The Battle Ditches are a part of an early 13th century earthwork which surrounded the town of Chipping Walden (Market Walden, later Saffron Walden). Today this south-west corner is the only visible section of the enclosure, described in Latin in the Middle Ages as the magnum fossatum, the Great Ditch, and later called the Repell or Battle Ditches, though there is no known connection with a battle. Chipping Walden was laid out on a grid system within the Great Ditch, and the earthwork was possibly intended to mark the settlement boundary, perhaps defining an area within which market tolls could be charged.

An earlier town ditch was dug around the hilltop chosen as the site for Walden Castle, probably built around 1140 by the second Geoffrey de Mandeville, the Norman Earl of Essex, on high ground overlooking the site of earlier Romano-British and Saxon settlements in the Abbey Lane area. This Norman ditch encircled the inner castle bailey, the church and the area of the original market west of the church. In 2013 local sixth-formers assisted Access Cambridge Archaeology in excavating the south-east corner of the ditch on the Common, finding pottery contemporary with the castle in the lowest level.

In 1141 Queen Matilda (the Empress Maud by her first marriage) permitted Earl Geoffrey to move the market from nearby Newport to Walden, which then became Chipping Walden and which has been a market town ever since.

The Battle Ditches and a nearby footpath are managed as a wildlife corridor, providing food and habitat for butterflies, small mammals and birds. The manor of Chipping Walden passed to the de Bohun family early in the 13th century. They remodelled both castle and town, moving the market to the southern slope below the church and constructing the Great Ditch, of which only the Battle Ditches survive, to extend the town boundary. By the end of the 14th century, however, it appears from excavation that much of this earthwork had been filled with rubbish or deliberately back-filled, perhaps no longer required as a boundary or hindering access. This south-western corner survived because the town expanded only slowly into this part of the Great Ditch enclosure.
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The Gibson Boulders

The mound adjacent to the eastern end of the south ditch was constructed on a filled-in length of the Battle Ditches as a viewing point for a 19th century rustic summerhouse, with a tunnel and ice-pit beneath. The mound was “decorated” with 25 glacial erratic boulders from various sites; it is listed as a Regionally Important Geological Site (RIGS).