



ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE FOR GRESHAM CASTLE TOWARDS A SPECULATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

by James Mindham, February 2021

The importance of Gresham Castle to the Paston story is considerable and was always going to be site worthy of 3D reconstruction for the Paston Footprints project. The vivid accounts from the letters and petitions at the time describe scenes of intimidation, threat and violence as John Paston fought both in the courts and in the field to secure his manor in Gresham. These documents also provide tantalising glimpses of the castle or ‘mansion’ itself and it is possible to extract enough information to conjure a speculative reconstruction of the fortified manor at Gresham.

The conventional narrative, in terms of the exact order of events during the siege, have tended to be somewhat ambiguous and contradictory and as a result, references to certain buildings in letters are difficult to tie down. However, a breakthrough was made by Marjorie A. Rowling in 1988 whereby she convincingly suggested¹ that the two Paston letters connected with the incident needed to be re-dated following the examination of a writ of *certiorari* to John de Vere.²

The actual writ itself provides crucial details of the manorial complex and this, combined with the letters, makes it possible to reconstruct the site within a framework of how a typical fortified manor house of the period would have developed.

The earliest form of the site was probably a standard 13th century moated manor house under the ownership of the de Stuteville family. The site passed to Sir Edmund Bacon who was granted a license to crenelate or fortify in 1318 by Edward II and presumably the walls and corner towers date from this period of fortification. In 1426 Judge William Paston purchased the manor house through Thomas Chaucer acting on behalf of Sir William Moleyns and gave the manor

¹ Marjorie A. Rowling, *New evidence on the disseisin of the Pastons from their Norfolk manor of Gresham, 1448-1451*, Norfolk Archaeology 40 (1989)

² Public Record Office. Reference: K.B.91262, no. 40

to John and Margaret Paston. Following the death of William in 1444, the Moleyns family moved in to retake the property that once belonged to their forebears under the delusion that somehow the manor still belonged to them. The ensuing violent dispute led to the Pastons abandoning the manor house, although it is possible that they intended to rebuild it during the 1470s.

Over recent decades, the site has been cleared periodically and possibly recorded although no trace of any surveys can be found³. There is a chance that a plan and associated notes can be found at Gressenhall within the Historic Environment Record,⁴ but COVID restrictions has prevented any search, in fact the restrictions have prevented any new volunteer efforts at the site to date.

We are left, rather frustratingly, with absolutely nothing to go on in terms of the recording of the physical remains, other than scant notes made during various site visits over the years.

The earliest recorded investigation we have is from Whites Directory from 1864⁵ :

It was 150 feet square, with a round tower 36 feet in diameter at each corner. It was surrounded by a deep moat, which was cleaned out in 1844, when the old drawbridge (formed of massive timbers), the keel of a boat, a few articles of pottery, and the entrance to a subcutaneous passage were discovered. The foundations of the building may still be traced.

Two things of note here are the mention of the timbers from the drawbridge and the visible remains of foundations. Drawbridges were the first line of defence and were common to fortified manor houses, it would not have extended the full width of the moat, but most likely filled the gap between the end of the bridge and the gateway. The ‘foundations of the building’ is likely to refer to the building within the walls, i.e. the actual manor house itself.



Fig.1- LIDAR image of Gresham Castle with overlay

The recorded dimensions are very accurate and suggests a detailed survey may have been undertaken at the time.

In modern terms the interior of the moat is roughly 40m x 40m and the ‘round towers’ 11m in diameter. However, the LIDAR image does indicate that the simple plan of a regular interior with a tower in each corner is not quite exact. Figure 1 shows the these basic dimensions overlaying the LIDAR image and although broadly correct, there is something odd about the SE tower about which we shall return to later.

3 D. Gurney (NLA), 10 June 2009, It has been reported (S16) that during the late 1970s/early 1980s, surveys of the site were conducted, but no further information on this has been traced. HER 6620. *Note: this may be the survey conducted by Roy Mitchell.*

4 For notes on clearance work undertaken by CP team, see note on plan by F. Healy (NAU) and schedule in file. E. Rose (NAU), 15 October 1985.

