

III.—MITFORD CASTLE.

By H. L. HONEYMAN.

In 1938 a few students from King's College in the University of London organized a camp on Morpeth Common, where some of the unemployed workmen of the North could be given good food, light work, and entertainment, so that they might be more fit to work if and when there was work for them. It was thought that digging would be a suitable form of exercise for the men and the organizers got in touch with the North of England Excavation Committee in search of advice. Dr. C. H. Hunter Blair's paper in *Archæologia Aeliana*, 4th Ser., Vol. XIV, had drawn attention to the possibilities of the Mitford Castle site, and it was within easy reach of Morpeth. The owner's permission was obtained and, in the summers of 1938 and 1939, a good deal of useful work was done before war broke out and put a stop to the undertaking.

Operations on the site were in the charge of Mr. Arnold Berrey, now a member of our Society; I was asked to select the positions for excavations and to give general supervision; and Colonel Spain of the Excavation Committee gave valuable advice and took a keen and helpful interest in the work. I would have preferred a plan and detailed record to be provided by Mr. Berrey, but Mr. Berrey has been prevented from completing such an account, and he has placed at my disposal his interim report and the photographs now reproduced.

HISTORY.

For detailed history of Mitford see John Hodgson's

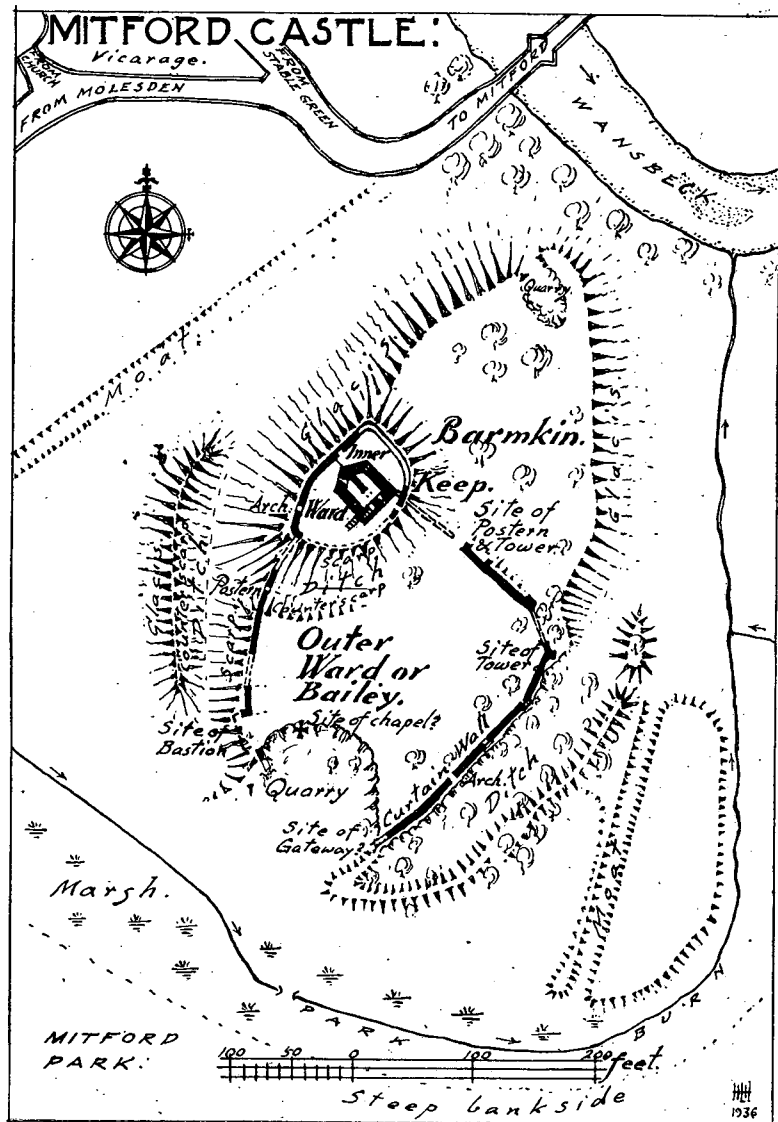
History of Northumberland and the accounts by Dr. C. H. Hunter Blair in *Archæologia Aeliana*, 4th Series, Vols. XIV and XXII. It is enough here to say that there seems to have been a fortified village on the steep-sided, rock-cored castle hill at or before the Norman Conquest. The early Bertram lords of Mitford cleared out the civilian inhabitants (as happened at Lincoln and Durham), settled them on the lower ground and built for them the present parish church. The hill top was then fortified as a standard pattern motte, bailey, and barmkin castle. In the twelfth century the area of the bailey was reduced by straightening its sides and digging deep ditches through the east and west slopes of the hill. The east ditch was a quarry and the stone from it was used to wall the castle in stone and lime. The castle was well maintained till about 1321 when it was dismantled and gutted by fire. It was probably restored by the 13th Earl of Athol but its later history is obscure; pottery evidence suggests that part of the castle was occupied at least until the building of the Mitfords' mansion on the low ground in 1637.

