

THE WESTGATE



West Gate and the Holy Cross Church of Westgate, Canterbury.

THE WESTGATE

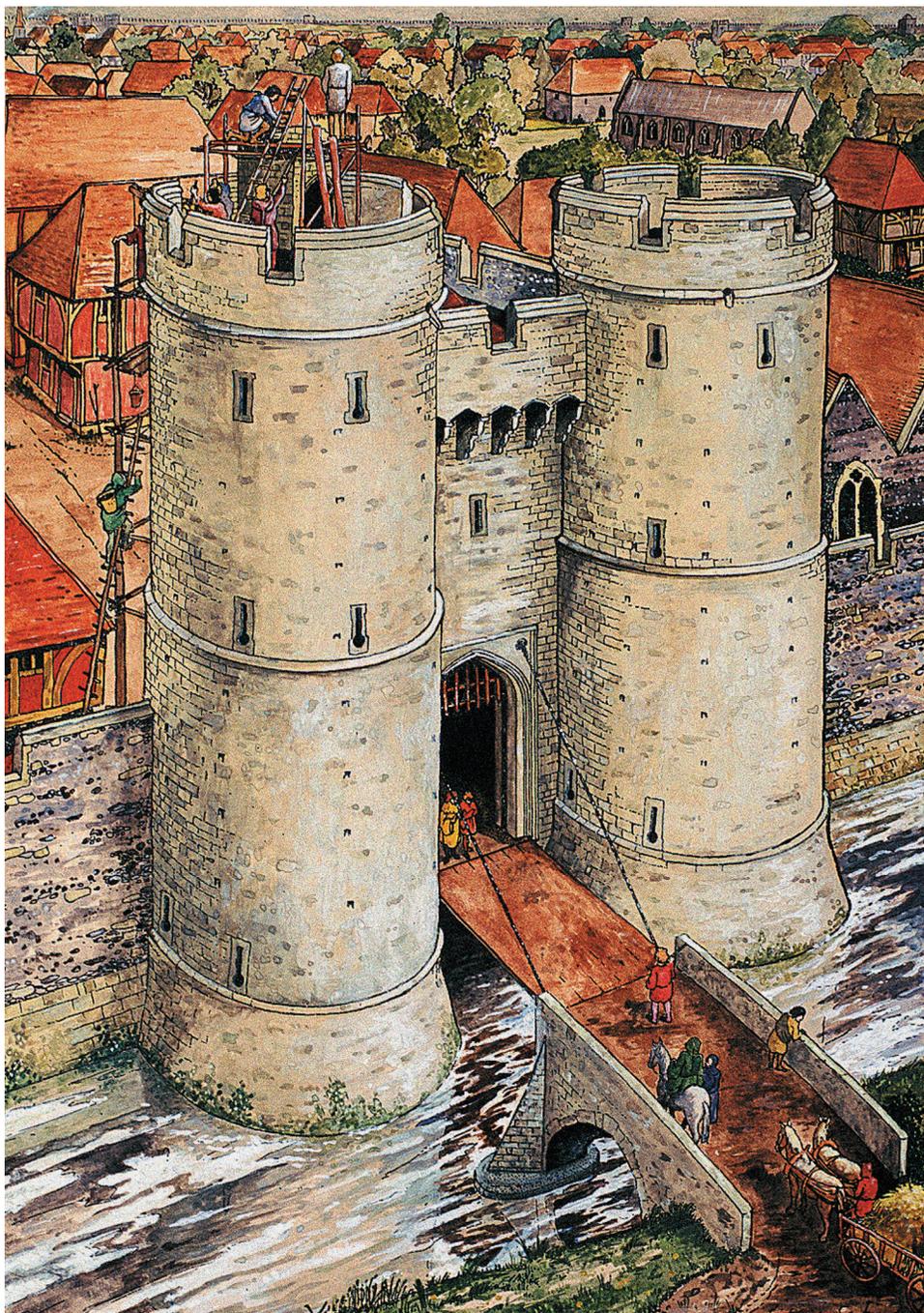
Canterbury's west gate, which is one of the finest surviving medieval gates in Britain, was always the most important gate in the City walls because it was both the gate at the end of the London road, and the main entrance to the County Borough of Canterbury from the County of Kent.

