DE COURCY’S CASTLE: NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE FIRST PHASE OF ANGLO-NORMAN BUILDING ACTIVITY AT CARRICKFERGUS CASTLE, COUNTY ANTRIM

Undoubtedly the most splendid example of Anglo-Norman architecture in Ulster, Carrickfergus Castle, County Antrim, occupies a sea-girt dolerite promontory on the north shore of Belfast Lough, next to the town that grew up in its shadow (Fig. 4). The castle has had a long and varied history and saw continual occupation from its construction in the late 12th century until the 1920s when it was handed over to the Northern Ireland government and placed in State Care. Few other castles in Ireland can show such continuity and yet have so much original fabric still visible.

The historical events leading to the construction of the castle have been rehearsed elsewhere and can be summarised as follows.20 In 1177 an Anglo-Norman knight — John de Courcy — led a small army of 22 knights and 300 foot soldiers from Dublin into the territory of the Ulaidh on the east coast of Ulster in what seems to have been a premeditated and planned attempt to fulfill a land grant authorised by Henry II. The numbers of de Courcy’s army are given by Giraldus Cambrensis, and variations are included in other sources.21 While such figures are probably unreliable, it does appear that de Courcy’s venture was still somewhat speculative. De Courcy had contacts in the north of England,

20 T. E. McNeill, Carrickfergus Castle (Belfast, 1981); C. J. Donnelly, Living Places (Belfast, 1997).
southern Scotland and the Isle of Man, and the promontory at Carrickfergus would have been strategically placed to enable him to communicate with his allies. As such, it was chosen as the site for his principal castle and it would seem that he commenced its construction soon after his arrival in Ulster. It would also seem, however, that de Courcy and his small army faced great difficulties during their first few years in the north, with the Uaithi and the Cenél Eógain making strong efforts to force the intruders out. In 1178 they nearly succeeded in their mission when de Courcy and his soldiers were ambushed during an expedition to North Antrim.

In 1181, however, the Cenél Eógain carried out a raid on the Uaithi. After this date there is no record of any fighting having occurred between the Anglo-Normans and the Uaithi and a new political agreement would seem to have been reached between the latter and de Courcy. While the MacDonlevys remained in some sense kings of the Uaithi, de Courcy became the ‘Princeps’ of Ulster, a role he maintained until he was deposed in 1204 by another Anglo-Norman lord, Hugh de Lacy (perhaps working under the auspices of King John), who then took over the de Courcy lands.

Previous Study of de Courcy’s Castle

While in government ownership since the 1920s, it was not until the 1960s that the castle’s fabric received detailed academic study, first by Jope for a guide-book, and then by McNeill for a comprehensive monograph. McNeill’s assessment of the architectural evidence was combined with the available historical documentation to demonstrate a ten-period development for the entire complex. Building commenced in the late 12th century under John de Courcy with the construction of a polygonal curtain wall (the present inner ward), containing a number of buildings including a great tower and a hall, that enclosed the southern end of the promontory. By the mid-13th century the castle had extended from this original nucleus to encompass the entire promontory, with a middle and outer ward added and a double-towered gatehouse constructed to defend the landward entrance onto the peninsula (Periods 2 and 3).

With regards to first period of building activity, Jope noted that the great tower had been added to the inner curtain wall. The wall’s earliest phase was marked by the use of local sandstone dressings rather than the creamy Cultra limestone used for the upper sections and much of the great tower. McNeill’s study showed that the tower had been intended in its present position from the outset, because those parts of the curtain wall where the great tower was situated had been completed up to a height of some 3 m before work was started on the rest of the great tower. These two sections of the curtain wall were built up before the change to the use of Cultra limestone occurred. Jope had also drawn attention to the projecting ‘tusker’ stones within the internal NE. angle of the curtain wall. He suggested that these stones betrayed an intention — never realised — to tie the E. wall of the great tower to the curtain wall at this point. McNeill also noted that there were a number of signs that the design of the great tower was changed before it was finished, and the curtain wall was only completed to its full height after the tower had been constructed to at least second floor level.

Archaeological excavations in 1993 and 2002 have since added to our understanding of the processes involved in the planning and execution of the castle during Period 1 (see Fig. 5). Earlier archaeological excavations undertaken at the complex were located outside

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25 Jope, op. cit. in note 24, 7.
26 McNeill, op. cit. in note 20, 41–2.
27 Jope, op. cit. in note 24.
de Courcy’s castle. Waterman excavated a bridge-pit in front of the gatehouse in 1950; Wilson exposed the middle curtain wall in 1955, and Rees-Jones uncovered the blocked postern gate at the SE. end of the middle curtain wall in 1962. In 1991 Brannon excavated a long, narrow service trench that ran from the W. vault of the great tower, through the inner, middle and outer wards, and terminating at the gatehouse, but the investigation was limited in scale and little of substance was revealed. It is, however, the excavation carried out at the base of the stairway on the E. side of the great tower, and the excavation undertaken at the S. side of the same building that has provided new information on the first phase of building activity on the promontory by the Anglo-Normans.

