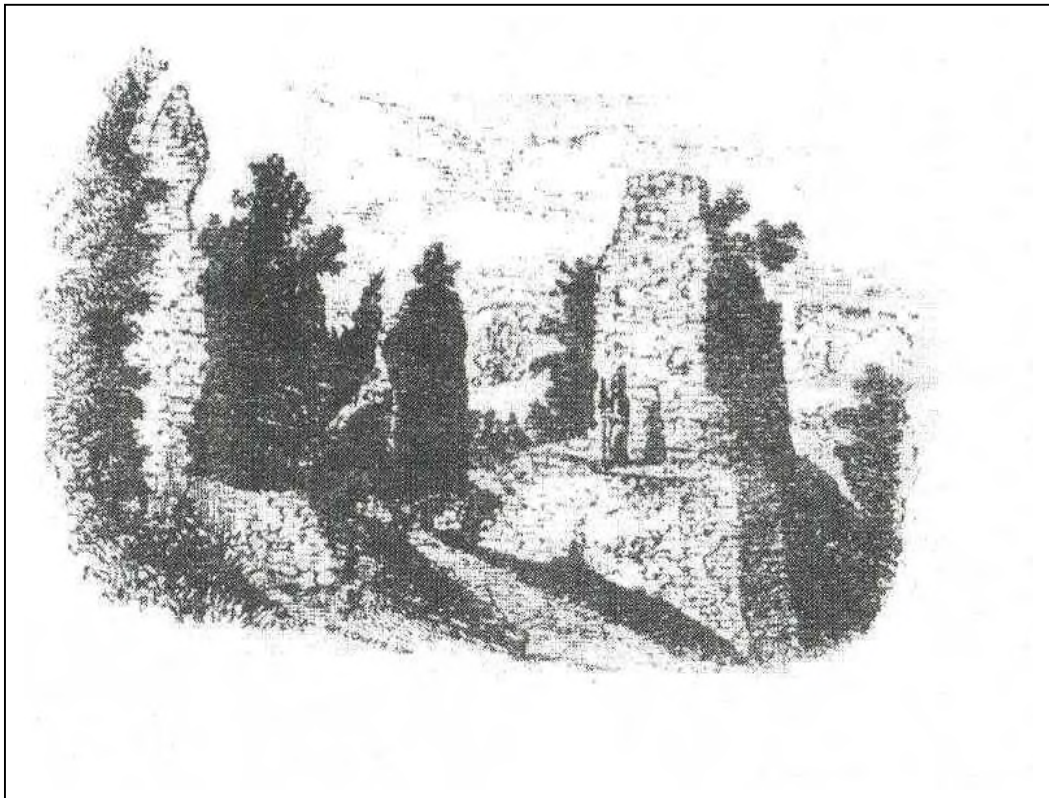


ON THE CASTLE OF BELLENCOMBRE
THE ORIGINAL SEAT OF THE DE WARENNES IN NORMANDY

BY MR. M. A. LOWER

(READ AT ARUNDEL, AUGUST 9, 1894)



Ruins of Belencombe 1849

The interest in the history of the De Warenne family, excited by the discovery of the remains of William de Warenne and Gundrada, at Lewes Priory, in 1845, led me, during a recent brief stay in Normandy, to visit the principal seat of that race –the Castle of Belencombe.

For this purpose I left La Chapelle, the chateau of M. de Breute, member of the Institute of France, in company with M. l'Abbe Cochet, of Dieppe, our foreign associate, taking in our way the towns of Longueville and S. Victor, the former celebrated for its castle and abbey, built in the eleventh century by the Giffards, Earls of Buckingham and the latter for it's eleventh century monastery founded by William the Conqueror.

