Patterns in Licences to Crenellate

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Philip Davis has done castle studies a much-needed service by mapping and counting the surviving licences to crenellate for the first time. He now knows those licences better than anybody else in the business, with the sole exception of Charles Coulson. But sorting out Coulson's material and making sense of what it means may require different skills. Social history is about recognizing patterns. And I've been in the business long enough to appreciate a pattern when I see it.

It was that background in socio-economic history - which I have and he hasn't - that enabled me to see more in Davis's map and in his bar-chart (2007 pp. 232-3) than he was ready to claim for himself. The distribution map, I argued (2008 pp. 204-5), was as important for its fortress-free areas - mainly inland - as for the evident concentrations of castles and walled towns in the more vulnerable marches and on the coasts. Why, I asked, if licences to crenellate were purchased principally for status reasons were they not distributed more evenly across the kingdom? Were the comfortably-off gentry on the champion lands of Leicestershire and Rutland somehow less 'aspirational' than their hardier cousins in Northumberland and Durham? Perhaps they were. But could it just be that they felt safer?

Davis's distribution map already raises tough questions about Coulson's influential premise - 'the starting point', writes Robert Liddiard, 'for much of the new thinking on castles that has emerged over recent years' (2005 pp. 6-7) - that licences to crenellate 'had more to do with social emulation than with the fear of physical violence' (1982 p. 70). But it is his bar-chart, giving the decadal totals of applications to crenellate, that offers an even greater challenge to Coulson's views.

Davis himself notes the sharp fall in the number of applications in the 1350s: the decade immediately following the Black Death. And he suggests - mistakenly, in my view (2008 p. 205) - that the reason why numbers began rising again in the 1360s was that the religious houses attracted a greater number of donations. But he makes no other attempt to interpret his chart's precipitous highs and lows, which he continues to see (along with the distribution of licensed castles on his map) as 'fairly random' and hence 'consistent with Coulson's hypothesis' (2009 pp. 247, 249).

But 'fairly random' is just what they are not. Thus the first surge in applications to crenellate coincides precisely with Simon de Montfort's Baronial Revolt (1263-5); the second with the collapse of the general eyre and mounting lawlessness in the famines and murrains of 1315-22; the third - and much the worst - with the deterioration of public order under extreme population pressure in the 1330s and 1340s; the fourth with post-plague tenant militancy and the Peasants' Revolt (1381); the fifth with a currency crisis in the mid-century and Jack Cade's Revolt (1450); and the last with the Wars of the Roses (1455-85). It doesn't need a professional historian's eye to see that the match works every time.

So acts of violence and applications to crenellate are closely related: point taken. But what of the social origins of the applicants themselves, to which Davis devotes the better part of his new paper? It has been an article of faith with Dr Coulson from the start that 'licence was sought most usually by lesser men in order to enhance their own social status' (1979 p.78). Coulson subsequently defined those 'lesser men' as 'aspiring gentry, ecclesiastics, and newly-landed or socially emergent individuals' (1982 p.70). And without ever counting them himself, his instinct told him that the licences awarded to 'the manor-houses and homestead moats of the lay and eccle-

siastical gentry class comprised about three-quarters of the total' (1994 p. 93). He has since broadened his agenda but hasn't changed his mind, claiming that even in the overtly military towerhouses of Northern England 'fortification was chiefly an expression of status, and the architectural programme was predominantly residential' (2003 p. 353). Davis agrees. 'I believe', he writes, 'that (Coulson's) evidence does show that the majority of grantees of licences to crenellate were gentry ... (and that) the fundamental reason for obtaining a licence to crenellate seems clearly to have been prestige' (2009 pp. 249, 261). But how does that square with Davis's own analysis of social origins? The short answer is that it does not.

Davis rounds-off his paper with an important appendix in which he refines his earlier breakdown of the titles and occupations of the 314 recorded licence-holders on his data-base. Of those, he points out, only some 30 fit happily into Coulson's category of 'lesser men', occurring nowhere else in the records. In contrast, no fewer than 121 individuals were of such national significance as to be included even today in the *Dictionary of National Biography; 22* belonged to the higher nobility; 85 held major offices; 63 were barons; 27 were bishops; and 'at least' 68 were parliamentary knights of the shire (2009 pp. 262-3). Inevitably, many of those grantees had humble roots. But many more came either from well-established families or had risen so high before obtaining their grants that they had nothing to gain socially from licences to crenellate that were 'issued on demand' (Coulson 2003 p. 353) and were both cheap and easy to obtain. As Davis himself in all innocence tells us, seeking only to explain why applications to crenellate began falling off seriously before 1500, 'the prestige that a licence held was limited, partly because grants may have been

fairly readily available' (2009 p. 261). Quite so.

Strip away speculation, and the facts speak for themselves. Licensed defences occurred more thickly in violence-prone regions; applications to crenellate soared in perilous times; many (and perhaps most) of the applicants were men of such substance that the purchase of a cut-price licence at no great cost to themselves could have added nothing to their already high prestige. With the greatest respect, Coulson's hypothesis is toast.

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