

The Great Gateway of St. Albans Monastery.

BY CHARLES HENRY ASHDOWN.



This interesting building is the only monastic structure in St. Albans (the Abbey Church excepted), which, having escaped destruction at the Reformation, has been preserved to us almost in its entirety.

Great gateways were erected in the mediæval period over the principal entrances to monastic establishments, in order to serve, primarily, as defensive works in those troublous times; hence, we find this building surmounted by a battlemented parapet, and originally provided with

four projecting loopholed towers, of which two remain, as flanking guards to the large archway, while the latter is provided with holes in the ribs of its vaulted ceiling, to enable missiles to be cast down upon an enemy. These, however, may be only part of the style of ornamentation, or imitations of practical apertures existing in the previous Gateway, inasmuch as Mr. John Harris informs me that some carved ornamental bosses which fell from these holes were preserved in the Slype half a century ago, and one aperture is even now partly filled with decayed ornamented stone. They also served as prisons for refractory monks, and barracks for the armed feudal servitors of the monastery when on duty. So far as I am aware, no particulars are extant concerning the Saxon or Norman Great Gateway of St. Alban's Monastery; the earliest reference in the "Gesta" occurs during the abbacy of John de Hertford, 1235-1260, of which the following is a translation:—"Likewise the Abbot we have mentioned built a fine stone house of great length, and covered it with tiles, and having three fireplaces on the opposite side of [or opposite to] the great gateway, by the aspect and neighbourhood of which the whole foundation [or monastery] is beautified." ("Gesta" I., 314.)

Abbot Richard de Wallingford, 1326-1335, when visiting King Edward III. at Northampton, rode unexpectedly to St. Albans, and presented himself at the Great Gateway, where the Prior and monks received him with a solemn peal of bells. ("Gesta" II., 193.)

About the year 1333 we have the following important reference:—"There was built also at that time by his [Abbot Wallingford's (1326-1335)] orders, an Almonry, constructed by Richard Heterset, the Almoner, from its foundations, with a hall, a chapel, chambers, a kitchen, a cellar, and the necessary buildings for the scholars and their masters. This now is [being] pulled down on account of the erection of the new gateway. For it was situated on the spot where we now see the great gateway standing." ("Gesta" II., 282.)

Abbot Richard Wallingford had the right of imprisoning excommunicated persons, granted to him

by the King ("Gesta" II., 283), and these would, of necessity, be incarcerated in the Great Gateway.

Under Abbot Michæl de Mentmore, 1335 to 1349, we have the following reference:—"William de Somerton, Prior of Bynham, deserted his Priory. He came as a suppliant to the great gateway of the Monastery, and was received in the Almonry; he did penance, and was finally absolved." ("Gesta" II., 303.) Further we read—

"Abbot Michæl acquired a large portion of the stone quarry near Egelmunt (?), where stone might be quarried for the works of the present Monastery." ("Gesta" II., 361.)

Abbot Thomas de la Mare (1349-1396) ordered that the custody of the gaol for felons, fugitives, and outlaws should still remain with the Bursar, but that their chattels should now go to the cellarer. ("Gesta" II., 411.)

In 1355 a jury from divers hundreds presented to the King, at the town of St. Albans, a complaint of the escape of divers prisoners from the Abbot's gaol. (Term. St. Michaelis, 28 Ed. III., p. 49.)

We now approach the period which is of peculiar interest, namely, the transition from the older gateway to the present structure. The first extract relates to the great storm on January 15th, 1362:—"Because we are given to understand that on account of an extraordinary gale of wind which lately occurred in divers parts of our realm, by which such a number [of buildings] were cast to the ground, and many were unroofed . . ." ("Gesta" III., 46.) And the next the precise statement that: "He [*i.e.*, Abbot Thomas de la Mare, 1349-1396] rebuilt, from the foundations, the great gate, which had been thrown down by a severe gale of wind, with chambers, dungeons, and vaults, and gave it a very strong covering [roof] of lead." ("Gesta" III., 387.)

Two important entries occur in the "Gesta" relating to the gateway under the records of the Abbey of Abbot John Moote (1396-1401). "He also built a room, which is called the Seneschal's Room, between the Almonry and the gate which leads to the Stables." ("Gesta" III., 441.) "He, appointed Abbot, took down the

cresting of the Great Gate of the Monastery, which was of Eglemounde stone, fragile and damaged. He put up a cresting of hard Kent stone, which is sufficiently lasting. Forty pounds, and over, besides transport expenses, were spent on this work." ("Gesta" III., 447, and Cotton MSS., Nero D. 7, fol. 24.)

The following references to the Great Gateway soon after its reconstruction are of interest:—

" . . . The restoration of the ancient devotion and honours to the images of SS. Lawrence and Grumbald, which had been cast out of the Chapel of the old Almonry during the building of the Great Gate and the new Infirmary of the Monastery . . ." (An Ordinance of Abbot John of Wheathampstead, 1428.)

