

# Swavesey Castle and Town Defences

## Where is it?

To your left, beyond the Nonconformist cemetery, the castle mound is among the trees, with the castle enclosure in the field alongside. Behind you, are the ditch and embankment that formed the town defences.

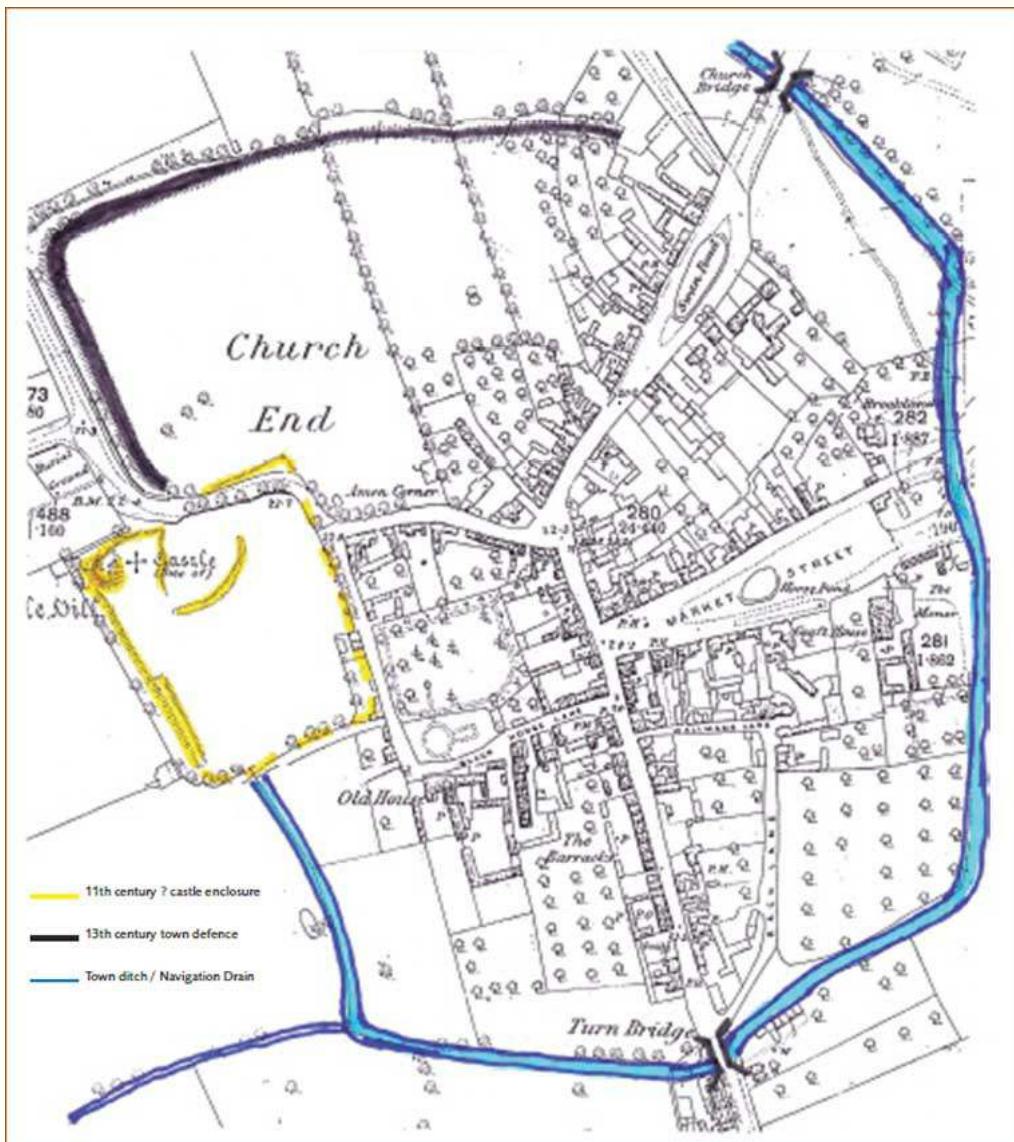
## What was it for?

After 1066, lands including Swavesey held by Edeva the Fair were distributed by William the Conqueror to followers who had helped his takeover of England. Swavesey passed to his son-in-law, Count Alan of Brittany.

The newcomers built castles for protection as they took possession of their newlands. Castles, a Norman innovation, were a stark reminder for the English that their new Norman lords meant to hold onto their new possessions. They also sheltered the villagers and cattle in times of trouble.

