

DUNSTANBURGH CASTLE AFTER TURNER.

## II.--DUNSTANBURGH CASTLE.

By W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON.

[Read on 31st August 1938.]

First impressions count for much, and not least to the student of mediæval architecture. Certainly I shall never forget the morning of 27th May, 1937, when, under the guidance of Mr. H. L. Honeyman, I first visited Dunstanburgh castle. It was a day of brilliant sunshine, and the glory of sea and sky was at its best. As we approached the castle along the green path by the shore from the quaint fishing village of Craster, the gigantic line of walls and towers, resembling rather a fortified town than a castle, loomed into full view; and one understood, at a glance, how the stupendous scene must have fascinated Turner, who painted it three times. (Plate IIA.) It also fired another observer of a very different genius, Freeman, who has thus recorded his impression of the place:¹—

“ Its isolated hill stands yet more nobly than the isolated hill of Bamburgh; the waves dash more immediately at its feet, boiling up in a narrow channel close under its walls, as if art and nature had joined together to make the fortress of Earl Thomas grim and awful above all other fortresses. Nothing can well be conceived more striking than the Lilburn Tower, a Norman keep in spirit, though far later in date, rising on the slope of the wild hill with the tall basaltic columns standing in order in front of it ‘ like sentinels of stone.’ Yet, simply as a building, one is almost more struck if one approaches from the opposite side, and if the vast gateway, with its two huge circular towers, is the first feature to burst upon us. It doubtless has its rivals in other places where we more naturally look for some of the great works of human skill. In that

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¹ *English Towns and Districts*, pp. 329-30.

desolate wilderness the gateway and the whole castle have an effect which is sublime beyond words."

The situation of the castle, on the mighty promontory of the Great Whin Sill, bounded on two sides by sheer cliffs of swart columnar basalt, overlying carboniferous limestone, shales and sandstone—all together about 120 feet in greatest height—and on the other two sides rising in bold green bluffs from the pleasant meadows of Dunstan and Embleton, is one of the grandest on our British coast; and the immense size of the *enceinte*, enclosing an area of no less than ten acres, makes it much the largest of Northumbrian strongholds. But the interest of the building lies far deeper than that which attaches to mere extent or even to scenic grandeur. Beauty of design and severity in detail combine with the high finish of the masonry to make this one of the most austere as well as the fairest of English castles. It is as virginal in purity and grace as it is adamantine in its rock-like strength. Technically its gatehouse—colossal in its stark proportions—is an architectural triumph of the first rank: and in its engineer, Master Elias, though nothing otherwise is known about him, we surely must recognize one of the greatest of English mediæval builders.

Fragments of native and Roman pottery, including a sherd of samian ware, and millstones of lava from Andernach on the Rhine, together with a "head-stud" fibula and a stray coin of Hadrian, indicate an occupation in the second century, during Romano-British times.<sup>2</sup> But the site is an unlikely one for a Roman post, unless perhaps for a signal station such as Theodosius the Elder planted along the north-eastern coasts in the year 368: and for this, quite apart from the fact that Dunstanburgh is far north of Hadrian's wall, the pottery is much too early. So, in all probability, we have to deal rather with a native village, using Roman utensils and currency. The name might be taken to indicate that in due course a Saxon *burh* succeeded

<sup>2</sup> *Arch. Ael.*<sup>4</sup> XIII, 279-92.

the Romano-Celtic village, and that its founder bore the great name of Dunstan.<sup>3</sup> In the eleventh century the Saxon in turn was followed by the Norman. But the newcomers in their northward advance, from York by Newcastle and Warkworth to Norham, left Dunstanburgh on their right flank; and there is no record of a castle here until the erection of the present fabric was commenced by Thomas Plantagenet, Earl of Lancaster, Leicester, Derby, Lincoln and Salisbury—

“ the mighty Prince of Lancaster  
That hath more earldoms than an ass can bear.”

As the building accounts tell us, the first quarry<sup>4</sup> was opened on 7th May, 1313. The same accounts show that the work was well advanced when, on 21st August, 1316, the legal position was regularized by the issue of a royal licence to crenellate.

