

## **OLD SARUM CASTLE**

Castle Road, Salisbury, Wiltshire, SP1 3SD

### **14<sup>th</sup> September 2017**

I'd often heard the name Old Sarum, but apart from thinking it sounded historically romantic and knowing it had been rather important as the historical forerunner of Salisbury Cathedral, I didn't know much about it. When we found ourselves within easy enough distance on a Wiltshire holiday, therefore, it beckoned alluringly.

I researched it a little before we travelled to the English Heritage site and became ever more excited to visit such an important location. I learned that it uniquely combines a royal castle and cathedral within an Iron Age fortification and was a major centre of both ecclesiastical and secular government for 150 years. Not much is known of this period and the following Anglo-Saxon era was generally poorly recorded, although archaeological finds suggest occupation during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the existence of a mint. The coin kind, obviously.

The name of Sarum seems to have been an inaccurate extension of 'Sa' which stood for the 'Sarisburie' that appeared in the Domesday Book, or similar adaptations of the name. The longer name was first abbreviated as 'Sar', but confusion reigned and it became known as Sarum at some point in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The addition of 'Old' was logically used to distinguish it from New Sarum, which was actually the formal name of Salisbury until 2009. Fascinating!

Less fascinating on arrival was the humdrum car park with its toilets and dog walkers, plus the definite nip in the air as we briskly walked across a sturdy wooden bridge above a dry moat to pay (£4.30 each concession rate) for access to the castle. Without crossing the bridge, free access to the hill fort and the footprint of the original cathedral was available, with open views of the surrounding countryside. It was clearly the destination of the dog walkers.

Meanwhile, we took advantage of the coffee machine in the small shop and each took a steaming hot takeaway cappuccino out into the crisp, morning air, sipping it slowly whilst drinking in the atmosphere of the historical remains.



**Sipping a cappuccino and gazing at Sarisburie – the old one**

There are, in fact, three main areas of interest at Old Sarum – namely the earthworks of the Iron Age hill fort, the stronghold of the Norman castle on the motte in the middle and the remnants of the cathedral within the north-west quarter of the hill fort. Although not much standing masonry has survived, the earthworks are fairly well-preserved.

Old Sarum is one of the biggest Iron Age forts in England and was crucial in the development of a series of other Wiltshire-based Iron Age sites. There is evidence that early hunters occupied the site, followed by farming communities. It's thought that at some time around 400 BC, local inhabitants constructed a protective hill fort by creating huge banks and ditches surrounding the hill.

Broadly oval-shaped, the hill fort was 1,300 feet/400 metres in length and 1,180 feet/360 metres in width, with a single entry on the eastern side protected by a midway ditch and double bank, most of which not only survives, but remains the main entrance to the site. The outer rampart is larger than most Iron Age hill forts, but just over half the size of Maiden Castle in Dorset, the largest of them all.

I'm not very clever at identifying hill forts and confess that during the visit I was more interested in the medieval castle, but I was aware of some very interesting topography and many clearly significant lumps and bumps.



**Significant lumps and bumps?**

When the Roman conquest of Britain occurred in 43 AD, the area of Old Sarum appeared to have formed part of the territory of a British tribe known as the Atrebates, ruled by exiles from Gaul. Although there's scant evidence Old Sarum was continuously occupied, the site became known after the Roman conquest as the settlement of Sorviodunum. This continued to at least 300 AD.

Three Roman roads converged outside the east gate of the hill fort and two substantial Romano-British settlements were situated outside the ramparts. It seems probable that a military Roman fort was set up within the earthworks in the early years of the conquest, but as the need for a fort lessened, the area inside the ramparts became the precinct for a Romano-British temple.

Sorviodunum was mentioned twice in the Antonine Itinerary (a register of the stations and distances along various roads), although little is known of this period. Later occupation resulted in most evidence being buried under much chalk and soil, with no systematic exploration of these very early levels. The little evidence there is from these times comes from finds dispersed over a large area of the site.

