THE EARTHWORKS AND CASTLE OF BUNRATTY, CO. CLARE.

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The Castle of Bunratty, one of the most historic sites of Co. Clare, having at last found a historian, I gladly follow the suggestion of Dr. Macnamara and Dr. Fogerty by giving as briefly as is consistent with clearness a study of its remains. Without further preamble, I may premise that in the once far broader estuary of the tidal Shannon, the ancient Laimnéach (from which the Norse city of Limerick obtained its name), where the lesser river (called the Raite and the Owenogarna) joined it, there lay a low peninsula of drift clay among the marshes. It was a sort of annexe to the limestone ridge, on the southern slope of which stands the modern house of Bunratty. No doubt this was frequently isolated before the growth of waterplants and the consequent deposits of mud and vegetable soil raised the corcass lands. The hillock is still partly surrounded at high tides, or in seasons of flood, which must have been commoner once than at present, when sheets of forest covered the hills and large portions of the plains of both of the present counties Limerick and Clare. It had often puzzled me, in examining the latter county for antiquities, where to locate the remarkable work recorded in the “Wars of the Gaedhil” and “Triumphs of Torlough” as made for protection of a Danish colony about 960, and of the Norman colony in Tradree about 1280. Both accounts state that “it ran from the river to the sea.” All knew that the latter was the estuary, and the former (at least in the later record) the Owenogarna. Most (and I inclined to their view) thought that the fosse and mound ran from the latter to Latoon creek, but I had carefully sought for any trace between these points in vain. Some, with inexcusable carelessness, identified the mound and ditch with the great stone hill-town of Moghane Fort—a structure most probably of the bronze age, and about as
unlike a boundary fosse and mound as could well be imagined. I therefore was ready to examine the claims of any better theory with favour, and as such I believe the theory of Dr. Macnamara in this matter can be regarded. If (as I consider most probable) he is right, the low marshy line, marked by flaggers and pools of water, in the bottom of the hollow between Bunratty House and the garden, marks the fosse, then it was a striking, but probable, work, well within the ability of the little Norman colony. On going over the site we find the low island of firm ground girt along its ridge by the remains of a great ditch, 2,000 feet long, well preserved for about eight hundred feet to the south and south-west. It is from 20ft. to 30ft. wide, and 11ft. below the reveted bank along the face of the rising ground; the bank is still from 6ft to 8ft. high all around. Where the ditch stops defence was no longer needed, for evidently the river on one side and the deep marshes to the south shut off access. Probably the desire in later days to obliterate an undesirable obstruction across the parks beside the castle led to pains being taken to fill up the ditch with the mound, and so only the swampy trace remains, where, so late as the time of the siege (1642), the side to the north was defended.

Mote.—On the summit of the "island," to the N.W. of the present castle, stands a curious earthwork, covered with trees and bushes. Unlike the ring forts and most motes, it is oblong—a platform 10 to 12ft. high, 70ft. long, and 46ft. wide. A fosse, 18ft. wide, and outer mound, 10ft. wide, is well marked along its western side, and seems to run south. I am not confident as to the other works, but not impossibly Dr. Fogerty is right in finding two terraces in the field (where not injured by gravel pits) forming an upper and lower baily. When I first ventured to suggest that it and the diamond-shaped platform of Culleen were motes of the early Norman colony of Tradree, I expected sharp criticism, leading to better light on the subject. Neither expectation has been fulfilled. Accordingly I can merely repeat my original suggestion that it may have been the base either of the castle of Robert de Musegros, about 1250, or of some bretasche defending the De Clare's castle and town of Bunratty at the end of the century. There was more than probably a baily, but the gravel pits and the garden must have utterly effaced it to
the north and the south. There are two different slopes to the east of the mound, the upper slightly marked, the lower a bold terrace planted with trees and about 5ft. high. I do not make any assertion, but it is not impossible that they may be ancient. The arrangement recalls the De Burgo’s castle at Ardrahin and similar fortresses.

The Church with its graveyard stands in what may be the middle of the Norman vill. The dedication is forgotten, and there is no record of a church being there in pre-Norman times. Its advowson pertained to the De Clares. No trace of remains attributable to the latter family, such as we find at the venerable churches of St. Luchtighern mac Ui Trato, at Tomfinlough, or that of St. Finghin, at Quin, near the De Clares’ second castle. The present structure can hardly be many years earlier or later than 1500 (probably built or rebuilt by the Macnamaras or O’Briens).

