Taunton Castle.

BY THE REV. F. WARRE.

AT the commencement of the eighth century, about one hundred and fifty years had elapsed, since Cerdic, landing at Cerdicshore, probably on the coast of Hampshire, had laid the foundation of the West Saxon Kingdom. During this interval, under the rule of able and warlike Sovereigns that state had gradually increased in power and importance, and at the time of which we speak under the auspices of the brave and wise Ina, was rapidly progressing to that superiority over the other states of the Heptarchy, which enabled Egbert and his successors to assume the supreme government, and eventually to become sole monarchs of the Anglo-Saxon nation. The Saxons, at first a race of heathen savages, as fierce and barbarous as ever laid waste a Christian and civilized country, had evinced a wonderful aptitude for improvement and government. No longer heathens, their kings and chiefs had become, in most cases, zealous, though perhaps ignorant Christians; while the laws of Ina, still extant, furnish ample proof that while carrying on a desperate contest during two centuries, with the Romano-British inhabitants of the

Taunton Castle—South Front.

island, this energetic and intellectual, though, undoubtedly, fierce and sensual race, had not neglected the improvements of domestic civilization or the science of civil government. But though thus powerful and increasing, the kingdom of Wessex, particularly on its western side, was anything but secure. On the heights of Quantock, Bleadon, and Brendon, as well as in the fastnesses of Exmoor, the Bretwallas, or British Welsh, as they are called by the Saxon historians, still held their own; while the whole of Devon and Cornwall was still inhabited by the descendants of those Danmonii, who had resisted the invasion of the men of Galedin, generally known as the Belgæ, and now improved by an admixture of Roman blood, and rendered formidable by the remains of Roman discipline, maintained an almost unceasing warfare against the usurping Saxons, under the command of their daring leader, Geraint, prince or regulus of Cornwall; and it was for the purpose of checking their inroads, and strengthening his western frontier, that Ina, in the year 702, determined to build a fortress on the site of the present Castle of Taunton.

In order fully to appreciate the advantages of this situation, it is necessary to consider the changes which a period of more than eleven hundred years has worked on the face of the country. To a person looking towards the south from Plais-street, the name of which implies that a road existed there in Roman times, the view presents a tract of highly cultivated and richly wooded land, extending in undulating beauty to the base of the Blackdown hills, which, with the bold height of Neroche, form on this side the outline of the picture, sinking with a gradual and easy slope from the high ground at Wilton, on the right, to the level plain, which extends towards Bridgwater, on the left; in the fore ground stands the town of Taunton, conspicuous for

its beautiful towers, between which and the spectator the Thone winds its slow course towards the Parret, through a narrow level of fertile and verdant meadows. But at the beginning of the eighth century this beautiful vale must have been occupied in great measure by the primæval Forest of elm, on which the Saxon husbandman was only beginning to make impression. Here and there might be seen the ruins of earlier civilization, the broken walls of Roman villas, and spaces cleared for cultivation, by those whom the barbarous invaders had exterminated or reduced to slavery. The Thone untrammeled by lock or weir, was then a rapid and shallow stream, which, beginning to lose the speed with which it had hurried from the western hills, pursued a more winding and deeper course as it passed between the thickets of alder and willow, which then covered the western part of the marsh. At the confluence of a small stream, flowing from the south with the river, a little to the right of the spectator, was a small space of ground, slightly elevated above the marshy level, affording a dry and firm situation for the intended castle ; protected on the north and west by the river and stream, and at a distance from the higher ground sufficient, in those days, to prevent its fortifications from being dangerously overlooked. Here it was that Ina built his castle, constructed, no doubt, like other Saxon strongholds, chiefly, if not entirely of wood, and consisting of little more than a strong palisade of wooden beams, surrounded by a moat, and containing the hall and other buildings which the simple habits of those days required to form a residence fit for a warlike monarch. Here he is said frequently to have resided ; and here it is not improbable that he compiled that code of laws which has done more to render his name illustrious than either his wars or his pious liberality, though the

first greatly tended to the consolidation of the West Saxon Kingdom, while to the latter the Cathedral of Wells, and the English College, founded by him at Rome, bear ample testimony. But this Castle, in spite of its advantageous situation both for security and political purposes, was not destined to be of long duration, for having been occupied by Ealdbert, a rebel noble, it was besieged and taken by Queen Ethelburga, and its destruction is thus briefly recorded in the Saxon Chronicle, under date, A.D., 722. "This year, Queen Ethelburga destroyed Taunton, which Ina had formerly built. Ealdbert wandered a wretched exile, in Surrey and Sussex, and Ina fought against South Saxons."

