SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

Clavering Castle: a mysterious moated monument

©Jacqueline Cooper

Reprinted (with minor alterations and additions) from: *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 9 Spring 2005

The moat of Clavering Castle (left); earthworks to the west of the Castle site.
Photographs ©Jacqueline Cooper.

Clavering Castle, which lies next to the Parish Church, is a large moated site designated by English Heritage as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, of Saxon or medieval origin. This article describes what remains today, and draws together what little is already known and what is surmised about its history.

The castle complex consists of a rectangular enclosure, 150 by 100 metres in size, surrounded by a large ditch, 26 metres across and 5 metres deep, and associated earthworks including a possible watermill site. The central platform, which is on private land, is deep in tree cover and lies within a bend of the River Stort, but parts of it can be glimpsed from the churchyard, from a public footpath and more distantly from the highway up Plantation Hill. Within the central platform are robbed-out trenches of

former buildings, with a large moat crossed by a modern causeway. To the east lies The Bury, built in 1304, and an orchard also full of humpy ground. To the south lies Clavering Church and churchyard, and to the north a flat area between banks, possibly once a mill leet linked to a watermill mentioned in Domesday. To the west are dramatic earthworks, popularly known as 'the humps and bumps', leading to the river. It is believed that the deep valley is artificial, the river having been dammed at some stage, and diverted to a new course, while the former valley was widened into a lake: the local field name, 'the dam', may relate to this. Also nearby is Bury Meadow, again very humpy, named on a map of 1783 as 'the Stow', which could derive from the word *stewe*, meaning fish-ponds, and indeed there is a pond remaining there today.

The complex arrangement of earthworks on the 'humps and bumps' is interpreted in the Essex *VCH* as 'hydraulic engineering of a very early date', an elaborate water management system, with sluices, banks and reservoirs, diversion and deepening of the river, to feed a mill and control water levels in the moat. As such, it represents a remarkably enterprising and skilled piece of work, entailing much labour.

It is also significant that Clavering Castle lies so close to the parish church, built in the 14th century, on or near the site of two former chapels. As in other aspects of this story, there are royal connections, for in 1251, Henry III visited Clavering and endowed the chapel of St John the Evangelist in Clavering churchyard, repaired the roof and installed a chaplain. There is also a reference to 'Our Lady Chapple' in 1570. Remains of a former building were discovered in the present church during 1860s renovations, probably at the east end of the north aisle.

Also relevant to the monument is the wider landscape, which includes Middle Street, possibly once a planned development linked to the castle. The surrounding parish, right up to the 19th century, featured up to 20 open fields divided into strips, remnant of an agricultural pattern that was ancient even when the Castle was in its heyday 800 years ago. The nearest open field to the Castle was *Melnefeld*, the windmill on the top reachable from a path which joined the road near Clavering Castle.

A Bronze Age ritual site?

Describing the Clavering Castle topography is easier than interpreting it, and theories abound. The earliest use of the site was actually long before in prehistoric times, as suggested by the finding of a Late Bronze Age 'founder's hoard', discovered somewhere near the Bury *c.*1870. Two plain, looped, socketed axes survive at Cambridge Museum of Archaeology, which acquired them in 1873 from a sale after the death of W. Fuller Maitland at Stansted Hall. The bronze objects testify to activity very near to the monument site 3,000 years ago, and may link to other LBA hoards found at Arkesden and elsewhere. With a polished stone adze found at

Starlings Green, and flint scrapers of similar date picked up in nearby fields, there is thus strong evidence that this valley was exploited in prehistoric times.

Hoards similar to the Clavering one, buried and never reclaimed, have been found at Arkesden and High Easter (now in Saffron Walden Museum), and were probably votive deposits. Bronze Age people are thought to have attached symbolic meaning to metal objects, and there may have been ritual significance. The proximity to the parish church strengthens the idea that this area had spiritual meaning from early times. However, Victorian antiquarians destroyed information of underground archaeology which gave context to the hoard, and the find-spot is unknown.

A Saxon *burh*?

As to the Castle site itself, one theory is that this could have initially evolved during the troubled times of the Viking raids in the 9th and 10th centuries. Sometimes a Saxon lord would build just such a defensive barrier around his home as protection from Danish aggression. This is the origin of some Anglo-Saxon *burhs*, notably that at Goltho, Lincolnshire where excavations showed that the wooden, single-storey hall of a minor thegn was fortified with a ditch and palisade. In Essex history, this was a notoriously obscure period, but recent scholarship suggests that, although the East Anglian Vikings settled the north-east of the county, other parts of Essex were an English outpost of Alfred's West Saxon kingdom. If Clavering was in an area of border territory, it would have been a good place to site a defensive *burh*.

