

King John as a Castle Builder, a talk by Dr John Goodall at the King John 800 Conference in Dublin Castle, Ireland, 8-10 September 2016-09-12

Reported by Dr. Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler

The conference organised by University College Dublin to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the death of King John and hosted by Dublin Castle was an intimate and friendly affair with only about fifty delegates of which half were invited speakers who were the academic experts in their fields. These included Professors Stephen Church, Nicholas Vincent, Sean Duffy, Marie Therese Flanagan, Martin Aurell, Rob Liddiard, Tadhg O'Keefe (also a co-organiser), Howard Clarke, Louise Wilkinson, Janet Loengard, Matthew Strickland and David Carpenter.

The talks ranged from the general about King John and the wider Angevin Empire that he succeeded in diminishing so greatly to his more specific relations with Ireland. Thus, delegates heard about John's style of rule and how this contributed to him losing first most of his continental territories, then his independence as a ruler following Magna Carta, and finally, almost, his kingdom of England following the Capetian prince Louis's invited intervention as his intended replacement. We learned of the role of the bishops in his administration and discussed the good and bad – mostly the latter, but not all – of his military prowess. As Matthew Strickland reminded us, he campaigned always with a large contingent of engineers and miners who contributed to his considerable success in siege warfare on the continent, across England and in Ireland. His victories otherwise were few, though perhaps mostly because he lacked the reckless charisma of warriors like his brother Richard Lionheart, and he was greatly outshone by his illegitimate half-brother William Longspee.

We learned of his application of the law, in which he liked to take a personal hand, which was generally okay if you weren't so rich that he felt he could transfer a large chunk of your wealth to his own pocket! We also were reminded of how cruel he could be and prone to

kick his perceived enemies when they were already down, but at the same time we learned how remarkable a woman was William de Briouze's wife Matilda de St Valerie who was starved to death by John together with her eldest son. We also got some insight into John's attitude to crusading and to the drafting and implementation of Magna Carta, as well as how he was perceived by his wives and children and by contemporary manuscript illustrators following his death.

We were led through his relations with and actions in relation to the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales, and in more detail in Ireland. We were given insights into how John managed these fringes of empire with a view to imposing a more centralised royal administration on them, evidenced by the explosion of related documentation. In Ireland, more so even than in Wales, he ruthlessly exploited factional local politics to divide and conquer, witnessed by his distribution of others' lands and by his ruthless destruction of the de Briouze dynasty and the defeat and exile of the de Lacy brothers, thus taking control of most of Anglo-Norman Ireland outside Leinster. We learned of the close connections with the southwester part of England centred on the port of Bristol, to whose citizens Dublin was originally given, and who were the main contributors of coin and materials to his two Irish expeditions of 1185 and 1210. The latter ended, of course, with the successful siege of Carrickfergus Castle.

Despite King John being a busy castle builder (and besieger) throughout his reign, both on the continent and, particularly after the fall of Normandy, across England and Ireland, only one talk dealt with John's castle building. This was *King John as a Castle Builder*, given by Dr John Goodall on the last afternoon. Whereas John's father Henry II, his brother Richard Lionheart and his son Henry III are all credited as patrons of architecture, the latter more for his less warlike projects, John is not, perhaps because mostly he added to already existing castles. There is one exception, Odiham Castle in Hampshire, which John built new with a polygonal great tower for about £1,100.