Excavations along the East and South Sides of the Great Tower (Fig. 6)

The replacement of worn steps on the stairway leading into the great tower in 1993 enabled an archaeological investigation to take place along the building’s E. wall. The work concentrated on cleaning up the fill that lay beneath the sandstone steps being removed during the renovations to record any archaeological deposits. In addition, a small

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29 McNeill, op. cit. in note 20, 61–70.
excavation trench was opened at the base of the stairway to investigate the nature of a stone step of Cultra limestone that had been revealed during monitoring. The laying of service trenches in the corner where the keep’s E. wall joins the northern stretch of the inner ward’s curtain wall and at the 19th-century gateway into the inner ward was also monitored as part of this work. This work examined the relationship of the foundations of the great tower’s E. wall to that of the northern section of the curtain wall.

The inner ward’s curtain wall was constructed on a foundation plinth of cut and dressed dolerite, revealed during pipe-laying at the point where the E. wall of the great tower meets the northern stretch of the inner ward’s curtain wall. The plinth was shown to run under the great tower and was not bonded into the fabric of the building, confirming
the relationship observed in the upstanding masonry, as noted above. The inner ward’s courtyard was shown to be made up of a surface of large basalt boulders that lay up against the wall’s foundation plinth. It was noted that the 19th-century gateway in the inner ward’s curtain wall cut through the plinth to the N. side of this entrance.

The excavation also revealed that a foundation trench (F44) had been cut into the original land surface (F41) to facilitate the construction of the tower’s E. wall. This trench had been filled with successive layers: large basalt beach boulders (F46); earth excavated from the foundation trench and re-deposited (F47); another layer of large basalt beach boulders (F39); and a layer of brown clay (F38). Basalt beach boulders of smaller size and containing voids (F23) were then laid down in the southern area of the foundation trench, with clay laid in the northern area (F37). The entire trench was then covered over by a layer of crushed Cultra stone (F22) coated by a skim of mortar (F17). The E. wall of the great tower (F16) and both the foundation for the stairway (F19) and the lowest course of the plinth for its retaining wall (F33) were constructed on top of this level surface. The lowest stone step of Cultra stone (F6) and its accompanying tread (F5) had then been laid down, with a further ten steps running up to the top of the stairway. Each step on the stairway was also of Cultra stone and accompanied by a tread. The Cultra stone steps had been bonded into the fabric of the E. wall of the great tower indicating that both the stairway and the great tower wall had been constructed as a single episode (Fig. 6). A Cultra stone jamb and springing for an arched doorway at the top of the stairway marks the entrance to a platform or forework in front of the doorway into the great tower. The jambs and arch of this doorway are also of dressed Cultra stone.

Further restoration work in 2002 enabled an archaeological investigation to take place at the great tower’s S. wall where a single-storey building is abutted. Measuring 8.9 m by 3.45 m internally, and with 1.45 m thick granite walls, this building was constructed as a magazine following the re-commissioning of the castle as the headquarters of the Antrim Artillery after 1855.32 An opening linking the magazine to the tower appears to date from this time. A 2.5 by 2.3 m trench was opened within this single-storey building.

The excavation of the trench against the S. great tower wall revealed traces of a foundation trench (F130), cut into a fine, peat-derived, clay subsoil (F125 and F126) that was present to a depth of 0.35 m. This soil contained some struck flint but was mainly sterile. The soil overlay the dolerite bedrock that was present at a depth of about a metre below the modern ground surface. The foundation cut (F130) was only present where the bedrock had to be levelled off by the insertion of a deposit of basalt pieces and sandy mortar (recorded as F129). The maximum visible depth of the foundation deposit was around 0.3 m. The plinth of the S. great tower wall (F106) rested, alternately, on the foundation deposit or bedrock. The plinth included sandstone and basalt, but no Cultra stone. The foundation deposit was sealed by soils disturbed during the use of the inner ward.

DISCUSSION: DE COURCY’S FIRST BUILDING PROGRAMME AT CARRICKFERGUS CASTLE

As a result of the recent excavations we are now in a better position to discuss de Courcy’s decision to build his castle on the sea-girt rock at Carrickfergus and also to clarify the initial progress achieved during the first years of work. This is of particular interest since it enables us to identify the processes involved in the construction of a new castle on a virgin site.

32 McNeill, op. cit. in note 51.
The excavations have clarified the nature of the promontory rock before any construction work on the castle had commenced, and the discovery that it was covered by a soil — however thin — is significant. One of the puzzles of the castle is how the builders knew that there would be a supply of fresh water obtainable by excavating a well where the great tower was sited. After all, the castle is situated on a promontory projecting out into the sea and any water on the rock might have been assumed to be brackish. It is known that fresh water percolates from the land along N.–S. fissures in the peninsula’s dolerite sill but the level of the water is not high enough to reach the rock surface, nor is there enough pressure in the present well to produce a spring. That there was a soil over the rock, however, now allows us to suggest that the promontory was capable of supporting vegetation. Presumably this must have included plants that required little fresh water and were tolerant of the salt spray that would have washed over the promontory during storms, but there may well have been a tree or substantial bushes whose roots penetrated down to the sub-surface waterline. Their presence would have guided the castle builders to dig down through the dolerite to find the same source of water. The securing of a water supply in this manner would certainly have encouraged de Courcy to invest in the building of his castle on the peninsula, however haphazardly he may have then proceeded with the construction programme.

