

DUNDRUM CASTLE

Information for Teachers



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Historical Background

One of Ulster's most impressive medieval remains, Dundrum Castle is set high on a hill overlooking Dundrum Bay. Its place name, Dundroma, means "fort of the ridge" which suggests there may have been an early Christian fort in the area. Archaeologists excavating the site in 1950 discovered several pre-Norman finds, including a beautiful bronze roundel. Evidence of dry stone early occupation was also found, but it was not possible to determine the nature of the early occupation from the small area examined.

In 1177 John de Courcy, an Anglo-Norman knight, invaded Ulster in a quest for land and wealth. He soon defeated the local Irish clans and set about building a series of castles to ensure his control of the area. It is thought that de Courcy recognised the important strategic position of the original Irish fortification at Dundrum, and so set about strengthening the site. However, de Courcy's power was short lived. In 1203 King John, concerned that de Courcy was becoming too powerful, ordered Hugh de Lacy to replace him as Lord of Ulster.

De Lacy captured the site from de Courcy who in turn led a force to try and recapture the castle in 1205. Despite the support of Norse troops provided by his brother-in-law Ragnold, King of the Isle of Man, de Courcy was unsuccessful in breaching the castle defences.

The castle changed hands again in 1210 when Hugh de Lacy fell out of favour with King John. Like de Courcy before him, de Lacy had begun to act against the king's wishes and an army of several thousand landed in Waterford, determined to expel him. The King's forces successfully besieged the castle and de Lacy retreated to Carrickfergus before eventually fleeing to France.

De Lacy regained his lands and title under Henry III and returned to Ulster in 1227. He agreed not to challenge the power of the king and that his land and title would revert to the crown upon his death. Thus in 1234 Dundrum became a Royal Castle once more.

At some point in the late medieval period the castle fell into the hands of the Magennis family, the most powerful Gaelic chieftains in the area. It is likely that the Castle was extended at this time with the addition of the outer ward.

More bloodshed followed. It was stormed by the Earl of Kildare in 1517 before

being recaptured by the Magennis's. The Earl's successor, as Lord Deputy, Lord Leonard Grey, captured several castles in Lecale, including Dundrum, in 1538-39. Dundrum seems to have been the most impressive castle in the area as Lord Grey singled it out for mention in a letter to Henry VIII:

"I took another castell.....Called Dundrome, which I assure your lordship, as it Standeth, is one of the strongest holds that I ever saw in Ireland....."

It later returned to the Magennis's, who eventually relinquished it to Lord Mountjoy in 1601. It was described at the time as having an outer court, surrounded by a ruined wall, within which there were eleven "Irish houses". By 1605 it had been sold to Lord Cromwell before eventually passing into the hands of Sir Francis Blundell in 1636. It fell to Irish forces during the 1641 rebellion but was soon recaptured and garrisoned by Parliamentary forces. These Cromwellian forces slighted the castle when the garrison withdrew in 1652.

Thereafter it returned to the Blundell family who built the dwelling house at the lower end of the ward. The site descended through the Blundell's to the Marquis of Downshire. In 1954 the monument was placed in State Care and an extensive conservation programme has since been undertaken.

The Building of the Castle

There were four main building periods at the castle. It was progressively strengthened and altered over a period of 450 years until its eventual ruination at the hands of the Cromwellian forces. Each of these building phases improved defences and the living conditions within the castle.

The late 12th Century

De Courcy is thought to have ordered the construction of the curtain wall surrounding the upper ward in 1180. This appears to have been built with stone quarried from the deep ditch which defends the North-East of the castle.

The 13th Century

It is thought that de Lacy ordered the building of the keep after capturing the site. Circular keeps are not common in Ireland, though there is a fine example at Nenagh (Tipperary). There are several in South Wales, the most impressive at Pembroke, and it is interesting that men from that area led the 12th century invasion of Ireland. The circular keep was the most up-to-date design of the period

– much more adventurous than the rectangular keep at Carrickfergus.

Around 1260 the substantial gatehouse was built. This provided the castle with an imposing and easily defensible new entrance, replacing the de Courcy original entrance.

The Late Medieval Period

It is more difficult to date some of the later features but it seems that the outer ward was added at some time after the construction of the gatehouse. It is known, however, that the Magennis's made substantial changes to the keep. The door was moved from the first to the ground floor and alterations were made to the second floor, perhaps necessitated by the castle falling into disrepair. The corridor which runs around the upper chamber shows distinctive criss-cross lines of wicker centring, an Irish building method which used wickerwork to support the weight of stone above while the mortar hardened. It differs from the plank centring used by English builders, evidence of which can be seen in the windows on the first floor. This indicates that any features on the second floor are late medieval.

The 17th Century

The slighting of the Castle in 1652 did not bring an end to the use of the site. The Blundell family built the large L-shaped dwelling in the south corner of the lower ward. Its large windows clearly show that defence was no longer a priority for the inhabitants of the site.

