

The Lost Castle of Armagh

A Medieval castle or a Seventeenth Century Campaign Fort?

by Kevin Quinn

The name Castle Street suggests the obvious and as a born and bred Armaghian, I have often stood in Castle Street and pondered over what type of structure gave it its name. For most people the word castle conjures up grand medieval castles on the scale of Carrickfergus or Dundrum. The recent discoveries in neighbouring towns of two distinct types of defensive structures only fuelled my curiosity. The discovery of the 16th century Sir Nicholas Bagenal's T-plan fortified house in Newry¹ and the uncovering of the remains of the 14th century Domnell O'Neill's Tower House in Dungannon are both examples of how the term "castle" can be misleading.² The term can in some cases be used to describe the most insignificant and humblest of defensive structures. It has long been believed based probably more on Armaghian pride than historical sources that Armagh had been graced with a significant medieval castle that stood somewhere southeast of the present day Church of Ireland Cathedral.

The Castle Street structure medieval or post-medieval?

It is most unlikely that a medieval castle was constructed in Armagh although there exists accounts stating that a castle had been constructed in 1236. The absence of entries from later native and Anglo sources for such an important structure suggests that Armagh did not have a castle until the early 1600s. Also the absence of a castle type structure or its remains from the later pictorial maps would confirm the above view. However, there is strong evidence that an O'Neill residence was constructed near Armagh

before 1375 and was still in use in the 1540s. The absence of a defensive type structure or its remains from the 1598 and 1601 pictorial maps would point to this structure being sited outside the town probably in the liberties of Armagh or being totally erased during the turbu-

On Castle Street frontage of St. Brigid's ground stood the old castellated house which gave name to the street. The under apartments were arched, and the upper parts embattled. It is possible from Roger's and the Valuation Maps of 1839 (See.fig1) to give an approximate position for the Castellated



fig 1 Valuation Plan of Castle street 1839, Armagh County Museum Acc. No. 21-1967

lent latter half of the 16th century. The structure that gave Castle Street its name was an early seventeenth century campaign Tower.

Conformation of Structural remains. (See.fig1)

Surprisingly the earliest reference for Castle Street is 1760 Rocque's Plan of Armagh.³ However, we do know from Reeves (1860), and Roger's (1876) histories of Armagh that there were structural remains still visible in Castle Street in the early 1800s. William Reeves in his Ancient Churches of Armagh describes how the street acquired its name,⁴

House.⁵ Local historian Edward Rogers writing in 1876 provides a detailed description for the Structure's location.⁶ *At the beginning of the present century, part of the premises were tenanted by the Rev. Dr. Burns, and at a later period by Robert O'Neill a sheriff's officer. It was subsequently permitted to go to ruins, and the late John Ross occupied the premises by building on its site several dwelling houses adjoining a lane called after the owner. The property has since fallen into the hands of William B. Kaye, Esq who has taken care to preserve a piece of grouted mason work the only remnant of this ancient fortress to be seen at the present day.*

The entrance to Ross lane was about halfway between Chapel Lane and

where the street arcs today. The Valuation maps show the area in Castle Street that was the probable site of the castellated House. The Structure probably spanned the houses numbered 1, 2, 40, 41, 42 and most of Ross Lane.

Existing Structural evidence for a castle in Armagh.

Unlike the Newry structure there are no remains above ground. Due to the extensive redevelopment of Castle Street in the 1970s & 80s any surviving remains above the ground have been lost. The best opportunity to excavate was before the redevelopment of the street. Maybe at some point in the future the opportunity will arise again to search for “The Old Castellated house”

Origins for a medieval castle at Armagh.

The source that has perpetuated the belief over the years that Armagh had been adorned with a medieval castle and has undoubtedly influenced local historians and others not too local in placing the Castle Street structure in the medieval period is attributed to The Marquis of Kildare. In his book “The Earls of Kildare” published in 1864 the Marquis quotes from Lodges Peerage that,⁷ “*Maurice Fitzgerald, second Baron of Offaly (Justiciar or Chief Governor of Ireland) in the year 1236, built the castle of Armagh*”.

