

# The Lost Water of Astley Castle Moat

Astley Castle,  
Near Nuneaton,  
Warwickshire.  
52° 30' N 1° 32½' E  
O.S. Grid Reference  
SP312894

# The Lost Water of Astley Castle Moat

## Introduction

Within living memory Astley Castle Moat was in water. Today it is almost dry and no one knows why. This investigation was a search for the lost water – it hasn't been successful but it has identified, and explored, several interesting features, maps and air photographs. With the addition of information offered by an elderly resident, and other advice from the Landmark Trust, this report has been prepared. I leave to others the search of the Newdigate Estate Papers for historical information on the moat and other water features.

## Overview

Astley Castle overlooks a wide valley with many water features. Just north of the moat is a small pool that is also dry. The grounds are believed to have been extensively remodelled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it is not clear whether this pool is, or is not that shown on the 1807 estate plan. A reasonable interpretation of the 1807 plan is that the outlet of the small pool was the principal feed to Astley Pool which lies only a short distance to the east. The plan might also show a stream leading north west from the moat to the fish ponds with a connection to the small pool but the direction of water flow is unclear – it might equally have fed or drained the small pool. I have a suspicion that the flow was SW, and into the small pool, from a spring located in the spinney some 450m NNW of the moat.

Some time before 1913 three buildings and a sewage tank appear in the grounds and what might have been the small stream leading from the fish ponds is now shown as a substantial drain. All these buildings, and the drain, were lost sometime after WW2. However the sewage tank is still present. If it is a sewage tank, and there is little reason to doubt the original OS identification, there can be little doubt that it served the castle and thus that a sewer must have crossed the moat at some point. The presence of this sewer might confuse evidence of other services.

There can be very little doubt that the early moat filled naturally. That it is now dry can be for either of two reasons. Firstly that the water table has fallen, or secondly that the moat has been drained. The first is not uncommon and might arise from improved land drainage or highway construction. The second is possible for there is a local belief that the moat was deliberately drained. I don't reject this out of hand but if the moat was artificially filled, and this seems very likely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, simply cutting off the supply would have the same effect.

If, as seems very likely, the moat was artificially filled, where did the water come from? If it was to be filled without resort to pumping (something that becomes a realistic proposition only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) a suitable source would be needed at an elevation above that of the moat. This requirement excludes all the obvious local water sources, including Seeswood Pool and its immediate feeders, except for the aforementioned spinney where the height might just be sufficient to bring water to the moat via the drain. Unfortunately I have not had access to the spinney but even with free access it might be difficult to reach any definitive conclusion as to the water table 100 years ago. In contrast there is no shortage of locally available water suitable for a pumped supply.

## **The Map, and Photographic, Evidence**

The County Record Office holds two relevant estate plans namely those of 1696 and 1807 (Respectively CR136/M7 and CR136/M9). I have also seen many large scale ordnance survey maps from 1888 onwards but use only the 1:2500 plan from 1913 in this report (Maps 1 & 2). I have also consulted the catalogued air photographs held by English Heritage but found them to be of little assistance. English Heritage do however hold an extensive, but uncatalogued, collection of air photographs acquired from Aerofilms. As many of these are of early date I shall await the outcome of the present cataloguing with great interest. I have not consulted the RAF collection of air photographs (not the post war OS collection but the main collection still held by the RAF) for this is both costly and difficult. I have also not been able to consult the collection of landscape photographs held by Cambridge University for they are no longer available for public access.

Clearly the Castle Grounds have changed greatly since earlier times and to see more clearly those changes I have added the early water features onto the 1913 map (Map 1). Clearly the principal feeder into Astley Pool has changed. In early days this came from a Small Pool just north of the Castle Moat. Now the principal feeder is from from a stream further to the north – the stream that passes the sewage tank. The old estate plans probably show another stream running west from the Small Pool and leading away towards where now are the Fish Ponds with a branch to the Moat. All of this is now lost, or dry, and it is uncertain which way the water would have flowed i.e. into or out of the Small Pond. The Fish Ponds and Mound first appear in 1888 – the Sewage Tank appears in 1903 whilst the buildings just to the north east of the Moat and the overflow first appear in 1913.

Finally I have used Map 2 to show the location of the various features in this report.

## **Item 1. The Old Footbridge.**

This is now lost – the only visible remains are those of the abutments. However there is local knowledge of a pipe that crossed the moat close by the footbridge. The detail is sparse – it is not recalled which side of the footbridge the pipe ran. I have searched for, but not found, any visible remains of this pipe – however such a pipe would be well aligned to reach the sewage tank (Item 2).

