

The Origins of Penrith Castle

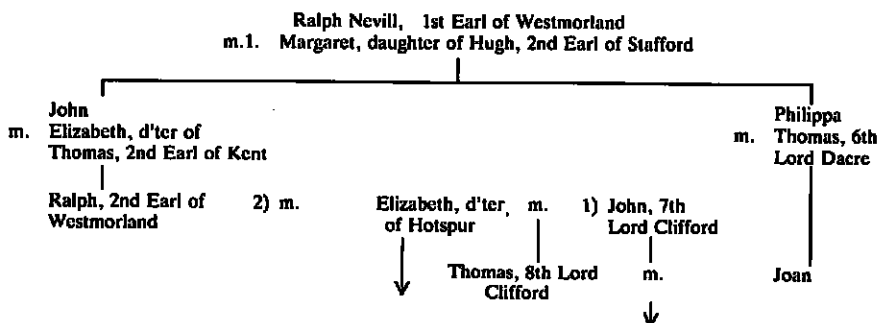
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BRIEF REFERENCE WAS MADE to the uncertain origins of Penrith Castle in an earlier article in *The Ricardian*.¹ The following contribution by Mark Craster-Chambers on the castle while in the possession of Richard as Duke of Gloucester and then as King, therefore provides a good reason for reviewing our thoughts on this matter.

Opinion has been divided. The great historian of the area, J. F. Curwen, believed that the castle held by the Nevills grew out of the house fortified by William Strickland who was Bishop of Carlisle from 1400 to 1419.² Curwen's contemporary, M. W. Taylor was of the same view, adding that there was a local tradition that a vanished tower within the castle had been known as the 'bishop's tower', and that hence the castle was developed around this by the first Nevill who held Penrith, who was Ralph, first Earl of Westmorland who died in 1425.³ Both of these historians knew of one or more licences to crenellate relating to Penrith and not unnaturally connected these with the ruins we see today. More recently however, Dr. Storey cast doubt on this by showing that the survey of Westmorland's lands in 1425 contained no mention of a castle and that consequently it must have been built by his successor, Salisbury.⁴ In these circumstances, it appears to be worth looking at the evidence once more.

There are three licences to crenellate relating to Penrith. The first was given on 10 April 1346 'for the good men of Penrith to crenellate their town', so need detain us no further. The second one, given on 12 February 1397, was 'for William Stirkeland, clerk, to crenellate his chamber in Penrith', and the third one, dated 2 April 1399 was also for Strickland 'to whom the king lately granted licence to crenellate with stone and lime a chamber in Penrith . . . to make a mantlet of stone and lime, join it to the said chamber and crenellate the same and so hold it for ever, in aid and succour of the said town and adjacent country.'⁵ Clearly then, between 1397 and 1399, Strickland was

The Senior Nevills and the Cliffords



involved in building some sort of tower and courtyard typical of the time and the place.

By 1397, Ralph Nevill, Earl of Westmorland had been granted the town and manor of Penrith. The initial grant, for life, was made on 29 November 1396 and was then converted, on 7 October 1397 to a grant in tail male.⁶ It is apparent then, that Strickland's work had nothing to do with the Nevill lordship at this time. Based on Dr. Storey's observation, we can also accept that this was still the case in 1425 and that no Nevill castle had been built by then. The first Earl of Westmorland would not have had any compelling reason to erect a castle in Penrith: he would probably not have needed a castle there for residential or administrative reasons and as his rights there were not in doubt, there were no military reasons either. After his death however, these circumstances changed. Possession of the manor and town passed to his widow, Joan, who later granted them to their eldest son, the Earl of Salisbury. While their right to Penrith was unquestionable, it is to be remembered that till 1443, they were in dispute over the Nevill patrimony with the senior house of Nevill headed by the second Earl of Westmorland. Dr. Storey saw Penrith Castle, not as a work inspired by fear of the Scots, but rather prompted by a desire to consolidate a power base against local rival magnate factions. Although Storey may perhaps have been thinking principally of the Percies, Cliffords and Dacres, it is tempting to conclude that Joan and Salisbury were more anxious about the new Earl of Westmorland and his brothers. In this connection it is worth considering that at this time, Westmorland was married to Hotspur's daughter, the widow of the seventh

Lord Clifford, through whom it seems he had temporary custody of a large slice of the Clifford estates.⁷ As if to underscore this link, Westmorland's stepson, the eighth Lord Clifford, was married to Joan Dacre, his aunt's daughter, as shown on the family tree. Of course Penrith was very much a Clifford area: their sizeable stronghold of Brougham lay only a couple of miles away on the river Eamont. Westmorland then, probably had the use of a base from which to threaten Penrith, and as we know he raided certain of the half blood's lands, it is feasible that Penrith was in fact assaulted. This situation would certainly merit erecting a castle in Penrith, just as Salisbury's brothers also built castles at Snape and Crayke in the North Riding.⁸ This theory fits in neatly with the first mention of Penrith Castle which was in 1437 on the occasion of the formal grant of the town and manor from Countess Joan to Salisbury.⁹

This is all very well, but unhappily it does not tell us whether Salisbury's work at Penrith was wholly new work on a fresh site, or whether he simply utilised Strickland's works as the core of his building. It would be helpful to know what Strickland's will contained, but unless further evidence comes to light, then historically at least, the origins of the castle must remain in doubt.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. J. Petre, *The Nevills of Brancepeth and Raby 1425-1499. Part I 1425-1469: Nevill v Nevill, The Ricardian*, vol. 5, no. 75, (December 1981), pp.424, 433 note 50.
2. J. F. Curwen, *The Castles . . . of Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire . . . , Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (CWAAS), Extra Series*, vol. 13, (1913), pp.219-220.
3. M. W. Taylor, *The Old Manorial Halls of Westmorland and Cumberland, CWAAS, Extra Series*, vol. 8, (1892), pp.250-251.
4. R. L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster*, (London 1966), p.116.
5. *CPR 1345-48*, p.69; *CPR 1396-99*, pp.66, 524.
6. *CPR 1396-99*, pp.39, 267.
7. J. Petre, *op. cit.* pp.423 and 432, note 36.
8. Of course Crayke was technically an enclave of the see of Durham within the North Riding.
9. J. Petre, *op. cit.*, Part II, 1470-1499: Recovery and Collapse, *The Ricardian*, vol. 6, no. 76, (March 1982), p.11; R. L. Storey, *loc. cit.*