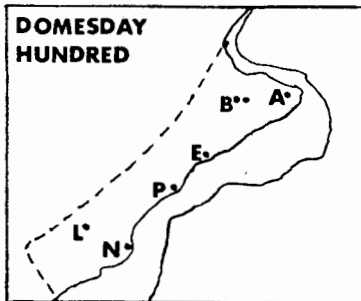
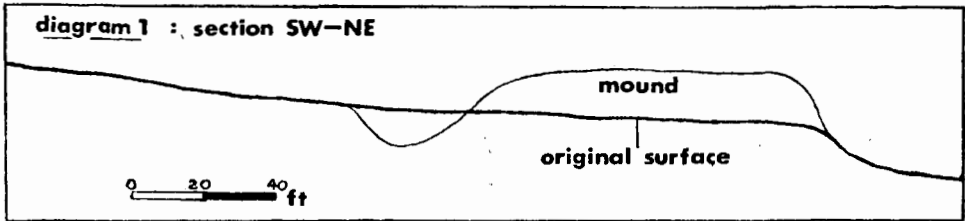
⁴ Id. *ibid.*, p. 173.

PLAN 1

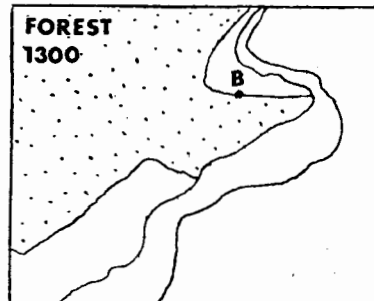


BLEDISLOE EXCAVATIONS, 1964

afforested. However, the bounds of the Forest were again extended in the 13th century, and under Henry III, if not earlier, Bledisloe was included in the Forest.¹ In a 1300 perambulation of the Forest bounds Bledisloe is on the boundary (see map 2): '... thence to the highway leading from Awre to Bledisloe, & thus following that way to a certain water-course called Ayleford'. It does not appear to have come within the Forest again, except perhaps briefly under Charles I in 1634;² and probably ceased to be on the boundary fairly soon, as the



map 1



map 2

Forest receded further west. The 1300 perambulation also states that Bledisloe was held by 'the tenants of Alan Plokenet'. In 1431 it was held by Tiptot, Earl of Worcester.³ It passed to the Grendours, thence through the female line to the Baynhams who held it until 1574.⁴ The manor was then owned successively by Eustace Hardwicke, Captain Walters and T. Ambrose who apparently converted the manor-house into a farm-house, and the principal house of the estate

¹ 1300 perambulation, quoted in Hart, loc. cit., p. 185; Bledisloe listed as disafforested.

² Ibid., pp. 181-6.

³ Rudge, *History of the County of Gloucester*, vol. 2 (1803), p. 116.

⁴ S. Rudder, loc. cit., p. 248.

was later erected on a new site some distance away.¹ By the end of the 18th century the manor had passed to the Bathursts of Lydney.²

At the time of the Domesday Survey Bledisloe Hundred included Awre, Bledisloe, Etloe, Purton, Nass and Lydney (see map 1), but its extent later fluctuated. The southern boundary of the Hundred varied: in 1200 it included Aylburton, in 1221 Alvington and Woolaston, in 1274 Earl Marshall tried to include Alvington in the Tidenham Hundred, and in 1536 Woolaston passed into the Westbury Hundred.³ It is also possible that the tongue of land shown within the Forest in 1300 (see map 2), or at least some of it, was periodically, if not permanently, in the Hundred of St Briavels: in a 1675 lawsuit a witness stated that St Briavels Hundred included 'part of the parish of Awre';⁴ and Thomas Dix's map of 1816 shows Bledisloe Hundred severed by a strip of land from Blakeney to Hagloe. The Hundred was held at Domesday by William Fitzbaderon, who had probably bought the right to hold the Hundred Court. Although his descendants were still there in the 14th century, their land-holding had shrunk considerably and they no longer owned the Hundred, for under Henry III it belonged to William de Valence and the Countess of Gloucester;⁵ and at the time of the *quo warranto* proceedings William and Joan de Valence and Maud de Mortimer maintained their right of private jurisdiction.⁶ They also held Awre manor, and later references to the Hundred suggest that it was sometimes, if not often, held by the lord of the manor of Awre: in the 14th century the Berkeleys owned both, as did the Earl of Warwick in the 15th century.⁷ In 1666 Awre was purchased by Gloucester Corporation,⁸ and there is apparently no further mention of Bledisloe Hundred until it passed to the Bathurst family in the 18th century.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The site was excavated on behalf of the Ministry of Public Building and Works as the mound was to be levelled for agricultural development. Excavations were carried out with the help of a