## **Item 2. The Sewage Tank.**

A sewage tank first appears on the 1903 OS map. All that can be seen today is a water filled circular brick opening. Whether this has been altered or rebuilt at some time can not be said. Neither is it possible to see any details. In the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no understanding of biological digestion and sewage tanks were just intended to separate the

solid mater from the liqueur. The solids would, hopefully, fall to the bottom whilst the liqueur would quickly pass through. When full the decayed solid would be pumped out, or otherwise removed, and used to fertilise the land. Such a primitive system is unlikely to have survived into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. My suspicion is that this tank will have either been modified, or rebuilt, to meet later treatment standards.



For reference I include a photograph of a chain pump typical of a type that would have been used to empty the sewage into a horse drawn wagon.

### Items 3a and 3b. Two Brick Shafts.



Close by the location of the lost footbridge are two brick shafts, a brick lined channel and some other brickwork. Both shafts have the heavy wooden covers which can be seen in the photographs.

### Item 3a. A Blue Brick Shaft.



Item 3a is a circular blue brick shaft with a shaped lip facing the moat. The bricks have curved faces. Abutting the lip is a brick lined channel leading



towards the moat and terminating in bull nosed brickwork. Although damaged by subsidence the channel falls towards the moat. There can be very little doubt that water flowed up the shaft and down the channel to some water feature by the moat. I suspect that the red brick work is more recent than the shaft.

**Item 3b.** A Red Brick Shaft.

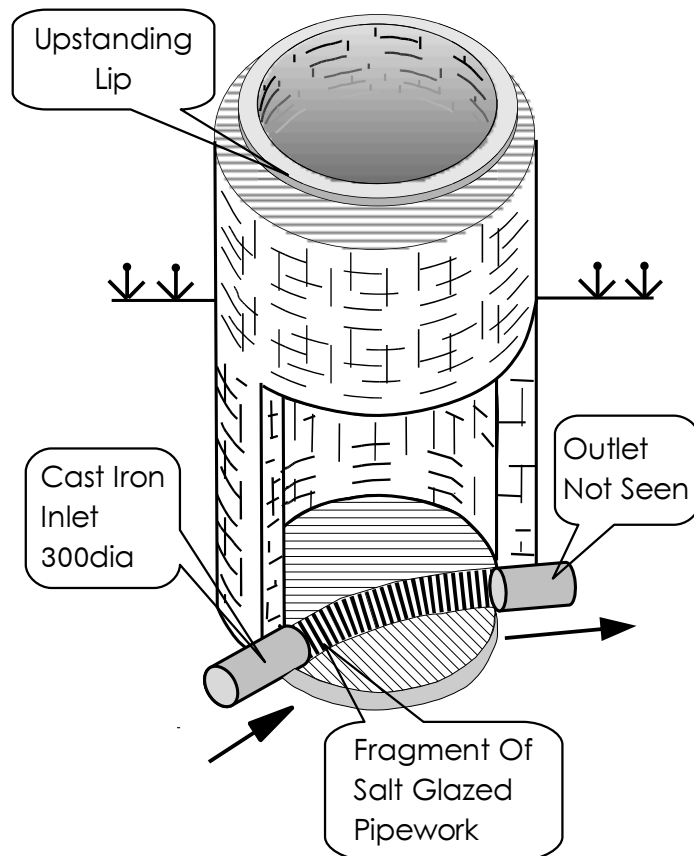


This shaft lies immediately beside the water and has a heavy wooden cover. Inside it is almost full of water – up to the level of the moat. It is likely that this was an outlet from the moat but no details can be seen. It might be part of the Water Feature (item 3a) or give access to a drain valve.

**Item 4.** A heavy wooden cover.

A heavy wooden cover similar to those protecting the various shafts lies about half way along the bed of the old stream between the Small Pool and Astley Pool. It has not been raised and it is not known what it covers.

## Item 5. The Overflow(?).



This brick shaft, or possibly one very close by, was first identified by the O.S. as an overflow in 1913. However what can be seen today is almost certainly something else.

Close by is a near semi-circular stone flag and at least one large fragment of another flagstone. These flagstones have not been lifted but if they were, and found to have a recess matching the raised lip on the sill, the evidence for the shaft being covered, and therefore not being an overflow, would be very convincing.



The shaft gives access to a sewer that flowing from item 6a turns to run northwards generally parallel to the moat at this point. The base of the shaft is concrete. It is moulded on two levels so as to provide an easy sweep bend for the sewage flow. A fragment of salt glazed pipe seen at the inlet might indicate that such pipework might have been used to form the bend at some time. Indeed the concrete might well postdate construction of the shaft.



## Item 6. A Brick Chamber and a Shaft.

Below the castle walls and above the moat are two adjacent features.