It is important to understand the circumstances that led to the erection of so formidable a fortress, on this hitherto neglected site, at so comparatively late a date. Up to this point, the power of the Anglo-Norman monarchy had been on the aggressive, and the milestones of its advance are the castles that sentinel the Great North Road from York up to Norham on the Scottish border. But now the tide had turned. Plantagenet imperialism, victorious in Wales, had sustained its first great set-back in Scotland, and all Northumberland henceforth lay exposed to devastating inroads.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> But the most recent derivation of Dunstanburgh takes it not from a personal name, but from O.E. *dun-stan*=hill-rock. See Allen Mawer, *The Place Names of Northumberland and Durham*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Probably at Newton, where a quarry and a mason, Adam Cementarius, are on record in the thirteenth century.—*Hist. Northumberland*, vol. II, pp. 83-4.

<sup>5</sup> How desperate the situation was is vividly revealed to us by what was going on at Durham just at the time when Dunstanburgh castle was being built. In 1311 the bishop was unable to attend a council at Rome because the Scots had so shockingly ravaged his diocese. Most of the inhabitants of Durham had fled, and the bishop had to grant a special indulgence to all who should stay and listen to the preaching of the Gospel in the cathedral. In 1313 the Scots burned the suburbs. Two years later the bishop obtained a grant of murage, and the royal writ says that the men of the Liberty “ have suffered loss beyond calculation

Under such circumstances, there was crying need for a castle with an *enceinte* ample enough both to accommodate, at a pinch, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, with their flocks and herds and chattels, and also to house a large standing garrison of the *hobelars* or light mounted troops so useful in border warfare, whose presence on the left flank of the Scots would be a serious annoyance to them should they attempt to advance southward along the "Devil's Causeway"—the old Roman road that connected Berwick with Corbridge. As the castle had a harbour at its command, it was thus secure of supplies, even should the Scots, as in 1384, be encamped "in the field of Embleton." It is in such considerations that we must seek the *raison d'être* of Dunstanburgh castle. The fortress was designed far more as a state or public concern, in the modern sense, than as the private stronghold of a feudal lord. It therefore differs radically from the other castles of Northumberland.<sup>6</sup> It was not the head of a great feudal lordship or honour, nor was there a barony or franchise attached to it, but itself it was simply an interpolation into the pre-existing barony of Embleton.<sup>7</sup> Its twofold purpose, as a *place*

owing to the constant ravages of the Scots who have pillaged and burned excessively in those parts, and all the more frequently because there are no military fortresses or towns defended by walls wherein to find refuge and shelter for the security of themselves and their goods."—*Vict. County Hist. Durham*, vol. III, p. 20. These particulars illustrate the kind of visitation against which Earl Thomas was trying to protect his tenants by the building of Dunstanburgh.

<sup>6</sup> It is idle to maintain, as Mr. C. J. Bates did, that "Dunstanburgh was not intended as a bulwark against Scotland," because at the time of its foundation Earl Thomas, then in bitter opposition to Edward II's government, was believed to be in secret league with Robert Bruce. So vast an undertaking as Dunstanburgh castle was assuredly not built to serve the shifting policy of a moment, but to meet a permanent need. This, surely, is the reason why so great an interest was taken in the work by leading churchmen in the north, such as the abbots of Alnwick, Newminster, and St. Mary's, York, the priors of Nostel and Tynemouth, the rector of Embleton and others, all of whom were clearly interested in the erection of the castle as a piece of public policy.

Mr. Honeyman, indeed, has gone so far as to suggest to me that Earl Thomas designed, in this vast fortified *enceinte* with its attendant harbour, to provide a substitute for Berwick, then gravely menaced by the Scots, who captured it in 1318.

<sup>7</sup> Before the building of Dunstanburgh, the barony of Embleton had a capital message which must have been quite unimportant, for in 1298

*d'armes* or garrison post and as a place of refuge, is clearly brought out by three ancient documents. The first is a record that in 1322 the garrison furnished no less than sixty-eight *hobelars* for service in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> The second is a letter, addressed by Edward II, on 26th September, 1322, to the constables of the castle, soundly rating them for having failed to take adequate precautions to repel the incursions of the Scots.<sup>9</sup> The third document is the report on the castle furnished by Sir Robert Bowes in his *Book of the State of the Marches*, drawn up in 1550, at the height of the War of the Rough Wooing:—

“ The castle of Dunstanborough is in wonderfull great decaye, and the utter wall thereof might be repayred with no great charge, also the gatehouse, and a house for a constable. And then surely it would be a great refuge to the inhabitants of those partes, yff enemies came to annoye them, either arriving by sea or coming by lande out of Scoteland, soe that they brought no great ordynaunce or power to remayne any longe tyme their.”<sup>10</sup>

With these considerations in our minds, let us turn now to consider the fabric of the castle. We find it perfectly to answer the requirements. It consists simply of a vast enclosing wall, adjusted to the contours of the site, formidably defended with flanking towers on the only side from which attack might be apprehended, and provided with a mighty gatehouse upon which the engineer has lavished all the skill and resource that he possessed in such abundant measure. This gatehouse, known in old records as the

it is rated only at 2s., as against the capital messuage of Stanford, rated at 11s. 6d.—*Hist. Northumberland*, vol. II, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Grose, *Antiquities of England and Wales*, vol. IV, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Bain, *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, vol. III, no. 783. The letter was sent also to the constables of Bamburgh, Warkworth and Alnwick.

