

Midhurst:

Where is the best place to live in Britain? It must be best for beauty, best for community, best for local produce, best for affordability, and best for sunshine. In a recent survey *Country Life* magazine placed Midhurst runner up, second highest throughout Britain, [with Alnwick coming first]. Savaric Fitzcane, a Norman lord, was clearly a man of taste. When he chose St Ann's Hill in the early twelfth century on which to build his castle above the River Rother, prompting the formation of what is now the West Sussex town of Midhurst, he picked one of the sunniest and driest spots in the land. It is also one of the south-east's most attractive areas, beneath the green shoulder of the South Downs.

Today, the town is perilously close to the south-east's choked major-road network, and not too far from Gatwick airport. However, it remains an island of tranquility. Midhurst is a thriving, traditional market town of about 5,000 inhabitants. Superbly preserved architecturally, the town retains a distinct identity that is enhanced by the flashes of vivid yellow on doors and window frames that mark the property of the neighbouring Cowdray estate - famous as a home of polo. London is within easy reach by train (to Liphook), and just over fifty miles by road. Opportunities for rural walks, sailing (from Bosham or the Witterings on the South Coast) and, of course, polo are exceptional. However, West Sussex is the second most expensive county for property in Britain. Affordable housing for anyone on a modest income is hard to find. However, Midhurst's appeal to outsiders will be sure to increase when the South Downs are finally designated as a National Park (A Public Inquiry has recently concluded). Whether this will add to the local quality of life, or simply raise house prices and deluge the area with visitors, remains to be seen.

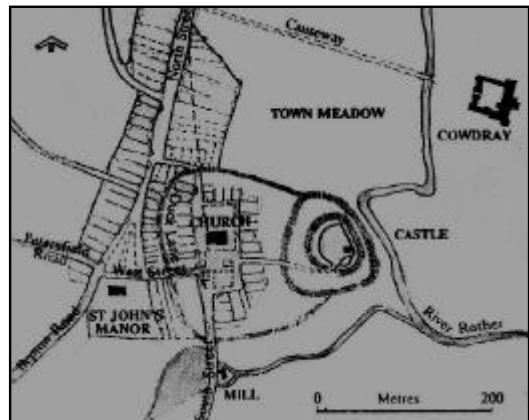
E.V. Lucas wrote in his 'Highways and Byways in Sussex' many years ago "Sussex has no more contented town" and so it is today. The novelist and science fiction writer H G Wells (1866-1946) had important links with Midhurst. His maternal grandfather was born here, and his mother, Sarah, was a maid and later a house-keeper at Uppark, the country house near South Harting, now in the care of the National Trust. In his autobiography he stated: "Midhurst has always been a happy place for me. I suppose it rained at at times, but all my memories of Midhurst are in sunshine". And thus it proved for the CSG.



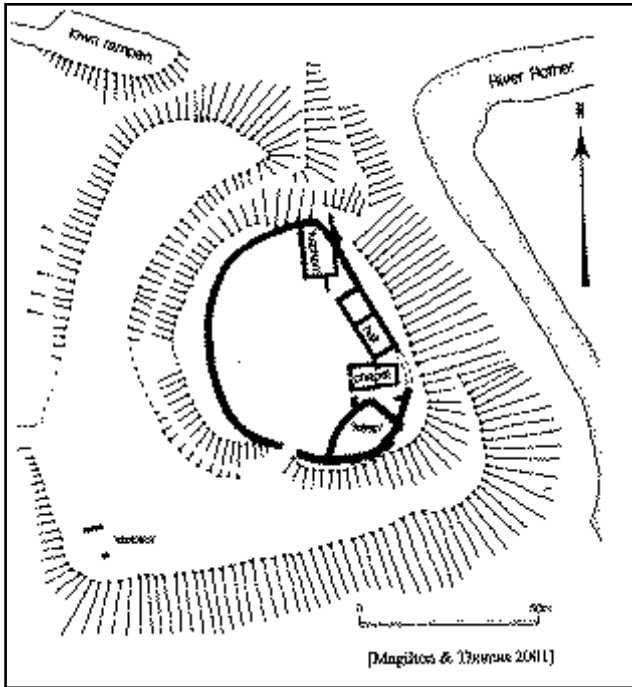
Midhurst - The Memorial Temple that lies on the Cowdray estate a short distance outside Midhurst - at Benbow Pond on the road towards Petworth. Built in 2000, it was erected in memory of the late Viscount Cowdray the Third. It is surrounded by an arboretum, and public access will be allowed once the arboretum has grown.

