A greedy bishop, three sets of leg-shackles, and the beginning of the end of Norman England

ALEX LANGLANDS

Alex Langlands reveals how burials found at Old Sarum can shed light on 'the arrests of the bishops' as an historical event.

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Above: The ruins of Bishop Roger's castle-palace at Old Sarum in 1935, stabilised after archaeological excavation in 1909-1911

Opposite: Old Sarum, from the south, showing the cathedral church, cloister and ecclesiastical compound in the northwest quarter. Immediately overlooking it can be seen the motte of the central castle. Antagonisms between church and state were a major factor in the abandonment of the hill by the clergy in c.1200

On June 24, 1139, the unthinkable happened. In what the great historian William Stubbs described as the most important constitutional event in England since the Norman Conquest, men loyal to King Stephen laid hands on not just one bishop, but three.

The act was to prove the spark that ignited the so-called 'Anarchy', one of the most turbulent, violent, and destructive episodes in English History.

Known as 'The Arrest of the Bishops', Stephen's rash and ill-thought-out action sent shockwaves through the aristocracy and church of Anglo-Norman England.

Its infamy is recalled in the numerous sensationalist commentaries on it provided by contemporary chroniclers keen to entertain their readership with a tale of controversy, brutality, and an allegorical fall from grace from unprecedented heights.

The challenge for historians has always been teasing out fact from fiction in the works of authors who frequently bent their narrative to use biblical and classical parallels in a bid to show off their learning.

While much can be verified about the facts of the arrest itself and its immediate aftermath, it has been difficult to ascertain how it was resolved and why it was so influential on following events.

Now, however, archaeological evidence can provide new perspectives on the true extent of Stephen's brutal methods, suggesting, in turn, that the Arrests of the Bishops would have had a far more profound impact than was previously thought.

It was an act that brought to a sudden termination the administrative structures upon which Norman power in England was based, and signalled the end of Old Sarum's importance as a centre of Norman power in southern England.

Bishop Roger of Salisbury, 'Viceroy' of England

At the story's heart lies the career of Bishop Roger of Salisbury, at one point the second-most powerful man in the kingdom after the king himself.

From humble beginnings in the suburbs of Caen, the Norman cleric struck up a close friendship with the young King Henry I, rising to the position of Chancellor in his court, and with full control of the kingdom's finances.

In England, he was gifted the bishopric of Old Sarum for his loyalty and from there set about spreading his octopus-like administrative tentacles throughout the realm. Roger did very well out of his power and influence, gaining key jobs for close family members at court and procuring the bishoprics of Lincoln and Ely for his nephews, Alexander and Nigel.

At Old Sarum, Bishop Roger invested in a major extension to the cathedral and across all of his lands he constructed grand, state of the art, fortified palaces (Insert Figure 2).

Upon Henry's death, Roger swore an early vow of fealty to King Stephen and was rewarded with the job of Chancellor being allocated to his son, Roger Le Poer. But the relationship seemed to cool, perhaps as Stephen's inadequacies as a statesman became more evident and the claim of Empress Matilda for the throne grew more support.

Roger also had enemies – what one chronicler described as a baronial elite 'stung with envy'. Many thought that much of his wealth was derived from his office and was money that should have been in the public coffers.

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Above: By 1910 excavations in the castle were at full swing. This picture is taken looking east, through the main gate of the castle. The Roman road to Winchester can be seen in the distance

Left: Colonel William Hawley, ex-Royal Engineer. Hawley was brought in to manage the site on a day-to-day basis. He kept a daily record of all activities and his fieldwork notebook is one of the best – and only – records we have of the excavations

The Arrest of the Bishops

By 1139, things had reached a head. The air was rank with suspicion and at a royal council held at Oxford in June, Stephen's men decided to strike.

On the pretence of a brawl instigated by men loyal to the king, a breach of the peace was considered reason enough to bring Bishop Roger and his allies to an ad hoc court.

The violence of the arrest is remarked upon by contemporary chroniclers, with the quarters of the bishops being ransacked and one of Bishop Roger's most loyal knights beheaded during the ensuing melee.

It may have been that, at this time King Stephen and his supporters' grievances could have been allayed by Roger, as it appears an offer of compensatory funds were made.

However, Nigel of Ely had managed to evade capture and, in fleeing to Devizes Castle and preparing it for a siege, the die had been cast.

With the bishop's men thrown in chains, Stephen marched on Devizes, imprisoning Roger and Alexander, in an ox-house and a 'mean hut' respectively, before setting about securing the castle in brutal fashion.

Knowing that the castellan, Maud of Ramsbury, was none other than Bishop Roger's concubine – the mother of his favoured son, Roger Le Poer – Stephen struck a simple bargain. It was that either the castle was handed over with no bloodshed or Roger Le Poer, who was then paraded in front of the gates, would be hanged to death.

It didn't take long for the castle to be relinquished and Stephen goes on, we are told, to acquire Roger's other castles in a similar manner.

By August, time enough had passed for news of Stephen's actions to reach the Papacy and for Stephen to be summoned to a Lateran council called by the Pope's legate in England, none other than the King's own brother, Henry, Bishop of Winchester.

It is clear that the bishops remained under some form of custodial captivity at this point and that the capture of the Bishop's castles was seen as just, as one chronicler put it, by returning to Caesar what belonged to Caesar.

How much Henry could press a charge against Stephen for laying hands on the bishops was clearly undermined by the case Stephen and his advocates must have made concerning the manner in which Roger's wealth had been accrued. The result appears to have been a stalemate, Stephen needs not to expiate himself of his sins and the bishops were allowed to return, we are told by Stephen's biographer, to 'hold their church in simple fashion'.

Or were they? In obituarial passages, the chroniclers record how, when Roger died on 11 December 1139, it was from grief and vexation, and that he had been driven to madness on account of the severe and repeated injuries that had been afflicted on him.

Yet, all accounts are thin on the details, and of September, October and November, we hear not a peep from the chroniclers, who up until this point had taken so much pleasure in regaling their readership with the most intimate details of the case. So, what happened in Roger's final days?

Fresh archaeological evidence now provides some vital definition to an otherwise opaque picture, and crucial forensic details suggest that it was anything but a 'simple fashion' that Roger returned to 'hold his church' in.

Rather, the evidence would seem to suggest that the bishop and his men were subjected to a sinister and violent existence from which they were driven to an early death.

Old Sarum and the 1912-1915 excavations of Old Sarum Cathedral

A short distance north of the present city of Salisbury lies Old Sarum, an Iron Age hill-fort that during the Anglo-Norman period served as one of the key administrative centres of King William's newly conquered territory.

Old Sarum was almost certainly the site of the Roman Sorviodunum, and a body of evidence suggests that the hill-fort was again pressed into service under the late Anglo-Saxon kings as a fortification of stature during the age of Viking aggression.

But it was the Normans who singled out Old Sarum for special treatment. It was they who undertook an overhaul of its earthen banks and ditches to create a vast, uniform, circular bailey within which, at its very centre, was constructed a huge motte and castle.

In 1075, as part of a fracturing of the Anglo-Saxon church, the Norman clergy took the decision to move the Bishopric of Sherborne and to combine it with that of Ramsbury to create a new diocesan seat centred on Old Sarum.

The work was completed by the 1090s and around this time a new town was set out at the hill-fort's eastern gate.

For the colonising Normans, this was a place built in the image of the great centres of ducal power in Normandy, the fortified citadels of Caen and Falaise. Here was a base from which Norman power could forever control central and southern England.

It wasn't long, however, before the inherent problems with the site began to take their toll and in little more than a century, the pope had granted permission for work to start on a new cathedral on the site of present-day Salisbury, and the old cathedral at Old Sarum began to be demolished.