<sup>10</sup> *Hist. Northumberland*, vol. II, p. 209. The use of Dunstanburgh as a place of refuge, for goods as well as human beings, during the Scottish wars, appears in the Embleton Account Rolls, 1348-51, in which there is an entry of £17 2s., being fine for chattels “ saved in the castle from the wanton damage of the Scots ” (*salvandis ab insultu Scotorum*)—*ibid.*, vol. II, p. 29.

*donjon*,<sup>11</sup> is far more than merely a well-fortified entry. It is also the principal habitation of the castle, providing in itself a complete suite of lodgings, state rooms and public rooms alike, for the governor or constable,<sup>12</sup> who thus had the entrance into the castle under his personal and direct control. Now this type of gatehouse is so typical of the great Edwardian or concentric castles built to enforce the conquest of Wales, that it has been usual to imagine its invention was an integral part in the evolution of these complex and masterly structures. But in point of fact, as the case of Dunstanburgh teaches us, such gatehouses have an origin and an existence quite independent of the concentric type of castle. Their origin, as I have shown elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> is due to the breakdown of the older feudalism, which was taking place all over western Europe at the end of the thirteenth century. Kings and barons were coming to base their power no longer upon the natural allegiance of their vassals but upon mercenary hordes. Out of this, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, arose the whole complex gamut of social evils summed up in England under the terms "livery" and "maintenance." Upon military architecture the influence of these new methods in warfare was profound. A castle ceased to be a fortified homestead, defended in time of need by the lord's vassals who dwelt around it. Instead it tended to become more and more like a garrisoned post, manned by a gang of hirelings whose constant presence was always irksome and often dangerous,

<sup>11</sup> In 1543 "ij greate towers, with a house goyng betwene them: both wiche ys called the dongeon tower"—*ibid.*, vol. II, p. 208.

<sup>12</sup> Edward King, in his description of Tonbridge castle, published in 1782 (*Archæologia*, vol. VI)—a most careful and accurate account, full of sound observation—has a good footnote in this connection (p. 290): "I should be sorry to indulge myself in carrying conjectures, relating to high antiquity, too far; but, when I consider with what care and pains a magnificent state room has been formed, in every one of these kind of towers of entrance, I cannot but reflect upon what we so often read, with regard to the earliest ages of the world, of Kings *sitting in the gates of cities*; and of *judgment being administered in the gate*."

<sup>13</sup> *Arch. Ael.*<sup>4</sup> xv, 115-36; see also my paper on "Castles of Livery and Maintenance" in *Journal Brit. Archæol. Assoc.*, 3rd ser., vol. IV (forthcoming).

so that the lord or governor found it necessary to isolate himself in a self-contained part of the castle, having the entrance under his own control. Of course the type became a standardized one; but it is easy to see how peculiarly suited it was to the special case of Dunstanburgh, where a large standing garrison was maintained, and which also had to admit within its gates, as occasion demanded, disorganized and turbulent mobs of refugees.

The gatehouse at Dunstanburgh, then, upon which Master Elias was engaged about Michaelmas 1314, forms an entirely self-contained unit (plan, plate IIB). As originally built, its trance was strongly secured by folding gates in front and a portcullis and folding doors<sup>14</sup> in rear, so that the narrow entry could be made good both against attackers from without and against an unruly rabble within. Sloped chain-holes also indicate provision for a lifting bridge, so that a pitfall must have been provided, or intended, in front of the outer portal.<sup>15</sup> This trance is set between two powerful semi-round towers, the ground floors of which form well-appointed guardrooms, with a porter's lodge in the thick rear-wall on either hand, and a pit or prison reached through a trap-door in the western lodge. The guardrooms are entered by doors, also well defended, opening from the courtyard, and from these doors access is obtained to the newel stairs leading to the upper floors. Although these arrangements are reasonably secure, they do not represent the full perfection of the keep-gatehouse idea which is seen at the contemporary castles of Kidwelly and Llanstephan, or at later Scottish exemplifications of the same thesis like Caerlaverock and Doune. In all of these the first floor is entered only by an external stair, and there is no internal communication between this floor and the basement. At

<sup>14</sup> The provision for the baton against which the inner folding doors were shut, crossing the rear portal at the springing of the arch, as also the sockets for the hinges on either side, are still to be seen.

