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Baconsthorpe Castle

Department of the Environment OFFICIAL HANDBOOK

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BACONSTHORPE CASTLE lies 3 miles east of Holt and $\frac{3}{4}$ mile north-west of Baconsthorpe village, from which cars may reach it by a gated road. It may be approached on foot only from the Hare and Hounds, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile nearer Holt, but there is no direct access from the north, on which side runs the only frequent bus service, from Cromer and Sheringham to Holt. The nearest point on this route is Bodham Street, $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles out of Sheringham and 2 miles north of Baconsthorpe. Ordnance Survey 1:50 000 map 133; tin map 125; reference TG 125378.

The cover design is taken from the arms of Sir John Heydon (II) and his wife Catherine, daughter of Sir Christopher Willoughby, on the porch of Saxlingham Hall.

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Department of the Environment
Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings

Baconsthorpe Castle

NORFOLK

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Inspector of Ancient Monuments

LONDON: HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

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PLAN—inside back cover

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History

Baconsthorpe Castle, or, as it was more commonly called, Baconsthorpe Hall, was not the only manor house in the village. The head manor was near the church, but there was also a secondary manor-house called Wood Hall which probably stood on the site of the Castle. Both once belonged to the Bacon family who gave their name to the village, and both passed in the fifteenth century to the ambitious and energetic house of Heydon who were advancing their fortunes by the two recognised means of ascent—wealthy marriages and a lucrative practice at the law. Early in the century one William Heydon bought half of Wood Hall Manor but it was his son, *John Heydon I*, who died in 1480, and his grandson, *Sir Henry Heydon*, who between them built the castle which rose and fell with the fortunes of this family alone. If we accept the account of Blomefield, the eighteenth-century historian of Norfolk, the tower (meaning the great inner gatehouse) was the work of John, and the rest was completed in the space of six years by Henry, John's share certainly included more than the gatehouse.

Both John and Henry Heydon are often mentioned in the *Paston Letters*, that unique series of private documents recording the life of country landholders in the fifteenth century, from which we know far more of such affairs in Norfolk at that time than in any other part of England. The Pastons and their friends, such as Sir John Fastolf of Caister Castle, hardly ever mention *John Heydon I* without some hint of craftiness, duplicity and extortion. They even liken him to Pontius Pilate. This was, of course, a partisan view; Heydon had his friends and supporters and, in at least one case where this rivalry came near to raising a riot, he had, as usual, the legal, if not the moral, right on his side. He was clearly a much feared and hated man, with a gift for survival in the rough climate of the Wars of the Roses; his politico-legal career had begun under the patronage of the Duke of Suffolk, when he was sheriff of Norfolk and held offices both locally and at Court, all with good opportunities for "graft." When Suffolk was beheaded in 1450, Heydon managed to remain in favour and by 1460 he was sheltering under the arms of Warwick and the other Yorkist lords, who issued a proclamation against anyone attempting to despoil him and his fellow "extortioner" Tuddenham. A little later Tuddenham was beheaded, but Heydon went from strength to strength, and acquired much land in the neighbourhood of Baconsthorpe. His enemies used both legal and physical means to thwart him and in 1451 tried unsuccessfully to indict him for "riding armed against the statute."

It is not known when he began the castle, since he did not bother to obtain the statutory royal licence to fortify his house; it may have been towards the end of his career, when he had retired but still neither felt sure of his neighbours nor of the King's unaided "peace," but more probably it was as early as the 1450s when lawlessness and "in-fighting" were rife.

His son, *Sir Henry* (1480-1504), who had been steward to Cecily, mother of Edward IV, and who had married a Lord Mayor's daughter, Anne Boleyn (whose namesake and great-niece was to be Queen), was a less formidable figure. Indeed, he became quite acceptable to the Pastons, when one of their daughters married a relation of his. In his father's lifetime he had built a fine turreted house at West Wickham in Kent and when he inherited Baconsthorpe he immediately set to work to complete the castle, since it is likely that his reported six years' work was practically at an end by 1486, when Henry VII revived the statutes of Livery and Maintenance and effectively stopped private fortification. Sir Henry then turned his building energies to sacred ends, and rebuilt the churches at Salthouse, Norfolk, where the masonry resembles his father's work at Baconsthorpe gatehouse, and at West Wickham, where a window shows him rising at the Last Judgment with a prayer, "Remember not our sins—nor the sins of our fathers."

