

# *The Medieval Town Defences of Cashel*

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By Tracy E. Collins

Medieval towns were a tool of colonisation and control for the Anglo-Normans. They were also an encouragement for potential settlers, with incentives such as burgage plots, civil liberties, protection and trade.

Cashel is a typical example of such a town. It is particularly interesting because it was originally a secular, and later an ecclesiastical centre in the early medieval period. It was founded by archbishop Donat O'Lonargan in 1216 (Gleeson 1927). The town is a classic example of an Anglo-Norman planned town, and is unique in being the only town established in this period by an archbishop to survive into the post-medieval times (Simms 1988, 31).

Cashel seems to have reached its peak c. 1250-1300, with many structures being built around this time, including a parish church and three religious houses (Gleeson 1927). Murage, or the building and repair of town defences, was granted by the king and parliament in England. At Cashel the first murage was granted in 1303-07, and another in 1319 (Bradley 1985b, 44).

The actual walling of the town began with archbishop Fitzjohn in 1317-26 (Leask n.d., 8). Some believe that it was not until 1320 that Cashel was completely encompassed by a wall (Gleeson 1927, 234). The traditional murage was still collected at Cashel's markets and fairs until the middle of the twentieth century (Bradley 1991, 26).

A town's defences were not of a stone curtain wall alone. They may have been totally of timber or earthen construction, or a combination of stone and earth (Bradley 1991, 25). Most would have had a fosse or ditch outside the stone wall, which may have been filled with water to form a moat. A rampart or bank created from the soil of the ditch may also have existed, although there is no evidence for this at Cashel.

The stone curtain wall, complete with towers, battlements, machicolations and gates, would have stood behind the earthen defences (Thomas Vol. I, 121). However, a town wall was, ironically, no ultimate protection. Fire was a major fear, as most of the medieval walled town would have been of wood and thatch.

The town of Cashel is marked on the first, second and third editions of the Ordnance Survey Maps, complete with "town walls". In 1779 a traveller said of the town defences that "what is left looks good", with "two gates standing of tolerable workmanship" (Luckombe 1780). By the seventeenth century, it seems, Cashel's defences had waned; during the siege by Inchiquin of the town in 1647 the inhabitants retreated to the Rock for safety (Murphy 1965).

The first plan of the wall at Cashel was drawn by Rev. Wyse Jackson (1949, 24-5) [Figure 1], based on the O.S. maps and the Corporation minutes. The wall is roughly heart shaped, surrounding an area of 14 hectares. The circuit was a single wall, with five gates and several possible turrets. The defences may have included a bank and fosse; only excavation would prove if this were the case. The perimeter is 1,550 metres in length.

The angular nature of the wall is due to the incorporation of the medieval parish church to the south of the town – now the Church of Ireland cathedral. This suggests that the parish church pre-dates the building of the wall. The wall also had the existing structures of the Dominican Friary (founded in 1243) to the north and the Franciscan Friary (founded in 1265) to the east.