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At the distance of a league and a half from S. Victor, at a place little known to the antiquary and rarely visited by the tourist, stand the remains of the habitation of the once potent De Warenes. A picturesque village of one broad street, consisting of irregular antique houses, chiefly constructed with wood, and flanking the *mairie*, constitutes the bourg of Bellencombre, which occupies a very agreeable and picturesque situation on the western side of the river *Varenne*. This river which rises in, and gives name to, the neighbouring commune of Omonville-sur-Varenne, is now more generally known as the riviere d' Arques, because it passes the castle and town of Arques on its way to join the Bethune, which debouches a few miles northward at the haven of Dieppe. The town itself, in early times, bore the same name as the river, and from it the De Warenes took their surname. It was not until the graceful mound upon which the castle stands had been cast up, that the spot assumed another name, and was called *Bellencombre*, which, as Mr. Stapleton observes, may be literally translated *Bellus Cumulus*, "the fair mound or pile" (1). At the present day, Bellencombre is the chef-lieu of a canton in the arrondissement of Dieppe, containing a population of less than 1000 inhabitants.

The castle of Bellencombre recently belonged to M. Godard de Belbeuf, of the Chateau de Belbeuf, near Rouen, and previously to the Duchess de Fontaine-Martel, near Bulbee, chatelaine de Cletes, who married the Duke de Bethune Charrost. It is now in the hands of a small proprietor named M. Dillard.

It occupies the artificial mound alluded to, and is apparently about 100 feet above the river Varenne. A few massive walls of stone and brick, once a portion of the keep or donjon, constitute the whole of the existing remains. Nor will this excite surprise, when I state that the property was purchased by the present possessor for the sum of 10,000 francs, in the year 1835, for the express purpose of selling the materials; and so little ashamed is the old man of his sordid spoliation, that he told us, with an air of the utmost satisfaction, that he had, within the last ten years sold 18,000 feet of freestone,

(1) *Vide Archaeological Journal*, vol. iii, p. 6.

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procured by the demolition of the two entrance towers only. The height of these towers was above 50 feet. Unless some friendly influence should arrest the progress of destruction, in a few years more it will have to be said of Bellencombre—

"Etium perierunt Runae"

In the middle of the donjon, according to Mr. Dillard's statement, stood a Chapel, no remains of which are now visible. The area, inclosed by the vallum and fosse, measures between two and three acres, and includes the parish church of St. Peter. Within the memory of man, a long flight of steps, extend from the warder's lodge to the keep: but this also has disappeared.

The accompanying etchings have been made from drawings taken on the spot in 1832, before the building was delivered over to the spoiling cupidity of Mr. Dillard. At that date it consisted chiefly of two lofty round towers, with machicolations, but the battlements had disappeared. Between the towers were a principal and a side gateway; and over these were two longitudinal openings, by means of which the drawbridge was raised. Internally the towers were square; but the interior walls of the left-hand tower had been removed previously to 1832.

I need hardly state, that the present owner of Bellencombre Castle had never heard the name of a De Warenne!

Very little appears to be known of the history of the descent of this castle. That it was the *caput baroniae* of the Earls of Warenne is beyond question, although the Norman antiquaries and historians scarcely recognize the fact. Indeed, I was assured, by a very erudite archaeologist, that the earliest record respecting it to be met with in Normandy was dated no earlier than the time of John *sans Terre*. (2) It is not, therefore, surprising that Dr. Watson, the English historian of the family, gives only two or three incidental notices of Bellencombre. It appears from Dugdale, that William de Warenne, the second earl, with Isabel, alias Elizabeth, his wife, gave to the church of All Saints, at Bellencombre, and the infirm brethren there serving God, all his arable lands at St. Martin's, probably part

(2) *M. Leprevost, however, in his notes to the "Roman de Rou", speaking of the De Warenes, says: "Ils possedaient dans notre province, entre autres dumaines, la terre et le Chateau de Bellencombre." (Roman De Rou, p. 241.)*

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of the ancient paternal estate of the family. The brethren thus referred to were the constituents of a hospital of lepers, founded here in early times. Isabel, Countess de Warenne, (3) likewise in the year 1135, gave to these lepers the sum of one hundred shillings, arising out of the borough of Lewes. (4)

