The castle of Limerick

by SHEELAGH HARBISON

IN Limerick, as in every medieval city, the ultimate and most essential part of its defences was the castle.[1] There is evidence of earlier fortifications in Limerick before the Normans came and even after their arrival it is thought that military works of a temporary nature were put up near the site of the present castle. Little or no attempt could have been made to erect the permanent structure now known as King John's castle before 1199. Earlier efforts by de Braose, de Cogan and fitzStephen in 1177 ended in failure, with the citizens setting the town on fire and the invaders retreating back to Cork.[2] The next attempt to occupy the city was defeated by Mac Carthaig in 1198 and it was not until the last assault by Cathal Crobderg Ua Conchobair had been driven off in 1199, that it would have been possible to start work on a stone castle.[3]

Leask suggested that a motte and bailey type of fortress would normally have been erected in the early days of the invasion. This could have been done by a small force of semi-skilled and unskilled men and would give the security necessary for the laborious and expensive business of erecting a stone castle. A building like Limerick castle would have taken between nine and ten years to complete at a cost of, at minimum, £1000. Its construction would have involved a large work force, much of it Irish slave labour pressed into service and guarded by a mounted sergeant to prevent their flight.[4]

While there is no information relevant to the erection of Limerick castle, we know from other sources that an army of masons, quarriers, smiths, carpenters, plumbers and glaziers must all have been involved in its construction. It is not possible to date the castle. Leask thought that no part of the present fortress was put up as early as 1185 when John came to Ireland for the first time, which would fit in well with the historical background giving the year 1199 as a possible date for the initial steps being taken to start work on the city's defences. The Annals mention a bawn there in 1200 and a castle two years later.[5] King John ordered the building of Dublin castle in 1205 and the instructions then issued to the justiciar could well have been similiar to those which would have been sent to Limerick:

> We command you that you cause a castle to be raised there, as strong as possible, with good ditches and strong walls, and build first the keep where afterwards the castle and bailey and other buildings can be conveniently added.

A difference was that Limerick was a keepless castle.[6]

On 2 November 1205 the king ordered de Lacy to 'to put Limerick into the hands of the lord justice, because without it he could not keep the peace in Cork

1 H.G. Leask, 'Castles and their place in Irish history' in *Jr. Sword*, x, no. 46 (winter, 1972), pp 235-43.
2 F.X. Martin, 'Overlord becomes feudal lord, 1172-85' in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland*, ii (Oxford, 1987), pp 110-4.
3 M. Lenihan, *History of Limerick* (Dublin, 1866), p. 48.
4 R.A. Brown, *English medieval castles* (London, 1976), p. 155; *Cal. doc. Ire., 1171-1251*, no. 395. No figures are available on the numbers of men working on the building of the castle in Limerick, but we know that when Trim Castle was being erected 193 men and horses were employed on its construction. These were paid on a daily basis by Robert Cambiator, 'a responsible official who had served the king well and was trusted to make payments from the exchequer to the men working there'. This same Robert was employed in a similar capacity at Limerick.
5 Harold G. Leask, *Irish castles and castellated houses* (Dundalk, 1975 edn.), p. 55.
6 Richard Cox, *Hibernia Anglicana* (London, 1689-90), i, p. 43.

or Connacht'. This decree was confirmed by an entry in the Pipe Roll of 14 John, when the sum of £733-16-11 was granted for the fortification of Limerick castle.[7] Being keepless, Limerick had large towers at the angles of its curtain walls.[8] This made it possible for the garrison to fire along the walls through loopholes. A large gate building, with two half-round towers, was built on either side of the gateway, which served instead of a keep as the quarters of the constable, who was then in a position to have the gate under his constant observation. From there he could order his garrison to fire dropping shots against the besiegers. There was yet another device, called the machicolation, a battlement parapet carried on projecting stones with slots in the floor, through which the men inside poured boiling pitch or threw heavy stones at those outside. The north-west tower in Limerick, which contained most of these features, is thought to have been the first part of the castle to have been built.[9]

Unfortunately, there is no evidence as to the progress or otherwise of the building. What little we have suggests that there were constant interruptions, as in 1205, when Myler de Bermingham besieged the town and took it by force. But Myler's incursion was not the only reason for the delay in getting on with the work. Some of the king's followers, knowing his anxiety to speed up the erection of the castle and other fortifications, had begun to occupy lands belonging to the bishop of Limerick. But the king, being determined to keep on good terms with the church, issued a prohibition against erecting any buildings on land belonging to the bishop. In his letter to all concerned, John told them 'that the rights of his venerable in Christ, D. bishop of Limerick should be strictly guarded in reference to the contemplated castle and the other muniments and fortifications and that nothing whatsoever should be done to interfere with church property until his arrival in Ireland'. He promised to see the bishop fully satisfied in everything connected with the proposed fortifications.[10]