<sup>15</sup> The mechanism for hoisting this bridge made it impossible to have a portcullis in the forepart of the trance, as was usual in Edwardian gatehouses.



Tonbridge, on the other hand, internal stairs exist, entered from the guardrooms. At Dunstanburgh, as at Tonbridge and Llanstephan, the hall is situated, very remarkably, on the *second* floor, and the first floor was primarily a fighting deck, its central room being appropriated for the machinery of the drawbridge and the portcullis, while the tower rooms no doubt were allocated to garrison purposes. The hall extended east and west, and was divided by wooden parcloles from the servery at its western end and the solar at its eastern. It was lit by two handsome windows towards the courtyard, and one, or possibly two set close together, between the towers in front. The solar was at a slightly higher level than the hall. Over all these rooms stretched a garret under a low-pitched roof, in front of which the bows of the towers were carried up one further storey above the hall, their rear walls being supported, above the second floor level, on grand segmental arches, most nobly conceived. I know of no parallel to this ingenious and striking arrangement. Each tower, as its great bow passes in to the straight wall, carried forward on enriched corbels above the outer portal, is developed by very clever and pretty frontal corbelling into a lofty stair turret, rising high above the main building and finished off with a bartisan. The newel stairs in these turrets enter from an oversailing parapet walk which extended across the hall windows between the two towers, so as to cover the outer portal: this parapet walk must have been reached from the garret over the hall. The turret stairs led up to the highest storey in the tower bows, and then finally to segmental corbelled platforms on the summit of the bows, which were carried up as far as the continuous corbelling on which the battlementing of the turrets rests. These turret stairs finish with neat ribbed umbrella vaults, over which the summits of the turrets were inaccessible, unless by an outside ladder.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> From the top of the west turret, which alone survives, the turret top of the Warkworth donjon can be seen. This suggests the use of these high stances for beacons.

The rearward newel stairs also were carried up into turrets, not so tall as those in front, but doubtless finished in the same way.<sup>17</sup> The whole design, when entire, must have been one of the outstanding pieces of mediæval architecture in Britain, and the extensive demolition of this gatehouse is sorely to be regretted. The interest of what is left to us is enhanced by the superb masonry and the fine architectural details. Mention may specially be made of the charming way in which the guardroom chimneys are resolved as semi-octagonal smoke-lanterns. In this, as in every other aspect of the building, the strongly-expressed individuality of a great master of design is clearly evidenced.

In the foregoing brief description, reference has been made to Llanstephan castle.<sup>18</sup> The parallel between the two buildings is all the more significant because at Llanstephan, as at Dunstanburgh, the keep-gatehouse was soon given up as a house of entry, its trance was walled up frontally and a new entrance made in the curtain wall on the flank. At Dunstanburgh this change is authenticated as the work of John of Gaunt, ordered by him in October, 1380, and carried out by "his dear and well-beloved mason, Henry of Holme." (Plate IIB.) Now precisely the same alteration took place in the Scottish castle of St. Andrews,<sup>19</sup> and the Irish castle of Roscrea.<sup>20</sup> Clearly in practice the combination of a lord's residence with a gatehouse was found to have its drawbacks. We can readily understand how the interpolation of the drawbridge and portcullis machinery, into the midst of what should have been the principal residential

<sup>17</sup> Evidently these four turrets are the "*parvos turres supra aulam ultra portas*" mentioned in the bailiff's accounts for 1348-51. Hence it is clear that the word, *ultra* in these records, though the usage is peculiar, means "over," not "beyond." The "*turris ultra portas*" is thus the gatehouse or donjon itself: and the accounts specify, in this tower, the cellar, the hall, and the garrets of the said hall. I suspect that the chapel, also mentioned in the same accounts, was likewise in the donjon. See *Hist. Northumberland*, vol. II, pp. 27-8.

<sup>18</sup> See *Anc. Mon. Com., Report on Caermarthen*, no. 574.

<sup>19</sup> See *Anc. Mon. Com., Report on Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan*, no. 465.

