

MACCLESFIELD CASTLE

by

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Until 1933, the porch of Macclesfield Castle still stood. It was not strictly a castle, but one of the very few fortified townhouses, ever allowed to be built by a commoner, in medieval England. Begun by John de Macclesfield, Keeper of the Great Wardrobe to Richard II, in 1398, it was added to and embellished during the 15th century by the Dukes of Buckingham and the Savage family. By 1585, the house was abandoned and in decay until only the porch remained.

This article brings together the historical, topographical and architectural evidence for Macclesfield Castle. It also tells the story of the efforts to preserve the porch in the 1930s, in which the Ancient Monuments Society played a prominent part, and the accidental rediscovery of the dressed stones from the porch in 1985. Some future for these last remains of a most interesting building now seems assured.



Fig. 1
The Porch of Macclesfield Castle in 1932
(Photo: Macclesfield Sunday School Heritage Centre)

The Ancient Monuments Society first became involved with the last remains of Macclesfield Castle as long ago as 1932.¹ By that time, all that was left standing were the rather dilapidated remains of the porch of one of very few fortified town-houses ever built in medieval England (Fig. 1). The porch was threatened with demolition in advance of the building of a new store. The site owner, Mr. Cutts, had presented the ruins to the town and the Macclesfield Castle Preservation Society was formed to organize the demolition and reconstruction on a new and more prominent site in the town. The Ancient Monuments Society cooperated closely from the beginning and in 1933 they commissioned Mr. E.F. Scaife, a Stockport architect, to make detailed measured drawings of the remains, which by this time had all the dressed stone numbered in preparation for demolition (Fig. 2).

No site was immediately found for the re-erection of the porch. The local Macclesfield papers of the day show suggested sites; as a porch to the churchyard and in the gardens at the top of the 108 Steps. West Park, where the Macclesfield Museum is located and where three eleventh-century Danish crosses can be found in the



Fig. 2
The porch in course of dismantling
(Photo: Macclesfield Sunday School Heritage Centre)

adventure playground, was also suggested. The numbered stones were put in wooden crates and stored in the Town Yard. The Preservation Society enthusiastically organized whist drives, a treasure hunt and musical evenings in an effort to raise the necessary funds. Nothing came from all this effort. Some years later, the wooden crates were emptied and the stones buried in the lime pit in the Town Yard, to be forgotten until 1985.

The Town Yard is to be closed in advance of a new road being built and so an unusual rescue excavation was undertaken to save again the last remains of this remarkable building. However, before finishing this story, the historical background to the Castle and a description of its architecture will establish its importance.

Historical Background

The present town of Macclesfield occupies the site of a medieval seigneurial borough. The manor of Macclesfield, important in Saxon and medieval times, was some distance to the south-west in what is now called Park Green. The borough was founded in c. 1220 by Ranulph de Blunderville, 6th Earl of Chester. Later in the thirteenth century and again in the middle of the fourteenth century considerable investment was made in the borough and the manor. Following Ranulph's death the Earldom of Chester passed to the Crown. Between 1270-1347, Macclesfield was separated from the earldom becoming part of the dowry to two queens.² The first of these, Eleanor, and her husband Edward I were frequent visitors and she founded the present church, dedicating it to All Hallows. In 1347, the Black Prince exchanged two manors for Macclesfield and his efforts to rectify the decay in both manor and borough can be found in his register.³

The builder of Macclesfield Castle was John de Macclesfield whose career as an officer of the court of Richard II led first to his wealth and secondly to his retreat to Macclesfield, following the demise of his patron. He would seem to have come from a line of minor court officials for there is a John de Macclesfield mentioned as a king's clerk in the Patent Rolls of 1334 and 1343, and on a number of occasions after that date. This may be the 'J. de Macclesfield in Hurdsfield' whose *inquisitio post mortem* of 1369 survives in the British Museum. The John de Macclesfield, builder of the castle, seems to inherit the office of king's clerk and is named as such in 1384-5, and in 1387 he was granted the first of a number of ecclesiastical benefices, as vicar of Denham, Lincoln.⁴ These were to grow in number and included being the keeper of the estates of St. Anthony, provost of the Cathedral at Wells, and prebend of St. Mary's, Darlington. In Cheshire, he had the income from the parishes of Wilmslow and Bosley. Towards the end of Richard

II's reign, John de Macclesfield became Keeper of the Great Wardrobe.