" . . . Since, therefore, the chapel of S. Lawrence, the chief almoner of God, formerly in the ancient Almonry of our Monastery, has been, in the erection on that spot of the Great Gate, utterly destroyed . . ." (Amundesham Annales, Vol. I., Appendix, p. 420-3.)

The preceding references to the Great Gateway, although meagre, are sufficiently comprehensive to allow of the assignment of a definite date for the present building, and to do away with the uncertainty which has hitherto existed upon that point. Newcome states that it was built during the reign of Richard II. 1377-1399); subsequent writers have asserted that the building dates from the latter years of Abbot de la Mare, *i.e.*, about 1396, and one even affirms it to have been 1399, after the decease of the Abbot. The solution of this difficulty is of the utmost importance, inasmuch as it connects the Gateway with the great rebellion of 1381, or does not do so. The previous gateway had been demolished, as we have seen, by a high wind; and the terrific gale which raged in the early part of the year 1361-2 may, with every show of probability, have caused the mischief. Ancient chroniclers agree in their descriptions of the devastation caused by this fearful visitation, which commenced about vespers on 15th January, St. Maur's Day, A.D. 1361-2. Adam Muremuth, Dean of St. Paul's, 1320-1380, tells us that it demolished "high houses, lofty buildings, towers, belfries, trees, and also other massive

and solid edifices," and records a Latin verse (here translated) :—

"It was the year 1362 when, on thy day,
O Maurus, violent was the passage of the gale."

Also—

"Lo ! this year Maurus doth breathe,
thundering throughout the world."

The annals of Bermondsey state that the gale was most destructive in the eastern parts of England. Stowe says that it lasted five days, and from Blomfield's "History of Norfolk" we learn that it prostrated the spire of Norwich Cathedral. To show that Hertfordshire was visited by the tempest, it may be mentioned that the spire of Ashwell Church was blown down in the same gale, whilst strong evidence that St. Albans suffered severely is furnished by the significant proclamation issued in the town the same year that tilers should not advance their wages, and that tiles be of the same price as they were during the corresponding time of the previous year.

That no detailed description of the re-erection of the Gateway is extant may perhaps be accounted for by the probability of its being contemporary with, or directly following upon, the building of the fortifying wall round the Monastery under the charter of Edward III., 1359. This stone wall, which was crenellated for the discharge of arrows and other missiles, passed along the southern boundary of the monastic enclosures, parallel with and not far from the river, then turned up the western side of Holywell Hill, approximately on a line with the present rear garden walls ; from near the upper part of Holywell Hill to Romeland it practically appears to have bisected the gardens of the present houses. At Romeland, diverging southwards, it followed the line of the front walls of the dwellings now standing on the bank, and eventually joined the west front of the Abbey at its northern tower. From the southern buttress of the main entrance in the west front the wall extended to the Great Gateway, where its junction at a point a little removed from the north-east corner of the eastern wall may still be seen. It is hardly to be conceived that so great an undertaking as this wall would be finished in the short interval of time between the granting of the

Charter and the great gale, so there is every reason to think that they were portions of the same work, and contemporaneous.

The urgent necessity for such a building as the Great Gate, having the dual capacity of a prison and a fortress, would compel its speedy re-erection; I therefore assign the date of the commencement of the building at 1362, and its probable completion—remembering that there is no elaborate stone-work in its construction—*circa* 1365, reign of King Edward III.

A singular confirmation of this supposition that the Gateway and the wall were built approximately at the same time occurred a few years ago. Some excavations, undertaken by Mr. W. Page, between the Gateway and the west front of the Abbey, reached the foundations of the great boundary wall. It was of beautiful workmanship and well preserved, and possessed a ground course of stone precisely similar to that which runs round the Great Gateway. I removed one of the stones, and found the measurements of the bevels, etc., exactly corresponded, the stone being Kentish rag in both cases. This stone is now lying, with others, to the north of the west front of the Abbey Church.

We are told that the new Great Gateway was erected “from its foundations,” “and wholly or partly upon the site of the old Almonry, the location of the previous building having been more to the east. This assertion must, however, be somewhat modified, inasmuch as the building contains a large portion of Early English work, which, of course, could not be in existence if the previous Gateway had been wholly demolished. That this portion is a part of a more ancient building is unquestionable; in appearance it resembles Abbot Trumpington’s work. Probably when the Almonry was built in 1333, this avenue, or vaulted chamber, was contiguous to it; and when, in 1362, the Great Gateway was built, not upon its former site, as we have seen, but more to the westward, undoubtedly the vaulted chamber was incorporated in the new building. In the large room above the archway are six carved heads, or brackets, supporting trusses, which, in turn, partly bear the weight of the ceiling-beams. Five of the heads are

