

WALLS, GATES, TOWERS, AND TURRETS

Though modern Newcastle may not have as much of its medieval walls surviving today as, say, York or Chester, there are nevertheless surprisingly substantial sections of them surviving, hidden away in and around the city centre. Leaving aside the Keep itself with its Inner Bailey wall and the Black Gate which feature in the Castle Garth section, the remains that concern us here are those of the town wall which surrounded the infant Newcastle from their construction during the reign of Henry III (1216-72) until their gradual demolition from the late 18th century onwards. As with all other large towns and cities, the need for protective walls during the turbulent Middle Ages was obvious. Typically, the Corporation of Newcastle did nothing by halves, and as late as 1540 one commentator was able to observe that the "strength and magnificence" of Newcastle's walls "... far passith all the waulles of the cities of England and most of the cities of Europe." By this time, the need for walls and fortifications in most towns had largely disappeared, but due to Newcastle's proximity to a still restless Scotland, they were wisely maintained for a lot longer than might be expected. The walls were strong enough to offer a brave defence during

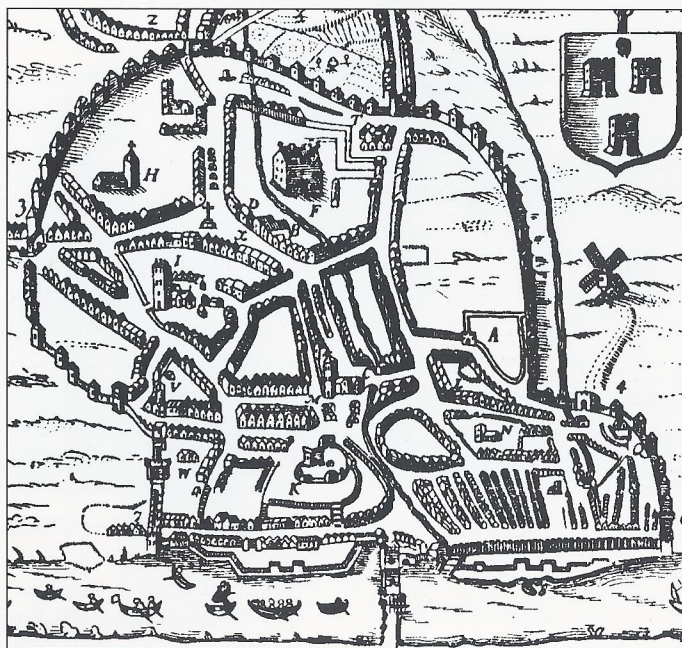
the Civil War, when the town was besieged by a Scottish army in 1644, and one Scots officer wrote of them: "The walles of Newcastle are a great deale stronger than those of Yorke, and not unlyke to the walles of Avignon, but especial-

ly of Jerusalem." These views of a military connoisseur were echoed by the historian William Gray, who recorded five years later in 1649 that: "In four things Newcastle excels; walls, gates, towers, and turrets."

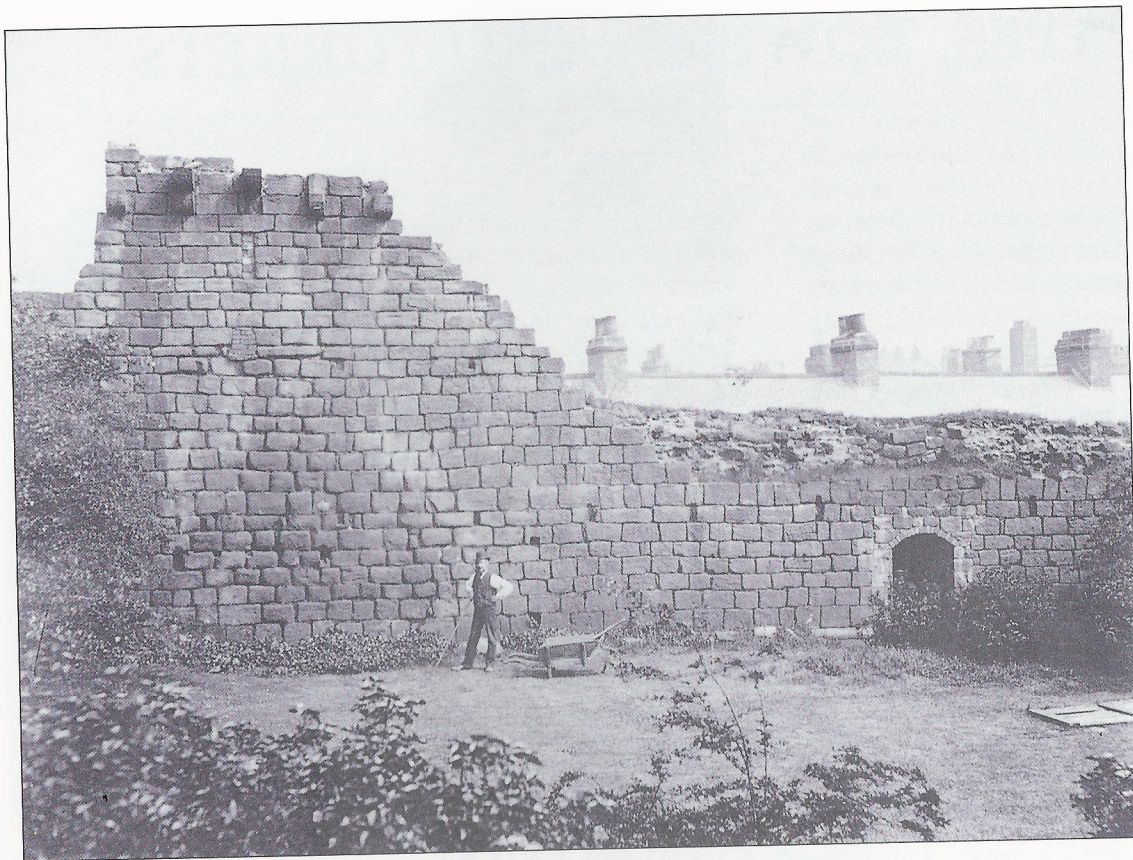
Even this was not yet the end of their defensive role. Newcastle is possibly unique in England, in that its medieval walls were still in use for their original defensive purpose as late as the 18th century. For, during the Scottish rebellion of 1745, the Methodist preacher John Wesley who was visiting the town wrote in his journal that "the walls were mounted with cannon and all things prepared for sustaining an assault ..."

