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Bristol Castle

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BRISTOL CASTLE,

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THE origin of this Castle is involved in obscurity, and its early recorded history is so interwoven with the ingenious fabrications of the poet Chatterton, that Romance is often confounded with Reality. Situate on an eastern spur of the hill on which the ancient walled burgh of Bristol stood, the Castle appears to have been, originally, an elongation of the defences in that direction, but before the end of the 13th century, under the Norman rule, it assumed the character of an independent fortress, unconnected with, outside the walls of, and domineering over the burgh (*See plate VI., fig 1.*) It may be described as under:—Between the Castle and Bristol stood the Barbican, on the site now occupied by a china shop, at the junction of Peter Street and Castle Street, and it extended nearly to St. Peter's Church. Between the barbican and the fortress a deep artificial dry ditch intersected the hill from the Avon to Newgate. This foss, crossed by a draw-bridge, was of the width of the second house in Castle Street, and ran along the front of the two houses known respectively as the Bear and Ragged Staff,¹ and the Cat and Wheel.²

At the corner of Castle Green, where the School-house now stands, the ditch and wall bent round to the N.E., until they reached the bottom of the hill. Here a leat of the river Frome formed the foss, whilst from its edge rose the lower north wall to

¹ This was Leicester's device. He was Lord High Steward of Bristol, from 1570 to 1588.

² The Catherine Wheel.

a height of from 20 to 30 feet, and from the platform within this a second wall was raised to an additional height, in some parts, of 20 feet.

Portions of this wall still remain, and with the rooms therein, will be hereafter referred to. At the N.E. angle of this wall was the millpond, in which stood the cucking-stool, for the punishment of bad brewers and scolding wives ;¹ the Castle mill stood outside the ditch.

From the millpond another artificial cut led the Frome waters, along the eastern wall of the outer ward of the Castle, as far as Old Market Street, (the course is now under Lower Castle Street). From Market Street the moat was carried round towards the west. It runs diagonally under four houses, forming the south side of Castle Street, and then emerges as an open water-course. It may be seen from the bridge in Queen Street at a great depth below, and it soon after joins the river Avon at the spot on which, originally, stood the Water-Gate. The space thus enclosed by foss and a crenellated wall with towers, contains about $3\frac{3}{4}$ acres ; but outside the foss, on the south-east, at the junction with the Avon, was the King's Orchard, or Garden, having an area of 2 acres, this was surrounded by a "bastyle."²

¹ Edward Mountjoy, whilst Mayor, in 1718, punished a woman in this manner, and after the expiration of his year of office, the husband of the woman brought against him an action of battery and recovered damages ; thenceforth the stool was discontinued. (Evans' Chron. Hist., p. 259).

NOTE.—Some further information upon this point would appear to be desirable. The punishment was strictly legal, and we believe it still to be. The Pillory for male offenders and cucking-stool for females were essentially appendant to the franchise of "view of frank-pledge, or leet;" inquest was ordered to be made respecting the sufficient provision of both, by the statute assigned to 51st Henry III. c.6. Possibly, the mayor was found not to possess the franchise which would have authorized him so to punish. The earliest mention of this mode of punishment for female offenders occurs in the laws of Chester in the time of Edward the Confessor, as stated in Domesday, Vol. I., p. 262 b. ; and among the "*Capitula Escaetrie*," one of the duties of the Escaetor is declared to be inquiry "*de pilloriis et trumbellis sine licentiâ Regis levatis*" (Stat. of the Realm, Vol. I., 201, 240). See the learned notes of the late Mr. Albert Way, on this subject under CUKSTOKE and KUKSTOLE. Prom. Parv.—Ed.

² Worcester, an embattled wall, without towers or foss.

Stow tells us that as early as A.D. 915, Edward built a Castle at the mouth of the Avon. Bristol is frequently described as thus situate by old writers, although it is some seven miles from the actual mouth. The Castle here mentioned would, we imagine, be merely an earthen vallum and agger fortress, but we look in vain for any remains of this, or of any castle of a higher character, between Bristol and the mouth of the Avon. Assuming, then, this hill to be the site spoken of it is natural to suppose that as the Burgh grew additions would be made to its Castle, and as the use of stone for fortification became more common, it would assume, even in Saxon days, an aspect of importance for defence.

We fear the "Death of Ælla, in Bristol Castle, A.D. 920," must be ascribed to the poetical imagination of "Bristol's marvellous boy," but we learn that Aylward Sneaw was Governor of Bristol Castle, A.D. 980, and that he built a second wall, which, beginning at the Jewry under the north wall of the ancient burgh, embraced all the low-lying suburb bordering the river Frome, and followed its course to Aylward's Gate at the Pithay, thence running due east until it ended at Newgate, at the foot of the hill under the Castle¹ (*See plate VI., fig. 1*).

