



Summary

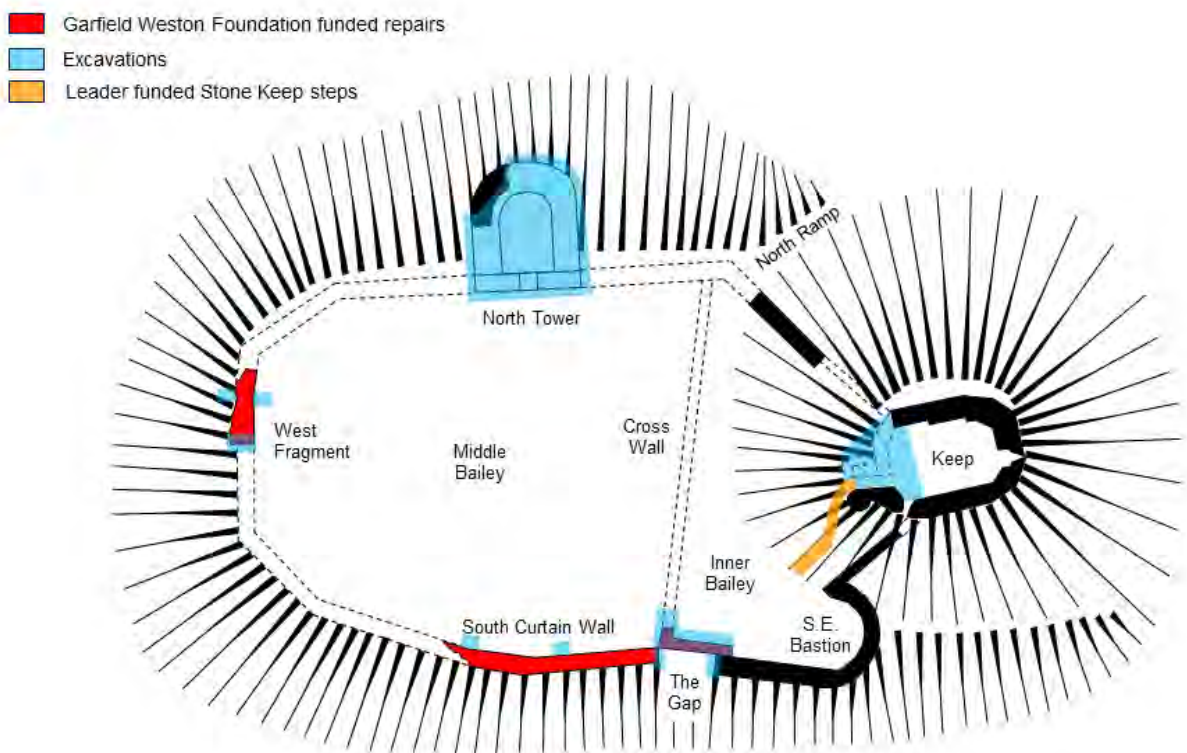
of archaeological, repair and other works
2019



Overview

2019 has been a hugely significant year for Snodhill Castle and the Trust. Several funding sources, both grants and gifts, have propitiously coincided to provide us with the means to carry out an ambitious schedule of works that will preserve and enhance the castle for future generations, and assist our understanding of this unique site.

The work has consisted of both archaeology and conservation construction, and has focused on the South Curtain Wall, the Keep, and the North Tower. This short report describes the investigations and works, which at the time of writing are still ongoing...so watch this space!



Plan of castle showing the proposed repairs and excavations 2019

South Curtain Wall: archaeological investigations prior to repair works, June-July 2019

