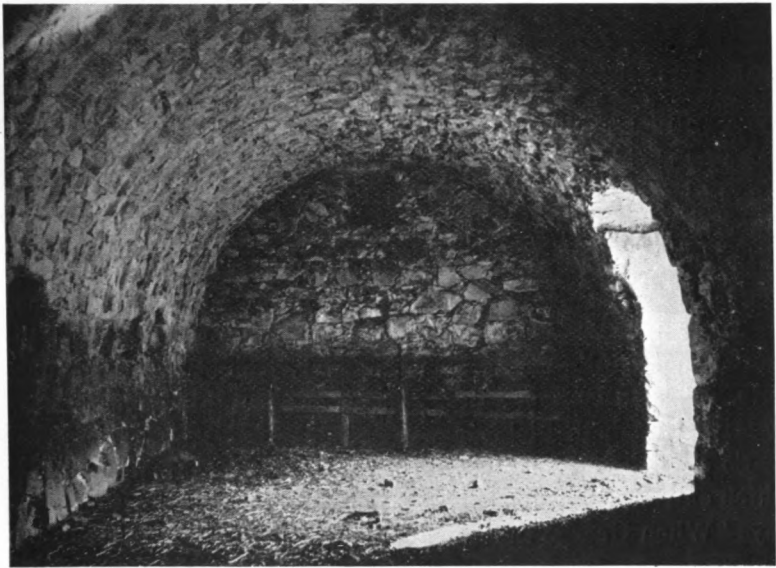


EXTERIOR.



INTERIOR.

AKELD TOWER, NORTHUMBÉRLAND.

IV.—AKELD TOWER.

By the Rev. MATTHEW CULLEY of Coupland Castle.

[Read on the 27th November, 1912.]

In 1541 there was at Akeld 'a lytle fortelett or bastle house wthout a barmekyn.' Thus does the survey of the English side of the border, made by the commissioners of Henry VIII, describe the stronghold which we see to-day at Akeld, almost in its original state. The earlier reports on border fortification do not refer to the fortlet at Akeld, but as they are imperfect, there is no reason to suppose that Akeld tower did not exist at a considerably earlier period, or that it did not, from its elevated position on the lower slopes of Akeld hill, bear witness to the tragedy of Flodden, fought only some six or seven miles away.

Akeld was an important manor of the barony of Wooler held in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under the great house of Muscamp by the de Akelds, and afterwards by the Prendergests, de Couplands, de Hetons and Greys. The site of the chapel, which would seem to have been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin; the existing, though disused graveyard; the traditional ground on which the gallows stood, still known as the Gallows bank, all point to the importance of the vill of Akeld in medieval times. Such a place would have been imperfect in later medieval days, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Scottish march, had there been no stronghold or refuge for its inhabitants.

Akeld bastle, as it exists at present, is of two storeys. The upper storey contains a granary and pigeon loft, and would appear to be an addition of some seventy or eighty years ago, though the original walls of an upper chamber may have been utilized to some extent in the construction of this addition; the whole is covered by a high-pitched slate roof of the same date as the granary and

dovecot. This roof, out of keeping somewhat as it is, has certainly been the means of preserving the lower storey or vault in its present excellent state of repair. A double stone staircase on the exterior south wall leads to the upper storey. The ground floor or vault is almost in its original condition. It is one apartment running the whole length of the building, entirely of stone, without woodwork of any kind; the roof is a stone arch, springing at about five feet from the floor, the height from the floor to the apex or highest point of the vault being about fourteen feet. The whole interior length of the vault is fifty-six feet, while the width is sixteen feet three inches. In the centre of the roof, or arch, is a square aperture, of perhaps two feet by one foot, now filled in with rough stones, which may have been a means of communication from a chamber above, or an outlet for smoke.¹ The latter theory is perhaps doubtful, as there would be ample escape for smoke through the various apertures or loopholes in the walls. There are two loopholes or small windows at either end of the vault, at a height of some nine feet from the ground; that in the north wall measures inside some thirty-three inches by eighteen inches, and appears to have been untouched since it was originally constructed; the aperture at the south end has been filled up by the building of the exterior staircase. There are several smaller loopholes piercing the walls at a much less elevation from the floor; all of them seem to be of original construction. The walls of the ground floor, measured well below the spring of the arch, show a thickness of four feet. The original doorway is tall and narrow, being seven feet in height from the ground and three feet three and a half inches wide; the stone label is of a simple but dignified type. The socket, into which the bolt or bar securing the door formerly ran, is five feet eight inches deep. A second doorway has been opened into the vault on the west side, but this bears all the appearance of