English Heritage states that there is no evidence of Sorviodunum's fate at the end of the Roman era and since most of the Anglo-Saxon period is hardly recorded, current understanding of Old Sarum is very patchy, both archaeologically and historically. To my mind, the site seems ripe for further research.

However, archaeological finds indicate there was a late Anglo-Saxon settlement outside the ramparts. Although Cynric, King of Wessex, captured the hill in 552, Old Sarum was largely ignored, until the Viking invasions in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century.

This led King Alfred (849-899 AD) to restore its fortifications and in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, it was a frequent residence of Egbert of Wessex. He assembled a national council there in order to plan a defence against the Danes in the north, but the site was abandoned when it was sacked and burned by King Sweyn Forkbeard – which is a truly delicious name.

Archaeologists discovered that in 1003 a mint was situated within the old hill fort and shortly after the Norman invasion of 1066, William the Conqueror clearly recognised Old Sarum's potential by having a motte built in the middle of the earthworks there. This created an inner set of fortifications that became his castle, with a huge outer bailey wrapped around it (within which a cathedral was built). This transformed the site, as it effectively divided the hill fort in two.



**The cathedral site within the outer bailey** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The size of the outer bailey meant it could accommodate a large number of troops. This fact and Old Sarum's location at the junction of the Roman road network most likely led to its use as an ideal army base in the early years of the Norman Conquest. In 1070, William gathered his troops at Old Sarum to pay them off after his relentless 'Harrying of the North' campaign, to subdue northern England.

He rewarded the soldiers who had acted particularly well, before dismissing them, but those who had complained about the hardships they'd suffered were detained for 40 days as punishment. In this case, complaining didn't pay! It's considered that William's successful display of authority at Old Sarum may have encouraged him to use the site for his forthcoming Oath of Sarum.

William was facing a crisis of revolt and invasion in 1086, which may have led him to host a great gathering on 1<sup>st</sup> August that year at Old Sarum, requiring his council and all landholders of any account to bow before him and swear an oath of fealty. This meant they promised from then on to remain faithful to him against all others, effectively consolidating the Norman Conquest of England.

Another reason for choosing the site for such a dramatic demonstration of homage could be that Old Sarum was where the returns from the Domesday survey were gathered, having recorded who held land across the kingdom. By the summer of 1086, the process had been completed and the results were known to William, so because the ceremony took place there and then, it consequently served to emphasise the fact that all land tenure was determined by the king.

Old Sarum's inner castle had taken shape in the form of a complex of towers, apartments and halls, with the new cathedral sited in the north-western part of the bailey. The castle's importance as an administrative base had grown, with the establishment of the Wiltshire sheriffs there, plus a group of literate clerks associated with the new cathedral. In fact, Old Sarum had become second only to Winchester as a centre of royal government.

The early buildings would have been of timber, while the oldest surviving stone structure is the keep that was probably built during the reign of King Henry I (1068-1135, reign from 1100). However, in around 1130, the castle was granted to Bishop Roger of Sarum, who was regent for the king when Henry was otherwise engaged in Normandy. Roger's addition of a courtyard house is internationally significant as the earliest known example of a medieval house incorporating covered courtyard walks in the style of a cloister in northern Europe.



**The courtyard house in the inner bailey**

The courtyard house consisted of four ranges around a small courtyard, originally built on two levels, with a service range on the east. The kitchen tower and its associated cesspits rose up the bank towards the north. Not nice, but necessary.

A two-storey chapel was contained in the south range, with its lower storey dedicated to St Margaret and its upper storey dedicated to St Nicholas. The west range was a large hall and the north range was set aside for the king's use, with deep latrine pits for private usage.

Bishop Roger was also responsible for impressively extending the existing small cathedral in an eastward direction. When he died in 1139, though, the castle passed back to King Henry II (1133-1189) and although any great ambition for Old Sarum declined, there was significant building between 1171 and 1189.