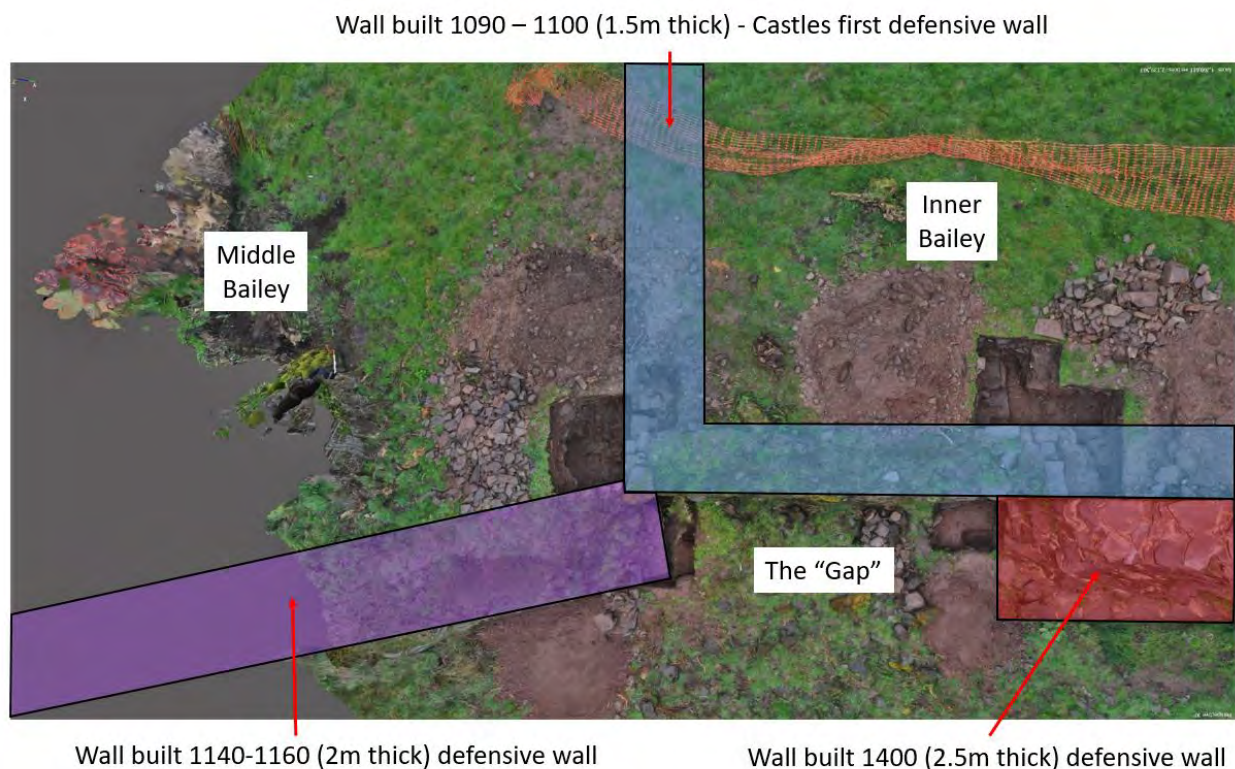
Before work could start on the South Curtain Wall rescue project, archaeologists dug a series of pits around the walls and the West Fragment to establish structural integrity. This being Snodhill Castle, any archaeological investigation seems to result in a surprising discovery - and a puzzle.

The 'Gap' in the South Curtain Wall

The puzzle here is the strange apparent gap in the castle's defences, blocked by a thin wall. It's puzzled archaeologists and castle experts alike for decades and was assumed to be a later wall built to close a possible collapse in the thicker defensive walls.

Far from a later addition, pits have revealed the thin infilling in the gap to be the castle's original stone wall. It linked up with the South Wing wall and crossed the main castle bailey to form a small triangular Inner Bailey (see plan).

This is an exciting discovery. The age of the wall - older than the main Bailey walls (of around 1140 - 1160) proves that Snodhill Castle is one of the earliest castles to receive stone defences in Britain; these old walls could date from 1100 or even earlier, a time when very few castles had stone defences.

