

The Mediaeval Walls of Carlow

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The town of Carlow situated at the confluence of the rivers Barrow and Burren, was an important town on the edge of the Pale in mediaeval times and consequently changed hand several times in the struggle between Gael and Gall.

The Normans initially had a motte & bailey at Killeslin, but this outpost proved too difficult to defend. They then moved to Carlow where a castle was built in the early 13th c thus forming the nucleus of a new settlement.

The earliest reference to a walled town occurs for the year 1361 when £500 was paid for walling Carlow when the Exchequer moved there from Dublin, until 1394. Later in 1373-4; *Irish enemies destroyed the countryside right up to the city walls*. In the year 1392 'aid was given to settlers within the walls of Carlow – a master smith was to dwell there in the King's service for the purpose of making guns, harness and other articles for the defence of the place against the Irish. The next reference is in 1537; *Carlow... being walled already* and again 1577; *Carlow... being large and great, and the walls ruined and down at many places*. (After an attack by the O'Moore's).¹

²Bradley.J wrote of the walled town of Drogheda but much of what he described could have equal application to Carlow and other settlement towns of the medieval period.

Such an Anglo-Norman town would be a settlement occupying a central position in a communications network, representing a street pattern with houses and their associated land plots whose identity is significantly greater than that of settlements around it, as seen in the burgh plot pattern; it incorporates a market place and a church and its principal functions are reflected by the presence of at least three of the following; town walls, a castle, a bridge, cathedral, a house belonging to one of the religious orders, a hospital or leper-house close to the town, an area of specialised technological activity, quays, a large school or administrative building and or suburbs.

Returning to the quotation above, the following would have existed in the 14th century; the castle, town walls, market house and possibly a small wooden bridge over the Burren. The cathedral for the diocese of Leighlin was at Old Leighlin at that time. We have no information regarding the other items mentioned ie hospital, quays etc.

All traces of walls and gates had disappeared by early 18th c at the latest and are not shown on the contemporary maps. The walled area occupied 13 hectares with a perimeter of 1350 metres. The town had three main gates ie Dublin, Castle and Tullow Gates. The possibility of a fourth gate at unknown location is mentioned.

Although no trace now remains of the medieval walls their approximate outline can be traced from property deeds for this early period.

According to a map of 1703 the town was still substan-

tially within the earlier walled area (except for some expansion towards the castle site). Later map of 1735 shows marked expansion outside the original walled area. The wider section of Tullow St dates from this period and later still College St

³ *O'Keeffe considers the town wall to be the single most important defining feature. Town walls had more to do with commerce and taxation than with defence from attack and were built primarily to control the movement of goods into the town so that tolls and taxes payable to the king could be levied. Townspeople could apply to the king for a murage grant- ie permission to levy tolls for a defined period to raise funds to build a wall or bridge).*

Bridges

For several hundred years ferries were used to cross both the Burren and Barrow Rivers. ⁴ It is recorded that in 1569 the foundations for a bridge over the Barrow were laid by Sir Henry Sydney. A map of Co Laois dated 1563, shows Carlow Castle and the White Castle on the opposite bank, but no bridge between. The map drawn by the Dutch cartographer, Petrus Bertius does however show bridges spanning the Barrow at both Carlow and Leighlinbridge in 1598.

The 'Graigue' Bridge as it was known is also mentioned for Cromwells campaign in 1650.

⁶ There was a timber bridge spanning the Burren by mid 16th c. However the earliest reference to a stone bridge is for the year 1670.

Quays

⁶ The Barrow was navigable to Athy and New Ross (also walled towns). Dineley writing in 1680 mentions that this trade was conducted with flat bottomed boats. The quays were located along the Burren where the town was unwalled.

Market House

Within the walls was the Market House at the junction of Tullow Street and Dublin Street. Traders of country produce and hand-crafted articles set up their stalls along the adjacent Castle and Tullow streets.

