

BAMBURGH CASTLE: ST OSWALD'S GATE, THE WESTERN OUTWORK AND ST ELMUND'S WELL TOWER

Preliminary assessment of the Standing Masonry Elements

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1. Summary

This report presents the results of a preliminary assessment of the standing masonry elements of St Oswald's Gate, the western outwork and St Elmund's well tower undertaken at Bamburgh in Northumberland, between 11th and 19th July 2023. This report is further contextualised in the BRP's Interim Report on Work on the Outworks Beyond St Oswald's Gate 2023, available [here](#). This includes accompanying illustrations, photographs and discussion.

2. Overview

Bamburgh Castle occupies a superlative defensive site on a dolerite crag, a raised plateau c. 300 m long by c. 60 m wide that is aligned north-west to south-east, rising c. 45 m above the sea which washes against its north-east side. The Castle is divided into three roughly equal wards, which are rather confusingly named: the Inner Ward is at the south-east end, the East Ward is central and the West Ward, set slightly lower, is to the northwest. The 12th century Keep stands between the Inner and Eastern wards.

This report is concerned with the north-west end of the Castle, where, close to the northern tip of the enclosed area, a natural gully and access point provided the site for St Oswald's Gate (originally the main entrance but later superseded by gatehouses at the south-east end). St Oswald's Gate was retained as a postern, and was provided with an outwork which linked it to a small natural harbour, now silted up.

St Oswald's Gate now takes the form of a passage piercing a length of 4-metre thick section of the main curtain wall. A short distance beyond it a thinner wall, here termed the Wing Wall, c. 1.5 m thick, abuts the curtain at right angles and drops steeply downhill to join at c. 45 degrees another thick wall (the Outwork South Wall) which runs east from the curtain a little south-east of St Oswald's Gate from c. 40 m before turning at a right angle to the north (the Outwork West Wall) before returning to the east again. In this final return is St Elmund's Well Tower. This contained the eponymous well in its basement, above which it was reconstructed as a cottage, which housed an apothecary in the 18th century, and was only demolished in the mid-20^h century (**Figure 1**).

Before embarking on a detailed description it is worth commenting on the multiplicity of building phases evident in this complex area. Whilst remains of Pre-Conquest buildings have been

excavated immediately inside St Oswald's Gate, the upstanding fabric demonstrates at least two phases of medieval work, then reconstruction associated with Dr Sharp's remarkable conversion of the Castle into a series of charitable institutions (beginning in 1757) before a final remodelling at the hands of Lord Armstrong and his architect C.J. Ferguson in 1894-1904.

3. Description

Approaching from the west (from the village cricket field) one finds oneself at the foot of a flight of steps that winds its way up to St Oswald's Gate. Initially there are a pair of short flights up to a platform in front of the Outwork South Wall, with a buttress to its front wall. However, at the foot of the steps an excavated trench (Area A) has revealed footings of an earlier parallel wall, apparently being joined the Wing Wall, which it appears predates and was cut by the Outwork South Wall.

4. The Outwork South Wall (W1)

From the platform the steps continue up through a postern gate in the Outwork South wall, the rebated jambs of which (maybe partially reconstructed) survive to the height of a metre or so, with a drawbar tunnel in the east jamb. About 6 m to the east a second similar gateway, later blocked, is being excavated. The juxtaposition of a pair of posterns is puzzling; possibly the eastern served St Oswald's Gate itself and the western gave access via the gateway in the Wing Wall to the remainder of the Outwork, and Port.

Beyond the Eastern Postern the rock face rears up steeply, and any evidence of the junction of Outwork and Curtain walls has been lost due to erosion and/or reconstruction. West of the Western Postern the Outwork wall stands to some height but is concealed by ivy and other vegetation. About 10 m west of the Western Postern the Outwork wall face steps out slightly, and old photographs (1960s-1970s) before the present rampant ivy growth seem to show an overlapped joint of some sort here.

Inside the Western Postern the paved path, with several flights of steps (which appear of no great age) rise alongside the Wing Wall to a platform adjacent to an archway through the Wing Wall to a flight of steps dropping to St Edmund's Well Tower before the main flight of steps dogleg right to ascend to St Oswald's Gate.

