Disappearing towerhouses — the evidence from County Limerick

T. J. WESTROPP’S pioneering work at the turn of the century was taken as a starting point for the study of tower houses in County Limerick. He had used the Desmond Rolls of 1583, the Civil and Down Surveys of the 1650s and other manuscript sources to suggest that at one time there were approximately 400 castles in the county. His work also included information from the 1840 Ordnance Survey maps and letters. Westropp compiled a list of castles, by townland and barony with relevant documentary sources. Using this corpus of information as a base the present writer visited and surveyed all surviving sites during 1989 and 1990. In total there were 359 sites that could be plotted on a distribution map and of these 244 or 68% are now demolished. Of course, this means that one cannot be sure that all these sites that have disappeared were tower houses, undoubtedly other types of castles are included.

The age of the tower house in County Limerick coincides with the period when the Desmond branch of the Geraldines controlled the county. It remained in their possession until the war with Ormond and the English Crown in the late sixteenth century, when the family were relieved of their power and influence. A limited plantation in the Elizabethan period followed, in which a significant number of the old landlords retained their property. However, in the aftermath of the civil war of the mid-seventeenth century there was a major change in the social hierarchy of the county, owing to a second plantation instigated under the Commonwealth. It

Among the most striking monuments in the Irish landscape are tower houses, built particularly in the period 1400-1650. In looking at the distribution of tower houses there has been a tendency just to illustrate their density in different counties. Useful as this, it does not address the important question of the state of preservation of this important building type. Here Colm Donnelly, a research student in Queen’s University, Belfast, examines the distribution and survival of tower houses in County Limerick as a case study.
was after this period that the tower house lost its position as the principal form of lordly residence within society and was replaced by a new wave of more spacious, grandiose and fashionable country houses. Nevertheless some tower houses continued to be inhabited and repaired throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while others were incorporated into the plans of the new country houses or were modified into accommodation for servants.

Looking at the geographical setting most of Limerick is good agricultural land, particularly for pasture, and the county may be considered as a fertile cup of land hemmed in by natural physical barriers. The fertile areas are largely below the 300ft (90m) contour and the bedrock of this region is Carboniferous limestone while the hills and mountains are mostly formed from older Silurian rocks and Old Red Sandstone. The tower houses are also generally found below the 300ft contour, with only five examples at or above 600ft (180 m). With the tower house and its bawn (fortified enclosure) in use as a primary means of defence against raids and forays on landowners and their possessions, including cattle, it is not surprising that there is a high concentration of tower houses in the rich pasture lands where medieval settlement and wealth would be centred.

The castles mapped in County Limerick can be divided into eleven groups. There were nineteen definite non-tower house castles, these range from simple earthwork castles to major multiperiod examples. These were included on the distribution map to indicate the total level of castellation within the county. Between 1650 and 1840, 216 castles disappeared from the landscape leaving no trace of their exact location. A particular arc of destruction can be seen in the environs of the city of Limerick. It is clear from the entries in the Civil Survey that some castles were in a ruinous condition before the mid-seventeenth century. However, in most cases one can only conclude that their destruction was a direct result of their lack of purpose in a changed society. They were now viewed as obsolete buildings that could be dispensed with.

Since 1840 a further 23 castles have been demolished. This includes buildings that were already fragmentary in the mid-nineteenth century, so total removal would have proved relatively easy. Unfortunately, there are also a number of substantial buildings that have collapsed as a result of neglect, frost, stone robbing or ironically efforts to render them more secure. The result is that today there are only 36 tower houses in good repair and a further 38 surviving as free-standing structures to a greater or lesser extent. Faced with such a slow but steady erosion of numbers there is little that the archaeologist can do, save make accurate surveys of the buildings as they survive today. Any future restoration or consolidatory efforts must continue to be directed towards those tower houses that are already in a good state of preservation and are in areas that are, or have the potential to become, tourist centres. However, there are also a number of buildings which are of such significant architectural variation and value to the main corpus that their protection is warranted for the benefit of future generations.