¹ A similar opening exists in the roof of the vault of Smailholme tower.

being a modern feature and was probably introduced the better to enable the ground floor to be used as a shelter for cattle or horses. There is no sign of any interior stair having led to an upper room; it is possible that exterior access to a second storey and to the roof may have existed, though it seems doubtful if the present external staircase is older than the modern second floor. The whole exterior length of the building from north to south is sixty-three feet and the width from east to west twenty-four feet six inches.

The situation of Akeld tower is both picturesque and commanding. Standing on elevated ground, it dominates the whole village, and from its summit a view could be obtained across the plains of the Till as far as Ford and Flodden ridges and up and down Glenwater, westward towards Coupland, and eastward to Glen-mouth and Doddington moor.

The Akeld burn flows over its rocky bed a few yards below, while immediately above, the romantic Akeld dene winds up to Gleedsleugh, and behind it Harehope and Akeld hills form a lofty barrier.

It would be quite outside the scope of this paper, which is professedly a memoir of Akeld tower, to describe in detail the descent of the manor and its dependent freeholds—this has been done elsewhere²—but some notices of the former owners of the vill and stronghold will help to breathe a little life and interest into the dry bones of the past.

The de Akelds, who would appear to have been enfeoffed under the Muscamps in the time of Henry I of England, owned Akeld before the days when almost every other manor on the border had its tower or keep, and very probably nothing survives as a tradition of their ownership except the name and possibly the site and an occasional stone of the chapel of which, with its still enclosed graveyard, they were not unlikely the founders. Such scattered

² *Berwickshire Naturalists Club's Transactions*, vol. XI.

chapels and burial grounds are not uncommon in this formerly wild district. They gave the opportunity of hearing Mass and of performing other ordinary religious duties to those living at some distance from the parish church, while in some instances these chapels, it has been suggested, may have marked the traditional preaching stations of the early local missionaries and apostles. The neighbouring 'Lady's close' and 'Lady's well' give some colour to the supposition that Akeld chapel was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin.

A certain cleric, named Robert, was in charge of the chapel of Akeld in 1287,³ and a few other scattered notices of its incumbents exist.

Probably by intermarriage with an heiress of de Akeld, the following century saw the Scottish family of Prendergest in possession of considerable land at Akeld; they had important possessions in Berwickshire, and no doubt found it convenient to have a footing on both sides of the border. Sir Henry Prendergest of Prendergest, was by Inquisition 3 Edward III (1330) seised of a messuage (probably the manor house) and forty acres of arable land, besides pasturage, etc., at Akeld; no exception was apparently taken to his loyalty and homage for his English estate, but his successor, Adam Prendergest, took open part against Edward III and was dispossessed of his Akeld property, which king Edward granted to Thomas de Heton. On making submission, Adam's offence was condoned or pardoned and his Northumbrian estate restored to him for a time; but either his submission was of short duration or his loyalty too suspect, for by the year 1359 the Prendergests' Akeld possessions, including one-fourth of the advowson of the chapel of Akeld, passed into the hands of Sir John Coupland.⁴ Through such stormy periods and varied fortunes was Akeld handed down to other owners.

³ *Berwickshire Naturalists Club's Transactions*, vol. XI, p. 415.

⁴ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1358-1360*, p. 233.

In 1420 Sir Ralph Gray is returned as holding the lordship and seignorial rights of Akeld, doing suit therefor to the barony court of Wooler. With, perhaps, some slight interruptions, the Grays of Chillingham continued to hold the manorial privileges, and probably the chief messuage or manor house, till the second quarter of the eighteenth century, and they were in all likelihood the builders of the bastle or tower. Meanwhile various freeholds gradually arose within the manor, and the names of Forster, Hall, Wallis, Hazelrig and others became associated with Akeld as larger or smaller owners. John Hazelrig took part in the rebellion of Middleton and Swinburne in 1317 and thereby forfeited his interest in Akeld,⁵ though his family, if not himself, would appear to have been eventually reinstated.

