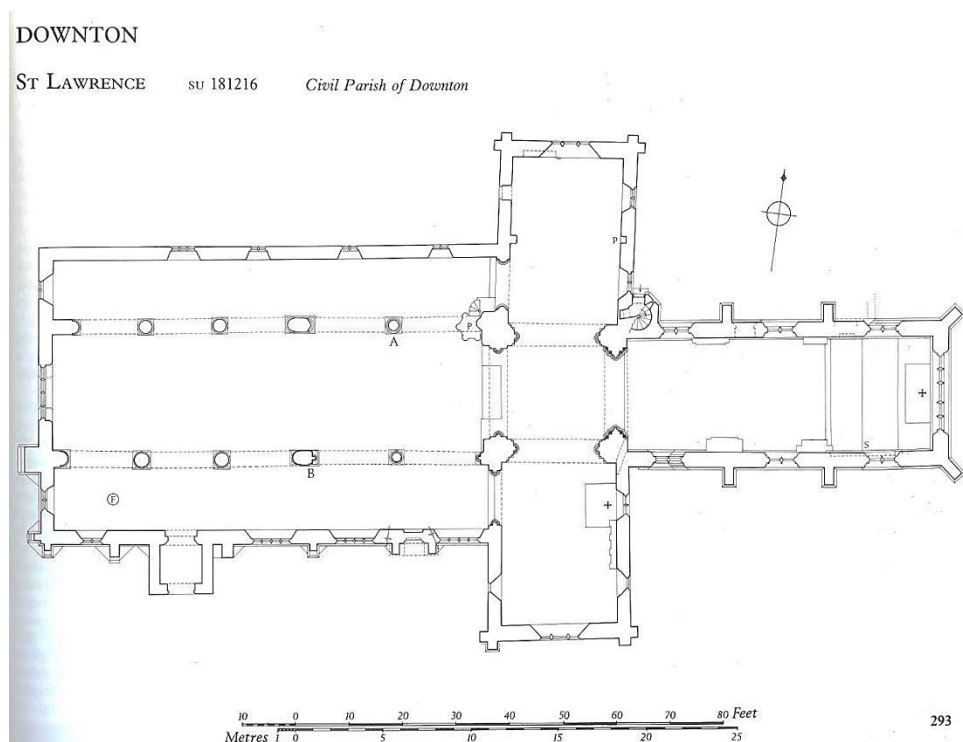


Downton, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

The River Avon leaves Wiltshire in Downton, a large parish that includes parts of the New Forest to the east. Excavations in advance of a new housing estate on its southern edge in the 1950s found Mesolithic and Neolithic evidence, and a Roman villa, but nothing of those periods is visible (Higgs 1959; Rahtz 1961-3a, b). Also in the parish, but three kilometres to the north, are Clearbury Ring, an Iron Age hill-fort, and Charlton, where an Anglo-Saxon late fifth-/sixth-century cemetery was excavated in the late 1970s (Davies 1984); the finds are in Salisbury Museum. The size of Downton parish reflects the very large and valuable estate owned by the bishops of Winchester since at least the later eighth century.

The bishops' ownership helps to explain why St Laurence's church is so large, for it was almost certainly a 'minster' serving an even wider area than the present-day parish (VCH 1980). Although no Anglo-Saxon work survives, a hint of its early 'minster' status is that it has transepts, which often replaced 'porticuses', such as survive in the next parish to the south, Breamore, and can be recognized at Britford (see on-line entry). The present church was built in stages from the mid twelfth to the late thirteenth century; later medieval windows were added, but nineteenth-century restoration involved much reconstruction. The unusual brick parapet on the south aisle is eighteenth-century, and it is surprising that it was not replaced to suit 'Gothic' taste. The font is Purbeck marble, c. 1200, and the very worn cross shaft in the churchyard is also medieval (Cocke (ed.) 1987, 129-32; plan from p. 129).