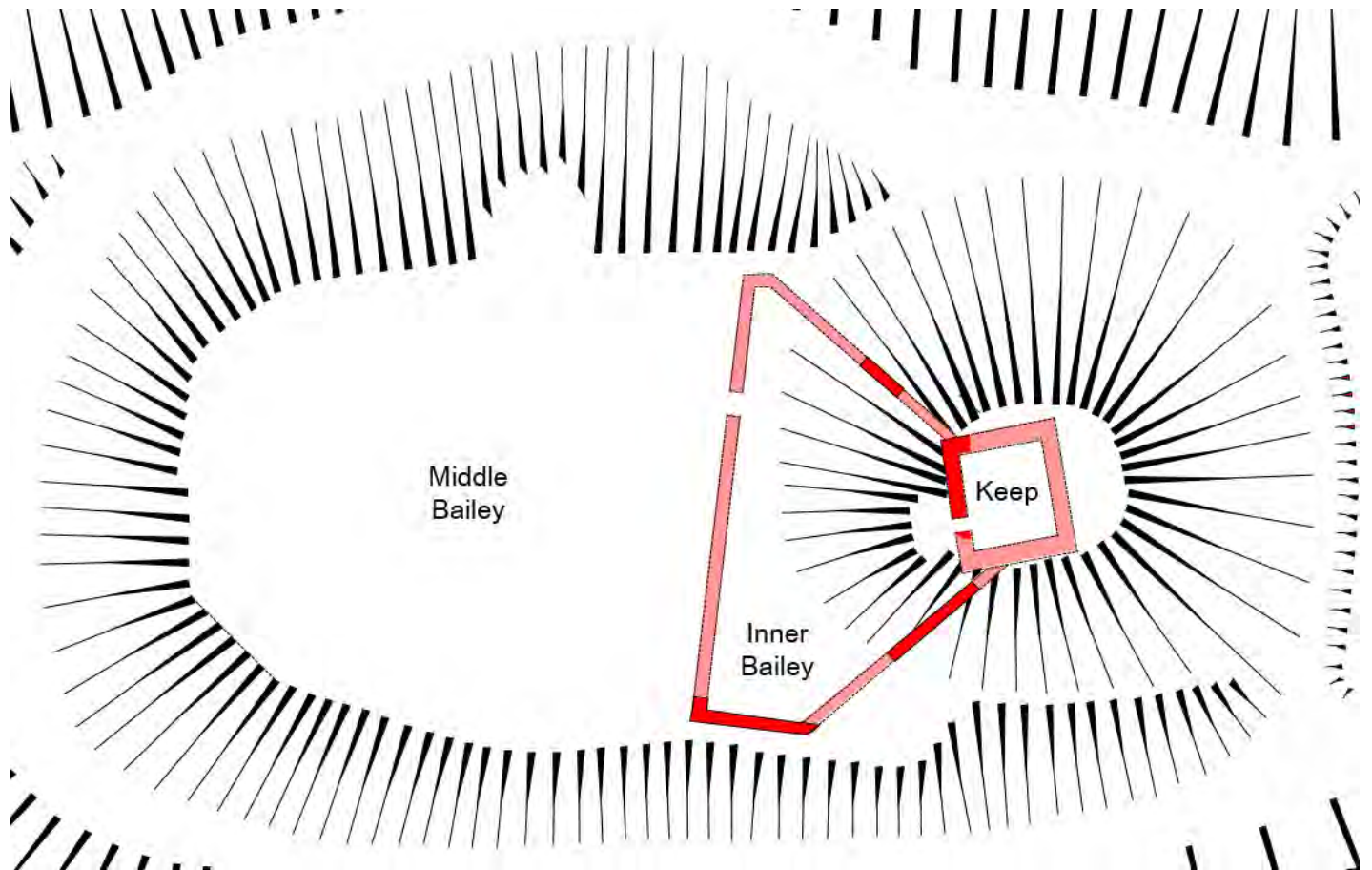


Overhead view of the 'Gap' showing the various walls in this area (Herefordshire Archaeology)

The discovery presents an interesting problem - why did they not close off the gap when they built the later, thicker defensive walls in front of it?

It's a weakness in its defences that the castle retained throughout its active history of 600 or so years - what kept its occupants from closing such an obvious weak point?

A continuing puzzle.



Snodhill Castle early stone defences (1100) solid red - confirmed by excavation; lighter colour - assumed line of walls

South Curtain Wall

The digs around and along the inside of the South Curtain Wall confirmed it was in remarkably good condition beneath the ground, and the decision was taken to pull back some of the earth abutting it inside the Bailey to leave more of the stonework exposed. This made the repair easier, will aid long term conservation, and gives us the agreeable bonus that the wall's fine stonework is now a more prominent feature.



South Curtain Wall before clearance (areas closed off by orange netting mark the archaeological pits)



South Curtain wall in July 2019 showing the earth pulled back (and repair work in progress)

West Fragment

As with the South Curtain Wall, investigations revealed this to be in good condition internally, so earth has been pulled back to reveal the fragment more fully, making it a more visible feature.