The uncertainties at the end of Richard II's reign seem to have led John de Macclesfield to apply for a licence to crenellate his new house in Macclesfield, in both 1398 and 1399. Elsewhere in Cheshire another supporter of Richard, the Abbot of St. Werburgh, made a similar application for his grange at Ince.⁵ Almost immediately after Henry's accession, on 20 October 1399, John's principal estates were confirmed along with many other similar ratifications. But eight days later he was replaced as Keeper of the Great Wardrobe and he seems to have retreated to the safety of his house at Macclesfield. He received a rather standard pardon from the new king and his licence to crenellate was confirmed in 1410, but his life at court had come to an end.

The acquisition of the land in Le Walgate (now Mill Street), and the subsequent building of the house can be followed in John de Macclesfield's cartulary, now in the British Museum. The acquisition began in 1392 (folio 42) and by 1398 most of four adjacent burgage plots on the east side of Le Walgate and immediately south of Souters Lane (now Back Wallgate) had been purchased. Work began on the mansion house and in 1398 he requested permission to fell twelve oaks in the Royal Forest, for use in the house (folio 70). The licence to crenellate was confirmed in 1399. One problem remained for John. He had been unable to purchase the house of Richard de Lerversegge, which formed part of the street frontage, behind which the house was being built. In 1400/1, important concessions were made. Folio 52 records an indenture on John de Macclesfield to erect a gutter, forty-four royal feet in length, raised on a stone wall two feet in width, running between their respective houses, up to his dwelling house, with an *aquicilio*, (a water cistern), at the end of the gutter. In return, John was to make above Richard's kitchen, a louvre, called in French a *fumerale*. Folio 92 mentions the new chapel at John de Macclesfield's principal mansion in 1401. In 1416, he was still buying plots of land so the holding eventually extended over the full street frontage of four burgage plots and down to the River Bollin.

In 1422, John de Macclesfield died. He had had a long liaison with Katherine de Kyngsley, but was unable to marry because he was a clerk in Holy Orders. He was survived by six children and he made considerable efforts to transfer his large estates to them. By 1444, the Dukes of Buckingham had bought the de Macclesfield estates from John's descendants. They were reported to have extended and enriched the mansion,⁶ but their lavish lifestyle led to their near bankruptcy and withdrawal from their Macclesfield

estates. In 1460, the 'great place' was leased by John Savage 'on condition that he was responsible for repairs, except to the hall, chamber and the kitchen thereof, which are roofed with lead'. The Savage family rose to prominence in Macclesfield from the middle of the fifteenth century. They leased the royal manor and park of Macclesfield, and took over the mills and the bakehouse.⁷ Close family links were created with the Stanley family who held the wardenship of the Macclesfield Forest, and the success of the family can be seen in the series of effigies in the Savage Chapel of Macclesfield church.⁸

The castle seems to have passed to the Stanley family, who were from 1485 Earls of Derby, though it was called 'Buckingham Howse or Buckingham Place' as late as 1582.⁹ Halstead's earlier article drew attention to the possible significance of the visit of Henry VII to the Earls of Derby at Macclesfield in 1496, particularly as the Tudor Rose occurs in the vault of the porch.

William Smith, in his description of the county in 1585,¹⁰ gives a full description of the 'huge place all of stone in a manner of a castle—but now gone much to decay'. The building was square in plan with two wings and five turrets, one central and one on each angle. It was surrounded by a strong wall and contained a spacious courtyard, stables, kennels and outbuildings. Access seems to have been through a gatehouse over what is now Palace Yard.

