

John of Gaunt's Building Works at Dunstanburgh Castle

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IT is a lamentable fact that contemporary documentation of medieval castle construction is all too rare. Where it does exist, reconciling it with the physical remains is seldom straightforward. The concise or ambiguous nature of the documents themselves, and the partial destruction or modification of the buildings with which they are concerned, can both lead to mistakes in interpretation. One such case concerns the programme of building works carried out during the 1380s by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and titular King of Castille, at Dunstanburgh Castle on the Northumbrian coast, a structural phase which constitutes the most important modification to the castle that Thomas Earl of Lancaster caused to be built in the first quarter of the fourteenth century.¹ It is the purpose of this paper to clarify the nature and purpose of John of Gaunt's works.

The construction sequence of the 1380s can be gleaned from a series of documentary references in the records of the Duchy of Lancaster. On the 25th October 1380, an indenture was drawn up between Gaunt and the Durham master mason, John Lewyn, in which Lewyn undertook to rebuild a battlemented mantlet of freestone "around the great tower" in the Duke's castle of Dunstanburgh.² The mantlet, which was to be an estimated 11 rods in length, 20 ft high, including the battlements, and 4 ft thick, had been completed by 17th July 1381 when John Lewyn received payment for this, and "another work" of the Duke's "device".³ Lewyn does not appear to have had any further involvement in the project, for, on 1st December, John of Gaunt engaged a different master mason, Henry Holme, to build "a new work of masonry, beside and joining on to the new mantlet".⁴ This had evidently been completed by 20th July 1383, for on that date Gaunt

ordered his receiver to pay Holme £20 for making "six houses with six vaults, six chimneys, and windows pertaining to the said houses, and for the making of an entry and a gatehouse with a vault and a portcullis and a vice . . . beyond his agreement".⁵ On the same day, an indenture was made in which Holme agreed to make a new vaulted gatehouse of freestone with a portcullis or barbican, and a postern and provision for a drawbridge. Materials from the old gatehouse were to be taken towards the use of the new.⁶

The general purport of John of Gaunt's scheme can be understood by an examination of the existing remains. In building Dunstanburgh, Thomas of Lancaster enclosed the promontory site with walls on the south, east and west sides (the north side was protected by a cliff rising sheer from the sea). At the south-west angle he built a massive twin-towered gatehouse which, even now, dominates the main approach from the south. As well as forming the principal entrance to the castle, the gatehouse was its strongpoint from which its defence would have been controlled, and it also contained its main residential suite.⁷ It was in the vicinity of the gatehouse that the works of the 1380s were concentrated.

Before John of Gaunt's improvements, it is assumed that the gatehouse gave direct access to the main ward. There were two drawbacks to this arrangement. Firstly, there was no second line of defence beyond the gatehouse. Secondly, the apartment on the second floor of the gatehouse, which was probably that which Gaunt himself might have occupied should he have stayed at Dunstanburgh, was too easily accessible at a time when lordly apartments were becoming increasingly exclusive.⁸ Gaunt's reorganization tackled both problems; it resulted in the construction of an inner ward imme-

