

EXCAVATIONS AT TAMWORTH CASTLE,
1972 AND 1974

T. E. McNEILL



being

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Staffordshire County Studies
Sample

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EXCAVATIONS AT TAMWORTH CASTLE, 1972 AND 1974

T. E. McNEILL

INTRODUCTION

THE CASTLE BEFORE EXCAVATION

Tamworth castle, in the south-west angle of the Anglo-Saxon *burh*, was constructed under William the Conqueror by Robert the Despencer. It was protected by the river Anker to the south and covered the ford or bridge at the junction of the Anker with the river Tame. The castle motte is still prominent, crowned by a shell-keep, in which the Jacobean and earlier house (Meeson 1983), now the Castle Museum, was built. The area of the bailey (or pre-motte enclosure) was less obvious than the motte in 1970, but its limits were in fact clearly visible on the ground (see fig. 1). To the north the line of the motte ditch is visible in the low-lying gardens of houses on the south side of Market Street, continuing as far as the line of entry from Market Street to the Castle Gardens. The houses east of the entry, starting with the (in 1970) Town Hall Vaults public house, showed no sign of the drop in level which was seen in the gardens to the west. The east side of the bailey was marked by a scarp down to the row of cottages known as River View. The bend in the road where George Street runs into Market Place marks the junction of the east and north sides of the bailey, confirmed by excavations in 1977 (Meeson 1980). The south side of the castle was obviously the scarp down to the river Anker. The castle boundary suggested by the topography is confirmed as such by the limit of the Castle Liberty, as surveyed for the Earl of Northampton in 1741 (plate 1; fig. 1).

Probably in the 12th century, the motte was surmounted by a stone wall built just within the perimeter of the top. Access to the top was provided by a ramp built within the line of the northern bailey ditch. To the north this was retained by the bailey wall; to the south by a wall marked by the use of herringbone masonry over the uncertain ground of the motte ditch. At the foot of the access ramp the bailey curtain wall shows a break in construction, but it is continued to the east by an addition made of larger and more regularly coursed blocks. The later wall extends eastward in two dog-legs in plan, but apparently all of one build. The interior of the first dog-leg is occupied by an electricity sub-station, while the second is taken up by a small Gothick gate-lodge. The most significant break in the line of the Market Street properties was the entry into the Castle Gardens, past the Town Hall Vaults. In 1970 this entry led to a little yard in front of two gates: one into the rear yard of the public house, and the other, opening south-eastwards, into the Castle Gardens. The gate to the gardens was set in an arch which stretched from the lodge to a featureless stump of masonry between it and the gate to the public house yard (plate 2). The north-west side of the little yard was formed by a curved stretch of ashlar masonry. Rebuilding of the premises to the west of the entry before 1970 had shown that this curved stump of ashlar and the north wall of the Gothick gate-lodge were of one build and went far down below the present ground level (plate 3). The two gate-arches and the gate-lodge were all built of red sandstone, which contrasted with the green sandstone of the curved walling to the north-west of the yard. The eastern side of the entry was occupied by the Town Hall Vaults with its four cellars. The cellar floors were c. 3 m. below ground level; their east walls and the dividing walls were of brick, but the west walls were of plastered stone. When the plaster was stripped off, it could be seen that the stonework was not uniform: big squared blocks irregularly coursed in the southernmost cellar, none regular coursing in the next, and coursed rubble in the two northern ones. The entry itself ran over a stone-vaulted lower cellar which was reached, through a stone arch, from the main cellars. All these observations remained, however, unrelated, and their significance was not appreciated at the time.

DOCUMENTARY BACKGROUND

This is not the place to embark on a detailed treatment of the history of Tamworth castle as a whole, but we must summarise the position in general, and concentrate on the 13th century in particular. The castle was held under William the Conqueror by Robert le Despencer, from whom it passed to the Marmion family (Gould 1972, 18-20). Under Henry II the castle was held by Robert Marmion II (*C.Ch.R.* 1226-57, 338), probably the son of the Robert Marmion killed at Coventry in 1144. Robert Marmion III had three sons, two of whom he called Robert: Robert IV (probably the issue of his first wife) and (probably by his second) Robert V and William. Robert III served King John at first; he was with him in Ireland in 1210 (*R.L.M.P.* 219), but later rebelled and lost his lands in 1215; in December, Tamworth castle was ordered to be slighted and its contents seized (*C.C.R.* 1204-24, 232b, 241).

