



MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SHEFFIELD CASTLE

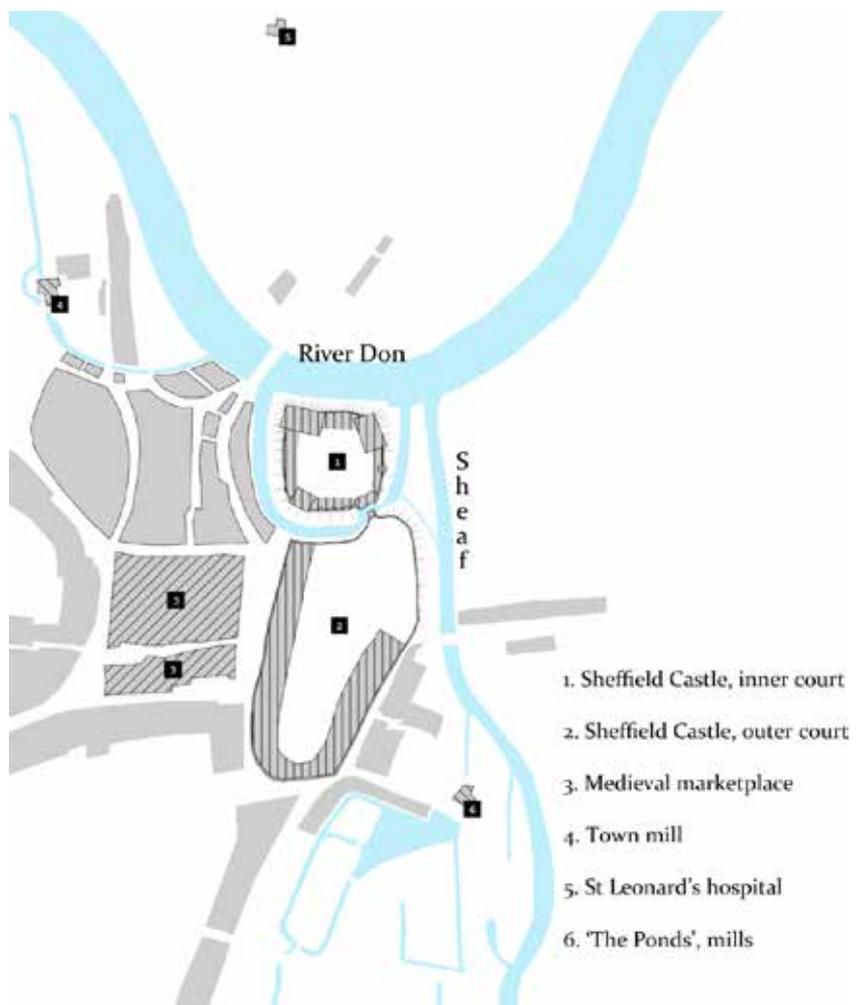
Professor John Moreland and Martin Gorman present the results of archaeological excavations and research at the remains of Sheffield castle in South Yorkshire, an important site in the study of Scottish history due to its status as a long-term prison of Mary Queen of Scots

Mary Queen of Scots spent a third of her life as a prisoner in Sheffield – much of it in the town’s castle. Once ‘among the largest in England’, this great fortress was demolished on the orders of parliament, in 1646, at the end of the English civil war). Subsequently ‘every trace of the building ... disappeared under the utilitarian demands of a manufacturing town’.

It is generally agreed that William de Lovetot built the ‘first Sheffield castle’ in the early 12th century, and many have assumed (on the basis of no evidence) that this was a motte-and-bailey castle. Towards the end of that century, the castle passed to the de

Gatehouse reconstruction produced, in collaboration with HumanVR, as part of the University of Sheffield’s CastlegateVR project

Plan showing the castle’s site in medieval Sheffield



Furnivals who, in the second barons' war, supported the king, Henry III (r. 1216-72). As a result in 1266 'Saffield' was burned by 'Johane D'eyvill cum equiis et armis'. In 1270, Thomas de Furnival received a licence to 'build a stone castle and fortify and crenellate it'. In the late 14th century the castle passed to the earls of Shrewsbury. George Talbot, the 6th earl (1528-90), is said to have been 'the nearest thing in that age to a modern tycoon' – and it was probably his great wealth, along with the comparative 'isolation' of his castle, which made Sheffield an appropriate 'home' for the captive queen of Scots between 1570 and 1584.

John Leader, writing in 1880, asks us to imagine Mary's arrival there in November 1570. After the royal party had passed over the drawbridge and entered 'the old grey walls of Sheffield Castle', he writes, the gates

were closed and, having assisted her to dismount 'in the inner court yard', Lord Shrewsbury escorted Mary 'across the hall and up the stairs' to her apartments. These, Leader feared, 'were not improbably cold, gloomy and comfortless'. Mary became ill within a week of arriving in Sheffield, and in her letters she regularly complained of ill-health. The castle's 'unklenly' conditions necessitated her removal to the nearby Manor Lodge while it was thoroughly 'cleansed and sweetened'.

