

## **Kirby Muxloe Local History Group. 20th July 2006.**

### **Kirby and Ashby Castles, Mr Glynn Coppack, English Heritage.**

Kirby Muxloe Castle, 6 km west of Leicester, is an incomplete brick structure surrounded by a rectangular wet moat, at the lowest point of the village and near the ancient packhorse route to Leicester from the NW. It was built during the Wars of the Roses by William, first Lord Hastings. In 1483 Hastings, when in his 50s, was beheaded by Richard III on a trumped-up charge of treason. Building work was suspended and then abandoned. English Heritage (EH) have recently extensively conserved the brickwork. The History Group toured parts of the Castle with Mr Coppack, the departing EH Inspector who has been in charge of the repair work here and at Ashby. He explained some of its history, in context with the other Leicestershire Hastings properties of Ashby de la Zouch Castle (20 km WNW) and Bagworth, 8 km WNW.

An Act of 1911 allowed EH's predecessor, the Ministry of Works, to take historic buildings into guardianship. That year they made a brick-by-brick drawing of the Castle and repaired the brickwork, unfortunately using Portland cement which has since damaged some facing bricks. They cleaned out the moat; important finds included the Hastings seal. There were further repairs in the 1970s – early 80s. Although most of the brickwork is sound, some has crumbled and in 2005 repairs cost £800 000. EH have put in 40 000 new hand-made bricks from Bulmers Brickworks, Suffolk, who also made bricks for repair of Hampton Court. The stonework has survived well and has needed little replacement. The speaker claimed the work has been so skilful it is difficult to see what has been done.

The earlier timber-framed house [Pakemans Place] on the site came into the Hastings family by marriage. It had a moat, two towers, a gatehouse and a two-storey chamber block of Mountsorrel granite, a stone too hard to work as ashlar masonry. The foundations survive. William Hastings, his grandfather Ralph and great-grandfather were all born there. The Hastings family were on the make and acquired the great house at Ashby and a smaller property at Bagworth. William Hastings obtained licences [from Edward IV] to crenellate all three in 1474, at first concentrating on Ashby.

Having refurbished the Kirby house, Hastings lived there while the new Castle was built around it, in what must have been a busy building site. The outer court extended to Main Street, 100 m NW. Rising ground beyond the brook to the SE, now a field, was set out as a garden, to be visible from the projected new Hall. The family was sufficiently wealthy for the work not to strain their finances. Unusually, the building Accounts survive. They show Welsh dykers were employed to dig the new bigger moat. Although some names are Anglicised, the Accounts sometimes resort to "John, a Welshman, John, another Welshman ...". The spoil was used to fill the old moat and to raise internal ground level by about a metre.

The Castle is based on Thomas, Lord Cromwell's Tattershall Castle and employed Tattershall's master mason and bricklayers. The somewhat irregular bricks were made nearby in the "Dower Croft", now Oakcroft Avenue. The ends of bricks exposed next the kiln fires came out roasted dark blue and were used ornamentally, contrasting with the rich red of the remainder; WH above the drawbridge chain holes, to the left half a knight in armour, to the right the Hastings "sleeve" badge. Black-headed diaper work resembles that at Eton College. These over-burnt bricks are very fragile, the pattern disappearing as the brick faces spall away. John Ellis was Brickmaker – an ancestor of that Ellis who, with Everard, made and sold bricks through the Midlands?

Anthony Innesbrond or "Anthony Dutchman", son in law of the Master of the Antwerp brickmakers' guild led the Flemish bricklayers. Locals from 5 to 10 miles around were also employed. All the bricks were originally moulded and burnt as rectangles, chamfers at doors, etc, being formed by brick-axe after laying; axe-marks survive. The recent EH repairs copy this "French" method. English practice, then as now, is to trim bricks as they are laid. Courses alternate headers and stretchers in Flemish bond. Much of the original very full pointing was cut out in 1911. The top and bottom edges are slightly bevelled, or "double struck", a typical Flemish touch.

The brick clay was dug from the local Mercian Mudstone or Keuper Marl. Building sand-stone, not available locally, came from Swarkeston on Trent, South Derbyshire. Leicester Abbey was being re-roofed at the time and supplied lead. Local carters brought in lime from various sources.

The Castle, intended to be the latest thing in architecture, copied features from Hampton Court Palace, such as "Tudor" window detailing. As at Ashby, Kirby was to have a central courtyard with corner towers, in two of which the Treasurer, Steward and other officers would have had their own apartments, with private latrines. The gatehouse is at the centre of the NW wall; the main hall, never built, was to lie opposite. The unbuilt South tower would have included kitchen, bakehouse and brewhouse. The hall would have been

entered at the kitchen end. Intended position of doors is not accurately known. Hastings' private rooms were to be in the East tower.

