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middleton  
mount

## A short history of Middleton Mount

Norfolk has the lowest density of castles in England and Wales. It has been argued that this was due to few lords having the wealth and resources to make castle building worthwhile. Eighteen castles sites are known in Norfolk, most of them built in the late 11th and 12th centuries in the decades following the Norman Conquest. They are an extremely varied group of monuments. They range from the royal castle at Norwich and aristocratic castles such as Castle Acre and Castle Rising, down to much smaller castles like Middleton. In many cases they survive only as earthwork remains, and often we do not know who built them, or when.

Francis Blomefield in *An Essay Towards A Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: Volume 9* (London, 1808), suggested an explanation for the location of the castle:

*'So called, as lying on a hill, surrounded with low grounds, marshes' and water, Mid-Le-Ton.'*

Middleton Mount, like the nearby castles at Wormegay

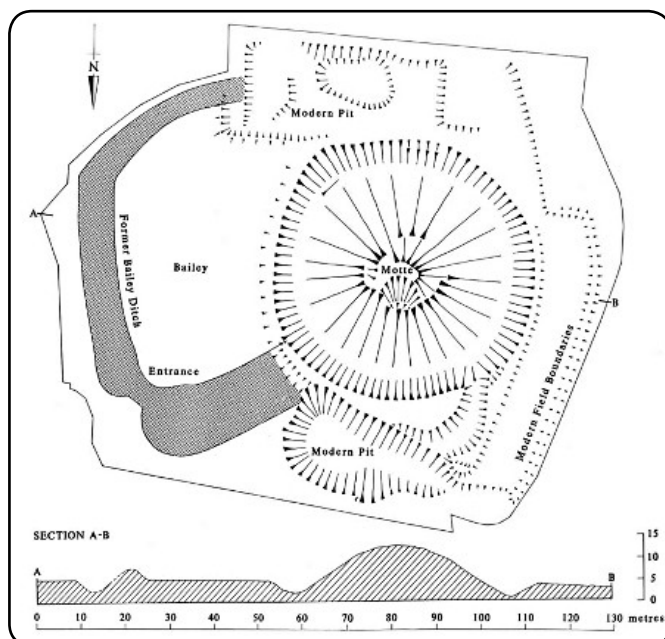
and Castle Rising, lies close to edge of the Fens. Middleton and Wormegay lie either side of the Nar - well situated both for controlling east-to-west routes and for overseeing the surrounding territory. Probably had a strategic role guarding the approach from the west, and could have been built either just after the conquest, or during civil war, perhaps with their face towards the Fens where there was unrest.

We don't know for certain who built the castle, or when. Although most motte castles were occupied for only a short period of time, they continued to be built and occupied from the 11th to the 13th centuries, after which they were superseded by other types of castle or dwelling.

It is possible that the castle was constructed soon after the Norman Conquest and could have been built on an existing Saxon site to assert power.

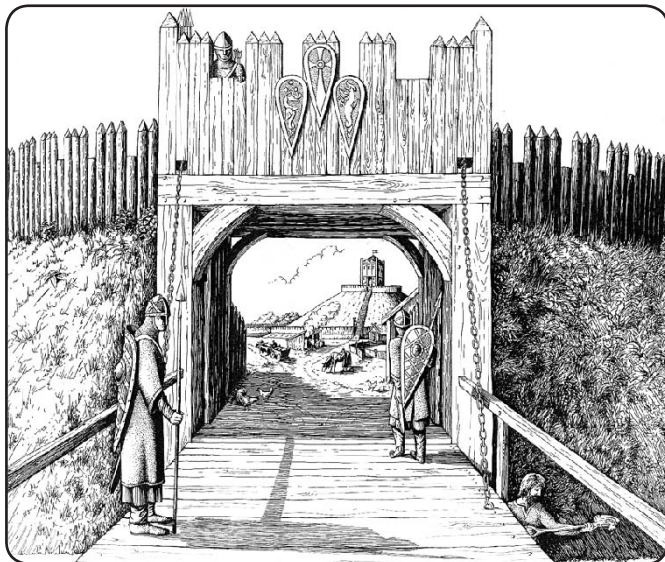
Of the manor lords listed in Domesday the most likely builder was William de Ecouis. The other lords of the manor, de Montford and Count Alan had sub-tenants, and the Abbot of Edmundsbury seems to have had limited significance in the settlement.

The holding later came through marriage to the Earls of Clare and is traceable as the 'Castle Hall' manor. This manor was in the hands of the Scales family by 1134 (i.e. prior to the civil war). They were major landowners in Middleton and built the large moated house at Tower End (15<sup>th</sup> century). It's likely the old castle was abandoned then, if not before.



Plan showing the castle earthworks (NB: north at bottom)





Reconstruction of the entrance to the castle bailey in the eleventh century. Visible through the gateway is the motte, shown with a timber keep on top (Susan White)

By the time of Blomefield (1775) it was 'an high mount grown over with bushes which seems to have been some place of strength and moment in ancient days'.

The conical mound of clay is nearly 20m high. It was shown as a *tumulus* (or barrow) on early Ordnance Survey mapping, but by the 1930s it had been identified as a castle. The ditch that surrounds the motte may once have been twice as deep as it is today.

A timber keep once stood upon the motte. To the east of the motte, the grassed area which visitors enter when they first arrive at the site was once the castle bailey. This was an area enclosed by a bank and ditch which contained dwellings, stables, workshops and outbuildings.

The earthen defences surrounding the motte were later flattened, but they have been recorded on air photographs and by excavation. This area was preserved from development

when the adjacent housing estate was built in the 1980s. There is now a hedge roughly following the outer edge of the bailey ditch, which helps visitors to imagine the original outline of the castle.

Elsewhere in Norfolk, other small motte and bailey castles open for public access include Denton Castle (owned by the National Trust), Horsford Castle (near Norwich) and Mileham Castle.

## Excavation and research

Evidence for occupation of the Middleton site prior to the construction of the castle bailey was recovered during the excavation in 1987 of a small area adjacent to the bailey ditch. This included remains of part of a substantial timber building, probably Late Saxon and fragments of Late Saxon pottery.

Fragments of pottery recovered during the excavation show that the motte was occupied during the first half of the 12th century, and so may date from the time of the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Maud (1139- 1153) when many unlicensed castles were built – or the pottery could just be evidence of continuation of occupation. It is also possible that the castle dates from the rebellion in 1173 against King Henry II of England by three of his sons, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, and their rebel supporters which was another violent period in East Anglia.

## Norfolk Archaeological Trust ownership

The site has been in the ownership and care of the Trust since 2006.

## Location:

Middleton Mount, Hall Orchards, Middleton  
King's Lynn, PE32 1RY

## Further reading

Higham, R. and Barker, P., 2004. *Timber Castles*, revised edition (University of Exeter)

Liddiard, R., 2005. 'Castles', in T. Ashwin and A. Davison (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Norfolk*, 3rd edition (2005: Chichester, Phillimore), 70-1

Ashwin, T., 1999. 'Middleton Mount excavations in and around the eastern bailey of Middleton Castle by Andrew Rogerson', *Norfolk Archaeology* XLIII, 645-56.



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