A description of the castle in 1637, and lists of materials sold off in 1648 as part of the demolition process, provide some hints at the physical character of the place where, two generations earlier, Mary had lived out her captivity. This dispersal of material has led to the castle being seen as the original home of a range

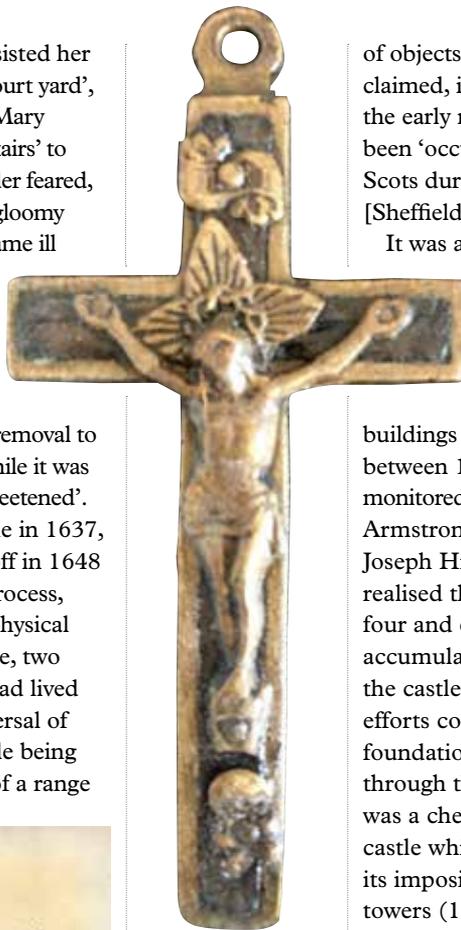
of objects, not least a bedstead claimed, in a series of letters from the early months of 1929, to have been 'occupied by Mary Queen of Scots during her imprisonment in [Sheffield] Castle' (see advert below).

It was also in the late 1920s that the physical remains of Mary's prison again saw the light of day. Construction of new shops and market buildings on the site of the castle between 1927 and 1929 were monitored by prehistorian Leslie Armstrong and by local cutler Joseph Himsworth. They soon realised that deep deposits (between four and eleven metres) had accumulated over the remains of the castle, and their archaeological efforts consisted of inspecting the foundations and other holes dug through these deposits. The result was a chequer-board glimpse of the castle which, nonetheless, confirmed its imposing scale. Circular bastion towers (14m in diameter) flanked the entrance on its south-eastern side, and the castle was encircled by a deep moat, passage over which, and through the gateway, was facilitated by a drawbridge.

This imposing structure was probably built by Thomas de Furnival in 1270, and the archaeological evidence suggests that it was further enhanced in the 14th century with the addition of a rectangular gatehouse between the two towers. This was the daunting entrance through which, in 1570, Mary entered what she would come to call her 'wretched prison'.

Armstrong records that the bottom 3m of the moat was 'composed of a black tenacious sludge, none to fragrant'. These water-logged deposits had preserved large quantities of leather (including many shoes) and wood. Other finds included animal bones, oyster shells, knives, coins, and glass – as well as cannon- and musket-balls. Most of this material dates to between the 14th and the 17th centuries – the moat clearly acted as a time-capsule for daily life in the castle.

From our perspective, however, three finds (or groups of finds) are especially interesting. The first is a brass and ebony crucifix (above) from a set of rosary beads, which



Brass and ebony crucifix, which may date to the 16th century, a find from the castle site

An advert for the sale of what is said to have been the bed 'Mary Queen of Scots slept in during her imprisonment' in Sheffield castle. The mistaken reference to 'Shrewsbury castle' probably derives from the names of the Lords of the Manor. *The Connoisseur*, October 1928

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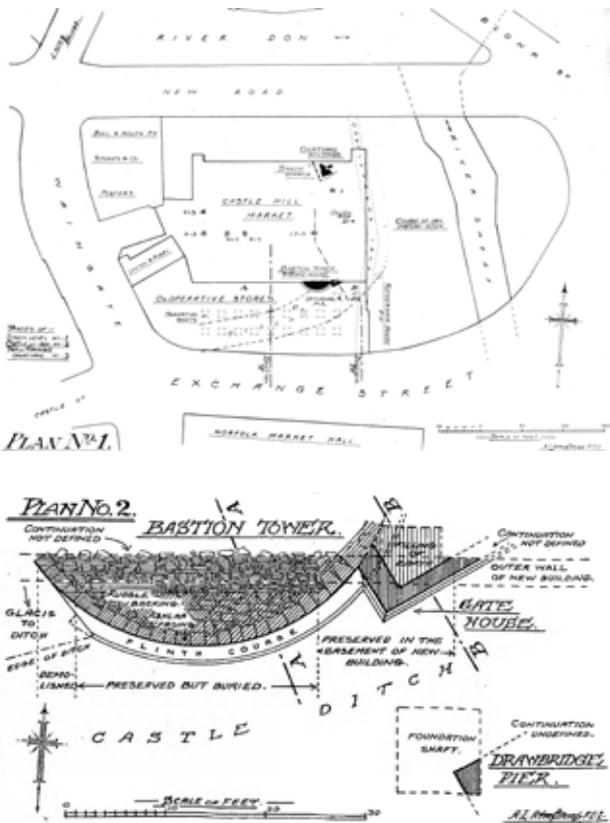
A STUART RELIC, dated 1572.
with Arms of the "Talbot and Shrewsbury" theron. Originally from Shrewsbury Castle. Mary Queen of Scots slept in this bed during her imprisonment at the castle.

