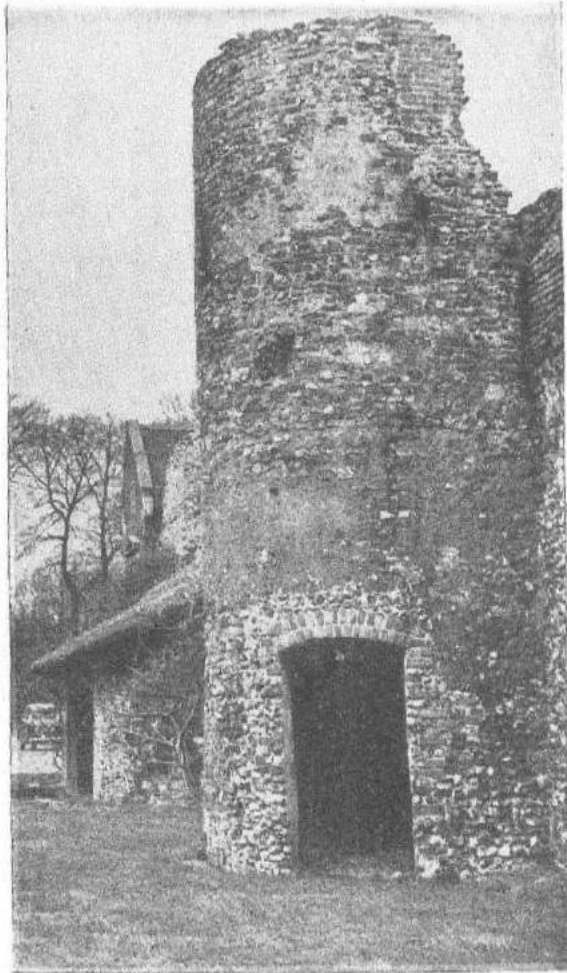


CLAXTON

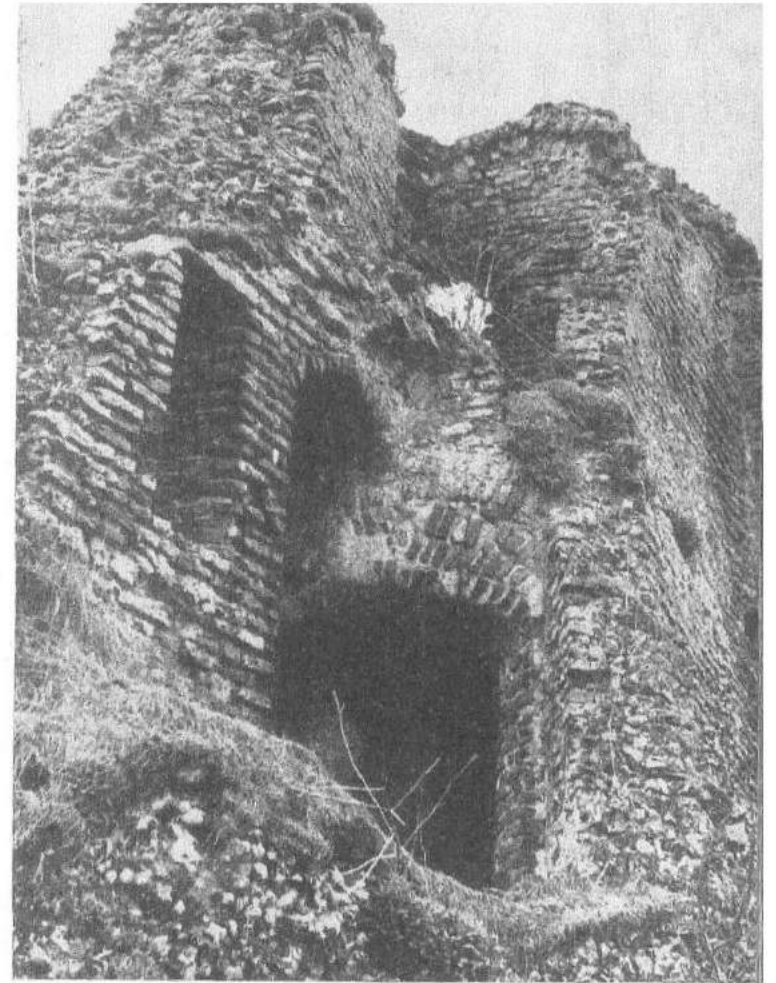
—the lost castle



THE house stands, warm in the sun, its face to the low Norfolk uplands, its back to the river marshes. Neither large nor small, but a comfortable sort of squire's house, with great barns, white-painted stables and tidy stock yards clustering about its skirts. Flint-built, a roof of red pantiles which hold the warmth of the sun, and Dutch-like gables at one end—the older end. The gables that might have come straight from Bruges. You find them all over Norfolk.