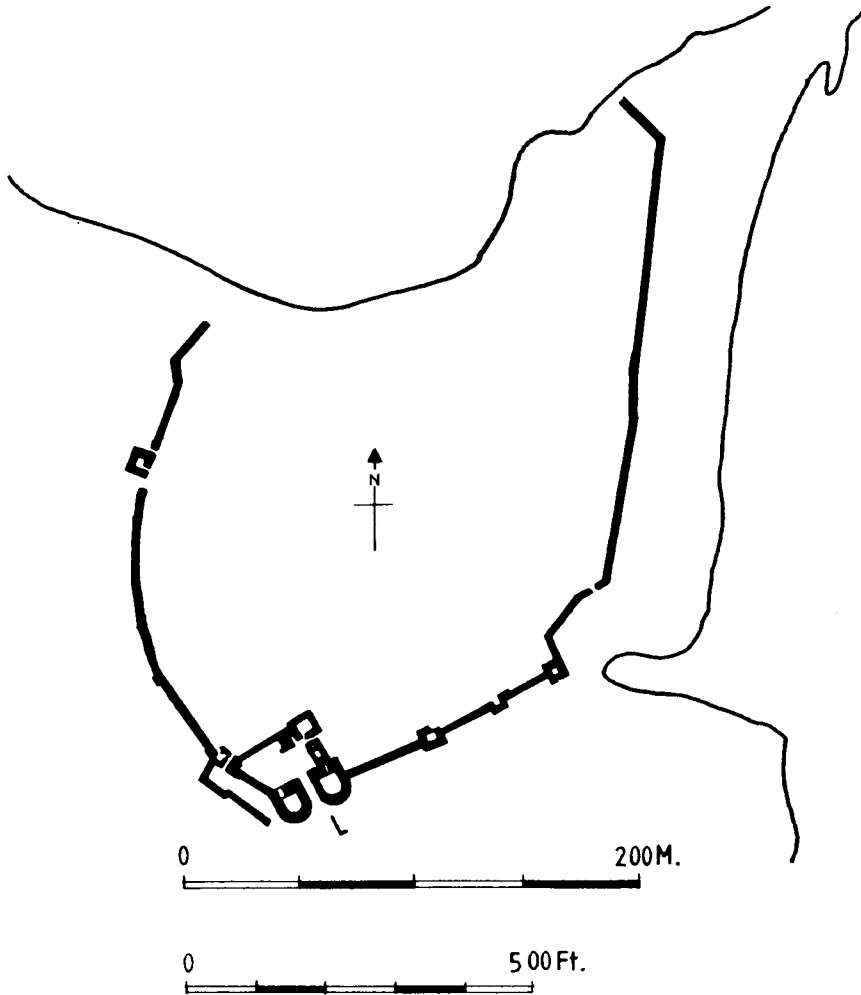


Fig. 1 Dunstanburgh Castle: after *English Heritage*.

diately behind Thomas of Lancaster's gatehouse, with buildings around three sides (which included a kitchen and bakehouse) and a gatehouse at its north-east corner, the blocking of the main gateway at both ends so that the gatehouse became a donjon, and the creation of a new outer gatehouse in the west curtain with an elongate barbican. As a result, the apartments in the great tower became more remote and self contained, and access to them could not only be subjected to a sustained

defence, but, in addition, it echoed the staged and drawn out approaches to the chambers of the lord that are to be found in other fourteenth century castles.⁹

Whilst the overall effect of John of Gaunt's improvements is clear, not all the component parts of this scheme are readily identifiable. There is now no trace of the six houses that Henry Holme was paid for in 1383, though we may perhaps hazard the opinion that they were identical single chamber lodgings possibly built

within the inner ward for the accommodation of members of John of Gaunt's retinue.¹⁰ Although no location was given for the entry and gatehouse that were paid for at the same time as these "houses", they are usually identified with the gateway to the inner ward and its associated gatehouse tower, as there is little doubt that the gatehouse of the 1383 indenture is the outer gatehouse in the west curtain. The stipulations that it was to have a portcullis or a barbican, and a postern and provision for a drawbridge, suggest a substantial outer gateway. The gatehouse itself appears to have been a rectangular tower¹¹ circa 50 ft by 25 ft, with a recessed entrance to the roughly central gate-passage, and a portcullis. In front of the gatehouse was a rectangular barbican with an entrance in its south side, also protected by a portcullis. Adjoining this at the south-west corner was a length of wall, the foundations of which remain, that ran parallel with the west curtain, as far as the north-west corner of Thomas of Lancaster's gatehouse, to which, at this point, it returned towards, being pierced by another gateway with portcullis, so that it formed an outer barbican dominated by the old gatehouse and west curtain.