Beyond the church is the massive buttressed pier of the ancient pigeon house. Before turning to the existing castle it may be well for me to recall the only fortress of Thomas De Clare which has survived to our time. In 1280 the Annals of Innisfallen record the building of his castle at Quin. This is borne out by the Cathreim Thoirdhhealbhaigh in recording the fatal visit of Domnall beg, King Torlough’s brother, to “the round towery castle of Cuinche” in 1279. Embodied in the beautiful monastery of Quin we find a strong fortress, the walls over 9 feet thick. The gateway was utilized as a tiny chapel under the belfry of the “Abbey”; great round turrets lie at the south and north-east angles of the courtyard, with deep embrasures and narrow loopholes and doors; a curving staircase ascends the eastern wall near the N.E. turret. The S.E. bastion with the curtain wall near the gateway was defended by a rock-cutting. The courtyard within the walls is about 100 feet square, the turrets about 40 feet across.

No such work is apparent at Bunratty. As we have seen, there are records of a stone tower and other buildings; the courtyards and outworks were probably mere fences palisaded, as at the outer baily of Desmond’s castle at Adare and many another fortress—no great safeguard in a land of fire raisings.¹

¹ See Dr. George Macnamara’s paper supra p. 237.
The Castle.

The later Castle of Bunratty is a remarkable building, about as different a structure from any of the peel towers and castles of either Limerick or Clare as can well be imagined. The masonry so fine in them, usually of strong grouted rubble, with a facing of fairly large, beautifully laid blocks, is here replaced by unusually small stonework, with large, long and short, quoin blocks alternating up the corners. The design consists of a central block, with three storeys, each with a large room, and at each corner a nearly square turret, with a small cell in its basement and five storeys, the three lower having each a vaulted ceiling, the two upper in each tower, with an attic, being under one brick vault. To the N. and S. the towers are joined by very slightly curved arches, on which rested upper rooms, over the space between the turrets; there is also a vaulted under storey or cellar between the northern ones. A vaulted terrace on the river side to the east runs from middle to middle of each tower on that side; there is a similar one along the south face of the south-eastern one, and evidently the vaulting ran as a continuation farther between the south turrets. The Constabulary barracks now fill the western interspace, and a section of the 18th century house of the Studderts, dark and narrow, fills the northern space. To this at some period flights of steps (perhaps to a northern short terrace or platform) rose along the towers in opposite directions, the mark being faintly seen where they abutted against the towers without a bond. Considerable alterations, not in the main structure, but to the older windows, took place early in the 17th century under Donat, "the Great Earl" of Thomond; externally imitation shallow quoins, "long and short," were made round the windows of the towers; the shafts of the south window were replaced by woodwork; it originally had three trefoil headed lights and cusped tracery. The side windows, with two trefoil headed lights in each, were also modified. There seems to be no staircase from the ground to the level of the paved or lower hall. I say "seems" for the continuation may be buried, but I could find no trace in the vaults below. It will help to give a suggestion of the proportion of the storeys to say that 16 steps lead outside to the terrace; 17 from the paved hall to the next storey in the towers and passages in the haunches of the great vault; 19 more to the
PLAN AT THE PAVED HALL.
level of the great upper hall, and 19 more to the storey above the chapel; 17 to the top room, and 8 to the attic; 19 from hall to N.E. chapel and ladies' rooms; 80 in all from the paved hall to the water tables of the turrets, or 96 if the steps to the terrace be included. The great under vault and the second athwart its north face are featureless, slightly pointed and smooth plastered; they were entered through a neat moulded round-headed door in the northern wall; the southern window has been broken into a shapeless gap to the south, the entrance to the main basement vault; the wall is 9ft. thick there. The bases of the towers have small vaults, reached by trap doors in the floors on the level of the paved hall. These were covered by flag stones in the northern and S.W. rooms, but are filled nearly to the top with earth and rubbish, save where idlers or treasure seekers have dug down into them. One of these pits probably originated the unfounded idea that the N.E. room was a "bath room," but the same is said of another room two storeys higher in the same turret. In the S.E. turret matters are different; a small door and steep little flight of steps from the paved hall (the latter lit by a slit about 9ft. deep) lead down to a small cell, evidently a dungeon, some feet below the lintel of its door, but probably much filled and apparently unlighted.

