

ARCHAEOLOGIA AELIANA

ON THE PREMONSTRATENSIAN ABBEY OF ST. MARY, AT ALNWICK, NORTHUMBERLAND.

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[Read at the Alnwick Meeting on the 29th June, 1887.]

I propose, in the following paper, to describe the result of excavations made on the site of Alnwick abbey in 1884, by the noble owner, the Duke of Northumberland.

Before the commencement of the excavations nothing was left to mark the site of the abbey but the gatehouse, and, in place of the mounds and hollows and fragments of walls so often to be found where extensive buildings have once stood, a perfectly level green field lay between the gatehouse and the river Alne, where the abbey of Alnwick had formerly stood. A more hopeless site for excavations could hardly be met with; but trial trenches soon laid bare foundations of walls, and by following these up in a scientific manner the entire ground plan of the abbey was gradually disclosed. Unfortunately, the destruction of the buildings after the suppression had been so complete that nearly everywhere the walls had been removed down to the very foundations; and in the church and claustral buildings, in the few places where the walls had not been utterly destroyed, only two or three courses of ashlar remained. Despite these drawbacks, a ground plan presenting many very singular features has been recovered; and although the excavations have been filled in again—for there was nothing worthy of being left uncovered—the Duke has caused the lines of the walls, etc., to be permanently marked out on the surface of the ground by an ingenious application of concrete.

Alnwick abbey was founded in 1147 by Eustace Fitz John, in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for canons regular of the Premonstratensian order, usually called white canons, from the colour of their habit. It was colonised, after the manner of white canons and white monks alike, from the mother house of the order in England—the abbey of Newhouse, in Lincolnshire. It was suppressed in 1535, when its annual value was under £200, but was refounded by the king in the following year. This was, however, only a brief respite, for it was surrendered to the king, Dec. 22, 1539, by the abbot and thirteen canons, and finally suppressed.

Of the history of the abbey between its foundation and fall, but little is known, and I have not succeeded in finding anything of importance to add to what is already in print.

The site of the abbey is roughly semi-circular in plan, a boundary wall forming the diameter (in which is set the gatehouse), and the river Alne the circumference. The abbey church stood in the centre of this, area, with the cloister and surrounding buildings extending southwards to the river. On the east lay the infirmary, and on the west the outer court.

The church was cruciform in plan, consisting of a nave and aisles of eight bays; north and south transepts, with two eastern chapels to each; and a presbytery of four bays. The whole of the walls east of the nave had been removed down to the foundations, and it was quite impossible to learn from these anything except the block plan. It will be noticed that the transept-chapels immediately adjoining the presbytery are twice the length of the outer chapels, and they possibly opened into the presbytery by arches. A short distance from the east wall of the latter was the foundation of a cross wall, which probably - marks the site of the reredos of the high altar.

Of the nave enough was found to make the arrangements pretty clear. The two easternmost bays formed the conventual choir, and retained the parallel walls on which the canons' stalls stood,

returned, as usual, at the west end. These walls were a little over 2 feet apart, the intervening space being paved. The width in the clear between the stalls was about 13 feet. In the choir were found the remains of a huge slab, once inlaid with a brass.