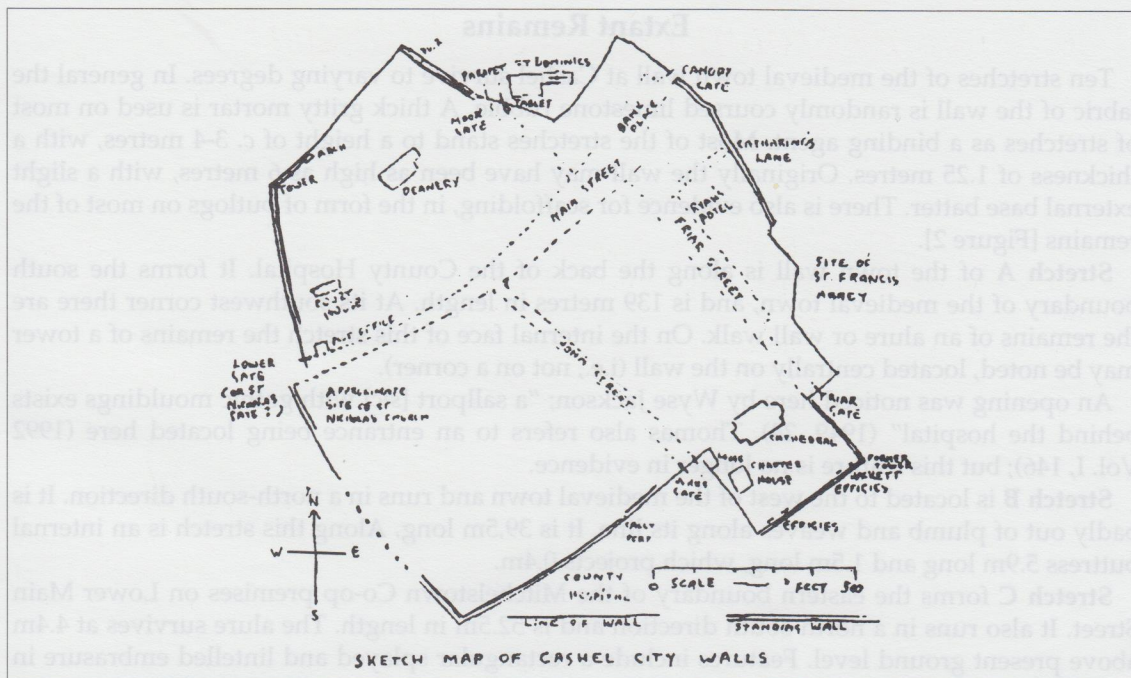


Fig. 1 – After Wyse Jackson (1949), reproduced from *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 6, 1, 24-25, with permission.

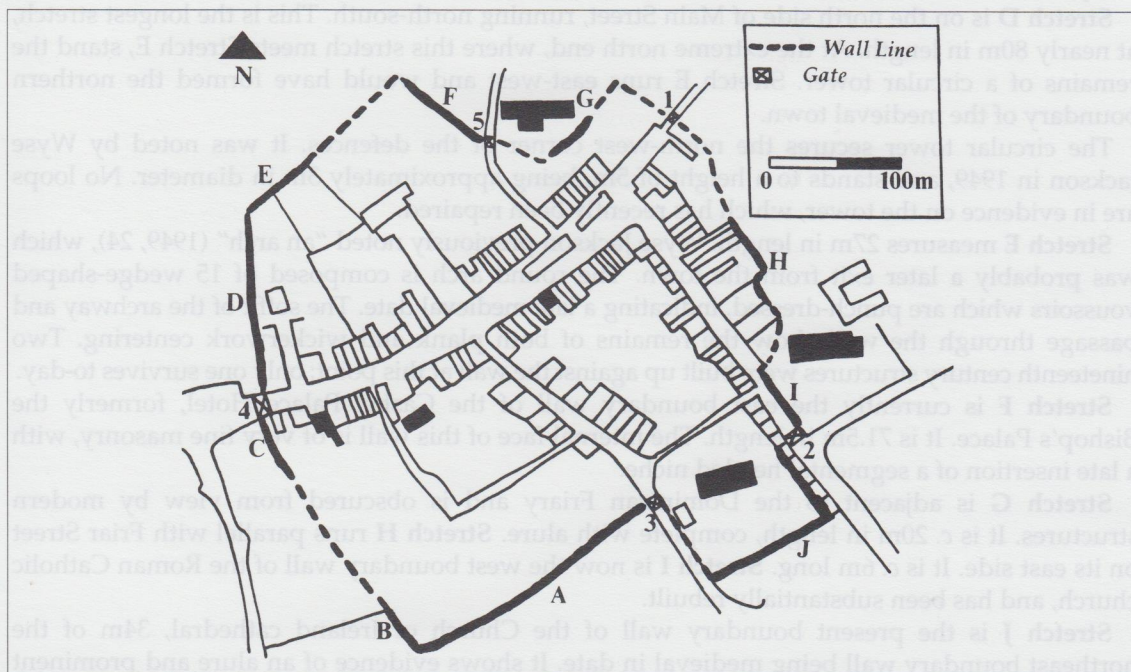


Fig. 2 – Location map of extant stretches of Town Wall (A-J), and Town Gates: 1 Canopy Gate, 2 Friar Gate, 3 John's Gate, 4 Lower Gate, 5 Moor Gate.



