Reconstructing the Earl of Desmond’s Castle, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick

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In 2004 a reconstruction drawing of the Desmond castle in Newcastle West was commissioned from the writer. It attempted to place the Banqueting Hall, by which the castle is known, back into its proper context of the much larger castle of the earls of Desmond. The reconstruction process necessarily entailed decisions being made where evidence was singularly lacking in order to make the reconstruction as complete as possible. Observations made since the drawing have cast new light on a number of these problems. Based on some newly described evidence, this article attempts to resolve the full extent of the castle in its final development, the likely dates of its last expansion and the probable location of the main gate into the castle.

Introduction

Very little has been written about one of the greatest and most substantial castles in Ireland, Newcastle West in Co. Limerick, since the seminal work of T.J. Westropp at the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^1\) For centuries the castle was one of two great castles occupied by the earls of Desmond, one of the three leading noble dynasties in medieval Ireland. During that time the castle grew considerably from a small early thirteenth century Norman fortress to a large residential baronial castle, before being handed over to English landlords at the close of the sixteenth century. The building of a large new house on the site marked the beginning of another few centuries as the administrative seat of a large estate. One reason for the lack of attention is that the site is split between public and very private ownership and thus is only rarely seen in the whole, and then usually only by a select group of visitors. In addition, the development of the post-medieval estate house, especially in the nineteenth century, and the gradual removal of almost all of the castle’s curtain walls have robbed the castle of its original integrity. For most visitors, the castle is little more than a pair of medieval halls in a space that is enclosed mostly by modern walls. The official name of the site, the Desmond Banqueting Hall, reflects this sad fact.\(^2\)

To balance this and as part of public works on the castle since it came into public ownership in 1989, a reconstruction drawing of the castle at the height of its development was commissioned from the writer in 2004 by the heritage service of the Office of Public Works (OPW) for a permanent exhibition on the public site. It now forms part of a multi-

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panel information display in the lower level of the Banqueting Hall. The reconstruction process was a collaborative effort between the writer as artist, the OPW conservation architect, the site archaeologist and the project historian, and included a complete public and privately owned site inspection. It required a close analysis of the architecture and developmental history of both the public and private sites in order to arrive at as complete and accurate as possible an image of the castle. Several problems had to be solved during the process and, with little or no evidence remaining, decisions had to be made about representation of certain absent features. Inspection of the site again in 2006, 2009 and 2011 by the writer, including those parts in private hands thanks to the generosity of the owners and their agent, has led to a reappraisal of three of these problems, namely the full extent of the castle before demolition of its walls, the date of the latest expansion of the castle and the location of the entrance gate. After reviewing the history of development of the castle, this article will describe in detail the features that lead the writer to posit solutions to these problems.

Newcastle West: Norman Adventurers and Desmond Earls
Newcastle West sits at the foot of the Mullaghareeirk hills, looking north and east across the lowlands of southwest Co. Limerick. Just over a quarter of a century after their arrival in 1170 in Ireland, the colonising Norman presence finally extended to Co. Limerick. In the carve-up of land that followed, the manor of Connello (or O'Conyill), in which Newcastle West was founded, was granted to Thomas fitzMaurice sometime before his death in 1213 or 1214. At that time the principal seat for the manor was the castle of Shanid. Little more than a century later, Newcastle West - simply Newcastle until comparatively recently - was to become one of the two great castle residences of the earls of Desmond, the other being at Askeaton on the Shannon estuary. The town beside the castle, named after the 'new castle' built there, goes back at least to 1302, when it is recorded that the church was burned in a raid. Local Irish insurgents destroyed the town again in 1315, during Edward Bruce's Irish campaigns. What constituted the town then is not clear because most of its present form, centred on the market square, dates from English resettlement of the Desmond estates by the Courtenays of Devon in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Fig. 1). The main streets before then, according to the 1586 Peyton Survey, were Shradegower (Goat Street), along the south bank of the Arra river, and Shradeenetona (Church Street), which ran north from the castle and probably swung past the east face of the castle to a river crossing near the present bridge.

Although local lore has suggested a Templar origin in about 1184 for the first castle at Newcastle West, there is no evidence for this and T.J. Westropp suggested in 1909 that the Templar legend arose from a misinterpretation of the Irish word 'teampul' for church. The first castle at Newcastle West was probably built by Thomas fitzMaurice soon after he was granted the manor of Connello. In 1244, his son John fitzThomas was granted free chase and warren rights in the manor of Connello. Following the death of

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4 Westropp, *The Desmond Castle Newcastle West*, p. 47.
5 Ibid., p. 47.
7 Westropp, *The Desmond Castle Newcastle West*, p. 45.
8 Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, p. 349.
Thomas's son and grandson at the battle of Callan in 1261, his great grandson Thomas 'Na Nappagh' fitzMaurice inherited the manor he was to hold until his death at Newcastle West in 1298.\footnote{Westropp, \textit{The Desmond Castle Newcastle West}, p. 47.} That Thomas 'Na Nappagh' oversaw a first phase of major rebuilding of the castle can be inferred from reference to it in 1298 as 'the new castle'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 46.} Thomas's son, Maurice fitzThomas, took control of Connello and the castle when he came of age sometime before 1315, and in 1329 he was granted the title of first earl of Desmond by King Edward III for his loyalty to the crown during the Bruce campaigns.\footnote{Ibid., p. 48.} Maurice lived until 1356, after which the succession was complicated for a time by madness, early death and the multiple marriages of the first earl.

