# The Thirteenth-Century remains at Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary

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*The surviving remains of thirteenth-century Cahir Castle are described and discussed. At the time there seems to have been a gatehouse, a curtain wall, mural towers, a hall, and a linked suite of chambers.*

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Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary, is a large and impressive structure, sited upon an island in the River Suir. A recent discussion of the castle by the late Henry Wheeler (n.d.) has shown that, contrary to most previous opinions (*e.g.* Leask 1973, p. 123), the castle (Illus. 1) was in existence in the thirteenth century[1]. It would appear that at that time a curtain wall with mural towers enclosed a ward on the top of the rocky island, now the inner ward, which was entered through a gatehouse and which contained a hall and other buildings. Later, in the fifteenth century, the castle was extensively altered as the gatehouse passage was blocked to form a 'keep', vaults were inserted into the north-eastern tower and the hall was linked to the 'keep'. After an eventful history the castle became generally disused at the end of the eighteenth century only to become the subject of large-scale restoration works in the 1840s directed by William Tinsley for the Earl of Glengall.

More recently the castle has been extensively conserved by the Office of Public Works and is now a major National Monument. During excavations carried out in 1972, James Reynolds found part of a cobbled surface, perhaps the original, in the barbican area and also a loop with crosslet and D-shaped terminal similar to those elsewhere in the castle. A small, simple, vertical loop with a low, internally splayed embrasure could, as Wheeler (*op. cit*, p. 9) suggests, be a gun-loop[2], though it might also have functioned as a drain in times of flood. Excavation within the inner ward found mostly late rubble fill (Reynolds 1972, p. 26).

The gatehouse is built of roughly coursed limestone, dressed to a rough face, with quoins, probably split from the naturally jointed limestone outcrop, laid so as to present their horizontal beds to the exterior. The quoins are visible on both wall faces when large and alternatively when small. The masonry has a white lime mortar, with later cement patching in places, and there is a truncated base batter.

The gatehouse has three bays at ground floor level, each running across the long axis from north to south. The central chamber, 2.7m wide, was the gatechamber leading into the ward from the south. The original inner dressings of the gateway, ashlar with diagonal tooling-marks, survive, framing the inner face of the thick, late, blocking, wall, giving a gateway width of 2.37m. The ashlar jambs end a short distance above the present, and presumably secondary, level of the gate passage. The outer opening of the gate passage, 3m wide, could have accommodated the eroded, chamfered sandstone ashlar gateway presently giving access

[1]Johnson has noted the presence of much early work in the inner ward (Johnson 1975, p. 113). A small brown official guide leaflet, *Cahir Castle: A Short Descriptive and Historical Account*, apparently printed in 1978, described the inner ward as "an excellent example of the courtyard castle of late fourteenth century type" (Anon.1978, ref. inside front flap).

