

FRAMLINGHAM CASTLE, A POLITICAL STATEMENT?

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CASTLES FIRST CAME under serious historical scrutiny as monuments in the 19th century. Until recently the dominant line of investigation has centred on their defensive qualities with authors devising periods of castle development or categorising them into different designs. The realisation that castles were more than fortified homes for the rich and powerful has led to the examination of how their design and appearance could have been influenced by factors other than defence and living accommodation. Recently, however, the idea that the focus of the design of a castle might be its appearance within its setting has come to the forefront with studies such as that of Bodiam with its orchestrated approach and viewing platform (Coulson 1991, 3).

When the Blue Guide to Framlingham Castle was written castle research was still largely fixed in trying to explain and understand castle defences (Raby and Reynolds 1959). In 1968 Derek Renn categorised Framlingham as a 'Motte and bailey (Ibc3)', that is a castle with a low oval motte (with the top diameters differing by 20 per cent or more), with a triangular bailey to which its relationship is peripheral, namely astride the projected line of the bailey bank (Renn 1968, 191).¹

There are problems, however, in trying to understand the remains of Framlingham Castle in terms of its defensive capabilities. It is not that they were inadequate, or weak, in terms of a baronial castle built at the end of the 12th century but that they appear to be asymmetrical. The outer defences on the eastern side consisted of a ditch and wooden palisade which would have been difficult to defend with the forces that Roger Bigod could command. In addition, the ground slopes slightly down towards the Castle² on this side of the Bailey. On the north-eastern side there are no additional defences at all, thus allowing any enemy to approach the Castle without hindrance. It is true that to the south the wall of the Castle does have an impressive row of double arrow slits to the east of the main entrance in addition to the outer ditch. Nonetheless, any enemy occupying the Bailey could avoid these by approaching from the weaker east side.

On the other hand the western side of the Castle is heavily protected. The Prison Tower projects into the Lower Court and could act as a caponier³. The Castle itself rises more than seven metres above the Lower Court. It appears to have been constructed deliberately using material excavated from the castle ditches rather than relying on the natural lie of the land (Coad 1971, 155). Examination of contours also suggests that the Lower Court was built up in the same way with the result that it stands over three metres above the Mere. Further, the northern side of the Lower Court is partly protected by a stone wall which had a spiral stair presumably leading to its battlements. Beyond the Lower Court the Mere stretched a further 300 metres to the west. These factors make the western side appear almost invulnerable to the siege technology of the late 12th century except that the dam that expanded the natural lake, or Mere, was impossible to defend from any part of the castle and so it could have been drained easily.

As all but minor parts of the existing remains of the medieval castle were built by one person, Roger Bigod sometime after 1189 when he inherited his father's lands and earldom, it is reasonable to assume that the castle was designed as a single entity and that the lack of balance in the defences was an acknowledged part of that plan. The only surviving parts that are believed to predate Roger's castle are the remains of a hall and chapel which were built by his father (Fig. 17). These were left standing after the rest of the original wooden castle was demolished as a result of the rebellion of 1173 and were later incorporated into the eastern part of Roger's new castle (Brown 1950, 127). It therefore follows that if the castle was deliberately built without best regard to its overall defence then there must have been an additional reason for its design.

Recent research into castle development has suggested that the ideas behind castle design were as much, if not more so in some cases, concerned with appearance and internal structure as they were with being fortified homes and administrative centres. Tom McNeill has promoted the idea that castle design reflects how their inhabitants organised their lives (McNeill 1992). Framlingham, Bodiam, Kenilworth and Leeds Castles are all seen as examples of what have been called 'water castles' because of the extent to which expanses of water are associated with them in excess of what would be needed for their defence or because the water features do not add significantly to the overall defensive capabilities of the castle. Instead, water is used to direct visitors to view a castle from certain positions and to create desired images (Everson 1998, 33). Marc Morris has argued that what was important was not how effective a castle's defences were but whether or not it looked like one because the possession of a 'castle' implied the status of nobility (Morris 2003, 4).

It is the contention of this article that a re-examination of the defences, internal layout and setting (both geographical and historical) of Framlingham Castle may lead to a better understanding of the ideas and reasoning behind Roger Bigod's castle.