A tour of the Castle

It is best to start a school tour in front of the Blundell House. This allows a discussion of Dundrum's strategic position. Here it is easy to see the natural harbour formed by Dundrum Bay, which provides a safe haven for ships and easy access to the Irish Sea. Control of this harbour would have been considered very important, as would the fact that help could be summoned from mainland Britain in the event of a siege. The castle formed part of a chain of castles running up the East coast, including Carlingford, Greencastle and Carrickfergus. With land routes hazardous, communication by sea was both quicker and safer. From this position it is also possible to emphasise the position of the castle itself, perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Bay.

The second point on a tour should be the rock cut ditch by the path leading to the Gatehouse. This ditch served two purposes. Not only did it increase the defensive strength of the castle, it also provided the stone for building the curtain wall. At this

point it may be useful to consider the types of material needed to build the castle, and the fact that raw materials are in abundance in the area.

From this point it is best to continue to the original entrance to the upper ward. Although now just a gap in the ruined wall the gate was originally protected by a drawbridge over a shallow rock-cut pit.

It leads into the upper-ward, a roughly oval area of 2 acres surrounded by a curtain wall built in short straight lengths. It is thought that de Courcy ordered its construction, using stone quarried by his men as they dug the deep ditch which protects the castle to the West and North. The wall is generally well preserved, especially to the West where it stands to its full height, including the parapet. It is just under 1.2m (4ft) thick, with a wall-walk behind the parapet only 46cms (18 inches) wide. This would seem to provide little support for defending soldiers but holes through the wall at parapet level would have held timbers for a fighting platform, generally improving the defender's position.

Dominating the ward is the circular keep or donjon. This is thought to have been built soon after the curtain wall, perhaps by Hugh De Lacy, who controlled the castle after the fall of de Courcy. The keep has three stories, with the upper storey greatly rebuilt in the fifteenth century. Its original main door, which can be seen on first floor level, would have been reached by an external flight of stairs. The present entrance was made in the fifteenth century. The base of the tower slopes outwards, forming a base batter. Not only would this have provided the donjon with firm foundations, it also would have formed a defensive feature. Stones dropped from the battlements above would have been deflected off the slope towards an attacking enemy.

Although now a shell, joist-holes and offsets (ledges to hold timbers) allow us to identify the original floor levels. The ground floor, lit by two widely splayed loops, was used mainly for storage. From this level a large pit for water storage was cut 7m (23ft) into the rock. Wells are common in castle keeps but this cistern is an unusual feature. It would have provided a good water supply for the castle, especially important when under siege, and it still retains water, even in the summer.

The first floor room once provided grand and comfortable accommodation. Warmed by a large hooded fireplace, the room would have been the setting for court hearings, feasts and entertainment.

The second floor has been greatly altered. Originally there would have been one large private chamber but this changed when the upper storey was rebuilt in the fifteenth century. A series of small interconnecting chambers opened off the large central room. They are roofed with overlapping flags (corbelling) or with vaults

which show evidence of wicker centring.

The wall walk is now largely ruined but the summit of the keep still provides magnificent views over the surrounding countryside.

A walk round the curtain wall will reveal other interesting features. Near the keep is a pair of latrines which emptied through chutes which can be seen from outside the castle.

Three splayed arrow loops were possibly added in the 15th century. These protect the postern gate, the castle's 'back-door', but this was later blocked.

The gatehouse was added in the 13th century. Though largely ruined it must once have been strong and imposing. Originally approached up a narrow sloping path the gatehouse has a lopsided, asymmetric design, soon to be underpinned. The Eastern tower curves outwards and is now perched precariously over an undercut rocky scarp. This tower would have blocked the path of any attacker and forced those entering the castle to make a sharp left turn to the gate. This was a key defensive feature as it made it difficult to rush the gate on horseback. The narrow, angled path also prevented use of a battering ram on the gate.

The Lower Ward has lost most of its original features. Pupils will need to try to imagine the types of buildings and activities of the area. The small gateway remains standing and is said to have been used as a gallows for rebels during the 1798 rebellion. In the South-West corner, close to the house, several loops can be seen.

The Blundell House uses parts of the lower ward wall in its construction. Its rooms are spread over two floors, with a basement to the East. Its large windows and many fireplaces suggest a comfortable, well-lit dwelling.

Educational Approaches

The castle can be visited as part of Key Stage 3 – the Norman Impact on the medieval World – or for many other cross-curricular opportunities at KS2. To prepare pupils for a visit they could:

- ❖ Study an aerial photograph and OS map of the site to establish which natural and man-made features have determined the siting, shape and layout of the castle
- ❖ Look at the location of the castle in a local and regional context to identify the main defensive techniques used in castle building and become familiar with castle terminology

- ❖ Your pupils also need to practise those skills which you expect them to use on site. This could involve observing, describing and recording skills (in a spoken, written or diagrammatic way), map work and looking for evidence of change.

