

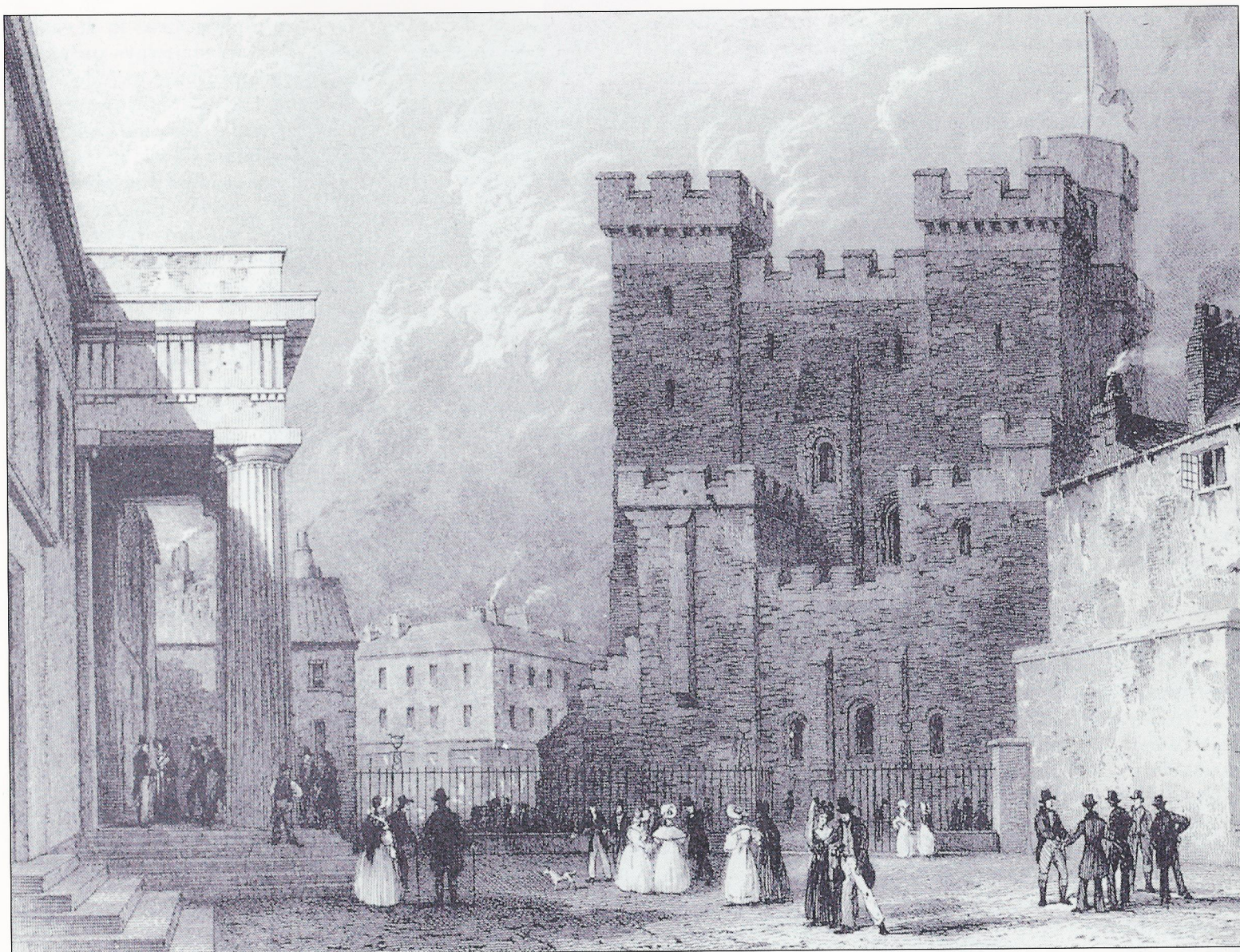
CURIOSITIES OF CASTLE GARTH

The only remnants of the original 'New Castle' from which the city takes its name are the Keep and the Black Gate. These two buildings are worth a book all of their own, but there are a few of the more unusual and curious matters of interest for us here. A clue to what is perhaps the most curious phenomenon of all here is given by the presence of the heraldic shield of the county of Northumberland on the railings of the Moot Hall close by. For although this square plot of land standing in front of the Keep is in the very heart of the city, for many centuries up until 1974 it enjoyed unique municipal status as an 'island' of the county of Northumberland.

The reasons for this throw an interesting sidelight on local civic history. From the Castle's construction shortly after the Conquest until 1399, both Castle and town came under Royal jurisdiction via the county of Northumberland. In 1400, however, King Henry IV granted Newcastle self-government as a town and county in its own right. The Castle and its precincts being of royal foundation, however, remained the property of the crown in possession of the King's representative, the Sheriff of Northumberland. This had the effect of creating the 'island' in the middle of the town where the Corporation and the Guilds had no authority. This was much to the convenience of felons and fugitives from the Town Justices, who could seek refuge there, immune from pursuit or extradition. A community within a community soon developed, served and catered for by its own micro-economy of rogue tradesmen. The existence of this unruly free-for-all within their town was intolerable to the Corporation, and they eventually persuaded Queen Elizabeth I to grant them the power to maintain law, order, and trading standards in the area. But the status of the land remained as belonging to Northumberland for some centuries to come.