The Marquis failed to provide the source for the statement but it is likely that the reference may have come from the royal records either in London or Dublin. The date 1236 seems quite precise but is corroborated in the Annals of Clonmacnoise with a slight variation in name.⁸

Built by Lord Deputy “McMorish”, (fitzMaurice) 2nd Baron Offaly, 1236

Documentary evidence for a 13th century castle

Between 1184-1217, Armagh was attacked six times by the Anglo-Normans and on three occasions by the native Irish.⁹ By 1220s royal influence gradually curtailed the activities of the

autonomous Anglo-Norman’s lords in Ireland. So by the 1230s royal castles were being constructed to protect and secure royal interests in Ireland. The “Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland,” references no’s 1312 and 1482 state that Henry III requested a site for a castle in Armagh in 1226 and again in 1227.¹⁰ The source also states that the King sought the co-operation of Luke de Netterville, Archbishop of Armagh and if the Archbishop had a particular site in mind that then the king would offer an exchange of land. The castle was to be built for the better security of the city.

Royal control over the Native Church in Armagh.

However, there was a significant Anglo-Norman presence in East Ulster the ecclesiastical organisation in Armagh at this time was of native composition. So therefore a royal request for a castle to be built at Armagh from faraway London or Dublin might not have been acted upon, (Dr. Marie Therese Flanagan, QUB. Personal communication) as the king’s writ may not have always run in Armagh.¹¹ Although on occasion the Crown sought and some times succeeded in having its preferred candidate elected to the See of Armagh their jurisdiction was limited in the Irish parts of Ulster. After the death of Archbishop David Megeraghty in 1346, the primates up to the reformation were men of English or Anglo-Norman blood.¹² These Archbishops resided in County Louth for most of the time, and left the administration of the Irish portion of Armagh diocese largely in the hands of the Irish Dean and Chapter who resided in Armagh.

Relations between the O’Neill’s and Armagh’s Archbishops

There is no doubt that the Archbishops of Armagh had troublesome relations with the O’Neills for a considerable period regardless of the incumbent’s nationality (Anglo or Native).¹³ The O’Neills frequently harassed the archbishops on their visitations to Armagh.

They were also attacking church tenants and destroying their property. The first known treaty between an Archbishop and an O’Neill was made in the late 13th century and by the 1440s both parties seemed have reconciled their differences. In 1455, the Anglo-Irish archbishop John Mey was present at the inauguration of an O’Neill.¹⁴ This new relationship between the two saw the O’Neills becoming the secular police force protecting Church interests. In 1467 Edward IV granted to Archbishop John Bole the Manor of Armagh, which consisted of the City and Liberties of Armagh and a large number of townlands.¹⁵ In 1487 Archbishop Bole gifted the Precinct of Toaghly to Art Mac Hugh O’Neill.

A possible O’ Neill Residence at Armagh.

It is probable that an O’Neill fortified residence was constructed in or round the City of Armagh before 1375. In 1375 Milo Sweetman, Archbishop of Armagh (1361-80), wrote to Naill Mor O’Neill “Prince of the Irish in Ulster” asking him to control the wild behaviour of his youngest sons, Henry Aimhreidh and Cu-Uladh Rua.¹⁶ The contents of the letter make it clear that Naill Mor was living near the City of Armagh. The date of 1375 suggests that the O Neill residence referred to in the Archbishop’s letter was probably a type of stone built hall house as tower houses date from around 1400.

An O’Neill “Poets Hall” at Navan Fort

Two bardic poems written in 1387 note that a Poet’s hall was constructed at Emain Macha by Naill Og O’Neill son of Naill Mor. Both the Annals of Ulster and the Four Masters state that Naill Og built a house within the ring of Emain Macha.¹⁷ However, there is no evidence from the site’s topography of such structural activity and no evidence for the “Poet’s hall” was uncovered during excavations at the site. The building was probably a temporary structure constructed of wattle-and-daub and not the

permanent residence referred to in the 1375 letter.

Evidence for an O'Neill Residence at Armagh in 1552

The strongest piece of corroborative documentary evidence for a purpose-built defensive structure in or around Armagh before 1609 comes from a complaint from Conn O'Neill (The Earl of Tyrone) to London in 1552.¹⁸ He complained that Sir Nicholas Bagenal had done injuries to his best mansion and dwelling house at Armagh. However, it is probable that the O'Neill house was outside the town in the liberties of Armagh. A significant structure like a Hall House or its ruins would have undoubtedly been depicted in the later pictorial maps of the town.

