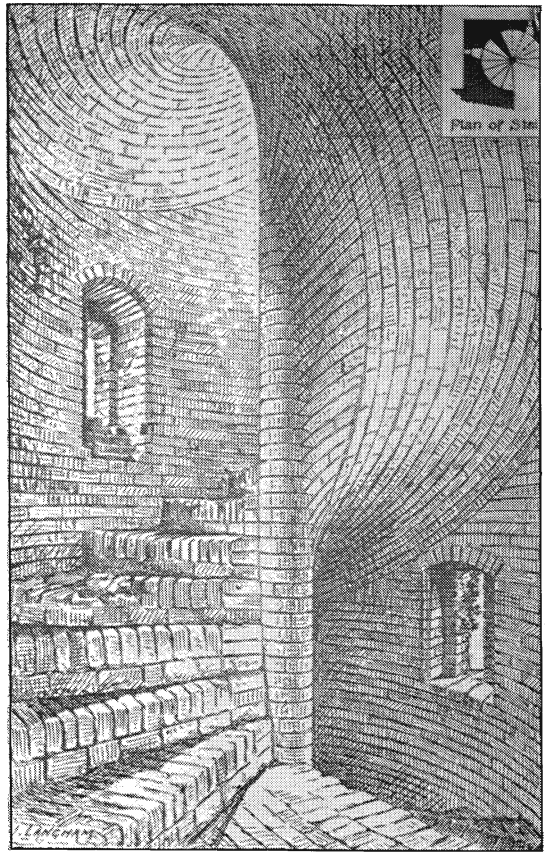
Kirby Muxloe Castle,
N.W. angle Tower.

To face page 109. Photo by Mrs. F. HEWITT.



Kirby Muxloe Castle,
Brick Spiral Staircase in corner Tower.

From a Drawing by J. LANGHAM, ESQ.

KIRBY MUXLOE CASTLE.

The work of repairing and clearing this fine building has gained greatly in interest by the discovery among the Hastings papers at Ashby-de-la-Zouch of the original building accounts from 1481 to 1484. This discovery makes it possible to date quite accurately certain parts of the Castle, and it also reveals the fact that it was not the first building on this site. Parts of the older house, particularly the Great Hall, were merely repaired by Lord Hastings, and to the older house doubtless belong some of the foundations which have been exposed in the course of the work within the Castle enclosure.

The moat surrounding the Castle has partly silted up and partly been filled with rubbish, and the clearing of its western arm, on the main front of the building, has been carried through, and that of the southern arm begun. In front of the gatehouse the remains of the wooden bridge across the moat have been uncovered, as well as the pit for the drawbridge, which extends into the gateway passage.

The moat was about 63ft. wide, with a sloping bank and no retaining wall on the outer edge, and the supports of the bridge, of which four have been discovered, were set at intervals of 10ft. from each other.

It was hoped that in the clearing of the moat a good supply of old bricks would be found, to be used in pinning up the old walls where needed, but very few came to light, and except for a few coping stones from the parapets nothing of importance was found here. The moat was originally filled with water from the brook on the west; a masonry dam, of which only the base course now remains, having been built across the brook at the point about due south of the Castle. From above this dam a channel led to a sluice at the south-east corner of the moat, and at the north-east of the Castle a second sluice provided an overflow to the brook, regulating the depth of the moat.

The gatehouse and southwest tower are the only parts of the Castle which still rise to any height above the ground level within the walls, but these, though roofless, were on the whole in good order, thanks to the excellence of their masonry. While the mortar on the outer faces of the walls had decayed in places, that in the core was so sound that no grouting was necessary, and in several places wide openings had been cut through the walls without bringing down any of the overhanging brickwork. The

tower and gatehouse were covered with ivy, and on the tops of the ruined walls elsewhere in the Castle large trees had taken root, dislocating the brickwork in all directions. The owner of the Castle, Major Richard Winstanley, whose consistent and valuable help the Board of Works very gladly acknowledges, allowed all these trees to be removed, and gave much of their timber for use on the site in fencing the line of the moat.