H. L. Honeyman referred to this outer barbican wall as the "mantlet built in 1380".¹² This must be wrong: quite apart from the obvious objections that this wall is not "around the great tower", that it is only 74 ft long rather than the 11 rods specified in the indenture,¹³ and that it was built of rubble rather than freestone, Honeyman contradicts himself by writing quite correctly elsewhere that "The barbican is clearly a later addition to the gate-tower, and the mantlet wall in its turn an addition to the barbican".¹⁴ The English Heritage guidebook is equally contradictory. Whilst acknowledging that the so called mantlet is that "which the Durham architect, John Lewyn, was engaged to construct in 1380"¹⁵ it is nevertheless stated elsewhere that it was "built in the late 1380s to control the approaches to John of Gaunt's gatehouse" of 1383.¹⁶

Whilst we may be certain that the outer barbican wall is not to be identified with Lewyn's mantlet of 1380, we are left with the

problem of where the latter was situated. The "great tower" of the indenture of 1380, that the mantlet was to be around, must mean the great gatehouse built by Thomas of Lancaster. The only other building that might conceivably have been meant is the Lilburn Tower, a large square tower that projects from the west curtain to protect a postern gate. However, there is no sign of there having been any additional works in its vicinity, whereas the area around the gatehouse was subjected to intense building activity. There are, therefore, only two possible sites for the mantlet: in front of, or behind the gatehouse. There is now no trace of any building that could be identified with the mantlet in front of the gatehouse, neither has excavation revealed any remains of such a structure.¹⁷ This leaves only one possible site, so it is interesting to note that as early as 1891, Cadwallader Bates suggested that the mantlet might be identified with the inner courtyard wall.¹⁸ Moreover, this wall complies with the contractual stipulations that the mantlet was to be around the great tower and made of freestone; the combined lengths of the north and east sections of the inner ward wall are approximately 140 ft, but if the space occupied by the north-east gatehouse is included, this gives a total length of 184 ft, very close to the estimated 11 rods calculated on a basis of $16\frac{1}{2}$ ft per rod ($181\frac{1}{2}$ ft).

Henry Holme's north-east gatehouse, then, must be a modification to John Lewyn's mantlet. There are certainly signs that the wall has been altered: towards the east end of the northern section, the stone coursing is interrupted by two vertical joints which define a different structural phase, 11 ft 10 ins wide. Its width, and its position almost directly opposite Thomas of Lancaster's gateway, which was itself 11 ft 2 ins wide, suggest that it represents a blocked gateway. The opening was filled in by the rear wall of an oven which was built within the inner ward, probably when Henry Holme built his new entrance on the east side of the ward.

John Harvey regarded the works of 1380–83 as related parts of a preconceived plan, and identified Henry Holme's "new work of