In origin the gate was almost certainly a Roman gate built in the late third century, and this first gate then survived for about eleven hundred years before being replaced by the surviving structure in the late fourteenth century. From the late Anglo-Saxon period there was a chapel (later a parish church) dedicated to the Holy Cross which was built over the gateway. It originally belonged to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who owned the large manor of Westgate immediately outside the gate, but in c1085 Archbishop Lanfranc gave it, along with other churches, to his newly founded Priory of St Gregory. The Patronage then remained with St Gregory's until the Dissolution in 1536 when it reverted to the Archbishop. In 1681–2 the parish was united with that of St Peter's.

Sometime in the late 1370s, as part of a major scheme to repair the defences of the City, the 'old tumbledown Westgate' (and of course the church above) was totally demolished, and work started immediately on a magnificent new gate. This gate, which was paid for in part by Archbishop Simon of Sudbury (murdered in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381) and in part by local taxation (fear of a French invasion was strong), was from the first to be both a status symbol for the City and a very strong and 'modern' gateway. It was therefore faced almost entirely in coursed ashlar of Kentish ragstone (very expensive to transport to Canterbury) and the design incorporated battered plinths to the circular towers, a drawbridge, portcullis, gates, battlements and machicolations, as well as a series of eighteen gunloops. The latter are not only the largest concentration of gunloops (or 'Gunholes' as contemporary records call them), but amongst the earliest gunloops documented in Britain, and guns were certainly in place in the Westgate by the very beginning of the fifteenth century. The gateway was constructed in three main levels: a ground floor with the gateway itself and behind it a large vaulted passage with doors opening into the drumtowers on either side (each containing a fireplace and no less than four gunports). The door on the north also led to a spiral stair to the upper levels. On the first floor above the vault was a large 'hall' (as it is described in the fifteenth century) with a fireplace in its south wall. In the west wall of the hall would have been the mechanism for the portcullis with, on either side, doors into the drumtowers (with three gunports in each chamber as well as a fireplace). On the east side of the hall (and looking up St Peter's Street) was the only large window in the building; this was a two light, transomed perpendicular window which was apparently rebuilt in 1491–2. The top floor of the building had a battlemented parapet walk with access to the machicolations on the west and two less tall chambers (each having two gunports) in the drumtowers. This upper part of the gateway is much less well built and may have been hurriedly completed at the time of the Peasants' Revolt, or it may not have been completed until the early fifteenth century. The city walls joined the gateway at the back of the drumtowers (though nineteenth century restorations have almost removed all traces of this).

At the same time that the gate itself was being rebuilt, the City walls and towers on Pound Lane to the north were also being rebuilt, while on the south the large new Holy Cross parish church was being erected. This church, which is one of only a handful of completely new churches of the late fourteenth century in Kent (the largest of which was Archbishop Courtney's new parish church in Maidstone), was built with a large chance], a nave and two aisles, with a tower over the west end of the south aisle. It had a new graveyard around it, though the northern part of the latter was covered by a widened St Peter's Street in the nineteenth century, as well as a special chantry chapel for the 'Fraternity of Jesus' (dissolved in the sixteenth century). In the late sixteenth century the crown-post roof over the nave was modified to its present remarkable form. In 1978 the church was converted to a new Council chamber as it had by then become redundant.