Order was restored to the succession in 1359, when Gerald fitzMaurice, a younger son of the first earl by his second marriage, succeeded as fourth earl of Desmond. Gerald steeped himself in Gaelic culture and laws, becoming a recognised poet and earning the title \textit{Gearóid iarla}. In 1367 he was appointed Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. He died at Newcastle West in 1398 at the age of sixty-three and was succeeded for a brief period by his son John fitzGerald. John's grandson Thomas became sixth earl in 1400, but lost possession in 1420 in favour of his uncle, James fitzGerald, seventh earl of Desmond.
Fig. 2 The reconstruction drawing of the Desmond Castle, Newcastle West, made in 2004, as the writer thought it might have appeared at the height of its development, assumed here to be when remodelling of the Halla Mór was nearly complete in about 1450. © Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler 2004.
James died at Newcastle West in 1462 and was responsible for the present appearance of much of the castle with its characteristically Irish stepped battlements. By the early sixteenth century, the earls of Desmond were lords of most of Co. Limerick as well as significant parts of counties Cork and Waterford. The earldom included the southern strip of north Co. Kerry and the Knights of Glin and Kerry, Desmond vassals, held northwest Co. Limerick and the Dingle peninsula respectively.¹²

**MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DESMOND CASTLE**

Today's remains of the earl of Desmond's Castle are split between public and private ownership. With little of its enclosing curtain wall remaining, the castle is represented by a scattered collection of internal buildings. In public ownership are two fine medieval halls, the Halla Mór (Great Hall) and the Banqueting Hall. Both are important multi-phase buildings that have been restored for visitors. In private ownership are the ruins of a long multi-phase domestic range and two towers. Reference to the castle locally and nationally simply as the Desmond Banqueting Hall perhaps best exemplifies the disaggregated nature of the castle. To compensate for its split ownership and the absence today of its unifying curtain wall, a reconstruction drawing of the castle illustrating its maximum development was commissioned from the writer in 2004 (Fig. 2). The mid-fifteenth century was chosen for the reconstruction to coincide with modernization of the Halla Mór, when a batter added to the base of its walls to support the added weight of new battlements covered over the lower part of large fourteenth century windows. With it, the writer hoped to put the Banqueting Hall back into the earl of Desmond's castle. The drawing is reproduced in the exhibition in the castle today.

**From Norman Stronghold to Earl's Residence**

The first castle, dating from the first decades of the thirteenth century, was a simple triangular enclosure constructed on the north bank of the Arra, the river truncating its acute southern angle. A stone building, later the Banqueting Hall, was constructed on the north curtain near the truncated northwest angle (Fig. 3). Only fragments of the early curtain wall survive: a short east-west section west of the Banqueting Hall, which terminates at what was probably a small rectangular northwest turret, and a short stretch between the modern visitor centre (a former coach house) and the river. Recent archaeological excavation identified more of this curtain in foundation: between the northwest angle turret and the river (passing beneath the later Halla Mór), a short section along the riverside (beneath a more recent wall), and beneath and northeast of the visitor centre. A postern gate was also identified in the southwest corner of the visitor centre.¹³ A short stub of demolished wall at the southeast corner of the Banqueting Hall probably marks where this early curtain terminated after a final turn (Fig. 4).

The lower part of the Banqueting Hall is the only building of any substance dating back to the early castle. Extensively remodelled in the fifteenth century with the insertion of a low barrel vault to support a second-storey hall, the building originated as a single storey structure lit by lancet windows. The east end of the south face of the building was lit by a row of four lancets three and a half metres tall and recent restoration has revealed the remains of a triple-lancet window at the centre of the east wall. This building may


Fig. 3 A plan of the Desmond Castle, Newcastle West, illustrating proposed stages of development: the first castle yellow, the ‘new castle’ of 1298 orange, the final castle red and the nineteenth century walled garden green. Modified from OPW and Urban Archaeological Survey plans.
have been an early hall but is more likely to have been a chapel. A piscina inserted into the southeast corner of the later first floor hall possibly came from the chapel. In the absence of any other stone buildings from that time, the building might have been a hybrid hall-chapel subdivided by screens. The complete remodelling of the early hall-chapel into the Banqueting Hall was carried out under James fitzGerald, seventh earl from 1420 until 1463. As well as creating the two-storey hall, the work saw the addition of a small square tower at the northwest corner of the hall serviced by an intramural spiral stair. The hall was entered from outside via a first floor door at the southwest corner, probably accessed from a timber staircase that has left no archaeological expression.14 The hall was capped with typical Irish fifteenth century stepped battlements at about the same time. A second building was also added to the west end of the Banqueting Hall, and this building survived until at least 1852 according to estate maps dating from the mid-eighteenth century to 1852.15

The second major building in public ownership is the Halla Mór, and this probably dates to the second half of the thirteenth century. Eight cusped, twin-light windows lit the

14 Personal communication, Grellan Rourke, OPW conservation architect, Dublin (26 Aug. 2004).
large new single storey hall, with an entrance at the east end of the north wall. While there has been some debate as to the purpose of this building, sometimes from the anachronistic viewpoint of there being two halls in the castle, the Halla Mór was almost certainly the great hall of the castle during the period that the future Banqueting Hall remained a chapel. The Halla Mór was twice significantly modified after it was built. In the early fourteenth century, most of the original windows were replaced with large four-light cusped windows with a fifth triangular cusped ope above. This work might have been carried out by Maurice fitzThomas, first earl of Desmond, perhaps to acknowledge his newly granted high status. In the fifteenth century the walls of the Halla Mór were raised and stepped battlements were added, presumably at the same time as the Banqueting Hall was remodelled. The Halla Mór battlements are unusually tall and narrow, and were certainly for show rather than anything else. To support their height, a broad batter that covered the lower lights of the fourteenth century windows was added to the building.

