

**FREE**

# A wee bit of maritime history... 14



## Strangford Castle



Strangford port was, between 1200 and 1800, the principal port of Strangford Lough. This was due to its geography - the bay provides a sheltering harbour and the shore drops away to deep water. Additionally, Swan Island provided extra shelter for vessels moored there.

Strangford was originally named by the Norse as **Strangfjörðr** (Strang Fjord) because of the strong tidal race at the Narrows.

Strangford was also known by its Irish name 'Loch Cuan' - Lough of the Harbours. This continued until the mid-18th century before 'Loch Cuan' was replaced by 'Strangford Lough' which had previously only applied to the Narrows.

The earliest recorded use of the name "Stranfeord" was in 1205 in the Chronicle of the Kings of Mann and the Isles. The ferry between Strangford and the Ards Peninsula had been in operation since before 1180.

The accessibility of the harbour for larger boats gave Strangford an advantage over its larger neighbour, Downpatrick, as the Quoile river was shallow and more difficult to navigate.

The five most important ports in Ulster and County Louth in c1200 were Carlingford, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Drogheda and Strangford. Ardglass began to rise in importance during the 15th century.

It is believed that the first fortification in Strangford was built mid-15th century. In the uncertain times that prevailed then, landowners built fortified stone towers as a degree of protection from attack. The Earls of Kildare ruled as Lords Deputy from 1470, aided by alliances with the Gaelic lords.

In 1515, Henry VIII granted Gerald, 9th Earl of Kildare, the Port of Strangford and Loch Cuan.

In 1534, Thomas, 10th Earl of Kildare rose in rebellion against the English Crown. Up to this point, English influence in Ireland since c1170 had been confined to the area of The Pale round Dublin. Henry VIII responded to the threat to English interests in Ireland with military force and had largely subdued the uprising by 1540. In 1550, the then Lord Deputy of Ireland was instructed to take charge of Carrickfergus and Strangford among other ports.

In 1567, Queen Elizabeth 1 instructed that a 'fort 'be erected in Strangford. In the decades after Strangford Castle was built, Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone largely controlled Ulster until 'The Flight of the Earls" in 1607 during the reign of James I. The Plantation of Ulster followed.

The purpose of Strangford Castle, a Tower House, initially appears to have been to help to help obtain taxes on imported goods for the Crown. Tower Houses built around the Strangford Lough area such as Kilclief, Audleystown and Portaferry would have served as both domestic and defensive buildings. Other examples can be seen at Walshestown and along the Quoile.

It was common for Tower Houses to be built on the site of earlier defensive structures. So, originally, when Anglo-Normans sought to establish themselves in an area, they would build motte (mound) and bailey (courtyard) structures - initially of timber with a wooden or stone 'Keep' on top of the motte.

At the close of the Middle Ages, Ireland was heavily populated with castles and small defensive buildings. According to an English document of 1515 there were no less than 500 piles or castles throughout the country.

Tower Houses first came into existence in the early fifteenth century, when a 1429 statute allowed the counties of the Pale to grant £10 to landowners towards their construction. The Tower House at Kilclief, County Down for example, was erected in the early fifteenth century.

Each tower house functions as a self-contained unit with the chambers stacked vertically, one over the other. Both of these factors result in the conformity of appearance throughout Ireland.

## Domestic life in a Tower House\*

The most widely quoted description of life in a Tower House is Luke Gernon's 1620 account of a coshering, or feast, where the entertainments were held in the uppermost storey. Hospitality was showered upon the guests from the moment they entered until the time they departed. The fire was kindled in the chamber, the bard sang, and food, alcohol and tobacco were consumed in large quantities, though the guests may have been expected to share the castle's beds since furniture was scarce.

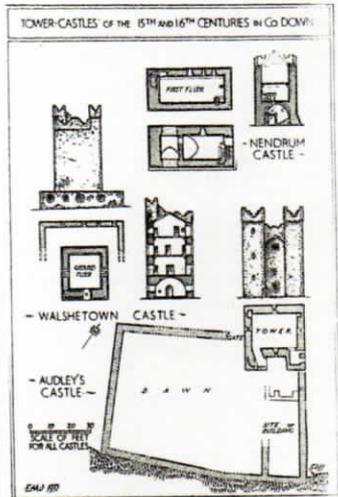


Fig. 9. Plans, elevations and sections of late medieval (Nendrum and Audley's) and 16th century (Walshetown) tower castles in Co. Down.

In a second document, written in 1644, the French traveller Bouillaye le Gouz states that the houses of the nobility were 'nothing but square towers', poorly lit, with little furniture and with floors covered in rushes a foot deep 'of which they make their beds in summer, and straw in winter.' This account is perhaps a little too contemptuous. When compared to the thatched, mud-walled cabins in which the majority of the contemporary population dwelt, the Tower House was a secure homestead with provision for heat and sanitation.

Defences were designed to resist petty plunderers rather than marching armies. The Tower House was not a citadel but the country seat of its time, bustling with the activities of everyday home life and the administration of the estate. The available evidence suggests that the buildings were not isolated on the landscape, but were economic and social centres in the rural community.

A number of castles included in the pictorial maps of the Cromwellian Down Survey are accompanied by smaller buildings. These were often protected inside a fortified wall - a bawn - where cattle and agricultural assets could be protected.

The Civil Survey of 1650 records orchards, gardens, cottages, mills and dovecots associated with castles. Archaeological excavations in the vicinities of Tower Houses have produced evidence of contemporary activity in the form of cultivation furrows, out-houses, terraces and trackways.

\* Taken from "Frowning Ruins: The Tower Houses of Medieval Ireland" - History Ireland: Issue 1 Spring 1996

## **Kilclief Castle** (for comparison)

Kilclief Castle, built between 1412 and 1421, was the earliest Tower House in Lecale. It was originally occupied by John Sely, who is said to have been its builder. He was Bishop of Down from 1429 to 1443, when he was ejected and deprived of his offices for living there with Lettice Whailey Savage, a married woman. The building was garrisoned for the Crown by Nicholas FitzSymon and ten warders from 1601 to 1602.

From the 18th century onwards, the value of Tower Houses for defence declined and their use became primarily residential and as places of safety, as the military use of cannon made their walls evermore susceptible to breaching. Few, if any, were built after 1700.

## **Strangford Castle** - more recent history

As its military usefulness waned, Strangford Castle was made to serve the needs of its owners and their tenants in other ways. During the 19th century, Strangford Castle yard and the ground floor of the castle were used as wintering quarters for cattle under the care of Pat McKeown.

In 1880, Dudley Charles Lascelles was the 24th Baron de Rós. He let Samuel Polly, the Old Court stonemason, keep lime on the first floor. Robert Kennedy, the estate carpenter was let a workshop on the second floor.

A new first floor entrance was cut into the Castle wall facing onto Castle Street and a wooden stairway was built to reach it. A silver shilling (1582-3), dating the reign of Elizabeth I, was discovered in the wall during the works to effect these alterations.

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