

## IV: A Medieval Building Contract from Storeton, Wirral

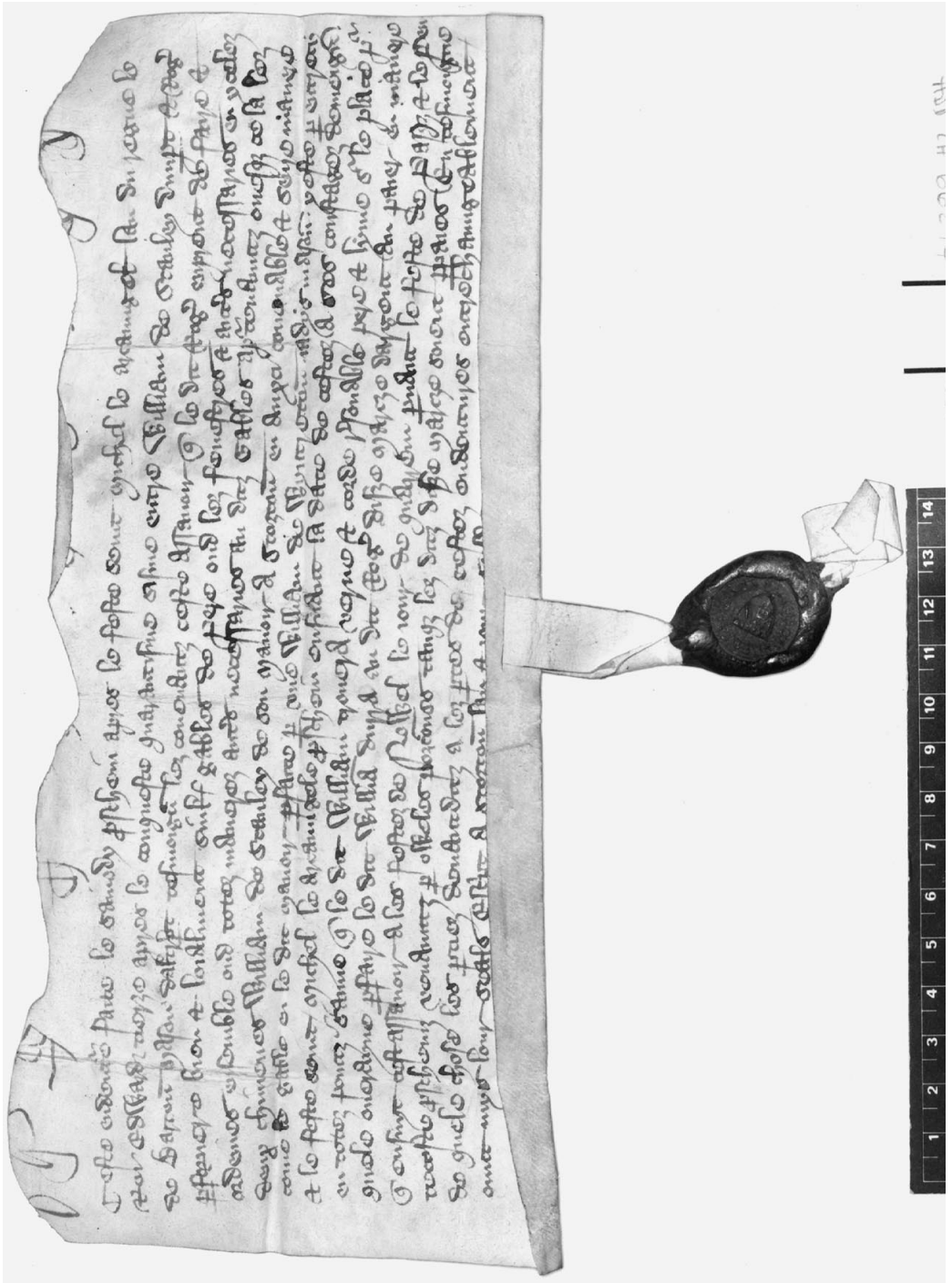
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by M J B Hislop BA, PhD

To those of us who interest ourselves in the architecture of the Middle Ages, it is a cause for deep regret that so much that could have added to our knowledge of the subject has been lost. Medieval houses that survive in anything like their original form, for example, are rare: changing fashions and fortunes have taken a heavy toll in the form of alterations, dilapidation and demolition. Paradoxically, of course, it is these very gaps in the record that give spice to the task of the archaeologist and spur him or her on to make the most of the sources available. One of these sources is the building contract, which can prove a valuable tool in interpreting the architectural history of the building to which it refers, in addition to contributing to our understanding of how the medieval master mason worked.

A local example (Ill IV.1) forms the subject of this paper. It was drawn up on 2 October 1372 between William de Stanley, head forester of the Wirral (Irvine 1953, 56–9), and Roger de Barton, a master mason who, eleven years later, was to take charge of the Earl of Northumberland's reconstruction of Cockermouth Castle in Cumbria (Harvey 1984, 15). Now preserved in the British Library, this document is provincial in more than one sense of the word, being written in indifferent French and in a hand that is markedly inferior to the elegant regularity of contemporary royal documents of this category (BL Add Ch 66294). It nevertheless remains an interesting local record which contributes to a deeper understanding of the county's architecture, and as such is worthy of being brought to the attention of a wider audience than has hitherto been attempted.

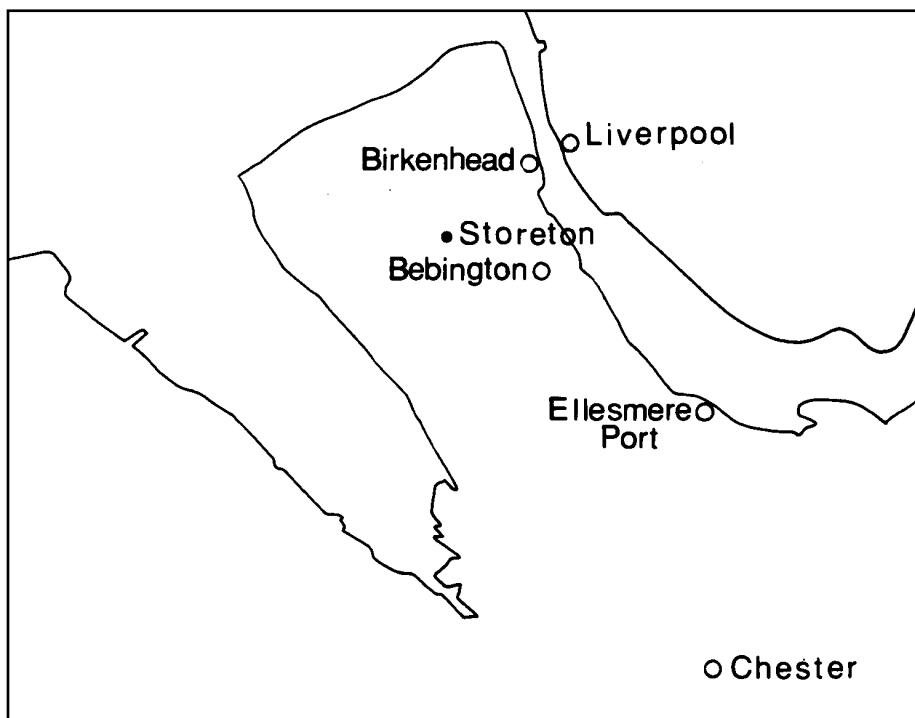
In essence, the contract of 1372 records Roger de Barton's undertaking to build five gables and two chimneys at William de Stanley's manor house at Storeton, the gables to be like one already completed by another master mason, William de Wyntreton. It therefore reflects either the final stages in the construction of the house or the remodelling of an older building. No details are given regarding the nature of these works other than an implication that at least some of the gables were to contain windows. It might seem unusual for a contract to be drawn up part way through a building project, but there are other recorded instances. For example, in 1383 Roger de Barton again entered into a contract to build a wall 'already begun' at Cockermouth Castle (Harvey 1984, 15), and an indenture of 1384, concerning works at the royal castle of Bamburgh, records that parts of these works had already been started (Salzman 1952, 465–6). We cannot, of course, be



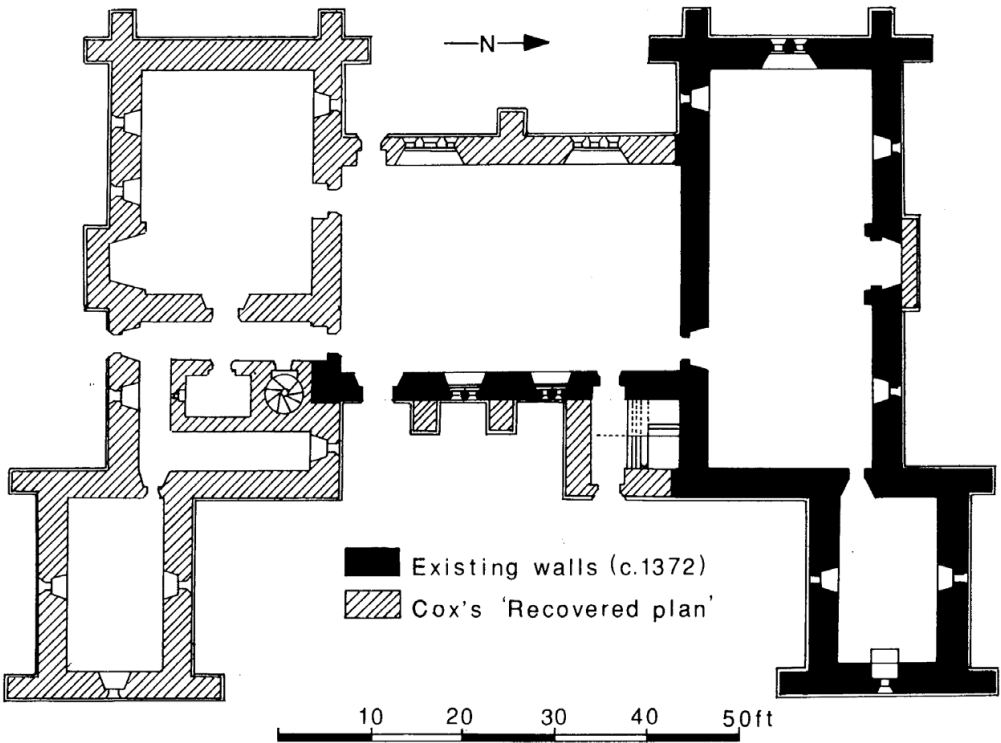
III IV.1 The Storeton indenture (BL Add Ch 66294). Reproduced by kind permission of the British Library

certain that these reflect changes of masons; they may indicate renegotiations of terms, as has been suggested for Bolton Castle, North Yorkshire (Hislop 1996, 16–17). However, we do know of other cases of one master mason succeeding another whilst building was in progress: during the rebuilding of Canterbury Cathedral the master mason William of Sens was replaced by William the Englishman after suffering a crippling fall (Harvey 1984, 272). Untimely death (Harvey 1977, 158) or poor business acumen (Knoop & Jones 1935–6, 1064) might equally prevent a mason fulfilling his obligations. In other cases we can only conjecture: John de Middleton, for example, was engaged in 1398 to completely rebuild the dormitory at Durham Priory, yet in 1401 another mason, Peter Dryng, entered into a contract whereby he undertook to continue the work begun by Middleton (Salzman 1952, 473–7). Similarly enigmatic are the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of William de Wyntreton from the work at Storeton; we can only hope that more documentary references will be forthcoming.

The building with which the contract was concerned is probably to be identified with the ruins of a late medieval hall house at Storeton Hall Farm, Storeton in Wirral (Ill IV.2). The building was recorded in 1897 by Edward W Cox, who included conjectural reconstructions of the parts that had been destroyed (Cox 1897, 62–8). Cox identified an H-plan house comprising a single-storey hall flanked by a pair of two-storied cross-wings, of which the east wall of the hall survived, together with the north, or solar, wing, which had a tall square annexe projecting from its north-east corner (Ill IV.3). Despite its brevity, the contract gives



Ill IV.2 The location of Storeton. (Not to scale)



III IV.3 Storeton Hall ground plan, based on Cox's plan (1897, between pp 60 and 61. (Scale 1/250)

some clues to the former appearance of the house: there was an intention that it should have at least six gables, and although there is no indication as to their intended positions, the suggestion that some of them were to contain windows may provide a clue. Cox wrote that the cross-wing had a 'fine and lofty pointed gable window' to the west, lighting the solar (1897, 66) (III IV.4), just the sort of feature that could have been intended by the indenture. Indeed, there is a distinct difference in shade between the masonry of the gable and that of the building below eaves level, indicating, perhaps, that the stone came from two different locations and that this is one of the gables built by Roger de Barton. If it is, then we might surmise that William de Stanley began to build his manor house at Storeton c 1370, and that by 1372 William de Wyntreton had completed the entire house up to eaves level, in addition to having built one gable. Barton might have been brought in to complete the two gables of the hall and the remaining three gables of the wings.

There is an alternative interpretation, however. Cox also mentioned that the east wall of the hall (III IV.5) contained 'two great square-headed windows' (1897, 63). In this he appears to have been mistaken, for, as Anthony Emery writes, these windows are 'cut off at the head' (Emery 1999, 576–8), so that their original form is open to conjecture. When the contract is taken into consideration, one interpretation that springs to mind is that their upper portions were contained within gables, rising above eaves level, an arrangement that was not uncommon in the Middle Ages. The great hall at Winchester Castle, for example,



*left:* III IV.4 Storeton Hall from the north-west showing the surviving cross-wing. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of RCHME. Crown copyright.