By the seventeenth century, the street frontage was being redeveloped (a timber-framed building of that date still survives) and perhaps the holding was redivided into its original plots. The house and buildings would have been a convenient quarry for building materials. From 1793-1811, the Roman Catholic congregation used a room in the castle but by the twentieth century it had been reduced to the porch and some of the curtain wall.¹¹

The topography of the site

In 1870, Finney described the remains as being contained on three sides by a stone wall, 140 yards by 39 yards.¹² It is possible to trace this wall and the position of the castle porch on the early O.S. Ward Maps of Macclesfield (Fig. 3). Some of this rubble stone wall still survives along Back Wallgate and can be seen as revetment in the goods entrance to the rear of Nos 30/32 Mill Street. It has been possible to estimate independently the street frontage of the burgage plots in Macclesfield from the number of plots recorded in the Danes Moss Book of 1509 (surviving in the Birkenhead Library)¹³, and the present layout of the buildings on the main streets of the town. This produces an average figure of *c.* 10m, confirming that four plots were combined to make the site for the

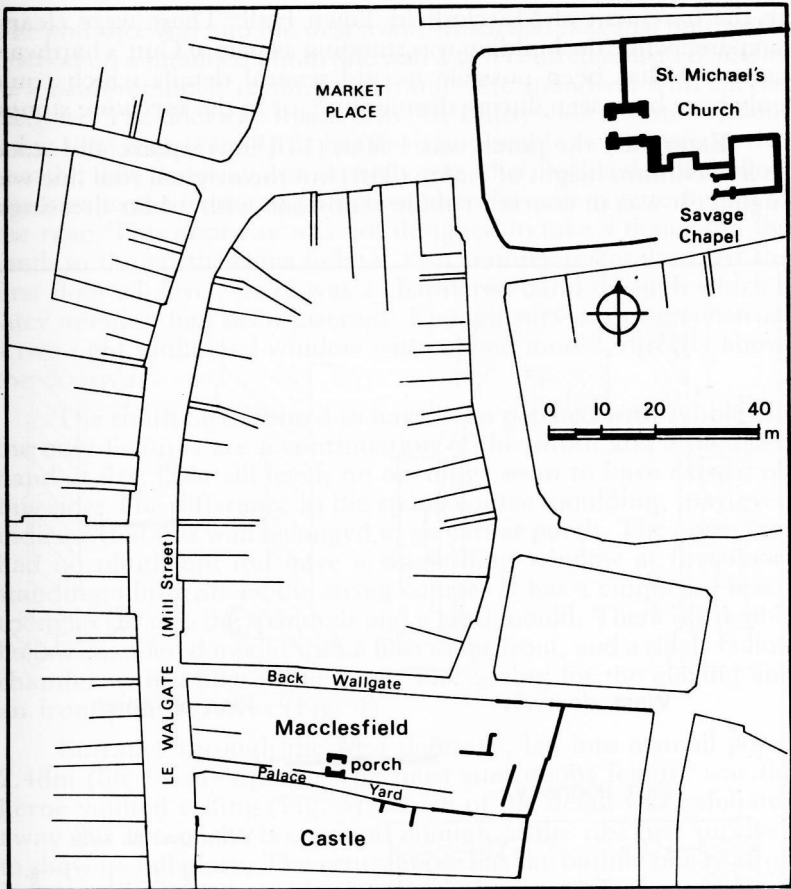


Fig. 3
Plan of part of Macclesfield, showing the surviving medieval layout

castle. The front of the porch stood 24.6m back from the street frontage but the building could not have extended beyond 53m back, because from here the land drops steeply away towards the river. Any building would have appeared very dramatic from the east, especially if heightened by a terraced garden, but from the street, there must have been little to betray its magnificence.

The surviving architectural remains

Following the re-excavation of the remains of the porch in 1985, the original architect's drawings of 1933 were rediscovered

in the basement of Macclesfield Town Hall. These were clearly prepared while the building was standing as part of Cutt's hardware store.¹⁴ It has been possible to add several details which could only have been seen during dismantling, or in the surviving stones.

Externally the porch was 4.50m (14ft 9in) square and stood to a maximum height of 7.31m (24ft) but the original roof line was higher. It was in coursed rubble sandstone with ashlar dressings.