William, fourth Earl of Warenne, by accord between King Stephen and Henry Duke of Normandy, resigned certain rights, on condition that Reginald de Warenne (son of William the second Earl) should, if he thought fit, have the custody of the castle of Bellencombre and Mortimer, giving hostages to the duke for same, until Henry should become king of England. (5)

On the separation of England and Normandy, the connexion of the De Warenes with Bellencombre ceased. The castle, however, remained as a fortress till a much later date. In the parish church (which exhibits very evident traces of the style known among us as that pertaining to the Norman period, and which was probably created by one of the early earls) is an incised slab, with an inscription which shows that the governorship of the castle was an office existing so lately as the year 1519. It is to the following effect:

"Beneath lie the viscera and intestines of the late noble and puissant Lord, Monsieur James de Moy, in his lifetime Chevalier, Baron of Moy, and hereditary Castellain of this land, lordship, and castelry of Bellencombre. His heart and body are buried in the collegiate church of Moy. He died on Sunday, the 12th of February, in the year of grace 1519." (6)

(3) *In the MS. Book of deeds relating to Lewes Priory (Vespas, F. xv, in Br. Mus.) the name of William de Bellencombre twice occurs, as a witness to confirmatory charters of Countess Isabella, together with Reginald de Warenne, William his son, Oddo priest of Roger de Warenne, & c. (f. 31, 35.)*

(4) *Dugd. Mon. Watson's Memoirs of the Earls of W.*

(5) *Chr. Nor. 993. Holinshed's Chron. Watson*

(6)

* "Ep dessous reposant les visceres et intestines de feu noble et puissant Seigneur Monsieur Jacques de Moy, en son vivant Chevalier Baron du dict lieu de Moy, et Chastellain hereditaire de ceste terre seigneurie et chastellenge de Bellencombre. Cœur et corps duquel est inhume en l'eglise Collegial du dict lieu de Moy: il trespassa le dymierc rix. jour de Fevrier, l'an de grace mil cinq ans dix neuf."

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Under the inscription are the arms of Moy; Gules, fretty or, of 6 pieces – a coat which, according to D'Eschavannes Armorial Universal, was borne by a family of this name in Picardy. At a still later period the castle must have been in a habitable state, as pieces of marble molding, not older than the 17th century, are to be found among the rubbish. About six years since an oblong slab of black marble, inscribed with the following lines, was found in the garden. It is certainly of the same period.

