The Medieval Manor of Aherlow

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The assumption that the medieval castle of the manor of Aherlow was situated in the present-day town of Galbally is questioned. The documentary, onomastic and cartographic evidence for this belief is shown to be unreliable. An alternative and more likely location is suggested.

The manor of Aherlow, or Natherlach as it appears in 13th century documentation, straddled the Limerick-Tipperary border in the Galbally region. Over the years there has been an assumption that Natherlach, Aherlow and Galbally are synonymous and that the centre of the manor, its castle, must have been in present-day Galbally. This identification first arises in the printed calendar of the Papal Taxation of 1306.[1] Westropp accepted its conclusion and the same line has since been followed by Ó Maolfabhail and more recently Marnane.[2] Superficially the evidence is convincing because there is the site of a castle and the ruins of a church within the town, both of which are features that may be used to denote a manorial centre. The clinching argument, however, would appear to be the entry in the Papal Taxation, which reads, 'The church de Natherlagh, Galbally *alias* Aherlow, with the chapel for the rector', where the three names appear together in the text.

A closer look at the evidence, however, shows that it is quite weak. The juxtaposition of the modern spellings of Galbally and Aherlow in a 14th century document is highly suspicious. Ó Maolfabhail does not give Galbally in any form before 1471, (1306 excepted) while the first use of the present-day spelling is from 1507. The same source gives no example with the modern spelling of Aherlow, nor is the modern spelling to be found amongst the many additional sixteenth-century examples footnoted below.[3] A notable feature of the document, as printed, is that whenever the editors believed they had identified a place name, its modern equivalent or equivalents were given in square brackets after the name. Thus on the opposite page is the entry, 'Church of Mor' [Moortown *alias* Ballynumona]', in the deanery of Grean. It is therefore suggested that

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[1] H.S. Sweetman. & G.F. Handcock (eds), *Calendar of Documents Related to Ireland, 1302-07* (London, 1886) p. 289.

[2] T.J. Westropp, 'The Ancient Castles of the County of Limerick', *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, vol. 26C (1906) pp 196-7; A Ó Maolfabhail, *Logaimneacha Na hEireann, Imleabhar 1 Contae Luimnigh* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1990) p. 178; Denis G. Marnane, *Land and Settlement: A History of West Tipperary to 1660* (Tipperary, 2003) p. 108.

[3] Ó Maolfabhail, *op. cit.* Other versions of Aherlow noted in the course of research for this article are; *Fiants*, Henry VIII, 1542 Narlagh, no 311; 1543-4, 'the friars minor of Mowre alias Galbally in Arlagh Co. Tipperary', no. 398. *Fiants* Elizabeth, 1576 Arlagh, nos. 2759 and 2787; 1577 Arloe, Argowle, Galbally in Arhlo, nos. 3084, 3086 and 3097; 1585 Arllogh no. 4935; 1587 Aharlow, Aharla, nos. 5032 and 5085; 1596-7 Arlagh and Atherlow, nos. 6034 and 6123; 1600-01 Arlow no. 6479; Brewer and Bullen (eds), *Calendar of Carew Manuscripts 1575-8* (London, 1868-70), 1580 Aharlowe, (p. 217) 1583 Aherlo (p. 364) and *Carew 1601-03*, 1601 Aherloe (p. 78); Morrin (ed.), *Calendar of Patent and Close Rolls, Charles years 1-8* (London, 1863), 'Rectory and vicarage of Galbally otherwise the prebend of Kilnelicke or Agherlowe, and Corkehenny, in the diocese of Cashel' (p. 444); *Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, 1571 Agherlagh, p. 439, Aharlaughe p. 446, and Aharlaghe p. 453; 1572 Aharlagh p. 466; 1575 Hahirlaghe, p. 56; 1579 Aharlaugh Wood, p. 196; 1580 Aharlow Woods p. 237, Arlo p. 241 and Arlagh p. 269; 1582 Arlowe p. 373, Arlagh p. 376, wood of Harlowe p. 388 and Arlowe p. 393; 1583 Ahirlaghe p. 430, Arlo p. 474 and Arloo p. 538; 1589 Aharlow p. 132; 1598 Arlogh p. 280.

there is a typographical error and that the commas around, 'Galbally *alias* Aherlow', should be square brackets, which would account for the modern spellings and also change the context of the entry. That the proof reading of this section leaves something to be desired is demonstrated on the following page where there are several mistakes in the alternative names given in square brackets, eg Crecota for Crecora, Manuret for Mungret and Kilquana for Kilquane.

The meaning of the name Galbally itself, the town of the foreigners, is possibly further good reason to doubt the calendar entry. Who are the foreigners in question? There are two possibilities, Vikings or later Anglo-Norman settlers in the late 12th or 13th centuries. While at present there is no evidence for Viking settlement around Galbally there is an ample amount for the Anglo-Normans, such as in the detailed partition of the manor of Natherlach found in the Gormanston Register.[4] One has to ask whether settlers in the 13th century were likely to have chosen to call their town, *Foreigners' Town*, in a foreign language with all its implications of not belonging? It is much more reasonable to see the name as one coined and applied by the Irish to a settlement already in existence. In which context it is worth noting that all the early references to Galbally given by Ó Maolfabhail (from 1471-c.1550) are Irish sources, while the first use in a Crown record is 1584.[5] There is therefore good reason to believe that the place name Galbally only became current in the later medieval period, long after the 1306 Papal Taxation. A possible further indication of this later date is the manner of formation of the placename. Galbally is a Germanic formation, of town, bally (*baile*), with a descriptive prefix; Irish names usually have town followed by the descriptor, i.e. Ballynagall *(baile na gall)*. Galbally thus has an English word order rendered into Irish, which suggests the name did not arise in the first flush of colonization.