of ecclesiastics or of angels, but the sixth represents a knight in a pointed bascinet, banded camail, roundels upon the shoulders, and an indication of what appears to be a surcoat. This points unquestionably to the period 1325 to 1360, as the roundels disappeared after that date, and the camail covered the part of the surcoat—then called a jupon—which is shown in the bracket. Remembering the mediæval tendency to represent contemporary costume, this may be taken to strengthen the supposition that the building was re-erected about 1360. The helmet of 1396—the hitherto-supposed date of the Gateway—differed very considerably from that of 1360 and that shown in the bracket. One of the best confirmations of the theory that the Gateway was erected *c.* 1362-65 is that found in the reference to the rebuilding of the parapet by Abbot John Moote, for if the building only dated from the latter days of De la Mare it would have been impossible for the stone to have decayed in so short a time, but in forty years it might possibly have done so.

Mr. Worthington G. Smith is of opinion that the “Egelmunt,” or “Eglemountle,” stone was Totternhoe stone from the base of Totternhoe Beacon, the friability of which, when exposed to the weather, is well known. He states that *Ægeles-birg* is mentioned in the A.S. Chronicle, A.D. 571, as being near Dunstable, and locates it as Edles-borough, near Totternhoe Beacon. If *Ægeles-birg* be Edlesborough, then the Beacon may well be “Egelmunt,” or “Eglemountle,” or (“Gesta” III. 386) “Eglemounde” and “Eglemunde.”

From the preceding evidence it may, with every reason, be inferred that the date *c.* 1365 is approximately correct for the completion of the building, and, if so, the present Gateway is connected with the Peasant Revolt of 1381, and gains additional historical interest by that association. I do not purpose to give a detailed account of the connection of St. Albans and the Monastery with that great intestinal revolution, inasmuch as it has been so ably dealt with recently by one of our former honorary secretaries, Mrs. M. C. Knight, in the *Transactions* for 1899 and 1900.* It

* *Transactions*, Vol. I., New Series, pp. 262-276.

will be seen from that account that the rioters made an assault upon the Gateway, and eventually forced their way into the cloisters; the insurgent leaders were afterwards incarcerated in the dungeons, and led forth to execution from confinement there. Subsequently, the commons of the county assembled in the great courtyard of the Monastery, to which the Great Gateway gave access, and swore an oath of loyalty to King Richard II. in person.

The Great Gateway is only mentioned occasionally by historians between the period of the events just narrated and the Dissolution. The judicial sway of the Abbots appears to have been a kind of palatine jurisdiction, such as is still, or was until recently, retained in part by the Sees of Durham and Ely. The Abbots had full power of life and death, and authority to try even the higher kind of offences, like treason; it is questionable, however, if the enormous fines which were usually inflicted in the most important cases went to swell the income of the community; these were probably handed over to the State, and only the minor fines and fees appropriated to the monastic revenues. The lower portions of the building appear to have been used for a prison up to the Reformation, the upper parts being used for various purposes. In 1480, the unknown Schoolmaster of St. Albans Grammar School, the "John Insomuch" of Chauney, issued his first work, his press being the third printing press set up in England. The assertion current in St. Albans that the second press originated here must be accepted with reserve, for a book exists in the British Museum which was printed at Oxford, and bears the date 1468. Typographists assert, that this date is evidently an error for 1478; but, personally, I see no reason why it should not equally be 1488, and, if so, St. Albans may once more be reinstated in the proud position of having set up the second printing press in England. Tradition asserts that the unknown schoolmaster-printer set up his machine and worked his cumbrous types in the upper portion of the Great Gateway, and assigns the room to the east of the large room over the archway as being the scene of his labours. Mr. John Harris has suggested the identity of the unknown with John Marchell, a

master of the Grammar School, who died in 1501, an opinion also subsequently expressed by Mr. W. Page.

In the twenty-fourth year of King Henry VIII. an Act was passed which restricted the judicial authority of the clergy and made the sessions the only criminal court for the district, the justices being appointed by the King. This first blow to the authority of the Abbots was soon after followed by the dissolution of the Monastery in 1539, whereby it ceased altogether.

The Gateway was saved from destruction when the Monastery was demolished by Sir Richard Lee, for the purpose of serving as a gaol for the borough and Liberty; the charter of King Edward VI., dated 12th May, 1553, gives the right to the Liberty magistrates to have their gaol in the borough, and to hold their sessions as before. "And the place where the said sessions had been ever held, and continued to be held, was the great room over the gateway; and here also sat the steward and convened his court of assize and general commission of oyez and terminer."

