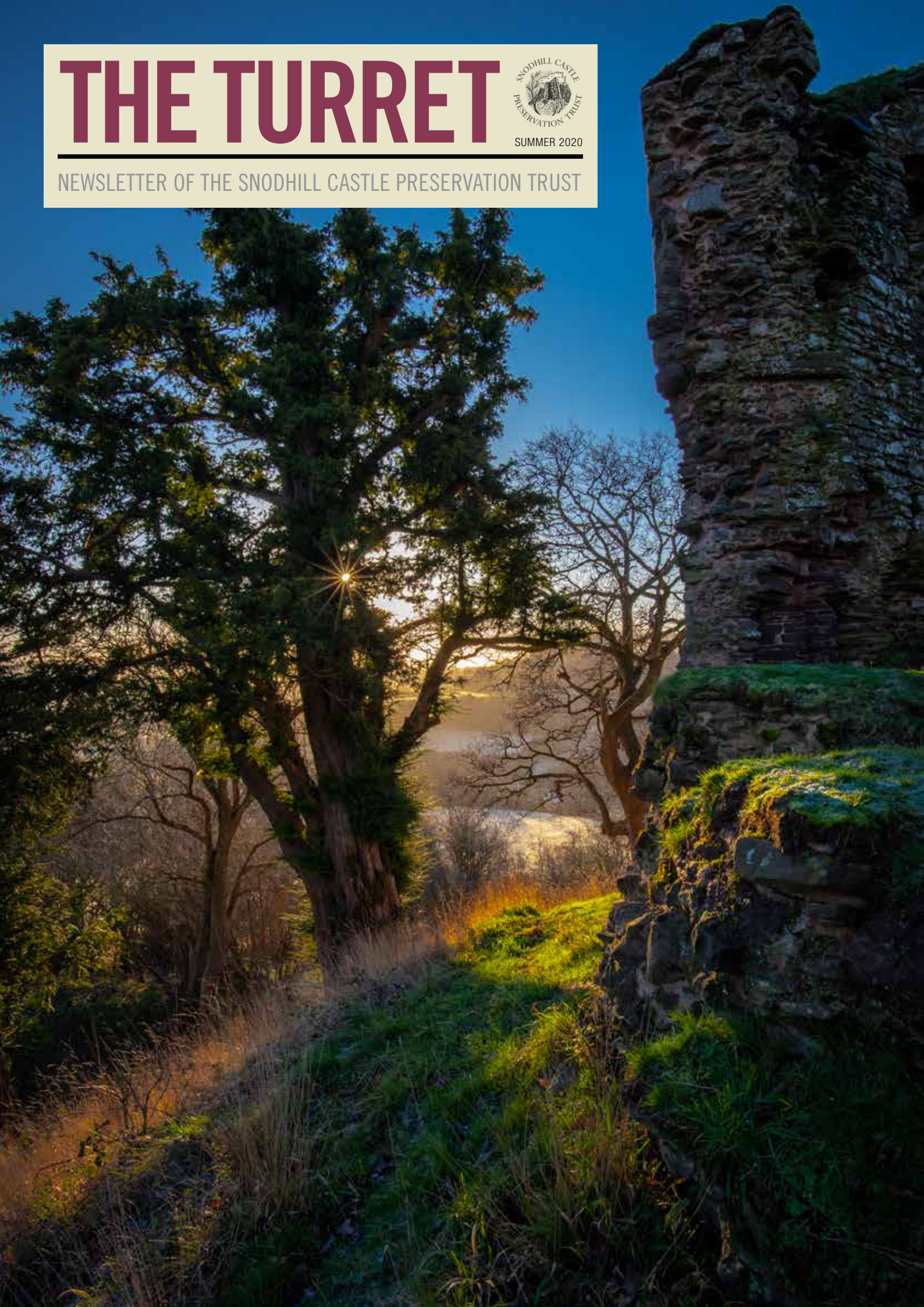
THE TURRET

SUMMER 2020

NEWSLETTER OF THE SNODHILL CASTLE PRESERVATION TRUST



Curtain up on the S. Curtain Wall

On time, on budget, – and in the nick of time too

The first major project designed, funded, and project-managed solely by the Trust, restoring the South Curtain Wall presented the now characteristic Snodhill challenges: it was indefinable, through overgrown vegetation; unintelligible, for lack of documentary or archaeological record; and inaccessible, by the simple threat of collapse.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Garfield Weston Foundation we've restored this 80m stretch of very early castle stone walling to a condition we hope its 11th and 12th century masons (on examination there appeared to be two sets of them working concurrently – see pic) would appreciate.

