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Pat Dargan

*Dublin Institute of Technology, pat.dargan@dit.ie*

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**A Review of Irish Medieval Castles  
as a Tourist Facility**

Pat Dargan

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## A Review of Irish Medieval Castles as a Tourist Facility

Pat Dargan  
Dublin Institute of Technology  
Dublin, Ireland

### ABSTRACT

*Ireland has an extensive legacy of ruined castles which lie sprinkled across the countryside, in both rural and urban locations, and which date from the country's turbulent medieval past. This paper looks at a number of these castles which have recently been reinstated, traces their history, examines the reinstatement process they experienced, and considers the range of tourist attractions and facilities they now offer.*

### INTRODUCTION

Of all the heritage features which lie spread across the Irish landscape, it is perhaps the vast array of medieval castles which - more than any other - offer the most evocative testament to the country's military and belligerent past. These castles vary considerably in age and scale, from the massive Norman fortresses of the thirteenth century to the later more modest fifteenth century tower houses of the lesser feudal lords. Despite these large numbers, only a handful of Irish castles have remained in continuous use and occupation since the medieval period. Another small number have been re-modelled during the Romantic era of the nineteenth century, but it must be remembered that the great bulk of these works were carried out in a very heavy-handed fashion. Indeed, the original medieval fabric of a number of Irish castles now lies buried deep beneath nineteenth century 'mock-castle' extravaganzas. Thus it is, that the great bulk of Irish castles currently lie abandoned and make up a body of romantic ruins, numbering in excess of two thousand, which are to be found in most areas of the national landscape.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in Irish heritage and this has prompted the refurbishment of a number of castles, particularly in regard to their potential to act as significant tourist destination centres. It must be pointed out that this is not an exhaustive investigation, but an initial review of what has recently been accomplished in castle refurbishment, particularly in the context of visitor attractions and facilities. In terms of this paper, four examples have been selected to act as case studies: the rural and isolated castles of Newtown and Bunratty and their massive urban counterparts in the cities of Limerick and Dublin. The reason for the choice of these particular castles was based on the fact that they offered a varied range of examples, in terms of scale, scope of development and location.

The aim of the paper is twofold: to explore the different development processes experienced by each of the case studies and to assess the levels of success achieved in the provision of visitor services and facilities. Research material for the study was drawn from three areas: published resources, discussion with the development undertakers, and the personal experience of the presenter. In delivery terms, the paper leads with a discussion on the historical and architectural context of Irish castle building and this is followed by a discussion on the case studies, coupled with an assessment of their visitor facilities.

### THE CASTLE IN IRELAND

A castle can be defined as a large stone-built building, fortified for defence and built in medieval or feudal times - a form of structure introduced into Ireland by the Normans in the



thirteenth century. The Normans had considerable experience in the advantages and techniques of castle-building earlier in Normandy and Britain and when their intervention in Ireland began, they brought these experiences with them. Prior to this, the indigenous Gaelic chieftains had little experience of castle building. The nearest structures to approach the Norman castles were the circular stone-built forts which are to be found in the western areas of the country and date from about the tenth century. Typical of these early structures is Grianan of Aileach fort in County Donegal. Here, the dry-stone structure stands over 75 feet in diameter and over sixteen feet high. The enclosing wall is lined on the inner face with terraced walkways, elaborate access stairs, a narrow portal entrance, and two mural galleries. Notwithstanding these features, it is considered that the Grianan fort, and others like it, were not castles in the strict sense of the word, but had a more ceremonial than military and strategic function (Harbison, 1992).

When the Anglo-Normans introduced the castle to Ireland it was in its fully developed form. This consisted, in essence, of a defended tower or 'keep' totally, or partially, enclosed by a walled courtyard, such as was built in Trim and Carrickfergus (Sweetman, 1995). In contrast, a number of keepless castles, such as Dublin and Limerick, were also built. These consisted essentially of an open courtyard enclosed by a curtain wall and a series of massive corner towers – which replaced the accommodation of the missing keep. The castle keep was usually several stories high, built of massive masonry construction and covered by a slated roof. Intermediate floor could be of wooden or stone construction. In spatial terms, the keep consisted of a simple rectangular structure, or a complex geometric form with projecting towers and battlements – the latter the most characteristic features of all castle-building. These battlements were essentially tall stepped parapets, which capped walls, roofs and tower tops; and which shielded defenders in times of attack. Castle windows were by their defensive nature small and limited in number, particularly in the case of lower floors where narrow slots or loops were all that was provided. Similarly, the entrance door was kept as small as possible and often protected by an external portcullis and drawbridge – all a reflection of the defensive nature of the castle (Leask, 1995).

