

ART. VII.—*Isel Hall*. By JOHN F. CURWEN, F.S.A.,
F.R.I.B.A.

Read at the Site, July 8th, 1910.

HISTORICAL.

THE history of Isel begins with a grant made by Alan, the son of Waltheof, temp. Henry II., to Randolph Engayne of the demesnes of Ishall, Redmain and Blencrake. Randolph's grand-daughter and heiress, Ada, married Simon de Morville, whose son Hugh left two daughters as coheirs, Ada and Joan. Isel fell to the elder sister's share, and within two years after her father's death she married Richard de Lucy, to whom, however, she had no male issue. Secondly she married Thomas de Multon, to whom she had a son and heir, Thomas. This Thomas, junior, in the reign of Henry III., entailed Isel and Blencrake on his two younger sons, Edward and Hubert. From an extract in the *Patent Rolls*, quoted further on, it would appear that at first Edward or Edmond enjoyed Isel, but whether by his death or otherwise it is certain that ultimately a Hubert* came into possession. He bore for his arms azure, two bars argent.

Hubert Multon enjoyed Isel for his lifetime, after which his son William entered into the entail, who left an only daughter, Margaret. Margaret married Sir William de Leigh and this brought Isel to this family, for a period of over 250 years. Leigh assumed the arms of his wife with the addition of a bend counter-compony or and gules. During her widowhood, in the year 1360, Margaret received a licence from Bishop Welton† for a chaplain in her oratory at Isel (Nicolson and Burn, ii., 3).

* All authorities speak of this Hubert as if he were the younger brother, but it is quite possible that he may have been the son of Edward.

† Gilbert Welton was bishop of Carlisle from 1352 to 1362.

In the year 1499, one Robert Leigh of Isel assisted Elizabeth Dykes to prosecute an appeal against Sir Thomas Curwen of Workington, Christopher his son, Thomas Curwen of Camerton, Sir Roger Bellingham, William Hudleston, and others for the murder of her husband, Alexander Dykes. An award was made by Richard Redmain, bishop of Exeter; Master Christopher Urswyk, archdeacon of Richmond; Edward Redman, and Sir Thomas Dykes, that whereas the said parties were nigh of blood the said Elizabeth should no longer sue her appeal, but that the said Sir Thomas Curwen and his partakers shall shew themselves meekly sorry for his death, and shall pay to the said Elizabeth four score pounds of lawful money, and further find one honest priest to sing for the soul of the said Alexander, in the church of Isel, by the space of two years, paying yearly for his salary seven marks of lawful money, &c.

In the year 1509 we find Sir Edward Redmain in possession of Isel, having married, in 1485, the lady Elizabeth, widow of Sir — Leigh, and daughter of Sir John Hudleston of Millom. Elizabeth survived Redmain some nineteen years, dying in 1529, leaving Isel to Sir John Leigh. We find a grant of confirmation of the estates to him in the *Patent Rolls* for 1530 as follows:—

Thomas filius Thomæ de Multon concessit Edmundo filio suo in feodo talliato manerium de Ishall et terras in Blencrayke. Rex Henricus 3^{us} concessionem confirmavit. Rex Henricus 8^{us} etiam confirmat pro Johanne Legh, armigero (*Patent Rolls*, 21 Henry VIII., p. 1, m. 5, Nov. 11).

In 1544 John Leigh held the manor of Isel and Blencrake of the king by the service of one knight's fee and the cornage of 46s. 8d.

