

## PELE TOWERS OF THE BORDER

*By Henry Hornyold-Strickland, F.S.A.*

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THE subject of Border pele towers has been examined in considerable detail by several antiquarians during the last century, and it would be difficult to find matter which has not been noted at some time by one or other of them. For the following account the writer must acknowledge his indebtedness to their work.

The Border lands of Northumbria and Cumbria existed in a constant state of turmoil and bloodshed from very early days. The Britons, for long subservient to their Roman masters, were soon a prey to Anglo-Saxon invasion, and in turn these colonists were, by the ninth century, either over-run or penetrated by the Norsemen. Each wave left the tale of its occupation in the names of their settlements, and in this large mountainous and rather inhospitable area there would seem to have been room and to spare for all. Whilst certain areas bear names of mixed Danish and Anglo-Saxon origin, others appear to be exclusively Scandinavian. By the time the Normans arrived to appropriate the Border country they found a people already united in its settlement on the land, and showing little of its former racial distinctions.

In domestic architecture the Anglo-Saxons are not generally considered to have attained any great proficiency, the principal dwellings of their chiefs being crude and simple. Perhaps this opinion is fostered by the fact that further south and east, where stone is not so readily available, these dwellings for long remained of wood and clay. But the magnificent churchyard crosses and sepulchral slabs on the Border indicate that some of them were skilled workers in stone, and may well have used that material in building their houses. In these parts by the eleventh century the principal *heall* or hall house belonging to the headman or overlord in each settlement was generally built to a pattern, only differing from each other in size. Rectangular in plan, it was usual to find two adjoining chambers, the larger of which was a communal livingroom for the household, where sometimes even the cooking took place, and where the domestics slept on the floor at night on

rushes and skins. The other chamber served the owner as his private quarters, and when, as sometimes, it was on top of the first chamber, it was styled the *solar*. The roof was usually thatched or covered with wood or stone slabs fastened with wood pegs. The womenfolk were accommodated in a separate building, and the whole range of buildings were to be found in a courtyard bounded by a wooden palisade.

With the coming of the Normans the old buildings gradually gave way to a superior construction and no remains are found in the Border of the purely domestic Saxon house. It is unnecessary here to treat of the more military castles and abbeys immediately before and after the Norman influence spread over Northumbria and Cumbria. Suffice it to say that with the obvious necessity of keeping a firm hold on a countryside but recently penetrated, the *motte* or moated mound of the eleventh century soon appeared as the site of the new Norman castle, and also of pele towers.

It must be remembered that for many years after the Normans first arrived, putting an end to some five hundred years of Saxon power, the invaders were never able personally to control the far northwest. Duke William found it advisable to appoint an Englishman, one Cospatric, to the earldom of Northumberland with the task of keeping the inhabitants peaceful. Even so, Cumberland and Westmorland did not at that time form part of the English Kingdom, but was held by Malcolm III, King of the Scots, as a feudal benefice. Cospatric, related to both Saxon and Scottish dynasties, had had the difficult task of resisting the continual forays of his Scottish cousin as well as upholding the rights of his English kinsman against the Norman. When, soon afterwards, Cospatric quarrelled with and was deprived of his earldom by Duke William, he went over to the side of Malcolm and held all Cumbria firmly for him. It was not until 1092 when William Rufus came north with a large army and took possession of the land of Carlisle, that the northern counties of Cumberland and Westmorland became for the first time a definite part of the English kingdom.

To secure his hold, King William at once began to erect along the Border massive stone keeps after the new Norman style and to place them in strategic positions up and down the country. The sites chosen were often those of the old Roman camps, and others were on moated mounds which were either thrown up at the time, or, as some think, were the sites of earlier Saxon fortifications. Until the Norman conquest the Saxon chief is not known to have built himself a private fortified dwelling; and, as the mottes, as we

know them, could not have afforded protection to the community within the settlement surrounding it, the greater likelihood is that these were of Norman erection. The Norman keep, with its enormously thick walls, its narrow slits for windows, and heavily protected narrow entrance, often with a moat close round the walls, was a structure that was almost impregnable except to lengthy siege or starvation. They were no longer private residences, but strongholds capable of controlling the surrounding country and of withstanding armed assault. Fortified and embattled, these castles were not erected by any local person, but were held by well trusted companions in arms of the Norman Invader, who could be relied upon to exert all their skill and strength in the service of the king.