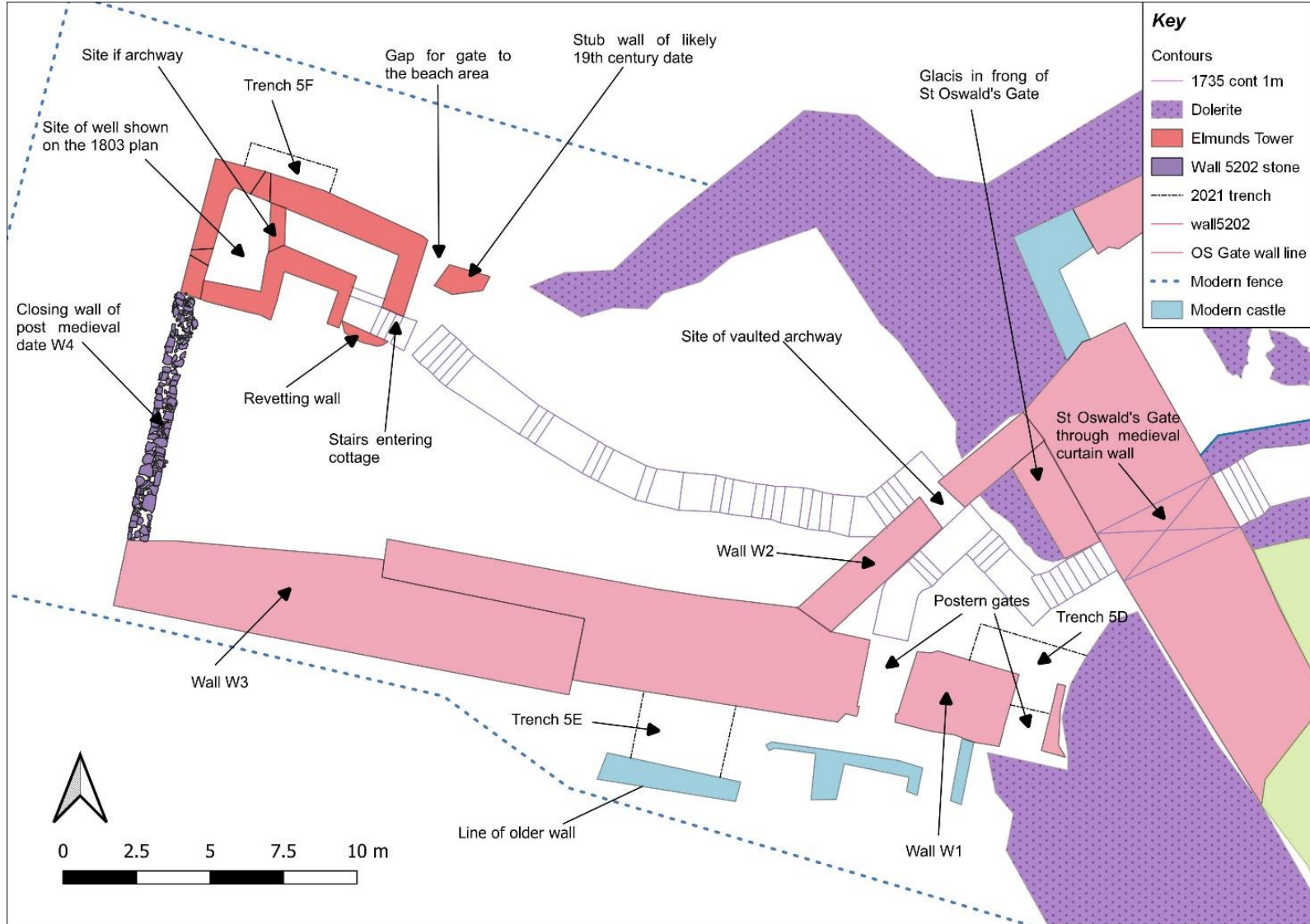


Figure 1: The northern extent of Bamburgh Castle showing the site of the outworks and the silted tidal port

5. *The Wing Wall (W2)*

The inner (south-eastern) face of the Wing Wall, which generally stands c. 5m high, although ruined down to ground level as it abuts the Outwork South Wall, shows four distinct phases of masonry. From left to right (uphill) the first looks the earliest, with only the lower courses of the facing surviving, large almost square blocks, heavily weathered, with rubble core above. Then comes an irregular area of coursed roughly-tooled stone, containing the archway; this looks like secondary re-facing, and has the look of having been fitted round the arch voussoirs. This is followed by a narrow-ragged column of rougher fabric, just possibly representing the stub of a cross wall, and then a final area of coursed close-jointed stone that looks like 18th or 19th century refacing.

