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# Twin Towers

Dr Christopher Thacker, Steven Ashley and Julian Berry

This article describes the existence of an unfinished tower on the Fonthill estate in Wiltshire, started in the 1760s, that would have reached a size far greater than that of Alfred's tower on the Stourhead estate, and that was nearly identical in design.

Fonthill is indeed, or was, a place of towers. Not just the central tower of Fonthill Abbey, put up and put up again by William Beckford, but also another and earlier tower, related to the highest point in the vast Fonthill domain, 'Stop Beacon', or the 'Beacon', or 'Beacon Hill' (O.S. reference ST 912 300).

Let us leave William Beckford, and return to his father, the Alderman William Beckford (1709–70), twice Lord Mayor of London. He had built, gardened and landscaped in the Fonthill estate from the late 1750s, and the tower on Beacon Hill may reasonably be seen as the last of his projects.

The tower's 'parentage' is complex, involving as it does the gardens of Painshill, Stourhead and Fonthill.<sup>1</sup> By 1760, Charles Hamilton, at Painshill in Surrey, had raised a tall, square gothic tower on the edge of his landscape garden, to suggest an earlier feudal ownership of the terrain. This idea appealed to Hamilton's friend (and banker) Henry Hoare, active in the embellishment of his Stourhead estate in Wiltshire. Friendly visits between Painshill and Stourhead led in 1762 to Hoare's architect Henry Flitcroft designing a bigger and grander tower for the edge of the Stourhead estate. Flitcroft had already designed a triangular tower in 1748 for the grounds at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire. Alfred's Tower at Stourhead is triangular, with round bastions or turrets at each of the three corners, and is open inside, having been designed to have no roof. It was not completed until 1772, three years after Flitcroft's death.<sup>2</sup>

By this time Alderman Beckford was also dead – he had died in 1770. But he too had started a tower, on Stop Beacon, or Beacon Hill, presumably in the late 1760s, and, we may imagine, in competition with his neighbour at Stourhead. If one visits the site today, the spacious triangular foundations, with circular bastions at the corners, are still apparent; these were accurately measured by Steven Ashley in 1994. The dimensions are vast – had the Alderman lived to complete this project we may imagine a building far larger<sup>3</sup> than Alfred's Tower at Stourhead, and indeed approaching the fantasy of Monville's 'colonne détruite' in the Désert de Retz in the 1780s.<sup>4</sup>

The Fonthill tower never rose above the first foundations. When the Alderman died in 1770 his son William Beckford was only ten years old, and it was not until the late 1780s that *his* tower-building fantasies began to be elaborated. The Alderman's three-sided tower remains as an enormous outline, an equilateral triangle whose walls now rise a mere two to four feet above the ground. The first reference to it is not until 1812, in James Storer's *Description of Fonthill Abbey*, where he mentions 'the Beacon':



*Fig. 1* Stop Beacon tower – north wall.

‘On the summit of this hill is a plain of about five or six acres, intended for the site of a magnificent tower; the foundations are entirely laid, and in most parts the walls are raised to the height of 9 or 10 ft; it is of considerable extent, of triangular form, having a circular bastion at each of its angles . . .’

The first edition of the 1" Ordnance Survey, published a year before in 1811, indicates ‘Stop Beacon’, but does not show the tower. By 1823 John Rutter’s book *Delineations of Fonthill* includes a map, where the ‘Beacon’ is indicated. A triangular symbol, with tiny circles at the corners, marks the site of the tower. Rutter’s text, page 89, refers briefly to ‘the Beacon, a tower commenced by Alderman Beckford, but not yet completed’. As Storer wrote in 1811, the foundations were ‘overgrown with shrubs and moss in a very picturesque manner’. They remain, like this, today.