This was not the first time that the bishop had to be pacified. When John granted William de Braose the honour of Limerick, with its mills and fisheries in 1200, the bishop protested and claimed that he had rights in connection with the Laxweir long before the king was even thought of! The bishop evidently impressed the king with the validity of his claim, for de Braose was ordered to pay the bishop £10 p.a. out of the profits of the fishery. Some years later de Braose quarrelled with the king and in 1217 the custody of the castle and the city was given to his kinsman, Reginald de Braose.[11]

Reginald's successor, Geoffrey de Marisco, was ordered to surrender all the late king's castles, including that of Limerick, to the new king, Henry III, because of his failure to control expenditure on the royal castles. It was hinted that 'he might have disposed of the revenues more to his own use than to the benefit of the king'.[12] The young king's advisers did not have much confidence in de Marisco. A letter was written to Henry of London, the justiciar, explaining that 'because the threatened raid of foes renders it expedient to constitute as bailiffs, people whom he can trust, he commits, during pleasure, to Richard de Burgh, the castle of Limerick'.[13] But de Burgh did not prove himself any more competent than his predecessor had been, for the castle was neglected during his term of office. In 1224 it was in a state of chaos, its contents 'a lot of broken crockery; the king's goods

7 *Pipe roll Ire., 1211-2*, p. 69.
8 *Pacata Hibernia*, pt. 1, p. 194.
9 Leask, 'Castles in Irish history', p. 239.
10 *The Black Book of Limerick*, ed. James MacCaffery (Dublin, 1907), p. 38.
11 *Cal. doc. Ire., 1171-1251*, no. 786.
12 Orpen, *Normans*, iii, p. 25.
13 *Cal. doc. Ire., 1171-1251*, no. 1114.

scarcely worth more than 18p'. Let it be said in his favour, however, that during the year 1226 'when all the others [castles of Ireland] were fortified against the king, Limerick alone remained faithful'.[14]

Because of the necessity of keeping such an important fortress in repair, a clerk was sent down from Dublin the following year to 'do up' the castle and make the houses inside its walls habitable and suitable for [illegible] a mint and an exchequer.[15] When this was done, the mint resumed its activities and 'treasure' was sent down from Dublin for its use.[16] Despite the large sums of money spent on the mint, it had ceased to function within a few months of the 'treasure's' arrival because of the dishonesty of the officials. The bailiff was ordered to 'use the prison of the town to confine offenders amongst the officers of the king's mint until they shall have been punished for their offences'. Shortly afterwards, £20,000 was removed from Limerick and taken up to Carrickfergus to form a mint there.[17] Equally serious from the viewpoint of the city's defences, was the dishonesty of the constables and sheriffs of the time. For example, Roger de Lees who combined both offices in his own person, was notorious, amongst other things, for taking bribes from wealthy citizens who had transgressed the law, whom he then released. He was accused of keeping for his own use the sum of £12 which had been paid to Walter Fitzjohn for the safekeeping of the castle. When the case came to court, the well-bribed jury aquitted him whilst Walter was accused of making a false claim.[18] However, de Lees finally met his match in the person of John Dullard, chancellor of the cathedral, who took him to court and complained 'that Roger de Lees took and imprisoned him in the castle when he was on his way to the dean's house on a business against Roger'.[19] Dullard won his case and in turn, de Lees went to prison!

The safekeeping of hostages was of greater importance to the king's interests than that of mere criminals in the gaol, who could easily bribe their way out with a man like de Lees in control. Shortly after this an extra chamber was built inside the castle to keep hostages more securely, and in 1297 a new wall was erected around the river front and watchmen appointed to prevent escapes.[20] However, the condition of the castle continued to deteriorate. When John Wogan, the justiciar, visited Limerick in 1312 he was horrified at the state in which he found it. He immediately ordered the treasurer and barons 'to survey the castle, situated in the dangerous march lands between the English and the Irish and to repair the same'. He considered it to be so 'threatened with ruin and so broken down on all sides and fallen down that peril may arise if it is not soon repaired and unless turrets and crenels be constructed'. Wogan's visit was probably the result of a plea sent to the king and council by John de Asey, the constable, requesting that the castle be repaired, crenellated and turreted.[21] It comes as a surprise, when looking at the 1633 drawing of Limerick castle (as printed in *Pacata Hibernia*), that the crenels and turrets shown were not included in King John's original building. Could it be that Wogan was responsible for their introduction into the structure of Irish castles? We know that some work was done in 1313, enough possibly to prevent Edward Bruce from attempting to take the city, but not enough to stop a wholesale prison break in 1318. These frequent references to mass escape suggest that the fault may have lain with the constables as much as with the structure of the gaol.