Whether the castle was damaged or not is unclear; its custody was granted to William de Harecourt in May 1216 (*C.C.R.* 1204-24, 361b), and in 1218 it was apparently in such condition that an undertaking could be given to guard it in good security. After the death of Robert III (*C.C.R.* 1204-24, 361) his two sons, Robert IV and Robert V, both claimed the castle, which was granted in May 1218 to the younger brother after he agreed to a fine of £500, and made a compact that if his elder brother came in to the king's grace he would surrender the castle to him in return for lands in Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire, and Sussex (*E.R.F.* 1216-45, 9-10; *C.P.R.* 1216-25, 153). This in fact happened, and in November 1210 (*C.P.R.* 1216-25, 273) Robert IV was granted his father's lands and Robert V held the other lands named in the compact from his brother, and so they passed to Robert V's son William.

Relatively little is known of the career of Robert IV. He went to France with the king and William Marshal in 1230, and was forbidden with others by the king to attend a tournament at Northampton in 1234 (*C.P.R.* 1225-32, 361; 1232-47, 68). He seems to have had financial problems, for in 1233 he assigned all his lands in England, including Tamworth castle, and the custody and marriage of his son Philip, to the bishop of Winchester. Accordingly the castle came into the king's hands in 1238 on the bishop's death, but the lands, castle, and custody of Philip were assigned to William de Cantilupe (*C.Ch.R.* 1226-57, 186, 248; *C.C.R.* 1224-7, 62). Robert IV died in 1241 (*E.R.F.* 1216-45, 387), but William in 1242 performed the duties of Philip Marmion as tennant of the Earl of Warwick; in 1244 Philip married another ward of William, Joan, the joint heiress of Hugh of Kilpeck (*C.C.R.* 1237-42, 29; *E.R.F.* 1216-45, 387).

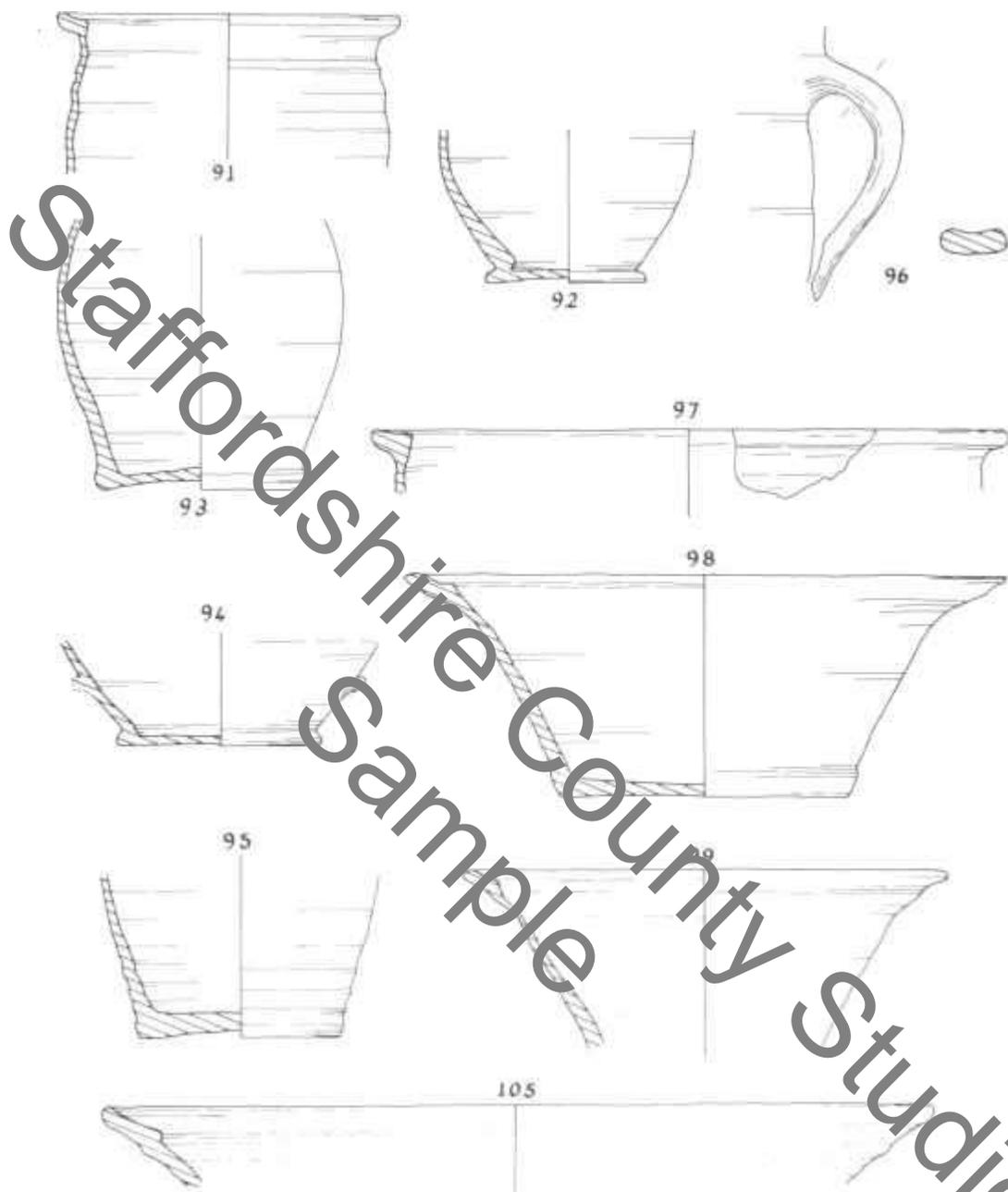
Philip seems to have got seisin of his lands then or soon after, and he started out on a career of royal service. He collected tallage from Jews in 1246 and from July 1249 to the end of 1251 was sheriff of Warwickshire and of Leicestershire (*C.L.R.* 1245-51, 69; *C.P.R.* 1247-58, 14, 128). He served in Gascony with the king from May 1253 to late 1254, and in Wales in 1257 (*C.P.R.* 1247-58, 232, 321, 598). In November 1259 he was appointed with Giles de Erdington to hold the eyre of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Northamptonshire, and early in 1260 was in France with Henry III (*C.C.R.* 1259-61, 143; *C.P.R.* 1258-66, 21). At the time of increasing tension between Henry and his barons Philip was a royalist. In March 1261 he was one of 99 barons secretly summoned to London to support the king (*C.C.R.* 1259-61, 159). He was one of the sheriffs appointed by Henry to replace baronial nominees in August 1261, being made sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk, and was one of the wardens of shires similarly appointed to replace baronial supporters in December 1263, this time to Nottinghamshire (*C.P.R.* 1258-66, 164, 357). In the period after the battle of Evesham he helped the king against the rebels who had seized the Isle of Ely (*C.L.R.* 1267-72, no. 676), and he was granted powers to bring former rebels in to the king's peace in 1266 and 1267 (*C.P.R.* 1258-66, 585; 1266-72, 62).

