

NOTE ON THE HISTORICAL RECORDS OF DUNWICH'S DEFENCES

By Norman Scarfe, M.A., F.S.A.

The two most circumstantial early descriptions of the town are Elizabethan. One, very brief, is a report by a well-known Suffolk land-surveyor, Ralph Agas, and is mainly concerned with a recommendation about stabilising the town's haven, or river-mouth, at that time opposite Walberswick. Gardner printed it, from a manuscript in his possession, in his *History of Dunwich*,⁶ together with a detailed map of the town to which the report relates. The map he dated 1587,⁷ the report 1589. It says the town is on a 'Cliffe fortie Foot hie . . . and is girte on the Weaste and South, near to the Bodie of the Toune, with an Auntient Bancke, whereof Parte is now builte with the Wall of the Graieffriers . . .'

The other Elizabethan description, very long and interesting, is among the Harleian MSS in the British Museum⁸ and was printed, with minor mis-readings, in Suckling's *History of Suffolk*.⁹ Its anonymous author addressed it in 1573 to 'Master Deye'. Suckling thought it was the work of John Stow, the London chronicler and antiquary, addressed to Deye the printer, who was a native of Dunwich. 'Master Deye' is surely one of the Deyes of Eye. In 1636 a collection of the records of Eye priory (with large holdings in Dunwich) was in the hands of 'Thomas Deye of Eye'.¹⁰ The 1573 author had known the place over a period, was almost certainly from the district, and includes a great deal of technical surveying information. It was presumably Agas, again, who was a native of Stoke-by-Nayland and spent much of his life in Suffolk. He begins by estimating the extent of the suburbs 'without the Palles Deike'. The town dyke was certainly called the Pales Dyke in 1573, which is at least presumptive evidence of an earlier palisade. On

⁶ *Op. cit.* in n. 3, pp. 20–22. For Agas' career, see *D.N.B.*

⁷ Col. Michael Barne of Sotterly Hall has kindly lent me the MS History of Dunwich compiled and illustrated for his family by Hamlet Watling in 1893–4. A map on pp. 24–5 is a reconstruction by Watling, in an old-fashioned Regency Gothick manner, that includes most of the town buildings recorded from earliest times, all extended from Agas' record of the Elizabethan town. By implying that it was based on a 'plat mentioned by Agas' he has misled readers into thinking there was an original map earlier than Agas'. Watling was not averse to that kind of ambiguity. His harmless object was to produce a pleasing book. Unfortunately his reconstruction was published by Spencer (*op. cit.* in n. 1) with the equally ambiguous caption, 'From a tracing of an old map of Dunwich by Hamlet Watling, date unknown, but probably about 1300'.

⁸ Harl. MS. 532, fols. 53v.–60.

⁹ II (1847), pp. 244–252.

¹⁰ Harl. MS. 639, fol. 68.

Dunwich's length from north to south, he refers to 'one end of the said town by Hithe upon the aforesaid Palles Dike towards the south'. And on Dunwich's breadth, he refers to 'the place called the mydle gattes' and also to 'the bredge gates coming from Seynt James street'. After enumerating six churches (there were certainly eight, probably nine), the friaries, Temple, and so on, he returns (f. 58) to the question of fortifications:

Also ye know veri well the greate deike that is called the Palles Deike, and the gate spaces going throughe and over the same deike, from and oute of the subbarbes in to the said town, viz. the Bridge Gates, or Seint James's Strete Gates—the mydle Gates, the Gyldinge Gates, and the south Gates, the which gate spaces are now so called, and yet doth still there remain, and all the rest of the gates are now drowned in the sea, all the which aforesaid gate spaces there is a number of old auntient dedes and dyvers evidence to prove the same, and that doth soo name and call them as aforesaid.

This passage assumes a mutual knowledge of the sites not only of the Bridge gates (safe, 1971), and Middle gates (lately eroded), but also the Gilden and South gates which apparently disappeared before that century was out.¹¹ From the gate-sites, and from the name 'pales dike', the author made reasonable conjectures about 'a myghtie strong and long pale' in the west, and an even stronger one in the east, where 'all the chefe danger of the enemies was to be feared . . . or with some other such strong defence of walles, towers and castelles'. These conjectures supply at least negative evidence. No actual remains of pales, gates, or castle were known in 1573. This is not surprising, for three-quarters of a mile of the town may already have been drowned.

