

ART. XIV.—*Askerton Castle*. By Captain EDMOND L. WARRE.

Read at Penrith, July 5th, 1923.

THIS building is already well known; * I can therefore proceed to a statement of my case without an initial description.

A scrutiny of the walls and roofs made the 18th June, 1923, together with a fair knowledge of the plan, lead me to the conviction that at four different periods additions or rebuilding have occurred.

The plan (p. 151) shews at a glance the stages of growth. Though the wing towards Scotland by no means faces due north, for the sake of simplicity I use the main points of the compass to indicate the various parts of the building.

The four main divisions of building appear to be :—

Original block, and part of East curtain wall,

Towers,

External walls West and North Wings,

Rebuilt West and North Wings.

Once the suspicion had dawned that the towers and the building between them were of different dates, there was no difficulty in finding evidence sufficient to establish the fact. I had noticed that the westernmost roof truss bedded on the wall of the central block had been removed, the only visible member of the roof which reached the gable wall being the ridge, mortice holes therein for queen post and its brackets clearly shewing that the roof origin-

* Described in these *Transactions*, o.s. iii, 178, by Chancellor Ferguson, and in *Castles and Towers*, 344, by Mr. John F. Curwen, F.S.A. Notes on the Castle and Manor are given in these *Transactions* n.s. xi, 48, 254, by Mr. T. H. B. Graham.

ally had its complement of trusses, of which there were seven in number. If further proof of disturbance at this point were needed, it may be noted that the purlins in the westernmost bay are of timber inferior to the rest, showing that in order to remove the principal rafters the original purlins had to be sawn out, thus becoming too short to reinstate. This considerable labour was undertaken because the tiebeam made access to the top chamber of the new tower and to its roof impossible, if a doorway of ordinary height was to be formed without disturbing garde-robes, which by the time the roof problem was faced had already been built.

A similar story may be told at the east gable of the central block. Here, however, the garde-robe is on the north of the tower, and access was accordingly made to the upper chamber and roof by cutting the tiebeam to obtain headroom, leaving the remainder of the truss in position. It was an unwise thing to cut the tiebeam and form a door so near the corner of the building; the weight, however, of the tower corner has arrested the spreading of the roof, which would be the natural consequence of such action.

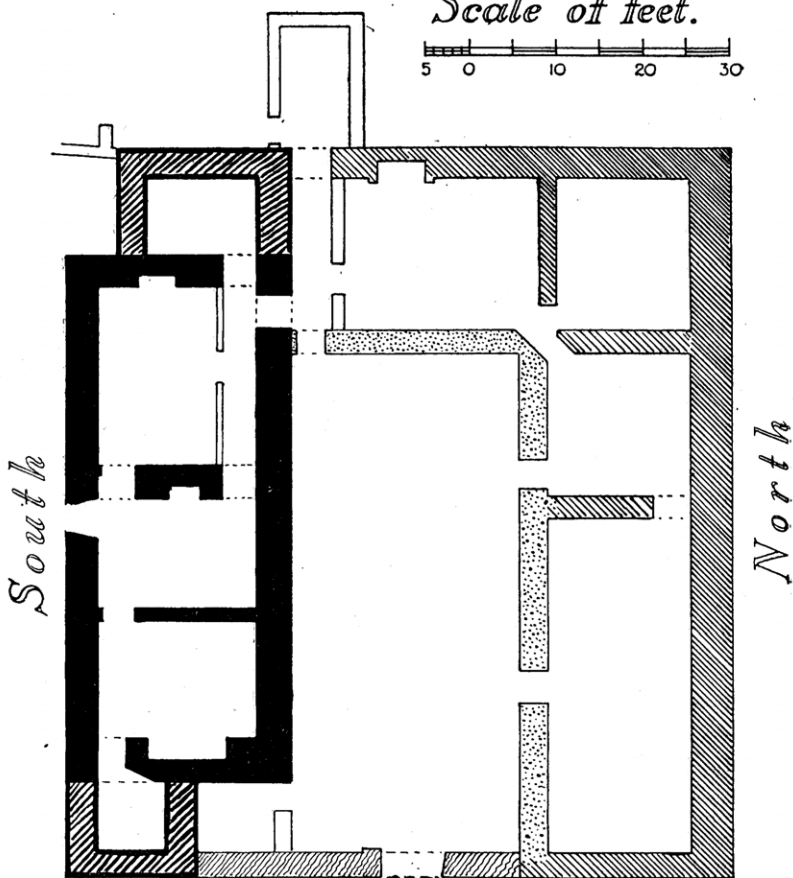
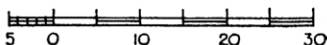
Further striking evidence that the towers were built since the central block may be seen by studying the wall on the south front at the junction of the East or Dovecot Tower with the original building. There is to be observed a difference in the character of the masonry, and a line of demarcation (not amounting to a crack) between the two areas of masonry, which shews that the S.W. corner, at any rate, of the tower is built upon the gable wall of the central block. The plinth or footing of rough stones under the latter is another distinguishing feature.

