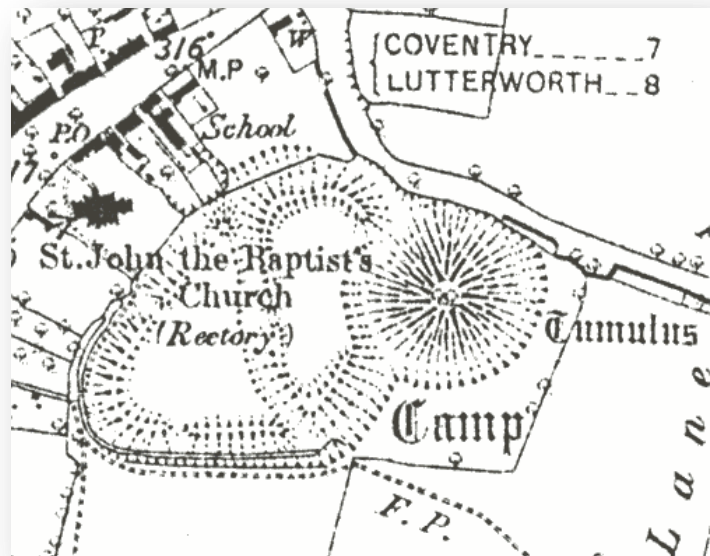# BRINKLOW CASTLE

The Norman Conquest was a brutal and violent takeover of an already settled and efficiently functioning country; in only 20 years between 1066 and 1086, events could not have progressed from conquest to consolidated military and political power otherwise. The native English, (despite Norman propaganda to the contrary) were well organised and effective administrators; William took over a country in which trained officials already managed local and central government, where taxes were collected and where every village belonging to a hundred had a court which met every four weeks. Once the country had been subjugated, and that subjugation enforced by military might, it was a relatively simple matter to assess and collect the new rich pickings of the Norman aristocracy through the Domesday survey. In shape, Brinklow, pre-conquest, was probably very much the way it is today, some habitations spread thinly along the Fosse Way, scattered farmsteads leading to Lower and Upper Smite, (Coombefields) and large open fields and common grazing spread around Brinklow Hill.

 Before the conquest, the now lost village of Smite was held freely from Edward the Confessor by a man called Harding, who presumably held Brinklow also.   The name "Harding" is comprised of two Old English elements, *heorde* meaning herder or cattle farmer, and *ing_*, meaning "people of"; thus it seems likely that cattle, then as now, were an important part of the Brinklow landscape, and that some, at least, of Harding's people were livestock farmers.   There would have been substantially more woodland than there is today, although by no means the heavy forestation of popular imagination; much had already been cleared and cultivated for agriculture.

In 1086, Smite was being managed for the king by Geoffrey de Wirce, a powerful Norman noble with holdings in Warwickshire and Leicestershire. Brinklow is not mentioned in the Domesday survey by name, but Smite is recorded as having land and ploughs for some 47 families, a rather larger figure than one might expect, and Brinklow was almost certainly a populated hamlet.   It is not unusual for established communities to be missing from the Domesday Book; the survey was purely a tally of assets, and not in any sense a census or parochial record.

There is some evidence that Brinklow already existed as a community in its own right before the Domesday survey, with enough souls to warrant a chapel, albeit an offshoot of "Peterchurche", the mother church of Smite. Smite lay where Coombefields exists today, and its smaller hamlet of Upper Smite can still be traced in the form of grassed earthworks behind Nettle Hill.   Peter Hall, now a private residence in Coombfields contains the remains

of Peterchurch, some as late as the 13th century.   Smite Brook today defines the present boundary between Brinklow and Withybrook, and the lost village itself is remembered in the still extant name of Smeaton Lane.   The modern spelling probably echoes the ancient pronunciation; Smite was almost certainly pronounced locally as **Smeet**", (Germanic Schmidt), _and "Smeaton" the oldest form of the name, stemming from the two Old English elements , *smith* meaning worker in metal, _ and *tun*, meaning farm or village (modern "town").

This last may well throw into question the local legend that Smite (with its connotations of being "smitten") was depopulated as the result of an outbreak of plague, and named in consequence of this seeming demonstration of the wrath of the Almighty.   The probable truth is more prosaic.   Early in the 11th century, Samson d'Aubigny gave both Peterchurch and "the chapelry of Brinklow" to Kenilworth Priory, who in turn gave or sold it to the Cistercian monks of Coombe, who by 1150 were granted by one Richard de Camville "all my lands of Smite." As wool became the growth industry of the time, the monks of Coombe, as other great landowners elsewhere, needed ever more land for sheep pasture.   The probable truth of the matter is that the cottagers of Smite were simply turned out of their homes to provide grazing for sheep.   Brinklow almost certainly grew to its medieval eminance as a result of Smite's misfortune, so in that sense, Smite may indeed be said to have been "smitten".

This last, however, was not an issue in the closing years of the 11th century, in the troubled reign of King Stephen, when the manor of Brinchelawa, Brinchelau, or Brynceslawe was in the hands of the powerful baron Roger de Mowbray,who held it from the Earls of Leicester. Possibly to settle wrangles about its tenantship by a show of force, or at least to emphasise Norman control over the surrounding countryside, Brinklow Castle was constructed. Castles, in the newly conquered country were the major instruments of subjugation, and Brinklow's fine motte and bailey earthworks, both large and exceptionally well-preserved, are notable for their twofold bailey, surely a sign that the castle was envisaged as a very strong defensive unit.