These services brought Philip the expected rewards. In 1258 he was granted a fee of 40 marks *p.a.* (*C.L.R.* 1251-60, 290 etc.), and the Close Rolls of nearly every year from 1253 to 1272 record the king's gifts of deer to him, usually from Cannock forest, and the king pardoned crimes at his instance (e.g. *C.P.R.* 1258-66, 302). In 1266 the king gave Philip the royal demesne lands in Tamworth and Wiggington (*C.P.R.* 1258-66, 624, but cf. *C.L.R.* 1267-72, no. 317). Of particular relevance to this study, he received 6 oaks for building at Tamworth castle in March 1261, 10 more in September of the same year, and 20 in November 1266 (*C.C.R.* 1259-61, 362, 441; 1264-8, 268).



18. Black ware pots of period 5 x 1/4.

- 83. Tankard. 1974, layer 3.
- 84. Cup. 1974, layer 3.
- 85. Tankard. 1974, layer 3.
- 86. Tankard. 1974, layer 3.
- 87. Two-handled tankard. 1974, layer 3.
- 88. Bowl. 1974, feature 1.
- 89. Tankard. 1974, layer 3.
- 90. Waisted tankard with thin, rouletted applied strips. Cellar A, layers 27 and 30.
- 91. Brown-glazed bowl. 1974, feature 1.
- 92. Bowl. 1974 u/s.
- 93. Jar. Cellar A, feature 71.
- 94. Small handled bowl. 1974 u/s.
- 95. Jar. 1974, layer 3.