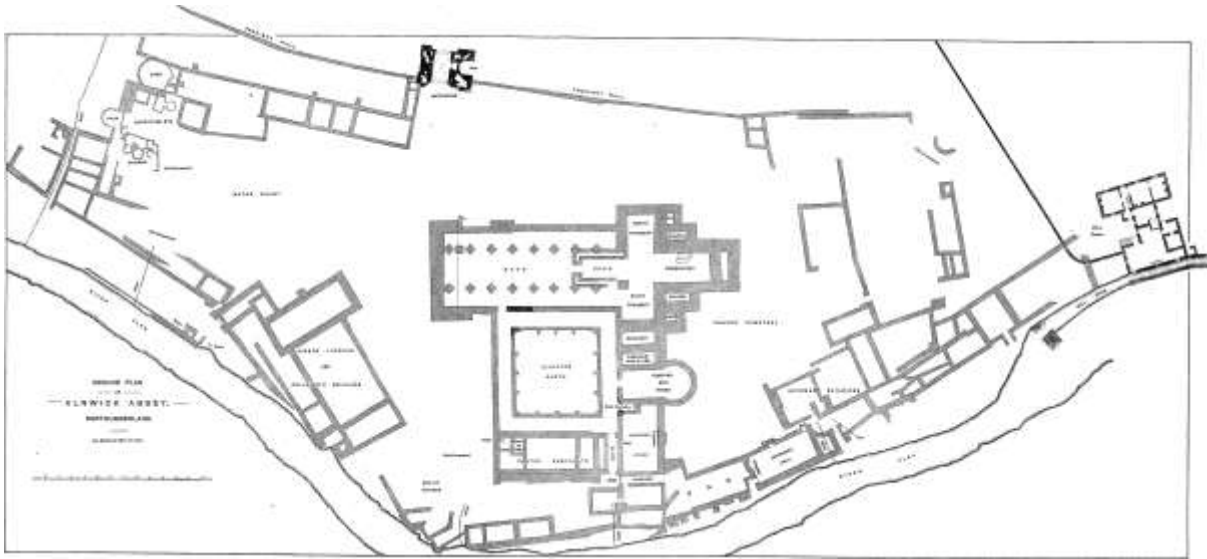


Figure 1: Ground Plan of Alnwick Abbey

The plinths of some of the nave arcade bases were found *in situ*, chiefly on the north side. In plan they consisted of a square 5 feet 3½ inches wide, set diamond wise, from the angles of which projected an engaged octagonal member. The whole plinth measured 7 feet inches from north to south. Nothing was found to show the plan of the piers themselves. The south arcade exhibited some slight variations in plan and section, and its western respond seemed to be of a different date.

In the westernmost bay of the north arcade was found a square base about 4 feet square. Under its western edge was a lead pipe, which was traced north and south across the whole width of the church (see plan).

At the west end of the north aisle a few feet of the base-mold of the front remained *in situ*, apparently of early Decorated date. In the north wall is a singular projection which, joined with an apparent break in the line, seems to point to an extension westward when a rebuilding of the nave took place.

The church appears to have had a central tower, though apparently one of no great size.

With the exception of some of the pier bases, the foundation walls of the stalls, and the fragment of the west front, the only portion of the church where a few courses of ashlar remained was part of the south wall of the nave south aisle. This was 4 feet thick, and fortunately retained the base of the east jamb of the western of the two doors opening from the cloister into the church.

The cloister itself was 90 feet square. The surrounding alleys were 11 feet 9 inches wide, and paved with flagstones, some of which we found *in situ*. [The church was paved with similar flagging.] The wall enclosing the garth was divided into four bays on each side by buttresses, and had an additional diagonal buttress in each corner. Some portions of the original arcading that stood on this wall were found during the excavations; they consisted of beautifully wrought twin capitals and bases, the former richly carved with characteristic early-English foliage. This arcade was an open one, and unglazed.

The buildings round the cloister-court present some features of great interest.

On the east side, next the south transept, were two rectangular chambers 10½ feet and 12½ feet wide respectively, and about 27 feet long, with a dividing wall about 5 feet thick. The one next the transept was probably the sacristy. In its floor was found a long piece of lead piping extending east and west. The other room was doubtless the auditorium, or regular parlour, where conversation was allowed. It perhaps had a door in its east wall, so that it also formed a slype from the cloister to the cemetery, which lay to the east. These chambers were, unfortunately, only traceable by their foundations.