That Brictric was Governor of Bristol Castle at the time of the Norman Conquest is an historic fact. All his possessions, including the Castle, were given by the Conqueror to Maud, his Queen. Henceforth, while the Tower of London became the King's Castle, Bristol Castle appears to have been frequently included in the dower of the Queens of England. After Maud's death, Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, was Constable of Bristol Castle, and held it for Robert Curthose.² In 1089, William Rufus granted the Castle as a part of the Honour of Gloucester, to Robert Fitzhamon,³ his cousin. After his death, Robert, an illegitimate son of Henry I., called "the Consul," upon marrying Fitzhamon's daughter, Mabel, obtained the Castle, and was created Earl of Gloucester. He so improved the fortress, that Leland was not far wrong when he said "He

¹ Barrett, 36. Evans, pp. 30-1.

² Seyer, I., 328.

³ *Ibid* I., 341.

builded ye Castelle of Bristowe, or the most parte of it. Every man Sayith that he buildid ye great square stone donjon, and that ye stoness thereof came out of Caen, in Normandic." "He also encompassed the whole with strong walls," and divided the outer from the inner ward. Its dimensions are given in 1480, by Worcester,¹ from the porter of the Castle as follows, "The tour called the dongeon ys in thyknness at fote 25 pedes, and at the lodyng place under the leede eueveryng 9 feet and dimid. And yn length este and weste 60 pedes, and north and south 45 pedes, with iiij toures standyng upon ye fowre corners. And ye hyst toure, called the mayn, id est myghtyest toure aboue all ye iiij toures, is v fethym hygh abofe all the iiij toures, and ye wallys be yn thyknness there vi fote." This keep stood between the site of Castle Green and Castle Street.²

During recent excavations for building, a part of the foundation, and the mouth of the great well, were uncovered.³ Beneath this keep was the dungeon, to which air and light were admitted by an aperture in its roof, the entrance to it was by a trap door, and a steep flight of steps in the thickness of the wall.

The Grand Hall, or Banqueting House, stood on the east side of the keep, across the green. The deed of sale by King Chas. I., A.D. 1630, calls it a Mansion House, and specifies 43 other tenements, some at least of which were then tenanted by leading merchants. It measured 36 yds. × 18 yds., and the height of the walls was 14 ft.⁴ Like most early Halls, its lofty roof was

¹ p. 148.

² It is needful, perhaps, to say these streets have been made since the Castle was destroyed.

³ Since this was written the well has been cleared out, and some objects of interest have been discovered. Bones and skulls of goats and sheep are among the articles found, together with a human skull, supposed to be that of a young woman; also several 17th century porcelain jars, many stone cannon balls (five-pounders), and others of the largest size known in the 17th century as "Canon royall," or 63 pounders. Such also as were used in sieges and garrisons have been recovered from the materials with which the well was filled. The well was found to have a smooth cylindrical bore, 10 feet in diameter, and 40 feet in depth. Water was reached at 30 feet.—Ed.

⁴ Dallaway's Worcester, 155-6.

Fig. 1.

