

OKEHAMPTON CASTLE.

BY R. N. WORTH, F.G.S.

(Read at Okehampton, July, 1895.)

"THERE stands a castle," are the words in which the Domesday scribe first records on the pages of history the existence of the fortalice of Baldwin the Sheriff, the chief seat of his great Honour and Barony of Okehampton. And what was true eight hundred years ago is true still. "There stands a castle" yet. That in its earlier days this was of much local importance, in its command of the country to the immediate north and east of Dartmoor, follows of necessity from its situation, but record is absolutely silent as to its having ever played any leading part in the strifes and wars of the Middle Ages. We have scant note of its builders, and less than a dozen lines would tell all that has been clearly handed down to us concerning it, from its first mention in *Domesday* to the note of its dismantling in the sixteenth century. When we have said that it passed from the Redverses to the Courtenays, from the Courtenays to the Mohuns; and so, through Savilles and Vyvyans, to its present owner, Mr. Reddaway, we have really said about everything that is really needful, or, indeed, possible. All that remains to add is that, since it was a residence, it has never been in more heedful hands than those of the gentleman to whom the public are indebted alike for needful conservation and liberal access, and I for the special courtesies which have made the writing of this paper possible.

Okehampton Castle differs from the other ancient castles of Devon in several noteworthy features. Most of the Norman fortalices, whether in this county or in Cornwall, have round shell keeps—as at Plympton and Totnes, Restormel and Launceston, may be seen to this day. The

typical Norman castles, with the true square keeps, were fewer in number, but as a rule, of greater comparative importance. Among them, that of Okehampton occupies what may be regarded as a middle position. More important than Lydford in its adjuncts, it must have been much inferior to Exeter—Rougemont; nor in its later phases can it ever have compared with the other Courtenay hold at Tiverton, as a residence with their present seat at Powderham, or in extent and defensive power with the stronghold of the Pomeroyes at Berry. Nevertheless, in the early Middle Ages, it must have been regarded as a place of no little strength and dignity, when the Courtenays had completed what the Redverses begun.

Of some of the Norman castles, specially those with the shell keeps, we may be pretty sure that they occupied the site of Saxon strengths, which may, to some extent, have dictated their plan. This was certainly so at Plympton and Totnes and Launceston and Barnstaple. Okehampton, however, seems to be purely of Norman origin. The site, indeed, is one that might have been chosen by the Saxon; but in the West, at any rate, he would never have undertaken the heavy work of cutting through the spur of the hill to isolate the keep, on which its main strength depended. He had already fortified his "tun" in the fork of the twin rivers, and before that had erected his stockade on the upland (Halstock), and a fortalice on the castle hill would have been of no use to him for the safeguard of his local interests. With the Norman, needing a centre of jurisdiction, the case was different. He had to keep in order, rather than defend. His protective ideas were in the main confined to himself.

It is not quite easy to say what the full plan of the castle in its complete form may have been. The castle hill is cut off from the spur of the high land, of which it forms the eastern point, by a deep notch through the solid slate rock on the west. It is steeply scarped to the north and south (where the West Okement formed a moat); and is approached by a more gradual slope, still sharp, however, only from the east. On the crest of the hill thus isolated stand the grim ruins of the keep, on a mound which may be partly artificial in height, as it certainly is in form. Down the slope to the eastward, connected with the mound by curtain walls, are the remains of two ranges of buildings, north and south, with a narrowing yard between them leading to the main gateway. Beyond this gateway, further to

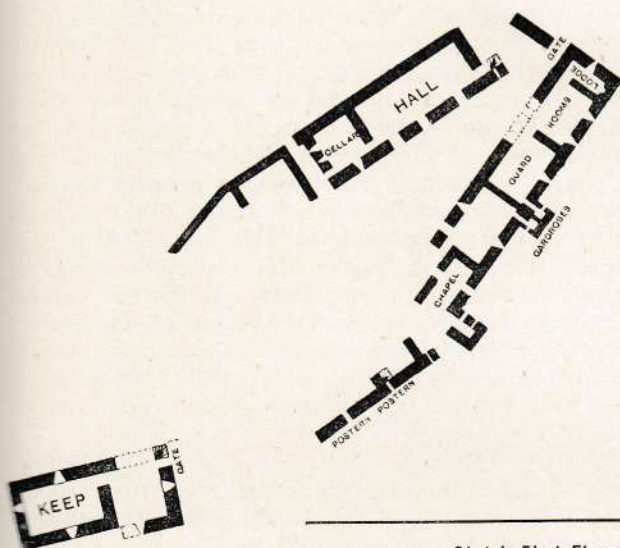
the eastward still, at the foot of the hill, and on the level of the ancient river bank, are fragments of the outer gate or barbican.

