

VIII.—NAFFERTON CASTLE, NORTHUMBERLAND.¹

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Interim Report.

THE SITE (FIG. 1), (NZ 083657).

Nafferton Castle lies on the western rim of Whittle Dene immediately north of the point where the Newcastle-Hexham road (A 69) crosses Whittle Burn, which is here running in a deep gorge. To the east the castle is protected by a steep cliff falling to the water's edge, to the south by a ravine through which a rivulet flows into the burn. To the north the ground is comparatively level and only on the west side is the site overlooked by rising ground.

Although it is now heavily burdened with trees and undergrowth the site still has something to show the persistent and well-clad visitor. The site extends over an area of approximately an acre, and is rectangular in shape. A substantial earthen bank on the three sides away from the burn is interrupted only in the centres of the north and west sides. Outside the gap in the north rampart there is a hint of a causeway. Whether the defences were carried also along the east side on the crest of the cliff is uncertain, for, though nothing of them now appears, it is apparent that erosion and landslip have been active.

¹ This excavation was carried out as part of the area programme of the Medieval Group of the Society.

Within the rampart the most striking feature is the fragments of a tower inside the south-west corner which rise to a maximum of 22 feet in a mass of rubble, undergrowth and the sordid leavings of tramps. Elsewhere surface indications suggest further stone structures, especially near the cliff edge at the south end of the castle and west of the gap in the north rampart.

Nothing here would suggest any *prima facie* justification for the comparative neglect which the castle has received from antiquaries perhaps over-impressed by the documentary emphasis on shortness of life and demolition. Indeed, the archæological promise of a site with occupation so closely dated and to such a brief period should cause one to hesitate before dismissing it as uninteresting. In the event the excavations revealed that this closely dated material, useful as it is, forms but one element in a complex history, and raised entirely new problems in the study of the site.

HISTORY.²

Although the early history of Nafferton Castle is told in the *Northumberland County History*,³ and in spite of the fact that no new documentary evidence has yet been found, this seems to be a suitable place to give a brief account of the site. The castle lay just within the eastern boundary (here formed by the Whittle Burn) of the township of Nafferton, which was in the parish of Ovingham.

In the twelfth century Nafferton was one of the vills held in serjeanty by the coroner of South Northumberland, and in 1191 the king granted the serjeanty to Sewal son of Henry. In 1199 Sewal bought from the king the marriages of Isabel and Joan, daughters and coheiresses of Robert of Mesnil,

² We are grateful to Miss J. E. Sayers, M.A., for help with this section.

³*Northumberland County History*, XII, pp. 254-261.

