

The Town Wall of Kilkenny

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PART II

THE construction of a town wall brought many problems of organisation to town authorities. It was basically a local affair — the decision to build was local, labour was recruited locally, local masons supervised the work, and the building materials were normally bought in the locality. The cost of building the wall could be offputting, but in the case of Kilkenny, stone—normally the most expensive commodity— was available locally. At Kilkenny the building stone consists of small surface boulders and some quarried limestone. No attempt was made to utilise cut stone in order to give the wall a smooth facing, but this rough and ready appearance is almost a characteristic of Irish defences. It is difficult to calculate the thickness of the wall because most of the existing sections have been interfered with, e.g. structures have been built up against them or upper courses have been added in modern times. In the best surviving portions, however, the wall is 4—4½ feet thick. This is the thickness of parts of the wall at Shrewsbury⁷¹ and it compares favourably with other Irish examples: Athlone wall is three feet thick,⁷² the wall at Youghal two feet,⁷³ at Athenry two feet and at Limerick seven feet.⁷⁴ The thinness of the Irish defences is usually attributed to the fact that cannon was not used against the walls until comparatively late in the medieval period. I would suggest, however, that after the end of the thirteenth century most Irish towns did not have the resources to build strong town walls.

No evidence survives to show the existence of a fosse outside the wall, but it was a usual feature.⁷⁵ The designers of the defences also took care to ensure that the wall was not overlooked by higher ground outside of the town — the castle occupies the highest point, while the entire west wall of the town runs along the top of a ridge. The ease with which a

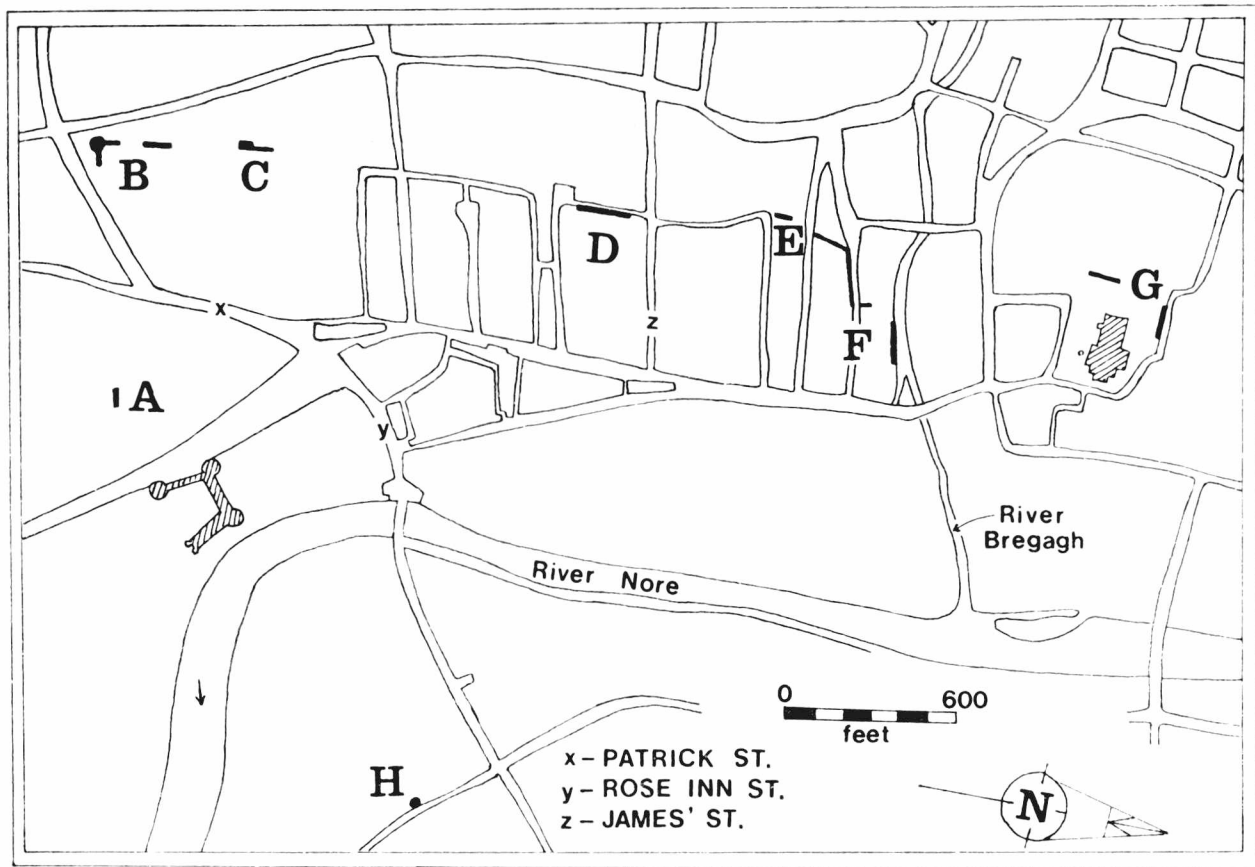
⁷¹cf. Barker, P.A., "Excavations on the Townwall, Roushill, Shrewsbury," "Medieval Archaeology" V (1961), 181—210.