But though the castle was thus destroyed, it is probable that the town continued to flourish, for in the next reign we find that the devout Queen Frethogitha prevailed upon Ethelard to bestow the town of Taunton, then a royal residence, on the Church of Winchester ; nor must it be supposed that its fortifications were altogether destroyed, for in those days no place of importance could be totally destitute of fortifications without being exposed to the constant danger of being plundered either by outlaws or more legitimate assailants. Savage, indeed, says that a new Castle was built about the time of the Norman conquest, by one of the Bishops of Winchester ; and it is certainly not improbable that Walkelyn, to whom and St. Peter, the Conqueror made a particular grant of lands in the neighbourhood, might have fortified the manorial residence, a precaution which the enmity of the conquered Saxons would undoubtedly render advisable to an usurping Norman prelate. But, however this may have been, I can find no positive mention of any Castle at Taunton, from the year 722, when, as above stated, that built by Ina was

destroyed by Ethelburga, until the reign of Henry I., when William Gifford, who, as Bishop of Winchester, at that time held the lordship of the town and manor of Taunton, built a strong Castle upon the site of the Saxon fortress. From the number of documents dated at Taunton Castle, it appears to have been frequently occupied by the Bishops of Winchester, and was enlarged and strengthened by them from time to time, as their convenience or security required. In the year 1490, Bishop Langton repaired the whole building. In the year 1496 the inhabitants of Cornwall being highly irritated by the oppressive manner in which the taxes, newly imposed by Henry VII., were levied upon them, rose in resistance of them, and having taken the Castle of Taunton, cruelly murdered the Provost of Penrhyn, who had sought refuge within its walls, and the next year, under the command of Perkin Warbeck, again occupied that fortress; but upon hearing that the King was in person leading a strong army against them, evacuated the place just in time to save it from the horrors of a siege.

In the year 1577, the Castle was again repaired and altered, by Bishop Horn. The last mention of Taunton, as a place of military importance, occurs in the reign of Charles I., when it was occupied by the Parliamentarian army, and, after a short investment, taken from them by the royal forces, under the Marquis of Hertford, and was again seized by Blake, whose occupation and defence of the town and Castle against a very powerful royalist army, under Goring, is, perhaps, one of the most remarkable instances of military daring and skill recorded in the history of that eventful time. Shortly after the restoration it was dismantled, by order of Charles II.; and though parts of it are still used for civil and domestic purposes,

its fortifications being no longer required for the purposes of defence, have gradually fallen into a state of complete ruin. Time, and the still more destructive inroads of modern utilitarianism, and still worse, the vandalism of modern improvement, have well nigh obliterated the remains of this venerable abode of episcopal and feudal power. Even since I have turned my attention to its ruins some of its most interesting features have past away for ever; and it is in the hope of recording what still remains, and of preserving some idea of its original features, before every trace of its plan has vanished, that I venture to lay before this meeting the results of my investigations among the neglected fragments of Taunton Castle.

