

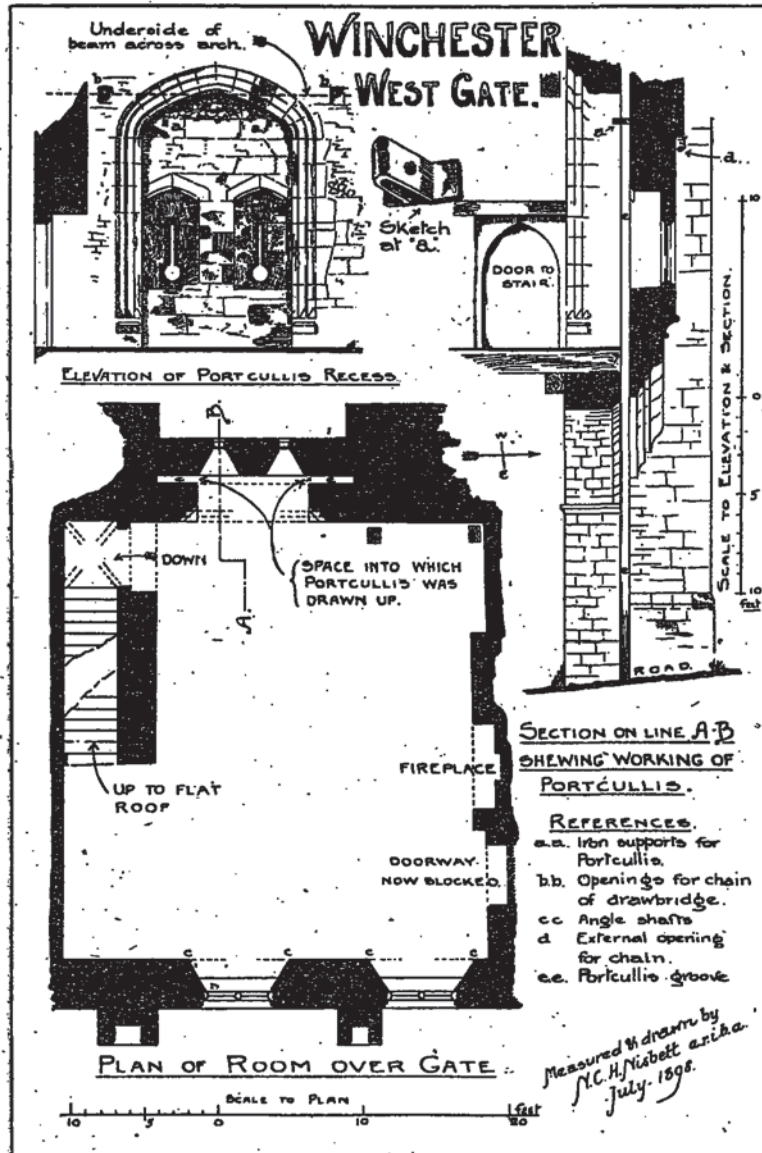
THE WEST WALL OF THE WESTGATE, WINCHESTER.

By B. H. ST. J. O'NEIL, M.A., F.S.A.

IT has long been realised that the existing western face of the Westgate of Winchester is later in date than the greater part of the rest of the building, but it seems that there is no contemporary, documentary record of its construction. Similarity has been noted between its architectural detail and that of William of Wykeham's work in Winchester Cathedral, and in particular it has been pointed out that the string-course contains carvings which seem to represent a white hart couchant, the badge of Richard II. It must be confessed that the figures in question now resemble some other beast rather than a stag, but this difference may be due to erosion of the usual attributes. If the carvings really represent white harts, then presumably they should be dated between 1390, by which time the Livery of the White Hart had become established, and the deposition of Richard II in 1399.

