

Old Sarum: A Layer-Cake of History

If you're looking for a site that typifies the multi-layered nature of British history, look no farther than Old Sarum. Situated just north of the city of Salisbury and west of Castle Road (A345), the mound known today as Old Sarum has been the site of a Neolithic settlement, an Iron Age hillfort, a Roman military station, and a Norman palace and cathedral, before fading into history on a final sour note as a "rotten borough."

In Roman times, the hill was known as *Sorvioduni* or *Sorbiodoni*. It is referred to as *Searobyrg* in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and *Sarisberie* in the Domesday Book. The name "Sarum," which begins to appear in the early 13th century, seems actually to be the result of a sort of medieval typo. In medieval manuscripts, the name "Sarisberia" or "Sarisburia" was often abbreviated as simply "Sa" -- but a mark at the end of this abbreviation (and others like it) was often incorrectly taken for an "r" and believed to indicate the suffix "rum." In the case of Sarum, the typo stuck, causing the site to be known both as Sarum and Salisbury.

As a visitor, you enter Old Sarum through an opening in the earthworks that surround the Iron Age hillfort and now, prosaically, guard the car-park. From there you'll proceed to the Norman motte that rises from the center of its ditch. A wooden bridge leads up to the location of the former gatehouse, where you'll pay your entrance ticket and be enticed to pick up a souvenir or two in the shop. (It must be said that the pickings are fairly slim.) From there, you wander amidst the ruins of gray stone walls and across the grassy sward that covers an array of interesting-looking, but largely unexcavated, lumps and outcroppings.

If it strikes you that the stones in these ruined walls seem just a bit too regular, you'd be right: The "ruins" are an illusion. They aren't actually the remains of Old Sarum's Norman keep; they're modern reconstructions, based upon the locations of the castle's foundations. They're still worthy of closer inspection, however, for embedded within this gray, dreary rubble are chunks of flint that display an amazing array of colours.

The first occupants of the site were Stone Age hunters, who left stone tools that can be seen in the Salisbury museum. These were followed by farmers, whose field systems eventually extended across the plains and who, as they moved into the Iron Age, constructed the original hill-fort on the site. The Romans followed, but left few traces on Old Sarum; the site seems to have been more of a way-station than a fort. After the Romans left, it appears that the Britons returned to their hillfort, only to be driven out once and for all by Cynric, king of the West Saxons, in 552. The site then remained abandoned until around 900 AD, when it was given to the Saxon bishopric of Sherborne. In the late 900s, when the Saxons were facing the threat of Viking invasions, the hillfort's banks and ditches were strengthened. This seems to have been effective, for when Sweyn the Danish Viking sacked and burned the town of Wilton in 1003, he apparently made no attempt to attack nearby "Sarisburia."

The first Norman castle upon the site was built of timber and constructed at some time before 1070, for it was already present when William the Conqueror chose this location to pay off his troops and disband his army. Old Sarum was not simply another Norman fortress, however; it was a royal castle, the property ("*juris proprium*") of the king. In 1086, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, all landowners "of any account" throughout England were required to come to Salisbury to pay homage to William, who held additional councils here in 1088 and 1096.

It wasn't until the reign of Henry I, however, that the keep itself was built in 1100. Henry then handed over the building project to Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, who was apparently a great builder of castles (and who owned several). It was Roger who oversaw the construction of a new stone palace between 1130 and 1139. But Roger's real masterpiece was the construction of a new cathedral below the castle, constructed on the site of an earlier cathedral built by Bishop Osmund between 1075 and 1092. This first cathedral lost its tower to a storm only five days after it was consecrated (did I mention it was windy?). Rather than repairing the building, Roger erected a replacement that was twice the size of the original, and that stood taller than the castle on the hill above it! Modelled on churches in Rome, the interior walls were covered in red porphyry and green marble, while the floor was made of slabs of white and green stone.

As Henry d'Avranches says in his poem about Salisbury, in Old Sarum "the city was in the castle, and the castle, in the city. The castle was subject to the laws of Caesar, the city to those of God. The king's followers plundered the clergy." Historically, Old Sarum is considered a castle, not a town; the area between the motte and the outer earthworks, with its houses and shops and cathedral and bishop's palace, was considered the castle's "outer ward." When the king was not in residence (which was pretty much most of the time), a guard was left to defend the castle; in 1166, for example, one Earl Patrick owed the crown the service of 40 knights, 20 of which were to be used in the defense of Sarum. Royal visits occurred sporadically in the 12th and 13th centuries, and Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine was even imprisoned in the castle for a period of time.

As d'Avranches' poem suggests, quite a bit of conflict arose between castle and cathedral. The monks didn't enjoy having to rent dwellings from the soldiers, and since the soldiers controlled the gates, the monks complained that they often prevented worshippers from entering. On one occasion, the soldiers locked the monks themselves out of the castle precinct, refusing to admit them to their own cathedral. And this, apparently, was the last straw for the current bishop, Herbert Poore. It was time to leave Old Sarum and build a new cathedral for Salisbury -- a plan approved by both King Richard I and the pope.

But where? According to legend, the bishop decreed that an arrow would be fired from the walls of the keep, and the new cathedral would be built wherever it fell. Miraculously, however, the arrow struck a passing deer, who fled a full two miles to the banks of the Avon ("and that," as my husband muttered under his breath on hearing the tale, "was where the second arrow hit it..."). Needless to say, this location was perfect for the new cathedral, which was founded in 1220. The old cathedral was completely dismantled for building stone; you can walk among its foundations, or view them from the motte above.

Today, the blazing white chalk, said to have been bright enough under the summer sun to blind the onlooker, is covered with soft green grass. The wind still blows, but no longer drowns out the songs of the monks in the cathedrals; now it seems a peaceful sound. The hilltop is quiet, except for the laughter of children scampering up and down the hillocks or climbing the walls, and it's hard to imagine the strife that once beset this site, strife that came more from within than from any threat outside the walls. When you buy your ticket, you'll be invited to take a "walking tour" of the site with a guide, but you'll find the same information in the booklet available at the counter.