Now, while it is perfectly clear that the keep was defensible in itself, and that the inner courtyard, with its double set of buildings, and its curtain walls, formed with the keep a complete fortalice, well protected by the escarpment—no doubt stockaded—from any sudden attack, it is by no means so clear that it would have held a garrison or munitions capable of standing even a short siege. If, however, the barbican gate, instead of being merely an outwork for the main entrance, formed part of a still larger external mural cincture enclosing the whole, there would have been plenty of room to accommodate a fairly large garrison in the wooden shelters which commonly formed the abodes of the mediæval rank and file. I am bound, however, to say that I have been unable to satisfy myself that such a complete line of exterior defence existed; or that the main building ever consisted of much more than one seas, or can trace, of the keep and the two wings, of what I should perhaps call, somewhat by courtesy, the base court. The barbican was, of course, much more extensive than now appears.

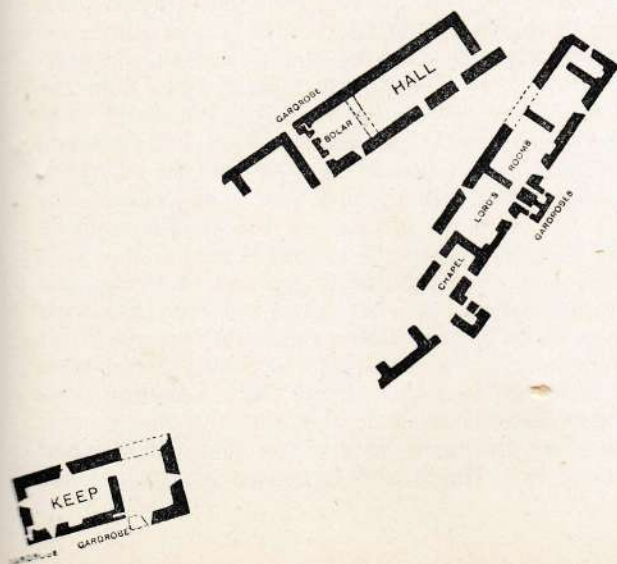
On the age of the castle, the structural indications are distinct. The oldest part of the edifice is the keep; the most recent that portion of the southern block which contains the remains of the chapel; and they date architecturally from the Norman to the Early English periods—or, say, from the eleventh to nearly the close of the thirteenth centuries. *Domesday*, of course, is clear that a castle of some kind had been erected before 1086. William of Worcester, who visited this “famous castle,” as he calls it, in 1478, when it was intact, records—no doubt on what he thought good authority—that it was built by “Thomas, the first Courtenay earl.” This, however, was clearly not the case, equally on the evidence of history and of structure, and I was once inclined, therefore, to adopt the suggestion of Grose, that Thomas simply carried out what may have been somewhat extensive repairs and modifications, the main features of the structure remaining as he found them. But it is far more likely the fact that it was held by Thomas Courtenay at William’s visit, is responsible for his slip, and that he was right in ascribing the main body of the fabric to the *true* first Courtenay earl, Hugh, who succeeded in 1292, on the

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Sketch Ground Plan.



Sketch First Floor Plan.



death of Isabella de Fortibus—a date which fits in excellently with the architectural character of the later edifice.

I at one time held that no part of Baldwin's work remained, but I am now convinced not only that the lower portion of the keep walls is essentially Norman, but Norman that may well be of his time. Close inspection will show that the northern wall is certainly the oldest part of the structure, as it stands, and it will be noticed also that in this wall, and some of the lower parts of the keep walls elsewhere, the materials largely consist of water-worn stones from the river-bed below, while the upper portions of the walls (like the walls of the castle generally) are built of the massive native slate. Evidently the original masons took the materials they could get with the least trouble, and that lay nearest to hand. These walls average near the base something near seven feet in thickness, and are, therefore, of great strength in proportion to the size of the structure.

