Parke's Castle

Catherine MacConville who worked as an assistant on the excavations at Parke's Castle went back to see what the Office of Public Works had made of the findings of Clare Foley and her team.

Standing on the northern shore of Lough Gill, Parke's Castle is not just a fine example of a 17th-century fortified manor house but a superb showcase for the skill of local OPW craftsmen who spent over six years on its restoration.

Archaeological excavation revealed many features including a well, sallyport to the lake, outer moat and the foundations of an earlier 16th-century tower house. A daughter of the O'Connors of Brefinn, the Parke family gained possession during the 1620 plantation of Leitrim and used stones from the earlier dwelling to build the manor house.

Although difficult to imagine today, photographs show its previous ruined condition and the extent of work involved in restoration — marvel at the roof reconstruction with timbers of Irish oak fastened in place without a single nail.

An audio-visual show sketches the area's history and gives a glimpse of the wealth of national monuments in the hinterland but is somewhat spoiled by the caricature of Cúlmacail as a half-ape Punch magazine Irishman.

The castle is presently lifeless, lacking furnishings or artefacts found during excavation. Criticism is probably premature as one partially furnished floor is reserved as an exhibition area.

Wheelchair access is limited to the groundfloor and audio-visual room, barn and outbuildings which include a tea room and toilets. Guide service is provided.

Centres in the mid-west region

Celine O'Rahilly
Senior Archaeologist, Limerick Corporation

Theme parks, Folk parks, Heritage Centres, Interpretative (or, as somebody once unkindly said, Interruptive) Centres — what's in a name? The development of these over the years in this region is one of the by-products of the tourism drive. With weather like ours, holiday-makers to an area, be they foreign tourists, Irish families on holidays or even local people, like to have somewhere they can go en famille and be entertained. The danger, of course, is that this aspect of a visitor attraction becomes all-important and there are too many competing for a limited market. There is also the problem, in areas of outstanding beauty, that they usurp the real purpose of a visit, i.e. to enjoy its natural amenities. There is a threat that they will become like the television and take over our ability to entertain ourselves. Why there can be no doubt that there is a real educational value in a visit, one should not lose sight of the fact that Ireland has so many uncontrived places of interest and such 'centres' are, after all, only an attempt to condense some particular aspects of our past and culture in a controlled way.

In the mid-west region, there is a variety of centres which are operated by Shannon Heritage, a subsidiary of Shannon Development. The latter is, for the most part, responsible for their instigation and development, while the former operates them on a day-to-day basis. The visitor attractions in their control have been brought a stage further than, for example, those in State care. The emphasis is on inundating the user by a variety of methods: as well as the presentation of the actual settings, there are display panels, audio-visuals and replicas. This variety makes visiting with child(ren) somewhat less traumatic as there is generally some elements of appeal to all ages. Visits to National Monuments in State care on the whole have less appeal to the younger age group and there should be alternative activities for 'little ones' in direct proportion to the 'Please-do-not-touch' signs.

The approach by Shannon Development to the region is realistic. By its nature it must be flexible yet follow trends and demands. There cannot be long-term planning now for centres which years down the road may become dinosaurs in terms of maintenance and staffing and ideas are looked at with a view to their shelf-life rather than the here and now. It has been realised that saturation point has been reached and that there are other aspects of our heritage and culture, both natural and human, which need to be developed within the region.

As the doyen of visitor attractions, Bunratty Castle and Folk Park is still a place that both adult and child can return to and enjoy. There is such a variety on display, ranging from the medieval castle to the 19th-century village, that one could not hope to absorb it all in one day. Where at all possible there is life, in the shops and some of the houses, but one disappointment is, perhaps, the lack of non-profit-making activities such as ploughing etc. which are only put on special days, while the noise in the blacksmith's forge is a recorded message. An added satisfaction, however, for those chronologically advantaged, is the ability to recognise and identify many of the vernacular items on display.

