

Hereford Flood Defences

The new Hereford Flood defences cross the line of Hereford's old defences that once surrounded St Martin's suburb. The Environment Agency are supporting this scheme of archaeological work to ensure that any evidence that might be buried here is not lost for future generations. The work is described in detail below with updates added regularly. Excavations on Row Ditch

Why was it built? There are two main reasons why city defences are built. One might have been as part of a military strategy given the Welsh assaults on places such as Painscastle in 1195. However, there was also the issue of the "rates" that could be charged for properties and business within the "walls" of the city. This in itself was a strong incentive for the erection of defences.

Why is it called 'Row Ditch'? In actual fact it shouldn't be! For its first 700 years it was called King's Ditch or in some cases Wall Ditch. There is a record referring to it as Kings Ditch as early as 1422. Row Ditch is the name of a bank and ditch erected on the north side of the Wye in Bartonsham Meadow forming a complete enclosure with the meander of the river. This Row Ditch dated to the civil war and the enclosure it made formed the stronghold of the Parliamentary forces for 6 weeks during the siege of Hereford in 1645.

How old is it? This is not easy to answer. We know that the City of Hereford was enclosed by defences at various times in the past. The earliest being when the Saxon defences were built in the 9th century AD. However, we think the bank you can see here was built around the same time as the Medieval defences in 1189. Excavations at Drybridge house in 1975 identified a clay bank sealing a gully containing 10th century pottery and some stone foundations dated to the late 11th and early 12th century AD. This archaeological evidence seems to support a late 12th century date for the construction of the feature. We hope to uncover further evidence to support this theory. However, that is not the end of the story. The bank you can now see was used in the civil war in 1645 to besiege Hereford. Behind it, on the swimming pool side, the Parliamentary forces were amassed. The Royalists withdrew to the north side of the river Wye and blew up the central arch of the Wye Bridge. So could the bank that stands in the field now actually be one that was reconstructed in the middle of the 17th century? Artist's reconstruction of the siege of Hereford in 1645. The red spot marks our excavation trench. The early stages of excavation

As work progresses some interesting clues as to how the monument was built and used are beginning to come to light. Initially work took place at the north end of the trench. This is on the city side and would have contained the bank. The ditch lay to the south of this. Looking at the photograph it is clear how little of the bank now survives. In fact the line of the modern path that presently runs next to the playground would also probably have been within the area occupied by the bank. So the historic landscape probably contained a much larger and more imposing feature than the one we see today. To the north of the remains of the bank is a relatively shallow ditch filled with gravel. The gravel is likely to have once formed the upper portion of the bank and has since slipped down to fill this ditch. The ditch was probably a later feature and one explanation for it is that it might have been part of the later use of the defences when the Scots army besieged Hereford in 1645. It is interesting that so little of the bank is visible now. Also that it is not clearly marked on Speede's map that predates the Civil War. This implies that the feature may have fallen out of use early in the Medieval period.

Update - August 2007 Excavations were slowed up by the onset of the flooding mid-summer. At this point instead of an excavation we suddenly had a 50m swimming pool. However, once the last available pump this side of the river Severn had been tracked down the excavation team with the aid of Morrison Construction were finally able to see the bottom of the historic defensive ditch that runs across King George's Playing Field. It was a lot bigger than we had anticipated. The ditch measured over 15m in width and its base was finally uncovered over 4m beneath the current ground level. This is as substantial as the other turf and gravel ramparts on the north side of the river Wye. Unfortunately because of the rain it was never going to be possible to completely empty the trench of water (the River just kept filling it). However, some samples were collected from the deposits at its base. A large proportion of the upper deposits proved to be very recent in origin. These included tree root disturbance, tipping to fill the hollow left by the ditch, and modern service runs. Unfortunately nothing was recovered from the base of the feature to help us date it so we can only hope that there is some organic material in the lower silts to enable us to get a C14 date. The upper layer of those shaded in blue contained pottery of 13th-14th century date. If this proves to be the latest silting of the ditch then it may well have been abandoned before the walled defences were constructed around the city on the north side of the river.

Update - November 2007 During watching briefs on the site, a massive dump of iron slag was found near the river, just south of Old Ford House. This fits in with our knowledge of the suburb on the south side of the river where there appears to have been a massive industrial complex during the medieval period. The Slag here was very near the surface and contained pottery of 13th century date (the 13th century being the peak in population during the medieval period). Other finds from the work include this bottom half of a jug handle. The jug has a greenish flecked glaze and dates from between the 13th - 15th centuries. Archaeological monitoring is now finished on the scheme and a written report is being prepared.