The long-standing rival claims to this pocket of land were brought to an end by the Moot Hall Building Act of 1809, and the purchase of the Castle's lease by the Corporation in 1812. As a result of these events, the Keep and most of the Garth became the property of the town, whilst only the site of the new Moot Hall and its courtyard remained assigned to Northumberland – its status remaining a municipal anomaly. From 1935 this tiny remaining portion of Northumberland became known as the Rural District of Newcastle upon Tyne, until the whole long business was finally brought to an end by the Local Government Act of 1974 and the creation of the new county of Tyne and Wear. One presumes that since the Tyne and Wear County Council were abolished in 1984 Northumberland have not asked for their 'island' back, but to this day, the gold and red striped shield of the old northern county is displayed on the Moot Hall railings as well as above the doorway of the old Northumberland County Hall (now the Vermont Hotel) adjacent to it.

Within the Keep itself can be found a number of curios and relics of the town's history. It is a relatively unfrequented building, considering its great antiquity. The garrison room on the ground floor contains two stone effigies of warriors who once stood as dumb sentinels on the town wall. Here are also carved representations of the Royal Arms of England (1340 to 1405 version) and an early version of the town's own coat of arms from the medieval Tyne bridge which spanned the river until 1771. Another relic of the old bridge here is the Blue Stone, which was set into the roadway across the river, two-thirds of the way nearer to the Gateshead side. This marked Newcastle's superior claim to jurisdiction over the bridge, and also the boundary of the political and civil influence of the Diocese of Durham. Worn smooth by the feet and



The Castle from the Moot Hall, completed 1812. The old houses of Castle Garth can be seen to the right.

hooves of generations, this stone has been trodden by kings and invading armies, and was once a great symbol of the town's status.

Higher up in the Keep, the name "RALPP" (sic) is carved into the surrounding stonework of a south-facing window, seemingly bearing witness to the fact that graffiti is nothing new. Another curiosity is an unfinished stair of 15 steps within the thickness of the outer wall on the second floor. This abandoned attempt at home-improvement, which comes to an abrupt halt blocked by solid masonry, is attributed to an interruption to the rebuilding programme of 1174, caused by the invasion by William the Lion of Scotland.

The climb to the top of the Keep is well worthwhile, as it affords a fine view of the river and Quayside to the south, and the inner city roofscape to the north. It is worth noting here that the Keep is one of only three castles of medieval Northumberland built on the north bank of a river. Normal practice at that time would have been to build on the south side, thereby using the river as a defence against attack from Scotland – the principal danger to the north. However, in the case of Newcastle on the Tyne, Bothal on the Wansbeck, and Berwick on the Tweed, the Castles' function was to guard important bridgeheads which enabled the English king to strike as far north as possible. This strategy was a key factor in Newcastle's history, which would have been very different indeed if the Conqueror's territorial ambitions had stopped where the Romans' had.

To the south side of the garth, substantial remains of the Castle's inner curtain wall can be found behind the Bridge Hotel. Here is a short stretch of the wall that runs from the High Level Bridge to the Moot Hall. Now much reduced in height, the wall itself serves only as a pleasant addition to the pub's beer garden on sunny afternoons. At the Moot Hall end at the head of Castle Stairs, more detailed remains survive, including a well, covered by an iron grille, and a medieval gateway with early 19th century carved stonework in the classical style added to make the ruins fit in better when the nearby wall was built.

Being higher than the surrounding areas to the south and east, the Garth is well served by stairways providing ancient shortcuts to the streets below. These include Castle Stairs leading from the Moot Hall gates down to the Quayside, and Dog Leap Stairs leading from the back of the Keep to The Side. When walking down Castle Stairs, to the left and right can be seen pockets of lawn and greenery – these are the remains of the small gardens or 'burgage' plots which lay up the hill behind the tall merchants' houses fronting onto The Close below. The Bridge Hotel, which faces the Keep across the square, is a fine example of early twentieth century pub architecture.

Newcastle has no shortage of old pubs, but the Bridge deserves a mention because of a special visitor it once played host to. During 1933, the playwright J.B. Priestley was touring the country researching his documentary book *English Journey*. Upon arrival in Newcastle, he was taken by a local friend to the Bridge, where in those days Newcastle's People's Theatre sometimes used to rehearse in the upstairs room overlooking the square. Priestley wrote:

"In the shadow of an enormous ebony bridge, which looked as if it stretched into the outer spaces of the universe, we found a large but almost deserted pub. But vague noises came from upstairs, and I was steered in their direction. That was the rehearsal."

Priestley was obviously, like many before him, quite impressed by the structure of the High Level Bridge seen at close quarters. He went on to describe details of the rehearsal he saw, and then later a tram journey to Scotswood Road. He made one more comment about the pub:

"If you were writing a story about a large pub in Newcastle, you would never have the impudence to fill its first floor front room with people rehearsing a Greek drama. But there is no end to the impudent surprises and twists of reality."

Trust Newcastle to come up with such a surprise.



Well-hidden, Castle Stairs in 1924.