The office of chief steward was created by Charles I. Clutterbuck suggests that the steward here mentioned represented a continuation, without authority, of the office of abbot's steward which existed before the dissolution of the Monastery. The stewards, who held their courts in the room where we are assembled during the hundred years following the grant, were Sir Nicholas Bacon, the Lord Keeper; William Cecil, the great Lord Burghley; Sir Thomas Yerton, afterwards Viscount Brockley and Lord High Chancellor; and Sir Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam and Viscount St. Albans.

Three years after the Charter was granted, viz., on August 13th, 1556, the Marian Survey of St. Albans is dated. The Great Gateway then consisted of the present building, the Almonry to the west of it, and the Prior of Tynemouth's lodging, which Mr. Page is inclined to think formed a part of the Great Gateway.* In 1634, Benjamin Hare's map shows the great court-yard still intact; on the east being a wall; to the south, a row of buildings; west, the King's Stables; north, the Great Gateway, flanked on either side by a tall embattled wall. Fifteen years later, in 1649, another

* Transactions 1893-4, pp. 8-24.

survey of the Abbey precincts occurred, and the Great Gateway is described as being "built of stone and covered with lead, having over it the gaol and chambers belonging thereto, in the possession of Colonel Coxe, and having a stable on the east side of the said gate." A note to this survey intimates that the lower part of the Great Portal, with a great chamber now divided into three, was, by letters patent, dated 28th of January, 15th James I. (1619), granted to the gaoler of the Liberty of St. Albans for keeping his prisoners, as a common gaol. The room over the archway was used for all session business until the year 1651, when the justices purchased it, together with the whole of the upper portion of the building, and converted it into a House of Correction. Up to this period only the lower part had belonged to the Liberty. The justices who made the purchase were Sir John Wittewronge of Harden, or Harpenden; William Leman of Northaw; Henry Ewer of Watford, John King (afterwards knighted) of St. Albans; Alban Coxe of Beaumonts, and John Marsh of Shenley. They acquired it from Godfrey Ellis and Griffantius Phillips of Glo'ster. The sessions were from that time held in the Moot Hall.

In 1651, the entire premises appear to have consisted of the Great Gateway, one building, a stable adjoining it on the west side, and a small garden. The office of gaoler or porter was undertaken by a man named Sturgeon; in 1695, a William Morris was appointed, and in 1702, letters patent were granted to Ralph Kentish "to hold, exercise, and enjoy during his natural life, together with the ancient fee or salary of £11 1s. 4d. per annum, payable as formerly by the receiver-general of the county of Hertford." A room for the gaoler's lodging in the building was provided, and Newcome, writing in 1795, states that "the patent hath been renewed at divers times," and "William Kentish, by patent dated June 20th, 1787, is the present gaoler and porter of the great gate so appointed." An old print, by G. Newton, shows the building in the year 1787, with two structures, erected on either side of the archway on the south, the windows being simply plain squares or oblongs, and the chimneys as at present. The roof, however, was flat. Two years

later, in 1789, the old flat, lead roof was removed, and the present high pitched and tiled roof substituted. In 1798, a picture by B. Green shows the building with plain windows, those in the present Armoury being merely loopholes; while another engraving, dated 1816, represents the road through the building as a country lane with old palisades on either side, and brambles and nettles growing freely, the mediæval doors being still in position. These are now preserved in the north Presbytery Aisle of the Abbey Church.

In the year 1815, the Liberty gaol consisted of that part of the building nearest the church, the gaoler being appointed by the Lord-Lieutenant of the county. There was a spacious courtyard for the use of the prisoners, whose daily allowance of food amounted to a pound and a-half of bread for each person. No firing was allowed in winter, and the inmates endeavoured to alleviate their pitiful condition by begging from passers-by. Their method of collection was generally by means of an old shoe attached to a string, which was lowered from one of the upper windows; any money collected in this extraordinary manner was invariably spent in the purchase of firewood. During the French war under Napoleon Buonaparte, some prisoners-of-war were incarcerated within the building, and it is stated that one of them effected his escape by a desperate and perilous leap from one of the windows of the room over the great archway. The remaining part of the building on the west side of the road was called the House of Correction, to which vagrants were committed until they could be forwarded to their respective parishes. The gaoler was appointed by the Corporation, who had a few years before effected the purchase of some of the adjoining land for the benefit of those offenders who were sentenced to hard labour. In 1856, the windows were partly or wholly renewed in many parts of the building, but some of the original ones still remain.

In 1868, the Monastery Gateway proved to be too small for accommodating the number of prisoners, and a new gaol was accordingly erected near the Midland Railway Station. The old building was then purchased by the Governors of the Grammar School for £1,000, and the school transferred from the Lady Chapel of the Abbey to its present quarters in 1871.