To do this, however, requires a new interpretation of the design and function of certain features of the castle. If the so-called Prison Tower is considered to have been a barbican giving access via what is called the Postern Gate to the Castle from the Lower Court (Fig. 17), which in turn had a gateway at its north-western corner giving passage to the deer or Great Park (Ridgard, 1995) to the west and north, a number of problems associated with understanding Framlingham Castle can be resolved. It would remove the need for a staircase on the outside of its northern wall to give access to the Lower Court (Raby and Reynolds 1959, 35). It would explain why there was a relatively large doorway or Postern Gate between the Great Hall and the extensive private accommodation (indicated by the individual garderobe chutes in the wall to the south), that was apparently intended to give access to a prison pit. If the base of the Prison Tower is considered to have been a drawbridge pit rather than a dungeon this would remove the need to explain why Roger Bigod bothered to build a specialised dungeon in the first place at the end of the 12th century. Also such an interpretation of the Prison Tower would explain the accounts entry of 1289–90 'for flooding the ditch within the great gate and for raising it' (Raby and Reynolds 1959, 34). This would no longer have to refer to the flooding of the whole of the inner or outer ditch of the castle, which would have been impractical without the construction of dams higher than the Lower Court, but can be seen as applying to a more practical possibility, namely the flooding of the existing pit in the Prison Tower. It would also explain the location of 'The gate towards the park' mentioned in 1293 and the 'bridge towards the park' mentioned in 1295 (Raby and Reynolds 1959, 37). These can be held to refer to either the Prison Tower itself or to the stone abutment at the north-west corner of the Lower Court which would have led via a bridge to the Great Park.

It is still necessary to explain why the name Prison Tower or Gate has come to be used for that part of the castle. References to a prison gate appear in the records of 1302 according to the Blue Guide and not before (Raby and Reynolds 1959, 35–36). When such accounts were drawn up some means had to be used to specify individual features that could be easily recognised by those who knew the castle. For a part of the castle to be designated a 'Prison Gate' it must recently have been used as such.

By the end of the thirteenth century the then Roger Bigod was Earl Marshal of England and in that capacity accompanied Edward I on his invasion of Scotland. Following the defeat of the Scots at Dunbar in 1296 'Their leaders...had been captured...and distributed among the castles of England' (Powicke 1962, 614). It is not unreasonable to believe that Edward would have wanted these high status prisoners kept separately and that his chief supporters, including Roger Bigod, would have been expected to accommodate some of them. The upper floor of the Prison Tower at Framlingham would have been ideal. There is a clear indication of the remains of a garderobe in the western wall and access to that floor was apparently only by a spiral staircase from below. Additionally there would have been access to the wall walks that ran between the Prison Tower and the Castle. Despite popular myth, important prisoners would not have been thrown into a pit but placed in secure accommodation according to their status, which the upper floor of the Prison Tower appears to have provided.