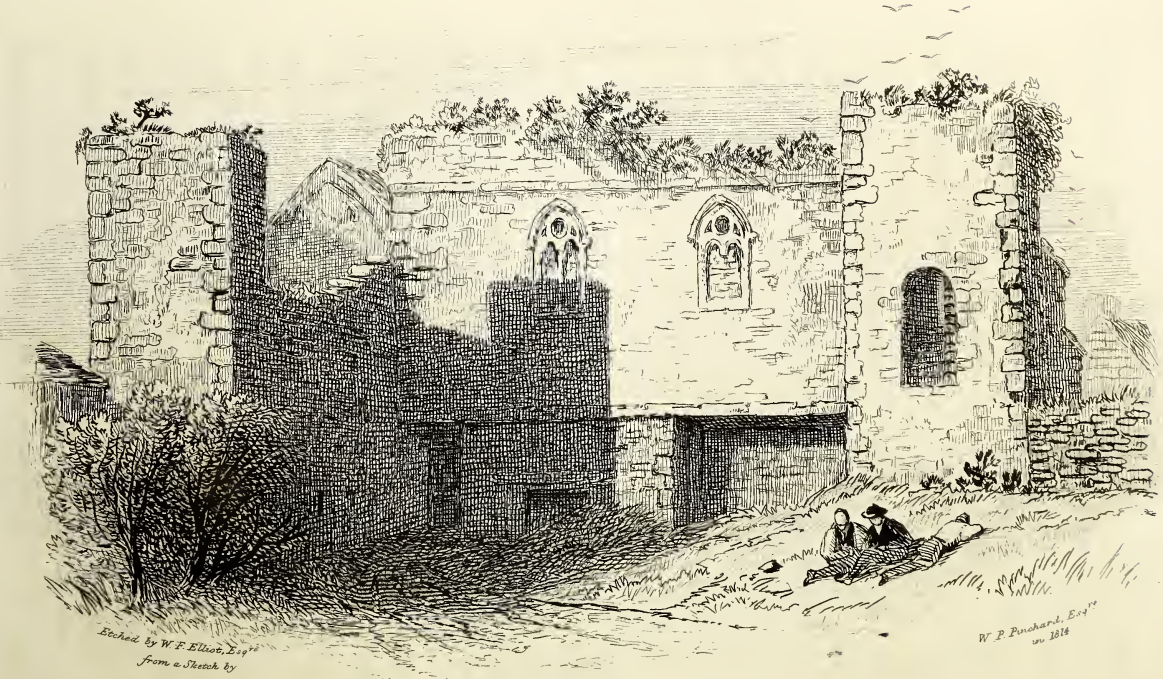
The style of fortification prevalent in Saxon times, was, as might be expected in so early a stage of society, extremely simple, consisting of little more than a deep trench, the earth from which being thrown inwards formed a high bank or agger, which was further defended by a palisade of strong wooden beams, or in some few cases of great importance, by a wall built on the top. The shape of this enclosure was usually determined by the lie of the ground on which the fortification was constructed; and such buildings of wood as were required for the convenience of the garrison were erected within. Of these castles nothing probably remains, beyond the trench and mouldering agger. But after the invasion of the Normans, a people much farther advanced in all the arts of war and peace, a massive and substantial style of fortification was introduced, many noble specimens of which have come down to our days in a state of comparatively high preservation, forming the most stately and impressive features of many of our finest castles. The most important feature of this style, was the keep, in the plan of which a remarkable uniformity prevails

both in Normandy and in this country. It was usually square or oblong; one or two squares in height, having the common flat Norman buttresses rising from a plinth, and dying into the wall a little below its summit; those at the end of each side usually join at the angles, and being carried above the top of the wall, form square turrets at the angles of the building. The openings in the lower part of the keep are mere loops, those in the upper story which contained the principal apartments, are Norman windows of the usual form, sometimes double. Whether these keeps were finished with a battlement, or plain parapet, it is impossible to decide with any degree of certainty, as those which remain are probably later additions. The entrance to the keep was, in most cases, by an arched doorway upon the first floor, near one of the corners, the staircase leading to which is contained in a smaller square tower, placed against the side of the main building. Newcastle and Castle Rising, are very fine and perfect specimens of this style of fortifications. This keep, together with the walls of the enceinte, of which in some cases it formed a part, and within which the other buildings for the accommodation of the garrison were situated, was surrounded by a moat, either wet or dry, according to the circumstances of the locality, and together with a lofty artificial mound, constituted the usual fabric of a Norman Castle. During the thirteenth century, a more scientific style of fortification was gradually introduced, in which flanking towers, enabling the garrison to defend the intermediate curtain wall from salient points, superseded the massive structures, whose passive strength had been the chief dependence of the Norman engineers; and in the reign of Edward I., the second type of English castle, known as the Edwardian, or concentric, was fully developed. We now, in place of a