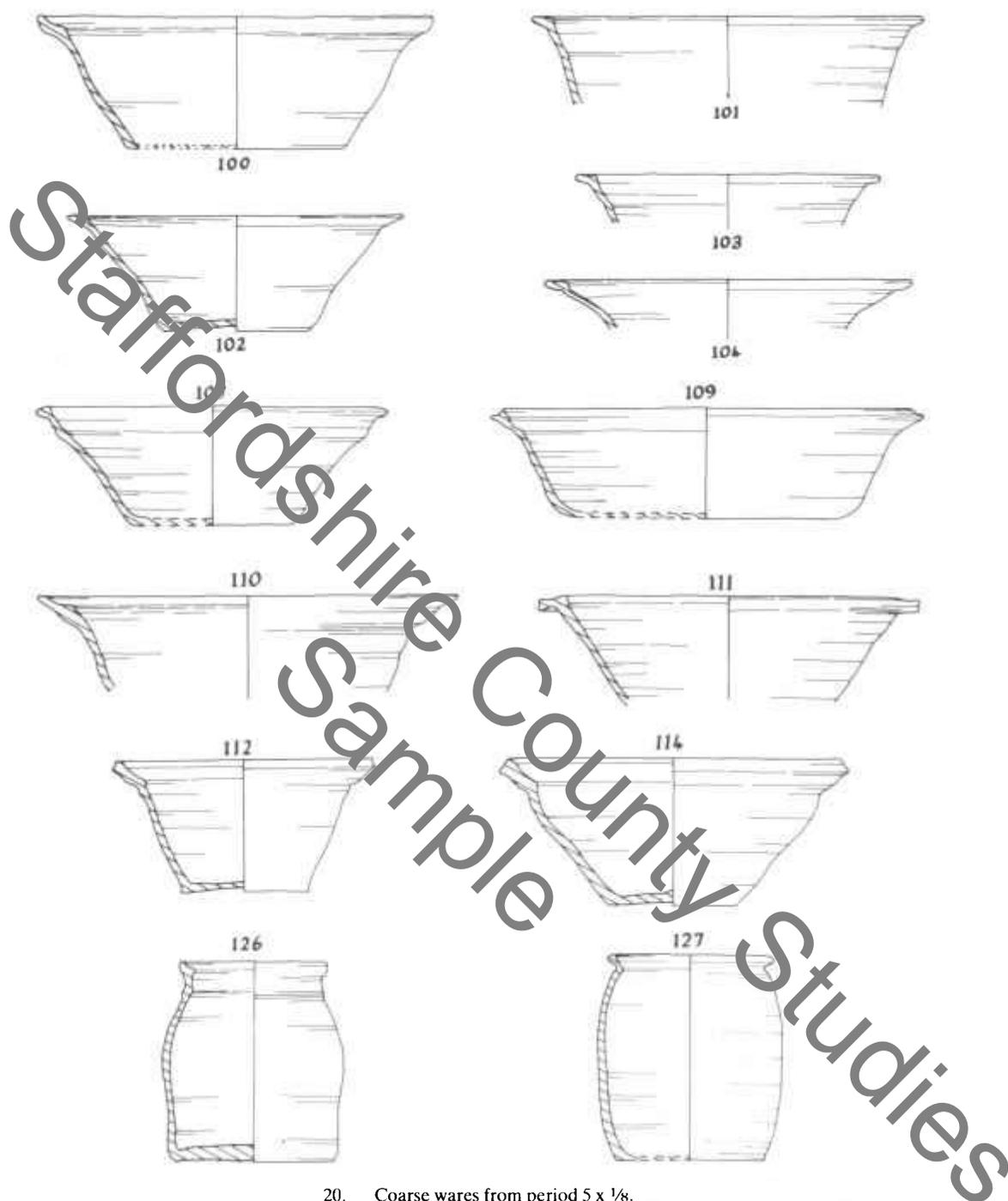
19. Pots from period 5: black ware (91-5), creamers (98-9, 105) and remnant pots (97-8) x ¼.

Period 5B — figures 24 and 25.

- 141. Small cup with applied floral and vertical motifs in white clay below the brown glaze. Cellar B, layer 26.
- 142. Cup with applied plain white clay pads. Cellar D, layer 18.
- 143. Body sherd with moulded and applied white pads. Cellar A, layer 10.
- 144. Tall cup. Cellar, layer 10.
- 145. Tankard? Cellar A, layer 17.
- 146. Small cup. Cellar, layer 10.
- 147. Tall cup. Cellar D, layer 3.
- 148. Base of jar. Cellar B, layer 24.
- 149. Rim of small bowl. Cellar A, layer 17.

Period 5C — figure 25.

- 161. Rim of a cup. Cellar A, layer 7.