The wall in question has at first floor level two openings shaped like an inverted keyhole. Recent research has shown beyond all doubt that such openings were for defence by means of primitive cannon. The earliest keyhole gunports known to the present writer, all of approximately the same dimensions in elevation as those of Winchester Westgate, are at Canterbury Westgate, 1380, and at Bodiam Castle, Sussex, 1386. In both these cases the dating depends upon absolutely reliable documentary evidence. At Bodiam Castle, however, as also at God's House Tower, *alias* South Castle, Southampton, where there are several similar examples, not dateable from documents, the internal beds of the embrasures are flat throughout the width of the wall at the level of the bottom of the actual keyhole. Clearly in these cases the cannon were laid on wooden beds or trunks, directly on the beds of the embrasures.

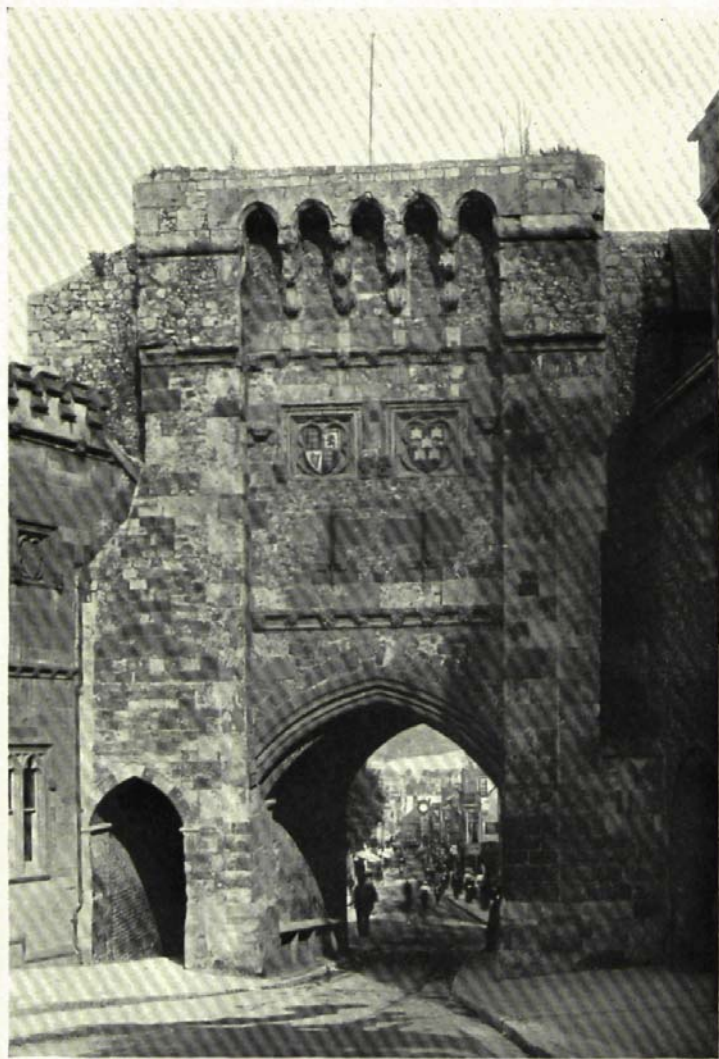
This arrangement cannot have been the case at Winchester Westgate; because, as the section shows, the flat bed at the level of the base of the keyhole does not extend throughout the width of the wall. Indeed it could not have been so constructed without altering the position of the portcullis groove. It is clear, therefore, that the cannon, for which the Winchester gun-ports were constructed, were supported at the breach by a wooden stand. This may mean merely that the cannon in question were of smaller calibre than those at Bodiam Castle, etc., where the embrasures are flat throughout the width of the wall. But on the other hand it is very likely that this arrangement at Winchester tended to increased efficiency, since it enabled the cannon to be moved more easily to right or left, in order to vary the line of fire.