solid keep, find an open quadrangle, having its sides defended by flanking towers, and its entrances by embattled gate houses ; and around the quadrangle two, or even three concentric lines of defence were drawn, containing between them the same number of courts or bailies, in the inner of which were situated the principal buildings, such as the hall, chapel, &c., while the offices, stabling, and frequently the mill, occupied the middle and outer courts. The entrances were defended by gate towers, with portcullises, and drawbridges ; and barbicans, or têtes-du-pont, were erected, usually of wood, outside the counter scarp of the ditch. Of this type of Castle, which is said to have been introduced by an engineer of the name of Elrington, Caernarvon, built by Edward I., furnishes a magnificent example. These are the two great types of the English Castle, and though improvements were introduced by Wykeham and others in later times, we find in almost every case the main features of these types, either separate, or when additions had been made to an original Norman Castle, very commonly combined. This appears to have been the case in Taunton Castle,—the general plan of which I will now endeavour to point out, by the help of this very excellent ground plan which I have procured for the purpose.

The stream whose confluence with the Thone marks, as I before observed, the situation of King Ina's Castle, enters the outer moat at the south western corner, and is there divided into two channels, one of which proceeds towards the river in nearly a straight course, through the garden attached to the house occupied by Mr. Channon, and passing under the road through Stevens's Nursery-garden, falls into the Thone at the north western extremity of the slight elevation on which the Castle was built. The

defences on this side, with the exception of a mass of masonry, evidently of ancient date, at the south western corner, and another small fragment at the north side of the western gate, through which the road now leading to Wilton runs, are totally destroyed and their situation marked only by the remains of the internal agger, which was probably crowned as at Castle Rising, Cardiff, and elsewhere, by a battlemented and looped wall of moderate elevation. At the bottom of the slope between the Winchester Arms Inn and Stevens's garden, the labourers employed a few years ago in constructing a deep drain, dug up part of several large beams; these were probably the remains of a wooden barbican situated as usual outside the moat, defending the approach to the western gate, and itself commanded by the interior defences of the gate, which probably consisted of a gate house with flanking towers, all vestiges of which have, however, totally disappeared. From the south-west angle, the moat extended towards the east nearly at right angles, to the course of the brook, between the school-house and the yard of the Old Angel Inn, as far as the present Market, where it turned to the north and proceeded in nearly a straight line under the stables of Pattison's Hotel, and at the back of the houses on the western side of North Street, and joined the river, or rather mill stream, a little above the town mills. Of the defences of this side of the Castle nothing remains until we come to the eastern gate, where, though sadly disfigured by modern additions, stand the very striking remains of a very strong and handsome gate-house, the erection of which has usually been ascribed to Bishop Langton, his arms being carved on a stone inserted in the western front of the building, but which I have no hesitation in referring to the Edwardian period. Not only



TAUNTON CASTLE,

North View of the Eastern Gate.

are the mouldings plain massive chamfers, quite dissimilar to those of the fifteenth century used in some parts of the Castle, but the arch and the whole character of the building, as well as the windows of the chamber north of gate (now destroyed, but well represented in some old drawings which have been shewn me), are decidedly such as to lead to the conclusion that the gate-house is not later than the time of Edward III., and probably earlier than even the reign of that monarch. At this point, outside the moat, were discovered, a short time since, the foundations of some strong stone fabric; either those of a barbican, which was sometimes, though rarely, constructed of masonry, or of walls leading to the drawbridge and confining the approach to a narrow passage commanded by the gate-house; an arrangement not uncommon in Castles of the Edwardian type. On the north side, the marshy ground, the river Thone, and the ancient mill stream passing nearly close to the Castle walls, rendered any other moat quite unnecessary. At a short distance below the junction of the brook with the mill stream, at the corner of Stevens's garden, a second moat opens upon the water, and extending round the buildings now in use, joins the external moat at the back of the Castle Inn. Whether this moat was ever deeper than it now is admits of a doubt, as there appears to have been a sort of platform on the interior side of the great moat, leading to an outwork at the north-eastern extremity of the place, nearly on a level with the bottom of the interior moat, which may perhaps mark its original depth before the construction of the outer defences; but it probably was deeper, for Sir Benjamin Hammet is said to have expended a large sum in laying out the grounds and filling up the moat, which on the western and southern sides is now occupied by gardens.