While the castle saw phases of renovation and a small community in the suburbs dwindled on into the fifteenth century, by the time John Leland – topographer to Henry VIII – visited in the 1530s, there was not one building occupied within or without the castle walls.

Phases of systematic robbing of the site saw its once great stone walls reduced to rubble and it very soon became overgrown with grass and shrubs, adopting the character we find it in today.

Antiquarian interest in the site started in the eighteenth century with a number of small-scale investigations.

Right: William St John Hope, eminent archaeologist of his day, initiated excavations at Old Sarum in 1909, visiting regularly throughout the six years of excavation. He died suddenly in 1919 and never brought his findings to full publication

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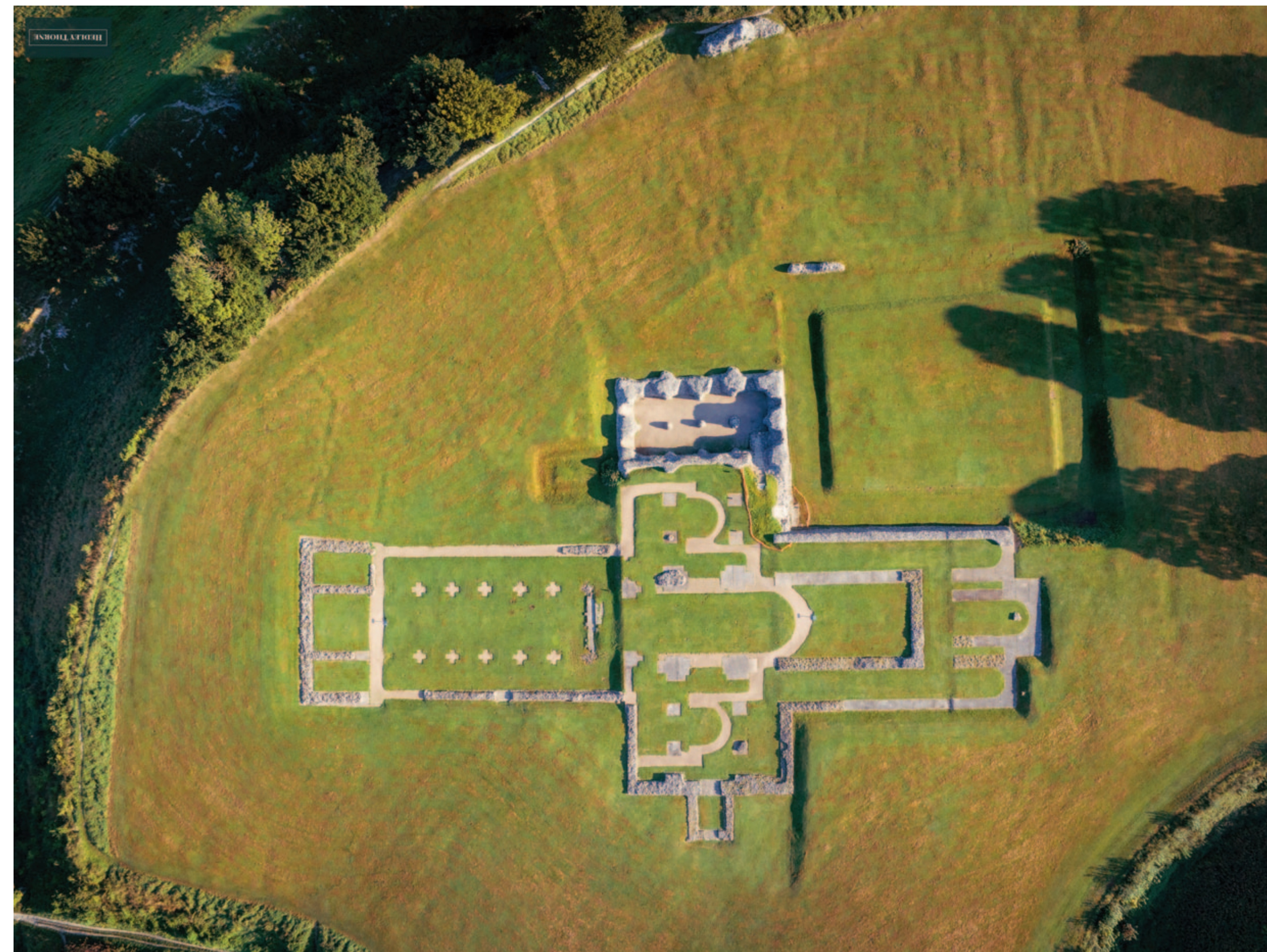

