Oakham Castle Community Dig 2018

Interim Report

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Introduction

In April 2018, University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) was commissioned by Rutland County Council to carry out a community archaeology dig at Oakham Castle. The project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of a broader £2.1 million grant to restore this nationally significant site. The grant included work to restore the 12th-century Great Hall, a Grade I Listed Building which is widely considered to be the best surviving building of its kind in England. Additionally, the *Restoring Oakham Castle* project has recorded, stabilised, and conserved the castle's stone curtain wall, improved visitor facilities, site access and site interpretation, and funded a programme of events and family activities to open up the castle's important history for visitors to explore.

As little remains of the castle above the ground, archaeology plays an important role in furthering the understanding of the site. As part of the project, archaeologists from ULAS have carried out several investigations in and around the castle, monitoring groundworks for new drainage and electricity cables, the restoration of the castle's defences and excavation of the footprint of a new toilet block to the west of the hall. Additionally, the project made provision for community involvement in the archaeological exploration of the castle.
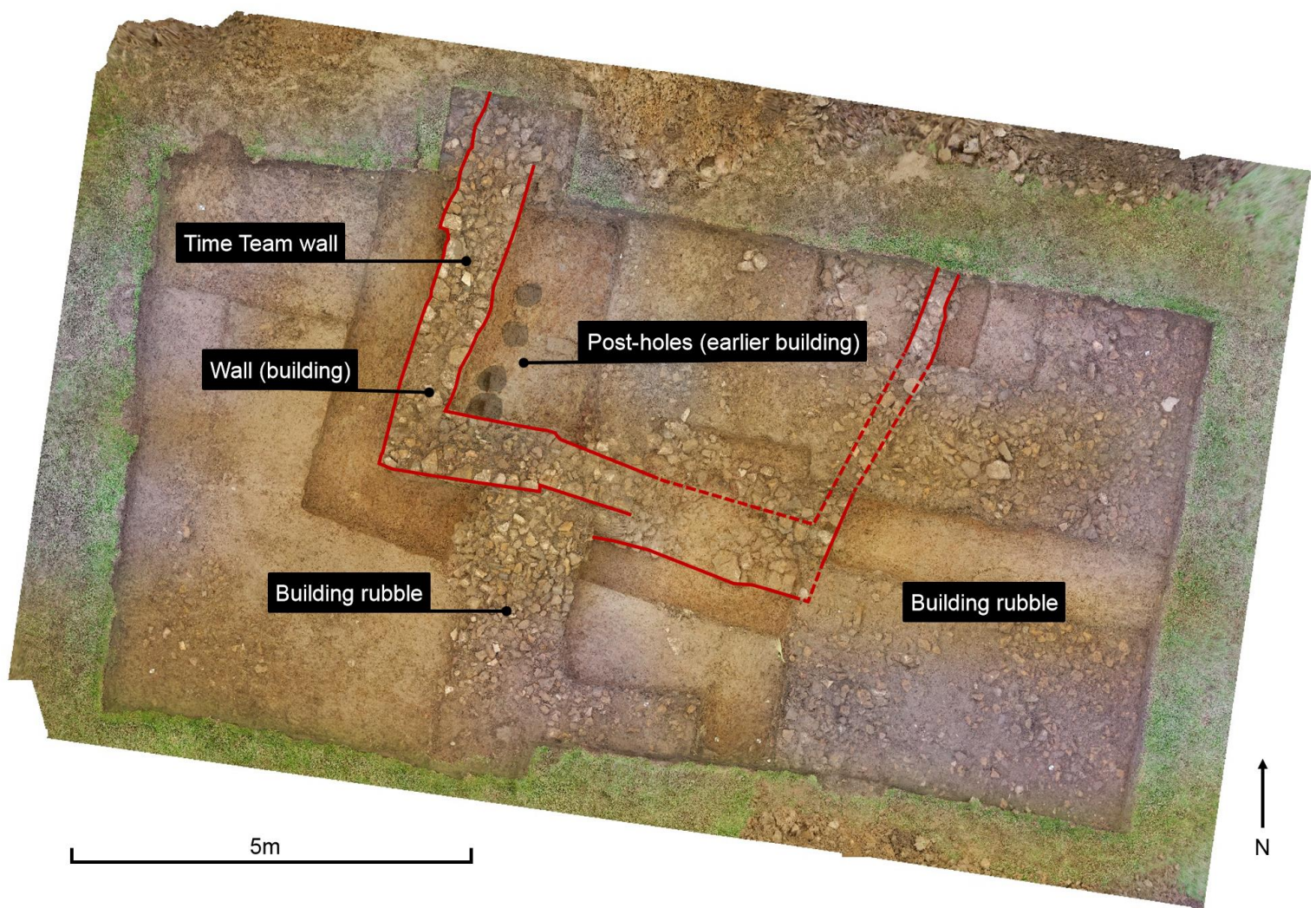
Community Dig Aims