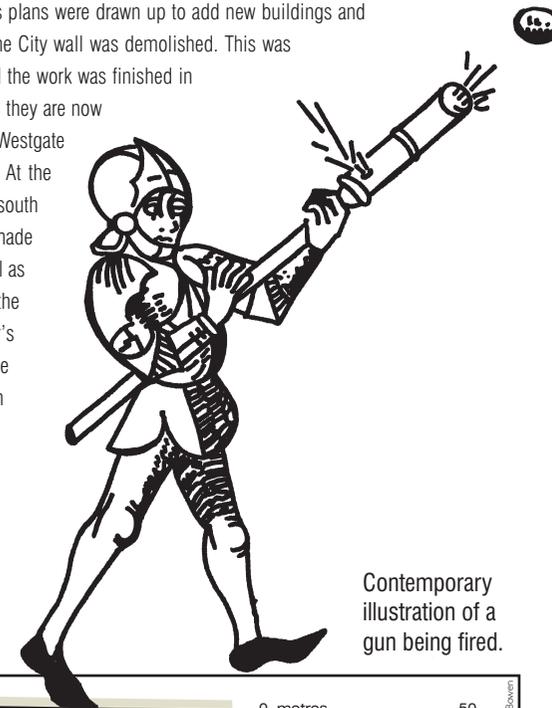
The later history of the Westgate itself was almost entirely as a prison, though major repairs were carried out to the defences in the 1470s and 1480s at time of another invasion scare. In 1473, Henry VI legally granted the Mayor and Commonality 'the keeping of the Gaol at Westgate' and from that time it was the prison for the City of Canterbury (as opposed to the Castle,



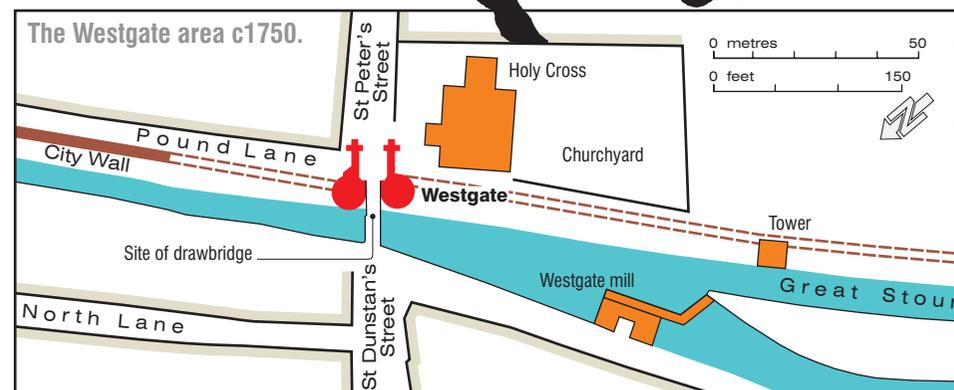
Westgate nearing completion at the end of the fourteenth century. An imaginative reconstruction by Laurie Sartin.