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Above: A bird's eye view of the ecclesiastical compound showing how the original apsidal-ended church was extended by Bishop Roger with a grand presbytery and new eastern end. To the north of the cloister can be seen the Bishop's hall and accommodation, the likely location where Roger lived out his final days

However, it was the eminent ecclesiastical archaeologist William St John Hope who, in the first decade of the twentieth century, set about the first serious investigation of the monument with funds from the Society of Antiquaries.

An ex-Royal Engineer, Colonel William Hawley (Insert Figure 5), was brought in as chief excavator, and together they set about a programme of work designed to uncover the buildings of this once great citadel.

Having begun work on the site of the castle in 1909, by 1912 attention had turned to the cathedral site .

Guided by parchmarks during a particularly hot spring, a team of workmen began chasing the walls of the cathedral, starting on the south side of the nave and presbytery, and slowly working round the east and western extents onto the north side of the cathedral and the cloister beyond.

Between 1912 and 1914 they were to uncover the whole of the church building, two cemeteries, a bishop's palace, cloister, crypt, well house, and various other ancillary buildings.

The outbreak of the First World War was to drastically curtail the project and after a short season attended by only Hawley and one other worker in 1915, the excavations were brought to a close.

St John Hope was to die prematurely in 1919 and thus never brought the excavations to full publication.

Short reports were read out at the Society of Antiquaries annual meeting and apart from these, all that survives is a handful of incomplete plans drawn up by the excavation surveyor, D H Montgomerie, a photographic album, Hawley's fieldwork notebooks, and a collection of finds that are currently on display at Salisbury Museum.

Recent work funded by the Society of Antiquaries has allowed what little information survives to be digitised and for the excavations to be reconstructed. By working from Hawley's diary, it has been possible to determine where and when they were excavating and thus to be able to associate recovered artefacts with specific deposits and locations.

Hawley was a military man, and his notebooks were largely prosaic in their content, recounting the numbers of men at work, how much they were paid, and the progress they were making on a daily basis.

There are very occasional discussions of the archaeological recoveries with rarely anything more than a passing line of speculation.

However, in the entry from 5 May 1912, he recalled with some excitement the recovery of an 'inhumation' in the north aisle of the ambulatory which had, in his words, evidently been buried in leg shackles. What is more, he describes the cervical vertebrae (neck)

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Above: In this photo the extant set of shackles, currently on display at Salisbury Museum, can be seen alongside two other corroded sets. The increased number of shackles recovered from the excavations suggest a more significant episode than hitherto thought

Left: The finds shed, circa 1916

Top right: The location of the bishops' tombs projected on to D. H. Montgomerie's plan of the east end of the cathedral showing the location where the shackles were recovered

Right: The different building phases of Old Sarum castle and cathedral

exhibiting signs of trauma, indicative of beheading.

Details of the finds were also recounted in St John Hope's report in which he describes a number of bodies recovered from the cathedral floor in a manner suggesting that they had been 'cast out of stone coffins' when the church was demolished, and that a 'perfect pair of leg irons' had been recovered with one of the skeletons.

Both Hope and Hawley commented on the curious nature of the assemblage. How was it possible that anyone buried in such a lowly fashion could find themselves interred in such a prestigious location?

Three key pieces of archaeological evidence can now conclusively address this question. The first is the recent reinterpretation of the eastern end of the cathedral and the arrangement of bishop's burials.