To the south of these two rooms was the *capitulum*, or chapter-house. In plan this building is perfectly unique. It consists of a rectangular western portion or vestibule about 30 feet 6 inches long, and 21 feet 7 inches wide, opening on the east into a circular portion 26 feet 10 inches in diameter, the whole being about 50 feet long. This extraordinary chapter-house cannot be later than the early-English period, and is probably earlier, for William de Yesci, son of the founder, who died in 1184, was buried *ante ostium capituli nostri juxta sponsam suam*. [*Chronico de Alnewyk*] Search was made for the graves of William de Vesci and his wife before the chapter-house door, but without effect. A stone coffin containing bones and without a lid was, however, laid bare in the centre of the round part of the chapter-house.

It is difficult to see what was the arrangement of this oddly shaped chapter-house. The change from the square to the round part is sharply effected, and there were no traces whatever of responds or jambs of any kind. A trench cut along the medial line disclosed no remains of pillars, so that the roof, however it was managed, was in one span. It would be interesting to know if the circuit of the western half was completed; I think it was not, and that the walls followed the lines of the ground plan.

Immediately to the south of the chapter-house was a door opening from the cloister, one jamb of which we found in situ. The sill was raised a step above the cloister pavement, and the door was clearly that of the stairs that led up to the *dormitorium* or dorter, which occupied the first floor of this eastern range of buildings. These stairs were for communication with the dorter during the day. They occupied the north end of a building extending from the chapter-house to the river.

The principal part of this building was a spacious apartment 44 feet long and 26 feet wide, with a projecting fireplace on its east side. This was the *calefactorium* or warming-house, and contained the only fire at which the canons, by leave of a superior, could come and warm themselves. It was entered from the cloister on the west.

South of the warming-house is a narrow passage, approached by an equally narrow passage or slype from the cloister. It had a descent of four steps at its western end, and led to a group of buildings of rather complex plan, amongst which the *infirmitorium*, or abode of sick and infirm canons, must be looked for. Immediately within this passage was a door leading to a chamber on the south, parallel to which another one of about the same size has been built, into which we found no traces of the entrance. The first chamber has a door on the west opening into an apartment about 19 feet long and 13½ feet wide. At its south-east angle is a solid mass of masonry pierced by a vertical shaft (1 foot 10 inches by 1 foot 6 inches), which probably descended from a garderobe in a chamber overhead. There is nothing to show the destination of these three chambers.

The narrow passage already mentioned led to an irregularly-shaped vestibule at the north-west corner of a large vaulted apartment 22 feet wide and 66 feet long, divided into two alleys by a central row of three columns. This apartment has, towards the river, with which it is parallel, a series

of buttresses of varying width and projection. It had apparently no outer doorways, and I am unable to suggest its use. The first floor I suspect in some way formed the *domus necessaria*, which always opened out of the dormer. To the east of and abutting on this chamber was a large hall 48 feet long and 22 feet wide. It had two wide windows on the north, a fireplace on the west, and a door in the south-west corner which led into a small porch or vestibule constructed in, and contemporary with, the vaulted hall on the west. This vestibule, however, does not communicate with the latter in any way, but is open on the south towards the river. Along the north wall of the hall was a molded basemold of unusually fine character, and of the same section as that found at the west end of the church. It is unfortunate that, with the exception of the south-west door, no other opening should have been found into this chamber, which was clearly the infirmary hall. It must have had a door or doors on the east communicating with some of the chambers shown on the plan, amongst which was the kitchen, buttery, etc. The maze, of walls and foundations extending from the hall to the mill is so confused, that as I had not the opportunity of examining them before they were covered up, I shall not venture to express any opinion as to their use or date.

In a monastery of normal arrangement the whole of the first floor of the range on the east side of the cloister formed the dormer; it is difficult to say if this was so at Alnwick, owing to our ignorance of the form of the oddly-planned chapter-house. I am inclined to think that the dormer here only extended from the chapter-house to the river; but there would, of course, be a gallery or bridge across the west end of the chapter-house itself, along which the canons might pass to the room or rooms over the parlour and sacristy—probably the muniment room, treasury, and library—and so down the usual night-stairs into the church to say matins at midnight. The western chamber above mentioned probably had over it the abbot's room, with a garderobe in the south-east corner.