Friends who pre-2016 braved the undergrowth of the inner bailey unpunctured by blackthorn probably didn't reach the wall at all; while those even braver who fought through the thick undergrowth outside it may recall the sturdy oak props holding up a perilously overhanging tonnage of disintegrating masonry on the castle's sunny south side.

This part of the bailey wall was both overgrown and undermined, and its rescue and restoration a delicate operation we were delighted to entrust to Ollie Fookes, conservation builder and mason par excellence, and foreman of the major 2017 HE contract. Nick Joyce, who oversaw the recent restoration of Clifford Castle, was consulting architect.

The result is the castle's exterior perimeter is now clearly defined, robust and proud for all to see and walk round; and its interior now has a graded and seeded surface, with the face of the wall providing shelter and picnic opportunities.

As well as crannies for pennyworts and mason bees.

A curtain of undergrowth – 2012

Before…

And after.

Dividing line between two teams of masons

Soft capping…

…capped

Putting right four centuries' plunder and neglect, we've used the best in restoration technique and craft – and the latest in old technology. So Ollie has used hot lime mortar: designed to be softer, more porous and flexible than the stone itself, it draws moisture away from the stone into the air. Cement does the reverse, and as Nick Joyce told me 'the damage done to our heritage buildings by the use of cement over the last 100 years is incalculable'. Gallets – small shards of stone inserted into the mortar bands – have been used both to assist this process, and to make the appearance of the wall more uniform.

Finally the wall has been capped with a thick pad of lime mortar on which the local turf and sward – kindly donated by the Dixon family from a field an arrow's flight to the South – will hopefully form a protective layer for years to come.

Curtain Wallflowers: Ollie Fookes (conservation builder), Bill Klemperer (Historic England), Nick Joyce (Architect), Bridie Sullivan (SCPT Secretary), Nick Longman (Vice-Chair), Tim Hoverd (Hereford Archaeology), Garry Crook (Chair) (terrible photograph: Surrey Garland (Treasurer)

The volunteers' year

A Q&A with Nick Longman

Why the barrowers? What do you do?
"We're a select team of fairly full-on volunteers who work on the site from September to end-March, to avoid the breeding and growing season. (Not ours, the wildlife!)

"We're the barrowers because it's a steep site wherever we go (clue is in the words motte, bailey, castle etc) and we're always pushing wheelbarrows up and down slopes!

"We do it both to gently reveal and preserve the site, balancing the integrity of the built remains with the need to preserve both flora and fauna and enhance Snodhill's intrinsic charm as a managed wilderness...in other words, we want people and wildlife to enjoy the remains and surroundings.