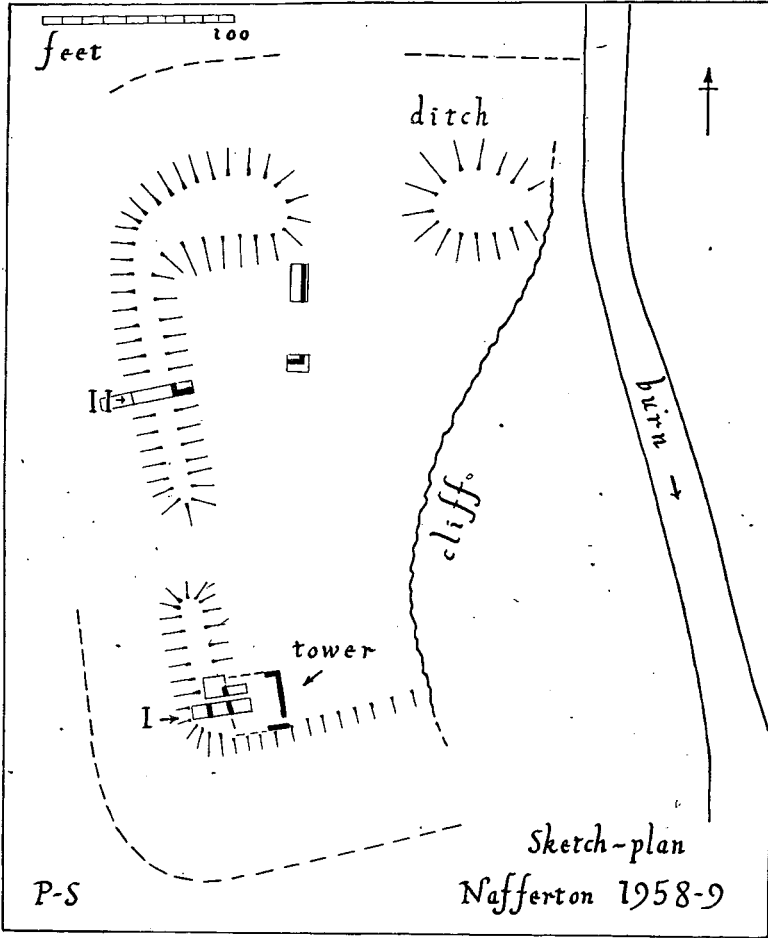


FIG. 1.

and married Isabel himself. Joan he married to his nephew. This nephew died soon after, and Joan's second marriage was to Philip of Ulecotes. Thus it was that the serjeanty was granted to Philip in 1210 when Sewal died without heirs.

Philip of Ulecotes was the son of Sir Gerard of Stirap, and inherited from his father property in Nottinghamshire. He entered the service of John before he became king, and remained a loyal supporter until John's death. Philip's first important post was as constable of Chinon in Touraine in 1203/4, and from 1208 onwards he was prominent in the affairs of northern England. In that year he and Archdeacon Aimeric were appointed custodians of the vacant see of Durham, and in 1212 he, William Earl Warren and the archdeacon of Durham became commissioners for the custody of Northumberland. Philip and Hugh of Baliol supported John against the barons; on one occasion Philip was ordered to destroy Alnwick Castle, and in 1216 he and Hugh had to take over the castles of Durham, Norham, Mitford, Prudhoe and Newcastle upon Tyne. This was not likely to endear Philip to their owners, and it appears that he had bitter quarrels with Eustace of Vesci of Alnwick and Roger Bertram of Mitford over the restoration of their forfeited lands. It would not be surprising if Richard of Umfravill of Prudhoe bore him malice for the same reason. After John's death Philip remained in favour at court. He was sheriff of Northumberland from 1214 to 1220, king's justice in eyre in 1218/19, and was appointed steward of Poitou and Gascony in 1220.

The first mention of a castle on Philip's newly acquired land at Nafferton is in a writ of 1218.⁴ Because Richard of Umfravill had complained that Philip was building a castle, without licence, where there had not been one before, to the damage of his own castle of Prudhoe, the king commanded Philip to stop building immediately and to destroy what he had already erected.

There is no further information about the castle until after Philip's death, which occurred before the end of October, 1220.⁵ The castle and land of Nafferton must then have come temporarily into the charge of Daniel son of

⁴ *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum*, 1204-1224, p. 379 b.

⁵ *Northumberland County History*, XII, p. 261.

Nicholas, one of Philip's brothers-in-law and constable of Newcastle, for on 22nd January, 1221, Daniel was commanded to deliver the property to Robert of Witcestre, sheriff of Northumberland.⁶

There is nothing to show if Philip stopped building when ordered to do so, but it seems clear that what he had built was not demolished during his lifetime. On 1st May, 1221, the king told the sheriff that though the tower could not be defended against his enemies it could yet be a danger to his land and to his castle at Newcastle if it was occupied by hostile forces. He therefore directed the sheriff to destroy the castle at Nafferton and to take the large timber, *scilicet breteschiam, et planchias et residuum de grossiori maeremio de aliis bretaschiis*, to Bamburgh castle, and the smaller timber to build the gaol at Newcastle.⁷ Three weeks later the king commanded Daniel son of Nicholas to help the sheriff in the work of demolition.⁸

These orders were altered on 25th May, 1221, by another writ which was addressed to both the sheriff of Northumberland and the constable of Newcastle.⁹ In this they were told to carry to Newcastle not only the small timber for the gaol, but also the large and the *breteschia*, previously allocated to Bamburgh. Once there the *breteschia* was to be put at the gate to the bridge in place of a tower which had collapsed owing to its faulty foundations, and the rest of the large timber was to be safely stored.