At the south end of the dormer, and opening out of it eastwards, was probably the *domus necessaria*.

On the south side of the cloister, and parallel with the church, were found the foundations of the substructure of the *refectorium* or frater, which here, as in other canons' houses, was on the first floor. At the east end of this range was a narrow slype leading from the cloister to the buildings by the river, and towards the west end a small square chamber marked the site of the stairs up to the frater; the rest of the substructure was used as cellarage. The south wall was considerably thickened for strength, along its whole length, at some time subsequent to its erection.

The *Chronica de Alnewyke* relates that:

*“Ad instantiam Walteri de Hepescotes abbatis de Alnewyk peritissimi patris ac famae vernantis Religionis nobilis advocatus noster Henricus quintus Dominus de Percy Anno Domini 1376 in die assumptionis beatae Mariae in Refectorio nostro comminavit cum 13 militibus quorum haec sunt nomina (names given) et multi alii Nobiles patriae, Impleto claustro parochianis nostris, et communibus patriae, computati fuerunt in claustro comedentes utriusque aetatis ad illam refectionem 1020. Yiri, in Refectorio vero 120, ad secundam Refectionem in Refectorio 86.”* [Harl. MS. 692, f 212]

Alnwick abbey differs in one important point from most monastic houses, in that there is no range of buildings on the west side of the cloister. This part of a monastery, except in the case of a few isolated instances like Westminster and Gloucester, is always occupied by the cellarage, and lodgings for guests under the cellarer's charge, and hence known as the *cellarium*. A diligent search, however, failed to bring to light any traces of a western range here; and it is probably represented by the large block of buildings a short distance to the west on the river bank. On the east of these buildings, and south-west of the frater, are some only partly explored walls, which must have belonged to the

abbey kitchen, which would here be conveniently placed so as to serve both the great guest hall and the canons' frater. There was probably a bridge from it to the frater.

West of the guests' lodgings, and extending round three sides of a square up to the great gatehouse, the excavations disclosed a singular looking collection of chambers, ovens, fireplaces, etc., of which it is difficult to fix the precise age. I am inclined to believe that they are the remains of the stables, bakehouse, brewhouse, and other buildings usually placed in the outer court of a monastery; but it is possible that they are of much later origin. Wallis, in his *Natural History and Antiquities of Northumberland* [Vol. ii. 388] published in 1769, says that the site of the abbey "*was granted, 4 Edward VI., to Ralph Sadler and Laur. Winnington, It was. afterwards sold, with the demesnes about it, to Sir Francis Brandling, Knt. of whose father it was purchased with the same lands by Mr. D'oubleday, father of Thomas Doubleday, Esq.; the present possessor, whose seat is built out of the ruins of it, which stood in his orchard, south of his pleasure garden. The only remains of this religious pile, is the court wall to the east, through which is the entrance, of very curious architecture, with a modern- built turret at the south end, beyond which is a building seemingly of a later erection, not corresponding with the grandeur of monastic structures, answering better the use it is now put to, viz., a stable, than any other. Adjoining to it, is an antient and strong tower, with four turrets, two at each end.*"

Grose, in his *Antiquities of England and Wales*, [Vol. iii.: London, 1775] gives a view "*which represents the eastern aspect of the Gate-house of the Monastery, and the gates of Mr. Doubleday's House.*" It "*was drawn anno 1773.*" This view is reproduced in facsimile on plate II. It shows distinctly that Mr. Doubleday's house, which has been pulled down since and all traces of it removed, was within the monastic precinct to the south-west of the abbey gate, the east face of which is shown. As the intermediate area has not been explored, nothing certain can be said on the point as to whether the ovens, etc., were portions of the Doubleday mansion; but their appearance certainly seemed to me to indicate a greater antiquity than that of about a century and a half. Grose quotes Wallis's account of the abbey, and adds: "*The Tower here spoken of by Mr. Wallis, was the antient Gatehouse of the Monastery, the strong latticed gate of which is still remaining.*"