<sup>20</sup> See *Archæol. Journal*, vol. XCIII, p. 180.

apartments, must have been awkward in more than one respect. At Caernarvon and Harlech the portcullis is actually operated from the chapel! At Dunstanburgh, Llanstephan and Tonbridge the difficulty was got round by relegating the hall to the second floor, but this arrangement was obviously inconvenient. The whole phenomenon of these keep-gatehouses, and the way in which, in the four castles mentioned, the scheme had to be abandoned before long time had elapsed, must therefore be regarded as a product of the tensions set up by a tug-of-war between considerations of defence and considerations of comfort. In Scotland, where the need to fortify lairds' houses persisted into the seventeenth century, we find numerous and fascinating instances of the efforts made to harmonize these conflicting requirements. But in England, where serious fortification of private houses practically ceased during the fifteenth century, this phenomenon is almost absent; and such examples as Dunstanburgh become the more striking in consequence. The manifest failure of the keep-gatehouse plan to combine the requirements of residence and defence, coupled with the fact that this type of structure was evolved almost at the end of English castle building, gives the type an extremely limited range in history: say from 1270 to 1350. Thus it is no longer found in Bodiam castle, erected pursuant to a royal licence granted in 1386. Its absence there is all the more significant because Bodiam is a strong fortress, erected—as the terms of its licence show—to subserve national military ends.<sup>21</sup>

At Dunstanburgh, John of Gaunt's alterations resulted in a great accession of strength to the castle. In addition to constructing the new entrance, he built an inner ward in front of the old gatehouse, entered through a portcullised gateway defended by a strong tower on the flank. It is noteworthy that, in later surveys of the castle, John of Gaunt's entrance becomes the "gatehouse," while the old

<sup>21</sup> See my paper on "The Moated Homestead, Church, and Castle of Bodiam" in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. LXXII, pp. 69-99.

keep-gatehouse is simply styled "the donjon." The latter, under the new arrangements, reverted to the purely passive rôle of the great tower in a thirteenth-century castle. In this respect, it foreshadowed the strong isolated tower-houses, built on one side of the domestic enclosure, which are found in some fifteenth-century castles, such as Warkworth and Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

The other buildings of Dunstanburgh castle present many points of high technical interest, but it is beyond the province of this paper to enter upon a discussion of these. Attention, however, may be drawn to the remarkable resemblance between the angle turrets of the Lilburn tower and those that were added, about the same time, to the donjon at Helmsley castle. In the Lilburn tower there is a curious provision of two long bar-holes, one above the other, evidently for a movable wooden barrier of some kind in front of the adjoining postern. An exactly similar contrivance, but with three holes instead of two, is found at Crookston castle, Renfrewshire.

In the plinth of this tower, on the north side, is a stone which displays an exceedingly well-wrought incised circle, 9 inches in diameter, now greatly weathered. This circle has all the appearance of having been designed for a consecration cross, and may therefore have originally been intended for the chapel in the castle.