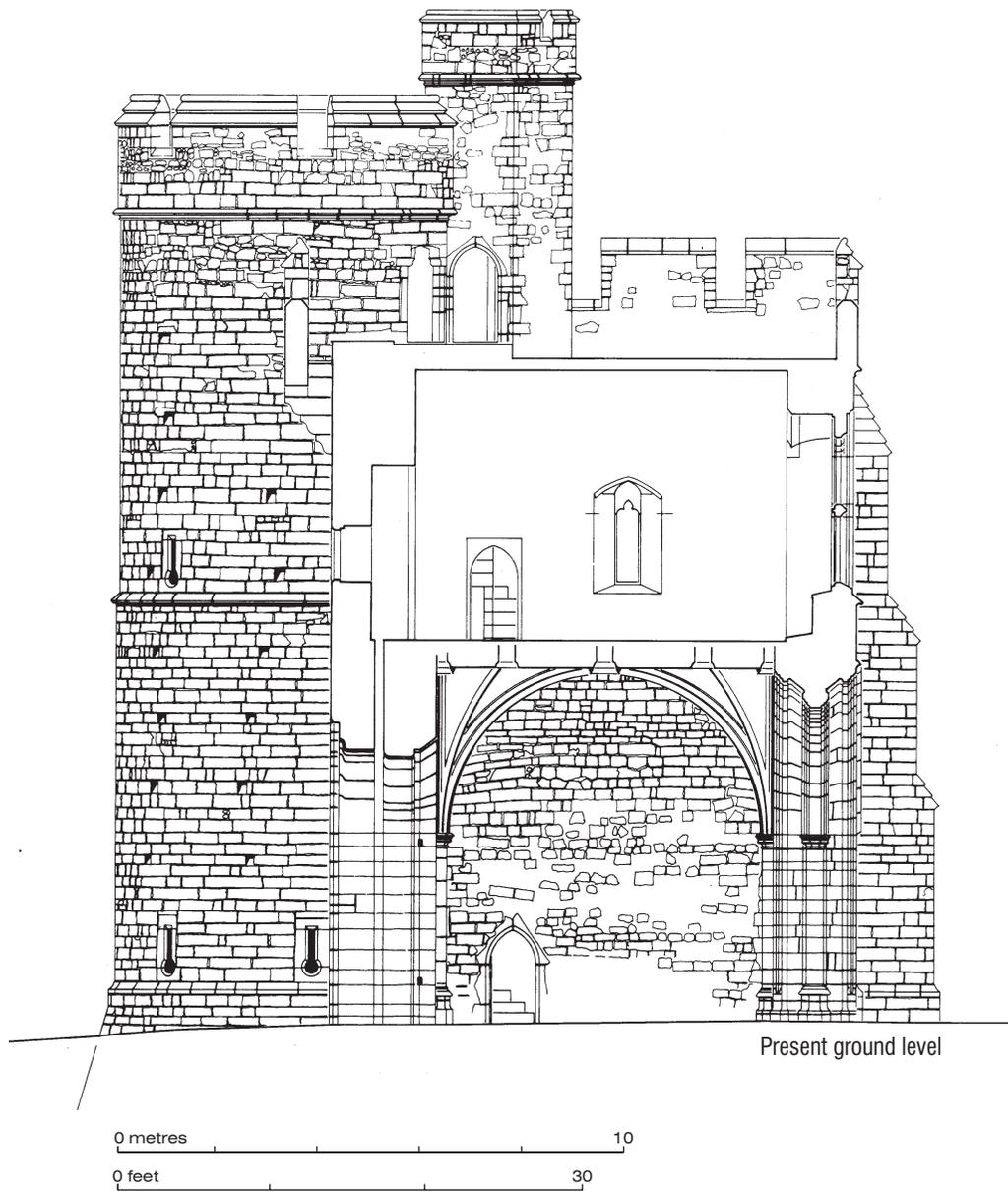
which was the County Gaol). In 1648 all the wooden doors of the City's gates were burnt by a Parliamentarian military unit after the Christmas Day riot, though they were all replaced in 1660, and we are told by Hasted that when these gates were finally removed at the end of the eighteenth century they had the arms of Archbishop Juxon on them. They must therefore have been similar to the still surviving Christ Church gates. The Westgate and gaol was thoroughly repaired in 1667 and sometime after this the City Pound was erected on the north side of the gateway (hence Pound Lane). From the mid eighteenth century the prison was used for both debtors and criminals, and Gostling tells us that the way up to the prison was 'through a grated cage in the gate, level with the street, where the prisoners, who are not more closely confined, may discourse with passengers, receive their alms, and warn them (by their distress) to manage their liberty and property to the best advantage, as well as to thank God for whatever share of these blessings he has bestowed on them.' This was removed in 1775. In 1793-4 nearly £400 was spent on repairs and alterations, and the large room over the gate was divided into three, while a square lantern was erected above. Much of the planking of the cells and the stout wooden doors in the various chambers that still survive probably date from this time. In 1823 various plans were drawn up to add new buildings and a gaoler's house on the north side of the gateway after the City wall was demolished. This was described as the 'City Gaol and House of Correction' and the work was finished in 1829. (These buildings later became a Police Station and they are now used as a Music School.) They were connected with the Westgate itself by a high iron bridge (still surviving, but unused). At the same time as this, a new street was constructed to the south of the Westgate (St. Peter's Place) and passages were made around the Westgate on the north and south sides (as well as new bridges over the river), thus creating more room for the increased traffic flow between St. Dunstan's and St. Peter's Street. Houses immediately outside the Westgate had to be demolished as well as the churchyard wall and porch on the north side of the Holy Cross Church. For the last one hundred and fifty years or so therefore, the Westgate has been in splendid isolation with increasing traffic damage to its six hundred year old fabric.