[2]I am grateful to the Hon. Editor for pointing out the existence of similar features at Doonnagore Castle, Co. Clare, and at St. Michael's Mount Cornwall.
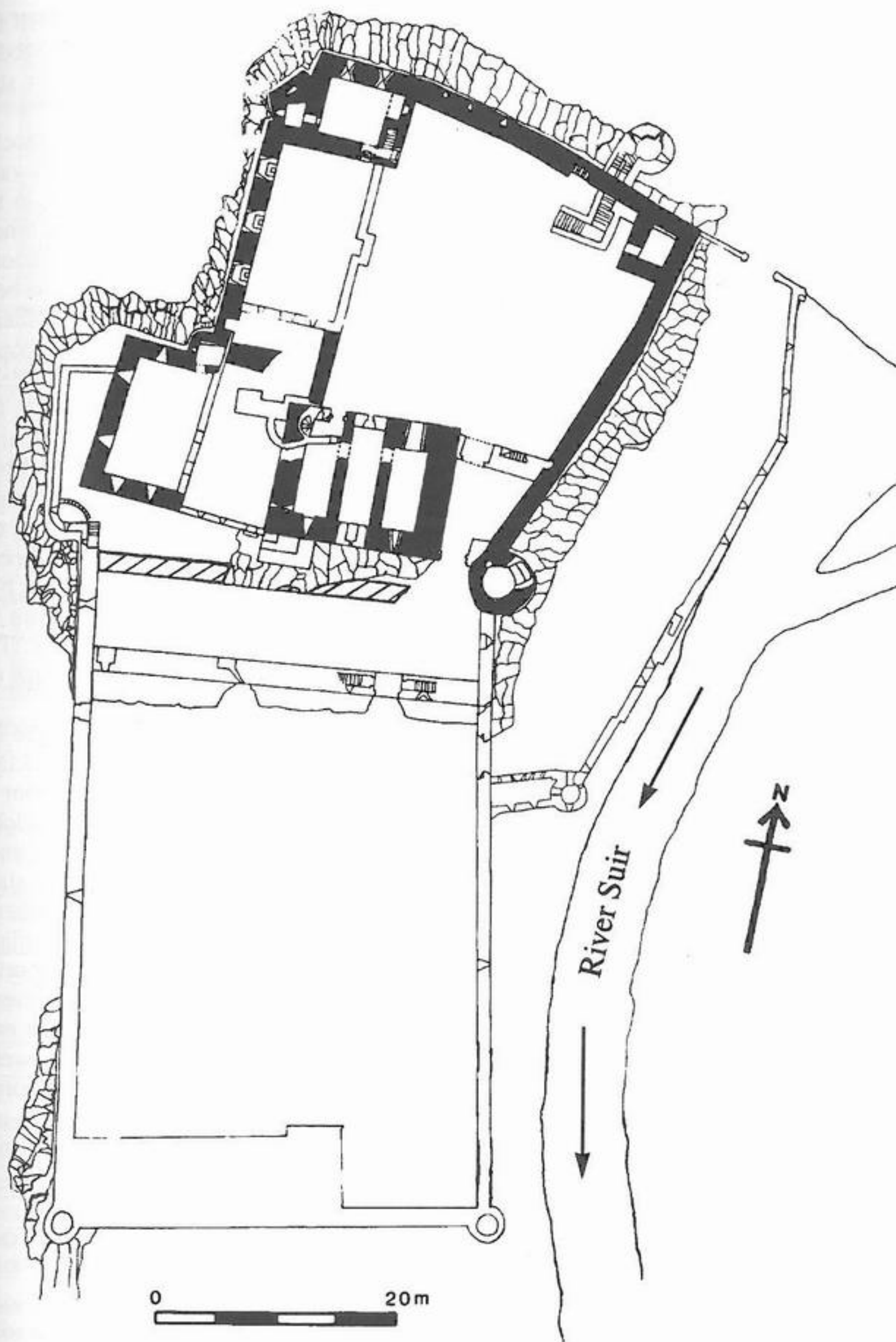
Illus. 1.   Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary. The walls shown as solid black are thought to be thirteenth century in date. The wall of uncertain date in the middle ward is shown cross-hatched. Later structures are shown in outline.

into the inner ward, as Wheeler suggests (*op. cit.*, p. 11), though the grained sandstone of the gateway is very similar to that of the later corbels above it. The eastern jamb has the eroded remains of a pointed stop to its chamfer, reminiscent of the pointed broach chamfer stop motif used on many of the later inserted doorways and windows in the castle[3].

The three bays of the gatehouse are roofed with a pointed vault of small, pitched blocks. The central vault has a higher, separate section at its southern end, with an almost flat vault which allowed for the opening of the tall gate leaves. This is reflected in a seam in the eastern vault and so probably indicates a pause in the construction work across the whole width of the building. The chambers on either side of the gate passage, the guardrooms presumably, had loops in their outer, southern, walls. That in the eastern chamber has been restored to something resembling that in the western chamber which was preserved when a latrine tower was built against the gatehouse in later medieval times. The western loop is narrow, rectangular and vertical and is set above a panel of masonry at the front of a deep, narrow, low embrasure with rough side-walls which narrow sharply to the front. The embrasure floor is one course above the chamber's, and the embrasure is roofed by flat slab-lintels resting on a course of continuous, protruding corbels. The loop itself is spanned by a slab-lintel on top of the corbel course. There appears to have been loops in the northern, inner end walls of both chambers. That on the east has had its outer wall broken out, while if one existed in the west, it was used as the site of a doorway inserted later, in the early fifteenth century, when the gatehouse was extensively altered[4]. The western chamber is also lit by a small double-splayed loop in the western wall, which may not be original given the uncertainty regarding the larger double-splayed loops in the north-western tower. Two doorways lead, at an angle, from the guardrooms into the gate passage at its northern end and, although altered, may occupy original positions.