The first great wave of castle building in Ireland began in the early thirteenth century and lasted for about one hundred years. Following this, few new castles were built until fifteenth century when the Crown offered a subsidy of £10 towards the building of new castles. This precipitated the building of a vast number of castles throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century – the majority of which were single towered structures or 'tower houses' – very often the homes of land-owning families. (Leask, 1995).

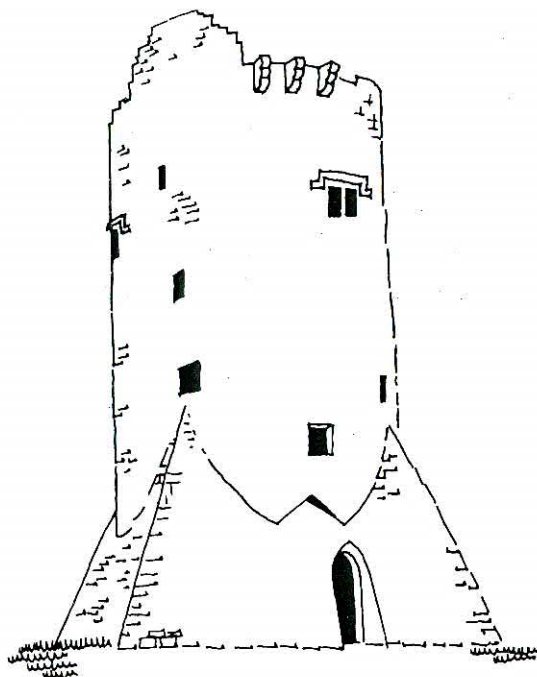
## CASE STUDIES

### Newtown Castle (1)

One of the smallest and most intriguing castles in Ireland is the tower house at Newtown in County Clare. Here, the shell of a small cylindrical keep, with a single chamber on each floor, is all that survived the medieval times. A precise foundation date for castle is uncertain, but it was probably completed during the fifteenth or sixteenth century (Leask, 1995). The outstanding feature of the castle is, undoubtedly, the cylindrical form which rises in four stories from a square pyramid-like base. Internally, the ground floor acted as an entrance and store, and above this the first and second floor provided domestic quarters. The top floor contained the main hall which was covered by a pointed conical roof and access between the individual floors was by means of spiral stairs, incorporated into the structural wall.

The castle was abandoned as recently as the nineteenth century and lay ruined until it and the adjoining farmhouse was bought by the Green family in 1989 (Fig.1) In 1994 the Greens completed the sympathetic restoration of the castle in the astonishing time of sixteen weeks and

incorporated the structure into the layout of the Burren College of Art. The restoration work was undertaken by skilled local labour and during the course of the work the masonry and window openings were repaired, the battlements and the projecting machicolations restored, and a new conical roof was built, dressed and slated.



**Figure 1. Newtown Castle, County Clare, Prior to Restoration.**

Today, the castle forms the striking centrepiece of the Burren College of Art where it acts as an imaginative exhibition and gallery space. Internally, the original circular floor plan and features has been retained. The ground floor is used as an entry foyer and the two overhead floors act as exhibition galleries. Underneath the new wooden conical roof, the top floor houses a permanent exhibition of the castle restoration project and is also used for reception and exhibition purposes. In addition to its academic and exhibition facilities, the castle is also accessible to general visitors and for use in connection with local community related activities. Around the base of the castle, the new college building have been laid out, and built, in a highly sensitive arrangement; and with a visual interaction – between the structural fabric and the academic focus - unique in Ireland.

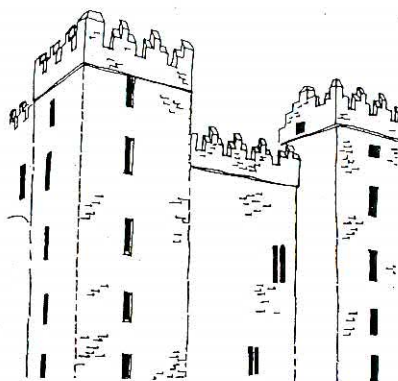
Because of its small scale, the range of visitor attractions available in Newtown castle is limited. Nonetheless, between two and three thousand people visited the castle in 1999.

### **Bunratty Castle (2)**

Bunratty Castle in County Clare is considerably larger than Newtown castle and dates from around 1460 when it was built by the McNamara family, at a site commanding a crossing of the small River Ratty. The structure consists of a massive rectangular central block with



projecting towers at each of the four corners – the entire topped with stepped battlements. An unusual external feature is the great arches which span between the corner towers. Internally, the main structural block was divided into three tall principal floors: the ground floor stores, the first floor Main Guard, and the top floor Great Hall. Access to the castle was by means of an external wooden staircase, while internally, a system of mural passages and spiral staircases linked the various floors. In contrast to the main block, the corner towers contain six floors and provided an additional sequence of domestic, administrative, military and ecclesiastical chambers (Leask, 1995).



