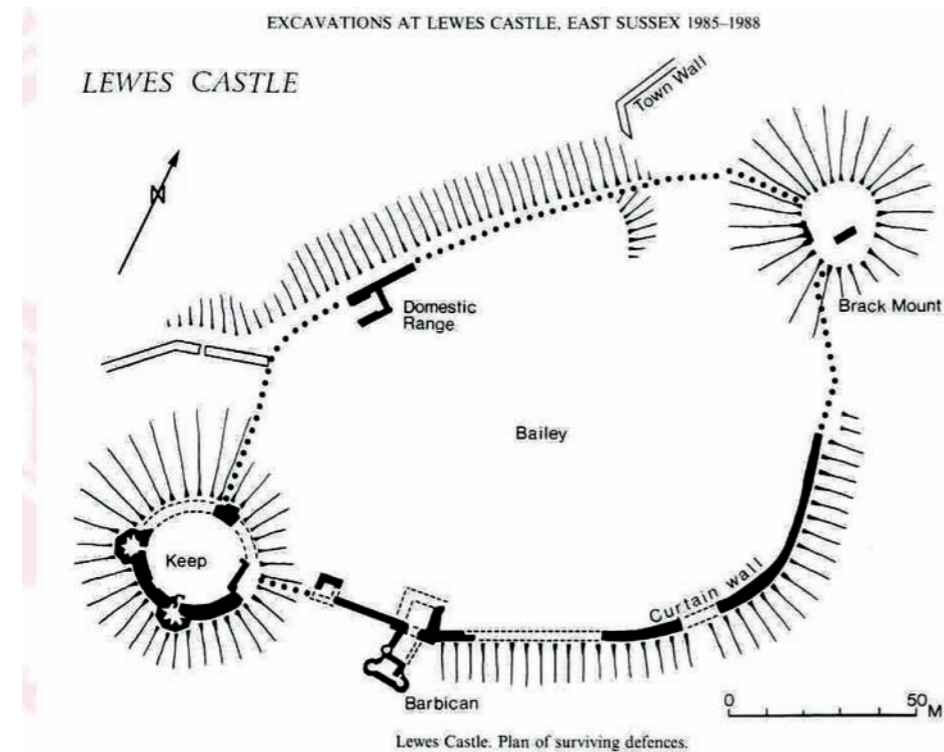


## The Archaeology of Brack Mount: details of an exciting archaeological discovery on the summit of one of Lewes's most prominent landmarks

Thanks to local press coverage, few within East Sussex can have failed to notice the mysterious appearance of a hole on the summit of Brack Mount, Lewes. The following reports on an small-scale archaeological investigation carried out by the Society in advance of infilling the hole which must rate as one of the Society's highest profile health & safety hazards.

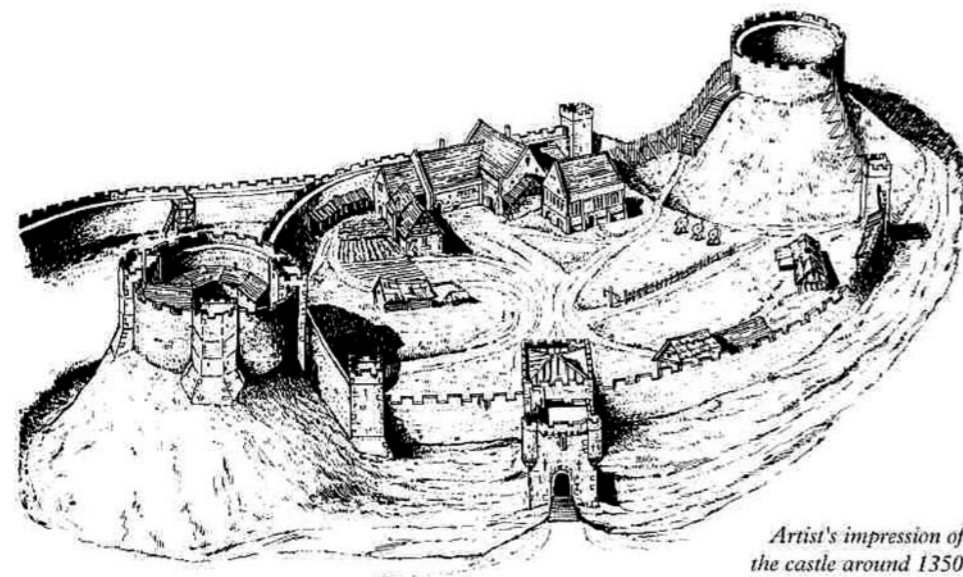
### What is Brack Mount?

