

# LATE MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS

(2009)  
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 MM 006  
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The landscape of Northern Ireland has been shaped by human activity for over 9000 years. Since the arrival of the first colonists during the Mesolithic era successive generations have each had an impact on the countryside around us. The Medieval period saw dramatic changes in the landscape of Ulster, with the influence of European styles of architecture spreading across the province. We have been left with a wonderful variety of monuments, from castles and tower-houses to churches and abbeys.

Many of these monuments are now in State Care and are looked after by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Still more are scheduled – protected from damage under law. This fact sheet is part of a series which provides information on monuments under State Care. County Down is particularly rich in medieval sites so it has been necessary to produce two fact sheets to cover the period. This fact sheet includes sites built, or dramatically altered, in the 15th and 16th centuries. A second, MM 005, provides information on sites built between the 12th and 14th centuries. Where there is confusion or uncertainty over dating, the earliest suggested date has been used. Meanings of words in bold, like **this**, can be found in the glossary.

## 1. ARD TOLE CHURCH

0.75 miles (1.2 km) north-north-east of Ardglass, east of the A2, on the A22, with a lay-by across the road from the site. The church stands on a prominent hilltop overlooking the sea and with views to the Isle of Man. An early cross slab from this site, now built into the church at Chapel town, and a **souterrain** south of the church suggest Early Christian period activity on the hilltop. The ruin is of the medieval parish church, dedicated to St Nicholas, and is said to have been abandoned after a massacre. According to this tradition some people from Ardglass found the chieftain of the MacCartan clan in a drunken sleep and tied his hair to some briars. He avenged this insult by massacring the townsmen as they worshipped in the Church. The long narrow church building seems to largely date to the 15th-century, and has a huge east window and opposed north and south doors, one with a draw-bar hole.

## 2. AUDLEY'S CASTLE

1 mile (1.6 km) north-west of Strangford in Castleward townland, on a rocky height overlooking Strangford Lough, signposted from the Downpatrick to Strangford (A25) road. This 15th-century tower-house and **bawn** was built by the Audley family, but passed to the Wards in 1646 and has been used since 1738 as an eye-catching focus of the long vista along Castle Ward's Temple Water.



AUDLEY'S CASTLE



ARD TOLE CHURCH



COWD CASTLE

Though the **bawn** is ruined its full circuit can be traced, running south to the cliff edge. The tower-house, like Kilclief (5), is of 'gatehouse' type with two projecting towers linked by a high arch (**machicolation**) to defend the entrance. In one tower were latrines and in the other a spiral stair leads to first and second floor rooms and the roof. The first floor room has a reconstructed wooden floor and semicircular stone **barrel vault**. The tower is well provided with domestic comforts, like cupboards, window-seats, latrines and drain holes for slops.

## 3. COWD CASTLE, ARDGLASS

At the entrance to Ardglass golf-club, overlooking the sea. This is one of an important group of tower-houses in this medieval port. Down hill is the Ardglass Castle complex, incorporating an important medieval warehouse range, and uphill is Margaret's Castle, unfortunately partly masked by a house. Cowd is a small squarish tower of the 15th or 16th century, built of split stone rubble with a **battered** base. Inside are two floors and an attic, with a wall-walk above. There are narrow loops on the ground floor and two windows with window-seats on the first floor. It is thought that originally this tower was linked to the town wall and that the door in the west wall at ground floor level was a later insert. Access to the town wall must have been at wall walk level and the two floors below were reached by stairs in the wall thickness. See also no 4, Jordan's Castle.

#### 4. JORDAN'S CASTLE, ARDGLASS

In Ardglass, between Kildare Street and Quay Street, commanding the harbour. This 15th-century tower-house is the largest of the impressive group which testifies to the importance of Ardglass as a town and port in the middle Ages (see also Cowd Castle above). The characteristic projecting towers with a high **machicolation** arch face north, and the entrance is protected by a smaller machicolation at right angles to the main arch. The west tower contains a spiral stair and the east tower contains latrines at two levels. The ground floor chamber has a semicircular **barrel vault** with impressions of **wicker centering**. There are three chambers above, all with modern wooden ceilings. The antiquarian Francis Joseph Bigger bought the castle in 1911 and restored it, fitting it out with furniture and bequeathing it to the state in 1926. There is a display about him in the castle. The **figure corbels** on the third floor are modern copies of 14th-century figures in St Francis's Priory, Kilkenny. The present flat roof is also modern: the original roof was gabled, with a pigeon-loft in one tower. Excavation in the castle grounds in the late 1990s suggested that a stone warehouse adjoined the tower-house.

