
Soulton, Parish of Wem, Shropshire

Place Name

The place name, now Soulton, is Suletune in 1086. There are a number of places across England from Bedfordshire to Cumbria with the first element of the name being Soul, e.g. Souldrop (Beds) and Soulby (Cumbria). All in their earliest forms were spelled Sule, a name indicating a gully.

The name, meaning place by a gully, is appropriate here given the landscape alongside Soulton Brook.

Moated Site

The mound and associated moated site, Shropshire HER Ref 01015, was identified as a medieval ringwork in 1965 from aerial photographs, by one of the compilers of the Ordnance Survey. It has subsequently been identified as the site of an older manor house, 13th century.

The main HER entry reads:

Well preserved small rectangular moat sited on gently E sloping ground on the W bank of Soulton Brook. There is no E side to the moat...the flooded brook may well have formed this E arm. The S arm has been partly destroyed by the modern road (built on its outer scarp). The N and W arms are intact and average 1.7m deep and up to 10m wide. At the S end of the W arm is the remains of a causewayed entrance c 3m wide... The very small island measures c35m x 30m and is raised 1m above the surrounding ground level, it also has a stepped profile. At its NW and its SW end corners are what appear to be small rectangular raised building platforms between which runs a linear holloway in alignment with the causeway. This may represent the original entrance flanked by? gate-towers. Abutting onto the N arm

outer edge is a rectangular area enclosed by its scarp on its N and E sides and a shallow ditch on the W which runs into the moats N arm. Just to the west of this running from the NW corner of the moat is a wide shallow linear depression which is wet and marshy and which may be a possible feeder leat. A similar but much shorter ditch runs into the W arm. The scarp defined rectangular area is probably an external enclosure. (M Watson FI 1981 SSA3679 - Field recording form: Watson Michael D. 1981-Feb-05. Site Visit Form, 05/02/1981).

Evaluated for MPP in 1990-1, High score as one of 133 Moated sites (Horton Wendy B. 1990/ 1991. MPP Evaluation File.)

Scheduled with the formal gardens across the road in 2000. Relevant parts of Scheduling description:

The monument includes the earthwork and buried remains of a medieval moated site and a post-medieval formal garden within two separate areas of protection.

The moated site is considered to be the centre of the manor of Soulton. In the Domesday survey the manor was recorded as belonging to St Michael's Chapel in Shrewsbury Castle. Records dating to the second half of the 13th century indicate that by that time the manor was being leased to Robert Corbet. In the 16th century it had been bought by Sir Rowland Hill, which probably led to the building of a new residence, known as Soulton Hall, 200m to the south west of the moated site. This house was sizably enlarged in the third quarter of the 17th century and is partly surrounded by a walled

garden. The hall and the 17th century garden walls are Listed Grade II* and are not included in the scheduling.

The moated site is situated on the western edge of the flood plain of Soulton Brook, at the base of a gentle east facing slope. An oval shaped moat, well preserved to the north and west (averaging 18m wide), but less evident around the rest of its circuit, surrounds a rectangular island. The island is an unusual construction, displaying a well defined stepped profile on all sides, which is believed to be the result of its later use as part of the post-medieval formal garden. The lower step averages 1.2m in height and the upper step is about 0.8m high. The upper portion raises the height of the moated island above the level of the surrounding ground to the west. The top of the island measures approximately 18m east-west by 22m north-south. On the top there are a series of slight scarps, which relate to the building or buildings that once occupied the site. Crossing the western moat arm are the slight remains of a causeway.

A number of features are excluded from the scheduling, these are: all modern field boundaries, fences and gates, the water trough and fodder container, the pump house and a disused section of water pipe, (above ground and encased in brick and concrete); the ground beneath all these features is, however, included in the scheduling (- Scheduled Monument notification: English Heritage. 2000. Scheduling Papers (New Scheduling, 07/07/2000). 32307.)

The mound and its surrounding ditch is quite possible an anarchy motte, that is a smallish fortification raised to protect the ford through the stream. There is little or no evidence to suggest a manor house was raised upon the mound, although it does have a raised rectangular top. A medieval manor house was self-sufficient as a farm and needed attendant buildings, the hall of such a manor house would have exceeded the size of the top of the mound. It is therefore suggested that if constructed in the 1100s the mound

and any wooden structures were left in situ while the manor and its attendant building developed around the present house & farm.