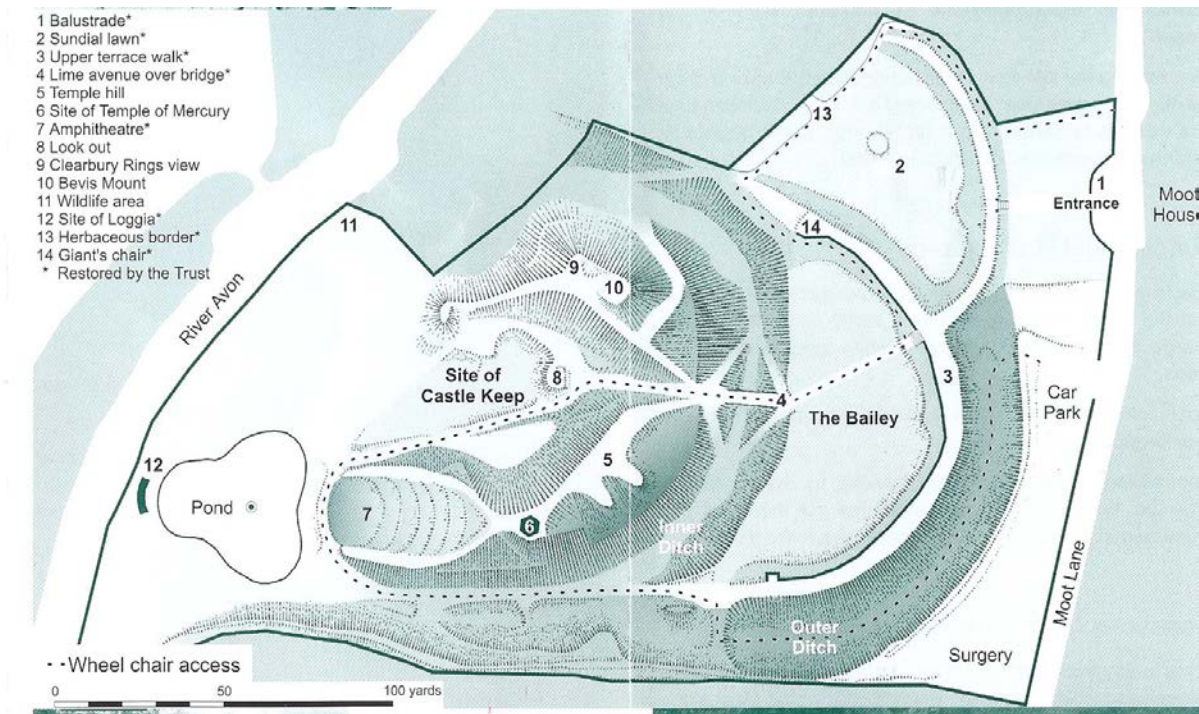


The church's position, on a ridge overlooking the river, made it very visible. If the Anglo-Saxon bishops had a residence in Downton, it is likely to have been next to the church, and a small settlement probably focused on it (plan from Haslam 1976). On the other hand, a quantity of Anglo-Saxon pottery of the sixth-/ninth centuries was found in a large pit thought to have been dug for gravel further south in the new housing estate, and could indicate buildings in that area (Rahtz 1964).



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On the same side of the river as the church, and an alternative location for the early bishops' house, is 'The Moot', where Henri de Blois, bishop of Winchester (1138-54) built a castle during the civil wars of King Stephen's reign. The name implies a Saxon meeting-place, but is more likely to be a corruption of 'motte' or 'moat'. After the wars, it would have been slighted, and the bishops thereafter seem to have had a house just to the south, called the 'Old Court', now almost entirely lost to a river channel. The bishopric lost the estate in the sixteenth century, and the castle grounds belonged to the owners of Moot House, a fine brick house with stone details of c. 1700 (private property) on the opposite side of the road, who in the early eighteenth century remodelled the earthworks into a pleasure garden, with the banks turned into terraces and walks, and an amphitheatre overlooking a large pond and loggia at one end. On a higher point was a small octagonal pavilion, the 'Temple of Mercury', which has a knuckle-bone floor of a type occasionally found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

