

A return to the burh-geat



Watchers on the English coast observing Earl Harold's return from Normandy. (Bayeux Tapestry; © Ville de Bayeux).

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Derek Renn

According to the eleventh-century tract *Gepyncoð*, a thegn had to own (among other things) a *burg-geat*.¹ What did this mean? *Burh* is an Old English word, which may have different meanings according to context, but always of some sort of (ditched) enclosure.² *Geat* today is the technical name for a channel carrying molten metal to the mould,³ but spelt *gate* is a common place-name with a similar meaning: gate or entrance. Other early texts employ *burh-geat* to mean a secure residence, not just a gateway.⁴

The search for surviving *burh-geats* arose from Courtenay Raleigh Radford's short note on the tower of Earls Barton church.⁵ Speaking of the same tower, Gerard Baldwin Brown had previously referred to 'those enigmatical doorways apparently leading no whither'.⁶ I have suggested that a tower embroidered in the Bayeux Tapestry was an eleventh-century artist's impression of a *burh-geat*, the large upper openings being its diagnostic feature.⁷ By 'large' I meant 'in which an adult human could stand upright'. Such large upper openings could have been used as exits on to an external gallery, or as a frame, to display relics or persons. I call them 'openings' since they usually show no evidence for doors and to allow for other purposes than display (for example, as watch-points or emergency exits). Pamela Marshall has drawn attention to further examples in *donjons* both in Britain and Western France.⁸

However, focusing on the upper openings ignores the ground level passage through the Bayeux Tapestry tower. The five castle buildings with large upper openings listed in my article – at Bramber (Sussex), Exeter, (Devon), Ludlow (Salop), Newark (Notts) and Richmond (Yorks) – were all gatehouses with a through entrance passage, at least four being subsequently blocked up front and back to convert the gatehouse into a *donjon*, with a simple entrance alongside.⁹ The possible exception was Newark (Notts), probably the last of this *burh-geat* - like group to be built, where the entrance passage seems to have stayed open.

Notes

1. Williams, A., 1992, 'A Bell-house and a Burh-geat: Lordly Residences in England before the Norman Norman Conquest' in *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood IV*, 221-40.
2. Renn, D. F., 1994, 'Burhgeat and gonfanon: two sidelights from the Bayeux Tapestry' in *Anglo-Norman Studies XVI*, 182 footnote 28 and also Parsons, D. N. and Styles, T., 2000, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Brace-Cæster)* (Centre for English Name-Studies) 70, 76-86; Draper, S., 2008, 'The Significance of Old English *Burh* in Anglo-Saxon England' in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 15*, 240-53.
3. Collins English Dictionary.
4. Williams (note 1), 226-7, 233-4; Shapland, M. G., 2012, *Buildings of Secular and Religious Lordship: Anglo-Saxon Tower-Nave Churches*: PhD thesis University College, London. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1396780/> (accessed April 2014), 31-33.
5. Radford, C. A. R., 1953, 'Earls Barton Church', in *The Archaeological Journal 110*, 196-7.
6. Brown, G. B., 1925, *The Arts in Early England*, 2: *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* (2nd edn), 287; examples listed in Taylor, H. M., 1978, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture III*, 826-9, 834-5, Table 25.
7. Renn (note 2), 183-5.
8. Marshall, P., 2012, 'Making an Appearance: some thoughts on the phenomenon of multiple doorways and large upper openings in Romanesque donjons in Western France and Britain' in *Château Gaillard 25*, 233-42. Dennis Turner (*The Church of St. Mary and the Burh of Guildford*, 2015, 12) added Sainte-Suzanne (Mayenne), citing Bocquet, A., in *Bulletin Monumental*.
9. A different type of entrance mentioned by Brown, R. A., 1984, 'Castle Gates and Garden Gates' in *Architectural History 27*, 443-45.