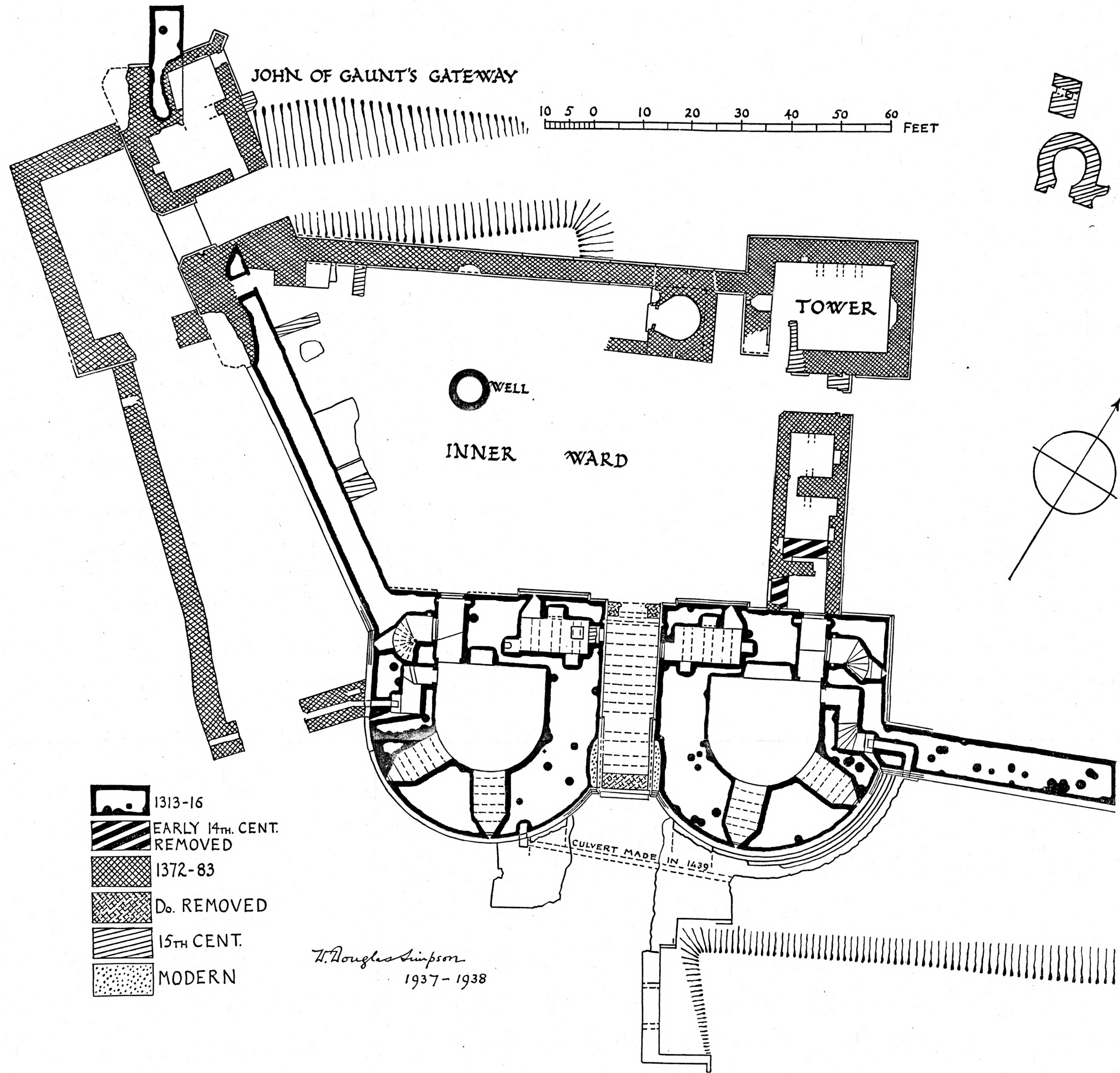
The east curtain wall is built in inferior masonry of *petit appareil*, consisting of small horizontal stones laid in clay, pointed on the two faces. It may be regarded as "common form," the product of local labour, whereas the superb ashlar work of the great frontal curtain and its towers is obviously the work of skilled masons imported for the task. Now it is notable that the east curtain has been built in sections, marked out by vertical joints. These sections show a very near uniformity of 40 foot lengths: once or twice there is a section of double length, and in one case a triple-length section (i.e. 120 feet) is visible. Mr. Honeyman, with whom I carefully examined this

curtain on 8th April, 1938, has made the interesting and, I think, very probable suggestion that whereas the fine work on the south front was built (as we know) by professional masons engaged under contract, the east curtain was probably made by the Embleton tenants, each forced to do his section under the obligation of "castle-work." He tells me that the type of masonry is such as the local farmers, accustomed to build their own tenements and steadings, would have been able to build under the general oversight of the master mason.

There is something infinitely tragic in the contrast between the power and majesty of Dunstanburgh castle, the sense of *zielbewusstheit* that seems infused into its every stone, and the pitiful futility which brought to an ignoble close the career of the proud Plantagenet prince for whom the castle was built. A predecessor in the ownership of the barony had been that great Earl Simon the Righteous upon whose memory the commons of England looked back as of one who had died a saint and martyr in their cause. Nothing could be a more telling proof of the fallibility of popular judgment than the way in which, in after generations, these two lords of Dunstanburgh, the constant and high-minded Simon de Montfort and the selfish and fickle Thomas of Lancaster, came to rank side by side as heroes and victims in the cause of good governance. It is for this reason, perhaps, that around the grey ruins of the mighty castle of Earl Thomas there seems to me always to linger, even on the brightest summer day, a strange *aura* of melancholy—born, it may be, of the contrast between the vast architectural achievement and the pettiness of the man to whose will that achievement was due.

*Note.*

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DUNSTANBURGH CASTLE: PLAN OF GROUND FLOOR OF INNER WARD;  
 AND DIAGRAMMATIC SKETCH PLANS TO SHOW ARRANGEMENT OF  
 UPPER FLOORS OF GATEHOUSE.

[The larger plan is based, by permission, on the official survey by H.M. Office of Works.]

