



DUNDRUM CASTLE

English Translation

DUNDRUM CASTLE

County Down

History

The place-name, Dundroma (fort of the ridge), suggests an Early Christian fort in the vicinity, and excavation in 1950 produced distinctively pre-Norman finds (including the bronze roundel illustrated above) and dry-stone structures, though the scale and exact nature of the occupation remains uncertain. It is likely that John de Courcy fortified this important site as part of his conquest of Ulster from 1177 onwards, though the first written reference to the castle is not until 1205, after his fall from power. It was one of a string of coastal castles, including Carlingford, Downpatrick and Carrickfergus, by which the Anglo-Normans established their hold on the north-east. It was known then as the castle of Rath from the parish in which it stands, Rathmurbuilg (now Maghera); the name Dundrum is applied to the castle only from the early sixteenth century.#

The castle was besieged unsuccessfully in 1205, and was captured by King John in 1210 when its garrison equalled that at Carrickfergus, a measure of the importance of Dundrum. It passed from royal hands to the earls of Ulster in 1227. Expenditure on repairs recorded in 1260 may have involved the gatehouse, but a 1333 inquisition described 'a ruinous castle, which is of no annual value, because it needs so much repair that nothing can be obtained from it'. During part at least of the later Middle Ages it was in Irish hands (the Magennises). It is said to have been spoiled by Cromwell in 1652, but the seventeenth century probably also saw the construction of the dwelling house in the lower ward by the Blundell family. The castle was placed in State Care by the Marquis of Downshire in 1954, since when an extensive conservation programme has been undertaken.

A Tour of the Castle

It is best to go straight to the original entrance to the Upper Ward at (1). Now simply a gap in the ruined wall, the gate was formerly protected by a drawbridge over a rock-cut pit. The Upper Ward (2) is a roughly oval area of about 2½ acres, surrounded by a certain wall built in short straight lengths. This may have been preceded by defences in earth and timber, but the stone wall must date from soon after the Anglo-Norman invasion. The wall is generally well preserved, especially to the W. where it stands to its full height, including the parapet. It is just under 4 feet thick, with a wall-walk behind the parapet only 18 inches wide, but holes through the wall at this level would have held substantial timbers for a fighting platform (see our hypothetical reconstruction). Dominating the ward is the circular Keep (3), built soon after the curtain and once linked to it by a bridge from a door at first floor level. The principal entrance was originally by another first floor

door, on the SE., now high above ground level but formerly reached by an external stair. The present entrance was made in the fifteenth century. The keep now has a ground floor room and two chambers above, but the original arrangement of the upper part are uncertain because of fifteenth-century rebuilding. The structure is now a shell, but the floor levels are clear from offsets (projecting ledges to hold timbers) and joist-holes. The ground floor was lighted by two widely splayed loops, now blocked, through the immensely thick walls. From this level a large pit was

cut 23 feet deep into the rock for water storage, fed by seepage. Wells are common in castle keeps, but cisterns of this kind are less usual. A spiral stair leads to the first floor room, which once offered grand and comfortable accommodation: note the two windows with seats and, a large hooded fireplace, now ruined. Before the late medieval changes there would have been another comfortable but more private room at second floor level, but the present arrangements belong to the fifteenth century. A series of small inter-connecting chambers (through which the visitor now walks) opened from the large central room, lighted by narrow loops and roofed either with overlapping flags (corbelling) or with vaults which show the imprint of supporting wicker centering, quite different from the plank centering visible at lower levels in the keep. The wall-walk and parapet are largely ruined, but rainwater drainage holes at the base of the parapet are clear. From the summit of the keep there are magnificent views of the Mourne, the sea and the countryside inland. Circular keeps are not common in Ireland, though there is a fine example at Nenagh (Tipperary). In Britain they are best represented in south Wales, the most impressive being at Pembroke, and it is interesting that men from that area were prominent in the late twelfth-century invasion of Ireland. This must be the background for the Dundrum keep – a more adventurous and up-to-date design than the great rectangular keep at Carrickfergus.

