

September 17th. 2023

PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS REGARDING PRIORY PARK, WARWICK

It is clear that Priory Park is an extraordinary site, close to the centre of Warwick yet exhibiting a whole series of landscape features representing over 2,000 years of history. A site visit was made on Sunday September 17th. 2023 and observations made at locations marked on the LiDAR image below (Fig. 1) .

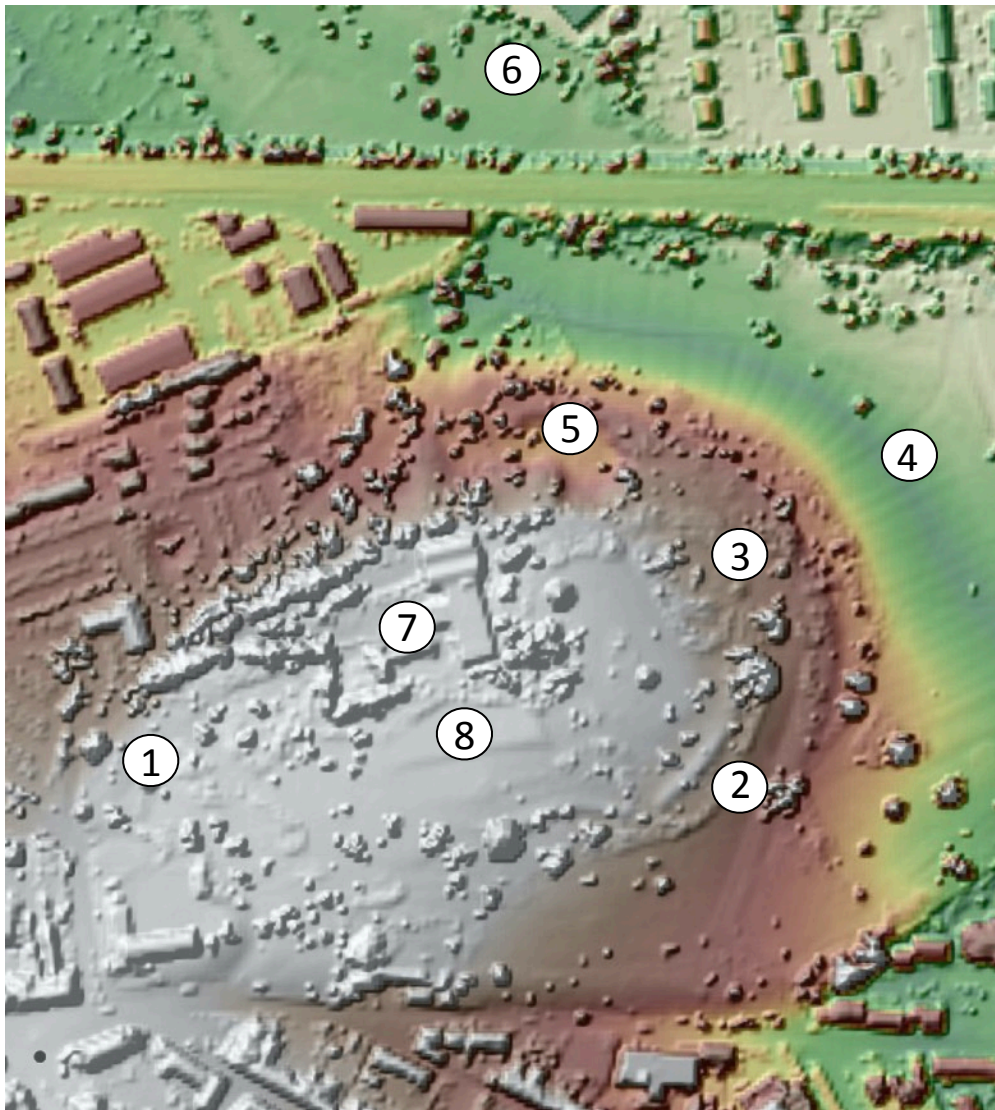


Fig. 1 Locations (LiDAR © Environment Agency)

1. The initial climb up into the park from the council car park to the west illustrates the elevated nature of the site and the steep slope may well reflect the layout of very early defences associated with the hill top.



Fig. 2 Earthwork bank, E side of hill looking N

2. The hill is bounded along its east side, closely following the 60m contour, by a series of banks, shallow ditches and terraces (Fig. 2) Whilst well marked, these are difficult to fully

analyse on the ground because of the natural cover of vegetation. However, the appearance of the surviving earthworks is indicative of a major defensive barrier that in this context could show the presence of an Iron Age hill fort comparable in scale with other sites in the county such as Claverdon and Beausale. Other possibilities could include a defended area from the early medieval period (cf. early Christian enclosures in Oxfordshire such as Thornbury, Bampton and Prescote) or a precinct boundary for the Augustinian Priory itself. Indeed an early boundary may have been re-purposed on a number of occasions.

