Medieval Fact Sheet

Clifford's Tower, York

Clifford's Tower from the Southeast showing the Forebuilding.

Introduction

Clifford's Tower is all that remains above ground of York Castle. In the medieval period, York was the largest and most important City in the North of England. Its economic prosperity was based on being at the centre of the fertile Vale of York and on the confluence of the Rivers Ouse and Foss with access to the Humber and the North Sea. Its strategic significance lay on being on the crossing point of the Ouse and the hub of a road network leading south to the Midlands and London and north to Newcastle-on-Tyne, Carlisle and the Scottish Border. York was founded as a Roman City but continued to be the important settlement of Eoforwic as part of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria and as the Viking City of Jorvik. This meant that when William of Normandy conquered England in 1066, York was a thriving city with strong links to Scandinavia and a population that was reluctant to accept his rule.

As in many parts of England, the Normans built castles as a way of consolidating their power. These were of the 'Motte and Bailey' type with two defended enclosures. Of these the Bailey was a relatively large area in which most of the buildings of the castle were located while the Motte consisted of a mound of earth, topped with a tower built initially of timber but later of stone that could be accessed only from the Bailey. York Castle was of this type although it had two Bailies, one located at the confluence of the Rivers Ouse and Foss with the Motte and the second bailey slightly to the North. Use was also made of the rivers to dig water-filled moats around the Motte and the Bailies. Clifford's Tower was later built on the Motte. Fields on the far side of the Foss were also flooded to create the King's Fishpond or Pool.

A second Motte was built to the south of the River Ouse at Baile Hill. The City was already surrounded by the Roman walls and these were used, rebuilt and extended to complete the defences. York was therefore strongly defended with the Castle located specially to defend the City from attack from the southeast from the sea and along the Ouse.

The Tower that exists today was built during the reign of Henry III (1216-72).

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The Site during the Early Medieval Period

The Norman Castle was founded where the Northumbrian town of Eoforwic had been. Archaeologists have found clay loom weights, a bronze hanging bowl and a bone trial piece incised with interlace decoration. King Edwin of Northumbria was baptised as a Christian at Eoforwic in 627. In 866 the Danes captured the City and named it Jorvik. Evidence of their settlement has been found especially in the Coppergate area not far from the castle. In 927 King Athelstan captured Jorvik and it became part of England although the descendants of the Danes remained. From 1016 to 1042 England was part of the Danish Empire of King Knut and his sons. Then in 1066 England was invaded by the Normans and William of Normandy became King William I.

The Normans build the Castle

William I was prompted to build York Castle by revolts against his rule in Northern England in 1068 and 1069 that were supported by the Danes. He suppressed the revolts, carried out the 'harrying of the north' (the destruction of farmland and livestock in many parts of the North and Midlands) and built castles at strategic points. These included the Motte and Bailey Castle at York of which Clifford's Tower is the Motte in 1068. It was originally garrisoned by 500 men. In the following year, another Motte and Bailey Castle was built at the Old Baile on the other bank of the Ouse. Later in 1069 these castles were attacked unsuccessfully during another revolt.

In September 1070, the Castle was attacked by a combined force of Northumbrians and Danes who advanced up the River Ouse by boat. During the attack either the defenders or the attackers set fire to the town. The attack was successful and the Castles were captured and destroyed. Later in the year King William I returned to York, laid waste the neighbouring countryside and rebuilt the Castles.

The Castles continued in use with records of works being carried out including the building of a stone tower on the Motte where Clifford's Tower now stands. It became a major military and political centre. For example, King Stephen based his army here in 1149 when facing a Scottish invasion and in 1173 the Scottish King William the Lion paid homage to the English King Henry II at York, probably in the Castle.

The Massacre of 1190

The Third Crusade was launched by Pope Gregory VIII in 1189. Its objective was for the Christian Kingdoms of Europe to capture Jerusalem from the Muslims. However, the crusade also unleashed prejudice against all non-Christians including the Jews, many of whom had settled in England including in York. At that time, Jews were not permitted to carry out trades or professions. Also, the Christian church taught that it was a sin to charge interest on borrowed money – a practice they called 'usury'. However, as the Jews were not Christians they were able to charge interest on loans and many became important bankers. Successive Kings funded their activities through loans from the Jews and the Jews were therefore afforded Royal protection.