## Extant Remains

Ten stretches of the medieval town wall at Cashel survive to varying degrees. In general the fabric of the wall is randomly coursed limestone rubble. A thick gritty mortar is used on most of stretches as a binding agent. Most of the stretches stand to a height of c. 3-4 metres, with a thickness of 1.25 metres. Originally the wall may have been as high as 6 metres, with a slight external base batter. There is also evidence for scaffolding, in the form of putlogs on most of the remains [Figure 2].

**Stretch A** of the town wall is along the back of the County Hospital. It forms the south boundary of the medieval town, and is 139 metres in length. At its southwest corner there are the remains of an alure or wall walk. On the internal face of this stretch the remains of a tower may be noted, located centrally on the wall (i.e., not on a corner).

An opening was noticed here by Wyse Jackson; "a sallport [*sic*] with gothic mouldings exists behind the hospital" (1949, 24). Thomas also refers to an entrance being located here (1992 Vol. I, 146); but this feature is no longer in evidence.

**Stretch B** is located to the west of the medieval town and runs in a north-south direction. It is badly out of plumb and weaves along its line. It is 39.5m long. Along this stretch is an internal buttress 5.9m long and 1.5m long, which projects 0.4m.

**Stretch C** forms the eastern boundary of the Mitchelstown Co-op premises on Lower Main Street. It also runs in a north-south direction and is 52.5m in length. The alure survives at 4.4m above present ground level. Features include a rectangular splayed and lintelled embrasure in the south end of this stretch, and a foundation plinth of roughly hewn limestone blocks.

There is an obvious bend at this stretch of the wall. It is unclear why the wall should bend at this point, as it does not seem to mark the site of a tower or turret, and none is documented.

**Stretch D** is on the north side of Main Street, running north-south. This is the longest stretch, at nearly 80m in length. At the extreme north end, where this stretch meets Stretch E, stand the remains of a circular tower. Stretch E runs east-west and would have formed the northern boundary of the medieval town.

The circular tower secures the north-west corner of the defences. It was noted by Wyse Jackson in 1949, and stands to a height of 5m, being approximately 3m in diameter. No loops are in evidence on the tower, which has recently been repaired.