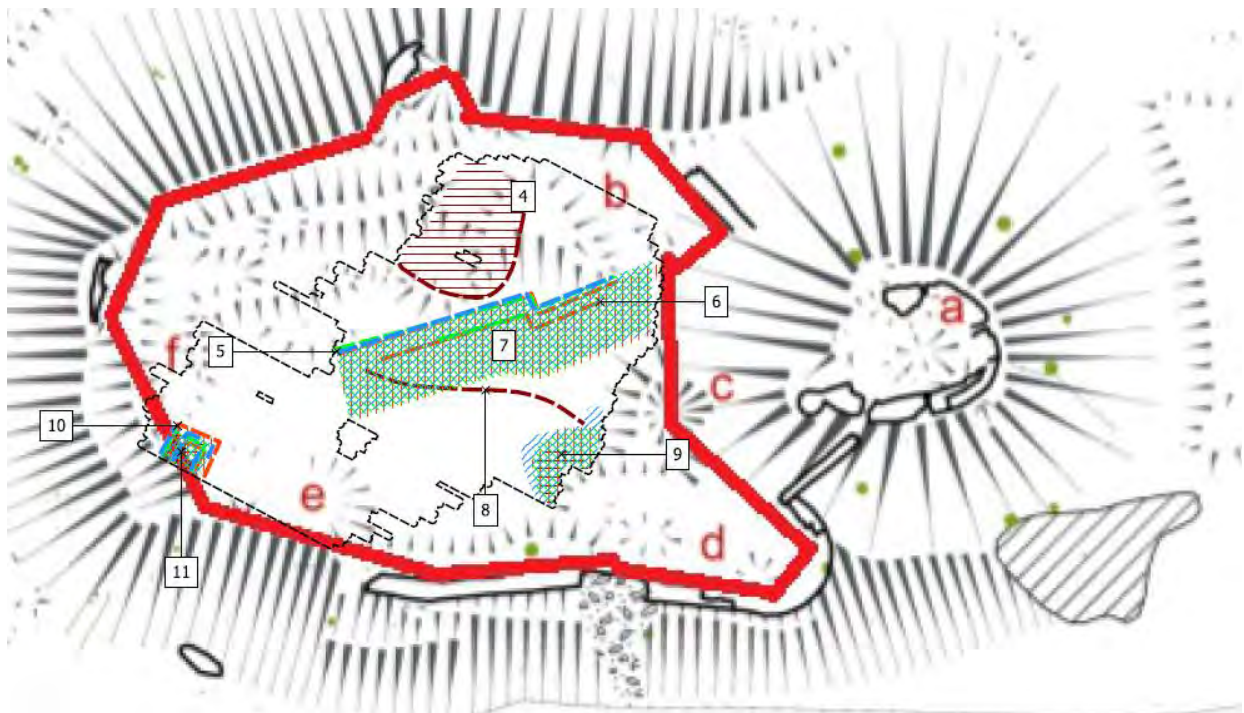


West Fragment with earth pulled back revealing its inside face

Geophysics

There was an opportunity to carry out limited geophysics (ground penetrating radar) to investigate the main Bailey and the platform just inside the current main gate for traces of any buried buildings.

The results hinted at some buried features to be investigated at some time in the future - a possible new Tower (numbered 10/11) the Great Hall walls (5,6,7) and on the platform inside the current gate, a possible building (Chapel?)



Geophysics Key: 4 Demolition Rubble? 5/6 Possible Wall, 7 Possible Building, 8 Drain? 9 Rubble, 10/11 Small Tower?