The Great Gateway is of unusually large dimensions. The ground plan is an oblong divided into two portions by a public road through the centre. In the walls, which are exceedingly thick and strong, of flint and lime-mortar, may be found Roman tiles and irregular blocks of stone, as well as the predominating flint. The windows are Perpendicular, and generally of modern construction, but only a few of the original ones remain. There is an entrance arch on the south and a smaller one on the north with a postern; the roof of the archway is groined in stone, and is considered a good specimen of fourteenth-century work. On the ground-floor are several apartments with stone walls and groined ceilings, presenting many points of interest. Buckler describes them as "four avenues—two on either side of the archway incorporated with the present edifice; one of those on the west side is of the age of the thirteenth century and extremely elegant."

Below the ground floor are the dungeons, now difficult of access; one of them on the east side of the archway is of considerable size, occupying part of one of the so-called avenues, and extending vertically to the second floor of the building, where four rooms are found similar to those below. Above the archway is the large room in which the sessions were formerly held, and this is flanked by two rooms of almost similar dimensions on either side. The ceilings are supported by massive oaken beams resting upon stone corbels, carved into heads and other devices; as the brackets are generally placed without regard to symmetry of design, it is probable that some of them formed a part of the earlier building, and are therefore specially interesting on that account. Some ancient fireplaces of peculiar design still exist; one of these bears a crude representation of the royal arms, the initials "C.R." for "Carolus Rex," and is executed in stone and plaster dating from the time of the first Charles. In bringing to a conclusion this account of one of the most interesting historical buildings to be found in St. Albans, a considerable degree of pleasure is experienced at the thought that this monastic relic will, in all probability, be preserved to us for many years to come as the home of the ancient Grammar School, and thus not only

perpetuate its intimate connection with the greatest conventional fraternity that ever flourished upon English soil, but the vicissitudes it suffered in the troubled times of the great Peasant Revolt.

[In the compilation of this paper, I wish to express my indebtedness to some unpublished MSS. of the late Rev. Henry Fowler; to Mr. Jno. Harris, C.E., for revision and correction of proofs; to Mr. W. H. Nicholson, for translations and researches in the "Gesta," etc.; to Mr. Worthington Smith, for information respecting Totternhoe stone; and, for the Plans of the Great Gateway, to Mr. Percival C. Blow, A.R.I.B.A., who spent much time in ascertaining and recording the dimensions of the building.]

St. Albans.

The Great Gateway of the Monastery,

now part of St. Albans School.

Ground Plan.

A. Armoury. The ceiling is groined in stone and plastered; light ribs spring from half-pillars in the walls. Modern wood floor. One high step up to each of the embrasures, and also to a small door at "a." No door between **A** and **B**. The doorway has been cut subsequently to the erection of the building.

B. Armoury. Vaulted as **A**. High step to embrasure. Low doorway at "b" to public road through archway. Wood floor, modern. Traditional dungeon beneath floor. Pillars supporting groining ribs, "e." At "o" are indications of a doorway leading to **B**.

C. Dungeon (reputed), 19 feet deep, inaccessible except by ladder or rope. Vaulted over with 3 courses of modern brickwork which has fallen through in places; this probably supported a floor at some time at a higher level than the floor in **A**. At "c" is a small aperture to "C" affords light. The wall at "d" is of modern brickwork filling up a gothic arch. The walls of the dungeon below the floor level are chiefly of rough flint work. There is a deep accumulation of flints, mortar, and rubbish on the floor.

D. Turret to First Floor and Leads. Probably continued downwards originally to dungeon under **B**.

X. and **XX.**, positions of the two demolished northern turrets. The foundation of **X** were exposed in 1870. Comparatively modern brickwork, almost from the ground to the embattlements, show the former positions.

E. Furnace Room, of similar architecture to **A** and **B**.

H. Small Spiral Stairway to First Floor only.

F. Avenue of Early English Architecture, possibly part of the Prior of Tynemouth's lodging. The ceiling is groined, with massive ribs, springing from corbels. At "m" are small apertures piercing the walls, and at "n" a cupboard, formerly a gothic doorway leading to **E**. "o" is probably an entrance for modern requirements.

G. Turret leading to First and Second Floors and to leads.

First Floor Plan.

I, J. Class Rooms with no special features, served by the Turret **L** ascending from **D** (Ground Plan). Wooden partitions at "f."