Gunports of the Winchester Westgate type, with similar stepped embrasures, occur in the City Wall of Canterbury, notably in Westgate and in Dr. Molaine's Tower behind King's School. This latter tower, with the rest of the line of the City Wall at Canterbury between Northgate and Queningate, was built in the time of Prior Chillenden (1390-1411), but, since Archbishop Courtney (1381-96) contributed £266. 13s. 4d. towards the work, it follows that it must have been under construction between 1390 and 1396. The gun-ports of Dr. Molaine's Tower show a development in advance of those of Canterbury Westgate (1380), in that they have larger "circles" and shorter "slits" forming the keyholes. In other respects, however, notably in the provision of stepped embrasures, the gun-ports of Canterbury Westgate are in no way inferior to those of Dr. Molaine's Tower. It is, therefore, clear that this more advanced device was known as early as 1380, although it seems that the following decade witnessed its more widespread adoption. At Winchester Westgate, then, this evidence may be said to support that of the architectural detail, which has been already quoted, in favour of a date between 1390 and 1399.

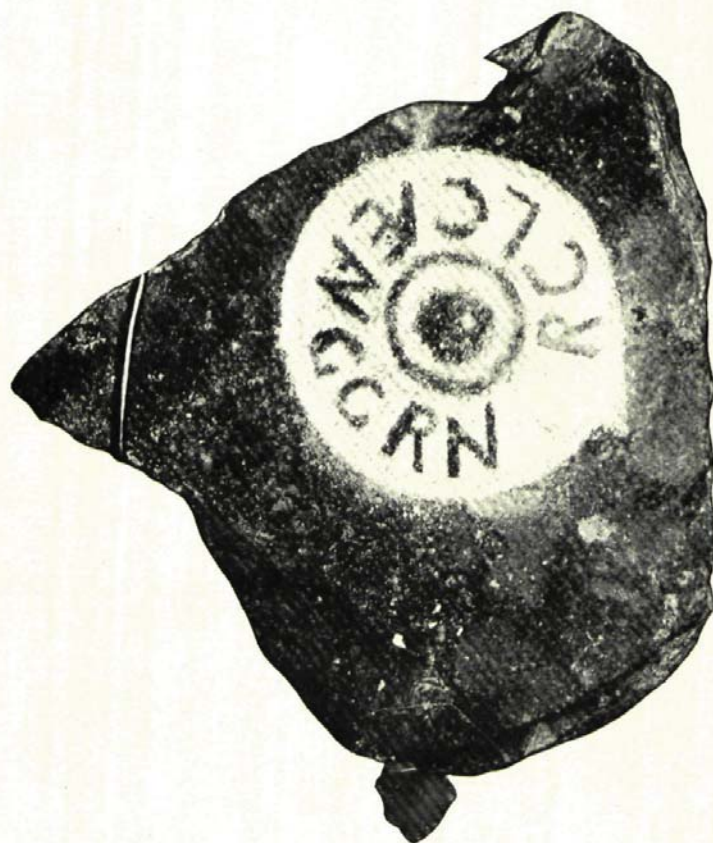
It is possible, however, to date them even more closely than to the last decade of the 14th century. They were certainly built for defence of the realm, and fall into place as part of the preparations against an expected invasion by the French. In 1385 and 1386 there was a very real fear of invasion. In the following decade there was less chance of serious trouble, since negotiations for a peace were being carried on with the French. Nevertheless peace was not signed until 1396, although it was preceded by a truce in 1394. Between 1392 and 1394 the negotiations were almost at a standstill. There can be little doubt that the serious preparations for defence, shown by the gun-ports of Winchester Westgate, as also by the City Wall at Canterbury between Northgate and Queningate, were a product of the uncertainties of those years 1392 to 1394.

The writer is indebted to Mr. Frank Warren for assistance with the architectural details and to Mrs. D. Gardiner for help with the documentary evidence for the date of Canterbury City Wall.



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WESTERN SIDE OF THE WESTGATE, WINCHESTER.



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NERO TILE FROM LITTLE LONDON, NEAR SILCHESTER.

(Photo. by Courtesy of Curator, Reading Museum.)

Read from bottom right :

N(E)R · CL · CAE · AVG · GR

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus.