

## Was Quin Castle Completed?

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The conversion of the remains of the thirteenth-century Quin Castle into a Franciscan friary in the fifteenth-century is one of the better local examples of turning swords into ploughshares. The documentary and physical evidence for the construction and destruction of the original castle is discussed and assessed. The conclusion reached is that the building of the castle had never been completed.

### The Historical Evidence

The historical documentation regarding the castle is sparse and quite brief. The *Annals of Inisfallen* for the year AD1279 (*recte* 1280) state:

The castle of Cuinche was begun by Thomas de Clare, and as he was engaged in building it the sons of Tadc Ó Briain, viz. Tairdelbach and Domnall, went to attack him by night, and he (de Clare) was nearly killed. He escaped to Bun Raite, and his entire army, including barons, knights and warriors, was slain. And for a long time afterwards none dared approach that place on account of the stench of the dead and the great number of them.<sup>1</sup>

In 1281, the same source records:

Domnall, son of Tadc Ó Briain was treacherously slain by a Maitsuinach<sup>2</sup> in Cuinche as he was drinking [from] a barrel of wine. The churl dealt him a thrust of a knife there unawares to himself or to his followers, and he [Domnall] forthwith drew upon that churl and mortally wounded him with a single thrust of a knife. And one of his (Domnall's) followers slew his companion, i.e. another Maitsuinach who was with him. And the said Domnall was tanist of Tuadmumu and a master in valour and prowess. A blessing on his soul, if he deserves it!<sup>3</sup>

This same incident is recorded under 1280 in *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* where the assailant is described as 'a certain Saxon of the knavish English belonging to the with-ditch-and rampart furnished castle of Quin'. This 'varlet' was wounded by Domnall and 'had bare time to rush back into the castle and among his fellows proclaim the deed, when he too fell and in like wise died'.<sup>4</sup>

The next recorded event is the storming of the castle:

Which impudent liberty that the English had taken with his people [the death of O'Liddy] coming to Cumea More Mc Conmara's ears, immediately he attacked Quin castle; its ditch was crossed, earthworks carried, great gate battered in and hewn down; its strong walls were

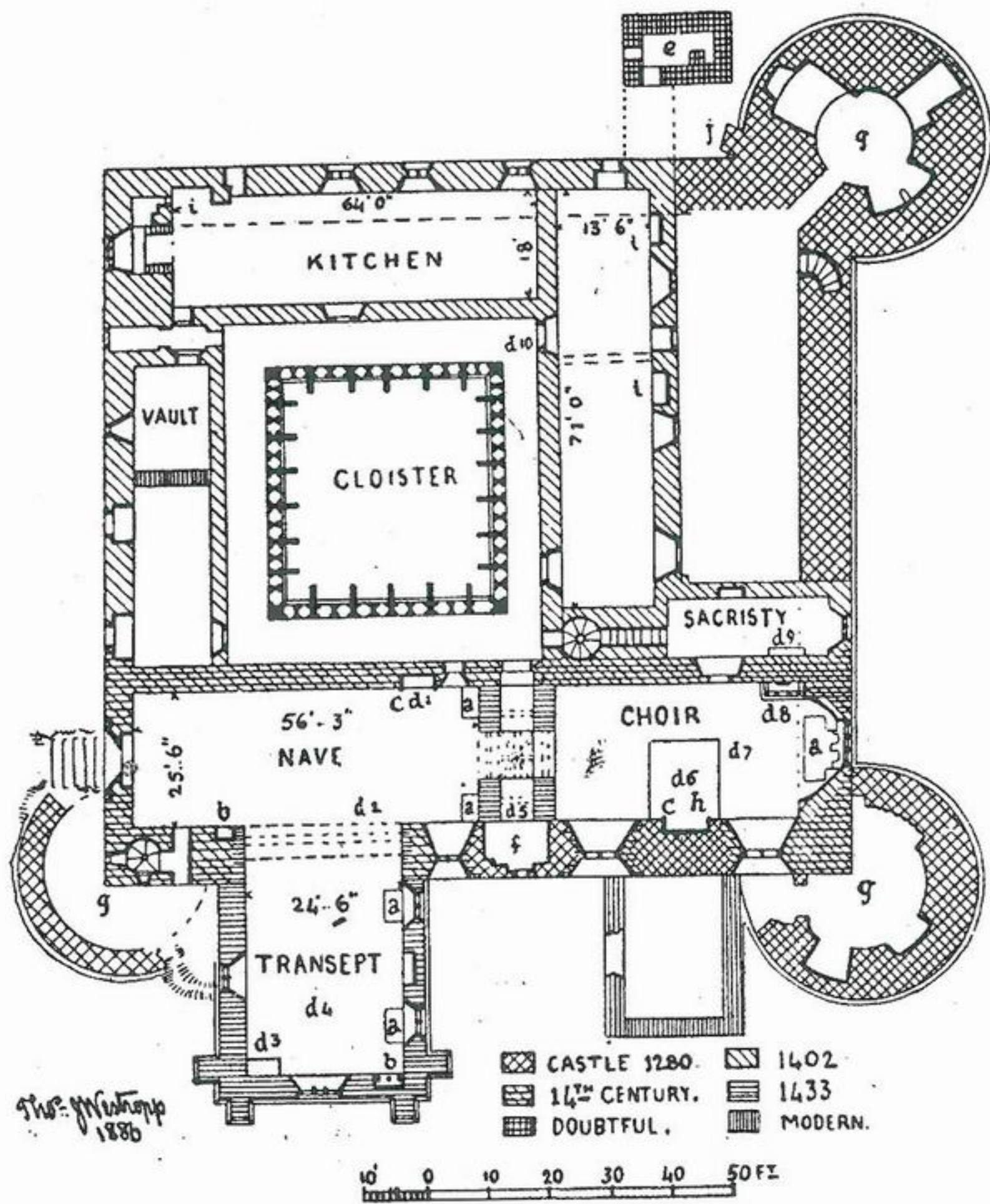
<sup>1</sup> Seán Mac Airt (ed.), *The Annals of Inisfallen* (Dublin 1988) p. 375.

<sup>2</sup> The translator suggests this is a mason but notes that other versions of the story refer to the slayer as an Englishman or a foreigner.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> Standish O'Grady (ed.), *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* (London 1929) p.19.





#### QUIN FRIARY—PLAN.

- a. Altars.
- b. Piscinae.
- c. Sedilia.
- d. Monuments.

- e. Garderobe Tower.
- f. Gate of Castle.
- g. Bastions of Castle.

- h. Stucco Work.
- i. Fireplaces.
- j. Broken Arch.

#### MONUMENTS.

- 1. Macnamara, 1761.
- 2. Stone with Axe.
- 3. Macnamara, 1768.
- 4. Macnamara, c. 1750.
- 5. John Macnamara, 1601.

- 6. Priest's Vault.
- 7. Macnamara, 1722.
- 8. Canopied Tomb of Oid Macnamara, c. 1500.

- 9. Macnamara of Ranna.
- 10. John Hogan, the last Monk, 1820.

Fig. 1 Thomas Westropp's plan of Quin published in *JRSAI*, 30 (1900) (courtesy of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland).





**Fig. 2** The stub wall projecting out to the left of the wall of the square building: the tower wall is curving in from the right.

breached, its English stammerers captured; the place was cleaned out of horses and warlike stores, and in the actual great castle a huge pile of stuff was given to the flames that ran riot till the whole became a black vaulted hideous cavern.<sup>5</sup>

This attack is dated to 1305 in O'Grady's translation of *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaig*.<sup>6</sup> Westropp has the same date but gives a caveat in a footnote that the text implies an earlier date of 1284-7.<sup>7</sup> Macnamara, also quoting *Caithreim*, gives 1285<sup>8</sup>, while Leask's date of 1288<sup>9</sup> is followed, most recently, by Sweetman<sup>10</sup>. The strongest evidence to support the earlier date for destruction is the *Inquest Post Mortem* on Thomas de Clare of 1287 in which Quin is described as waste and there is no mention the castle<sup>11</sup>.

In brief therefore we seem to have a castle which was begun c.1280 and destroyed c.1285. Macnamara gives a reference that the castle was finished at the end of ten months.<sup>12</sup> This seems highly improbable because, as noted above, Thomas de Clare was attacked during construction work and forced to fall back on Bunratty. The remains at Quin are those of a sizeable castle, so ten months

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> T.J. Westropp, 'The Normans in Thomond, 1275-1318', *JRSAI* 21 (1890-91) pp 284-93, 381-7 462-72, 715-6: 381-2.

<sup>8</sup> George U Macnamara, 'Bunratty, Co Clare', *JNMA* 3, no. 4 (1915) pp 220-313: 233-4.

<sup>9</sup> H. G. Leask, *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses* (Dundalk 1986) p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> David Sweetman, *The Medieval Castles of Ireland* (Cork 1999) p.130.

<sup>11</sup> Macnamara, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.



is far too short a period for its completion, even under the most favourable of conditions. Conwy castle in North Wales, about two and a half times the size of Quin, took five years to build, while Harlech took six years and Flint and Rhuddlan both took nine years<sup>13</sup>. These Welsh castles were part of a royal programme of castle building which saw Edward I using the full resources of his kingdom on their construction. At its height there were 1,500 men employed at Conwy while Beaumaris, in Anglesey, had 400 masons, 200 unskilled workmen, 200 quarrymen plus numerous other workers<sup>14</sup>. De Clare would not have had such massive resources at his disposal, so it is almost certain that the castle was still under construction when it was attacked in 1285. There was presumably some sort of defensible earthwork and palisade perimeter around the incomplete curtain wall and towers with some accommodation and storage on the inside. The detail in *Caithreim* is therefore highly embellished. The reality that it was an incomplete castle that was stormed would have spoilt a good tale of derring-do.