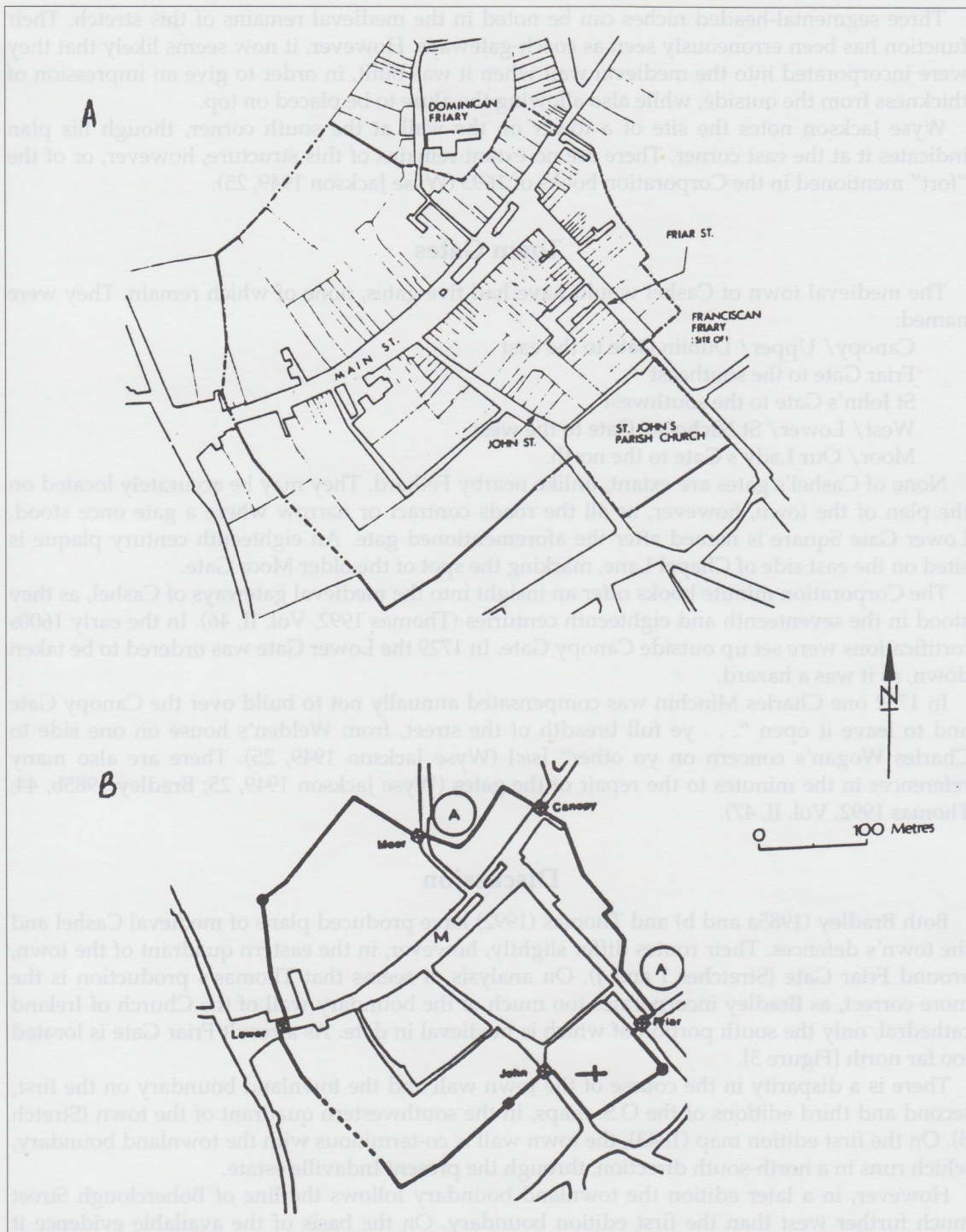
**Stretch E** measures 27m in length. Wyse Jackson previously noted "an arch" (1949, 24), which was probably a later exit from the town. The round arch is composed of 15 wedge-shaped voussoirs which are punch-dressed, indicating a late medieval date. The soffit of the archway and passage through the wall show the remains of both plank and wickerwork centering. Two nineteenth century structures were built up against the wall at this point; only one survives to-day.

**Stretch F** is currently the east boundary wall of the Cashel Palace Hotel, formerly the Bishop's Palace. It is 71.5m in length. The internal face of this wall is of very fine masonry, with a late insertion of a segmental headed niche.

**Stretch G** is adjacent to the Dominican Friary and is obscured from view by modern structures. It is c. 20m in length, complete with alure. **Stretch H** runs parallel with Friar Street on its east side. It is c. 6m long. **Stretch I** is now the west boundary wall of the Roman Catholic church, and has been substantially rebuilt.

**Stretch J** is the present boundary wall of the Church of Ireland cathedral, 34m of the northeast boundary wall being medieval in date. It shows evidence of an alure and prominent base batter. The southeast wall is also the medieval town wall, while the southwest boundary wall follows the medieval line but appears to be a modern construction.





**Fig. 3** – (A) reproduced from J. Bradley, *The Medieval Towns of Tipperary* (1985b); (B) reproduced from Avril Thomas, *The Walled Towns of Ireland* (Dublin 1992), Vol II, 47, with permission.



