Conisbrough castle, Yorkshire, West Riding

Description
Conisbrough Castle stands above the River Don on a natural limestone and clay hill. The remains consist of an outer bailey bounded by earthworks, an inner bailey of c.1200, and a stone keep, which is the earliest and most significant building remaining on the site. Extensive damage to the gates, bridge, and walls of the castle was recorded in 1537-8; in addition one floor of the keep had by that time probably fallen in. (Renn 1973,155-7; Toy 1966, 105-7.) Conisbrough and its chapel was used by Sir Walter Scott as the setting for his novel Ivanhoe. The keep, built of fine limestone ashlar c.1180-1202 (see below, History, chapel, for the dates) is cylindrical with six trapezoidal projecting buttresses, the whole keep on a splayed base. The sides of the buttresses have alternate courses of plinth and chamfered stone. The diameter of the base is 19 m; the thickness of the walls above the splayed base 4.6 m and the highest point of the surviving keep is 28 m above ground. There is a single main room at all four levels: a vaulted storage chamber and well in the basement, a work and storage area at the entrance (first) level, the hall on the second floor, the chamber on the third floor with a chapel and sacristy lying off it, and the roof level with a wall walk. Each of the second and third floors has a window, fireplace, stone lavabo basin and latrine. The internal floors and roof were rebuilt in the mid 1990s, until then the sculpture on the fireplaces was open to the rain. The Lord's apartment has a private chapel. This opens off the main chamber, and is contrived in the thickness of the wall and the SE buttress. The chapel is an approximate elongated hexagon, and is vaulted in two bays. A small L-shaped vestry opens off it on the N wall in the first bay. The stonework in the chapel appears to be damp in the vaulting. There is sculpture on the fireplaces on the second and third floors, and in the chapel on the third floor. The N and S walls of the chapel have circular windows in the buttress, these are quatrefoil on the outside.

History
Harold Godwinson (King Harold) owned the manor of Conisbrough before 1066. By 1086 it had come to the Warenne family, who built a motte and bailey castle here (Clay 1949). Architectural historians ascribe the stone castle to Hamelin Plantagenet (bastard brother of Henry II who married Isabella the Warenne heiress in 1164 and died in 1202) on the grounds that the only close analogy to the circular keep with its trapezoidal towers is Hamelin’s castle of Mortemer (Seine Maritime). The keep has been dated c.1180-1190 on the basis of the chapel decorations (Johnson 1989); but we believe for the reasons set out in the following paragraph that it must be dated c.1180-1202. The date of the chapel within the keep is of interest as the chapel serves to date the whole stone castle and the curtain wall probably followed the building of the keep after only a very short interval (Thompson 1977, 5). The chapel within Conisbrough castle, dedicated to SS Philip and James, was granted rents by Hamelin earl of Warenne and Isabella, countess of Warenne, with the assent of William their son and heir, in an undated grant only known from 17thc. copies. Hunter believed that the grant (50s in rents from the local mill) marked the chapel's foundation. This grant was tentatively dated 1180-1189 by Clay (Clay 1949, no.74, 100). 1180 is the earliest date that the heir would be old enough to consent (his parents were married in 1164) and seems secure. The grant uses the phrases pro salute, or pro salute animae (for the safety of the soul/s) of various people, both dead and alive, one being King Henry II (d. 1189). Clay chose 1189 on the assumption that Henry was still alive when the grant was made, but that is an unsafe assumption: in which case the latest date of the chapel grant would be 1202, the death of Hamelin earl of Warenne; the date that Hunter uses (Hunter 1828, l, 107). Stylistically a date before 1180 seems unlikely. See the Comments section for the dating of the sculpture.
Features

Exterior Features

Doorways

Doorway to keep/donjon

The entrance doorway into the keep is at the top of a modern stair which mimics the original arrangement. There are a few courses of the flight of stone steps remaining at the base of the modern staircase (Thompson 177, 8), and traces of drawbridge pivots inside the doorway (Renn 1973, 155). The doorway has plain jambs, a joggled lintel of the same dog-leg pattern as is used for the fireplaces, and a segmental plain arch (Renn 1973, 155). It gives entrance to the first floor, where there was general access to passages and stairs, also the only entrance to the basement and the well.

Windows

Interior aspect of window in second floor hall

A window at second floor level (hall) has ‘two square-headed lights under a joggled lintel with semicircular relieving arch’; steps up to window seats (Renn 1973,155).

Windows to chapel

Windows are few and mostly round-headed and plain: in striking contrast, the chapel oculi are quatrefoil with a series of domes in the hollow chamfer.