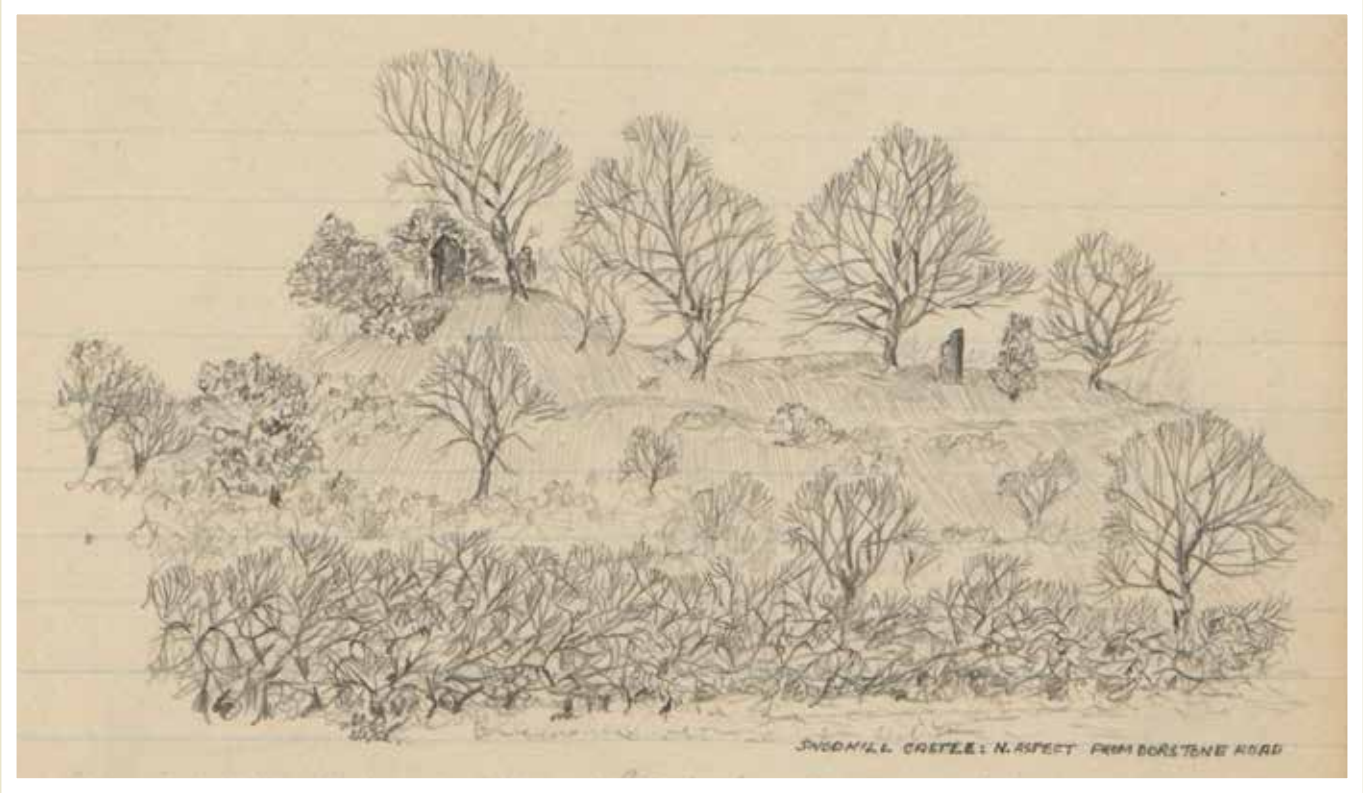
How do you do it?
"Our sessions generally last about three hours, with a break for coffee and cake. It's a blend of the W.I and the Last of the Summer Wine; the former for the quality and variety of cakes and the latter because many of us are advancing in years (but not waning in enthusiasm).

"We boast an impressive range of both relevant and completely irrelevant skills, including in no order: a retired psychiatric nurse; a qualified tree surgeon; an ex-TV news presenter; a professional ecologist, a retired police inspector, a book publisher, an adman, a financial controller turned wood-turner, two head-teachers and an airline pilot. But we're all skilled in barrow, bowsaw and bonfire. Bonfires are on raised plates to protect the archaeology beneath. And for the tidy-minded visitor wondering at the piles of rotting wood – these are left as veritable castles for invertebrates (see Ecology report for more).

"We work all round the site, but Health and Safety is our friend; we don't take risks, don't work unsupervised and stay within the bounds of our fairly expensive insurance.

What are you up to now?
"Spring 2020 we've been below the North Keep opening up vision splays. This structure (more about it below) must have been an imposing landmark, commanding the northern end of the valley, and we want to open it up while being careful to preserve trees that will, hopefully, become the veterans of the future.

Only 70 years ago, the site was woodland pasture interspersed with large trees, mainly oak and ash. Since then, many younger trees have sprouted, which need thinning to allow good specimens to grow to maturity. The site has been managed for most of its last thousand years but neglected for the last fifty or so, and it needs tending. So we've 'haloed' many of the veterans, removing saplings and brush under the canopy which take away nutrients from the main tree.



