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THE CURTAIN WALL OF MARLBOROUGH CASTLE

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Though little has been heard of it in the last four hundred years, the site of Marlborough Castle, by which is meant the royal stronghold and not the private house which went by the same name, has always been known. A long account of all that was established (and much that was guessed) about it appeared in this *Report* three years ago.

A prophetic sentence in the opening paragraph of that account has since been fulfilled. "When some of the larger trees fall, as they are likely to do soon, we may learn more." But as is the way with prophecies, the exact manner of its fulfilment was not foreseen. The age of many of the trees suggested that a gale, particularly if it arrived from some unusual quarter, would bring them down: it was not anticipated that they would be removed to give place to a new building.

It was, however, for that purpose that several of the large trees on the eastern side of the Wilderness were felled early this year, and it was at once apparent that the roots had met and penetrated the foundations of some building. A yellowish discoloration of the lower soil suggested decayed mortar or cement, and a number of blocks of sarsen and freestone were found in the holes from which the stumps were extracted. When, therefore, the trenches were cut for the foundations of the new class-rooms, a watch was kept upon the work.

It should, however, be explained that the observers had other duties which made a continuous watch impossible. The fact, moreover, that the work was being done under contract made it undesirable to interrupt the men engaged upon it or to ask, without serious cause, for any variation in their instructions. The foreman and the clerk of the works gave all the assistance in their power with the ready acquiescence of the contractor, but it is possible that with a more leisurely exploration of the exposures more information might have been obtained.

The building operations, so far as they concern us here, necessitated four trenches running east and west and one running north and south. (These directions are only roughly accurate.) Towards the west end of each of the four first mentioned the picks soon struck a mass of flint rubble, below which there appeared closely packed sarsen boulders ranging from one to two feet in diameter. The removal of this material left in

each of the eight faces of the trenches a clear section of the foundations of a massive wall.

The rubble began about 2 ft. 3 in. below the surface, and the sarsens lay on a bottom some 3 ft. lower. The requirements of the modern builders, owing perhaps to the raising of the ground-level, did not necessitate as deep a trench as the earlier work, and the bottom of the sarsen footings was not reached. This is to be regretted, but the extreme depth can later be established in another section of the wall.

Comparison of the different sections in the sides of the trenches revealed the foundations of a wall varying in width from 7 ft. 6 in. to 9 ft. But the interior or western face was easier to determine than the outer. The lucky intervention of Whit Monday at a time when one of the middle trenches was only partially excavated made it possible to uncover a length of the interior face still showing some half-dozen courses of dressed and well-laid flints resting on the sarsen footings. But in no other place did we establish the actual line of the inner face of the wall, and nothing approaching a definite limit could be discovered on the exterior or eastern face. It can only be said that the average width of the material exposed was about 8 ft. or a few inches more.

It was remarkable that, so far as we could observe, very few fallen stones from the upper courses of the wall and no accumulation of the flint rubble with which it was presumably filled were visible in the trenches. This would seem to indicate a deliberate destruction of the wall at some period and the removal of the material for some other purpose.

In the southern sections exposed the axis of the wall ran on a bearing of 348° , or 12° west of true north. But about thirty feet north of the south wall of the class-rooms as since erected – somewhere, that is, about the middle of the western part of the central passage of the building – it changed direction slightly. The bearing of the axis became 341° , a variation of seven degrees from the original line. Complete accuracy is not claimed for these measurements owing to the difficulty of establishing the wall-face, but it is unlikely that they are seriously incorrect.

There can be little doubt that these foundations supported the curtain wall of the Castle as it stood in the thirteenth century, the period of its prime. We know that the bailey, or base-court, stood on the site of the present Wilderness, and consequently that the eastern face of this wall, already referred to as the exterior face, was the one towards the moat. The change in the line of its axis is therefore in the right direction, but it was evidently too slight to require a flanking tower to cover it, especially in view of the fact that it was commanded by the barbican, which stood not very many feet to the north, as we have good reason to assume. No evidence of any flanking tower appeared in the trenches, and it may also be said that in the attempted reconstruction of the ground plan, which accompanied the account published in the *Report* for 1933, no tower was shown on the east wall of the bailey, because no documentary evidence was forthcoming to support it. The curtain on this side was there shown as a straight line. Among the alterations which that ground plan will inevitably require, a slight inward bend of the eastern curtain is now substantiated.

The fortunate accident that the foundation trench for the west wall of the new classrooms ran almost parallel to the castle wall and actually met it at the south-west corner enabled us to observe some traces of buildings within the bailey resting on the curtain. It was not, however, possible to decide their shape or purpose. Nor could they, without serious interference with the builders' operations, be explored beyond the limits of the trench. This is a task which may be undertaken at some future date. At one spot about twenty feet north of the south-west angle of the class-rooms there appeared to have been a door or passage-way communicating between two rooms. The evidence consisted in what looked like a dressed stone jamb at a distance of about four feet from the supposed inner face of the curtain wall. There were also some traces of a rammed chalk floor. But the stones were removed in the course of the operations before any definite conclusions could be drawn, and in any case the evidence was too fragmentary to justify a request to the contractor for further delay. The presence of such buildings was of course to be expected and had indeed been indicated in the conjectural ground plan of the 1933 *Report*, where they are shown as stabling. Nothing, it may be remarked, in the slight traces visible lent any particular support to this theory, and it is highly unlikely that stone would be used in the Middle Ages for such a purpose.