The Scottish king, deprived of his land of Carlisle, was not to be content to leave without any attempt to recover it, and during the twelfth century the Border was in a very disturbed condition, the countryside being laid to waste by incessant raids and wars. First one side and then the other would obtain possession of Cumbria, and, though peaceful relations might obtain for an occasional decade, the country was continually overrun by organised expeditions, plundered and burnt, and prisoners taken and held to ransom. It was, indeed, pitifully defenceless, and where so many were reduced to famine and poverty family feuds were common, and stronger folk robbed their weaker neighbours.

It is not surprising that except for the Norman style of fortified castle and keep, there remain no traces of the timber dwellings of the lesser lords along the Border of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. They must all have perished in the general destruction. Farmers as well as landlords suffering frequent losses of all their crops, stock and farmsteads, at last began to see that, even apart from the brutality of the raiders, their greatest enemy was the burning firebrand, and that to combat this a different material must be used in the structure of their buildings. Stone was at hand, and it was self-evident that in a lightning foray it would be an unprofitable waste of time to attack a house of such material, as well as dangerous lest neighbours, coming between them and the path of their retreat, should wreak a bloody vengeance. From the middle of the fourteenth century there seems to have been a fresh impetus to build, and now with the wisdom of experience the better off landlords began to put up houses, lesser in extent than the great Norman castles, but still based on the same principles with which they had now been long familiar. Rectangular towers were raised with thick stone walls, pierced on the ground floor only by slits for

light and air, with often a moat and a palisade enclosing a barmkin. But the development of real interest lies in the fact that these new structures were probably the first fortified private dwellings as distinct from those which had hitherto been erected for military reasons.

Towers of this new type were soon scattered all over the Border, and not only in Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland on the English side but equally on the Scottish side, and indeed generally throughout Scotland. With various modifications and refinements it became the prevailing type of residence of the chief landowners for the next three centuries, until Elizabethan architecture displaced the sternness of the castellated mansion. Doubtless this length of popularity was dictated by the continued disturbed state of the Border well into the sixteenth century. Such few less rugged Tudor manor houses as are met with are termed "moated granges," being an adaptation of the early motte and bailey, having an artificial earthwork and a moat protecting a manor house with buildings spaced out on what might be called a platform.

Before describing the actual layout of the pele tower a word is needed to account for the name. The derivation now accepted, and given in the New Oxford Dictionary, is from the old French *piel*, and medieval English *pel*, both coming from the Latin *palus*, meaning a stake. The usual stockade surround to the buildings in time gave its name to the tower itself, which has retained it long after all vestige of a defensive palisade has vanished. When the palisade was sometimes replaced by a stone curtain wall and guard-house this too retained the name of "the pele."

The pele tower was an oblong rectangular building, usually of three floors, and with a vaulted basement. Builders were evidently influenced by the form of the familiar Norman keep. In limestone country we find the walls rising either from the living rock, or from large blocks of stone, and they are constructed of rough but very solid rubble masonry. Where sandstone is found there is usually a moulded plinth, and the walls are of good ashlar work. The early peles show no projections which might assist an enemy to scale the walls, but those of a later period sometimes have a string course. The walls varied much in thickness as did also the dimensions of the pele, though it was not always the thickest walls which enclosed the largest peles. They varied from about four feet to as much as ten feet at ground level, tapering towards the top, and enclosing a basement consisting of one or two cellars, usually with mud floors, and with stone barrel vaulted roofs. Where two cellars exist this is

because the area enclosed was considered too great for a single vaulting, and they are divided by a stout cross wall pierced by a communicating doorway. These cellars were storerooms and not used for the cooking of food, which work was usually carried out in a cell or shed adjoining the main pele. Sometimes, instead of one cross wall, two are found forming a passage through the building with a cellar on each side. The cellar walls were pierced by narrow slit windows of a few inches width, widely splayed inside, which thus gave ventilation without exposing the people inside to much risk from an enemy without. They did not, however, afford the inmates more than a glimmer of light. In some peles the slit windows are high enough from the floor to necessitate steps up to them. It has often been pointed out that the narrow slits with wide width of wall inside made them of little value for defensive action, and indeed their primary purpose was no doubt to admit air and so to keep in condition the winter store of salted or potted carcasses. Most of the stock, except such as was needed for breeding purposes, was killed off each autumn owing to the lack of roots and other winter fodder.

