

## V.

NOTES ON SOME NORTHUMBRIAN "PELES." BY A. GRAHAM,  
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In the course of its survey of Roxburghshire, the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments has lately identified a small group of buildings of a distinctive and interesting type not previously known in Scotland. No more than four certain examples have been discovered, and all of them are concentrated in quite a small area on and near the head of Jed Water. However, on the English side of the Border structures of identical type survive in much larger numbers and in much wider distribution, the nearest being in Redesdale at a distance of some thirteen miles from the Roxburghshire group. As their special features do not seem to be generally known, the following notes, which were obtained in the course of some work recently carried out in Northumberland, may be of interest to Scottish antiquaries for purposes of comparison.

In the first place something must be said about the use of the word "pele" to describe these houses. In virtue of its derivation, this word, however spelt, should properly apply to a stockade or palisaded enclosure; but it has been used so loosely that this original and correct meaning has been largely lost sight of and misunderstanding and controversy have resulted. To discuss the rights and wrongs of this question now would not be relevant to the subject of the present paper, and I will therefore state that in adopting the term "pele" I am simply following the usage of the Ordnance Survey—and this for the sake of convenience, and without hazarding any opinion as to whether it is correct or otherwise.

The so-called "peles," like the brochs, resemble one another so closely that a general description of one or two normal examples will suffice to indicate the main characteristics of all. Individual features of interest and points of divergence from the normal can then be conveniently dealt with.

At *Gatehouse*, on the left bank of the Tarsset Burn, some three miles above its confluence with the North Tyne, a "pele" stands on either side of the road. The one to the north is in very fair preservation and will serve as a first example. As is shown by Pl. XI, 1, it is a modest oblong structure, two storeys in height, possessing no particularly noticeable external feature apart from the forestair that leads to the first-floor entrance. It measures 37 feet 6 inches from north to south by 23 feet 6 inches from east to west

over walls 4 feet 6 inches thick on the ground-floor and 3 feet 3 inches on the first floor. The forestair, which is the only ground-floor feature on the east side, shows some signs of disturbance and ends in a landing 2 feet below the threshold of the first-floor entrance; this is placed in the centre of the north half of the east face, and shows door-checks, a hole for a stout bar, and sockets for the pintles that took the place of hinges. As the illustration shows, there are two original windows on this side, one round-headed and one rectangular, and a slit which seems to be modern. In the north end there is a door at ground-level, with checks, bar-hole and pintle-sockets and a relieving-arch above, and on the first floor a small square loophole. A small slit shows on the west side on the ground-floor, but otherwise neither this side nor the south end retain any original feature. The roof is modern, and in all probability the skews of the gables likewise. Internally the building contains a single compartment on each floor, the floor itself, which is modern, being supported by joists resting on scarcements. The first-floor room has a fireplace at the south end, flanked by stone slabs and surmounted by a hood which contracts to form a flue in conjunction with a channel running up the inner face of the gable. In the east wall there is a recess which may represent either a blocked window or a large aumbry; two aumbries appear in the north gable and one small one in the west wall near the north-west corner.

A second example is provided by the so-called "*Hole Tower*," a "pele" now incorporated in the farm-buildings at Hole, midway between Bellingham and West Woodburn. This structure, which was carefully restored in recent years where weaknesses had begun to appear—*e.g.* in the north-west gable and the forestair—is now in very good preservation, and is one of the class that possesses a masonry vault in place of a floor supported on joists and scarcements. Hole Tower is slightly smaller than either of the buildings at Gatehouse, as it measures about 33 feet from north-east to south-west by 23 feet transversely over walls 4 feet 6 inches thick and standing about 24 feet high to the wall-head. The lower part of the south-east side (Pl. XI, 2 and 3) is largely taken up by the imposing forestair; this leads to a first-floor entrance-door, which is provided with the usual bar-holes and is flanked by windows which have probably been enlarged. On the second floor this south-east face shows two small square windows, chamfered in the same way as the original openings but possibly enlarged none the less. The south-west gable is pierced at ground-level by an original door, the details of which are obscured by the cow-byre that has been built on to this side; and no features appear in the upper part of the gable where this rises clear. The only external feature visible on the north-west side is a window near the north-east end; the north-east gable shows a slit on the ground-floor just above the modern entrance-door, another on the first floor, and pigeon-holes on the second floor (Pl. XI, 5). Internally, as



1. Gatehouse: north pele from S.E.



2. Hole Tower from S.



3. Hole Tower from E.



4. Branshaw Pele: door-check and bar-holes.



5. Hole Tower from N.E.



6. Shittleheugh Pele: interior, showing aumbries.

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1. Woodhouse Pele from N.E.



