

ART. XVI. – *Bowness Rectory Tower.*

By D. R. PERRIAM.

NOTHING remains above ground today of Bowness Rectory Tower, which stood at the southern extremity of Bowness-on-Solway village, beyond the church, close to the present rectory.¹

Without illustrations or early references, it is difficult to suggest a date for the tower, but its defensive role indicates the late 14th or early 15th century, when such buildings were needed on the border and sufficient stone would remain on the Roman Fort site to provide the quantity of good building stone required, in an area where glacial boulders and cobbles were the only alternative. Fortified rectory towers were not unusual in Cumberland and there are some standing examples to be seen today, although none can be dated from documentary sources.

It is perhaps the tower which is first mentioned in 1464, when William Raa, registrar of the diocese of Carlisle, recorded that the rector of Bowness had licence from the Bishop of Carlisle to collect subscriptions in the diocese for the repair of a house of defence there.² This shows that a building, which was used as the rectory, had been built by the mid-15th century and it is reasonable to assume that at this early date the “house of defence” was the tower.

In an emergency, the villagers would have joined the rector in the safety of the tower and helped to defend it if the need arose: one such occasion was reported by Thomas Lord Dacre in November 1516, when certain Scotsmen “to the number of 700 horsemen . . . robed Bowness and burned 18 houses, with much corn, hay, etc., assaulted the tower and barnekyn for half an hour and returned [to Scotland]”.³ From this we can see that the defences were not only a tower, but an outer wall or barmikin, within which would have been “barns, stables and cowhouses”.⁴

Further evidence of the existence of a tower was given by John Leland in 1539, “Bolness . . . wher is a lytle poore Steple as a Fortelet for a Brunt [sudden attack], and it is on the hyther Syde of the Ryver Eden, abowt a viij Myles from Cair Luel”.⁵

The strategic position of Bowness, beside the Stonewath across the Solway to Scotland, led to Crown interest in the village as a part of the national defences and when invasion threatened certain measures were taken. On the 24 May 1544, in the aftermath of the battle of Solway Moss, thought was given to “placinge of the hundrethe Kerne footmen [Irishmen]” at various strong points on the Solway, twenty “at Bownes”:⁶ and on the 2 June 1557, there is a “note of remembrances for the better furniture of the West Border . . . to plant gunners at Bowness against the gunners at Annan”,⁷ but the alarms which led to these considerations seemed to pass without action. The only defensive building that soldiers could be placed in was the Rectory Tower.

Border defences were extensively surveyed in 1580 for the Crown, to assess their readiness to withstand a Scottish invasion and the position of Bowness Tower was further considered: “This house or towre doth belonge to the p[ar]sonadge there, standing about ij miles west and by north fro Drumbewghe, adioyninge to a sea crick, wch. deuideth the Englishe and Scotishe borders, and the furthest pte toward the west that the Scotts

