The Tower Houses of Co. Limerick


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LIMERICK AND SOUTH-WEST IRELAND

Medieval Art and Architecture
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Medieval Art and Architecture

Edited by
Roger Stalley

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reflects well a society where the magnates moved easily between the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic-Irish worlds. The cultural roots involved here are shared between English and Irish, just as we see the same castle agenda for the organisation of life shared between Anglo-Irish and Irish magnates in Limerick. The main trendsetter is Desmond, who we see here not as the ‘degenerate’ or ‘gaelicised’ magnate but as one sharing a lifestyle and organisation with European magnates, but also, crucially with an Irish magnate, too, the O Briain lords at Carrigogunnell. This is a good example of the hollowness of thinking implied by the assertions of the two nations in Ireland. Late medieval Ireland was different from the rest of Europe, but not in the traditional way. To judge by secular and religious buildings along with surviving artefacts, it had arrived at a level of modest achievement in the 15th century. We may stress the modesty, the result of the natural poverty of the country, or we may stress the achievement, but it was not a society suffering from violent decline or collapse.

NOTES

1. For example, J. F. Lydon, *The Lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin 1972).
3. For the foundation date and construction of the friary of Askeaton, see the discussion by Aisling O’Donoghue in this volume, p. 112.
4. H. G. Leask, *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses* (Dundalk 1947) gives just two pages (123–24) of his book to Cahir, Askeaton and Newcastle West, the only castles he mentions other than tower houses to show work from after 1350.
5. The individual Masters theses on these castles, carried out in Queen’s University and cited under each castle concerned later, are a start but they lacked, for example, the full apparatus of photographic elevation recording in particular and, of course, are unpublished. This said, I am very grateful both to the students themselves and to the staff of the (then) Office of Public Works for generous help and access to them.
6. R. Frame, *English Lordship* (as n. 2).
15. Ibid., 361.
16. Ibid., 359.
17. Westropp, ‘The Desmonds’ Castle at Newcastle Oconyll’, 57 (as n. 8).
The Tower Houses of Co. Limerick

COLM J. DONNELLY

Tower houses were a major secular building tradition within late medieval Ireland and were constructed as the defended homes of Anglo-Irish and Gaelic families during the period from c. 1400 to c. 1600. This paper provides an overview for the building series within Co. Limerick, where the locations of 174 buildings are known on the modern landscape. The tower houses are distributed across the county’s fertile lowlands and it can be suggested that their proliferation is a result of wealth generated through pastoral agriculture. The buildings display a shared assemblage of Irish Gothic architectural features and, although there is a general conformity of appearance, there is also great variation in floor plan, to the extent that it is possible to identify sub-groupings within the overall corpus whose location on the landscape suggests that they may be the work of regionally based masons. The paper also examines the county’s sectionally constructed tower houses and concludes with a review of what happened to the building series in the Early Modern period when tower houses had ceased being the primary form of lordly residence in the county.

Tower houses were constructed by landowning Anglo-Irish and Gaelic families in Ireland during the period from c. 1400 to c. 1600. Tower houses were regarded as castles by their occupants — as can be demonstrated by the use of the term in contemporary documents — but this classification should not overwhelm our own understanding of their function. While the buildings certainly had defensive capabilities, it is their residential nature that is central to their proliferation and use within late medieval Irish society; a tower house was a territorial marker, an ostentatious display of wealth and a status symbol. As such, the buildings identified the power and standing of their occupants, factors which necessitated that a landowner should construct — or at least occupy — a tower house (Fig. 1). It is for this reason that the majority of the estimated 2,900 castellated buildings of medieval Ireland were tower houses and that the country had become so heavily populated by the building series during this period. Where the concept of the Irish tower house has its origins, however, has not been successfully resolved. It may have been the great towers at Anglo-Norman castles such as Carrickfergus, or an idea imported from contemporary England, Scotland or the Continent; it may have been a concept that developed from urban fortified merchants’ houses or as the secular equivalent of the belfry towers raised at Irish abbeys and monasteries during the 15th century; it may have been the transfer to secular society from an ecclesiastical setting of priests’ residential towers — whose architecture has recently been explored by Bermingham — or the fortified churches found in southeastern counties such as Wexford.

