CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

LOCATION

Pleshey is a small village 9.7km NNW of Chelmsford with prominent earthworks, in fine condition, of a motte and bailey castle (TL 666144) and town enclosure. The geology of the area is a chalky boulder clay dating from the Anglian glaciation which overlies at depth glacial sands and gravels, in turn overlying London clay (information from the Institute of Geological Sciences, South East England Unit). The undisturbed stratum found in the excavation was a buff clay c. 0.5m thick with angular flints in its surface, the weathered upper part of the chalky boulder clay.

PRE-CASTLE OCCUPATION

A bronze socketed axe of mid-8th to mid-7th century B.C. date (Couchman, forthcoming) was found in the village in 1974 (in the approximate position marked on fig. 2) by Mr R. Spearman of 3, Woolmers Mead, Pleshey in whose possession it remains (personal communication from Mr P.J. Drury). Several other late Bronze Age implements have been found previously in the village and are now in Colchester Museum. In a small cut into the make-up of the motte made by Mr S.R. Bassett (1972–4) two linear features were uncovered both of which could have been peri-glacial, but did in fact contain a few sherds of hand-made flint-gritted pottery probably of late Bronze Age or early Iron Age date (personal communication).

A considerable number of finds of Roman material have come from Pleshey and the surrounding area. A group of coins, probably part of a 3rd century hoard are believed to have been found in 1907 during excavations in the castle (Rahtz 1960, 13) and part of a Castor-ware beaker was discovered during the consolidation of the brick bridge in 1958-9 (p. 144). From the earliest levels of the excavation described in this report came a Roman brooch (p. 185). The section of the bailey bank excavated by Mr S.R. Bassett in 1973 produced a considerable quantity of Romano-British pottery of late 3rd and 4th century date and some metalwork (personal communication). There were no associated features. Evidently, the finds from the castle and village suggest that there is a late 3rd to 4th century site in the immediate area (Christy 1923, 191–2; May 1918, 227–32; VCH Essex 3, 166–7).

At Plesheybury, west of the village (Essex Site Record No. TL 61/11), Romano-British material which has been found in the area since the middle of the 18th century can now be associated with a large courtyard-type villa, apparently fairly rich for the area (VCH Essex 3, 166–7; Rodwell forthcoming). A further significant contribution has been the recent identification of another

Plate I. Air photograph of Pleshey Village, 1959.
large courtyard villa at Chignall St James, south of Pleshey (Britannia 6 (1974), 263). The finds of Romano-British material from Pleshey and its environs indicate an area potentially rich in information. At the moment, however, insufficient fieldwork has been done to determine the precise character, extent and inter-relationships of the Romano-British settlements.

THE EARTHWORKS

The Motte

The castle was built on a slight ridge near the confluence of two streams which flow east towards the river Chelmer (RCHM Essex 3, 202). The flat-topped mound stands c.18.2m high with traces of terracing which may indicate that it was built in layers to ensure stability. The motte is surrounded by a deep moat c.21.3m wide at its widest point. A brick bridge probably of late 14th or 15th century date (Wight 1972, 263-4; Medieval Archaeol. 18(1974), 196; also see discussion on p. 85 ) on the SW side of the motte links it with the upper bailey.

The Upper Bailey

A kidney-shaped area south of the motte is enclosed by an inner rampart surviving to a height of c.5.5m and a moat c.30.4m wide and c.11.3m deep from the top of the rampart (RCHM Essex 3, 202). Recent excavation has shown that the rampart was timber-revetted initially, only at a later stage being formed into a bank, and that it sealed an earlier bank (Medieval Archaeol. 18(1974), 196). The rampart is breached at three points. The main entrance during later medieval times was almost certainly from the SW on a line with the brick bridge. The NE gap may be connected with a road running through the town enclosure in a NE direction and found as a hollow way in the garden of Mount House. The moat is much wider at this point than elsewhere and has a small island in the middle. It is possible that this was the central support for a double bridge and that the Norman entrance to the castle was from the NE (Rahtz 1960, 8). The SE breach in the rampart is relatively recent but pre-dates the recording of the site by Gough (1803).

