

Medieval Homes 1200-1600 AD



The Medieval period or Middle Ages commenced with the Anglo-Norman invasion which introduced new types of equipment and buildings. The Normans conquered **East Antrim** and **East Down**, but eventually their settlements were restricted to a few coastal enclaves centred on a large castle like **Carrickfergus** or a trading port like **Ardglass**. The introduction by the Anglo-Normans of large earthwork and stone castles was something totally new to the Irish landscape. These castles can be divided into three groups: the earthwork castles of the earliest invading Normans (c1169-1225), the large stone fortresses of the period of territorial consolidation (c1175-1300) and the late medieval fortifications typified by the tower house. Later fortified houses were erected.

The Motte and Bailey



These constructions, built largely of timber, are characteristic of the early part of the period. A motte is a large flat-topped artificial mound, usually sited on a hilltop with a wooden stockade around the perimeter of the summit enclosing a wooden tower. The bailey or courtyard was a low earthen platform, rectangular or kidney-shaped and situated to one side of the motte but separated from it by a ditch and protected by a wooden palisade. Access from the bailey to the motte was sometimes by a moveable bridge.

Excavation at **Clough, Co.Down** revealed the post-holes of a palisade and pits for archers, with a domestic building rather than a tower in the centre. Domestic buildings have also been found at **Lismahon** and **Rathmullan in Lecale, Co.Down**. The best-preserved motte and bailey is at **Dromore, Co.Down** and another is located at **Harryville near Ballymena, Co.Antrim**.

Stone Castles

Stone castles symbolised power and wealth and called for a greater investment of time, money and labour. They were generally built for the Crown or by powerful and wealthy individuals.

The first stone castles were built to dominate and intimidate. These large fortresses were roofed and had wooden galleries round their walls. Unfortunately they were smelly places too, especially in the height of summer, as they lacked running water and flushing lavatories. Maybe this is the reason they were seldom used as permanent residences! A lot of these castles had keeps. Most of the keeps of the earlier period were almost square but at **Greencastle, Co.Down** and **Carrickfergus, Co.Antrim** there were rectangular ones.



Carrickfergus Castle (c1200) dominating **Belfast Lough** was one of DeCourcy's first strongholds. It may have been the first stone castle in the country. Its earliest phase is the polygonal curtain (outer defensive wall) and the great rectangular keep. At **Dundrum, Co.Down** the same style of wall was used but the keep was circular like those in South Wales from where the invaders may have come.

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For defensive reasons, the keep was entered by a door at first floor level, and frequently there was a chapel on the second floor immediately above the entrance. The great hall, which was for the use of the Lord and his family, was also situated at first floor level, while their private chambers were on the floors above. Most of the servants and soldiers would have occupied the buildings within the wall or courtyard.

Stone castles continued to act as important military and administrative bases but few were built during the 14th and 15th centuries, as Britain was engaged in other wars and both Britain and Ireland suffered population decrease as a result of the Black Death (1348-50).

Tower Houses

The economic revival of the 15th century saw the emergence of tower houses with interesting groups developing in **Antrim** and **Down**. The heads of some important families also built tower houses e.g. the Maguires of Fermanagh and the O'Neills of Tyrone.

The tower house was the typical residence of the Irish gentry in the 15th and 16th centuries. It was built of rubble masonry with stone cut dressings to doors and windows and finished with a steep-pitched roof and gables.



It consisted of a rectangular stone tower, up to six storeys high, with various defensive elements including a courtyard. The accommodation consisted of a hall directly over the barrel-vaulted ground floor and private chambers on the levels above. Access to the chambers would have been by the spiral stairs in one of the projecting towers. The main doorway, which is always at ground floor level, gave access to the ground floor and the stairwell. The entrances on the ground floor were protected by murderholes from which arrows could be fired at the enemy. The strong wooden doors could be barred from the inside and an iron grill, called a yett or portcullis, pulled across the front of the door with chains.

Left, Kilclief Castle

On the outside wall was a small stone chamber called a machicoulis, which projected from the wall and was carried on corbels. From inside this, boiling oil could be poured on unwelcome visitors below. Similar protective features at the corners were called bartisans. The windows at ground floor level consisted of splayed slit openings to allow arrows to be fired outwards while some of the later examples had loops for guns.

The upper levels comprised the sleeping and living quarters and had larger and more decorative windows. They also contained large stone fireplaces at the gable walls. Apart from these the interiors must have been cheerless and stark with little light, space or privacy for the owner and his retainers.

Most of these dwellings would have had a defended courtyard surrounded by a stone wall. Within the courtyards or bawns there would have been wooden buildings, some freestanding and others built against the curtain wall. Tower houses continued to be built well into the 17th century and only ceased with the advent of artillery and gunpowder.