Castles were powerbases, sited together to control territory, and were generally the preserve of the king and aristocracy. Royal castles at Cambridge and Huntingdon controlled the route to the north, and, with Wisbech, the Fens. The years between 1066 and 1300 were full of disturbance, raiding,

cattle theft, torture and land grabs. The Fens occasionally provided bases for rebels between 1066 and 1300, including Hereward the Wake – English Patriot or sword swinging hooligan? – around 1070. During the Anarchy years (1136 to 1154), King Stephen ordered castles, known as Anarchy castles, to be built against raids on villages and towns, including Cambridge, and on monasteries at Ramsey and Ely. In the late 1100s, Henry II's rebel sons used Huntingdon Castle, and disaffected barons, led by Simon de Montfort, were based in the Fens in the late 1200s.



Swavesey's mediaeval defences are still shown on this 19th century map.

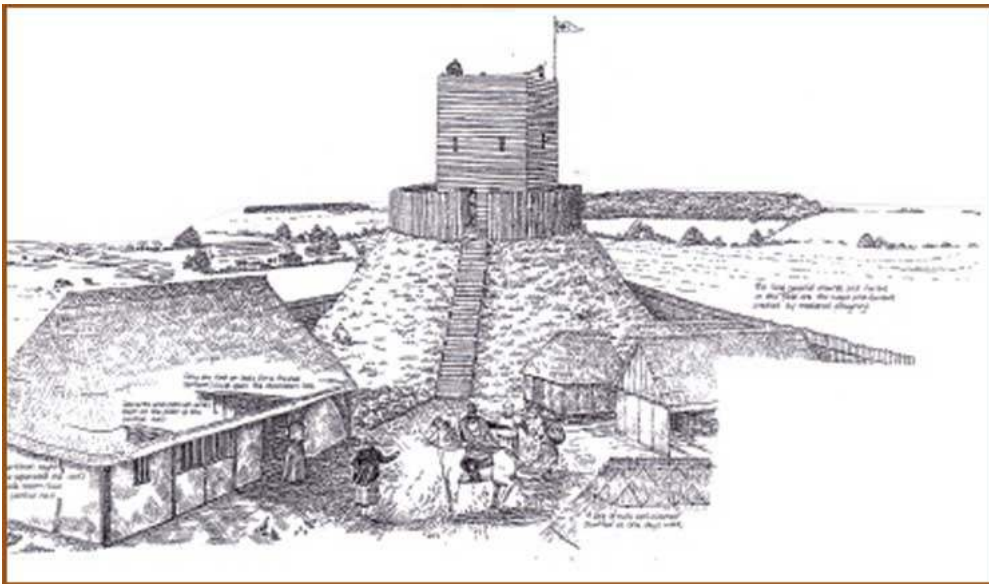
*This Project was undertaken by Swavesey Festival Committee, Swavesey Village College History Club, Swavesey and District History Society and Oxford Archaeology East. Young people from SVC History Club asked the questions, investigated Swavesey's mediaeval past and helped formulate the information on this board. Swavesey Parish Council supported the project which was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Cambridge Antiquarian Society.*



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How motte and bailey castles may have looked. This illustration of Washingley Castle in Cambridgeshire is reproduced from the original by Sarah Wroot.

**How long did it take to build?**

Swavesey castle mound would have been higher than it is now, built probably with forced labour. It is estimated would take 25 people between three and four weeks. In addition the earthworks round the bailey and palisades had to be built. One such castle was supposed to have been built in six days!

**How much did it cost?**

Not very much ,as the villagers would not be paid for their work! Stone castles were every much more expensive, perhaps taking 200 Men eighteen months. For royal castles the king could have ditch diggers, mortar makers, masons and carpenters sent from all over the country – military projects are always urgent!

**Was Swavesey attacked?**

Yes – in 1266 all the corn was burnt and church chest attacked.