By contrast, his successors under the secure regime of the Tudors, *Sir John Heydon II* (1504-50), who attended Henry VIII at his splendid meetings with foreign monarchs, and *Sir Christopher I* (1551-79), were loyal and peaceable landlords, husbanding and making hospitable use of their originally ill-gotten wealth. Baconsthorpe and the surrounding block of manors formed a vast and profitable sheep-run. Already Sir Henry, as his will shows, had maintained the household at Baconsthorpe and endowed his younger sons from portions of his wool-profits. Sir John evidently preferred to live at Saxlingham, about the same distance from Holt, on the western side, where he rebuilt the hall and decked the porch with a display of heraldry; at Baconsthorpe he transformed the east range in order to carry on a woollen industry within the walls of the castle. Sir Christopher entertained thirty head-shepherds of his own flocks for Christmas. He added the unfortified outer court and outer Gatehouse. After him this pastoral prosperity began to fail, but the reserves of landed wealth were such that the decline took several generations.



Whether by his own lavishness or by a fall in the wool-market, Sir Christopher died in debt and his son *Sir William* (1579-93) sold some of his lands to meet the deficit and then, having made things worse by "engaging in projects with certain citizens of London," was forced to sell even more. Sir Christopher had had a reputation in Kent for his interest in local defence and "training the country people" and we know of his son's part in similar activities in Norfolk during the threat of Spanish invasion.

Sir William's son, *Sir Christopher II* (1593-1623), seems also to have been unbusinesslike and preoccupied with astrology or other strange

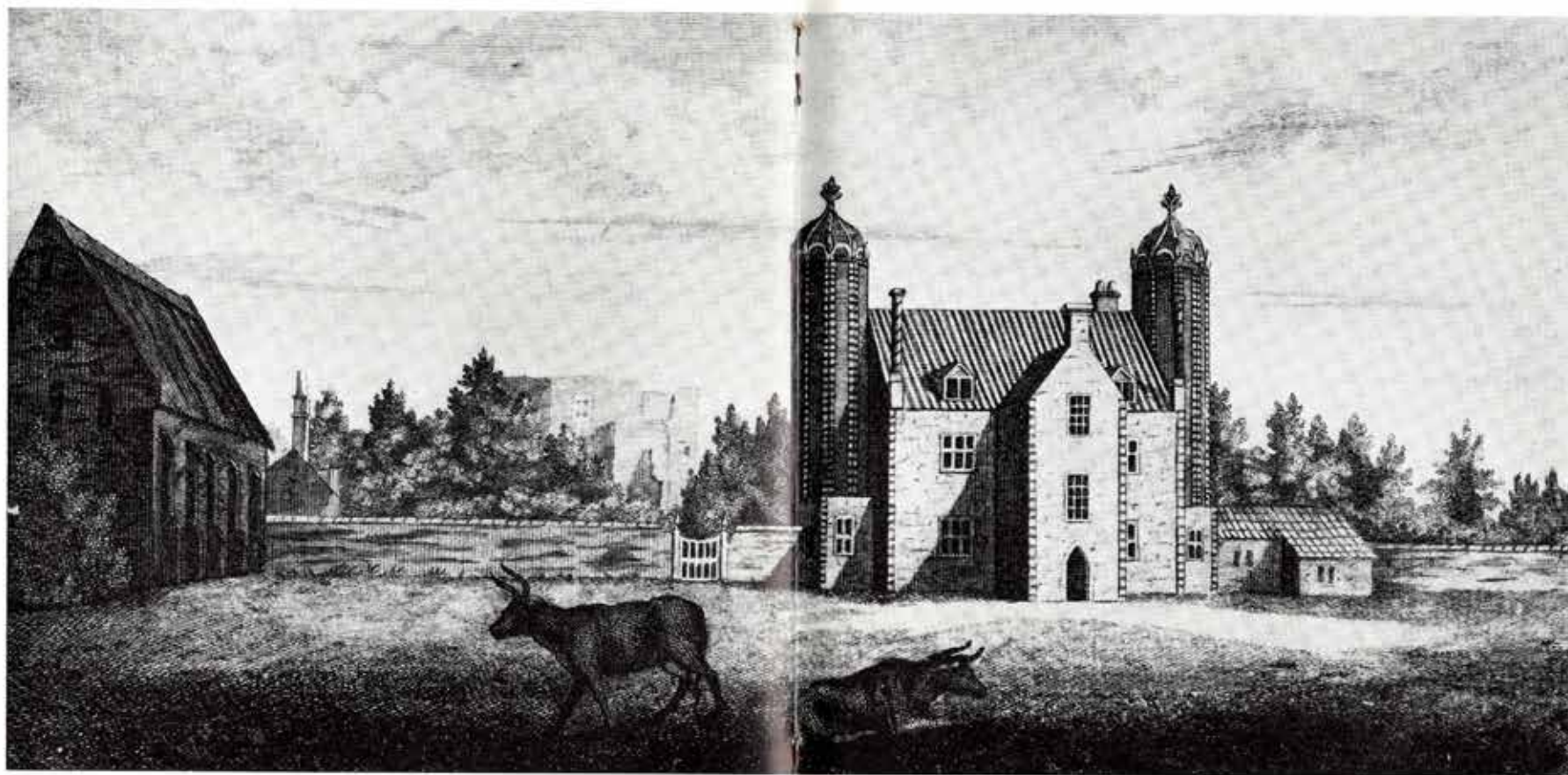
learning, but he had something of his ancestors' interest in building. In Saxlingham church he built a fantastic allegorical monument of which little remains, and wrote an explanatory pamphlet about it, extolling the virtues of his young wife who died in 1593. Her coat of arms was the last of a series that formerly decorated the windows of the Inner Gatehouse, which he seems to have refitted. Excavation has shown that he narrowed the front moat, which no longer served any military purpose, and at the same time dismantled and presumably rebuilt certain parts of the castle. The new window in the end of the east range is probably part of a scheme to unify the whole front and give it a more domestic appearance. In his youth he had been knighted by Essex at Cadiz, and both his sons followed military careers, as though their estates were no longer sufficient to interest or support them. The elder son was killed on the expedition to the Isle of Rhé in 1627; the younger became Lieutenant General of Ordnance to Charles I and the victorious Parliamentarians sequestered what remained of his estates. He was allowed to buy them back but, before he died in 1657, he had tried to recoup his losses by demolishing most of the castle and selling the materials. In 1654 John Windham's steward was buying cartloads of freestone for re-use on his master's estate at Felbrigg.