Brack Mount is a conical flat-topped mound, located just to the NE of the conjectural precinct of Lewes Castle, in roughly diametric opposition to the larger mound or 'motte' on which the surviving shell keep of the castle presently stands. The Mount, along with the rest of the Sussex Archaeological Society's Lewes castle property, is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.



The current consensus, most recently outlined in the official castle guide (Poole 1997; see also Drewett 1992) is that Brack Mount represents the surviving motte, or artificial mound, of a military motte-and-bailey castle which was constructed, along with a network of other Sussex examples, soon after the Norman invasion. While the form of the mound which survives to this day is undoubtedly Norman in date, it has recently been suggested that it may have utilised the site of one of a number a pre-existing tumuli or burial mounds of possible Romano-British origin located within the bounds of the later settlement (Bleach 1997). A factor underpinning the site's potential ritual and later strategic use was its dominant position within the landscape for it marks the end of a prominent chalk spur commanding excellent views of the Ouse Valley, especially upstream.

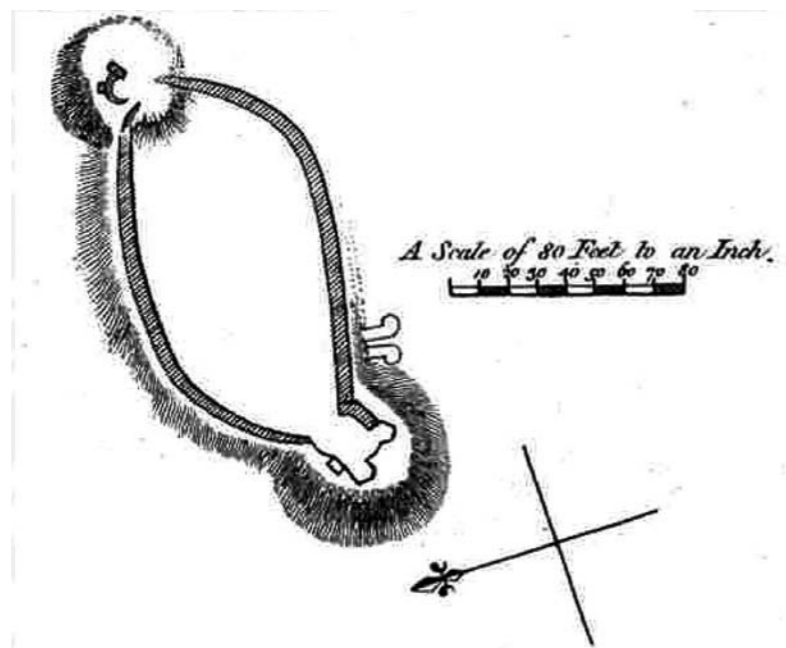
Little or nothing is known of the Norman-period defensive features which once capped the Mount, although excavated parallels suggest that the earliest phase may have consisted of a timber tower and palisade (Drewett 1992, 103). It is likely that these wooden structures were replaced by a masonry shell keep before the close of the 11th century when, with the construction of a second motte, the castle was enlarged into the feudal residence of Lewes's Norman overlord William de Warenne. From this point onwards Brack Mount was also likely to have been incorporated within a continuous or at least semi-continuous defensive circuit formed by a masonry curtain wall which would have enclosed a large interior bailey now referred to as the 'castleyard' (ibid. 103).