The keep is rectangular in plan, with the longer axis east and west, in two sections, now divided from each other by gaps in the walls north and south. The eastern section, moreover, is broader than the western, and may have been an addition in some sort to the original building. In its final form the keep consisted of two rooms below and two above, entered by a low-pointed doorway in the north-eastern corner, immediately within which, on the north, a flight of stone steps in the wall led to the upper floor and to the roof. The cavities for the sliding bar which fastened the outer door still remain; and both the arches of the external doorway and the stair opening are intact, with the arch on the inner side of the porch or passage in the thickness of the wall. A doorway, lower, but of similar character, led from the outer into the inner apartment on the ground floor; and this latter division I have been somewhat inclined to regard as the original keep, on to which the outer section was first grafted by Redvers, and modified by Courtenay. But there is no certain evidence.

This inner apartment is 26 feet by 16, and is lit on the ground floor by three deeply-splayed windows, with small openings, in the north, west, and south walls respectively, the doorway being the only opening on the east. The northern window is round-headed, in rubble masonry without dressings. The eastern and southern are semi-pointed, and may have been altered, in rebuilding, from the northern form; while the southern has been partially blocked outward by granite dressings, so as to reduce it to a longitudinal

slit once containing iron bars. There are remains of similar dressings in the northern.

Nine joists, supported by two transverse beams, carried the floor of the upper room. Here there is another window in the north wall, immediately over that below. The south wall contains a fireplace and a large window, both with dressings. The west wall another large window, and a rude lancet arch in granite, giving entrance to a garderobe in the northern corner. A roof corbel remains. There are a good many patches of plastering.

The outer chamber is the larger of the two, 22 feet by 22, on the ground floor; but the walls are so broken away on each outer side, that is impossible to say more than that it appears to have been lighted much after the same fashion as the inner — certainly on the south — while there was a window also on the east. Nor can we say whether it contained a fireplace, like its neighbour, above. There are, however, the remains of a second garderobe on the south, wrought in the thickness of the wall; and the drains to both are complete. The upper apartments were somewhat bigger than the lower, because the thickness of the middle wall was reduced at the floor level. The defence must have been from the roof, to which the newel stair gave access; and at the head of the staircase there is just one fragment of the battlements. In case of a siege before the rest of the castle was built, or as a last place of refuge, the quarters of the garrison must have been excessively inconvenient, and their capacity for storage of provisions and munitions of war very small.

The keep is, at present, approached from below by a winding path, but a sketch of the castle, taken by T. H. Williams, early in the century, seems to shew traces of a sunken way, which would, of course, be provided with steps, and in the absence of which, indeed, the access to the keep would be exposed to the missiles of the assailants. Some sort of protected access, in later days at any rate, there must have been.

We have now to deal with the main buildings. These, as has already been said, form two ranges, or blocks, on the north and south of a long and narrow base court, triangular in plan, in consequence of their convergence on the main gateway at the eastern end. All these buildings are essentially of one period and style, though I am not sure that they follow one original design.

The main feature of the northern range is the great hall, with the solar, or lord's chamber, over the usual undercroft, or cellar, at its upper (western) end. This is the only part of the northern section of the castle that is substantially intact. The hall was a fine apartment, 45 ft. in length by 25 in breadth; and was lit by two large windows in the southern wall, to the west of which was the entrance, a boldly-moulded granite doorway, 4 ft. 4½ in. in width. At the lower end of the hall, in the south-eastern corner, a doorway leads into what was a staircase-turret, lit by a loop, which gave access to the roof. A few of the lower steps remain, and some fragments of fallen masonry. It was at this end, in halls of later date, that the kitchen and buttery were approached; but the hall is characteristically twelfth century in plan, and there are no existing traces of offices of that, or any sort, in the space between the end of the hall and the main gateway, the wall of which, on this northern side, is much ruined. These offices, therefore, must either have been of small structural importance, or of a mere temporary character. A doorway at the upper end of the hall, in the south-western corner, leads on the level into the cellar, 14 ft. by 25, lit on the south by a splayed loop, and on the west by a loop and a window of larger size. The northern wall is broken, and its indications doubtful. This chamber was entered from outside by steps, through a doorway in the north-west corner, the dressings of which still retain the tool marks.

