



THE RUINS ASHBY-DE-LA-ZOUCH CASTLE

**ASHBY CASTLE**

**BY ANTHONY HERBERT, A.R.I.B.A.**

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The first historical note of Ashby occurs in the Domesday Survey of 1086, where it is set down as being held in chief by the great Norman feudatory, Hugh de Grantmesnil, to whom it was granted among the manors comprised in the honour of Leicester for his services during the Conquest and after. At this time Ashby had twenty villeins and a priest living upon the manor. It has been inferred from this reference to a priest that there must have been a church in the place, but of this there can be no certainty; there is no documentary evidence on the subject, and the present church was practically rebuilt in the sixteenth century, when nearly all traces of the earlier work were obliterated. (The earliest fragment remaining is a stone of undoubted twelfth-century date, built into the south face of the tower.)

Upon the death of Hugh de Grantmesnil, Ashby came into the possession of his son, Ivo de Grantmesnil, of whom, as one historian pithily comments, "no good is known". After the disgrace and death of Ivo, about the year 1100, the manor passed into the hands of Robert de Beaumeis, whose family seems to have already had some connection with the place. He was succeeded in 1130 by his son, Philip de Beaumeis. Philip died in 1160, leaving no male heir; his daughter, however, had married Alain de Porrhoet la Zouche, a descendant of Eudo, earl of Brittany. Alain thus became lord of the manor of Ashby, and gave to the town its present suffix of *la Zouche*.

From the architectural standpoint, it is important to bear in mind that a great many, if not most, of the manor houses of the early middle ages were, in some sort, fortified. The lords' houses of these early times, though much more substantial than the homes of the villeins, were extremely primitive from the point of view of planning as we know it, consisting, as they did, principally of one great room or hall, with a central hearth, in which the ordinary communal life of the manor was conducted. Any sleeping apartments and other domestic adjuncts were merely small, sometimes even detached, chambers arranged around the

great hall. The chief difference between an ordinary manor house and a castle was one of scale; a castle usually possessed outer baileys and a rampart, as well as a moat, a fact to be borne in mind when considering the growth and development of medieval fortified buildings.

The manor house of Ashby at the end of the thirteenth century probably consisted of the great hall, with its subsidiary buildings grouped about it, flanked on the north by a courtyard containing in its north side a gate tower or keep. To the south of the great hall there was probably another, or inner, courtyard. The whole establishment may have been surrounded by a moat.

To return to the history of Ashby, the Zouche family, beginning with Alain, continued (if one accepts William la Zouche, who was really Sir William Mortimer, a relative, but assumed the name and was created baron of Ashby in 1279) in unbroken succession until 1399, when Sir Hugh la Zouche died without male issue.

During the tenure of the Zouches, in about 1350, extensive alterations were carried out in the great hall. The wooden floor was removed, the undercroft was done away with, and stone arcades, supported on stone piers, were inserted to carry the roof in lieu of the original wooden posts. A screen and minstrels' gallery was also inserted at the west end of the hall, whilst doorways were pierced behind the screen leading to the north and south courtyards.

The estate now passed, through his cousin Joyce, to Sir Hugh Burnell, who held it by the Courtesy of England till his death in 1420. The next holder was the earl of Ormond, a strong supporter of the house of Lancaster. At the battle of Towton in 1460, the earl was taken prisoner and his estates forfeited to the Crown. In the following year, Edward IV granted Ashby to Sir William Hastings, and created him baron Hastings of Ashby-de-la-Zouche. Thus began the long and illustrious connection of the Hastings family with this place—a connection which has lasted until the present day. From 1461 onwards, the family of Hastings seem to have steadily increased in power, riches and magnificence; and on several occasions during the next hundred and fifty years they entertained their sovereign at the castle. By the beginning of the reign of James I, who stayed there himself, this great establishment had attained the zenith of its magnificence

and splendour, and the head of the family, the earl of Huntingdon, about the same time acquired also Donington Park, as an additional residence. (What that splendour was may be judged from some contemporary accounts which are left to us; these show that the annual household expenses reached the enormous figure, for those days, of nearly three thousand pounds).

Shortly after Hastings came into the possession of Ashby, the king issued Letters Patent authorising him to enclose lands in Ashby, Bagworth, Thornton and Kirby Muxloe, and to build houses in these places. The patent carried with it a licence to crenellate. At this time the buildings of Ashby probably consisted of the usual semi-fortified manor house of the period, which appears to have been somewhat out of repair. Hastings, however, took the place in hand and modernised it throughout. At the same time he built in the south wall of the inner courtyard the magnificent stone tower known as the Hastings Tower, or, though hardly correctly, the Keep. In reality it was a mansion built in the fashion of a castle. It is probable, too, that the group of buildings known as the Priest's Rooms were pulled down at this time.

