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EXCAVATION AT AYDON CASTLE, NORTHUMBERLAND 1975

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AT AYDON CASTLE, Northumberland, a small excavation was carried out in 1975 in the north-west corner of the curtain wall. The north wall to the west of the main gate was leaning outwards and work to stabilize it was to begin shortly. The purpose, therefore, was to excavate the area inside the corner formed by this wall and the west curtain wall to obtain dating evidence for the construction of the curtain wall and to establish the original ground level and the depth of the made ground within the walls. It was also hoped that some structures associated with a blocked door, window and drain outlet in the west wall might emerge to provide an explanation of the function of these features, which are apparently part of the original construction of the wall. There was also a blocking of an opening or recess in the north wall, of uncertain date.

The documentary evidence relating to Aydon, as outlined in the *Northumberland County History Vol. X*, suggests the existence of an earlier manor house or settlement on the site of the present castle from the late 12th century onwards. The first wing of the existing manor house was probably begun soon after 1296 when the manor was acquired by Robert de Raymes. Licence to crenellate this house was obtained in 1305 and the second wing of the house and the inner bailey were probably built at this time. The curtain wall was constructed some time after this during the course of the 14th century, possibly as a strengthening of the defences after the capture of the castle either in 1315 or 1346. The castle seems to have been abandoned as a residence by the Raymes family soon after the end of the 14th century. By 1450 it was ruinous. In 1541, when it came into the possession of Sir Reynold Carnaby, it was once again restored as a residence and has been in continuous occupation until the present D.O.E. restoration programme began. The datable material from the excavation is consistent with this pattern of occupation.

The excavation revealed that the area in the north-west corner of the curtain wall had been constantly levelled and relevelled from the time of the construction of the wall onwards. The original ground level sloped steeply from south-east to north-west. The foundation trench of the curtain wall was cut into this bank, and where fully excavated was found to be approximately 40 cm deep. No datable material came from the fill of this trench but at the east end of the excavation it was covered by a thick layer of soil and stone rubble datable to the early 14th century but containing residual pottery of the first half of the 13th century and late 12th century, presumably from the earlier occupation suggested by the documentary evidence. This material covered the whole site and in the north-west corner overlay at least two further layers of made ground, one of which contained a further sherd of late 12th/early 13th-century pottery.

It is likely that the levelling of the ground within the curtain took place fairly soon after the building of the wall, probably as the final phase in its construction. This seems then to place the construction of the curtain wall in the early 14th century. That is, if it was built in response to the capture of the castle by the Scots it is likely to have been after the incident in 1315 rather than after 1346.

Remains of mortar flooring, largely destroyed by later levels, were found to lie immediately over the soil and rubble levelling of the early 14th century and were also datable to the 14th century, probably laid immediately after the ground was levelled. Two post holes on the south side of the excavation were probably associated with this flooring but it was impossible to determine their function. A gravel path leading up to the threshold of the blocked doorway in the west wall was apparently associated with the flooring but 19th century disturbance made it impossible to be certain. The most substantial remains of this flooring were found against the west wall. In the centre the level of the floor was a sufficient depth below the blocked window (56 cm) to suggest that they could be associated. In the north-west corner the floor had subsided considerably to just below the drain outlet. (No evidence was found to suggest that a drain, associated with this outlet existed in medieval times, so its function remains unexplained.) The subsidence had then necessitated a further levelling of this corner with stone rubble and soil. This contained pottery of late 14th century type. Mortar flooring was then relaid, at least in the north-west corner and beside the west wall. The remains of this flooring were even more fragmentary than the earlier floor, but probably two phases were represented. There was evidence of further levelling with stone rubble over this later flooring in the late 14th or early 15th century. The surface of this layer was apparently disturbed in the late 16th or 17th century. There were other slight traces of 17th and early 18th century activity but the rest of the material on the site seems to have been deposited in the late 19th or early 20th century to create a yard or hard standing outside the barn.

There were a number of features associated with the 19th century levels, in particular a small stone-built shed or animal pen, and two drains constructed of river boulders. One of these made use of the drain outlet in the west wall, but since it lay over a 19th-century deposit and contained only 19th/20th-century material, this was obviously a reuse.

