

AN OLD VIEW OF TONBRIDGE,

a note, topographical and iconographical,

BY AYMER VALLANCE.

AMONG works of art, acquired by the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge during the year 1931, is a water-colour drawing in monochrome from the collection of the late John Ruskin, presenting an early view of Tonbridge Castle from the river-side. The drawing formed Item No. 2 of Ruskin's Exhibition at Oxford in 1878, when, in his notes to his *Catalogue of the Rudimentary Series*, he described it as a "most characteristic" example "of Turner's earliest manner, pencil outline washed with neutral tint. He [the artist] could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen when he made this sketch; but he had been under good water-colour masters, and was already quite practised in laying flat colour. His sense of warmth and sunlight is already shown by the difference in hue between the bridge and distance, as well as between the cottage roof and the towers of the Castle."¹

In another place Ruskin called this same drawing "An example of the constant method of Turner's study in early youth"²

And, although this drawing was subsequently withheld by Ruskin, and was not included in his gift to the University of Oxford, nevertheless the terms in which he wrote of it leave no room to doubt that he was satisfied that it was an authentic work of J. M. W. Turner, R.A. Ruskin was probably mistaken in assigning to it so early a date as 1790. There is reason to suppose rather that it belongs to about the year 1794. Turner's maternal uncle by marriage, Henry Harpur, at one time ministered at Tonbridge, a circumstance

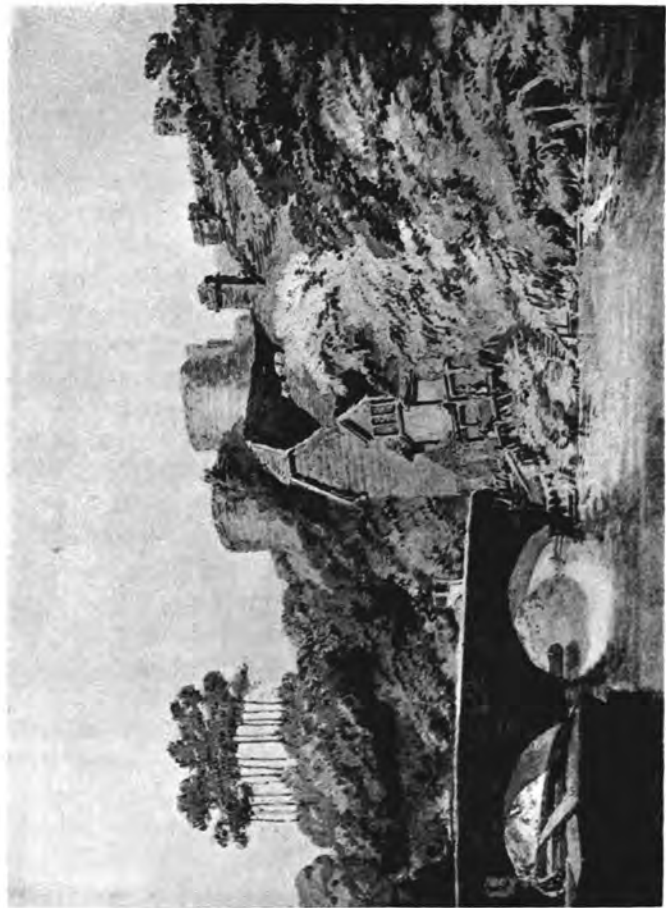
¹ *Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. XXI, pp. 280-1.

² *Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. XIII, p. 414.

which may possibly afford a connecting link between Tonbridge and Turner himself.

Considerable doubt, nevertheless, attaches to the authorship of this drawing, particularly as there exists in the possession of the present Mr. T. Girtin, great-grandson of his celebrated namesake, a drawing in pencil outline of precisely the same subject, inscribed on the back "Tunbridge Bridge and Castle, Kent. T. Girtin, delt."—the signature at any rate being in Girtin's own handwriting. The fact that both drawings, viz., that at the Fitzwilliam Museum and that which belongs to Mr. Girtin, are identical in composition and detail, goes to show either that, if one was executed by the hand of Turner and the other by the hand of Girtin, one of them might well have been copied from the other, or that both alike might have been derived from a common original. Before the close of the eighteenth century there had developed, both on the part of the public and of artists catering for the taste of the public, an extraordinary rage for topographical drawings, and nearly every young artist at the time was attracted into the service of the prevalent demand.

A well-known patron of water-colour artists, Dr. Monro, presided over, in the Adelphi and other places, what may be called a drawing-factory, in which numbers of clever youths were employed in working up original drawings, left unfinished by such artists as John Henderson (who died in 1785), John Robert Cozens (who produced no artistic output after he became deranged in 1794) and Paul Sandby (who died in 1809), and other well-known contemporary, or recently deceased, artists; as well as in reduplicating copies of their works. Among the most promising of the young men thus engaged were two of the same age (since they were both of them born in 1775), viz., J. M. W. Turner and Thomas Girtin. The latter, whose superior talents Turner did not fail to acknowledge, died when only twenty-seven years of age, i.e., in 1802, but so long as they both lived they were closely associated together in their work. All this may account for the existence of the two drawings of Tonbridge, though it



OLD VIEW OF TONBRIDGE CASTLE AND BRIDGE FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.

From a drawing, attributed to Turner, reproduced by the courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

does not bring one nearer to the exact solution of respective authorship between them.

The same view of Tonbridge from a slightly different angle was drawn by Paul Sandby in 1782; an aquatint from which was published in 1812 by T. Palser. A drawing by Sandby, signed P.S. 1794, identical with the aquatint, except that it does not include a sailing barge in the left foreground, was bought from Agnews in 1921 by Mr. S. L. Courtauld, the art collector.