*Artist's impression of the castle around 1350 showing Brack Mount (right)*

### Later history

The standing defences were already in a ruinous state of repair when the Mount was first recorded in historical sources, although such descriptions and images provide a flavour of their original nature and scale. The earliest known source of about 1533 records the removal by townspeople of timber from its summit (Poole 1997, 7). Two maps of 1620 clearly portray the castle with complete circuits of walls on both mottes (Farrant 1996, 169, note 4) and William Green's 1776 plan of the castle published within Grose's *Antiquities of England and Wales* depicts a masonry structure with a north-facing semi-circular angle tower or bastion. A threedimensional view of a 20ft-section of these masonry defences is also illustrated in a James Lambert watercolour of 1772 (Farrant 1996, note 14 with references). A surviving section of wall on the SE side of the mount below the summit may represent the vestiges of these illustrated features (see fig above).



*Extract from Green's plan showing surviving castle defences; Brack Mount is on the upper left*

It is also possible that a written description of this defensive structure may survive in the travel diary of the Revd John Burton of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, who visited the castle in about 1730, if, as has been recently advanced, his entry mentioning inter alia, 'traces of a large broken-off wall and of steep towers and of a palisaded enclosure of no way through' describes a view from Brack Mount itself (Farrant 1996, 171).

By the time that Green and others were surveying the castle remains access to the Mount, which was granted without lease from the Lords of the Castle, was gained via the fashionable Georgian gardens which then occupied an area to the south and east of the bowling green within the castle-yard (Farrant 1996, 172-3). By the 1840s the enterprising landlord of the Lewes Arms, cashing in on the spectacular panoramic views afforded by the prominence, had appropriated the Mount as a 'mountain garden' for his punters; a function it was to retain until well into the 20th century .

**V**ISITORS should not fail to see an historical Inn, "The Lewes Arms," situate five minutes from the station, and a short distance behind the Castle Arch. The house contains the Dungeons [built A.D. 1070], and the painted Coat-of-Arms of the Norman de Warenne only re-discovered this year. The mountain garden [Brack Mount, and northern keep of the Castle], whence splendid views of the surrounding country are obtained, is shown to customers. Excellent Accommodation for all. Good Beds. Charges very moderate. Storage for Cycles. Teas. Wines & Spirits. BEARD's famous Ales and Stout. Choice Cigars, Cigarettes and Tobaccos of the finest brands.



*Proprietor H. BENNETT.*

*Contemporary advertisement for the Lewes Arms*

Brack Mount was transferred to the Society's Lewes Castle property in 1937 following a generous gift by the then owner of Brack Mount House, the novelist, Mrs Henry Dudeney who acquired it from Lord Abergavenny, the modern representative of the Lords of the Castle. It was agreed that the owners of the eponymous residence should retain access to the Mount and she continued to use summit as a garden up until her death in 1944, references to which can be found in her published diary (Crook 1996).

### Place-name evidence

The name Brack Mount is a relatively recent formulation, for during the 16th and 17th centuries, when the feature is first named on maps and in documents, it is referred to as 'Bray/e castell' or castle. The word 'bray/e', which is derived from the Latin braca, means outwork; mound or bank defended by palisades and watchtowers' (OED) and can be traced back into the medieval period in an earlier form 'braya'. The phonetic change from 'Bray' to 'Brack' and the substitution of Mount for Castle probably occurred as recently as the 19th century. (see Coates 1989 for expanded discussion).

### Archaeology

#### Previous work

Although such a prominent topographical feature is unlikely to have escaped the attention of antiquarians and past generations of archaeologists, the only record of any previous work having taken place on the Mount is a single reference to an unpublished archaeological foray by David Thompson, similarly following subsidence in 1962, from which he apparently recovered 'medieval pottery and slate, and located a possible well' (Drewett 1992, 72).