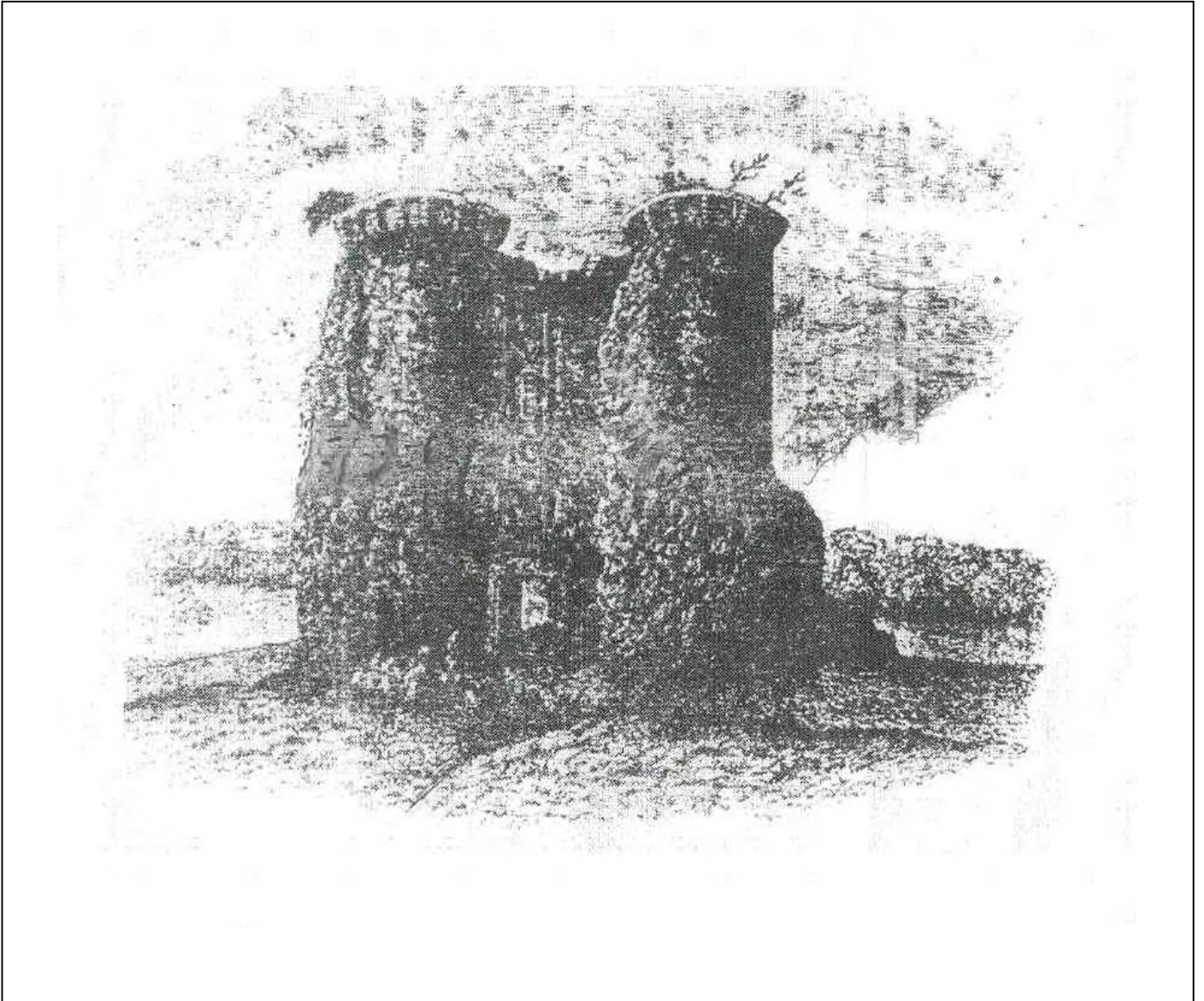
“MON . HONNEUR . ET . MA . VIE
SONT . DEVX . LOTS . DE . MON . BIEN .
QVAND . L'UNE . M'EST . RAVIE .
L'AUTRE . NE . M'EST . PLUS . RIEN.”

I inquired of Mr. Dillard if any other articles had been found, and he stated that about two years since his wife had picked up silver ring and an antique spur, both of which she had sold. Many tiles of medieval date had also been found. The greater part of them were taken from a corridor in the castle, and now laid down in the kitchen of the old man's cottage.