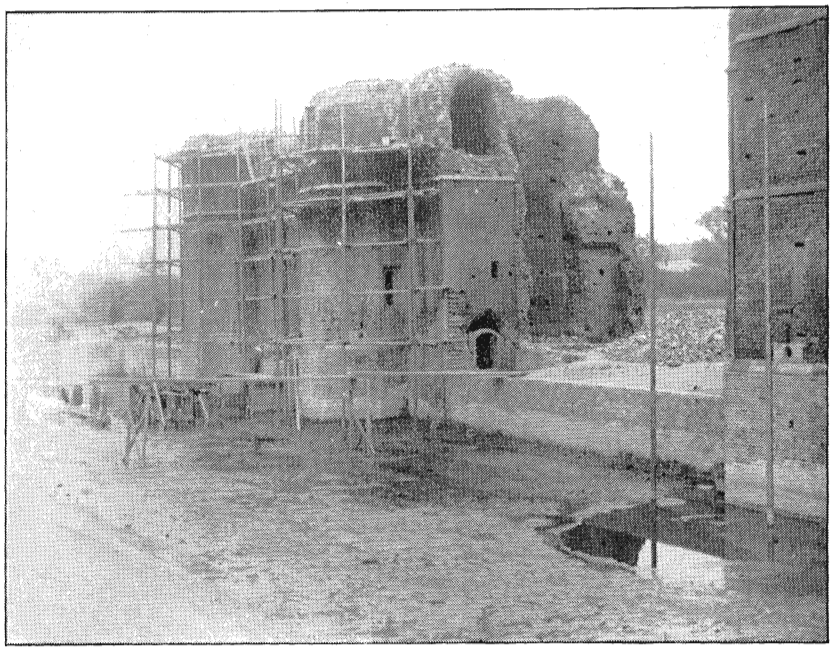
The chief damage to the brickwork was on the line of the water level of the moat, the facework for a depth of some 5ft. being split away and hollowed out, but the lowest 3ft. of the walls, having been always below water, were perfectly preserved. In the upper parts of the walls many bricks which looked quite sound on the face were found to be split vertically, so that the faces were loose and ready to fall. It was however found possible here to refix the loose parts by an adhesive, which it is hoped will be permanent. The bricks at the water level were too far gone for such treatment, and old bricks were obtained in the neighbourhood to fill in the hollows in the walls and catch up the overhanging masonry.

The foundations were examined, and fortunately proved to be sound. The lowest footing is of stone, 12in. high, and laid at about 3ft. below the level of the bottom of the moat.

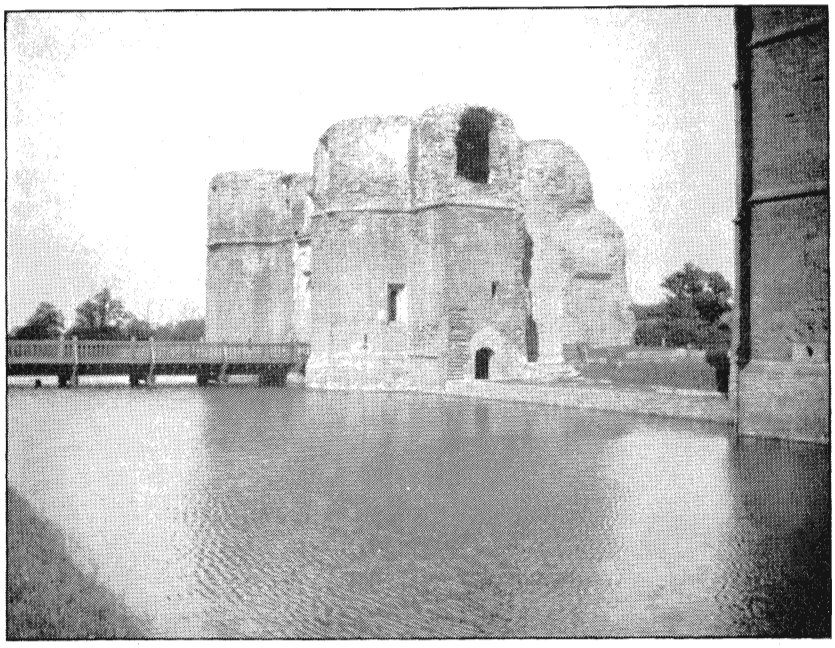
The masonry of the south-west and south angles of the tower was in a dangerous condition, much of it having fallen away, while the facing on either side threatened to do the same. This was secured by rebuilding the angles and bonding to the old core, and the parapets, especially at the south-west, were at the same time carefully secured and grouted. On the south-east of the tower is a series of garderobes, whose shafts doubtless weaken the wall at this point, and a crack which had formed in the upper part was bonded across and grouted in cement. A curious feature here and in the gatehouse is a ventilating shaft, if such it be, from the garderobe pits, carried up right through the parapets. The brick vaults of the rooms in the garderobe turrets were very wet, they were built with four courses of bricks laid flat over the crown of the vault, and to waterproof them the two upper courses of flat brick were lifted and bedded on a layer of Portland cement and Medusa, and then pointed in the same material.