14 Ibid., no. 1145.
15 Ibid., no. 1514.
16 Ibid., no. 3201.
17 Ibid.
18 *Cal. justic. rolls Ire., 1308-14*, p. 309.
19 Ibid., *1295-1303*, p. 2.
20 T.J. Westropp, 'The ancient castles of the county of Limerick' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, no. 47 (1907), pp 31-3.
21 *Cal. close rolls, 1307-13*, p. 484; P.R.O., sc8/89/4429.

William Skelton, who had just escaped from Corfe castle, was considered suitable to hold office as constable in 1327. He was succeeded by yet another member of the de Lees family to whom several payments for the maintenance of the castle were made but whether used for that purpose or not is open to doubt.[22]

In May 1330 the O'Briens attacked the city and killed the sheriff. They allowed no food into the town.[23] Faced with the prospect of losing the fortress, the king made arrangements to provide 'the garrison with casks of wine, crannocks of wheat and beans, pigs and beef'.[24] There is no evidence as to how long the siege lasted, but after this event no outsider could be found to take on the custody of the castle. Eventually, a local merchant, John White, was appointed on condition that 'he furnished sufficient security for the safe keeping of the castle and to repair fifty feet of wall which had fallen down, and to provide at his own expense six men-at-arms to guard the castle'.[25] White only lasted for one year, probably because the earl of Desmond, who had been arrested in the city, had managed to escape, possibly with the constable's assistance.[26] All the evidence we have suggests that a combination of riots in Limerick, O'Brien's attack on the city and Desmond's escape led to a change in royal policy concerning the administration of the king's castles. The next justiciar, Anthony Lucy, an experienced soldier with no Irish connections, appointed one of his own trustworthy men, Alexander Fetherstonhaugh as constable in Limerick.[27] And significantly, the next time Desmond was arrested he was not left in Limerick, but taken to Dublin castle, where Fetherstonhaugh was also in charge.[28]

Limerick was still a beleaguered city in 1332 when O'Brien and Macnamara, after capturing Bunratty, moved across the Shannon and seized the castle, killed its constable, released all the hostages held there and finally chased Bambere, the mayor, and his citizens across the bridge. However, he soon rallied his forces, retook the fortress and hanged any Irish he could find. As a result of these disturbances, the city was so impoverished that a petition was sent to the king asking 'that the arrears of the farm be pardoned because of the activities of the Irish of Thomond and Macdermot'.[29]

Comparative peace seems to have descended upon Limerick whilst John d'Ufford, who succeeded the murdered constable, held the office.[30] He was followed by Peter O'Keyburn, probably the first Irishman to be appointed. There is a certain significance in this appointment for it suggests a more liberal attitude towards the Irish, which also emerged with the appointment of William Quhynouran as king's surgeon and a grant for life 'in consideration of good services over seas'. This grant was to be extended to his heirs, even though he was Irish by birth.[31]

By the time William of Windsor came as justiciar in 1369, most of the land west of the Shannon had reverted to the Irish, who were now a constant threat to the city. The capture of the earl of Desmond and his Anglo-Irish followers at Magio brought the governor down post haste in an attempt to relieve the city, now surrounded by O'Brien and Macnamara. The latter burnt down the drawbridge and entered the town by night to rescue his two daughters, then held prisoners in the

22 *Cal. pat. rolls, 1327-30*, p. 28; P.R.O., sc8/122/6065.
23 *Cal. memoranda rolls, 31 Edward III*, m.34.
24 R.I.A., Haliday coll. 12 D 14, p.57.
25 *Cal. pat. rolls, 1327-30*, p. 545.
26 Robin Frame, *English lordship in Ireland, 1318-1361* (Oxford, 1982), pp 202-3.
27 *Cal. pat. rolls, 1327-30*, p. 28.
28 Frame, *English lordship*, p. 210.
29 Philomena Connolly, 'Irish material in the class of ancient petitions (sc8) in the Public Record Office, London' in *Anal. Hib.* 34 (1987), p. 20; P.R.O. sc8/58/2866.
30 Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 51, n. 3.
31 *Cal. pat. rolls, 1340-3*, pp 84, 85.