⁷²Langrishe, JRSAL, XX (1890—91), 277.

⁷³Buckley, JCHAS vol. III, Ser. 2 (1900), 157.

⁷⁴Leask, NMAJ II (1940—41), 103.

⁷⁵I wish to mention here the suggestion of the late Mr. Lawrence Hunt that the name "Boher-na-thoundish," which has been interpreted as "road of the aed or infirm" (Hogan, "Kilkenny," 33) and "road of the quietness" (O'Kelly, O., "Kilkenny," K.A.S. 1970, 189) is in fact "Bothar, a Town Ditch," i.e. the town ditch road.



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wall could be reached from within was another important consideration. The *pomerium*, the road behind the walls from which the towers could be approached by the defenders, and along which supplies could travel, exists in part between Friary Street and James' Street. The name "sconce" survives in places.⁷⁶ No wall was built by the river as it was considered to be easily defensible in time of attack. It is possible that a river wall would have interfered with a quay, as was the case at Worcester and Kings Lynn. The origin of the name "St. John's Quay" in Kilkenny might prove interesting in view of this.

The identification of the town wall can pose some problems e.g. where it is overgrown with ivy, where additions have been added in modern times, etc. The most characteristic feature is the ground level on the town side of the wall which is at least 2—3 feet higher than on the outside in the undisturbed sections. On the accompanying map I have plotted the location of the existing portions and I shall now consider them in turn :

A. Kilkenny Design Workshops.

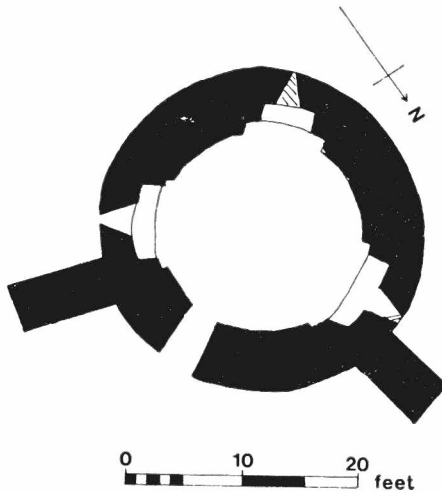
This section was discovered recently during the removal of a lean-to structure. It is 36 feet long and nine feet in height. The ground level on the inside is at least six feet higher than on the outside of the wall, and it is likely that this represents the remains of a rampart erected in Cromwellian times. The wall has one arrow embrasure which is blocked with stones and covered on the inside by the rampart. The embrasure loop is three and a half feet in height and four inches in width. It appears to be a simple vertical loop but the wall needs to be completely cleaned of mortar in order to determine this satisfactorily. Most of the stone in this section is quarried limestone.

B. Talbot bastion.

This is the only complete remaining bastion of the defences. It is 27 feet in external diameter, 16 feet in internal diameter, 30 feet in height and the wall is five and a half feet thick. Its only floor is six feet above outside ground level, and is entered by a door (7 x 3 feet) on the north east. It has three arrow embrasures but two of these have been blocked up; the third is three feet seven inches in height, six inches in width and widens slightly 15 inches above the base to give it a cruciform shape. The roof is dome shaped and bears wicker-work impressions in its mortar. There is a row of slots ten feet above ground level which probably held roof supports. There is no evidence of an internal stairway. The bastion does not appear to be bonded into the town wall, but the possibility

⁷⁶cf. Hegan, op. cit., 15 n.3.