Situated as it is at the divergence of two important highways into Scotland and within a few miles of the border, Akeld lay right in the way of much of the border warfare. The battle of Humbleton, in 1402, was fought as much on Akeld ground as on the adjoining land of Humbleton. The Scots, under Douglas, had stationed themselves on Homilheugh; the English, under Percy, took up their position opposite on Harehope, within the territory of Akeld, placing their archers in Mundy-cleugh between the two. Bender burn, which, according to tradition, ran blood for three days after the fight, is the boundary between the two manors. Some of the vanquished may have graced the 'lord's gallows' on the Gallows-bank when all was over!

During the fifteenth century Glendale, and the Northumbrian border in general, suffered terribly from raids and war, and is described by historians and by the records of the period as being in a wretched and pitiable condition. Many of the castles and strongholds were partially dismantled by the Scots and left in a ruinous state. Interesting evidence of the unsettled condition of affairs is furnished by a licence granted by Cardinal Langley

⁵ Bates, *Hist. of Northumberland*, p. 159.

on the 18th April, 1436, to Thomas Whityngeham, vicar of Kirk Newton (the parish in which Akeld is situated), to say Mass in an oratory or any 'secure place' properly arranged for divine service within his parish, 'so long as the hostility of the Scots then prevailing should continue.'⁶ No wonder they found it necessary to build the strong stone-vaulted edifice which came eventually to be used in more peaceful times as a chancel!

In 1541, probably in the autumn or late summer, Sir Robert Bowes (a year later a prisoner in the hands of the Scots) and Sir Thomas Elleker must have ridden up Glendale and stood under the grey walls of Akeld tower, seeing it very much as we see it now. They undoubtedly walked through the tall labelled doorway and stood beneath the strong stone vaulting, the better to report upon the condition of the little fortlet, surveying all its points with the critical eye of experienced soldiers. Probably, too, they may have called around them some of the inhabitants of the ancient village and questioned them as to their number and capacity in bearing arms, and what provision they had in case of a raid. Apparently these commissioners of king Henry were satisfied with what they saw, for they find no fault in their report of Akeld a month or two later.

To within a year or two of the union of the Scottish and English crowns, things were not much better on the border and life very unsafe. On the 8th June, 1595, while the Whitsun fair was being held at Weetwood, the laird of Cessford crossed the border and lay in wait at Akeld and Humbleton to intercept and kill the Storeys as they went to the fair; the Storeys, however, escaped his vigilance and saved their lives. Cessford consoled himself on his way home by stopping at Kirk Newton to drink; and, as his road led him by Pawston he quenched his thirst again there and talked to laird Selby, with whom he seems to have been friendly.⁷ Perhaps Fergus Storey of Yeavinger, who was

⁶ *Depositions and Ecclesiastical Proceedings* (21 Surtees Soc. publ.), p. 25.

⁷ Sir John Carey, 'To Burghley from Berwick.' Raine, *North Durham*, p. xlvi.

buried under Kirk Newton church in 1617, was one of those who escaped Cessford's vengeance that day!

A constant watch was kept along the range of hills in Glendale so that immediate notice could be given of the approach of any hostile force, and official setters and searchers of the watch, as they were called, were appointed from among the chief inhabitants of the townships. In the day-watch, Humbleton watched Akeld dene-head with one man; Akeld watched to Tomtalens grave with one man; Coupland and Kirk Newton watched the Green Torr with one man, and so on.⁸ This system of watches and beacons formed a regular feature in the daily life of the inhabitants, and must have furnished many interesting and exciting incidents in what would otherwise have often been a monotonous and dull existence. In 1551, Gilbert Wallis of Akeld, was one of the setters and searchers of the watch, and held also the post of bailiff of Akeld.⁹ He probably commanded the little garrison of the tower in the case of a raid.

With the union of the English and Scottish crowns, the military significance of the border castles and towers for the most part ceases. Comparatively few of them played any important part in the subsequent civil wars. Akeld tower, indeed, saw the march past of the gallant, though ill-fated, Jacobite force under lord Derwentwater and Forster on its way to Kelso on the 20th October, 1715, but it is not recorded that any halt was made at Akeld.

On the dispersal of a considerable portion of the Grey estates during the first half of the eighteenth century, the old tower of Akeld became for a short space the property by purchase of two successive owners, Kettilby and Sparrow, each family holding for some thirty years. In 1795 the tower, along with the lordship of the manor and the bulk of the estate, was conveyed to the ancestor of the present owner.

⁸ Nicolson, *Border Laws*, p. 217.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 214.