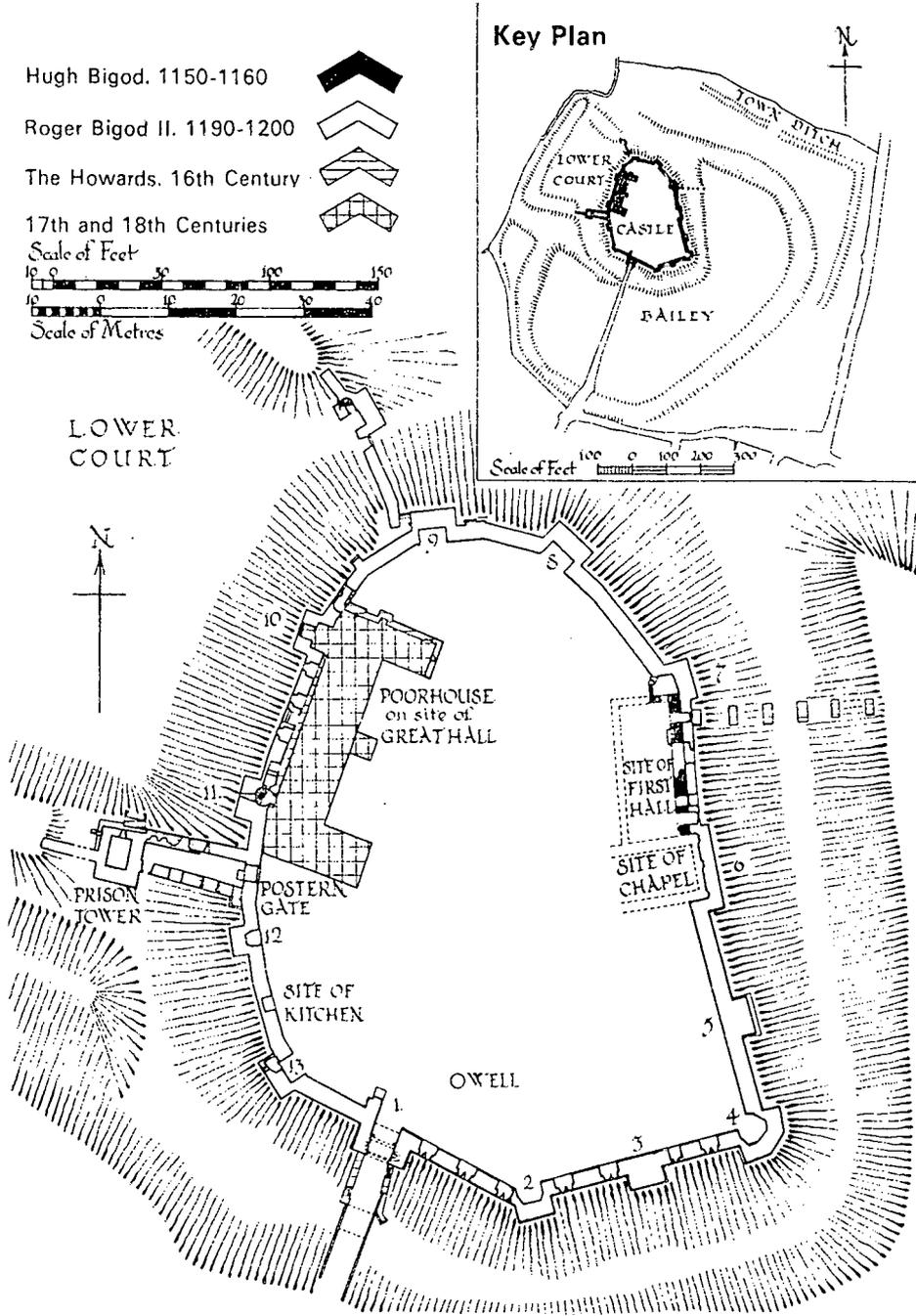


FIG. 17 - Plan of Framlingham Castle from the Blue Guide of 1959 (English Heritage, Crown Copyright).

The other evidence usually given for considering the pit in the Prison Tower to have been used as a dungeon is the small window in its north wall, which opens into the pit. However, this opening does not appear to have been constructed at the same time as the rest of the castle because it does not have an ashlar surround; unlike other openings it is simply a crude slit in the wall. A more likely explanation for its origins is that it was inserted when the castle was used as a prison for recusants during the reign of Elizabeth I. The entrances to the castle were then reduced to one and the 'Keeper' was allowed to restrain the inmates 'of all liberty' if they fell foul of the prison rules (Booth 1930). The pit of a blocked entrance would have been ideal for this and would also explain the 17th-century reference to 'a passage on the west side to a dungeon' (Raby and Reynolds 1959, 35).

If it is taken that the Prison Tower, as originally built, was a major entrance to the Castle (being a barbican covering the route to and from the Lower Court), it is possible to re-examine Framlingham Castle to gain a better understanding of the purpose of Roger Bigod's design.

The reason for constructing an elaborate entrance to the Castle from the west that gave direct access to the main area of status accommodation, as well as having a simpler entrance from the south, was because that was the route Roger Bigod wished visitors to take. A map of 1798 shows the outline of what was called the Great Park to the west and north (Ridgard 1995). A route following the Roman road from the Bigod manor at Earl Soham to Saxted Green and then east to Saxted Road and Pembroke Road would bring a visitor into the Great Park at the highest point to the immediate west of the castle, now occupied by Framlingham College (Fig. 19 point 'a'). Visitors would then need to turn north to descend to Little Lodge (point 'b'). They would then go around the northern end of the Mere and take a track south following the edge of the higher land on the eastern side of the Mere to gain entrance to the Lower Court via a bridge, of which only a stone embuttment at its southern end still survives⁴. Such a route to the castle would allow visitors to approach through the Great Park where they would first see the castle across a valley as if it were rising out of the Mere. The image would be enhanced by the inlets to the north and south of the Lower Court. This view would also emphasise the size of the castle as the north/south axis is longer than the east/west. This is the view that has been most popular with artists since the 18th century, and in postcards today. A second viewing point would have been at Little Lodge where visitors could have enjoyed an uninterrupted view of the castle across the widest possible expanse of the Mere. The next sighting of the castle was of the cluster of towers (Fig. 17 towers 8 to 10) dominating the Lower Court as the visitor approached from the north. Once the Lower Court was entered its length had to be crossed with the Castle looming up on the left before the climb up to enter the Castle between the double walls of a barbican. The whole approach emphasises views that were in keeping with the ways in which castles were portrayed at that time; this can be seen in Chretien de Troyes' description of an approach to a castle. A visitor rides along a river bank opposite a cliff with water lapping at its base. On the cliff is the castle; further on, when the visitor turns, the castle comes into view again. This time it appears dominated by its towers. The final approach is by a long bridge and then the castle is finally entered (Kibler 1991, 397). The contention, therefore, is that the purpose of the design of the western side of Framlingham Castle and the landscaping of its environment was to use the Mere as a means to direct visitors by a particular route that allowed the castle to be seen as Roger Bigod intended.