castle.[32] The girls had been well treated for the constable was allowed a hundred shillings for their maintenance.[33] Windsor deemed it unwise at this stage to attempt the recapture of the city, but instead awaited reinforcements at Adare. Meanwhile, O'Brien and Macnamara took and burnt the city after appointing Siodh Macnamara as governor. But the citizens, knowing they were soon to be relieved, turned on Siodh and killed him.[34] By this time Windsor was ready to set off from Adare to retake Limerick. While there is no information as to how this was achieved, we know that John Macnamara had been defeated and the city was back in English hands by 15 December 1370, when Macnamara 'humbly sued for peace' and promised to cease molesting the citizens or attacking their castle.[35] In the truce which followed, Windsor demanded 1000 fat cows and the right to take 1000 trees from the woods of Cratloe. These trees were delivered to the citizens to defray the cost of rebuilding the castle.[36] By ordering the re-fortification of the city with the proceeds rather than enriching the exchequer, Windsor alienated the Anglo-Irish, but to him the defence of the only fortress capable of commanding the lower Shannon was the first priority. And in pursuance of this policy the mayor was pardoned 'all monies due from the farm of the city, so that the city may be fortified properly'.[37]

After Windsor was recalled to England in 1372, O'Brien and Macnamara broke out again and were joined by Richard Og de Burgh, and most of the Irish of Munster and Connacht.[38] Kildare, who had succeeded him as justiciar, came down to Limerick to deal with the situation, but soon realising that the castle was in no fit state to stand another siege 'granted payments to Richard Og and several Irish chiefs' in order to buy them off.[39] When Windsor resumed his office in 1374, he found the castle in an appalling state, with the Irish on the rampage again in the surrounding counties, preparing to attack the city at any moment. John de Beverely, the constable, who had surrendered the city in 1370, was immediately dismissed, the Laxweir taken into the king's hands and 'ordinances made for the keeping thereof to the king's profit'. Windsor took on the office of constable himself and started making preparations to launch an attack against the Irish in Thomond. Nothing, however, came of these preparations as most of his men deserted for want of pay.[40] After Windsor's final departure in June 1376, no further attempts were made to attack the O'Briens across the river, and the castle reverted to its former role of providing suitable accommodation for the governor and his entourage. Ormond, the next justiciar, made the castle his headquarters when he arrived in February 1377 to levy money on the citizens in order to pay off — and pacify — renegade O'Briens and Macnamaras who had earlier agreed to join the royal forces.[41]

By 1383 no more money was made available to maintain or repair the castle, which is not surprising when we discover that Richard l'Enfaunt, the sheriff and many of the officials had attempted to defraud the king during Windsor's term of office.[42] As a result of this, the next constable, Thomas Brightrick, was appointed on condition that he maintain the castle and 'pay the king a tun of salmon and a

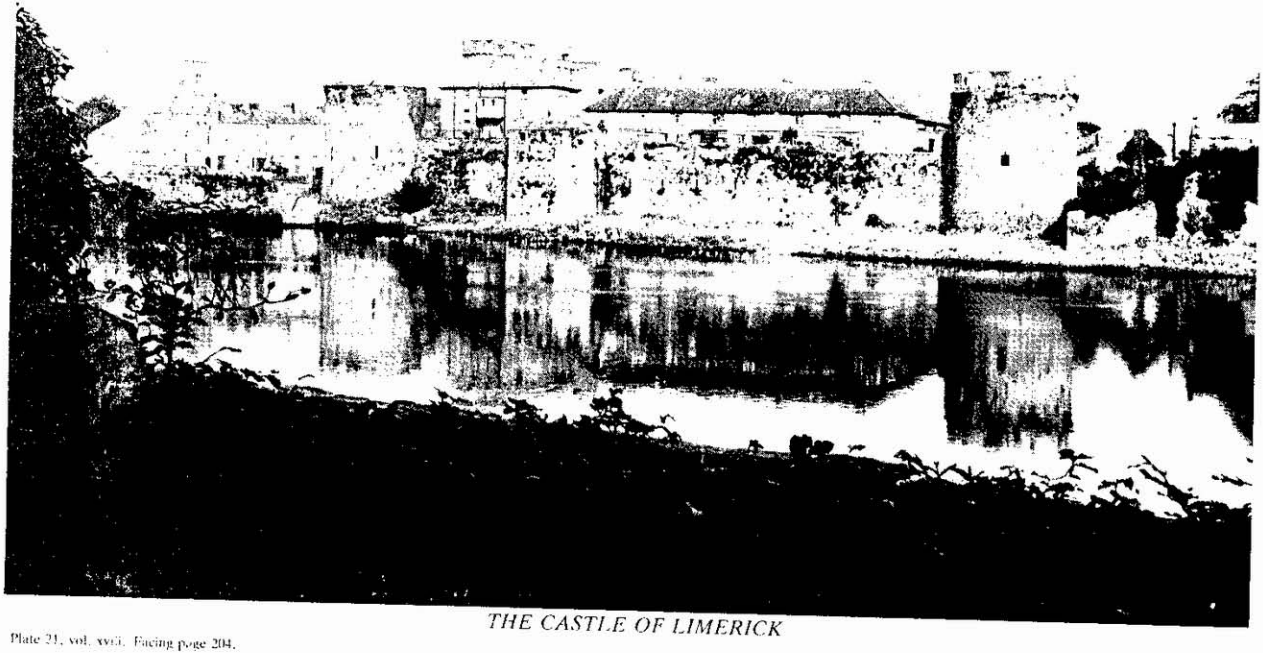
32 P.R.O., E. 101/245/3, m. 267.
33 Ibid., m. 262.
34 Ibid., m. 267.
35 Lambeth Palace Library, Carew MSS, vol. 605, ff 136-7
36 Richardson and Sayles, *Parl. and councils med. Ire.*, i, pp 39, 48.
37 College of Arms, PH 15170, p. 183.
38 *Rot. pat. Hib.*, p.84.
39 Walter Harris, *Collectanea de rebus Hibernicis*, iii, p. 100.
40 Ibid., p.211
41 B.L., Egerton MSS, no. 78, P. 111357.
42 College of Arms, PH1517, p. 397.