A walk round the inside of the curtain wall will reveal other features. Near the keep is a pair of latrines (4): the mark of a vanished gable roof is clear. The latrines emptied through chutes, visible in the outer face of the curtain. At (5) are three splayed loops, pierced through the wall, perhaps in the fifteenth century. Here, opposite the original entrance, was a postern gate, the castle's 'back door', but this was later blocked and is only traceable outside. At (6) is a puzzling feature, a skin of masonry built against the NE. curtain. Excavation nearby found no trace of a stone building here, nor does the curtain need strengthening at this point. The semicircular tower reached by steps beside it is a fairly recent feature, though its date is not known. At (7) is the Gatehouse, added in the later thirteenth century, perhaps the 1260s. Though badly ruined, it must once have been strong and imposing. It was built onto the original curtain, with a central passageway between two towers, square to the Upper Ward but the more easterly one semicircular externally, now alarmingly perched on an undercut rocky scarp. This lop-sided design makes sense when you realise that the only approach was by a narrow sloping path from the SW., blocked by the

semicircular tower. Small rooms in the towers, probably guard-chambers, communicated at an upper level with the wall-walk. The wooden buildings shown in the Upper Ward in our reconstruction are purely hypothetical, but they are a reminder that other less substantial buildings did probably stand within the curtain. We show a hall, a kitchen and a chapel.

Before exploring the Lower Ward the visitor is urged to walk round the outside of the Upper Ward curtain wall: only by doing this can be strength of the site and the scale of the rock-cut ditches be appreciated.

The Lower Ward (8) is now a grassy expanse on the slope below the early castle, and again its lost buildings must be imagined: probably a mixture of residential and agricultural structures. The Lower Ward wall, badly ruined, is clearly later than the Upper Ward, but there are no closely datable features and its date remains uncertain. One possibility is the late thirteenth century, soon after the work already described, but it could well be later, when the castle was in Irish hands. The wall is thicker to the S. and W., the more exposed approaches, than to the E., where parts have collapsed down the steep slope. The entrance (9) is by a simple pointed arch, with a draw-bar socket in the jamb. Near the SW. corner, where the wall is best preserved, several splayed loops are visible, covering the easy approach from the south.

The latest feature is the House (10) built partly against and partly over the curtain wall, probably in the early seventeenth century. Now a gaunt ruin, it must have been a grand and gracious dwelling house, its rubble masonry harled (rendered) and its outline enlivened by dormer windows and

chimney stacks. The house is L-shaped, with the W. wing probably slightly earlier than the E. The rooms are on two floors, with a low basement in the E. wing. All are provided with fireplaces and are well lighted with plenty of windows (some now blocked and some enlarged to form doors). The S. gable of the E. wing stands to its full height, and the scars of decorative triangular pediments can be seen above the ground and first floor windows. The W. curtain against which the house was built has two loops for defence, but the house itself appears to be purely residential, with no defensive features. Dundrum does, therefore, illustrate the change that came about in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the transition from fortification to architecture.

The Site

The castle occupies a magnificent situation, dominating the surrounding country and the sea. It is built on a prominent hill of shale and grits, carved out the ice: the rock is clearly visible, especially under the gatehouse and in the ditch. Sited on the W. shore of Dundrum Inner Bay, it commands a fine natural harbour which offered penetration inland, especially to the fertile Lecale peninsula.

This strategic importance, recognised by the builder of the Early Christian dun and the Anglo-Norman castle, was described by Lord Leonard Grey who took Dundrum in 1538: 'one of the strongest holds in Ireland, and most commodious for defence of the whole country of Lecayle is environed by the sea, and there is no way to enter it by land, but by the said castle'. Dundrum was an important fishing port in the sixteenth century, and doubtless in earlier times too. Although one of the delights of the hill is now its tree cover, the surroundings of the castle must formerly have been far more open: trees would have provided unwelcome cover for assailants.

Further Reading

Waterman, D. M. in *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 14 (1951), 15-29 and 27 (1964), 136-9; *An Archaeological Survey of Co. Down* (H.M.S.O. 1966), 207-11.

Access Uphill to NW. from Dundrum village (grid ref. J404370). Car park below castle.