EXCAVATIONS AT
A MOATED SITE NEAR SCARISBRICK

SCATTERED over the south-west Lancashire plain are the remains of some forty moated sites. (1) Little is known of the origin of these earthworks and their function in some cases is not at all obvious. Many were doubtless fortified farmsteads and enclosures for animals, built for protection against robbers and wild animals. Some still surround farmhouses though the extant buildings are usually later in date. (2) They vary greatly in size from the tiny one on top of the mound at Rufford to the considerable area enclosed originally at New Park, Lathom. (3) The shape of these earthworks also varies considerably but most are rectangular or square, as at Lathom, while a few are round or oval.

Until systematic excavation is undertaken it is unlikely that much will be known about these moats although it is quite possible that field work will reveal the sites of several more. So far local historians have been content with highly speculative guess-work about their origin and use. An instance of this is in the opinions put forward about the moated site in the grounds of Scarisbrick Hall. In a letter to the Southport Visiter on 24 December 1906, the Rev. Bulpit expressed the opinion that the original hall was “erected where there is now a moat in the grounds”; and that “it was a timber and plaster erection”. F. H. Cheetham, after noting that there is no documentary evidence existing in the Scarisbrick charters for the existence of a hall during the Middle Ages, thought that there must have been a house for the Scarisbrick family to live in but recognized that “of this mediaeval Scarisbrick Hall we know nothing”. (4)


(2) As at Bradley Hall. See V.C.H., Vol. II, p. 549 (plan). Here a moat crossed by a bridge and arched gateway, built by Sir Peter Legh c. 1460, surrounds a brick farmhouse which preserves part of the old building.

(3) At Rufford, on one-tenth of an acre, there seems little room for a house. Possibly it is a windmill site. See V.C.H., Vol. II, p. 547 (plan). At Lathom the area is about 160' x 180' and only one side of the wet moat remains. Excavations begun in 1960 have revealed part of the house of the earls of Derby who held court here in the sixteenth century. F. H. Cheetham discusses the documentary evidence for the site in Trans. of Lanes and Ches. Antiquarian Soc., Vol. 31.

He agreed that the earthwork in question might possibly be the site of such a hall, but it was "in such a position as to preclude its having been connected in any way with a house on the present site". J. Wans, author of *A Short History of Scarisbrick Hall*, thought that "an earlier house was probably situated in what is now woodland behind the vegetable gardens. There is a right-angled ditch in these woods which is thought to have been the moat round the old house".

During the Easter Holidays 1960, an investigation of the "moat" was carried out by members of the sixth form of King George V School Southport. An attempt was made to ascertain the date when the "moat" was cut; the relationship of the two ditches composing the "moat"; and the use of the earthwork.

The main ditch extends for 325' in a south-east, north-west direction and then turns roughly at right angles and cuts back slightly for another 175' to the Eas brook, a stream which drains away to the north-west. The main ditch is 19' wide for most of its course, and the shorter one is about 13' wide. The soil is boulder clay, overlain in places with a thin layer of sand, some of it a very recent fluvial deposit. The area between the ditches and the stream is covered with a sprinkling of trees and shrubs and is called the Old Wood. The roots of the rhododendron bushes and numerous saplings were particularly troublesome to the diggers in the north-west corner of the site.

Eight trenches were cut. Trench A, 20' x 3', was cut at right angles across the "inner" lip of the ditch and extended right into the ditch itself. Layer 1 of this section revealed 9" of leaf-mould and black soil. Nothing was found in this. Layer 2 was of reddish black sand 2' 2" in depth, gradually falling away to about 15" at a point 20' from the edge of the ditch. In this layer at depths of between 12" and 2' 2" were found several small fragments of pottery. All these were picked up within the first six feet from the edge of the ditch. Layer 3 was about 1" thick and was black soil and some pebbles. Layer 4 consisted of undisturbed stiff yellow clay. It seems that layer 2 represented the upcast from the ditch on top of the old turf line, layer 3. (See Fig. 16).

Trench F was cut at right angles for 15' across the ditch end.

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(5) We are grateful to the principal of St. Katherine's College for giving us permission to survey and excavate the site. Also for the co-operation and interest shown by members of the staff, especially Miss J. Wans who put at our disposal her unpublished researches into the history of the Scarisbrick family.

(6) Some attempt has been made during the last century to make parts of the wood ornamental, especially those abutting onto the raised path parallel with the moat.
of trench A. The section exposed the same layers as before, and in layer 2 at a depth of 2′ were found a number of pieces of pottery. Layer 3 contained some remains of blackened leaves and acorns. (There are no oak trees in this part of the wood now.) Clay was found at 3′ 3″.

An attempt was made to cut a section across the ditch at trench C, but this had to be abandoned since the digging became waterlogged. Layer 1 consisted of black mud 2′ deep. In this were found burnt wood fragments 1′ 7″ from the surface. Layer 2 consisted of reddish sand and in this were found several pieces of grey slate. The caretaker of St. Katherine’s College, Mr. Johnson, formerly in service with the family, could remember a ditcher being employed by the Scarisbricks to clean the ditch out regularly.