Trust-funded archaeological investigations

Keep entrance

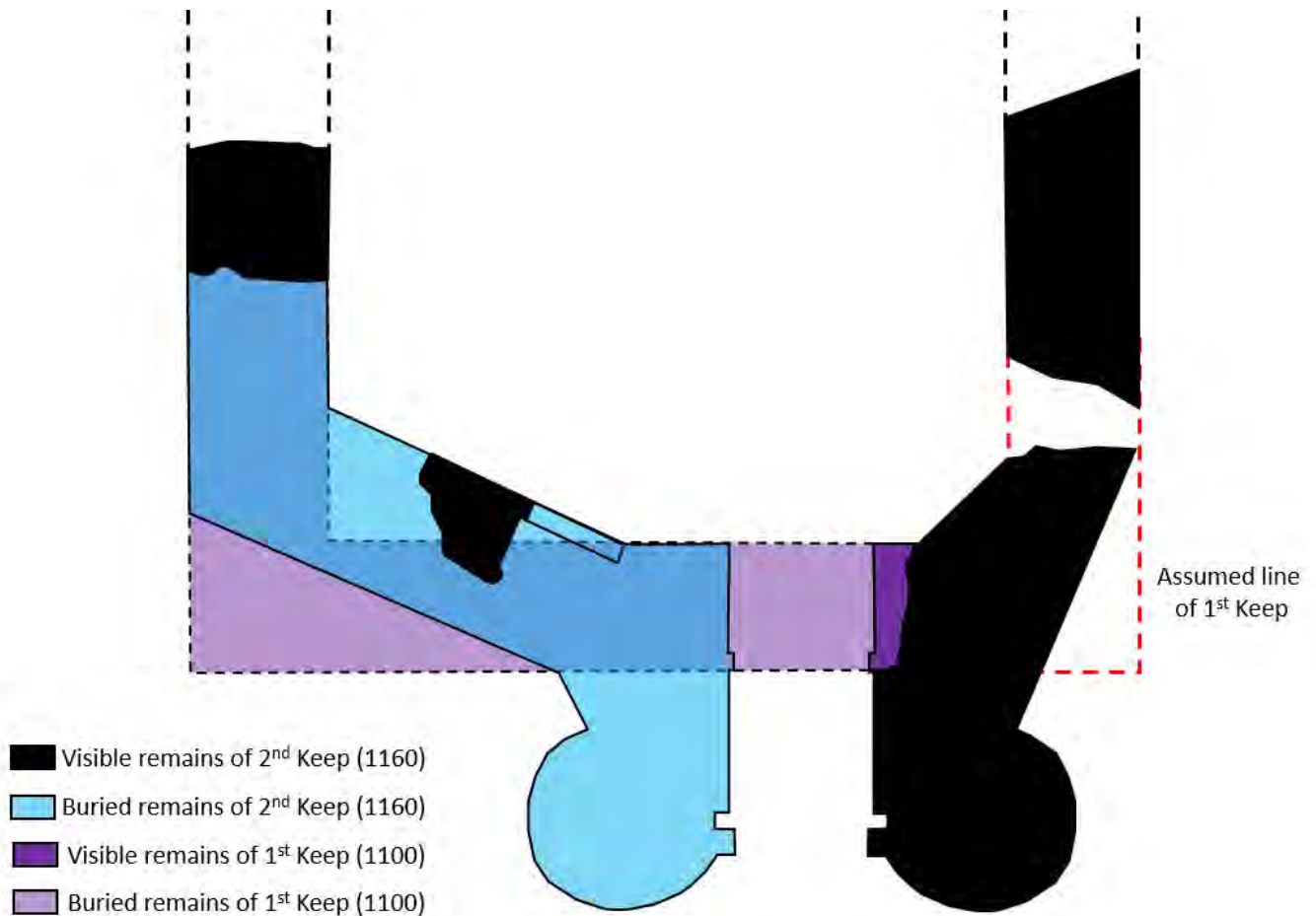
Snodhill Castle's Keep is known to be unique - an irregular 12-sided tower with very unusual entrance arrangements (a twin towered gatehouse with portcullis, but unknown access arrangements).

Investigations in 2017 confirmed the Keep's shape but left a segment by the entrance unexplored. Accordingly it was decided in 2019 to further the investigations by excavating the entrance and NW quadrant.

This was an excavation of delight and disappointment, the disappointment being that this quadrant of the Keep had been comprehensively demolished leaving almost no trace of the other side of the entrance or second turret. A small delight was that it was confirmed that the Keep did have a spiral staircase, and parts of it have survived.

However, the major discovery of this excavation was that of an earlier (square or rectangular) Keep underneath the present one. Part of this original survives in the standing half of the Keep entrance (the fragment with the putlog hole). This early Keep is at least as old as the newly discovered early curtain wall in the gap excavation (1100) - it could be even older.

The discovery of the early Keep and early curtain wall in the 'gap' confirms that Snodhill was a substantial stone castle at around 1100, and as such it pre-dates nearly all the castles in the area (Longtown, Clifford, Hay) by decades, making Snodhill one of the earliest stone castles in the country.



Remains of the 1st and 2nd Keep

North Tower

The North Tower has always been seen as an unusual structure and work carried out in 2017 confirmed that it had walls nearly 9ft (3m) thick.

In 2019 an ambitious plan to investigate the tower was initiated, involving a number of pits around its suggested circumference.

The excavations' results have exceeded all expectations. The North Tower was enormous, measuring 45ft by 34ft, had walls at least 8ft 6 inches (2.8m) thick, but up to 12ft thick (4m) on its North, ie downhill, face.