Above the cellar are the remains of the lord's chamber, lit by a window on the south, and containing a window, fireplace, and garderobe on the west. The garderobe is formed in a little projection from the main building, lit by a loop, and has apparently been cut off from the chamber by a structural screen of some kind, the broken chase of which remains. It is not quite clear how the room was reached, but the wall between it and the hall is so broken down, that a stair might very well have been carried up from the dais in connection with the space apparently screened off—a common arrangement. There are fragments of masonry in the north-eastern corner of the cellar, which look like steps leading up to the dais. If what they seem, there may have been a wooden stair to the solar. Towards the centre of the hall are what may be the remains of the hearth.

The hall and its adjuncts are separated from the building to the west by a narrow passage, which has been regarded as forming a kind of private approach. There are, however, no

traces of any gate—and it is evident that the passage owes its origin to the fact that the hall is isolated. There must, therefore, have been some means of defence here. In fact, the absence of distinctive defensive works in this block of the buildings, is very striking. And whether there was ever an exterior cincture in connection with the barbican or not; it is quite evident that a wall must have continued from the main gateway, round the hall to the keep mound, forming a narrow, but no doubt effective, rampart. On the south, the buildings themselves form the enclosure; and I think the need of this special work on the north, helps the conclusion that the hall was the earliest work of reconstruction. To the west of this passage are the ruins of a square building, with no noteworthy characteristics remaining, and from this the remains of a curtain wall run to the mound of the keep.

The southern range is much more extensive and complete than the northern, and includes several interesting features. The eastern end and by far the greater portion of the southern face are intact and picturesque; and it is quite clear that when both sides of the gateway were standing, this portion of the castle must have had a very bold and dignified appearance. It will be convenient for the purposes of description to deal with this range as two sections—the eastern containing the guard and residential chambers, and the western the chapel.

This eastern section consists of a two-storied block of buildings, the upper floor of which is approached by a doorway from the exterior, immediately north of the chapel; the rooms communicating with each other. To the ground floor there are two entrances, and there was no internal connection between the separate apartments thus approached—the eastern, nearest the gate, were certainly the guard-rooms; the western may very well have been used, at any rate occasionally, as a place of ward.

The guard-rooms consisted of two chambers, each about 17 feet in width, the one 30 ft. 6 in., and the other 21 ft. in length. The western of these has a garderobe, built out in a square turret with similar accommodation for both floors, and lit by a small arrow-slit on the eastern face. The entrance to the garderobe is in the southern wall at the western corner; and to the east of this is a deeply splayed pointed window, which ends in a rectangular loop. The state of the northern wall prevents our ascertaining how the room was lit on that side. The eastern or outer guard-room

is lit on the south by two squared-looped windows, pointed within. A doorway in the north-eastern corner leads from this room into a small chamber in the gate-tower, 9 ft. 9 in. by 6 ft. 6 in., which formed the porter's lodge or look-out, a loop window in the eastern wall commanding the approach. Above this chamber there is one precisely similar in the upper story (the floor, of course, is gone), and it is noteworthy that this is the only part of the fabric that retains its roof, which is supported by three massive stone ribs. A deep recess in the southern wall continues from one room into the other, and in its present form is somewhat puzzling.

The western room of the ground floor section of this block—28 ft. by 17 ft. 3 in.—is entered, like the adjacent guard-chambers, by a doorway in the northern wall, in the extreme north-western corner. It is lit by two deeply splayed windows of the usual small type, one in the south wall, slightly pointed, and one in the north, the outer dressings of which retain the holes in which iron bars were formerly set. There is a garderobe forming part of the external turret already noted, opening from the eastern end of the south wall.

The upper suite of rooms, as already explained, is entered from the exterior by a doorway in the angle of the western wall, which projects beyond the chapel, originally approached by steps. So far as can be seen they correspond in size and number with the rooms below, the doorways in the partitions being next the southern wall, with the exception of the doorway into the little chamber above the porter's lodge, which is directly over that below.