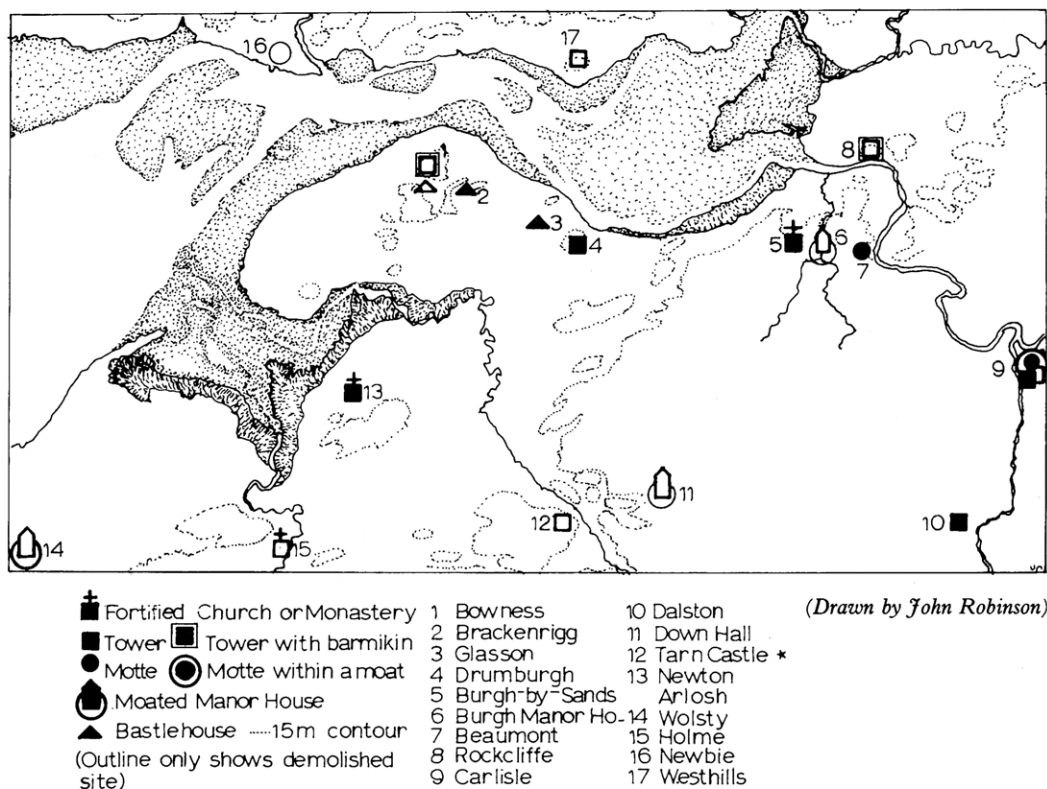


FIG. 1. – Fortified sites in the Solway area.

may enter otherwise than by botinge and about a mile and haulfe ouer the same crick to Scotland at a full sea, a place of small receipt and yet very necessarie for defence of that pte of the border ptyl decayed, the charge of wch reparacon with a platfforme for ordinance wch were necessarie to be made upon the same towre is esteemed to be x^{li} [£40] and without the platfforme to be x^{li} [£10]”.⁸

Bowness was a parcel of the barony of Burgh, a Dacre possession, but because of their implication in the Northern Rebellion of 1569, there was lengthy litigation as to the rightful heirs. At the survey of Leonard Dacre’s lands in 1589, a jury summoned by the Queen’s auditor, found in favour of the Queen⁹ and it was recorded “that there is within the said maner one psonage wch haithe a glebe and the tythe corn of all the townshippes of bowness . . . and that the same is now in the gift of her ma’tie by reason of this laite tytill founde for her ma’tie and that one Leonerde Lowther is now incumbente of the same and the said psonage is valewed to xx^{li} xjd [£21.0.11d] by yere”.¹⁰

Again, in 1593, Bowness Tower was regarded as a strategic defence, but the report merely repeated the survey of 1580 and as most fortifications required expensive repairs, which would fall on the Crown, nothing appears to have been done.¹¹

* Since John Robinson prepared Fig. 1, I have found that Tarn Castle is in fact an octagonal summer house (*Carlisle Journal*, 18 July 1911) and not a fortified building.

As it was Gerard Lowther the elder who had "set up a title for the Queen to the Baronies of Brough [Burgh] and Gilsland",¹² the Queen granted the office of steward and keeper of the courts of Dacres' lands, to Gerard Lowther the younger in 1597. However, the manor of Bowness reverted to the female Dacre heir, the Countess of Arundel, in 1601¹³ and with the Union of the Crowns in 1603, Bowness Tower ceased to be of importance to the defence of the realm, responsibility for the tower being left to the various resident incumbents.

William Camden, wrote after his visit to Bowness in 1599, "the inhabitants at this day call . . . Bulnesse . . . as small a village as it is, yet hath it a pile [pele]".¹⁴ Few eyewitness accounts exist, so even slight passing references such as that of Reginald Bainbrigg, who made a tour of the Roman Wall in 1599, are of interest: "I began my journey at Boulnes, wher I fond nothing but a few englishe words without sense in a vault at the personage".¹⁵ He was again at Bowness "the xvth daie of August 1601 . . . wher Mr Lowther parson ther, a man of good learning, diggin to make a gardin, found two faire hewen stones",¹⁶ which were considered to be Roman. However, this must have been retrospective, as Leonard Lowther resigned from Bowness on 20 May 1597.¹⁷

One reason for the ruinous condition of the tower was that it had been abandoned as a defensive structure in favour of a bastle house, which had been built by the rector beside the tower, at sometime in the 16th century.