2. Raw Pele: relief carvings.



3. West Woodburn Pele from E.



4. Cottage Fireplace at Spittal, Roxburghshire.



5. West Woodburn Pele: entrance, showing marks of fire.



6. Black Middens Pele, Shipley Shiels, from S.W.

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has been said, the ground-floor is covered by a barrel-vault, its haunch pierced by a hole about two feet square near the north-east end. The first floor contains a modern fireplace at the south-west end and several small aumbries; the north-east end of the room is partitioned off by means of a light wall of rods and plaster mounted on studs, and beyond this a flimsy wooden stair, no doubt modern in its present form, rises to the second floor or roof-space. That the partition may be original, or may stand in the same position as an original partition, is suggested by the position of the first-floor window in the north-west wall, which seems to be placed so as to light the space cut off by the partition. The roof is modern and the eaves seem to have been raised, perhaps to permit of the enlargement of the second-floor windows (Pl. XI, 3).

The normal type of these houses is thus seen to have been a barn-like, gable-ended structure of two storeys, or sometimes of three; it is of small dimensions, fourteen measured examples averaging internally just under 28 feet in length by 13 feet 9 inches in breadth;<sup>1</sup> and it lacks the parapet that distinguishes a castle or a tower. The ground-floor, which is adapted for defence in virtue of its strongly-barred door (Pl. XI, 4), often turning on pintles, and its small slit-openings, is evidently a stable and store-place; while the upper part, which has separate access from without, is intended for human occupation. Aumbries (Pl. XI, 6) and small square windows are found regularly on the first floor, and sometimes fireplaces with flues; but it is doubtful whether these last are original features, except possibly at Raw and Highshaw, and it is probable that the "peles" were designed as temporary refuges only and may not have been used as places of permanent residence until a later stage in their history.

In addition to Gatehouse and Hole Tower, fourteen "peles," as distinct from bastels, were visited, and the special features of these may now be reviewed briefly. Internal dimensions at ground-level are given for every building that could be measured.

*Woodhouse Pele* (30 feet by 17 feet), at Beacon Grange, near Holystone, possesses some abnormal features such as an internal stair; but this may be due to its having been adapted as a residence, probably in 1602, the date recorded on the lintel.<sup>2</sup> The aspect shown in Pl. XII, 1, however, is fully typical, the height being due to the presence of a loft above the first-floor room. The basement is vaulted, with a loft at the south end, which is remote from the ground-floor entrance; this entrance, which is almost

<sup>1</sup> Actually the lengths range from 20 feet to 34 feet 6 inches, while the breadths range only from 10 feet to 17 feet—indeed, with the exception of three examples the breadths all fall between 13 feet and 15 feet 6 inches. Increase in size thus seems to have been obtained mainly by addition to length, an inference which is strengthened by the dimensions of Akeld Bastel which, though much longer than any of the "peles" as it measures 54 feet 6 inches internally, is no more than 16 feet in breadth. The reason is no doubt to be looked for in the size of the timbers that were available for floors and roofs.

<sup>2</sup> On this, however, see *A History of Northumberland*, vol. xv. p. 490.

certainly original, is of interest as being rebated for two doors, only the inner one being barred.

A "pele" in the village of *Thropton*, two miles west of Rothbury, has been reconstructed as a cottage, but the built-up ground-floor entrance can still be seen.