**Figure 2. Bunratty Castle, County Clare.**

The castle came into the ownership of the Studdart family in the early eighteenth century, but they abandoned the castle for a new house in 1804, and by the middle of the nineteenth century all that survived was a roofless medieval ruin. In 1945 the castle shell was purchased by Lord Gort who, in co-operation with Shannon Development, initiated a programme of total restoration which was completed by 1963 (Fig.2). In addition, the castle was fitted out with a range of medieval furniture (Sharp, 1995).

Today, the visitor facilities in Bunratty castle operate on two levels. First, the castle building acts as a conventional visitor centre during the day. In this case, the visitor is offered a series of guided tours around the rooms and chambers of the castle. The tour includes visits to the Main Guard, the Great Hall and the basement in the main block; as well as the guard rooms, the lord's domestic quarters, the chapels, and kitchen in the corner towers – the entire all furnished in the fittings of the medieval period. By this means, the visitor is introduced to and allowed to appreciate castle life and facilities as they existed in the Ireland during the middle ages.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, the castle tours are ended and the visitor facilities changes from one of guided presentation to one of interaction. In effect, visitors are invited to dine in the castle and experience a medieval banquet as it might have been served, in the castle during medieval times. The meal is served in the Main Guard and a range of medieval culinary experiences are offered. Apart from the castle and its fittings, the atmosphere of the medieval is enhanced by the catering staff who are dressed in medieval attire and by groups of traditional

Irish musicians who entertain the diners - again who are also dressed in medieval garb. This unique method of interpretation provides the guests with a valuable link between the food and entertainment offered, and heritage appreciation.

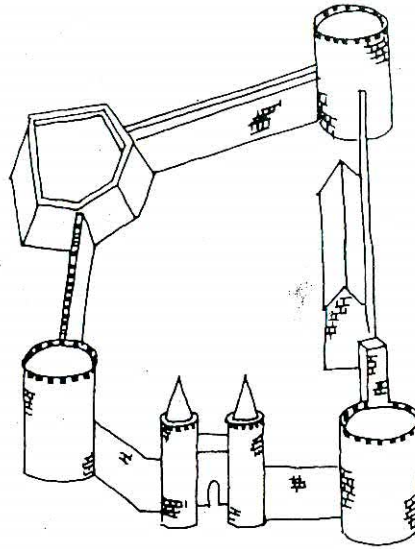
The facilities offered in Bunratty castle have clearly proved eminently successful in attracting visitors. This success is clearly evidenced from the fact that nearly 350,000 people are recorded as having visited the castle in 1998. In addition to the castle itself, a village folk park has been laid out immediately adjacent. The village incorporates a range of nineteenth century farm houses, domestic and craft buildings and, although the time-frame between the medieval castle and the Georgian village differs, the park facilities offer additional retail, catering, function and picnic service to the castle visitors.

### **King John's Castle (3)**

King John's Castle in Limerick was one of the earliest castles to be built by the Normans. The structure was placed strategically on the north-western edge of medieval Limerick where it was incorporated into the city defences, protecting both the city itself and the bridge which spanned the River Shannon. Work probably started in the early thirteenth century and the layout consisted of a keepless sub-rectangular plan with a massive circular tower at each corner, coupled with a twin-towered gate-house on the northern side. During the seventeenth century the castle was altered considerably (Sweetman, 1999). The south-eastern tower was demolished and an 'arrow-head' bastion was built in its place (Fig.3). The castle continued in military use until it was vacated by the military in the early years of this century, following which a development of municipal houses was built in the castle courtyard in 1935.

In 1990 these houses were demolished and a programme of restoration was initiated. This restoration was extensive and, as well as work on the castle fabric, a new heritage interpretative centre was located over the destroyed east wall adjacent to the remnants of the seventeenth century bastion. The new building consisted of a steel 'high-tech' structure carried on small pods, so as to minimise the damage to the archaeological layers which lay directly underneath. This use of dramatic 'high-tech' architecture within medieval context has aroused considerable controversy. Despite this, the city of Limerick has acquired a major heritage attraction.





