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THE VICAR'S PELE, CORBRIDGE.

XVII.—THE VICAR'S PELE, CORBRIDGE.

By W. H. KNOWLES, a member of the council.

[Read on May 26th, 1897.]

Corbridge, one of the great manors appertaining to the earldom of Northumberland, was a place of early importance. It was made the headquarters of David king of Scotland during his advance southward; and on the assumption of the earldom by his son Henry, when the castles of Bamburgh and Newcastle were as yet exempted from his jurisdiction, it appears to have been maintained for a time as the capital of the earldom. Its position on Watling Street, and its proximity to Hexhamshire, gave it prominence as a frontier town, but rendered it at the same time particularly liable to the precarious conditions of such a site in times of warfare.

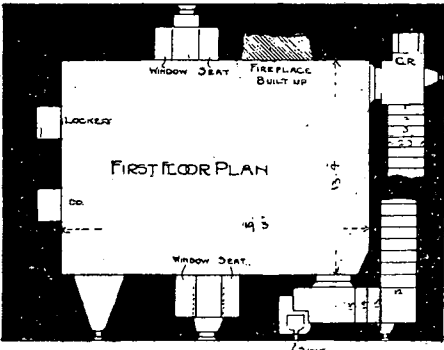
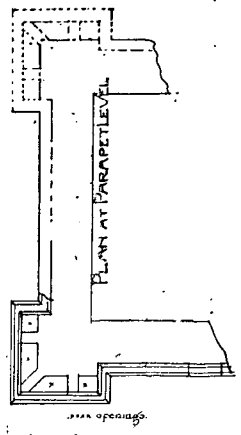
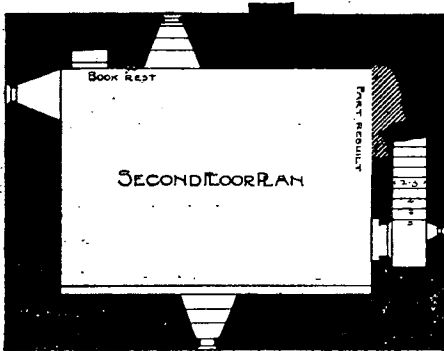
It appears to have possessed the character of an open town, depending for its safety upon the presence of a large defending force. With the withdrawal of this its history became a record of repeated devastations, both in times of serious invasion and during the chronic minor incursions which ensued.

These raids were equally injurious to the church and the community, and compelled the ecclesiastic to seek protection in a fortified place of abode similar to that of his neighbour. Such are the *turres* still to be seen contiguous to the churches of Embleton, Alnham, Elsdon, and elsewhere.¹

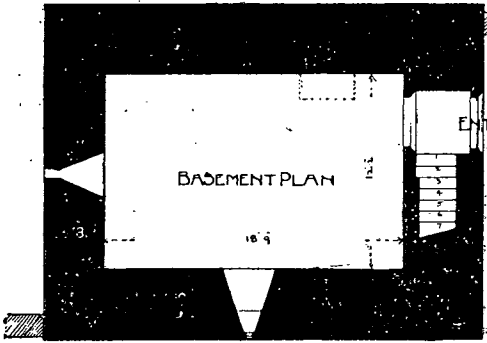
The Corbridge pele stands on the north side of the market place, which here forms part of the main road now connecting two portions of Watling Street since the disuse of the Roman bridge across the Tyne at Colchester (*Corstopitum*). It is about fifty feet from the south side of the chancel of S. Andrew's church, and now intercepts the churchyard wall, which abuts on its east and west sides. No doubt the original boundary wall enclosed the pele.²

¹ Occasionally church towers were requisitioned and afforded the necessary protection for the rector, as at Longhoughton in Northumberland, Burgh-on-Sands in Cumberland, and Bedale in Yorkshire.

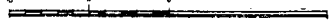
² Mr. R. O. Heslop has kindly lent me a survey, made by Fryer in 1776-1777, of which the block plan on p. 178 is a portion. On this the pele is without the Kirkgarth enclosure. Since 1777 the cottages to the west of the pele have been removed (see the basement plan).



THE VICAR'S
PELE
CORBRIDGE.



SCALE OF FEET



WILKINSON, MENZIES & DEL
FEB 1896.