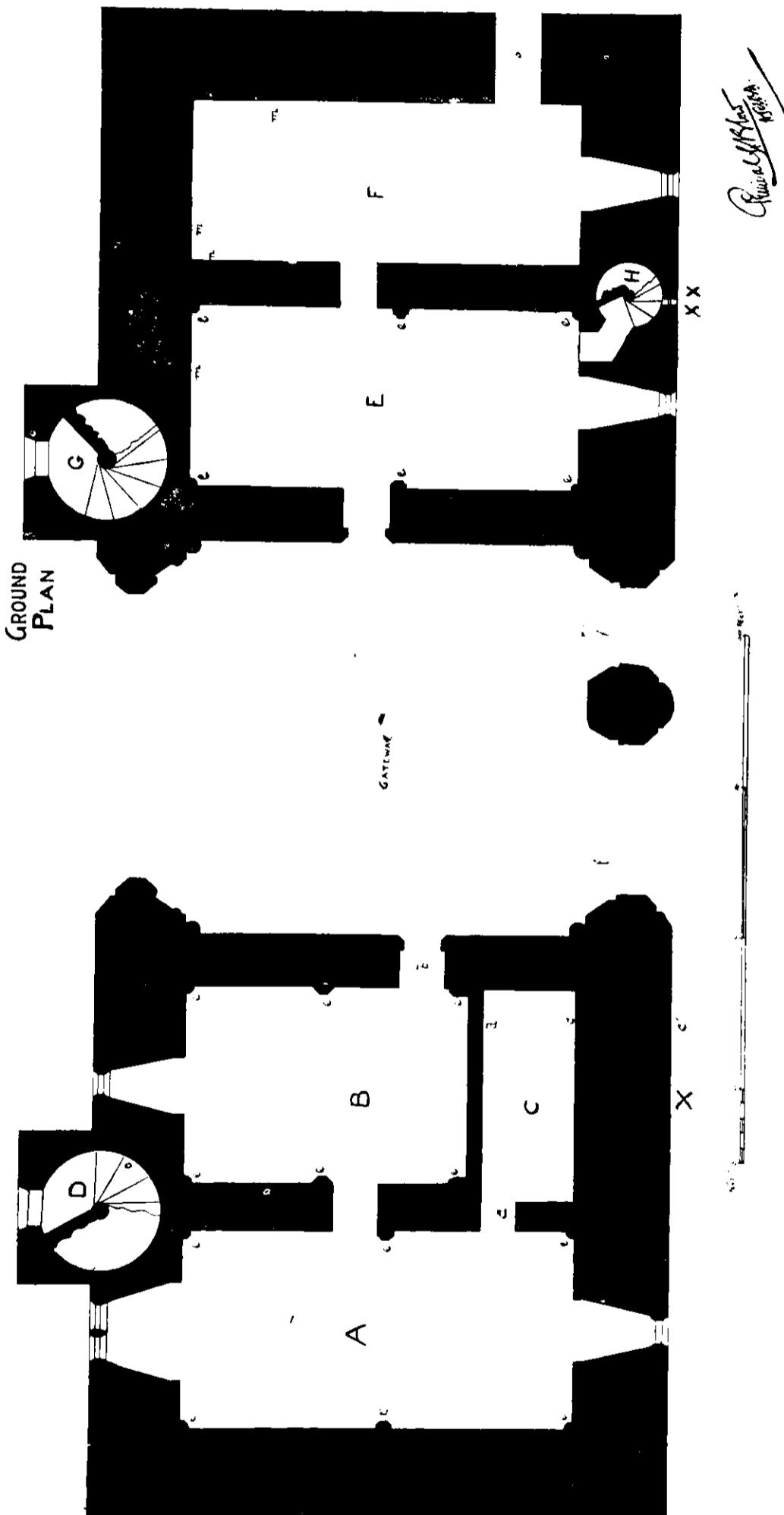
K. Small Ante-Room.