pipe of lampreys yearly'.[43] These conditions were continued throughout the reign of Richard II when it was stipulated that the profits from the weir were to be spent on repairs to the castle.

As time went on, the calibre and efficiency of the constables deteriorated still further. No one of importance wanted the office, which eventually was undertaken by a deputy.[44] Under the [illegible] Lancastrian administration, Limerick soon became the worst maintained castle in the country. Its citizens were so afraid of Gaelic infiltration that in 1414 they forbade any Irishman to be admitted into apprenticeship, nor were they satisfied with the management of the castle, the main part of which was in ruins. When the earl of Desmond was appointed constable in 1423, his tenure of office was opposed because of his increasing Gaelicisation. Eventually the burghers of the city became so exasperated by Desmond's neglect and by official incompetence that they petitioned the king 'as it had often nearly been lost by carelessness and treachery of its custodians, that the castle be given into their care'. This was duly done, on the understanding that they kept it in good repair.[45]

For the next forty years this was the policy pursued by the Dublin government. The custody of the castle was entrusted to prosperous Limerick merchants, such as the Arthurs or the Creaghs, rather than to English officials or great Anglo-Irish nobles.[46] It was very much in the interests of the merchant class to safeguard the port and its docks from enemy action. When the city was surrounded and cut off from its hinterland in 1450, all supplies had to brought in by sea.[47] From this period onwards, Limerick rarely figured in the official records. As time went on, its connection with the English government became purely nominal. Like Galway, Cork or Waterford it had almost developed into a little self-governing state with its own magistrates and officials. It excluded the king's judges and the profits of the pleas were no longer sent to Dublin, but were to be paid to two local merchants, Thomas Comyn and Phillip Russel 'for the good of the city and its fortifications, which were still in need of repair'.[48] Moreover, by the early years of the sixteenth century the citizens had begun to look after their own defences and to protect themselves both from the sea and the land. In the Arthur MSS there is a description, dated 1505, of pirates who came up to the 'very water gates of the city but the citizens had a great tri-oared galley, fitted out with all things necessary for the purpose of guarding our port and protecting the public interests against pirates'.[49] And if one may judge by Stanihurst's description of the city in 1577 as 'having sumptuous and substantial buildings and a quay where ships of 200 tons may berth',[50] they succeeded very well, not only in protecting themselves against all and sundry, but in making their city both prosperous and safe.

43 *Cal. pat. rolls, 1381-5*, p. 397.
44 Ibid., *1391-6*, p. 502.
45 Westropp, 'Limerick', p. 38; P.R.O. sc8/121/6025; *Cal. pat. rolls, 1422-9*, p. 390.
46 Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 51.
47 Art Cosgrove, 'The emergence of the Pale, 1399-1447' in *A new history of Ireland*, ii, p. 543.
48 *Cal. pat. rolls, 1429-36*, p. 261.
49 Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 76.
50 Timothy O'Neill, *Merchants and mariners in medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1987), p. 49.



THE CASTLE OF LIMERICK

Plate 21, vol. xvii. Facing page 204.