To make way for the new hall, the west curtain of the early castle was demolished and rebuilt further west. A section of this curtain still exists south of the Halla Mór, extending to just beyond the area in public ownership, where it turns north. Now gone, the curtain wall turned west again, parallel to the river, to terminate in a slender, tall three-storey round tower, where a squinch arch connected the top storey of the tower to a domestic range built against the curtain, probably at the same time as the Halla Mór (Fig. 3). Only the lower storey walls at the west end of the range survive, where they adjoin the round tower. The 1298 survey referred to this as 'the new castle', suggesting that major works had been carried out not too long before that date. The survey describes the castle as 'a strong castle comprising curtain walls and mural towers enclosing buildings'. During restoration works just south of the early northwest turret, a junction was identified between the early curtain wall and a curtain wall that would have continued to the west. It is assumed that this line marks the northern extent of the westwards expansion of the castle prior to 1298. The castle would have been extended to a new west curtain wall that enclosed the new domestic range, presumably with a circular tower at the northwest angle that mirrored (though probably shorter) the surviving round tower at the southwest angle.

A much later description of the castle describes a round tower at every angle, suggesting that the east end of the castle was also extended to the east by 1298 and round towers added there too. Little remains to show for this eastward extension, the former curtain wall lost beneath later properties. The only substantial surviving stonework is a short stretch that extends just a few metres east from the Banqueting Hall, and this appears to have been remodelled at a later date. However, it was assumed in the 2004 reconstruction that this broad plinth on which the irregular modern eastern boundary wall of the public castle is built might represent the late medieval curtain.

**Gunpowder and the Medieval Castle**

Sometime in the later fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, the castle was remodelled yet again, with accommodation made for the use of gunpowder weapons at this time. To the east, the new wall that extends for a few metres east of the Banqueting Hall was either

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17. Personal communication, Greilian Rourke, OPW conservation architect, Dublin (25 Aug. 2004).
rebuilt or remodelled with the insertion of a circular gun port. About twenty centimetres in diameter and set low in the wall, about forty centimetres above present ground level (Fig. 5), this would have facilitated an early iron breech-loading cannon mounted on a wooden bed on the ground. Such weapons, with almost no manoeuvrability, were commonly loaded with grapeshot for short-range anti-personnel use. Particularly good Irish examples of similar gun ports survive in the bawn wall of Aughnasne又 Castle, Co. Galway, probably rebuilt sometime in the sixteenth century. The gun port at Newcastle West, as at Aughnasne又, has an inward-splaying embrasure that suggests a date prior to the middle of the sixteenth century and the common adoption of externally splaying ports.

To the west, a low hall was added to the late thirteenth century domestic range, terminating in a rectangular five-storey tower house that acted as a chamber block for the hall. The new range took the castle beyond the 1298 curtain wall and thus required a new curtain wall to enclose it, of which only the south wall between the earlier round tower and a new D-shaped tower at the southwest angle survive. Two large fifteenth or sixteenth century windows in the tower, facing northwest and southwest (blocked), are later insertions.

It is most likely that the north and west curtain walls built not long before 1298 were demolished as part of the expansion of the castle, opening up the space in front of the newly extended domestic range along the south curtain. The new hall, towers and curtain wall were all included in the mid-fifteenth century reconstruction drawing, even though they include features that suggest they may have been built later. They were definitely built before 1583 when the crown survey that followed the confiscation of the Desmond estates describes the castle as:

'A large castle in quadrilateral form formerly a chief house of the late Earl of Desmond in Connello having a round tower at every angle with divers places and

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20 The 'peel-tower' of T.J. Westropp: Westropp, The Desmond Castle Newcastle West, p. 357.
rooms in every tower, at the south west corner is a lofty quadrilateral peel built for
defence within the walls. And within the walls were many buildings viz a great
hall, large chamber, very good rooms; a garden in which were two fish ponds, all
of which are now ruinous and waste. Without the walls and near thereto are divers
orCHARdS and gardens containing 3 acres.\textsuperscript{22}

The ‘peel’ is the tower house described here. Presumably the ‘large hall’ refers to the
Halla Mór and the ‘large room and excellent chamber’ refer to the Banqueting Hall and
its upper turret chamber.\textsuperscript{23}

A number of loops in the tower house are adapted for firearms. These include a
cruciform loop with a circular opening for a firearm at the base in the southwest angle of
the tower (Fig. 6a) and a loop with two opposing circular openings that permitted a
spread of fire at the base in the west face (Fig. 6b). Other loops are concealed today
behind overgrowing ivy. Long narrow loops with a circular opening at the base, called
inverted keyhole loops, are a common feature in English castles and town walls from the
first appearance of gunpowder weapons in the second half of the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{24}

They do not seem to appear in Ireland, for example in the town walls of Limerick’s

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{gun-loops}
\caption{The gun-loops in the sixteenth century tower house built by
one of the later earls of Desmond.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{22} Parcell (ed.), Desmond Survey, paragraph 439; compare with Westropp, The Desmond Castle Newcastle West, pp 56-7:
‘One great castle, built of square plan, a chief house of the said late Earl of Desmond (under that part of the aforesaid county Limerick, which is named Connoic), having at each angle of the same a round tower, with various places and
chambers in each tower. And there is at the south corner, on the western side of the said castle at the south part, a high
square tower or peel, built for defence within the said walls of the said castle. And also there were within the walls of the
said castle many buildings -- namely, a large hall, a large room and an excellent chamber; one garden, and in the same two
fish-ponds, all of which buildings are ruined and waste. And outside the walls, and near them, are divers orchards and
gardens, three acres of land’.