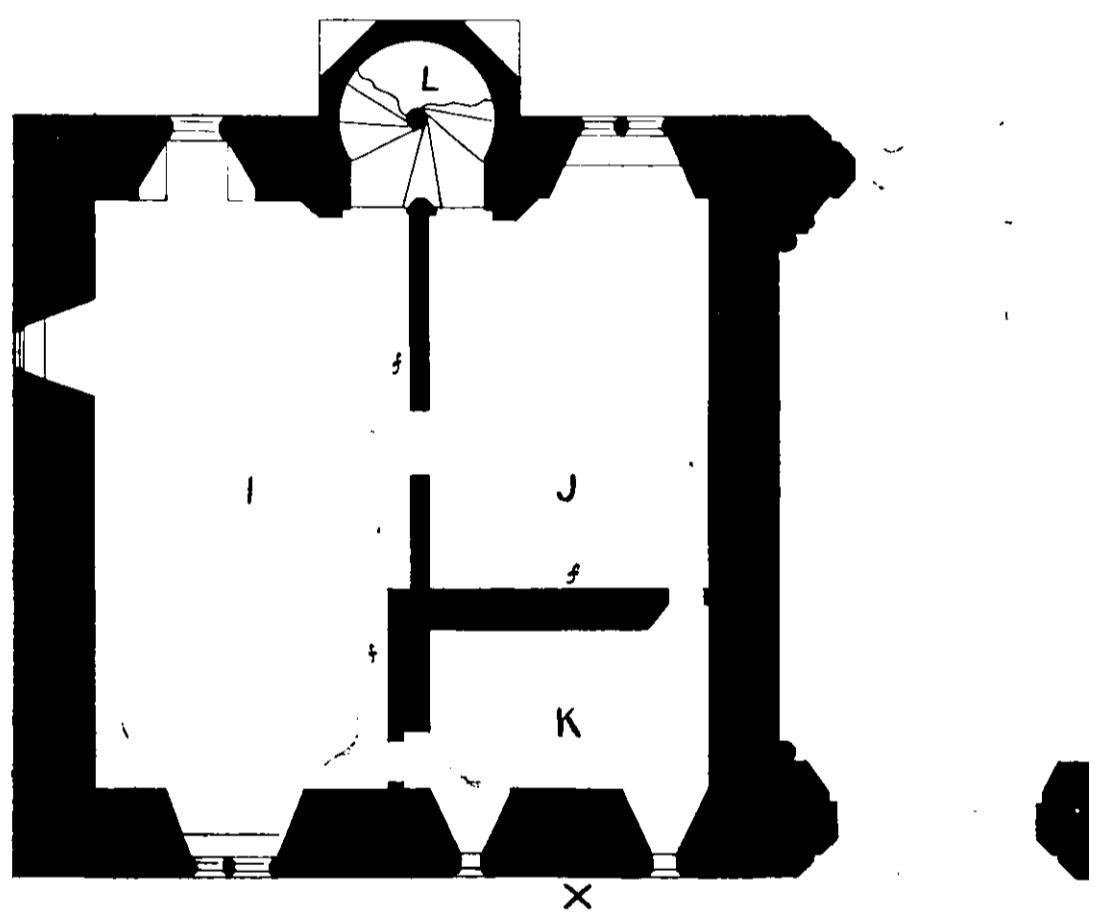
M, N, O. Rooms used for domestic purposes, served by the spiral staircase **P** ascending from **G**.

Q. Spiral Stairway ascending from **H** (Ground Plan).

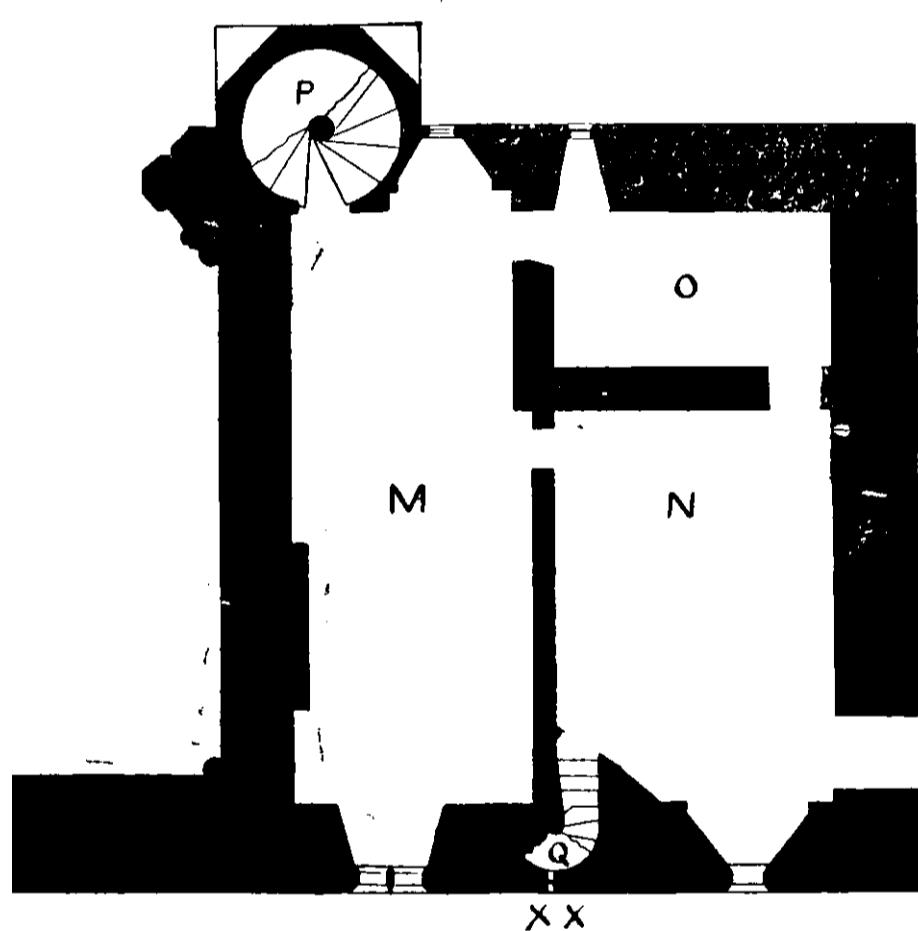
Second Floor Plan.