There is little gain in giving minute measurements where the plans of the chief storeys are given. The northern face measures: the towers each about 22ft. 8in., the interspace 20ft. 10in., the topmost room over its arch is 33ft. long. The south face has the S.W. tower 23ft. 6in. each way; the S.E. one 23ft. 1in., and 23ft. 5in. deep; the interspace also about 21ft. The east face has an interspace 42ft. 4in., the towers 23ft. 5in. and 24ft. wide, projecting 9ft. 10in. The paved hall is 45ft. by 25ft. 9in.; the upper hall 25ft. high, 46ft to 47ft. long, and about 30ft. wide, the building being somewhat irregular. The different storeys (save the larger chapel and the two basement storeys of the S.E. tower) have a small room with a passage and garderobe beside it.

We shall now note each storey, beginning at the PAVED HALL. The latter is a dark vaulted room; there were windows opening on the east terrace; the northern, if not originally a door, is defaced and modern piers built; the wall there is 9ft. thick. In the middle of the east wall is a large early 17th century fireplace of well-cut
limestone, without ornaments; behind it in the thickness of the wall a small crooked cell, with a small window to the east, is reached by a door in the adjoining window recess. This last window opens east close to the S.E. turret, and has, besides the door to the dungeon, a second one in its right jamb leading into a little crooked passage 2ft. wide to a window slit in the S. interspace, where also is staircase to the third storey of the S.E. tower. The passage has two other slits in its N. wall, and leads to a small room with walls 6ft. or 7ft. thick, a deep recessed east window, and two ambries. No trace is visible of a south window, but the room was plastered in late times. The south window of the paved hall is in a deep recess, and has been more than once altered; no trace of the mediaeval light is visible. It has a large red brick outer arch built up for over 6ft., with two small loops. The basement room in the S.E. tower is entered through the police barrack, the large late door from which into the hall is permanently closed. The little vaulted room is reached by a crooked passage 13ft. long. It has windows to the S. and W., and a cupboard recess to the N. A manhole to the little vault below is open in the floor. Along its east side is a continuation of the passage, with a light to the S. and steps to a little garderobe. The walls here are over 6ft. thick. The north end of the paved hall has a passage 11ft. 6in. long to the lower storey of the northern late house. A cross passage leads to the rooms in the northern towers. To the left is a very irregular, somewhat triangular, room, used in latter times as a kitchen or buttry, with an oblong ope into the paved hall, a fireplace and a closed east light. Inside of it a passage with small slits leads to a garderobe in the E. wall of the N.E. turret. The room in the tower was called "the Earl's study" or "office" in 1885. As usual, it is a vaulted room a step below the other floors, with a long pit. It had lights to the N. and E., the latter closed, and is richly decorated with stucco work. In the west wall is a lion passant in a rich border, with flowers; below is a recess for shelves. The crest of the O'Briens appears to the east on the vault, and on the S. wall are their arms, three lions passant, under the Earl's coronet. The last is greatly defaced with thick whitewash.

The western reach of the passage has a large spiral stair to the upper hall, and runs on to the N.W. tower. The room here is a
STUCCO WORK IN THE "STUDY."

Photo by [Geo. J. Fogarty, R.N.]
HEAD OF THE SOUTH WINDOW, GREAT HALL.

DOOR AND STAIRCASE IN N.E. CORNER OF THE UPPER HALL.
plain vault, with a pit, and windows to the N. and W., and walls over 7ft. thick. In the east wall is a passage and garderobe only recently opened since 1906. We ascend the spiral stair to another cross passage at the 11th step giving access to narrow cells and passages in the haunches of the vault of the paved hall. In the N.E. tower the vaulted room has N. and E. windows, with black marble sills and seats to either side, the walls 5ft. thick. The usual passage and garderobe in the thickness of the S.E. angle exists. The little room in the vault flank may have communicated with the staircase and passage in the same farther south, but, if so, the connection is built up.

In the N.W. tower the second room is vaulted and has lights to the N. and W., the walls 6ft. thick. It has richly decorated stucco work on the vault, with pomegranates and flowers, and probably has a passage and garderobe now built up.

Quite detached from this wing are the southern "second floor" rooms on the same level. They are reached from the upper hall, which lies up 19 steps, or 36 from the terrace. That in the S.E. tower is reached by a door and staircase in the left jamb of the southern window of the east side. A short passage leads to a spiral staircase of 13 steps, with another passage southward. The room is also reached (as we noted) by a breakneck stair from the lower storey. It is vaulted and plain, with ambries to the S. and E., a stopped window to the W. In the S.W. turret lies a similar room, reached from the corresponding W. window of the upper hall by a similar stair of 12 steps and passages. It is, like the others, a plain vaulted room, with S. and W. lights and much modernized; in the E. wall is the usual passage and garderobe.