Churches

The mediaeval parish church according to ¹ Thomas was to the east of the castle in the south-west corner of the town near the main street. This location would correspond to the present site of St Mary's Church and churchyard. However other local opinion places the medieval church somewhere near the present Town Hall. ⁵ On the site of St Mary's (Church of Ireland) two previous buildings are known to have existed both are post medieval. The first church was built about 1635, the second completed in 1732 and the present church (designed by Cobden) was completed in 1835.

The Moneen

During the medieval period and right up to the late 18th century much of the area between the town and the Barrow was a marsh known as the Moneen. Beranger's print shows the castle to be on a hillock within this marsh. Bridges would have been needed to span the fosse around the castle from the Castle Gate and again to the west. This marshy area was gradually filled up between the 17th and 19th centuries.

In common with cities and towns elsewhere the construction of a secure bridge would promote the development of suburbs across the river.

Mills

⁶ Three mills existed along the Burren in 1370. These were sited downstream of the present bridge.

Population.

Likely to have been in the hundreds in early centuries of the town existence. ⁶ In the year 1659 the combined population of Carlow & Graigue was recorded at 666 persons.

OUR SURVEY

The survey began at the suggestion of Seán O'Shea to whom we are indebted for much of the historical information given in this article. The survey was conducted by the authors between November 2003 and March 2004. The material which follows was derived by direct observation, by consulting old maps and divining on site where possible. Our results generally agree with Thomas and Horner with the exception of a) the wall did not follow College St to its end and then turn left, and b) the wall did not make a right angled intersection with the Burren (from the Castle Gate.)

We found also that the level of the Barrow and Burren rivers was substantially higher in our reference year of 1400 AD, a likely explanation for the many lakes from which the town gets its name. This would also explain why a wall was not needed along the Burren.

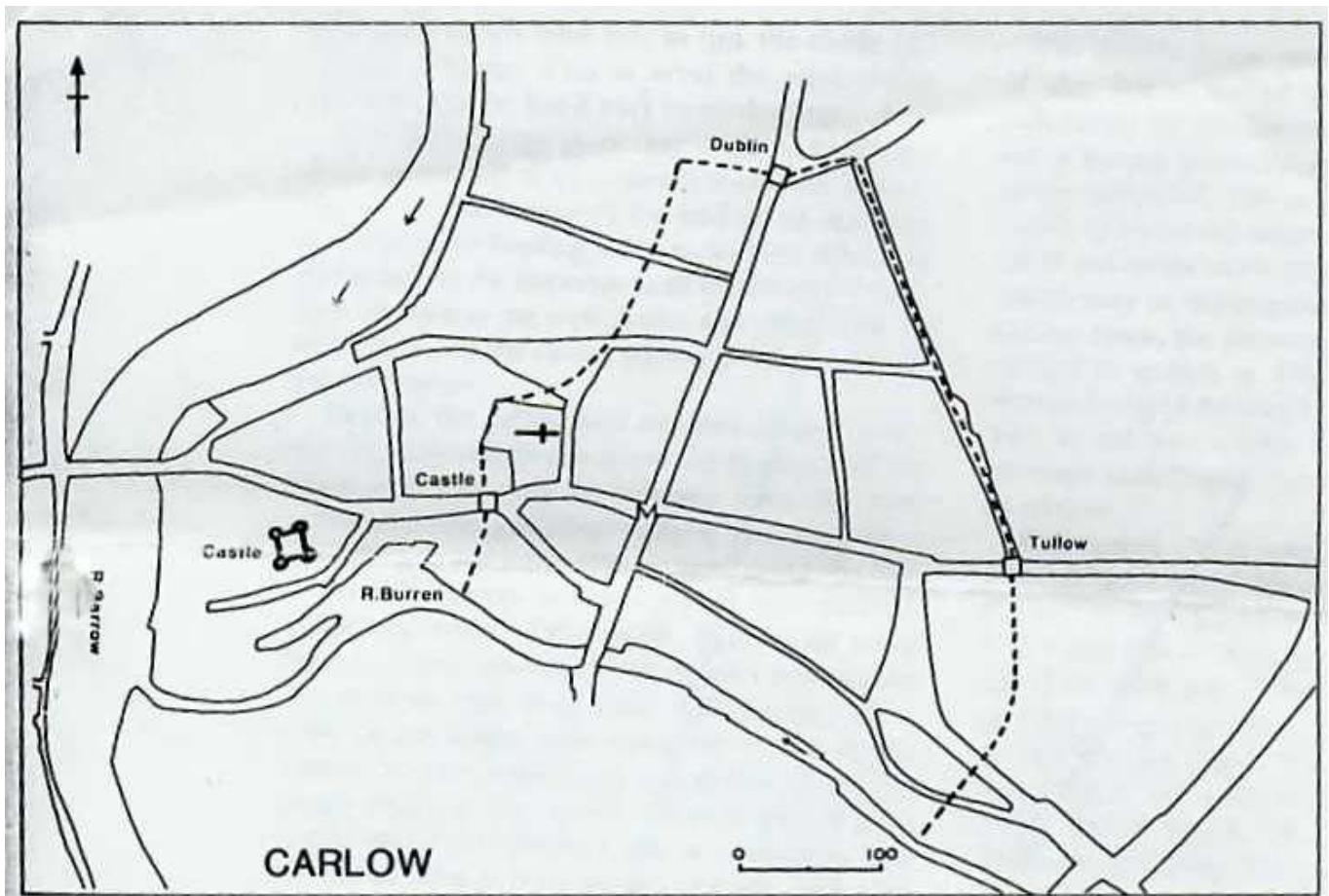
The small island shown on Horner's Map 2, was found to have existed under south pier of the Burren Bridge.