Interior Features

Vaulting/Roof Supports

Chapel vaulting: chancel

It is probably correct to refer to the (conventional) E bay as the chancel and the W bay as the nave: it will certainly be easier to describe it in that way. The chapel has two bays of vaulting with diagonal ribs, and a common transverse rib, the ‘chancel arch’. The vaults are supported by base, shaft and capital in the four corners of the chapel and, in the middle of the long sides, by a single base and (lost) half column which rises to a capital flanked by two corbels treated like capitals. The bases appear to have spurs like those on the fireplace, but some of these are entirely lost and others are worn. The torus is again similar to that used on the fireplace: wide below and with a hollow belt and narrow upper ring.
The capitals bearing the diagonal ribs at the NE and SE corners of the chancel vault are worn and the R shaft is lost. The corbels at the chancel arch are remade on the S side and worn on the N. The secondary corbels, or capitals bearing the ribs, are set at a slight angle to the main capital and all project less from the wall than normal: the want of space, of course, accounts for the reduction in shafting and the corbelling of the ribs. Imposts as before. The diagonal rib rises as a roll moulding flanked by hollow chamfered bands. The ribs are prominent from the rough material of the vault, where some plaster remains. In the centre of the vault is a boss of large size which includes the first section of the four ribs. It has a central motif of a threefold repeat of two symmetrical foliage designs, all within a beaded ring. The two designs are a sprig of two leaves enclosing a bud, and a sprig with fluted leaves folded back (leaves, one might suggest, centrifugal and centripetal?). There are further carvings in the angles of the ribs, but these are hard to see, decayed and not so extensive as those on the nave boss. Two designs are foliate.

Chapel vaulting: 'chancel arch'

This is the main transverse rib. The N capital and corbels are original, and appear to have been prepared to take a shaft, at least on the L (W) side, but there is no sign of one at floor level. The S capitals seem to be restoration, and they are flatter to the wall with no side faces. The N capital seems to have been of the waterleaf kind, very like the capital in the SW angle of the chapel, but with fluted, folded-down, leaves in the centre. The S capital resembles features seen elsewhere in the sculpture in the keep. Imposts as before. In the arch, a soffit roll encased by a row each side of centripetal chevron normal to the wall and ceiling, the points extended over the roll to clasp it.

Chapel vaulting: nave

The capital bearing the diagonal ribs at the SW corner of the nave vault is in good condition. It is a waterleaf derivative, with an upright fluted leaf in the centre each face and the leaves forming spirals or crockets on the angles. The shaft is lost this side, but in the NW corner where the capital is decayed, the shaft remains in place. The capitals or corbels at the chancel arch are remade on the S side and worn on the N. However, it can be seen that the capital in the NW angle of the nave bay is also of waterleaf form. There is a short horizontal band linking the two leaves on the main face, this has a row of bored holes, while between the leaves at the top of the main face is a fan of fluted leaves: these details are also seen in fireplace capitals. Imposts as before. The diagonal rib is a roll moulding flanked by hollow chamfered bands, as in the E bay. In the second stone in the rib rising in the SE corner, is a dogtooth star, see the comments section below. In the centre of the vault is a boss of large size which includes the first section of the four ribs. It has a central motif of a cross moline, that is, it has arms of equal length that fork at the ends and curve backwards. This cross is not set quite perfectly to match the ribs, but is slightly rotated. The arms of the cross are each formed of two strands, these are woven as they cross at the centre. The two strands are bound by a beaded clasp at their ends, and then widen and curve backwards to meet the strand from the...
adjacent arm; this swelling, curving band seems to have been beaded. Where the bands meet they are bound together with another beaded strap and emerge as a leaf with five flutes to fill the quadrants. The outer flutes of these leaves spiral round, the next pair are small, the central flute larger and filled with a line of beads. In the fork of the strands of the cross, and above the fluted leaf, is a larger bead. There are further carvings in the angles of the ribs, mostly foliage but perhaps also a triqueta: fiddling with the image on the computer the following patterns can be seen in: top, N, two leaves with spiral flutes and a central trefoil bud; W/R, a pointed trefoil loop with inside it a motif which is its reverse (that is, concave for convex, hollow for point); S, bottom, two leaves with stems entwined; E/L, a fan of fluted leaves.

**Vault to basement**

The basement ‘has a domed vault with a central hole above the well shaft’ (Renn 1973, 155). The wooden floors above were/are supported by a ring of simple corbels, each block being rounded in a continuous curve through the undersurface and face; plain on the sides - this can be seen in some of the pictures of the fireplace on the upper floor. It became a common form of corbel in the thirteenth century (eg. exterior fireplace support on the N side of the hall at Burton Agnes (East Yorkshire); compare exterior corbels at Farnham (West Yorkshire)).