Immediately within the moat the south-eastern corner of the enclosure is occupied by an elevated rectangular platform, the sides of which, in the garden attached to Mr. Dyer's house, were, within a very few months, marked by masses of masonry, which have now given place to raspberry bushes; while that towards the moat displayed a face of undoubted Norman masonry, which has also disappeared before the unsparing march of modern improvements. From this platform a high agger extends to the north-eastern corner, where stands a mount commanding the outwork before mentioned, and the approach to the ancient mills; while along the front, defended by the mill stream, masses of very solid masonry may still be seen, but in so mutilated a condition as to defy any attempt at accurate description.

At the distance of more than twelve hundred years it would be manifestly absurd to expect any remains of a building constructed at a time when *getymbrian* was the word used to express building of any kind, fortifications included; but it is probable that this interior moat marks the exact site of the Castle built by Ina, and destroyed soon after by his sister, as it follows the form of the ground, and encloses the highest part of the elevated spot at the confluence of the brook with the Thone. That the platform at the south-east angle was the site of the Norman rectangular keep, does not admit of a doubt; while the mount at the north-eastern extremity was probably one of those so often met with in Norman fortifications, though the arch in its northern side, leading into the outwork before mentioned, is evidently of later date. Whether the Norman Castle extended farther to the west than the masses of masonry, before mentioned, may be doubtful, but I am inclined to think that the base court occupied the whole area included

Taunton Castle—North Front.

within the inner moat; and that much of the walls now remaining, are Norman, though modernized and adapted to the improved system of fortification introduced by Edward I. Immediately to the west of Mr. Dyer's premises, flanked by an enormous mass of ruined masonry, is a way leading at once to the mill stream, through a door-way having a segmental arch, which may perhaps be as early as the latter part of the thirteenth century, beyond which extends a wall of very great thickness, having flat buttresses of a very Norman-like appearance, which I believe to have been the original curtain surrounding the base court of the Norman Castle. This wall now forms the north side of the great hall which has been built against it inside, and has been cut through to give space for the insertion of the large square-headed windows of the sixteenth century, by which the hall is now lighted. This hall is generally supposed to have been built by Bishop Horne, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, his arms,* with the date, 1577, being carved on a stone built into the wall of the room now used by the grand jury. But this building is evidently an addition to it, and though the height of the hall, rising as it does considerably above the external defences, gives reason to suppose that it was constructed in comparatively peaceful times, yet the high pitch of the original roof, which is still to be seen against the square turret which rises at its western extremity, induces me to think that it is of considerably earlier date, and if not of the Edwardian period, together with the tower which contains a staircase of communication between the hall and the upper story of the western buildings of the inner bailey, more likely to be the work of Bishop Langton, in the fifteenth century,

* Partè per Pale, Winchester and Horne.

than of Bishop Horne, in the sixteenth. Whether the building composing the western side of the inner bailey of the Edwardian Castle be originally Norman, or no, (which from the immense thickness of the walls, as well as from a letter of Sir Benjamin Hammet, in which he says he has converted a Saxon arch into an apartment, I am inclined to believe it was) the ashler work of lancet windows still apparent in both external and internal walls, which can hardly be later than the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, as well as the circular towers at the angle, leave no doubt that if not built from the ground they were modernized and adapted to the system of fortification in use during that period. The entrance into this inner bailey was through an embattled gate-tower, which, from the inscription and arms upon two stones in its south front, has been ascribed to Bishop Langton. But this stone is clearly not in situ, and though the mouldings of the internal arch of the gateway are such as were commonly used in the fifteenth century, those of the outer arch are plain bold chamfers. This, as well as the shape of the arch itself, which may well be as early as the thirteenth century, leads me to believe that the gate-tower is an Edwardian addition to the base court of the Norman edifice, which Langton probably repaired and faced on the inside with ashler work, moulded according to the taste prevalent during the period in which he lived.