Wherever there were pockets of rebellion, or reluctance to pay dues exacted, the Normans erected their fortifications.   The land around the castle would be cleared of brush and woodland which might offer cover for potential enemies, and even houses were demolished if this impeded the view.   The building of castles, firstly in wood, and later in stone, was a massive exercise in forced labour by the local community, so we can be sure that the peasant farmers of Brinklow were first menaced, and later coerced into constructing the castle which once dominated the village from Brinklow Hill.

Brinklow Castle, an early example of Norman fortification, was almost certainly of timber, and was probably in use only for a relatively short time; no trace of stonework has ever been found.   Its very existence, however, implies that the Normans felt the area was strategically important, and anyone who today scrambles up the hill on a clear day to marvel at the impressive view of the surrounding countryside, cannot fail to understand why this particular site was chosen.

Castles were constructed first by enlarging existing mounds, or creating new ones, the earth thrown up by digging the moats and ditches being used to heighten the mound and

BRINKLOW CASTLE

ramparts.   The Brinklow castle mound rises some 40ft. above the natural rise of the land, and about 60ft. above the bottom of the moat, which is approximately 40ft. wide, and some 20 ft. deep.   The outer bailey was higher by some 10 or 20 ft. than the inner courtyard, and would have been crowned by an imposing wooden pallisade - strong pointed stakes used in a close defensive row.   A second ditch and rampart would have separated the inner from the outer bailey.   On top of the mound would have been a watchtower, reached by a ladder, which in dire emergencies, would have been used as a last refuge, and almost certainly there would have been some kind of drawbridge between mound and outer ditch, supported on two, or perhaps three wooden tiers.

Recent research has suggested that in many cases, prefabricated components for such castles were often brought by sea to England from Normandy, although clearly That this may have been influenced by whether the castle was built as a matter of national fortification, or as is most likely the case in Brinklow, as a means of intimidation between localised feuding barons. Excavations of similar motte-and-bailey sites show that such castles contained a teeming mass of activity -stables, smithies, barracks and fighting platforms jostling for space with all those other buildings necessary to enable an army of occupation to live, eat and sleep beneath the same roof, and, if called upon, to withstand seige conditions.   At times of danger, cattle and those local peasants under the protection of the Norman overlord would be driven into the inner bailey, and the outer ramparts manned for defensive action.   There are no records to tell us what skirmishes, if any, occured in Brinklow, and as it seems the castle was abandoned at a relatively early stage, clearly the area soon settled down to some kind of grudging co-existence with the conquerors.

The feudal system continued long after the conquest, and was very complex, largely a story of powerful warring barons, great absentee landowners, tenants-in-chief, and sub-tenants, and the rearranging of landholdings through political marriages and complicated bequests. For the humble cottager, the true inhabitants of Brinklow, with only a subsistence interest of land, or even none at all, life very probably carried on much as it had always done; the intricacies of the lives of their overlords would have meant little other than that their taxes were paid to different people.   Of course, some lords were more exacting and others more lenient, but in general, few men were personally free, some were free in name only, bound by the weight of their dues, and others were little more than slaves.

In 1106, the manor of Brinklow passed from Roger de Mowbray to William de Stutteville, and in 1218, his nephew, Nicholas de Stutteville was confirmed in possession by the king. In addition, he was given the right to hold a weekly market on Mondays, and an annual fair on St. Margaret's Day. In 1275, the Earl of Leicester held a court in Brinklow twice a year, and an Assize of Bread and Ale, at which the statuary price of both were fixed.

At the time of the Domesday survey, that part of Warwickshire bordering Leicestershire and Northamptonshire was divided into three "hundreds", or administrative districts. Of these, "Bomelau", the northernmost, which incorporates Brinklow, seems to have had its centre and court at Brandon (also possessed of a castle) at a place called "Bumbelowe" in 1313, but now another lost village. Later, the same court clearly shifted to Brinklow, and the hundred took its name, functioning as a "leet" (minor court) until the end of the 16th century,

BRINKLOW CASTLE

although Brinklow, Marton and Stoneleigh were already combined administratively under the name of "Knightlow".   To this day, an obscure forfeiture known in 1236-7 as the "warth penny", in 1628 as "the wroth monies" and now as the "wroth silver", is collected from parish representatives at dawn on St. Martin's Day (11th November" on Knightlow Hill (in Ryton-on Dunsmore"; Brinklow's tithe, if any, is not recorded.

It would seem, then, that Brinklow had its moment of medieval importance, when, probably due to its position on the Fosse Way, it acted as a centre for trade and jurisdiction.   It would have been a thriving, bustling place on those days designated for markets or meetings, and well known in the vicinity.   During archeological excavations before the building of Chandler's Row, amongst evidence of a medieval tannery were found fragments of 13th century Chilvers Coton pottery, providing further evidence of habitation and commerce. There seems to have been a moment in time when it was poised to become a small market town or to slip back into village status.   We can still find echoes of that time in Town Yard, between the former Wilkin's garage, now the Victorian Ironmonger's, and the Raven Inn, where there were cottages at one time, and in the remaining stretches of the village green, fronting The Crescent

Brinklow, with its prematurely vacated castle and later its fine Norman church probably fared no worse, and possibly even a little better than most settlements. The early years after conquest may have been ones of repression and stern unbending rule, but the plus side of Norman government was the eventual restoration of order, and a status quo which, if not initially entirely acceptable, became at least stable.   Rural life, with its rhythms of the seasons, its periodic disasters in the form of poor harvests and epidemics, its small internal wrangles and its regular communal celebrations probably changed very little until the 17th century, when civil war and religious dissention were to cause an upheaval every bit as great as anything that had gone before.

BRINKLOW CASTLE