

Architectural Features of Garbally Castle



The castle is referenced in several state papers in the late 16th century, so it is unclear if it was completely rebuilt after 1504 or if it was only partially damaged and subsequently repaired following the attack. In 1832, Samuel Lewis notes that the castle was “partially destroyed by Cromwell” in the middle of the 17th century. It is again unclear if the damage to the tower, that is visible today, occurred during this attack or if it is the result of natural deterioration combined with opportunistic extraction for subsequent local buildings or other structures of our built heritage.

Approximately half of the original three-storey structure survives. The north-east wall is entirely present to roof level, while substantial sections of the north-west and south-east walls also survive. The south-west wall has

been completely destroyed, which allows modern observers to examine the tower’s three levels, along with many of their interesting features, in the cross-section that has been exposed by the wall’s absence.

In general the walls are of ‘viz’ construction, meaning they contain a well-mortared centre with an inner and outer face. A gentle batter or slope is visible on the exterior, which served to strengthen the structure at the base and reduced the possibility of the walls being undermined during an attack. The exterior of the castle would most likely have been covered with a lime plaster and then whitewashed, which in turn may have been stained with locally available pink or yellow pigments. A tower house of this size would typically contain only one main room on each level. These levels were usually divided by timber, though most tower houses had at least one vaulted level, as is the case between the first and second stories of Garbally Castle. The upper level was often used as the main reception area, as this was where fires could be lit and smoke released, while the ground floor was most frequently used for storage and the levels in the middle were for private use with bed chambers and living rooms. Later tower houses had fireplaces built into their walls, but there is no evidence that such a feature was present at Garbally Castle.



Ground Floor

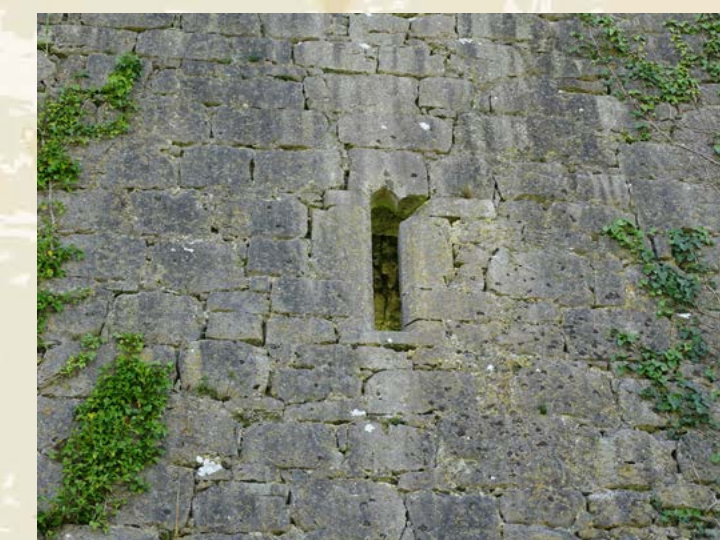
The main entrance was in the south-east, where a pointed arched doorway with two orders, one of which accommodated a yett, or iron gate, is present. This door contains two ‘murder holes’, or ‘Poll na marbha’, which were openings in the ceiling through which defenders could shoot, throw down or pour harmful substances or objects on suspected attackers. A door bar slot and an aperture for a door chain are also present, with the latter showing signs of regular use. A mural staircase, that is built directly into a wall, is present in the south-east

Garbally Castle is a fine example of a late 15th/early 16th century Irish tower house. While its construction has been dated to 1499, ‘The Annals of The Four Masters’ record that it was “demolished” by MacWilliam Burke prior to the Battle of Knockdoe in 1504.



wall and two small arrow loops exist in the north-east and south-east walls, the latter of which is accessed from the mural stair passage.

Arrow loops such as these consist of narrow vertical apertures which were difficult to penetrate by an attacker from the exterior due to their diminutive scale. Conversely, these features typically contained



oblique internally recessed areas that provided defender with a wide range of vision and movement, from which they could launch their arrows against any would-be attacker.



First Floor

The first floor is likely to have been timber floored, as the remains of putlog holes are visible in the wall at this level. A mural passage in the north-west wall contains the remains of an ogee window (pointed arch with a double curve) and a small arrow loop. Three other windows, some of which are ogee headed, open directly into the main chamber at this level one in the north-east and two in the south-east. A vaulted ceiling with marks of wickerwork support is also visible, while a mural staircase in the south-east wall gave access to the top floor.

Top Floor

A double ogee headed window is present in the north-east wall, while two smaller windows are present in the south-east and north-west walls. Machicolations are present in the north-east and south-east walls; these were floor openings that projected from the castle’s exterior wall between the supporting corbels of a battlement, and through which stones or other material could be dropped on attackers at the base of the structure. The south-eastern example is located directly



above the arched doorway, and would have provided an extra layer of defence in this key area of the structure. A primitive garderobe feature may also be present at this level of the castle, as there is a small horizontal opening visible in the north-east, at the base of which a stone feature protrudes from the wall. The opening may have been used to expel waste from the upper level of the castle, while the stone feature at its base may have helped to guide it away from the wall as it fell.

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