¹ Rudge, loc. cit., p. 116. The manor house referred to may have been 'Hickmanscourt', lying about 200 yards west of Bledisloe Tump, parts of which could be earlier than 17th century. Bledisloe Farm is described as 'Bledisloe Court Farm, modern built', but there may have been an earlier building on this site, perhaps the medieval manor. The 'New House' built some distance away still stands on the east side of the Gloucester-Lydney road.

² Rudge, loc. cit., p. 116.

³ C. E. Hart, 'The Origin and the Geographical Extent of the Hundred of St Briavels in Gloucestershire', *Trans. BGAS*, LXVI, pp. 138 ff., *passim*.

⁴ Exch. Deps. by Coms. 27, Chas. II, Mich. 28, quoted *ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁶ Rudder, loc. cit., p. 247.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

mechanical excavator, which enabled the mound to be sectioned to its base, and which allowed extensive trenching for a bailey or any other features.

Trenches 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see plan 1) were dug to an average depth of 5 feet. The natural subsoil lay 9 inches below the surface. The only disturbances in the soil had been caused by two shallow modern field drains. Trenches 1, 2 and 3 were excavated in order to locate a possible bailey, but it was obvious that there had never been one. Bearing in mind that 'Hickmancourt' may not have been the site of the original manor (see under 'note 1, p. 60'), it was considered possible that the unlocated manor house may have been sited on a spur near the well (see plan 1). The narrowness of trenches 4 and 5 (2 feet 2 inches wide) may easily have meant that remains were missed, but the absence of any evidence at all may limit the possible site to the area on which the present farm stands, which seems quite a reasonable assumption.

Pre-Mound Occupation: Trenches 6, 7, 8 and 9 revealed earlier occupation underneath the mound (see plan 2). The post-holes cannot have extended over a very large area, as the extent is limited by the size of the spur—they did not occur in the northern half of trench 7 (southern half not fully investigated), or to the west of the ditch; and in all probability only encompassed an area not more than 16 feet square. They may not all belong to the same structure. The two large, roughly oval-shaped holes seem to belong together, and so may the elongated holes which appear to contain the complex on the south and west sides. Some of the smaller holes also seem to be aligned. However, it would be possible for some of the holes to have held the scaffolding for the erection of a high building, rather than be the remains of successive buildings. It would probably have been a tower, perhaps stilted; there is no sign of any earth having been heaped around the foundation uprights, or of any associated earthwork. If it was indeed a tower it would have been very vulnerable to attack from the west owing to the rising gradient and must have been intended as a watch-tower to observe movements across the Severn. However, the posts could conceivably have held a permanent, raised timber platform. It is hoped that a further investigation of this occupation will be possible when the mound is finally levelled.

The lowest spread of ash and charcoal seems to have been associated with this early occupation (see section 1). The layer was rather patchy, suggesting several distinct fires. The burnt material

consisted of small twigs and grass, the latter possibly the remains of the turf where the fires were lit. Among the debris were animal bones, often burnt, and fragments of cooking pots, probably belonging to the 12th century. This layer appears, therefore, to be the remains of several cooking-fires (see below under 'Pottery').

The exact relationship between this spread of burning and all the post-holes was not entirely clear. As the ash and charcoal would have been easily windblown and trampled about one cannot be certain that, where the spread appears to run over the top of a hole, the post cannot have been *in situ* when the fires were lit. The posts in the two large holes were obviously still in place as the burning stopped abruptly at their eastern edges (see section 1); but it is curious that when the posts were removed and their holes filled with clay none of the burnt material found its way into the holes. Here the spread petered out and did not extend any further west. It extended to the northern end of trench 7 where it ended abruptly, suggesting that the side of the spur had been subsequently trimmed. The fires could be associated with the erection of the building/buildings, with the actual occupation, or with the demolition. In view of the similar burnt spread (see below under 'Mound (1)') appearing a little higher up (see section 1), the earlier burning probably belongs to the demolition of the timber structure in preparation for the construction of the mound, and both were carried out as one operation. In consequence the pottery would suggest that the building went out of use in the 12th century, but gives no indication as to when it was first erected. If, however, the burning did belong to its construction or occupation—and outdoor cooking-fires will appear the same, whether lit by builder or occupants—the pottery indicates that the building was in use for only a comparatively short time. This is borne out by the fact that there are no deposits lining the post-holes and something would surely have drained down the sides over a long period. It is possible, therefore, that this was one of the adulterine castles demolished by Henry II.