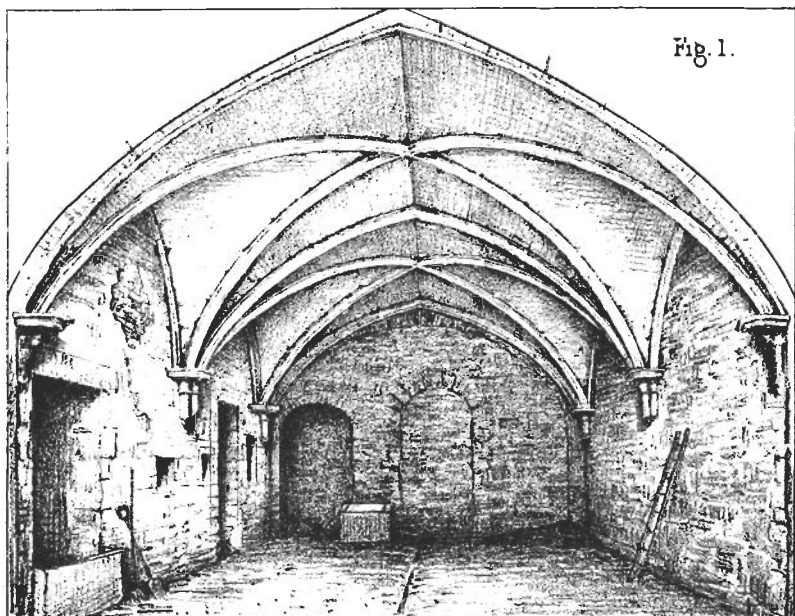
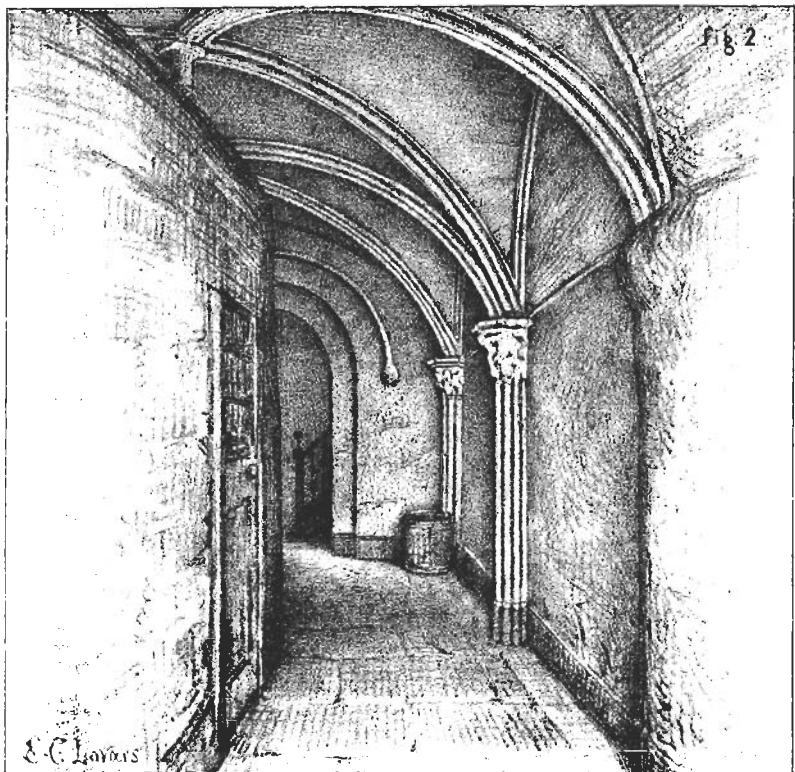


Fig. 2.



S. C. Lavers

Lavers Ltd. Bristol

upheld by wooden pillars; of these, two, of ruinous condition, were "45 feet, of hole piecc;"¹ the roof, therefore, must have been of very steep pitch.

On the north, adjoining this Banqueting Hall, was the King's Chapel. Traces of the entrances to both these buildings remain, but additions of later and different dates have been erected outside them. We will take the entrance to the Chapel first (*See ground plan, plate VI., fig. 2, a—a*). In the corners of the east wall of what is now a stable in Tower Street, there are the remains of two freestone door-jambs, with short pillar shafts and capitals, forming a part of the door-way, and a small portion of the springing of a Norman segmental arch; the width is between 14 and 15 feet. This once grand entrance was subsequently divided into two smaller doorways, one 4ft. 4in. in width, the other 7ft. 8in., and these again have been since roughly filled in. Only a few feet to the south, in this same wall, there is a fine segmental arch of Norman construction, with a good deep label (*See plate VI., fig. 2, b—b*). It is about 10 feet wide, is thickly encrusted with lime-wash, but carries, apparently, traces of dancette moulding beneath. These ancient entrances led, it is presumed, to the Royal Chapel, and to the Banqueting Hall.

Outside the arch *a—a* has been constructed a building about 24 feet by 18 (*plate VII. fig. 1*). The plainness of the groins (half octagonal), which spring from short corbel shafts, with very simple mouldings and the almost entire absence of ornament, indicate a very early date. There are, in addition to the alterations noted in its eastern wall (*plate VI., fig. 2 a—a*), some striking features in its northern, a large aumbry, a doorway, 4ft. 4in., broken through, cased with freestone, a small piscina, and a smaller doorway, 2 ft. 4 in., having its freestone lintel beveled to a feather edge, to admit, apparently, of the ascent of a steep staircase. Seyer thinks this was the vestibule to the banqueting hall,² but the "piscina" proves this to have been a chapel. Our opinion is that this was originally the entrance to the Royal

¹ Dallaway, 149-156.

² Seyer, vol. I., p. 385.