Snodhill Castle from the Dorstone-Peterchurch road near Gattimer Lodge. From R E Kay's notebooks, 1952 (National Archives)

"As we cannot plant (the site being an Ancient Monument) we must conserve. So we're leaving candidates that will hopefully make future veterans and, wherever possible, leaving standing and fallen deadwood for much needed nesting sites and habitat. Where trees are felled, we leave the stumps in the hope they'll resprout. In the case of our hazels, they thrive on coppicing and are an important asset for dormice – uncoppiced, they eventually rot from the centre and die completely. So we're coppicing in sections to create a whole range of hazels at different life stages - as there always used to be when woodlands were properly managed.

"During the warmer months, various trustees blag mowing equipment off generous locals and we mow, strim and cut bracken, encouraging wild flowers and their attendant insects (while being careful not to disrupt the locals – like our slow worms).

What about the future?
"The site will always need maintenance, whether to remove a branch hanging over a path or vegetation on the built remains threatening its integrity. This work will never stop, even though we will! So we're always looking for new volunteers of all and any age group - we've currently got two young gents working towards their Duke of Edinburgh Bronze award.

"At some point, we'll have to grasp the nettles (literally) and deal with the overgrown hedge on the road boundary. Untended, it's grown small trees which are now falling into the road. It's likely to need coppicing and 'gapping up' (planting new hedge whips in the gaps) so in years to come we get a thick growth that can be properly laid to form a good solid hedge – not only a boundary, but also a great site for nesting birds and small mammals.

"Our philosophy is gradualism; the castle's been here for 900 years or so, and much of its ecology has every right to co-exist with both the remains and us visitors. So we're moving out of the slash-and-burn clearance phase towards nurturing a future where our ancient trees can be confident in their conservation and succession. Whilst, for our other species, the site is their own castle and redoubt - against development, intensive agriculture and habitat loss."

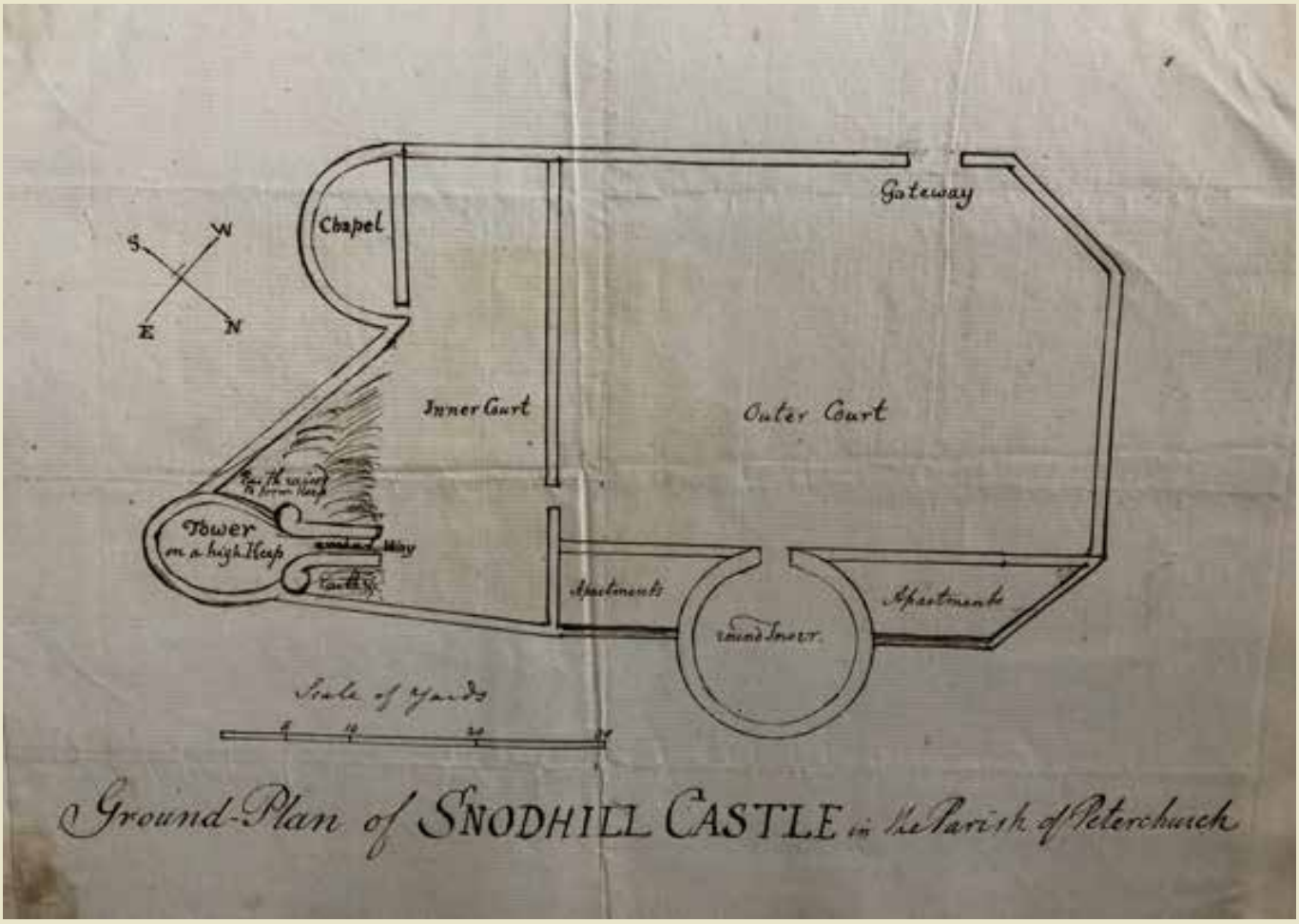
Nick Longman

Everyone's Snodhill Castle...

Ruth Hayward:

"The year, 1986. The band, Kelvin and the Absolute Zeros. The event, my 21st birthday. The electricity came from the Green, arranged by Simon Penney via a large copper nail in the fuse box and multiple extension leads. There was a lump of meat on a spit. I had some money from my grandparents which I spent on stupendous fireworks. I was in the Keep with Simon launching these display mortars and we must have put the biggest one in the wrong tube. It went up just about 6 feet and exploded – somehow we survived. Later on, Sam heard cries for help coming from below the curtain wall, and going to investigate, fell over it, landing on top of – I forget who – breaking her wrist quite badly. She'd only gone down there for a pee. Ian B fell asleep by the fire; next morning one of his flip flops had melted to his foot. Fond memories."

Archaeology, 2019-20



Plan of the castle from the Bishops' Library – though of uncertain provenance it depicts a chapel, outer gate and a cross wall (since confirmed) with an inner gate (not confirmed) and gives us tantalising clues as to the Keep's access arrangements

It was the smell of a Soho alleyway on a Sunday morning: but incredibly, coming from the newly exposed latrine gulley next to the North Tower. Undisturbed for 370 years, odours can be trapped for centuries in soil. The gulley was one finding of a rewarding archaeological season in which we were able to investigate the North Tower, Keep, Bailey and West Fragment for their structural history. In July we had an unexpected piece of luck worthy of Time Team: Tom Oliver, trustee, unearthed the earliest plan yet found of the castle in the private library of the Bishops of Hereford. It could be one drawn by Silas Taylor, a local antiquarian, around 1652. Though of uncertain date and provenance it charted some of the very discoveries we were making on the ground.

The archaeologists found a very early (C11) square-plan Keep incorporated into and under the present C12 polygonal one, and in the Bailey, a C11 curtain wall. These discoveries confirm that Snodhill is one of the oldest Norman stone castles in the country. They also uncovered the remains of a spiral staircase atop the motte; evidence that a C11 cross wall divided the main bailey; and a chamber with doorway and steps down (latterly disclosing a well) inside the North Tower.

The North Tower begins to reveal its circumference

The more the team steadily uncovered this remarkable structure the more it has grown in size and importance to assert itself as an independently defensible second Keep – a feature unique in motte and bailey castles in Britain – and which Tim Hoverd says, contains some of the finest medieval masonry in the West Midlands.

The trust plans to open up the North Keep (as we propose now to call it) for public access, and grade the High Keep to improve its interior and make our discoveries intelligible.

Doing this will enhance the site for our visitors, and further our aim to make sure Snodhill Castle's growing significance is recognised by all – thus helping ensure its long-term preservation.

Continuing this work on the 'twin keeps' of Snodhill is the object of our next major appeal.

As 2019 came to a close we had an increasingly clear idea of the castle's build phases and ground plan, which has allowed us to better focus our efforts and funds in the short post-covid season of 2020.