If I be right in supposing this gate-house to be of early English or early decorated date, there is at its western junction with the other buildings of the south front, a piece of construction which strongly corroborates my idea that the walls of, at least, part of the inner bailey, are Norman. I find that the buttress of the lower building, which is flat and of very Norman-like construction is carried up

close to, and flush with, the front of the gate-house, which is evidently a later addition to the other buildings of the south front. To the east of the gate-house, a building, very similar in character to that on the west, extends nearly to the south-western angle of the platform on which I suppose the Norman keep to have stood. It is without buttresses, the masonry very coarse and irregular, being little better than rubble work, and decidedly unlike that of the round tower which flanked its eastern extremity, little more than the foundation of which now exists. Immediately within the wall stands the house occupied by Mr. Dyer, apparently a building of the fifteenth century, but probably containing portions of much earlier date. The school-house, also, founded by Bishop Fox in the year 1522, stands immediately within the southern ramparts of the Castle, and is a very excellent specimen of the domestic architecture of the beginning of the sixteenth century.

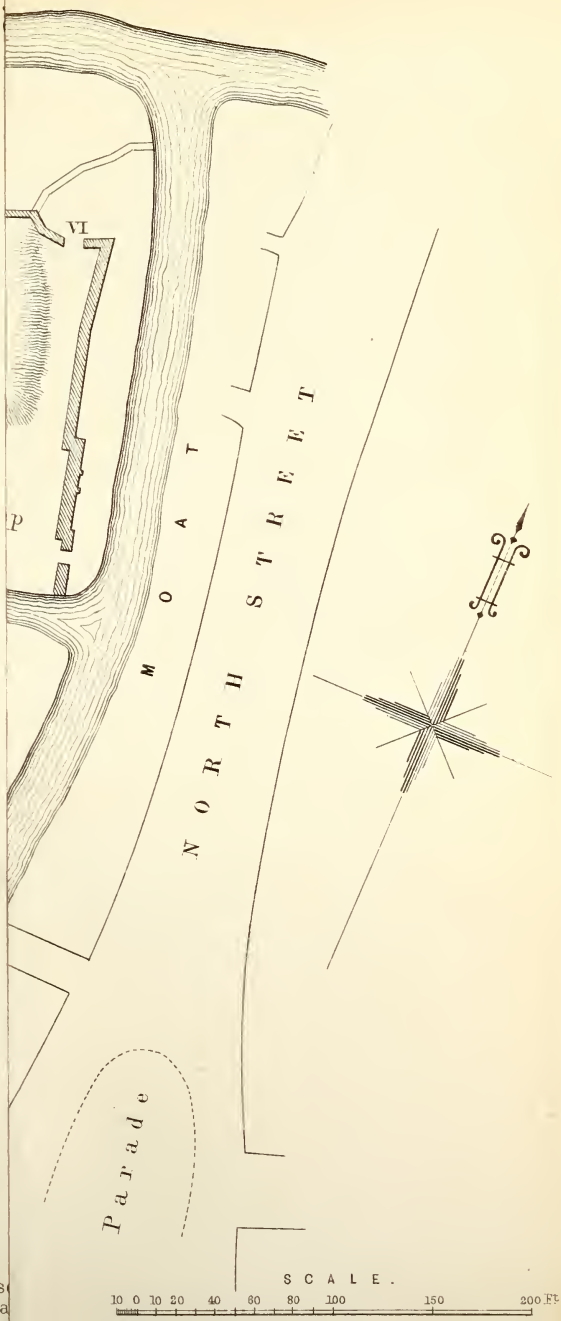
This is all that I have been able to trace of perhaps the most important of the nine castles which are known to have existed in this county ; and I feel that I ought to apologize for having occupied your time with so meagre and unsatisfactory a series of conjectures; for in truth they are little more. It is now generally allowed by architectural antiquaries, that it is almost impossible accurately to determine the date, even of ecclesiastical edifices, merely by the style of the architecture, without the aid of documentary evidence; and if the difficulty be great when the strict rules of ecclesiastical architecture kept in order the exuberant fancies of the builder, it is very much increased in the case of domestic and castellated fabrics, where these rules were much relaxed and varied to suit the convenience of the inhabitants and the circumstances of the locality.