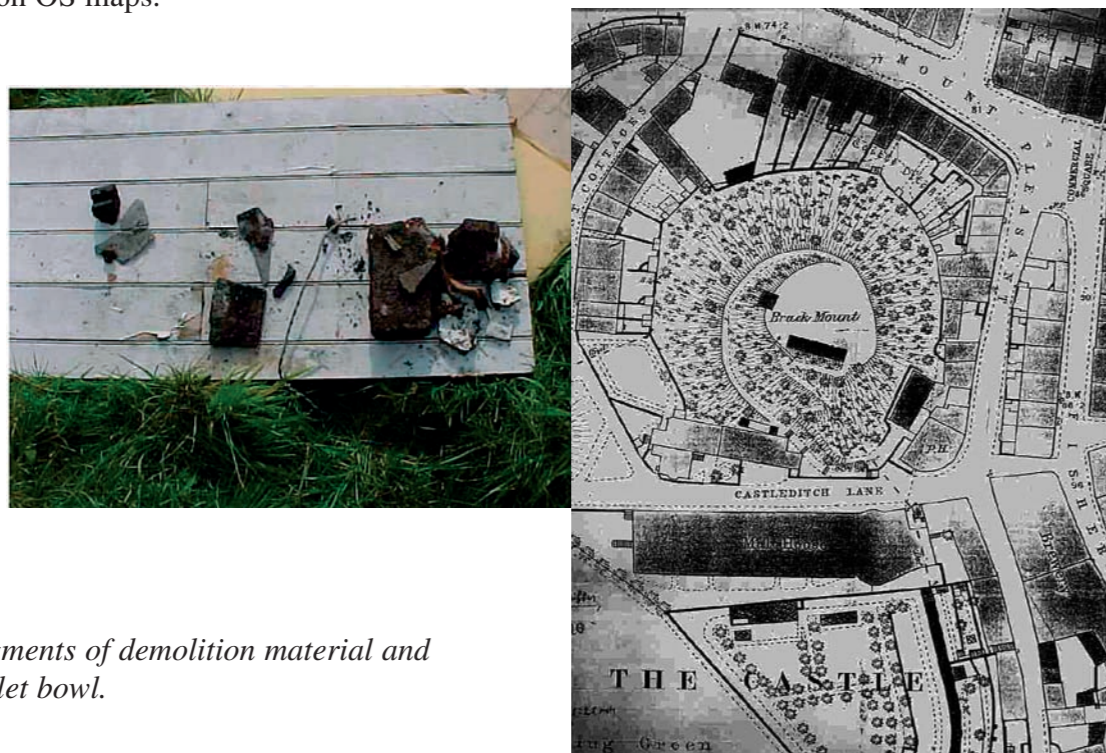
### The current investigation

The Sussex Archaeological Society were first informed of subsidence on the summit of Brack Mount by the present owner of Brack Mount House, Andy Gammon, in April 2001. Following a visit by English Heritage Inspector and the County Archaeologist, it was agreed that limited work could be undertaken under Class 5 Scheduled Monument Consent so that the extent of the void could be ascertained prior to its infilling.