What of the other features that suggest a manorial centre? The first edition of the Ordnance Survey marks a castle ruin in Galbally, but this had gone by the time of the 1928 revision where it is marked as the site of the castle. The Ordnance Survey Letters suggest there was little left in 1840.[6] Westropp quotes a number of references under Galbally.[7] In 1569, 'Jas f. Maurice preyed Arlagh and burned the castle', and in 1604 there was a grant of the 'Abbey and Castle of Aherloe' to Miles Roche, but neither of these specify that the castle in question was in Galbally town. In 1653 Arthur Helsham, 'paid for the house at Galbally', while in the same year Capt. Cusack was paid for 'repairing the garrison'. A third entry for the same year refers to the 'walls of a very fine house or castle, lately well fortified'. If one takes the last three entries as relating to the town, the descriptions suggest a building that hovered in the grey area between what constitutes a fortified house and a castle. There is nothing to suggest that it was thirteenth-fourteenth-century in date. At best we are talking of a later medieval tower house.

The medieval church ruin in Galbally appears to have *antae* at its eastern end so this portion is probably of pre-Norman date. This early section was then extended westwards to become an unusually long church for its width. Unfortunately ivy covers much of the

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[4] O'Donovan in the Ordnance Survey letters translates the name as 'town of the English' which is accepted by Westropp in 'A Survey of the Ancient Churches in the County of Limerick', *Proc. Roy. Irish. Acad.*, vol. 25C (1905) p. 452; J. Mills. & M.J. McEnery, *Calendar of the Gormanston Register* (London, 1916) pp 111ff.

[5] One earlier reference is to be found in footnote 3 while another is cited in the next paragraph.

[6] See Westropp, *Castles.*

[7] Ibid.

ruin so it impossible at present to see whether the extension was a single event or if several phases were involved. The Ordnance Survey Letters suggest a later medieval date for the windows visible at the time.[8] The early date and the size of the building suggest a probability that the church became the original 13th Century parochial church, but this is not absolutely certain. The parish of Natherlach is known to have contained four chapels, Corray, Dundirleke, Glendowyn and Kylmyhn, so the site in Galbally could be any one of them or the parish church.[9] It is not unknown for an early church to fail to become the parish church at the time of parish formation, Kilrush church in St Munchin's parish in Limerick city, springs readily to mind as one example.

The location of a church near a castle is often a good indicator of a manorial centre however this normally occurs where the castle and church are part of the same phase of settlement. In Galbally the church preceded any castle in the area so the Anglo-Normans would have felt no obligation to use the location because the best site for a castle would have taken precedence. An example of this, from this writer's own experience, is the Rock of Dunamase in Co. Laois, which is over a mile from the original Dysert Enos church.[10]

So if there is no convincing evidence for a manorial centre in modern day Galbally then where was it? Part of the explanation can be found in the place name itself. The *baile*, element does not mean town in the urban sense as we understand it today, rather it is a larger unit of land pertaining to a settlement. This helps explains a 1598 grant to George Sherlock of 'the entire of the town of Galballie, in the counties of Limerick and Tipperary'.[11] There are further instances, in some of the sources listed in footnote 3, of Galbally being used in this wider sense, for instance when Moor Abbey is described as part of it. The same examples also show that Galbally and Aherlow are not synonymous but that Galbally is just a part of Aherlow. All this opens up a much wider area straddling the county border for consideration as the location for the manorial centre. A few kilometres to the east of Galbally town, on the Limerick side of the border, is the site of the Castle of Dungrot, first fortified by Brian Boru in 1002, while 200m away in Tipperary is another possible castle in Longford townland.[12] The Civil Survey of 1655 makes no mention of a town in Galbally, listing only the parish of that name, but Dungrot is named as a manor with courts baron and leet and two mills.[13] Elsewhere it is noted that Dungrot had a court of pie-powder, which would have regulated the fair held on the manor.[14] Manorial privileges could be granted by the Crown well into the early modern period, but there is no record of such in this area in the reasonably well-documented 16th century. It is therefore more likely they originated in the high medieval period.

In conclusion, therefore, it appears that there is good evidence to suggest that the medieval manor of Natherlach was based on Dungrot and that Galbally town replaced Dungrot as the local focal point only in the early modern period.

[8] See Westropp, *Churches*.

[9] *Gormanston Register*, pp 116-17.

[10] P.D. Sweetman, O. Alcock, & B. Moran, *The Archaeological Inventory of County Laois* (Dublin, 1995), entry numbers 738 and 937. Dysert Enos church was relocated to the foot of the Rock long after the Castle was deserted.

[11] J. Morrin (ed.), *Calendar of the Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery in Ireland, vol. 2, 18-45 Queen Elizabeth I* (London, 1862) pp 495-6.

[12] For Dungrot see Westropp, *Castles*, and Limerick SMR No LI050-004; Longford townland, Tipperary SMR, TI073-017.

[13] R.C. Simington (ed.), *The Civil Survey of Limerick* (Dublin, 1938) p. 229.

[14] Westropp, *Castles*, entry for Dungrot.