DESCRIPTION.

The castle, see sketch plan, consists of three parts. 1: A barmkin on the north protected, it would seem, only by a mud wall though a stone wall joined it to the north corner of the shell keep. 2: A bailey surrounded by a stone wall and with the main gate, destroyed by quarrying before 1810, at its south end. This bailey was crossed by a cruciform church somewhat on the lines of the "college" church at Warkworth and was surrounded by various buildings huddled against its curtain wall. 3: A mound or "motte" crowned by a "shell keep" within which stood a pentagonal great tower whose vaulted semi-basement still remains.

EXCAVATIONS.

1. The Postern. It seemed probable that there would have been the usual gateway at one end of the division



between motte and bailey, and most likely at the end which reached the barmkin. Accordingly a party was set to dig here and soon unearthed the lower part of the expected portal. The following particulars, and all the dimensions which follow, are from Mr. Berrey's notes: Depth of sill below present surface, 2 ft. 6 in. Width of opening, 7 ft. 6 in. Facing stones on west side remained to a height of three feet; on the east side only the core of the wall remained but it had a large beam socket about six feet above ground (see plate X, fig. 1). There has been a portcullis. Finds: Arch voussoirs, an iron spear point, a horse's jaw bone and three fragments of unglazed pottery, all lying on the former surface level.

2. The great tower or keep. This was examined but not interfered with. It was noticed that the two parallel barrel-vaulted chambers which form its semi-basement had been constructed as cisterns—there being no well on the motte—with inlet spouts for rainwater and an entrance door set well above floor level. But that they also served as places of confinement was indicated by the pathetic inscription *CAPTIVVS MORIOR* 14-7 (plate X, fig. 2) cut on a stone of the innermost chamber. Note the Arabic numerals: I am informed that a date in the fifteenth century (unfortunately the third figure is indecipherable) is possible for their use, though not common. The main floor of the tower was reached by a flight of steps which may have been covered by some sort of fore-building (see plate X, fig. 3).

3. The 1810 map of the castle indicated some remains, apparently vaults, between the great tower and the west side of the shell keep. It, therefore, seemed worth while to dig in this area, and the results were interesting and unexpected. Digging revealed the lower part of a rectangular building projecting westwards from the great tower and filling most of the remaining space within the shell keep. In plan it resembled Dally Castle and, like it, had well-formed arrow loops. Digging to a depth of five feet failed to reveal its floor, and one can only suppose that the designer intended

to remove the wall of the shell keep and scarp the mound, as at Dally. Work was stopped before it was possible to relate the date of this block-house to that of the great tower, but the probable sequence may have been as follows. First, the shell keep and its attached hall, kitchen, etc., of which clear traces remain. Second, the block-house, begun but never carried very far. Third, the building of the great tower and the burying of the lower walls of the block-house. The latter's dimensions, so far as recorded, were, walls 3 ft. 3 in. thick, breadth externally 22 ft. 10 in.

4. A trial hole was dug in the filling of the ditch between motte and bailey. Among the hewn stones encountered was one with a fragmentary Latin inscription which appears to record work carried out for a lord "vallis de Bøgi", if Dr. Douglas Simpson's reconstruction of it is correct, in other words David of Strathbogy, Earl of Athol. This fragment is, like the "captivus" stone, of great importance as indicating that the castle, or at any rate the building on the motte, survived, or was restored after, the disaster of 1321.