As a counter argument to this, there have been some notable Danish finds in north-west Essex, such as the Ashdon coin hoard, the Saffron Walden Viking necklace and at Stansted Airport, an Anglo-Scandinavian bronze cheekpiece from a bridle, as well as metal-detectorist finds. Arkesden (which adjoins Clavering) has a Scandinavian personal name (Arnkel) attached to an Anglo-Saxon element (Valley); and Skeins Way in Clavering derives from Walter Skayn, a 14th century landowner here whose name sounds Scandinavian too. The knowledge of Viking Essex is very incomplete.

A pre-Norman ringwork?

Although this theory is plausible, there is no evidence, and the official description of Clavering Castle in the list of Scheduled Ancient Monuments refers to a possible pre-Norman ringwork. There are only 200 recorded examples of these in Britain, and pre-Norman castles are even rarer, with only three possible sites, referred to in the 1051-2 period recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. One is known only as Pentecost's Castle, which was in Herefordshire. Richard's Castle near Ludlow is another. The third is

Robert's Castle, its location not given but identified by historians as Clavering. The 'E' version of the *Chronicle* (where Robert's Castle is mentioned), compiled in the 12th century, was based on annals of the 1050s written by a contemporary scribe, so is seen as a reliable source.

These early castles were built by Continental followers of Edward the Confessor, of whom Robert Fitz Wimarc was one, said to have been a kinsman of Edward, and a member of the Royal household. His closeness to the throne is exemplified on the Bayeux Tapestry in Edward's death scene, where he is identified as the man pictured holding up the king's head as he lay dying. Fitz Wimarc was thus a witness to the enigmatic touching of fingers between the dying king and Earl Harold, which some have interpreted as showing that Edward intended Harold to be king.

Robert Fitz Wimarc, lord of Clavering (right), pictured on the Bayeux Tapestry, supporting the dying king, Edward the Confessor who is touching Harold's fingers.

This Robert was one of the richest laymen in the country, owning land in seven shires, but largely in Essex, where his most valuable manor was Clavering, assessed at Domesday as 15 hides and worth £20. It is thought that Robert's estate did not exist before Edward's reign, so was created specially for Robert. As a Frenchman, Fitz Wimarc would have been familiar with castle-building on the Continent. Edward was trying to strengthen his court, and allowing his aristocratic followers to build castles could have been politically expedient, for Edward was having problems with powerful earls, especially Godwin.

The year 1052 is the earliest date on which Robert's signature is found on a document, and this was also a year of conflict. Godwin felt his dominance threatened by the increasing Norman influence, and rebelled against the King, who then banished him and his followers. After various skirmishes, Edward reluctantly re-instated Godwin and agreed to banish those Frenchmen whom Godwin disliked. The Frenchmen, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, then fled in various directions. Some went east to leave the country, some 'west to Pentecost Castle, some north to Robert's

castle'. Robert Fitz Wimarc was not among those expelled, but appears to have offered temporary refuge to them in his castle. The only castle north of London that fits the bill is Clavering, particularly as it still has the remains of a large moated site traditionally called a castle.

There are some historians who are more cautious, suggesting that 'Robert's castle' could be elsewhere, or that it could be a different Robert, or even that the word 'castle' could have been mis-translated. The English word originally had a more general meaning of a defended settlement, derived from Latin *castellum* (with a double ll); but from the 1050s it also became associated with French-type castles from the French word *castel* (with single l). These two meanings appear to have existed contemporaneously for a while. It could be that the word 'castle' has been misunderstood, and it could simply refer to Clavering as a defended settlement, and not to a castle *per se*. There is also the problem that there are no other documentary references referring to the castle.

However, many believe quite firmly that Clavering was indeed Robert's Castle. The distinguished Essex historian J. H. Round gave this interpretation almost a century ago, and most others agree, including Ann Williams, a leading authority on the period. To summarise, if the 1052 reference is correct, Clavering is the site of a rare pre-Norman castle, and the earliest castle in eastern England.