Thomas Leigh, the last of the name, gave Isel to his second wife, Maud Redmain, who afterwards married for her third husband Sir Wilfred Lawson (he died 1632), and as frankly conveyed over the inheritance to him as

she had received it of Leigh. The story is quaintly told by Edmund Sandford as follows:—

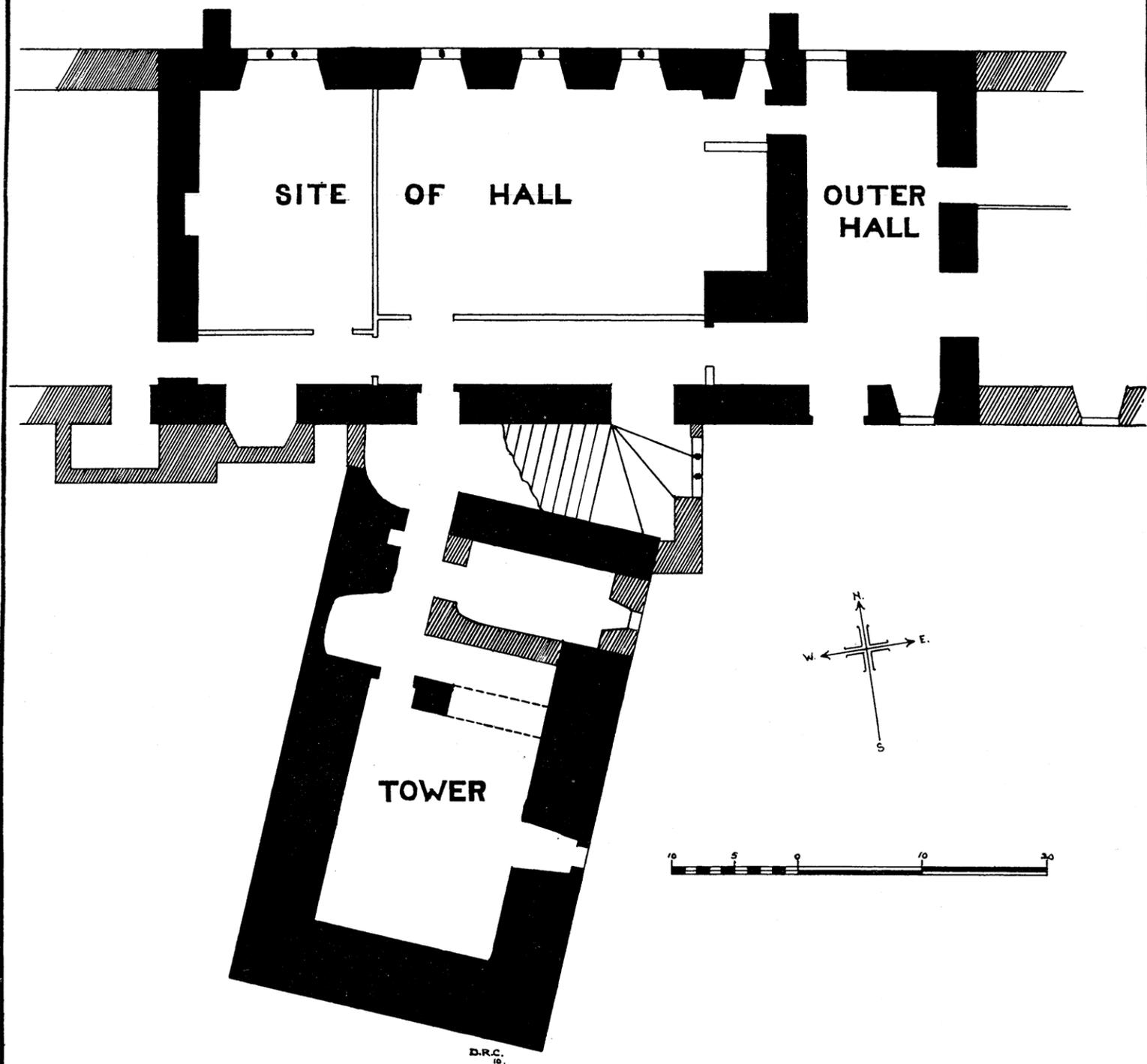
Isill Hall once the ceite of an ancient gentile familye of the Leighs: the last whereof married the ffair Matilda Redmain: the widowe of the Noble Squire Ireton of Ireton Tower. And on this mariag, the said Mr Leigh mad this Isell to himself and this Matilde his wife, and the longer liver of them, and their heires: And she survyving Mr Leigh married Sir Wilfrid Lawson, Grand Steward of the Earle of Northumberland of all his lands in Cumberland: And she likewise made over this Isill and all belonging therto To her said husband and the longer liver of them; and their heires: And her husband survyving It came To the now Sir Wilfrid Lawson who married the daughter (Jane) of Sir Edward Musgrave of Haiton Castle who now Injoyes this ancien ceite of Isell and Blencrake a great village a little above it northward.