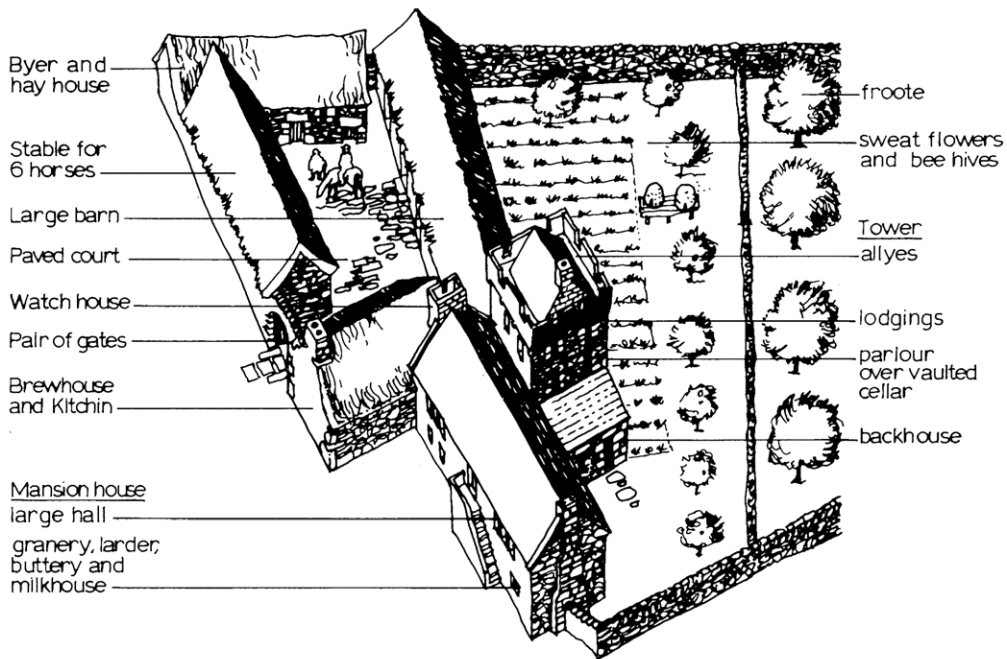


FIG. 2. – Reconstruction drawing by John Robinson, of Bowness Rectory, based on the description of 1680.

From a description of the rectory buildings prepared retrospectively on 23 June 1680, to show the misdoings of rector George Troutbeck (in office 1660-1691), we are able to build up a complete picture of the layout (see Fig. 2):

"About 40 years since in Parson Orball time [Orbell died 1629 in office] there was belonging to the parsonage of Bowness severall houses kept in good and sufficient repair – viz.

The Mansion house [the bastle] built with stone and Lyme now standing Two house highe the Roofs were roved with slate and riged with lime: At the West end of the said house a Watch house¹⁸ placed in the Wall some 4 yards from the ground well and close boarded att the bottom. The 1st flower [the ground floor] was divided into severall Rooms, a Granery, a Larder, a Buttery and a Milkhouse, above these were a large hall.

Joining to the North East end of the Mansion house there is a Tower built with stone and Lime 3 house highe covered with slate and riged with Lyme upon the top batteled about and leaded in the Allyes, [the walls] some what more than a yard broad, underneath which were severall lodging roomes and a Ladder placed to up to the tower head The midle Room a large Parlour vaulted underfoot, under the valted flower a large Cellar.

At the East end of the Tower a Backhouse with 3 ovens. On the Southe side of the gate a Brewhouse and a Kitchin. On the North side the gate a stable for 6 horses well planked. Joining to the North end of the Stable a Byer and a hay house. North of the Tower a large Barne.

All which houses well built with good stones and well covered with straw thach.

