

A lonely gun hole ... (Oxford city wall)



Fig. 1. Oxford City wall, Bastion 11 exterior.



Fig. 2. Oxford City wall, bastion 11 - from the interior.

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Peter Purton

In preparing the CSG visit to the city walls of Oxford, preserved in the gardens of New College, during the 2019 annual conference, I noticed a gun loop in bastion 11 (using the numbering of the Royal Commission survey of 1939).¹ There is no reference in any of the published discussions of the city wall to this gun loop – the Commission itself did not distinguish it from the thirteenth century or reconstructed arrow loops it described - but everyone who saw it confirmed it was not an illusion! (Figs. 1, 2).

It is possible to suggest a date and rationale, but not to explain it, unless others existed in bastions which have disappeared or been significantly rebuilt, apart from those in the long-term care of New College, whose founder was bishop of Winchester, William of Wykeham, and this connection leads to

one hypothesis. If it is correct, the gun port here can also be connected with similar constructions at a number of castles in southern England, as well as the major rebuilding done at Canterbury at the same time, which also creates a link with the best-known late medieval English master builder, Henry Yevele.

The walls of Oxford were rebuilt in stone under Henry III, confirmed by both documentary evidence and the building style. Construction took place over years, with additional repairs later in the century, which may explain the unique (in England) concentric outer lower wall possibly from Edward I's reign. There followed a long period of neglect and the walls decayed, and the context for the possible date of the gun loop is the time of insecurity created by a series of raids by the French that penetrated inland

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Fig. 3. Canterbury West Gate external loop

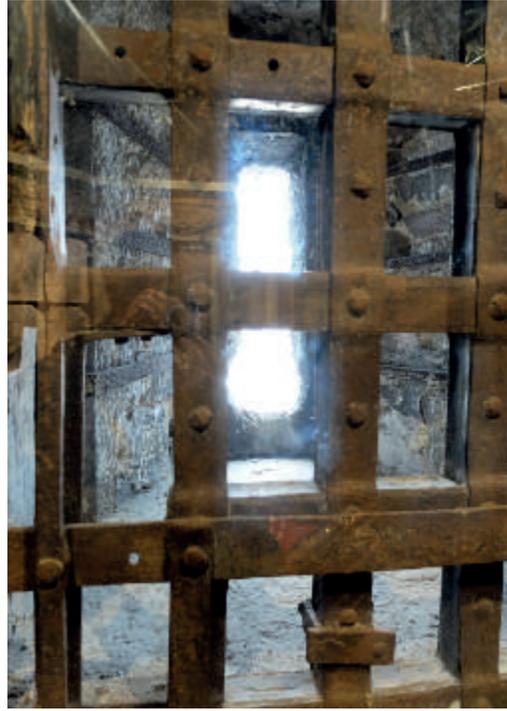


Fig. 4. Canterbury West Gate internal loop 4

and burnt towns and villages during the late-fourteenth-century phase of the Hundred Years war. In 1378 the mayor and bailiffs of Oxford were ordered to repair the walls, towers, gates and ditches, compelling everyone 'save poor beggars' to contribute to the cost, because 'if the King's enemies of France should invade England it is in great peril ... for advantage of others of the parts adjacent flocking thither if danger threatens'.² The consequence of these orders was observed by the commission in the reconstruction of the upper parts of many of the upstanding bastions and the curtain wall. Further orders for repair were issued in 1423-4 though it is not evident what (if anything) may have been done, or where.³

William of Wykeham had been supervisor of works for Edward III's building of Queenborough castle and other projects in the 1360s. He fell out of favour but was

restored to royal good books by Richard II. He was not unfamiliar with architecture, also reflected in his foundation of New College, Oxford, having bought the derelict land behind the city wall where building work began in 1379, on condition (continued to the present day) that the Corporation would inspect the adjacent walls every three years to check they were being maintained, which helps explain the survival of these walls.

The bishop's main home was in Winchester, and it may be no coincidence that vigorous work to update the walls and towers here took place at the same time, following a similarly-worded order from the crown.⁴ The surviving West Gate here has two gun loops dated to the rebuild of the front of the edifice either in 1392, or 1396. Wykeham had paid for the rebuilding of the city wall where it stretched around his palace at Wolvesey so was evidently associated with the upgrade

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Fig. 5. Canterbury city wall, gun port in tower behind Dane John park, interior.

while the West Gate itself was paid for by the whole city.⁵ A pair of parallel gun ports was built above the gate passage beneath, of similar design and dimensions to Oxford's – and those at Canterbury and elsewhere. It was probable that masons working for the bishop at Winchester college – to which New College Oxford was linked – and the cathedral also worked on the new West Gate.⁶

The West Gate at Canterbury contains many gun ports, similar to those at Oxford, and is firmly dated by references to the work at the expense of Archbishop Simon Sudbury (before he was terminated by revolting peasants in 1381), from October 1378, again with royal permission for the same reasons as elsewhere.⁷

The 20 inverted keyhole gun loops at Canterbury West Gate are all type A according to John Kenyon's now established typology.⁸ These are the earliest specifically designed

creations enabling defenders to mount contemporary gunpowder weapons efficiently inside fortifications, the external dimensions being of a scale suitable for these small weapons, the vertical slit enabling sighting, the circular hole itself and the platform behind it being designed to provide both a firm location for a gun on a timber base, and the opportunity to move the gun from side to side, often up to 45°, enabling wide coverage of the approaches to the gate. Their dating is based both on documentary evidence for construction of the building, and by analogy, though the latter is risky because the shape continued in use for a long time after more sophisticated designs appeared.