This has concluded that the 'blessed' and later canonised Bishop Osmund (1078-99) was almost certainly buried in the chapel at the far east end of the church, and that Roger (1102-39) and Jocelyn (1142-84) were assigned one or other of the tombs within the first bays of the north and south aisles.

It was in the immediate vicinity of the first bay of the north aisle that Hawley's 'interment' was recovered,

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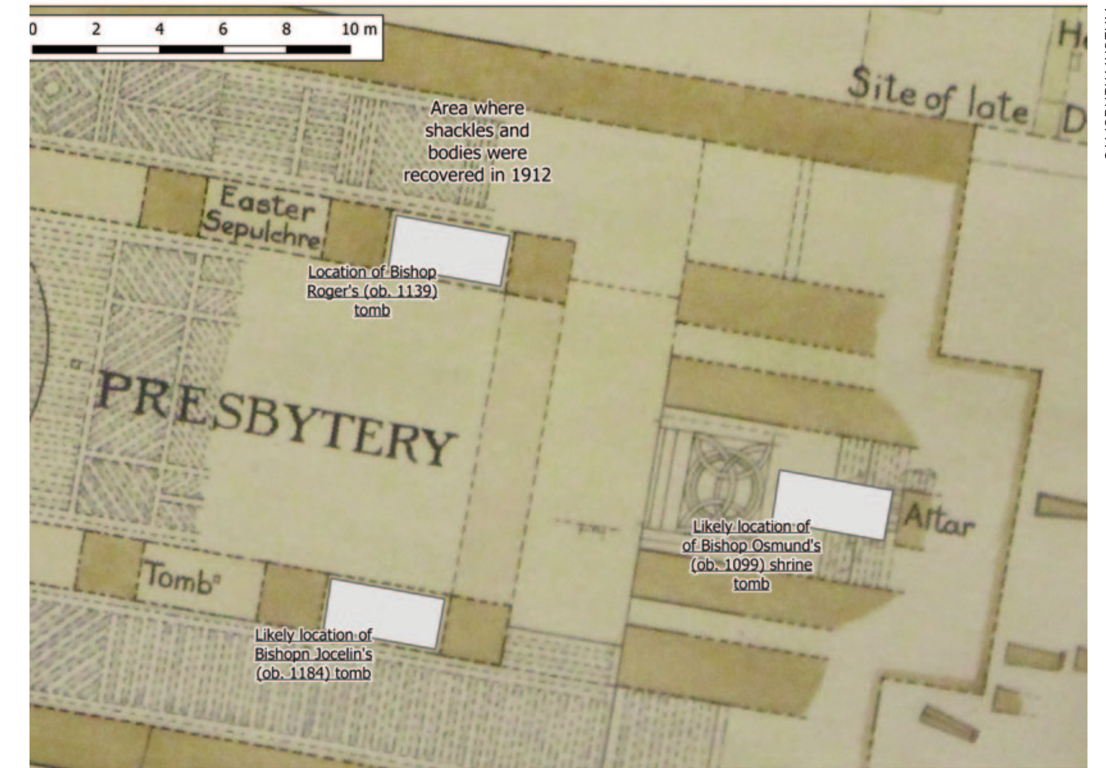

and this is where the second piece of archaeological evidence comes in to play.

In a review of the photographic record made at the time, one vital piece of evidence has come to light: There were, in fact, three sets of shackles recovered in the excavations – all of the same design and all with closed links.

The inescapable conclusion is that Hope's bodies 'cast out of stone tombs' had all been buried in leg irons. Finally, the stratigraphic context can now firmly be asserted.

In studies of the stones that were robbed from the old Cathedral and reused in the new, it is apparent that carved stones from the eastern end of

the Old Sarum cathedral were reused in the parapet of the new cathedral in 1226.