\textsuperscript{23} Patrick O’Connor similarly reinterprets Westropp, The Desmond Castle Newcastle West, p. 357 in his Hometown, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{24} Kerrigan, Castles and Fortifications in Ireland, p. 25; J.R. Kenyon, ‘Early Artillery Fortifications in England and Wales: a
Irishtown,\textsuperscript{25} or in Scotland\textsuperscript{26} before the mid-fifteenth century. Variations include a separate circular gun-loop below a normal window loop, or an inverted keyhole with a short cross loop as occurs here. The new curtain wall also has a row of at least four gun-loops overlooking the river. Each has a splayed square embrasure at shoulder height on the inner face of the wall that terminates in a small circular (blind) gun-loop in the outer face (Fig. 7). The size and height of these loops suggests they were designed for pistol or shouldered musket fire. Small circular gun-loops of this kind are a common feature of mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth century castles in Ireland.\textsuperscript{27}

Fig. 7  The interior face of the south curtain wall added at the southwest end of the castle in the sixteenth century (a), with a series of splayed square embrasures (b), each of which terminates in a small circular blind gun-loop in the exterior face of the wall (c).


\textsuperscript{27} Kerrigan, \textit{Castles and Fortifications in Ireland}, p. 40.
It is difficult to tie down the date of firearm defences in Ireland because there are so few records to date the buildings where they are found. This also makes it difficult to determine any evolutionary pattern. While circular or inverted-keyhole gun-loops are common from the fourteenth century through the fifteenth century, they are still found well into the seventeenth century in Ireland. It is also true that existing walls may have been modified to accommodate firearms long after they were first constructed. Guns were in use in Ireland by the late fifteenth century, the first record of a gun being fired dating to 1487. The forces available to the earl of Desmond in the 1480s included 3,000 kerns, 400 horsemen, eight battles (480-640 men) of galloglass, one battle (60-80 men) of crossbowmen and gunners. A bullet killed the ninth earl of Desmond in 1487 and the then 34-year-old eleventh earl was described by envoy Gonçalo Fernandez to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1529 as lame from a gunshot wound. In 1528 the eleventh earl had sought handguns, artillery, gunpowder and ammunition from Charles V.

Who built the tower house (and adjoining hall) and the enclosing curtain with their gun-loops? Gun ports like that beside the Banqueting Hall and gun-loops like those in the tower house are integral to Raglan Castle in southeast Wales, constructed in the 1460s, and to those parts of Warwick Castle built shortly before 1477. Possible candidates, then, could include the ninth earl of Desmond. Thomas, who preceded him as eighth earl between 1463 and 1468, was also Lord Deputy of Ireland and founded the College of Youghal. He might also have built at Newcastle West to reflect his high status. The eleventh earl, so keen to acquire gunpowder weapons in the late 1520s, is another likely candidate. In Scotland, where sixteenth century society, politics and architecture were similar to those of Ireland, hand-held firearms and the consequent provision of gun-loops were not common before the middle of the sixteenth century. On this basis, perhaps a stronger candidate would be James, fourteenth earl between 1541 and 1558, who was also Lord Treasurer of Ireland for a time. He could have carried out significant building work at Newcastle West to signify his elevated status. Certainly, the style and range of gun-loops described above suggests a sixteenth century origin that is best attributed to one of the last few earls of Desmond.

LATEST MEDIEVAL TO EARLY MODERN CASTLE
Following the death of the fifteenth earl of Desmond in 1583, the Desmond estates were confiscated and divided up between a number of English Undertakers. The Desmond estates around Newcastle West were granted in September 1591 to Sir William Courtenay of Devon. In return, as part of his undertaking, he had an obligation to make for himself a defensible house and to build houses for eighty colonial families. Sir William clearly neglected his obligations so that when James Fitzgerald, the súgán or 'straw' earl of

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28 Ibid.
32 McCormack, The Earldom of Desmond 1463-1583, p. 66.
33 J.R. Kenyon, Raglan Castle (Cardiff, 2003) p. 10 and plan inside back cover.
35 Maxwell-Irving, 'Early Firearms', p. 201.
36 Westropp, The Desmond Castle Newcastle West, p. 352.
Desmond, joined the earl of Tyrone’s rebellion in 1598, the castle at Newcastle West was still in ruins from the 1583 Desmond rebellion and poorly defended, and it fell quickly to the rebel forces. English forces under George Carew, newly appointed Lord President of Munster, retook the town and castle in 1601.

