

# THE TURRET



No1 Summer 2016

## NEWSLETTER OF THE SNODHILL CASTLE PRESERVATION TRUST

*‘There is a castell a mile and more benethe Dorston apone the right ripe of Dour. It is called Snodhill, and ther is a parke wallyd, and a castle in it on an hill caulled Sowthill, and therby in undar the castle a quarrey of marble. The castle is somewhat in ruine. Ther is a Fre Chappell. This castle longyd to Chandos.’*

*(Leland, Itineraries, 1543)*

## What a site!

Dr. Pamela Marshall is internationally recognised as a leading researcher in castle studies. For fourteen years she was Chair of the British Castle Studies Group whilst also serving as UK representative on the foremost international body for European castle studies, Chateau Gaillard. Here she shares her first thoughts after visiting the site in April.



significant witness to a thriving later history: I find that late extension to the motte-top keep entrance particularly intriguing.

Where historical sources were sparse, and where fieldwork methods were undeveloped and practically difficult it has not been uncommon for significant sites to have escaped the attention they deserved. This castle was, after all, the caput of a barony – and I am so pleased that the relative neglect of the past is giving way to a proper programme of investigation using up-to-the-minute techniques.

It will be great to see Snodhill appear on the map, academically and in terms of regional awareness. The Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust in conjunction with Historic England and, indeed, the local community which has shown such an appetite for the project, are to be applauded for this. Personally, I cannot wait for some more results!”

“Snodhill does not exactly rank high on the list of must-see castles Britain has to offer, barely qualifying for a short entry in gazetteers and conspicuous by its absence from bibliographies.

Yet what a site!

It’s easy to think that after 250 years of castle studies, even in a country as rich in medieval castles as Britain, we have pretty much got them all sussed.

This has never been my stance, and my first visit to Snodhill did nothing to make me change my mind.

The castle stands in a part of the country we know to have been crucial in the advance of the Norman Conquest and here we have indications dating to the earliest period of Norman advance. The topographical setting and the immense scale and variety of the earthworks alone make it more than worthy of study, while the standing remains bear



Castle Studies Group visit, April 2016

# Snodhill Castle – the top Unknowns

For such a large and important site, Snodhill Castle is cloaked in mystery.

As we start the first serious investigations of its history, we invite our Friends to be part of the discovery. Email your own theories to [info@snodhillcastle.org](mailto:info@snodhillcastle.org) for discussion in our next issue.

## 1) *Where does the name Snodhill come from? What does it mean?*

It's been variously Snow hill, Snowdown, Snoddehill, Snowdell, Snowdle, hill of the Snod, hill of Snot, Snathill, or, possibly it derives from the Old English 'Snoed' denoting a property of a manor. Some texts suggest it means either 'bald hill' or snowy hill. Bald maybe, but why snowy?

## 2) *What was on the hill before the Normans arrived?*

Behind the motte is a large flat area and the whole hilltop is encompassed by various banks – an Iron Age hillfort? There are several of these nearby. Before the conquest, was a Norman castle built on the hill in 1050 to protect the prosperous but vulnerable Saxon villages of Mynydd Brydd, Dorestone, Wilmastone and Peterchurch?

## 3) *Was there a village at Snodhill in Saxon times?*

The valley beside the Castle is sheltered, well drained and fertile (an ideal place for a village). If there was a village here in Saxon times it appears not to have been recorded in the Domesday book – or was it? After all, there are many places named in the Domesday book in Herefordshire with no modern equivalent. Or was there another reason for its not being recorded? Was, for example, the west bank of the Dore off limits to the Domesday recorders? The possibility of a LiDAR survey of the valley and castle, and landscape investigations by Historic England, might throw light on this fascinating issue.

4) *In 1055* (according to Florence of Worcester), Earl Harold Godwinson's army (that's Harold of the Battle of Hastings) "Encamped beyond Straddell (at Snowdon." ('Straddell' is the old

