

Carlow 800



# Carlow Castle

Medieval Stronghold on the Barrow

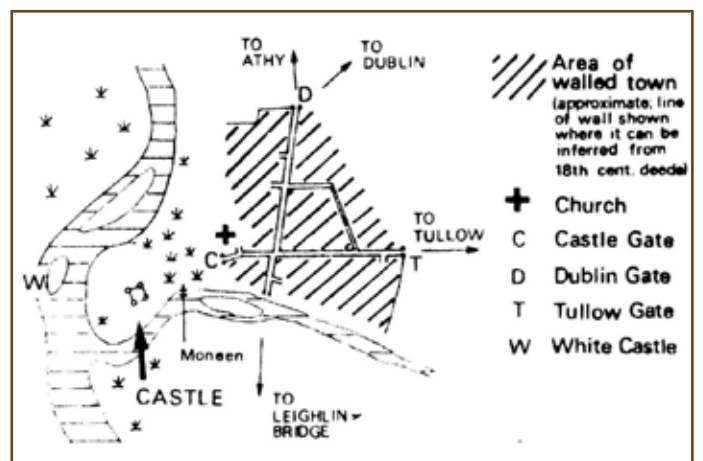
by Dr Margaret Murphy



## INTRODUCTION

The remains of Carlow Castle occupy a raised site or knoll overlooking the confluence of the Rivers Barrow and Burren in Carlow Town. Built in the early thirteenth century, the castle has functioned as an administrative centre, a military fortification and a residence. In the medieval period the town of Carlow grew up in its protective shadow. During the middle ages the castle played a central role in the settlement and exploitation of the Barrow valley by the Anglo-Normans. For a time it housed the Irish exchequer, the most important department in the English administration of Ireland. The castle went on to play a significant role in the Kildare Rebellion, the 1641 Rebellion and the Cromwellian Wars.

Leased to a certain Dr Middleton in the early nineteenth century, the castle was a victim of his ignorance as to the correct use of explosives. Now only the imposing west wall with two of the original four corner towers survives intact. Ignored for many years, the castle was excavated by Dr Kieran O'Connor for the OPW in the 1990s and developed as a national monument.



Location of the castle and the medieval town of Carlow. Source: A. Horner, 'Two eighteenth-century maps of Carlow town' *Proc. of the Royal Irish Academy*, 78 (1978).

This plan shows the probable extent of the medieval walled town of Carlow as well as the approximate location of the town gates mentioned in eighteenth-century deeds.

## EARLY EARTH AND TIMBER CASTLE

The stone castle was not the first Anglo-Norman castle on this riverside site. The excavations of the 1990s revealed that it was preceded by an earlier earth and timber fortification. This was most probably a motte, carved out of the natural feature of the knoll, the summit being divided into two wards by a ditch and palisade. The discovery of the remains of a corn-drying kiln indicated that farming activities were carried out in one section or ward.

Kieran O'Connor, the excavator, put forward the convincing argument that Hugh de Lacy, in his capacity of 'Keeper of Ireland' built this earthwork castle c. 1180 for John de Clahull who was granted all the land 'between Oboy and Leighlin' by Strongbow, Lord of Leinster. De Clahull held the castle until the first decade of the thirteenth century when it reverted to the Lord of Leinster once again.

# CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

## Conjectural Reconstruction of Carlow Castle in its landscape setting (by Uto Hogerzeil)

The site's natural defensive features were considerable. The knoll was surrounded on three sides by water while an area of marshland (later called The Moneen) restricted access from the fourth side. It was, in effect, a castle on an island. On the top right of the drawing can be seen the Castle Gate leading into the medieval town of Carlow. A causeway linked the town to the castle and gave access to the bridge across the Barrow.



The artist has shown a timber bridge over the River Barrow. There is no clear documentary reference to a bridge here until the seventeenth century when the Down Survey map shows a stone bridge over the River Barrow and a timber bridge over the River Burren. It is very likely, however, that there was a timber bridge over the Barrow in the later medieval period. The presence of a tower on the opposite side of the River, known as the White Castle, is well attested.

