



2007-01-01

The castle building of William Marshal in Ireland

Pat Dargan

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

Follow this and additional works at: <http://arrow.dit.ie/schfsehoth>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dargan, Pat: The castle building of William Marshal in Ireland. Irish Roots, no. 61, 2007, pp.12-14.

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Food Science and Environmental Health at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other resources by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)



Off-print

The Castle Building of William Marshal in Ireland

Pat Dargan

in
IRISH ROOTS

No 61, Cork, 2007
pp 12 -14

PAT DARGAN on: The Castle Building of William Marshall

William Marshall was one of the major Anglo-Norman magnates to involve himself in Irish medieval history and in the process left a legacy of four major castles imprinted on the Irish landscape. These include the castles at Kilkenny, Carlow, Ferns, and Lea. In order to fully appreciate these castles it is necessary to bear in mind that they must be seen in the context of a comprehensive Marshall policy of land control — rather than as individual buildings. However, before looking at the Marshall's building programme, it is worth considering the background to his acquisition of his Irish lands.

The late twelfth century Anglo-Norman intervention in Ireland resulted from the issuing of an invitation to Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, by the native Dermot McMurrough to help him recapture his kingdom of Leinster, from which he had recently been driven. McMurrough promised de Clare the hand of his daughter Aoife in marriage and the succession to his kingdom, should the venture be successful. In the event, McMurrough and his Norman allies were eminently successful and de Clare and Aoife were married in Waterford in August 1169. Two years later Dermot died and de Clare claimed his promised inheritance. Henry II agreed to the granting of Leinster to de Clare, but with the proviso that Dublin, Waterford and the coastal edge of County Wicklow were reserved to the crown, together with Wexford town and parts of counties Carlow, Kildare and Laoise. Notwithstanding, these restrictions, de Clare's new Irish territories were vast and included most of the present counties of Carlow, Wexford, and Kilkenny. However, like his father-in-law, de Clare had only a short time to enjoy his Irish inheritance. He died in 1176 and the ownership of Leinster passed to his infant daughter Isabelle.

WILLIAM MARSHALL

Twelve years later, King Richard presented Isabelle in marriage to his then landless Norman warlord William the Marshall. Marshall had inherited the title of Marshall from his brother, but little in the way of property. However, his marriage to Isabelle brought Marshall the ownership of extensive lands in Wales and Ireland — elevating him to one of the most powerful Norman barons of his day. Events in England prevented the Marshall from visiting his

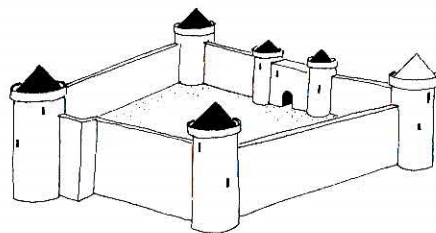


FIGURE 1: CONJECTURAL ILLUSTRATION OF KILKENNY CASTLE (13TH CENTURY)

Irish lands for some time, although he seems to have paid a short visit in 1200. Four years later he was able to visit Ireland for an extended period and give his full attention to the development of his Leinster estate. During this period he commenced work on the construction of a series of castles in the towns of Kilkenny, Carlow, and Ferns, in addition to further castles at Leas in County Laois — all to protect and secure his ownership.

KILKENNY

Marshall's castle at Kilkenny was built in the south-east corner of Marshall's new town, on an elevated position that overlooked and dominated both the River Nore and the new town itself. Work on the castle commenced in 1207. The plan consisted of a sub-rectangular courtyard or bailey, enclosed by a tall stone-built curtain wall. This had circular towers at each corner and a twin-towered gateway on the south side (Fig. 1). Internally the irregular shaped bailey measured about 53 by 50 meters and was similar in plan-form to the contemporary royal

castles of Dublin and Limerick.

Unfortunately Marshall's original structure has suffered considerable alterations, particularly in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. During this period, the moat, the south-east curtain wall, the south-east towers, most of the north-east curtain wall, and the internal buildings were removed, giving the castle its current 'U-shaped' plan. A new classical gateway was inserted in the west wall and a range of domestic buildings was arranged around the inside of the curtain wall. During the same period, the remaining towers and curtain wall were pierced with a range of large windows, and the walls were capped with new battlements, turrets and chimney stacks. Today only three of the original towers and the north and west wall survive. Despite all the amendments, the medieval atmosphere of the castle still survives and projects a powerful presence in terms of scale, mass, and form.

CARLOW

While the work on Kilkenny Castle proceeded, Marshall began work on his other castles — all of which were based on the geometric form of Kilkenny, but all much reduced in terms of floor area. The idea of the four circular corner towers was retained, but what was previously the courtyard was completely taken up by a solid residential block, or keep. In other words, these later castles consisted of a single rectangular building with circular towers at each corner. The castle at Carlow, for example, was much like Kilkenny, in



Figure 2: Carlow Castle

that it was positioned on a prominent rise and dominated both the adjoining River Barrow and Marshall's new town of Carlow. The entrance was positioned on the first floor and was probably accessed by a wooden ramp and platform. The castle seems to have had three floors and access between them was by means of a mural staircase. The structure measured approximately 17 meters by 10 meters internally and the arrangement probably had wooden floors and partitions, as well as a slated wooden roof.