A generation later the Heydons sold all their Norfolk estates to a London merchant. Baconsthorpe passed soon afterwards to a doctor named Zurishaddai Lang. He and his immediate successors probably lived in the modest house that had been constituted from the outer gatehouse. This house remained inhabited until one of the turrets fell in 1920. About 1801 the estate had been acquired by John Thruston Mott of Barningham Hall and, in 1940, his descendant, Mr Charles Mott-Radclyffe, placed the ruins in the guardianship of what is now the Department of the Environment. The ruins were then smothered in ivy but as soon as the war was over clearing and consolidation began and have now revealed the quality of the building.

Description

Though parts of Baconsthorpe Castle, particularly the inner and outer gatehouses, stand almost to full height and are quite impressive, important sections of it have been so utterly demolished that even their plan cannot be recovered. This means that any attempt to describe the castle in its entirety involves much conjecture and uncertainty. Reconstruction might have been easier had the castle conformed to a normal plan of fortified house, but in fact it was something of a nondescript. In a typical English late medieval residential castle the whole of a quadrilateral moated site is enclosed by curtain walls, with corner-towers and a strong gatehouse in the middle of the façade, while the main dwelling lies either against the curtain or across the middle of the courtyard. Superficially Baconsthorpe looks typical enough; the inner gatehouse is the most prominent feature and dwarfs the walls on either side. But it is clear that it was not so symmetrically planned; the original curtain enclosed only the south-western part of the moated enclosure, so that the gatehouse would then have stood at its south-eastern corner. Even though the area to the east of it seems already to have been occupied (but not fortified), the combined layout of two courts, side by side, would still not have been regular. We do not know even after excavation, how the curtain was completed on the east side, or how the two courts were originally related, but it seems likely that the gatehouse originally led into the western court, and subsequently, when a range of buildings was built between them, into the eastern. A single moat, leading off a mere to the east, surrounded both courts as well as an area to the north which was later also brought into the walled enclosure, but there was no moat round the additional court to the south into which the outer gatehouse leads. Thus it cannot be classed among the water-castles with two moated enclosures, after the Dutch or German pattern, that occur occasionally in eastern England, the finest being Sir John Fastolf's castle at Caister by Yarmouth.