#### 5. KILCLIEF CASTLE

2.5 miles (4 km) south of Strangford on the A2, facing the sea. Car-park opposite. Impressive tower-house, reputedly built by John Sely, bishop of Down, between 1413 and 1441. If this attribution is correct, this is the earliest datable tower-house in county Down. Its features include the high **machicolation** arch between projecting towers and stepped battlements. The **machicolation** protects the entrance leading to a spiral stair in the south-east tower. In the NE tower is a latrine shaft with access from three of the four floors. As at Jordan's Castle, the ground floor chamber has a semicircular **barrel vault** built on **wicker centering**. On the second floor a 13th-century coffin-lid from the nearby church was reused as a **lintel** for the fireplace. The two-light window in the east wall is a modern reconstruction based on a surviving fragment.

#### 6. MAHEE CASTLE

Commanding the north end of Mahee Island in Strangford Lough, now reached by a causeway, but formerly by a ford. Visitors should park at Nendrum Monastery close by (ECP004) and walk the short distance back to the castle. This tower-house, said to have been built in 1570 by an English soldier, Captain Browne, is badly ruined but is still of considerable interest. Rectangular and fairly small in ground plan, it was entered by a door in the north-west wall which has a draw-bar socket and a **murder-hole**. There are two ground floor rooms, the larger with a semicircular **vault** built on **plank centering** and the smaller with a pointed **vault** probably built on paired wicker mats. The smaller room can be interpreted as a secure boat bay, important on an island site (compare nearby Sketrick, no 11). There were two storeys above, but the upper parts are ruined. Part of the **bawn** wall survives to the south-west.

#### 7. NARROW WATER CASTLE

5 miles (8 km) south-east of Newry beside the A2 to Warrenpoint, picturesquely and strategically sited on a **promontory** in the Newry River. Tower-house and **bawn**, built in the 1560s at a cost of £361 4s 2d for an English garrison but later known to be in Magennis hands. A lease of 1570 refers to 'nine cottages covered with earth within the precinct of the said castle'. The tower entrance in the west wall was protected by a **forebuilding** and a **corbelled machicolation** above, with a **murder-hole** immediately inside. There are chambers at three levels with an attic, and straight stairs, latrines and other small chambers in the wall thickness. The first floor room has a semicircular **barrel vault** built on **wicker centering**. The present roof and some windows are restorations of the 1960s, and wicker centering from that restoration has been left in position in two windows to demonstrate this characteristically Irish method of construction. There was a wall-walk behind the stepped battlements, commanding extensive views. The **bawn** wall has been modified by later use (the site was used for industrial purposes in the late 18th century) but represents the extent of the original enclosure, with part of the **promontory** to the west left for a small boat quay.



JORDAN'S CASTLE



KILCLIEF CASTLE



NARROW WATER



MAHEE CASTLE



## 8. PORTAFERRY CASTLE

Prominently sited on the slope overlooking Portaferry harbour, within sight of Strangford and Audley's Castles across the water. This is a 16th-century tower-house, built by the Savage family. Along with Strangford Castle (12) it controlled the entrance to Strangford Lough. Simpler than the earlier 'gatehouse' type, it is square in plan with one projecting tower to the south. Here a small **machicolation** arch defends the door. There are three storeys and an attic, and the projecting tower rises higher than the rest of the building. Like early tower-houses it has spiral stairs, but it lacks a stone **vault**. All the floors were originally of wood, a common feature in the later tower houses. The east angle is ruined and the castle is a shell, visible only from outside.

## 9. QUOILE CASTLE

1.5 miles (2.4 km) north-north-east of Downpatrick, north of the A25, near the south bank of the Quoile river, beside the Quoile Countryside Centre. These are the ruined remains of a late 16th-century tower-house, inhabited until the 18th century. The south angle has fallen, revealing an interesting cross-section through **vaults** and floors. The entrance in the north-east wall was protected by a **murder-hole**. On the ground floor were two chambers, each stone-**vaulted** (showing marks of **wicker centering**), with many small gun-loops. A straight stair in the wall thickness led from the door to first floor level, and another to the second floor. Both floors feature fireplaces. There is access to the ground and first floor levels.

## 10. RINGHADDY CASTLE

8 miles (12.8 km) south-east of Comber and 2 miles (3.2 km) south-east of Killinchy, approached on minor roads off the A22. At quay turn left through gate and along lane to castle on Castle Island. This is one of the most completely surviving tower-houses in the county, retaining its gables and one original wooden window. There are two periods of building here. The ground floor, which had a stone **vault**, dates from the 15th century, while the upper parts were rebuilt in about 1600. It is rectangular in plan with small turrets at the north-east and south-west angles, one with the stair and the other with a latrine chute. There are large fireplaces on the first and second floors, and an attic in the roof.



PORTAFERRY CASTLE



QUOILE CASTLE



RINGHADDY



SKETRICK CASTLE

The castle seems to have changed hands between Bryan McArt and the English in the early 16th century, and it is likely that the earlier castle was McArt's stronghold, **slighted** when he withdrew, and rebuilt by the new English owner. Underwater investigation has confirmed the presence of a stone slipway beside the castle, and water transport was clearly of great importance in this location. Ringhaddy Church (see information factsheet MM005) is on the hill beyond the castle.