The Hastings Tower is the glory of Ashby castle. It consists of a great rectangular structure of four storeys, rising originally to a height of some eighty-five feet with, adjoining it on the east side, another tower of similar height but comprising some seven storeys. Although immensely strong in construction and provided with a portcullis to the single narrow doorway, the Tower was not crenellated. The reason for this is to be found in the increasing use of gunpowder in warfare. (At Kirby Muxloe castle, which Hastings erected simultaneously with his work at Ashby, there are crenellations and embrasures for artillery; but if cannon had been discharged through them, the balls would, in many cases, have been received within the castle again through another wall. In point of fact, buildings by now were fortified far more for the sake of appearance than for any actual offensive or defensive purpose.)

By the time Ashby was granted to the Hastings family, there also existed the shell of the present chapel, which is notable by reason of its unusual size. It is probable, however, that the first baron carried out a certain amount of work in it, including the

insertion of new, traceried windows. A large twelve-light window was also inserted in the solar, which may at the same time have been enlarged.

Between the years 1475 and 1530, there does not seem to have been any important building activity at Ashby castle; but about the latter year the enormous kitchen tower was put in hand. At this time, too, the butteries and pantry were remodelled, and a subterranean passage was constructed to connect the Kitchen Tower and the Hastings Tower. Two porches also, were added to the doorways at the west end of the great hall, one on the north side and one on the south.

Early in the seventeenth century there seems to have been yet another period of building at Ashby. The great hall was again taken in hand, being entirely recased in new stonework. The stone arcades supporting the roof were removed, and the hall was re-roofed in a single span; the central hearth was displaced by a huge fireplace built in the south wall and having an external flue—a welcome alteration, one may imagine. A very fine carved fireplace was also inserted in the solar. Formal gardens by this time were becoming fashionable, and at Ashby two rather quaint brick garden towers were erected at the south-east and south-west angles of the castle gardens, which lay to the south of the castle.

The history and development of Ashby castle has now been briefly traced up to the period of the Civil War, and it would perhaps be well to recapitulate its architectural form at this, its final stage of development. Beginning at the main entrance to the castle on its north side, we come first of all to the keep, which must have been in the wall now forming the southern boundary of the churchyard, though no trace whatever remains to mark its exact position. Within the keep lay the north courtyard, and across this, and forming its southern boundary, was the main group of castle buildings some ninety yards in length. At the west end of this group lay the kitchen tower with the great hall to the east, separated by the pantry and butteries. To the east of this was the solar and, beyond, the chapel. To the south of the chapel lay a group of buildings supplanting the original Priests' Rooms demolished in 1464, and continuing south-west, the Hastings Tower. The latter two buildings, with their con-

necting wall which continued round to the kitchen tower enclosed the south courtyard. The whole castle within its enclosing walls embraced an area of about two acres. To the south of the castle proper lay the gardens with their two brick towers, comprising a further two acres in extent.

During the Civil War, Ashby castle was held by Henry Hastings, afterwards lord Loughborough, son of the then earl of Huntingdon. In order to obtain provisions for the garrison, which was augmented, from all accounts, by some unusually wild Irishmen who even had to be lodged at the distant Mount House fort, Hastings proceeded to plunder the country round him, occasionally, indeed, carrying his raids as far as Leicester. From his habit of making these forages he gained the nickname of Rob Carrier. An amusing story is told of the only occasion on which he ever tried to obtain supplies in Leicester itself. We are told that Hastings and some of his men entered the borough and quartered themselves at an inn in the Swinesmarket, now High Street, near the mansion called Lord's Place, because it was the town residence of the earls of Huntingdon, which formerly stood in the thoroughfare. The townspeople, however, becoming weary of his high-handed methods, showed more spirit than their neighbours of the country districts. They descended in a body on Hastings's men and, vigorously trouncing them, drove them out of the town. An interesting sidelight on the strictness and puritanical feeling amongst the Parliamentarians at this time is afforded by the story, current in their ranks, that the Royalist garrison at Ashby were so dissolute that they "drank and roared and swore and marvellously cozened each other" during the siege.