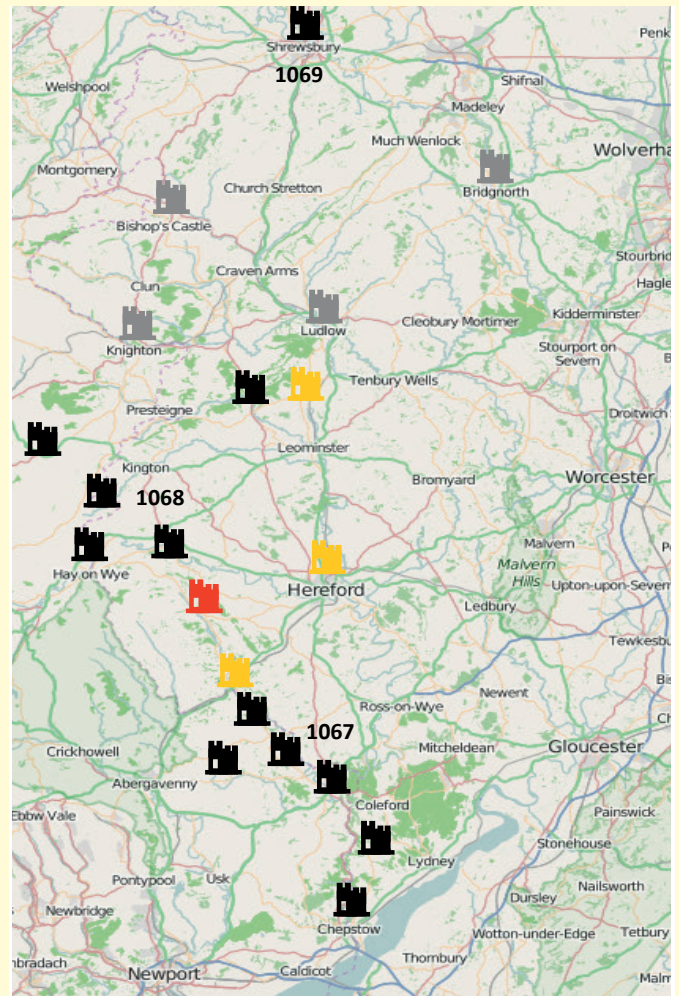
name for the Golden Valley.) Was 'Snowdon' actually Snodhill? (Snodhill was certainly called 'Snowdown' in 1302.) The army was some 15000 strong, and had been raised to repel the Welsh from Herefordshire after they burned down Hereford Cathedral.







## 5) *Who built the castle?*

William Fitz Osbern built at least seven castles between Chepstow and Wigmore to keep the Welsh at bay. There's a gap in this line between Ewyas Harold and Clifford Castle that Snodhill could exactly fill. Did he build (or rebuild) the castle in 1068 as part of his campaign to secure the border with Wales?

## William Fitz Osbern's castles



-  Pre-Conquest Castle – Refortified
-  Castle built by William Fitz Osbern
-  Possible William Fitz Osbern Castle
-  Snodhill Castle

6) *No-one seems to be able* satisfactorily to identify the entrance to the castle; Where is it? What was it? A LiDAR survey may reveal more.

7) *The current architecturally unique* 12-sided Keep was, we think, built around 1200. It had three big windows at first floor level, which would have looked over the village, park and up and down the valley. Its stonework was of high quality, but not of serious fortified strength. Its enclosed space was compact; maybe floors were supported from a single central pillar. Was it a 'tower' keep or a very unusual 'shell' Keep?

8) *Where is the chapel?*

Snodhill's 'Royal Free Chapel' had chaplains appointed by the King from 1287 through to at least 1540 but no trace of it remains. Robert Fayrfax, a popular composer in Henry VIII's reign, was its chaplain from 1497-8. What happened to the building? Where was it?

9) *Rather than* reinforce its weakest points, the Chandos' built the enormous North tower on the castle's strongest side. Why?

10) *Why*, if Snodhill Castle was even partially habitable (and described contemporaneously as 'strong') did King Charles I stay in a farmhouse near Arthur's Stone and not at the castle, on the 17th September 1645?



11) *Where is the castle key and bell?*

In 1869 the Rev. C. J. Robinson, in *A History of the Castles of Herefordshire*, wrote: '*The Castle key is in the possession of the Rev. T. W. Webb of Hardwick, and the bell was removed some 50 years ago, at which date there was a good deal of ancient armour in the Court. There are still some curiously carved corbels and massive oak beams to be seen there, relics of the stately Castle which have escaped its general ruin.*'

12) *Was the castle* besieged and destroyed in the Civil War, was it already abandoned or was it slighted later?