The Lower Bailey

It has been argued that the curving line of Back Lane and the change in level on either side of it mark the line of a possible lower bailey (Rahtz 1960, 8). At its west end the ground rises north of the lane and slopes down to the south while at its east end it rises on either side. The west edge of a NW to SE ditch not less than 19.5m wide was recorded in a construction trench to the NW of the castle (fig. 2; information by courtesy of Essex County Council Planning Dept.) and it seems probable that this ditch survives from the postulated lower bailey defence-work now fossilised by Back Lane, since it fits in well with the projected curve of the lane to the south. At the NE end of Back Lane an oak post, now at Colchester Museum (62.1966) was found in 1964 by the late Major J.G.S. Brinson in a services trench (fig. 2). The post has now been given an approximate felling date of 1110 A.D. ± 5 by dendrochronological investigation (information by courtesy of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology, Oxford). The circumstances of the find, however, precluded the association of the timber with other archaeological deposits which might
have elucidated its function. Earthworks marked on the 1875 OS map of Pleshey (1st Edition, 1: 2500, ERO) describe a curve from the NE corner of the upper bailey, which is concentric with the curve of Back Lane (fig. 2) suggesting that at least two phases of this defensive line are present. A similar pattern of town planning with a semi-circular line of earthworks dictated by the position of a castle, and the development of a road system reflecting that shape, can be seen at Richmond and Devizes (Butler 1976, 39, 45, fig. 20c).

The Town Enclosure

A rampart and ditch define the area of the Norman town north of the castle. At its strongest point the ditch survives to a width of c.13.7m and depth of c.3.4m from the top of the rampart (RCHM Essex 3, 202). (The documentation of the borough of Pleshey is discussed in Appendix III). The remains of a mill dam are sited to the south of the castle (RCHM Essex 3, 202) and may have serviced it and the town.

PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS AND RECENT WORK

In 1863 William White wrote (1863, 355):

'Foundations of brick run from the end of the bridge to the left round the keep, and on each side of the way to it are foundations of large rooms and angles of stone buildings.'

The buildings described were uncovered in 1907 by Col W.N. Tufnell who conducted the first known excavation on the site of the castle, on the motte and in the upper bailey (Rahtz 1960, 5). The latter area produced a large number of decorated glazed floor tiles. The plan of the rectangular stone building found on the motte was published in 1922 by Miller Christy after the Morant Club had re-excavated it (Christy 1923). Three sides of the structure were found measuring c.20.4m by c.17.1m with rectangular and square projections – some hollow, others solid, probably surviving from towers and/or buttresses. This may have been the keep of the castle, but the walls are surprisingly slight for a major defensive structure. Three types of construction were recorded by Miller Christy in the following sequence (with his suggested dating):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Flints in white mortar</td>
<td>12th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Flints and tile in yellow mortar</td>
<td>13th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Bricks in bright yellow mortar</td>
<td>15th or 16th century</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1958–9 the brick bridge was consolidated by the then Ministry of Works (now Dept. of the Environment) in conjunction with Mr J.J. Tufnell and Essex County Council. The excavations described in this report took place in 1959–63 and were directed by Mr P.A. Rahtz. Mr and Mrs J. and E. Sellers recorded surface indications of buildings in the upper bailey as parchmarks in the exceptionally hot summer of 1965 (fig. 3). Mrs Sellers also recorded archaeological deposits on the southern face of the ditch between the upper bailey and the motte, east of the bridge, which were exposed in 1968 by machine damage. Parts of the north walls of two flint rubble buildings were found on the lip of
PLESHEY CASTLE

Fig. 3

Scale 0 50 200 ft
0 10 50 m

A Building found in 1907 excavation
B Chapel excavated 1959-63
C Other bailey buildings planned in 1965 from surface indications
D 1962 trial trench cf. Appendix I

Water
Metal

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Plate II. Air photograph of Pleshey Castle, 1959.
the bailey at this time. Excavations by Mr S.R. Bassett in successive seasons from 1972 (proceeding) have investigated a wide section across the ditch around the motte in the immediate vicinity of the bridge, and masonry structures on the bailey top and slope in the same area. The bailey bank was also sectioned by Mr Bassett in 1973 immediately to the east of the SE breach; here two phases of bank were identified (Medieval Archaeol. 18 (1974), 196).

EXCAVATION METHOD 1959-63

The Excavation

In 1959 an exploratory trench 115ft (35m) by 10ft (3.0m) was opened in ten grid squares with intermediate baulks (Rahtz 1960, 11) in the western half of the upper bailey. The corner of a large stone building was found as well as contemporary and earlier timber structures. The following year the stone building was completely uncovered and excavated to floor level using six cuttings 20ft (6.1m) by 18ft (5.5m) with temporary baulks. The stone wall foundations have been preserved in situ. The sub-floor levels were examined in 1962 and parts of two circular stone and clay foundations were uncovered. During the final season in 1963, work concentrated on investigating the relationship of these foundations to the rampart by examining the unexcavated wedge between the 1959 trench and the 1960-2 area (fig. 4).