There is some very early support for these conjectures. It is provided by Jordan Fantosme and William of Newburgh, two remarkable contemporaries who were chronicling the rebellion in 1173–4 against Henry II. While Henry was abroad and his justiciar, Richard de Lucy, fighting the Scots' king, the earl of Leicester landed at Walton (the Bigod castle within the Roman fort at Felixstowe). Fantosme, a former official of the diocese of Winchester, wrote his account of the whole episode in metre, in Norman French.¹² He was present when De Lucy captured the Scots' king at Alnwick, but there is no independent evidence that he was

¹¹ Gardner, p. 94.

¹² Richard Howlett ed., *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, Rolls Series, III (1886). Fantosme's name implies that he was uncommonly thin, not that he lacked reality.

present when De Lucy smashed Leicester's force of Flemings at Fornham St. Genevieve, near Bury St. Edmunds.

Fantosme described De Lucy's dismay at hearing of Leicester's arrival and of his concentration of strength between Orwell and Dunwich (lines 820-2). Hugh Bigod tried to persuade the people of Dunwich that Leicester was their friend, and that their heads would roll if they would not take his side (ll.843-6). They defied him and prepared for a siege. That day you could see burgesses and valiant knights sallying out to their defences, each knowing his job, some bowmen, others lancers, the strong helping the weak to have spells of rest. Inside the town there wasn't a girl or a woman who didn't carry stones for hurling from the palisade: 'Ki ne portast la pierre al paliz pur geter' (ll.871-6). The earl of Leicester retired humiliated.¹³

Fantosme added (ll.1,000 *et seq.*) that the Flemings came for wool. Most were weavers and didn't know how to carry arms. 'They came for loot, for there is no better-provisioned place on earth than Bury St. Edmunds'. If this assessment of the rebels detracts a little from the formidable effectiveness of the defences of Dunwich, it also suggests that Fantosme had personal knowledge of the places in his narrative.

William of Newburgh refers very briefly, in his prosaic but reliable way, to Dunwich's successful defiance of the rebels.¹⁴ Confirming the event, he indirectly supports Fantosme's more circumstantial account, with its reference to the 'paliz'.

In John's reign, there is plenty of reference to Dunwich's importance and prosperity, none that I can find to its defences. They had need of them in 1216, when the baronial rebels under Prince Louis extorted ransoms from Yarmouth, Dunwich and Ipswich.¹⁵

For 13 May 1222 the Patent Rolls contain a grant of Murage for Dunwich, as the sea had flooded the town and there was need to build a barrier against it more quickly, '*cicius*'.¹⁶ Miss Hilary L. Turner tells me that because of this clear reference to the *sea* walls, she has dismissed the 'walls' of Dunwich 'somewhat lightheartedly' in her forthcoming book on the fortified towns of medieval England. Yet in the same Calendar of the Patent Rolls, under 1217, one sees a reference to Eustace de Vescy's custody of 'the castle and town of Dunwich'. It does not sound like an *unfortified* town; it might, I suppose, be that a small Norman castle stood within the walls of a Roman fort, as at Burgh Castle and Walton (Felixstowe).

¹³ Gardner, p. 7, recorded the tradition that the earthworks still visible 'on Westleton Heath, not two miles from Dunwich, are remains of the Barons' Fortifications when they besieged the town'.

¹⁴ Howlett, *op. cit.*, I (1884), p. 178.

¹⁵ *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xxxi (1969), p. 313.

¹⁶ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1216-25*, p. 333.

The Close Rolls for 1253 refer to a building up against the South gate at Dunwich,¹⁷ confirming the Elizabethan memory on that point. Finally, there is the licence in Mortmain, 25 August 1290,¹⁸ quoted by Gardner, in which the Greyfriars of Dunwich were granted the King's Dike of Dunwich adjoining a plot ('*placee*') given to them by the commonalty of the said town to build upon and inhabit; also licence for them to inclose the same. In 1290, then, the town's west rampart had occupied its present site long enough to be thought dispensable. Less than forty years later, in January 1328, the sea made its most devastating advance.

By destroying the town, the sea destroyed its corporation's need to preserve intact its official documents. Even in Ipswich, where the sea exerted no such dominion, it is hard to provide documents for a history of the town ramparts. At Dunwich, we must manage with these scraps, and look the more carefully at the evidence of the spade.

¹⁷ *Cal. Close Rolls, 1251-3*, pp. 311-2.

¹⁸ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1281-92*, p. 383.