The early importance of the site of Tonbridge town and castle consisted in the fact that it lies on the direct road between Hastings and the metropolis. The castle itself belonged from the outset to the mount-and-bailey type of early Norman fortress, "built" to quote Professor Hamilton Thompson (*Military Architecture*, 1912) "to meet needs which were purely military, and strengthened with a stone keep and walls and towers of stone, as those needs became more pressing". The donjon, a shell keep, then, did not constitute part of the original castle; but when, in course of time, it came to be erected upon the mound, it was "one of the most considerable and finest examples", measuring, as it did, no less than 86 feet by 76 feet. "The entrance was by a simple doorway pierced through the wall, approached . . . from the general enclosure by a straight flight of steps up the mound, and a drawbridge over its proper ditch."¹

As is learned from the survey drawn up after the attainder of the lord of the castle, the third Duke of Buckingham, in 1521, the donjon was then but partly covered in lead. "Otherwise the castle", writes Professor Hamilton Thompson, "and its curtain were in good repair, the rampart-walk keeping its battlemented outer parapet and rear-wall. The gatehouse, on the north side of the castle, was 'as strong a fortress as few be in England'. On the east curtain was a square tower called the Stafford tower, and at the south-east corner, next the Medway, was the octagonal watch tower. The river constituted the chief southern defence of the castle, and there was no south curtain: the substructure of the hall

¹ *The Castles and Walled Towns of England*, by Alfred Harvey, 1911.

and lodgings, 26 feet high and built of ashlar, was on this side, but the buildings themselves had never been finished." The gateway, which, though ruinous, still stands, is of Edwardian construction. On the first floor the middle room above the entrance contained the apparatus for working the portcullis. In the upper storey the hall, the largest apartment, measured 52 feet long by 28 feet wide by 15 feet high.

"In the days of the Commonwealth struggle", writes Dr. J. C. Cox (*Rambles in Kent*, 1913) "the castle was deliberately unroofed, and the chief points of the fortifications dismantled, so as to unfit it for military occupation".

In the drawing under consideration a conspicuous clump of trees on the left in the distance marks the site of the mound, which survives to the present day. Rising in the middle of the picture are seen the tops of the pair of mediaeval drum-towers which flank the main entrance gate. On the right, adjoining the north end of the bridge, is a quaint old house, apparently dating from the XVIIth century, with a hipped gable above and a little further to the south, a three-light dormer window.

Though the fact of there having been a bridge here from very early times be enshrined in the town's very name, the earliest bridge actually on record at Tonbridge is that which is referred to by Lord Rochford, Treasurer of the King's Household, in a communication written from Hever on 8th August 1525.¹ From this it would appear that a bridge at Tonbridge had then been recently finished, that it was built of freestone, and that it was 104 feet long. This would be the principal bridge, that across the main channel of the Medway, for, as enumerated by Ireland, Vol. III, p. 358, there were altogether five branches of the river with as many bridges, at Tonbridge. "Inscribed stones, now seen in the Loggerheads' Inn wall, and near the bridge, shew that the bridges", including no doubt the principal bridge, were repaired at the expense of the County in the years 1628 and 1630.²

¹ *Archæologia Cantiana*, XVI, p. 50.

² *Archæologia Cantiana*, XVI, p. 50 footnote.

Later, Thomas Weller, the Parliamentarian, who obtained a lease of the Castle of Tonbridge on the outbreak of the Civil War, put in a claim to the authorities, on the ground that he had defended the bridges of Tonbridge town for the space of twenty-one weeks from 27th October 1642.

The bridge shown in the left foreground of Girtin's drawing, spanning the main channel of the Medway, is obviously not mediaeval, nor even that which was erected in XVIth century, but a later bridge still. Built of stone, comprising three arches, and claiming to stand upon the foundations of the older structure, this was a new bridge erected from the designs of the engineer Milne in 1775. It indicates the limit above which the Medway is not navigable, except only for small craft. Even this eighteenth century bridge has since disappeared, a new one constructed of iron having been opened in September 1888. "The river", to quote the most recent authority, *The Ancient Bridges of the South of England*, by E. Jervoise, 1930, "is now crossed" exclusively "by iron bridges at Tonbridge".

Lastly the banks of the river in the drawing are depicted as being richly wooded. In fact Girtin's view shows how much of natural beauty and of picturesque charm of surroundings still survived until a comparatively recent date, and how much, owing to modern developments and "improvements" has now been lost.

It remains to mention certain published representations of the Castle. A view by S. N. Buck, in 1735, from the south, shows the buildings in a much more complete state than now. In illustration of a paper, dated 17th January, 1782, plans of Tonbridge Castle are given on plates 31, 32, 33 and 34, and views on plates 32 and 35, of *Archæologia*, Vol. VI. In the *Antiquarian and Topographical Cabinet*, Vol. VII (1810), is a view of the Mediaeval Gateway of Tonbridge Castle from the south, showing a part of the incongruous modern addition, erected by a former proprietor, Thomas Hooker, whose father, John Hooker, had purchased the property in 1739. Another, and a better, view from

much the same aspect, is to be found in the *History of the County of Kent*, by W. H. Ireland, Vol. III (1829), facing p. 358. In *Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. XVI (1886), is an illustrated article (pp. 12-57 inclusive) on "Tonbridge Castle and its Lords" by J. F. Wadmore, A.R.I.B.A.

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A.V.