*C.T.*

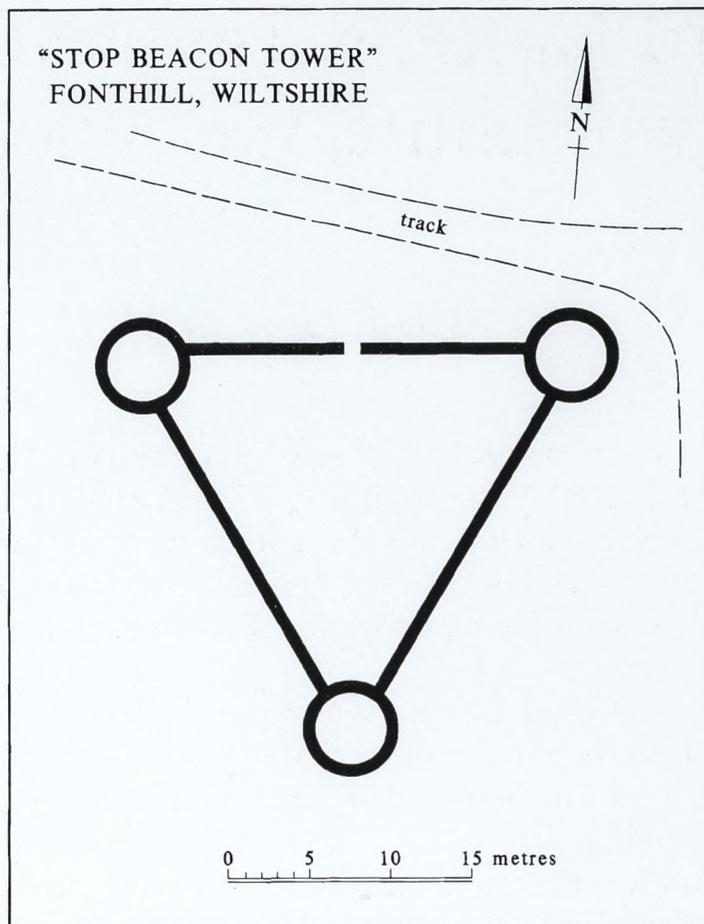
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*Fig. 2* Stop Beacon tower – north-west bastion.



*Fig. 3* Stop Beacon tower – north-east bastion.



*Fig. 4*

The remains of the 'Stop Beacon Tower' lie in a relatively level area on top of a small wooded hill within the Fonthill estate. They comprise a triangular plan with circular bastions at each of the corners (Fig. 4).

The walls of the 'tower' are formed from evenly coursed Chilmark Wiltshire Sandstone, surviving to a height of approx. 40 cm along the length of the walls and approx. 96 cm (two courses) at the north-east corner bastion. The walls are approx. 70 cm wide, although those of the bastions are approx. 80 cm. There is an entrance in the centre of the north wall.

All that now remains of Alderman Beckford's scheme for a tower on the 'Stop Beacon' at Fonthill is the barest of plans. Although contemporary descriptions tell of walls rising to some 'nine or ten feet' (Storer *op. cit.*), these are now much reduced, and could never have achieved a height much in excess of that noted in the above account. If, like Alfred's tower, it was designed to be built without a roof, the wall width although slight, would have allowed a tower of considerable height.

*S.A.*

- 3 See pl. 1a in my paper referred to above.
- 4 Ibid. p. 164.
- 5 ex. inf. *D.N.B.*
- 6 It may be worth recalling that the reasons for attributing the Somerset House design to Webb are set out in *The History of the King's Works*, vol. v, p. 256.
- 7 Gomme, art. cit, pl. 1b.
- 8 ib. p. 165.
- 9 Implied in a further contract of the same date with the mason Thomas Hayward, ib. p. 166.
- 10 p. 130.
- 11 art. cit., p. 169.
- 12 *Architectural History*, vol. 32, 1989, p. 89.
- 13 Quoted by Jackson-Stops, *Country Life*, 9 April 1987, p. 130
- 14 Badminton Drawings 3.8–11, three showing interior elevations and one the plan.
- 15 3.12.

- 16 12.15.
- 17 Badminton drawings 12.5–11.
- 18 See *The Monmouthshire Antiquary*, vol. v. 3, 1988, pp. 88–95.

#### NOTES TO PAGES 115–18

- 1 C. Thacker, forthcoming *Enchanting Paths*.
- 2 Kenneth Woodbridge, *The Stourhead Landscape*, 1986 p. 60.
- 3 Alfred's tower has been carefully measured by Gordon Pickard who looks after it today for the National Trust. Its height is 160 ft, and each side, including the bastion, measures 56 ft. The wall width is 2 ft 9 in at the base. For comparison the Fonthill tower measures just under 100 ft on each side.
- 4 C. Thacker, *The Wildness Pleases: the Origins of Romanticism*, 1983 pp. 199 and 203.