DESCRIPTIVE.

Margaret Multon's private oratory, referred to above, does not of necessity mean that it was situated in this tower. Rather must we suppose it to have been in an earlier structure, which perhaps was burned and destroyed, 27 years later, when the Scots, under the banners of the dukes of Douglas and Fife, made their sudden raid upon Cockermouth, captured the castle, and from thence sent out raiding parties to burn all the country round about. That was in the year 1387, and it is not likely that a knight's tower, within an hour's march, would be left unmolested.

Unfortunately we have no authentic account of the erection of this pele, neither the date when the owner received licence to crenellate it. But then it must be remembered that the Lord Warden of the Marches had the privilege of granting these licences as well as the Crown, and it is no doubt owing to our having no published records of those issued by the wardens that our list of licences is so incomplete. Now, if we exclude the windows which are evident insertions, there is only one architectural feature that can give us any clue to the date. It is a Carnarvön-arched doorway, and to be found in that

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part of the tower which is usually the least altered—*i.e.*, the basement. It is, however, a somewhat wide doorway, so that I am rather inclined to look upon it as a late example of this feature, and accordingly to place the date of the tower to the early part of the fifteenth century. I am strengthened in this opinion by noticing that the loop in the inner basement is also much wider than we generally find them in the fourteenth century towers.

As to the site, I think that you will agree with me that it is an interesting one, indeed almost unique, in that we find the tower situated upon the *north* bank of the river Derwent. Such a position, at first sight, seems to be contrary to all precedent, for whenever there was a stream in the vicinity we invariably find an English pele tower placed upon the southern bank, so as to interpose the river between it and the northern enemy. But on making research into the early geographical features of the district, it will be found that there existed an impenetrable forest between Isel, Uldale, and Wigton, and that there was no road through this vast tract of land by which the Scots could descend. Their only way would be by the old Roman road from Carlisle *via* Wigton to Cockermouth, or else by galleys from Dumfries to Allonby or Flimby, and thence up the valley of the Derwent. Isel, therefore, could only be reached from the south, and in view of this fact it will be seen that the hall is placed as it should be, with the river interposed between it and the enemy.

The site, moreover, is further protected from small raiding parties by a woodland beck which flows rapidly round the north and west sides. It is called the Bloomer Beck, an interesting name, which forcibly tells us that here stood an iron charcoal-smelting forge or "bloomery" for the making of armour and weapons.

The tower consists of the customary vaulted basement and three stories over. It is of the oblong type and of medium size, measuring externally 43 by 25½ feet, the longer axis being north and south. Here again we have

rather a unique feature, for out of the whole number of pele towers within our district I can only find two others, those at Yanwath and Newbiggin, where the axis is not approximately east and west.

The masonry is of freestone rubble, with red sandstone dressings to the sixteenth century windows. There is no plinth or offset of any kind, but, as is usual, the parapet slightly projects beyond the face of the wall. The height is 43 feet, and the walls are six feet in thickness.

Unfortunately, when building the adjoining hall, the south wall of the tower must have been taken down, so that we are unable now to trace the original entrance. It was probably at the south-east corner where in the basement can still be seen the hollow curve of the newel staircase. The basement is barrel vaulted, and divided by a cross wall, in which is the before mentioned Carnarvon-arched doorway.