Having been so actively involved in the development of King John's Castle, the latest in the series to be converted, comments on the new interpretative centre are based on reports received from colleagues and friends. It is hard, even still, to accept the new building when viewed from the outside. It not only dominates the east side of the castle but
rears up to dwarf the Norman architecture from every viewpoint. One must question the attitude adopted that in order to make the centre pay it needs to achieve certain dimensions. There was certainly a need to have a major 'visitor attraction' within the city but the castle speaks for itself and a lower building along the east wall would have enhanced the extant stonework. Having said that, the building is very cleverly designed in that all the archaeological features revealed in the excavation have been preserved at ground level and are on view to the visitor. The building is literally standing on eight columns which are carefully located in the archaeological zone with minor interference to the excavated features.

There are three main elements on display: the archaeology below the new building, the restored bawn, towers and wall-walk and the exhibit within the new building. Again there is too much to be absorbed in a single visit. The archaeology is subdued, because interpretation of the excavation could not be conclusive in the time allowed. One difficulty here is that the display panels are inadequate and the orientation of the plan of the dig needs to be adjusted to reflect the correct direction of viewing. The bawn and original fabric of the castle itself allows the visitor freedom to wander (and children to run) about, to appreciate the atmosphere of a Norman fortress. The display panels within the towers are minimal, in contrast to the new building. Here, the exhibition covers two floors and includes an audio-visual about the history of Limerick, lasting half an hour, and a very complex display covering historical events from the Norman period to the 17th century.

At Craggaunowen, the interpretative element is taken a step further by the live demonstrations of life in 'Celtic Ireland'. These happen during the summer months only and as our visit was in the early spring I cannot vouch for these. The place itself has a special atmosphere and a wider variety of exhibits, not all related to the Celtic period. They are widely spaced throughout a sylvan setting and are very user-friendly. The average youngsters are happy as they can go in and out of exhibits; something which means more to them than standing behind a Please-do-

not-touch notice, thereby resulting in a more relaxed visit for all.

In complete contrast to the other centres the East Clare Heritage Centre is a small locally operated centre in Tuamgraney, Co. Clare. Based in the local Church of Ireland (10th century) there are items on display, some crafts and books for sale and a 10-minute video about the area (which was not available at the time of visiting). The highlight of the visit, however, was the trip to Holy Island on Lough Derg, which is operated from the centre. While obviously not the shortest approach to the Island, the trip includes a passage down the Scariff river, across the lake (not for the faint-hearted in fresh easterlies) and a guided tour around the monuments. In terms of value for money, variety of unspoiled scenery and an opportunity to appreciate the atmosphere of a monastic settlement one would have to go far to match the two-hour trip. Signs of change are, however, manifesting themselves as the OPW are about to start work and I have the feeling that on my next visit I may have to queue, be managed and become part of a flow pattern.

Geraldine Tralee

Post-medieval specialist Roseanne Meenan gets a whiff of

Geraldine Tralee

The Geraldine Tralee exhibition is a tour lasting eight to ten minutes of a streetscape in Tralee set in 1450. The visitor enters the town through a gate in the town wall, and is guided down through a street to the market square before viewing the interior of an inn, a private house and the cloisters of the Dominican Priory. The shops of different tradespeople such as a butcher, a shoemaker and a foodseller are located on the street with life-size models providing the scale for the two-storey half-timbered buildings.

There is a good attention to detail in the clothing of the models and the objects on sale in the shops, and the scale of the streetscape also appears convincing. However, the attempt to reproduce the smells of a medieval town is overpowering and distracts from the general effects. The visitor sits in a four-seater open 'car', which drives itself along a track. Commentaries (in a choice of 7 languages) are provided on each car and there is background noise appropriate to each stage of the tour. The scale of the buildings and models and the attention to detail make a visit to the Ashe Hall well worthwhile, and it will become even more attractive when the new museum opens in June 1992.

Geraldine Tralee - The Irish Medieval Experience
Ashe Memorial Hall

Mon - Sat 10 - 6
Sun 2 - 6
Admission
Adults £3.00
Children £1.50
Students/OAP £2.50
Family Rate £7.50

Wheelchair access at back of building
Café and craft shop