

Piel Castle Survey and Excavations 1983-85

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In accordance with the policy of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England to assess the monuments in its care, a full analytical survey and limited excavations were carried out at Piel Castle, Barrow-in-Furness. This castle is unusual in that it was constructed on Piel Island by Furness Abbey, rather than by a secular lordship, to guard the entrance to the deep water harbour at Barrow.

Documentary sources record a licence to crenellate in 1327 (Calendar of Patent Rolls I Edward III, p.169) and some subsequent refurbishment, but that it was ruinous by 1537 (Beck, Annales Furnesienses, LXII). The eastern side of the keep and parts of the eastern corner towers of each of the baileys had collapsed into the sea by the 1870's, when the Duke of Buccleuch, at that time the owner of the island, organised a partial restoration.

The excavations in the autumn of 1983 demonstrated that the restorations of the Duke had been more thorough than previously supposed. All trace of any medieval activity had been removed, as had most of the debris from the decay of the buildings. The excavations did produce more information about the sequence and manner of construction of the castle, however, which was confirmed by the fabric survey in 1984.

Every accessible internal and external wall of the castle was surveyed, using a theodolite and lap-held computer, which converted the surveyed points to a scale of 1:50, with reference to a known point on the wall. Details on the walls were then added with the aid of measurements and photographs.

The original design of the castle seems to have comprised a rectangular keep with three compartments, each three floors high, with an attached tower at its south-eastern corner. This stood on a low mound of boulder clay. Inner and outer baileys surrounded this to the north and west. It is almost certain that there was never an outer bailey on the south and east sides, but so much of the island has been eroded here that the keep now stands at the very edge. The remains of the outer curtain wall on the south side appear once to have linked with the inner bailey and may have continued as a single wall around the keep.

It is clear that the curtain walls which survive above foundation height were constructed before any corner towers were added, although the sequence was probably rapid in some cases, particularly in the addition of the gatehouse through the inner curtain. The outer curtain wall is visible only as a foundation on the west side and at the north-west corner, so that the north-western outer tower stands alone. It may be that this wall was never fully constructed. It is likely that the three surviving outer towers were part of the original design; the three inner towers are more obviously later augmentations. The north-eastern and south-western inner towers are clearly built over an existing curtain wall and the north-western tower is constructed over the bottom steps of a stair to the northern rampart walk.

The design of the keep was changed during the occupation. It seems likely that the original plan included diagonal buttresses, certainly at the north-west and south-west corners. Early in the sequence of construction, further buttresses were added to give additional strength. The original entrance into the central keep compartment from the north wall seems to have been into the ground floor. A two-

storey gatehouse was subsequently added, possibly almost immediately. Subsequently, the entrance through both the gatehouse and the north wall of the keep seems to have been blocked partially to raise it to the first floor. The various functions of the keep must have been reorganised, as the ground floor was now no more than a semi-basement. This partially explains the confusing number of putlock and joist holes in the internal walls of the keep, although these do not produce a clear pattern. The main joists and the doors linking the chambers relate to the latest entrance to the keep.

Further evidence of a change in function within the keep can be seen in the blocking of many first floor windows. The original design of the castle included numerous large traceried windows on both the first and second floors. The first floor windows were blocked at some unknown date, but clearly before the castle fell out of use.

The building traditionally known as the "chapel" in the outer bailey now seems to have been constructed late in the sequence, even possibly after the end of the occupation of the castle. The stones used in its construction are smaller and not finished as well as the materials in the rest of the castle and it is also unrelated to what appears to be a ruinous arch projecting from and integral with the north-eastern outer tower.

The castle is built of beach stones, roughly worked to form a flat face. Architectural features, such as door and window surrounds, stairs, fireplaces and quoins are constructed of red sandstone ashlar, quarried at Furness Abbey and shipped across the harbour. The restoration work of the Duke of Buccleuch apparently concentrated on replacing this latter material and stabilising the decaying tops of buildings.

PIEL CASTLE