Regretfully, only part of the structure survived an attempt to convert it into a mental hospital in the early nineteenth century. The proposal was poorly executed and half the castle was accidentally blown down with dynamite — leaving only the west wall and the two corner towers standing. Nevertheless, the ruin, when viewed from the street offers a clear impression of the original massive structure. This includes the two corner towers, the massive stone wall, and part of the battlements (Fig. 2).

FERNS
The surviving structure of Ferns Castle is more substantial than at Carlow and includes the two southern corner towers, as well as parts of the south, east and north walls (Fig. 3). The keep was larger than that at Carlow and measured 20 metres by 18 meters internally. As is the case with Carlow, the building had three floors, with the entrance at the first floor. Again similar to Carlow, access between the floors was by means of a staircase incorporated into the tower walls.

Three surviving elements of the Ferns castle are of particular interest. The south-east tower contains a superbly vaulted chapel with decorated ribs and traceried windows and the surviving wall offers a range of decorated pointed windows and cross loops. In addition, the dramatic rock-cut moat still stretches along a section of the south wall.

LEA
Lea Castle is smaller than the two previous examples, but is the only one of the Marshall castles where the full outline of the keep survives. Unfortunately, only one corner of the structure survives to anywhere near its full height. The internal dimensions of the keep measure approximately 14 meters by 10 meters (Fig. 4). The ground floor is divided into two equal sized chambers by a central masonry partition, although nothing survives of the remainder of internal structure — which was probably wooden. Lea is also unusual in that the outline of the bailey or courtyard that surrounded the keep still survives. This suggests that the other Marshall castles once pos-

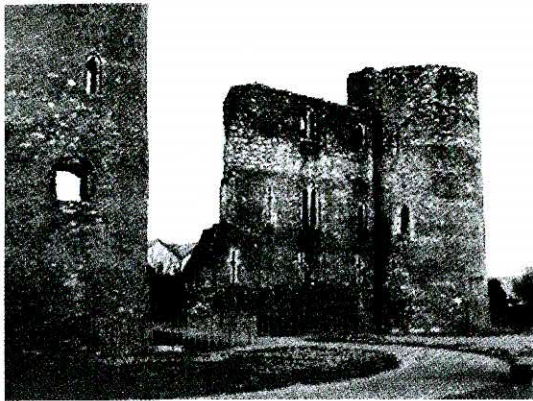


FIGURE 3: FERNS CASTLE

sessed defended baileys, but apart from Lea there is little evidence to support this.

OTHER CASTLES
Two further castles suggest a Marshall involvement. Enniscorthy Castle, in County Wexford, displays the characteristic four corner towered plan of the Marshall. The present castle dates from the sixteenth century, but may have been built on the outline of an earlier structure, perhaps built by the Marshall. Dunamase Castle in County Laois, was built near the end of the twelfth century, with a central keep placed within a bailey. Marshall took over the structure and sometime between 1208 and 1210 added a second outer bailey and defensive wall.

The Marshall seems to have been the only one of the Anglo-Norman barons to build multiple castles in Ireland. Even the most powerful of his contemporaries, Hugh de Lacy and John de Courcy satisfied their requirements with single castles. It may, however, have been the vastness of his estates in Ireland, which extended over nearly the whole of Leinster that prompted the Marshall's castle building programme. In relation to the design of the castles, it is uncertain whether it was the Marshall himself, or an experienced master mason employed by him, who decided on the planform.

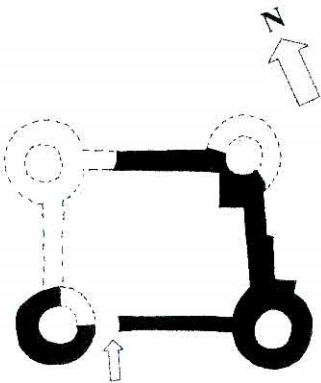


FIGURE 4: PLAN OF LEA CASTLE

DEPARTURE
How much time Marshall spent in his new castles is uncertain, but in 1213 he was recalled to England to assist King John in his dispute with the rebellious barons. Six years later, at the age of 71, he became seriously ill. In April, he took leave of his wife and family and entered the Order of the Knights Templar in London and on 14 May 1219 he died — without ever having returned to Ireland. Following mass at Westminster Abbey, the Marshall was laid to rest in the Temple Church, where an effigy still marks his burial. Within a year Isabelle had followed her husband and the Marshall's lands passed to his sons, one after the other. By 1245 all had died without male heirs, and the great Marshall estates, including the old kingdom of Leinster and Irish castles, were carved up and distributed amongst Marshall's daughters and their families — never to return to single ownership.

Irish Roots Binders

IRISH ROOTS BINDERS — EACH CAPABLE OF HOLDING UP TO 16 ISSUES OF IRISH ROOTS MAGAZINE — ARE AGAIN AVAILABLE AT A COST, INCLUDING POSTAGE, OF:

IRELAND: €15.00
UK: £12.50
USA: \$23.00
REST OF WORLD: 18.00

PAYMENT MAY BE MADE BY PERSONAL CHEQUE, CASH OR CREDIT CARD.
ORDER FROM:
BELGRAVE PUBLICATIONS, BELGRAVE AVENUE, CORK CITY, IRELAND

Ireland's Genealogy BOOKSHOP

HERALDIC ARTISTS
3 Nassau Street, Dublin 2 Tel: (01) 679 7020

HERALDIC ARTISTS
3 Nassau Street, Dublin 2. Tel: (01) 679 7020
email: sales@heraldicartists.com