On Site Recording

The methods of field recording used are noted here for correlation with the original site records and finds which will be deposited in the Chelmsford and Essex Museum.

1959 Grids: 1 - 10
Layers: A, B, C, etc. within grids e.g. 3H = Grid 3 Layer H (cf. Table II)
Features: according to grids e.g. 1/2 = Grid 1 Feature 2
Small finds: Bronze No. 1, No. 2 etc.
Periods: I - III
Phases within periods: A, B, C etc.
Publication: First Interim Report, 1960 (Rahtz 1960)

1960 Grids: 1 - 6, 14 - 15; baulks 7 - 13; minor extensions 16 and 17
Layers: A, B, C etc. (single series not respecting grids; different from 1959)
Features: 1, 2, 3 etc. (single series not respecting grids)
Small finds: Bronze No. 1, No. 2 etc. (new series)
Periods: I - III (different from 1959)
Phases within periods: A, B, C etc. (different from 1959)
Draft Second Interim Report (Rahtz, unpublished)

1962 Area excavation
Layers: A, B, C etc. as 1960
Features: 1, 2, 3 etc. (new series)
Small finds: Bronze No. 1, No. 2 etc. (new series)
Periods: not defined
1963 Area excavation

Layers, features and small finds all recorded in a single numerical series 1, 2, 3 etc.
Periods: not defined

The preparation of this report has presented many problems. The present author did not see the excavation in progress and began working on the material ten years after it had been completed. This has accentuated the problems of site recording. The correlation of several seasons of work each with a slightly different recording system and without the benefit of personal observation, has proved complex. It demonstrates the advantages of consistent recording or at least the need to avoid overlapping systems which risk confusion in the records. The limitations of the recorded evidence can be seen in the sequence diagram (fig. 5) and the table of stratigraphic information (Table I). Unfortunately a plan of the total excavated area did not survive in the records. It is not thought, however, that any error factor thus incorporated is great enough to be archaeologically significant.

Numbering system used in this Report

In this report the original feature numbers have been retained with a single prefix number identifying the year of excavation:

1959 feature 4/5 (i.e. grid 4 feature 5) = 945
1960 feature 45 = 045
1962 feature 45 = 245
1963 feature 45 = 345

Letters referring to layers are distinguished by the season site prefix e.g. PC 59 G, PC 60 G. The field layer letters have been used except in the case of the 1959 layers for which the previously published (Rahtz 1960) layer letters are given for ease of reference. A correlation list of 1959 field contexts with those published appears in Table II.
INTRODUCTION

This survey of the documentary evidence relating to Pleshey is intended to provide the historical framework within which the results of the archaeological investigation can be placed. The material is discussed in two sections:

The Castle

Ecclesiastical buildings in Pleshey

A short note on references to the borough of Pleshey can be found in Appendix III. This chapter collates relevant published material, but there is no doubt that further detailed research into the documentation would be extremely fruitful since Pleshey, although a small borough, must have been of considerable significance. The castle was initially one of the main strongholds of the Mandeville family in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, and maintained its significance in the last half of the 13th century and first half of the 14th century as the pre-eminent residence of the Bohuns, the greatest landowning family in Essex at this time. Probably the most illustrious period in the castle's history, however, was when Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, held court there in the late 14th century having acquired Pleshey through his marriage to the heiress Eleanor de Bohun. From the early 15th century the castle was incorporated into the Duchy of Lancaster, and formed part of the dowries of several queens of England.

THE CASTLE

It is probable that Pleshey was not mentioned by name in the Domesday survey but was included within the parish of High Easter (VCH Essex 1, 509 note 4), although Morant argued that it was referred to as Plesinchou (1768, 451).

The Mandevilles became 'one of the wealthiest and most influential families of post-Conquest England' and the accumulation of this wealth began with the grant of extensive lands, concentrated in Essex but radiating out to ten other counties, by William the Conqueror to Geoffrey de Mandeville I (Hollister 1973, 18-19). Pleshey may well have been a part of this fief but the earliest definite reference to a castle there belongs to the time of Geoffrey de Mandeville II, created the first Earl of Essex in 1140, when he presumably acquired Pleshey. Imprisoned in 1143, he was forced to surrender his castles of Walden, the Tower of London, and Pleshey (CP 5, 113-6; Davis 1964, 304).