We did query the purpose of the raised rectangular top of the mound, and one theory considered was whether the mound was re-used in the civil war of the 17th century to protect the crossing of the stream, a gun platform. On a related theme consideration was given to the mound having been put up in the 17th cent civil war mound with a gun platform on the top set at an angle with a point acting as a bastion towards the river crossing. We contacted an old friend, Dr Glenn Foard a Civil War Battlefield expert, who now lives in Shropshire, and he looked at the site, his response was:

Had a look at the Soulton mound. Looks to me like a garden feature rather than Civil War gun emplacement. They did create 'mounts' on which to place artillery but this was normally within the defences of a fortified garrison. Maybe in a long siege involving complete encircling with siegeworks then the attackers might have constructed mounts but I can't think off hand of an example. While some mounts will have been round – the classic example is the reworking of the Towcester motte by Prince Rupert in 43 – most artillery platforms would however have followed the angular forms typical of renaissance and later defences. So, given the position of this mound, so far from Wem, a place which I don't think was subject to a large scale siege of the form requiring mounts, and unless there was a fortified outpost of unusual form at Soulton, then I doubt this is Civil War. But I would not want to say 100%. If there were Civil War works of such magnitude at Soulton I would have expected Johnathan Worton, who recently completed his PhD on the Civil War in Shropshire, would have identified the site. I will copy him into this email so he can reply if he does know of documentary evidence for fortification there. Sometimes garrisons did have outposts but I would be surprised by somewhere as small as Wem having a major outpost, unlike the pattern one sees

at places like Oxford or Newark, but I could be wrong.

Johnathan Worton subsequently replied:

As much as I would like to add to the list of Shropshire's ECW monuments, I think I have to endorse Glenn's comments here on the nature of the mound at Soulton. I have not visited the site (although my appetite is now whetted to do so) and so can only go by the HER report and Glenn's own site visit.

Given the location of Soulton, and the substantial nature of the hall, as it seems at the time of the First Civil War, the place could have been a likely site for a satellite garrison to Parliamentary Wem (or indeed, a Royalist advance post threatening Wem from the east).

However, in my research for the PhD (and resultant book) I came across no references at all to Soulton having been garrisoned by either side. Had it been so, and especially if substantial earthwork defences of the sort resembling this putative mound had been built, then I would have thought such a fortified place would have appeared in the documentary record. Having said that, although I managed to push up the number of recorded garrisoned places in Shropshire to the higher thirties, I have no doubt that other sites were occupied that so far have escaped notice. Furthermore, I think we can also reject the thesis of the Soulton mound as a siege work, part of a putative Royalist circumvallation of Wem, because, as Glenn mentions, Wem was never besieged, being subject only to an occasional short-lived Royalist blockade.

The only method of confirming whether the mound and ditch is 12th century or of some later period, would be through excavation.

Regarding the irregular field in which the mound sits. The ditches there are more reminiscent of drainage ditches though

their use as some form of garden plan cannot be excluded. That said, gardens of the Tudor through to the end of the 17th century were usually formal, this includes the water features, e.g. the moat etc. at Lydden New Beild in Northamptonshire. There does not seem to be any indication of such a formal plan here. On the other side of the hall there are traces of what appears to have been a more formal garden layout. How or if the two relate is unclear.

River Crossing

The river crossing was probably a ford until the late 17th or early 18th centuries. Such fords usual had some form of surface to ease the passage of traffic across the stream. The paved area described as having been noted in the field next to the road and stream, could be such a surface put down before the bridge and causeway were built, to ease the passage of traffic getting into the ford.

Leat near the Woods

The notion that a second water course lay immediately east of the present stream, forming a mill leat to the mills is highly unlikely. There was no second water course in the 1880s. The 1880s OS suggests that is that the mill leat was directly fed from the main river into which the Soulton Brook flows further down stream.

Settlement

We observed no obvious signs of a deserted medieval village on either side of the road.

There are two sunken areas in the field north of the road. The nearest, which we thought from the aerial photographs might have been a road, appears have been a former water course. In the field to the west its line is marked by a hedge, suggesting a post enclosure field ditch. The more northerly feature is still very wet despite drainage efforts and can be traced going west to Lacon Farm where a substantial moat existed until the mid 1900s. It may be a run off stream from Lacon to the Soulton Brook, and if so would have fed the ponds near to the mound.

Open fields

Other than a possible furlong boundary running close to the hedge between the hall and the stream (noted from the sheep dip

bridge), and the ridge and furrow remains in the wood, no other sign of medieval field systems were observed.

Soulton Hall and gardens

The exterior of the hall and the internal stud partitions are consistent with a house built in the second half of the 16th century (mullioned windows, red brick with black brick diapers etc.), however the panelling surviving in one of the bedrooms, and the upper staircase are most likely the result of remodelling by Thomas Hill in 1668. With the exception of the ceiling beams in the basement (kitchen) room all of the axial (ceiling) beams have a plain chamfer and plain stop ends. Those in what must have been the kitchen have ovolo mouldings along their length. The style suggests late 16th century.

The Gardens/homestead appear to have been quite substantial. As well as the enclosed (listed) garden, the lidar suggests that the closes east of the house (to the hedge) were part of the homestead, and there were closes continuing south. The present farm yard was constructed in the late 18th century.

