

HARBOTTLE CASTLE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT



RCHME Newcastle

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Mark Bowden

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NT 90 SW 3

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Harbottle parish

Alnwick District

Northumberland

Introduction

Harbottle is a motte-and-bailey castle with well preserved earthworks and rather poorly preserved stonework. A timber and earthwork castle possibly existed on the site by the 1150s (Ryder 1990). In 1157 Henry II ordered Odelin de Umfraville to build a stone castle but the actual date of building in stone is uncertain. The castle remained in the hands of the de Umfraville family until the fifteenth century when it passed to William Tailbois. By the early sixteenth century the castle was kept at the King's expense and was occupied by the Warden of the Middle March. The castle decayed throughout the sixteenth century and after the Union of 1603 no further attempts were made to repair it.

Historical accounts have been published by Hartshorne (1852, 52-9), Proc Soc Antiqs Newcastle (vol. IX, 1900, 229-36), Dippie Dixon (1903, 177-87), Hope Dodds (1940, 480-7), Hunter Blair (1944, 134-6) and Colvin et al (1975, 252-4). These have recently been summarised by Ryder (1990). Other references are included in Bain (1894 and 1896), Bates (1895), St Joseph (1950, 8-9), Cathcart King (1983, 334, 368) and Robson

(1989).

The only recorded excavation on the site was by Honeyman and this remains unpublished but for a brief note in the County History (Hope Dodds 1940, 483-5).

Description

Harbottle Castle occupies a ridge, which is aligned from east to west, in the lowlands of the Coquet valley. The ground falls away very sharply below the castle to north and south. On the north side there have been many minor land slips and some of the flat terraces resulting from this are waterlogged. A spring (1) issues from just below the castle barmkin and a number of banks (2) and drains (3) indicate attempts to control water on this hillside. The bailey ditch approaching this area from the west, which has been partly filled by a modern track, hangs over a hollow caused by slippage but it is impossible to tell whether the ground has slipped since the ditch was dug or whether the ditch was dug to the edge of a pre-existing natural feature (4). There are four stone clearance heaps (5) on the largest of the terraces but there are no visible signs of cultivation.

The castle's position is one of both tactical and strategic importance; the defensive position is good and the views, both and up and down the valley, are extensive. The line of Clennel Street, one of the principal routes over the Border, can be kept under observation, hence the castle's importance in medieval and early modern times.

The twelfth-century castle appears to have consisted of a motte and single kidney-shaped bailey. The bailey was subsequently, but at an unknown date, divided in two by a straight north-south wall. Two sixteenth-century surveys (Hartshorne 1852, 57-9; Colvin et al 1975, 253) describe the castle in three parts: the Inner Ward, the

Outer Ward and the Barmkin. Two interpretations of this scheme are possible:

1. The Inner Ward was the west part of the bailey, the Outer Ward was the east part of the bailey and the Barmkin was the enclosed field to the east of the castle ; the motte was treated separately or as part of the Inner Ward. This possibility has been suggested by Ryder (1990)
2. The Inner Ward was the motte, the Outer Ward was the west part of the bailey, the Barmkin was the east part of the bailey.

The second of these interpretations is, by analogy with other sites (e.g. Wark), preferable, is the most widely accepted and has therefore been adopted for the purpose of this description.

The circular motte is placed on the southern edge of the ridge. The reason for this location is uncertain but it is probable that the southern branch of the valley, which it overlooks, was always the more important routeway. The motte is up to 14m high from the bottom of its surrounding ditch. It is 65m in diameter at the base and 30m at the top. The sides of the motte on the south and east have been somewhat disturbed by animals and also probably, towards the top, by stone robbing.