### The Physical Remains.

This interpretation of the historical sources, suggesting that the castle was unfinished at the time of the attack, can be tested by an examination of the existing fabric to see whether the physical remains support that conclusion. The immediately visible portions of the castle are a section of the east wall, the whole of the north-east tower and large parts of the south-east and south-west towers, while the remainder is hidden by the friary building. The south wall of the church retains the full thickness of the castle wall, as does the east wall of the choir and part of the west end of the nave. The remainder of the west and the north walls of the friary are thinner. If the castle was completed then one wonders why it was necessary to demolish these walls in order to rebuild them immediately only slightly thinner? The gain in space is only minor in relation to the amount of work involved and if extra space was needed it would have been simpler to take in some of the unused part of the castle, on the east side.

A close examination of the south wall shows the projecting stub of a wall, immediately to the west of the south-east tower, which is bonded into the lower part of the wall. This is distinctly separate from the wall of the later square building abutting the church (Figs 1 & 2). Its location suggests it is part of a garderobe arrangement similar to that seen on the north-east tower in the angle with the north wall. The stub wall rises to the same height as the tower and no further. There are two ways to interpret this: that the south wall was demolished down to top of stub wall level and was then rebuilt to the identical thickness or that the original castle wall had only been raised to more or less this height and the rest, including the windows of the church, is a later addition. The latter seems the more plausible. The castle wall had simply been built to a height where it was easier to carry on the thickness to church roof level than to demolish it. A further indication that the wall was built up was the need to extend the south wall slightly at either end in order to form corners within the area of the towers. This is best seen at the east end of the south wall, where the footing for the extension can be seen abutting the inner wall of the tower (Fig. 3). In fact the butt joint is carried vertically for just over a metre above the footing, in the angle of the right hand jamb of the window. This suggests the possibility that the outer eastern side of the window may have re-utilised one side of the first floor entrance to the tower. The cut stone around the outside of this window is found only at the springing stone of the right jamb but forms the full height of the left jamb.

The entrance to the castle appears to have been in the southern wall, in line with the tower. It has been blocked and there is a single light in the blocking. The rear arch over the gate seems to be in style with the rest of the friary, so it would seem the walls either side of the gate had not been raised to a

<sup>13</sup> Tom McNeill, *Castles* (London 1992) p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 43-4.





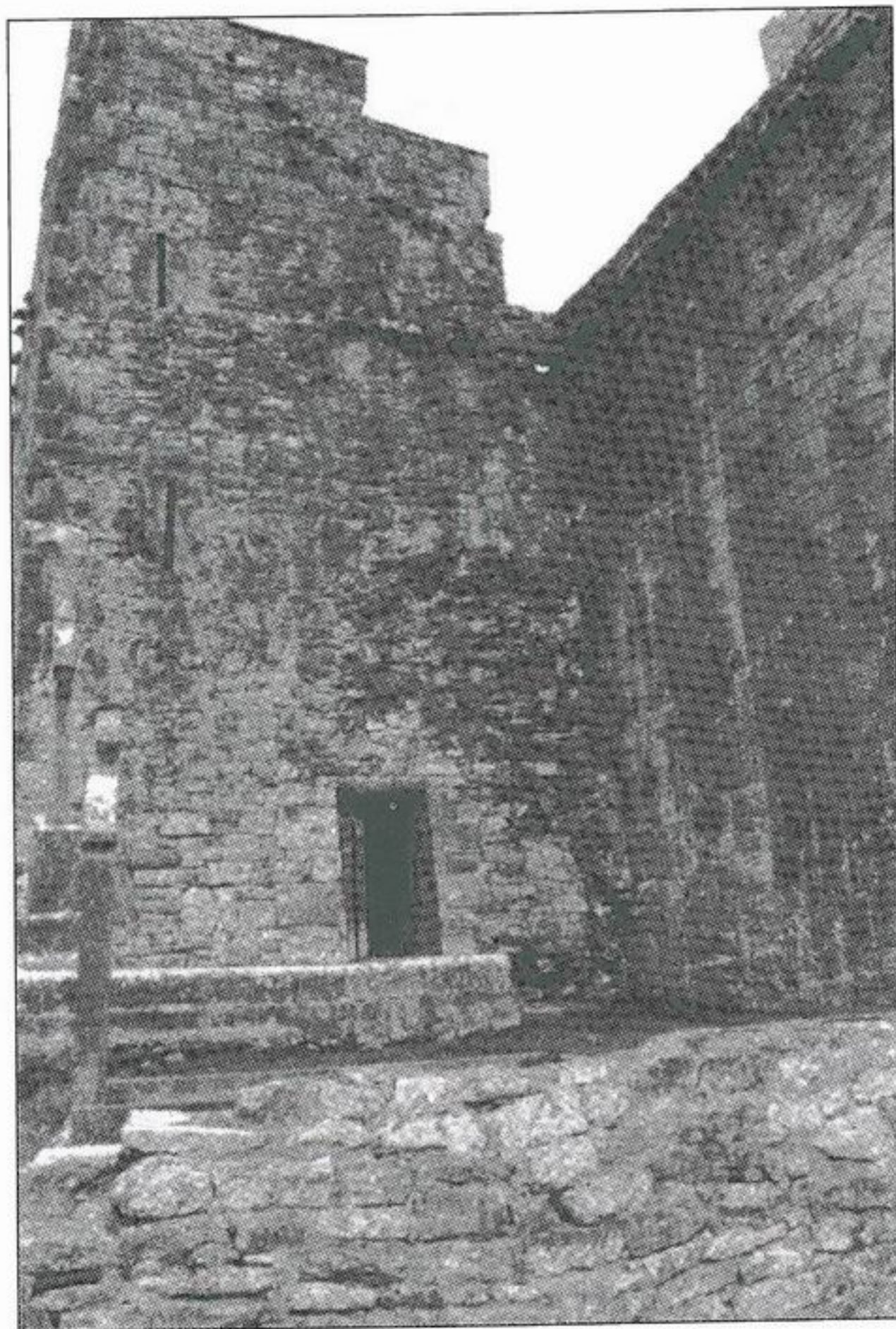
**Fig. 3** Footing of the end of the church wall abutting the inside of the castle tower: note the vertical continuation of the line in the corner of the window.