The outer gatehouse was used as a dwelling long after the dismantling of the rest and what remains of the original inner enclosure owes its survival, in large part, to its having served as a walled garden for this house. The walls that bound it, though varying greatly in age and quality, form a continuous circuit and still bear traces of trees trained on to them. The few buildings allowed to remain, including the lower part of the inner gatehouse, could also have served the uses of the garden.



OUTER GATEHOUSE

The outer gatehouse, which visitors first approach, is a late addition to the castle, for show rather than for defence. It is on the same axis as the inner gatehouse and the outer court that lies between them was perhaps flanked by outbuildings (the barn, still in use, is of about the same date), but was totally unfortified. Originally the gatehouse comprised a gate-passage, with a lodge on either side (one wall of the passage, with a door and a hatch survives) and a large first-floor chamber with a garret over it, the whole flanked by two identical

turrets. When the main castle was dismantled the gatehouse was turned into a dwelling house; the front gate-arch was removed and replaced by a three-storey porch, and this in turn was removed early last century and replaced by a front-door in Jacobean-Gothic style with embattled top, and a walled forecourt was formed in front. Most of the rear gate-arch remains, having been embedded in the partition between the original gatehouse and the rooms added at the back when it was converted into a dwelling.

The gatehouse is faced in knapped flint, galleted with small chips.

The ashlar-work, cut with typically East Anglian precision, is still entirely Gothic in style but certain details, such as the quarter-round moulding on the gate-arch, and the projections of "kneelers" at the base of the gables, which once carried small twisted columns, show that it is not medieval but conservative Perpendicular of the Elizabethan period. The use of the turrets to extend a symmetrical façade and, indeed, its very position on a spacious axial layout confirm this late date—probably in the 1560s—when similar turrets were being built at Melton Hall and elsewhere in East Anglia. The remaining turret has a square base, with a blocked external door on the ground floor which led to a stairway to the upper chamber (the present odd internal arch is not original); the octagonal upper part has three small windows, and is crowned by a ogee cupola ringed with lunettes, one of which carries the arms of Heydon. The windows on the front generally follow the lines of the original ones, though the central one has been reduced. The form of one rear window has been preserved in the impression in its blocking. The fireplaces in the first and garret floors are in plain brickwork, as are the linings of the window-embasures. The low side-wings, of large flint cobbles, already existed in 1781 but were altered and heightened later, and the exposed footing on the west and north sides represents various phases of domestic additions.

MOAT AND BRIDGE

The moat which surrounds the main castle was originally as wide on the south, along the principal façade, as it is on the west. On the north it is less regular, but there is no sign that it ever followed the line of the original north curtain which, as will be shown, lay within the present one. To the east, in place of the moat, lies an extensive mere, now cleared of silt and prepared for re-flooding. The bridge over the south moat, by which visitors enter the main castle, is in two sections of which inner one was originally a drawback. About 1600 the moat on this side was narrowed and made shallower, thus partly burying the trapezium-shaped pier between the two sections of the bridge. This has now been freed and reconstructed on the old plan, but the wing-walls of rough cobbles that retained the embankment of the restricted moat can still be seen. The brick-arched culverts from the garderobes in the gatehouse belong to this alteration.