*String course on 12-sided Keep*



*The North Tower*



*Fragment of window pillar*



*Scaffold staircase April 2016*

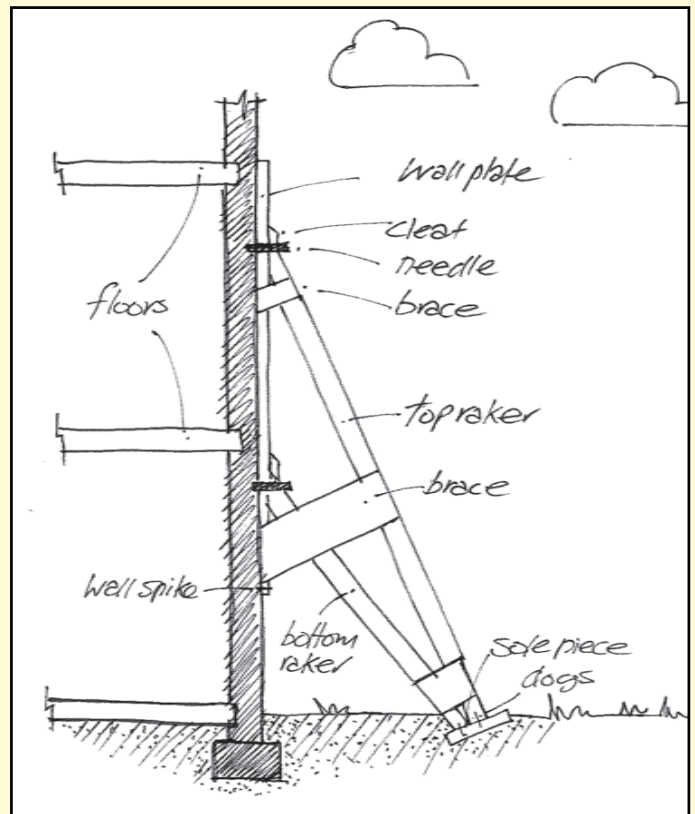


*– The first staircase at Snodhill for 400 years*

# 2016 emergency propping project

In 2016 Historic England appointed Stone Edge (a specialist contractor) to carry out propping and shoring work on Snodhill Castle to prevent the imminent loss of masonry; this was the first work on the castle in over 400 years.

The project followed extensive environmental, topological and rectified photography surveys and was divided into two phases: clearance of the site to facilitate access and the emergency work itself. The emergency propping work concentrated on two key areas; the south curtain wall and the Keep. The Keep had already lost the remnants of one of its 12th century windows in 2015; the remains of the other window were in danger, so a complicated prop was devised to hold it in place.



*Double-raking timber shore*



*South Curtain walls before propping*



*South Curtain wall propping in place*



*South Curtain wall void propping in place*



*Note use of wedges*

When work commenced, Historic England's appointed architect re-examined the keep and decided that underpinning its foundations couldn't wait until 2017. Historic England agreed to the underpinning and several cubic metres of 'limecrete' were poured into the voids under the structure to stabilise the foundations.

In addition to the propping and stabilisation work, a large tree that was threatening the Bailey's South East Bastion was carefully removed. The work of 2016 is only a stop gap measure to ensure the castle's survival until the major planned repairs in 2017. These will be explained in detail in our next newsletter.



*Keep foundations showing the voids*



*Keep foundations with voids filled in*



*Main oak prop*



*Much work to be done!*

# Snodhill Castle — call for images

Do any of our Friends know of any images of the castle that pre-date 1977? If so, we'd love to see them. Get in touch or send them to us at [info@snodhillcastle.org](mailto:info@snodhillcastle.org)

For such a picturesque and magical place there are surprisingly few recorded images of Snodhill Castle from past times. Here we reproduce a drawing by Lady Frances Vernon Harcourt (née Harley of Brampton Bryan), 1858, about which Edward Harley writes:

*'Lady Frances Vernon Harcourt was the youngest daughter of the 5th Earl (of Oxford); it was her elder sister, Lady Jane Harley, later Lady Langdale, who made my great grandfather her heir. She was much loved, she lived in the house where we now live and there is a monument to her in the churchyard here.*

*She was quite an accomplished artist and did all the illustrations for 'A History of the Castles of Herefordshire and their Lords', by Rev Charles J Robinson 1869. In the preface he thanks LFBVH for her 'faithful sketches'.*

*It's good to see such an interesting and important Herefordshire landmark finally getting the attention it deserves.'*



*Snodhill Castle by Lady Frances Vernon Harcourt*



*A wood engraving by Kenneth Lindley ARE,  
Principal of Hereford Art School 1971-8.*

# Snodhill: the discovery begins

On June 23rd we heard the great news that Historic England's Investigation Team has agreed to conduct an investigation of the castle and its environs, including the deer park, valley and village site. This will entail LiDAR and landscape surveys as appropriate, as well as professional document searches and investigations on the ground. The survey will well and truly mark the beginning of our journey of discovery into Snodhill's many, and fascinating, 'unknowns'.



*3-d render of low resolution LiDAR survey image of Snodhill.  
The castle earthworks crown the hill top centre-right.*



*Your Preservation Trust Trustees*