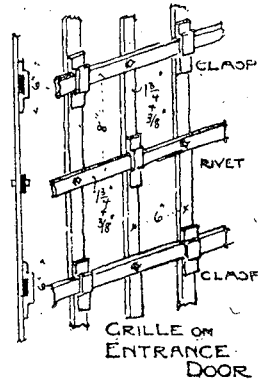
The tower is mentioned as the vicar's property in the list of fortalices drawn up for Henry V. in 1415.³

Although there is no record of its erection, the architectural features clearly indicate that it was built *circa* 1300. It is of one date and well constructed, the sandstone of which it is built being laid in courses, which diminish in size as they ascend; the lower courses are unusually large.⁴ It is a very good example of the smaller pele, and comprised a vaulted basement and two other floors, which yet exhibit, in a very complete manner, the details of the interior arrangements, only the timber floor and roof and a portion of the parapet having suffered destruction.

The tower is rectangular on plan, and measures on the exterior twenty-seven feet four inches from east to west, and twenty-one feet from north to south. From the ground level to the parapet walk is thirty feet, and to the top of the parapet five feet more.

On the exterior the four elevations are generally alike. They are perfectly plain, without string or offset courses, and are finished with an embattled parapet, which is carried round the four angles of the tower on projecting corbels, forming machicolations of equal dimensions on each side.

The entrance doorway is on the east side, and at the ground level. It has an acutely pointed arch formed of two stones only. In it is an old wooden door covered on its outer face with an iron grate.⁵ Two small loops are the only other features on the east side. On the south elevation is a loop

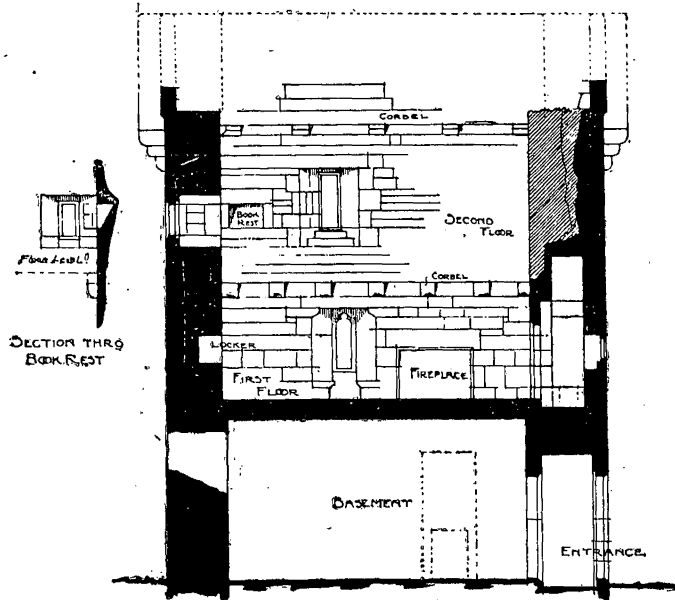


³ At that time John Bryg was vicar. Hunter MSS *Arch. Ael.* xv. p. 181.

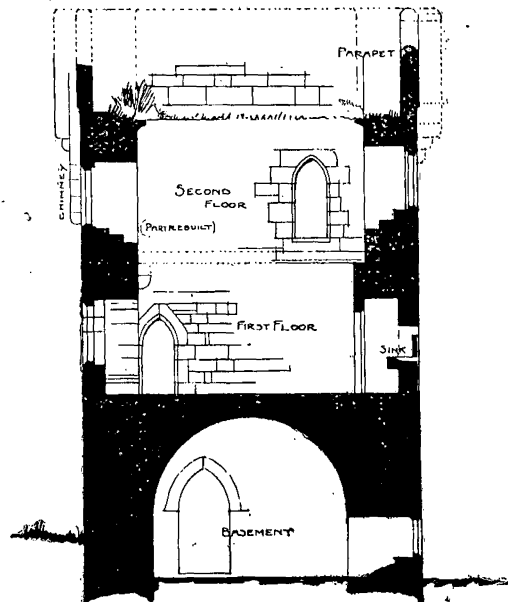
⁴ Some of the large stones have cramp or lewis holes. They were doubtless obtained from the Roman city of Corstopitum, as were also the arch stones of the opening between the tower of the church and of the nave.