*Removing the overhanging turf at the entrance to the subsided void*

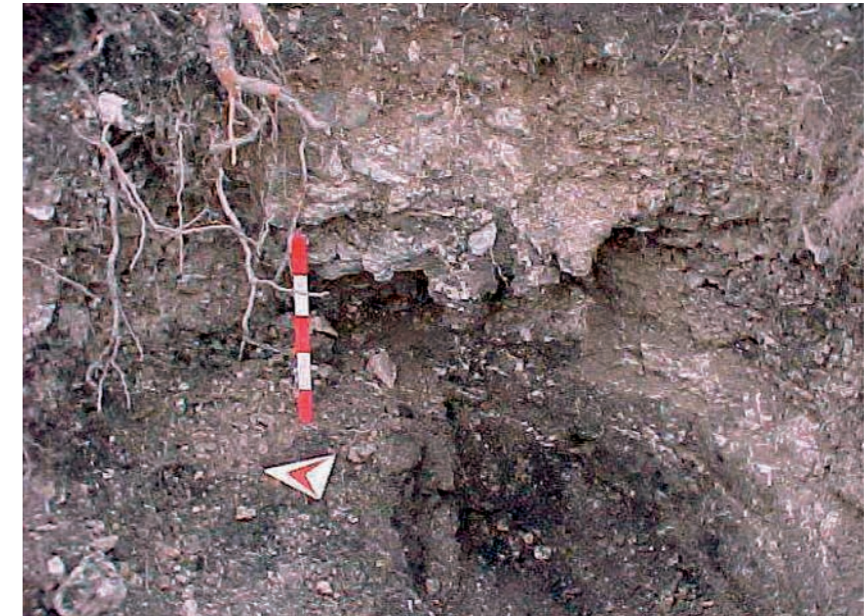
Removal of the upper layer of slumped topsoil revealed a dumped deposit of demolition material and rubbish containing brick, tile and several fragments of a ceramic toilet bowl. Artefacts from this deposit indicated that it was probably the backfill of Thompson's earlier investigation of 1962. Moreover, the fragments of toilet basin suggest that Thompson may have used as backfill the demolished remains of an outside toilet dating from the Mount's use as a pub garden, an attribution which explains the potential function of one of the two uninhabited structures recorded on early edition OS maps.



*Fragments of demolition material and a toilet bowl.*

### Extract of the First ed. OS map for Lewes

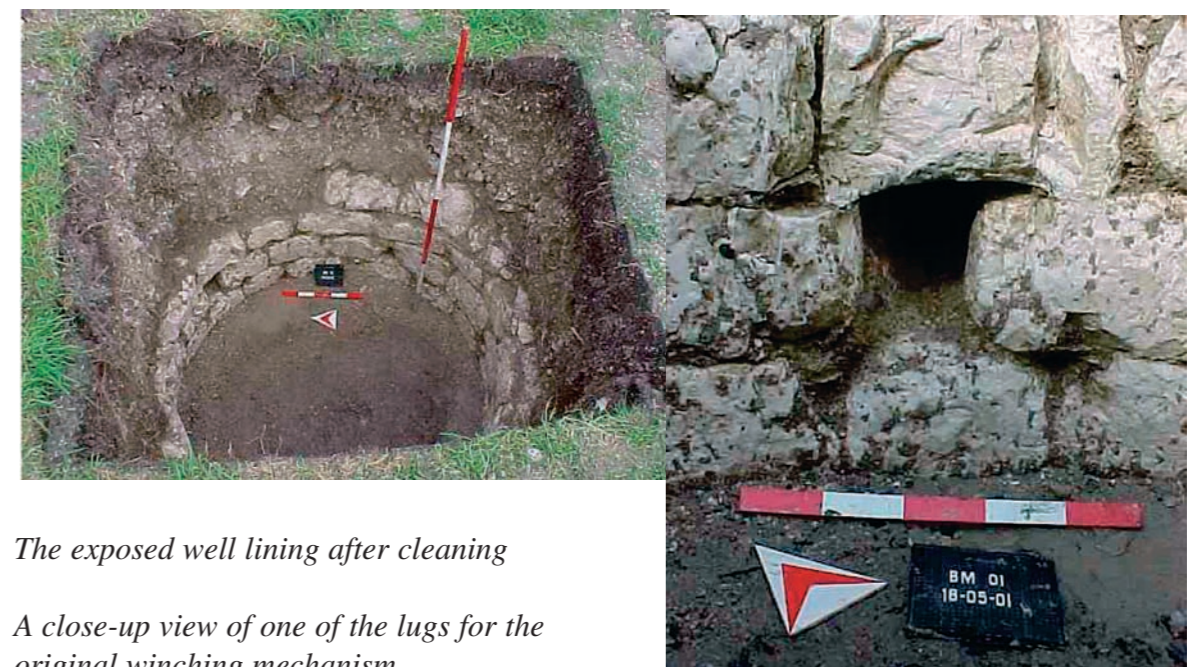
The sides of the void below the depth of the topsoil were composed of a very loose gravel deposit also containing flint nodules, some of which were mortared, and in the west-facing section, a substantial overhanging section of mortared flint walling or foundation. A stub of this was also seen in the east-facing section.