**Item 6a.** This decayed brick chamber is a collection chamber for sewage. At least two drains enter from the castle and the outlet is a cast iron main leading to item 5. One difficult to explain curiosity is the location of a gate valve in the cast iron main a few feet from the collection chamber. Normally sewage pipes dare not valved.

**Item 6b.** This is a brick shaft has a stone coping. It is completely full of rubbish. Its purpose is unknown.



## Item 7.

This item comprises a brick shaft and the foundations of a brick building(s). The buildings are probably those first shown on the O.S. Map of 1913.

The shaft has a heavy wooden cover – through gaps can be glimpsed a deep shaft, rods probably used to operate valve gear and iron rung ladder. The ladder is loose and it must not be assumed that its original purpose was to give access to this shaft without further evidence.

There is some local knowledge of these buildings etc. It is said that the valves were used to empty (fill?) the moat and that the buildings were not agricultural but full of machinery. It is also said that the castle had electricity, or at least that wires crossed the moat from about here, before the arrival of mains electricity. It is not unreasonable to suggest that here was the site of a private electricity generator. It is then but a small step to suggest that it was also a pump house used to manage the water, and water features, about the moat for it is well positioned to draw water from the drain running past the Fish Ponds.

## Further Work

It is unlikely that extensive further archaeological investigation can be justified. I leave it to others continue the present research into the Newdigate Estate Papers – papers which may very well contain useful information on the moat, on water, sewage and also on electricity.