The Courtenay Castle
By 1609, Connello and Newcastle West had passed into the hands of Sir William Courtenay’s son, George, though Sir William was still living. The son must have done what the father did not, repairing the domestic quarters and defences. By 1611 Newcastle West was described as having ‘a fair castle and divers houses’ and, in 1622, a new survey described the castle as ‘a fair large castle, which has been somewhat ruinous, but it is now much repaired and is in continual repairation. Also there is to it a very strong bawn’. By December 1641 the castle was repaired enough to provide safe haven for 1000 English refugees during the uprising of the Catholic Irish Confederacy. By May 1642 the garrison had lost only five warders despite daily assaults by Confederate forces. However, a sally that month by the garrison saw the capture, execution and public post-mortem display of a further five men. George Courtenay was absent at the time because between May and June 1642, as constable of King John’s Castle, he was also under siege by Confederate forces. The siege of Newcastle West ended after nearly seven months in August 1642, when cannon were brought up from Limerick after the surrender of King John’s Castle. The threat of bombardment sufficed and no shots were fired.

It has been suggested that following Oliver Cromwell’s campaign in Ireland, English parliamentary forces would have slighted the castle, but the Civil Survey of 1655 does not indicate this. It describes Newcastle as:

‘The ploughland of New Castle and five acres of flearre Mearluin, with a castle and bawn, and other houses and stone worcke, having a market once a weeke; a fayre once a yeare; an orchard on it; the benefite of a river running by the castle, and the same, with several houses, tenements, and gardens thereunto belonging ... Proprietor, Colonell Francis Courtenay, of New Castle, English Interest.’

The whole is described as valued at £50 in 1640, with no suggestion of a drop in value since then, indicating that the castle remained in good repair. The castle was seized and garrisoned again by Jacobite forces supporting King James II during the 1690 and 1691 sieges of Limerick City, and during the Rockite disturbances of the early 1820s the

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37 Ibid., p. 353.
41 He had been appointed to this position in 1622, Kenneth Wiggins, _Anatomy of a Siege: King John’s Castle, Limerick, 1642_ (Bray, 2000) p. 55.
42 Westropp, _The Desmond Castle Newcastle West_, p. 354.
43 United suggestion on an OPW exhibition panel in the Desmond Banqueting Hall, Newcastle West, compiled by historian Jane Fenlon (2005).
44 Westropp, _The Desmond Castle Newcastle West_, p. 355.
castle was ‘strongly fortified’ once again to protect it from the ‘hostile intentions which the insurgents manifested towards that gentleman [Courtenay]’. A large group of armed men attacked the castle in June 1821 ‘marching right up to the gates before being driven off by the guards’, after which Courtenay’s agent, Alexander Hoskins was reported to be ‘fortifying the castle against a second assault’.

From Domesticity to Final Ruin
All changes to the Desmond castle after 1650 appear to have been peaceful and domestic. Three of these are significant structurally. A large house was constructed on the footprint of the late thirteenth century domestic range between 1709 and 1760. Known both as Devon Castle and Castle House, the new house incorporated the tall southwest angle tower of 1298. The additions of the sixteenth century were not incorporated and were either demolished or allowed to fall into ruin. The Courtenays paid for the building of a Protestant church on the south side of the town square, just north of the Banqueting Hall, in 1777. The church is described as in ruins on the first Ordnance Survey map of 1840 and was taken down in 1962. Between 1837 and 1840 the extended north and west curtains of the castle were finally demolished to make way for the large walled kitchen garden that exists to this day (Fig. 3).

The Courtenays auctioned off Newcastle West in 1910 and their agent purchased the castle. The castle was occupied militarily one last time by the Irish Republican Army during the Civil War and the Courtenay house burnt down in August 1922 as Free State troops reoccupied it, after which a new house was built in the grounds for the owner. The yard with the Banqueting Hall and the Halla Mór was sold later to the Nash family, after which the two buildings saw a variety of commercial and community uses. The Halla Mór in particular was much altered during this time. This part of the castle had passed into State care by 1989 and the current programme of restoration was begun.

LATE REFORIFICATION: NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD CASTLE
The extent of the earl of Desmond’s castle is not certain because of the complete disappearance of the north and west curtains by 1850. Yet it is located, but with some inconsistency, on several Courtenay estate maps dating from between 1750 and 1840. The northern boundary of the castle at its fullest extent was shown in the 2004 reconstruction drawing simply as an extension of the 1298 curtain wall, interrupted by the circular northwest angle tower of the 1298 ‘new castle’ (Fig. 2). The north curtain was shown meeting the west curtain, which connected to the surviving D-shaped southwest angle tower, and a similar D-shaped tower was inferred for the northwest angle. Evidence brought to light during restoration casts new light on the full extent of the castle in its final configuration.

47 James S. Donnelly Jr., Captain Rock, The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821-1824 (Cork, 2009) p. 44.
48 Based on the evidence of a series of Courtenay estate maps: the house does not appear on Moland’s sketchy 1709 map, but does figure on a caricature map of the mid-eighteenth century, both redrawn in O’Connor, Hometown, pp 5 and 7; O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s Past, p. 66.
49 Desmond Hall: Visitor’s Guide.
50 Based on Courtenay estate maps of those dates: O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s Past, p. 149; O’Connor, Hometown, p. 11.
52 Desmond Hall: Visitor’s Guide.
A Late Fortified Wall