Mound (1): A ditch was dug in the form of an arc to truncate the end of the spur, but leaving a causeway to the north-west, and the earth was heaped up on the end of the spur so as to form a mound (see plan 1, diagram 1 and section 1). The sides of the spur had probably been trimmed (the east side has subsequently eroded). The maximum height of the mound above the original ground surface was roughly 7 feet at its eastern extremity and it is unlikely to have been any higher (see next paragraph). The mound was constructed so as to give a level surface on top roughly 60 feet in diameter.

The second ash and charcoal spread and the small patch a little higher up were probably the remains of the cooking-fires of those building the mound (see above). A few stake-holes were located, and animal bones and blackened sherds of the 12th century were found (see below under 'Pottery'). A sherd of a similar date was found in a higher construction layer. On the mound surface there was also a quantity of 12th- and early 13th-century sherds. There were too many to be purely residual. The top of the mound, including the top few inches of the top construction layer, has been subsequently disturbed, so that there was no stratification. Some of the sherds were blackened, although the disturbance had removed all traces of any fires. The pots may have belonged to the builders of the mound, but the presence of sherds which may be of 13th-century date may point to subsequent use, if not the remains of chance visitors (see below under 'Pottery'). The presence of this early pottery on top of the mound suggests that the top has not been erased, for presumably the pottery would have been removed as well; unless a sizeable slice had been removed from the top of the mound (but see paragraph below) and that this early level of the present mound surface represents an intermediate stage in the construction (see above paragraph).

The purpose of the mound is not immediately apparent. There appears to be no building which can be associated with its initial use. The mound surface was systematically stripped, but no stone foundations or post-holes were found, and the latter would have shown up clearly in the marl and clay. If it had been a motte supporting a timber tower the uprights would have been set at some depth in the mound, and might even have stemmed from its base; for it is unlikely that the supports of a tall building would have been morticed into a sleeper beam just resting on the ground surface. If it had been of stone it would probably have been grounded on a rubble foundation.¹ Although traces of these would have disappeared if the top of the mound had been subsequently removed, there is no evidence to suggest that the latter happened; it is most likely that the material would have been pushed into the ditch which would subsequently fulfil no useful purpose, whether it had been levelled for political reasons or to make way for another building (see below under Mound (2)), but the ditch contained no building debris (see section 1). Possibly it was never finished—it would surely not have been left with a causeway connecting it to the rising ground to the north-west, thus giving easy access—and is in fact a motte on which the castle was never built.

¹ Cf. D. A. Casey, 'Lydney Castle', *Arch. Journ.*, xi (1931), pp. 240-61.

But it could not have been intended as a watch-tower because the additional height obtained (see above) would not have warranted the undertaking, as it would not have increased the range of vision either over the Severn or to the north, south, or west. It is hard to imagine its purpose was defensive: about 25 yards further west one is level with the top of the mound, and the gradient continues to rise, so that even with the additional height of a tower it would have been a fairly easy target. However, 'platform' mottes in not always easily defensible positions do occur along the Welsh Border, for example Pontrilas, near Hereford; but, as none of these have yet been excavated and in theory they must be presumed to have carried some structure, it is not possible as yet to draw any comparisons.¹ In spite of the presence of small pieces of stone scattered on the surface, which could be the remains of sill walls, it is unlikely that the mound would have been initially constructed to carry a purely domestic building: there would be no obvious advantage in its being heightened in this manner on such a small platform, and indeed the exposed nature of the site would make this highly undesirable. At present the only apparent explanation for an artificial mound with an easy means of access and carrying no building is that it was either an unfinished motte, or a mound erected for some other purpose not as yet evident.

Mound (2): In the 14th century, or possibly late 13th, a building was erected on the mound. Several crested ridge tiles of that date were recovered, together with flat stone roofing tiles. It is possible that the small pieces of stone are the remains of sill walls, although it was impossible to locate their position as the subsequent disturbance had removed any traces. The ridge tiles require the building to have been square or rectangular. The building continued in use until the beginning of the 17th century; and the amount of pottery suggests that it was a dwelling-place rather than a store-house or barn. Among the debris there was a quantity of slag and, although no furnace was found, this together with many iron objects and whetstones suggests that at some stage this building was a smithy (see below under 'Iron' etc.).