To put this into context the North Tower is larger than most castle keeps:-

Hay Castle keep 10m x10m (30ft x 30ft square)

Skenfrith Castle keep 10m (31ft in diameter)

Bronllys Castle keep 10.3m (32ft in diameter)

Tretower Castle keep 11m (33ft in diameter)

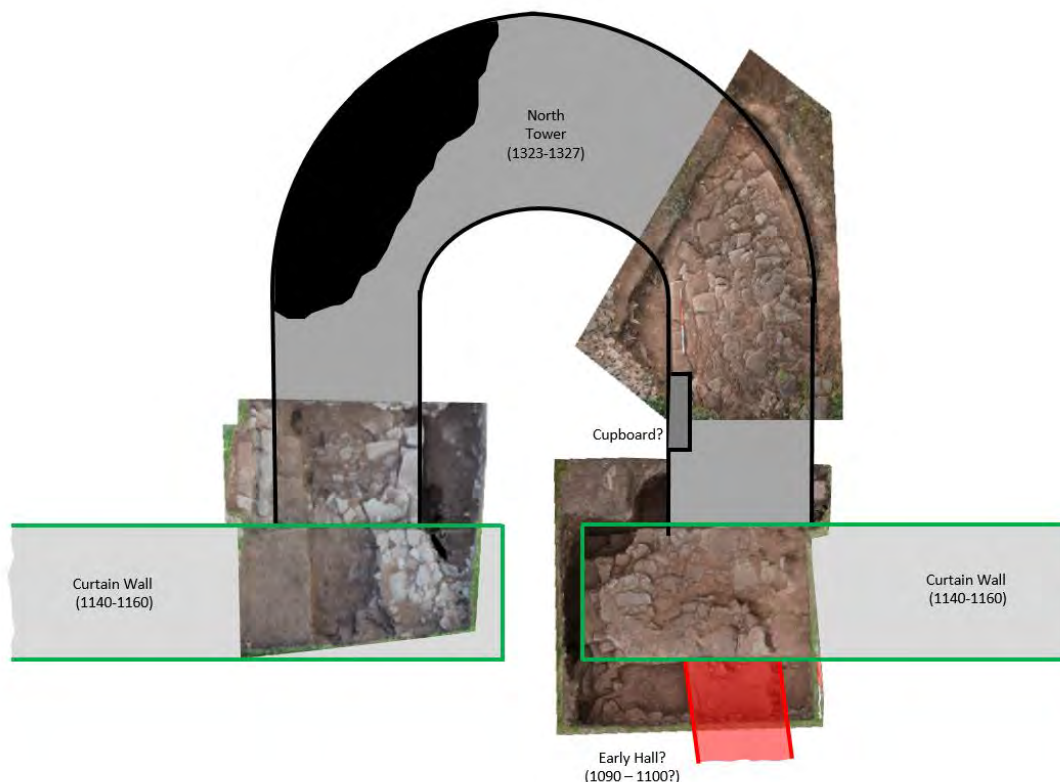
Launceston Castle keep 12m (36ft in diameter)

Longtown Castle keep 14m (43ft in diameter)

(but not Snodhill - main keep 16m x 12m (49ft x 37ft))

It's now considered an independently defensible tower, or more precisely, a second keep! The excavations also uncovered the doorway into it and a possible staircase leading down into its interior.

The Trust is looking into leaving the tower excavations on display in some form for our visitors, and to further our aim to ensure that Snodhill Castle's growing significance is recognised - thus helping its long-term preservation.



Photomontage of 2017 and 2019 excavations of the North Tower (Keep)

What next?

South Curtain Wall and West Fragment

The repairs will be complete in late October 2019, leaving the walls safe and secure for future generations and an attractive feature for the present.

