

## The Vicar's Pele, Corbridge

The Vicar's Pele at Corbridge, best-known and best-preserved of the 'vicars' peles' of Northumberland, stands on the south-east side of the churchyard of St. Andrew's parish church, the churchyard wall being attached to its north-east and south-west corners.

### Historical Notes

The Northumberland County History account<sup>1</sup> rehearses the history of the building:

- 1296 In the Lay Subsidy Roll the vicar of Corbridge is recorded as living in a *manerium*, ie manor house, but this may have been some earlier structure, perhaps been destroyed when Corbridge was burnt during Scots raids in 1296 and again in 1312, after which the incumbent would have good reason to have a defensible residence.
- 1415 The 'Turris de Corbrigge', owned by the vicar, is included in the list of defensible structures made in this year
- 1607 Camden refers to a tower at Corbridge built and occupied by the vicars.
- 1663 Clarke's survey points to a change in use, implying the construction of a new vicarage elsewhere; he refers to 'a tower scituate on ye churchyard wall, said to have been antiently ye lord's goale, but is now ye place where ye lorde's courte is usually kept, but ye roof is in much decay'.
- 1776/7 Fryer's map of the village<sup>2</sup> shows the tower with an attached structure (which Knowles refers to as a cottage) to the west<sup>3</sup>.
- c1830 The earliest illustration of the tower so far traced, an engraving showing it seen from the north-west, shows it a roofless ruin, but much in the same condition as other pre-1910 illustrations; the attached structure has gone and the churchyard wall is in its present position, adjoining the south-west corner of the tower rather than the north-west as it did on Fryer's map.

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<sup>1</sup> *Northumberland County History X* (1914) 209-215. Largely a re-run of Knowles' earlier article.

<sup>2</sup> Knowles, W.H. (1898) 'The Vicar's Pele, Corbridge' *Archaeologia Aeliana* 2<sup>nd</sup> series **XIX**, 178

<sup>3</sup> This plan is reproduced, with only minor changes, on the 1841 Tithe Award map, which should not be relied to show contemporary detail.

- 1910 The Duke of Northumberland restored the tower with a new gabled roof, and it served as a museum for carved stones and early grave covers from the adjacent parish church; the building was leased to the Vicar and Churchwardens.
- 1935-6 Joseph L. Murray lived in the tower.
- 1969 Listed Grade I and SAM
- 1987 The Vicar and Churchwardens surrendered their lease to Tynedale Parish Council, and it then passed to Corbridge Parish Council; the tower served as a Tourist Information Centre.
- 2007 The tower was leased to private companies and individuals. In 2012, controversially, the collection of carved stones and grave covers<sup>4</sup> was removed by the Duke and put 'in store', despite being specifically included in the Grade I listing of the building.
- 2013 The tower was sold to its present owners.

## Description

The tower is a rectangular structure of three storeys, 8.3M by 6.4M externally, being constructed of large well-squared blocks, obviously in a large part re-used Roman material, some with cramp holes visible; there are a number of irregularities in the coursing, and some very large blocks both low down and high up in the angle quoins. The walls, 1.3M thick in places, rise sheer, without any plinth or off-sets, to the parapet; in the lower part of the west wall are a puzzling series of projecting stones that may relate to the attached structure shown on the c1776 map; some of the early photographs show a faint gabled roof line above these. The only external projection is the stack serving the first-floor fireplace, the upper section of which is carried on two simple corbels, projecting at around second-floor level.

The entrance doorway is set towards the north end of the east wall, and is a two-centred archway with a continuous chamfer, the head being formed of two inclined slabs; there is a drawbar tunnel in the south jamb, and the doorway is formed of oak planks bolted into an iron grille, very similar to a door at Bywell Castle. Inside is a small lobby, with a second similar arch in front, opening into

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<sup>4</sup> Ryder, P.F. 'The Vicars Pele, Corbridge. An Inventory of Loose Lapidary Material' (2012)

the basement, whilst on the left (south) is the foot of the mural stair.

The basement is covered by an east-west barrel vault of roughly semi-circular section; there is a splayed loop at floor level on the south, and a second loop at a higher level, just beneath the vault, in the west end. The walls and vault are heavily mortared and whitewashed. There are two rough cut-outs in the haunch of the vault, 2.5 m above the floor, set roughly opposite each other towards the east end, and traces of the position of the fireplace removed in 1910, towards the east end of the north wall.

The mural stair rises under a series of lintels, some of which are re-used cross slab grave covers; other grave covers are re-used as the internal lintels of windows, and above the upper mural stair<sup>5</sup>. There is a small lobby in the south-east corner of the tower, lit by a small loop on the south, and then three further stairs to a lobby in the thickness of the south wall; this is provided with a recess containing a stone bowl or slop stone in a recess lit by a small loop, above a drain. From the lobby another two-centred doorway opens into the first floor of the tower.

The first floor is provided with a square-headed fireplace on the north, with a moulded surround, somewhat damaged. To the west of the fireplace is a trefoil-headed single-light window with a shouldered rear arch and stone window seats; there is a similar window on the south, with a plain rear arch, with a smaller square-headed loop to the west of it. In the west wall are two stone cupboards, with above them some small cavities that may relate to inserted ceiling joists. The east wall has another two-centred doorway at its north end, giving access to the upper mural stair.

The second floor has been carried on timbers, supported by an off-set on the south wall and a plate carried by a series of corbels (most of which have been removed) on the north.

The upper mural stair has a stair-foot lobby with a loop on the east and a garderobe to the north; the stair rises to a second-floor lobby, lit by another loop in the east wall, with another arched doorway of the usual type giving access to the second floor, now removed except for a 1910 platform at the east end.