The Upper Hall is a fine and handsome room; as originally designed it had two pointed recessed windows, with two trefoil-headed lights to either side and a large round splayed south window, with four trefoil-headed lights and cusped foliage. This was altered by the Great Earl about 1620 by replacing the heavier stone frame by a wooden one of three lights, also closing the tracery with stucco work, displaying the O'Brien crest and covering the splay arch with a rich stucco pattern of vines and flowers, still well preserved. Unfortunately during the Studdert occupation the upper rooms were not used; lean-to roofs were built to
either side, with a gutter down the middle of the hall, and still remained in dilapidation in 1885. Accordingly the fine stucco ornaments of the S. end, round and above the window, have nearly all perished, female figures growing out of floral and leaf designs (of the kind denounced by Ruskin as “a pottage of vegetables and the heads and limbs of meek wild beasts”), while scroll work and panelled frames appear everywhere in too fragmentary a state to restore its general effect. The windows have fine views across and down the river, over the corcass land to the Cratloe Hills, the Galtees, and the turreted rock of Carrigogunnell, the chief O’Brien stronghold across the Shannon.²

Of the towers on the level of the upper hall, the S.E. contains the very interesting chapel, with its ornate ceiling. A large window, its sill and wall now removed, enabled the congregation in the hall to see and hear the service. The chapel is a modification of one of the vaulted rooms; the ceiling is covered with a bold pattern, panelled, and with vine and corn, symbolic of the bread and wine. In plan the room is very irregular; it had three deep window recesses to the E., S. and W., but the last was made into a rounded niche, with cupboards or hiding places behind it, I presume for the church plate.³

A plain ambry and a 15th century piscina, with a quatrefoil basin and rich foliage in the spandrels of its ogee head are in the S.E. corner. To the north an irregular flight of steps (6 straight, the rest spiral) leads up the wall in a N.E. angle, 19 steps to the battlements of the hall, and the next turret storey; 17 more to the top room of the towers, and 8 more (90 from the ground upward) to the battlement of the S.E. tower itself, a dangerous spot, whence at least one reckless person was hurled and dashed to pieces 100ft. below. The rooms over the chapel may be concluded here. The lowest has modernized windows; its ceiling, with the wooden floor of the next storey, rested on plain curved corbels. There are a garderobe and a small cell at a lower level to the west; 13 steps lead to the landing. The tower has an attic with a brick vault over it. On the level of this top room is a long narrow room or passage

³ Father Mooney, in 1619, tells how the Great Earl, “that worthy nobleman,” retained the church plate of Quin Monastery, which the Friars had handed to him for safe keeping.
STUCCO WORK, CEILING OF THE CHAPEL.
1906.

PLAN AT THE UPPER HALL.

SCALE

0  10  20  30  40

FEET
across the southern interspace; over the well-known lofty flat arch is a deep recessed long window, with remains of rich floriate designs on the stucco of its splay, and divided into lights plain, chamfered and oblong. In its N. wall, against the S. gable of the upper hall, is a good plain limestone fireplace and a lofty chimney.

Of the other turret rooms on the hall level, the S.W. tower, reached from the S. jamb of the west window, has a crooked passage to a garderobe in its E. wall, and a plain vaulted room with old windows to the S. and W., and ambrys in the S.W. corner. In the passage a spiral stair, at the S. angle of the western interspace, gives access to the upper storeys, of which I may here dispose. At the 16th step we reach the next floor, similar in plan, with the garderobe and passage to the E. and windows to the S. and W., with stone seats to either side of their recesses. Over it was a ceiling and wooden floor of the upper room, with corresponding windows, and two doors at the N.E. angle to recesses in the wall. The top window has a shaft and two oblong lights of the 1610 period. The attic vault is of brick; 15 more steps lead to this storey, but no further. The N.E. turret has the so-called "Bath Room" (some apply this term as absurdly, though more plausibly, to the "Earl's Study," with its long oblong pit). I never heard this tale on my many earlier visits, or from the late Mr. Studdert of Bunratty, when he very kindly explained the building (in which he was born) to me, and I noted his account in 1896. The room is vaulted, has lights to the N. and E., with stone seats to the sides, and a garderobe passage at the S.E. angle. Between the upper hall and the Studderts' house is a small room much filled by fallen debris. In the S.W. angle of the hall is a staircase which commands the "Bath Room" passage by a shot hole. To this I must allude later on, as the stair leads to the "Drawing Room."