The "pele" (30 feet by 15 feet) that now forms part of the farm-buildings at *Raw*, three miles south-south-west of Holystone, still possesses its upper floor, but its wall-head is modern and its general external appearance has been much disguised by reconstruction. An interesting feature, however, is the pair of relief carvings that seem to have been inserted, after disturbance of the adjoining masonry, one on either side of a small square window at first-floor level—a human head showing traces of Classical influence, and a panel with swags below it bearing a Tudor rose and another much-weathered device (Pl. XII, 2). The basement is vaulted, the centre of the vault being pierced by an aperture less than 12 inches square. The west gable contains a cavity resembling a fireplace, now partially blocked; its original base was apparently about 3 feet above the floor, and its head narrows to a flue-like passage running up into the gable above the vault. A similar feature, but definitely identifiable as a fireplace, also occurs at *Highshaw* (*infra*). No flue appears on the floor above, but there the east gable shows clear marks of fire running up its face to a square aperture just below the peak; this may consequently have been a horizontal outlet for smoke coming from a fire built in front of the gable with a hood and flue applied to the face of the wall, not sunk into it. Pl. XII, 4, shows a flue of this type, photographed in an old cottage at Spittal-on-Rule, Roxburghshire.

*Highshaw Pele* (30 feet by 14 feet), which stands about half a mile west of *Highshaw* farmhouse, has now lost the upper storey that it no doubt once possessed. As at *Raw* the basement is vaulted, and the vault is pierced by an aperture; here, however, the aperture is 1 foot 9 inches square and is placed in the haunch of the vault. The entrance is checked for two doors, both provided with bar-holes. The end-wall remote from the door contains a fireplace set about 2 feet above the floor, with the remains of a projecting hood on either side and a flue ascending above it in the thickness of the wall. The back of the fireplace is pierced by a triangular loophole. This fireplace and the aumbry beside it seem to suggest that this basement room was designed from the first for occupation by human beings, not only by animals, and probably for more than temporary occupation at that.

*Iron House* (34 feet 6 inches by 13 feet), which stands by the edge of a shallow gully some 300 yards west-north-west of *Highshaw Pele*, is interesting chiefly on account of the associated remains. This house forms part of a complicated group of ruined buildings and enclosures, and it is said that the settlement was inhabited within living memory; but part at least of the

enclosure-wall that flanks the gully is made of very massive masonry similar to that used in the "pele," while a series of six rectangular buildings which are backed against this wall seem to be aligned with its axis as if planned in relation to it. This site may therefore provide an example of a "pele" in something reminiscent of its original setting.

The "pele" at *High Rochester* has been rebuilt as a cottage, and most of its original features have been obscured. Its small size, however, is noteworthy, as it measures slightly less than 20 feet by 10 feet internally on the ground-floor. The ground-floor entrance can be recognised though now transformed into a window, and the filled-up first-floor entrance, from which the forestair is said to have been removed in the nineteenth century, can likewise be made out.

*Branshaw Pele* (30 feet by 15 feet 6 inches) stands by the Roman road three-quarters of a mile east-south-east of Dudlees farmhouse. Only the basement now remains; this is covered by a vault the haunch of which is pierced by an aperture 2 feet square. A breach recently made at one end of the vault discloses the method of its construction; the voussoirs are set in lime mortar, the spandrels are filled with earth and small stones, and above this filling there has been laid a floor of stone slabs up to 3 inches in thickness. The usual method of securing the door of a "pele"—with two massive wooden bars of square section issuing from bar-holes one on either side of the doorway—is well exemplified here (Pl. XI, 4).

Two other "peles" in Redesdale—those at *Shittleheugh* (30 feet 6 inches by 10 feet 6 inches), two miles north-west of Otterburn, and *West Woodburn* (33 feet by 14 feet), half a mile north-west of Lowleam farmhouse—have some features of interest in common. Both, for example, contain enormous stones, particularly at ground-level. In both, the ground-floor entrance is placed in a long side, not in a gable, with the result that the upper entrance—at West Woodburn at least—may have been approached by a ladder, not by a forestair (Pl. XII, 3). Again in both, the floor of the upper compartment rested, in whole or in part, on a corbelled-out ledge instead of on an intake, a feature also observed at Lowleam. Shittleheugh, like High Rochester, is exceptionally narrow for its length. West Woodburn, like Iron House and the reputed "pele" at Evistones, stands in a complex of foundations which may represent a contemporary settlement.

