

# Ireland's Tower Houses

**T**ower Houses are defended residences or castles built by the better-off members of society in many parts of Ireland in late medieval times – the 15th and 16th centuries. They consist of tall, usually rectangular towers often of four or five storeys with either a spiral stairs or lengths of straight stairs within the walls giving access to the upper floors. The ground-floor entrance was usually defended by one or all of the following:

- a projecting section of the parapet directly above the door through which rocks could be dropped on attackers;
- a murdering hole inside the door which could be used in the same way if attackers had penetrated that far;
- or an outer grill of iron secured on the inside with a chain, which protected the main wooden door.

There was usually only one main room on each floor. Normally at least one of the floors consisted of a stone vault, while the others were of timber. In many examples the vault formed the floor of the main upper room of the tower house, which was the main reception room of the building at the top of the stairs.

In many cases this originally had a central fireplace and was open to the roof, where a louver took away the smoke. This was originally the case in the fine tower houses in State care at Clara and Burnchurch, Co Kilkenny, though subsequently in both cases the central hearth was replaced with a fireplace against one of the walls.

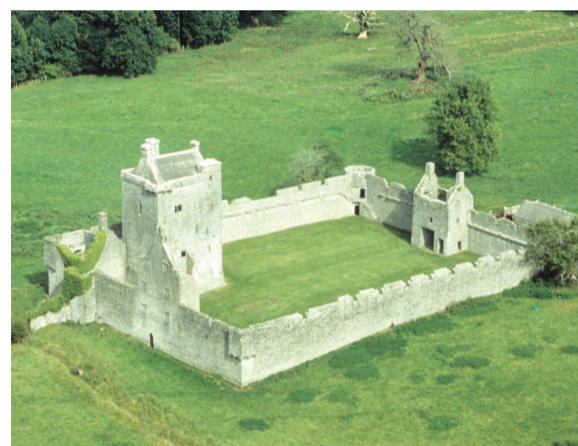
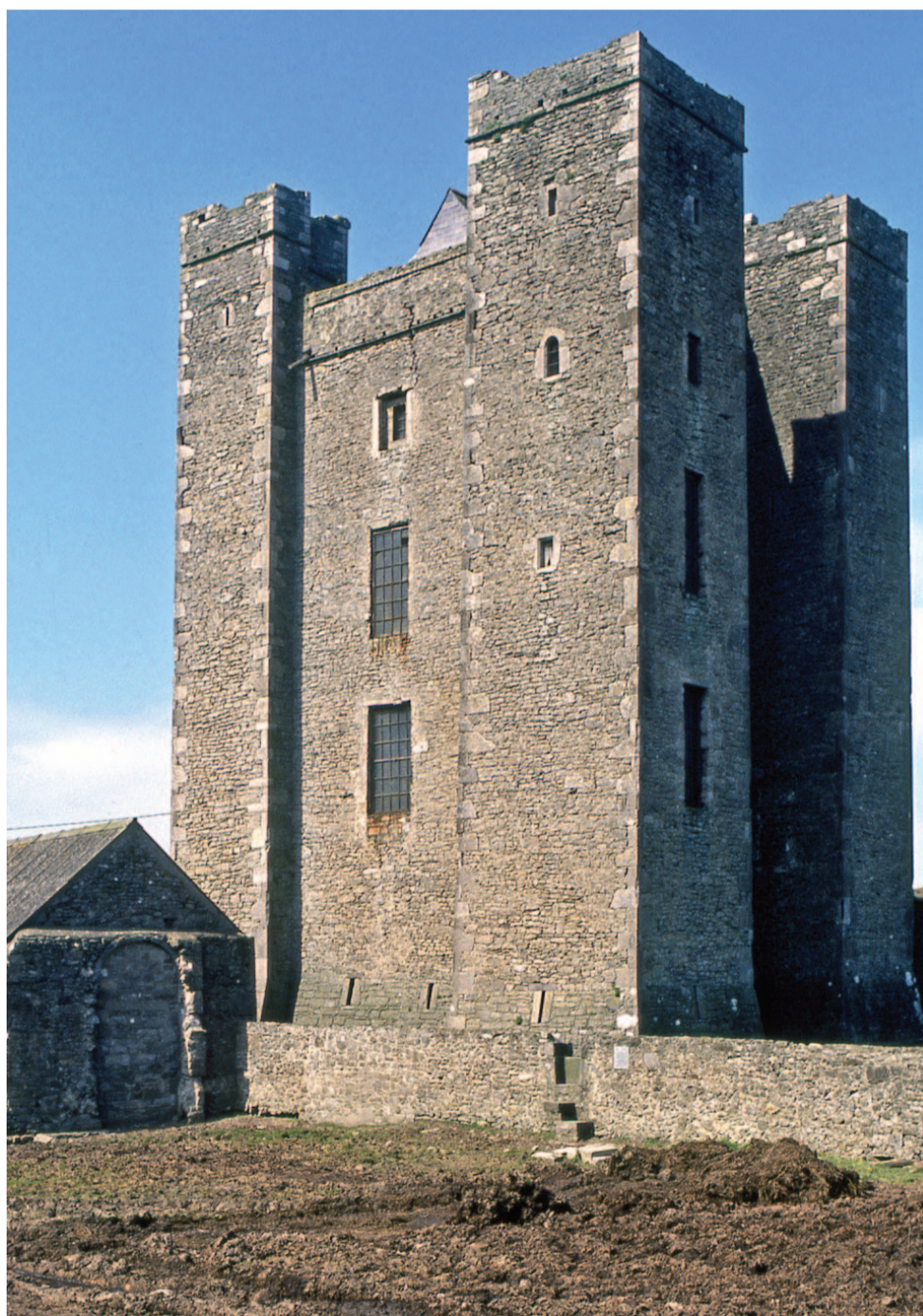
The other floors contained more private rooms – bedrooms and living rooms for the family – while the ground floor, with only narrow defensive slits giving little light, was generally used for storage.