Destruction of Armagh between 1540-1601

Within this period, there is a rich vein of primary sources that confirms the construction of defensive walls or ramparts around the fortified Cathedral. The Elizabethan campaign in Ulster against the O'Neills effectively placed Armagh in the middle of the main theatre of war for the best part of sixty years. Between 1540- 1601, Armagh suffered greatly in the protracted conflict between the O'Neills and the English especially during the Nine-year war between Hugh O'Neill and Elizabeth, 1594-1603. Armagh was of great strategic importance to the English due to its geographical position between the Pale and the O'Neill heartland of Tyrone. Armagh was an essential supply and defensive base for the English invasion of Ulster. Therefore, the O'Neills viewed any English garrison in Armagh as a threat. In the ensuing wars, Armagh changed hands many times until its final and complete destruction by Hugh O'Neill in the late 1590s in order to deny it to the English. The occupation of the town and the destructive abandonment on withdrawal by both sides is well documented in The State Papers of Ireland. It is this pattern of occupation and withdrawal that suggests

that by 1600 there was still not a purpose built defensive structure in Armagh.

16th Century documentary evidence for earth and timber defenses.

Between 1561-64 The Earl of Sussex occupied the town and fortified the cathedral. He constructed defensive features around the inner rath mentioned in the Annals in the year 1121. The State Papers of Ireland state that Sussex,¹⁹

converted the cathedral into a fortress by constructing deep entrenchments and impregnable ramparts around it.

In 1575 Sir Henry Sidney The Lord Deputy, passed through Armagh. The Sidney description had a similar effect as the Marquis of Kildare's statement i.e. perpetuating the myth of the existence of a castle. He noted,²⁰

The towne is miserable; the forte imperfecte, not worthe the charge of the keeping, if there be peaceable proceeding. The bridge and gate to guard it is not half reared.

The use of the term "forte" by Sidney and again in the 1596 description of the English surrender of the town to O'Neill has been interpreted over the years as providing confirmation that there was a castle in Armagh.²¹ However, what Sidney was probably describing was the remains of defensive work that had been carried out by Sussex 14 years earlier. During that time, Armagh had suffered destructive raids, in 1566 and especially in 1569 when both the O'Neills and O'Donnells destroyed the town. So by the time Sidney passed through Armagh in 1575 any of Sussex's defensive work had probably been demolished. The description of a fort by Sidney is a reference to the ramparts that Sussex had constructed around the cathedral. The term "bridge" is probably referring to the structure that was constructed to cross over the ditch created by the construction of the rampart. The gate referred to by Sidney is Sussex's fortified entrance into the enclosure probably at present day Market Street. The fort referred to in the 1596 English withdrawal is not a stone built castle but is the same fortified area around the Cathedral described by

Sidney in 1575.

No reference for a castle in 16th century descriptions

There are two descriptions of Armagh one from the late 16th century and another written in 1610, describing the town in the 1560's. In 1586, Sir Henry Bagenal, Marshal of Elizabeth's forces in Ireland, wrote a description on the state of Ulster for Lord Burleigh (Elizabethan minister). He describes the buildings of Armagh and county,²²

Buildings within the countie of Armagh, none save the fort at Blackwater, must needful to be repaired and better fortified, and Armaghe a small villadge, having the church and other frieries there for the most part broken and defaced.

In 1610, Camden describes how the constant raiding by the O'Neills in the 1560s, had reduced the buildings to rubble during that period.²³

Armagh cathedral in our memorie was fied, and fully defaced by the rebell Shan O'Neill, and the Citee withall, so that they lost all the ancient beauty and glory, and nothing remaineth at this but very few small walled cotages, with the ruinous walles of the Monasterie Priorie, and Primats pallace.

Both descriptions are brief but significantly fail to mention the existence of any stone built defensive structures within the town.

