

Earthworks at Raheen Castle, Co. Limerick

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About five miles to the south of Limerick City and roughly two miles north-east of Kilpeacon cross-roads, there is a ringfort within which are the remains of a castle known locally as Raheen or Caheravally Castle.¹ Westropp gives most of the known references to the site.² It appears to have been held in turn by the Boyle, O'Kahisse and, finally, in the seventeenth century, by the Roche family. In the Desmond Survey of 1582-87 the site is referred to as the "old very ruinous Castle called Rahin."³ The Castle is shown on the Down Survey barony map,⁴ and in the Civil Survey of 1654 David Roche of Cahirivally is given as the landed proprietor in the area.⁵

Only the foundations now remain of the fabric of the castle (Plate V, 2). These consist of a number of wall-footings of rectangular plan, measuring internally nine metres from north to south and seven metres from east to west (Fig. 1). The walls are, on average, one metre thick and four courses in height, with good facing-stones and a rubble core. There is no clear indication of an entrance, but one may have existed in the southern corner of the west wall. Internally a low grass-covered wall-footing extends eastwards from approximately the centre of the east wall and indicates some form of internal division, possibly of a secondary nature. A number of small mounds of collapsed stone, including some large wallstones, are the only other features visible within the walls.

As noted above, the castle is located within an earthwork roughly circular in plan and some thirty-five metres in maximum diameter. This earthwork, to which the term ringfort can in a general way be applied, is of the platform variety, and rises on the eastern side to a maximum height of about two metres above the surrounding field surface (see section, Fig. 1). The castle was built on a small, possibly artificially raised, area within the north-eastern quadrant, and was enclosed by a stone wall which was erected on the perimeter of the surrounding ringfort. Little survives of this wall but, in places, some of the facing-stones can be seen and a thickness of about one metre measured. The wall follows the circular plan of the earthen fort, but appears to have been built in straight sections with a possible entrance feature in the north-western corner. It probably represents the remains of the bawn wall which surrounded the castle, so providing a measure of defence and security for the inhabitants. Within such a wall the out-houses and associated structures could be accommodated, as also cattle or other livestock at night or in times of danger.

¹ Td. Raheen; Par. Caheravally; Bar. Clanwilliam; Co. Limerick; O.S. 6-inch sheet 13 (64.5 cm. from western margin and 6.5 cm. from southern margin); Nat. Grid Ref. R.596-493. It is marked on the 1840 and all subsequent editions as *Castle (site of)*.

² T. J. Westropp, *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 26, C (1906), 89.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, The castle and the nearby church are marked on the map for the South Liberties.

⁵ R. C. Simington, *The Civil Survey of County Limerick, A.D. 1654*, Dublin 1938, p. 472.