The archway through the Wing Wall is a plain round-headed one, with a rebate on its outer (north-west) face, which does not extend onto the head, which has some voussoirs that extend for much of the thickness of the wall. On both faces of the wall the jambs include some large upright blocks, hinting at Pre-Conquest forms, although in fact most of these look suspiciously fresh and may be a relatively recent restoration. The fact that this opening is not in its original form is also suggested by the presence of a drawbar socket in the south-west jamb.

The outer (north-west) face of the Wing Wall shows exactly the same four phases/areas of facing as the inner, the oldest masonry (with facing only surviving low down) being downhill of the arch. The neat square stonework of the uppermost section gives away its late date on this side by the manner in which it overlaps the external face of the Curtain Wall, and abuts on its core. An 1803 plan seems to show the Wing Wall ending against the foot of the Curtain Wall glacis, which could mean that the section which over-rides the glacis is in fact 19th century work.

6. *The Curtain Wall (W3)*

The outer face of the length of Curtain, with St Oswald's Gate at its centre, is quite an impressive section of fabric, stretching from the Wing Wall to a point at which is obscured by vegetation or abuts on bedrock. At its base is a chamfered plinth, then three courses of vertical face followed by eight courses sloping back forming what is technically a glacis. All this is of predominantly grey sandstone, well squared and regularly coursed. The upper wall uses much more yellowish stone (with some pink), and in the course immediately above the glacis are a series of large open sockets, three to the left of the gate and two to the right. Three or more courses at the wall head are of more close-jointed grey stone (as is most of the internal face) and may well be Armstrong's late 19th century work. Above and behind the facing rise crags of rubble core.

The gateway has a plain semicircular arch, with square-edged voussoirs; there is an internal rebate, with a drawbar tunnel in the north-west jamb but no sign of any corresponding socket. The stone steps continue to climb through the gate passage, which has a slight offset on each

wall at the internal ground level. The vault of the passage is considerably higher than the external arch, and seems to be in two parts, the first is of roughly two centred in form and shows traces of plaster, and may be medieval; the second (inner) is semicircular and is in close jointed grey stone with a pecked finish. This goes with the plain semicircular internal arch and the whole internal face of the curtain as part of the Armstrong restoration.

It is difficult to ascertain how much of the structure is genuinely medieval. The Northumberland County History (1893, 57), which describes the Castle before the Armstrong restoration, states that 'the postern itself has been refaced by Lord Crewe's Trustees'. The yellow stone observed on the exterior wall face above Saint Oswald's Gate is likely to be the original construction material, and the open sockets are presumed to have accommodated a brattice, a timber structures that supported a defensive external gallery. It is worth noting that this wall might have been reconstructed. One might have expected the gateway arch to show some further defensive features (other than the one surviving drawbar tunnel) and evidence of door hanging. The upper courses, and the whole internal wall face (and inner part of the passage vault) are Sharp's 18th century work and their grey stone matches that of the glacis. This is clearly there on an 1803 plan, and is probably Sharp's reconstruction of a genuine medieval feature.

7. *The Outwork West Wall (W4)*

For most of its length this is represented by a low and thin wall of dolerite rubble, which seems of no great age, although surmised to be raised on an older structure. The last section forms the west side of St Elmund's Well Tower and is described separately.

8. *St Elmund's Well Tower.*

At ground level the Tower/Cottage now forms an irregular U-shaped structure consisting of entrance lobby, stair and basement chamber. The room is currently excavated to a depth of around 2 m (although the floor has not been reached). None of the external walls survive to more than a metre above the ground, and their upper sections are all quite thin (under a metre) and of small roughly-coursed stone including some dolerite. Better-quality and presumably earlier masonry survives in the lower walls (of which only the internal faces are visible), and parts at least of these may survive from the medieval tower.