The identification of the tower house as a distinct unit of study among the castellated architecture of Ireland is, however, of relatively modern origin. In 1858 the English antiquarian John Henry Parker made a visit to southern Ireland, during which time he
Fig. 1. Ballygrennan Castle, Co. Limerick. Belonging to the 16th century, the tower house has fine mullioned and transomed windows, complete with hood-moulds, while there are defensive corner machicolations at parapet level. Note also the tall chimney of a Jacobean manor house constructed as an extension to the medieval building in the early 17th century.

Colm Donnelly
visited a range of medieval monuments. In the paper that he published in 1866 he used the term tower house to describe the series of small towers that he had encountered. The name, however, did not gain immediate currency among the country’s antiquarian community, and it was not until the title was adopted by Harold Leask in his own publications on the building series that tower house became the accepted nominative among academics. Westropp, for example, preferred to call the buildings peel towers. Born in the year that Parker’s paper was published, Westropp was a native of Co. Limerick who devoted his life to the study of archaeology, history, genealogy and folklore, and was the author of over 330 publications by the time of his death in 1922. The starting point for any consideration of the tower houses in Co. Limerick must rest with the comprehensive survey undertaken by Westropp and published in the pages of the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*. Organised townland by townland, parish by parish and barony by barony, Westropp identified historical documentation for 405 castles, of which the locations of 174 buildings can be identified with certainty on the modern landscape. This is a very large corpus of buildings — the majority of which were tower houses — and forces us to ask why might there be such a heavy population within the earldom of Desmond?

Events such as the Bruce’s invasion and the Black Death undoubtedly led to social dislocation and economic recession during the 14th century, but the effects on society may not have been as detrimental as has often been suggested. The period witnessed a change from arable to pastoral farming, while research in east Galway, Meath and the barony of Knockgraffon in Tipperary has shown that there was a fragmentation in major lordships and a proliferation of minor lordships. The content of the *Desmond Survey* of the 1580s suggests that something similar had occurred in Limerick. The Elizabethan document is the first overall view of the county after the late medieval period and it depicts a landscape divided up among lesser lords and tenants who paid dues in rent and services to their overlord, the earl of Desmond. Precisely when this proliferation of lesser lordship occurred cannot be readily identified, but it can be suggested that there is a relationship between this development and the advent of tower houses from the 15th century onwards.

Building work requires capital and for this reason an increase in building activity in late medieval Limerick can be taken as an indication that there was wealth among landholders at some point at least during this period. Limerick’s tower houses show a marked concentration in the county’s fertile central plain (Fig. 2), lowland framed by natural physical barriers on all sides, with the river Shannon and Shannon estuary to the north, the Mullaghareirk and Ballyhoura mountains to the south, the Slievefelim and Galty mountains to the east, and a series of uplands to the west providing a divide between Limerick and Kerry. The rich central lowlands would have provided excellent pasture for cattle, a key factor in generating wealth for landholders. A tower house would also emphasise the landholder’s position in society and would protect the family at a time when raids and raiding was the principal form of warfare in Ireland. It can be suggested that the long and stable reign of James, the sixth earl of Desmond, may have provided an optimum time period when the political, economic and social stability required to generate the wealth necessary to support a tower-house construction industry in the region was in place. The sixth earl held the title from 1411 to 1462 and — apart from a short-lived episode of raid and counter-raid with the earl of Ormond in 1446 — his rule was secure and strong. As such, his long incumbency may have provided the conditions necessary for his supporters to establish themselves on
FIG. 2. Distribution map of tower houses in Co. Limerick which displays how the buildings are predominantly located in the county’s fertile lowlands. A total of 165 sites can be located to townland level, while the exact locations are known of 54 buildings that were destroyed prior to the production of the first edition six-inch Ordnance Survey map series for the county in 1840. Since 1840 a further twenty-four sites have been demolished

Colm Donnelly

their lands through the construction of tower houses, financed by wealth generated through pastoral agriculture.