**Interior Decoration**

**Miscellaneous**

**Credence in sacristy or vestry**

Trefoil-headed credence in sacristy is recessed in the N wall opposite the entrance, with a window on the E wall.

**Fireplace on second floor**

The Hall (second floor) has a large fireplace in the wall against the NW buttress. Plinth chamfered and plain; a square plinth with the three bases for the shafts. Each square plinth, although much damaged, has traces of spurs from the round base. The round base is wide below, and more deeply moulded above, but all very decayed. Rising from each base are three original shafts, with stylized leaf capitals. L capitals and rings integral. The lower part of the capital is now almost plain, but
the inner capital in the fireplace alcove preserves a frill of delicately carved upright leaves above the ring. In the upper part, bolder foliage patterns are symmetrical on face and angle, with a large fluted leaf in two layers on each angle, their tips rolling over and lying on the bell of the capital, the leaves meeting in a wavy line in the centre of the face of the main capital. In the gap at the top, on the face is a fan of some six pleats of foliage. In the upright band at the top of the capitals, which is often blank elsewhere, here is a continuous pattern of stems with leafy offshoots, this is shallowly carved and very worn. The R capitals are similar though not the same: the leaves meet in the centre of the face in a form like a little column, and the fan at the top is three-fold. The pattern in the upright band at the top is more regular, resembling an open cable treated as a stem with leaves. These capitals are more decayed than on the L. Impost has a hollow chamfer, and upright with quirk near the bottom. It continues on from the fireplace on either side to fade into the curving wall of the chamber. It supports a similarly continuous straight lintel. The lintel is formed of 9 stones, joggled with a dog-leg joint (as used in the warming room at Fountains Abbey). The front edge of the lintel is narrowly chamfered over the fireplace. Another impost of the same pattern runs along the top of the lintel, and then the plain sloping hood continues back to the wall.

Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Capital and ring integral, height</td>
<td>0.265m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Height of lintel above present floor</td>
<td>1.94m to 1.96m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal width of fireplace alcove</td>
<td>2.22m</td>
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Fireplace on third floor

The lord’s apartment (third floor) has a slightly smaller fireplace, directly above that on the second floor and sharing the same chimney. Plinths of supports to L and R: chamfered and plain; square. Integral with the square plinths are the bases of the three free-standing columns which are grouped on each side of the fireplace. Bases spread wide below, have a deeply concave belt and a prominent upper torus. One base only retains a good example of a spur: this extends from the base for a short distance as a low moulding and ends in a prominent knob. Three detached shafts rise from the base either side, the central one slightly wider than the others. On the L the shafts are renewed, on the R the central shaft seems to be sandstone, at least it is pinkish and grainy, and this may be a replacement (compare Victorian porch at Askham Richard
(West Yorkshire) where a pinkish sandstone archway has decayed faster than medieval stone). The three capitals, like the bases, are carved from one stone, which is very large since it also runs back into the side of the fireplace alcove. L capitals symmetrical on main face and on angles, the design is based on two rows of foliage sprigs. The carving maintains a flatish outer surface with the beaded, leafy design cut only moderately deep, but the sprigs themselves are hollowed out behind from the interior of the bell, and in places are free-standing: because of this the main capital has been broken on the L side. R capitals again symmetrical on face and angles. The design has an upper row of foliage sprigs which are also freestanding, though less obviously so. Below on the bell of the capital on each angle is a symmetrical fluted leaf. These differ slightly on each of the three capitals; on the outside capital the two leaves are joined by a band with three bored holes. The upper part of all the capitals is usually plain below the impost, but the central R capital has ornament in its impost at the front, apparently unfinished. The L side of this impost has a wavy band and what may be foliage or an abstract symmetrical design; at the centre is a knob (a human head?); on the R end is a circular daisy or star in a ring which is complete at the top and beaded in the lower half. Integral imposts have hollow chamfer and plain upright; these bear the outer stone of the lintel but not quite equally. Lintel of seven stones joggled with a stepped line, symmetrical about the centre and with a slight chamfer on the angle. Above the lintel runs an impost with hollow chamfer and quirked upright bearing the plain hood. The impost, lintel and upper impost do not continue and fade into the wall to L and R as with the fireplace on the second floor, but they end somewhat abruptly above the L and R piers.