However, the many 'unknowns' of Snodhill Castle continue to tantalise us, just as they did Thomas Prosser-Powell, Rector of Dorstone, in this postscript to his account of the castle for the Woolhope Club in 1888:

'As the decayed bones of some Mastodon or Glyptodon, I have picked up these fragments of the history of Snodhill, its castle, and its Barony, but like an unskilled naturalist, I am unable to put the complete framework together.'

Garry Crook, Chair, receiving Medieval PPE in the form of a replica Chandos helm, kindly presented to him by Tim Hoverd, Hereford Archaeology

Restoring the view

View from the bailey, 1848, from The Castles of Herefordshire and their Lords

The same view restored, 2019

The views blended together

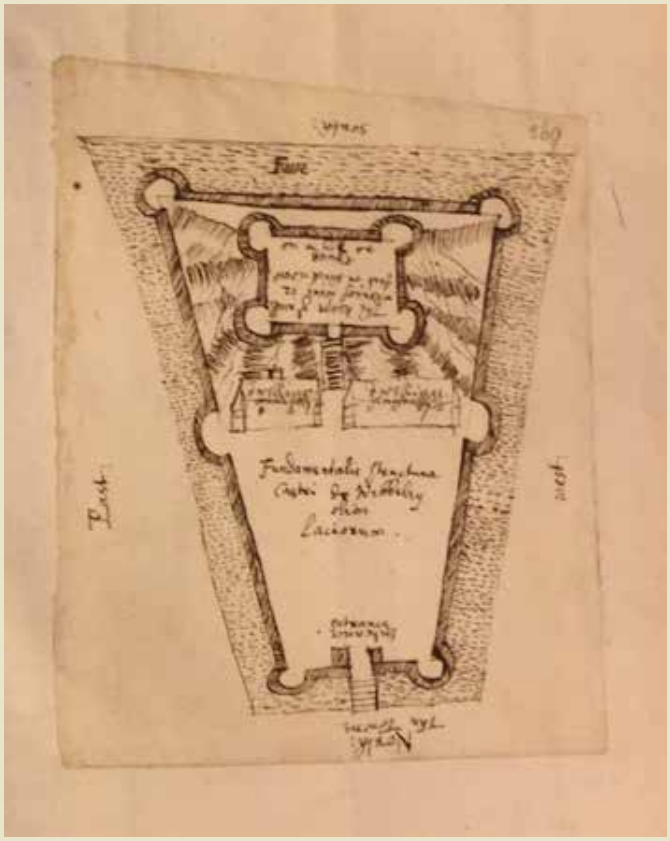
Still the standard castle reference for Herefordshire is A History of the Castles of Herefordshire and their Lords by Rev (they're so often Revs) Charles J Robinson, vicar of Norton Canon and president of the Woolhope Club. Published in 1869, the illustrations (in steel nib pen and ink) are by Lady Francis Vernon Harcourt, daughter of Edward Harley, 5th Earl of Oxford of whom the grateful author acknowledges: her 'faithful sketches give a value to his work which it would not otherwise possess, and evince the interest which the artist takes in the County with which her ancestors have been for so long and so honourably connected'. And faithful they certainly are, as this montage shows. Since 1846, the fragment of 11th Century curtain wall to the right collapsed in 1997, the ash tree has grown and died and the spire of St Peter's Peterchurch has been replaced by a fibreglass model. What those two apparent slabs are in front of the figure we have no idea – maybe part of some access arrangement to the Keep? We've placed a bench as close to the spot as possible so visitors can once again take in her view.

Latin test

Encouraged by the map discovery, during the year your Treasurer found an opportunity to examine several Harley manuscripts for references to Snodhill - in particular those from a draft gazetteer of Herefordshire written by Silas Taylor in 1652. About this enigmatic figure, Garry Crook writes: "he was born at Harley, Shropshire, educated at Westminster and New Inn Hall Oxford and commissioned in the Parliamentary army. He seems to have had a good war, ransacking the cathedral libraries of Hereford and Worcester for bankable manuscripts.

