

Moated Sites

Moated sites consist of one or more ditches, which in most cases were intended to be water-filled, surrounding an area occupied by buildings or other structures. The earth created by digging the moat was often piled into the area enclosed by it to form a raised platform on which buildings were constructed. The size and shape of the area enclosed by the moat varies. Rectangular enclosures are common but some are circular or trapezoidal. Sometimes there is more than one enclosure, and the moat is often accompanied by one or more fishponds. There are often channels to carry water into and away from the moat.

Most moated sites were constructed between the 12th and 14th centuries. They are particularly concentrated in the West Midlands, in Essex/Cambridgeshire and in south-east Ireland.

Although they would have kept out unwanted visitors, moats were not primarily defensive and were rarely accompanied by anything more than a low bank or fence. A wet moat could have other practical purposes. It could assist drainage, it could serve as a fishpond, although moats are frequently accompanied by separate fishponds, as water for animals, and as a source of water if fire broke out in the timber buildings it surrounded. Excavations have shown that moats were not surprisingly used as a convenient place for rubbish disposal, although they were not constructed for this purpose. The main reason for constructing a moat around a house is likely to have been prestige: the moat was one of a number of status symbols in the medieval period. The moat made the building it surrounded stand out and look something like a castle even though it had no stone walls, towers or battlements.

As archaeological sites, moated sites consist of three parts: the moat itself, the surface of the area enclosed by it, and an earlier surface under the platform derived from upcast from the moat. Under the platform, there may be remains of land use before the moat was constructed, such as cultivation or remains of earlier buildings. The structures enclosed by the moat could include a dwelling consisting of a great hall and crosswing, accompanied by ancillary buildings. The moat, even if it is now apparently dry, may still contain deposits in which conditions are suitable for the preservation of remains of the past environment such as seeds, and objects made of organic materials such as wood and leather.

In later periods, when they had ceased to be regarded as status symbols, moats were sometimes wholly or partly filled in and a new dwelling was constructed in a more convenient location outside the moated area.

There were originally as many as ninety moated sites in what is now the city of Birmingham, mostly in the south and east of the city. Few of these are now visible because the buildings have long since disappeared and the moat itself

has been filled in and covered by modern development, but there are still likely to be below-ground remains of the moat and the structures it originally enclosed.