

History of Tower Houses

The towers were able to withstand attacks of short duration by violent neighbours or bands of raiders and also formed impressive status symbols. The buildings were regarded as castles by their occupants. This classification continues today and tower houses are regarded as a species within the castle genus. Their evident defensive strength should not, however, overshadow their residential nature, for tower houses were primarily the defended homes of a wealthy landowning class and were erected by both Anglo-Irish and Gaelic families during the period from circa 1400 to circa 1650.

Most of the tower houses in this area are plain rectangles in plan without any projecting wings or turrets. Like most of the surviving monuments of our medieval past, the majority of Irish tower houses are in poor condition, with collapsed walls and ivy shrouded exteriors reflecting centuries of neglect. Yet these ruins, the remnants of a major medieval building industry, provide a valuable source of information on life in Ireland during the later Middle Ages.

Tower houses came into existence by the early 15th century. They may have been scaled-down copies of earlier and larger Anglo-Norman keeps or they may have developed as the secular equivalent of the belfry towers raised at Irish abbeys and monasteries during the 15th century or perhaps the concept may have been imported from England, Scotland or the Continent of Europe but, either way, they became very prominent in late medieval society.

After a recession in the mid to late 14th century the construction industry recovered, building in a style—Irish Gothic—whose elements arrived from England between 1300 and 1350. Great social and economic changes did occur in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. There was a change from arable to pastoral agriculture while there was a fragmentation in major lordships, accompanied by a proliferation of both minor lordships and tower houses.

The tower house also emphasised the landowner's position in society. Secure behind its walls, the tower house and bawn provided a landowner with protection from troublesome neighbours and raiders at a time when forays were the principal form of Irish warfare.

The Architecture of Tower Houses

No two tower houses are ever identical. While the same assemblage of architectural features occurring in one tower house can be present in a neighbouring building (thereby suggesting that both were erected at a similar period), the location, variety and number of features present in each individual building can differ. The presence of a shared architectural assemblage does, however, allow the buildings to be defined as a distinct architectural series. In addition, each tower house functions as a self-contained unit with the chambers inside stacked vertically, one over the other. Both of these factors result in the conformity of appearance throughout Ireland.

The majority of tower houses have a rectangular, nearly square, plan with tall walls which taper upwards from thick, base battered foundations. The entrance is at ground floor level, framed by an arched doorway of dressed stone. The presence of a small hole set in one of the stone door jambs can betray where an iron door, or yett, once hung. Looking upwards a stone box at parapet level may

be set directly out over the doorway. The open floor of this machicolation allowed missiles such as boiling water, hot sand, quicklime or boiling cooking oil to be dropped on assailants below.