The location of the stairs in the thirteenth century gatehouse is not certain. There is a clockwise newel stairs in the north-eastern corner of the gatehouse which, though associated with later modifications, could be original or on the original site. A circular wall about the base of the stairs was altered or introduced, perhaps along with the stairs itself, when a lobby overseen by an equal-armed cross-let loop[5] was created at the base of the stairs and a doorway leading into the inner ward was inserted[6]. There is no trace of any other stairs, especially a long mural stairs such as is present in the north-westeren tower and in thirteenth-century secular buildings elsewhere, and the original arrangement may have been similar to the present one. The gatehouse at Nenagh also has a newel mural stairs, though the doorway leading to it is a late medieval addition (Stout 1984, p. 119). Finally, the doorway presently leading into the western chamber of the gatehouse is also a later insertion of the early fifteenth century where the batter above the door has been cut back. Lower down, however, the batter seems to have been refaced as it covers part of the door's dressings. The doorway is of ashlar with a chamfer and a pointed broach stop and one of the jamb-stones is a re-used window jamb with two bar-holes. The original access into the gatehouse ground floor must

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[3]This motif is found in the sixteenth-century extension (Leask 1978, pp. 81–82) of the north aisle of St. Nicholas' Collegiate Church, Galway, in a window at Kiltinan church, Co. Tipperary, and in a window in the southern wall of the chancel of the Franciscan friary or the French Church in Waterford. The motif was also used later on the 1840s doorway into the hall at Cahir Castle

[4]The dates for the late medieval alterations are, in general, taken from the site plan, with chronological phases, surveyed by Kerrigan for the National Parks and Monuments Branch of O.P.W., a copy of which is on display in the castle though there are a few points of difference between it and the views expressed here. The double splayed embrasures in the basement of the north-western tower are unlikely to be original, for example.

[5]There is a similar loop at Kiltinan medieval church and Cairns (1985, p. 113) notes one at Killaleigh, Co. Tipperary.

[6]In the late fifteenth century according to Kerrigan's plan.
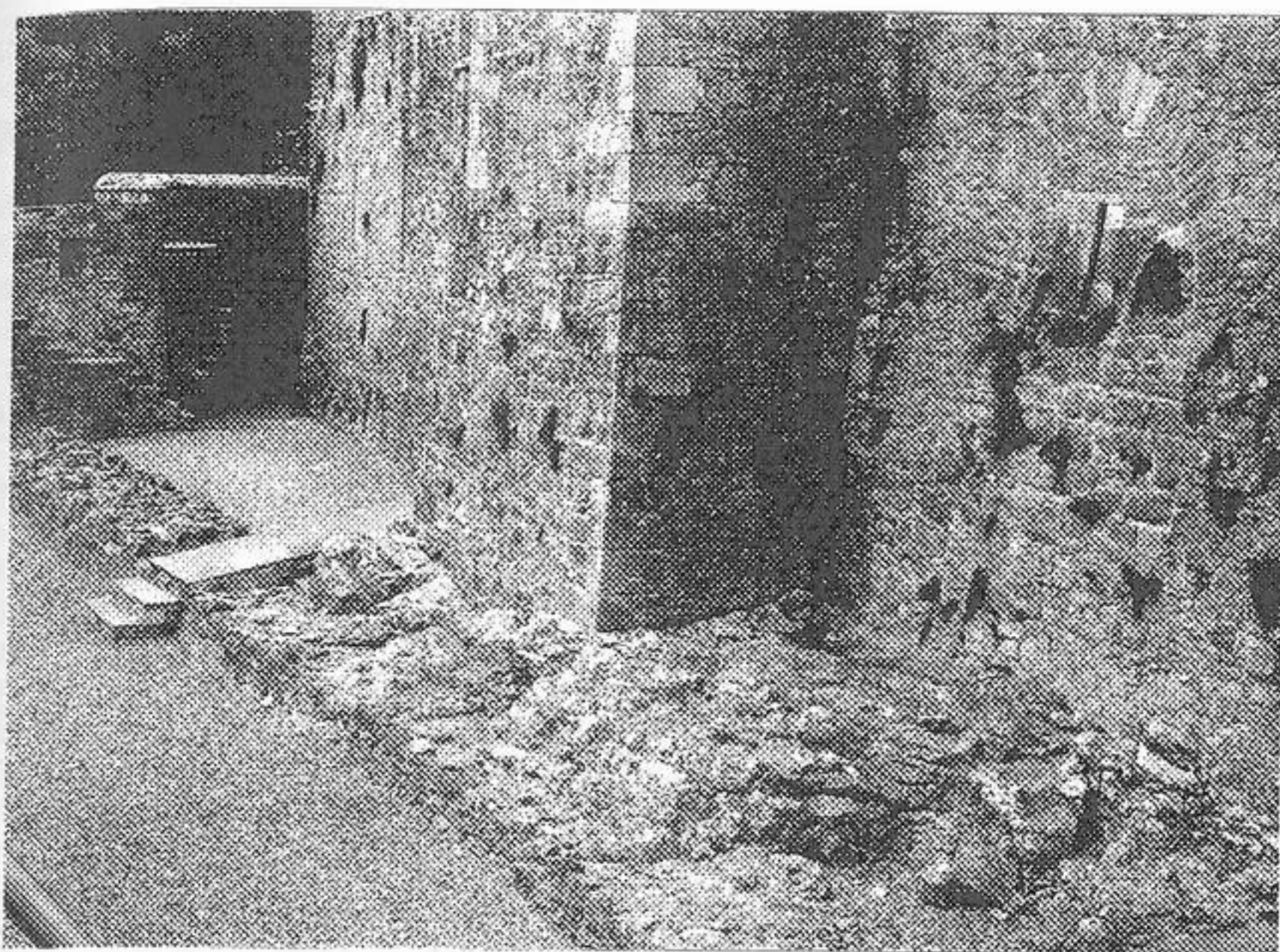
Illus. 2.  Blocked-up gateway in the front wall of the gatehouse visible on the right with, in front, the low wall footing running across the middle ward and up to natural bedrock upon which the gatehouse is based.

have been through the now-blocked gate passage, (Illus. 2), as at Nenagh (*ibid.*, pp. 117–118) and the two later doorways were probably inserted when the gate passage was blocked. The two doorways strongly suggest that in the late medieval period the ground floor had a distinct use which was kept separate from the chambers above it.

Other later additions to the gatehouse in this area include the addition of a quadrant-shaped tower with fireplace and chimney, as well as two passages providing access between the two upper floors of the gatehouse and the building immediately to the north, either the hall or a building between it and the hall.

The 1599 military plan shows a structure to the south of the hall (Johnson 1975, plate 6, following page 10) and the eastern wall of this structure, a kitchen in the later period, is apparently tied into the northern wall of the gatehouse. It could, therefore, be thirteenth century in date though this part of the wall is likely to have been disturbed by the creation of a new doorway and the insertion or alteration of the stairs within. It is unclear, however, what direct access there was, if any, between the gatehouse and this structure, a kitchen perhaps, to the south of the hall. The quadrant tower is built of both sandstone and limestone, in contrast to the earlier work where limestone predominates and was probably quarried on site. Later again, sandstone predominates in the restoration work of the 1840s.

The first floor of the gatehouse, reached from the newel stairs, has been heavily altered but it may be, as Wheeler (*op. cit.*, p. 14) suggests, that the large fireplace in the southern wall occupies the position of a portcullis—if one were present when the gate passage was in use. A blocked loop with a splayed embrasure and segmental head, to the east of the fireplace,

could be taken as original were it not for its wickerwork centering on the soffit of the vault. The windows with pointed broach stops, the passageway to the present portcullis chamber, the tower at the south-western corner and the passage through the quadrant tower, are all later modifications. Traces of an original window embrasure may remain in the outer face of the northern wall, at first floor level, where a segmental pointed arch of rough pitched voussoirs can be seen above and superceded by the larger late medieval window. No trace of this arch, presumably the front of an embrasure, can be seen in the wall's inner, plastered face. Much of the second floor is also secondary, though the two corbels in each long wall and a doorway leading from the allure into a garret could reflect earlier arrangements.
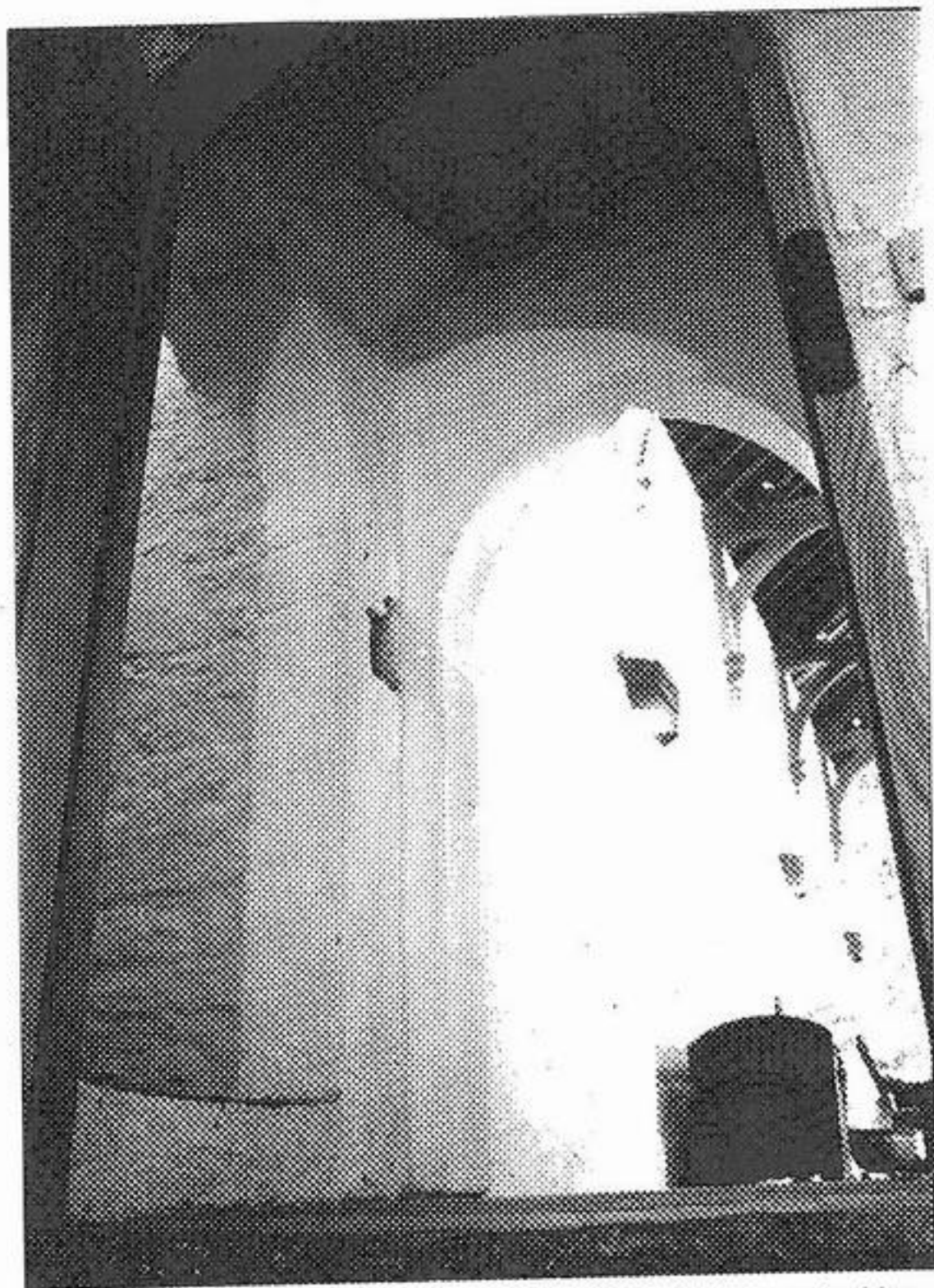


Illus. 3. Lobby between the hall and the north-western tower, looking towards the hall. Entrance to tower's mural stairs on the left.