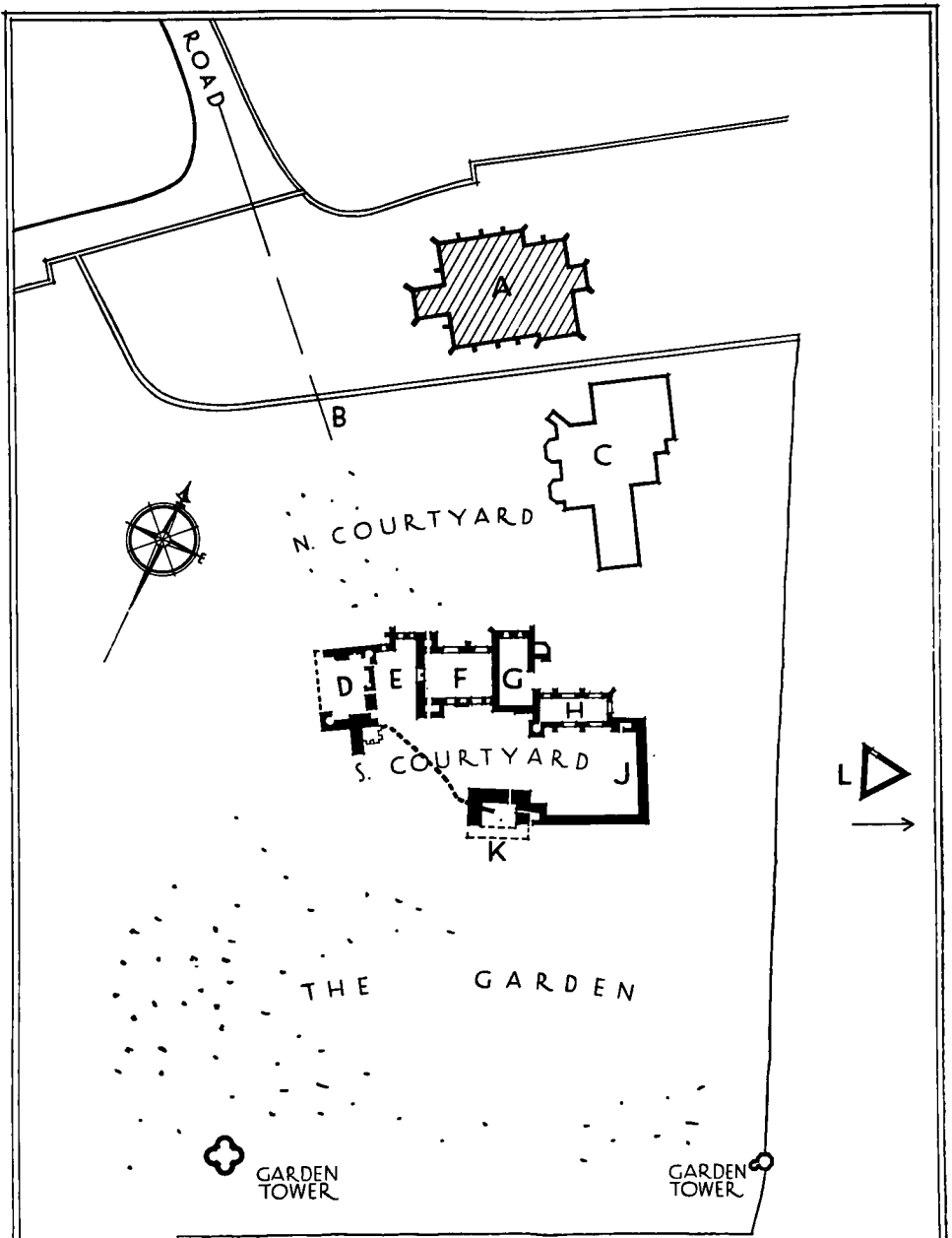
In spite of all his efforts, Henry Hastings in 1648, after an eight months' siege, had finally to surrender Ashby castle to the Parliamentarians. Shortly afterwards the castle was "slighted" and the family retired to Donington Park.

The slighting of the castle was entrusted to Hastings's bitter foe, lord Grey of Bradgate, who certainly carried out the duty with a will. The western walls of the Hastings Tower and the Kitchen Tower were undermined and completely blown out by heavy charges of gunpowder, and all the fortifications were destroyed.

During the Civil War, the earl of Huntingdon himself wished to remain neutral, and to this end, had early removed to another of his houses, Donington Park, that he might appear to have no part in the actions of his hotheaded son, Henry Hastings, at Ashby castle. (This fact is proved by several letters written by the earl from Donington.) In this attitude he was successful, and when Ashby had finally to surrender, the earl was not implicated.

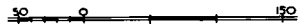
Many years later the Hastings family erected in the north-courtyard a large mansion known as Ashby Place, the residence of the celebrated Countess of Loudoun. In the eighteenth century this was largely demolished, and in the middle of the nineteenth century the present manor house was erected on part of the site.





REFERENCE

- A S. HELEN'S CHURCH
- B SITE OF POSSIBLE GATE-TOWER
- C ASHBY MANOR
- D KITCHEN TOWER
- E PANTRIES & BUTTERY
- F GREAT HALL
- G SOLAR
- H CHAPEL
- J SITE OF PRIESTS' ROOMS
- K HASTINGS TOWER
- L MOUNT HOUSE FORT



**ASHBY  
CASTLE**  
DIAGRAM PLAN