No castle at Armagh in 1598. (see fig.2)

Based on the 1598 contemporary pictorial map of The Battle of the Yellow Ford and 1601 pictorial map of Armagh, there was no castle in Armagh until the early 1600s.²⁴ The English had reoccupied Armagh in 1595 but were forced to surrender before they could be relieved. The constant English attempts to occupy the town remained a bone of contention with the O'Neills until 1598. Armagh was in Irish control from 1598 to June 1601 but O'Neill burnt it in the face of the Mountjoy advance. In August 1598, the routed English army of the Yellow Ford took refuge in the town churches. A contemporary English soldier, who

had taken part in the battle, sketched the battle and the fortifying of the Cathedral prior to the engagement. Significantly the drawing depicts soldiers fortifying the Cathedral with meal bags. This action probably confirms that there was no stone purpose built defensive structure in Armagh at this time. The drawing,

remains of one. Bartlett drew his map of the town in the summer of 1601, in the aftermath of the O'Neill and his Irish allies' defeat at Kinsale. Mountjoy Lord Deputy of Ireland was now poised to strike into the O'Neill heartland of Tyrone. Richard Bartlett was the official cartographer to the Mountjoy expedition

their geographical gains through a string of strategic forts.²⁷ Each fort was to be planted with a garrison and Armagh was to be one of the defensive bases protecting the supply line and the surrounding area. Moryson states,²⁸

It will be necessary that Ballyshannon, Lough Foyle, some garrisons on the Bann, Lecayle, Mountnorris, Armagh, Blackwater; and some other places be continually kept all places may be ever victualled by sea, or they being near together, without any dangerous passage between them may be victualled by sea and land without any further force then their own. And if there be in every fort some little keep (or tower) of stone built then as the wars decrease, or occasion shall serve, the places as may be guarded with a few. Neither need these little castles be works of any great charge, for they may easily made such, as this people will hardly force them.

Therefore, the tower at Armagh was to be part of a line of forts that had started in 1600 with the building of Moyry castle in south Armagh and included the fort at Mountmorris on to Charlemount fort and Mountjoy fort on the shores of Lough Neagh. This line of forts was to protect against the O'Neill hit and run tactics and to secure Mountjoy's supply line during his advance from the Pale into the O'Neill Heartland of Tyrone.

The first and only glimpse of the Castle street Tower.

In the summer of 1609 a cartographic survey of the land in Ulster was made under the direction of Sir Josias Bodley in preparation for the plantation.²⁹ The survey began in Armagh on the 29th of July 1609. Armagh and county were completed by the 10th of August. The survey consisted of the interrogation of the local inhabitants and the compiling of townland lists, the collecting of geo-



fig.2 Armagh from the Pictorial Map of the Battle of the Yellow Ford., 1598

which has to be seen in its military context, does go some way in confirming this view, as it covers a significant geographical area taking in the primary buildings of the town. The absence of a castle type structure is clearly evident. It must be said that the cartographer has omitted a number of buildings that did exist in Armagh at this time. The churches of St Columba's, Templebrede and Templenafertagh are not shown.

No Castle in Armagh by 1601. (see fig.3)

The Bartlett map of Armagh shows what remained of Armagh in 1601.²⁵ His map is a bird's eye view of Armagh looking west. It is possible to identify most of the buildings depicted but there is no castle or what could be identified as the

against Hugh O'Neill.²⁶ It is unknown whether his maps were intended as aids to the campaign or to record events. However, they are not mere sketch maps made during the heat of action but were skillfully drawn. It would be safe to say that the accuracy of his maps represents the highest standards for the period. If there were a castle or the ruins of one in Armagh in 1601 Bartlett would have undoubtedly included in his map of the town

Documentary evidence of a campaign Tower.

One piece of documentary evidence for a castle in Armagh is from Mountjoy's secretary Fynes Moryson. Notes from an Itinerary written by him in 1601 outlines how the English were planning to secure

graphical information, whether by hearsay, sketching and plotting of the results in cartographic form. Most significantly the inquisition was held in Armagh so the surveyors obviously saw what structures were in Armagh and most likely attained a degree of accuracy in their depictions. Regardless of the survey's flaws of which it has many; it does provide the first visual evidence of the tower that gave the street its name.