The internal layout of the western side of the Castle suggests that views over the Mere from the Castle were also of crucial importance in the castle's design. All the garderobes built into the Castle walls are on the western side. The majority are individual, suggesting high status private accommodation in that part of the Castle (McNeill 1992, 47). Two separate garderobes built into towers one and thirteen were accessible from the wall walk. The only known permanent stone access to the wall walk is also on the west side of the Castle and rose either from or just outside the Great Hall in tower eleven (Fig. 17). These features strongly imply that the ability to view from the wall walk the Mere and activities that were taking place on, or close to it, was considered important in the design of the Castle⁵. If the Prison Tower was in fact originally designed as high status accommodation (as argued above), its rooftop may also have been intended as a viewing platform.

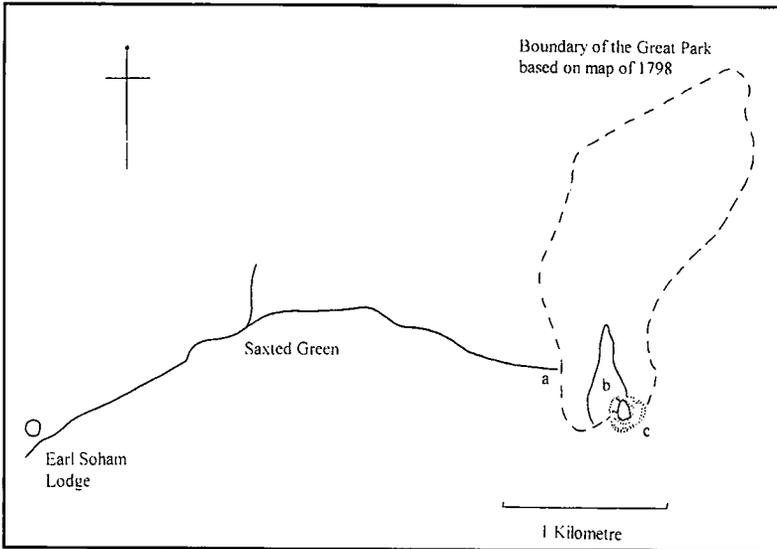


FIG. 18 – Map showing the route from Earl Soham to Framlingham Castle via Saxted Green.

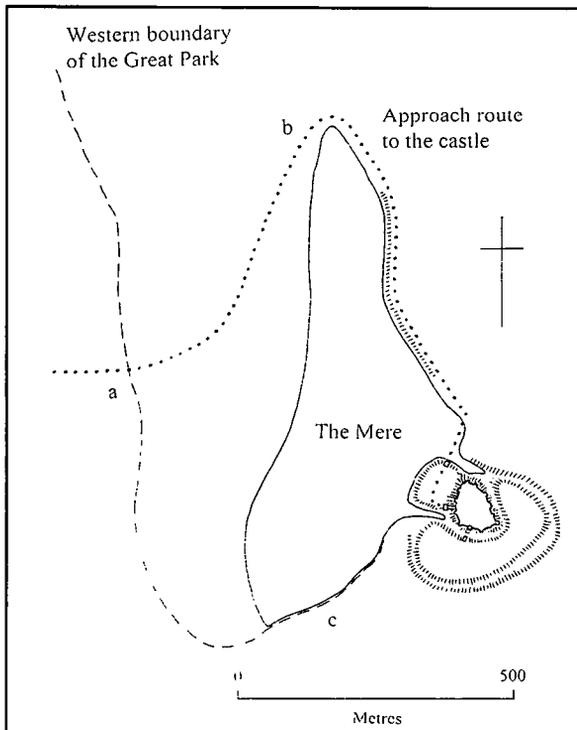


FIG. 19 – Map showing the suggested approach route to Framlingham Castle. (a) is the entrance from the end of the present day Pembroke Road, (b) is the site of Little Lodge and (c) is the position of the dam that also acted as the boundary of the Great Park. The boundary ran south from point (a) along the line of the modern day College Road and then Bridge Steet (c) before turning north towards the castle.