Beside the west wall, sand, mortar and ash were used to level the ground under a flagged floor, which remained only in fragments elsewhere but clearly ran under the blocked recess in the north wall, establishing that as a modern alteration, and under the upper blocking of the doorway in the west wall but well above its original threshold. The final phase on the site was yet another levelling with soil and stone rubble. In the south-east corner of the excavation this lay on the subsoil and in many places cut deeply into the medieval levels.

From such evidence as it was possible to gain from this stratification it seems clear that the made ground in this corner was of such an unstable nature that no permanent stone structures could be built on it, although the features incorporated in the west wall suggest that this may have been intended. Some kind of timber building, with mortar floors, probably not domestic, seems to have existed in this corner throughout

the 14th century but it was not possible to determine its plan. It was presumably bounded on the south side by the gravel path which led to the door in the west wall, which one could regard as a postern leading to the ancient trackway to Corbridge on the west side of the castle. The building, such as it was, must have been abandoned by the time that the ground was levelled for the third time at the end of the 14th century or in the early 15th century. The absence of specifically 15th-century or early 16th-century pottery confirms the documentary evidence for the abandonment of the site in this period. The reoccupation of the site after 1541 is marked by the occurrence of late 16th/17th-century material on the surface of the latest medieval levels. The outward lean of the curtain wall can be explained by the steepness of the slope on which it was built and the comparative shallowness of its foundation trench.

THE FINDS

19th/20th century

POTTERY

A large quantity of kitchen vessels in cream and brown glazed red earthenware. Transfer printed and sponge decorated tablewares, mostly local. The following are of interest:

1. Fragment of mug: blue transfer printed design, "The Sailors Farewell", almost identical (rather cruder engraving and not over painted) to a frog mug, Laing Art Gallery no. 34-153 made by Scott and Sons, Southwick, Sunderland c. 1825. The verse appears to be identical.
2. Willow pattern jug (almost complete): mark: C.T.M. FORD POTTERY. *The Potteries of Tyneside* R. C. Bell and M. A. V. Gill (Frank Graham 1973) records this mark for New Ford Pottery p. 22 M64. Late 19th century, post 1879.



(a)



(b)

Fig. 1.

3. Fragment of plate: blue transfer printed "Albion Pattern" as plate Cc (*op. cit.*) c. 1875. Marks: (fig. 1). The impressed mark b. overlaps the printed mark a. The manufacturer is John Wood, Stepney Pottery, Newcastle, founded c. 1872. Neither of the marks is identical to any in *The Potteries of Tyneside* but the printed mark is identical to the George Patterson Albion mark M84 (*op. cit.*) except for the initials in the centre.

4. Grey stoneware bottle, (almost complete): blue printed label: "R. Lumley & Co. Ovington on Tyne Extra Stout Ovington Brewery". The firm appears in directories from 1890 to 1921.

GLASS

A considerable quantity of green bottle glass and fragments of pharmaceutical bottles.

One complete pharmaceutical bottle, moulded label:

TAYLOR GIBSON & CO. 30 BIGG MARKET NEWCASTLE

The firm first appears in Wards Directory 1907/8. It moved to a new address in 1921.

IRON

Horse shoes, tools, fragments of farm machinery.

Late 16th to early 18th century

POTTERY

5. Body sherd, soft white fabric, good white tin glaze mottled with manganese purple externally, mixed to pale mauve internally. English tin glazed ware, similar to Malling. Late 16th or 17th century.
6. 2 body sherds, one at the base of a handle, 1 base sherd, red fabric, glazed internally and externally (except the base) with shiny dark brown almost black glaze. 17th to early 18th century "Black-Glazed" ware.

CLAY PIPES

3 stem fragments. 17th century.

Medieval

POTTERY

14th/early 15th century rubble levelling

7. Rim sherd of jug, just turning to pinched spout, aperture 160 mm (fig. 2). 6 body sherds and the bases of two strap handles from the same and similar vessels. Whitish fabric, reduced in places, some grits, pinkish surfaces where glaze absent, yellowish brown glaze, good cover externally, patchy internally. 14th century.



Fig. 2.

8. 2 body sherds, whitish gritty fabric, pale grey internal surface, yellowish brown external glaze.