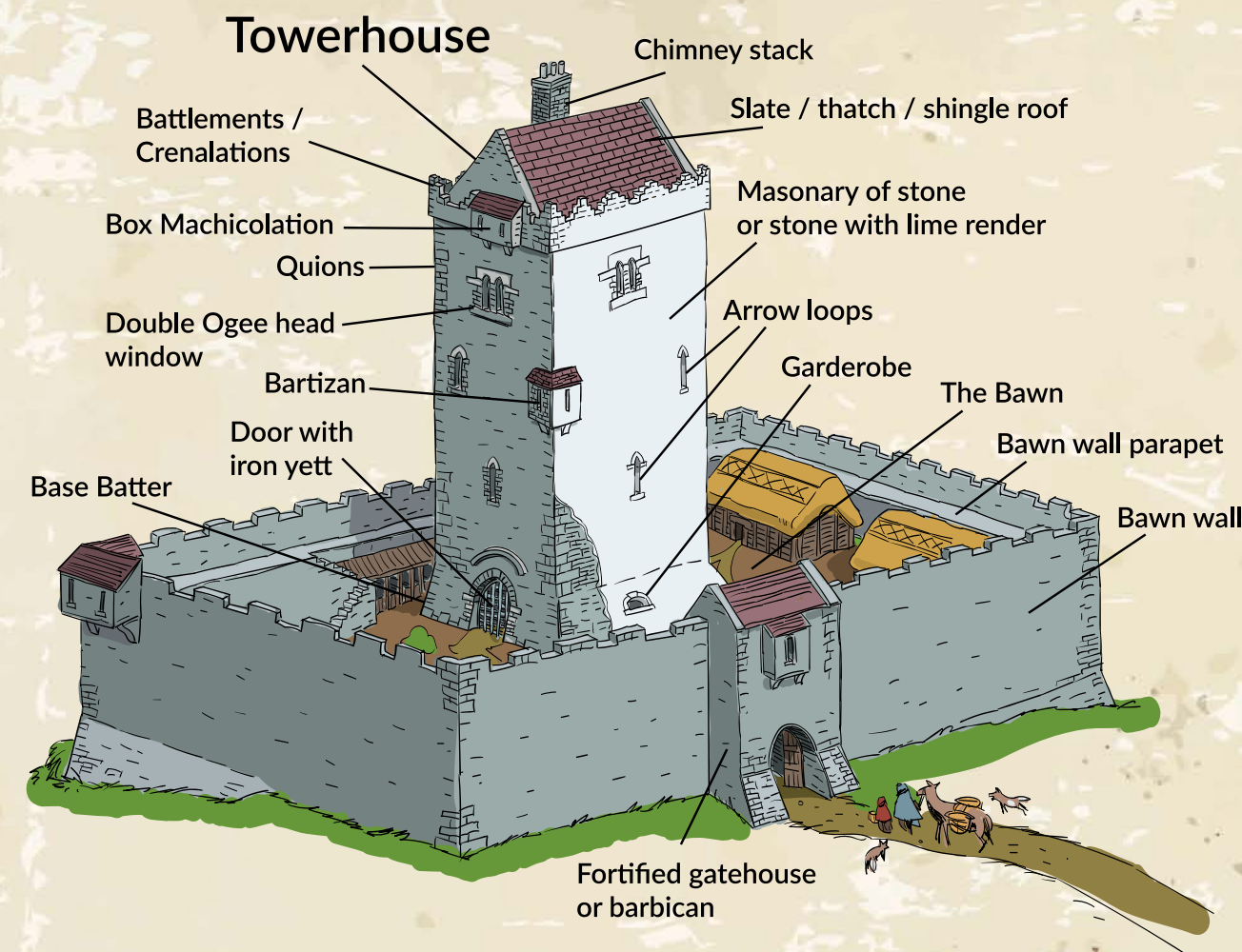
The entrance normally leads into a small lobby, in the roof of which is often positioned a murder hole, another defensive feature and one which enabled the occupants to dispatch any unwelcome visitor from the safety of the building's first floor level. On one side of the lobby there may be the entrance to a small subsidiary chamber (perhaps a porter's station), while often on the other side is the doorway leading onto the spiral staircase which gives access to the upper floor levels. The lobby may lead through to the large main chamber. Both main and subsidiary chambers may lie under stone barrel vaults, but the stress which vaults placed on the side walls often restricted their number in the finished tower house. As a result, the builders more often used wooden floors, set on joists which spanned the room and were supported on beams placed on stone supports (corbels) projecting from both side walls of the chamber.

Usually the floor plan is repeated in each of the upper levels, and each level's internal space is divided between a main chamber and a subsidiary chamber. The timber doors throughout the building were hung on 'hanging eyes' or pivot holes placed at the top inner side of the doorway, into which the door stile was inserted. The chambers can contain deep wall cupboards and fireplaces. Long stone-roofed passages, housed in the thickness of a side wall, lead to the castle's washrooms and toilets. These were set over a downward flue which allowed waste matter to fall through the shaft to an opening in the external wall-face where it was jettisoned from the building.