**Map 1.** Early Water Features, from 1807, superimposed onto the OS 1913 1:2500 Map

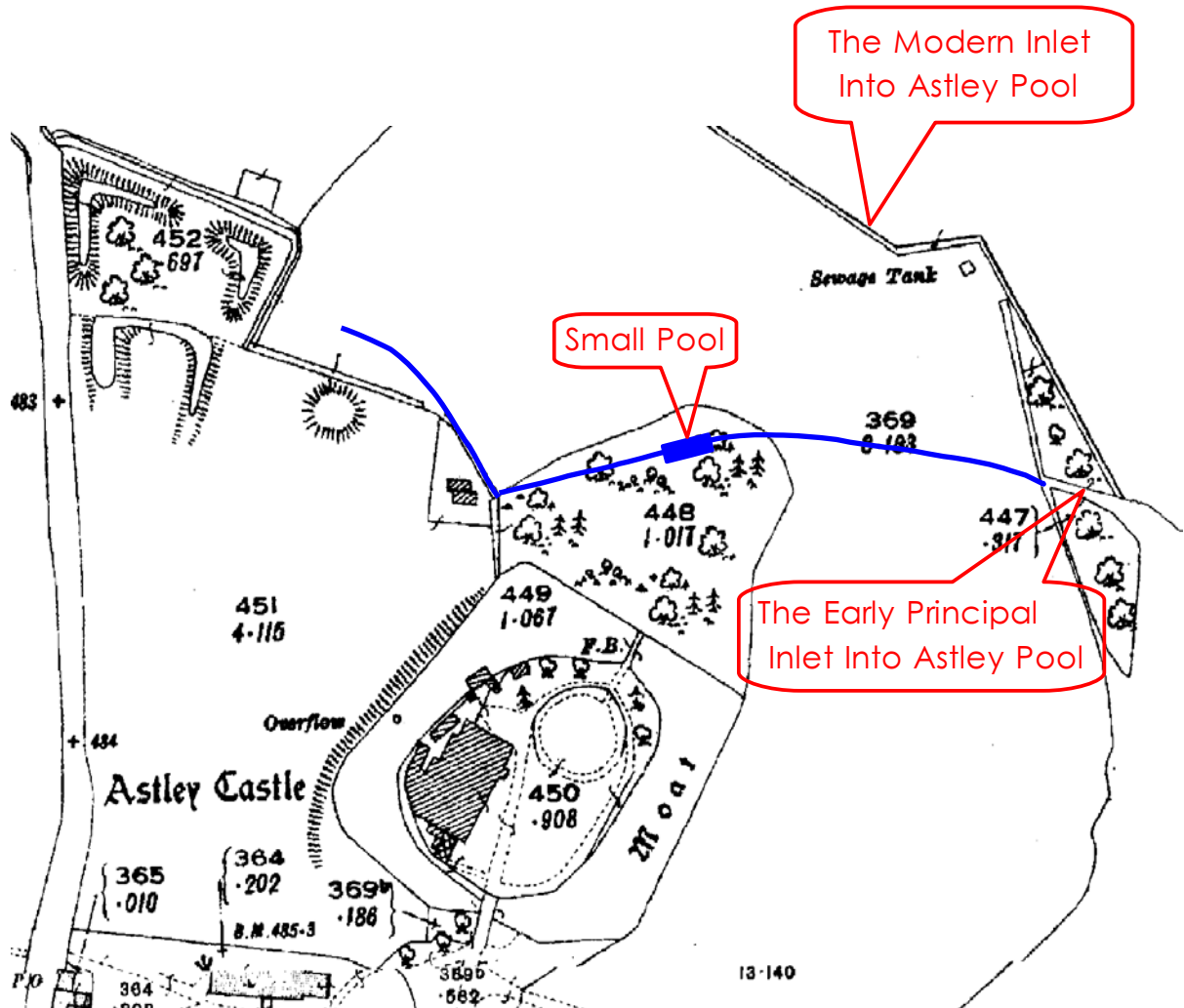


Image produced from the [www.old-maps.co.uk](http://www.old-maps.co.uk) service with permission of Old-Maps and Ordnance Survey



**Map 2.** Location of Features Identified in the Text.

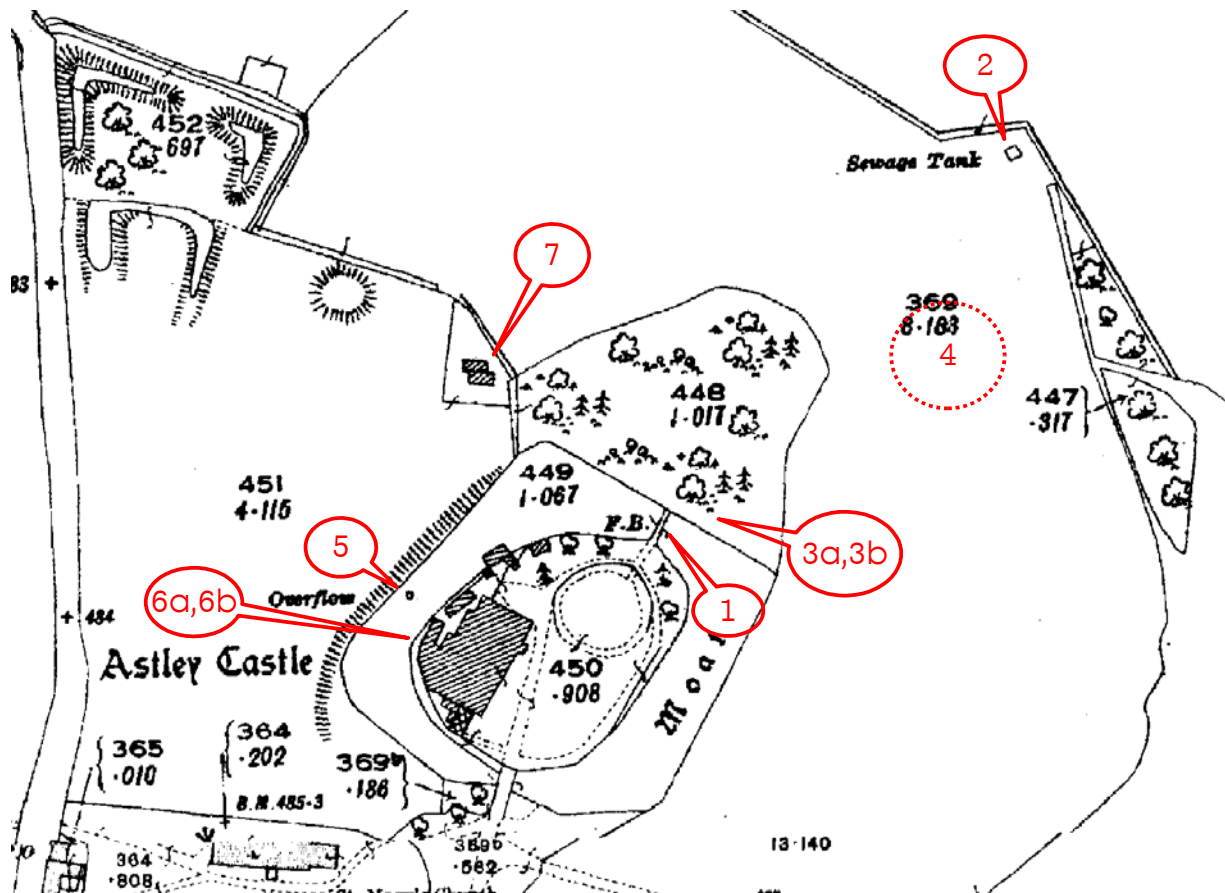


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## Notes

1. The Old Footbridge
2. The Sewage Tank
3. Two Shafts
4. Heavy Wooden Cover
5. A Shaft (The Overflow?)
6. A Shaft and a Brick Chamber
7. A Shaft and Building Foundations.