Chapel, converted afterwards into a hermitage by Henry III. A document, recently discovered, strongly corroborates this view, it is "a Code of Instructions," signed at Berkeley, Aug. 28th, 34th. Henry III., in which the King enjoins the mayor and bailiff to lengthen three of the windows of his chapel, and to whitewash it throughout; also glass windows are ordered to be put in our hall at Bristol, a royal seat in the same hall, and dormant tables around the same, *to block up the doors of the Chapel beside our great Hall there, and make a door in the chancel towards the Hermitage; in that Hermitage make an altar to St. Edward, and in the turret, over that Hermitage, make a Chamber for the Clerk, with appurtenances; also build a Kitchen and a Sewer beside the said Hall; and find the wages of a certain chaplain whom we have ordered to celebrate divine service in the chapel of our tower there, all the days of our life for Eleanor of Brittany,¹ our cousin; to wit, 50s. per annum.²*

Outside the other archway (*plate VI., fig. 2, b-b*) with the dripstone label, which was, apparently, the entrance to the Hall, is another, and more beautiful room, about 24 feet long, and 13 feet high from the present floor, which is 2 feet above the street level. It is of Early English construction. The round, deeply hollowed, ribs spring from clustered wall pillars with bosses at the intersection of the cross-springers. The capitals are foliated, a light string course connects them around the wall, the bases are below the flooring (*See plate VII., fig. 2*).

The whole is so encrusted with limewash that minor details are concealed, and only the graceful contour of capital and arch remain to gratify the eye. Even this is greatly marred, a room like a box, has been built up within, leaving only a narrow passage to a courtyard behind.

In the courtyard, about 10 yards distant, is a Newel staircase, in the exterior wall, about 30 feet high; the steps, of Caen stone,

¹ Forty years did this unfortunate Princess spend in captivity, the greater part of the time in this Castle.

² Taylor's Book about Bristol, p. 180 (from Parker's Dom., Arch. I., 226.

were so worn that they have recently been cased with wood. The whole area, hereabouts, is honeycombed with cellars, some of which have recesses for lamps, and one, at least, the remains of Norman freestone mouldings to a window jamb.

Next door (to No. 1 room) are two fine doors, one bearing the mark P^{TE}_{1697} , the other is an iron-bound wicket.

Relics of the 17th century abound in this neighbourhood, notably, some in the house now in the possession of Mr. Vowles, builder, in which Champion manufactured his famous Bristol china.

In the North Wall, overlooking the Frome, and about 12 or 14 feet above the water, there are two vaulted stone rooms of great wall thickness, dimly lighted; the hollow sounding floors cover, no doubt, some subterranean dungeons. These rooms which are accessible from the roadway that now covers the Frome ditch, are about 7 feet above the present level, and a recent doorway, driven through the wall, shews the masonry to be of very early date. Whatever they were intended for, originally, whether guard-room, store-room, offices, or prisons, these apartments have undergone some curious alterations; a narrow staircase in the wall has been built up, and a garndrobe runs down one of the dividing walls.

On the southern side of the area were the lodgings of the soldiers, the governor's house, &c., &c.

At the house of Mr. Pingstone, No. 56, Castle Street, a rough stone stair in the wall leads down to a large wagon-roofed apartment overlooking the south ditch, converted in the early part of this century into a place for the manufacture of salt. Enough remains to prove it to be a veritable portion of the early structure. Situated, 20 feet, at least, above the ditch, beneath its floor there are hollow sounding tokens of other subterranean rooms.

Along this south wall were built several bulwarks and bastions, and at the junction of the Frome ditch with the river Avon stood the great Water Gate, through which, when besieged by his

Queen and the men of Bristol, King Edward II. and the younger Spencer escaped in a little ship, and tried to get away to Lundy.

There is no mention of the Castle in the charters of 1373, by which the town of Bristol was granted the franchise of a County distinct from Somerset and Gloucestershire ; the perambulations surround it, yet it continued to be a portion of the Royal Demesnes, and to belong to the County of Gloucester until A.D. 1630, when, Charles I. sold it to the City of Bristol for £959,¹ *at the request of our well-beloved Consort, the Lady Henrietta Maria, Queen.*" It then became a part of the County of Bristol, held in free soccage, and not in chief or knight's service, at a yearly fee-farm rent of £40.

The Castle was slighted, by order of Oliver Cromwell, in A.D. 1654, December 21st. Every householder had to assist or to find a substitute. The destruction was heartily undertaken by the people, and was completed in a fortnight.

The record of the many noble and royal prisoners, that from time to time have been confined in this ancient Castle, would fill a volume of no inconsiderable size.

¹ The Castle and premises had been previously granted on lease for three lives at a yearly rent of £100, to Francis Brewster. Patent dated August 23rd, A.D. 1626.