The ground floor hall, to the north of the gatehouse, is mainly a rebuilding of the 1840s (Shirley 1867, p. 80, n.13 by the Rev. James Graves) and could originally have extended further south, though the quadrant tower at the gatehouse's south-western corner and the fire-place it contains, are later additions. The plan of 1599 shows a separate building here. The hall's western wall, and window embrasures in it, have been dated to the thirteenth century by Wheeler (*op. cit.*, p. 14). The wide and large segmental headed embrasures have broadly chamfered, plain ashlar dressings with rough rear arches. The lobby (Illus. 3) leading into the north-western tower and the lower part of the mural stairs in the tower are also of thirteenth century date. A later doorway, apparently of fine ashlar (it, like most of the castle's interior details, is covered with paint and plaster), leads from the northern end of the hall into a small lobby. A modern door closes against the doorway, hanging on butt hinges inserted into the ashlar. However, there is a doorbar hole and slot immediately within the doorway showing that originally the door opened inwards rather than outwards as at present. The lobby, which is c.1.5m square, would appear to originally have had a floor level with the hall's. It is covered with a plank-centered vault of rough voussoirts, angled downwards toward the ground floor chamber of the north-western tower which is at a much lower level. The vault is pierced in the centre by a square 'murder

hole' the chute of which opens in the floor at the end of a mural passage in the first floor of the north-western tower. A doorway leads from the lobby's northern side and down some steps, into the north-western tower.

The present doorway seems to be a later insertion. When the lobby level was raised to lessen the step up to the lower landing of the mural stairs (26.5cm), the doorway into the north-eastern tower had, similarly, to be raised. The work clearly interfered with, and post-dates the wicker centering of the vault over the tower's ground floor. The original rough ashlar jambs or embrasure edges of the doorway survive around the modern ones. Presumably the step of c.26cm was thought too high for convenience at some late date, probably in the 1840s. The practice of placing the mural stairs' lower landing above the level of the building's interior has also been noted by the author in thirteenth century first floor halls in Co. Galway.

The ground floor of the north-western tower is presently covered by a wicker-centred vault with small rectangular put-log holes in the western wall along with two larger holes, one close to each corner of the wall. The lowest level of the wicker centering is very close to the level of the plank centering of the lobby vault on the other side of the doorway linking the two areas, though the plank centering does not appear to have been disturbed. A note of caution might profitably be inserted here since there is little external sign of the tower being extensively altered, though one might expect some if a vault were inserted and the upper part of a tower rebuilt. Plank centering is normally taken as an indication of a thirteenth century date in the same way as wicker centering indicates a later date, in the fifteenth and sexteenth centuries (Leask 1973, p. 86). However, early examples of wicker centering are known (Waterman 1958, pp. 77, 88, note 19, and Jope 1966, p. 124) and we may yet find evidence of a late, anachronistic, use of plank centering[7]. It is possible that the chronological distinctions made between parts of the north-western tower may not be accurate. It is hard to find any external traces of extensive works and the staggered ashlar quoins are found at ground level on the two corners. It would certainly not have been easy to insert a ground floor vault and two embrasures without disturbing the mural stairs and the plank-centered embrasure below it. However, the face of the tower could have been restored in the 1840s and the quoins on the north-eastern corner do not extend below the level of the double-splayed embrasures in the northern wall, showing that both they and the embrasures are probably secondary and inserted. The gatehouse's quoins are far less regular than those on the tower.

The ground floor of the north-western tower has, as just noted, two secondary loops in the northern wall which is linked with the wide thirteenth-century footing, immediately to the east, along the line of the later, thinner curtain. A segmental arched recess in the eastern wall, below the mural stairs to the first floor, has the impressions of plank centering with flat planks, on average 1.15m long and 15cm wide, though wider close to the base of the arch, as well as the impressions of the ends of the two beams which held up the planks. There is also a slab-roofed aumbry, low down in the western wall.