The aim of the 2018 community dig was twofold: to build upon work first started by Channel 4's Time Team in 2012, and to give volunteers the opportunity to take part in a unique archaeological project which would uncover new information about the castle's history.

During filming of their Season 20 episode 'Horseshoe Hall' Time Team identified that significant archaeological remains still survived beneath the many lumps and bumps in the castle's inner bailey. Of particular interest was tantalising glimpses of two building, one north-east of the hall, possibly a stable, and one to the west of the hall, possibly the solar block.

In both areas, by finding Time Team's trenches again and opening larger areas for investigation, it was hoped that the 2018 community dig would make more sense of these complex structures.

Left: top, Time Team excavate a building west of the hall; bottom, ULAS archaeologists investigate the castle's curtain wall.

Labels on image: Time Team wall · Wall (building) · Post-holes (earlier building) · Building rubble · Building rubble · 5m · N

Above: A vertical view of the archaeology in Trench 1. A 3D model of Trench 1 can be viewed at **https://skfb.ly/6yPnH**

Trench 1 (north trench) – a stable or workshop uncovered

North of the hall, Trench 1 focused on a series of earth mounds in the north-east quarter of the castle's inner bailey. Here, in 2012, Channel 4's Time Team identified a sizeable stone wall, thought to date to the 13th or 14th century. Removal of turf and topsoil with a mechanical digger revealed that the earth mounds within the trench area were large piles of rubble, presumably from the demolition of an underlying building.

The topsoil contained finds dating to the late 17th, 18th and 19th centuries – pieces of clay tobacco pipe, pottery, china, animal bone, iron nails, copper buttons, a bone knife handle and part of a jar lid for Crosse & Blackwell anchovy paste (c.1839). This 'rubbish' was probably dumped here by the people of Oakham after the castle had been abandoned, the site becoming a convenient place to dispose of refuse from the 17th century onwards.

Above: A medieval stone wall found by Channel 4's Time Team north-east of the Great Hall in 2012.

Left: Part of Time Team's wall is found again in 2018. The wall was buried beneath a thick layer of rubble left behind following the building's demolition.

Top right: The stone wall, fully uncovered in 2018, was the south-west corner of a building.

Bottom right: Scorching inside the building was evidence of re-use of the derelict structure.

Far right: A row of post-holes beneath the building was evidence of an earlier structure on the site.

The building rubble probably dated to the early 17th century, when George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham levelled the ruins around the castle. The rubble contained dressed stone, roof slates and large quantities of broken glazed medieval ridge tiles. Soil beneath the rubble produced medieval pottery of 12th- to 14th-century date, with later 15th- and 16th-century pottery types largely absent. This would suggest that the building had fallen out of use before the 15th century, becoming derelict perhaps 200 years or more before its ruins were finally demolished in the 17th century, and supports historic sources which describes the castle "in a poor state, suffering from neglect and lack of maintenance" in 1388, and "all ruinous" in 1521.

Beneath the rubble was the southern end of a long narrow building (5m wide inside). In places, the walls still stood to waist height, but whilst they were built of stone, construction was crude and the building only had an

earth floor. The eastern side of the building also appeared to be less well built that the other sides and may have been open, perhaps facing a yard to the east. Current thinking is that this was probably one of the many service buildings in the castle, perhaps a stable or workshop.

Soil around the southern side of the building produced large quantities of animal bone, many showing butchery marks, as well as sherds of 12th- to 14th-century green-glaze table wares and plainer kitchen wares – all probably waste from the castle's kitchen located nearby. Excavation also revealed that the building had gone through a prolonged period of neglect and reuse before it was eventually demolished, including a fire in the 'derelict' structure which had scorched the stones of the southern wall. Again, this fits

the documentary sources which suggest that buildings in the castle were in poor condition by the end of the 14th century, ruined by the early 16th century and demolished at the beginning of the 17th century.