Three segmental-headed niches can be noted in the medieval remains of this stretch. Their function has been erroneously seen as coach-gateways. However, it now seems likely that they were incorporated into the medieval wall when it was built, in order to give an impression of thickness from the outside, while also allowing the alure to be placed on top.

Wyse Jackson notes the site of a tower on the wall at the south corner, though his plan indicates it at the east corner. There are no extant remains of this structure, however, or of the "fort" mentioned in the Corporation books of 1693 (Wyse Jackson 1949, 25).

### Town Gates

The medieval town of Cashel would have had five gates, none of which remain. They were named:

Canopy/ Upper/ Dublin Gate to the east

Friar Gate to the southeast

St John's Gate to the southwest

West/ Lower/ St Nicholas' Gate to the west

Moor/ Our Lady's Gate to the north.

None of Cashel's gates are extant, unlike nearby Fethard. They may be accurately located on the plan of the town, however, as all the roads contract or narrow where a gate once stood. Lower Gate Square is named after the aforementioned gate. An eighteenth century plaque is sited on the east side of Chapel Lane, marking the spot of the older Moor Gate.

The Corporation minute books offer an insight into the medieval gateways of Cashel, as they stood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Thomas 1992, Vol. II, 46). In the early 1600s fortifications were set up outside Canopy Gate. In 1729 the Lower Gate was ordered to be taken down, as it was a hazard.

In 1732 one Charles Minchin was compensated annually not to build over the Canopy Gate and to leave it open ". . . ye full breadth of the street, from Welden's house on one side to Charles Wogan's concern on yo other" [*sic*] (Wyse Jackson 1949, 25). There are also many references in the minutes to the repair of the gates (Wyse Jackson 1949, 25; Bradley 1985b, 44; Thomas 1992, Vol. II, 47).

### Discussion

Both Bradley (1985a and b) and Thomas (1992) have produced plans of medieval Cashel and the town's defences. Their routes differ slightly, however, in the eastern quadrant of the town, around Friar Gate (Stretches I and J). On analysis, it seems that Thomas's production is the more correct, as Bradley incorporates too much of the boundary wall of the Church of Ireland cathedral, only the south portion of which is medieval in date. As a result Friar Gate is located too far north [Figure 3].

There is a disparity in the course of the town wall and the townland boundary on the first, second and third editions of the O.S. maps, in the southwestern quadrant of the town (Stretch B). On the first edition map (1843), the town wall is co-terminous with the townland boundary, which runs in a north-south direction, through the present Indaville estate.

However, in a later edition the townland boundary follows the line of Boherclough Street much further west than the first edition boundary. On the basis of the available evidence it seems likely that the first edition map is the correct representation [Figure 4]. However, only archaeological investigation would solve this problem.