The entrance to the pele tower, except in rare instances, was at ground level, two or three narrow steps leading by a low and narrow doorway, possibly with pointed arch, through the thick main wall into the basement. With a wall of eight to ten feet in thickness a second door was fitted on the inside of the wall, whilst leading off this narrow passage would be a third door guarding the circular newel staircase, built in the thickness of the wall, and leading to each floor above and finally on to the roof. Though there are examples which may be considered to throw doubt on the accuracy of the statement, it is usual for these staircases to wind in a right-handed ascent, the purpose of which was said to be to facilitate defence. An invader would need to be a lefthanded swordsman, whilst the more normal righthanded defender would have the greater freedom for his swordarm. When the wall of the tower was not thick enough to take the whole of the newel staircase the latter might encroach partly inside into the corner of the room. Where the structure of the pele is of limestone rubble it is not usual to find any manual aid to climbing, such as a hand-rail round the staircase wall, but in sandstone country a neat widening rail is often found carved into and flush with the wall surface. Some of these staircases ended at the top in arched and moulded ribs supporting the vaulting of the roof, but more commonly the staircase led straight on to the roof and there would be a small projecting turret above,



crenellated, and with a low-pitched roof to give reasonable head-room above the topmost step.

Unless the entrance door were of exceptional strength even its narrowness would have availed little against fire in the hands of a determined aggressor. Though original doors are scarce on the south side of the Border, just a few survive to show the difference in their construction with those on the other side. In Scotland they consisted of a latticework of horizontal and vertical iron bars which pierced each other in alternate crossings, that is in true fret fashion, but on the English side the horizontal bars were all laid across the vertical ones and secured to them by alternate rivets and clasps. By this means it was possible to face one side of the grill with vertical planks between the bars, and the reverse side with horizontal ones similarly placed. These planks were securely fastened together to form a very massive reinforced door. In 1605, not long after James I acceded to the English throne, he issued an order for the conversion of these English reinforced doors into ploughshares or similar implements as a means of advancing the pacification of the Border. These heavy doors were hung so near to the passage ceiling that it was not possible to lift them off their hinges, and they were secured by iron bolts running deep into holes in the wall and padlocked. In the case of peles where entrance is effected at first floor level by an outside staircase, as not uncommonly found in Scotland, the newel staircase does not descend to the ground floor, which is then reached by a ladder through a hatch in the vaulting.

The first floor, which was the principal one, contained the general living room of the whole of the household, and this extended right across the house from one outside wall to the other with very seldom any partition. Here family, guests and household retainers all lived and dined, and the latter at night-time would find room to sleep drawing up rugs round the stone fireplace which is always found on this floor. Where the thickness of the walls and the material of which they were composed made it possible, small cupboards or lockers, lavabos, chambers and one or more garberobes, according to the size of the room, are found. Sometimes a short, straight flight of steps in the depth of the wall leads to a gallery or to a small private chamber. Thus, especially where sandstone was the medium, a number of small bedrooms were possible with much increase in private comfort. With limestone rubble all this was not often possible so that a separate turret or tower might be joined on to one of the walls, usually at the corner diagonally opposite to the newel staircase, with access on each floor from the main tower

room, to accommodate the garderobes. Their construction was very primitive, consisting generally of a shaft sunk in the thickness of the wall with a few small ventilating holes at the base at ground level to the air outside. Still more primitive were some in which the shaft sloped outwards and then the main surface of the wall was utilised with a screen of stone or perhaps wood forming the shaft. Where a moat came close to the wall with running water perhaps, this method was no worse than the former one. Garderobes were always provided with a ventilating window and their privacy increased by the small lobby which divided them from the main rooms. A dungeon may often be found at the basement of these turrets access to which is by creeping through a very low and narrow passage tunnelled through the thick tower wall, the only light inside being what penetrated through the guarding grill at the tunnel mouth. At the entrance to the big room from the staircase are often found lavers, consisting of basins cut into the stone with a drain-hole through the thinnest part of the staircase wall to take away the dirty water.