The second floor is lit by a pair of square-headed loops near the centre of the north and south walls, and a similar light at the north end of the west wall; adjacent to this, but in the north wall, is a recess with a sloping back, evidently a reading desk which utilised the light from the loop. Part of the internal face of the east wall had

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<sup>5</sup> Ryder, P.F. (2000). Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers in Northumberland. 1: South West Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th ser. XXVIII, 51-110.

already been rebuilt before 1910; Knowles suggests that there may have been an original access to the parapet in this area.

The present roof structure dates to the 1910 restoration, and is carried by corbels on the north and south walls; the central three corbels on each side carry principal rafter trusses with curved struts, whilst those against the end walls are no longer used. There is a hollow chamfered string, pierced for drainage spouts, at the base of the parapet, which remains ruinous, being consolidated but not repaired in 1910; it is best preserved on the south where the jambs of the chamfered coped merlons have sinking for hanging shutters (one of which, now in poor condition, was restored); at each angle has been a square bartizan with machicolations, of which little more remains than its corbelling.

The gabled roof structure of 1910 rises behind the parapet; there is a broad square-headed oak framed and mullioned 4-light, one casement leaded window in each end, with a recessed slit above, incorporating modern clay airbricks on end.

## Discussion

Anthony Emery<sup>6</sup> lists eight vicar's towers in Northumberland – Alnham, Corbridge, Elsdon, Embleton, Ford, Ponteland, Shilbottle and Whitton – but this is by far the best-preserved example and remains in a remarkably unaltered condition.

Knowles states that 'its architectural features clearly indicate that it was built c 1300' but it seems more likely that it was built later in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the memory of the Scottish raids was still fresh. One clue to the dating is the re-use of a cross slab over the smaller of the two southern first-floor windows, bearing a cross of almost identical form to that of the late-13th century slab to Lady Alice of Tynedale, in the south transept of the St. Andrew's Church. It is usually stated to be of one build, and all its original features seem more or less contemporaneous, but there are irregularities in the masonry that could imply two or more building phases, in particular the way that some of the upper quoins do not course in well with the masonry in the east and west walls. With the eye of faith one might discern evidence of an earlier gabled roof, with the present upper works and bartizans being secondary – but this remains uncertain. There have clearly been repairs to the upper walls, some of which took place before the 1910 restoration.

There are some interesting gaps in what little recorded history we have of the building. It was clearly built as a detached tower house for the vicar – and as such is quite a rarity, as the vast majority of 'pele towers' in both Northumberland and Cumbria were in fact tower solars at the ends of hall blocks (cf Low Hall, also in

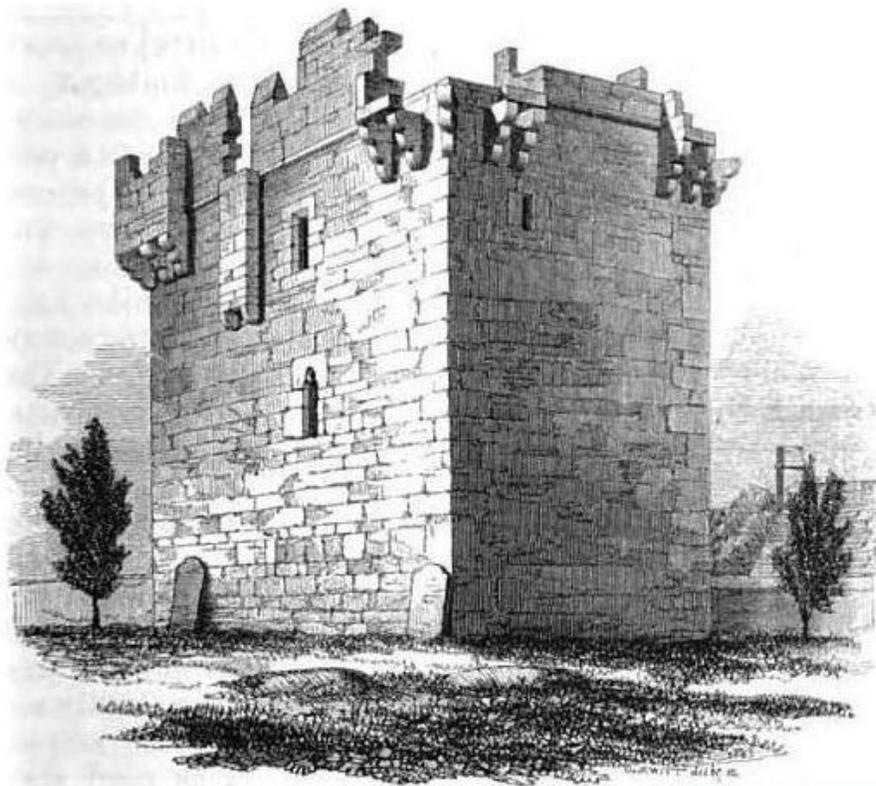
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<sup>6</sup> Emery, A (1996) *Greater Medieval Houses in England and Wales*, I, 73

Corbridge). It remained the vicar's residence in 1607, but by 1663 this was clearly no longer the case, and then, serving as a court house, it was remembered as having been a gaol; clearly the basement could readily serve as a lock-up. The roof was already in poor condition in 1663 and there is no evidence that it was ever repaired.

The earliest illustration of the tower, a print of c1830 shows it very much as it stands today. This raises an interesting question, as to how a derelict building at the heart of a village, would be allowed to stand unmolested for almost two centuries and not become a convenient quarry for building stone; in fact, there is evidence that the ruin was repaired and consolidated; whether this was due to early antiquarian interest, or the fact that no one dare interfere with a Ducal property is uncertain.

Whilst the 1910 restoration may have removed evidence of the later phases of use of the building (a late fireplace was removed from the basement), the tower remains in a remarkable state of preservation.



c1830