The narrow slit-like windows at lower floor levels provided little light to the internal living area but had a necessary defensive quality while at upper floor levels defensive considerations were not as paramount and often had more elaborate windows with carved heads. The spiral staircase terminated at the parapet where there was a wallwalk, protected by stepped battlements. The building lay under a pitched roof, normally thatched.

The bawn was a fortified enclosure where outbuildings, often made of timber, were located and was also used to enclose animals at nightfall for protection. The bawn walls were usually of stone and enclosed a rectangular area surrounding the tower house. Of a less substantial nature than the walls of the tower house, many bawns have thus been demolished.

A tower house, similar to the one at Garbally, is a fortified medieval residence of stone, usually four or more stories in height. The vast majority of the castles in Connacht take a form known to modern writers as tower houses although contemporaries simply referred to them as castles. Tower houses are common throughout Ireland, Scotland and the Northern parts of England and in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries were generally regarded as a suitable form of residence for both lords and their most important tenants.



Domestic Life in a Tower House

Various accounts and historical references point to 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 in scarce supply. Other references indicate that the houses of the nobility were nothing but square towers, poorly lit, with little furniture and with floors covered in rushes, of which they made their beds in summer but used straw in winter. However when compared to the thatched, mud-walled cabins in which the majority of the contemporary local population dwelt, the tower house was a secure homestead with provision for heat and sanitation.

With defences 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. 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 are accompanied by smaller buildings, orchards, gardens, cottages, mills and dovecotes associated with castles. This is further evidence for settlement nucleation, and that in every village there was a castle and church.

Defensive Life in a Tower House

The defences of the tower house and its bawn engaged at two levels. At the first level the bawn's shot holes and loops worked in conjunction with similar features in the tower house to hold an enemy away from the defensive circuit. If this circuit was breached then a second category of defences came into play as the inhabitants retreated into the tower house, firmly shutting the yett and wooden doors behind them. Shot holes made the doorway a 'killing zone', while a box machicolation on the parapet allowed missiles to be dropped on the heads of the aggressors below. If the enemy managed to break into the building the defenders closed the doors on the entrance lobby and then retreated upstairs. As the intruders stood in the lobby they could be attacked through the murder hole above their heads.

The rebellion of 1641 saw a return to more traditional methods of warfare. Lacking artillery, the Irish raided or besieged the settlers in their tower houses and castles and attempted to starve them out. The arrival of the New Model Army in 1649 heralded the end of an inconclusive war. Well equipped with artillery, Parliament's army crushed all opposition, including that thrown up by the humble tower house. In contrast to the usually detailed accounts of military operations in letters to the speaker of the House of Commons, Oliver Cromwell's lack of detail on the destruction of tower houses may suggest that the buildings fell with relative ease.

There is a series of buildings which belong to the last phase of the developmental sequence of tower houses, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries often characterised by their gabled walls, cruciform roofs, large mullioned and transomed windows, and gun defences. As with earlier tower houses, elaboration and architectural detail differs from one building to the next, but certain features still betray their kinship with the earlier Irish Gothic building tradition; of more importance is the fact that they retain the function of self-contained units. The change in style reflects a general change in architecture during this period with the construction of major fortified houses. The desire for defence is still apparent in the form of shot holes and machicolations, but greater emphasis was now being placed on privacy, symmetry of plan, and increased provision of heat and light.

The seventeenth century saw, however, a continuing shift towards low, thin walled fortified houses, though defensive features such as murder holes and box machicolations could still be retained. Control of the country had now passed to the English government in Dublin, with consequent changes in social, political and economic organisation that would lead to a new era and a new series of buildings – the Big House.

The majority of the tower house buildings remain under siege to this very day from neglect, stone-robbing, frost, ivy growth, natural erosion and so on. As this erosion of our medieval past continues we must all try to ensure that the siege is minimised and the best preserved examples continue to remain protected and preserved for future generations.

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Original tower house illustration: Rory O'Shaughnessy 2012.



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