Armagh between 1601-09

There is no doubt have the accuracy of Bartlett's depiction of Armagh in 1601. The factual picture of Armagh was one of a largely ruinous town. Bartlett's considerable variety of representation of its buildings and other features indicates that he depicted what did actually exist. Armagh between 1601-09 was gradually being rebuilt. Until the Flight of the Earls Ulster was still very volatile so the tower with its garrison offered protection to native and newcomer. The 1609 pictorial map of



fig.3 The 1601 Bartlett Pictorial Map of Armagh.

Armagh (See.fig4) provides the first and only glimpse of the tower-like structure that gave Castle Street its name. By 1608 plantation houses had been constructed in present day Scotch Street, Market Street and Castle Street. A row Plantation houses were constructed to the east of the tower with the gable of one built up against the tower's southeast side. Directly behind the tower on its westside is probably the Church of St. Brigid mentioned later by Stuart. To the east of the Market cross is a group of plantation dwellings surrounding what looks to be a tower house. This building perfectly

fits the criteria for a tower house more so than the tower on the opposite side of the market cross. It seems probable that this structure is a ruined church that has been restructured. This assumption is solely based on Bartlett's 1601 map, which places the church of St.Columba's near that location. It is also quite possible that this is very early-fortified plantation house with a cluster of out buildings surrounding it

Conclusion.

There are several sources that confirm the construction of the Castle Street Tower. The Fynes Morrison Intenary is most reliable as keeps/towers were constructed in the locations mentioned in his reports. i.e. Culmore and Ballyshannon. Secondly, the castle structure depicted in the 1609 pictorial map does fit the Morrison description of a little keep or tower of no great charge. Its location and some of its important structural features depicted on the 1609 map are more or less confirmed by the 19th century sources. The Tower at Armagh was part of a

line of fortifications to protect and secure the English advance into the O'Neill heartland. The chain of forts began with Moryry, (1600) Mountmorris, (1600) Charlemount, (1602) Mountjoy, (1602) and Armagh, (1602/3?) The tower at Armagh was probably constructed between late 1601-03. The structure was in place by 1608 as there is an entry in The State papers of Ireland for a constable for the castle at Armagh in 1608.

The history of the tower between 1609 and the early 19th century is unknown as the structure vanishes from the documentary sources only to re-emerge in Stuart's Historical Memoirs of Armagh. (1819). Stuart noted,³⁰

Castle Street is that district of the town which was anciently called Port-Rath or Rath-Ardmagh and occasionally Rathene. Some of the ruins of the ancient castle may yet be seen, in the rear of the tenement formerly possessed by Mr. Thomas Campbell.

So it seems that by the early 1800's parts of the tower had survived by being incorporated

into a town house or houses whilst other parts lay in ruins exposed to the elements. By 1876, the former Burns later O'Neill and Campbell tenements had become derelict. Redevelopment of the tenements by the then deceased John Ross had reduced the tower that had once graced the Armagh skyline to a section of grouted masonry in the basement of either No. 1 or 2 Ross Lane. It was left to William B. Kaye, esq to afford the tower its last piece dignity by preserving this piece of stonework, the only known surviving remnant of the Castle Street tower.

References

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⁴William Reeves, *The Ancient Churches of Armagh*. Lusk. 1860

⁵Valuation Plan Of Armagh. (1839) Armagh County Museum.

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⁷ Ibid, p.9

⁸ Annals of Clonmacnoise., 235.

⁹ Ulster Journal of Archaeology, 3rd series. Vol 47 1984. ,p10

¹⁰T.G.F. Patterson, *Armachiana*. Vol 1.

¹¹ John Watt, *Coexistence in The medieval Diocese and Province of Armagh*.

¹² Ibid., p.48

¹³ Katherine Simms, *The O'Neills in the Later Middle Ages*. The Rise of a Gaelic Lordship. 1969 p.74

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¹⁹*Annals of the four Masters, 1561*

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²² Ibid., p.150, U.J.A. Vol.2

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²⁴ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Battles*. A Military History of Ireland. Belfast. 1990.

²⁵ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Ulster and Irish Maps*.(ed) Irish manuscripts Commission. Dublin. 1964.

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²⁷ Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary*. Vol.2 Glasgow. MCMVII

²⁸ Ibid., P.394.

²⁹ J.H. Andrews, *The Maps Of the*



fig.4 Detail from map of the Escheated Counties of Ulster 1609-10.