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[7] The modern use of plank centering, albeit with longer and wider planks, can be seen in cement repairs on the soffits of arches and vaults in the dormitory range of the Augustinian friary at Fethard and in similar repairs to the underside of the road bridge close to the graveyard at Baptistgrange, near Lisronagh, Co. Tipperary. Ballycarbry Castle, near Caherciveen, Co. Kerry, a very interesting tower house with features showing early influences such as a first floor hall, has plank-centered vaults backing apparently contemporary late medieval dressings. The castle was held by MacCarthy Mór and is dated to the fifteenth century (Killanin and Duignan 1967,131). Mr. John Sheehan has informed me that there are traces of plank centering at Ballinskelligs Castle, a tower house nearby on Ballinskelligs Point, and at Blarney Castle, Co. Cork. There are also traces of what appears, from ground level, to be plank centering on the vault over a window embrasure high up under a vaulted floor in Knockelly tower house, Co. Tipperary.

A low, segmental-headed doorway in the southern end of the western wall leads into a small projection of the tower to the west. This projection or annex is roofed with a high wicker-centered vault (*pace* Wheeler *op. cit.*, p. 14) though the doorway has a plank-centered vault, the planks of which were *c.* 1.08m long and from 10cm to 15cm in width. The unusual plan of the annex is probably due to the irregular nature of the rock outcrop at this point, where lack of a secure foundation forced an open angle between the annex and the tower which was spanned at a higher level. The annex is likely to have been a latrine tower originally, given its location close to the river and the fact that a mural chute, coming down from the first and second floor levels is present in its north-western wall. The late rebuilding of the upper part of the annex may have retained the original function. The provision of latrines and the defensive nature of its entrance suggests that the north-western tower was a separate, solar tower at the hall's high end. The doorway to the first floor mural stairs opens off the lobby from the hall. It is, like the hall's window embrasures, built of well squared dressings but not of the same quality as the ashlar of the later doorway from the hall. The stairs doorway is backed by a plank-centered vault. The mural stairs, which is moderately steep and wide (80cm), rises by sixteen steps to the first floor. It is lit by a simple vertical loop close to the bottom and two more at the top though the latter may, like most features at this level, be later. The doorway into the first floor room has the pointed broach chamfer stop typical of the later inserted doors and windows. The lower part of the stairs is roofed by an overlapping series of three small, plank-centered barrel vaults built of rough voussoirs, decreasing in length as one ascends and of sufficient heigh to allow headroom. The upper part of the stairs is roofed by several sloping flags, butted edge-to-edge, which could be a result of later alterations[8]. The stairs above, linking first and second floors, is completely roofed with these limestone flags.

Other thirteenth century features in the inner ward probably include much of the curtain wall. The length of the wider curtain wall footing in the northern wall is tied-in to the north-western tower. The north-eastern and prison towers appear — at least in their lower parts —to be original and contemporary with the curtain. The upper part of the north-eastern tower has been rebuilt, perhaps after the 1599 siege and certainly again in the 1840s (Wheeler *op. cit.*, p. 12)[9]. The prison tower is shaded, as if destroyed or damaged, in the 1599 military plan (Johnson 1975, plate 6). Two wide wall-footings, probably thirteenth century in date, lie between the present southern end of the hall and the gatehouse. They would appear to be foundations of the building shown in this location on the 1599 plan. They may not be of the same period however, as they differ in plan and alignment. That to the east seems to be tied-in to the gatehouse wall. The long and thick wall-footing in the middle ward could also be thirteenth century in date and need not be a feature made redundant by the gatehouse as the floor of the gate passage is some distance above the rock outcrop to which the wall is linked, and it may be that the wall formed some sort of outer defence to the gatehouse. At any rate, the wall, which divided the middle ward into two very narrow parts, survived until 1599 when it is shown on both the military plan (Johnson 1975, plate 6) and less definitely on the *Pacata Hibernica* illustration where the space between it and the outer wall of the middle ward is shown in a similar fashion to the surface of the bridge leading into the castle, as if it were a raised walkway. It is described as a 'void place' in the map annotations however (*ibid.*, p. 110).

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[8]The use of flags to roof a straight mural stairs in the thirteenth century can be seen, however, at Kiltartan Castle, Co. Galway

[9]The re-building of the north-eastern tower and other parts of the castle would seem to have included the re-setting of the cannon-balls embedded there, as Johnson as discussed. A description of the castle, in a book published in 1864 and containing photographs of the castle by W.D. Hemphill, the Clonmel photographer, contains the following comment: "Many of his (Essex's) cannon balls have been found in the walls and are now again replaced in the spots out of which they had to be taken" (Howitt 1864, p. 224).