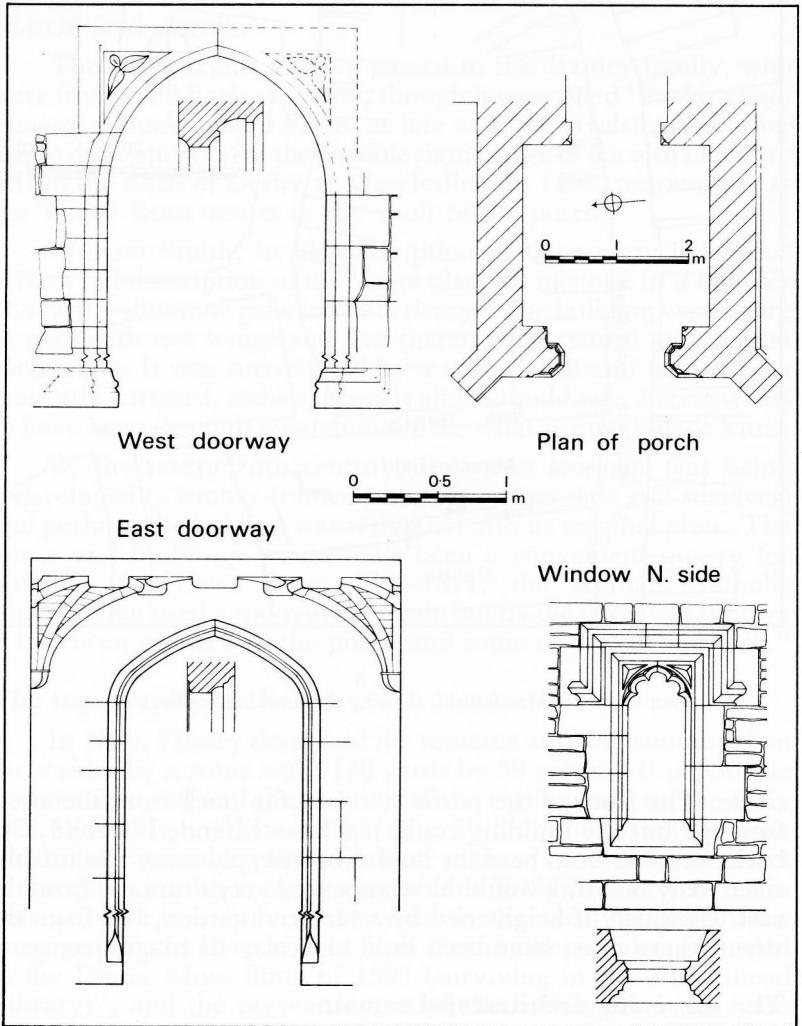


Fig. 4
Details of the porch of Macclesfield Castle (after Scaife)

The entrance was into the west front, which had diagonal buttresses. It stood on a moulded plinth and had a two-centred arched doorway in a bead-moulded rectangular frame, the spandrels with carved 'angels'. The doorway was 1.47m (4ft 10ins) wide and stood about 2.4m (8ft) high (Fig. 4). It has been impossible to reconstruct this exactly. The doorway was ornately moulded, with a double hollow chamfer to the front, and a hollow chamfer and cavetto mould to the rear. This doorway was not designed to take a door, and the jamb to the north seems to be a 19th century restoration. At the first floor sill level, there was a chamfered band through which a later opening had been inserted. Enough survives to reconstruct a two-light mullioned window with a hood mould, directly above the doorway.

The south face seemed to have been patched with rubble but the only features are a continuation of the plinth and a moulded band at first floor sill level; no openings seem to have existed on this side. The difference in the string course moulding, may even indicate that this wall belonged to an earlier porch. The north face had no plinth but did have a single light window at first floor, standing a little above the string course. It has a cinquefoil head, triangles cut into the spandrels and a label mould. There is a double hollow chamfered mould with a fillet to the front, and a single hollow chamfer with a fillet to the rear. The setting for the glazing and an iron grille survives (Fig. 4).

Entrance through the west doorway, led into a small porch 2.48m (8ft 1½ in) square. The most sumptuous feature was the lierne vaulted ceiling (Fig. 5). Much of the detail was exfoliated away but two of the bosses and enough of the ribs had survived to show its full glory. The central boss has the outline of a coat-of-arms and is surrounded by four main bosses of Tudor roses and four minor bosses of oak leaves and acorns. The vault is carried on four main springers in the corners and three intermediate stops on each wall. A section across the vaulting ribs is given in Fig. 5.

Beyond was the front door to what must have been the screens passage. This is four-centred and less heavily moulded, with an ogee, fillet and hollow chamfer, ending in a stop on the plinth. Studying Scaife's plans and elevations, it is clear that the porch was attached to a long narrow stone building running back for 12.50m (41 ft). The internal arrangements had been clearly altered as there were three storeys behind the two of the porch, but the masonry shell may have belonged to the castle.

