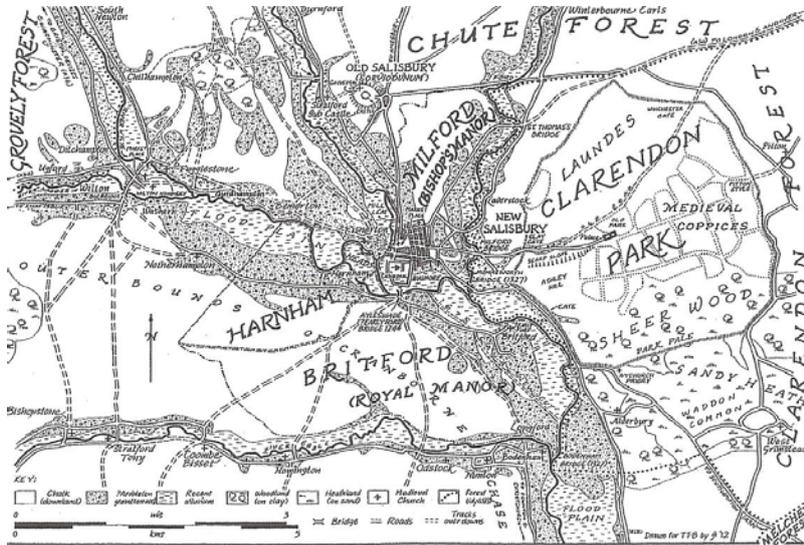


Old Sarum, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

The present-day city of Salisbury is ‘New’ in relation to ‘Old’, the site from which the bishop and townspeople moved in the thirteenth century (map drawn for Tim Tatton-Brown by Jill

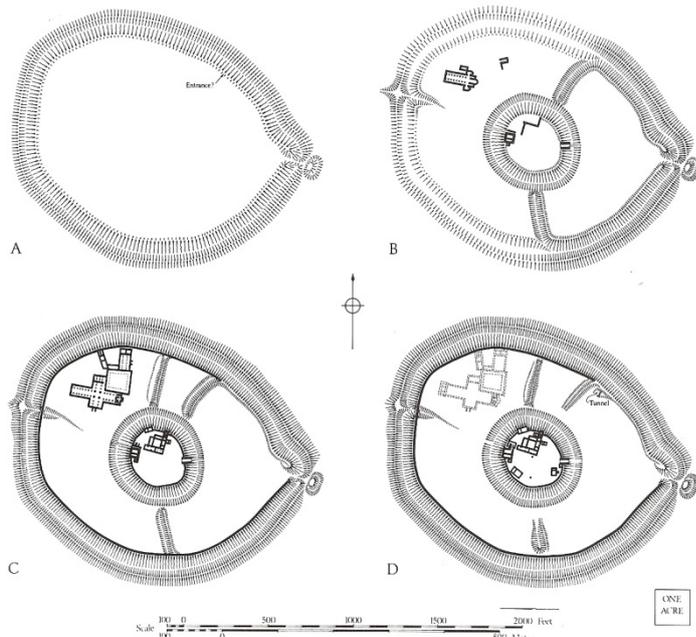


Atherton). Usually now called Old Sarum, the site seems to have had no occupation before becoming an Iron Age hillfort, the pottery sequence starting around the fifth century B.C. (photograph: English Heritage). Its bank and ditch enclosure has outer banks at some points, and the elaborate east entrance, enhanced by a mound (in the bottom left corner of the picture), may be first-century

B.C. This probably covered the approach from tracks preceding the known Roman roads, which form a junction just outside the fort. It was *Sorviodunum* in the third century, *Searobyrig* in the sixth, when it is recorded as the site of a British defeat by King Cynric in 554; by then, however, there were already Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in the area, including one found on the northern slopes of the hill-fort. It was not one of Wiltshire’s four ‘burhs’ in the late ninth/early tenth century (see also Malmesbury online entry), the nearest being Wilton, four miles to the south-east, but that was not strong enough to resist the Viking ‘great army’ in 1003, the mint being transferred to Old Sarum soon afterwards.

The Norman castle is first mentioned as early as 1069x70; in 1086, William the Conqueror held a great council at Sarum when all the lords of England had to swear an

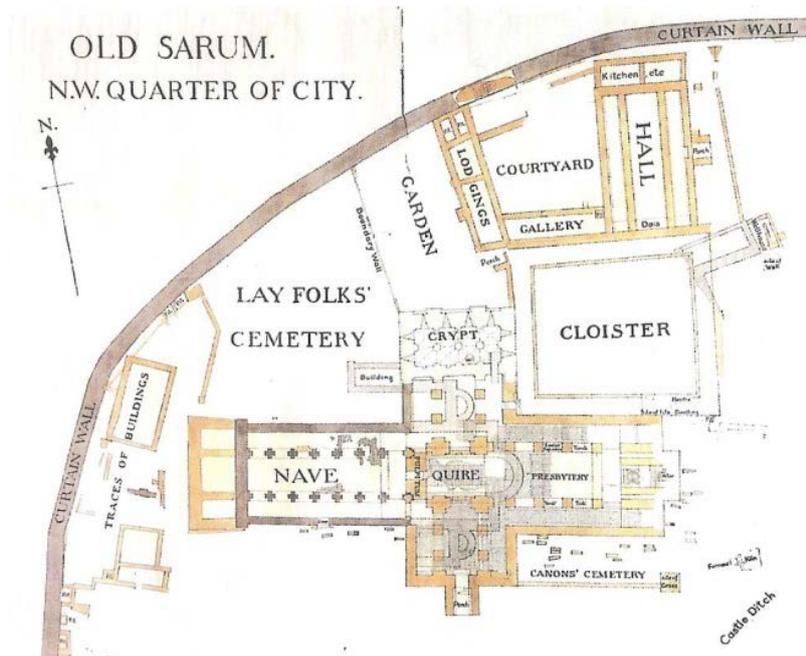




oath of allegiance, but no stone buildings of his survive. In 1075 the decision was taken to move the cathedral from Sherborne. The castle ringwork occupied the centre of the hillfort, forcing the cathedral, and after 1139 the canons' cloister and the bishop's palace, into the restricted area on the north side (RCHM 1980, 1-15, plan *ibid.* 2).