5 Directory: White, W. *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Norfolk, and the City and County of Norwich.* pp 647-648. (1864)

The image on the left (fig.2) is an enhanced LIDAR representation of Gresham Castle today. The white areas are reflected vegetation cover, but the dark moated areas show up very well and allows for an accurate drawing (fig.3) to be made from which various observations can be made.

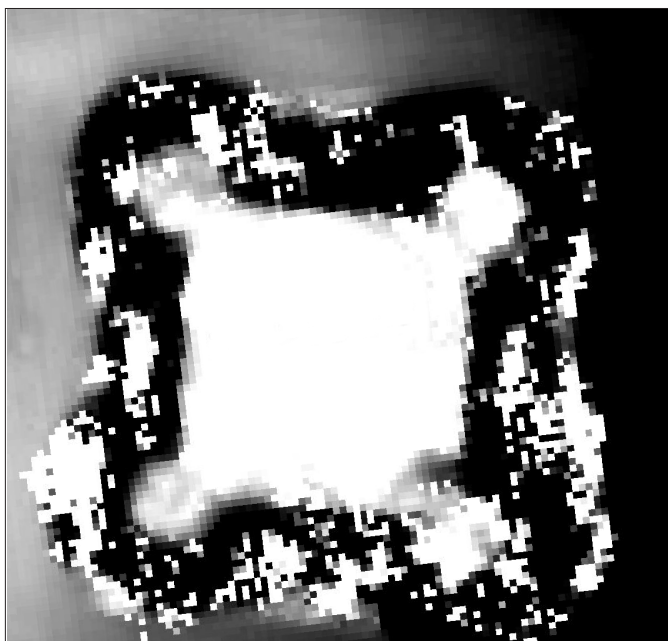


Fig.2- LIDAR image of Gresham Castle

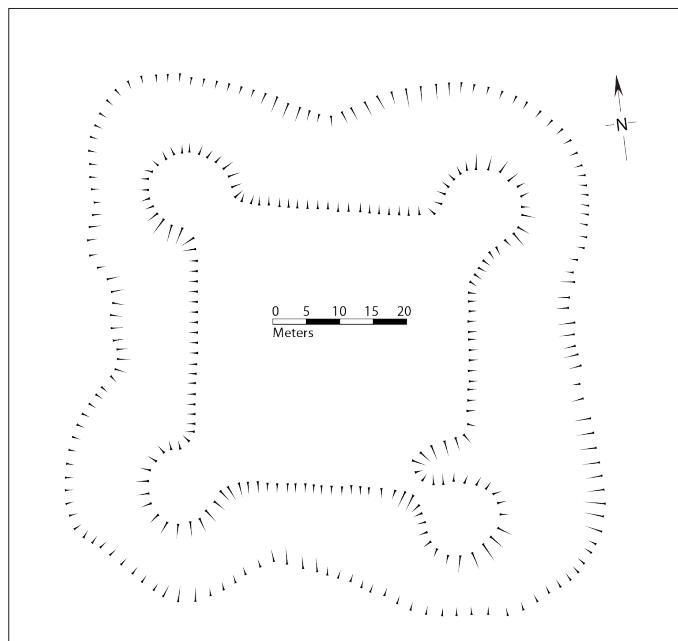


Fig.3- Plan of Gresham Castle

Probably the most appropriate place to start is with the earliest known representation of Gresham Castle. In September 1471, Sir John Paston was possibly considering rebuilding Gresham and in a letter to his brother, he asks for various dimensions and included a sketch.

