

Fortified Houses of Ireland

One of the most visible medieval buildings in the Irish landscape is the tower house, a small medieval castle. However, towards the end of the medieval period, in the late sixteenth century, there was a move away from these well defended but uncomfortable tower houses to more commodious, better lit accommodation, with an increased emphasis on privacy. Some builders were more progressive than others resulting in a variety of building forms. In many instances there is a strong link with the past, houses being built onto existing tower houses, as at Donegal Castle, Leamaneh Castle, Co Clare, and Loughmoe Castle, Co Tipperary, all in State care. Others that were entirely new build and are also in state care, include Rathfarnham Castle, Co Dublin, Portumna Castle, Co Galway, Burncourt, Co Tipperary, and in Co Cork, Kanturk, Mallow and Monkstown Castles.

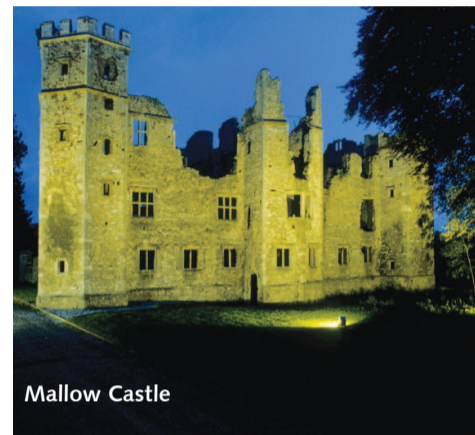
The main difference between tower houses and fortified houses is the shift away from compact, tall, vertical structures to longer, more rectangular buildings with more elaborate ground plans. The houses are usually three-storeys high with an attic, over a half-basement. As the ground floor can be slightly elevated, there may be steps up to the main entrance. Each storey was carried on a wooden floor. This period was one of great experimentation and there are examples of fortified houses with H-plans (a central rectangular block with a projecting tower at each angle), Z-plans, U-plans, L-plans and T-plans (where the projecting tower usually houses the stairs).

Despite differences in plan, fortified houses share many common features. They are recognisable by having large, usually flat-headed windows, subdivided into smaller sections by stone mullions and transoms, often with hood-mouldings over the windows. The exterior looks more symmetrical, with windows often placed in a row which is repeated for each storey. The level of each storey is often further emphasised externally by a projecting horizontal stone band called a string-course. Though comfort was important, defence was not abandoned as Ireland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was still a very turbulent place. Guns were in common usage and gun-loops were incorporated into these houses, usually on either side of the entrance, in projecting towers to provide flanking fire and in angle turrets at parapet level. The roofs of these buildings are also quite distinctive as there are often many small gables and a large num-

This is the final article in the series produced by 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.



Portumna Castle



Mallow Castle



Donegal Castle



Fireplace from Ormonde Castle

ber of chimneys, often with lozenge shaped stacks. All these features were a testament to the wealth of the owner.

An increased desire for privacy meant that more rooms had to be provided with partitions, usually of wood or wicker. Though these rarely survive, their imprint can sometimes be found on internal plasterwork. Where the partitions do not survive the number of rooms can be indicated by the number of fireplaces, as each chamber generally had one. The fireplaces often have quite simple flat stone or timber lintels, sometimes chamfered and/or decorated. However, the fireplaces of the larger public rooms could be elaborately decorated, such as that found at Ormond Castle, Carrick-on-Suir. The improved standard of living can

also be seen at a more basic level in new toilet arrangements. In tower houses garderobes (dry toilets) were a standard feature, with the seat placed over a chute built into the thickness of the wall which exited near the base of the building. These must have been quite smelly affairs! In fortified houses garderobes were dispensed with in favour of chamber pots, which meant that waste could be emptied frequently and, more importantly, away from the house, thus preventing bad smells from lingering.

MONUMENTS TO VISIT

The wealth of our archaeological heritage and the extent to which it has been preserved makes Ireland the envy of many other nations. Visitors from every corner of the

world come here to savour our rich and diverse heritage. Our tourist industry is of course more important than ever in the current economic climate and it behoves us all to ensure that the reputation we enjoy internationally that brings so many visitors to our shores remains untarnished.

Ireland's archaeological heritage can be appreciated and experienced in our cities, towns and countryside as part of looped walks, on national waymarked trails and in our museums and heritage parks. Many of our national monuments include excellent visitor facilities that offer guided tours and also free educational visits for schools. Full details of admission arrangements to the many heritage sites and national monuments managed by the Office of Public Works can be found on www.heritageireland.com. Lots of these sites offer free admission on the first Wednesday of every month.

The National Monuments Service hopes that you have found this series of articles to be both interesting and informative and that it will encourage you to go out and see what archaeological monuments may be on your own doorstep. A good starting point is to visit the National Monuments Service's website, www.archaeology.ie and to use the map viewer to identify what monuments are in your area.

Knowing something about these monuments, and understanding their origins and significance, will help to ensure that both the monuments themselves and the memory of our ancestors who constructed and occupied them are preserved for the enjoyment and enlightenment of present and future generations.

There really is so much to discover and learn! **CL**