At the back of the house lies a great green sea of marshes, seamed by reedy dykes, dappled with black and white Friesian cattle. Here and there an island of willow-bushes or hairy willows stands up, an oasis in the sharp winter wind for roosting pigeons, blackbirds and the carrion crows who hunt the river levels, like

Left: Front view of the tower beside the bricked up entrance.



*Photographs
by
Alan
Savory*

witches. In the middle distance a sudden flash of water, a shield of stippled silver flung down in the heart of that green tapestry—Rockland Broad, one of the wilder, less visited Broads.

There are 120 acres of water and hundreds of acres of reed-beds about it, with pulk holes and floating hovers and a mud

bank or two in the middle of the Broad, where old barges lie sunk. The haunt of bittern, sedge-warblers, redshank, coot, with a great colony of coypus and a heronry in the gaunt trees beyond Wheatfen Broad, that tiny hidden pool which no one ever visits. A land of wet wastes and windy skies, or enormous marching

BY J. WENTWORTH DAY

cloud-scapes. In winter and in the first faint days of spring it is a land of shadowy ghostliness at dawn and dusk, a place of mystery and watery beauty out of this tormented world.

Now this house, which sits sentinel by a grove of trees with a clear and running double moat to one side and a great shadowy ruin of embattled walls to the other, is no centuries-old manor-house of the sort that one may discover for ever at the foot of forgotten lanes in the eastern counties. There are plenty such enchantments. Some still cry out for the hand of sympathy, the touch of beauty, that will redeem them from muck and desecration.

This house, Claxton Manor, was in much such a way 20 years or so ago. The front of it is good, solid Victorian Tudor, with, mercifully, plain beauty and no fancy encrustations. Then it was a farm house. Today, it has returned to its old state, a squire's house.

THE interest of Claxton lies, however, not so much in the house, the back part of which is Elizabethan, as in that 120-ft. long stretch of embattled castle wall with its bastions and towers, which lies immediately to the right of the house as you come at it from the road: all that remains on earth of Claxton Castle—the castle that history has forgot.

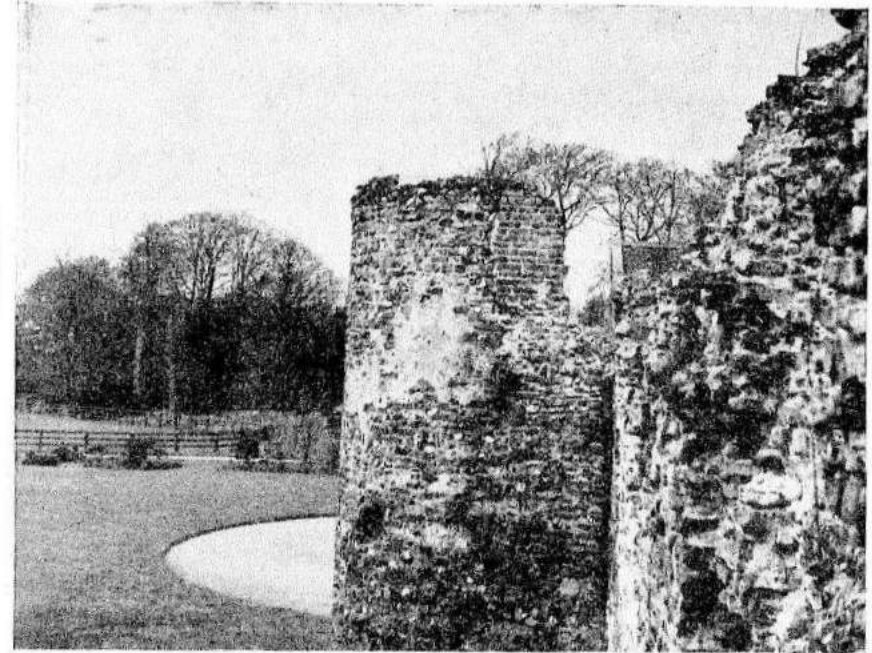
Dutt gives it no more than a line and a half in his 'History of Norfolk'. The late Monty James did not even bother to mention it in his work on the architecture of 'Suffolk and Norfolk', although, to be sure, he tells you that in Reepham church there is a splendid tomb-effigy (of 1337) of Sir Roger de Kerdeston, whose figure is conceived as 'laid on a stony bed, bivouacking on a battlefield', with eight good figures of mourners in relief on the front of the tomb.

