

Wraysholme Tower, the building
How old is it?



Wraysholme Tower April 2017 Pat Rowland

Stockdale ¹ described the building and suggests that ‘the tower is all that remains of premises once more extensive.’ He refers to Arnside Tower, Hazelslack Tower, Dallam Tower, Pile (Piel) Castle, Gleaston Castle, Millom (Millom) Castle and Broughton Tower and writes that they have ‘no doubt, been built as places of defense and protection from the attacks and invasions of enemies approaching from the Irish Sea.’ He refers to the Romans appointing an officer, the Count of the Saxon Shore, whose task it was to protect the coasts of Britain and Gaul from the attack of Saxon pirates. He points out that the current building at Wraysholme and the other Towers were not built in Roman times but suggests that the original building ‘may have existed six or seven hundred years, and might have been built not long after William Marshall the Elder, Earl of Pembroke, founded the Priory of St Mary, at Cartmel (in 1188), as a defense for the Priory...’

This theory is adopted by Croston whose book was published in 1882.² He stated that ‘According to tradition the Pele Tower was erected in the 12th century by William Marshal 1st Earl of Pembroke and that it was built on the site of a Danish strong hold by the Harrington’s of Aldingham.’

It is interesting that Stockdale and Croston thought the Tower was related to the Priory and that it was a place to protect the treasures of the Monastery when

there was a threat of invasion. However moving treasures towards the sea from where the invaders would probably attack at that time seems a dangerous activity. However there is only one record of an incursion from the sea. In 1322 Robert Bruce and his army came south from Scotland around the coast of Cumberland and Lancashire to reach the over sands route and the southern areas of Lancaster and Preston. The over sands routes pass close to Wraysholme and Arnside Towers.

Curwen ³ in 1913 gives the building date as 1485. He refers to Roper's Castles of North Lancashire (1880) and Stockdales Annals of Cartmel (1872). Most subsequent writers have adopted this date. ⁴

Two sides of a door, the original entrance, is 14th century. ⁵ A 1976 description⁶ of the Tower states that two trefoil-headed lights are 15th century. Therefore the base is older than the tracery. Was the upper part rebuilt or refurbished in the 15th century?



Both sides of the 14th century entrance door. April 2017 Pat Rowland



The remains of tracery above two windows. April 2017 Pat Rowland

There are no floors inside the tower now and it is used as a farm machinery store. An arched fireplace in the west wall can be seen to the right of the doorway. This suggests that there once was living accommodation at the top of the tower.



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Two views of the spiral stone staircase inside the southwest turret that gave access to the upper floors and roof.



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The view from the top of the Tower towards Humphrey Head



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The view from the roof of the Tower today shows the reclaimed land between the site and the coast. In the past it was marshy land. A wide view of the bay would have been possible from the top of the Tower.

A ring of Pele Towers or fortified buildings exists around the Kent Estuary. An article published in 1936 ⁷ about the Port of Milnthorpe considers that the Port in the 14th and 15th century was important as it was guarded by the numerous pele towers and fortified houses. The Towers are listed as Wraysholme Tower on the north and Arnside Tower on the south coast. Further up the estuary were Hazelslack Tower and on the River Bela at Milnthorpe the now vanished Dallam Tower. Protecting access to the Kent Valley and Kendal were Beetham and Heversham Halls, Over and Nether Levens and Sizergh Castle. Were pirate raids another threat? In 1565 commissioners were first appointed to superintend all ports, creeks and landing places throughout the realm but this was more directed against the loss of revenue from smuggling.

However the first reference in documents to Arnside Tower was in 1517.⁸ The architectural evidence in the remains of Arnside, Hazelslack and Wraysholme Towers suggest late 15th century buildings. What we see today are probably rebuilt fortifications.

An ancient monument of national importance

The Tower's importance was first recognized in the early 20th century when it was protected by The Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act of 1913 which introducing scheduling of ancient monuments.

Extract from Historic England's site about the most current listing

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1007154> accessed 16 Jan 2021.

This monument is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 as amended as it appears to the Secretary of State to be of national importance.