## 11. SKETRICK CASTLE

Island site off the west coast of Strangford Lough, now reached by a causeway, 5.75 miles (9.2 km) south of Comber. Written accounts of warfare in 1470 record a castle here which suggests a mid 15th-century date for its original construction. The present large tower-house is probably later, perhaps built in the 16th century on earlier foundations. It was actively involved in 16th-century warfare but stood fairly complete until 1896, when about half of the building collapsed in a storm. The door was in the east wall and was defended by a **murder-hole**. There were four chambers at ground floor level, the largest with a **vault** built on **wicker centering** and two ovens. The central space may have been a boat bay, as at Mahee Castle (no 6), and the small, unlighted room could have been a lock-up or a treasury. The upper floors are badly ruined but the joist-holes for the wooden floors can be seen, indicating that there were three upper levels. Part of the **bawn** wall survives to north and east and there is a **lintelled** channel from the **bawn** under the wall to a freshwater spring, rising in a small chamber with a **corbelled vault**.

## 12. STRANGFORD CASTLE

On a height overlooking the harbour in Strangford town, in Castle Street, across the Strait from Portaferry Castle (no 8). This small tower-house dates from the late 16th century in its present form, but a blocked door of 15th-century type at first floor level suggests the remodelling of an earlier tower. A report in 1540 refers to a castle at Strangford as ruinous and broken down. The present entrance is a reconstruction, positioned by the surviving **corbelled machicolation** above and a socket for a draw-bar to secure the original door.

A simple square in plan, the castle has three floors with no stone vault and no sign of a stone stair. The wooden floors are modern additions. The first floor fireplace has an oven and a dry 'keeping place', and there are window-seats on the first and second floors. Pistol-loops are provided at ground floor level and in the **crenellations** at roof level

### 13. TULLYNAKILL CHURCH

4 miles (6.4 km) south-south-east of Comber, between Ballydrain and Ardmillan, approached by a short footpath from a lay-by on the road. Note the low foundations of the 1825 Church of Ireland parish church, demolished in the late 1960s or 1970s to the right of the graveyard gate. The old church is of two periods, the late 15th and the early 17th centuries. It replaced Nendrum (ECP004), probably in the later 15th century, as the parish church site and, unusually for Ireland, burial was transferred to the new site and Nendrum was abandoned. The 15th-century church had a west door, but the main visible features date from the 17th century, when the building was 'modernised'. The handsome south door in red Castle Espie limestone, is dated 1639, and dates to the same period as the windows - a two-light east window and three others, the one left of the door that survives particularly well. The windows are all grooved for glass. Although Strangford Lough is not visible, the church is not far from the water and is only 1.5 miles (2.4 km) west-north-west of Nendrum.



STRANGFORD CASTLE



TULLYNAKILL CHURCH

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

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### GLOSSARY

- Barrel Vault:** A vault in the shape of a half barrel split lengthways.
- Battered:** Having a base batter - the thick base of a wall, sloping inwards towards the top.
- Bawn:** a fortified courtyard or farmyard.
- Corbelled:** A structure supported by over laying stones.
- Crenellations:** The teeth like battlements of a castle.
- Figure corbels:** carved stone corbels depicting figures
- Forebuilding:** projecting defensive work screening entrance of keep or other structure from direct attack.
- Machicolation:** An opening in a turret above a gate, used for dropping things on attackers.
- Murder Holes:** openings in the roofs of passageways through which missiles and liquids could be dropped onto attackers.
- Plank centering:** a method of building a vault using a wicker support, favoured by English builders, which leaves distinctive a straight line pattern. Compare **wicker centering**.
- Slighted:** damaged to prevent further use.
- Souterrain:** Underground passages built in Early Christian raths as a refuge from raiders.
- Vault:** an arched roof usually of stone.
- Wicker Centering:** a method of building a vault using a wicker support, favoured by Irish builders, which leaves distinctive a criss-cross pattern. Compare **plank centering**.

### FURTHER READING

Mallory and McNeill - The Archaeology of Ulster (QUB, 1991)

Colm Donnelly - Living Places (QUB, 1997)

A Hamlin and C Lynn (eds) - Pieces of the Past (HMSO, 1988)

Various- An archaeological survey of County Down (HMSO, Belfast, 1966).

#### The Monuments and Building Record

The Monuments and Buildings Record (MBR) holds data on all elements of the built environment in the form of databases, written, photographic and drawn material. MBR makes available information on archaeological, architectural, industrial and maritime sites, as well as historic gardens and designed landscapes and the statutory lists of scheduled historic monuments and listed buildings. For further information visit: [http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/built/mbr\\_intro.htm](http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/built/mbr_intro.htm)

For advice on access to State Care Monuments contact NIEA - Regional Operations  
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For further information on State Care Monuments contact the additional address at the back of this publication.