

Garbally Castle Tower House

A late medieval statement of O'Kelly expansion in central Galway.

With the career of William Buide O'Kelly, king of Uí Maine in the second half of the fourteenth century, the authority of this Gaelic lordship expanded significantly beyond their traditional lands in south Roscommon and east Galway. William, with his immediate forebears and subsequent descendants, undertook a number of incursions in what is now central Galway, in a sustained effort to claim control over the area.

This interest in the lands of central Galway, what is now largely the barony of Tiaquin, could be traced as far back as the interment of Domnall O'Kelly, king of Uí Maine, at the famous Cistercian house of Abbeyknockmoy in 1295. Abbeyknockmoy (*Mainistir Chnoc Muaidhe*) was founded in the twelfth-century by Cathal Crobhdearg O'Connor, king of Connacht, but as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries progressed, it became more and more associated with the Uí Maine elites.

These kings of Uí Maine, as well as the younger O'Kelly sons who went into the religious orders, heavily patronised this Cistercian foundation. O'Kelly displays of wealth at Abbeyknockmoy can be seen with the early fifteenth-century tomb to Maolsechlainn O'Kelly and his wife Fionola, and the wall paintings that once adorned both this area and other locations within the abbey. With Abbeyknockmoy, the Uí Chellaig used their new position to exercise authority over what must have been another wealthy resource in their expanded lordship.

Forceful expansion west by the O'Kelly is seen in the 1320s or 1330s when Diarmaid Mac Gilbert O'Kelly, king of Uí Maine, hanged the O'Mannion chief of Soghain, after which he seized on O'Mannion's 'castle' and estate of Clogher. The reference to 'Clogher' is regarded as Killaclogher townland, Monivea parish. O'Mannion's residence may relate to the enclosure site in Killaclogher townland.

Moving into the late-fourteenth century, William Buide O'Kelly defeated the de Berminghams or *Clann Mac Feorais* in 1372, evidence of further incursions by the O'Kelly in the cantred *Clantayg*, in the area close to Athenry. The emergence of the O'Kelly as the dominant force in *Clantayg* seems to have been cemented by the early-fifteenth century, judging by the reference to Tiaquin as the place of residence and death for Maolsechlainn mac Uilliam Buide O'Kelly, king of Uí Maine, in 1401.

Tiaquin is also the site of an early Anglo-Norman castle, historically-attested to in the year 1266.

The O'Kelly seem to have successfully established Tiaquin and its environs as a permanent powerbase by the early-fifteenth century, and this is corroborated by the evidence that one of Maolsechlainn's sons, and another king of Uí Maine, Donnchadh O'Kelly, is regarded as having resided at Tiaquin during his reign (r. 1420-1424). This preference for Tiaquin continues into the middle of the century, when the location is again referred to in relation to O'Kelly activities for the year 1461.

It is into this environment that Garbally castle is built. That Maolsechlainn may have inspired his grandson and namesake, for by 1504, as king of Uí Maine, he had constructed three castles, located at Garbally (*Garbh dhoire*), Monivea (*Muine an mheadha*) and Gallagher (*Gallach*), close to Castleblakeney. These fortifications were recorded as being demolished by Ulick Fionn Burke of Clann Ricaird in the same year, but its survival to the present day indicates that it wasn't destroyed entirely, and was certainly occupied after this date.



Garbally is a castle of tower house form. Located in Garbally townland, it is the most centrally located of these three strongholds built by Maolsechlainn. The tower house does not have any evidence for a surrounding bawn, but, it may be possible that the south-eastern limits of the small field that the castle is sited in today could conform to an older boundary around the site, perhaps the remnants of a bawn enclosure.

The north-eastern wall, and the adjoining sections of the north-western and south-eastern walls survive to the second floor, with the interior exposed

on its southern side. Through its architectural remains, O'Keeffe dates Garbally Castle to the second half of the fifteenth century. Of the three tower houses mentioned above, Garbally is the best surviving example. Garbally is marked on the 1591 Browne map, which may suggest it was still in use at that date.

One of the main characteristics that connects these three castles is their siting. All three fortifications were constructed adjacent to a road running west from Caltra to Galway, now the R339. This communication routeway passes close to both Abbeyknockmoy to its north, and Athenry to its south, while to the east of Caltra it connects to another regional road, the R358, which leads through Ahascragh and on to the important ford over the River Suck at *Áth Nadsluaigh* (Ballinasloe). Given the expanses of wetland that survive in this area to the present day, both north and south of these roads, it is likely that this is a route of considerable antiquity, through a landscape that would have been difficult to traverse. The siting of tower houses at roads and passes more generally seems to be done with reason, and the functions that this could supply to the castle builder. These range from the ability to hold off raiding parties and restricting access, through to their use as locations to toll travellers through the region.

Therefore, it is quite possible that Maolsechlainn's siting of Garbally castle may have been as important as the construction itself, as he sought to keep communication, trade and revenue streams open between the traditional core of his lordship, closer to the River Suck, and the secular and ecclesiastical foundations of *Clantayg*, and even further on to Galway, a sign of the importance which Garbally castle once had.

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