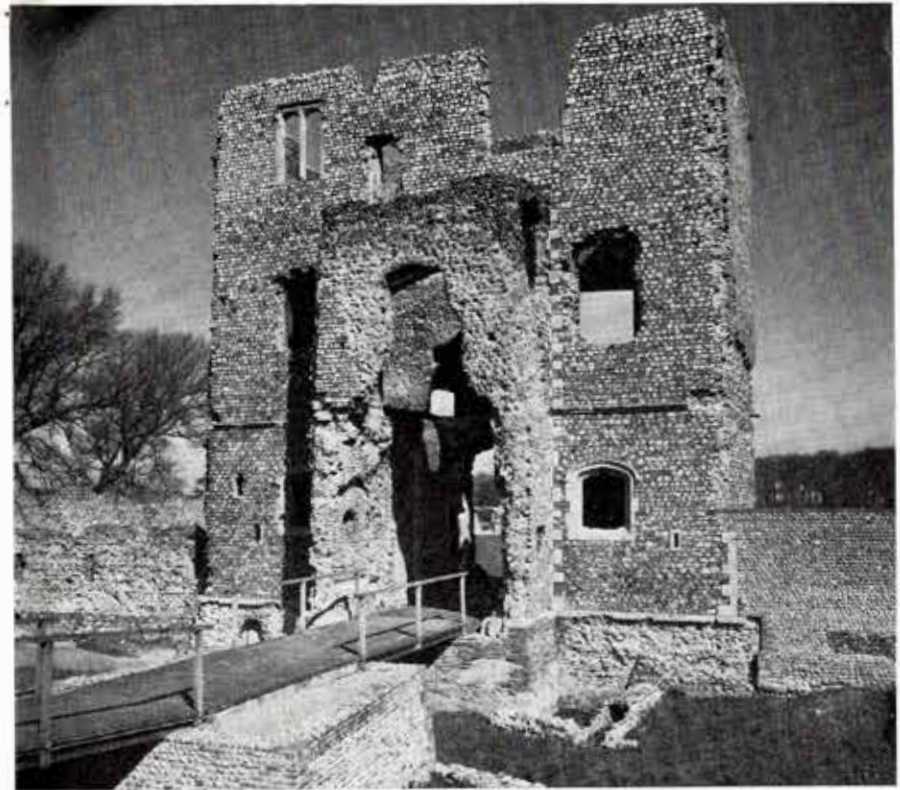


INNER GATEHOUSE

The inner gatehouse dominates the whole scene, as a massive three-storeyed tower now bereft of its parapet. It is faced externally with fine knapped flintwork in the best East Anglian manner, and internally with unbroken flints. The core of the building is of coursed rubble containing a quantity of roof-tile from some earlier building on the site. Roof-tile occurs in the additions to the west curtain-wall, but not in the original build; this would suggest that the gatehouse is also later than the original curtain—but only slightly later, as one must respect the tradition that it is also the work of John Heydon I, before 1480. The ashlar dressings, including a string-course and chamfered plinth, are of good quality and include brick for the alternative vousoirs of the lower windows (a local late medieval

mannerism), while the internal dressings are entirely of brick. The ground-floor contains the gate-passage, originally vaulted, the corbels bearing plain stone shields. The chases for horizontal baulks to carry the drawbridge-chains and the blocked shafts for their counter-weights can be seen. Immediately within the gateway is a vaulted half-bay with recesses to receive the door-leaves; in front is a projection or porch, vaulted in a different manner, with two stone seats and loops covering the line of the moat; on either side of the passage are two vaulted lodges, self-contained dwellings, with fireplaces, privies, wall-cupboards and recesses to receive the doors when opened, all in brick; the western, and slightly larger, one was perhaps for the steward, the eastern for the porter. Above this is a spacious suite of chambers which was accessible from the western lodge but normally approached by a stair-turret from the courtyard within. Though there was undoubtedly also a grander dwelling, with Great Hall and all the usual conveniences of the time, it seems probable that the apartment in the gatehouse was completed first, and was likewise intended for the use of the lord of the castle and his family either as an ultimate retreat in times of trouble or simply when he was living with a more restricted entourage. The main rooms were doubtless a parlour and a great chamber above it, both with garderobes or privies and fireplaces. The windows, slightly differing on the two faces, have plain four-centred heads to the lights and hood-moulds. The small room over the porch, separated from the parlour by an arch moulded towards the small room only and which must have contained a timber screen, has its own fireplace and a large but high-set east window. It was probably a domestic chapel; the piscina would have been in the destroyed south wall and there would have been room for a reredos below the east window—the sculpture of the Virgin Annunciate that has been found near by may well be part of it. A door from the great chamber gives access to the parapet over this room.

The living-rooms of this suite were entirely contained within the gatehouse; there is no sign of any early building butting on to the west wall of the gatehouse, though its external plinth was chipped off at a later date. It is, however, probable that the fragment of walling containing a well and cooking range, just north-west of the gatehouse, belonged to a kitchen and service-block for the gatehouse-suite. The small building with a fireplace, whose foundations lie north-east of the gatehouse, is of uncertain date.