From documentary sources we know that the bodies and tombstones of the bishops were moved to the new site in 1225. So the sequence is clear: When the bishops' bodies were exhumed from the tombs, any other matter removed at that time would have been cast out on the floor and sealed by demolition debris from the dismantling of the old church.

The lurid account of Bishop Roger's arrest and references to members of his retinue being thrown in chains, the refined provenance of the surviving set of shackles, and the identification of a further two sets, when brought together, begin to tell a sinister story.

Above: Old Sarum cathedral excavations 1912-15

What really happened at Old Sarum cathedral in the dark days of autumn, 1139?

There were some clues in the documentary record that when Stephen allowed Roger to return to his cathedral, his work with him wasn't quite complete. Stephen was broke. He may have acquired Roger's castles, but it was his moveable wealth – his silver – that he remained keen to get his hands on.

We can infer this because, having returned to Old Sarum, Roger took the desperate act of piling his wealth up on the altar of the church. He can only have done this because he knew that this was the only place that it would have been safe.

No one, not even Stephen, would consider stealing from the Lord himself. And when Roger died, guess who turned up at Old Sarum to celebrate Christmas? None other than the cash-strapped King Stephen.

What, then, went on behind closed doors during the autumn months of 1139? The recovery of three shackled bodies suggests a brutal form of house arrest where Roger and close members of his familia, unable to rid themselves of their leg-irons, were driven into the ground. Deprived of food, perhaps even water and fuel, how long can the bishop have been expected to last?

Who do we think might have been buried with Roger? He was old when he died and it is reasonable to presume that, out of loyalty, a number of close associates chose to share his fate.

The better-preserved state of the surviving set of shackles and the record made by Hawley of an 'interment' suggests that at least one had remained entombed, as opposed to Hope's 'bodies cast out of coffins', when the bishop's body was removed. This would indicate a death occurring before that of the bishop himself.

We are reminded of Hawley's observation of a cut mark to the cervical vertebrae and are drawn to consider the fate of Roger Le Poer, the Bishop's favoured son. Having been installed in such an important and yet secular role in Stephen's court, he was more exposed than anyone to accusations of treason, for which the punishment was execution.

Le Poer — 'the pauper' – as he is referred to in later sources, is never heard of again. The chroniclers who had taken such delight in recounting, in lurid detail, the demise of the bishop, fall silent on the fate of his son.

When the clergy of Old Sarum moved their cathedral to the present site of Salisbury, we are told that it was because of a lack of water, its exposed position, and the blinding whiteness of the chalk.

Antagonisms between the community and the garrison of the castle are also alluded to, but now we can really begin to see just how oppressive it was to have a cathedral incarcerated within the walls of a castle.

The documents are silent on the shameful end of Bishop Roger and his dynasty, a perfect allegory for which was the spinning of fortune's wheel.

What happened to Roger was scandalous, but his wealth accumulation clearly played a role in how his fate came about. The ghost of what happened to the bishop would have haunted the community and defiled the sanctity of its church and, as such, was very likely an unspoken reason for the seeking of fresh pastures.

Old Sarum never recovered. For a short period it had served as an invincible stronghold wherein king and bishop worked in unison to control southern England.

But now that link was broken forever, the wealth it had brought swiftly dissipated, and a chapter closed on Norman England. ■

To see the extant shackles and other artefacts related to Old Sarum, visit Salisbury Museum's excellent Wessex Gallery.

Special thanks go to Hedley Thorne for the remarkable images he has kindly let me use. To buy these, or any other fantastically archaeological aerial photographs, visit: https://www.hedleythorne.com/

To read the full report on the finding of the Old Sarum shackles and their wider significance, visit: www.cambridge.org/ and navigate to the Antiquities Journal. Search for Three sets of shackles at old sarum the arrest of the bishops in 1139 and the power of shaming in the anglonorman world

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Below: The earthworks of Old Sarum castle, an Iron Age hillfort re-used by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Normans. By 1220, the cathedral had been moved down into the valley to the site of modern-day Salisbury, in the background

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