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The White Wall, Berwick-upon-Tweed

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DURING June 1989, maintenance undertaken by English Heritage on the White Wall at Berwick-upon-Tweed castle afforded an opportunity to examine the medieval and Tudor work on this section of the defences and prompted this brief consideration of the phasing of that portion of the visible monument that lies next to the river.¹

Berwick castle stands atop a steep slope immediately to the north of the River Tweed. It has suffered through abandonment in the Elizabethan period and in the mid-19th century through the construction of a new station for the North British Railway Company, the line crossing the Tweed on the Royal Border Bridge and passing through the heart of the castle. The north-western defences were retained as a boundary wall for the railway yard, whilst to the east of the railway, a length of wall runs north from the Polygonal (or Constable's) Tower to the south tower of the Dungeon, all of these features now being incorporated into the gardens of a private nursing home.

Berwick castle was captured by Edward I in 1296 and then, in accounts of 1297–8, we find the sum of £122 being spent on, amongst other things, “a wall below the castle towards the River Tweed”.² Between 1392 and 1395, there are references to the construction of a postern with a door in the White Wall and “a great wooden gate at the end of Whitewall on the River Tweed, forty feet long for the fortification of Berwick town”.³ Just over a century later, a survey of the walls of Berwick undertaken by Christopher Morris and Richard Cavendish,⁴ probably in 1538, records the following:

“The said Whit Wawll, goinge southwart from the utter corner of the castell down to the watter of Twed, conteigneth of length iiijx.xx.iiij [94] yerdes, in the myddest whereof is oone yeron Posteron to issue into the felde; and at the end of the same wawll is a tower mayd for occupyng of ordenance, and stondith in the watter, the foundation wherof is under myned by the watter, and the corners of the same dryven away, wherby the same tower by all likelyhed will right shortly fall into the watter. The same tower conteigneth in widenes within ix foote, the wawll in thikenes iiij [4] foote. The entringe into the sam from above the wawlle was covered with tymbre, and the tower self with flagges of stoone. The tymbre is rotten and decayed so as ther dar no gunners neither lye within the same as hath ben accustomed, ne yet occupy any ordenance, for doubt of fawllinge thereof.”⁵

In 1639, unspecified minor repairs to the White Wall were undertaken,⁶ then in 1719, workmen from the barracks began demolishing the wall but were stopped by the Mayor and Corporation.⁷ Since then, it seems to have been left alone until it was taken into the guardianship of the Office of Works at the beginning of this century.

That the White Wall was an addition to the original castle layout is confirmed by the butt joint visible where it meets the south-west corner of the castle wall at the top of Breakneck Stairs (fig. 1, A). Descending the slope to the side of the Tweed in a westerly direction, the wall is some 1.6 m (5' 3") wide, turning to a slightly more south-westerly heading as the ground begins to level. At this point the primary wall has been reinforced, first by a thickening of its front face, associated with the construction of the Water Tower, and second by an expansion wall to its rear, most of this

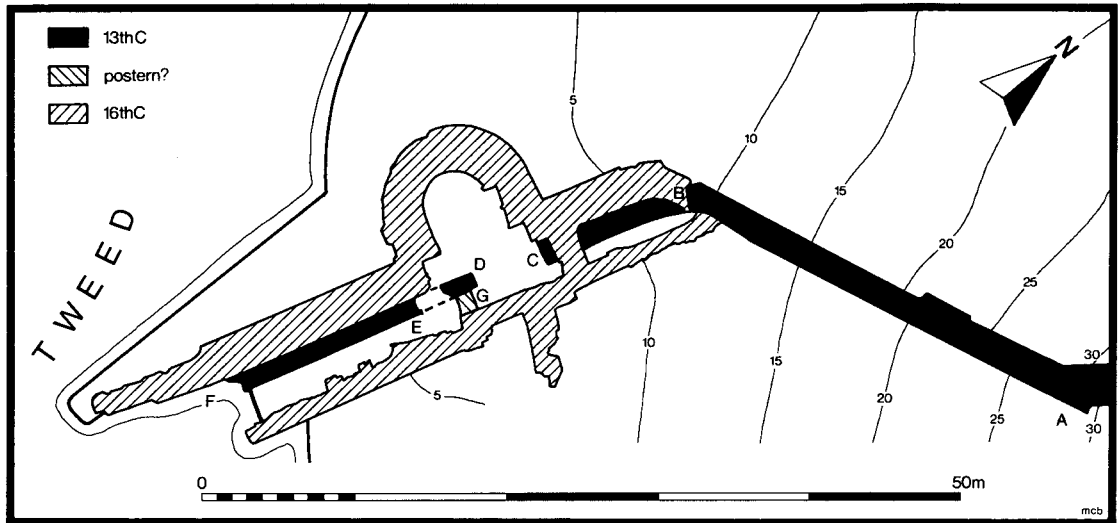


Fig. 1 The White Wall and Water Tower, Berwick-upon-Tweed. Contour heights in metres.

additional work being preserved largely in the form of core masonry (although facing blocks can be traced at many points along the base of the wall). As consolidated, the expansion wall north of the Water Tower is separated from the inner face of the original wall by concrete flooring.