The N.W. Tower is reached by the usual irregular passage at the spiral stair head and from the upper hall. In the N.W. angle of the last are a door and closed spiral stair probably leading to the upper rooms before the approach from the "Drawing Room" was made. The N.W. vaulted room has ambrys to the E. and S.W. angle, and a window to the west. The garderobe and passage are to the east. Returning to the N.E. staircase, we
ascend up two steps to a neat pointed door, with two bolt holes. Here we find the shot hole which commands the passage to the "Bath Room." The stair is lighted by narrow slits to the east. The 19th step brings us to a passage and garderobe in the S.E. angle of the N.E. tower. Formerly a lintelled doorway led direct into the main room, but this was built up and a new one broken through the end of a fireplace in its west wall. Beside the stair-case door is a gargoylike sink for emptying slops—I presume not used after the terrace was built.

**Upper Chapel.**—The main room was fitted up as a chapel; the old door opened back into a shallow recess beside an ambyry in the west. There are large windows to the E. and N.; beside the former is a neat piscina (with a plain ogee head and broken basin), supporting the tradition of the room being "the Ladies' Chapel."

![Diagram of Upper Storey of North Wing](image)

The **Drawing Room** runs on a vaulting over the north interspace; there are two defaced windows over the great arch facing north; the more eastern retains the last crumbling fragment of its stucco, showing that this, like the upper hall, was once decorated; no other trace is visible, even in the chapel, save some apparently elaborate work over a curiously jogged chimney-piece in the upper room. There was evidently an attic reached from this room
and running to the opposite (N.W.) turret over the "Drawing Room." There is a corbelling and a row of beamholes at the east end of the latter apartment. The rest of this once fine room is utterly defaced; its south window looking into the upper hall is rebuilt; a modern chimney from the barrack has broken up its S.W. corner; the Studderts made lean-to roofs just above its floor with a central gutter out through the west room, and its window and a handsome moulded fireplace have been shattered to pieces.

It is thought that the problematical carving now set in the north wall of the upper hall fell (more likely was thrown by some empty-headed idler or child) from this room. It seems of the late 15th century, and I make no assertion as to the date on it, save to doubt the popular idea that it commemorates the foundation year of the castle. The room in the N.W. tower has a joggled fireplace to the S; an amby and window to the W., and a window broken by a later chimney to the north; the rooms over it had wooden floors, and need little notice. If (as is probable) there was a garderobe and passage to the east, it was pulled down to add to the length of the Drawing Room; every part of this side of the building has been patched and modified, so that it is only interesting as a problem. I find no stair to the upper storeys of this turret, unless the closed staircase led to them. Those in the N.E. tower are reached by the spiral staircase—17 steps to the roof gutters of the upper hall and the door to the top room of the tower, 8 more to the break near the top of the latter.

In brief we have a late 15th century building, which may date about 1460 to 1480; only its details have been altered in later ages, notably in the reign of James I. by Donat the Great Earl of Thomond; anything after that implied mutilation or deterioration. It is hard to realize the rapturous account of Rinnuccini as to this palace; he, too, to whom the magnificent fabrics of Italy and probably of the other southern nations were familiar. Still when the great hall, with its rich hangings and its stucco work, gilt and coloured, glimmered on sunny days or in torchlight, when portraits (some now extant at Dromoland) hung on its walls, and the richly clad company of the Earl and Countess trod its pavements, the place must have indeed seemed palatial to the inhabitants of smoke-grimed or white-washed peel towers.
The tradition that the N.E. tower was De Clare’s castle deserves no attention. All the towers and the central building are of one period, nearly a century and a half later than that May morning in 1318 when “Claraghmore” and his 80 knights and soldiers fell on the banks of the stream near Dysert O’Dea. It is improbable that there was much moulding or ornamental detail in a castle built by either Thomas or Richard de Clare. However, no fragment of any earlier building is recognizable in the walls of Bunnratty, nor do any foundations of towers appear in the fields near it. The very church is late. Of course there was a great outburst of building and restoration after 1400, which may account for this. Very few of the monasteries or churches of Co. Clare fail to show signs of this revival. The traditions as to the builders of the peel towers, so far as these men have been identified, fall in very well with the architectural phenomena. The O’Briens and MacNamaras, after the final destruction of the older Bunnratty, may well have acted on (if they even did not know) the saying, “down with the nests and the rooks will fly.” When the English power was at its weakest there was no reason for not building a castle with which the English colonists dared not meddle, and which bridled their trade for the benefit of the chiefs. At that time there were probably mere heaps of debris of the Norman stronghold, so the designers could build (unhampered by any existing ruin) a new castle in the favourite style of their generation at Bunnratty. This is the scene of the stirring later history that Dr. Macnamara has striven to describe.