There can be little doubt that the king's orders for the destruction of Nafferton Castle were obeyed. In the Pipe Roll of 1222 it is recorded that the large *breteschia* and others were cast down at the cost of two marks and also, though the building material from Nafferton is not mentioned, that £15 were spent on the Newcastle gaol.¹⁰ It is reasonably

⁶ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1216-1225*, p. 279.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 287-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁹ *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum*, Vol. I, p. 459 b.

¹⁰ John Hodgson, *History of Northumberland*, Part 3, Vol. III (Newcastle, 1835), columns 129 and 130, 6 Henry III.

certain, therefore, that Philip of Ulecotes' castle was demolished only some four years after its existence had been brought to the king's notice.

The writs of 1218 and 1221 tell us little about the actual structure of the castle, but what information they do contain is worthy of further consideration. There are two reasons for supposing the castle was largely of wood. In the first place, Philip had no licence to build a fortification and he would probably have wanted to build as much as possible before he was interrupted. After a very short time his castle was far enough advanced to warrant deliberate demolition, and wood was the obvious material to use if speed were initially of more importance than permanence. Secondly, the king gave detailed orders for the salvage of all the timber, both great and small, which had been used at Nafferton.¹¹ He made no reference to stone buildings, and it is hard to believe that he would not have done so if a large amount of ashlar had been used at Nafferton.

If it is accepted that Philip's castle was built of wood and was demolished soon after his death—and it is difficult to interpret the existing documentary evidence in any other way—it follows that the stone structures, or the greater part of them, which still remain at Nafferton belong to a later period.

There is no known documentary information which can safely be said to relate to the castle after its demolition in 1221-2. It is not mentioned in the subsequent history of Philip's property, which was divided between his five sisters after his death,¹² nor does it appear in the lists of Northumbrian castles and towers made in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹³

¹¹ A *breteschia*, which apparently formed an important part of the castle at Nafferton, has been described as "primarily an embattled wooden erection of several stories used for the attack or defence of a fortress", with the characteristic of being easily moved from place to place. C. J. Bates, "The Border Holds of Northumberland" (*Archæologia Aeliana*, 2nd Series, XIV, 1891), p. 54.

¹² For a full account of the complicated descent of Philip's lands see *Northumberland County History*, XII, pp. 262-278.

¹³ The relevant parts of these lists are printed in C. J. Bates, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-53.

This omission is not significant. Only the survey of 1415 covered the whole county, and many small towers were built after that date. The lists drawn up in the sixteenth century were incomplete, and did not include fortifications in the southern half of Northumberland. Thus the lack of written records does not preclude the possibility of a later fifteenth- or sixteenth-century tower at Nafferton, and indeed the existence of several towers in the parishes of Elsdon and Simonburn is known only because the buildings are still standing. There is, however, one piece of information which must be recorded here, even if it cannot at present be explained. In 1513 the Earl of Westmorland leased for eighty years to Thomas Swinburne of Nafferton Hall "a piece of waste ground of 60 feet off Nafferton Dyke to build a house thereupon".¹⁴ It is not now known where Nafferton Hall was situated, though as Swinburne was then the owner of the manor of Nafferton the hall may have been in or near the vill, which almost certainly lay on the west side of the township, close by the present Nafferton farm. There is only one feature which to-day could be described as Nafferton Dyke, and that is the south bank and ditch of the castle. Unfortunately this is all too vague, and it cannot safely be assumed that Swinburne's new house was the stone tower on the site of Ulecotes' castle.

The absence of information makes it impossible to come to a firm conclusion. Nevertheless, there are at Nafferton stone-buildings which cannot belong to the time of Ulecotes, and which may tentatively be assigned to the later Middle Ages. There was, after all, a strong tradition of occupation in the legends and ballads concerning the mysterious Lang Lonkin, so strong that the Ordnance Survey still describe the site as Lonkin's Hall.