Tim Tatton-Brown, September 1985
 © Canterbury Archaeological Trust Ltd

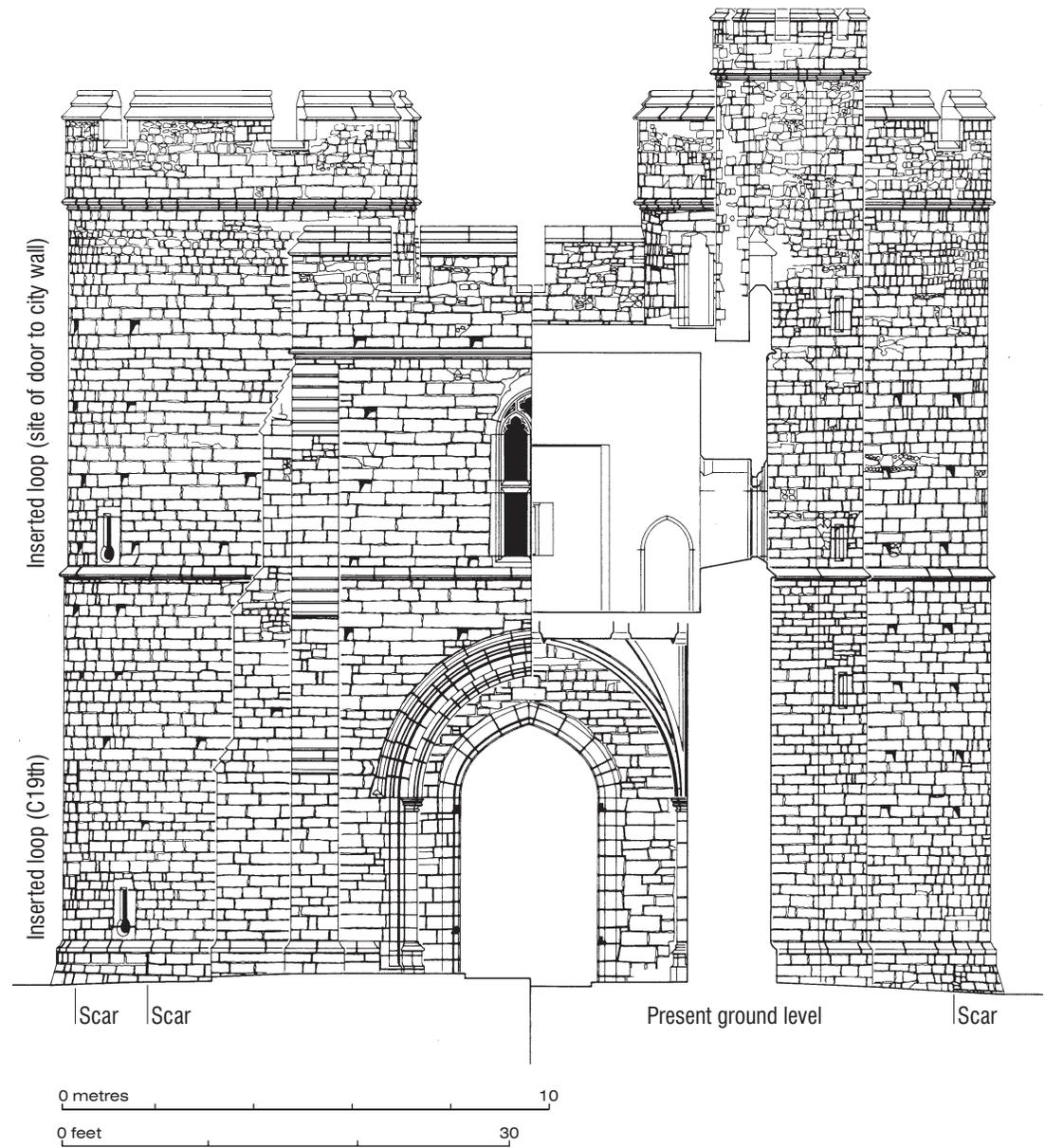


Contemporary illustration of a gun being fired.

