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# *A Tower House and Ringfort at Pallas Upper, Borrisoleigh*

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By Donal O'Regan

## INTRODUCTION

In the townland of Pallas Upper, about two miles (five kilometres) south-south west of the village of Borrisoleigh, stands the remains of a small tower house demarcated on its east side by a segment of a substantial earthwork. The structure is situated in what would appear to be a defensive position overlooking Pallas Bridge and the Clodagh River.<sup>1</sup>

It is the latest element in what may have been a multi-period site, and today survives to a maximum height of *c.* 5 metres. Rough sandstone and mortar have been employed in its construction, and it enjoys maximum dimensions of *c.* 3 metres by 2 metres.

It is, as such, an unusually small example of the tower house class. This consideration, combined with its commanding position at the junction of three route-ways and overlooking a river-crossing, and its previous enclosure within an earthwork, suggest that its original purpose may have been less residential than defensive. The pre-existence of a ringfort in a pivotal position may have been a conditioning factor in determining the siting of the tower house, with the ringfort being pressed into action as a kind of bawn when the stone structure was built.

Tower houses in ringforts, although comparatively rare, occur elsewhere in co. Tipperary, as at Cloghonan and formerly at Rahelty, near Thurles. Outside the county examples can be cited at Rathasker, co. Kildare, where only the tower house base survives; at Raheen, co. Limerick; and at Rahinane, co. Kerry.

The closest geographical parallel is at Gortkelly, some nine kilometres west of Pallas, where the base of a tower house occurs within a bivallate ringfort. This little known survival in marginal terrain further hints at the possibility that such an adaptation of ringforts in later medieval times may have been somewhat more common than current evidence would suggest.

## History

The first known historical reference to Pallas Castle concerns a deed of William Bourke FitzTheobald of Oleighe, Co. Tipperary contained in the Calender of Ormonde Deeds and dated July 13 1570.<sup>2</sup> Here we find Bourke making a grant to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormonde,

*"... of all his manors, lordships, pastures, etc. in the town and fields and hamlets of Oleighe, Pallaise Oleighe, Cwolleighill Oleighe, Killowllayne, Glanekyne, Glanbridie, Knockefallydowe, Garrangreyny, Graig, Lyssymie, Knockenywre, Keappaghereghlighe, Garraneyloghe, Ardebayne, Rathbay, Knockarne, Dromgeyl, Correvally, Killomoyne, Cnonywynye, Knockanycashlayne, Cowleine, Glankane, Curraghbeyna, Curraghleigh and Aghanebehaye in Yleigh, Co. Tipperary to have and to hold to said Earl, his heirs and assigns; said Williams hereby appoints Oliveer Morris of Droghedfarney county Tipperary as his attorney"*.

The witness list consists of Oliver Grace, Thomas Grace, parson of Callan, Edmund Butler, Edmund Roo Butler, H. Sheethe, Donill O'Meara, Redmond Morres, John Cantwell Fitzpiers and William, son of Dermot Ryan. Also included in the said grant is a "Letter of Attorney of Thomas,



Earl of Ormonde to John Aylward of Clonmel to receive seisin of the above premises”.

In the following year a substantial land grant by Thomas Earl of Ormonde to William Johnson, dean of St. Canice’s, John, Archdeacon, treasurer of St. Patrick’s, Cashel, and Richard Shethe of Kilkenny, as well as Edmund Butler FirzTheobald of Callan, dated June 1 1571, consists of “all the Earl’s honours, manors, lordships, castles, lands etc.” in over 200 townlands across much of co. Tipperary, including Pallise O’Leighe.<sup>3</sup>

We find a similar arrangement in a deed dated September 20 1576, when the Earl of Ormond grants to “William Johnson, dean of St. Canice’s Cathedral, Kilkenny, John, Archdeakin, dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Cashel, Richard Shee of Kilkenny and Edmund Butler FirzTheobald of Callan all his honours, lordships, manors, courts etc.” in named townlands in Tipperary, Wexford and Waterford, including the holding of Pallise Oleighs.