Of the east wall of the precinct, with its ancient gateway, as described by Wallis, no traces now remain, and it is difficult to say which of the buildings shown on the plan was that then used as a stable, as this part of the site was not fully explored. The north wall of the precinct has been traced for a considerable distance on either side of the great or main gatehouse, which stood in the centre of its line. It should be noticed that the gatehouse projected clear of the wall, and had not, as was more usual, its front flush with (or close to) the latter. This arrangement permitted another departure from, the normal planning of a gatehouse, viz., that instead of the front having the usual two entrances, a larger for horses and carts and a smaller for foot- passengers, side by side, the larger arch only is set in the main front while the smaller door is placed on the east side.

The north front of the gatehouse is flanked by two square battlemented turrets, and divided midway by a molded stringcourse. The entrance door is segmental, headed with continuous moldings, and had above the apex of the arch a small image, which has now quite perished. On each side, at the springing level, is a small square panel; but nothing is left to show what was sculptured therein. Over the door, in the upper stage, is a large and much decayed canopied niche, now vacant; and above is a projecting embattled parapet with seven machicolations. On one of the dexter battlements is a shield charged with a cross patonce or fleury, and on the sinister side a shield bearing a cross. The flanking turrets are devoid of ornament—the only relieving feature being a small trefoiled ogee-headed loop on the face of each. The whole front is characterised by extreme plainness.