*View of mortared section of flint walling or foundation in west-facing section with well steining exposed below on the right*

After further removal of the dumped deposit the cause of the mystery subsidence finally revealed itself to be a circular well, 1.8m in diameter, constructed of chalk ashlar blocks set within thin spreads of mortar. The well lining or 'steining', which was sealed below the overlying gravel deposit, was very carefully constructed in regular courses to produce a curved, vertical, inner surface; several of the blocks displayed tooling marks.

By the time all of the 1962 backfill was removed the well had been exposed to a depth of three and a bit courses. Cleaning revealed a difference between the lower and uppermost courses; whereas the former were vertical, the chalk blocks comprising the latter were angled to create a slanting lip indicating that the well had survived to its original height. Also revealed were two pairs of sub-rectangular recesses associated with the original wooden winching mechanism.



*The exposed well lining after cleaning*

*A close-up view of one of the lugs for the original winching mechanism*

### **Interpretation and date**

Unfortunately because the investigation failed to recover any dating evidence earlier than the material incorporated within Thompson's backfill, it is impossible to assign a precise date to either the well's original construction or to its final abandonment. Otherwise, chalk-lined wells are notoriously difficult to date on purely morphological grounds since they represent a comparatively long-lived building tradition. Examples discovered from within Lewes and its locality for example, span the 11th to the 15th centuries. Two late medieval examples also utilising large ashlar blocks were discovered during excavations at Friars Walk, Lewes (Freke 1978). Another parallel, recently dated by scientific means to the 11/12th century, was discovered during the Society's excavation at Clay Hill, Ringmer, East Sussex, although the lining of this example consisted of smaller blocks which were only faced in the uppermost course. ([www.sussexpast.co.uk/research/aug21.htm](http://www.sussexpast.co.uk/research/aug21.htm)).

In the absence of primary dating evidence from the well itself, there is one piece of secondary evidence on which a broad attribution may be based: its location. Irrespective of past fluctuations in the water table and construction technique, the sinking of a well on the summit of Brack Mount, estimated to be over 30m (100ft) above the current water table, must have represented a major logistical undertaking. Such a considerable expenditure of resources and effort was only likely to have been outlaid during a period when the Mount was expected to serve as a point of defense or refuge and thus require a water source of its own; perhaps to maintain a garrison during a siege. On the basis of this assertion, the well was likely to have been constructed before the second half of the 14th century by which time the castle had ceased to function as a lordly residence and had fallen into military decline, as is suggested by Earl of Arundel's decision to leave it undefended against the French in 1377 and four years later, the apparent ease by which it was stormed and looted by a mob of local protesters (Farrant 1996, 169).

Although the well may be associated with some of the 13th and early 14th-century improvements to the town defences recorded in murage grants and other sources (Jones 2000), on the basis of the hypothetical development of Lewes castle, one may speculate further that the well could potentially date to the Norman period, when for a short period during the 11th century the Mount was the strategic and defensive focal point of the castle. The recently excavated parallel from Clay Hill, Ringmer, suggests that this attribution would not be anachronistic in a local context.

### **Epilogue**

Prior to backfilling, the Society intends to take mortar samples from the well lining and the section of overlaying wall foundation for analysis in the hope that this may provide alternative dating evidence for the well and the overlying section of wall/foundation. However, the questions posed by this opportunistic glimpse into the Brack Mount's past can only be adequately answered by further research and excavation.....

**Garbor Thomas**

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### **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to the Gammon's of Brack Mount House for their enthusiasm and support throughout.

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