

CASTLE HOUSE, TAUNTON CASTLE

BY ROBERT TAYLOR

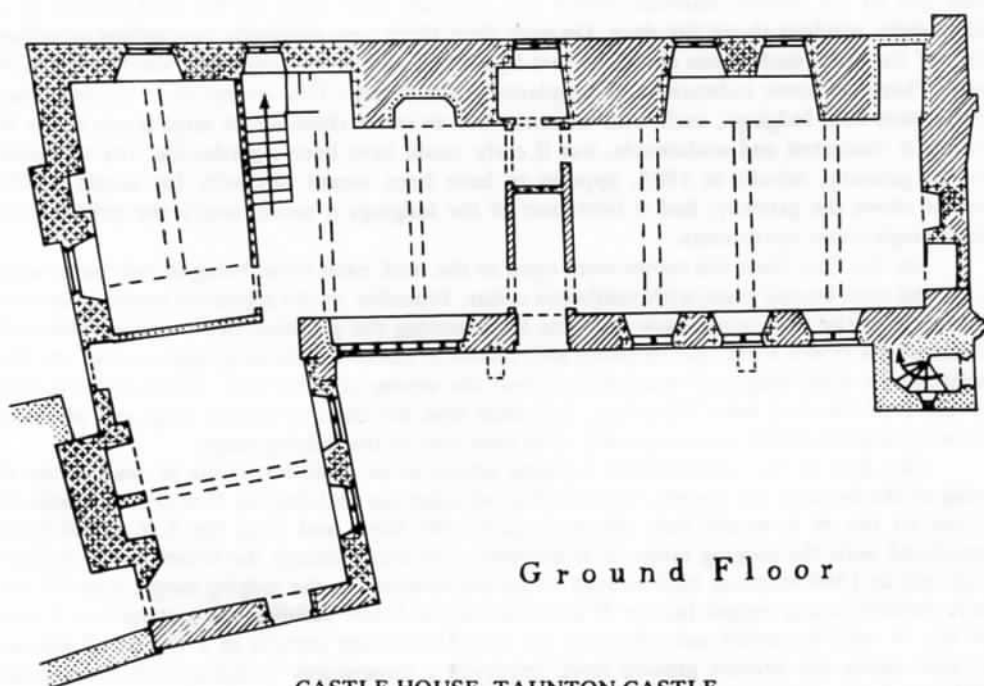
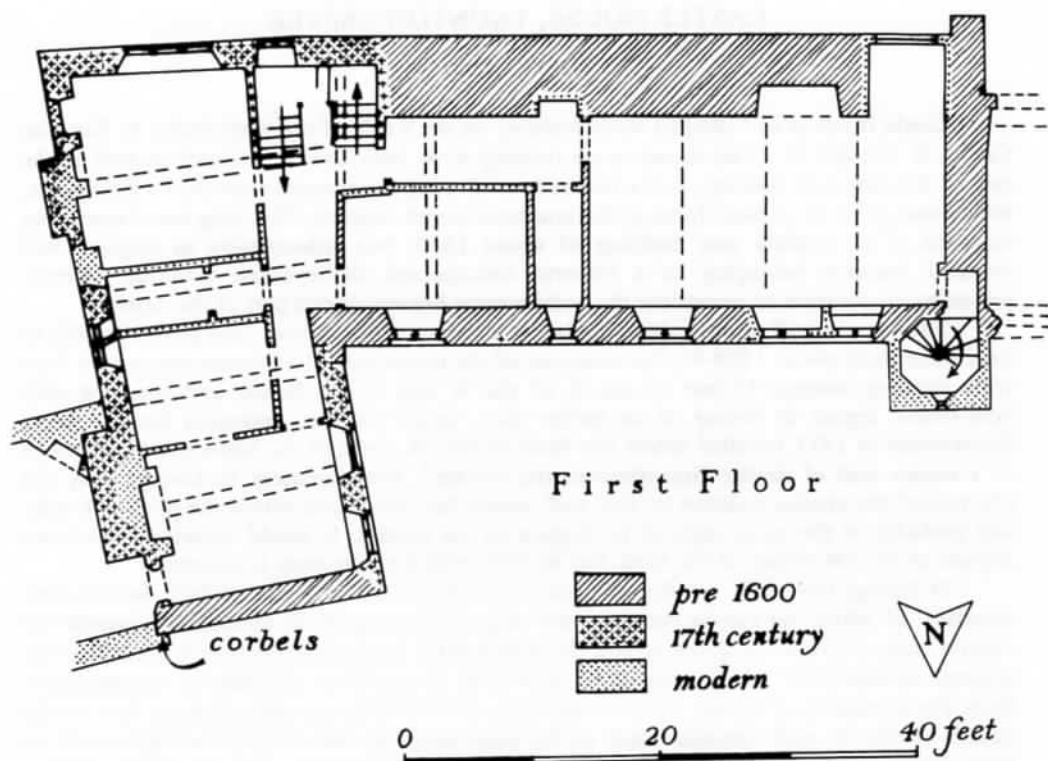
Castle House is an L-shaped stone building on the S side of the inner bailey of Taunton Castle. It consists of a two-storey range running E-W built against the curtain wall at the end of the fifteenth century, and a three-storey E wing at somewhat less than a right-angle, which was given its present form in the late seventeenth century. This wing has always been regarded as an entirely new building of about 1680, but redecoration in August 1966 revealed features belonging to a hitherto unsuspected timber-frame building, thereby providing an occasion to reconsider the architectural history of this part of the castle.