POTTERY

The only stratified pottery was that found in the mound or underneath it. No glazed sherds were found in these levels, and as about a quarter of the mound was removed this may be taken as fairly representative.

¹ I am indebted to Mr Eric Talbot for drawing my attention to these sites.

(1) *Lower Ash and Charcoal*: The sherds were unglazed and of a coarse-textured fabric with grit, varying in colour from buff to light pink. The rims were in-folded and probably belong to the 12th century (see below no. 3).

(2) *Upper Ash and Charcoal*: The sherds were comparable to those in (1), (see below nos. 1 and 4).

(3) *Mound Construction*: 3 body sherds of probably the same vessel were recovered, similar to those in (1) and (2).

(4) *Unglazed Sherds on Mound Surface*: Some of the unglazed sherds may have been from glazed vessels (see below). These exhibit roughly the same characteristics of fabric as those in (1), (2) and (3); but only 5 rims are of the thick in-fold type, another 6 have a rim which is upstanding with only a faint suggestion of an in-fold, and the rest have everted rims some of which may be 13th rather than 12th century (see below nos. 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24).

(5) *Glazed Sherds on Mound Surface*: These sherds formed the bulk of the pottery. Some may belong to the end of the 13th century, but most of it seems later. There are several jugs typical of this Severn region in the 14th and 15th centuries, but the glaze and fabric suggests that much of the pottery is late 15th to early 17th century in date. Some of the sherds are similar to those found at Stoa, which was assumed to be the site of a late 16th-/early 17th-century kiln.¹ There were also 2 pieces of 16th-century English Delft (see below no. 21).

(6) *Ditch*: The section excavated contained only a few sherds. There were 2 unglazed fragments, one with an everted rim, and several small glazed body sherds (see below no. 9).

POTTERY CATALOGUE: INTERIM REPORT²

By ERIC TALBOT

- 1 Part of a jug in a slate grey fabric with buff surfaces; quartz and dark grits up to 4 mm. and some shell inclusions. Incisions on handle made by a roughly triangular point.

Cooking pots. All are in a light grey fabric except nos. 16, 18 and 20.

- 2, 3 and 4. Buff, brown and orange surfaces; quartz (angular and rounded) grits up to 3 mm. (no. 3 also has shell inclusions up to 4 mm.). The three vessels have the rim in-folded.

Rim in-folding is characteristic of much Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, and West Midland medieval pottery of the earlier period; it is not easy and perhaps unwise to give a close dating to the sherds under discussion. The closest parallels come from Lydney Castle (FIG. 6, nos. 1-3) where a 12th-century dating was suggested but occupation could have gone on into the 13th century. Further published examples come from Littledean Camp (FIG. 6), where a 12th-century dating is reasonable; Blackfriars, Hereford (FIG. 3, no. 19); Town Wall, Roushill, Shrewsbury. A 13th-century date is suggested for the latter site and a late 13th-early 14th century for the Blackfriars find.

- 5 Buff to black surfaces; quartz (rounded) grits up to 2 mm.
 6 Orange surfaces, soot on interior; quartz grits (some black) up to 3 mm.
 7 Orange wash on surfaces; inclusions of quartz and light to dark grits up to 2 mm. Rim out- and in-folded.

¹ Finds in Gloucester Museum.

² A full report is in preparation.

TRANSACTIONS FOR THE YEAR 1966

- 8 Black interior, buff exterior; quartz inclusions up to 2 mm.
- 9 Orange surfaces; quartz and black grits up to 3 mm. Interior line suggests a marked foldover.
- 10 Dark cream surfaces; grits, light to black, up to 5 mm. also occur thickly on surfaces. Rim is in-folded.
- 11 Buff to light grey surfaces; heavily gritted with minute dark inclusions but with some quartz, exceptionally up to 9 mm.
- 12 Cream wash on surfaces.
- 13 Black interior, dark orange wash on exterior; quartz and light to dark grits up to 2 mm. Rim folded outwards.
- 14 Black interior, light grey wash(?) externally; grits as no. 13. Rim out- and in-folded.
- 15 Buff interior, medium brown wash (abraded) on exterior. Rim out-folded.
- 16 Dark grey fabric, buff wash; grits as no. 13. Soot on exterior. Rim out- and in-folded.
- 17 Buff surfaces; grits as no. 13 and occur on surfaces. Rim out-folded.
- 18 Black fabric, light grey to black exterior, cream wash on interior; minute black and quartz grits. Rim out-folded and perhaps in-folded.
- 19 Cf. 17.
- 20 Light blue-grey fabric, orange exterior, light grey interior.
- 21 Orange surfaces with abraded orange wash internally; grits as no. 13. Small amount of greenish brown glaze on rim—presumably occurs accidentally.