John Goodall began by stating that King John's reign coincided with the transformational moment in architectural history when Gothic replaced Romanesque. In castles the most obvious change was the reintroduction of the round tower, which became a consistent feature of thirteenth century castles, used repeatedly on a geometrically regular plan. The best and perhaps the earliest example of this combination is the Louvre in Paris built by the Capetian king Philip II Augustus in the decade or so after 1190. Round great towers were to characterise Philip Augustus's work at captured Angevin castles and towns across Normandy and Anjou after he took these from John in 1204–05. The regularity and uniformity of Philip's towers reflects the replacement of often very regional Romanesque styles with the more uniform Gothic style in ecclesiastical architecture. Castles could be converted from peaceful display of their new architectural features to a more threatening warlike appearance by the erection of brattices on tower and wall tops. This is evident on the twelfth or thirteenth century Rochester city seal, which shows the castle with square holes just below tower parapets and even some projecting timber beams. William Marshal's round great tower built at Pembroke from about 1200, predated only by that at the Louvre, also comes with holes for brattice timbers at outer parapet level. The tower at Pembroke, however, is unusual in having three concentric sets of battlements that progressively narrow and rise higher until the last sits like a 'papal tiara' on top. For John Goodall, this emphasises the two ways a castle could present itself: to visitors as a confection of battlements demonstrating Marshal's importance, and to any besieger as a massive and threatening hulk.

John Goodall believes England saw a change during King John's reign from local patronage of castles to a more centralised patronage. John's works used standard elements to enlarge, enhance and revolutionise the appearance and functionality of existing royal castles across England, in several cases spending over £1,000 on each. At Scarborough

he added a new curtain with frequent D-shaped towers and a domestic complex comprising a freestanding hall and a chamber block built against the new curtain, the King's chamber identifiable from the outside by a polygonal tower. At Corfe he added new curtains and D-shaped and polygonal towers as well as a 'gloriette,' an opulent domestic complex in the inner ward. The appearance of these palatial domestic complexes can perhaps be traced to the palace complexes being built by the Frankish aristocracy in the Holy Land to entertain their royal and lordly crusader guests, as described in a talk by Dr Nicholas Paul. At Knaresborough, John built a new curtain with towers; at Dover he completed Henry II's outer curtain with D-shaped towers and one polygonal tower probably associated once again with a chamber block; and at Kenilworth he also built a new curtain and towers. In each case John also spent a phenomenal amount of money on extensive and huge earth works, often accessed by sally ports at the end of long tunnels, examples of the latter being seen at Knaresborough and at Dover. Those at Dover led beneath his new twin-towered gatehouse into a ditch that was spanned by a bridge 120 feet long with an 80-foot drop. In Limerick, John built another new castle that Goodall suggested was planned from the start as a the sub-square enclosure we see today, though this writer has written elsewhere that there is evidence to suggest this was a change of plan made later during Henry III's reign. A huge ditch was excavated at Limerick too, at a cost of £400 according to Goodall.

Despite a call for posters, only one materialized and that was produced by this writer. Titled *King John and Innovative Castle Design on the Western Fringe of the Angevin Empire*, the poster discussed and illustrated in some detail the spread of the round tower and the twin-round towered gatehouse into Irish castle design. It is planned that an expanded version of the discussion on the poster will appear in the *Castle Studies Group Journal* for 1217/18.

King John ordered the building of quite a number of castles across Ireland from the time

of his first visit as Lord of Ireland in 1185. These included Dungarvan in about 1209, Athlone in 1211 and Clonmacnoise in 1214 as well as Limerick in 1211-12. In 1204, he ordered the building of a new castle to protect the city of Dublin and the treasure he kept there (nothing is known about the one there before except that it existed). It was to start as a strong tower onto which could be added a 'castle' and bailey later. These latter was probably not begun until 1213 and completed about 1230, by which time it defined a sub-rectangular enclosure with a round tower at each corner and a twin-towered gatehouse at the mid-point of its long north curtain. As part of the conference, Con Manning, Senior Archaeologist with the Irish national Monuments Service, led a short excursion to inspect the archaeological remains of the northeast *Powder Tower*, conserved beneath a modern wing following excavation. As yet there is neither an archaeological monograph nor a visitors' guidebook to the castle, though the process has finally begun to produce a four-volume monograph over the next few years. Also there is no public access to the one remaining tower, the southeast *Record Tower*, though work is in progress to open it up in the near future.