**Figure 3. King John's Castle, Limerick, c.1600**

Today, the visitor to King John's castle is presented with a range of heritage facilities. The medieval castle has been sensitively restored and a series of interpretative features have been incorporated into the complex. The great corner towers and gate house contain a range of exhibits and animated displays which express the history of the castle. The wall-walks offer spectacular view across Limerick city and in the courtyard a range of medieval craft and military equipment is displayed. In addition, a series of historic enactments take place in the courtyard. The new interpretative building contains a further range of exhibits as well as an audio-visual gallery. Also, a lower floor gallery allows visitors to inspect the archaeological site underneath.

Directly south of the castle, a new street of vernacular residential and industrial buildings – Castle Lane - has been created. This extra-mural complex acts as an additional tourist resource to the castle and contains the new City Museum, as well as a range of supporting restaurant and entertainment facilities. As is the case with Bunratty, King John's Castle has proved a popular tourist destination, and during its opening year alone, in 1998, nearly 50,000 visitors are recorded.

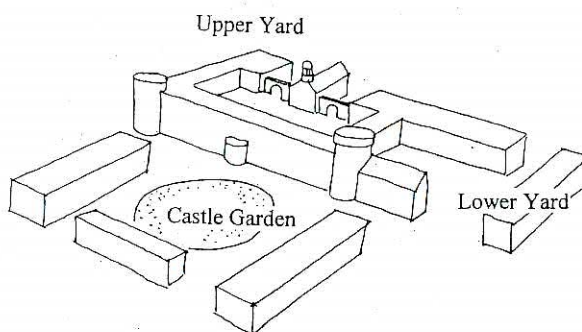
#### **Dublin Castle (4)**

In 1204 King John ordered that a castle be erected in the city of Dublin and in 1213 work started on the construction of Dublin Castle in the south east corner of the medieval city. Like Limerick, a massive curtain wall was built around the courtyard and this was strengthened by a system of massive corner drum-towers. In addition, a central double-towered gate house was provided on the northern side and the entire arrangement was enclosed by a mote. Also, as was the case in Limerick, Dublin Castle was incorporated into the city defences. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century the castle was almost completely rebuilt and most of the medieval structure was swept away (Sweetman, 1999). Several original elements, however, managed to survive and when the re-building programme was completed in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rectangular form of the medieval courtyard, remnants of the curtain wall, and the southern towers were all incorporated into the new fabric. In addition the extent of



the castle was expanded to include two new enclosed quadrangles: the Lower Castle Yard to the east and the Castle Garden to the south.

Since its foundation, Dublin Castle has acted as the centre of government administration. This use has now declined and although some administration facilities still operate within the complex, the castle is largely given over to visitor attractions and facilities. Today the visitor will find the castle divided into three distinct sectors: the Upper Castle Yard, the Lower Castle Yard and the Castle Garden - the whole complex contained within an historical, Medieval and Renaissance environment (Fig.4). Within this arrangement three distinct visitor facilities can be identified: the State Apartments, a series of museums, and a conference centre (McCarthy, 1975).



**Figure 4. Dublin Castle, Dublin.**

The Upper Yard represents the surviving form of the original medieval castle courtyard and now includes a range of visitor facilities. These include the medieval Birmingham and Record towers; the eighteenth century State Apartments – the old Royal Quarters of the castle; the Castle hall, the police museum and the conference centre. The latter contains a full range of hi-tech conference and entertainment facilities. In the Lower Yard the visitor will find some administrative buildings, the Chapel Royal, an exhibition crypt, the base of the medieval Powder Tower, the remains of Viking city defences, a restaurant, and the castle gift shop.

The Castle Garden lies immediately south of the original medieval complex and consists of a large circular landscaped area surrounded by a range of buildings including, the Chester Beatty Library of Oriental Manuscripts, and the Castle Coach House – an reception and dining complex linked to the conference centre.

Visitor numbers to Dublin Castle are difficult to ascertain as the castle grounds are open to the public and to administrative personnel. However, recorded visitors to the State Apartments numbered nearly 140,000 in 1995.

### CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limited scope of this paper, three interesting conclusions can be drawn. First, three of the case studies considered started from ruined shells which were successfully reinstated. This demonstrates that the principal of castle refurbishing for visitor use is a practical feasibility. Secondly, the impressive numbers visiting the refurbished castles, highlights the potential of such developments as centres of income generation. Finally, it is worth noting that the castle refurbishment works and the subsequent visitor interest generated, makes a substantial

contribution to the appreciation, conservation and sustainability of one significant element of Ireland's medieval heritage.

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#### Contact information:

Dr Pat Dargan  
Dublin Institute of Technology  
Rathmines House  
143-149 Lower Rathmines Road  
Dublin 6  
+353-1 4023460 voice  
+353-1 4023499 fax.  
pat.dargan@dit.ie