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Otterburn Castle

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History

THE HISTORY OF OTTERBURN TOWER/CASTLE

Origins - The D'Umphraville Family

In 1076, in return for his services to his cousin, William the Conqueror, Robert D'Umphraville, was granted the liberty of Redesdale, which includes Otterburn, to hold and "keep free from wolves and enemies" for the king.

In 1245 the demesne lands of the manor of Otterburn are listed as consisting of 168 acres of arable and 42 acres of meadow ground to which were attached a mill and cottages and land for ten bondagers.

A survey commissioned by the king in 1308 revealed that the original Pele Tower at Otterburn was in existence. It was then described as a "capital messuage". There was also a park stocked with "wild beasts".

So it would appear that the original tower was built between 1245 and 1308.

A Pele Tower is a fortified structure peculiar to the English/Scottish border region. They were built, mainly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a defense against raids. According to the Pease family, former owners of Otterburn Tower, the tower part of the building stands on the exact site of the original Pele, the original foundation walls of which can still be seen.

The Battle of Otterburn - 1388

The Pele Tower features in old accounts of the 1388 Battle of Otterburn.

An account of the battle was detailed by Froissart who describes how the Scottish tried to take the Tower while waiting for the English Lord Percy and his men. Their attack against Otterburn Tower began at dawn, but the Tower was "tolerably strong and situated amongst the marshes, they attacked so long and unsuccessfully that they were fatigued and therefore sounded a retreat."

That evening most of the Scottish Leaders wanted to return across the border but were overruled by Lord Douglas who still wished to take the Tower.

However before the next morning Harry Hotspur and his English soldiers arrived at Otterburn and taking the Tower became a minor issue. The battle of Otterburn took place that moonlit night, Wednesday 19th August 1388 with the English suffering heavy casualties.

The supposed site of the Battle of Otterburn just off the A696 about half a mile north west of Otterburn Tower. An old beam from our kitchen marks the position and a full account of the battle is given on a notice board at the site.

The Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century

In 1415 at the beginning of the reign of Henry V a list of castles and Towers in the country was compiled. The Tower was then described as being owned by Sir Robert De Umphraville (who died in 1436).

The Umphraville family resided elsewhere but probably hunted here.

According to a letter from Lord Dacres to Henry VIII, Christopher, brother of Lord Dacre stayed at "the tower of Otterburn" on his return from a destructive raid in Scotland in 1513.

From the Sixteenth Century to 1716 - The Hall Family

Later the Hall family is mentioned as domiciled here but there is no account of how they came to be possessed of the property. The Halls are described as "the greatest, and of most reputation of any" in Redesdale in the time of Henry VIII.

In 1540 "John Hall of Otterburn" is named for his services as a "pensioner of the crown". He was also a Commissioner for Enclosure in 1552.

There are other references to the Halls residing at Otterburn and John Hall of Otterburn was a Sequester under Cromwell.

Jack Hall - The most famous of the Hall family, "Mad Jack Ha" was one of those "out" in the 1715 Jacobite rising. He was described as "a man of daring and pertinacious spirit"

He features in Harrison Ainsworth's novel "Preston Fight". The 1715 rising was an attempt to claim the throne for James Stuart "the Old Pretender", the eldest son of James II. The Catholic James II had been deposed in 1688 in favor of his Protestant Daughter Mary and her husband William III.

Jack Hall was born in 1671 and married the daughter of Alderman Hutchinson, who was Mayor of Newcastle when William III landed at Tobey in 1688. Alderman Hutchinson was a staunch Whig and friend of Alderman Barnes.

In 1715 Hall, together with many Northumbrians, joined the first Jacobite Rebellion. However with others he was captured at Preston and imprisoned at Newgate

At his trial Hall claimed that he was leaving a Justices meeting when he was surrounded by Jacobite rebels and compelled to accompany them. However the prosecution alleged that he was on the bench at the Alnwick Quarter Session when the news came that the Northumbrian Jacobites were mustering whereupon he set

off in such haste that he left his hat behind!

He was convicted and after being reprieved five times was eventually hanged at Tyburn on 12th July 1716.

The Eighteenth Century

*After Jack Hall's attainer Otterburn Tower was sold to **Gabriel Hall** of Catcleugh who died here on 24th April 1733 aged 90. He is buried at Elsdon Parish Church.*

*He left Otterburn Tower to his son **Reynald Hall** who added "a square building of the Scots farmhouse style not unlike Troughend Hall which was rebuilt at about the same time".*

***A Grim Discovery** - In the eighteenth century there was a large cairn or pile of about 60 tons of stones in the "grounds of Otterburn". In 1729 the stones were cleared for some reason. When the upper stones were removed a large rough undressed stone was revealed at the bottom, it was laid on the ground in the form of a gravestone with smaller stones wedged between it and the ground. When this was taken off, a cavity of about two feet long, four feet wide and one and a half feet deep was revealed. Within the cavity were the remains of small pieces of burnt bone, burnt wood and ashes. The age or origin of the "grave" was not known.*

*In 1745 Reynald Hall left the Tower by will to **Robert Ellison** of Newcastle. At that time there was only one small house on the west side of the river, located at the end of the wooden bridge which crossed the brook at the foot of the castle garden.*

*Robert's son **Henry Ellison**, a merchant of Whitehaven and High Sheriff of Cumberland, succeeded him. Henry Ellison built a four-room house to the west of the river for his Agent.*

*Henry Ellison sold the property to **James Storey** of the Low Lights, North Shields. Storey was a shipbuilder who obtained a patent for a machine to be fixed on pumps by which two men could easily do the work of six (Newcastle Courant 1773).*

James Storey built the village of Otterburn.