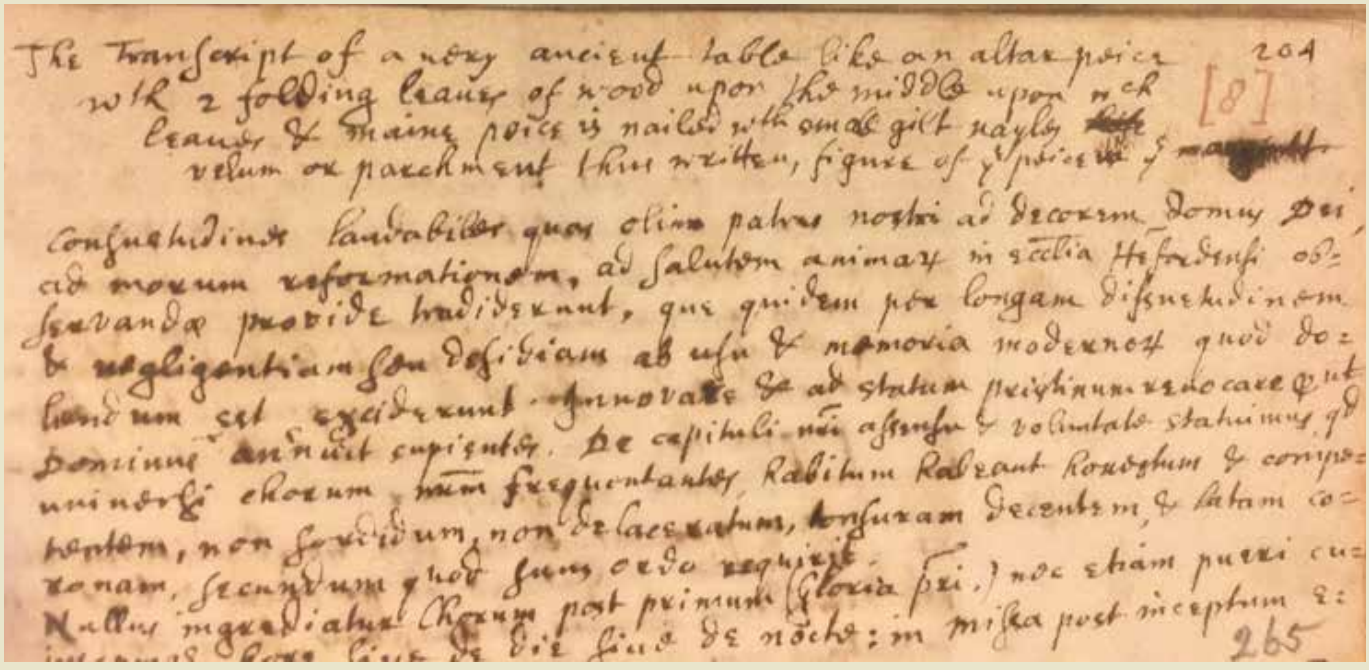
"At the Restoration he appears to have segued successfully to the winning side, becoming a parliamentary sequestrator (basically a court bailiff) in Herefordshire, having impressed Sir Edward Harley as commissary for ammunition in Dunkirk during the Dutch war. Taylor died in Harwich, in debt, and his valuable collections and manuscripts were seized by his creditors and sold for next to nothing. Some were suspect: John Aubrey, the antiquary, writes of an original grant of King Edgar he apparently pinched from Hereford Cathedral, dated 964: 'I have seen it many times, and it is as legible as but lately written. I told one of the prebends [of Worcester], and they cared not for such things. I believe it hath wrapt herrings by this time.'

"Taylor left his papers for a history of Herefordshire at Brampton Bryan where they joined the Harleian collection, now at the British Library. He was clearly bitter at having been bested in publishing them by John Ogilby, who 'desired me to epitomize my collections into 9 or 10 sheets of paper for Herefordshire, & he would put it into what stile of English he thought fit: so I should have the flitted milk for my entertainment & he goes away with ye cream & all under his own name too' (Egerton MS. 2231, f. 259)."



Silas Taylor's map of Weobley castle – the paper, hand and style appear different to that of our Snodhill Castle map – ideas welcome.