sufficient height for the castle gate arch to be built. On the exterior, immediately west of the transept, is a section of rough walling, which is on the line of the return of the south-west tower (Fig. 4). Here the tower seems to have been lowered and hacked back flush with the south wall. If the tower's internal diameter matches that of the north-east tower then it is just possible that at least part of the stair arrangement at this corner is original to the castle.

The west wall of the church retains the full width of the castle wall as piers on either side of the main doorway. The southern end of the lower room of the west wing has a section of truncated rough masonry, the continuation of the northern pier, visible above a section of faced masonry. This faced wall may be connected with the adjacent friary window but it is possible that it represents one side of an embrasure in the castle wall. However, no embrasures are evident in the exposed section of east wall or in the south wall. Whichever interpretation is accepted there seems to have been some reduction on the west wall in this area.

The north castle wall is visible on the exterior immediately below the base of the ground floor row of friary windows. Here there is a marked change from rough coursed rubble at the base to more rectangular blocks, with worked faces, above. At the north-west corner there is a short, higher, section which retains the full thickness of the castle's west wall. Within this is a mural passage leading to a square feature at the corner, which looks to be a large garderobe chute, though it is marked 'well' on some older plans. The passage has been broken through at a later date to allow the insertion into the west wall of a window throwing light into the friary kitchen. The garderobe chute presumably discharged to the river and demonstrates that there was no tower at this corner. The size of the chute





**Fig. 4** South-west tower cut back to church wall line.

advantages over raising the whole castle at an even rate. A completed tower, for instance, could be used defensively while the rest of the castle was under construction, while, presumably, some early provision of accommodation was desirable. The best example of this practice, though somewhat later in date, is the unfinished castle of Kirby Muxloe in Leicestershire. There it is possible to see the whole layout of the castle as footings inside the water-filled moat, but only one corner lodgings tower was completed together with a substantial part of the gatehouse<sup>16</sup>.

#### **Acknowledgement.**

My thanks to Mr Con Manning, President of the *Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, for permission to reproduce Westropp's plan.

suggests that there were to be further garderobes at a higher level within the castle, which in turn suggests that the main living accommodation was to be concentrated on this side of the courtyard.

The absence of the north-west tower breaks the presumed axial symmetry of the castle. Such an absence is not an unknown phenomenon. There is the nearby example of King John's castle in Limerick where excavations uncovered a simple right angle at the south-east corner instead of the expected tower<sup>15</sup>.

#### **Conclusion.**

In summary then, it is suggested that the remains of the castle that we see today represent more or less the stage construction had reached when it was abandoned in 1285. Only the south-west tower and a section of west wall seem to have been raised to a greater height and reduced in width. The whole southern façade and north-west corner seem to have been raised somewhat higher than the rest when building stopped. It was quite normal to build in this fashion. Doing so gave certain

<sup>15</sup> Personal observation.

<sup>16</sup> For a photo of this castle see R. Allen Brown, *English Castles* (London 1970, 3rd ed.) plate 91.