The Nineteenth Century

On the death of James Storey, the estate was sold under a Decree of the Court of the Chancery. The castle, manor and demesne and other lands, a total of nearly 1200 acres was sold. One source states that they were sold to the Gallon family, another that they were sold to James Ellis who was the owner and occupier in 1827.

On Storey's death, the village and lands to the west of the river were also sold by Chancery Court Decree to John Davidson. Otterburn Hall was built on this land in the nineteenth century. In about 1870 the Misses Davidson passed this land by Deed of Gift to Lord James Murray and in the early twentieth century it was purchased by Charles William Bell of Sunderland.

Sir Walter Scott the border poet and songwriter, who is pictured on some Scottish bank notes, was a guest of James Ellis at the Tower in 1812 and gathered information for his poem "Rokeby" during his visit. When the Tower was sold by Mrs Marna Pease (see below) in 1931, there was stated to be a copy of a letter of thanks from Scott to Ellis held in the Tower library.

Thomas James of Rutchester purchased East Otterburn (which included the Tower) and further extended the property in about 1844. It was then that Otterburn Tower gained its present Victorian Gothic appearance. The present Tower was restored by James on the exact site of the ancient border Keep.

Thomas James was known as "The Squire". He was born in the north of England educated at Westminster, Harrow and Oriel College, Oxford. He resided first at Beaufront Castle, near Hexham and then for many years at Otterburn Tower. During his education he developed a love of the Classics, however was particularly known for his extraordinary athletic ability.

He was an officer in the Yeomanry Cavalry and a Magistrate.

He is described as initially intimidating but fair and well liked. He was married to the daughter of the Rector of Boldon (who was apparently had 41 brothers and sisters!). He was described as a "fine old English Gentleman". Mrs James was reputedly beautiful, refined and generous.

They had seven sons and one daughter, unfortunately most of the sons pre-deceased their parents. The strains told heavily on the Squire and he died in London shortly after celebrating his golden wedding anniversary. He was buried at Ovingham. His wife survived him by nearly twenty years but suffered from failing memory.

Thomas James converted the former mansion into an elegant tower with gardens, lawns and parterres, and planted trees. He gave the site for the Presbyterian Church and Manse.

Nineteenth Century photographs of Otterburn Tower show it covered in ivy and with the high central tower still existing, and bearing a Union Jack. (The central tower was subsequently burnt down and never replaced).

The Early Twentieth Century

Howard Pease - In the early 1900's the Tower was sold to Howard Pease, a wealthy antiquary from the Middleborough area, who carried out further extensions, mainly to the rear of the property. He also built the lodge at the gates.

His widow, Marna Pease, moved away from the area when he died.

In 1931 Otterburn Tower was used as the headquarters for the police investigation into the murder of Evelyn Foster, a local hire car driver.

Marna Pease sold the property later in 1931. The estate then consisted of 1285 acres including three capital stock rearing farms, the Otterburn Mill and a number of cottages.

The Mid to Late Twentieth Century

*In the 1940's Otterburn Tower was converted into a hotel. In 1946 **Hugh E Holliday** sold Otterburn Tower to **William R Henderson**. In 1963 William Henderson sold the property to **George Muris** who in 1966 sold it to **Scottish and Newcastle Breweries**.*

*It remained a hotel until it closed in 1996. In 1998 **John Goodfellow** bought it, renovated it and re-opened it in June 1999. Goodfellow sold it in October 2011 to **Tan Sri Dato Francis Yeoh Sock Ping CBE**, a Malaysian Anglophile who fell in love with Otterburn Tower Hotel.*

Historical Features

The foundations of the original Pele Tower can supposedly still be seen at the base of the restored Tower.

The original castle well also remains, some forty feet deep and surrounded by rough early masonry and below by solid rock.

The stone porch features the Arms of the Umphraville (a wolf baring an upright sword), the arms of the Pease family and the initials "JH" of "Mad Jack Hall".

Stained glass windows on the main landing show the dates 1905 (presumably when it was put in by Howard Pease) and 1388 (the date of the Battle of Otterburn).

The large drawing room features a magnificent Florentine marble fireplace carved to depict the Greek Romulus and Remus.

The panelled dining room features sixteenth century oak panelling and a finely carved over mantle which reaches to the ceiling. Family crests are depicted on the stained glass windows.

The old Library (now a bedroom) features a frieze of the Battle of Otterburn painted above the stone fireplace.

There is a portrait of Thomas James in the Entrance Hall.

The initials of Howard Pease and his wife, Marna, "HMP" appear above the arch at the bottom of the gardens.

Sources

The Old Halls, Houses and Inns of Northumberland - Frank Graham

Castles of Northumbria - M J Jackson

Castles and Peles of the English Border - Robert Hugill

Borderland Castles and Peles - Robert Hugill

History of Northumberland - John Hodgson

Northumberland: Its Features, and its People - Rev. James Christie

Particulars of Sale of Otterburn Tower in 1931 by Mrs Marna Pease

Title Deeds of Otterburn Tower

If anyone reading this is able to add any information about the history of Otterburn Tower, we would be delighted to hear from you!