The upper floors do not call for much notice. The windows are clearly insertions, and, with the exception of an earlier double-light window with segmental head on the third floor, they are wide, double-chamfered, and placed beneath square sixteenth century labels. The newel stairway which communicated with the rooms stopped at the second floor level, and I am confirmed in my opinion as to its having been situated in the south-east corner by the fact that from this corner a straight mural staircase leads up in the thickness of the east wall to the third floor, and from thence to a doorway on to the battlements at the north-east corner. In the north wall of the third floor there is a good specimen of a garderobe lighted by a loop.

Now when the time came, in the early sixteenth century, for greater luxury and space the owner built, a few feet away from the tower, a banquetting hall looking toward the south, together with a new entrance hall and bedrooms over. After pulling down the awkward newel staircase and reducing the thickness of the tower wall, he

blocked the ancient entrance by raising a new wide staircase in the intervening space.

This magnificent banquetting hall occupied the space of the present dining room, smoke room, and passage, and measured 40 by 24 feet ; similar in size to the great hall at Yanwath, and just two feet wider than the renowned hall at Levens. A huge ingle nook occupied the western end of the room, and added an extra five feet to its length ; whilst at the other end, where there is now a recessed window, can be seen a rough stone opening where, I am told, a second fireplace previously existed. The ceiling is spanned by four very wide and richly moulded beams, and laid across these smaller moulded ribs support the floor above.

I would call your particular attention to the beautiful Tudor panelling in this block of rooms. Over the doorway of the present smoke room are the Lawson arms, inlaid, whilst all the adjoining panels have been ornamented in colour with different devices and figures. In the sitting room immediately above, the Lawson arms again appear in inlaid wood over the mantel-piece, with the initials "W.L." and "M.L.," and surrounded by ten other panels of figure subjects, whilst close beside the door and beneath a cupboard there are twelve more panels treated in the same way. Sir Wilfrid Lawson informs me that when he came into possession, the whole of this panelling was covered over with a coat of paint, and that when he had this removed all these figure subjects were revealed in perfectly fresh colouring. And yet, for the sad truth must be told, in one night the air had such an effect upon the pigments that by morning most of the colouring had disappeared.

Similar panelling adds considerably to the beauty of the fine drawing room, and in the dining room below there are some large panels of the linen-fold design.

The armorial tablet, high up over the front door, is so weathered as to be undecipherable from the ground.

Subsequently—*i.e.*, during the late Elizabethan or Jacobean period—another range of building was erected in the same plane, and making an imposing frontage to the court of 42 yards parallel to the river. In this wing we find the ridge of the roof lower, the level of the floors different, and the windows set regularly in three tiers without transomes.

There is one peculiar feature on the façade of the whole which calls for attention. The line of the eaves is broken at regular intervals by a form of ornament superimposed upon the top of the wall, and of which I can only find a parallel example at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire. The principal ornament consists of an open arched rib with the feet sunk slightly down below the eaves, but which rises up clear above the slates, being surmounted on the crown by a terminal. At intermediate distances somewhat smaller ones occur, but in these the arch is not pierced, neither do the feet penetrate into the wall.

Belonging to the hall, but now in the kitchen, there are two characteristic dining tables of late Elizabethan work with massive frames, and the tops in one piece of solid oak, measuring 10 feet 9 inches by 2 feet wide.

Many further additions have been made to the house to increase its comfort, and in one of these, on the south side, two early armorial tablets have been built in. That coat within the Tudor-arched label, and beneath the initials "I.R.," I take to belong to a branch of the Redmains—namely, a bend counter-compony or and gules between two lions rampant guardant. There is, however, the appearance of a bar in the dexter chief, as if the sculptor had endeavoured to also represent the argent bars of Leigh.

The other coat stands for Lawson—namely, per pale argent and sable a chevron counter-changed, impaling a coat of roundels.