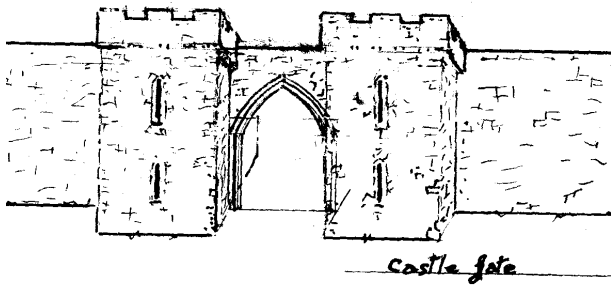
Carlow Castle early 19th c after Gabriel Berenger

References;

1. Thomas .Avril —Walled Towns of Ireland. Vol 2 .
 2. Bradley. J. 1978. The Topography and layout of medieval Drogheda, County Louth. *Co Louth Archaeological & Historical Journal* 19 (2) 98-127.
 3. O'Keeffe.T. 2000. *Medieval Ireland; an archaeology.* Stroud. Tempus.
 4. Carloviana. 1977-78. Graigue Bridge
 5. St Mary;s Church, Carlow. Leaflet
 6. Bradley.J. & King. H.J.—OPW 1990. *Urban Archaeological Survey. Co Carlow*
- King. T. Carlow, The Manor & Town. 1674-1721



Map 1; Mediaeval town walls, showing the three main gates and the Market House (M) According to; Avril Thomas —Walled Towns of Ireland. Vol 2