The huge extension of the cathedral's east end to accommodate the large new canons' choir, aisled transepts and presbytery are also attributed to

Bishop Roger (Tatton-Brown and Crook 2014, 8-13, plan from Salisbury Cathedral archives photographed by John Crook), as is the stone wall round the outer bailey/hill-fort. Roger was thrown out of his 'palace' inside the castle in 1139 during the Anarchy, and Bishop Jocelyn (1142-84) had to build a new residence, with aisled hall and cloister, to the north-east of the cathedral, to which he added a new door into the south transept, and west end towers. At the east end a quasi-shrine to the 'Blessed' Osmund was created in c. 1180.



By the late twelfth century the borough had grown considerably, and was spreading outside the Iron Age perimeter. We are told that the noise made by the garrison's soldiers disturbed the cathedral's services; also, the water level was too deep for wells to cope with demand. The decision to move the cathedral was taken in the 1190s and the new Close was laid out, but King John's reign delayed building of the new cathedral (see Salisbury on-line entry). The canons' houses, the bishop's palace and the great cathedral were demolished during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, stone from them being used for rubble in the new cathedral, in the Close wall and elsewhere in New Salisbury.

A great deal of what we see now in terms of the surface levels and the outer walls and ramparts is the product of the half century or more after the mid twelfth-century Anarchy, but we know that there was a tower with cellar in 1129-30. Whether that building is the partly surviving Great Tower (a solid and militaristic keep) built into the bailey bank's west side is debatable. It could date from the late eleventh century, or could be one of the changes made by Bishop Roger of Salisbury (1107-39) when he was also the castle's custodian as Henry I's 'vice-roy' in the 1120s and 30s; Roger certainly built the fine courtyard 'palace' inside the ringwork to the east, notable for the high-quality masonry of which parts survive, and can be dated to the 1130s. The tower is on a different alignment and probably therefore not contemporary with the house, but is it earlier or later? Could it have been built by Edward, Earl of Salisbury, another local warlord and rival of John the Marshal, in the later twelfth century. Roger's work at Sarum and elsewhere was of exceptionally high quality, with stone so finely cut that the joints did not seem visible, as can still be observed in the surviving parts of the Courtyard House where the dressed stone faces have not been stripped away from the rubble core. But how far are there differences in the quality of the masonry of the tower and the house, and how far should one explain this in terms of an improving quality of masons over the years, or the differing context of civil conflict when there was a greater premium on speed rather than on quality?

After the twelfth century, various repairs and minor building were undertaken. Although kings preferred to stay at Clarendon, only four miles away (see on-line entry), the castle remained the Wiltshire sheriff's administrative centre. It was not updated for artillery, however, and was granted out of royal control. The town outside the ramparts quickly declined, but the burgesses sent to medieval parliaments were regarded as representing the old rather than the new site, and their rights passed to local land-owners, so that Old Sarum became a notorious 'rotten borough' until 1834. It overlooks a First World War airfield, and was used in establishing an early Ordnance Survey baseline.

The archaeological history of Old Sarum begins with recognition of its importance by its being one of the first sites protected by the 1881 Ancient Monuments Act. Excavations were undertaken (but apart from interim reports, never published) between 1909 and 1914, funded by public subscription and the Society of Antiquaries of London; directed by Sir William St John Hope, one of the local leaders was Lt-Col. Hawley, who also dug at Stonehenge. An 'Old Sarum Excavation Committee' was set up, with representatives from the county society and the local authorities – very much like the county committees of the 1970s but with bishops and nobility. The work first involved clearance of the interior – using a miniature railway - and then moved on to the cathedral, and a section through the upper part of the northern rampart. After the War, the site was laid out for visitors by the Office of Works, which in 1957 commissioned Philip Rahtz to investigate the earthworks near the entrance; he found a complex picture that included a palisade, but the curtain wall had been robbed out. This was a time when sectioning hillfort defences was becoming a vogue, but Rahtz did not dig down through the scarp and ditches (summary in RCHM 1980, 1-15). Then in 2014 new technology began to be used, with geophysics undertaken by Kristian Strutt, University of Southampton.

One goal of the geophysics is to test a theory proposed by Alex Langlands (2014) that the late Saxon borough had not been partly inside the defences and partly around the road junction, but was on the slope of the defences on the south-west side. He proposes a reinterpretation of the area defined by a problematic Anglo-Saxon charter and by an eighteenth-century map. Crucial to the argument is the location of the tenements that, despite being no more than land parcels by the eighteenth century, constituted the ‘rotten borough’ that was abolished in 1832 (VCH 1962). They may, however, have lined the road down into new Salisbury, shown on a map of tenements.

References and further reading

LANGLANDS, A. 2014. Placing the burh in *Searobyrg*: rethinking the urban topography of early medieval Salisbury, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 107, 201-105

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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Old Sarum were prepared by John Hare, David A. Hinton and Tim Tatton-Brown. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.