¹⁴ *Northumberland County History*, XII, p. 276. We are grateful to Miss M. H. Dodds, M.A., for drawing our attention to this reference.

EXCAVATION REPORT FOR 1958 AND 1959.

By the kind permission of the owner, Viscount Allendale, the Medieval Group was able to examine parts of the castle by excavation in 1958 and 1959. Labour was provided by members of the Group and other volunteers. Substantial results were obtained in each of the three areas examined.

(i) SOUTH-WEST CORNER.

(a) *West Rampart* (fig. 2).

Two partial sections through the west rampart revealed a profile 9 feet 6 inches in height with a flat top 10 feet 6 inches wide. Towards the front of the platform were the fragmentary remains of a stone wall. This wall was too badly damaged to interpret with any precision, but it may tentatively be suggested that these were the footings of a stone parapet, the rearward portion of the platform forming a walk 3-4 feet broad. Since there was no sign of an earlier timber structure beneath the wall, it is probable that the latter is contemporary with the palisade found in the northern part of the castle rather than a reconstruction in stone. Comparison of the profiles of the two sections of rampart (fig. 2) will show that only the stone wall (section Ia) was provided with an adequate space for a walk or fighting-platform. The differences between the two ends of the castle therefore probably represent differences in function rather than in date.

(b) *The Tower* (figs. 3, 4).

The tower itself was partially cleared of rubble and recent rubbish. The exterior dimensions of the building are 27 feet from north to south and the same from the centre of the east side to that of the irregularly-aligned west wall. The walls ranged in thickness from 3 feet to 4 feet 6 inches. The base of the wall is widened by up to three offsets and a projecting