**Dimensions**

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<td>Height of lintel</td>
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<td>Internal width of fireplace alcove (approx.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Width of lintel</td>
<td>2.05m</td>
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**Interior decoration of E window in chapel**

At the E end a round-headed window of one order. The inside of the splay is ashlared throughout. This is coursed in the lower part but above it uses long blocks which radiate from the opening to include the first order arch. At the bottom, near the window the opening is splayed, but near the room it makes a horizontal shelf. First order, plinth and base formed within the coursing of the wall; on the L what would have been the chamfer of the plinth is broken but retains three foliage flutes, growing downwards. On the R, this part of the lowest course has been broken off. The base was of upright proportion, leading to the continuous angle roll which completes the opening with a plain band on the face. Second order, best preserved on the L, square plinth and integral base in lowest course. The base resembles those used on the fireplaces: wide lower part, concave belt and prominent though narrow upper torus. Detached shaft. Capitals of upright proportion, decoration only surviving on the L, and that in part. One good leaf on the L, fluted and folded down. There are various plain bands, probably symmetrically arranged, but no comparisons come to mind. Impost with hollow chamfer, upright with quirk near bottom. The arch which corresponds to this support does not sit on the impost, but is related to the E wall. There are two rows of centripetal stepped chevron on the face. Eight legible spandrels are filled with a variety of symmetrical foliate patterns, the foliage of the fluted leaf type. Additional details include beading, a cross and a triquetra (R side). Five spandrels, including the lowest, are decayed. Outside the chevrons is a row of fat largish beading. The order finishes flush with the wall.
Internal doorways are usually round-headed, continuous and plain, perhaps with a narrow chamfer. Their arches are flat-faced, in one plane tangential to the walls, they do not curve with the walls, consequently the lowest corner of an arch lies back 10-20mm within the general surface; the jambs are a continuation of the walls. One opening on the second floor had a crude lintel, but most openings are of the round-headed type. The doorway of the chapel is square-headed, but plain.

**Dimensions**

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Width of opening of doorway to battlements</td>
<td>1.0m</td>
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**Interior form of oculi in chapel**

At the E end, the N and S walls have circular windows with a slight chamfer. Outside, these are quatrefoil openings, with a hollow chamfer bearing a series of domes, see above, Section II.

**Laver on second floor**

The hall has a laver or washbasin on the N wall. It is plain and square, the basin projecting slightly from the plain alcove. The N wall is used for the outfall of the drains, hence the position of this laver and the one on the floor above.

**Laver on third floor**

The laver is on the N wall, it has a trefoil headed arch.

Also illustrated with Interior doorways as it is next to a doorway to the battlements.

**Dimensions**

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<td>Maximum height of opening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Width of alcove</td>
<td>0.75m</td>
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</table>
To the W of each oculus in the chapel is a piscina alcove with moderately-cusped trefoil head. The basin is curved from L to R with the drain hole at the back. The part of the basin projecting into the room is broken off in both.

**Comments/Opinions**

**Fireplaces**

According to Margaret Wood (1965, 262, pl XLI) the two fireplaces are the two earliest known examples of hooded fireplaces, created because the circular plan of the room made an arched fireplace difficult to construct. Wood 1974, 81-2, says the wall fireplace became almost essential once living quarters left the ground floor.

**Date**

The single dogtooth star in a rib vault of the chapel resembles those used round the arch of the S doorway at the parish church. Of several sculptural details used in the castle, it is the one that looks forward to the arrival of Gothic taste, and it supports the date of 1180-1202 suggested above; similarly the trefoil-headed niches to laver, credence and piscinas, and the quatrefoil window frames, all in the upper floor, are architectural motifs of the very latest fashion. Otherwise, novelties such as the undercut capitals on the fireplace might have been attributed to skilled immigrant workmen working in a purely Romanesque environment.

**Bibliography**


L. A. Shuffrey, *The English Fireplace*, Batsford, London 1912, Fig. 15.


Castle from S.
Castle from SW.
View of parish church (St. Peter's) from bailey.
The keep
The buttress containing the chancel end of the chapel.
The town from the top of the keep.
St Peter's church tower from the top of the keep.

**Location**

**Site Location**

Conisbrough castle
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Grid Reference</th>
<th>SK 514 989</th>
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| Boundaries              | now: South Yorkshire  
|                         | pre-1974 traditional (England and Wales): Yorkshire, West Riding |
| Diocese                 | now: Sheffield  
|                         | medieval: York |
| Dedication              | medieval:  
|                         | now: |
| Type of building/monument | Castle |
| Report authors          | Barbara English, Rita Wood |
| Visit Date              | 06 May 2010 |