⁵ The grate at Corbridge, which is similar in workmanship to that at Bywell castle (see illustration of this, *Arch. Ael.* xiv. 376, and *Proceedings*, v. 69-71), is not now filled with planks, but secured to the front of the wooden door. It comprised five vertical and nine horizontal bars, within a frame, which is shaped to fit the arched opening. The standards and rails now measure one and three-quarter inches by three-eighths of an inch, they are bound together at the intersections, alternately, with rivets and a kneed clasp welded on the back, as shown on the sketch, and hung on two band hinges. As the Bywell example appears to be of the date of the castle, *i.e.* fifteenth century, and that at Corbridge is identical in design, we may attribute both grates to the same period.

THE VICAR SPELE CORBRIDGE



SECTION LOOKING NORTH



SECTION LOOKING EAST

W. KNOWLES, ARCHT. BY DEL.
FEB 1896

SCALE OF FEET



lighting the basement, and above it at the first floor level, a window with a round trefoiled head, worked in one stone. To the east of this window are two small openings, the lower one three inches square, is the sink waste water outlet, and the upper one six inches square, is to admit light. There are three other square-headed windows on this elevation, two at the first, and one at the second floor level. The projecting hollow moulding supporting the parapet, between the machicolations, is pierced in two places, and probably contained a spout of gargoyle form to throw off the roof water. The coping to the merlons and embrasures is chamfered only.

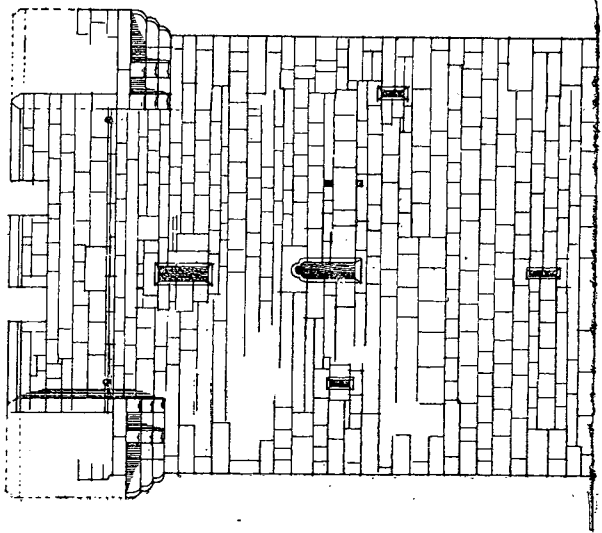
The north elevation has a trefoil-headed window at the first floor level, similar to that on the south side, and above it a square-headed window. There is also a projection carried on corbels containing the smoke-flue from the first floor fireplace.

The west elevation is pierced by a square-headed window at the level of the second floor and a loop at the basement.

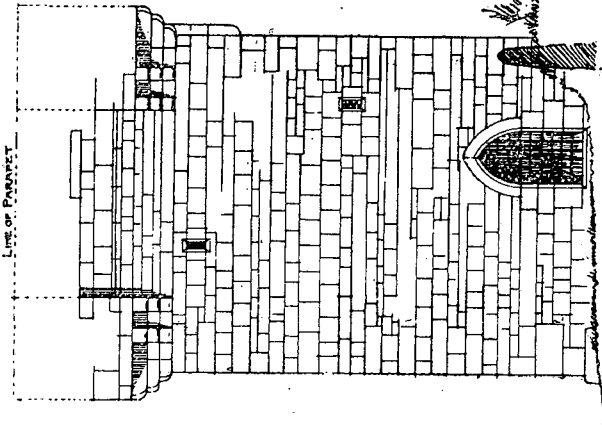
All the windows are chamfered on the exterior face, and rebated within for shutters, the crooks on which they hung remain in many places. The basement or ground floor was entered by the door already described; it was three feet three inches wide and was secured on the inside by a stout bar. Opposite the entrance door, another, arched in two stones chamfered but not rebated, leads into the semi-circular barrel vault, eighteen feet nine inches by twelve feet two inches, which occupies the basement, and is lighted by two loops, one on the west and the other on the south side. The walls on the north and south are each four feet five inches, and on the west three feet eight inches in thickness. On the left of the entrance a stone stair two feet three inches wide, having a ceiling of large flat stones, ascends to the first floor in the thickness of the east wall, which here measures five feet. It is lighted by a small loop and finishes in the thickness of the south wall.