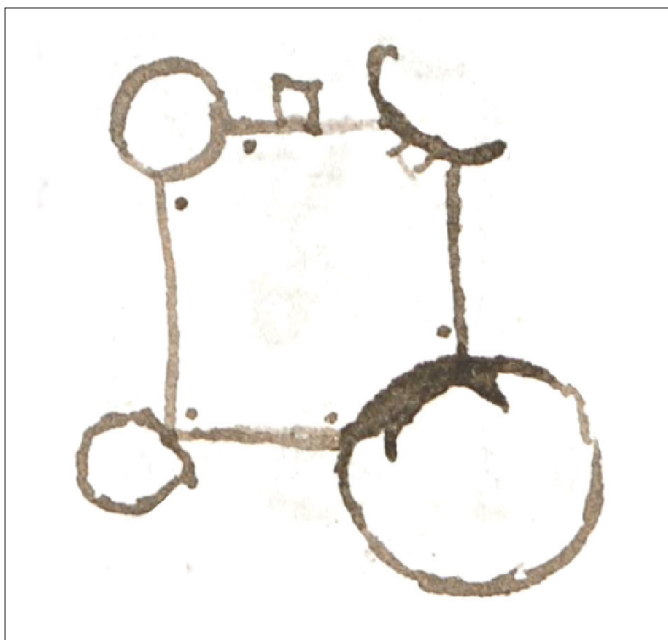


Fig.4- Sketch of Gresham Castle made by Sir John Paston

The sketch (fig.4) has been orientated 90 degrees anticlockwise so that North is at the top. At the time of writing I am unaware of any considered analysis of this sketch, although Davis suggests that the rectangle beyond the northern wall is a gatehouse⁶. I find myself disagreeing with Davis on this point and would suggest that it is more likely to be the bridge as Sir John makes specific reference to it in one of his queries.

To that end, it seems logical to me that this sketch found within the letter is a pictorial aid to clarify those queries. The dots could be the tower doors for example.

The towers themselves are obviously problematic with only the NE tower resembling anything like what we would expect in reality. The re-drawing of the SE tower appears too exaggerated to be a mistake and therefore must be a deliberate attempt to differentiate the tower from the others.

6 Norman Davis 'Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century' Part I, p.442

The NE tower is only half drawn, although this may be a space issue within the letter and it has a curious rectangle projecting from it into the courtyard. This could represent an entrance or steps to the tower or battlements.

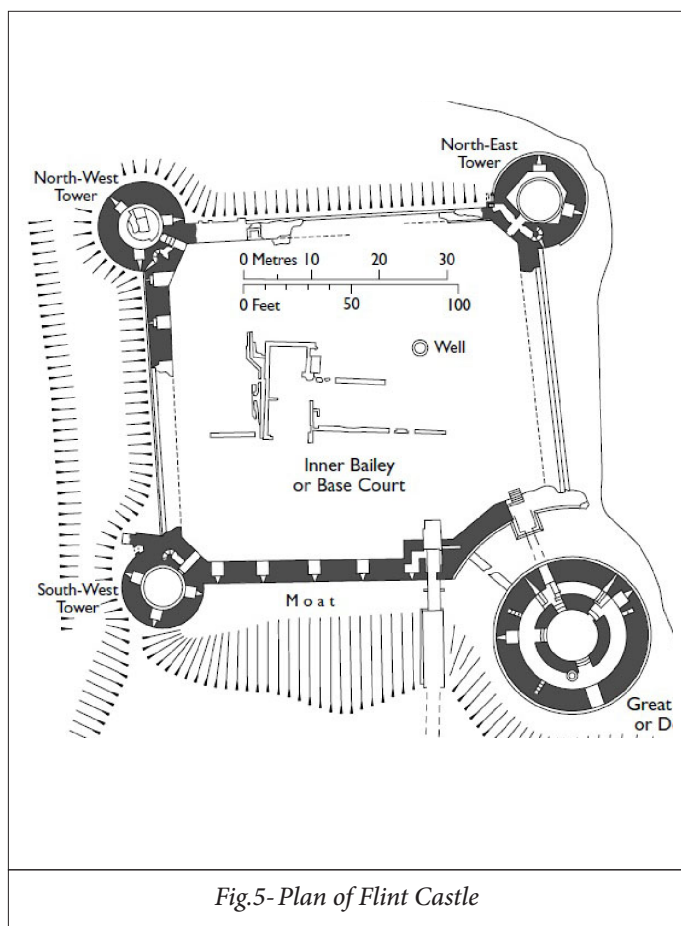
The SW tower is drawn outside of the courtyard and seems at odds with the LIDAR image as the LIDAR does suggest that all the towers, except the SE tower, are uniform and positioned as you would expect them to be. The SE tower is noticeably different and seems to be somewhat projected into the moat and may have been isolated from the complex.