EARLY CURTAIN AND SQUARE CASTLE

The south curtain west of the gatehouse, the square south-west tower with moulded brick internal dressings, and three-quarters of the west curtain (as far as the mutilated remains of another square corner tower, south of the present round north-west tower) comprise all that remains of an austere and regular rectangular layout that terminated with the building of the gatehouse, and must therefore also be given to John Heydon I. Its details accord well with the third quarter of the fifteenth century and the north-west tower has a small gun-port of the early key-hole type, already beginning to look old-fashioned at that date. The well in the north-east of the enclosure probably preserves

the site of a well-tower, also square, at the north-east of the "square castle" which was elementary in plan but effective against light assailants. The buttresses on the south façade were probably never completed, since they would have interfered with cross-fire leaving a plain defended front with six double frontal loops, turned in brick, and cross-covered by loops in the gatehouse and corner-tower. No original embrasures are visible along the west curtain. The wall-facing is of large knapped flints, tightly galleted.

DOMESTIC ARRANGEMENTS AND EXTENSIONS TO THE CURTAIN

Whether or not it was originally intended to build a great hall along the line of the now destroyed north wall of the square castle, there was one in this position at least from the time of Henry Heydon, early in the 1480s. The well in the well-tower determined that the service end of the hall should lie at the east and the hall must have run east to west, since the range at the opposite end of the hall which contained the parlour and private chambers certainly ran down the original west curtain, the floors gradually stepping up towards the south. Two round intermediate towers, the northern now blocked off by a late wall, were added to serve as garderobes, or privies, to these chambers, and also to provide extra fire-cover for the flank by lateral loops. The embrasures for domestic windows, three between the garderobes tower and one each side of them, all now blocked, can be seen cut into the older curtain.

The completion of the hall-range, perhaps followed by the construction of another range connecting the service-end of the hall with the other service block adjoining the gatehouse (thus excluding the gatehouse from direct access to the courtyard of the house), was the signal for building a new outer curtain to protect the exposed sides of these ranges and bring the gatehouse again into the enclosure. It is much less solidly built than the square castle, which is consistent with the view that it was hurriedly completed by 1486. The first stage, the northward extension of the west wall, contains no re-used roof-tile, but the new, round, north-west corner-tower has a quantity of tiles in its rubble, as do the round garderobe towers now added to the old west wall, and the curious, slightly bowed, new north curtain with wide and shallow embrasures to its loops. In the middle is the base of an added tower, blocking a small postern gate, and at the east end is a

second postern, beside the fairly strong rectangular tower at the north-east corner. This tower has brick quoins throughout, but the top storey, with single-light windows, seems to be an addition. The east curtain, running southwards from it, and the wall along the principal façade, joining it to the gatehouse, are defensively feeble and without adequate fire-cover, but they probably incorporate some of the original eastern court that antedated Heydon's castle. The northern half of the east curtain now represented by a very thin wall, was originally set back in line with the more substantial southern half and, between the two sections, there is a projecting bastion with traces of an embrasure like those on the north curtain.

Against the southern part is a range of two long rooms which show signs of more than one alteration. Only the footings remain of the north room, but the doubling of the front wall suggests that it carried a jettied upper storey that needed additional support; a projection in the centre contained a doorway on the ground-floor with a bay-window above it. At the end of the room is a fireplace flanked by two openings into the southern compartment, which stands two storeys high; the level of the openings and the two sets of joist-holes show that both floor levels have been considerably raised. The odd oak-mullioned windows, arranged in pairs on either side of a central door, are set in surrounds of brick (rendered to simulate stone) which resemble that in the upper part of the north-east tower, and are probably the work of Sir John Heydon II in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Though perhaps originally intended for habitation, the whole east range from the north-east tower southwards was adapted, when this second phase of brickwork was inserted, for various processes in the preparation of wool and became, in effect, a textile factory. The tower, where a pile of fuller's earth, or lye, and numerous pins were found, has a sunken tank in the floor, with an overflow through the wall and a wooden culvert running beneath it. Traces of a turnstile, perhaps for admitting sheep for shearing, have been found against the north long room, and a brick-sided chute in the stout wall behind the fireplace leads into the south room, which contains, in the south-west corner, the supports and the chases for the plumbing of a great wooden sink 17ft (5m) long. The long windows were suitable for weavers and finishers to work by; the weavers probably worked on the upper floor.

The final alterations, when the windows on the south front of the long room were narrowed and replaced in stone to match those of the

gatehouse, can hardly be earlier than the reconstructions of about 1600, for which there is evidence from excavation. But, though in its present form this whole corner has a modest and unmilitary appearance, when compared with the fine curtain to the west of the gatehouse, in the last phase of the castle there was an upper storey throughout which gave a unified and domestic character to the whole façade.

NOTE

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