A modern concrete wall running from the south curtain to the southwest corner of the Halla Mór and from the northwest corner of the Halla Mór to the early northwest angle turret forms most of the eastern boundary of the private garden containing the western part of the castle. From there it steps east along the early north curtain wall before continuing north again on the west side of the modern driveway into the public castle (Fig. 3). Restoration of the castle removed vegetation overgrowing this last stretch of wall to reveal a fortified wall that has itself been restored by the OPW (Fig. 8). Today’s visitor enters the castle via a small gate in the wall adjoining the northwest angle of the Banqueting Hall and it is rare enough that the visitor will turn right, away from the Banqueting Hall and Halla Mór, to walk up the walled-in castle driveway, so this important feature of the castle is easily overlooked. The fortified wall appears to have been built in two phases. The lower part of the wall stands to a height of about two and a half metres, but leans inward towards the west at about five degrees from the vertical. At some point the wall was raised by about one and a half metres and, to support both the tilted earlier phase and the extra height, a series of carefully positioned triangular buttresses about half a metre wide were added to the inner side of the wall (Figs 8c and 10).53

The buttresses are paired with a half-metre square platform set between them, just less than a metre and a half below the top of the older part of the wall (Fig. 10). These are firing platforms (FP) for a series of musket-loops in the wall (Figs 9 and 10). On the exterior of the wall, facing the Banqueting Hall, the loops are fairly evenly spaced, but on the interior they are grouped in twos and threes so that a single musketeer can fire in multiple directions from one platform (Fig. 10). The three visible firing platforms are numbered from the north on the map in Figure 8, and a fourth is inferred at the southern end of the wall based on a loop in the outside of the wall (concealed inside by a shed full of timber when visited). The ground inside the wall has built up over time, but where it falls away towards the gate into the garden it reveals a low stepping stone about twenty centimetres below FP1 (Fig. 10a, arrowed). There is another pair of buttresses just outside the timber shed, between FP3 and FP4 (Fig. 10c) though there are no loops associated with them. The fact that they form a pair, however, suggests that there were once, but that they were perhaps not obvious and were lost when the wall was restored.

FP1 serves two loops directed to either side at a high angle to the wall (Fig. 8a and Fig. 10a), though the northern loop is now only fragmentary. FP2 serves three loops (Fig. 9b and Fig. 10b), two directed to either side but in this case at an angle very close to the line of the wall so that they have depths of up to a metre or more within the thickness of the wall. The third loop, in the centre, is recessed slightly on the inside under a narrow lintel. It cuts through the lower, tilted part of the wall and is directed straight ahead. All three loops are directed down towards the ground outside the wall, the centre one most steeply. FP3 serves two loops again (Fig. 9a, the nearest two loops, and Fig. 10c). Both are directed to the right, into the castle, the northern one at a high angle to the wall and more steeply, and the southern one at an angle very close to the line of the wall. The structure of FP4 on the inside of the wall is unknown at this time, but it appears to serve just one loop directed straight out from the wall and downwards.

Unlike the circular gun-loops in the curtain wall at the west end of the castle, the musket-loops here are rectangular openings, aligned vertically. They measure about eight centimetres wide (wider where they are directed at an angle very close to the line of the wall) by between fifteen and forty-five centimetres long (longest where directed more

53 The buttresses are in a private garden, so are not generally visible to the visitor.
Fig. 8  The fortified wall (a) overlooking the protestant church site in front of the Banqueting Hall (b); a sketch map (c) showing the firing positions (FP) and musket-loops associated with the wall (for location in relation to the whole castle, see Figure 3).
Fig. 9 The musket loops in the east (exterior) face of the fortified wall as viewed (a) from the south and (b) from the north.
Fig. 10 The firing positions (FP) and musket loops in the east (interior) face of the fortified wall: (a) two-looped FP1, (b) three-looped FP2 and (c) two-looped FP3 with a possible further FP just beyond, in front of the timber shed.
steeply down through the wall). Musket-loops of this kind appeared in Scottish castles from about 1580 and continued to be constructed into the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Though not so well dated, musket-loops of this type also appear in Ireland from the late sixteenth century and become common in the seventeenth century. Examples survive at many tower houses where the bawn was refortified in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, notably including Pallas in Co. Galway, built about 1500 but the bawn refortified sometime after 1574, Derryhivenny in Co. Galway, where tower house and bawn both date from 1643, and Parke’s Castle in Co. Leitrim, which was rebuilt in the 1620s. These dates suggest that the musket-loops at Newcastle West were most likely the work of George Courtenay, part of his ‘repair and reparation’ of the castle that included provision of ‘a very strong bawn’, as reported in 1622. These defences must have played a strong part in the resistance of the castle to the assaults of Confederate forces in 1641-2.

Extent of the Final Castle
The other noteworthy fact about the fortified wall is the two phases of construction. If the musket-loops were introduced as part of a repair and heightening of a wall that was already collapsing, the lower part of the wall must have much greater antiquity. This wall most probably defines the sixteenth century enlargement of the castle to its fullest extent, when the domestic range was extended to include the ‘peel’ tower. Thus, in the sixteenth century, as well as expanding westwards from its 1298 boundaries, it appears also to have expanded northwards to the west of the site of the future Protestant church (Fig. 3). Do the six estate survey maps dating from between 1709 and 1852 support this hypothesis? Thomas Moland’s map of 1709 lacks detail but indicates a large rectangular western area that extends north of the future church site. A highly inaccurate mid-eighteenth century caricature of a map again suggests that the castle enclosure extended beyond the future church. This map is interesting because it is the first map to portray a circular driveway filling the castle enclosure in front of the Courtenay house. A 1776 map is an exception in that it suggests that the northern boundary of the castle was entirely in line with the Banqueting Hall, indicated approximately in Figure 3. Both these maps, as redrawn by Patrick J. O’Connor, appear to support the inferred existence of a tower at the northwest angle of the castle enclosure. The next map, from 1837, reverts to a large nearly square enclosure in front of the Courtenay house that extends beyond the church, now built, and a smaller square enclosure south of the Banqueting Hall. The circular driveway again fills the castle enclosure in front of the Courtenay House on this map. In 1840, the first Ordnance Survey map of Newcastle West shows the main castle enclosure with its circular driveway once again extending past the Protestant church, but the west boundary has been removed by this time and overprinted by the large kitchen garden that exists there today. The 1852 estate map is notable for the complete absence of a northern