In the medieval period the River Barrow was navigable from Carlow southwards down to New Ross and northwards as far as Athy. Agricultural surpluses of grain and wool could be sent downriver to be exported from the thriving port of New Ross, founded by William Marshal. Imported goods like wine and salt were sent upriver to supply towns such as Carlow.

## THE MASONRY CASTLE

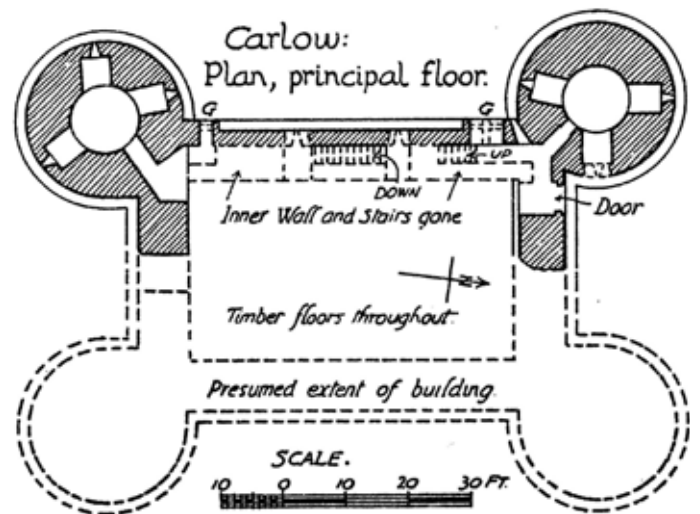


Crossform arrow loop in the south-west tower

In the early thirteenth century the earthwork fortification at Carlow was replaced by a stone castle. William Marshal, son-in-law of Strongbow, is generally identified as the builder of Carlow Castle and construction is dated to the period between 1208 and 1213. The crossform arrow loops in the south-west tower are similar to those found at Chepstow Castle in the sections of that Welsh castle which were rebuilt by Marshal in the 1190s. Carlow belongs to a small group of early stone castles referred to as 'four-towered keeps'. These castles are rectangular in shape with cylindrical drum-towers at their corners. This type of castle was in use in Western France at this period and William Marshal, who spent much of his adult life in France, may have introduced the style into Ireland.

The walls were 2.7 metres thick rising up from a battered plinth and the excavation revealed that the keep had no foundations. The builders had flattened the surface of the knoll and understood that the leveled surface could take the downward thrust of the massive walls. The original building was only two storeys high with at least some of the outer walls rising above roof level.

Access to the lower and upper floors and to the roof was by way of stone staircases contained within the thickness of the western wall. The floors and roof were of timber. The entrance to the castle was at first floor level via a door in the north wall, close to the angle of the north-west tower.



Ground Plan of the Castle. Source: H. Leask, *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses*. (Dundalk, 1941)

## ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE

In the later thirteenth century Carlow Castle came into the possession of the Bigod Earls of Norfolk. It was used by them as an administrative centre for their lands which were spread across Counties Carlow, Wexford and Kildare. Documents from the 1280s show considerable expenditure on the upkeep of the castle. A range of different types of wood was purchased for roofing along with lead and thousands of nails. The accounts mention the 'old hall' - which was adjacent to the castle and in which the courts sat - and also the kitchen which was located in one of the towers of the castle. The 'great hall' was located within the castle as was the 'exchequer house'. The presence of two garderobes (latrines) in the west wall suggest a division of the first floor level into two distinct rooms.

In the early fourteenth century the castle was described as badly roofed as was the hall opposite the castle. The English crown assumed ownership, appointing constables to take charge of the everyday running of the castle and its garrison. When the Irish Exchequer was moved to Carlow in the 1360s major works were required to repair and extend the castle. It is possible that the third storey was added to the castle at this date. Defences around the castle were significantly upgraded and, according to one medieval source, £500 was given for the walling of the town of Carlow.

Despite the large expenditure on defence, Carlow remained vulnerable to attacks by the MacMurroughs to the south and east and the O'Mores to the west.

# CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

## Conjectural Reconstruction of Carlow Castle in the late fourteenth century (by Uto Hogerzeil)

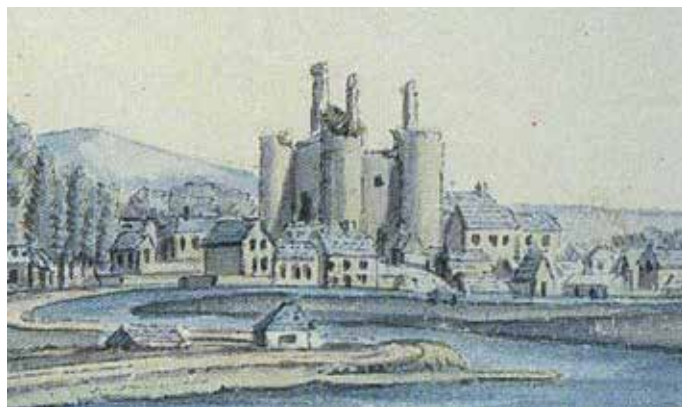
This drawing is based on the standing remains of the castle and documentary evidence relating to the building and the surrounding area. There are several references to a timber building, known as the hall or the 'old hall', which is shown here positioned beside the castle in an adjoining bailey area, surrounded by a ditch and timber palisade. Access to the castle from this bailey was via a bridge, which is also mentioned in the documents. A further 'outer bailey' area is also shown, defined by a timber palisade. The upkeep of the timber defences required constant attention. The illustration shows timber stakes laid out in readiness for work on the palisade. Various animal enclosures are shown in the outer bailey as well as a dovecot (to provide eggs and fresh meat for the castle) and archery butts. It is likely that one of the buildings in the outer bailey functioned as a tollhouse to collect tolls from traders coming in and out of Carlow. Some foodstuffs and building materials would have arrived at the castle complex by water and the artist has shown a landing place for small boats as well as nets associated with fishing activities.



The castle is shown with three storeys, as it has been suggested that the third storey was added in the later-fourteenth century to accommodate the Irish exchequer along with its administrative officials and clerks. The entrance into the castle is not visible in the illustration as it was situated in the north wall facing the inner bailey. It was at first floor level and access to it would have been via a wooden stairs. The castle's timber roof was lower than the towers and a wall-walk allowed those guarding the castle to move around. The castle also had a prison and this is likely to have been situated in the windowless ground floor level of the north-west tower. Ground floor levels of medieval castles were rarely occupied and were used primarily for storage. During excavations at Carlow castle the remains of a well were found in the north-eastern corner of the ground floor. Documentary sources from the 1360s mention the construction of a house within the 'curtain wall' of the castle and the artist has proposed that the curtain wall was close to the keep, hugging the sides of the raised knoll. There are no remains of a curtain wall visible on antiquarian drawings of the castle so its location and form must remain conjectural.

## CONCLUSION

The exchequer moved out of the castle and back to Dublin in 1394 following a series of attacks by the Irish of the surrounding areas. Carlow's time as the administrative capital of Ireland came to an end. The castle continued to function as an important frontier stronghold and remained in the hands of the crown or those loyal to it until the end of the fifteenth century. Thereafter the castle entered a yet more turbulent phase of its history. During the Irish Rebellion of 1641 the castle gave refuge to English settlers fleeing from the violence in the surrounding countryside and in 1647 it was taken by the Irish Confederates. Carlow became the last town in south Leinster to hold out against Cromwell's forces in 1650 and only surrendered when faced by General Ireton's cannons.



View of Carlow Castle in 1804 by Daniel Grose (Reproduced Courtesy of Lord Rosemore and The Irish Architectural Archive)

## AUTHOR

Dr Margaret Murphy is a lecturer in History in Carlow College (St Patrick's). She is preparing the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* for Carlow.

Carlow 800 was an initiative of Carlow Town Council to commemorate and celebrate the construction of Carlow Castle and the foundations of what is now a cultural, creative and socially vibrant town.

The ruins of Carlow Castle are free to visit all year round and a series of plaques and information boards are set out around the castle to provide a visual history of the Castle.

Carlow Castle is a National Monument in State Care, Number: 306. A partnership of the National Monuments Services of the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government and the Office of Public Works, looks after the national monuments in state care.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## FURTHER READING

Bunbury, Turtle 2013 *800 years of an Irish Castle*. Commissioned by Carlow Town Council

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