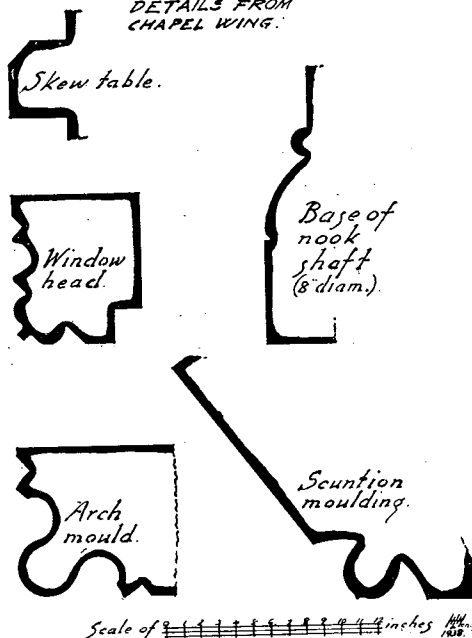
5. The 1810 map shews "supposed chapel" in a mound of debris in the bailey and, although the expansion of the quarry to provide stone for John Dobson's new Mitford Hall in 1820 had encroached on the area indicated, it seemed worth while to excavate in the corner between the quarry edge and a part of the curtain wall which had obviously been the end of a two or three-storied building. It was found that the latter overlay the foundation walls of an earlier building, not parallel with it, one of a series extending eastwards across the bailey, and having mixed up with them either the north or south wall of a church. The church had been cruciform as the east respond of its north, or south, transept arch remains to some height with the moulded base (see plate X, fig. 4) of a nook shaft.

All these buildings overlay a graveyard whose monuments had been left undisturbed, buried in earth under the later floors. Where burials interfered with foundations, the builders dug a trench alongside and pushed the bones into it.

Fragments of a window (see details and plate X, fig. 5) and a well carved nook shaft capital (see plate XI, fig. 6) proved that the superstructure was of late twelfth century date and therefore that the graves were earlier, as indeed was indicated by their decoration. Some were mere stone boxes, little less

MITFORD CASTLE:

DETAILS FROM
CHAPEL WING.



rude than pre-historic "cists", but most were protected by a headstone, a foot-stone, and a long heavy slab, sometimes plain, sometimes carved, tightly fitted between them (plate XI, figs. 6 to 11). They thus illustrate, what is not commonly known, the way in which early mediæval tombs were actually covered. The headstones which can be seen in such churches as Woodhorn were not meant to be used alone

but each formed part of a group, head, foot and ledger stone, all designed to be placed together.

Seven individual tombs were uncovered in the comparatively small area dealt with and one, on being opened, contained the bones of a man who had been 6 ft. 2 in. high. The graves were not disturbed but unfortunately some of them have since been desecrated and cover stones have been thrown down into the quarry.

Work had to stop before a clear picture could be formed of the occupation of this part of the bailey and much still remains to be learnt about it.

Apart from many pieces of hewn stone, no objects of interest, pottery, etc., were found in this area of excavation. The bones of a horse, among the graves, probably represent a "secondary interment"!

POTTERY.

Many fragments of pottery were found in the inner ward on the motte. Most of them of late mediæval or Tudor date and not far below the present surface. We would have liked to remove them to the Black Gate for expert examination and dating but the proprietor was unwilling and the pottery, as also the portable objects found, had to be stored in a wooden hut in the castle field. Hut and contents disappeared during the war.

PRESENT CONDITION.

Owing to the outbreak of war in 1939 it was not possible to resume digging in 1940, nor was it possible to have the excavated area re-filled. During the war much damage was done by the military and Home Guards in training, but even more was done later by picnickers and trippers, who threw gravestones into the quarry, desecrated graves, and cast down loose stonework wherever it could be got at. Even the bronze plate, which had been supplied by the Ministry

of Works and fixed to the end of the wall of the shell keep, was stolen. A smaller plate has, however, been fixed in a less accessible position.

Nature has at last stepped in to give some of the protection denied by man. A large fallen limb of a tree blocks the postern gate. Great beds of nettles threaten the legs of intruders. And the turf now heaves in many a mouldering heap above the graves in the burial ground and the grave-stones thrown into the quarry. It has, so far, proved impossible to convince the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate of the Ministry of Works that taking over the site could be an economic proposition, but there are signs that the inspectorate may adopt a different attitude in future and it is much to be desired that Mitford Castle should be in its care.

FUTURE WORK.

The following are the lines of investigation most likely to be of interest: Opening and preserving the masonry of the postern gate. Completing the excavation of the rectangular building on the motte and preparing a record plan of it. Completing the excavation of the church and the burial ground and, after retrieving the latter's gravestones from the quarry, preserving it as a unique specimen of an early mediæval cemetery.

But, to quote from Mr. Berrey's notes: "Before any further work is attempted it will be necessary to place the site under adequate surveillance."



4.



5.



2.



3.



1.

MITFORD CASTLE.



10.



11.



8.



9.



6.



7.