54 Maxwell-Irving, ‘Early Firearms’, p. 221.
55 Kerrigan, Castles and Fortifications in Ireland, p. 40.
56 O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s Past, pp. 66-7, 149 and 156; O’Connor, Hometown, pp 5, 7 and 11.
57 O’Connor, Hometown, p. 5.
58 O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s Past, p. 66; O’Connor, Hometown, p. 7.
59 O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s Past, p. 67.
60 Ibid., p. 149.
boundary to the castle enclosure, though its location north of the Protestant church can be deduced from the circular driveway.\textsuperscript{61} The northern boundary reappears on T.J. Westropp’s 1909 map of the castle, and he infers that the earthwork associated with it reflects the castle’s northern limit.\textsuperscript{62}

Westropp believed the north curtain enclosed the site of the future church,\textsuperscript{63} but the fortified wall alongside the castle driveway suggests otherwise and it is the writer’s contention that the full extent of the castle was as outlined in Figure 3, in line with the evidence of the majority of the historical estate maps. Thus the castle began as a small triangular enclosure with two corners truncated and a stone chapel (or combined hall/chapel) towards its northeast angle (Fig. 11a; yellow in Fig. 3). By 1298 this had been enlarged westwards, but with the new north curtain wall stepped about five metres south, to enclose a new great hall (Halla Mór) and a long domestic range (Fig. 11b; orange in Fig. 3). As in part of the 2004 reconstruction, this was probably a garden area (Fig. 2). The new extension terminated in round towers at the northwest and southwest angles, the taller, southwest tower acting as a chamber block for the adjoining domestic range. The castle was probably also extended eastwards during these works, with round towers added at new northeast and southeast angles.

The greater parts of both the east and west curtains of the original castle were demolished in the course of building, to produce a castle and accommodation on the scale of royal and baronial castles elsewhere in Ireland and Britain, though with significantly less substantial walls and towers.\textsuperscript{64} Sometime in the sixteenth century, the castle was extended again, pushing out the new western end of the castle both north and west, the eastern limit of this expansion being the fortified wall described above (Fig. 12; red in Fig. 3). This latest expansion accommodated gunpowder weapons, both by insertion east of the Banqueting Hall and in the new walls of the expanded enclosure. The new enclosure was once again probably taken up with the gardens described in the 1583 Desmond survey,\textsuperscript{65} and was possibly subdivided into two halves for a pleasure garden and a kitchen garden.\textsuperscript{66}

The Castle Gate
The other problem posed during the reconstruction of the Desmond castle concerned the location of the castle gate, for which there is no evidence at all. Based on the estate maps, the eighteenth century approach to the castle was from the seventeenth century square to the north of the Banqueting Hall, just as today. However, there was then no compelling evidence that this was the case before the seventeenth century and it was decided by all involved in the restoration of the castle to infer a gatehouse close to the southeast corner of the later castle, close to the bridge over the Arra river. This gatehouse was inferred to have replaced an earlier gatehouse, suggested by a geophysical anomaly close to the centre of the demolished east curtain of the earliest castle (Fig. 3). The gatehouse was

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 156.
\textsuperscript{62} Westropp, The Desmond Castle Newcastle West, pp 351 and 357.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 357.
\textsuperscript{65} Purcell, The Desmond Survey, paragraph 439; Westropp, The Desmond Castle Newcastle West, pp 56-7.
\textsuperscript{66} Suggested by its apparent continued subdivision in the eighteenth century; O’Connor, Exploring Limerick’s Past, p. 66-7; O’Connor, Hometown, p. 7.
modelled on the simple gatehouses at Adare Castle, because no Desmond castle has evidence of a larger or more sophisticated gatehouse, not even the other great Desmond castle at Askeaton. Identification of the fortified wall suggests a possible solution to this problem too.

The English town square in Newcastle West came into existence only after George Courtenay took control of his father’s Irish estates in the first decade of the seventeenth century, when he also began to repair the castle. From estate maps it is clear that entry to the castle was from the southwest corner of the square from 1700 onwards, but when did this become the entry into the castle? The siege of 1642 only ended when the garrison faced the threat of cannon brought from Limerick, without a shot being fired. By implication, the siege of the preceding seven months must have been characterised by infantry assaults, the most usual physical threat to Irish castles for centuries before the age of gunpowder. These would almost certainly have been directed at the weakest point in the walls, the gate. The arrangement of musket-loops in the fortified wall, which presumably dates from George Courtenay’s repairs, suggests they were designed to defend a narrow field at the foot of the wall, with particular emphasis on either end of this field. This most probably corresponds to a narrow approach to the castle gate. An equally high wall faces the fortified wall across today’s OPW driveway and there is a boundary here on all the estate maps including, though less clearly, the eighteenth century maps that predate the Protestant church. If there was a high wall here dating back to the early seventeenth century, the concentrated field of multi-directional musket fire from the fortified wall experienced by a force of infantry storming the castle gate between these two walls would have been devastating (Fig. 12).