What follows is an attempt to interpret the specific queries made by Sir John in his letter and what they can tell us about the castle.

I praye yowe late the mesur by pekthred be taken or elt mesured by yerde, how moche is ffrom the northe gate, ther the brygge was, at Gressham to the sowthewall, and in lyke fforme ffrom the este syde to the west

This initial query clearly tells us that there was a bridge and a North gate. There is no mention of a gatehouse. In order to make the measurement to the south wall there would have to be a clear line of sight which could suggest that, at this time, any buildings within the walls may have been cleared. The same applies for the measurement between the East and West walls. This was twenty years after the buildings within the walls were rendered uninhabitable.

also the hyght off the estewall, and the hyght of the sowthest towr ffrom the grownde, iff ye maye easely.



Asking for the height of the east wall in isolation may suggest it was higher than the other walls or maybe he was planning to use it to form one side of a new house. He also he specifically asks for the height of the SE tower which we know is drawn larger on the sketch. Does this suggest that the SE tower is taller along with the east wall and the larger drawn tower represents a taller height?

Another possibility is that the east wall and SE tower could have been completed at the time of writing and therefore representative of the final heights for the towers and walls.

As previously mentioned, the LIDAR image does also suggest that the SE tower is a little different with an indication that the tower was perhaps a little within the moat. A similar arrangement can be seen at Flint castle (fig.5), albeit the tower is considerably larger. It could also have

been a well-tower as wells of water were seen as vital, especially in sieges, or it could simply be how it has become ruinous and robbed over the years.

To continue with Sir John's queries he next turned his attention to the actual towers.

Also what bredde every towr is within the wall, and whych towr is moor then other within.

This does suggest that the actual tower diameters may have been different or that they projected differently into the courtyard. The LIDAR image does indicate a fairly consistent size, but being familiar with the Castle he must have known that some towers were different from others. My interpretation of 'within the wall' is where the towers intersect the curtain wall, especially as the request below seems to ask for something different.

Also how manye ffote, or what brede eche towr takythe within iche corner off the quadrate ovyrthwert the dorys,

The first part seems to place each tower partially within the courtyard as you would expect – i.e. within each corner of the courtyard, although 'ovyrthwert the dorys' confuses things. If we take 'ovyrthwert' to mean 'from one side to the other' the dots on the plan could be the doors and he is asking for the measurements between each tower door, or he is asking for the measurement between each dot.

