Brancepeth Castle

Brancepeth Caste, four miles southwest of Durham, was the original seat of the powerful Neville family. It is first mentioned during the Magna Carta war of 1216. In outline, the castle may date back to this period but nothing now standing is that old. The castle is similar architecturally to some of its late fourteenth century neighbors in the county and the rebuilding is attributed to Ralph Neville, first Earl of Westmoreland, after Raby was complete. Unfortunately his stronghold has been subjected to radical alterations.

From 1818 there was a heavy-handed restoration in neo-Norman style under the architect John Paterson, whose uninspired work has been justly criticized. The end result is a castle, which is a mishmash of original and sham features, best seen from a distance. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of medieval masonry has survived and the contrast between the old and the new is clearly apparent.

The castle is situated on a rise overlooking the Stockley Beck. It is a large, irregular enclosure surrounded by a strong curtain. The curtain looks complete, but some portions have been rebuilt. Paterson erected the present round-towered gatehouse on the site of the original. Most of the mural towers are authentic and have suffered comparatively little interference. These massive, oblong structures are unusual for the diagonal buttresses clasping their outer corners.

Proceeding clockwise from the gatehouse, we pass the Westmoreland and Constable towers, which have turrets rather than buttresses. Next comes the Russell Tower, a Paterson insertion, followed by three closely spaced towers containing vaulted chambers (including the so-called Barons' Hall in Bulmer's Tower). These three towers were attached to the main residential apartments, but the buildings, which now lean against the curtain on this side, are entirely of the nineteenth century. The curtain returns to the gatehouse via two small turrets.