In the gatehouse, the brick vaults over the chambers flanking the entrance passage were similarly waterproofed, but here a 3in. layer of concrete was found to have been laid over the vaults.

In clearing the moat the drawbridge pit was discovered, as already mentioned, and in the basements of the turrets flanking the entrance were found gunports like those in other parts of the Castle. But these must always have been below the water except when the moat was empty, and their construction must have been



Kirby Muxloe Castle.
The Gatehouse in progress of restoration.



Kirby Muxloe Castle.
The Gatehouse, shewing moat filled after excavation.

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Photos by Mrs. F. Hewitt.

due to some mistake in the levelling. They are blocked up, and the basement which they should have served is filled with earth, and has doubtless always been so.

The remains of the north-west tower were cleared, and were found to correspond in plan with the south-west tower, the lowest courses of the circular staircase being in position.

Within the courtyard some of the lines of the ruined buildings have been followed, but the completion of this work must await the final levelling of the site.

The foregoing account is substantially that presented by Mr. C. R. Peers, F.S.A., Inspector of Ancient Monuments, in his Report for the year ending March 31st, 1913. To it may be added a less formal description of the work which appeared in *The Times* for September 5th, 1913, and which the courtesy of the Editor permits us to reprint. It adds some additional details, and its literary merit makes it desirable that it should be preserved among our records.

Among the pastures five miles from Leicester, by the side of a little stream which served to fill an ancient moat, stand the remains of the rectangular brick castle of Kirby Muxloe. All that is left above ground is the gate-house and a massive south-western tower; but since the castle was entrusted by the owner, Major Winstanley, to the Office of Works much has been done to clear the site and display the character of the building, which is singularly interesting from many points of view. It was built by William Lord Hastings towards the close of the 14th century, about the same time as his other house of Ashby-de-la-Zouch; but the castles of Kirby and Ashby show a marked difference in design. Ashby is irregular in outline, and may have been an enlargement of a previous dwelling of less importance; but this castle at Kirby seems to have been built all at the same time, and the ground plan, which can be traced by the foundations, is conspicuously symmetrical. The gate-house fronts the west, and at the north-west angle of the moat stood a massive brick tower of the same design as its surviving south-western fellow. At the other two corners stood a smaller pair of towers; and on each side and at the back there was a central tower, corresponding to the gate-house in front. The only exception to the general regularity is that the tower on the eastern wall stood not quite in the midst, and therefore does not exactly face the gate. Possibly the reason for this may be discovered when the interior foundations are more fully laid bare and explained. But it is clear that the new house of Kirby Muxloe must have worn an unusual appearance to the 14th century eye when the heraldic designs in its brickwork first gleamed brand new across the moat. In the 15th century, under French and Italian influence, great houses of

symmetrical design became more general; but with an open field before them Lord Hastings and his builders seem to have evolved the principles of order and balance for themselves.

Kirby Muxloe is even more interesting as an example of the transition from the true castle to the fortified country residence. The Wars of the Roses were over when it was built, and great feudal strongholds were giving way to country houses capable of withstanding a moderate assault, but not intended to play the part of fortresses. For its late date, Kirby is designed with unusual strength. The moat is wide, and was crossed by a drawbridge, of which the chamber for the weight and swing has been recently laid bare. Besides arrowslits of the old design, the bastions of the gatehouse and the great south-western tower are provided with several pairs of gun-ports. One curious feature of the gatehouse bastions is that gun-ports are visible on the outside some feet below the water level in the moat. These have been bricked up, the work being apparently of the same date as the walls. It is clear that they could not have been used when the moat was filled, and their presence can only be explained as due to a mistake of the builder. The brick walls are themselves of remarkable strength. At one time or another large openings have been hacked in them, in order to use the inner space as farm sheds; and though no supports were inserted to hold up the rudely treated masonry, the walls have not been fractured to any important extent. The chief damage to the surviving portions is due to the disintegration of the surface of the brick under wind and weather, especially on the upper courses of the south-western tower. Like much 15th century brick, it is of very imperfect manufacture, though its softness adds greatly to the attraction of its weathered surface. Large pebbles were freely included in the bricks, which under any thorough firing would have been split and destroyed by them. They have greatly weathered and crumbled, and some have now decayed into what is indistinguishable from brown soil. On the face of the towers the hard face of many bricks was found to be a mere skin over a softer body, from which the face would come away at a tap. In order to consolidate the surface of the walls and to preserve their old appearance these hard faces were removed and refixed with an adhesive which has given excellent results. Old bricks have been used where additions were necessary, and care was taken in facing to make the colours match.