And now the question. Translate as much as possible of the following into English:



The Transcript of a very ancient table like an altar peice 204
wth 2 folding leaves of wood upon the middle upon wch [8]
leaves & maine peice is nailed wth small gilt nayles
velum or parchment thus written, figure of ye peice

Consuetudines laudabiles quas olim patres nostri ad decorem domus Dei,
ad morum reformationem, ad salutem animarum in ecclia Hefordensi ob=
servandas provide tradiderunt, que quidem per longam dissuetudinem
& negligentiam seu desidiam ab usu & memoria modernorum quod do=
lendum est exciderunt. Innovare & ad statum pristinum revocare ut
Dominus annuit cupientes. De capituli nri assensu & voluntate statuimus qd
universi chorum nrum frequentantes, habitum habeant honestum & compe=
tentem, non sordidum, non delaceratum, tonsuram decentem, & latam co=
ronam, secundum quod suus ordo requirit.
Nullus ingrediatur chorum post primum (Gloria pri.) nec etiam pueri cu=
[illegible] de die sive de nocte: in missa post inceptum e=
265

Pens down. When you're done, please submit your efforts to info@snodhillcastle.org

Ecology survey, January 2020

Besides looking after the standing remains of the castle and site, the Trust is also responsible for the care of its thousands of inhabitants.

These are of absolutely all ages from 450 years to a few hours, of considerable diversity, and various needs – often contradictory. Our veteran ash trees are important county specimens, and their naturally rotting older limbs are a resource for woodpeckers, king alfred's cakes (a burnt-cake-like fungus) and countless other folk; but they also overhang the Keep and are liable to crack off without warning. Meanwhile below, in a pile of rotting wood, are galleries of the large ash bark beetle grub, for which the tree is an endless all-you-can-eat buffet.

To conserve these various communities means a management plan and will involve trade-offs. A first step in this complex stewardship involves finding out exactly who, species-wise, is living here. For that we're lucky in having Tim Kaye, who conducted a comprehensive ecology survey in January 2020.

Among the 200 or so species listed are 45 mosses, 16 fungi and over 80 vascular plant types. (We picture a few here.)

Tim Kaye in action

The delicate Common Centuary (Centaurium erythraea) growing near ant hills.

Rutpela maculata, a common but beautiful denizen of flower heads

Our numerous yew trees support large numbers of Artichoke gall made by the cynipid wasp Andricus fecundator.

In our 10 acre site, this is an Amazon of biodiversity and an increasingly important refuge for plants, animals, and creeping things – safe from the monocultures that march across the valley to the North.

Every year a particular plant seems to claim a place in the sun: in 2019 it was the Great Mullein (Verbascum Thapsus)…

…complete with its stylish attendant caterpillar, the Mullein Moth (Cucullia verbasci)

The successful graft of one of the perry pear trees – awaiting its planting in the Autumn

New in 2019/20…

Motte steps

We now have a fine set of new stone steps up to the 'High' Keep. Their main purpose (apart from access) is to stop erosion of the motte caused by innumerable bottoms sliding down it, probably since well before Kilvert's picnic of June 1871 when *'…the first thing of course was to scale the castle mound and climb up the ruins of the Keep as far as might be. It was fearfully slippery and the ladies gallantly sprawled and struggled up and slithered down again…'* Now, with the steps installed, there's a safe and picturesque way up – and more to the point for most, down. The Kilvert Society's last slither was at their picnic in June 2019.

New information board, car park and benches

Part of the Herefordshire LEADER programme-funded works, (along with the Keep steps) we now have a fine solid oak information board for the castle, and for visitors, a hard standing on which to park their cars, plus two immensely solid green oak benches on which to park their behinds.

New castle information board…

and one of our new benches in local green oak (being tested by our Chair)

And finally…

By the end of 2020 (pandemics, weather and finances permitting) the North Keep should be on display for all to marvel at and puzzle over, the SE Bastion and South Curtain walls cleared and the ground levelled, and the High Keep the deserved highlight of any visit. There are lifetimes of discovery ahead, but in the meantime the Trust hopes you will continue to support our work by enjoying its unfolding beauty, pondering its many oddities, and maybe quietly appreciating that you're helping redeem a truly great lost castle of the Marches.

As always the Trustees thank our many friends for their support during the year

SNODHILL CASTLE PRESERVATION TRUST

Be part of the discovery

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