20. Coarse wares from period 5 x 1/8.

Coarse wares — creamers, butter pots, etc.

There are three types of fabric represented in this group of pottery. The commonest (fabric A) is an open textured one, usually yellow, buff or red, often with yellow streaks in the clay. Most of the pots have heavy black glazes, but some are brown depending on the amount of iron and manganese present; there is often a purple sheen at the edge of the glazed area. The second fabric (B) is similar to a Midland Purple one, hard near stoneware, grey or purple in colour with purple surfaces; yellow streaks and inclusions in the clay. The third (fabric C), found in only two pots, is an open textured buff clay with grey surfaces. Fabric A was used for all types of large vessel — it is still in use for domestic crocks — but B was confined on this site to butter pots and similar tall vessels.

creamers, and cisterns. The deposit does not, therefore, look like the results of discarding freshly broken pottery into the cellar, using it as a primary rubbish dump over a period of time. Rather it appears to have been put in at one time, but not to be the product of clearing a large midden which had accumulated either in the castle or the town into the convenient space to be filled up. There are simply too few pots, and too little material, for that to be likely. The pottery is also rather too homogeneous for that explanation, being very largely composed of coarse table ware and kitchen or dairy vessels. The deposit would appear to be the result of an incidental clearing out of a room or small yard in the service area of the castle, where rubbish had been accumulating for a reasonably short period. The clearing probably occurred at the same time as the work was starting on the gatehouse area. The main filling, after all, was redeposited natural clay, itself perhaps derived from excavations carried out as part of the work elsewhere, such as foundations being dug for other properties further along the old ditch. The pottery may have been lying around for a long time before being cleared in this way, but it seems unlikely in that case that no later material would have crept in to it. The date of the assemblage is thus likely to be close to the date of its deposition.

The bulk of the finer wares were the Black wares and the Yellow wares; Manganese mottled ware was relatively scarce. Goodall (1984, 153, 155) points out that the first two types were giving way to the latter during the first decades of the 18th century. The absence of wares of the second quarter of that century, such as salt-glazed stoneware, is probably also significant, although this might be because of the social nature of the deposit, rather than its date. The tobacco pipes are of styles of the two decades before and after 1700, with 1720 as the latest likely date for any one of them. The one exception to this (fig. 26.25), which is of firmly earlier 18th-century date, came from a feature which was constructionally later than the cellar floor and which may have been in use for some time. It is to be regretted that neither the context of the coin allegedly found during the demolition of the cellar vaults, nor its identification, can now be firmly accepted, for it would tighten up the *terminus post quem* date well. As it is, however, the assemblage of material dumped into the gatehouse basement may reasonably be dated to the very beginning of the 18th century, almost certainly before 1725.

Such a date agrees well with deductions from the history of the castle at that time. In 1714 the younger Robert Shirley died, leaving the castle to his married sister. This event probably marked the end of the castle as a place of residence, and so opened the way for the new owners, the Earl and Countess of Northampton, to make money out of the site by filling up the ditch, laying out properties along the south side of Market Street, and letting out the castle bailey area, a process recorded in the 1741 map. In summary, we may date the events and deposits of Period 5 to the years after 1715.

Working backwards, the next event to be considered is Period 4; the construction of the bridge which joined the inner causeway to the market, and probably of the section of causeway immediately in front of the gatehouse. This happened after the deposit of the upper layers of the ditch fill in Group C, which were sealed by deposits associated with the bridge's foundations, but before the deposits of Group D. Unfortunately the latter contained very little material and none diagnostic enough to provide a *terminus ante quem*, although the absence of typical 16th-century pottery, such as stonewares, may just be thought significant. The upper levels of Group C contained both Tudor Green and Midland Purple pottery which were produced, and could have reached Tamworth, before the end of the 15th century. The bridge itself is too simple a design to assist in dating, but it is likely to have been built within fifty years of 1500.

The dates of the layers which made up the general silting of the ditch can be considered as a whole. At the top, as we have seen, are the layers with the 15th century Tudor Green and Midland Purple wares, found in Cellar B (layer 40) and its equivalents in Cellars A and C, (respectively layers 63 and 56), and the layers above. Below these were the layers of the earlier phase of Group C, and those of Period 3 and Group B, which seem to form a continuum, punctuated by the construction of the inner causeway in Period 3. The most productive of these was layer 40B in Cellar B, which was the same as layer 66 in Cellar A. The metalwork from the layer provides the best introduction to the dating. From it came the pewter pilgrim souvenir of the earlier 14th century; the spur of the later 14th century; the scissors of the 14th century in general; copper alloy pins and scale-tang knives found from the 13th or 14th centuries onwards (Goodall in Crossley, 1981, 56). One of the shoe soles from the layer (fig. 12.7) should date from the third quarter of the 14th century. The layer also marked the transition between pottery from the earlier Nuneaton tradition and the local Nuneaton type on the one hand, and the predominance of the harsher-fired pots of the Leicester types on the other. This move to plainer pots

fired at higher temperatures marks the general difference between the 13th or earlier 14th century products and the later mediaeval ones.