But where war had failed, commerce succeeded, and by the

late 18th century the rapidly expanding town had outgrown the wall which had enrobed and nurtured it for so many years, and the increased traffic to and from the crowded streets necessitated the demolition of the narrow fortified gates – none of which survive now. The advent of the railway



A map dated 1610 showing the walls surrounding the town.



This imposing stretch of wall, photographed here in 1886 when it formed the edge of West Walls Bowling Green, can still be seen on Bath Lane. The houses to the rear were demolished long ago.

and Grainger's new town centre put paid to most of the rest in the 19th century. But while there may be no gates left, there are still walls, turrets, and a handful of towers to be sought out. The longest surviving stretch of wall is that known as West Walls which runs alongside Bath Lane, turns to run behind the numerous Chinese restaurants of Stowell Street, and then after a break at St Andrew's Street (formerly Darn Crook), runs down the side of St Andrew's churchyard with the Tyneside Irish Club building leaning directly onto it.

Along this stretch are the remains of the Andrew, Ever, Morden, and Heber Towers. By far the best preserved of these is the Morden Tower, which had an upper storey added by the Company of Plumbers, Glaziers, and Pewterers in 1700. The tower is still regularly in use today as a venue for poetry readings. Near this tower is the best surviving turret, with the remains of a passageway and a stair.

The tallest stretch of wall, which gives some idea of how high it must have been, is a restored section hidden away behind the Central Railway Station, which runs south towards the river parallel to Orchard Street. Then crossing over Hanover Square to the 'Hanging Gardens' overlooking the river, the remains of the wall fall steeply down the bank to the Quayside where the Copthorne Hotel now stands. It is easy to see why this section was called Breakneck Stairs. Over to the east

city centre, the walls have almost totally gone, but three solitary towers survive, two of them with interesting 18th century modifications.

In Croft Street – a quiet backwater not far from Worswick Street bus station – stands the Plummer Tower. Originally semicircular in plan with the curve projecting out to the east, the structure was remodelled by the Company of Masons as a meeting hall in 1740. As would be expected, the master craftsmen made a very stylish and elegant addition to

the medieval base in the shape of a two-storey palladian frontage onto Croft Street, topped by a slate roof. There is also a small brick cottage added to the side – unfortunately, both are unused.

Further east in Tower Street, leading off Melbourne Street, is the Wall Knoll or Sallyport Tower. This building was very imposingly developed from what had been a minor gateway by the Ship's Carpenters Company in 1716. The substantial upper storey which they added has two tall windows looking down Tower Street, and on the other side three overlook the river. The pitched tile roof has ornate turrets at each corner topped with pyramids and orbs. At the side of the upper floor facing City Road, there is an 18th century doorway which has a stone plaque above the lintel portraying a ship's hull. Incidentally, the name 'Sallyport' refers to a breach in the wall which was made during the Civil War siege, the scene of much bloody fighting. Needless to say, the ghost of a cavalier is said to haunt the long-deserted tower.

The third surviving tower is an untouched medieval ruin which stands largely unnoticed near where City Road and Melbourne Street converge just before the Swan House roundabout. Overlooking Broad Chare and the Quayside, there is a beautiful view of the tree-lined hill upon which All Saints Church stands. In its day there would also have been a view of the Pandon Burn (now covered) as it flowed through its dene. As the name suggests, the Corner Tower is formed by two turrets meeting at right-angles to each other, and it was at this point in the 14th century that the wall was turned outward to the east to enclose the newly-acquired suburb of



Sallyport or Carpenters' Tower in 1879-80. The streets below are long vanished.

Pandon. The ruins are quite tall and are still impressively imposing when viewed from the pleasant walks below. The details include several window spaces, an arrow firing slit, a doorway, and a parapet walkway and passage. At the foot of the wall, Croft Stairs follow a delightful tree lined route down to the foot of Dog Bank and to Broad Chare.