The tour took us under current castle buildings to where we could see the lowest levels of three quarters of the circumference of *Powder Tower*, which has a high batter at its base not unlike that on the Louvre levels preserved beneath the more famous Early Modern palace. Inside the tower, the remains of the stone revetting on a short overbuilt section of the earlier Viking ramparts of the town have been preserved. A very short length of the battered north curtain of the castle has also been left exposed. The batter at the foot of the wall is interrupted by a steep stairway set just in from its face which accessed a postern gate in the wall, perhaps for the delivery of river-borne supplies. Similar features were built about the same time or a little earlier at Kilkenny Castle by William Marshal. The castle walls extended down to bedrock exposed by the excavation of a great ditch twenty metres wide and ten metres deep that was filled by the River Poddle before it entered the nearby River Liffey. A short section of the eastern town wall is also

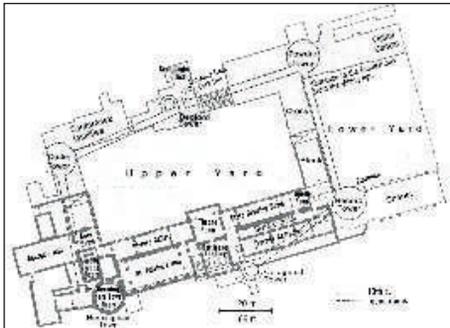
preserved where it joins the tower. This includes the broad pointed arch through which the river filled the castle moat, with a more angular relieving arch contained above it. The arch is blocked with stone, something done at the start of the fifteenth century according to evidence from archaeological excavation.

There was some discussion about which of two towers represents the great tower ordered to be built by King John in 1204. There are two candidates that are in dispute. One is the surviving Record Tower, which definitely has the massive substance of the great towers at Pembroke and the Louvre. This argument has been supported in the past by Tadhg O'Keefe and by this writer. However the tower is not fully round, having a short arc of its circumference set back within the right angle made by the curtain walls on either side, suggesting it is contemporary with the later completion of the castle. Con Manning argues that its greater solidity reflects the defensive vulnerability of its position, and it could also reflect the physical vulnerability of a position on the inside of a curve in the River Poddle. Con Manning put forward his arguments in favour of the southwestern Bermingham Tower: its displacement from the corner of the later enclosure, requiring the construction of a square tower alongside Bermingham Tower to flank the corner (though this writer can't understand why they didn't just build the west curtain to meet and be flanked by the earlier tower); excavation evidence for an over-built earlier curtain that turned in to meet Bermingham Tower; the fully circular plan of the Bermingham Tower together with its size which falls not too far short of that of Record Tower; its location at a topographical high point from which the ground falls away towards Record Tower and the River Poddle; its description in later times as the tallest of the towers (though this could reflect later heightening); and the need to compensate the church for land taken before the 1213-30 works could commence (though the location of the church land is not known). In one article, Tadhg O'Keefe is more equivocal about which tower was built first, citing arguments for both, and this writer too is swinging more towards Con Manning's position on this.



Dublin Castle. Top row from left to right: **Record Tower** from the south with top floor and battlements of the early 19th century; view of the rebuilt Georgian Cross Block overlooking the line of the 14th century east curtain with the southeast Record Tower on the left and the remains of the northeast Powder Tower beneath the junction of the two Georgian blocks on the right.

Middle row from left to right: Record Tower from the north showing the recessed arc within the angle of the south and east curtains, the latter running along the front of the Cross Block; **Bermingham Tower** that was demolished in 1775 and completely rebuilt on its battered base, and the Georgian State Apartments extending in the distance to Record Tower, including the red-painted Georgian St Patrick's Hall on the site of the early thirteenth century castle hall; St Patrick's Hall, fronted by the red brick Picture Gallery, behind which stands Bermingham Tower on a line with the central chimney stack.



Bottom row from left to right: The excavated remains of the town wall abutting the base batter of Powder Tower, with the arch accessing the moat that was filled in around 1400; the postern stairway built into the base batter of the north curtain of the castle beside Powder Tower; the excavated interior of Powder Tower with the remains of the stone-revetted Viking embankment inside it on the right.