Exciting evidence found in the last days of the dig (a row of four post-holes) now also suggests that there was an earlier timber structure beneath this building, which could be evidence of the original Norman castle, although so far an exact date is not forthcoming.
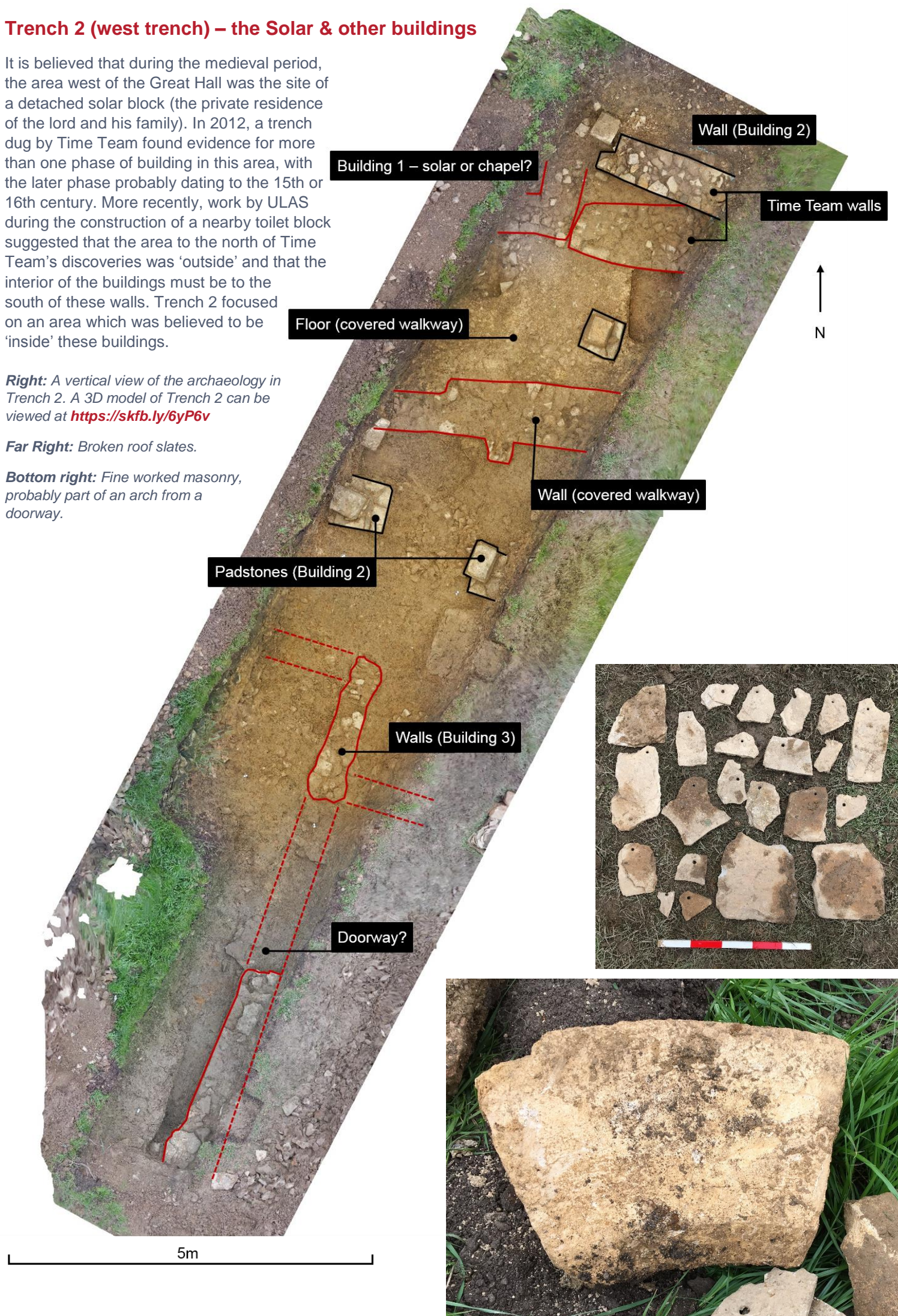
Trench 2 (west trench) – the Solar & other buildings

It is believed that during the medieval period, the area west of the Great Hall was the site of a detached solar block (the private residence of the lord and his family). In 2012, a trench dug by Time Team found evidence for more than one phase of building in this area, with the later phase probably dating to the 15th or 16th century. More recently, work by ULAS during the construction of a nearby toilet block suggested that the area to the north of Time Team's discoveries was 'outside' and that the interior of the buildings must be to the south of these walls. Trench 2 focused on an area which was believed to be 'inside' these buildings.