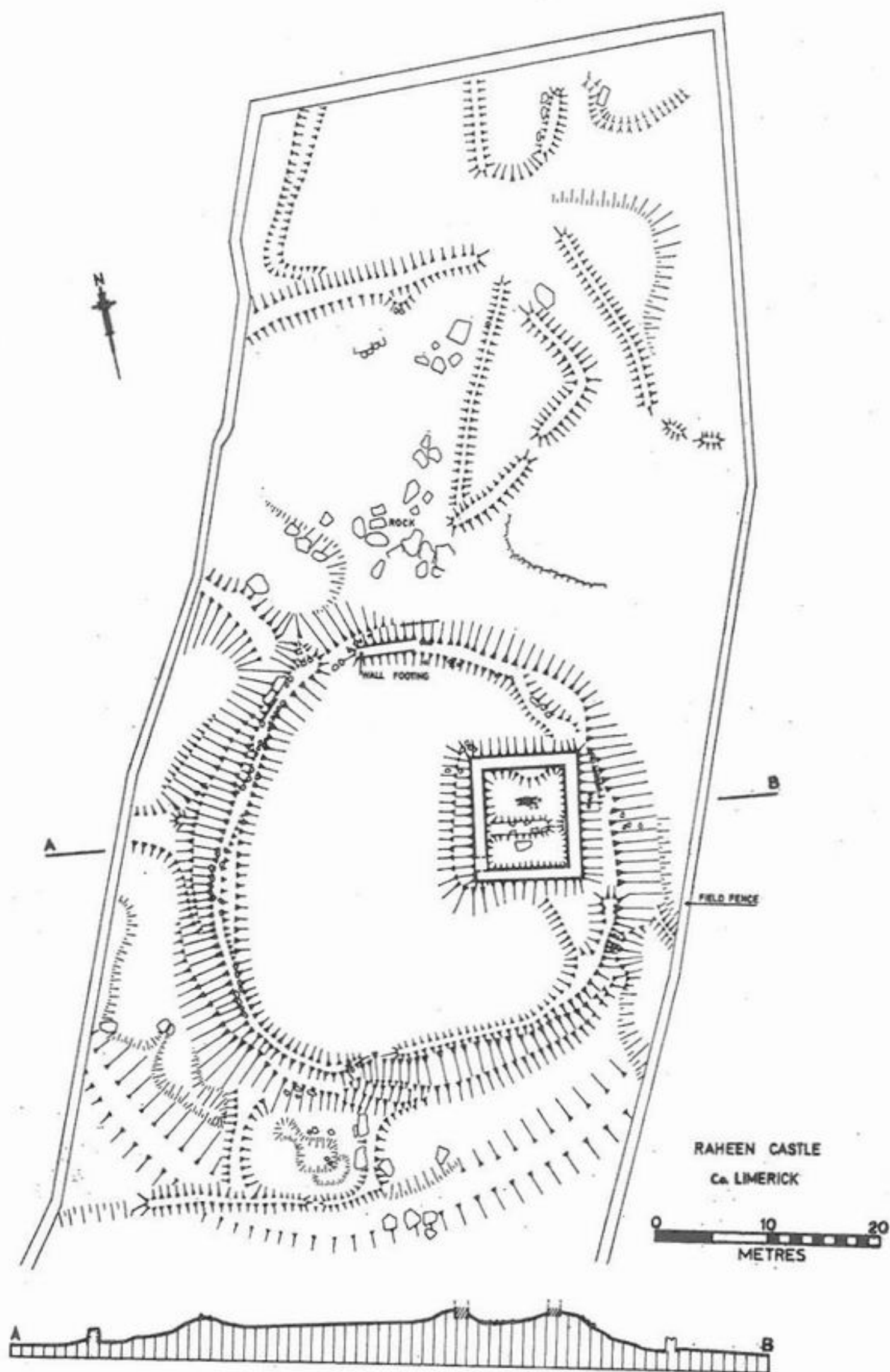


Fig. 1. Plan and section of castle and surrounding earthworks.

On the southern side of the enclosing earthwork there is a slight indication of a fosse and an outer bank. These features may have also existed along the western and eastern sides and, indeed, the 1840 edition of the O.S. map appears to suggest this, particularly along the eastern side where the later fence curves outward, apparently along the line of an outer bank. At present the area to the west of the enclosure is covered with small quarry-holes and this interference, together with the modern field-fences, has destroyed any surface evidence for the outer defences of the site in this sector.

On the basis of the surviving remains, it would appear that Raheen castle was a form of tower-house—the typical fortified dwelling of both the Irish and Anglo-Irish from the late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century.⁶ Some alterations or re-modelling of the original plan may have taken place in the seventeenth century if, as seems likely, the castle was repaired and reoccupied by the Roches.

At first sight it seems reasonable enough to suggest that the medieval castle was built on the site of an earlier ringfort dating probably to the Early Historic Period. If so, then the stone wall enclosing the castle bawn may have been erected on the crest of the inner eastern bank which would have been largely levelled in the process. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the earthwork and the stone structures are coeval. This matter can only be resolved by excavation, perhaps especially by a cutting in the north-eastern quadrant which would reveal the stratigraphical relationship between the castle and its surrounding outworks. Rynne, in an earlier volume of this *Journal*, has already raised this problem in regard to Desmond Castle, Adare,⁷ which is sited within a large earthen enclosure, and there are other examples scattered throughout the country, as for instance, Rahinanne Castle, near Ventry, Co. Kerry.⁸ Again, only about two miles to the north of Raheen castle, in the townland of Drombanny, another castle is marked on the O.S. map as being within an earthwork, in this case of rectangular plan and most likely a moated-site of early medieval date. Here, also, only excavation could reveal the relationship which existed between the structures but, alas, little if anything now remains of either the castle or the surrounding earthwork.

On the northern and western sides of the ringfort at Raheen, though not marked on the O.S. maps, there can still be seen amongst the limestone outcrop a number of low earthen banks, some of which survive to a height of about 70 cm.⁹ (indicated in Fig. 1). They are best preserved on the northern side of the enclosure but do not, to-day, extend beyond the modern field boundaries. Though obviously not all contemporary, some, at least, perhaps represent the boundaries of the small plots or orchards associated with a medieval rural settlement of Anglo-Norman character. In this regard, the location of the medieval church may be significant, situated as it is across the roadway from the castle, within a small graveyard. As Glasscock has pointed out in a recent survey,¹⁰ such a grouping of castle and church in close proximity

⁶ H. G. Leask, *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses*, Dundalk 1964, p. 76.

⁷ E. Rynne, *N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 8 (1961), 193-202.

⁸ R. Hitchcock, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 3 (1854-55), 394.

⁹ An example of earthworks of this nature may be those surrounding Ballydoyle Castle, a tower-house in Co. Tipperary, for which see E. Rynne, *N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 10 (1966-67), 72-74.

¹⁰ In N. Stephens and R. E. Glasscock (eds.), *Irish Geographical Studies*, Belfast 1970, p. 171.

to each other are very often the sole surviving indicators of deserted medieval villages or boroughs dating from the thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Notable examples, of which we have both material and written documentation, have survived at nearby Glenogra¹¹ and Caherguillamore.¹² Perhaps these earthworks at Raheen date from a similar period, though it must be borne in mind that many of them could be associated with the later occupation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹² S. P. Ó Ríordáin and J. Hunt, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 72 (1942), 37-63.



2. Site of Raheen Castle, Co. Limerick, from the north-west.

(Photo: T. Fanning)