The desire to concentrate the attention of visitors and guests on the western side of the castle helps to explain what Roger Bigod wanted to achieve in building his new castle to the west of his father's hall and chapel rather than around them. It does not explain why he wanted to concentrate attention on the western side or why he wanted to build and landscape his new castle on such a scale and manner when the rest of the castle appears to have been adequate for his military, residential and administrative needs.

The main reason for wanting an imposing water feature may have been because it was the latest fashion and an approach using the Mere both as an imposing feature and as a means of directing visitors would show it, and his new castle, to their best advantage. The descriptions of castles and the approach to them as given by Chretien de Troyes was only expressing what the writer's audience expected of a castle held by a noble of high rank (Kibler 1991, 397 and 469). It is logical to assume that Roger, in building his new castle, would want it to be of the latest style with an extensive approach that included a major water feature as well as the latest military ideas of flanking towers and a segmented wall walk.

The above discussion may help explain why Framlingham Castle was built in the style it was. It does not take into account the political and social circumstances for its rebuilding. In 1189 Roger's restoration to royal favour meant the granting of the earldom his father had held and the confirmation of Roger's rightful possession of all his father's lands which had been denied to him since the death of his father in 1177 (Brown, 139–40). The reason these had been withheld from Roger was that his claim to inherit was disputed by his stepbrother Hugh. In 1189 Roger paid 1000 marks to Richard I to be confirmed in his title and possessions. Richard I was doubtless as glad to accept the sum to help finance his crusade, as he was to settle an inheritance dispute. Such an important change in Roger's circumstances with its confirmation of his right to be accepted as a member of the ruling aristocracy, with all that such a position implied, demanded a permanent statement to be made that only a member of such an elite could make. This would be especially true considering the monetary circumstances under which Roger gained the confirmation of his position after a twelve year legal dispute. The statement he made was to build Framlingham Castle in a style and scale that allowed no room for misunderstanding his political and economic status.

To undertake the construction of an ostensibly military structure to confirm a political position was not new. The keep at Hedingham Castle has been shown to have been conceived as a pair of grand reception rooms built to celebrate Aubrey de Vere's creation as Earl of Oxford by the Empress Matilda in 1142 (Dixon and Marshall 1993, 21–2). Such an elevation by Matilda in England during the reign of Stephen might well have required some form of practical confirmation. Even the machicolated keep at Chateau Gaillard, far from being a redoubt of last resort in Richard I's castle built to deny Normandy to Philip II, has been shown to be a two-storey hall of audience without a well (Coulson 2003, 148). Christopher Taylor has pointed out that a large proportion of created medieval landscapes, such as that at Framlingham, were undertaken by those whose status had recently or was about to rise (Taylor 2000, 47). With confirmation of his father's estates Roger would have had the resources to construct his new castle on a scale and to a design that would proclaim to any visitor following the directed approach route to Framlingham Castle from the west that Roger Bigod was a wealthy member of the ruling elite with his modern multi-towered stone castle sitting solidly above a lake.

In conclusion, though Framlingham Castle was built as a baronial residence fit to carry out the normal military, social and political functions that one would expect, the reason why Roger Bigod lavished so much attention on its western features, and in so doing created an asymmetrical castle, was the result of his particular personal circumstances at the time.

NOTES

- 1 The best account of the history of Framlingham Castle covering the period of this article is 'Framlingham Castle and Bigod 1154–1216' by R. Brown (see references). The site came into the possession of the Bigod family in 1100 or 1101. Hugh Bigod built a stone hall and chapel there in the middle of the 12th century as part of his castle. The defences of this castle were demolished on the orders of Henry II following Hugh's participation in the rebellion of 1173 though the hall and chapel were left standing. Hugh died in 1177 and his son began building the castle this article is concerned with in 1189 or soon after. It was sufficiently completed by 1213 to accommodate a visit by King John. The castle's military capabilities were only questioned once, during John's war with his barons in 1216. The castle surrendered after two days of negotiation.
- 2 The main parts of Framlingham castle will be referred to according to those terms used historically. See Figure 17.
- 3 Caponier is a term used to describe a structure projecting out from the main defences in artillery forts; it was used to provide flanking fire.
- 4 It is possible that the low cliff which the approach followed to the east of the Mere was deliberately arranged by landscaping. Besides making the approach more dramatic, the view of the castle from the area of Little Lodge would have been impaired without the removal of material and the extension of the Mere further to the east at this point.
- 5 The importance of the view of the Mere from the Castle and the Lower Court may be the reason why the stone wall around the Lower Court appears never to have been completed. The section standing on the north side of the Lower Court suggests that the original plan intended the stone wall to be continued along the western side in order to meet the Prison Tower. If it had been built, the view of the Mere would have been severely impeded.

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