Stalley and McNeill have shown that there was no complete hiatus in building activity during the 14th century. After a recession in the mid- to late century, the construction industry would certainly seem to have recovered. What is to be noted, however, is the fact that the buildings belonging to this period are constructed in a style — Irish Gothic — whose elements had arrived from England between 1300 and 1350. This architectural style would become the principal building style present in tower houses for the next two hundred years, and it is elements of this style that have been recognisable as forming a basic package of features to be found at tower houses throughout Ireland (Fig. 3). No two tower houses, however, are ever identical. While the same assemblage of architectural features occurring in one tower house can be present in a neighbouring building (thereby suggesting that both were erected at a similar time), the location, variety and number of features present in each individual
Architectural Details of "Castles" in County Clare.
(For references, see p. 365.)

Fig. 3. Westropp's illustration of architectural details found at tower houses in Co. Clare, published in the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy in 1899
The presence of a shared architectural assemblage does, however, allow the buildings to be defined as a distinct architectural series. In addition, each tower house functions as a self-contained unit with the chambers inside stacked vertically, one over the other. Both of these factors result in the general conformity of appearance throughout Ireland, but within this general conformity there is also great variation in floor plan. Fieldwork in Co. Limerick, however, did reveal that a number of buildings had recognisably shared floor plans. As a result, it was possible to identify specific typological groupings among a series of twenty-one buildings. All of the tower houses exhibited a similar assemblage of Irish Gothic architectural features, but it was also noted that their rectangular floor plans revolved around the chosen positioning of the entrance lobby at ground-floor level in each of the buildings, and it was possible to identify five floor plans — Type 1A to 1E — among this corpus (Fig. 4). When the location of all the Type 1 tower houses is plotted on a map, it can tentatively be noted that each of the five sub-divisions are distributed in their own particular area of the Limerick landscape. The construction of tower houses in Ireland during the medieval period would have undoubtedly required the backing of some form of building industry. Is it possible, therefore, to see each sub-division of Type 1 displayed in the distribution map as being indicative of the work of a regionally based mason and perhaps erected by the same workforce? If so, they would presumably be the descendants of the masons whom Stalley regarded as local craftsmen with introspective and archaic ideas on architecture, who took over the industry after the general decline of immigration from England in the late 13th century.

There are, however, other architectural variations in floor plans within the county that should also be noted. Rathurd is the single example of a round tower house in the county. This seems unusual, given that the neighbouring county of Tipperary has some twenty examples. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Rathurd is located in the east of Co. Limerick, in the barony of Clanwilliam, and near the Tipperary border. As such, perhaps Rathurd might best be considered as an outlier to the Tipperary building series. If we wish to explain why round tower houses exist at all, then perhaps we might consider them as an experiment in format within an already established and successful building corpus. This is certainly the case at Castle Troy (Fig. 5) where there is a unique and ingenious use of space within a building that does not conform to the rectangular plan found at the majority of other Irish Gothic tower houses within the county. The location of the stairwell at the junction of the north-east and south-east walls, the use of mezzanine and mural passages, the setting of vaults directly above one another over main and subsidiary chambers, and the pentagon-shaped plan of the building are highly original. The building, however, is still recognisable as belonging to the tower house genre, both in its architectural detail and in the fact that it is a self-contained unit. In conclusion, this building is an excellent example of the variety and versatility of tower-house construction within late medieval society in Limerick.

A further architectural peculiarity that exists among a small number of the county’s tower houses is evidence that they were constructed in two separate but interlocking sections. One section contained the spiral staircase and subsidiary chamber, while the other section contained the building’s main chamber block. There are five definite examples of these sectionally constructed tower houses to be found among the building series in Co. Limerick, of which Bouchier’s castle (Fig. 6a) is an example of an intact building where the divide between the two sections can be seen rising up along the building’s southern long-wall. On first impressions, Ballinveala appears to be a typical Type 1 tower house, albeit particularly small in size. Upon entering the building,
The Tower Houses of Co. Limerick

Type 1A: Bouchier's Castle, Lough Gur.