The gatehouse was refurbished, a masonry wall was built around the inner bailey, a treasury was built in the keep and a new drawbridge was constructed. In fact, the castle was kept to a standard high enough for King Henry to keep his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204), detained under house arrest there on several occasions, for inciting her sons to rebel against him.

As for the cathedral, plans to rebuild the nave had been abandoned after the death of Bishop Roger, meaning that it was his successor Bishop Jocelyn who fitted out the extended cathedral, as well as adding a new west front.

However, dissatisfaction with the site and deteriorating relations with the castle's garrison led to the cathedral being moved to its current site in Salisbury (New Sarum). Royal approval for the move had been granted in 1194, although the move wasn't actually carried out until the 1220s.



**Looking up to the castle from the cathedral site** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Despite this abandonment of Old Sarum by the clergy and a growing lack of royal interest in the castle, it continued to be used. Over £700 was spent by King Edward III (1312-1377) on maintenance and repair and the courtyard house, lived in by the sheriff and his officers, was subject to a major overhaul in 1366.

As time went on, though, structures in the inner bailey became no longer used and although the castle continued to be utilised as an administrative centre into the 15<sup>th</sup> century, its time was finally up in 1514. In his wisdom, King Henry VIII decided to hand over the castle to Thomas Compton, a knight who served in the House of Commons, along with the right to carry away castle materials.

John Leland, Tudor antiquarian and chaplain to Henry VIII, visited Old Sarum in 1540 and reported that the east suburb was no more and further to that, not one house in either the inner bailey or outer bailey was inhabited. He concluded that since the building of "New-Saresbyri", "Old-Saresbyri" had gone "totally to ruine".

Nevertheless, Old Sarum lived on as a 'rotten borough' that continued to elect members of Parliament until the 1832 Reform Act put paid to such a rotten practice (I had to say it). A rotten borough was entitled to elect an MP despite having hardly any voters, with the choice of MP often in the hands of one person or family. Surely there was no such corruption? Surely the word 'rotten' can't be used in the same sentence as 'member of parliament'...

Sadly on our visit, there was no audio guide and as we wandered around different areas, it was evident that several information boards were in dire need of replacement – some were cracked, weather-worn and very difficult to read. I found this hard to credit at such an important place and our main enjoyment was derived from taking photos and appreciating the atmosphere of the site.



**Steps to ... somewhere?**

The importance of Old Sarum was recognised when it became one of the first sites protected by the Ancient Monuments Act of 1881. William St John Hope led excavations there in 1909-15, but these were abandoned before completion and a final report was never written after William died in 1919.

In 2014, however, the University of Southampton carried out a geophysical survey that revealed the layout of an extensive settlement in the outer bailey, with a courtyard, residential areas and several huge defensive structures. This indicates that there was once a thriving medieval city at Old Sarum.

There is now a consensus that the main areas of population in both the Roman and the medieval periods were outside the old fort and several gaps in research have been identified as warranting further investigation.

As it was, the clear historical significance of the site made it worth visiting, as well as its layout and position, with the spire of Salisbury Cathedral visible from the ramparts. The wind was a little gusty at times and some of the clouds were tending to veer towards grey, but we had a decent exploration, of both the old castle and then the site of the first cathedral. We finished the morning with a part-walk around the ramparts, trying to identify some wildflowers.



**The great tower middle left – courtyard right** (photo by Alan Santillo)

I loved the idea that Eleanor of Aquitaine had spent part of her life there, between 1173 and 1189, perhaps admiring wildflowers too and possibly using some for medicinal and other purposes. Evidence suggests that her enforced stay was a comfortable one, with fine clothes for her and her household being sent regularly from London. In fact, she could well have been sent to Old Sarum because she liked the place, since she visited it before and after her confinements.

However, as we left via the remains of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century gatehouse, over the modern wooden bridge spanning the bailey ditch, I couldn't help thinking one thing – that it would have been a brilliant visit if only there had been an audio guide...