However, *if* Clavering had a castle, it was not in use for long, for Robert's successors had their castle at Rayleigh. This came about because of the astuteness of Fitz Wimarc. Not only did he survive the Godwinian episode, and remain in Edward's court, then serve under Harold, but he managed to serve two masters when William the Conqueror landed in England. He had gone to warn William of the size of Harold's army, a warning which William ignored and went on to win the famous victory at Hastings. But once again, Fitz Wimarc prospered under William, gaining even more land and probably becoming Sheriff of Essex. Robert died *c.*1070 and was succeeded by his son Swein. The extent of his holdings is known from Domesday, which shows that Swein of Essex was one of the greatest landowners in England. For such a man, Clavering would be small fry, and he built himself a new castle at Rayleigh, the only Essex castle mentioned in Domesday. Sweyn died in 1100 and is buried in Westminster Abbey, a sign of his importance in the land.

A castle of the Anarchy?

If Robert's Castle was in Clavering, it must lie buried under later structures, for the present form is believed to date from the mid-12th century. From 1100, the manor of Clavering was held by Swein's son, Robert of Essex, who built the church at the linked parish of Langley and founded Prittlewell Priory, for which Clavering tithes were part of the endowment. After his death, the manor went to his son, Henry of Essex,

recorded by 1145 as a constable under King Stephen, whose reign (1135-54) was known as 'the Anarchy' due to the civil war that raged at that time.

During this troubled period, many unlicensed castles were thrown up, often consisting simply of an earthwork mound with a palisade, and outer ditch. They were placed strategically to deal with the rebellion and lawlessness led by Geoffrey de Mandeville, who from his Fenland base was laying waste to countryside for miles around. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* famously comments: 'they greatly oppressed the wretched people by making them work at the castles, and when the castles were finished they filled them with devils and evil men'. Another medieval chronicler, Henry of Huntingdon, says that the king 'caused castles to be built in suitable places' and garrisoned them, in order 'to overawe the marauders'.

Could Clavering Castle have been rebuilt or refortified at this time? It has been thought that over a thousand such temporary 'adulterine' castles were put up, but more recent scholarship says that this was greatly exaggerated, and there were actually less than a hundred. Clavering as it stands today seems rather too substantial to have been one of these generally rather flimsy constructions, but some of them have survived. One such is at Burwell Castle, Cambridgeshire, built in 1144 but unfinished. This is because de Mandeville attacked it and was mortally wounded, and this brought the civil war to an end, so there was no need to complete the construction.

In some ways, Burwell is uncannily similar to Clavering Castle. Like Clavering, there are uneven mounds and hollows on a rectangular island surrounded by a ditch; on the outside are further earthworks composed of spoil from the digging of the ditch and, like the humps and bumps at Clavering, at a higher level than the castle itself. Other possible Anarchy castles could include Therfield, Rampton, Swavesey, Cottenham, Bassingbourn, Kirtley, Anstey and Caxton, but lack of excavations or documentation makes confirmation difficult.

If Clavering followed this design, it should be possible to find traces of a gate tower and a wall, with garrison, stables, stores and workshops within. Pottery is also dating evidence, but at Burwell the Saxo-Norman sherds found on the central platform are thought to relate to houses demolished to make way for the castle.

The manorial dates are not entirely clear, but *if* Clavering Castle was built or rebuilt during Stephen's reign, it was probably during the lordship of Henry of Essex, but this great-grandson of Fitz Wimarc lost all his lands during the reign of Henry II (1154-89). In 1163, Henry of Essex, standard-bearer to the king, was found guilty of treason after flinging down the royal ensign and fleeing from the scene of a Welsh battle,

causing panic to the army. His lands were confiscated and he was forced to become a monk, so Clavering then belonged to the Crown.

Knight's effigy in Clavering Church. ***Photograph ©Jacqueline Cooper.***

By the late 12th century, Clavering had gone to Robert Fitz Roger, son of Alice of Essex, second wife of Robert Fitz Sweyn. The Clavering lords continued to be associated with the monarchy, and one of them has his effigy in Clavering Church, its style of armour pre-dating the present church. The status of these early lords helps explain the existence of such an impressive moated site, far larger than the normal homestead ditch. Impressive it may have been, but Clavering Castle was replaced in 1304 by a new manor house, The Bury, on an adjacent site, its beams precisely dated by dendochronology.