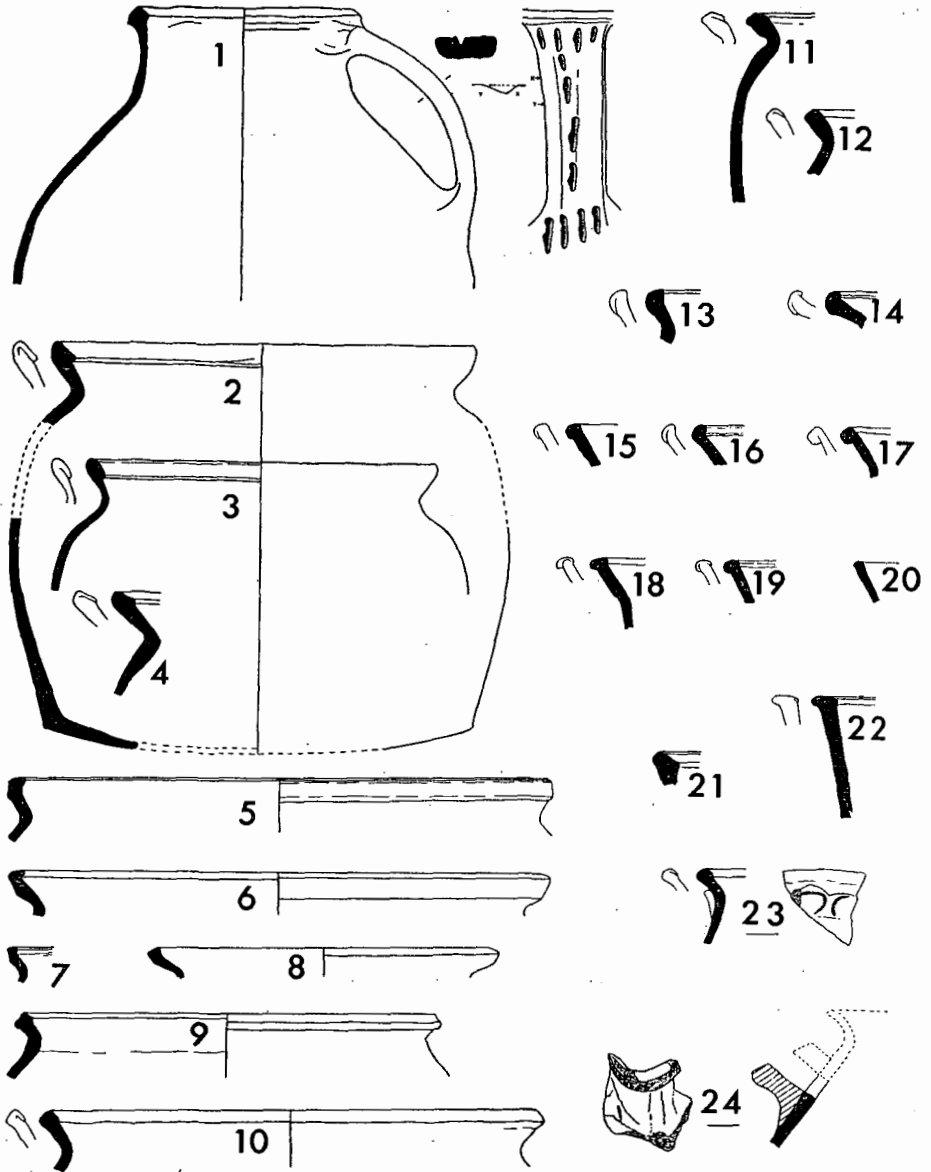
Miscellaneous

- 22 Fragment of rim and upper body of a pan(?). Light grey fabric, medium brown surfaces with uneven orange wash. Minute light to dark quartz grits which also occur on surface. Rim out- and perhaps in-folded.
- 23 Rim of perhaps a cooking pot in a buff fabric with brown surfaces; grits, mainly quartz (rounded) are up to 2.5 mm. Applied finger impressed strip below rim. This form of decoration can be assigned to the 13th century and possibly goes on into the 14th century.
- 24 Lower part of a cylinder spout in a crumbly brick-red fabric; traces of black inside and out and traces of a light orange wash internally; quartz grits up to 2.5 mm. I have discussed the cylinder spout in this part of the world in reports on the pottery from Monmouth School (*Monmouthshire Antiquary*, II, Part 1 (1965), forthcoming) and Castle Tower, Penmaen, Glam. (*Antiquaries Journal*, forthcoming).