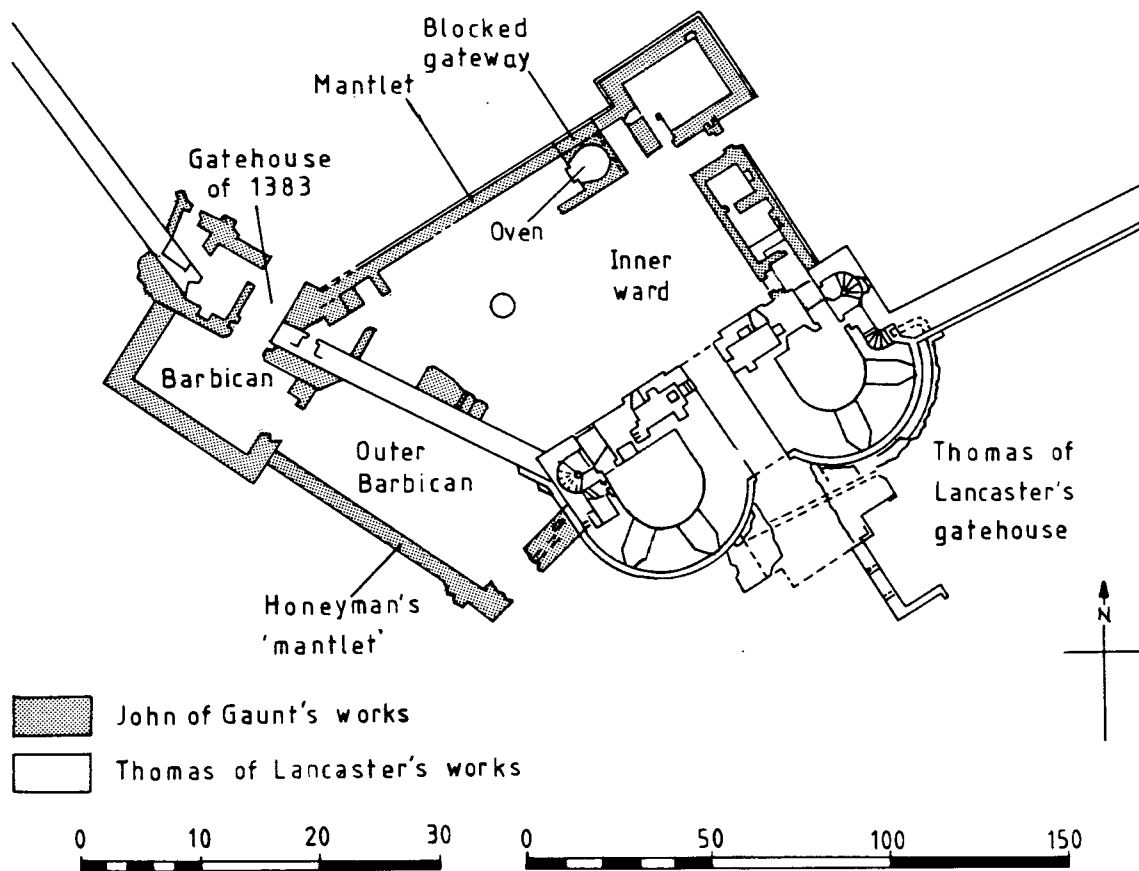


Fig. 2 *The Gatehouse Dunstanburgh: after English Heritage with alterations.*

masonry, beside and joining on to the new mantlet” with the unspecified “work” of Gaunt’s “device” made by Lewyn in 1380–81, and concluded that “there can be little doubt that Henry Holme simply continued what had been designed and begun by Lewyn”.¹⁹ If the above interpretation is correct then Harvey must be wrong. His view is certainly not supported by the documents which suggest that Lewyn’s work had been completed by July 1381. There followed an hiatus of four and a half months before Henry Holme appeared on the scene.

There is little doubt that John of Gaunt’s improvements to Dunstanburgh were connected with his appointment as the king’s lieutenant in the marches towards Scotland on 6th September 1380.²⁰ At this time, Dunstanburgh, with its vast circuit of walls and windswept interior, must have seemed neither tenable nor hospitable, and no doubt Gaunt made his headquarters at Bamburgh, the principal royal castle of the area, which offered more commodious accommodation and more formidable defences.²¹ Lewyn’s mantlet did nothing more than provide Dunstanburgh with minimum

standards of privacy, comfort and security for the occupant of Thomas of Lancaster's gatehouse. The second phase of the works comprised a more drastic remodelling of the area to create a secure military base and exclusive residence.

An explanation of why the second phase was considered necessary may be found in the hostility to Gaunt's intervention in the north on the part of the earl of Northumberland, the most powerful of the border lords.²² This ill-feeling came to a head in the summer of 1381 during the Peasant's Revolt. Gaunt, who was one of the prime targets of the rebels' displeasure, was in the borders, and sought refuge with the earl. Northumberland refused him sanctuary and Gaunt had to flee to Scotland.²³