Nos. 7 and 8. are of the same type as a number of examples excavated in Newcastle and datable to the 14th century. No. 81. "Excavations of the South Curtain Wall of the Castle, Newcastle upon Tyne. 1960-61". Barbara Harbottle, *A.A.* 1966, is perhaps the most similar to the rim sherd illustrated here, although it is a smaller vessel. The rest of the material from this layer consisted of thin sherds of a gritty grey fabric, usually with paler or oxidised surfaces, with external yellowish green glaze, datable to the 14th century, and a smaller number of fragments of storage jars or cisterns, dark grey fabric often with pale grey surfaces slightly oxidised in places and green external glaze, of a type which appears in the late 14th century and persists throughout the 15th century.

Rubble levelling over the first flooring and under the later flooring. Second half 14th century

9. (residual) fragment of base and wall, gritty buff fabric, reduced core, outer surface orange tinged. Derivative of 12th century types as excavated in south and south-east Durham. Not much later than 1300 (D. Austin, L. Addis).
10. (residual) body sherd, gritty orange/buff fabric, grey/buff external surface, analogous to types of the first half of the 13th century or earlier excavated in south and south-east Durham (D. Austin, L. Addis). Similar to 12.

The rest of the material from this layer consisted of the same mixture of 14th and late 14th to 15th century types as described above.

The First Flooring

11. body sherd, dark grey slightly gritty fabric, pale grey surfaces, green/brown external glaze. 14th century.

First Rubble Levelling, under the Flooring. Early 14th century

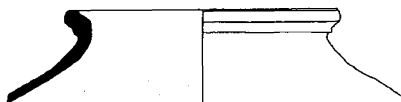


Fig. 3.

12. (residual) Fragment of rim and shoulder of cooking pot (fig. 3) gritty fabric, light buff to almost black, outer surface greyish buff, incised line externally at base of neck, knife marks visible, aperture 140 mm. Analogous to types of the first half of the 13th century or earlier

excavated in south and south-east Durham. Rim shape not parallelled. (D. Austin, L. Addis.) Two sherds from the same or a similar vessel, one with external rilling and splashed yellow glaze internally.

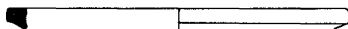


Fig. 4.

13. (residual) Rim sherd (fig. 4) grey to beige gritty fabric, aperture 180 mm. Analogous to types of the first half of the 13th century or earlier excavated in south and south-east Durham. Rim shape not parallelled. (D. Austin, L. Addis.)
14. (residual) body sherd, almost black gritty fabric, light grey external surface under olive-green/brown glaze. Parallelled at Thrislington County Durham, late 12th century onwards. (D. Austin, L. Addis.) The pottery from this excavation is not yet published.
15. 2 body sherds, light grey, slightly gritty fabric, pinkish external surface showing in patches through sage-green glaze. Parallelled at Thrislington, end of 13th century to c. 1300. (D. Austin, L. Addis.)
16. body sherd, orange gritty fabric, paler internal surface, external surface smoke blackened. Derivative of 12th century types as excavated in south and south-west Durham. Not much later than 1300. (D. Austin, L. Addis.)
17. body sherd, buff gritty fabric, similar to above.
18. fragment of base and wall, light grey slightly gritty fabric, buff internal surface, external surface orange buff where glaze absent, external yellowish glaze. 14th century.

The rest of the material from this layer consisted of sherds of dark grey gritty fabric with lighter grey or buff surfaces and green/brown external glaze, datable to the 14th century.

BONES

These were few in number and many were too fragmentary to identify. Those that were identifiable were of cattle, sheep and dog.

IRON

3 nails approx. 35 mm long, 1 nail approx. 67 mm long.

COIN

Excavated from a 19th century level, a fragment with the edge partly detached. Mr. Graham Robson offered the following suggestions: as it is of base metal, it could be a late 17th or early 18th-century penny, which would be of this size (possibly approx. 25 mm diam.). The thinness of the metal, however, suggests a medieval coin, in which case it could be a continental "jeton" in imitation of a silver half-groat of the 14th/15th century.

I am grateful to Mr. David Austin, Miss Laurie Addis and Mr. Graham Robson for their assistance in identifying the finds, and to Mr. James Rackham for a report on the bones.