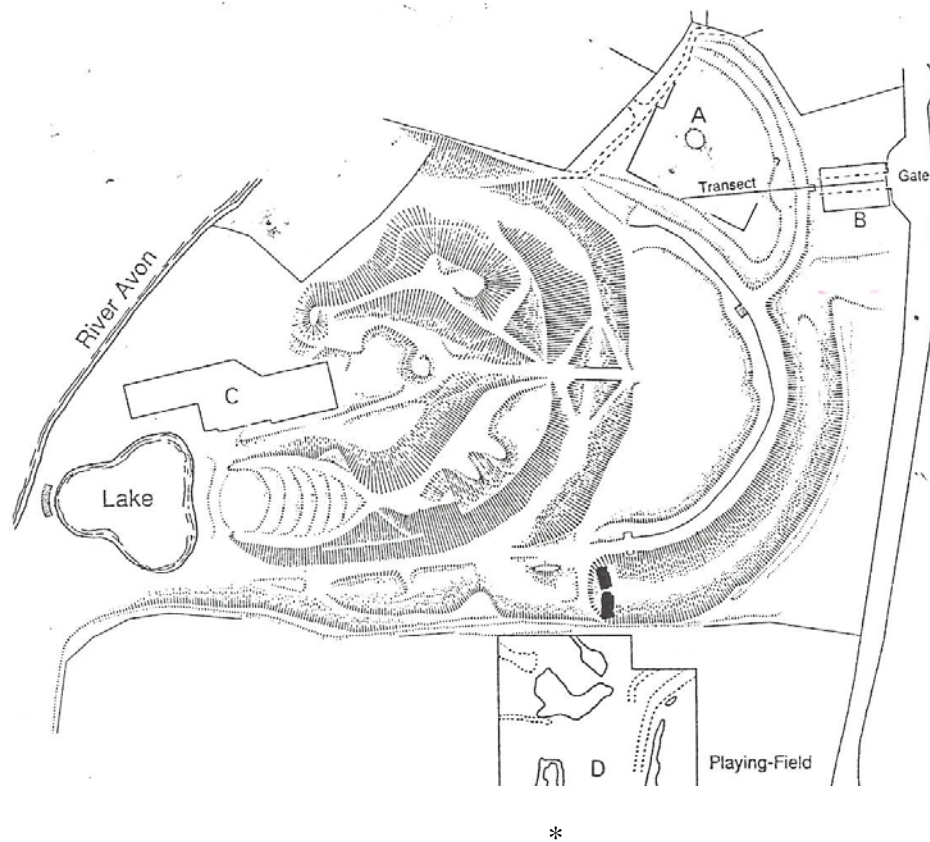


The house and garden went into separate ownership, and the latter has been maintained and restored by a preservation trust since 1988 (plan by courtesy of the Friends of Downton Moot, photograph of the amphitheatre by Isobel Thompson).

Geophysical survey and limited excavation were undertaken in 1990, but the details of the medieval castle are still not fully established. The excavation (shown as the black rectangles on the plan) proved that the deep ditch on the south

side was the outer bailey ditch, but on the west side the medieval work may be represented by the fairly tight curve of the upper terrace walk south of the 'Sundial Lawn', or it may have taken a wider arc, enclosing the lawn and running on under the houses to the north. The castle's inner ditch is more clearly recognisable, now crossed by a bridge, with a lime avenue path cut through the castle's inner bank. What remains very uncertain is whether the inner bank was a continuous 'ringwork' circle, or a 'horseshoe', left open on the river side. Also debatable is whether there was an artificial earth mound, a 'motte', for a timber tower. If so, it is probably the high part of the north side of the inner bank, now called Bevis Mount, perhaps deliberately lowered a little to slight it in the later 1150s, or to ease the pleasure-seekers' walk and giving a good 'prospect' to Clearbury Ring across the Avon, or simply by erosion over the years. Alternatively, there was never a motte, but that part of the bank was heightened slightly (Creighton 2000; plan by Royal Commission on Historical Monuments,

with addition of excavated trenches and outline of areas surveyed by geophysics by University of Southampton).



Downton became one of the six new towns founded in the first half of the thirteenth century by the bishops of Winchester; their study was the catalyst for a paper by Maurice Beresford (1959) which reinvigorated research into medieval urban plans. Hindon in west Wiltshire is another; both reflect the similarities and variations between a lord's (or his council's) approach to different circumstances. In both, the street and burgage tenements were laid out, and both were designed to cater for the bishop's large estates. At Downton 'The Borough' was on the opposite,



western side of the river from the church and castle and was already being developed in 1208/9, when the *novum forum* is recorded as having thirty tenements. It had 89 burgage plots by 1218/9, and reached its peak by 1244/5. The decision to create a new borough here may have been linked to the bishop's decision to colonise and cultivate a new large area on the west bank of the River Avon at Wyke. The area available for market stalls was almost as large as the rival New Salisbury's original market-place, probably laid out a few

years later (photograph by Stefan Czapski, reproduced under Common Licence, CC BY-SA 2.0, accessed from Wikimedia).

The present appearance of The Borough suggests shrinkage and amalgamation of tenements, though a base cruck identified in no. 61 (private property) indicates considerable thirteenth-/fourteenth-century investment, as does the White Horse, which incorporates a medieval merchant's house. The market declined after its thirteenth-century peak, though was not finally abandoned until the 1800s. By then, Downton was a parliamentary 'rotten borough', like Old Sarum. The shaft of the medieval market cross survives on a new base, but it does not rival Salisbury's, and whereas new churches were established to serve the new town there, it seems that the Bishop of Winchester made no such provision for Downton (see Salisbury on-line entry for comparisons).

The streams that run through 'The Borough' result from a seventeenth-century irrigation scheme for floating the water-meadows (see Salisbury: Harnham); the river channel has been much altered, not least for mills, and canalization in 1675. Now converted into flats is a very large tannery, with a grist mill on the opposite side of the road.

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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Downton were prepared by John Hare, David A. Hinton and Tim Tatton-Brown. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.