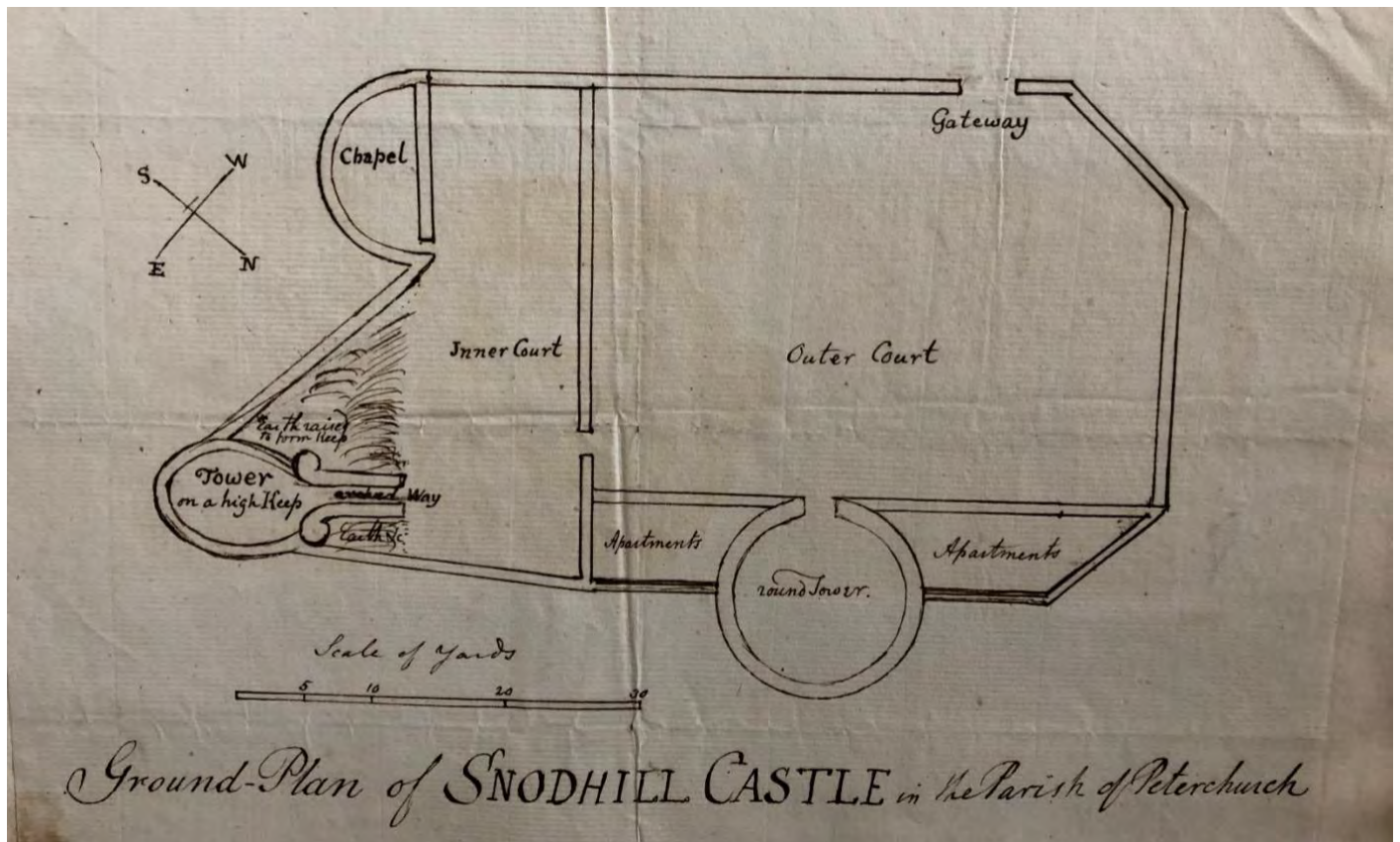
Renaming parts of the castle

The discovery that the North Tower is a Keep in its own right suggests we should consider renaming it the 'North Keep' and the current 12-sided Keep on the Motte as the 'High Keep' (which would respect the name given to it on old plans).

The South East Bastion with its apsed interior wall and East-facing orientation has been suspected to be a small private chapel for the lords of the castle, and this appears to be confirmed by the discovery this year of the oldest plan of the castle ever found – as well as the unearthing of a 'chapel stone' in its adjacent walls.

The plan was found in the private library of the Bishops of Hereford by Tom Oliver in a collection of notes from 1842 (but the plan looks a lot older – it could be a plan drawn by a local antiquarian named Silas Taylor around 1652). The plan shows not only the original walls crossing the Bailey but clearly labels the SE Bastion as 'Chapel' in which case we should probably rename it the 'Chapel Tower.'

Thoughts on all this (and suggestions) welcome!



Oldest plan to date of Snodhill Castle -c1652?



The 'Chapel stone' with inscription 'Domus'

Presenting the 'High Keep'

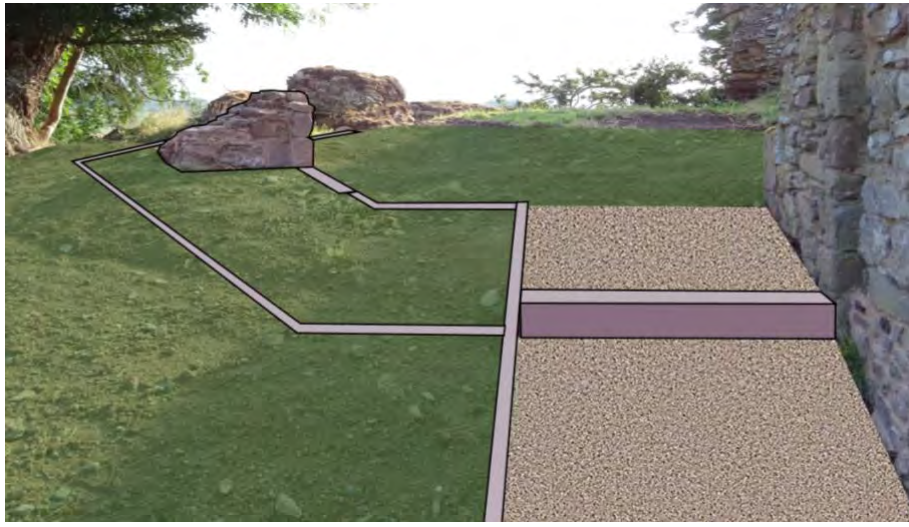
The newly discovered spiral staircase fragment will be consolidated and two new steps created to show its location and protect its remains.