Type 1B: Fantstown

Type 1C: Amogamore

Type 1D: Rarrissar

Type 1E: Other types (2-6)

County boundary
Rivers

Distribution map of Type 1 tower houses in Co. Limerick

FIG. 4. Type 1 tower houses in Co. Limerick, showing the typical floor plans for each of the five sub-groupings within this corpus of twenty-one buildings and the location of each sub-grouping on the Limerick landscape

Colm Donnelly
however, it becomes apparent that the main chamber block is missing; the subsidiary section survives, but the main chamber section has been demolished. At Ballinveala the spiral staircase and subsidiary chamber that occupies one-third of the castle is built as a unit, with its own corner quoins. A series of nine sets of projecting stone slabs or ‘through-stones’ that rise up layer by layer from ground to fourth-floor level indicate how the now demolished main chamber block was once bonded into its accompanying subsidiary section (Fig. 6b).

The current author has previously speculated on why this form of construction technique was used by medieval builders. It may have been for structural reasons, or perhaps it might have been the case that the building was constructed over a period of years, with resources and effort directed towards the construction of the spiral staircase and subsidiary chamber section of the new tower house during the first season of work. Provision would have been made for integration of this section with the remaining section yet to be built, in the form of the rows of protruding ‘through-stones’.

A number of tower houses in the county belong to the last phase in the building tradition in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Buildings such as Gortnetubbrid, Kilduff and Oola (Fig. 7) have architectural features that include hood-moulded and mullioned windows, large chimneys and numerous fireplaces within the interiors, and parapet water spouts and cruciform roofs, while the buildings dispense with stone vaults over their main chambers. The greater importance placed on privacy and increased provision of heat and light is evident within these buildings, but it is equally evident that each remains firmly recognisable as belonging to the tower-house genre, although betraying the fact that new Renaissance concepts of architectural symmetry and plan have been married to the pre-existing building tradition. A similar blending of
The Tower Houses of Co. Limerick

FIG. 6. Sectionally constructed tower houses in Limerick. (a) Bouchier’s castle is an example where the spiral staircase/subsidiary chamber section and the main chamber block are both still in situ, with the sectional joining clearly visible on the building’s southern side-wall. (b) At Ballinveala the main chamber block has been demolished, but the spiral staircase/subsidiary chamber section remains standing. The four doorways that provided access to the building’s main chambers at each floor level have been blocked, while the nine sets of projecting ‘through-stones’ that once tied both sections of the building together are visible.

Colm Donnelly

Renaissance ideas with traditional spatial grammar was identified by Howard\textsuperscript{25} in her study of the architecture of contemporary Scotland. This process, however, was not restricted to Britain and Ireland; similar dialogues between traditional buildings forms and Renaissance innovation were taking place throughout Europe at this time.

The Elizabethan Desmond Survey\textsuperscript{26} records 83 castles in the county, of which 24 buildings — 29 per cent of the total — were described as ruinous, old or devastated, while the Cromwellian Civil Survey\textsuperscript{27} recorded 181 castles, of which 77 buildings — 43 per cent of the corpus — were described as out of repair, decayed, broken, roofless, ruinous, demolished or reduced to stumps.\textsuperscript{28} These buildings might be castles which had grown old and had been abandoned by their owners over time. Alternatively, they may represent buildings that had become caught up in the episodes of warfare that raged within the region between 1579 and 1652. While the medieval Irish annals often refer to the capture of castles, the exact mechanisms whereby this might come about are rarely related. It is only with English accounts from the Elizabethan conquest of the late 16th century and the county’s involvement in the Nine Years’ War of 1594 to 1603 that we gain information on the tactics used in sieges. This also corresponds to the
period which witnessed the increased size of armies and the greater use of gunpowder in Ireland. The defences of the tower house were not designed to cope with either of these developments.\textsuperscript{29} It would not be until the Restoration in 1660 that economic stability would return to Ireland, with prosperity leading to new levels of construction activity in a country that had witnessed depletion in its building stock as a result of the political upheaval and warfare of the previous eighty years.