On the East side of the Barn were 2 litle gardens one for sweat flowers, wherein stood severll Bee hives, The other garden was for froote, a wall of stone 3 yards highe. Between them the Court well paved and Round all the aforementioned a wall 3 yards highe built with stone and Lime att the west side of the Court a pair of large Gates well and strongly made with Boards

... The decays in Mr Troutbecks tyme [1680] about the parsonage. The Flower under the hall [in the Mansion house] he hath made a Byer and a stable and places to feed his Poultry. The valted sellar in the Tower he makes places to feed his hogs and his Geese in, and sometimes he makes itt serve for a Pinfold for his neighbours goods. He hathe taken Slate from the Tower Stones from the Mansion wall to build a pidgeon-house on [land] not belonging to the said Rectory.¹⁹ He also tooke wood from the Tyth Barn²⁰ to repair the said Pidgeon house. The gardens are laid waste. The Court Wall [and] gardens walls most part lying even with the ground".²¹

We can now see that in the 17th century the tower was standing to its full height of 3 storeys (2 storeys over a vaulted basement), with thick walls, under battlemented parapets and slate roof: but it was beginning to decline by the late 17th century and from then on it gradually fell into ruins.

Bishop Nicolson visited Bowness on 2 July 1703 and found "the Rector (Mr Gerard Lowther) has remov'd all his Goods to Colbyleathes, near Appleby, designed to fix his Family there; and his Curate is also retired into Lancashire; so that, on Sunday last, they had no Service; nor do they know when they shall. Mr R. Jackson, a Waiter [of tides] in the Customes, lives in the Parsonage-House; which is left in Pretty good Order".²² But the Bishop's intervention led to the rapid return of Mr Lowther, as he was back at Bowness in 1704.²³ By the 19 August 1739, it appears that much of the tower had gone and that what remained was mistakenly thought by Sir John Clerk to be Roman: "[of] the station at Boulness . . . few ruins except an old square vault remain".²⁴

In 1847, mention was made of "the rectory house [which] is very ancient and some of its walls are upwards of six feet thick",²⁵ but unfortunately the writer gives no clue as to which part of the building he was referring to. What perhaps happened was that the remains of the tower were incorporated into a rear outhouse and where the bastle wall ran parallel with the tower wall, the combined thickness would be over six feet.

Canon Wilson, in 1923, made reference to a now lost “watercolour drawing in my possession, made in 1856, [showing] a group of the church and parsonage of Bowness, with a portion of the massive wall of the old tower *in situ* close to the modern [1859] rectory”.²⁶ Without this watercolour it is difficult to interpret what it showed, but it is possible that what Canon Wilson identified as the tower wall could have been part of the bastle wall, which is perhaps confirmed by T. B. H. Graham, writing in 1911, “Mr Wills, a native of Bowness, tells me that he has never heard mention of such a tower, but he remembers, some 50 year ago, a building known as ‘the Old rectory’ [which would be the bastle] though not occupied as such, being demolished. It stood near the gate of the present rectory, and its foundations were so solid that it was necessary to blast them with gunpowder”.²⁷ Harold Skelton, thought that part stood for a little longer, “the last vestige of which was demolished about the beginning of the 20th century”.²⁸

As we have seen, the bastle-house rectory was demolished “in 1860 following provision of a new parsonage house in 1859 to the east of the old pele”.²⁹ The 1859 building (Fig. 3) was “further back from the road and was surrounded by trees”.³⁰ However, it did not last for very long: “in 1913 it suffered much damage from fire . . . in 1921 its walls cracked and was pulled down”.³¹ A new rectory was built much closer to the road (Fig. 3), probably partly on the site of the tower: “because of subsequent structural weakness [after the fire] it was replaced in 1922 by the presently existing parsonage, of stone with rough cast and a slated roof, using material from the 1859 parsonage house”.³²

This is not the end of the story as Richard Bellhouse received a letter from Canon David Jenkins, dated 19 May 1987: “we heard this week that we have won an appeal to build a new Rectory between the present Rectory and the Churchyard, fronting onto the road”.³³ With the information now available on this site, it is hoped that a watching brief will be kept during the digging of foundations for the new rectory, to try to locate any remains of the tower.

Appendix

Solway Bastle Houses

These buildings will be dealt with in a more detailed future article, but it is relevant to include some introductory comments here as they relate to the bastle house at Bowness Rectory.