R. Class Rooms, divided by a recently-erected partition at "g," "h," fireplace; "j," ditto, erected temp. Charles I. with plaster representation of the Royal Arms above and initials N.Y. At "k" is a blocked-up entrance in brickwork to **U**, a spiral ascending from **L** and continuing to the leads. The

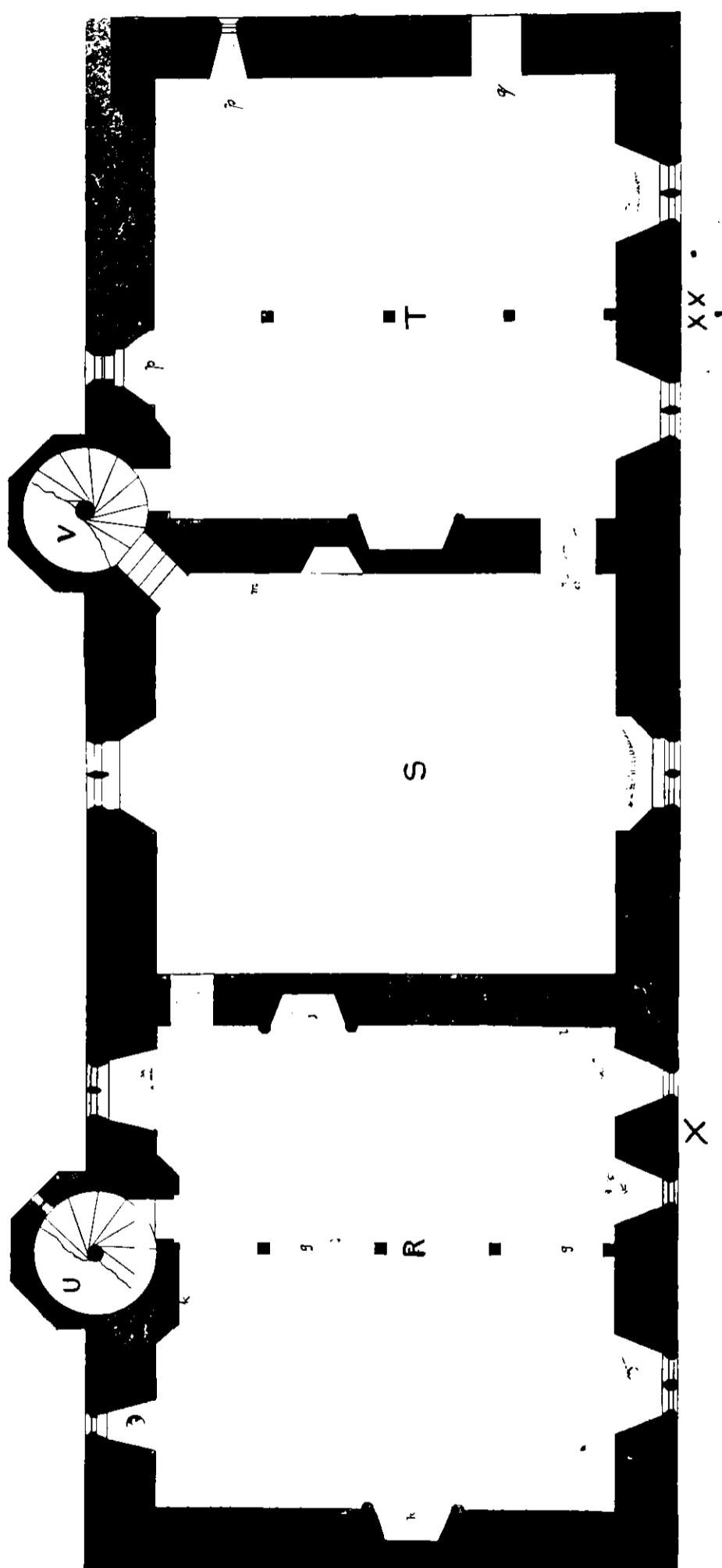




FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



ceiling is supported by oak beams resting centrally on four perpendicular posts, and sustained at the ends by trusses springing from carved corbels. A deep recess at "l" used for a cupboard. In R the third (or second) printing-press in England is reputed to have been set up, in 1480.

S. *Class Room* over the archway, used for the Sessions until 1651, and subsequently, with R and T, and the chambers in the roof, as a House of Correction. The ceiling is similar to that in R and T, but no central supports exist. The spiral stairway Y ascends from P and continues upwards to the leads. Fireplace at "m."

T. *Gymnasium*. Similar in every respect to R, served by the stairway at Y
Small embrasures at "p." Modern doorway at "q."

Roof.

The three rooms in the roof are only used as storerooms, the flooring being more or less unsafe. The strong bolts and locks upon the doors show that they were used for the incarceration of prisoners after 1789, when the high-pitched roof was constructed.