Anglo-Norman castles

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.

When the Anglo-Normans came to Ireland in 1169, on the invitation of the ousted king of Leinster, Dermot MacMurrough, they introduced a new type of defensive residence: the castle. Most castles were private, defended residences, which were the centres of landed estates or manors.

Many of the early castles that the Normans built were of earth and timber and many of these took the form of a high flat-topped circular mound, called a motte or moat, and an attached embanked enclosure called a bailey. There would have been a strong timber tower on top of the motte with a defensive palisade around it. The bailey would also have had timber defences and would have contained the main residence, a hall for meetings and feasts, farm buildings and sometimes a chapel.

It is wrong to think of motte-and-bailey castles as temporary or second-class castles. Many remained in use as the centres of manors for many years though in some cases the timber buildings and defences were eventually replaced in stone.

TRIM CASTLE

Only a small number of particularly important castles were built in stone in Ireland prior to 1200. This number includes one of our finest and most impressive examples: Trim in Co Meath, a national monument in State care and a significant tourist attraction since a major excavation and conservation project was carried out there in the 1990s.

Of course, important castles like Trim, which was the chief castle of the great de Lacy lordship of Meath, had major alterations and additions made to them over the centuries. Even at Trim, where the first phase of the great stone tower or keep was begun in 1175, archaeological excavation has shown that this was built on the site of an earlier de Lacy wooden castle, which was burnt by the high king Rory O'Conor in 1173.

STONE CASTLES

Many important castles were not built in stone until the 13th century and among these can be numbered the great castles of Dublin, Limerick and Kilkenny, which were all built in the early decades of that century. In the cases of Limerick and Kilkenny, excavation has again shown that the stone castle was built on the site of an earlier earth-and-timber castle.

Many castles were built on pre-Norman defensive sites such as the Rock of Dunamase, Co Laois, or at important early ecclesiastical sites, which were centres of population,

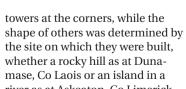Pictures: © National Monuments Service Photographic Unit

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Clonard Motte, Co Meath;
Aerial view of Trim Castle,
Co Meath;
Glanworth Castle, Co Cork.

such as the motte at Clonard, Co Meath and the castle at Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly.

The largest castles were built either by the crown, as in the case of Roscrea, Co Tipperary and Rindoon, Co Roscommon, or by major lords, such as the Burkes, lords of Connacht and earls of Ulster, who built Ballintubber, Co Roscommon and Ballymote, Co Sligo in and around 1300.

Some of these castles follow a rectangular plan with a great gatehouse and circular or D-shaped towers at the corners, while the shape of others was determined by the site on which they were built, whether a rocky hill as at Dunamase, Co Laois or an island in a river as at Askeaton, Co Limerick.

In the latter case, much of the castle dates from the 13th century but the buildings were greatly altered and heightened in the 15th century. This was also the case with the Roche castle at Glanworth, Co Cork, where excavations, recently published, have helped to disentangle a complicated sequence of

building and alteration over the centuries.

One of the oldest buildings at Glanworth was a small stone hall-keep of around 1200. When this was built, the other buildings and defences were probably of timber. Such hall-keeps of the 13th century are relatively common in Munster and Connacht and examples in private ownership survive at Clohaskin and Lisbunny, Co Tipperary, where the rest of the defences may have been of earth and timber.
NEXT WEEK TOWERHOUSES