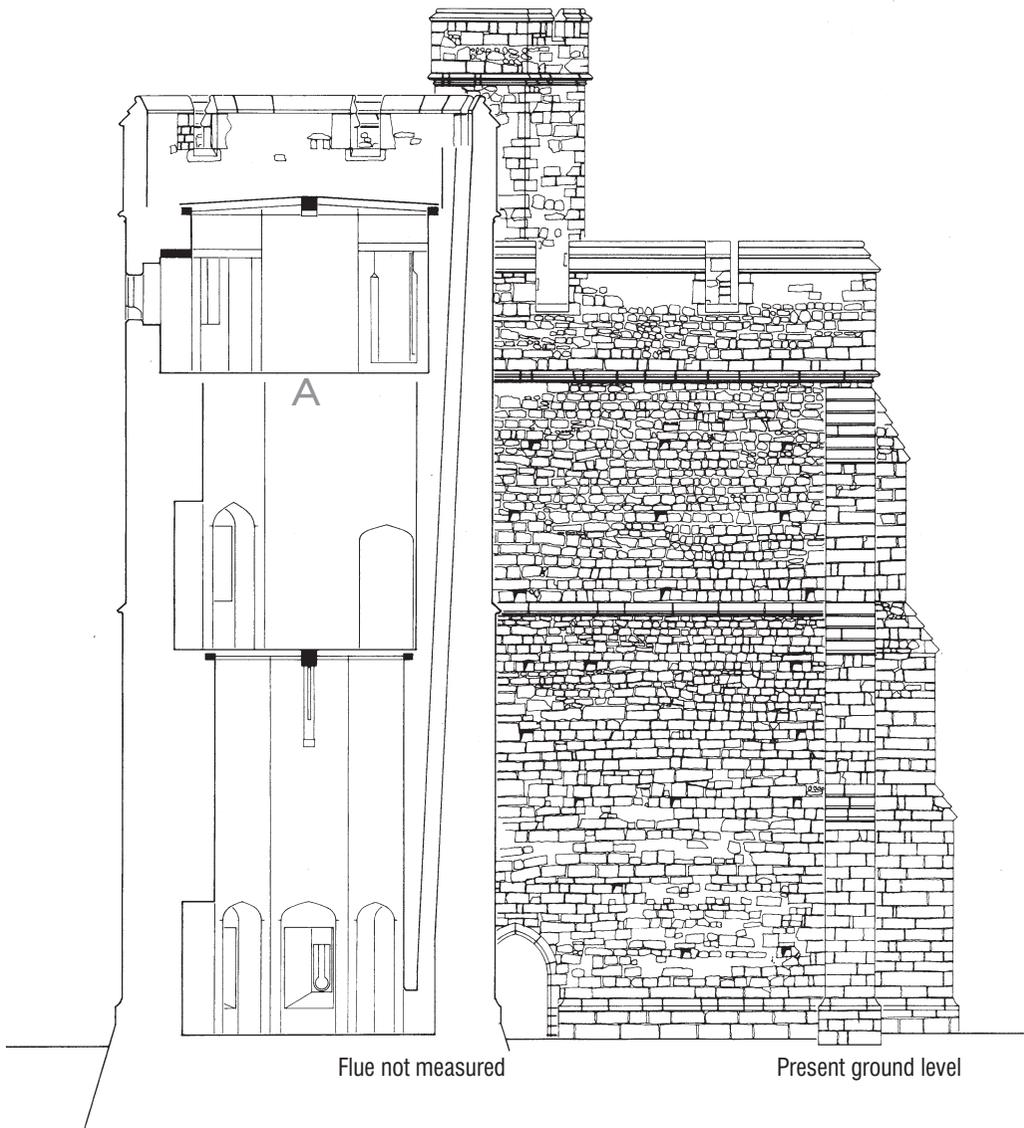




Westgate: section through, looking north. Drawn by J. Bowen.