The original, Edwardian, wall can be traced south of the turn at the bottom of Breakneck Stairs because its inner face was preserved within the inner expansion wall. The parapet walk seems also to have belonged to the medieval wall, since it is partially covered by later masonry at one point (fig. 1, B). Just north of the Water Tower, part of the inner face of the original parapet is visible beneath later material and one or two facing stones from the outer face are embedded in the side of the (now ruinous) stairway on the eastern side of the tower and the wall is still 1.6 m (5' 3") wide here (fig. 1, C). Another short stretch of the Edwardian Wall can be found immediately south of the passageway beneath the Water Tower (fig. 1, D), although it has now narrowed to only 1.25 m (4' 1"). This has been truncated at a later date (a fact confirmed when workmen from English Heritage cleared overlying material, supervised by the writer). South

of this gap, the Edwardian wall can be followed once again (fig. 1, E), narrowed even further to 1.2 m (3' 11") and now with a projecting course, presumably representing the parapet walk (the masonry platform supporting the modern stone seat rests upon this course). Finally, south of the modern stone seat, it disappears, leaving only the later wall which had originally butted against its front face. Although the original length of the White Wall was recorded as 94 yards (85.95 m), only some 67 yards (61.31 m) now remain, indicating how much has been lost to the Tweed.

The new wall added to the front of the Edwardian curtain was some 2 m (6' 6") wide (excluding the offset course). Its rear face butted directly against the front face of the earlier wall: that it had a rear face is confirmed in two places where the Edwardian wall is absent, namely the gap just south of the Water Tower, and on the exposed portion south of the stone seat (fig. 1, F), where the older wall has fallen away (there is no indication that this rear face was added subsequent to the construction of the new wall).

To the rear of the Edwardian wall, an expansion wall survives largely in the form of core masonry, although a faced stone plinth can still

be traced. This butted against the White Wall at the point where it changes direction at the bottom of Breakneck Stairs. South of the Water Tower, three buttresses were traced, attached to the rear (which is not faced) and one of these buttresses had been used as part of a later retaining wall, joining it to the White Wall next to the stone seat platform. Bonded with this expansion wall, and behind the Water Tower, a short length of spur wall heads south-east.

Removal of a set of concrete steps and a concrete platform, which led to a stone seat set upon the stretch of wall by the River Tweed, exposed a section through the fill of the expansion wall and this was studied by the writer during June 1989. This fill was largely sand and gravel, with traces of mortar and occasional larger stones, resting on reddish clay, which contained charcoal.

North of the Water Tower, masonry (associated with the north wall of that tower) bridges the gap between the White Wall and the expansion wall, suggesting that this gap had been filled in before the masonry was carried across it, so this portion of the tower appears to have postdated the initial construction of the expansion wall, although there is no reason to suppose that the completion of these two elements of the reinforcement could not have gone hand-in-hand. It is, however, evident that a short length of wall, which butts against the White Wall and now forms part of the south wall of the passage leading beneath the tower (fig. 1, G), pre-dates the expansion wall to the rear and it is possible that this represents the old postern which the Water Tower was designed to replace. If this was indeed the case, then the postern may very well have been an addition to the original Edwardian wall.

The survey of Morris and Cavendish gives us a *terminus post quem* for the reinforcement of the White Wall and the construction of the Water Tower, since the wall was noted as four feet wide just by the older tower (the same width as the Edwardian wall) and the Water Tower was clearly intended to replace the

tower lost to the river. A likely occasion for this work would seem to be the programme of 1539–42, apparently under the charge of Sir George Lawson, and most likely to the operations of 1539.⁸

The reasons for the reinforcement of the White Wall at this point are not hard to find: although the Edwardian Wall provided adequate defence as it descended the precipitous slope from the castle, as soon as it reached the flood plain of the river it was tactically extremely vulnerable, being only 4' wide by this time. The loss of the tower at the end of the wall into the River Tweed prompted the construction of the new Water Tower on the site of the old postern and this was probably accompanied by the reinforcement of the Edwardian wall by virtually doubling its width at the front and placing a sand and gravel-filled expansion to the rear.

NOTES

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² J. Stevenson, *Documents Illustrative of the History of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1870), vol. II, 160–1.

³ P.R.O. E101/483/5.

⁴ H. M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works*, vol. IV, 1485–1660 (Part II) (London 1982), 633; AA¹ 1857.

⁵ P.R.O. E36/173; AA¹ 1857, 93.

⁶ P.R.O. E351/3521 M10.

⁷ Berwick R.O. B1/15 f. 56v.

⁸ Colvin (above n. 4), 636.

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