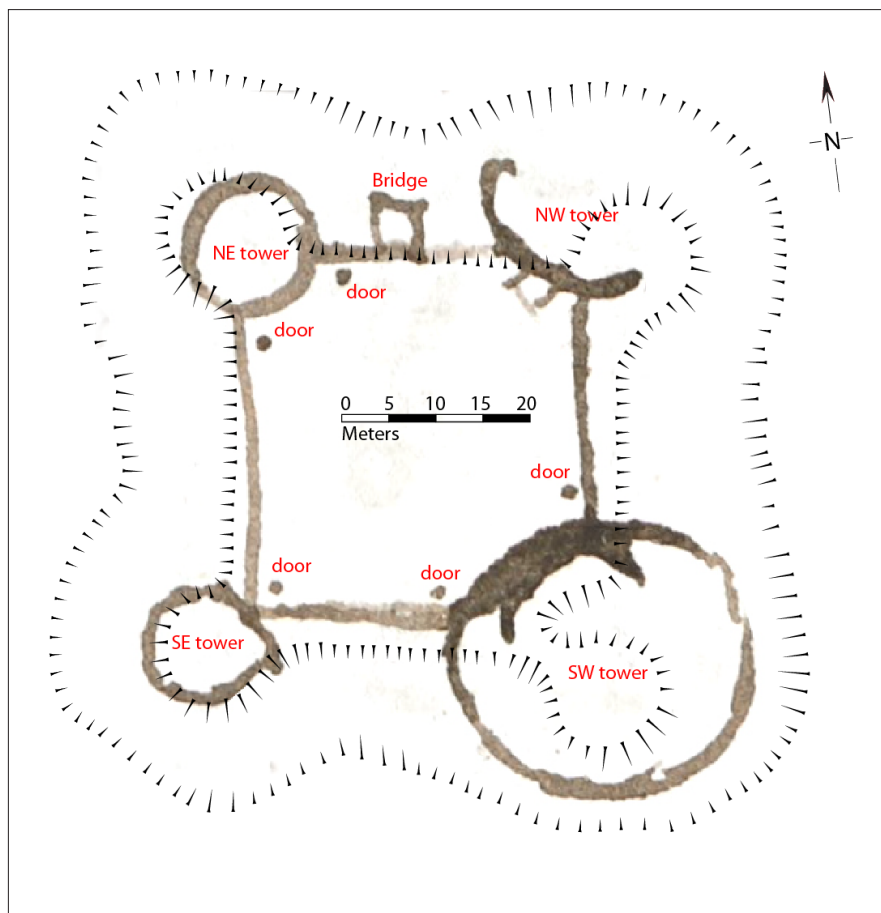


Fig.6- Paston sketch overlay

Sir John has placed the SW tower outside of the wall on the plan, but both the LIDAR and First Edition OS map suggest otherwise. The tower also has one dot which does suggest the dots are more likely to be indicative of doorways. It would then follow that the NW and SE towers would have doors where they intersected the wall.

All things considered, the scale of the sketch is very accurate. The diameters of the west towers are astonishingly accurate, considering this is a hand drawn sketch from memory, and it is clear that Sir John knew the layout of the site exceptionally well by the questions he was asking as well as the sketch he provided.

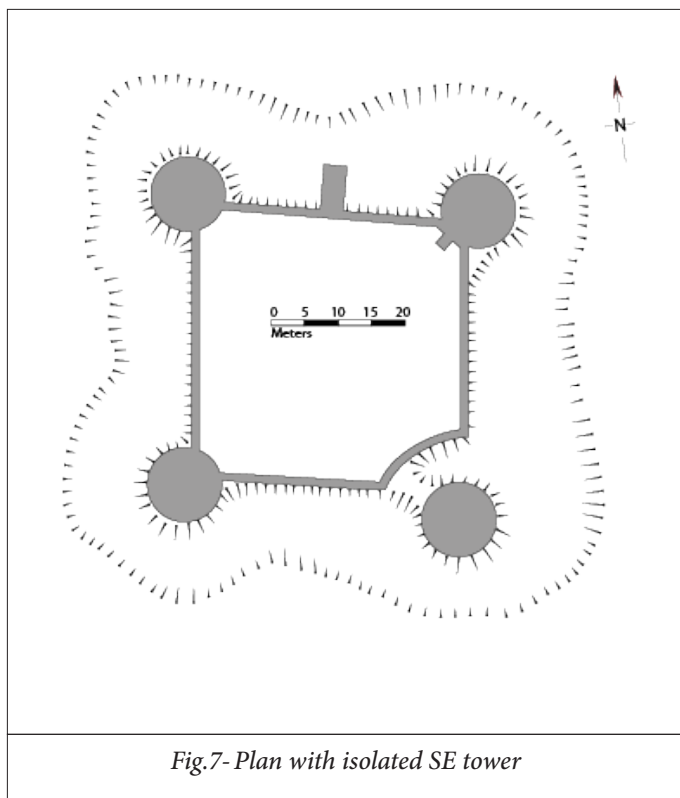


Fig.7- Plan with isolated SE tower

With that in mind, I believe that the SE tower has been exaggerated because he makes specific reference to it in the letter as he does with the doors and the bridge.

It is tempting to separate the SE tower from the curtain wall (fig.7), but without further investigation the reconstruction will show it as a conventional tower. Also, the LIDAR image suggests that the curtain wall does not form a perfect square and the whole complex is slightly skewed.