There is no reason to think that the deposition of layer 40B or its fellows in the ditch was a single event; rather they represent the steady accumulation of silt. Layer 40B and layers 68 and 70 in Cellar B, with layers 65 and 66 in Cellar A, are the first of these silting layers to accumulate against the base of the inner causeway of Period 3. We can say that they were so accumulating from at least the middle of the 14th century, and therefore it would seem unlikely that the inner causeway was built later than around 1350.

The inner causeway blocks the forward-facing arrow-slit of the gatehouse basement and it was cut through a silt layer which had built up against the outer face of the gatehouse wall (layer 72 in Cellar A, layer 73 in Cellar B). Presumably there was a period of time between the construction of the gatehouse and the inner causeway. The lowest silt only produced pottery of the local Nuneaton-type industry, as did the layers associated with the inner causeway foundations. The decorated leather sheath found in layer 74 may well be considered a 13th century object, and it might be significant that the five shoe soles from Group B layers were all of round-toed, probably 13th century type. The only architectural detail in the gatehouse is the use of fishtail arrow-slits, which is certainly a feature found in the 13th century, and probably most commonly then.

The foregoing is not conclusive on the date of the gatehouse and neither is the evidence of the documents. The history of Tamworth castle in the 13th century falls into two periods. In the first, Robert Marmion III's disputes with the king and Robert IV's assigning of the castle must both have inhibited major building works. In the second Philip Marmion, in control from c. 1245 to 1291, rebuilt the family fortunes and stood high in Henry III's favour. He was certainly building at Tamworth castle in the 1260s, but building what we do not know. We must be wary of jumping at using the chance survival of unspecific documents; his known building activity has already been equated with building on the motte by Meeson (1982: 30-1). Philip Marmion's public career ended c. 1270, but he was personally active for at least a dozen years afterwards; his youngest daughter was born in 1283. From 1295 the castle was the residence of the Frevilles, who had both the resources and the motive to build: Alexander Freville might well have wished to mark his wife's inheritance by rebuilding the gate in the early 14th century.

To decide this matter we may look to the general design of the building and its relations to architectural development as a whole. The two gatehouses which appear at first sight to be like that of Tamworth are the Constable's Gate at Dover (1220-7) and the Black Gate at Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1247-50). Both are oval in plan and set across the entrance with half round towers on either side facing up and down the ditch. Both have vaulted gate passages separate from the side towers, and are part of a complex entrance stretching back behind them. Tamworth gatehouse is a single space, with the side towers (if the side elements can be so called) facing forward, even if they have only a shallow projection. It is also clear that the Tamworth gatehouse was linked, not to a building behind, but to one at either one or both sides.

The "parallel" drawn between Tamworth and Dover or Newcastle gates is not, however, totally useless. It is helpful in that it places the Tamworth gate into that period of the development of castle design when the idea of the fully developed gatehouse, with strongly projecting twin towers integrated with a well defined gate passage, had not gained total acceptance. The typology of development from the rather hesitant projection of the Beeston (Cheshire) gate, in the 1220s, to the splendid formal displays of Edward I's castles at the end of the century is not a simple one. It includes the twin round towers with a poorly integrated gate passage at Chepstow, and the remarkably modest main gatehouse at Kenilworth.