The new excavations enable us now to sub-divide the first part of McNeill’s original classification of Period 1 into three episodes of activity. It is clear that the lower section of the inner ward’s curtain wall around the whole area to be enclosed was begun before the construction of the great tower, and this should be considered as Period 1a in de Courcy’s work. Given this, it would seem that the principal initial objective was to fortify the southern end of the promontory as quickly as possible. It would also seem, however, that they proceeded with work on the great tower before completing the curtain wall. A close examination of the layout of the great tower suggests that the planning for its construction was haphazard. The nature of the foundations along the E. and S. walls are different. The foundation trench filled with stones and the levelling layer of crushed Cultra stone found under the E. wall was missing on the S. side. The lowest courses of the SE. angle quoins of the tower are of sandstone and not of the Cultra limestone used in the quoins built after the curtain wall had been selectively heightened to take the N. and W. walls of the tower. The implication is that the lowest courses of the S. wall were laid out at the same time as the curtain wall was first constructed, when two sections only had been heightened. This constitutes Period 1b in de Courcy’s work. The use of Cultra stone below the E. wall implies that this wall was built as the third phase of building activity — Period 1c — at a date after the S. wall had been started but before the first and second floors of the tower had been raised.

The SE. angle of the great tower is several degrees less than a right-angle. The corner itself is part of an eastwards projection of the S. wall which appears at first sight to be a buttress but this cannot be so since it projects only to the east but not to the south. A right-angle projected from this corner leads to the NE. angle of the curtain wall and the line of projecting ‘tusker’ stones. It appears, therefore, that there were changes made to the original plan of the great tower. The principal change was to move the line of the tower’s eastern wall about a metre to the west, leaving the foundations prepared for it to support only the access stairway and part of the courtyard. The reason for this cannot lie in the planning of the tower itself, for it makes the angle that contains the spiral staircase within the tower awkward. The hall was sited between the access stairway to the tower and the eastern stretch of curtain wall, which must have left the area between very short of space. There was no possibility of making the hall smaller so a decision must have been taken to cut the floor size of the tower. An alternative, but less likely, explanation is that the problem was created by a decision to put the entrance and the spiral staircase in the tower’s E. wall and not its S. wall.
CONCLUSION

Given the political context in which de Courcy was operating, it is fair to see Phase 1a and Phase 1b of his building programme at Carrickfergus as belonging to the period between 1177 and 1181 when he was under severe pressure from the indigenous Irish population. The details of the initial building programme prior to 1182 stand in contrast to the final flourishes afforded by de Courcy in his newly elevated position after that date. This can be best seen in the nature of the grandiose stairway that he erected as an integral part of his keep. There is no parallel for the survival of a stone stairway such as this at any other Anglo-Norman great tower in Ireland. At a few sites there is evidence for timber stairways; for example, at Dundrum, Co. Down, and Maynooth, Co. Kildare, the sockets to support a timber stairway are visible in the fabric of the great towers. At Trim, Co. Meath, however, there is an absence of any evidence (such as bonded stonework now torn away or timber-beam sockets) to indicate how entrance was gained to the tower’s first-floor entrance. At Carrickfergus Castle it is clear that an open stone stairway led up to a doorway at the top of the steps. Behind this doorway lay a forework guarding the entrance into the great tower at first-floor level. In short, the entrance arrangement at Carrickfergus Castle relates more to a showpiece stairway, such as that at Hedingham Castle (Essex) built around 1140, than to any other entranceway in contemporary Ireland. This should not surprise us too much, however, since de Courcy’s great tower was no mean construction in itself, and the cream-coloured stone steps and associated doorways would have made a fitting entrance into the great tower and private domain of the ‘Princeps’ of Ulster.

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RECENT PALAEOENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE FOR THE PROCESSING OF HEMP (CANNABIS SATIVA L.) IN EASTERN ENGLAND DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Hemp (Cannabis sativa L.) — whose origins as a domesticated plant probably lie in C. Asia — has been cultivated in England since at least A.D. 800 (and before this perhaps in the Roman Period), mainly for its fibre, which was used to make sails, ropes, fishing nets and clothes, as well as for the oil from hempseed. Hemp cultivation may have reached a peak during the early 16th century, when Henry VIII decreed that increased hemp production was required to supply the expanding navy. Evidence for the locations where the crop was cultivated and processed is available in several different forms, including written evidence in parish records and government reports, place-name evidence (e.g. Hempholme and some instances of Hempstead), and features on old maps, such as Hempisfield (hemp field).34