The motte is crowned by the remains of an encircling wall of sixteenth-century date. The inner ward thus formed was an irregular polygon. Only two fragments of the wall now survive, both being in a dangerous state. The fragment on the south-west corner stands about 6m high, that on the north-west corner up to 3.6m high. The

dating evidence is provided by two gun-loops of distinctive mid sixteenth-century Scottish type (Colvin et al 1975, 254) in the latter fragment. The wall is 1.4m-1.7m thick. The remains of at least three internal rectangular buildings are now visible, surviving as earthworks 0.3m-1.0m high with some facing-stones visible. These buildings back onto the encircling wall, leaving a small open courtyard, approximately 7m x 10m in the centre. It is possible to suggest dimensions for only two of the buildings. That on the east side (6) is about 10m long by about 5m wide; that on the north (7), which is sub-divided, is about 11m long by 7m wide. Neither of these fits very convincingly the dimensions of buildings given in the surveys of 1537 and 1596 (Hartshorne 1852, 56-7; Colvin et al 1975, 253). Behind the east building (6) is a roughly triangular space 7m wide, perhaps the location of a tower.

At the foot of the motte on the south side is a large mass of masonry (8) fallen from the motte. This masonry is considered to be of thirteenth-century date (Hope Dodds 1940, 483, 485-6). It fell during the mid or late nineteenth century (Ryder 1990).

The motte is approached from the west. A continuous ramp (9) now leads across the motte ditch and up the side of the motte from the bailey. At the top of this ramp is a stony earthwork (10), 1.0m high, suggesting a fore-building, presumably that discovered by Honeyman (Hope Dodds 1940, 482, 486). This ramp is flanked on the north by the remains of a stone wall, surviving only 0.3m high. A few stones on the south side probably represent a similar wall.

The ditch round the motte is up to 2m deep with traces of a counterscarp bank (11) 0.3m high. It should be noted that the segments of the motte ditch on either side of the wall dividing the earlier bailey do not match each other in plan position. This discrepancy may be connected with the existence of a subsidiary gate, alongside the main gate, discovered by Honeyman (see Appendix). The south side of the motte ditch has been modified by use as a trackway.

The original bailey was surrounded by a ditch up to 3.5m deep on the counterscarp side and up to 11m deep, from the top of the internal bank, on the inside. A counterscarp bank up to 0.4m high survives on the north-west part of the circuit: this bank, which contains some masonry, has been used as a field boundary but may originally have been a medieval defensive feature. A stony mound (12), of uncertain purpose, in the ditch bottom on the west side and a double line of stones (13) in the ditch bottom at the south east corner are relatively recent features.

The curtain wall of the western part of the bailey (presumably the Outer Ward) remains partly as exposed stonework, partly as an earthwork; elsewhere it has been totally robbed-out. The best surviving portion is on the western flank of the motte where it stands up to 4.0m high. At this point it is clearly of more than one build. At the south-west corner of the outer ward it stands to a height of 2.5m but elsewhere around the circuit it is poorly preserved.

In the southernmost corner of this 'Outer Ward' are traces of a long rectangular

building or range of buildings, surviving as scarps up to 0.3m high with some exposed masonry. This range is approximately 25m long by 7m wide and is, therefore, too long to be any of the buildings mentioned in the surveys of 1537 and 1596, if each one was freestanding. However, this range is divided into two or possibly three cells. The major division gives two rooms (14 and 15) approximately 12.5m and over 10m long respectively, which would fit the hall and dining chamber of the 1596 survey. The width, at 6.5m-7.0m, is also correct for these chambers, but the evidence is very weak.

A possible building platform (16) in the north part of the 'Outer Ward' is 7.5m long by 3m wide but has been much damaged by later disturbance. Most of the 'Outer Ward' is devoid of features and a few very slight scarps (17) suggest that buildings, in the later phases of the castle's occupation at least, were restricted to the area adjacent to the curtain wall while the greater part of the ward remained open. A well (18) in this courtyard, 1.6m in diameter, has been filled with rubble.

The wall dividing the earlier bailey and thus, presumably, the Outer Ward from the Barmkin, is relatively well preserved, standing to a maximum height of about 5.5m with much of the facing-stone surviving on its outer, eastern, side. Honeyman's excavations were mainly in this area on the site of the North Tower (19), and the gatehouse (20). Little trace of the North Tower is now visible but the gatehouse survives as a considerable earthwork about 3.3m high. Disturbance of the top of this mound is possibly the result of Honeyman's trenching but it may simply reflect the collapse of the gate vault. The line of the curtain continuing up the side of the motte is

visible as a slight earthwork and a stone rickle and some of the inner face is visible.