Right: A vertical view of the archaeology in Trench 2. A 3D model of Trench 2 can be viewed at https://skfb.ly/6yP6v

Far Right: Broken roof slates.

Bottom right: Fine worked masonry, probably part of an arch from a doorway.

Wall (Building 2)

Building 1 – solar or chapel?

Time Team walls

Floor (covered walkway)

Wall (covered walkway)

Padstones (Building 2)

Walls (Building 3)

Doorway?

N

5m

The mechanical digger removed turf and topsoil which covered a thick layer of rubble. This was over a metre thick with some of it probably falling from the castle's curtain wall, whilst the rest had come from the demolition of other castle buildings in the vicinity. Because of the rubble's thickness, it was also removed using the digger so that the archaeology beneath could be safely accessed.

During this work pieces of fine worked masonry, probably part of an arch of a medieval doorway, and broken roof slates, probably from the roofs of nearby buildings, were recovered.

Beneath the rubble at the northern end of the trench, a complicated sequence of buildings with evidence for multiple phases of rebuilding was uncovered. It appeared that the walls first discovered by Time Team were part of two stone buildings constructed close to the curtain wall. The earlier building (Building 1) was connected to the north aisle of the hall by a pentice (covered) walkway and appeared

Above: Looking west at the covered walkway attached to Building 1.

Above: Looking north at the padstones and wall of Building 2, built over the remains of Building 1.

to date to the castle's heyday in the 13th and 14th century. The walkway was 2m wide and had a sturdy stone and mortar floor and may correlate with an Inquisition of 1375 which refers to the building of a new chapel and chamber, the chapel being connected to the hall by a passageway.

At a later date, probably in the 15th or 16th century, Building 1 and the passageway were demolished and replaced with a large timber post-built structure (Building 2). The northern side of the building was supported by a stone wall but the rest of the structure was supported by sturdy vertical timber posts which rested on large square padstones.

A third stone building, also probably of 15th or 16th century date, was identified at the southern end of the trench. It was also probably built against the curtain wall and appeared to have a threshold and doorway on its eastern side. However, not enough of this building was uncovered to know whether it was contemporary with Building 1 or 2 to the north, although 15th-century pottery from beneath the threshold suggests the latter. As in Trench 1, evidence shows that the remaining buildings west of

the hall were demolished by the 17th century.

As yet, not enough evidence has been found to say conclusively what these buildings were used for. However, finds of decorated green-glazed table wares, dress pins, an iron knife, high-quality masonry and elaborately decorated glazed ridge-tiles all suggest that use of the earlier building (1) was of higher status than that of the later buildings (2 and 3) and the buildings in Trench 1. This agreed with the idea that this area of the castle was kept as the private residence of the lord and his family.

Right: Looking south at the remains of Building 3. A section of wall survived with the room (to the right) filled with building rubble. There is a possible doorway with a stone threshold where the wall ends in the foreground of the photograph.

A Selection of artefacts from the dig

Top row (l-r): Post-medieval finds from Trench 1 - part of a jar lid of Crosse & Blackwell anchovy paste (c.1839), a bone knife handle, and part of a clay tobacco pipe bowl.

Second row (l-r): Three lead pistol shot, copper alloy buttons, and a medieval iron knife from Trench 2.

Third row (l-r): Sherds of decorated tableware (c.1225-1400) from Trench 2, decorated glazed ridge tiles from Trench 1 and Trench 2.

Bottom row (l-r): Part of a medieval whetstone, a lead fishing weight, and two copper alloy dress pins, all from Trench 2.

This document was published in July 2018 (© ULAS 2018). Image: Decorated glazed medieval ridge tiles from Oakham Castle.