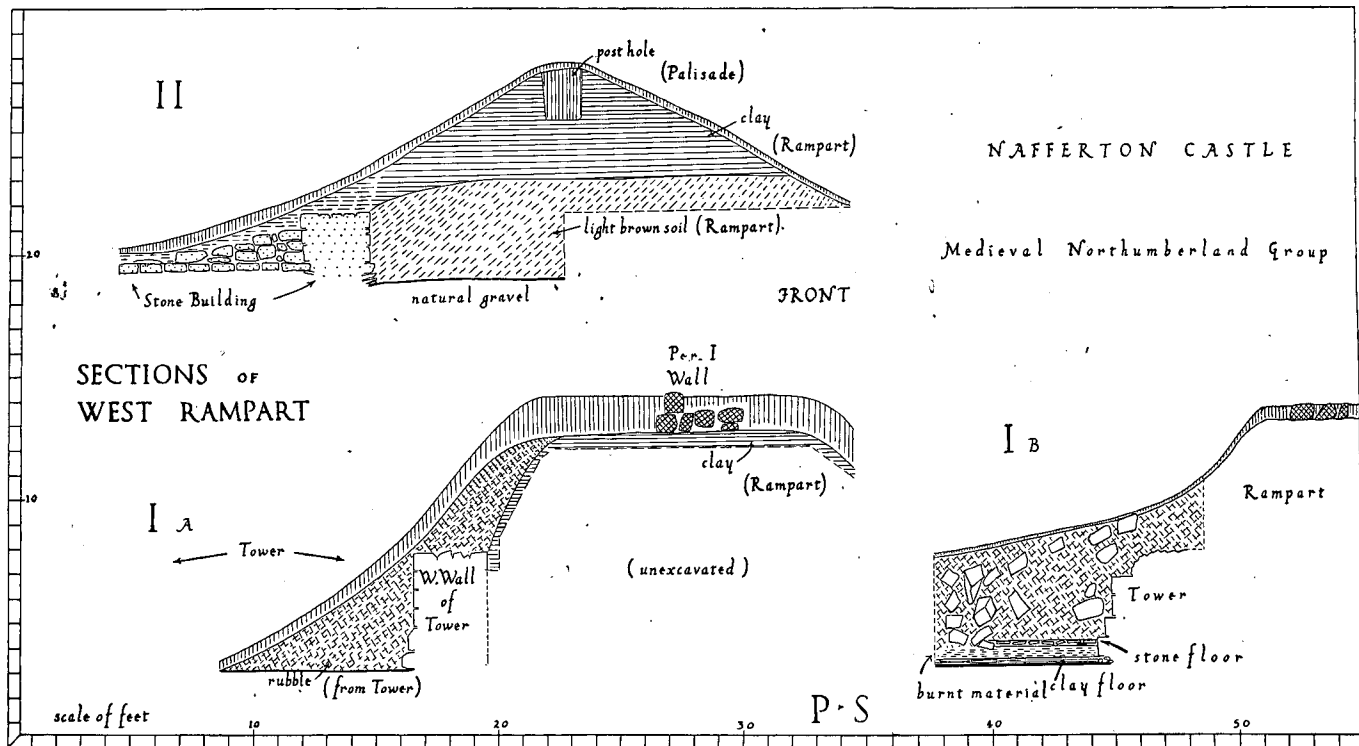


FIG. 2.

N AFFERTON

S.W. corner of the Castle



P-S 1960

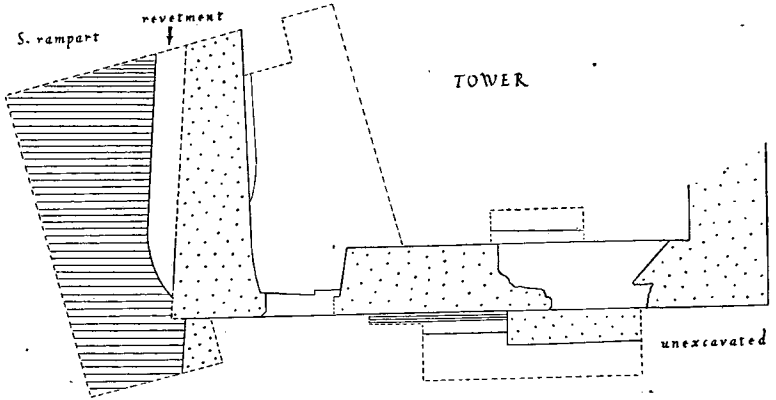
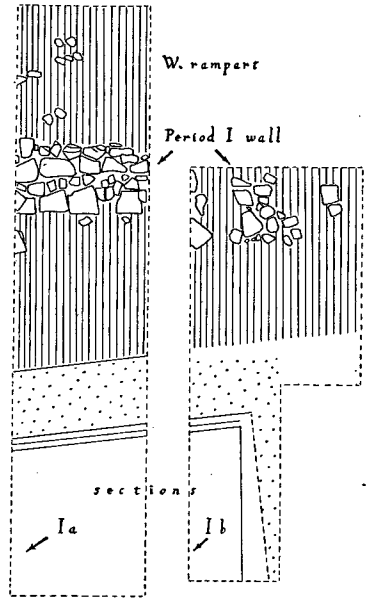


FIG. 3.

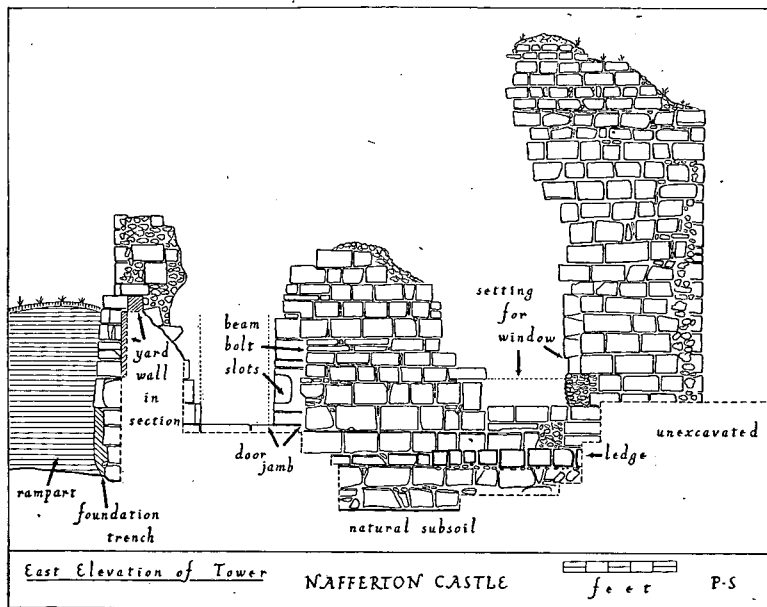


FIG. 4.