# DISCUSSION

An interesting fact about Cahir Castle is that not only can we identify early features but that we can also make tentative identifications of their use and so present a picture of the castle in the thirteenth century, one with a gatehouse, curtain wall, mural towers, hall and linked suite of chambers. McNeill (1980, pp. 24,72) has shown how in the early thirteenth century Hugh de Lacy, Earl of Ulster, had a suite of chambers at Greencastle, Co. Down, for his private use, with other chambers for his retinue and a first floor hall for public business. A similar arrangement dating to the mid-thirteenth century is to be found at Ludgershal, in England. Athenry Castle, Co. Galway, where the thirteenth century remains date to between 1236 and 1252, may have had a similar arrangement with a first floor hall, and a separate chamber and hall suite on the eastern side of the ward.

More generally the castle, with its sub-rectangular plan and rectangular gatehouse, can be seen as part of a tradition of defended enclosures with gatehouses found early in the conquest of England at ringcastles such as Penmaen and later in stone as at Ludlow (Platt 1982, p. 7). Primary gatehouses, later blocked, are found at Exeter, Richmond and Ludlow (Allen Brown 1976, p. 63). Although gatehouses began to be equipped with flanking towers towards the exterior from the end of the twelfth century onwards, the use of simple rectangular gatehouses continued (*ibid.*, p. 98). In this country early and mid-thirteenth century castles such as Athenry, Co. Galway and Glanworth, Co. Cork, as well as slightly later (*c.*1280) castles such as at Roscrea (Leask 1973, p. 57), have similar plans with a rectangular gatehouse, a polygonal ward with mural towers and, at Athenry and Glanworth, stone halls. These rectangular gatehouses were provided from the 1220s until the 1240s, when many gatehouses, such as those at Ballyloughan, Castle Roche and Carrickfergus (McNeill 1981,56), were being built with the more up-to-date D-shaped flanking towers.

Knockgraffon, some three miles north of Cahir, was the *caput* of Philip de Worchester's manor which extended over three cantreds; Slieveardagh, Moyenen and Offa (Empey 1985, pp. 79–80). The *caput* was probably founded by 1200, and the fine motte there would appear to have been the primary castle in the area. The presence of standing medieval masonry at the foot of the motte would indicate a long period of use. The relationship, both chronological and manorial, between the castles at Knockgraffon and Cahir has yet to be clarified. There does not appear to be any historical reference to the foundation of Cahir Castle. Similarly the date of commencement of Anglo-Norman settlement there is also unknown, though subinfeudation probably began shortly after the conquest (Empey 1985, p. 80). Bradley has noted the problem of identifying the site of the settlement in Cahir and its lack of a town wall (Bradley 1985, p. 36), though an Augustinian priory was founded there *c.* 1200–1220 (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 162).

We can only assume that the stone structures at Cahir Castle are secondary to the motte at Knockgraffon, though the ringcastle-like form of the inner ward might suggest a primary fortification at the former site as well. Architectural parallels provide a thirteenth century date because of the use of very thick walls, plank centering, segmental pointed arches and a rectangular gatehouse. Leask has dated the use of shouldered lintels to the early fourteenth century (Leask 1973, p. 24) which, in the case of the gatehouse loop would be too late. A window with shouldered lintels (albeit restored) is on the third floor of Carrickfergus keep and is dated to 1178–1195 (McNeill 1981, pp. 26,42). Segmental pointed arches are common in stone first floor halls and castles in Co. Galway which can be dated to the second quarter of the thirteenth century[10] though Leask (1973, p. 24) indicated a wider and later date range

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[10]Information acquired as a result of the author's research work on the Anglo-Normans in Co. Galway. See Holland 1987–1988 and Holland (in press).

for these arches in general. The lack of a keep would be in accord with the trend after c.1220 to place greater emphasis on the perimeter, while if one assumes that the gatehouse was built before the introduction of D-shaped flanking towers, a date for it in the first quarter of the century can be proposed.

However, the use of plain gatehouses continued and, taking this and all other factors into account, it might be more prudent to indicate a broad thirteenth century date for the majority of the early features at Cahir Castle, pending further historical and archaeological evidence.

## Acknowledgements

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