Continuing up the staircase, to which light from outside was admitted by narrow openings at intervals, one reached the second floor, which, like the one below, was usually one large room without division. But in as much as the height from the ground was greater and vulnerability therefore less, the window openings were usually taller and more elaborate. It is natural that with progressive ideas of hygiene and amenity the windows of early generations have passed through many changes. It is as a rule only on the topmost floors that there is any chance of finding them in their original condition, for as buildings spread outwards and rooms were subdivided in days of greater security, top floors were left to house unwanted or out-moded furniture and probably were seldom visited from one generation to another. Where, then, such windows survive we find them of two lights and sometimes ornamented with trefoils and cusps under ogee arches. These would have been fitted with protecting iron bars and had wood shutters hung on the outside which could be propped up to the horizontal by means of a wood or metal bar, or perhaps sometimes hinged vertically within. The more wealthy might possess casements of the new expensive glass but these were usually arranged to hang loosely in front of the window so as to be easily removed and transferred to other window openings. Flanking the window on either side of the deep embrasure were narrow stone seats, often raised off the floor level with a sloping step inside the bay to enable people to reach them without climbing. In

winter when the women needed daylight for their sewing their task must have been a very chilly one.

On the second floor the family could find some greater privacy than in the communal room below, and at night it would have been the sleeping quarters of the unmarried menfolk of the house and the guests. Bedrooms, except for small chambers in the depth of the wall, were not known, and many people shared the same room, either sleeping in beds surrounded by hangings or on wheel or truckle beds. These, as the name clearly indicates, were low couches which in the daytime could be pushed away under the principal beds, and drawn out for use at night.

In most pele towers there was yet a third floor, similar to the ones below, which was the family sleeping room, and reserved in the daytime for the women and children. Again, much the same convenient cupboards and closets were to be found within the walls. Sometimes a small chamber leading out of this top storey was set aside as the oratory of the house.

Rising still further, as explained earlier, the staircase finished with an access to the roof, usually through a very narrow doorway with pointed arch. This roof is always found enclosed by a crenellated parapet, between four and five feet high, usually in line with the walls or very slightly projecting. Both merlon and embrasure were completed with a slight prominent moulding probably intended to deflect arrows aimed at defenders from below. Permission to crenellate one's pele tower was a privilege to be obtained from the Crown, which was naturally careful not to grant it to possibly disaffected subjects who might abuse it once they felt strong enough to risk doing so. But undoubtedly many peles were hastily built and fortified without royal licence during the early days. Hence it was that Henry II ordered the destruction of the unlicensed castles which he said had been built primarily to withstand the rightful claim of his mother, Matilda, after the barons had broken their promise to Henry I and accepted the usurper Stephen as king. By the following reign a regular form of licence was in use, and permission granted either by the Crown or by the Lord Warden of the March. A record of such licences does not exist and today it would not be possible to compile anything like a complete list.

The roof itself was either flat, or rather with a slight incline, or else with a low ridge. On the south side of the Border, and contrary to Scottish custom, the apex of the ridge is nearly always below the level of the parapet. An alure or passage was provided so that defenders on the roof were not exposed at the higher levels of the



ridge slope. The roof was covered with a tough skin of lead, though probably stone flags may have been used sometimes with ridged roofs. Though peles relied chiefly on their massive strength for defence, other means were not neglected. On some towers corbels are found high up on the outer face of the walls and these were for wooden galleries—known as *bretasches* and copied from the Normans—to rest upon, from which the defenders could more easily and safely hurl their missiles at the attackers below. On the English side of the Border it is believed that only one pele shows provision for firing a small cannon from the rooftop, but in the later fifteenth-century Scottish peles they are not uncommon, and still later are found under the sills and windows and guarding the gateway. Rainwater was led off the roof through stone drain spouts in the wall which were usually ornamented. Slop-water from household usage in kitchen or laver was often got rid of in similar fashion through sloping holes which pierced the walls.

Projecting upwards, and sometimes slightly overhanging the walls below, were watch towers, placed at the angles or other convenient position; and, if there were several, one of them was large enough to constitute a guard tower with reasonable accommodation for a number of men to keep a whole-time lookout. A flight of stone steps, often unsupported and projecting from the guard tower wall, gave access to a small but crenellated roof above, and from here watch must have been kept either for approaching strangers or for the smoke of the nearest beacon fire giving warning of an imminent foray.