foundation course of boulders roughly-shaped. The core is rubble bound with mortar. The door was found at the south end of the east side. The tapering entrance-passage is 4 feet 3 inches wide at the inner end, and, although only one door-post remained in position, plaster on the step retained the matrix of the other, giving a width of 3 feet for the opening to the outside. The door had been secured on the inside by two beams, the upper sliding in a slot 4 feet 3 inches deep and 6 inches square in section, the lower resting in a shallow niche. The height of the doorway could not be exactly determined, as the lintel was lost, but the recess for the jamb at one side was found to be 5 feet from the top to the surface of the threshold.

Towards the northern end of the east wall one side of the setting for a window remains, with indications of the position

of the top and bottom of the frame. The width of the window is uncertain, but the deep splaying of the cheek suggests that it was comparatively narrow. The height of the opening cannot have been much more than 2 feet 6 inches.

Three feet below the window a ledge projects from the wall, into which it is bonded. Its purpose remains unknown. The fact that it was provided with a footing course and that the lower courses of the main wall are decidedly rougher than those higher indicates that this ledge was at the original ground level.

A curious feature of the building is that although at the north-east angle it still stands to a height of 22 feet there is no sign of an upper floor, whether timber or stone vault. But perhaps the chief oddity of the structure as at present known is its shape and position. Instead of filling in the angle between the two ramparts to form a base for the new tower, or alternatively siting it inside the angle, the builders decided to cut away most of the rearward part of the bank, utilizing the front as a shield for the foot of the tower probably against undermining or ramming. The west tower wall is not parallel with the east, so that rather more of the original rampart remains on this side than on the south. When in the course of the excavation a portion of the south rampart was removed, it was discovered that the tower wall had been widened for its lower nine courses to act as a revetment against the thrust of the bank. A slighter wall ran eastwards from the south-east angle of the tower, presumably to perform the same service for the yard outside the door.

The relation of the tower to the ramparts would suggest but not prove that the tower was a later insertion. The presence of the remains of a wall on the crest of the west rampart allows us to go further, for they cannot be explained except on the assumption that they represent a stage before the tower was built. Moreover there is other corroborative evidence. The documentary sources indicate that the main works of the castle demolished in 1221-2 were of timber, which argues against the existence of the stone tower at that

time, even if this corner of the castle was defended by a stone breastwork. Moreover the first occupation lasted not more than four years, yet the tower had been refloored, with a substantial deposit between the two levels. Finally, the single datable object found sealed in the structure of the tower was a sherd apparently of late-medieval fabric.

(ii) NORTHERN PART OF THE CASTLE.

(a) *West Rampart* (fig. 2).

The second section through this rampart was cut north of the central gap and close to the north-west corner of the castle. Here the rampart stood 8 feet 6 inches high and, unlike section Ia, there was no platform on the top, the profile being more nearly triangular. At the top of the bank was a post-hole, 1 foot 9 inches across and 2 feet deep, indicating a substantial palisade. Resting on undisturbed subsoil of gravel, the lower part of the bank consisted of 4 feet of light brown soil. The tail of this had been cut back for the insertion of a stone building. The upper part of the bank was composed of clay, and at the rear this extended in a thin layer over what remained of the west and south walls of the building. In view of the sequence at the south-west corner of the castle it seems probable that here too the construction of a stone building on the tail of the bank was subsequent to the erection of rampart and breastwork, the spread of clay over the structure representing a washing down of material from the bank later than the final destruction of the building. Of this building itself little is at present known. The masonry is rougher than that of the tower, the coursing is irregular and the foundation is composed of flakes of stone. The west and south walls are bonded together. Further excavation is required to elucidate its size, shape and purpose.