Ramm, McDowall and Mercer, completely dismissed the Solway area: “in these parts bastles for individual householders would have been a needless and doubtfully useful expense even if good stone had been easily available, and in most of the plain it was not”.³⁴ However, they overlooked the Roman Wall as a source of building material and the two bastles that do survive are built of Wall stone, as was Drumburgh Castle: “the stones of the Pict Wal wer pulled down to build Drumbuygh. For the Wal is very ner it”.³⁵ This “castle” may have been more recognisable as a tower before alteration in 1517,³⁶ but has the appearance today of a large bastle house, very much as Alexander King described it in 1593, “neither castle nor tower, but a house of strength and a very fit place for defence”.³⁷

Drumburgh Castle may have been the prototype for the smaller bastles on the Solway

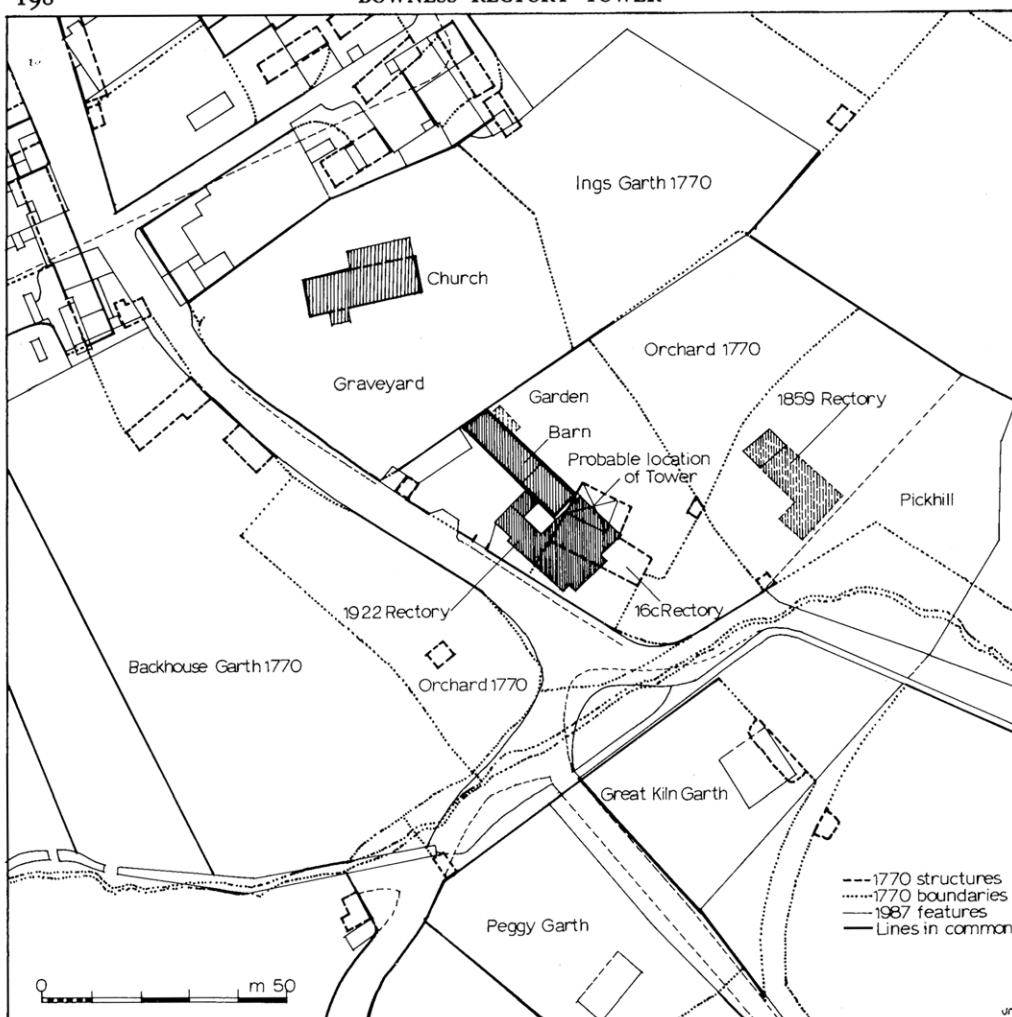


FIG. 3. – Plan showing the various rectory buildings at Bowness. Drawing by John Robinson, based on Burgh Barony map, c. 1763-1770 (C.R.O. D./Lons.L) and later O.S. maps.

peninsular, which were characterised by their thick stone walls, when clay was the usual material; narrow external doorways on both floors, with interior drawbars; slit vents for the ground-floor storage area, with hall above lit by small windows secured by iron grilles; slate or stone-flagged roof and the most identifiable feature, a gable watch tower on the side nearest to Scotland.