The moat was dug first. Then the West and North towers were completed fit for occupation. Next, the front range and gatehouse were started, the hall and private apartments being scheduled to follow. The walls, windows, glazing and gutters of the gatehouse block were completed by 1483, although only the first of two floors was complete when work stopped on Hastings' death with the Castle one third complete, having cost £980. One of the last Account entries is for temporary thatching of the gatehouse wall tops against the weather. One tower was demolished, its materials being sold and re-used in many Kirby cottages. In 1911 the Ministry bought reclaimed bricks locally to renew brickwork just above moat level. These probably came from the Castle, or from its brickworks which may have continued in operation after 1483.

Walking round the West tower and stair, the most complete, we could see each of the three floors formed a "flat" with its own fireplace, the chimneys being reconstructions. The internal walls would have been panelled. The Accounts show completion of glazed windows, not merely shuttered against the weather. Each floor's latrine drained to a brickwork pit which could be cleaned out, rather than polluting the moat. A defensive wall between the towers formed a killing ground for any intruders crossing the moat. Stone gunports plus arrow-loops at the base of each tower and the gatehouse covered all approaches.

The moat was kept clean as a feature to be enjoyed. Complex water works controlled its level. Kirby Brook, which nowadays never dries, was diverted, with inlet and outlet sluices. The soleplates of the original bridge to the gatehouse survive. The rotted 1482 oak bridge was renewed in 1911, in the 1950s and again this year, now at slightly higher level for wheelchair access. Digging the moat first proved inconvenient, all material having to cross a temporary bridge, site unknown, linking the Oakcroft Avenue brickworks. A blunder, or a reflection of the uncertainty of the times? Although the Castle had no chapel, St Bartholemew's Church is only 300 m to the West.

Unusually, the Hastings estates were not confiscated by the Crown, perhaps reflecting the weakness of the treason charge. The family, later Earls of Huntingdon, lived at Ashby until after the Civil War, when Parliament slighted the Great Tower. Ashby Castle, on low ground with neither wall nor moat, was not designed for defence. It had good communications and resembled a great city house of state to demonstrate the Hastings authority and wealth, Kirby being for private use. There was a front open court with the parish church to one side. Only the inner court is an Ancient Monument, which EH have been evaluating stone by stone. The buildings date from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, added to by the Hastings family and several times updated. The chamber block is about 1370. The kitchen and collegiate chapel are by William Hastings. Four extant fireplaces in the college wall, and a fifth over the chapel, reflect the five priests who maintained continuous prayer for his soul.

Ashby follows the pattern of Ralph Cromwell's South Wingfield, built thirty years before, with a similar two-courtyard layout. The kitchen had a hall above, for entertaining important guests. The courtyard was behind the hall. The chapel has a third courtyard. Construction was the fashionable arrangement of stone on the outside, timber within, "veneers" making the building look more modern than it really was. The Great Tower is in the centre of the courtyard behind the hall. It has four floors, again as South Wingfield, and was for entertaining in state. Seven apartments, for seven trustworthy officers, had access to the central staircase and the latrine tower. Corner windows look onto the main avenue of the garden. The kitchen chamber corner window enabled the ladies to watch the chase in the 3000 acre hunting park.

Ashby's gardens were remodelled 1530. The separate Garden Tower is an incredibly rare feature, erected after Hastings' time. Henry VIII had similar garden pavilions at Hampton Court, quatrefoil plan with a watching chamber above a dining room, with ground-level service rooms below. Chimney brickwork copies Hampton Court. Ashby's very early formal garden, more than ¼ mile long, is to be excavated this summer. Will octagonal mounds prove to be fountain bases?

We await Kirby Castle's reopening to the public. No date has been announced but Mr Coppack told us that a new official guidebook is in preparation.

Answering questions:

- ☒ Corbels, projecting brackets, feature in brick at Kirby.
- ☒ The speaker thought Kirby's gunports were for show and to say Hastings understood the new cannon fire. But the tower walls are 10 ft thick, coursed brickwork right through.
- ☒ The tunnel under Castle Farm may have been a stone-built drain or water supply.
- ☒ Bagworth house does not survive and was intended as a "country cottage". A description exists. The site is privately owned.

J N Briggs, 21 September 2006.