This deed is signed by Thomas, Earl of Ormonde and Ossory; the witnesses include John Rothe, Sovereign of Kilkenny, Edmund Butler, William Sheeth, Peter Sheeth, Sir William Keogh, Sir William White, priest, Robert Garvey and Patrick Shortall.<sup>4</sup> The tower house at Pallas is thus found to feature in important legal transactions between the Earl of Ormonde and ecclesiastical and sular dignitaries, for whose benefit large areas of co. Tipperary and other of the Earl’s holdings were being made available.

On 22 October 1601 Pallisoleigh is again one of a large number of buildings mentioned in a legal dispute between Thomas, Earl of Ormonde and Robert Rothe, before whom the Earl was summoned to appear” . . . to answer to Robert Rothe etc. on a plea that they hold towards them a convention made concerning the above manors etc., namely that the said earl etc. recognise the said manors and tenements to be the right of Robert Rothe etc. as those which they have of the gift of said Earl etc. Also they have remitted and quitclaimed them for themselves and their heirs for ever to said Robert etc. in return for £1,000 silver. And according to statute proclamations of this were made in court on sixteen occasions from the 16th October in Michaelmas, the 41st year (1599) to the 28th of May following”.<sup>5</sup>

In dispute in the “Inspeximus of the record of a foot of fine and recovery before the justices of the Common Bench of Ireland between Tomas, Earl of Ormonde, Peter Butler etc., and Robert Rothe, etc.” are “... the manors of Carrickmagriffin, Killenalke *alias* Kildenale, Thurles, Nenagh, Lisronagh, Kilshilane, Clonmel and Kilfeacle and 37 castles, 600 messuages, 400 tofts, 12 mills, 400 gardens, 20,000 acres of land, 1,000 acres of meadow, 15,000 of pasture, 8,000 of moor...” in no fewer than 222 different townlands ranging from Athassel in the south of the county to Corkehenny (Templemore) and as far as Grange townland near Nenagh.<sup>6</sup> Pallisoleigh features as but a comparatively minor pawn in a far wider legal wrangle.

In the Civil Survey of 1654 the proprietor of Pallis in 1640 is listed as Walter Butler of Noddstowne, Esqr., Irish Papist, who held the lands “in fee by descent from his ancestors”. We are told that “upon this land stands a small castle out of repaire, and ye ruins of an old mill upon the River of Cludogh which runs through the said lands. There is on the sd. lands 120 Acres of timber wood about twenty and three miles from any navigable part of the River Swire. the lands are waste”.<sup>7</sup>

According to John O’Donovan, writing in Nenagh on 8 October 1840, “In the townland of Pallas Upper there was another castle, but only a fragment of its south wall remains at present, and the foundations of the others cannot be traced. The fragment of the wall remaining is six feet in thickness and well grouted.”<sup>8</sup>

It appears that Pallas Castle may well have fallen victim to the ravages of the Confederate wars of the 1640s, a view borne out by a local tradition which recalls that it was blasted by Cromwellian cannon. Another local account recalls how the top of the castle collapsed in the last century, with the stones from the ruin being jettisoned into the yard of a neighbouring house.



## The Stone Structure

The tower house is (as already noted) in a poor state of preservation, surviving to a maximum height of just c.5 metres. The doorway is east, facing towards the river, and slight traces of corbelling survive immediately inside the entrance.

A good aperture or arrow-slit recessed into the south wall about a metre above ground level is the most notable surviving feature of the tower house. Nothing of the northern and western walls remains.

## The Earthworks

It has been suggested by some writers that the earthworks enclosing such tower houses as those at Rahinane, co. Kerry and Raheen, co. Limerick may be of the ringwork castle class of Norman construction and generally dated to the second half of the twelfth century. Such ringworks, which are essentially embanked circular or penannular earthworks, are well attested in Britain. Their presence in Ireland has only been generally accepted, and then not without reservation, since the late Dermot Twohig published a pioneering paper on the subject in 1978.<sup>9</sup>

One of the features held to be associated with ringworks is that of elevation, a factor which holds out certain possibilities for the site under discussion. In the area to the east of the Pallas tower house the ground is artificially raised to a height of about 3 metres. Could one thus be dealing with an example of a later medieval tower house built within the confines of a Norman ringwork, itself located within an earlier ringfort?