The 1803 map locates St Elmund's Well in the basement. At the south-east corner of the structure is a small square entrance lobby, entered by an external doorway on the east. Two steps descend in the thickness of the wall to a landing, from which two further steps drop to the north to a further landing at the head of the main flight. There are a dozen or so steps, steep and now very worn, descending to the west, under a semicircular arch to open into the basement chamber. This is of rather irregular plan, around 3 m north to south but less than 2 m

east to west, narrowing at its north end. The arch has neatly cut voussoirs of white and pinkish sandstone, of plain square section, and is set at a skew angle to the wall on the south. In the west face of the wall above the southern springing of the arch are a series of angle quoins, implying that the arch and wall above are of a secondary build. The wall above the arch carries a course of brick, which looks like the threshold of a door, at the same level as a slight offset in the south wall of the stair.

In the south end of the basement, at about two-thirds height near the east end is a rectangular opening, partly infilled, with a crudely chamfered surround. The walling above it looks to have been rebuilt in smaller stone. Close to its north end of the west wall, are the remains of a splayed loop (its head gone) which suggests medieval work, although the wall is of no great thickness; lower down and further north is a rough socket, perhaps for a ceiling beam. The north end wall of the basement has the remains of a splayed slit, very like that on the west, and similarly lacking its head.

Several old illustrations show the Cottage as a low building with a north-south gabled roof. Map evidence suggests it was demolished in the earlier 20th century.

9. Acknowledgements



The masonry survey, photogrammetry 3D models and geophysical survey work described in this report has been funded by the Castle Studies Trust.

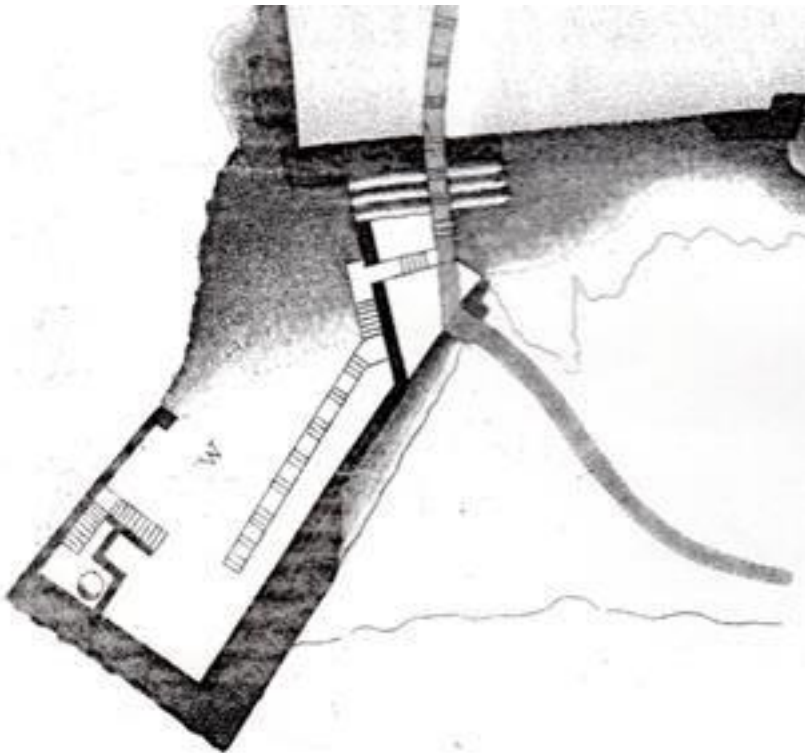
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APPENDIX

Account from the Northumberland County History 1 (1893) 57-8

but the postern itself has been refaced by Lord Crewe's trustees, and the steps also are modern. A further flight of steps leads from this postern through a round-headed and very weatherworn doorway down into an outwork among the sandhills that has been surrounded by a strong wall of archaic masonry. In the north-west angle of this outwork stood the tower of Elmund's well, repaired in 1250, at the same time as the barbican before the gate of St. Oswald, by which possibly the whole of this outwork before the ancient gate of the castle was meant. Probably this outwork was the wall built in front of the castle that collapsed with such fatal consequences to the young men engaged in mocking the Scottish host in 1138. The well, no doubt the same as the ' Gaitwell ' at the postern of 1372, is approached by steep steps of no special interest, while the base of the tower, above it, is used as a powder magazine.



10. 1803 MAP