Apart from the enigmatic *Chronicle*s reference, there is no known early document referring to a castle here. The earliest reference was not until the 18th century in Philip Morant's *History of Essex*, where he notes: 'Clavering-Bury, standing on the north side of the Church, the residence of the ancient Lords of this place, and the Head of the Barony of Clavering, was a Castle, some of the walls of which were not long since in being. There is still a large area belonging thereto, with a deep trench.' Morant's volumes, with their wealth of manorial detail, have continued in use, and of course he could have had access to sources that are now lost to us. Early maps do not help resolve the matter: the 1777 Chapman & Andre map of Essex does not depict anything here, and the 1783 Christ's Hospital plan of Clavering, although it shows a rectangular moated area, merely calls it The Moat or Orchard.

But if Morant *c.*1760s was able to describe walls 'not long since in being', it seems likely that, to survive for 600 years, they must have been made of stone or flints and this suggests some substantial construction. Typically such useful building material would be taken by villagers and re-used, leaving the type of hollowed earthworks that are found on the castle site today. It would be difficult to prove that Clavering Castle had

anything to do with the Anarchy, but it is perfectly credible that some major construction took place here in the 12th century.

A 12th century ornamental landscape?

This construction is believed by Christopher Taylor to be, not a castle, but a high-status moated site. Christopher Taylor used to be head of archaeological survey for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and is probably the country's leading authority on the interpretation of such earthworks. Conducting students around the site in 2003, he pointed out that, although earlier phases may lie underneath, its present form is definitely mid-12th century or later. There are thousands of such moated sites, though few with such a huge ditch or moat. They were constructed after 1150 and are common in Essex, especially in the TL51 square of the Ordnance Survey map, and were built largely as status symbols, resources for water, fish and reeds, and as a barrier to keep stock in or wild animals out.

With its large moat, former fish ponds, mill and other earthworks, this could represent a medieval ornamental landscape. Taylor has pioneered studies of such landscapes, for instance at Somersham Palace in Cambridgeshire which offers possible parallels with Clavering. This too features banks, dams, leats, fishponds and other water management and control features, including a 'massive moat' (although it is far smaller than Clavering). Somersham may have been laid out for a royal visit, and Clavering's early lords are known to have been close to the Crown at various times.

The central platform of Clavering Castle is about an acre in area, but the moat seems to be twice as deep and five times as wide as one would expect for a site of this size. Surely it is built to impress: if moats were largely built for status reasons, then possessing a bigger moat perhaps betokened an even higher status! Examination of the moat deposits may yield dating and environmental information to take the story back in time.

The mystery of Clavering Castle

As this discussion demonstrates, the origins of Clavering Castle are the subject of much speculation. Unfortunately there is as yet no archaeology to support any hypothesis. In 1977 a group of university students carried out a survey, but the only archaeology in the vicinity has been in the adjoining churchyard in 2000. This produced a few Saxo-Norman sherds, rather more Early Medieval wares, a post-hole (sign of former settlement) and evidence of early boundaries. One boundary was aligned with one side of the castle earthworks, and another with the east side of the churchyard. Although the earlier wares could point to a pre-Conquest date for the Castle, as they were found with Early Medieval wares, a 12th-13th

century date is more likely, which would fit Christopher Taylor's hypothesis.

It is of course possible that the monument may represent a complex of different dates, evolving over time from a prehistoric spot of ritual significance, later perhaps used by the Romans (as found during excavation at Burwell), then maybe a Saxon *buhr* consolidated into a ringwork, further developed in the 12th century, and finally used only for barns, while a new manor house was built in 1304. The Castle could have been both functional – supplying fish and eels for the table, and rushes for flooring; administrative – the place from which the manor was organised; and aesthetic, with a viewing platform overlooking a beautifully moated enclave, designed to impress.

Whatever the truth, for generations of villagers and visitors, Clavering Castle has been a source of fascination, not least because it is also a nature reserve of great wildlife and landscape value. The monument has been well cared-for and seems ripe for further investigation. From 2005 to 2008, 'Project Castle' was organised by the Clavering Landscape History Group, in association with Essex Heritage & Conservation, and resulted in new insights through earthwork and geophysical survey (see below). Excavation is not generally allowed by English Heritage on Ancient Monuments, but this is really the only way to expand on knowledge of the monument, and to add nationally to information on moated sites, early castles, earthworks, water management systems, ornamental landscapes and medieval settlement. For Clavering Castle, after a thousand years of slow evolution, a new phase has taken place but there remains much still to learn.

Note: Since the publication of this article, the results of the Project Castle have been summarised on an information board in the adjoining churchyard (see below), a DVD and a printed booklet. The project archive can be found on the website www.claveringonline.org.uk