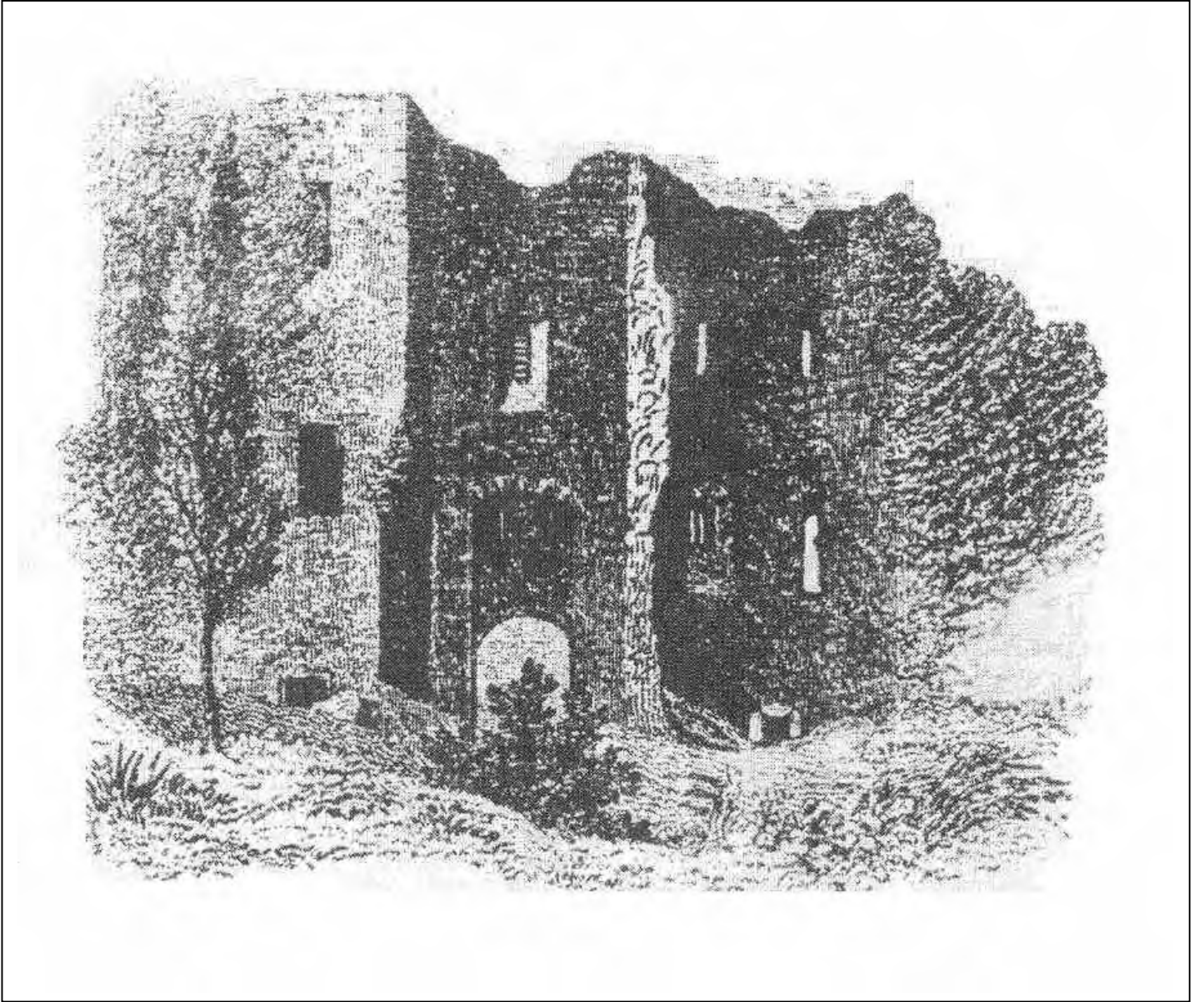
I was fortunate enough to procure one relic of extremely interesting character, for which this modern Baron of Bellencombte demanded the moderate sum of two francs, and the sale of which seemed to him a very satisfactory transaction. It is a bronze *wyvern* – in the opinion of M. l'Abbé Cochet, of the 13th century. The wyvern or two-legged dragon was the crest or rather badge of the De Warenne family; and the article in question bears a striking general resemblance to some drawings of it made in the time of Henry VII, and engraved at page 13, vil.1, of Watson. The only material difference between them is, that the latter have expanded chequy wings, while in my bronze figure the wings are close, and very slightly relieved from the back. I may mention that Alice, Countess of Warenne, and consort of John, the seventh earl, was buried in Lewes Priory, in 1296, before the high altar, under a marble tomb, whereon was sculptured a *wyvern, or heraldic dragon*, with a branch in its mouth. The coincidence may be accidental, but it is certainly highly curious, and deserving of further consideration.

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These few facts, however meager they may appear, are all that I was enabled to glean regarding this once important and interesting spot. I trust, however, that their relation to Sussex history, and their connection with a distinguished race, represented at this time by the noble proprietor of Arundel, will render them acceptable to the members of a Society which may truly be said have been called into existence by the discovery of the bones of William de Warenne and Gundrada.



Castle Bellencombe from a Sketch Taken in 1832



Interior of Castle Belencombe



Church of Belencombe