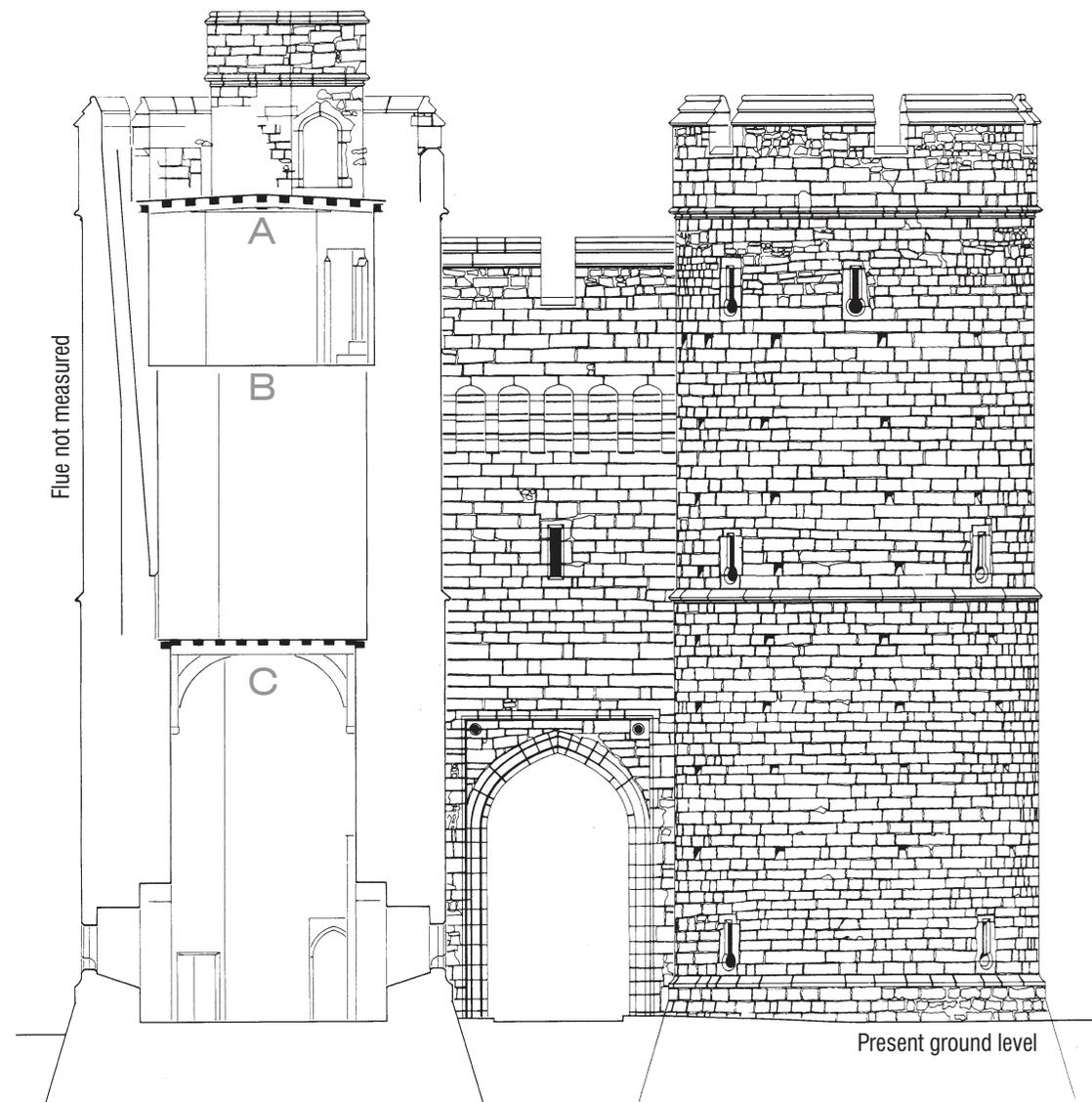
Westgate: east elevation and section. Drawn by J. Bowen.



0 metres 10
0 feet 30

A Inaccessible

Westgate: south elevation and section. Drawn by J. Bowen.



0 metres 10
0 feet 30

A Roof reconstructed, based on that in south drum
B Inaccessible
C Corbels, posts and braces reconstructed

Westgate: west elevation and section. Drawn by J. Bowen.