On the first floor landing there is a stone sink and table, formed in the wall as shown on the plan. The sink stone is dished out on the top, and the outlet discharges through a small opening, above which is the aperture for light previously mentioned, both cut through stones only four inches thick. A pointed doorway, chamfered but not rebated, opens into an apartment nineteen feet three inches by

THE VICAR'S PELE CORBRIDGE



SOUTH ELEVATION



EAST ELEVATION

CHURCHYARD

ENTRANCE

SCALE OF FEET



H. WOODS, MARKET DEL
Feb 1896

thirteen feet four inches, lighted by three windows, one small and two larger with trefoil heads placed opposite each other in the north and south walls. They are set in large square shouldered recesses with side seats. In the west wall are two lockers, and in the north wall a moulded square-headed fireplace, four feet six inches wide, now built up. A small pointed door, two feet wide, leads on to a staircase, which rises above that below, in the thickness of the east wall. It is lighted by a small loop. Near to the door and at the foot of the stair is a latrine, the drain from which is in the thickness of the wall.

The timbers supporting the second floor were carried by an offset on the south wall, and by a wall plate which rested on seven corbels, rounded on the under side, on the north wall.

The upper apartment is entered by a pointed doorway, in the east wall, formed by oversailing the horizontal ashlar courses as shown on the section, and not by arch stones; it is chamfered and rebated. This chamber is lighted by three windows, one on the west and two opposite each other in the north and south walls, each one foot wide by five feet nine inches high; they have widely splayed internal jambs and stepped sills. In the north wall, near its west end, is a sloping panel set in a recess, two feet ten inches by one foot ten inches; it was undoubtedly intended for, and formed a very convenient book rest,⁶ on which fell the light from the west window. This window and the one in the north wall enabled the occupant engaged at the reading desk to command a view of the church and its approaches.

The roof timbers were supported by chamfered stone corbels, which yet remain on the north, south, and west sides. The pitch of the roof is not indicated; it would not much exceed the height of the battlements. It is not apparent how the roof and parapet walls were gained—most probably from the east end, where the masonry has been rebuilt.

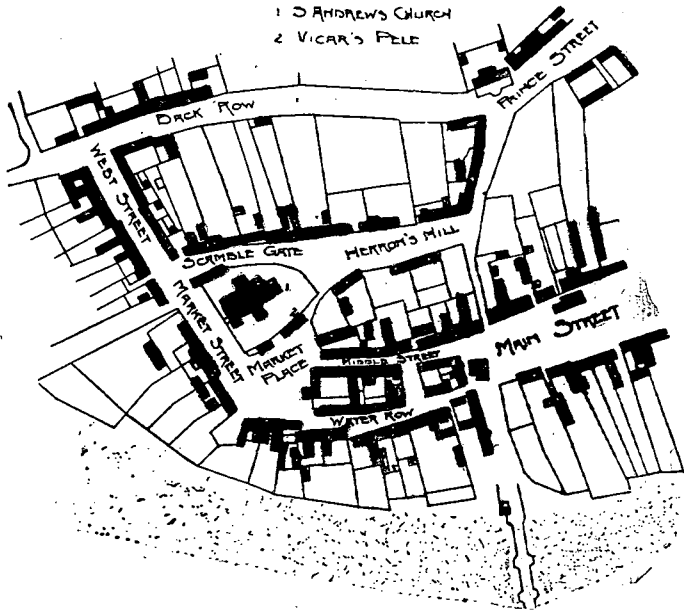
The parapet walls are one foot thick and stand five feet two inches above the level of the walk. The embrasures are two feet six inches wide and the jambs of the merlons have sunk holes for hanging shutters. At each of the four angles is a series of machicolations

⁶ Stone desks, both recessed and projecting, are met with in churches; there is one on the north side of the chancel at Etwall, Derbyshire, and another in the same position is in Paul church in Holderness.

thrown out on five corbels, two on each side and one set anglewise, all of three projections rounded on the underside.

Conceivably the first floor was used as the living room, a portion of which may have been screened off at its west end, where are the two lockers and the small window. The second floor was apparently the private chamber, and the vaulted basement an excellent store.

Among the large lintel-stones, many grave covers may be observed. The fireplace dotted on the basement plan is of recent introduction.



BLOCK PLAN OF PORTION OF CORBRIDGE (from Fryer's Map). (See Note 2, p. 171.)