



JORDAN'S CASTLE

English Translation

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Ardglass

County Down

The Anglo-Norman invasion of Ulster resulted in domination of only limited areas along the E. and N. coasts of the province. In the face of Irish hostility, local strongholds and good harbour were equally important for the establishment of settlements. In many cases the two were combined, the stronghold protecting the harbour, as at Carrickfergus Castle and Donaghadee Motte. Possibly because of the great strength of English settlements around it in the Lecale area SE. of Downpatrick, Ardglass grew to importance in the late middle ages when elsewhere English influence was declining. A London trading company settled here in the reign of Henry IV, and by the 15th century the harbour handled more trade than any other in Ulster.

Unlike the other great fortified harbour, Carrickfergus, which had both a castle and town walls for protection, Ardglass depended on a ring of tower houses and the Newark, a range of fortified warehouses (now partially occupied as the golf club). The tower houses followed the general pattern of dwellings common to all persons of property in late-medieval Ireland. They comprise a series of superimposed chambers, sometimes subdivided, connected by stairs either in the thickness of the walls or contained in smaller attached towers. In County Down a 'gatehouse type' was developed in the 15th century which defended its doorway between two projecting towers. These were joined at roof level by an arched machicolation or drophole which gave further defence. The full effect was not unlike that of 13th century castle gatehouses, from which this type derives its name and possibly its origin, too. (See cutaway reconstruction and plans.)

The unusual character of fortified Ardglass may still be seen in the views of romantic artists of the 18th century. Thomas Robinson's engraving, adapted for the title illustration, is typical, showing the harbour surrounded by tall towers. Of thee, writes the Dublin Penny Journal in 1833, 'the most remarkable is that called Jordan's Castle, though inferior in size to King's Castle (a few remains of which were incorporated in a castle-style house, now part of a modern hotel) is yet constructed with greater elegance than that of any other building of the kind, and was a place of considerable strength. It is situated in the middle of the town and appears to have been the citadel. This castle is memorable for the gallant defence made by its owner, Simon Jordan, who in the Tyrone rebellion, held it for three years till he was relieved by the Lord Deputy Mountjoy, on the 17th of June 1601'.

Kilclief Castle, along the coast to the north of Ardglass, is the earliest datable example of the 'gatehouse' type. It was built for Bishop John Sely who became Bishop of Down in 1413. It seems likely that Jordan's Castle, too, was built in the early 15th century. Apart from the dramatic siege, however, little is known of the building's history. It was probably used as a dwelling until at least

the end of the 17th century, and thereafter may have been a store. It was ruinous by 1911 when it was purchased and restored with somewhat romantic enthusiasm by the Belfast solicitor and antiquarian, Francis Joseph Bigger. It is part of Mr. Bigger's collection of antiquities which may be seen in the castle, including the 3-pounder cannons on siege carriages (see back page). On his death in 1926 the castle, with its contents, was presented to the government to be preserved as an historic monument in State Care.

Jordan's Castle still dominates the harbour from the centre of the town. It is built of split-stone rubble with sandstone dressings, and the exterior of the walls which taper inwards through their full height were probably originally covered with renderings or harling, following the custom of the north, to minimize water penetration. From the outside the windows are only narrow slits. Just to the W. of the tower is a small stone-covered well and on the lawn to the E. an improbably mounted cannon, possibly of the 17th century, from Mr. Bigger's collection.

The castle is the most developed example of the 'gatehouse' type. The two attached towers extend to the N. from the NE. and NW. corners of the main tower. They are connected at roof level by the usual arched machicolation, but a modification peculiar to Jordan's is the provision of a second machicolation, higher than the first and set at right angles to it on the E. side of the NW. tower. This gave drophole defence for the doorway directly below.

The doorway has been rebuilt, though the drawbar hole by which the original door was secured may still be seen. The Ground Floor Chamber has as its floor the irregular surface of the rock on which the castle is founded. The narrow openings are splayed both inside and out, giving defenders a wide arc of fire. Dark and often damp as well, this area would normally have been used for storage rather than habitation. The vaulted roof, designed to afford protection against fire, still shows the imprints of the wickerwork centering on which it was built.

The Spiral, or Turnpike Staircase in the NW. tower leads right up to the castle roof, giving access at each level to a chamber which could have been secured by a door with a drawbar. The bulk of these doors when opened was minimised by the provision of a recess in the wall into which the door was fitted, a neat functional solution.

The First Floor Chamber has the wide fireplace at which most of the cooking would have been done. The hood over the fireplace belongs to the 20th century reconstruction. At this level the windows are splayed internally only, and provided with stone seats in the embrasures. In the W. wall is a small opening sloping outwards, and probably used as a drain for kitchen slops. The solid floor rests on the vault below. The wooden ceiling is a modern reconstruction. As on all the upper levels, there is access to a small latrine chamber with a lintelled stone roof in the NE. tower.

The Second Floor Chamber was probably used by the castle's owner as the main formal space for eating and entertaining. As on the first floor, there are wide window embrasures with stone seats, a slop drain to the W., and a latrine chamber in the NE. tower, this time with a wider corbelled roof. The fireplace has a reconstructed segmental head but the chamfered sides are original. Again the timber roof is modern.

The Third Floor Chamber also has a modern wooden roof supported on stone corbels which were copied by Mr. Bigger from those under the mid-14th century tower of the prior church of St. Francis at Kilkenny. The latrine chamber in the NE. tower has a corbelled roof.

The present flat Roof is a modern concrete construction; the presence of the wall-walk all round the roof suggests that the original roof was pitched and gabled. It was probably slated, either with local split stone, or with Welsh slates which were a principal import to Ardglass. There has been a good deal of rebuilding about the turrets which occupy the four corners of the roof. That on the

NW. is a storey higher than the others; originally it was from here that the entrance drophole could have been used, but in later years the turret was remodelled as a pigeon loft. The defender's view of the front door may still be had through the main drophole. From the roof there are excellent views along the coast and inland, an enjoyment for modern visitors and a reminder, too, of the castle's earlier tactical significance.

Further Reading

An Archaeological Survey of Co. Down (H.M.S.O. 1966), 220-225.

Other tower houses in State Care in Co. Down are Narrow Water on Carlingford Lough, Sketrick on Strangford Lough, and Kilclief, Strangford and Audley's Castle, all in Lecale. Ardtole Church, 1/2 mile NE. of Ardglass, is also in State Care.

Access Jordan's Castle (J560372) stands in the centre of Ardglass, 6 miles SE. of Downpatrick.