The most easterly element within the defences, which may be the sixteenth-century Barmkin, is almost a mirror image of the 'Outer Ward' although it is somewhat larger and there are significant differences in detail. There is a fall of up to 8m from the Barmkin level to the bottom of the surrounding ditch but there is little sign of a wall or palisade on the lip except possibly on the east side to the south of the entrance. Ridge-and-furrow cultivation covers much of the Barmkin but some earthworks, 0.2m-0.8m high, do remain, suggesting a barbican (21) to the 'Outer Ward' gatehouse and a rectangular building (22) in the south-east corner. There are signs of traffic hollowing inside the Barmkin entrance. Other noteworthy features are a scoop (23), perhaps the result of stone robbing, on the lip of the motte ditch and a low knoll (24) at the extreme south-west corner. No interpretation of these features can be offered on the evidence of the present survey alone.

The defences were approached from the east across a causeway (25) but there is no trace on the surface of any gatehouse, although the existence of one seems to be implied by the 1537 survey (Hartshorne 1852, 57). The causeway appears to be a built feature and some facing stones are visible. Probably the ditch was originally continuous and entry was by means of a bridge but this is not certain as the character of the scarps on the north and south sides differs.

On the top of the ridge to the east, beyond the defences, is a triangular piece of ground

defined by a lynchet (26) to the north and a stone revetting wall (27) to the south. It is bounded at its east end by a lynchet (28) about 1m high. This piece of ground shows traces of ridge-and-furrow cultivation but no other archaeological remains. The steep slope to the north of this area has been divided into a series of small parcels but only slight lynchets (29) now remain. At the east end an earthen bank (30) up to 0.6m high continues the line of (28) and defines the edge of the present wood.

To the south of the ridge top a hollow-way (31) cuts diagonally down-slope from a point near the causeway towards the back of the village. This hollow way is up to 1.2m deep. It may represent an early access route to the castle, if the causeway (25) is on the site of an original entrance, or it may be part of the later route which cuts the bailey defences north of the North Tower. The latter is still in use but the hollow way is not.

To the south of this hollow-way are a number of fragmentary earthworks representing other track alignments. The most southerly of these (32), which runs along the backs of the village properties and is blocked at its west end by a stone wall, appears to cut a large mound (33) over 1.5m high. The purpose of this mound, which is almost triangular in plan and which has been disturbed by surface digging, is uncertain. Behind it is a small square structure (34) up to 0.4m high with a hollow centre, also of uncertain purpose.

The earthworks in the fenced enclosure in the south-east corner of the planned area (35) are largely the result of recent tipping and disturbance, though the line of the

hollow way and at least one stone-built wall can be seen.

To the west of the castle a low platform (36) with a stand of mature trees contains some worked stone and may represent the site of a building or buildings. Immediately to the west of this is a scarp marking the edge of ridge-and-furrow cultivation, intermittent traces of which remain.

Appendix

1537 Survey (Hartshorne 1852, 57-9)

Hall: 14.6 x 9.6m

Kitchen/brewhouse/bakehouse: 16.5 x 8.2m

Other buildings mentioned in 1537:

Gatehouse of the outer ward, north tower, ruined stables, gatehouse of the inner ward, great chamber, chapel chamber, round tower, queen's chamber, a little gatehouse at the [barmkin] entrance.

1596 Survey (Colvin et al 1975, 253)

Hall: 12.8 x 7.3m

New gatehouse to the inner court: 7.3 x 7.3m

Round tower for captain's lodging: 7.3m diameter

Dining chamber: 11.0 x 6.4m

Other building mentioned in 1596:

New stable with granary above.

1930s excavations

Dimensions of buildings found by Honeyman:

Gate tower 7.6m wide with an archway 2.9m wide; the arch flanked by a barbican, a later addition, projecting 6.1m in front of the tower. 1.4m to the south of the tower was a subsidiary gate, 0.8m wide, through the curtain wall. The North Tower had a flat back but it is unknown whether the projecting face was square or chamfered; the walls

were 2.4m thick with mural passages and embrasures. No further dimensions are given (Hope Dodds 1940, 483-4).

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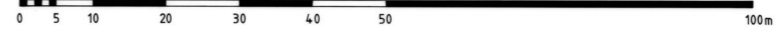
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— masonry
○ tree