*Figure 2: Alnwick Abbey, view showing the Gatehouse c. 1773*

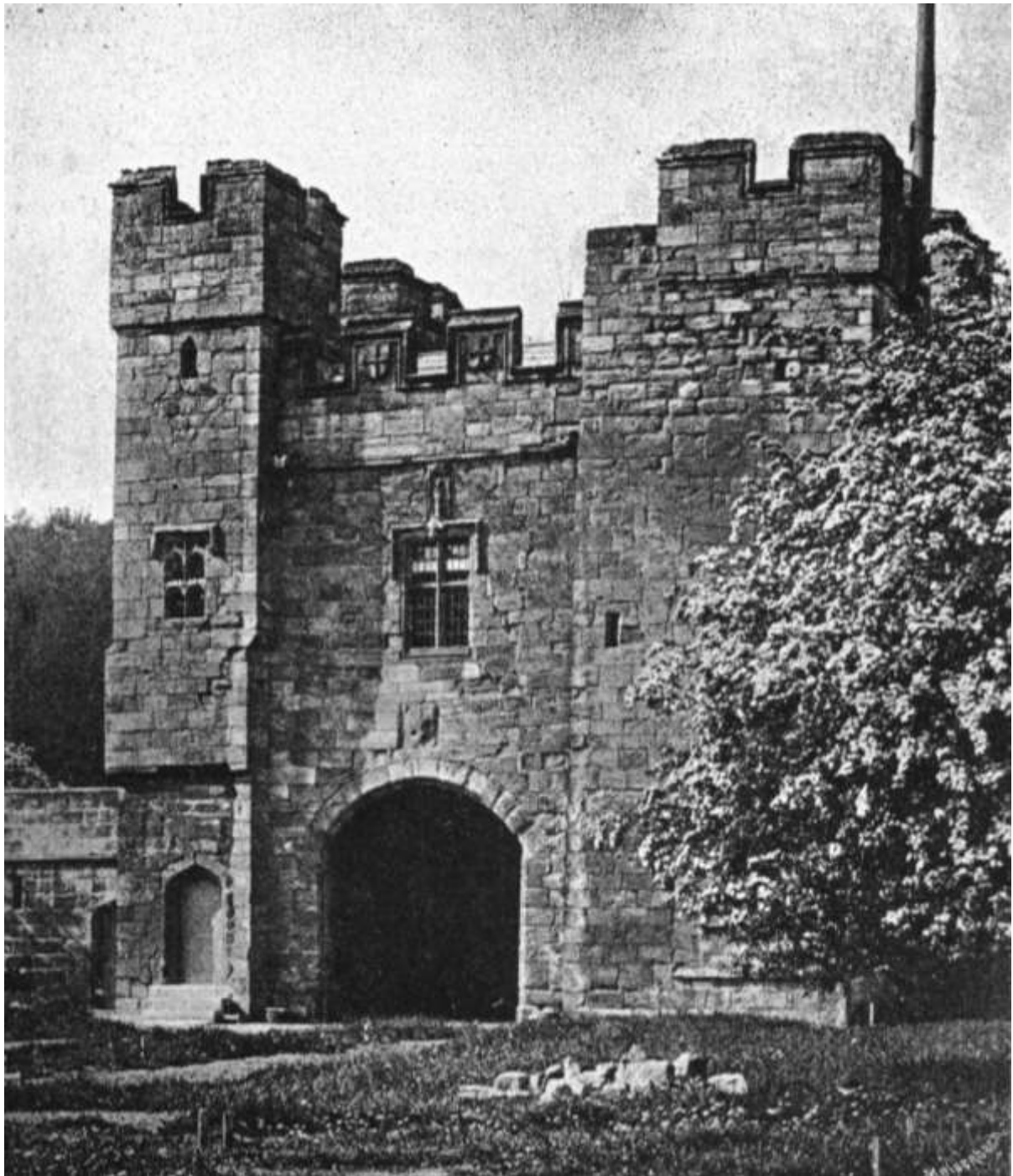
On the east side, owing to the peculiar oblong plan of the flanking turret from east to west, the wall between is, as it were, very deeply recessed. The lower stage has a low doorway, 5 feet 9 inches wide, with a four-centred arch, the label of which terminates on each side in a large angel holding a plain shield. On the apex of the arch is a mutilated angel holding a shield, Percy and Lucy quarterly. Above this is a very good canopied niche, now vacant. The upper stage projects slightly over the Tower, and has in the centre a good two-light Perpendicular window with a transom and square head. The label ends in angels holding plain shields. Above are four machicolations, the intermediate corbels of which carry a projecting parapet. On the central battlement is carved a large shield of Percy and Lucy quarterly. The north turret is plain in the lower stage; the upper stage, which projects somewhat on all sides, has a good two-light square-headed window with two trefoiled ogee-headed loops above, separated by the Percy and Lucy quartered shield. The south turret has the same shield in the upper part, and lower down a loop similar to those described. This front is well shown in the accompanying woodcut.

The south or inner front of the gatehouse has in the lower stage a segmental headed door with very few moldings. Over this is a square panel, once filled with sculpture, now all decayed. Above is a square-headed Perpendicular window, which has unfortunately lost its tracery. Over this window is a niche containing a figure, apparently of a bishop, but the whole has nearly perished. The parapet has shields on the battlements as on the north side, and similarly charged. The west turret has an original four-centred doorway at the base, and a small two-light window, square headed, and with a transom above. Over this again is a loop. The east turret has an original door a little way up, with two loops above at different heights.

The west side is quite plain, with the exception of several loops and a corbelled out garderobe.

The passage of the gatehouse has a plain waggon vault of suspiciously modern appearance.





*Figure 3: The Gatehouse, South Front, 1887*

The thanks of the Society, and of those who, like myself, are interested in the study of monastic architecture and arrangement, are especially due to the Duke of Northumberland for so liberally undertaking the excavation of the site of Alnwick abbey in the manner in which he did at the suggestion of Earl Percy.

Thanks are also due to Mr. George Reavell, the able clerk of the works at Alnwick, under whose superintendence the excavations were carried on, by the aid of only occasional directions from me, and the accompanying ground plan measured and drawn out.