Up to the end of the fourteenth century nothing more commodious is found than the rectangular pele described above, but in the next century an important development occurred which should be mentioned even though still later developments of the Elizabethan era may well be considered beyond the scope of this article. It became the fashion to erect a large independent building against one of the walls of the tower, usually the one in which the main entrance door was situated, and with a new low arched doorway near one of the angles at the further end. There is also often found at the further end another smaller tower, similar in construction to the main pele tower with barrel vaulted cellar and newel staircase leading to smaller chambers on two or three floors and finally to a roof lookout.

This large chamber with open timbered roof and serving as a great hall or dining room at once became the centre of the life of the house, for it was here that everyone now lived whilst the pele

tower solar was left more for the private uses of the owner. At one end was a raised dais where the owner and his family ate, whilst across the other end was a wooden screen concealing the passage to the old kitchen cell; or sometimes a new one was contrived within the same wall as the hall. In the spacious centre would be placed plain trestle tables at which the servants ate, but which at other times were taken apart and stacked on one side to leave room for recreation or exercise. From the immense increase in general comfort brought about by this new architectural development has come down to us even at the present day the custom of styling as a hall the most important dwelling in every manor.

However, lest it be thought that the advent of stone-built peles was the complete answer to the destruction of private property, as has been described in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, two examples may serve to show to what astonishing an extent Border warfare must have preyed upon the harassed countryside even so late as the middle of the sixteenth century. Between July 2nd and November 17th, 1543, the State Papers record that Sir Thomas Wharton, in a series of fierce forays northwards of the Border, was responsible for:

|   |        |  |
|---|--------|--|
| "Towns, towers, stedes, barnekyns, parish churches, |        |  |
| bastel houses cast down and burned .. ..            | 192    |  |
| Scots slain .. .. .                                 | 403    |  |
| Prisoners taken .. .. .                             | 816    |  |
| Nolt (i.e., horned cattle) taken .. .. .            | 10,386 |  |
| Sheep .. .. .                                       | 12,492 |  |
| Nags and geldings .. .. .                           | 1,296  |  |
| Goats .. .. .                                       | 200    |  |
| Bolts of corn .. .. .                               | 890    |  |
| Insight (i.e., household furniture) not reckoned."  |        |  |

And again between September 8th and 25th, in 1545, the mischief done is thus set down:

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| "Monasteries and friar houses burnt or destroyed .. | 7   |
| Castles, towns and piles .. .. .                    | 16  |
| Market towns .. .. .                                | 5   |
| Villages .. .. .                                    | 243 |
| Milns (i.e., mills) .. .. .                         | 13  |
| Hospitals .. .. .                                   | 3"  |

But in spite of fire and sword, famine and sometimes pestilence, it is a happy thing to see yet standing on the Border more than a

few old peles in a fair state of preservation, some as farmhouses, only inhabited, alas, on the ground floor, others incorporated and rather lost in splendid later Elizabethan mansions, and yet a few whose still rugged exterior, housing the descendants of those who built them, can echo the words of Scott in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

“The frighten'd flocks and herds were pent  
Beneath the peel's rude battlement;  
And maids and matrons dropp'd the tear,  
While ready warriors seized the spear.”

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#### BOOK REVIEW

*The Secret People* by E. W. Martin. Octavo, 193 pp. 16 pages plates and additional line illustrations in the text. Phoenix House Ltd. 1954. 21/-.

This admirable and serious work deals with village life and village problems from the year 1750, and makes fascinating and arresting reading. The author has attached prime importance to the economic aspect of parish and village life, although substantial space is given to village crafts and trades in the period. Much of the matter strikes the reader as grim and sombre, and the plight of the peasantry from the time of the Enclosure Acts and the Game Acts is particularly disturbing. Mr. Martin reviews causes which influenced the breaking up of the co-operative and self-contained community of the Middle Ages, and the impacts of industrialism and other factors on that way of life.

The relationship between squire, parson, tenant farmer and labourer is effectively described. Notable characters like Arthur Young, Thomas Coke, Charles Kingsley, Cobbett, Tull and Arch, and other great-hearted champions of progress and social welfare are invoked, and the quotations, especially the poetical extracts, are most happy and appropriate.

The book leaves the reader with a deep sense of Mr. Martin's own indignation and frustration at the criminal apathy and lack of foresight shown by our statesmen, past and present, which allowed a peasantry and peasant crafts to disappear. One is bound to agree with the author that, so far, the battle against industrial infiltration is hardly more than a defensive one.

The plates, illustrations and woodcuts add to the value of this work which deserves the widest circulation.