Monty James was a good Provost of Eton but as an historian he was obsessed by abbeys, churches, tombs and effigies. I do not know what Blomefield has to say about Claxton Castle because I have not got his 'bible' but Arthur Mee, whose nose again was permanently wedged in the church door, has no more to say of Claxton Castle than two lines in his 'Norfolk'.

So let us consider this forgotten castle. The late Walter Rye, who missed nothing and knew pretty well everything where Norfolk was concerned—the Gurneys never forgave him for having torpedoed their pretentious lineage—had a good deal to say about it in 'The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany' in 1906. There he tells us that the de Kerdestons who built the castle, or rather had licence to castellate their manor house in 1339—which probably amounts to the same thing—sprang from William de Kerdeston, who had a grant of lands in Bircham Newton from Hubert de Rye in 1200.

Thereafter, de Kerdestons were Sheriff of Norfolk, Governor of Norwich Castle, supporters of Edward III against the Scots. One fought at Crecy and in 1354 signed the baron's letter against the pope. In 1359 he was appointed one of the council of the king's son Thomas, who was left in charge of the kingdom during the king's absence in France. A later de Kerdeston, Sir Thomas who died in 1446, left a daughter and heir who married Sir Terry Robsart, of the Walpole family, Earls of Orford.

SO much for a forgotten family. Now for their forgotten castle. Walter Rudd was of the opinion that it 'was probably amongst the most important examples of Norfolk medieval domestic fortresses'. It originally covered a space of about two acres, compared with six acres



The ruined tower of Claxton Castle.

at Caister Castle and some sixteen acres at Burgh Castle, whose mighty Roman walls still stand above the grey tides of Breydon Water, tall enough to stand a seige by footmen and archers.

Claxton has this in common with the two greater fortresses. It stood, as they stand, upon what were then the marshy verges of that great estuary which the Romans called Gariensis.

When Aulus Plautius subdued the early Iceni, the sea ebbed and flowed through four great estuary mouths which fed the salt and shallow waters of Gariensis. There was one opening at Horsey to the north-east, another at Kirkley near Lowestoft, a third at Lake Lothing and a four-mile wide bay between Caister and

Burgh Castle, of which Breydon is the last wild relic today.

The Romans christened Norwich 'Venta Icenorum' and there they built a new and thriving settlement with a fort and garrison at Ad Tavum, which is now Tasburgh, to protect it with greater forts and larger garrisons at Caister and Burgh Castle.

The triremes and galleys with banked oars ploughed the waters and patrolled the estuary mouth to ward off the sea raiders and pirates who swept down in the kind months of summer from their Danish and Baltic roosts.

When de Kerdeston was building Claxton in 1339 at the landward end of this great estuary, the latter had declined

probably into a wide tidal quagmire, influenced by every tide, fringed by immense reed-beds, alive with wildfowl and fish. That side, on the north, was practically impregnable.

TODAY only the south face of the castle remains, in the shape of the massive wall with its six bastions between 120 and 130 feet long, with an isolated pier about 20 yards to the north-west. This pier is probably part of the east face and the entrance gateway. What looks like portcullis grooves can still be seen in the brickwork. The south and west walls have gone altogether.

The north side of the existing wall clearly shows the probable position of the great hall and various other rooms. Doorways still show in the flanking towers where they led to the upper and lower storeys. The wall however is not pierced by windows. Evidently the rooms were lighted from the inner courtyard. Traces of a deep moat round the whole building can still be seen, whilst a four-acre pasture to the north, which shows the foundations of a surrounding wall, was evidently the castle garth.

When Sir Thomas de Kerdeston died in 1446, it was decided (Escheat Rolls, 29 Henry VI) that he died not possessed of Claxton and other manors, and that William de la Pole, Marquis of Suffolk and Alice, his wife, were the heirs, so that Elizabeth, the daughter and heiress of Sir Thomas, who married Sir Terry Robsart, lost her inheritance.

However, Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, in the 12th granted her several Norfolk manors, a belated act of reparation.

Edmund de la Pole was later attainted. Claxton passed to Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. Then, according to Blomefield,

on the death of Anne, Duchess of Norfolk, this lordship was granted to Charles Brandon, that puissant Duke of Suffolk.

It is referred to several times in the Paston Letters and there is a tradition that Anne of Cleves, the despised wife of Henry VIII, not only owned Claxton Castle but lived there for a time.