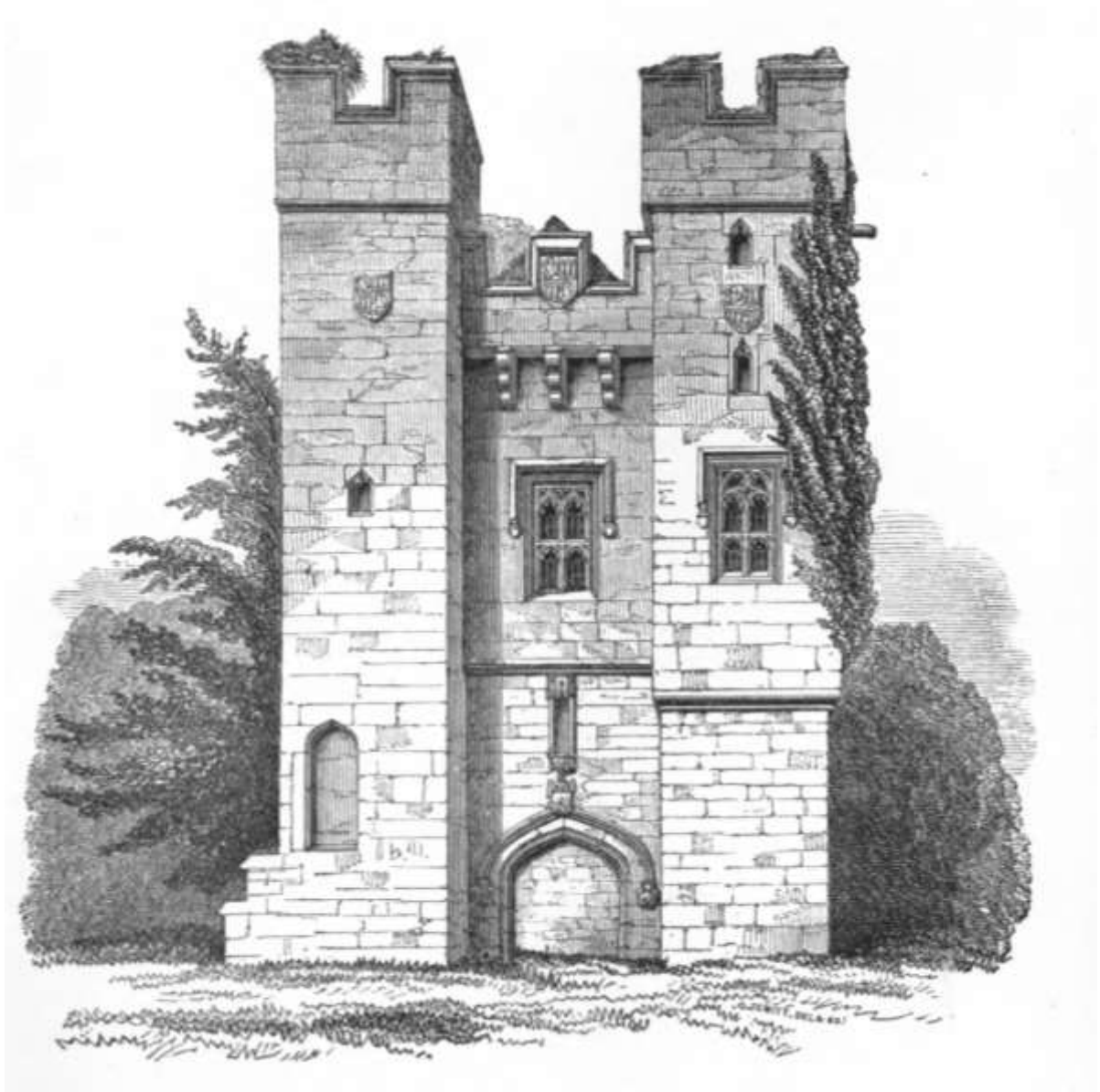


Figure 4: East front of the gatehouse. From Hartshorne's *Feudal and Military Antiquities of Northumberland*