of later interference must not be discounted. The top of the tower is approached from the outside by a stairway set in the thickness of the wall. Corbels which supported the wall walk project from beneath this stairway. A section of the town wall exists here running north and east from the bastion, but much of it appears to be rebuilt and of modern origin. A print in Grose's *Antiquities*⁷⁷ shows that niches for garden statues had been placed in the wall during the eighteenth century — three of them still exist in the west wall and are all of red brick. Fleming states that two doors lead into the bastion⁷⁸ but he is the only one to record this and it is an error. The name "Talbot bastion" is modern, probably derived



PLAN OF TALBOT BASTION

from the belief that it was built by Robert Talbot; it was known as Wattles bastion in the last century⁷⁹ and as St. Patrick's Tower in 1692.⁸⁰ In 1854 a cannon, now on display in the National Museum, was discovered during the removal of the rampart here. It was described then as a "specimen of the wall-pieces of the times of Henry VIII and Elizabeth

⁷⁷Grose, "The Antiquities of Ireland," (London 1791), vol. I, plate 52.

⁷⁸Fleming, J. S., "The Town Wall Fortifications of Ireland," 46.

⁷⁹JRSAI III (1854—56), 130.

⁸⁰Indenture between the Mayor and Corporation of Kilkenny and John Baxter, 8 Nov. 1692. In Kilkenny Corporation Archive—a catalogue of the charters and indentures is being compiled by the author.

(which) seemed to be of the kind known to old gunners as a 'falcon.'⁸¹ It is five feet eight inches in length from breech to muzzle with a handle two feet one inch in length projecting from the breech, and the bore is two inches. The chief interest of this piece of ordnance is that it is the only piece of artillery to survive from the town defences. The form of the bastion and the shape of the arrow loops indicate a date in the late thirteenth - early fourteenth centuries.

C. Provincial Bank — Kilkenny Journal Office.

This stretch of wall is 160 feet in length and includes the remains of another bastion. The wall is 12½ feet high and 3½ feet in width. The upper courses may not be original. It is pierced by two doors of modern origin, both of which are now disused. Portion of the wall at the rear of the Journal Office was destroyed in a storm in 1947 and a concrete wall was erected in its place. The rectangular remnant of the bastion is approximately 10 feet in height, 25 feet in length and 10 feet in width. It is partially overgrown with ivy and there is evidence of some rebuilding. At the base of the bastion there is a large recess known as "the arch" which may have been a sallyport. In 1692 the bastion was known as "Myles Tower."⁸²

D. The Presentation Convent.

This is the best preserved and most accessible part of the town wall. It is 170 feet in length and approximately 15 feet in height. The upper courses, however, are modern. It has two arrow embrasures and a battered plinth. The embrasure loops are of cruciform shape and measure four feet in height, three inches in width and seven inches between the arms of the cross. It is possible that a portion of the rampart survives inside the wall, but it has been turned into a garden rockery.