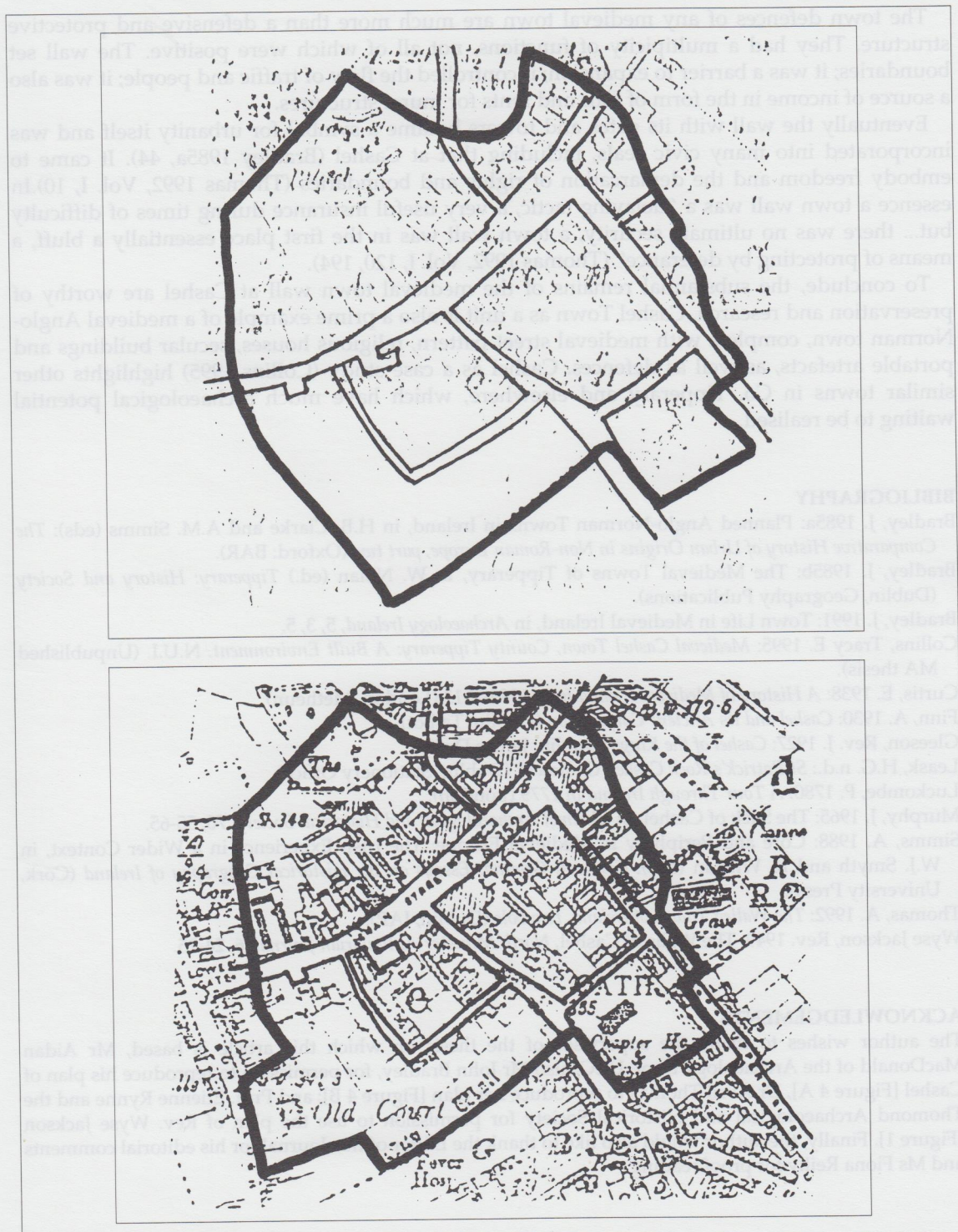


Fig. 4 – First and Second edition O.S. outlines of the town wall at Cashel.



The town defences of any medieval town are much more than a defensive and protective structure. They had a multiplicity of functions, not all of which were positive. The wall set boundaries; it was a barrier to expansion; it controlled the flow of traffic and people; it was also a source of income in the form of tolls and rents for mural structures.

Eventually the wall with its gates and towers became a symbol for urbanity itself and was incorporated into many civic seals, including that at Cashel (Bradley 1985a, 44). It came to embody freedom and the demarcation of rights and boundaries (Thomas 1992, Vol. I, 10). In essence a town wall was a "delaying tactic, a very useful insurance during times of difficulty but... there was no ultimate security, a town wall was in the first place essentially a bluff, a means of protecting by deterrence" (Thomas 1992, Vol. I, 120, 194).

To conclude, the substantial remains of the medieval town wall at Cashel are worthy of preservation and research. Cashel Town as a unit is also a prime example of a medieval Anglo-Norman town, complete with medieval street pattern, religious houses, secular buildings and portable artefacts, as well as defences. Cashel as a case study (Collins 1995) highlights other similar towns in Co. Tipperary and elsewhere, which have much archaeological potential waiting to be realised.

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