The potential differences in tower sizes and position can easily be reconciled through a survey of the site, although these questions have probably already been answered via previous surveys.

As it stands, I have no way of resolving these unknowns without a site visit and an attempt to locate the remains beneath the leaf litter. It is possible that a volunteer effort post COVID could address this.

Key objectives would be to find out what the relationship is between the SE tower and curtain wall and verify the diameters of each tower. To my layman's mind, it is the towers that distinguish Gresham from any other fortified manor house if the reported dimensions are correct. Gresham is often compared to Baconsthorpe, but although slightly smaller in terms of the main courtyard, the size of the towers (11m or 36ft in diameter) takes it beyond a simple fortified manor house. The towers themselves are more or less equivalent to those at Flint castle, or to put it another way, imagine a Baconsthorpe inner gatehouse within each corner.

Put simply, this is a proper castle, but there seems to be a disconnect. We know that there was a 'mansion' or manor house on the site, most probably the same one that existed before the license to fortify was granted. We also know that the same manor house is likely to be the one that features prominently in the dispute and was eventually rendered uninhabitable by Moleyns men. The obvious question is why Margaret and even Moleyns men are using the manor house and not the towers to defend themselves? In fact, the towers do not seem to feature at all during the unfolding events of 1450.

The first thing that springs to my mind is that they may have been unfinished and uninhabitable. Did Sir Edmund Bacon run out of money? The scale of the fortification is considerable and it is easy to imagine that it would have been very expensive.

Maybe the SE tower was meant to be a donjon (defensive tower) after all. The other possibility is that these towers were simply corner bastions, but again they seem a bit too large, especially when compared to the bastions of the Baconsthorpe Castle curtain wall.

Examination of the various testimonies in relation to the dispute enables us to gain enough information to understand the nature of the manor house itself, some examples follow below.

..and have made openings on every quarter of the house to shoot out of

- Letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston

..burning therein, long crooks to pull down the walls, and long trees with which they broke up gates and doors, and so came into the said mansion. ..and mined down the wall of the chamber wherein the wife of your said beseecher was, and bore her out at the gates, and cut asunder the posts of the houses and let them fall, and broke up all the chambers and coffers within the said mansion

- Petition to the archbishop of York, from John Paston

I saw and found the entrance and doors of the said dwelling broken down and levelled to the ground; and walls, both of the outbuildings and of the hall and chambers of the same house demolished and overthrown on the ground and posts of the said hall cut indiscriminately threatening destruction to the house

- John de Vere, writ of certiorari

From the above we may assume that the house is a free-standing timber framed building with a hall, chambers, possibly an entrance porch and two associated outbuildings. The description fits a typical manor house of the period, usually divided into four bays with the hall taking up the middle two bays. This 'standard tripartite plan' consisted of service rooms on the left, with the open hall in the centre and parlour/solar on the right. The hall itself could have contained an off centre hearth with a cross passage and may have been the focus or 'social space' for people to interact. In this very space it seems, that Partridge entertained with 'greats feasts' after ejecting Margaret.

The open hall transcended the class divide, being the focus of the majority of houses, from the landed gentry to the landless peasant, and dominated plan forms, from the Saxon period through to the

early 16th century⁷. We get a glimpse of this in John Pastons petition to the Arch Bishop of York, describing how Moleyns men would..

..lie in wait sundry days and nights about Goneld's, Purry's, and Beck's places, and some of them went into Beck's and Purry's houses, both in the halls and the barns, and asked where [the tenants] were,