In the 5th Philip and Mary, it was held by Charles Throgmorton who conveyed it to Sir Thomas Gawdy, Knight, Judge of Common Pleas. Probably at this time, the castle was 'ruinated', and the Tudor mansion built. The judge was a wealthy man, the lord of no less than 15 manors. That he lived at the manor house at Claxton and that the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk both stayed there appears to prove that the mansion was a fine and commodious one. From the Gawdys the property passed in 1697 to Thomas Brereton. Roger Crow was lord about 1720 and John Bedingfield in 1740.

TODAY, having been for many years a farm house, Claxton and the surrounding estate are owned by Major D. S. Allhusen, High Sheriff of Norfolk in 1959, the well-known international horseman, who farms it on an extensive scale and takes a vivid interest in his historic home and land. He owns not only Claxton but the much more extensive remains of the once great Premonstratensian Abbey of Langley, most of which is incorporated in farm buildings at Langley Dyke, not far from the banks of the Yare.

Major Allhusen's coat of arms, inherited from his Danish ancestors, who came here in 1824, includes a demi-lion guardant az holding in the dexter paw a passion cross between two buffalo horns, clearly an heraldic echo of the horned helms of his Viking forbears.



Side and rear of Claxton Castle looking north-west.

It is a pretty thought that in all likelihood they sailed up the estuary in the beaked galleys of Asbjorn's fleet, on their way to their defeat at Norwich, with the raven of Odin at the mast-heads, war horns blowing, and the wind and the rowers' song of 'Yuch-Hey-Saa-Saa' ringing hoarsely over the marshes.

OTHER highlights in Claxton history given in the Paston Letters and elsewhere are as follows:

1450. St. George's Day. The King (Henry VI) had been expected either at Norwich or Claxton for ten days past. 1452. Some gentleman wrote to the sheriff enquiring whether the Duke of

Norfolk was coming to Norwich or Claxton.

1465. 'The Duke of Suffolk, and both the Duchessys' came to spend the night at Claxton on their way from Framlingham Castle.

1465. 'XII. of my Lord of Suffolks men VIII. in harness came from Claxton to Hellesdon and felle' upon John Paston; and would have mischiefed him, and told him if they caught him there again, he 'schuld dye'.

1465. 'The Duke of Suffolk's men come from Claxton to Norwich, and face us, and fray upon us daily.'

1466. Paston had a suit before the Duke of Norfolk, respecting the aggressions of

the Duke of Suffolk, and he writes the former to ask whether he shall come before 'his highness' at Norwich or Claxton.

The Duke of Suffolk's occupation of Claxton turned it into a veritable hornet's nest for the surrounding district, as witness the letter written by Margaret Paston to her husband John 'in haste' in 1465, in which she says:

'Right worshipful Husband, I recommend me to you, praying you heartily that ye will seek a mean that your servants may be in peace, for they be daily in fear of their lives; the Duke of Suffolk's men threaten daily Daubeney, Wykes, and Richard Calle, that wheresoever they may get them they shall die, and affrays have been made on Richard Calle this week, so that he was in great jeopardy at Norwich among them . . .

' . . . The Duke of Suffolk and both the Duchesses (his mother and his wife) shall come to Claxton this day, as I am informed, and this next week he shall be at Cossey whether he will come further hitherward or not, I wot not yet . . . '

BEST of all those who have lived or dined within the walls of Claxton I like to think of the builder, William de Kerdeston. He was a man of parts. A good soldier, the wise counsellor of his

king, rich, busy, and fair in his dealings. In 1340 he joined the expedition into Flanders, taking 10 men-at-arms and 10 archers from Claxton. The following year he sent 10 men-at-arms to fight the Scots.

Four years later he was fighting in France, and was one of those who saw the final defeat of the flower of French chivalry at 'the crowning mercy of Crecy'. That seems to have been his last battle. He was almost certainly a friend of Chaucer, for later his granddaughter married Thomas, the son of the poet.

His 'good frende' in Norwich was Bishop Bateman, who submitted the draft of the agreement between England and France to Pope Innocent I at Avignon. Part of the Norwich city walls which still stand are in a sense a memorial to William de Kerdeston, for in 1344 he witnessed the gift which gave the citizens the ground on which the city walls were built, from Baar Gate to the Wensum, much of which still stand.

Today, although 'their name forgot, their hold a ruin', the ghost of William de Kerdeston, bold, busy and wise, would not, I think, be disappointed by the beeves and bloodstock, the dairy herds, and the rich ploughland which make the lands of his manor a picture of good farming in an ancient frame.