Later the bed became the property of the late Lord Brougham, then Chancellor of England, and removed to Brougham Hall. There is a history of this wonderful oak bedstead in the British Museum, under the history of Penrith and Cumberland.

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Armstrong describes as ‘of French type’ and which could date from the late 16th century onwards (see <https://scot.sh/hsemuseum>). Then we have a series of brass counters inscribed with “Ave Maria Gracia Plena” ... in Tudor lettering’, with emblems of the apostles or a fleur-de-lys on the reverse. While we cannot link these objects directly with Mary, they can be taken to stand for her ‘catholic’ presence in a city, and country, which was becoming increasingly ‘protestantised’ – we are told that Mary hated Shrewsbury as ‘an earneste Protestante’.

And finally there is ‘the key’. In late 1927, in a newspaper article headed ‘Discovery of Interesting Link with Queen Mary’s Days’, Armstrong told of the discovery, in the sludge of the moat, of ‘two Papal medals of the Tudor period’, and of an ‘elegant’, ‘neatly ornamented’ key, about 15cm long, which originally would have had ‘the appearance of silver’. ‘There can be little doubt’, he suggested, that it was ‘the key of one of the state apartments, possibly that of Queen Mary herself’.

In his published account of the excavations, Armstrong again highlighted the importance of this key, telling how its discovery engaged

the attention of workmen who, up to that point, had not been ‘sufficiently keen to look out for objects of interest’. It is, in fact, highly unlikely that the key had any connection with Mary – as Armstrong revealed in his excavation report, it probably dates to the 14th century. However, like others, then and since, Armstrong was keen to create associations with the ‘Scottish Queen’ – Mary was Sheffield castle’s most famous ‘resident’, and for many Sheffield antiquarians she was, and remains, a romantic, tragic, maligned figure.

Further archaeological work took place on the site of the castle in the late 1950s and in the late 1990s – the former, overseen by Leslie Butcher, took place in the context of post-war reconstruction; the latter, by the University of Sheffield, as a prelude to redevelopment. The most recent excavations (August to October 2018), carried out by Wessex Archaeology North on behalf of Sheffield City council, and in partnership with the University of Sheffield and the Friends of Sheffield Castle, discovered further traces of the medieval castle. In fact, what look like the remains of a motte could be the first evidence of the original Sheffield castle – although this will only be confirmed when the scientific dating has been completed.

If this is William de Lovetot’s castle, it would already have been half a millennium old when Mary passed through the gateway of Shrewsbury’s fortress. Pieces of window tracery and other building materials, and courtyard surfaces (on which Mary might well have walked), were also uncovered. Sections of the moat were located on both the eastern and (for the first time) western sides of the castle. In each case, and just as Armstrong and Himsworth had warned, the castle remains were

deeply buried under later deposits – in the case of the eastern moat so deep, in fact, that despite the use of 6m of shoring the archaeologists were only just able to excavate into the moat itself.

The excavations have now been completed, and the results are being processed for publication this year. In the meantime, discussions about the future of the site, and especially about how to use its heritage to stimulate/influence urban regeneration, have begun. The depth of the deposits presents a challenge to the physical display of the castle remains. But these accumulated deposits are also testament to the occupation of the site, to the human lives played out there, from at least the 12th century onwards. As such they constitute a long-term record of Sheffield’s past, a past in which Mary played a significant, but momentary, part – though it undoubtedly seemed interminable to her!

Professor John Moreland (University of Sheffield, and Friends of Sheffield Castle). Martin Gorman (Friends of Sheffield Castle).

For a full list of references for this article, visit our website: <https://scot.sh/mqsref>

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Plan of the 1927-29 excavations on the site of Sheffield castle (Armstrong 1930, plan 1)

Plan of the bastion tower and gatehouse as uncovered by Leslie Armstrong and Joseph Himsworth (Armstrong 1930, plan 2)

Leather shoe recovered from the moat of Sheffield Castle by Armstrong and Himsworth, and conserved by Museums Sheffield. Photo – John Moreland