O'Keefe, however, has been inclined to dismiss such sites as Rahinane, Co. Kerry from constituting genuine ringworks, opting for the reused ringfort equation.<sup>10</sup> According to this school of thought, circular earthworks associated with tower houses, as distinct from those attached to Norman castles, should be viewed as re-used ringforts, unless there is particular reason to suspect otherwise. At Pallas the outline of the ringfort fosse can clearly be seen in the level field to the west of the tower house. One is likely dealing with a classic ringfort and not with a ringwork of Anglo-Norman construction.

The other possibility is that an existing ringfort was adapted for the purpose of constructing a small Norman motte — the forerunner of the stone castle. Such Norman mottes — large mounds of earth thrown up within an enclosing bank and ditch and surmounted by a pallisade and timber residence — are known from the Continent. Excavations in Northern Ireland at such sites as Dunsilly, co. Antrim and Rathmullen, co. Down have revealed the existence of pre-existing ringforts beneath the Norman structures.

It has been suggested that this may involve the symbolic take-over of indigenous high status sites, while a simpler explanation may be that existing ringforts provided a stable base on which to construct the new mound. Tipperary is a good county for mottes, having been heavily colonised during the later stages of the Norman advance. Fine examples can be cited at Moatquarter near Dunkerrin and also at Knockgraffon.

A well-documented motte on a more modest scale occurs at Inch, some three kilometres south east of Pallas. It is not unlikely that another diminutive example may have been built as a defensive outpost within ten kilometres of Thurles, Theobald Walter's principal manorial centre from 1185 until c.1200.

However, mottes have often been confused with platform-type ringforts, and it may simply be that the ground was built up at one side during the Early Medieval / Early Christian period in order to build up a site with a natural incline or gradient. One would then be left with a level area on which to construct a dwelling house and outbuildings. Only scientific archaeological investigation may yet prove or disprove the suggestions put forward in this note.

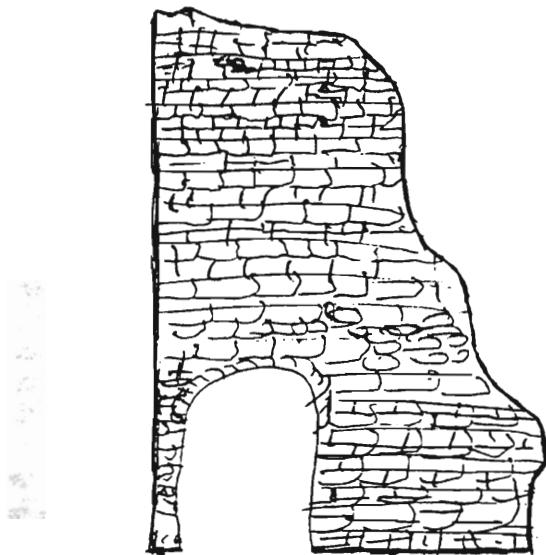


## FOOTNOTES

1. The site is located 9 cms. from the southern margin and 43 cms from the eastern margin of Sheet 34, O.S. (2nd ed.) for co. Tipperary, and is in the parish of Glenkeen and barony of Kilnamanagh Upper.
2. Calendar of Ormonde Deeds (Curtis ed.) Vol. V, p.186.
3. Ibid. p.186.
4. Ibid. p.201.
5. Calendar of Ormonde Deeds (Curtis ed.) Vol. VI, p.190.
6. Ibid.
7. Civil Survey for Co. Tipperary (Simington ed.), Vol. I, p.90.
8. Co. Tipperary O.S. Letters, parish of Glenkeen, p.243, par. 519.
9. Twohig, D.C.: "Norman Ringwork Castles", in Bulletin of the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement, Vol. 5, pp.7-9
10. For a discussion on ringwork castles and mottes on ringforts, see Tadhg O'Keefe on "Archaeology of Norman Castles in Ireland, Part 1: Mottes and Ringworks" in *Archaeology Ireland*, Volume 4 No. 3, pp.15-17.

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*A rough drawing of Pallas Castle (from the east) as it is today.*