The southern wall of the western chamber of this suite contains in succession, going eastward, a window much larger than the one below (following the castle rule), a fireplace, and a garderobe entered like its companions by a lancet doorway—the turret thus containing a set of four. The southern wall of the second chamber contains in like succession a garderobe, window, and fireplace, the chimney from which is boldly corbelled on the exterior. The window had a traceried head and a stone seat formed in the sill. The northern wall of all three is mainly in a state of ruin. These rooms were the principal residential part of the castle in its latest form. It is quite possible that the small chamber was an oratory or private chapel. What appears to be a corbel from below has a drain, and may well have been a piscina, though unusually placed.

At the western end of the group of chambers is what is commonly known as the chapel, but this is evidently a portion of a larger structure, which has, perhaps for the most part, disappeared. The orientation is clearly dictated by the lines of the main body of this section of the castle, being N.E. and S.W. It is 14 feet in width by 20 in length, and has a two-light window, with the remains of traceried heads, in each side wall, and a very elegant trefoil headed piscina in the southern wall, of good Early English type, but rather late, corresponding with the fragments of the window tracery. As the east wall of the chancel is the west wall of the guard-room block there is no east window. The position of the piscina shows that the floor must have been considerably above the present level of the ground. At the western end of the north chancel wall are the remains of one side, with the springing, of what was evidently another window, but beyond this, whether to the north or south, there are only a few fallen masses of masonry, of which nothing can be made.

On the south, however, the wall is continued at right angles, transeptal fashion, to the remains of a small chamber in a projecting square tower, which contains an arrow slit. It is not at all improbable—in fact, most likely—that the residence of the priest, or chaplain, was here, but the whole of this part of the fabric is too much ruined, broken down, in fact, nearly to the foundations, to allow of any very definite deductions. It does not seem, however, to have been part of the chapel, which probably consisted of little if anything more than the present chancel and area connected with an extension westward. Several of the roof corbels remain in the chapel, and the walls are battlemented.

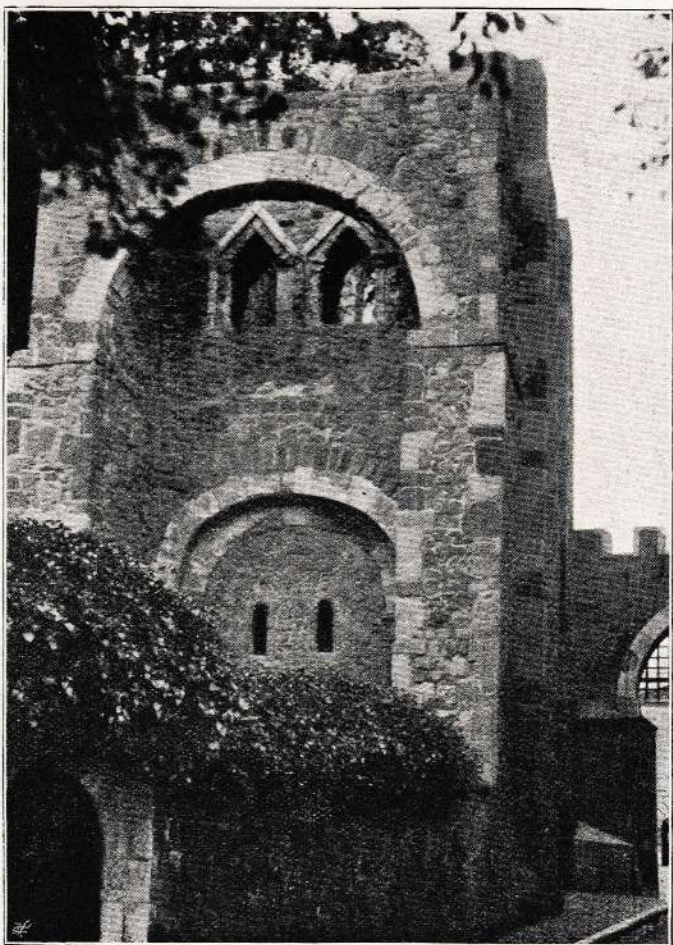
At the western end of the chapel, and its adjacent tower, there is a gap broken in the outer wall, which commences again at the corner of a chamber that has almost wholly disappeared, but still contains the remains of another garderobe. There was a two-storied building here, continued by the curtain wall to the keep mound, completing the enclosure, but very little can be made of it beyond the fact that there are two posterns—one in what appears to have been the building, approached from within by a flight of steps, and the other in the curtain wall. The former has a kind of projecting penthouse hood on the exterior.