Reasons for Designation

Tower houses, including pele towers, are a type of defensible house particularly characteristic of the borderlands of England and Scotland. Virtually every parish had at least one of these buildings. Solitary tower houses comprise a single square or rectangular 'keep' several storeys high, with strong barrel-vaults tying together massive outer walls. Many towers had stone slab roofs, often with a parapet walk. Access could be gained through a ground floor entrance or at first floor level where a doorway would lead directly to a first floor hall. Solitary towers were normally accompanied by a small outer enclosure defined by a timber or stone wall and called a barmkin. Tower houses were being constructed and used from at least the 13th century to the end of the 16th century. They provided prestigious defended houses permanently occupied by the wealthier and aristocratic members of society. As such, they were important centres of medieval life. The need for such secure buildings relates to the unsettled and frequently war-like conditions which prevailed in the Borders throughout much of the medieval period. Around 200 examples of tower houses have been identified of which less than half are of the free - standing or solitary tower type. All surviving solitary towers retaining significant medieval remains will normally be identified as nationally important.

Wraysholme Tower is reasonably well preserved as an upstanding building and is representative of its period and region. As the tower was never reused as a domestic dwelling a significant number of its original architectural features survive. The monument provides insight into the character of fortified residences in the borders region during the later medieval and earlier post-medieval periods and will contain archaeological deposits relating to its construction, use and abandonment.

Details

This record was the subject of a minor enhancement on 24 March 2016. This record has been generated from an "old county number" (OCN) scheduling

record. These are monuments that were not reviewed under the Monuments Protection Programme and are some of our oldest designation records.

The monument includes the remains of a pele tower of 15th century date, situated at the end of a slight rise on low lying ground. The tower is sub-rectangular in plan, is built from limestone rubble with dressed quoins and stands to three storeys with a slight projecting parapet corbelled out from the 1.2m thick main wall. The tower has three corner turrets with a staircase and projecting garderobe turret at the south west corner and a projection contained small chambers rising the full height of the tower at the south east corner. Inside the tower are fireplaces at each floor level, one of which has a flat Tudor-style lintel. There are a number of original windows with two lights and trefoil cusped heads as well as a number of square lights with chamfered surrounds. The original entrance to the tower was through a pointed arch on the north end of the west wall. Documentary records indicate that the tower was built at the end of the 15th century. The tower is a listed building Grade II*.

Unfortunately no reference is given to the documentary records referred to in the last sentence.

Was there a settlement before the Tower?

An article in the Kendal Mercury dated 22 July 1848 in a series titled A Guide to Grange states that Wraysholme Tower and Winder Hall formerly guarded this area of Morecambe Bay. It gives a history of the Harringtons and speculates that Wraysholme continued as their chief abode at the time of their greatest prosperity. The article tells the imagined Story of Wraysholme, a tale about an invasion by the Danes in Saxon times, Welthrid as the occupier of Wraysholme and Rothwulf a retainer who lived at The Wyke told by Rachel of Holywell and written down by a venerable-looking, aged gentleman and extracted by the unnamed writer of the article.

Wraysholme was described as ‘an extensive building of one storey, and divided into a number of compartments, the chiefest occupied for the accommodation of the master of the house and his personal attendants - the other appropriated to cattle-herdsmen, and bondsmen and their families. A deep marsh drain, like a fosse, had been constructed all around these dwellings, with the exception of one side, where there was a rude but elevated building which served, not only as a watchtower, but also as a place of defense. Being of stone, it could not be burned as easily as the thatched abode surrounding it. Within the ditch, a crossing place – we can scarcely call it a bridge – has been made of undressed trunks of trees, boughs and rushes, sufficiently firm for the passage of cattle and horses, but which a bill-hook, or a hatchet, could, in a very short time destroy. The whole settlement appeared of recent construction, and such it was, for scarcely 20 years had elapsed since the Danish Rovers had leveled the former dwelling of Welthrid to the ground.’

The tale of Danish invasion and the battle of Wraysholme Tower continued in editions published on 29 July and concluded on 5 August 1848.

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References

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6. McDowall, RW with plans by Black, D W. 1976 *Wraysholme Tower (CWAAS Transactions)*

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8. McIntire, W T. 1937 *Arnside (CWAAS Transactions) p130-146*