The curtain wall against which the house is built is 6½ feet thick, and generally held to have been built about 1208-9¹. The existence of the upper part of a Romancesque arch for a wide opening centred 17 feet to the E of the W wall of the house, and enriched with beak-heads, argues in favour of an earlier date, nearer to that suggested for the keep. Excavations in 1911 revealed below the floor of the SE room of the house the foundations of a return wall of similar dimensions to the curtain². Unfortunately St. George Gray did not record the precise position of this wall, which lay below and within the present E wall, and probably at the same angle of 82 degrees to the curtain. It would therefore have been aligned on the SW corner of the keep, but its relationship to the keep is uncertain.

St. George Gray also saw foundations on the S side of the inner bailey³, but the first structure of which we can be certain is the range of lodgings built about 1500 against the curtain wall, between the gateway and the return wall. Later alterations have destroyed the original arrangement, which appears to have been symmetrical and can be reconstructed from the remaining evidence. Two storeys high, the building was entered by a door in the centre of the N wall. On either side of the door were two windows of two lights each on both floors; there were also three irregularly-spaced buttresses, one of which remains embedded in later masonry. Inside the door a small lobby gave access to the rooms on either side and to the central staircase; lobby and staircase were open to the roof and lit by a single-light window above the door. On each floor there were originally two rooms, on either side of the stair, each room about 14 feet by 15 feet and lit by a two-light window in the N wall. There are some indications of fireplaces in the S wall. This arrangement suggests that there were four lodgings, each with an inner and an outer chamber. A large recess in the W rooms is mutilated and undateable, but if early could have been a garderobe. The vice next to the gateway, rebuilt in 1883, appears to have been meant primarily for access to the rooms above the gateway; had it been part of the lodgings it would imply the existence of eight single-room apartments.

On the first floor the rooms were open to the roof, each room being of two bays, with a central arch-braced truss with cambered collar. Probably in the sixteenth century the two rooms W of the stair were made into one by removing the partition below the uncambered collar of the closed truss, and inserting arch-braces to match the existing open trusses. At the same time a wide fireplace⁴ was inserted near the centre of the S wall. Although the rooms to the E of the stair were left intact, it is clear that the creation of this large and pleasant room indicates a major re-arrangement of at least part of the lodging range.

The date of the timber-frame building whose stone gable forms the N wall of the E wing of the house is not known, nor is it clear whether the building lay N or S of this wall. If it lay to the N it would have abutted against the keep, and if to the S it would have interfered with the lodging range. It is however clear that although the return of the curtain wall was in 1500 standing high enough to be incorporated in the lodging range, it could not have existed to any height further N when the timber-frame building was put up. The E end of the N wall is carried out 10 inches on three Hamstone corbels at a height of almost 17 feet above the present ground level, implying a three-storey building with floor-levels different from those in the adjacent lodgings. This suggests strongly that the building lay N



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of the wall. Remains of what must have been a similar three-storey jettied building of comparable date may be seen in the E range of Berry Pomeroy Castle, Devon.

About the end of the seventeenth century a series of alterations converted the former lodgings into a substantial house. The sequence and chronology of the alterations is not clear, and they are best regarded as a single project spread over several years. A new three-storey E wing was built incorporating the E rooms of the lodging range and the gable of the old timber-frame building. Part of the curtain and its return wall were rebuilt several feet thinner in order to increase the size of the rooms and provide space for a new staircase. One of the roof-trusses of the lodgings range was partly cut away to give headroom on the stair, and at the same time was made to support a timber-frame wall on the top storey of the new building. The ground floor of the lodgings range was opened out and replanned, the W room being fitted with bolection panelling and fireplace, while the first floor was ceiled over and subdivided into bedrooms. At the same time two of the buttresses were removed from the N wall, several wooden-framed mullion-and-transom windows installed on the ground floor to match those used throughout the new E wing, and a fashionable shell hood placed over the door. The stone frame of one of the original windows was reused on the first floor of the E wing, in the E wall where few would see it.

Being the result of piecemeal adaptation, the plan of this new house is unusual and cannot be compared directly with other houses of similar date. Interpretation is not difficult, and the general arrangement of the rooms is in accordance with current notions of house-planning. The NE room was the kitchen, with a wide fireplace, and the W room was clearly the main parlour. The room between the entrance and the stair must have served as a hall, and the SE room, with traces of panelling and plaster cornice, was a second parlour.

Castle House remained in continuous occupation until 1966, and suffered comparatively little alteration in that time apart from the removal of some post-medieval features and the alteration of several windows.

1. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 98 (1953) 68-70. The main accounts of the Castle are published in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 56 (1910), 86 (1940), 98 (1953) and 109 (1964-5).
2. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 56 (1910) xii.
3. MS. in the Society's Library.
4. This fireplace is given what can now be seen to be too early a date by a decade or two in M. Wood, *The English Mediaeval House*, pp. 267 and 275.