**When was it built?**

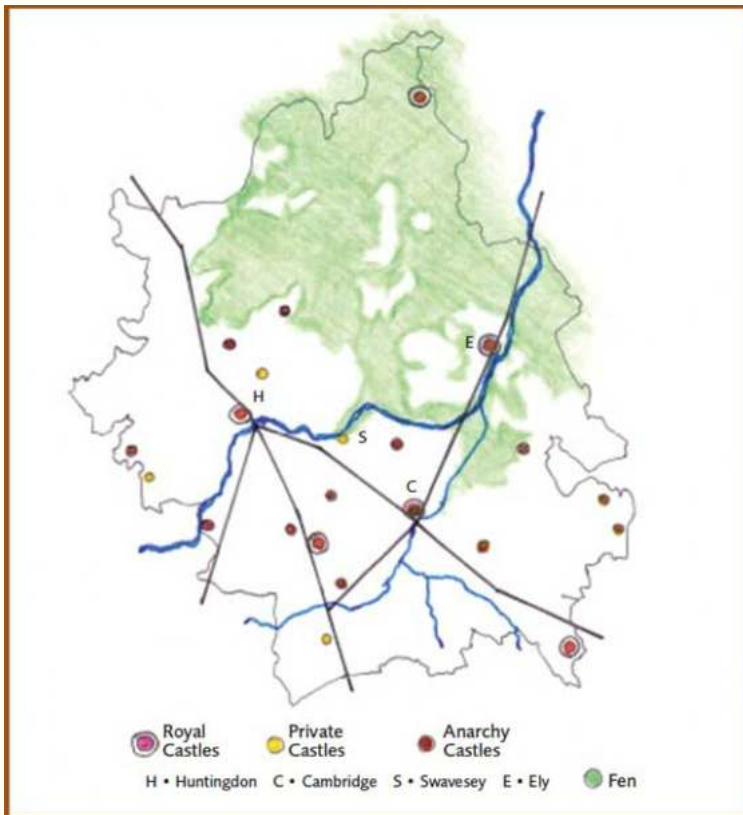
Many ‘ motte and bailey castles ’ were built soon after the Conquest. Swavesey looks like such a castle, but it may also be an Anarchy castle. The town defences are later, and built on the instructions of someone powerful with investments to protect. The most likely candidate is the la Zouch family after 1250. The town ditch around the south and east sides of

Swavesey was widened at that time, and continued in use until after 1450.

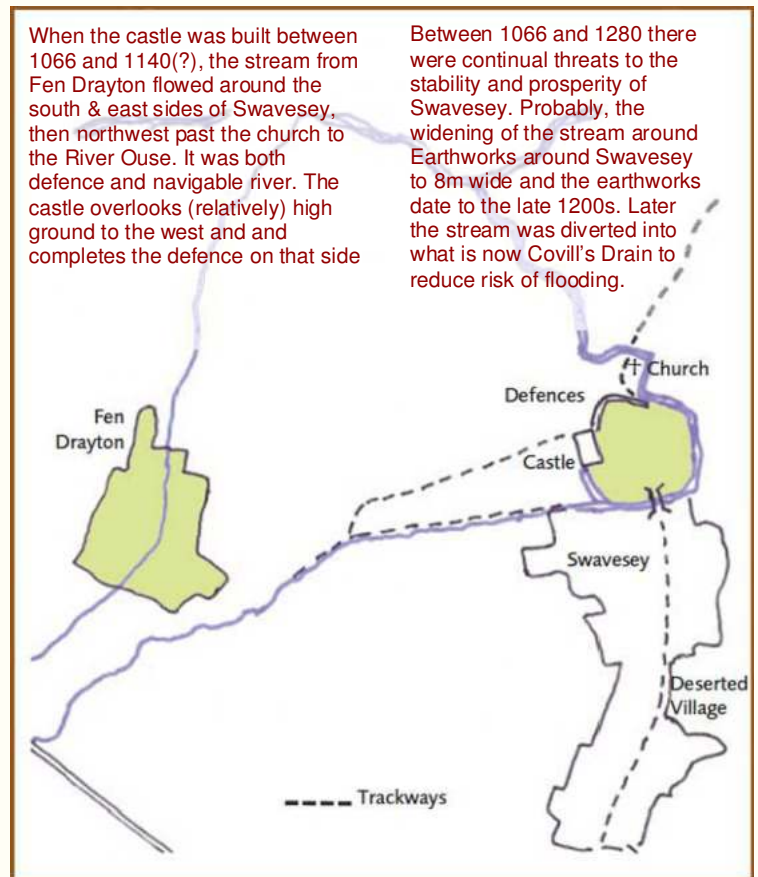
**Why was the castle built here?**

The castle is on ‘high’ ground commanding the approach from the Fens and the river. The other sides of Swavesey were protected by the town ditch up to 8m wide and 1.5m deep.

**Castles in Cambridgeshire**



**The Town Defences**



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