The roof was usually surrounded by a parapet with stepped crenellations behind which the occupants could defend the building against attackers.

Though sometimes tower houses survive in isolation, they would originally have been surrounded by other buildings, often within a defensive walled enclosure known as a bawn. Sometimes the bawn itself was defended with corner towers and a gatehouse, as at Pallas Castle near Portumna, Co Galway, a national monument in State care.

While earlier castles in Ireland dating from the late 12th to the 14th centuries were built mainly by the Anglo-Normans and their descendants, tower houses spanned the ethnic divide. O'Malleys in Mayo, O'Flahertys in Connemara and O'Mahonys, O'Sullivan's and

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.



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Dunsoghly Castle, Co Dublin; Aerial view of Pallas Castle, Co Galway, showing the large bawn; Clara Castle, Co Kilkenny.

O'Driscolls in Munster, like many other Gaelic lord families, all built and lived in tower houses, just as those of Norman descent did, such as Fitzgeralds, Butlers, Roches, Burkes and Walshes.

Very large tower houses such as Blarney and Barryscourt, Co Cork, and Bunratty, Co Clare, were built by major lords – MacCarthy, Barry and O'Brien, respectively. Tower houses were also built in towns by wealthy merchants and still survive in places like Ardee and Carlingford, Co Louth.

A small number of tower houses have been lived in almost continuously since they were built, often with a two-storey farm house attached. Sometimes larger country houses are attached to or incorporated with tower houses.

In many cases, the tower house, even if unroofed, is still part of a farmyard, showing the long continuity of usage and settlement. Probably the only tower house with its original medieval roof timbers intact is Dunsoghly Castle, Co Dublin.

A few still have some of the original massive floor beams, the most extraordinary examples being in Clara and Ballybur in Co Kilkenny, where all of the floor beams of the main rooms survive.

Tower houses are a very distinctive feature of many parts of the Irish countryside, especially in counties such as Wexford, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Cork, Limerick, Clare and Galway.

**NEXT WEEK  
FORTIFIED HOUSES**

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