King Richard I was an enthusiastic crusader and was crowned in 1189. His coronation sparked anti-Semitic riots in London and other cities. Two of York's prominent Jews, Benedict and Joceus attended the coronation. Benedict, however, was murdered on his way home and in March 1190 a mob attacked his house in Coney Street in York and killed all the inhabitants. Following this the Jews of York sought and received sanctuary in the Royal Castle while the mob went on to attack the house of Joceus and to kill all its inhabitants. Jews who were captured by the mob were either forcibly baptised or killed.

Events then took an uglier turn. The Constable of the Castle, who had given sanctuary to the Jews left the Castle but when he returned the Jews refused to let him enter. He therefore sought the assistance of the Sheriff (the King's representative in the County) who provided additional soldiers who joined forces with the mob in attacking the Castle. It soon became clear to the Jews that they would not be able to hold the Castle so on 15th March 1190 they determined to take their own lives and destroy the Castle. Those who were still alive on the following day were promised safe passage from the Castle by Richard Malebisse (the leader of the mob) but when they emerged they were killed. The mob then progressed to York Minster where they burnt all the records of the loans that the Jews had made to the townspeople. English Heritage consider that about 150 Jews lost their lives in the massacre although other sources estimate the number may have been higher.

The Tower was rebuilt in 1193 at a cost of £236. Further building work was carried out in 1200 and 1204. In 1225 it was necessary to repair the bridge, houses and breaches in the stockade of the Castle and in 1228 a great wind blew done some of the timber including the gateway.

The Building of Clifford's Tower

Between 1237 and 1238 a house was built in the inner (southern) Bailey for King Henry III. In August 1244 York was visited by the King and he instructed the Sheriff to secure timber and other materials to strengthen the Castle as a defence against the Scots. In March 1245, he embarked on a more ambitious scheme. Master Simon of Northampton the Carpenter and Master Henry de Reyns the Mason were sent to York to survey the Castle and to advise the Sheriff on its re-building. Henry de Reyns was an experienced mason who may have worked at Rheims Cathedral before 1239, and who was Master of the King's Masons at the building of the King's Chapel at Windsor Castle between 1239 and 1243. He is credited with introducing the Gothic French Court style to England that is evident in Clifford's Tower, especially in the windows, blind arcading and spiral staircases. He later became Master of Works at Westminster Abbey. Simon of Northampton oversaw carpentry works at Windsor Castle from 1236 to 1251. The proposals for the Tower on the Motte at York were unusual with four lobes and were influenced by the French Chateaux at Ambleny, Aisne and Etampes all in the modern French department of Seine-et-Oise.

The spiral stairs are probably the earliest example in England of ne-piece cut-slab winders with the winders embedded into the turret cylinder wall for additional support. This eliminated the need for vaulting and increased the speed with which spiral staircases could be built. The shortness of the winders (at 90cm with a 20cm riser height) probably results from Henry de Reyns being cautious with an innovative approach.

The building of the new Castle started in 1246. Some existing buildings including the gaol and the chapel were demolished. During 1250, the Sheriff received twenty cart loads of Lead from the Bailiff of the Peak in Derbyshire for the completion of roofs on the new towers in the inner Bailey. Orders were also made for twenty oaks for the same purpose. However, it was not until 1251 that the first reference is made to a new tower on the Motte, known then as the King's Tower but subsequently to become known as Clifford's Tower. In November 1251 Master Richard, the King's Cook was using carpenters to build a Mill and other buildings required for a Royal visit. Between 1252 and 1253 at least eighty oaks were used in the construction of the Castle.

By 1257 the King appears to have become impatient with the Sheriff who he accused of making insufficient effort to complete the work. Roger Thurkelby, a Justice in Eyre (a court of itinerant justices) was sent to York to establish what remained to be done and at what cost. In 1258 money was spent on roofing, the King's Chapel was completed and in 1262 all the works were complete.

The annual budget for the works varied between 200 and 400 Marks (a unit of currency equivalent to about 67pence in modern money making the cost between £133 and £267 a year). The total cost of the Castle was about £3,700.

The Motte was heightened at this time and the remains of the timbers of the original timber castle have been found between three and five metres below the top of the existing Motte. When the stone castle was completed the Motte at Baile Hill was abandoned.

Clifford's Tower from the Northwest

The North Lobe from the wall walk

The walls were faced with finely jointed ashlar masonry of local magnesian limestone.