At first-floor level there was a room of the same dimensions as the porch. No internal detail seemed to have survived; the original door had been replaced by a modern opening, and no part of the ceiling or original roof structure remained.

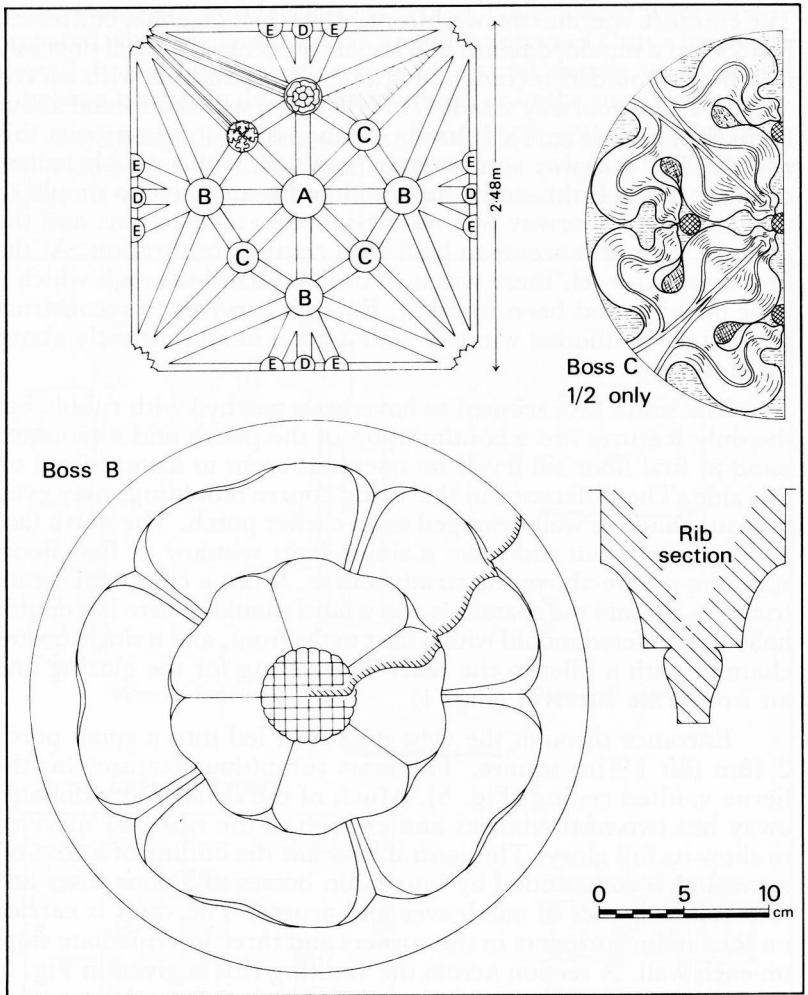


Fig. 5
Plan and details of the vault of the porch (after Scaife)

Conclusions and parallels

The original building of a fortified town house by a commoner within a royal borough seems almost without precedent. Permission could have been granted only to highly favoured court official like John de Macclesfield, seeking to find some security at home. The only direct parallel to be found is the Manor of the Rose, built in the City of London by Sir John Pulteney, who was given licence

to crenellate by Edward III in 1341. He was a well-trusted and much rewarded court official. This house incorporated a battlemented tower still visible on a view of London in 1550.¹⁵ There is an earlier building in Cheshire which may have been similar. This was Pares Place, which stood in Lower Bridge Street, Chester, described by Randle Holme *c.* 1660 as 'a famous structure of stone much like a castle or fort having a high tower'. It was sold in 1320/1 by Almaricus Le Gynour when the tower is specially mentioned.¹⁶ However, it is most likely to have been built by Richard the Engineer, Almaricus's father, who as a prominent military engineer in Edward I's campaigns in North Wales, received benefices similar to the other two court officials already described.¹⁷

For an idea of the plan of the original building then some comparative examples might be suggested. At this time, castles were still being built, for example, Bodiam in Sussex, dating from 1386.¹⁸ Richard II himself was active at Portchester, where he created a courtyard house in the inner bailey, with a first-floor great hall with access from a projecting porch.¹⁹ John de Macclesfield must have been intimately involved in the payment for this building, which was not finished until 1399. John O'Gaunt was undertaking even more spectacular alterations at Kenilworth Castle, building a new great hall, 90 ft by 45 ft, at first floor level between 1390-3.²⁰ This was reached through a porch and by a sumptuous staircase.