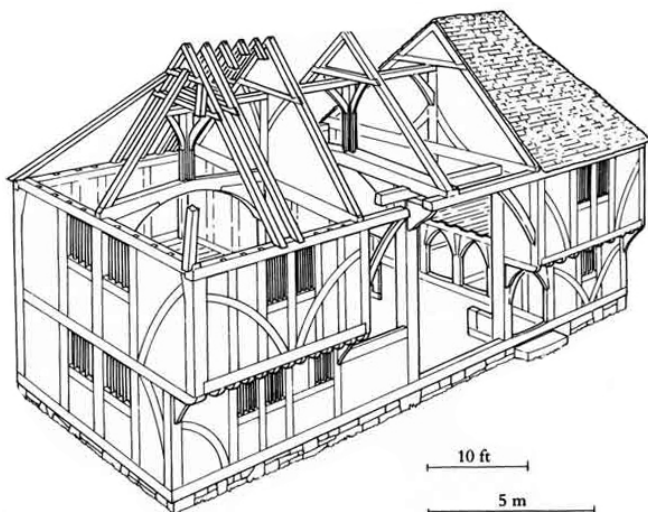


Fig.8- Typical 'box framed' manor house of the period (Harris 1978, 15)

Its difficult to know exactly what the two outbuildings would have been. We know there was a yard and there were barrels, so it wouldn't be a great stretch to imagine one of the outbuildings was some kind of store. No specific reference was ever made to stables, my hunch is that if one of these buildings were for stabling then it would have been called so rather than an outbuilding. I'm also inclined to have these outbuildings utilising the walls rather than being free-standing like the house.

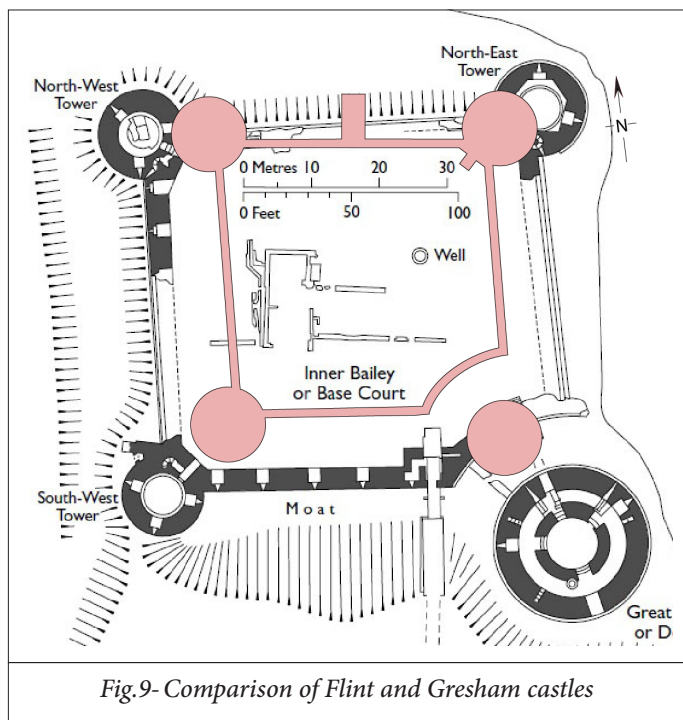


Fig.9- Comparison of Flint and Gresham castles

If no details are forthcoming in terms of further descriptions and plans then I believe there is enough in the documentary evidence to enable a broad picture of Gresham Castle to be conjured.

Interpretation is always key and I'm rather drawn to the idea that Bacon never finished his castle. The build was ambitious and I think it is useful to draw a direct comparison with Flint castle (fig.9) in order to illustrate that point (Gresham Castle is overlain in pink). I also like the symmetry with a 20th century owner of Oxnead in terms of ambitious builds and running out of money!

Of course, there is no evidence for this so the 'unfinished castle' idea is pure artistic license.

So the imagined backdrop for the Gresham model is one of an unfinished castle with the original manor house still in use. Within the courtyard there will be two main generic outbuildings built against the curtain wall, no gatehouse - just large gates leading out to a small drawbridge and an embanked approach with deep ditches either side.

As an interesting aside, during my research I came across Carveswell Castle in Staffordshire. The Caverswall family were granted licence to crenellate their manor house in 1275, but had fallen in to ruin by the end of the sixteenth century. In 1615 it was bought by Matthew Cradock of Stafford, a local wool merchant who subsequently built a three storey mansion house which survives to this day. One wonders if Gresham castle could have looked very similar if the Pastons had invested in it.



Fig.10- Carveswell Castle, Staffordshire

Gresham castle re-imagined