By the late thirteenth century, King Edward I was engaged in war with Scotland and used York as a major administrative centre. In 1298, the King's Exchequer and Treasury were established at York Castle. The Exchequer managed and accounted for the King's revenue while the Treasury collected revenues and minted money. The King's Tower prepared for the Treasury of Receipt that involved storing money and receiving taxes. This required modification to the Tower with King Edward I instructing the Sheriff to:

"Prepare the Tower with doors, bars and locks and other things which are lacking for the safeguarding of our Treasury which we shall place there, as John Dymmok, usher of our Exchequer, shall more fully explain on our behalf."

In 1304 repairs were made to houses in the Castle that were used for sittings of Parliament, and chests were bought for storing documents. In 1312, King Edward II visited the Castle and arranged for a new roof to be made for the chapel in the King's Tower and the building of a further Tower and outwork to the southwest of the Castle. In the winter of 1315 a flood caused part of the curtain wall to collapse and the Motte to be softened. In response, works were carried out including works to the well.

The Naming of Clifford's Tower

It is thought that the King's Tower was renamed Clifford's Tower in 1322 after Lord Roger Clifford was executed there and was hung in chains from the Tower.

The reign of Edward II (1307-27) was characterised by conflict between the King and the nobility and lack of success in the war with Scotland. In 1314, the Scots under King Robert the Bruce defeated the English at the Battle of Bannockburn and Scottish incursions into England became more common. Sometimes disaffected English nobles and the Scots made common cause.

In 1322, Thomas, Earl of Lancaster led a revolt against Edward II in alliance with Robert the Bruce. He was joined by other disaffected Lords including Humphrey de Bohun (Earl of Hereford), Lord John Mowbray, Sir Robert Holland and Lord Roger Clifford who was hereditary Sheriff of Westmorland. The campaign concluded in March 1322 at the Battle of Boroughbridge where the King's forces were victorious.

Lord Roger Clifford received severe wounds and was forced to surrender. He was imprisoned at York, condemned to death and his estates were declared forfeit. His body was hung in chains from the King's Tower following which the Tower gained the name of Clifford's Tower.

The Clifford family were later made hereditary constables of York Castle.

The Fourteenth Century

York Castle continued to be a major administrative centre during the fourteenth century. In 1322, when the exchequer temporarily left Clifford's Tower, several items remained including a large counter (3.4metres x 0.9metres), a screen, barriers and benches. In 1323, new lead was provided for houses in the Tower and a wooden stockade was mended. In 1325, the walls between the Tower and the Castle were repaired. In 1327 at the accession of Edward III, a gate tower was refurbished for Isabella the King's mother (including the lead roof and walls and re-plastering a room), four shillings were spent of wattling to make partitions in the wine cellar and houses at the Castle were repaired when the Exchequer returned:

"So long as the King shall stay there for the expedition of the Scotch war in the North."

In 1333, a new building was constructed for the receipt and exchequers of Queen Philippa in the outer Bailey. In 1338, the Countess of Buchan (a Scottish noble woman who had married an English Lord) and her children were accommodated in the Tower while the Count accompanied the King:

"To parts beyond the sea… provided that the King's things in that Tower be safely kept for his use."

In 1353, the mint was rebuilt.

In 1358 surveyors reported problems with subsidence. The Tower cracked in two places and the East lobe was in danger of falling over. The buildings within the Tower were also in poor repair with timber decayed, ironwork removed and lead in need of replacement. The surveyors recommended that the Tower be demolished and rebuilt at a cost of 200 marks but this did not happen. In 1360, another survey of the Castle found that the Great Gate was cracked and the room above the gateway was uninhabitable. Part of the western tower had fallen into the ditch. Another Tower called the 'Boretour' was split right through and half collapsed. Flooding had undermined the foundations of the gaol and the dungeon was unusable. Most of the buildings in the bailey including the chapel, exchequer and halls were in disrepair or ruins.

Repairs to the Castle were made in the 1360s. In 1362, a 'Bretesse' (a covered timber gallery on the wall head of a tower) was installed with iron stays. 32 square feet of glass was installed in the chapel above the entrance. In 1364 wall tiles were bought for the kitchen chimneys and two stones for mantelpieces. In 1365 254kg of lead was bought to re-roof the turret and for kitchen gutters and 'evesplates'. The banks of the River Foss were also strengthened with rammed earth and straw.

The crack in the south lobe that passes through the first-floor window can still be seen. It was repaired by filling it with masonry. The leaning of the east lobe was not repaired and can still be seen.

Clifford's Tower from the Southwest

The West Lobe from the Interior

The Fifteenth Century

In February 1423, Bartholomew Seman, a London goldsmith and master of the King's mint was authorised to mint coins at York. He was also known as 'Goldbeter'. Seman was instructed:

"To coin there the gold and silver of the said country that was not of right weight, and to remain there during the King's pleasure."