The listed buildings entry for the Hall states:

Manor house, now farmhouse. Dated 1668 for Thomas Hill, probably incorporating parts of an earlier building; minor later alterations and additions. Red brick (English Garden Wall bond) with blue brick diamond patterns to left and right on first floor and centre to parapet; stone angle quoins and chamfered plinth. Flat asphalt roof (formerly lead) concealed by coped parapet. Square plan with rectangular corner turrets. 3 storeys on chamfered plinth incorporating semi-basement to sides and rear but concealed by C18 balustrade to front; moulded stone string courses with C18 square urn finials to corners of parapet. 5-light stone mullioned and transomed windows on each floor to either side of central entrance. This has fluted Roman Doric columns with oval-shaped decoration to echinus and guttae to moulded architrave; frieze with rounded triglyphs and rosettes to metopes and moulded cornice supporting elaborately shaped pediment with armorial shield depicting 8 quarterings of the Hill family.

C19 panelled door with festooned garlands and date "1668" in raised lettering to stone lintel. Lead downpipes cutting through

string courses and plinth to left and right are probably original or C18. 1:2:1 windows to left and right returns, mullioned and transomed of 3 lights to centre and 2-light mullions to corner turrets; three 2-light mullion windows to semi-basement on left side. Stacks to corner turrets rebuilt in C19 red brick each have 3 attached and rebated shafts with moulded stone capping and bases probably reused from original stacks. Flat rear elevation has 2 pairs of 5-light mullioned and transomed windows grouped to centre on each floor. Plain probably mid-C18 balustrade to front with buttresses and coping approached by straight flight of 9 steps; this has shaped piers to top and bottom with carved garlands and elaborate floral decoration to inside face of moulded ramps. C20 statues of owls to top are not included. Panel with floral decoration at right end of balustrade possibly not in situ. Rectangular area to front of balustrade enclosed by red brick walls (mixed bond) on chamfered stone plinth with triangular coping attached to balustrade. Square gate piers to front have moulded stone plinths and capping surmounted by ball finials; brick projections to opposing faces with carved scroll-like stone brackets to top. Garden wall attached to left corner of enclosure wall probably also C17. Red brick without plinth and with plain stone coping; C20 stone buttresses to front. Encloses an area of approximately 30 x 50m

Interior: considerably altered C19 and C20 but retains several features of special interest. Right ground-floor room has 2 deep-chamfered spine beams with straight-cut stops and an original square-headed stone fireplace with moulded mantel-shelf. Most of the other rooms have inserted C18 and C19 cast-iron Coalbrookdale fireplaces and several of the rooms have chamfered ceiling beams and C17 or C18 panelled doors. Present main staircase is C19 but back staircase with moulded handrail and pointed finials surviving from first floor to second floor (removed below) to middle of left return is probably original. Room to left-hand rear turret has C17 rectangular oak panelling. Parts of earlier (?C16) timber framed house apparently incorporated to rear left corner; exposed square panels and close studding with incised decoration in rendered infill to presumably originally

exterior wall on first floor. A medieval precursor of this house may possibly have stood on the moated house platform approximately 250m to north-east (N.G.R. SJ 546 303). The owner (March 1986) suggests that the date 1668 on the main entrance may commemorate a marriage rather than the building of the house. B.O.E. p.290.

features is, however, included in the scheduling (SSA21275 - Scheduled Monument notification: English Heritage. 2000. Scheduling Papers (New Scheduling, 07/07/2000).

The HER entry (Ref: 08247) for the Gardens is:

In the second area of protection opposite the moat, and to the east of the 17th century walled garden of Soulton Hall, lie the earthwork remains of a formal garden consisting of a series of well-defined terraces and raised areas, including a rectangular building platform measuring 16m by 11m. These earthworks follow the same alignment as Soulton Hall and the walled garden and are believed to be of the same date. It is apparent that the gardens were laid out in relation to the moated site and to provide an impressive formal setting for ... Soulton Hall, 200m to the south west of the moated site. This house was sizably enlarged in the third quarter of the 17th century and is partly surrounded by a walled garden. The hall and the 17th century garden walls are Listed Grade II* and are not included in the scheduling.

The spring in the north eastern part of the garden is contained and surrounded by walls of red sandstone blocks and covered by a red sandstone slab. The complex of garden earthworks opposite the walled garden continues to the north of the modern road, incorporating and utilising the existing moated site. A series of shallow channels connect with and radiate out from the northern half of the moat, some of which also connect with the ditches which now define the western and northern boundaries of the field. An associated linear depression to the north of the moat appears to be the remains of a pond. There are slight traces of terraces on the sloping ground to the west of the moated site.

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