The surviving bastles at Brackenrigg and Glasson (Fig. 1) have lost their watch towers and that at Drumburgh Castle is a modern replica,³⁸ but their defensive role was noticed by historians at an early date.

Brackenrigg was first mentioned in 1847, “Brownrigg [sic] an old house, about a mile from the village [of Bowness] has evidently been a place of defence; the remains of the bell turret³⁹ are still seen on one of the old gables and on the ground floor the draw well [for the drawbar] is visible”.⁴⁰

The other example, Barracks House, Glasston, was identified by Hodgson a little earlier: "in our tour along it [the Roman Wall] in 1833, we called at Glasston, and Mr Borrodaile, the oldest and ablest antiquary of the village, told us that the bastile house, at its entrance from the canal, was 1,700 years old, and a veritable building of the Romans".⁴¹ Use of Roman Wall stone in the construction of this house has given some the impression of an earlier building, but the fact that sufficient stone was available to build a substantial bastle house suggests an early or mid-16th century date, because by 1599 Camden and Bainbrigg were recording that little remained of the wall in this area.

Acknowledgements

It was at the suggestion of Richard Bellhouse that I wrote this initially as an appendix to his paper on Bowness Roman Fort (in this volume) but it gradually developed into an article in its own right: I am grateful to him for this opportunity to bring an important fortified site to publication and for his useful comments on reading my first draft. Thanks are also due to my colleague John Robinson for his accompanying drawings and for his continued support in a joint venture to study all of the known sources on the Medieval Fortified Buildings of Cumberland: this is the first of a series of papers on that subject. As usual I would like to thank the help of staff at Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle, and Carlisle Library. If anyone has the watercolour which Canon Wilson owned, or knows its whereabouts, I would be very grateful to hear from them.

Notes and References

- ¹ The 1970 1:2500 O.S. map, gives the tower site a little to the south-east of the present rectory, but this is not based on any known reference and cannot be taken seriously as the tower was between the present rectory and the church.
- ² CW2, xxiii, 25 and *VCH Cumberland*, ii, 257. In October 1300, the Bishop appointed a custodian priest at Bowness, with instructions to "keep the manse in repair" (CW2, xxv, 97), but at this early date it would be unlikely that this refers to a tower.
- ³ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Vol. II, pt I (1515-1518), 470.
- ⁴ Nicolson and Burn, ii, 608, in a glossary explaining the buildings within a "Barnekin".
- ⁵ *Itinerary*, 3rd ed., vii, pt i, 55. T. H. B. Graham in CW2, xi, 240 says "the building was not a church tower, for Bowness does not posses one", and never has. Nightingale (*The Ejected of 1662 in Cumberland & Westmorland*, (1911), i, 600) thought "the Church dedicated to St Michael, is of the castellated type and was used as a shelter in those troubled times, as well as for purposes of religious worship", but this statement has no truth in it.
- ⁶ *Hamilton Papers*, 1543-1590, ii, 733.
- ⁷ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, (C.S.P.D.)*, Addenda, 1547-1565, 451. Fortifications at Annan are described in *R.C.H.M. Dumfriesshire*, (1920), 2-3.
- ⁸ *C.S.P.D.*, Addenda, 1580-1625, 18, Christopher Dacre's survey. A similar report of the same year, which also includes Bowness Tower, in the handwriting of Thomas Phillips, Walsingham's secretary, is mentioned in *Calendar of Border Papers*, 1560-1594, i, 32.
- ⁹ Further details on the fate of the Dacre lands are given in the introduction to *Household Books of Naworth Castle*, (Surtees Society, 1877), vol. lxxviii, xi-xxi. Something of the early medieval history of the manor of Bowness is given in CW2, xxviii, 167-78 and CW2, lxxv, 55, but the latter is not entirely correct.
- ¹⁰ *Revenue Records and Inrolment, Surveys - Cumberland & Westmorland*, pt i, Elizabeth-James I, 31, fol. 55, published version in Carlisle Library. As the gift of this rectory was a Royal prerogative from 1589 to 1601 there are references in *C.S.P.D.*, 1595-1597, 495, when Leonard Lowther resigned and *op. cit.*, 1598-1601, 90, when Richard Sibson was presented the living.