*below:* IV.5 Storeton Hall from the south-west showing the cross-wing on the left and the east wall of the hall on the right. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of RCHME. Crown copyright.



was built with gabled windows between 1222 and 1233, the upper halves of the windows being above eaves level and contained within the gables (Wood 1965, 13; Brown *et al* 1963, 858). At Stokesay Castle, Shropshire, the great hall of *c* 1280 also has gables above the windows, eaves level corresponding to the springing of the arched heads. Margaret Wood recorded other examples at Nurstead Court, Kent (*c* 1350) and two Berkshire houses, Cumnor Place of *c* 1330–40 and Sutton Courtenay Abbey of *c* 1330 (Wood 1965, 357). The adoption of such a device would have increased the amount of light within the hall by permitting the use of taller windows than would have been possible had they been confined below the eaves, in addition to transforming an essentially horizontal elevation into one which had a decided verticality. The contract of 1372 might lead us to postulate that a similar scheme was intended at Storeton, with the six gables being shared between the two sides of the three-bay hall.

We need not be concerned that the southern bay contains the entrance to the hall rather than another window. Firstly, the contract is vague about the distribution of the fenestration, and not all of the gables need have been intended to contain windows. Secondly, at Winchester the gables over the doorways were pierced with smaller lights whose sills were above eaves level. If this was the case at Storeton, then we cannot expect to find archaeological traces, given that the surviving east wall has lost some of its height.

Whilst a detailed archaeological investigation of this medieval house would no doubt throw more light upon its original form, we are unable, at present, to be any more conclusive about the intentions behind the Storeton contract; but if, in the future, such work should be forthcoming, this document will have drawn attention to possibilities, and offered solutions, that may not have been immediately apparent had it not existed. In addition, it has given us the names of two master masons who were working in Cheshire during the fourteenth century and has thus increased our scope for interpreting the development of medieval architecture within the region; it is possible that this will be its greatest contribution to posterity.

### **Transcript of the Indenture**

Ceste endenture faite le samedy prochein apres le feste seint Michel le arcangel lan du regne le Roi Edward tierze apres le conquete quarantisme sisme entre William de Stanley dunpart et Roger de Barton dautrepart tesmoign lez covenantz ceste assavoir qi le dit Roger enprent de faire et parfernere bien et loialment sinks gables de pere and lez fenestres et autres necessares en ycelez ordenes ensemble and totez manerez autres necessares au ditz Gables apurtenantz ovesqz cela lez deux chimenes William de Stanley de son manoir a Storton en anxi covenable et seire manere come le gable en le dit manoir parfaite par une William de Wyntreton iadys mason yeste parentrecy et le feste seint Michel le arcangele prochein ensuant la date de cestez a ses coustagez demeign en totez pointz sauve qi le dit William trovera verne et corde resonable pere et lyme sur le place pur quele ouerayne parfaire le dit Willia dnrra au dit Roger disze Marcze dargent au paier en manere qensuyt cestassavoir a les festez de Nowel le iour de quaqrem pendant le feste de Pasqz et le Pentecoste procheinz venantz par oweles portones tanqz lez ditz disze Marcze soient paies. En tesmoigne de quele chose les partiez devandit a les partes de cestez endentures entrechangeablement onnt mys lour seals. Escript a Storton lan et iour susdit.

### Translation of the Indenture

This indenture, made the next Saturday after the feast of St Michael the Archangel, the forty-sixth year of the reign of King Edward, the third after the Conquest, between William de Stanley on the one part, and Roger de Barton, mason, on the other part, witnesses the agreements; that is to say that the said Roger undertakes to make and furnish, well and truly, five stone gables, and the windows and other necessities in these collective works, and all manner of other necessities pertaining to the said gables, (and) with that, the two chimneys of William de Stanley's manor at Storeton in this appropriate and fitting manner: like the gable on the said manor completed by one William de Wyntreton, erstwhile mason, and to be (done) between here and the next feast of St Michael the Archangel, following the date of these presents, at his own expense in all points, except that the said William will find a gin and rope, (and) suitable stone and lime on the site; for which completed work the said William will give to the said Roger ten marks of silver to be paid in the following manner: that is to say, at the feasts of Christmas, the day of Lent, during the feast of Easter and Whitsun next to come, by equal portions until the said ten marks are paid. In witness of which things the aforesaid parties have interchangeably put their seals to the parts of these indentures. Drawn up at Storeton the above-said year and day .

### Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Mrs Anne Hislop for her comments on the transcript and translation, Dr Peter Carrington for reading a draft of this paper and making useful suggestions for its improvement, and Miss Susan Nicholson, of Merseyside Sites and Monuments Record, both for her comments on the paper and for her assistance in locating photographs of the building.

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