Mention has been made of the brickwork patterns with which the wall of the front of the castle is decorated. Among them, over the gateway, stand the initials W. H.—for William Hastings—and some curious sprawling designs notched and pulled askew by the necessity of representing curved figures in rectangular brickwork. Some of them appear to represent the sleeve of the Hastings coat-of-arms and the figure of a man. They are traced in dark brick, which is also used to ornament a large part of the

walls with a diaper pattern. In restoring the face of the wall where the external layer has perished, the course of this pattern can usually be followed by the ends of the cross-laid bricks, or 'headers,' which remain in the course next inside; and the pattern has in all cases been made good. These patterns form a not unpleasing superficial ornament, especially now that age has softened and mellowed their tones; but the greatest attraction of the brickwork lies in the skill and solidity with which it has been utilized in the barrel roof of the guard-chambers at the side of the gate and in the spiral steps and vaulting of the staircases in the towers. For the plane designs of the castle front bricks provide poor material; but it is fascinating to see the smoothness and accuracy with which they are moulded into the sinuous curves of these inner stairways. The great tower has also some fine brick chimney stacks and fireplaces of fine design.

When the repair of the castle was taken in hand by the Office of Works ivy with stems of immense thickness loaded part of the walls, while large trees had twisted their roots into the foundations and along the top of the masonry. The site was rich in that spurious picturesqueness which conceals ancient architecture and destroys it. The work of removing the tree stumps has been exceptionally laborious; in one place a large root passed right through the wall, while in another an ash tree had worked its way completely round a loose brick, which was sawed through in felling the tree. Goats and occasionally cattle climbed the stairs and frolicked on the walls, on which the growth of wood was so thick that a cow once fell to the ground from the first storey of the gate-house uninjured. When the last of the roots is removed the masonry will be finally safeguarded against the wedge-like action of growing timber. Rain soaked constantly through the vaulted roofs of the chambers in the tower and gate-house; and this has been prevented by inserting a layer of cement beneath the upper two courses of bricks and then replacing them. Here, too, the disruptive effect of ivy was manifest in the loosened courses of brick, which showed that the castle was paying dearly for its picturesque mantle.

An important part of the work of restoration is the excavation of part of the old moat. This had been filled up in front of the castle nearly to the level of the surrounding field, while on the opposite side a trickle of water runs past the foundations of the walls through a tangle of meadowsweet and sedges. The first excavations were made in order to look for any remains of the castle which had been buried by the accumulated soil. They were rewarded by the discovery of a number of oak piles forming the supports of the original bridge over the moat. The pit for the drawbridge, already mentioned, was unearthed at the same time. The piles are much decayed, and are being preserved by a coating of damp sacks until the water is once more let into the moat, when they will be visible evidence of the former method of entry. For

present use a smaller bridge of oak will be constructed in keeping with the general character of the gateway, which will be filled by an oak door partly built of the shattered relics of its predecessor. Subsequently the excavations were extended in order to allow the underpinning of the walls and towers where the facing had perished below ground level in the alternately wet and dry soil. The decayed inner wall of the moat is being built up to a short distance above water level, in masonry which is frankly modern, but is kept carefully in harmony with the surrounding work. No trace can be discovered of an outer moat wall; on the face of the new cutting the line of division can be clearly seen between the original marl of the field and the soil heaped upon it to raise the bank to the required level. A couple of hundred yards from the castle there is an intake of water from the little brook, and excavation has revealed a sluice skilfully constructed to hold up the water in the moat at the required level. There is a second sluice at the point where the leat runs into the moat, and a third where it runs out again to join the brook below. At present the moat is being restored on the front of the castle and on the south side, so as to form a setting for the noble south-west tower and the gate-house. When the warm brick walls once more reflect themselves in the water, with their details stripped clear of concealing verdure, it may be hoped that they will be at least as picturesque as when they were partly invisible, while they will certainly be in a state to give both the present and future generations a far better idea of the original 15th century dwelling.