Nonetheless, there is documentary backing for type A keyhole loops in numerous contemporary constructions: apart from the two ecclesiastical cities mentioned, Carisbrooke (gatehouse, 1380), Cooling castle (gatehouse 1381), two mural towers at Dover (late 14C), Hever gatehouse (1381), St Stephen's gate at Norwich (date not known), Asheton's Tower at Portchester (late 14C), and Saltwood (tower in outer bailey, same date). The new towers on Canterbury's city walls were similarly provided for.⁹ The crown ordered the citizens to take the advice of the now elderly royal master builder (architect) Henry Yevele. John Harvey stated there was 'good reason for thinking' he was the designer of the West Gate and also worked on Cooling; certainly the appointed supervisor at both sites, Sir John Cobham, oversaw both.¹⁰

The other castle mentioned in connection with this sudden appearance of type A gun loops across southern England was, of course, Bodiam (1385). This is not the place to reopen the 'battle of Bodiam'. However, it might be observed that the gun ports assiduously added at the time of the expensive extension

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or renewal of city walls and gates at Canterbury, Winchester (and Oxford?) were not obviously a design feature, and that they were militarily efficient – indeed, as Derek Renn observed (note 9), their spacing and distribution at two levels at Canterbury provided a remarkable interlocking field of fire (and closely resemble the layout at Cooling castle).

It is impossible to know if these were for show, or deterrence (which is a valid military role in itself), or were intended for use. But the fact that these places also obtained guns and gunpowder suggest a serious purpose, while, if the royal instruction was formulaic, why spend so much money in a hurry at this time, when they had been quietly decaying for decades, if there was not a pressing need? Citizens' reluctance to reach into their pockets to pay for their walls was longstanding.

The gun loop at Oxford seems, therefore, to have been built simultaneously with many others, in response to the same royal injunction, and by a man familiar with the technology. But why, and why in bastion 11? It covers no gate or postern and serves no purpose of display if it was intended to demonstrate the builders' modernity. And why is it on its own? As we used to say, answers on a postcard ...

Dr Peter Purton

¹ City of Oxford. Survey by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Oxford 1939, 159-61. See also T Hassall, 'Oxford City walls', *Archaeological Journal*, 135 (1978), 258-62. There are good descriptions using the same source material in the standard accounts of town walls in England by H. Turner and O Creighton/R Higham, while for comparative drawings and measurements of the loops discussed here see B. St John O'Neil, *Castles and cannon. A study of early artillery fortifications in England* (Oxford, 1960), 8-11, 19-21.

² Calendar of Close Rolls Richard II, 1377-81 (London 1914), 51-2.

³ *Victoria County History*, Oxford, 4, ed. C. Elrington (London 1979), 301f (by T Hassall).

⁴ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Richard II, 1377-81*, 111.

⁵ D Keene (ed.), *Survey of Medieval Winchester*, I (part 1), Winchester Studies 2 (Oxford 1985), 42-48. Specifically, on the West Gate see M. Bullen, J. Crook, R. Hubbock, N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Hampshire – Winchester and the North*, (New Haven/London 2010), 662-3, where it is falsely claimed that these loops are 'the earliest in the country'. They cannot be earlier than 1392.

⁶ W. Jacob, 'The West Gate of Winchester', *Papers and proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and archaeological society*, IV (1898-1903), 51-7.

⁷ Calendar of Patent Rolls Richard II, 1377-81, 450; Calendar of Close Rolls Richard II, 1385-89 (London 1921), 120-1 (5 February 1386), 207 (3 December 1386) and 342 (12 September 1387). See also *History of the King's Works*, I, 210 and II, 589-90 for other works on the defences of Canterbury.

⁸ J. R Kenyon, 'Early artillery fortification in England and Wales', *Fort*, 1 (1976), 22-25; and 'Early gunports. A gazetteer', *Fort*, 4 (1977), 4-6.

⁹ S. Frere, S. Stow, P. Bennett, *Archaeology of Canterbury*, II (Maidstone 1982), 18-59 with a note by Derek Renn on the West Gate gun ports shown to be remarkably similar to those of Cooling (117).

¹⁰ J Harvey, *Henry Yevele. The Life of an English architect*, (London, 1944), 36. *History of the King's Works*, I, 210.