St Ann's Castle.

St Ann's is a motte and bailey (or ringwork) castle with some stonework - probably a late Norman stone keep or hall - and a 1.4m thick wall. Henry I granted Midhurst to Savaric Fitzcane and it was probably his son who built the stone castle. The foundations of medieval buildings including a curtain wall, hall, chapel and the possible keep were excavated in 1913. The site was abandoned circa 1280, though the chapel was still in use in 1291. The large oval outer defences were encased by a strong curtain wall, with a small break to indicate the site of the gateway. The site was abandoned for a new site called *la Coudraye* in the late 13th century; all the walls have been reduced to foundation level, which have clearly been restructured.



St Ann's Castle - Midhurst, showing the original lines of its defences. The pattern of streets, buildings and plot boundaries throughout the town centre also preserves evidence of its original form and its growth over the centuries.



Notes:

The castle is on a Lower Greensand outcrop overlooking the River Rother. It was originally an earthwork and timber construction, later rebuilt in stone. The simple stone wall that replaced the timber palisade had no towers added.

The visible masonry today is a modern capping, over medieval footings or robbed trenches, placed to give protection and some form to a site that would otherwise be devoid of interest. The identification of a chapel is more definite than the other buildings. The so-called 'keep' is an odd feature. Dating of all work is uncertain, but a possible chronology is:

- Keep, chapel and kitchen constructed in the inner bailey and stables in the outer bailey
- Hall built
- Keep and kitchen collapse through subsidence and are robbed to provide material for walls
- Curtain wall built north and south of the hall and buttresses incorporated where needed.
- Stonework robbed (apart from chapel) and shipped to Cowdray.
- Chapel abandoned and robbed.

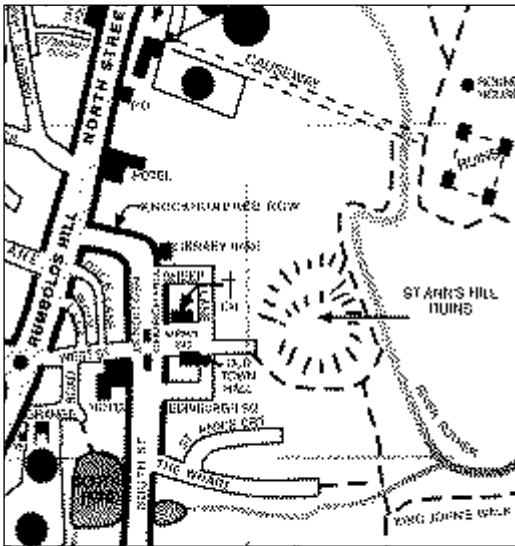
St Ann's Castle:

Outline History

- 11th C Roger of Montgomery granted western Sussex. Establishes seat at Arundel and also constructs subsidiary castles, including Chichester and Midhurst.
- 1102 Roger's son rebels against Henry I and forfeits estates. Midhurst passes to Savaric fitz Cane in whose family it remains. When they acquire the Bohun estates in Normandy, they change their name to Bohun. (John de Bohun was prominent in Wales and Ireland under Edward I)
- Late 13th C New (moated?) house established possibly where Cowdray Castle is built
- 1913 Site investigated by Sir William St. John Hope, but with an unskilled investigation.
- 1994 Small scale excavations as part of a wider scheme for the preservation and display of the castle.



St Ann's Castle. Looking north toward the hall and kitchen.



Below - Midhurst - St Ann's Castle. Looking east on the grassy natural knoll. The chapel to the left and the irregular shaped keep or hall to the right. The outer curtain wall enclosed an ovoid court 60m by 45m. Saveric Fitzcane's son, Frank, took the surname de Bohun and this family held the manor until the



Cowdray House - Midhurst. The entrance as seen from the town - the car park off North St. Looking down along the causeway. Meadows to the left and right of the causeway may at one stage have been flooded to consciously form a picturesque view, echoing Bodiam and Herstmonceux.