The dressings vary in material, from ordinary granite to a fine working elvan, and a close reddish grit which

I learn comes from Hatherleigh, and which in some parts, as elsewhere noted, retains the tool marks. This stone was used for the tracery of the chancel windows, and the piscina appears to be of kindred material. Yet, in spite of its excellent state of preservation, it is so free working that it is easily cut with a knife, as the well-known inscription by one of the French prisoners of war, interned at Okehampton early in this century, testifies: "Hic V——t fuit captivus belli, 1809." The early masonry is very massive and solid, and much of the later shows very good work. The granite dressings are the rudest, but this may quite as much be due to the refractory character of the material, as to any noteworthy want of skill on the part of the workmen, though it is most probable that the different dressing materials are indicative in the main of different periods of operation.

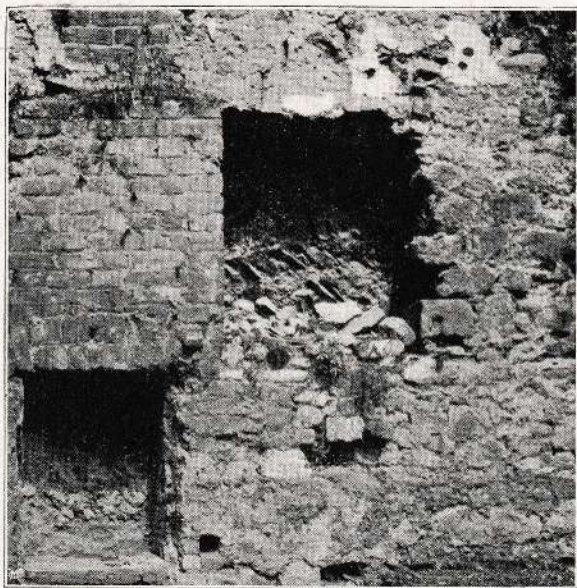
The general conclusions which I draw from the structural character of the remains, with such slight aid as history affords, may be summed up very shortly. Baldwin the Sheriff, in the first place isolated and scarped the castle mound, and reared thereon a square keep, of which the base of the western section of the present keep is essentially part, the northern wall shewing some of his work practically intact. Somewhat later, but still in Norman times, the eastern section of the keep was added. We have no clear trace of what other buildings there may then have been on the slopes below, now occupied by the main body of the castle, and possibly they were neither very extensive nor permanent in character. Be that as it may, they have all disappeared. There must, however, have come a time during the continuance of the Redvers lordship, when the need of better residential accommodation than the keep afforded must have been urgent; and to that period, it seems to me, belong, at least in inception and origin, the northern range of buildings, especially the hall and its adjuncts, which carry out, as I have said, precisely the customary twelfth-century plan of such structures. Of course, there must also have been other buildings completing the enclosure on the south, but of their character we have less direct evidence. Finally, in the early days of the Courtenay regime—perhaps commencing with Isabella de Fortibus, Bess of Hardwick is not the only great lady builder—towards the end of the thirteenth century, this northern block was rebuilt, with its elegant chapel, and a suite of residential apartments for the lord and his family, which in these days

would have been regarded as "exceeding magnificent," while the whole of the elder buildings that were retained, the keep included, were reconstructed, and brought into harmony with the new work. There were, of course, minor stages and subsequent changes, but these seem to me the main features in the structural history of the Castle of Okehampton. It may be that the judicious clearing out of the soil and rubbish, which has in the course of centuries accumulated to a considerable extent in some of the chambers, would throw further light upon many interesting details, but I do not think it would add materially to our knowledge of the main facts.



"ATHELSTAN'S TOWER."

SEEN FROM CASTLE STREET.



HERRINGBONE WORK IN ORIGINAL WALL OF CASTLE.

DISCLOSED BY REMOVAL OF LATER RUBBLE CASING.