3. Remnants survive on the surface of flights of stone steps at a number of locations and clearly relate to earlier garden layouts such as the one recorded in detail on the town plan surveyed in 1885 where steps are shown immediately east of a now vanished aviary (Fig. 3)

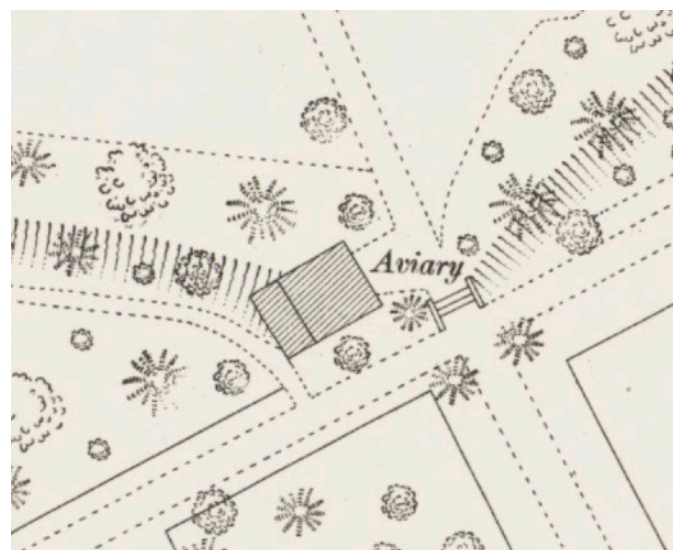


Fig. 3 Aviary and steps from 1885 mapping (© National Library of Scotland)

4. There are significant traces of ridge and furrow, presumably associated with medieval open fields, on the lower ground to the east and north fanning out radially in an unusual pattern but respecting the boundary formed by the earthwork bank (Fig. 1). This may be an indication that the earthwork may be pre-medieval.

5. Quarries that survive on the north side of the hill remain undated but may have been associated with the construction of the priory or the post-medieval house. They form a complex series of earthworks which presumably also reflect access arrangements to the property from the north as well as later, nineteenth-century perhaps, garden landscaping.

6. The Priory Pools to the north of the house were, as mapped in the nineteenth century, an extraordinarily complex series of pools, canals and moated areas. Whilst these no doubt originated as monastic fishponds it seems very likely that they were remodelled either immediately post-Dissolution in the sixteenth century as with Bindon Abbey in Dorset or possibly as a seventeenth-century development in line with sites such as Sir Francis



Fig. 4 Priory Ponds from 1885 mapping
(© National Library of Scotland)

Bacon's Pondyards at Gorhambury, Hertfordshire or Sir Walter Cope's Water Maze at Holland Park, London. Whilst now completely filled in settlement reveals their outlines as partly sunken features

7. The immediate environs of the county record office on the site of the former priory and later house present a confusing and slightly unkempt picture but it is clear that many interesting elements remain some of them relating to the garden landscaping in the immediate vicinity of the house.

8. The well preserved terrace to the south of the house may be a surviving element from the formal gardens mapped in 1711 (Fig. 5). A mid-eighteenth century view by Canaletto shows the striking view across the town with ornamental vases and a statue on a plinth (Fig. 6). This in some ways is a confusing image for when examined closely the formal garden seems to be sunken and bounded on the town side by a raised terrace. Certainly by the 1880s there was a circular fountain with a central flight of steps down to a lower level of the garden.



Fig. 5 Detail from Fish and Bridgeman's map of 1711

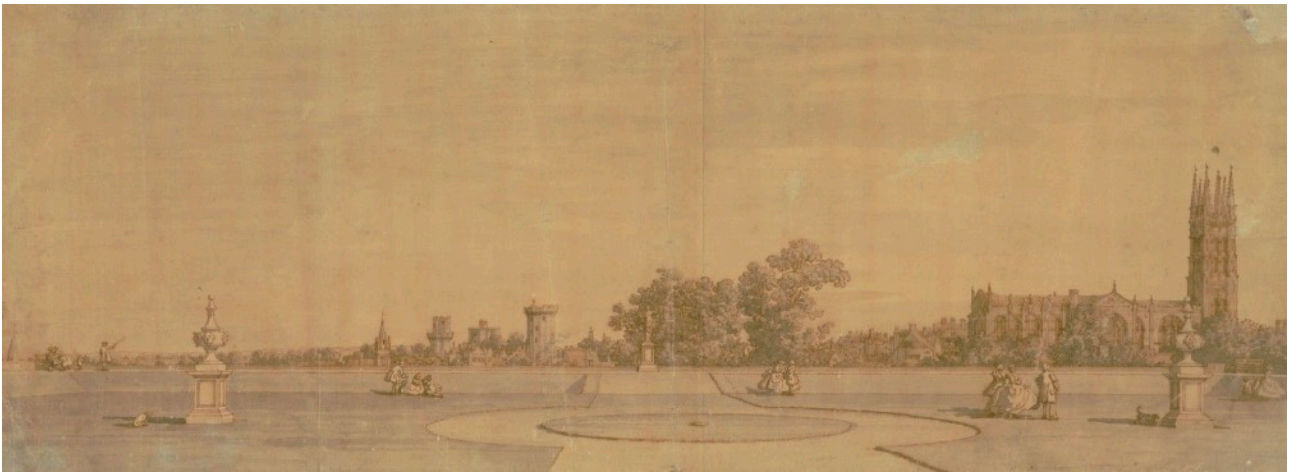


Fig. 6 Warwick: The Town and Castle from the Priory Gardens (© Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

Conclusions and Suggestions

This is clearly an extraordinarily complex landscape with many possibilities for further investigation and research. The Friends of Priory Park are developing plans to undertake some elements of this work. Initial steps worth considering include collating early maps and plans with modern topographic mapping and LiDAR imagery through the use of appropriate GIS software and then using GPS technology to accurately locate and map a variety of features that have been noted around the park. Making detailed comparisons between maps, plans and surviving earthworks would enable some idea to be formed as to how landscapes from different periods have been superimposed. A further non-invasive technique for gathering more data about the garden's layout would be to commission a geophysical survey of key locations. The contractor selected would be able to advise as to suitable techniques to apply. Although fraught with difficulties the Friends may also want to consider for the future the benefits of some small scale excavations, run on a community basis, as a further stage in unravelling the complex story of the park.

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