This episode may have caused Gaunt to pay serious attention to the strengthening of Dunstanburgh, not only as an alternative refuge to Bamburgh, but as a strategic counterbalance to the earl's neighbouring strongholds of Warkworth and Alnwick. It was very probably one of the reasons why Gaunt subsequently attempted to exclude Northumberland from the wardenships of the marches towards Scotland by advancing his own retainer, John Lord Neville of Raby, at Northumberland's expense, a policy that began in December 1381 with the appointment of Neville as sole warden of the east march, and culminated in 1383 when he was warden in both marches.²⁴ The works at Dunstanburgh went hand in hand with Neville's advancement. On 1st December Henry Holme was engaged to resume work at Dunstanburgh; he is last heard of in the indenture of 1383 for the new gatehouse. By 1384 Gaunt had recognized the impossibility of ignoring the Percies in matters of border defence, and had abandoned the policy of excluding Northumberland from the wardenships; in this year his commission lapsed.²⁵ It is symbolic, perhaps, that after Gaunt's withdrawal from the sphere of border politics, he carried out no further works of importance at his castle of Dunstanburgh.

NOTES

¹ See *NCH* II, 196–9 for Thomas of Lancaster's works.

² For a transcript see *John of Gaunt's Register 1379–83*, 2 vols., eds. Eleanor C. Lodge & Robert Somerville. Camden Society, 3rd ser., 56, 57 (1937). II, 291, n. 922. See W. D. Simpson, "Further Notes on Dunstanburgh Castle", *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser. XXVII (1949), 21–22, for a translation.

³ *John of Gaunt's Register* I, 186, no. 566; Simpson, pp. 22–23.

⁴ *John of Gaunt's Register* I, 202, no. 624; Simpson, p. 23.

⁵ *John of Gaunt's Register* II, 284, no. 903; Simpson, p. 24.

⁶ *John of Gaunt's Register* II, 292, no. 923; Simpson, p. 25.

⁷ *NCH* II, 212.

⁸ For reflections of the desire for greater privacy in late medieval domestic arrangements, see Anthony Emery, *Dartington Hall* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 226–30 and *Archaeological Journal*, supplement to vol. 147 (1990), 108–10, and P. A. Faulkner "Castle Planning in the Fourteenth Century", *Archaeological Journal* CXX (1963), pp. 215–35.

⁹ See P. W. Dixon, "The donjon at Knaresborough: the castle as theatre", *Chateau Gaillard* XIV (1990), 121–39, for one example. Comparable lines of approach may be discerned at Kenilworth Castle after John of Gaunt's remodelling of the residential apartments there, and at Warkworth Castle after the construction of the donjon by the first Percy earl of Northumberland.

¹⁰ For the development of retainers' lodgings, see Emery, *Dartington Hall*, pp. 247–55 and *Archaeological Journal*, supplement to vol. 147 (1990), 106–7, and M. Wood, *The English Mediaeval House* (London, 1963), pp. 177–88.

¹¹ It was recorded in a drawing by Francis Place of 1628, reproduced in the English Heritage guide: Henry Summerson, *Dunstanburgh Castle* (London, 1993), p. 18.

¹² C. H. Hunter Blair and H. L. Honeyman, *Dunstanburgh Castle*, 3rd ed. (1982), p. 11.

¹³ Rods of 16½ ft and 20 ft were both in use in northern England at this time. These measurements would give respective lengths for the mantlet of 181½ ft and 220 ft.

¹⁴ *Dunstanburgh Castle*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Summerson, *Dunstanburgh Castle*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Only a barbican or forebuilding has been uncovered.

¹⁸ *The Border Holds of Northumberland* (1891), p. 189.

¹⁹ *English Medieval Architects*, rev. ed. (1984), p. 183.

²⁰ *Rotuli Scotiae*, 2 vols. (Record Commission, 1814–19) II, 27.

²¹ The indenture for the mantlet was drawn up at Bamburgh.

²² On the quarrel between Gaunt and Northumberland see R. L. Storey, "The Wardens of the

Marches of England towards Scotland, 1377–1489", *English Historical Review* CCLXXXV, (1937), 594–8, and J. A. Tuck, "Richard II and the Border Magnates", *Northern History* III (1968), 27–52.

²³ *The Anonimale Chronicle*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (Manchester, 1927), p. 152.

²⁴ Storey, "The Wardens of the Marches", p. 596.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 597–8; Tuck, "Richard II and the Border Magnates", p. 42.

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