History

The military nature of the castle is an essential topic of study. Adequate preparation in school should ensure that pupils can identify defensive elements and explain how they contribute to the defence of the castle. Relate this to your visit by asking pupils to:

- ❖ Identify potential weaknesses in the layout and position of the castle and what measures have been taken to compensate for them
- ❖ Assess the protection given to the entrance to the castle and evaluate the effectiveness of the curtain wall.

Providing a context or structure for your activities around real or imaginary events provides additional motivation.

- ❖ We believe that Dunderum was garrisoned by 25 soldiers of whom 5 were crossbowmen. Ask pupils to deploy this force around the castle in anticipation of an attack. Use a large site plan to position their men.
- ❖ Ask pupils to make their own preparations for an attack. They only have sufficient men to launch an attack in three places. Having surveyed the castle they could work in groups to outline their plans, justify their choices, indicate the obstacles which will confront them and state how they will overcome them.
- ❖ Take on the role of a spy who has gained access to the castle. They have been instructed to make a report for their master who intends to capture the castle. In addition to a plan of all the obstacles your pupils could offer suggestions how they would attack the castle. Compare these reports back at school.

Domestic Accommodation

A status survey is an ideal way of focussing on the remaining physical evidence of a castle to provide clues on how rooms may have been used. Practice this first by using rooms at home or in school before applying the same technique to selected rooms in the castle. Pupils should draw up a list of the most significant features that they would expect to find in a room – windows, doors, light, heating, storage and decorations and other factors such as size, position and outlook.

Record the information on a chart and use it to determine the status of each of the selected rooms. Give each room a score according to the quality or quantity of each feature. A high score will usually denote an important room, used by a significant person. Pupils could record all internal details on the walls, floor and ceiling and use this information to prepare designs for a reconstruction of a room back at school.

- ❖ Water Supply. The provision of water is essential to the running of a castle. Ask pupils to indicate:
 - ◆ Who would require the water?
 - ◆ What would it be used for?
 - ◆ Where would it come from?

Visitor Information

Ask groups of pupils to create information for a cross-section of visitors to explain what life was like in the castle. This could involve:

- ❖ A trail for children which helps them focus on the main surviving evidence. The information needs to be presented in a concise and appealing way suitable for a guided tour. Pupils should devise a route and compile a checklist of the main elements which they would highlight. Pupils should begin by making a detailed description of the area and record their own impressions

English

All new environments invite exploration and stimulate verbal responses from pupils which can be used for creative, descriptive and narrative work.

- ❖ Ask pupils to write an article, compile a commentary or script a drama on the arrival of an important visitor to the castle. How would they be greeted? What preparations would be made? Where would they and their household be lodged?
- ❖ Alternately pupils could be given the role of a newsreader, radio commentator or journalist assigned to make a report of the occasion and has been allowed to follow the visitor through the castle to the first meeting with Hugh de Lacy in the donjon.

Mathematics

Take measurements and use estimation and calculation skills for reconstructions of various parts of the castle.

- ❖ Groups of pupils could be assigned different areas such as the donjon, outer gatehouse or the curtain wall.
- ❖ Record the thicknesses of different walls in the castle, suggesting why some parts are much thicker than others.
- ❖ Measure or estimate the dimensions of the different types of windows. Calculate the angle of fire of archers at different parts of the castle.
- ❖ Use measurements to compare the amount of living space for the lord of the castle and that available for his household.

Design and Technology

Many practical design problems can be analysed and appreciated by asking pupils to make annotated drawings, diagrams or descriptions to show how:

- ❖ Different types of windows and doorways support the weight above
- ❖ Floors and ceilings were supported – corbels, joist holes and ledges
- ❖ Different types of arches and vaults are used as supporting structures.

Geography

Use local, regional and national maps to help pupils understand how the location of the site is determined by:

- ❖ Medieval communication routes
- ❖ Dundrum Bay and its crossing points
- ❖ The existing ruins of an earlier defensive structure
- ❖ The relationships with other castles (e.g. Carlingford, Greencastle and Carrickfergus).

Art

- ❖ Drawings taken on site could be used at school as the basis for work in other media including painting, simple printmaking or collage work.
- ❖ Pupils could use a variety of materials to construct a model of the castle.

HOW TO GET THERE

Road: The road is signposted off the A2 in Dundrum village

Access for the disabled: There is an uphill walk from the village and from the car park to the castle entrance. The castle is on a sloping, rocky knoll and the gatehouse is intended to make access difficult. Wheel chair users may find access challenging or impossible.

Parking: Car park provided.

Toilets: On site

Picnics: Permissible. Please take all litter home.

Free Educational Visits: For information on educational visits to Dundrum Castle, please contact EHS on (028) 9054 6518. Demonstrations of Historical combat techniques are available. It is also possible to arrange for the assistance of the Historic Monuments Educator by calling 07771 542956.

Maximum Party Numbers: Reference to the Guide to Educational Visits and Use of EHS Sites, available to download from http://ehsintranet/education/resource_packs.shtml (bottom of page) gives details about adult:pupil ratios. It is advised that there should be an adult for every 15 pupils.

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