I anticipate that if the plaster were removed from the meeting of the north wall of the Dacre Tower and central block a similar condition would be revealed.

In explanation of the building of the towers upon the

Askerton·Castle·

Scale of feet.



Reference 15th century ■ 16th century ■ Modern □
 Early 16th ■ later work ■

N.W. and S.E. corners of the central block, I can advance no theory, except that so placed they would more effectively resist attack.

An examination of the tower walls, where they master the roof of the central block, would throw light upon the manner in which the masons here proceeded. It appears that the coping or water-tabling of the original coping has been left in position on both the remaining portions of gable, as the eaves course, worked into a cove about four inches across, corresponds with the cove on the shoulder-stones at the gable ends. The working of these stones shews that the original block had some care bestowed upon it. Except where chimneys occur at either end, its walls are an average of 3 feet 8 inches thick, that toward Scotland being the thickest.

This wall contains a semicircular flight of steps of sharp gradient from first floor to attic, and appears to have been the only way up even after the addition of the towers, as there are no signs of stairs within these, except leading from the attic upwards.

Further investigation may reveal the original stair from ground to first floor, the natural position of which would be immediately below the existing flight.

A recently discovered doorway in the east wall of the central block clear of the tower has a head composed of two chamfered stones cut to form a two-centred arch. The inner jambs of this doorway were disturbed when a large arched fireplace was here constructed with an oven to the north of it, and the smoke from the fire has blackened the stones of the door head.

The character of the arch indicates that the central block was built about 1350 or earlier.

The doorway led out into an enclosure, part of the east wall of which with its rough stone footing reaches from the tower corner to the south jamb of the gateway. The outer ring of the gateway arch and the whole of the parapet

are modern, and both jambs have been disturbed, but to the left on entering, a corbel stone, and what appears to be the remnants of a very steep stair, suggest some arrangement for defence; possibly a small chamber commanding the entrance. There is a window 2 feet 10 inches by 1 foot 4 inches, apparently to light the stairway. Further investigation and comparison with similar gateways would make clear the original purpose of this piece of building.

Records that I have read do not assign any exact date to the towers, which I judge to be contemporaneous, but one may infer that they were built in the lifetime of Thomas Lord Dacre (1485-1525), and probably not before he was twenty years old.

That some time elapsed between the completion of the towers and the additions of the west and north wings is indicated by the existence in the wall of the Dacre Tower of several defensive windows, but the fall of the ground to the north of the Dacre Tower does not exclude the possibility of a single story building or lean-to against a western curtain wall. The Castle is reported in 1590 to be "sore spoyled." If this means that the walls were breached, I should point to the western wall, which seems to have been rebuilt in the region of the chimney stack, which is not original. From the fact that there is an inscription dated 1676 on the fireplace lintol belonging to this stack nothing definite can be inferred, especially as it has been mended during the last sixty years.

The north wall of the north wing is 4 feet 10 inches thick, and appears unchanged, except for the piercing of later windows.

Both these walls were originally topped by parapets. I judge that this was so from the almost makeshift formation of the north gable of the west wing, which contains in its upper portion the remains of a parapet wall set forward on a coved course of stone similar to but smaller

than that supporting the tower parapets, and containing a water-shoot with a stopped chamfer, differing in this respect from the water-shoots of the towers, which have not got this detail.

Immediately below this course occurs a three-light, roughly cusped window, which by no means conforms to the centre of the gable.

In the thickness of the wall on either side of this window are circular stairs, which leave one in doubt as to whether there was a parapet walk throughout at a high level, or whether the parapet walk was stepped up to surmount the ridge, or, again, whether there was no parapet walk over the ridge, and the stairs were built to enable the men at arms to pass from one walk to another. This last seems the most likely explanation for two sets of stairs so close together.

Approaching from the north, therefore, the Castle would in the years anterior to 1590 have presented a plain front surmounted by a parapet, probably battlemented but interrupted by chimney stacks.

There is no sign of the incidence of the parapet on the north wall of Dacre Tower, but above and to the east of the present ridge the wall of the tower is chaced as if for a roof of larger span; but without further evidence I prefer to establish the old inner wall on the site of the present one, and, indeed, it is only the fact that the facing stones of the present wall shew a more modern "picked" surface which has raised the question.

The roof construction of the west wing is similar to that of the south wing, but the wood is less good in quality.

The timbers of the north wing are hardly more than barked trees, and the stone slates are half the size of those on the other roofs. It is probably wrong to assign an early date to them, and in any case both north and

west roofs would have been modified after the disappearance of the parapets.

Regarding the roof of the original block, research in the history of timber construction is perhaps advisable, but I do not at present see any reason to doubt that it is of the same date as the building it covers. The evidence I have set down at the beginning of this paper proves that at any rate the roof was anterior to the towers. If the joiners' marks (consisting of slashes and segments) point to a later date, I would suggest that the roof was at one time taken down, and that these elaborate marks were employed to secure the proper reassembling of the trusses.