In April 1423, Seman rebuilt the Mint, the Treasury, melting houses, furnaces and houses for the moneyer and his servants. In January 1424, he was also appointed Master and Worker of the Mystery of the King's Mint at York, a post that he held until his death in 1431.

Thomas Roderham was appointed Controller, Changer and Assayer of the King's money; and Thomas Haxby, Clerk & Treasurer of York Minster was appointed Warden, receiver of the profits and keeper of the dies.

It is thought that the Exchequer and Treasury used several buildings around the Castle but that the centre of their operations was in Clifford's Tower where important activities such as assaying (checking the metal content of coins) was carried out. This was because Clifford's Tower was the most secure part of the Castle.

In March 1461 King Henry VI came to York. He was facing a serious revolt against his rule that culminated in the Battle of Towton fought some twelve miles southwest of the City. The King was not at the battle but stayed in York, probably at the Castle. Upon hearing of the defeat of his army the King fled York for Scotland with his Queen and son.

In 1483 King Richard III acceded to the throne. As Duke of Gloucester, he had been the previous King's lieutenant in the North and had developed a good relationship with the City. In 1484, he started to re-build the Castle but work stopped after he was killed at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. In 1487, the Lord Mayor of York reported to the new King Henry VII that the City was decayed due to the:

"Takyng downe of yowe castell there by King Richard and as yet not re-edified."

In 1540 John Leland, the antiquary, described the Castle as a 'desolate ruin'.

The Ground Floor

Clifford's Tower is entered through a forebuilding. This was originally reached by a stone bridge from the inner Motte. The ground floor was a reception area and includes a stone bench on the east wall where people could wait to be admitted. A pointed doorway with a slot for a portcullis forms the entrance to the main tower. The oldest part of the forebuilding is to the northeast. It includes the side of the door and part of the arch and dates to the thirteenth century. A vertical scar in the wall shows where there were two walls that flanked the original stairs.

The Ground Floor of the main Tower was originally divided into several rooms that accommodated the Exchequer and the Treasury. One of them was a timber entrance lobby.

In the thirteenth century, there was a central octagonal stone pier that supported the first floor. However, this was later removed when a central square tower was built although it is uncertain whether this was medieval or later.

The East Lobe was used as a service area and includes the well. It has two rectangular windows that include arrow slits below and has a stairway that leads to the first floor and wall walk. Above the windows there are large sockets (now filled with brick and rubble) that originally contained the corbels that supported vertical timber posts that supported the first floor and perhaps the second. There are other sockets for corbels in this area and it is thought that as the walls of the Tower leant outwards because of the subsidence, more corbels were included to provide further support to the floors.

It is thought that the Treasury and Exchequer were housed in the North Lobe where there are latrines and a fireplace. A socket in the wall suggests that there was once a wooden screen there. The fireplace has a height that is disproportionate to its width and a flue that tapers to a very narrow opening. It is likely that the fireplace was designed for metal working as it would have created a fast 'draw' that could be used in minting coins and assaying precious metals.

The West Lobe also has latrines and a similar fireplace. The latrines can now be observed from inside and outside the Tower.

The North and West Lobes from outside (left) and inside (right)

The South Lobe has many sockets in the walls that suggest it contained many partitions that created smaller rooms than in the other lobes and these may have been guard or service rooms. There are two windows and a stairway that leads to the Chapel, first floor and wall-walk.

The First Floor

The first floor was designed to provide luxurious and secure accommodation for the King and Queen when they were in York; or for other important visitors to the Castle. It may also have housed the Treasury at times. The floor was divided into two separate apartments by a partition that ran from the southwest to the northeast, each being accessed from each of the two separate staircases. There are large pointed windows in the south and east lobes. There is direct access to the Chapel from the south lobe while a window (sometimes called a 'squint') allowed people in the east lobe to observe services in the Chapel. There were stair cases leading from each apartment to the wall-walk through small towers and both apartments had access to a single latrine between the north and west lobes. Both apartments had fire places with chimneys but these have now disappeared.

The first floor of the forebuilding contains the Chapel. It is entered from the spiral staircase to the south. Much of its decoration survives including blind arcading with pointed arches originally supported on slender shafts with molded capitals and bases. In the northwest wall, there is an aumbry (a cupboard for holy vessels) and above that two squints (small windows) that allowed those in the east lobe to observe the altar and services. The portcullis that closed between the forebuilding and the main tower was raised against this northwest wall.