Of this aid I have been almost entirely destitute, my only guides havin g been the mutilated buildings which still remain, and the analogy of other Castles which have suffered less from modern utilitarianism and senseless want of taste. My conclusions, therefore, are little better than conjectures, but such as they are they may perhaps be the means of at least recording what still remains of a very important Castle, of which, as I mentioned at the beginning of my paper, many of the most interesting features are, even now in the act of passing away for ever.

August 31st, 1853.

REFERENCE TO THE PLAN.

I. Entrance to inner Bailey.
II. Interior of Gate repaired by Bp. Langton.
III. Way leading to Mill-stream.
IV. Stair-turret, between hall and upper floor of western buildings.
V. Mass of masonry in Mr. Channon's garden.
VI. Out-work, commanded by Mount.
VII. Eastern gate.
VIII. Western front of ditto.



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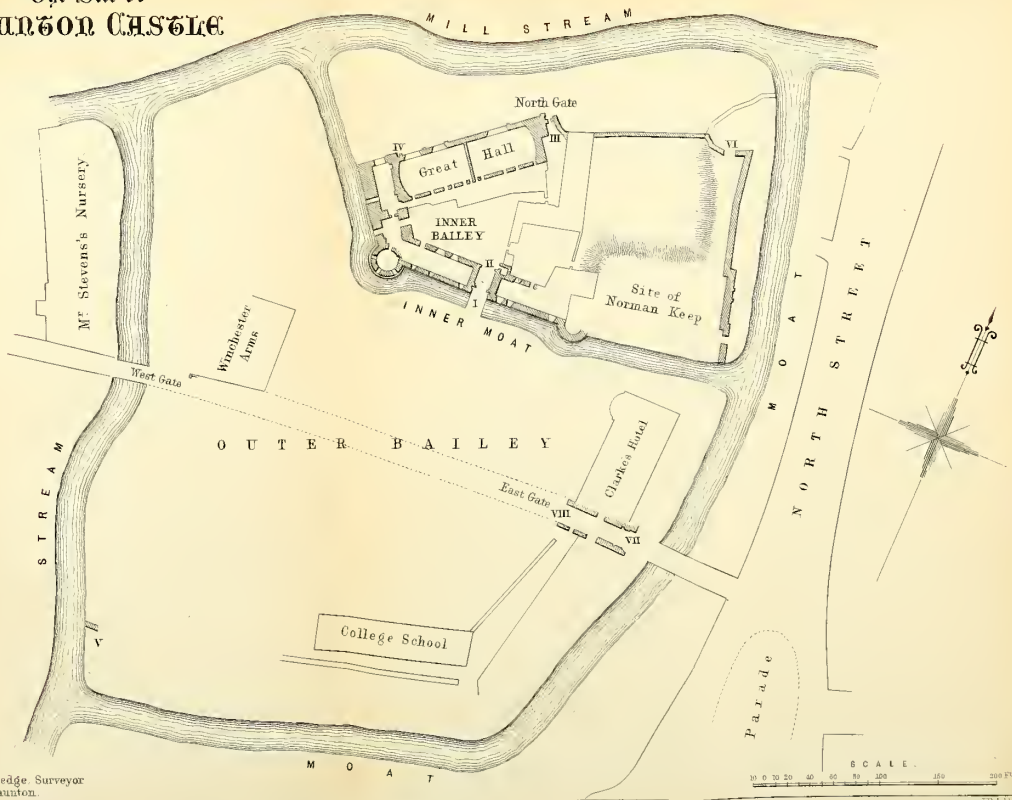
The Site of TAUNTON CASTLE



Jno Leversedge. Surveyor
Taunton.

F T Dollman Del^r

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