Tiles: Crested ridge tiles were found on the mound surface. They were glazed and had a white slip forming a thin line running roughly parallel to the ridge; and are probably 14th century. Fragments of one or more louvre tiles were also found.

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SMALL FINDS

Bones: Animal bones were found in both the ash and charcoal layers and on the mound surface. Many were blackened and several were burnt.

Iron: On the mound surface there were 34 nails, half of which were probably horse-shoe nails, 2 keys, a pair of pincers, 2 horse-shoes, a bill-hook, a hinge rod, and 4 unidentifiable objects.

Bronze: A bronze strap-end with some of the leather still attached was found on the mound surface.

Slag: A quantity of iron slag was found on the mound surface, but it did not form a concentrated deposit in any particular spot.

Whetstones: Parts of 4 whetstones were recovered from the mound surface.

Clay Pipes: 2 clay pipe stems were found on the mound surface.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

The first activity on the site was the erection of what may have been a timber watch-tower, overlooking the Severn, perhaps attached to Bledisloe Manor. As it faced east and was well within the English boundary it cannot have been intended against the Welsh. If its construction could be assigned to the 11th century it might have been built in face of the Norman advance. The evidence, however, points to a 12th-century date, although, as the post-holes may represent more than one structure, a pre-12th-century tower would not be impossible. The 12th-century tower could have been built in connection with the disputes over the eastern boundary of the Forest, or it could have been adulterine; some defence measures were also underway at Lydney and Littledean at about the same date.¹ It appears to have been in use for only a comparatively short time, and to have been taken down rather than to have fallen into disrepair. If it was a private castle which came within the Forest bounds it would probably have been dismantled by the king, and if indeed it was unlicensed Henry II probably demolished it c. 1154.

The (?) tower may have been removed to make way for the mound which was thrown up in the 12th century. This does not appear to have been a castle unless, of course, it was unfinished and the original intention had been to build a much higher mound and remove the causeway—if this were the case it could also have been started because of boundary disputes, or, if the timber castle was earlier, it could have been adulterine. What is perhaps most significant is the fact that had a

¹ Lydney, loc. cit.; Littledean in C. Scott-Garrett, 'Littledean Camp', *Trans. BGAS*, LXXVII, pp. 48 ff.

castle existed here, even if it had gone out of use by 1300, it would have been mentioned in the perambulation, as such landmarks on or near the boundary were usually listed. It is possible, however, that it was built for another purpose. There is nothing to suggest that it was intended as a beacon. It may have been used as the meeting-place of the Bledisloe Hundred, sited as it was near an ancient trackway, particularly in view of the fact that at Domesday both Bledisloe tithing and Bledisloe Hundred were held by William FitzBaderon.

Whatever the original purpose of the mound a domestic building was erected on it in the 14th century which probably belonged to Bledisloe Manor. At some stage it was used as a smithy. Among the iron objects were horse-shoes and horse-shoe nails and pincers, and indeed it would have been admirably placed for shoeing, situated as it was near the track leading from the river to the Forest; and from the 11th century onwards places along the west bank of the Severn made nails for ships, and it is possible some of the other nails were for this purpose. The smithy went out of use sometime in the 17th century. This may have been due to the fact that the manor house had been rebuilt some distance away, or that with the silting up of the west bank of the Severn in this part Awre and similar places were no longer small ports with riverside traffic and industry, and thus the trackway also went out of use. All traces of this building must have disappeared and all memory of it gone by the time Rudder was writing in 1779.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks to my assistant Mr S. J. Taylor; to the owner Mr R. Baber and his tenant Mr G. Fisher for their kind co-operation; to the volunteers who helped in the excavation, Mr and Mrs D. Barron, Misses G. M. Spencely and P. McClure, and Mrs S. J. Taylor; to Mr Irvine Gray, County Records Office, Gloucester, and Mr Abbott, Gloucester Museum, for their assistance; and to Mr Eric Talbot for his contribution on the pottery.