The front third of the interior will be landscaped to smooth out humps and bumps and make access easier for visitors (currently it's a bit of a trip hazard).

Though substantial remains of the Keep in the NW quadrant were found, the remains were not durable enough to be left exposed to the elements. Instead the line of these walls will be indicated on the ground by marker stones which will illustrate the unique shape and structure of the Keep for visitors, and consolidate the approach to the Keep interior. The currently bare Motte top (from the excavations) will then be reseeded and will 'green up' over winter and by next spring will have recovered.



Left: the new motte steps Right: remains of the spiral staircase (with helpful shoes for scale)



Planned final layout of the High Keep entrance with indicator stones showing line of buried walls

Longer term it would be desirable to dig out the **Keep** interior down to its floor level, which would make its unique 12-sided layout more visible than today: all the interior walls would be 1.3m higher (4ft) than they are now. This would need funding we don't currently have (it would cost about £3000) but it is an aspiration.

North Keep

The excavations at the North **Keep** are ongoing; the plan is to uncover all the inside and outside faces if possible, so revealing its overall shape and size.

Once this is complete a decision will be made in conjunction with Bill Klemperer (Historic England) Tim Hoverd (Herefordshire Archaeology) and Ollie Fookes (the specialist building contractor) on the practicalities of leaving the tower exposed (or partly exposed).

There are many challenges to be overcome (how do we preserve the walls? how do we allow safe access? How much will this all cost?) but if there is a practical and affordable way to achieve this the interior will be cleared out completely and Ollie Fookes's team will repoint the exposed walls, grass cap the exposed surfaces and enable safe access.

This is undoubtedly an ambitious plan but the discovery that the castle has two **Keeps** is an astounding find and will definitely be a major boost to ensuring the castle's long term care and survival if it can be achieved.

These decisions will be made in mid-October.



North Keep excavations (the back wall of the Keep and its entrance door are top right)

Other works in 2019

Motte steps

In the summer, stone steps were constructed ensuring safe access up to the 'High' Keep. The main purpose of installing steps was to stop erosion of the motte (there being no option before than roughly climbing up the grass slopes using the footholds slowly being worn into it).

Now, with the steps installed, there is a safe and picturesque way up – and more to the point for most visitors, down!



The new steps up the castle motte to the 'High' Keep



New castle information board and benches in local green oak



New information board and benches

Part of the Herefordshire LEADER programme-funded works (along with the Keep steps) has been to construct and install an updatable information board for the castle, which will allow us to keep visitors continuously updated on the developments and discoveries taking place on the site. In addition, two solid green oak benches have been placed for the benefit of visitors. Both these new enhancements are the craftsmanship of Nick Lane of Common Bach.

By the end of 2019 we will know a great deal more about this complex, unusual and very significant castle - 'the great lost castle of the Welsh Marches' - and its purpose and significance will be more widely understood, with a substantial formal report on the new archaeological discoveries produced by Hereford Archaeology in the autumn. The castle will be easier to access, more rewarding to visit and its remains secured for the nation and the future.

But the story isn't over...!

Of course, the beauty of Snodhill Castle is that there is still so much more to understand, puzzle over and investigate. We still don't know where the entrance to the castle is, how the High Keep was accessed from the Bailey below; we have several possible towers to investigate, we have the castle's Great Hall and the elusive Snodhill Chapel to find, and we have the tantalising prospect of pre Norman occupation of the castle site (was it a hillfort? What went on in the Roman, Dark Age and Saxon periods?).

There is easily a lifetime of discovery and wonder ahead and in the meantime we all can enjoy its beauty and ponder over its many oddities and quietly appreciate a unique accomplishment - that we have saved a castle!

Garry Crook, Chair

October 2019



Be part of the discovery