The evidence for two phases of construction in the fortified wall suggests that the enlarged castle of the sixteenth century also overlooked the point of entry and defended it from unwelcome advances. What if the parallel eastern wall was also there, and perhaps from an early date? It has already been stated that the earl of Desmond’s island castle of Askeaton lacks a substantial gatehouse. In fact there is no evidence for a gatehouse at all. If one examines the 1633 Patina Hibernica drawing of the castle, entry to the castle from the bridge over the river Deal is through two gates, between which there is a narrow, open enclosure (Fig. 13). The entry inferred here for Newcastle West would resemble this if it were carried back prior to the sixteenth century expansion of the castle. Instead of the simple gatehouse tower at the southeast corner of the castle inferred in the 2004 reconstruction drawing, there would have been no gatehouse, simply two pairs of gates at either end of a high-walled, open passage (Fig. 11b). Though lacking the typical gatehouse at its inner end, this narrow passage gated at each end would have been similar to the barbicans that existed on several castle and city gates across England. Several notable but more elaborate examples survive on the bars (gates) of York, added sometime in the fourteenth century. It would also make better sense for the entrance to the castle to have been in the north curtain of the Desmond castle from the earliest construction, rather than at the southeast corner, because the roads from both the ancestral castle of Shanid and later the other great Desmond castle at Askeaton both come from that direction.

67 See, for example: ‘Askeaton Castle’ in ‘Castle Studies Group Conference, Castles of North Munster’, p. 49.
Fig. 11  New reconstruction drawings of the first two phases of the Desmond castle: (a) the castle in about 1250, the Arra river running close to the short wall at the near end of the enclosure; (b) the ‘new castle’ in about 1350. By 1350 the earlier enclosure had been enlarged to east and west with corner towers, and the Halla Mór and domestic range built. The open entrance passage, gated at either end, is top right. None of the temporary buildings that would have occupied the courtyard in both cases are shown, nor indeed the garden that probably fronted the domestic range in the later phase. © Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler 2011.

Fig. 12  A new reconstruction drawing of the final phase of the Desmond castle after a second enlargement sometime in the sixteenth century. The reconstruction is dated to about 1630 to show the fortified wall stripped of battlements, raised to a level top and with musket-loops. The enlarged part of the castle was probably a garden that may have been divided into two (as it was in the eighteenth century), with a private garden to the west. © Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler 2011.
CONCLUSION
Following completion of a detailed reconstruction drawing of the Desmond castle in
Newcastle West, the writer has had the opportunity to revisit the site on several
occasions. The reconstruction attempted to restore the Desmond Banqueting Hall, by
which the site is known, to its rightful place within the large baronial castle and residence
of the later medieval period. In an effort to make as complete as possible a representation
of the late medieval castle, a number of decisions had to be made about aspects of the
castle for which there is no longer any evidence on the ground. Notably, these included
the date of the latest buildings, the fullest extent of the castle and the location of the main
gate into the castle. All have been something of an enigma since the greater part of the
castle's curtain walls were demolished in the eighteenth century.

The castle began in the early thirteenth century as a simple sub-triangular enclosure
with a stone chapel near its northeast angle. By the end of the thirteenth century, probably
in response to the creation of the Desmond earldom, it was transformed into a strong new
castle with curtain walls, mural towers and internal buildings. The new castle was
extended both eastwards and westwards to accommodate the living requirements of the
new earl. Only short sections of curtain wall along the Arra river, one mural tower at the
southwest angle of this new castle and the foundations of much of the new internal
building survive today. Only the new Halla Mór stands intact. By the mid-fifteenth
century the older buildings in the castle had been remodelled in line with the most
modern architectural standards. The last earls of Desmond enlarged the castle again
during the sixteenth century, with new accommodation and new curtain walls with angle
towers to enclose the new works. These works included provision for firearms, only
recently introduced into general use in Ireland.
Recent visits have drawn attention to the importance of a previously undescribed feature of the site, a lately fortified wall along the west side the OPW driveway into the castle, a location that falls outside the area generally ascribed to the castle. This wall appears to have been constructed in two phases. A first phase about two and a half metres high that had taken on a severe tilt before being supported by internal buttresses and heightened by a further metre and a half with the provision of musket-loops. The style of musket-loop suggests an early seventeenth century origin for the second phase of the wall, and their complex arrangement indicates that they were designed to provide devastating fire onto a narrow corridor of ground approaching the north curtain of the original core of the castle, between the town square and the Banqueting Hall.

A number of conclusions are drawn from the fortified wall that are at variance with the interpretation in the earlier reconstruction drawing. The first phase of the fortified wall, which must predate its early seventeenth century heightening, most probably serves to define the fullest extent of the castle in the sixteenth century. This is much larger than suggested in the reconstruction drawing based on common understanding at the time. Re-examination of estate maps surveyed for the Courtenay owners of the castle between 1700 and 1850 tend, with one exception, to support this conclusion. George Courtenay, probably in the second decade of the seventeenth century, replaced the wall's damaged battlements, here at least, with a new and better-defended wall top. The careful arrangement of his musket loops indicates that they covered an important narrow corridor of ground and this in turn probably led to the castle gate, which would have been the weakest point in the castle defences. This continued as the way into the castle after 1700. By comparison with the other great Desmond castle at Askeaton, it is finally suggested that entry into the castle at Newcastle West was not through a towered gatehouse but via a narrow enclosed space outside the main gate that acted as an effective killing ground between secure gates at both ends.

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