- ¹¹ *C.S.P.D.*, Addenda, 1580-1625, 349.
- ¹² *Household Books*, *op. cit.*, introduction, xix.
- ¹³ *Household Books*, *op. cit.*, introduction, xviii. After the death of Richard Sibson in 1617, there was a dispute as to who held the patronage of the living of Bowness, but it was found that Henry Spiller of Middlesex had purchased this right from Anne, Countess of Arundel and it was he who presented it to William Orbell.
- ¹⁴ *Britannia*, Cumberland (1610 edn), 775.
- ¹⁵ CW2, xi, 364.
- ¹⁶ CW2, xi, 352.
- ¹⁷ CW2, xl, 56-9, gives further details on the life of Leonard Lowther. He had been presented the living of Bowness in 1580, by the Earl of Arundel and Lord William Howard, but because of their claim to the Dacre lands against the rightful heir, Francis Dacre, they were later both imprisoned in the Tower of London.
- ¹⁸ This watch house shows that the tower had been abandoned because if the tower had still been in use a further lower viewpoint would have been unnecessary.
- ¹⁹ Ferguson, in his article on dovecotes, CW1, ix, 433, says "the rector of Bowness-on-Solway tells me that his predecessors had one in a field opposite to the church".
- ²⁰ The Rev. Norman Joyce (Ms History of the Parish of St Michael, Bowness-on-Solway, undated, Cumbria Record Office, (Carlisle) (C.R.O.)) suggested that "an old Tithe Barn dating back to the 15th century" stands as one of the outbuildings of the present rectory, but it appears to be a later building and not the tithe barn.
- ²¹ Decays of Bowness Parsonage, C.R.O., D/MH, vol. vii, 277-9.
- ²² *Miscellany Accounts of the Diocese of Carlisle*, ed. by R. S. Ferguson (1877), 21.
- ²³ CW2, xliii, 121-4, gives further details on Gerard Lowther.
- ²⁴ Hutchinson, ii, 489, quoting a letter to John Gale. The finding of the remains of the walls of so many old buildings outside of the Roman Fort has led some to believe that these were the remains of the vicus.
- ²⁵ Mannix and Whellan, 180. Whellan, 150, explained why the rectory was empty: "the old rectory is about to be rebuilt [so] the rector resides at present (1858) in the village".
- ²⁶ CW2, xxiii, 25.
- ²⁷ CW2, xi, 240-1.
- ²⁸ Ms History of the Parish of Bowness-on-Solway, 1959, Carlisle Library, 2B9 BOW 9, vol. 2, 93.
- ²⁹ 1974 *Terrier*, Carlisle Library, B-BOW/9. The Diocesan Registry has a deed of covenant for the new rectory, dated 17 April 1860: they also have *Terriers* going back to 1704, but none makes reference to the tower.
- ³⁰ Harold Skelton Ms, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, 235. The 1974 *Terrier* records that "in the garden a small part of the house of 1859 remains, in poor condition now and used as a fowl house and store", but it has since been demolished.
- ³¹ Harold Skelton Ms, *op. cit.*: "it was during this fire that the oldest registers . . . were destroyed". Richard Bellhouse suggests that structural failure may have been the result of the rectory having been built over the vallum.
- ³² 1974 *Terrier*. Elevations of the new parsonage house by J. H. Martindale, dated 1922, are in C.R.O., DB6/Plans/1/6. In the Diocesan Registry is an approval of the new parsonage house dated 11 June 1923: it cost £3,000.
- ³³ Quoted in a letter to the author from Richard Bellhouse, 19 June 1987.
- ³⁴ *R.C.H.M. Shielings and Bastles* (1970), 70.
- ³⁵ Leland, *op. cit.*, vol. vii, fol. 69.
- ³⁶ This date was originally over the entrance but is now lost.
- ³⁷ *C.S.P.D.*, Addenda, 1580-1625, 349.
- ³⁸ For years the west wall of Drumburgh Castle was supported by shoring and it was necessary to take this wall down, stone by stone and rebuild it exactly as it was.
- ³⁹ The watch tower probably had a bell in it to warn of incursion.
- ⁴⁰ Mannix and Whellan, 180.
- ⁴¹ *History of Northumberland*, ii, vol. iii, 302.