Views of the Interior of the Chapel

The altar was set next to the southeast wall that had two windows and blind arcading. These features are no longer there.

The Wall Walk

The Wall Walk enabled guards, or anyone else in the Tower, to have a good view of York and the surrounding countryside especially the approaches to the City from the southwest along the River Ouse. It also enabled defenders of the Tower to resist any attack. The original floor of the wall walk was about 60cm higher than the current floor with several of the original paving stones still projecting from the walls. The remains of the rain water drains can also be seen including one head-shaped shoot. In the south and west lobes, the fishtail-shaped bases of arrow loops survive.

The Baileys

Not much remains of the baileys. However, remains of two of the six towers of the inner bailey survive. Behind the later assize courts, a part of the medieval curtain wall survives including a small postern gate that led to an outer enclosure. Behind the Castle Museum are the south angle and southeast tower and the remains of the South Gate.

Conclusions

I first visited Clifford's Tower in the 1960s and at that time it struck me that this medieval tower on the top of a grassy mound and surrounded by car parks looked rather incongruous. It does not appear at first glance to be a significant castle. I am sure that many of the visitors go there principally to enjoy the panoramic views of the City and rush up the stairways and around the wall walk without paying too much attention to the building. However, the wall walk at the top of the Tower is also the best place to go to understand its significance as the only remaining tower of the once mighty York Castle.

From the wall walk you can see the River Ouse to the south and the River Foss to the east. In the medieval period the area between the rivers and the Tower contained the Inner Bailey of the Castle surrounded by walls and towers and a water-filled moat. It now contains the York Castle Museum and other buildings. To the northwest between Clifford's Tower and the City centre was the Outer Bailey, similarly surrounded by walls and towers and a water-filled moat. Both Baileys were filled with stone and wooden buildings serving numerous purposes. From the walls of the Castle sprung the walls of the City (that are largely still there) and they completed the defences of the City. Clifford's Tower was not built as a tower on a mound that stands on its own but as the centre of a great Castle. The location near the rivers was especially important as it commanded access to the City from the sea and enabled water-filled moats to be dug that prevented would be attackers from approaching or digging 'mines' to undermine the walls. However, the water itself proved a danger to the Castle as subsidence was always a problem.

We like to imagine the history of a castle as being a series of great sieges and battles but, as with most castles, this was not the case at York. Other than in the Norman period there were no significant attacks on the Castle but, far from being a sign of failure, this is a sign of success. Castle builders intended to build a place of such strength that no one would attempt to take it and this seems to have worked at York. The Castle therefore fulfilled the other important function of a Castle as an administrative centre with the principle function of housing the King's Treasury and Mint. As the centre of the fortifications of the Castle, Clifford's Tower was the most secure place for these functions and for keeping valuables. However, Clifford's Tower has also been the scene of more gruesome events including the massacre of 1190 and the execution of Lord Roger Clifford in 1322.

Those with an interest in architecture will note that the Tower is in the French Gothic Court style with its four lobes and innovative windows, blind arcading and staircase construction that are unique in England and rare elsewhere in Europe being based on the architectural ideas of Henry de Reyns.

Ironically, King Richard IIIs intention to strengthen the Castle resulted in its decline as his works were incomplete when he was defeated and deposed in 1485 and were not completed by his successors.

Nonetheless, Clifford's Tower is an important medieval building that is well worth visiting and studying.

Clifford's Tower Today

Clifford's Tower is now in the guardianship of English Heritage and is open to the public daily from 10am to 4pm. Further information about visiting is available on the English Heritage website at: http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/cliffords-tower-york/

The exterior can be viewed easily from the surrounding streets.

About the Fact Sheets

These fact sheets are written by me (Adrian Waite) unless otherwise stated. Their purpose is to provide basic information and some analysis and comment on medieval historical subjects. They therefore do not provide information about events prior to the fifth century unless this is needed to set events in the medieval period in context and do not cover events after the early sixteenth century. The subjects may be historical buildings, events, people or other subjects. They are published on the 'AW-History' website and are freely available. I hope that people enjoy reading them and that they encourage readers to explore medieval history further. Feedback about the fact sheets is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk .

About AW-History

The address of AW-History is www.aw-history.co.uk

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The website contains:

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- Other historically related items that can be bought by mail order
- Information about events that you can attend - organised by "AW History" and by other organisations
- Links with other websites containing information about medieval history

We welcome visitors and hope that they enjoy the website. Feedback about the website is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk .

Adrian Waite
March 2017