It may be asked what evidence was found of the castle moat in the trenches which crossed its site. The answer must be given gradually. It is known that the castle moat was neglected, and allowed to silt up, and that in the eighteenth century it was in part re-excavated to make Lord Hertford a fish-pond below his newly constructed terrace. That pond in turn probably became choked and was finally filled up and levelled in the early 50's of the last century on sanitary grounds, together with the moat which still seems to have encircled the Mound for some ten years after the foundation of the College. The material for this purpose was taken from the site of the Eleven. In the trenches there were definite traces of the margin of the fish-pond at least on the Terrace side, but nothing which could be identified as the original limits of the castle moat. This, however, is a feature which can be sought elsewhere, if need be: it did not seem to be worth more prolonged attention in the emergency created by the building operations.

Beyond the material of the foundations and a few odd blocks of freestone, which had evidently tumbled out of the Castle wall or been overlooked by its despoilers, the excavations yielded remarkably few by-products. No coins, for instance, in any way connected with the castle period were seen. The foreman, however, collected several slabs of stone roofing shingles showing the nail-holes for attachment and one object of peculiar interest. This was an oak peg 9¼ inches long, 1½ inches wide at the head and tapering to a chisel edge. It was found standing upright among the blocks of sarsen at the base of the wall. It is remarkably well preserved, probably owing to its having been buried in mortar, some of which still adheres to it. Unfortunately the exact position at which it was discovered was not noted, but it appears to have corresponded to the turn of the wall through the angle of seven degrees, which only became apparent at a later stage. If this is correct, the peg was used in laying out the

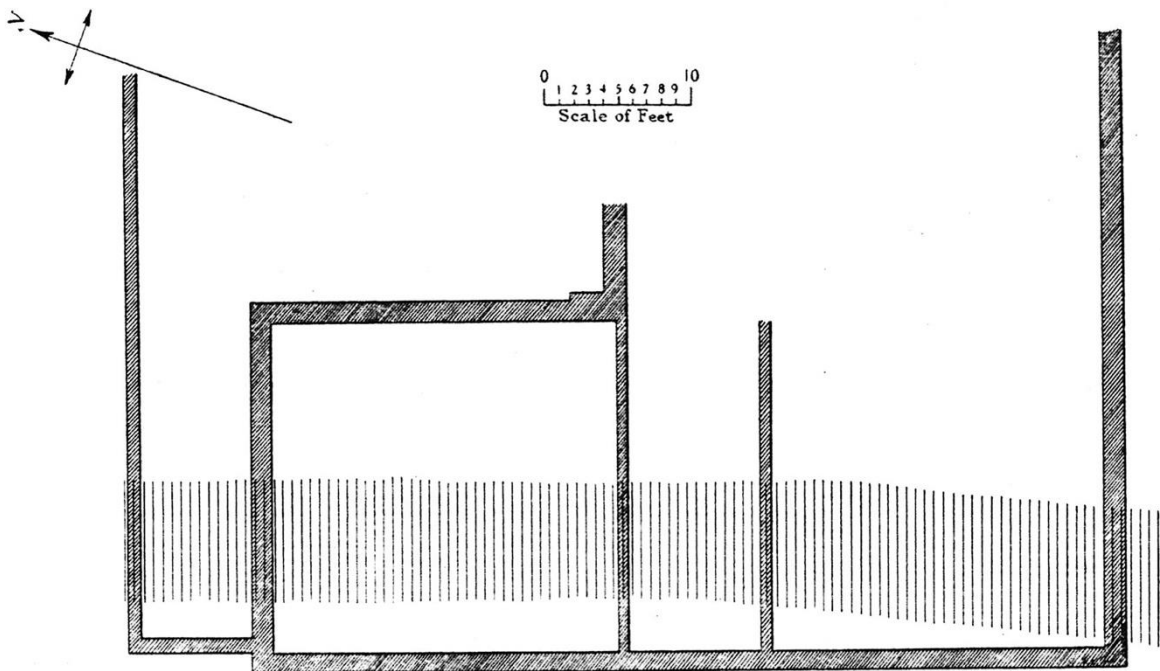
foundations probably in the twelfth century. The precise date at which stone walls were substituted for the original palisaded rampart of the bailey cannot be determined, but we have a reference to the use of freestone for (unspecified) work at Marlborough Castle in the Pipe Roll of 22 Henry II (1175-6) and some such date for the erection of the curtain is supported by a remark of Professor Hamilton Thompson in his *Military Architecture in England during the Middle Ages* (p. 89): "The walls and towers of medieval castles show, as might be expected, a considerable variety of masonry; but the epoch at which their fortification in stone became general may be said to be the third quarter of the twelfth century."



Peg apparently used by the surveyors for the original layout of the curtain wall (Scale in inches, Photographed by R. H. Lane).



Broken roof-shingle of limestone from the excavations showing nail hole for fixing
(Scale in inches, Photographed *by* R. H. Lane).



Track of the curtain wall of Marlborough Castle under the west end of the Leaf
Classrooms