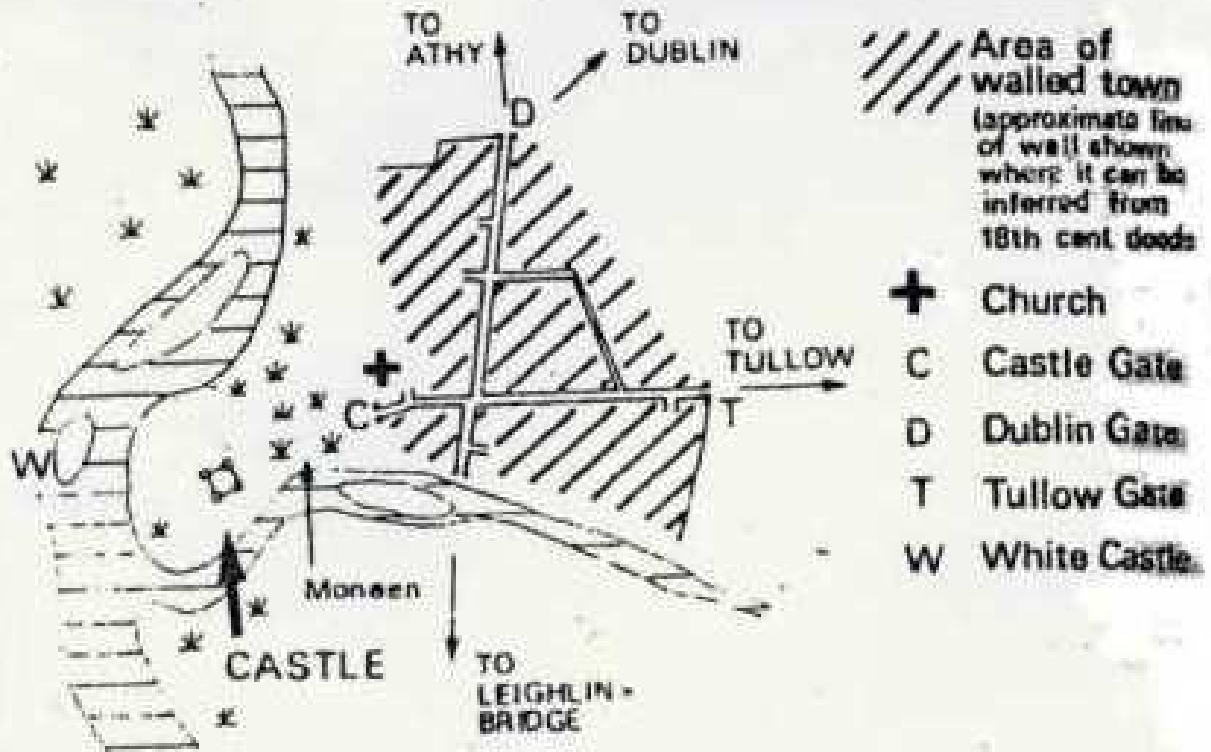


Castle gate

Artists reconstruction of Castle Gate



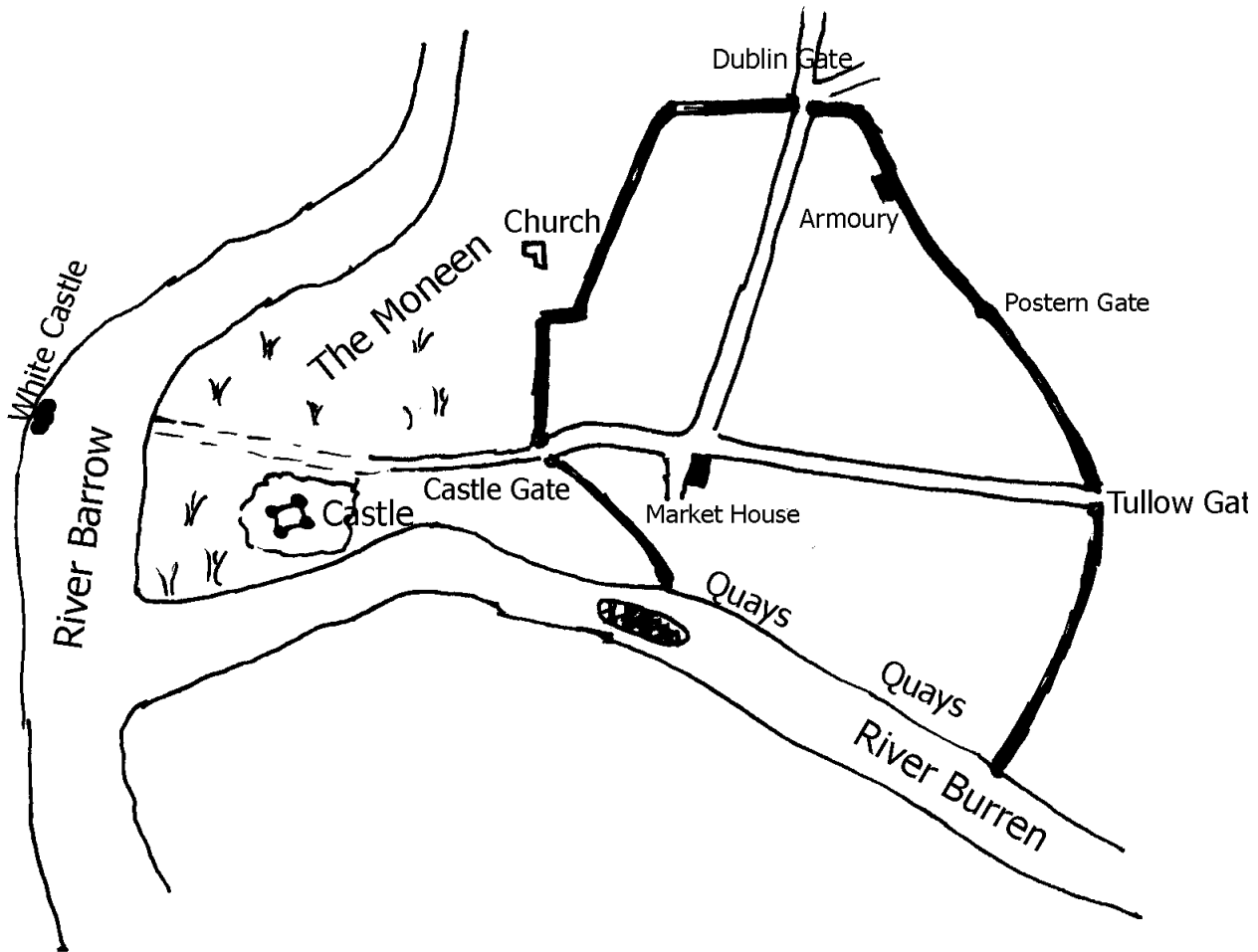
Location of Dublin Gate in medieval times



Map from A.A.Horner, Royal Irish Academy

Town Walls

Height		Width		Buttresses	Towers	Gates
feet	metres	feet	metres			
14	4	5	1.5	33 Num	1	3
				13' x 13' ext dim	8' x 8' internally	Twin towers joined by arch as in sketch
				3.9 x 3.9 m	2.4 x 2.4 m	Door open; 12' Height; 12/13' Postern gate' 3' W x 6' H
				Possibly an armoury or holding cell.		Closed at sunset, opened at dawn
				Location; The Irishman's carpark		



Map 3. Carlow Medieval Walls.

Feeley/Sheehan

According to our readings; the mediaeval town wall ran the following route;

Section 1; From bank of River Burren through former gaol site, along by AIB Bank (at east side) to meet the **Tullow Gate** at junction of Tullow and College Streets.

Section 2; From Tullow Gate to a point opposite entrance to St Patrick's College (location of postern / night gate), curved to other side of street at junction with Brown St, straight section through Irishman's Car park before taking sharp left turn (before end of College St) to meet **Dublin Gate**.

Section 3; From **Dublin Gate** (at top of Dublin St) due west through Blue Sisters Nursing Home grounds before taking sharp turn to s-s-west. Onwards to intersect with Cox's Lane before emerging again in the car park behind Ewing's Bar. Continue into Hay Market before turning due west. Turn south when opposite back wall of St Mary's churchyard. Short straight section to meet the **Castle Gate**.

Section 4; From **Castle Gate** (at bottom of Castle St, where it meets Kennedy St) travelling south east, across Kennedy St / Burren St Junction to a point just east of the Burren Bridge where the wall intersected with the river.

The Market House existed from mid 14th c and was located at the recess at top of Tullow St, next to gable of Paul's Bookshop (space presently occupied by a transformer). This important commercial building was close to the quays along the Burren River.

Editors note;

The technique known as divining (dowsing) used by the authors is not a scientific procedure. and our readers may wish to decide themselves on the veracity of the results thus obtained.