Not the least interesting feature of West Woodburn Pele, however, is the sinister evidence that it bears to its own ultimate fate. The ground-floor doorway is heavily marked with fire, as can be seen clearly in Pl. XII, 5; and the small stones that once filled up the interstices between the larger blocks have disintegrated and largely disappeared under the influence of heat. Besiegers must have burned down the door, suffocating or roasting the people and animals within.

The last "pele" to be mentioned in the Redesdale district is the one

now incorporated in the farm-buildings at *Lowleam*, between Hole Tower (*supra*) and West Woodburn village. Measurements could not be taken when this building was visited, but it is certainly one of the smallest examples seen. All the original features have disappeared except the ground-floor entrance, and the only peculiarity is the corbelled-out ledge that serves to support the first floor in place of an intake (*cf.* Shittleheugh and West Woodburn).

Another group of "peles" occurs on the Tarsset Burn, of which one of the pair at *Gatehouse* has already been described in detail. Its neighbour<sup>1</sup> (28 feet by 14 feet), on the south side of the road, preserves no features of interest; and the same may be said of the much-ruined structure (24 feet 6 inches by 13 feet 6 inches) a quarter of a mile north-west of the ford and footbridge at *Waterhead*,<sup>2</sup> except for the fact that it is associated with the remains of a number of small buildings. "*Corbie Castle*,"<sup>3</sup> however, situated about half a mile north-north-west of this last, is noteworthy as possessing a vaulted basement, and provision for two doors, both barred, in its ground-floor entrance. It is also remarkably small, being only 22 feet 6 inches long by 13 feet 6 inches broad internally. *Black Middens Pele* (25 feet by 14 feet 6 inches), which stands 200 yards north-west of Shipley Shiels farm and close to the junction of the Tarsset and Black Burns, still preserves its upper storey with its original entrance and the forestair leading thereto (Pl. XII, 6); it will be noticed that, as at *Gatehouse*, the forestair ends well below the level of the threshold. The lintel of the doorway has sockets for three iron bars and is therefore probably a re-used window-lintel; the window to the left of the door has had square wooden bars; and the one to the right has been reduced in size since its first construction—unless, as is possible, its lintel was originally made for some larger window.

The foregoing notes do not cover the whole of the material that survives in Northumberland, as remains of "peles" which are on record at the following sites could not be included in the survey: *Crag*, two miles south-west of Holystone; *Gunner's Bar*, three-quarters of a mile north-east of Darden Lough, in the same neighbourhood as *Crag*; *Little Lough*, half a mile east of Darden Lough; *Ray*, *Ray Fell*; and *Roses Bower*, four miles west of Wark.<sup>4</sup> Two reputed "peles" in Redesdale, at *Evistones* and *Rattenraw*, have been purposely omitted, as the scanty remains to be seen at both these places are probably those of small towers; and likewise four others in North Tynedale—*Stanners Burn*, *Falstone* farmhouse, *Hawkhope* and *Snabdaugh*—as their identification is also doubtful for one reason or

<sup>1</sup> On both see *A History of Northumberland*, vol. xv. p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> Shilla Hill, *ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> "Barty's Peel," *ibid.*; but see below, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> It is reported locally that the ruins of some other "peles," not yet identified or recorded, exist somewhere in the neighbourhood of *Roses Bower*.

another. Of "*Barty's Peel*," which is said to have stood about 100 yards south-east of Comb farmhouse, nothing now remains.

In conclusion, I desire to thank the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) for permission to publish these notes; the National Buildings Record for permission to make use of its photographs for the illustrations; the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (Scotland) for permission to allude to unpublished material; H.M. Stationery Office for permission to publish the photograph appearing as Pl. XII, 3; and my colleague, Mr G. P. H. Watson, F.R.I.B.A., R.S.W., F.S.A.Scot., who first observed these structures in Roxburghshire, for much valuable help and guidance.