This section was carried a further 12 feet beyond the outer limit of the rampart in an attempt to locate the ditch. There was, however, no indication that the natural subsoil had at any time been disturbed in this area. Beyond this

point the present surface rises sharply and it therefore seems improbable that a ditch was cut on this side of the castle. The material for the bank must have come from elsewhere, perhaps the deep cut beyond the south rampart. The absence of a ditch on the west strongly suggests that the castle was never completed and it would not be surprising if work stopped on the death of Philip of Ulecotes, some months before the sheriff was ordered to take possession of it for the king and shortly afterwards to destroy it.

(b) *North Gate (?)*

Excavation inside the rampart immediately west of the wide gap in the north side of the castle, presumed site of the north gate, revealed a wall running at right-angles to the bank. A tree prevented examination of the junction with the body of the bank, but at the far end, 48 feet from the tail of the rampart, the wall turned west. It was 2 feet 3 inches thick, very well-built, lying on a bed of flakes of stone. The single remaining course of facing-stones was unusually in the form of thin slabs placed vertically. Immediately west of the wall a large boulder lay undisturbed, suggesting that if the interior of a building lay on this side the structure was either unfinished or the floor was raised above ground level. Outside the angle at the south-east corner of this structure lay a carved stone, probably from the parapet or balustrade of a building of some pretensions.

The evidence from the north-western part of the castle suggests that there were a number of substantial stone structures in a similar relationship to the rampart as the tower. Further excavation is required in this area to uncover the details.

(iii) POTTERY AND OTHER SMALL FINDS.

With the solitary exception of the sherd from the structure of the tower the small finds have not been of any assistance in determining the date of the phases in the castle's history. But one of the most important results of the excavations has

been the discovery of a group of sherds (including rims and bases) which can confidently be dated *not later than* Period I (1218-1222) on stratigraphic evidence. This pottery, the other small finds and any further discoveries in the third season will be described in the final report.

SUMMARY.

The excavation has provided clear indications of two structural periods in both the northern and southern parts of the castle and in view of the similarity in the phases in the two sectors and in the absence of contrary evidence it seems reasonable to assume that Periods I and II are respectively the same in date in each part. Moreover the absence so far of any signs of occupation on the site previous to the original construction of the castle permit the tentative ascription of the associated pottery to that construction period rather than anything earlier.

The picture that emerges of Nafferton in Period I is of a rectangular castle with an earthen bank and an unfinished ditch, the bank in the southern part (or perhaps only one corner of it) being surmounted by a stone wall, while the northern part was more lightly defended by a smaller bank surmounted by a timber palisade. This corresponds well with the *breteschiae* of the thirteenth-century documents, and there seems no reason at present to doubt that this is the castle of Philip of Ulecotes. Its date of construction (and the *terminus ante quem* for Group I of the pottery) is therefore 1218 and its end 1222. Distinctions between sizes of timber in the records of the demolition suggest that there may be wooden structures of this period other than the palisade, and the absence of payments for carting of stone perhaps implies that little, if any, more than the south-west corner was provided with stonework.

The second period at Nafferton seems to have retained the same distinction, concentrating the defence in the south-

west corner, but there the similarity ends. The essential military feature is the massive new tower. The northern area, bereft of its palisade, can hardly have been considered defensible against determined assault. Most probably, being conveniently pre-existing, it was utilized as an enclosed courtyard sufficiently protected by the bank and ditch to deter marauders, human or animal. It seems likely that the structures found on the tail of the rampart in this area will prove to be domestic buildings or outhouses when further excavated. The date of this second period remains obscure, but the lack of any documentary evidence whatever for its existence suggests a period of disorder, and, remembering the traditional ascription of the site to Lang Lonkin, it is indeed tempting to consider it the pele of some Border bandit of the fifteenth or the sixteenth century.