Trench D was cut across the outer lip of the ditch. The path, which runs along the side overlooking it, was cut through, exposing regular layers of cinders, yellow sandstone and brick rubble. Below was reddish sand at a depth of 1′ 3″. In this were found several more pottery fragments. At 2′ 8″ clay
Moat in grounds of Scarisbrick Hall

Trenches

Figure 16. The trenches are not drawn to scale. The site was surveyed by J. Hodnett, B.A. and members of the geography department of King George V School. This plan was reduced from a scale drawing summarising their information.

The lower drawing is a composite diagram made up of sections from trenches A, C, and D. The vertical scale is exaggerated. For dimensions of the trenches see the text.
was exposed below the black band of the old turf line. (See Fig. 16).

Trench E was cut across the ditch which runs more or less at right angles to the main one, and was found to cover a field drain which carried water down to the Eas brook. Three layers were exposed. Layer I was leaf-mould about 9" thick; layer 2 red sand 2' 6"; and layer 3, clay. Two fragments of pottery were found near the surface; one white piece, glazed with a blue pattern and the other brown, glazed on both sides.

A trial trench B was cut through the area on the south-east side of the moat. Layer 1 consisted of 11" of leaf-mould; in this were found lumps of brick, pebbles and stone fragments; Layer 2, 13" of pink sand and rounded pebbles. White sand was found at 2' and water was struck at 3' 5". No artefacts were found.

Trial trenches G and H were dug at the north-west side to see if the moat had ever been extended round on the Eas brook side but here there was no indication that the natural soil had ever been disturbed. The section revealed 9" of leaf-mould; 2' 3" of red sand; 12" of grey clay and then yellow sand, with water struck at 5' 6".

From this somewhat meagre evidence several suggestions may be put forward.

1. The pottery fragments found in the upcast of the ditch in trenches A and F were dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. (7) (see Fig. 17). This suggests that the main ditch was originally dug in the late Middle Ages.

2. The pottery which was in the short northern ditch was dated to the eighteenth century. One is a piece of Delft (tin glaze with blue decoration), Dutch or English. The other is a lead glazed fragment. The fact that the ditch was much narrower and steeper than the main ditch suggests that it is of much later date and possibly dug for the purpose of draining the larger one. It has also been re-dug recently to serve as a field drain.

3. No remains of human habitation were found between the main "moat" and the Eas brook. It should be emphasized that only a very small part of the area was tested.

4. The conclusion drawn from these points is that no evidence has been found in support of former theories that this

(7) A report was kindly provided by P. Lasko, assistant keeper, department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities, British Museum. In it all the pottery, except the fragments found in Trench E, is stated to be likely to date from the late mediaeval period. The rim fragment and the body fragment with rouletting suggest fourteenth to fifteenth century pottery. (Letter dated 23 June 1960).
A. Four fragments from same pot. Red ware found in trench A at 2' 6"; late mediaeval.

B. Handle fragment with traces of green glaze, found in trench A at 2'; c. 1400.

C. Rim fragment. Red coarse ware. Found in trench A at 1' 7"; c. 1400.

D. Fragment with rouletting. Red ware. Found in trench A at 1' 9"; c. 1400.

E. Fragment with rouletting. Red ware. Found in trench A at 1' 9"; c. 1400.

F. Two fragments of base. Red ware. Found in trench A at 2' 3"; late mediaeval.

G. Rim fragment. Red ware. Found in trench A at 1' 8"; late mediaeval.
area was the site for an earlier Scarisbrick Hall. In fact everything seems to argue against it. It is frequently waterlogged even now; and before the extensive drainage schemes of the nineteenth century must always have been very damp and undesirable for the site of a dwelling. The present house 165 yards to the south-east, is considerably higher and drier in position. Moreover the fact that the two ditches were apparently dug at different dates argues against any defensive purpose of the main ditch. This is supported by the fact that the upcast was heaped on both sides when the ditch was being dug. No suggestion of a rampart was found. What was the ditch dug for? It is too massive for a boundary and too regular for a clay pit. A likely solution is that it was a fish pond, or rather in this case, a fish ditch, fed by water from the gullies in the wood. The main ditch is still full of water although it is not directly connected with the Eas brook. Fish ponds were common features found near mediaeval farmhouses, halls and monasteries. Chaucer's franklin had "many a breem and many a luce in stuwe". With poor communications and inadequate methods of food preservation it would be necessary to breed fish supplies for Fridays, Lenten fasts, and for supplementing the diet generally. It would be natural for the original founders of Scarisbrick Hall living in a house, probably on the present site, to dig themselves a fish pond, or fish ditch.

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(8) The sections exposed in trenches B, G and H show that recently the area has been washed over by the stream. Probably the Eas brook originally was much wider and is now artificially deepened and embanked in places.

(9) Field Archaeology, p. 53, and Archaeology in the Field, pp. 190 and 191. For the importance of fish in the life of a monastery see The Cockersand Chartulary, Chetham Society, Index in Vol. 64 under fisheries.