The ditch at Tamworth was obviously spanned by a bridge, which could presumably be removed or interrupted in time of danger. The position of the forward facing arrow-slit in the basement precludes the possibility that there was in the original design a turning bridge in front of the gate; the front wall is also too thin to support the pivots for such a structure. It is tempting to see the purpose of the inner causeway as being to provide the outer support for a lifting bridge, perhaps replacing the original arrangement, whatever that might have been. Unfortunately it is surprisingly difficult to pin down the evidence for the invention or early adoption of the true lifting drawbridge in English castles. We can see the remains of pivoting bridges, either the pit for the inner end of the bridge to drop in to, or the pivot holes themselves. There are a number of castles, however, where there is no evidence of either

a pit, or of the holes in the front wall for the chains of a true lifting bridge. In some cases this is due to rebuilding of the wall, but it is clear that in others there must have been a sliding "gang-plank" arrangement. It is now often impossible to decide which type was originally present. In Tamworth's case it is therefore wrong to use the possibility that it was perhaps only later fitted up with a lifting bridge (even if this was firmly established) as a means of placing it in a context of the developing ideas of gatehouse design. We are left with the suggestion that its anomalous design is easier to explain if it was built in the middle decades of the 13th century than in the early 14th, but this cannot be considered an established fact.

In summary, therefore, we can put forward the following scheme of dating for the periods of the gatehouse as discovered.

- Period 1 (Gatehouse construction) — 1250s to 1270s
- Period 3 (Inner causeway) — early 14th century
- Period 4 (Outer causeway and Bridge) — around 1500
- Period 5 (Gatehouse destroyed and the Bull Inn built) — 1715-1730.

The results of the excavation were not confined to the structural sequence of the gatehouse. Information was also gained about two of the local crafts, potting and cobbling. The comparison of the pottery from Tamworth castle with the Nuneaton material is an interesting one. Before excavation, we would have expected the massive Nuneaton output to have dominated the Tamworth market, as the two towns are only a dozen miles apart. It is clear, however, that there was a more local centre of production for Tamworth, exploiting the local clays. At the start of the sequence of the ditch filling, this local industry was run by men trained in the Nuneaton tradition, although they used their own ideas of decoration. Later, the geographical links changed and the pottery resembled, from the later 14th century, that found further north in Leicestershire. The centre of production there was presumably not in Leicester itself but somewhere in the west of the county within reach of both places. The evidence for this connection is both of pots from this Leicestershire centre and of the local Tamworth industry using the same ideas and methods of clay preparation and firing. The reason for the shift may, of course, lie not in conditions at Tamworth but in those at Nuneaton, where the attraction of the large Coventry market directed the potters' attention south rather than west.

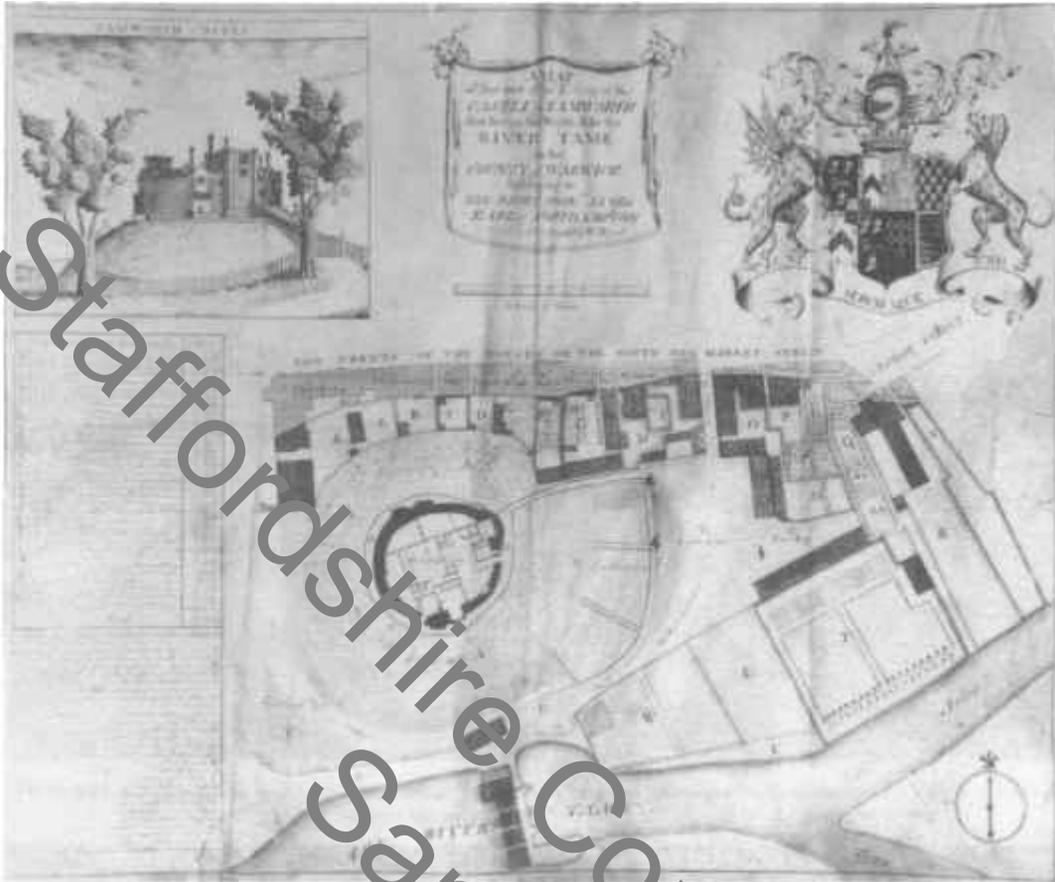
We cannot tell if the remains of the cobbler's workshop that we found in the castle ditch came from the castle yard or from the market on the other side of the ditch. Whichever was the case, they shed some light on the organisation of the craft. The ear, scrotum and udders show how the tanner of the period was prepared to spend a considerable effort to recover the whole of the skin of the animal, in contrast to modern practice when the saving of leather does not justify the labour involved. It was clearly also the tanner's business simply to provide hides; it was up to the buyer, in this case the cobbler, to decide what he would cut off and thrown into a convenient ditch. Again we can see in the small size of the scraps he threw out and in his cutting of small pieces from old soles for repairs that the raw material was valued more than the cost of labour; nowadays we would not consider the effort worthwhile. The extreme specialisation of the craft is shown by the fact that he dealt only in shoes; there was no sign of him making or repairing belts, sheaths or other goods.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used for references to authorities:

- | | | |
|---------------|------|--|
| Allin | 1981 | C. E. Allin, <i>The medieval leather industry in Leicester</i> , Leicestershire Museums and Art Galleries Archaeological Report no. 3, 1981. |
| Arthur & Jope | 1963 | B. V. Arthur & E. M. Jope, 'Early Saxon pottery kilns at Purwell Farm, Cassington, Oxfordshire', <i>Medieval Archaeology</i> , vi-vii, 1962-3, 1-14. |
| Atkinson | 1975 | D. R. Atkinson, <i>Tobacco pipes of Broseley, Shropshire</i> , Saffron Waldon, 1975. |
| C. C. R. | | <i>Calendar of Close Rolls: 1204-25</i> , ed. T. D. Hardy, London 1833; 1216—, London, H.M.S.O. |
| C. Ch. R. | | <i>Calendar of Charter Rolls</i> , London, H.M.S.O. |
| C. F. R. | | <i>Calendar of Fine Rolls</i> , London, H.M.S.O. |
| C. I. P. M. | | <i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</i> , London, H.M.S.O. |
| C. L. R. | | <i>Calendar of Liberate Rolls</i> , London, H.M.S.O. |
| C. P. R. | | <i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i> , London, H.M.S.O. |

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1. Map of Tamworth Castle Liberty in 1741.
 (Staffordshire Record Office, D. 1041; reproduced with permission of the County Archivist)



2. Plan of features excavated in the bailey area, 1972. (The south-west of the grid is at the south-west point of the area excavated as shown in fig. 1).



3. Exterior of the west tower and adjacent curtain wall as exposed in the 1960s' building work; *n.b.* the loop in the west tower at ground level and the three ascending loops in the curtain, lighting the staircase.



4. Rear of the gatehouse wall as excavated in 1972, showing the cobbled surface cut by the trench-built wall and later pits.

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1987

- 2 Oct. (L) Annual General Meeting
 Rise and Fall of the earldom of Mercia — Dr. Philip Morgan
- 16 Oct. (L) Archaeological Landscapes of the Peak District — Ken Smith
- 6 Nov. (L) Discovering the basilica of Roman London — Gustav Milne
- 20 Nov. (L) *Petra, city of the Nabataeans* — Dr. Margaret Lyttelton
- 4 Dec. (L) The Norman cathedral of Lichfield — Dr. Warwick Rodwell
- 18 Dec. (L) Social Evening

1988

- 5 Feb. (L) Palaeolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain and South-West France — Dr. Gary Lock
- 19 Feb. (T) The Rocester Excavation — John Ferris
- 4 Mar. (L) Religious Beliefs of the British Celts — Dr. Graham Webster
- 18 Mar. (T) Civic Evening
 The Saxon mill at Tamworth — Professor Philip Rahtz
- (L) St. Mary's Heritage Centre, Lichfield
 (T) Rawlett School, Comberford Road, Tamworth