Whilst the scale of Macclesfield Castle could not have matched these examples, they must have provided some inspiration. Whether there was a great hall at first or ground floor is unknown. If the porch gave access to the screens passage and the hall lay to north as the window at first floor might suggest, then there is space for a room *c.* 15m long. There is no equivalent surviving townhouse to which reference can be made. Perhaps only abbots and bishops could ever have built on such a scale in other towns.

It is not possible to speculate any further on the original building. There is documentary evidence to suggest additions in the mid 15th century and the surviving architectural remains also indicate later work as well. Smith's description of a building square in plan with projecting wings and decorated with towers is not typical of late 14th century manor houses. It sounds more like the mock or 'conceit' castles of the mid-to-late fifteenth century, such as Tattershall, Hurstmonceux and Oxburgh Castles.²¹

The remains of the porch, decorated as the vault is with Tudor roses, must belong to the reign of Henry VII.²² To confirm this it is possible to compare the other architectural details with surviving examples. A very local example is the sumptuous three-storey porch

to the Savage Chapel, St. Michael's Church, Macclesfield, built between 1501-7 by Thomas Savage whose family were occupying the castle at the time.²³ A castellated three-storey porch, with an oriel at first floor on one side only, survives at Saighton Grange, near Chester. It was built *c.* 1490 by Simon Ripley, Abbot of St. Werburgh.²⁴

Looking a little further afield, porches with vaulted ceilings are rare. There is a lierne vault of the early-fifteenth century at Norrington Manor,²⁵ a two-bay tierceron vault at the London Guildhall of 1411,²⁶ and a two-bay vault in Morton's Tower added to Lambeth Palace in 1495.²⁷ The closest comparison is with Great Chalfield Manor, Wiltshire of *c.* 1480.²⁸ This is a single bay, though only with a tierceron vault, simpler than that at Macclesfield Castle. However, the bosses are strikingly similar, incorporating a Tudor rose and oak leaves. The doorway mould and the diagonal buttresses provide a further link.²⁹ Smith's description suggests that the porch would have had a castellated parapet.

The doorway behind may be from an earlier phase of the building. It is simpler, and its mouldings can be found in a different combination, at Dartington Hall, of 1388-1400, built by Richard II's half-brother, John Holland.³⁰ However, it would be an early use of a four-centred arch, and may represent work by the Duke of Buckingham.

It has been possible to conclude from the documentary history, topography and surviving architectural remains, that Macclesfield Castle was a most unusual building with a complex history. It helps to confirm that in the later Middle Ages, Macclesfield was a town of importance, of which almost all visible traces have now gone. The problem remains of what to do with the surviving remains of the Castle now they have been rediscovered. The coarse yellow and pink local sandstone of which it is made, has not survived well. Most of the details are worn or exfoliated and the stone is now weak and soft after centuries of exposure, made worse by fifty years' burial in a lime-pit. It is now impossible to fulfil the hopes of the Macclesfield Castle Preservation Society in 1933, by re-erecting it as a free-standing building. Too little survives, and what does, has little structural strength. What does remain possible is reconstruction of the principal elements, the two doorways, the window and the vault, though the last presents considerable problems of presentation two-dimensionally. Now the pieces are safe, a suitable redevelopment is awaited where these elements could be incorporated under cover, with appropriate interpretive material in order to bring home the interest of this aspect of the town's history to residents and visitors alike.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The sorting, analysis and recording of the stones was undertaken by Brian Howes and the project was begun at the instigation of Peter Nears and Peter de Figueiredo of Macclesfield Borough Council. However, the historical background to John de Macclesfield and his house was the life's work of Mrs. May Carne, who kept the interest alive for many years through newspaper articles, displays and talks. Detailed transcriptions of documents relating to the Castle are to be found in her papers now kept by the Macclesfield Historical Society, on which the author has relied heavily. Grateful thanks are due to all these people.

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