Tastes in architecture had changed by now, however, and — given the opportunity — a landowner would be more likely to construct a new-build house rather than take up occupancy within an old tower house.\textsuperscript{30} A few tower houses were incorporated into the fabric of later country houses, such as Maidstown where an 18th-century house was added to the old tower house, while other buildings were adapted for use as domestic dwellings. At Ballyvoreen there is an example of a tower house which was cut down in height to just above ground-floor level, with the remaining structure being converted for use as a two-storey farmhouse. Occupied until the early 1980s, the entrance into the building was via the old tower-house doorway, while a huge and seemingly original fireplace was present in one of the side-walls of the building. A similar venture was
undertaken at Ballinahinch where the tower house was lowered by two storeys, the original doorway at ground floor in the eastern end-wall was blocked and a new entrance was inserted midway along the northern side-wall. Hood-moulds in the western end-wall betray the location of a series of blocked windows. The reason for this action was to provide more heat within the building, for the entire western end-wall was modified to provide fireplaces and a connecting flue for each of the four storeys within the heavily modified building.\(^{31}\)

The erosion of the fabric of tower houses is a continuing process and those in Co. Limerick remain under threat from the combined effects of neglect, frost damage and episodes of stone robbing. The tower house at Caherelly West was in use as a barn until some sixty years ago when its entire west and south walls collapsed, bringing down the vaults within the building in the process, while the building at Ballybricken South (Fig. 8), remained a substantial ruin until it was judged to be unsafe in the 1960s.
and explosives were used to bring down its upper floor levels, with the rubble being used for agricultural field-drains. As previously stated, the locations for 174 tower houses are known within the county. A total of 341 castle sites could be recorded on the modern landscape (Fig. 2), of which 243 have been demolished. Of this number, 165 sites can be located to the townlands where the available historical sources indicate that a castle once stood, while the exact locations are known of 54 buildings that were destroyed prior to the production of the first edition six-inch Ordnance Survey map series for the county in 1840. Since 1840 a further 24 sites have been demolished and — in the last decade of the 20th century — of the remaining 98 tower houses, only 44 could be judged to be in relatively good condition.

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NOTES

9. T. J. Westropp, ‘Notes on the Lesser Castles or “Peel Towers” of the County Clare’, PRIA, 21C (1899), 348, n. 1.
14. Dublin, National Archives of Ireland, The Desmond Survey, 1583: A transcript made in the PROI from the portion relating to County Limerick, MSS 5038A (rough copy) and 5038B (fair copy).
16. Ibid., 327.
The Tower Houses of Co. Limerick


26. Desmond Survey, 1583 (as n. 14).


31. Ibid., 10–11.

32. Ibid., 12.
LIMERICK AND SOUTH-WEST IRELAND
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The essays in this volume are devoted to the art and architecture of Munster, one of the four ancient provinces of Ireland. Most were presented as papers at the British Archaeological Association’s 2008 conference, held in Limerick in July 2008, an occasion that provided an opportunity for British and Irish scholars to share ideas about a remarkable range of works that are not well known outside Ireland. Limerick cathedral is much to the fore in the volume, with important papers on its fabric, its splendidly preserved misericords and the lavish crosier and mitre of the bishops. Other essays are concerned with some of the more distinctive aspects of Ireland — Hiberno-Romanesque sculpture, the well-preserved cloisters of the Franciscan friaries, the mighty fortress at Bunratty and the numerous small castles or tower houses. Analysed in print for the first time is the eclectic array of medieval stained glass, inserted into the windows at Bunratty during restoration of the monument in the 1950s. A major theme underpinning many of the essays is the degree to which Irish craftsmen and builders engaged with the rest of Europe, and the nature of their relationship with English practice. The extent to which the advent of Gothic was a colonial phenomenon, an inevitable consequence of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland after 1170, is likewise considered, so too the extent to which Ireland developed its own identity in architecture and sculpture in the later middle ages. While travellers from abroad regarded Ireland as one of the most remote regions of the Western world, ‘situated at the end of the earth’, these essays make it clear that the province of Munster was still very much an integral part of Christian Europe.

Forthcoming volumes will include Canterbury and Newcastle.

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