

Asby History Group Visit the Rectory

On June 12 2024, thirteen members of Asby History Group took part in a visit to the Old Rectory (see photo at end of this article). It was led by Paul Lewis, current Chair of the Cumbria Vernacular Buildings Group. Paul, a Historic Buildings Consultant, has been advising the owners, Daniela and Gary Dillon, on work to be undertaken at the Rectory and, in doing so, has developed a very good understanding of its structure and the likely phases of its development.

Readers may already know that one of questions central to the debate about the Rectory's past is, 'was it a Pele Tower'? Whilst a number of books that mention the Rectory suggest that it was, Paul Lewis has reached a very firm conclusion that it was not. He argues that it is too small – in terms of its 'footprint' – and not high enough to have been a Pele Tower. He adds that there is no evidence of crenelation (a battlement, with alternate raised and lowered sections) but, instead, there is evidence of an earlier, more steeply raked, flagstone roof.



EXISTING GROUND FLOOR PLAN (Courtesy of Paul Lewis)

Paul's view is that the Rectory was probably first constructed as a three-part or three-unit house. This consisted of:

A The surviving fourteenth century structure (which is the northern part of the present building); marked as 'Hall' on the ground floor plan. This contained a lower 'refuge room', with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, to which occupants of the house (or perhaps even other villagers) would have retreated for safety during attacks of various kinds, which once punctuated life in the northwest of England. Above that place of refuge, and built with slightly thinner walls, was a Solar, an upper living-room in a medieval house. Originally the vaulted refuge area would have had only one small, narrow slit-window, which can still be seen on the northern elevation. The additional windows now visible on the ground floor of the fourteenth century structure, would have been inserted in the seventeenth century, as the region became more peaceful. The window illuminating the Solar above, positioned in its east gable, is of fourteenth century design. The upper windows in its northern elevation are seventeenth century.

B A now 'lost' but, in terms of its estimated 'footprint', *rather grand* hall, which was swept away by the building of a seventeenth century structure, with a centrally positioned, east-facing entrance. This seventeenth century structure is, more or less, the area shown on the ground-floor plan as 'Office', 'Cupboard' and 'Reception'. Its surviving east-facing door opening can be seen below the staircase on that floor plan. The imagined 'grandness' of the Medieval Hall suggests that it was built by somebody of considerable wealth. Hugh Prince, Rector of Asby from 1944 to 1947, speculated in his 'Asby Memoirs' that the fourteenth century part of the Rectory was built by Thomas de Anandale, Rector from 1345-1374. There is some evidence that de Anandale was a 'man of means' as, in his will, he made bequests to Asby Parish of '50 marks' – present-day value, roughly £30,000 – and twice that amount to the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

C There would also have been a 'kitchen wing', now also 'lost'. This would have continued the line of the Medieval Hall or have been positioned at a right-angle to it.

The seventeenth century phase of building (see **B** above) has been partly obscured by nineteenth century additions to its eastern and western elevations – marked as 'Living Room' and 'Kitchen' on the floor plan.



As well as receiving clarity about the Rectory's phases of building, History Group members were introduced to some of its curiosities. First, two fireplaces of polished fossiliferous limestone (see illustration). Just before the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a short-lived limestone polishing operation, located at 'Marble Mill'. It was set up by the then lord of the manor, John Hill. At the time, just before the Great Exhibition of 1851, there was considerable national interest and investment in production of this kind, aimed at competing with imported Italian marble. It is possible that some of the polished limestone on the pulpit and at other points in St Peter's is so-called 'Asby Marble', produced at 'Marble Mill'. Sir Martin Holdgate, now of Hartley, whose family used the Three Greyhounds Inn as a 'shooting-lodge' before World War II, recalls seeing fireplaces of 'Asby Marble' in one or two houses in the Parish. A photograph of one of the Rectory fireplaces was sent to Sir Martin, who confirmed that they resemble what he saw as a child.

Second, Group members were shown a west-facing window, which illuminates the first-floor landing of a nineteenth century part of the Rectory. Paul Lewis believes that this window may have been salvaged from the medieval St Peter's church, demolished in the 1860s. His view is that the large area of glass required for the window would have been too costly for a window in a secular building; it could have been afforded only by the wealth of the church.

This was an expertly led and very informative visit. If you would like to take up membership of the Cumbria Vernacular Buildings Group, go to [their website](#), scroll down to Membership and download the membership form. If you would like to become a member of Asby History, contact khcooper1@aol.com

Keith H Cooper, July, 2024