E. Christian Brothers' Monastery.

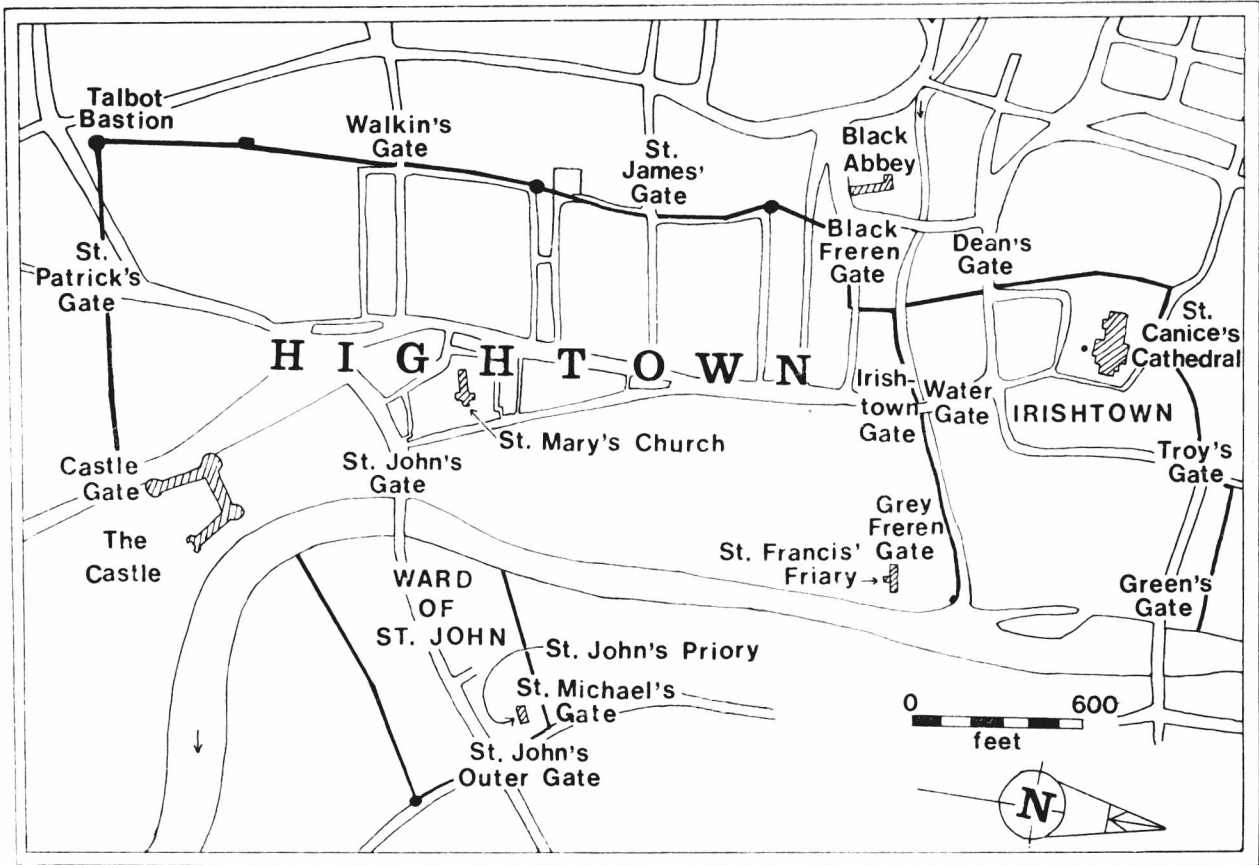
Most of the wall was demolished here in 1860 but portions of the lower courses probably survive in the existing wall.

F. Newbuilding Lane and Abbey Street.

Three stretches of the wall totalling over 300 feet in length survive here. There is a length of 130 feet between Newbuilding Lane and Abbey Street, but it is almost completely overgrown. The section at Abbey Street is 175 feet long and 12 feet in height. It is buttressed but the stonework is concealed by a whitewash. The Black Freren Gate consists of a single arch eleven feet high, eight feet wide and one and a half feet thick. It is impossible to reconstruct the original gate from this

⁸¹JRSAI III (1854—56), 312.

⁸²See note 80.



PLACES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

remnant which is unfortunate as it is the only gate for which we have a close dating: it was built between 1384-97 (supra part I, p. 95). A section of the wall runs northwards from the gate but it is overgrown with vegetation, and another length of wall stands by the river Bregagh.

G. St. Canice's Cathedral.

The two remnants of the Irishtown wall suggest that the defences of Irishtown were inferior to those of the hightown. This is not the case with all Irishtown defences: at Limerick the Irishtown wall was seven feet thick,⁸³ but on the other hand the Irishtown at Athlone had no stone defences at all.⁸⁴ At Kilkenny two sections of a stone faced rampart survive but the ramparts have been used for internment purposes.

H. Maudlin Street.

A small turret exists here but I am reluctant to include it as part of the defences because its dimensions (ten feet high, seven feet in diameter, one foot thick) render it indefensible. It may be worth noting that it was originally open-backed.

A photograph of St. Patrick's Gate⁸⁵ and a drawing of St. James' Gate⁸⁶ have been published. These show that the gatehouses were rectangular, but it is difficult to infer any other information from them. The upper portions of both gatehouses do not appear to be very old.

Two other gates are sometimes mentioned as part of the town defences: "Grey Freren Gate" and "St. Michael's Gate." Birthistle states that Grey Freren Gate led to a bridge (now removed) over the Bregagh, which would have made access to St. Francis' Friary from Irishtown easier for the friars.⁸⁷ St. Michael's Gate opened from St. John's Priory into Michael's Lane according to Hogan.⁸⁸ Both gates were posterns and have left no remaining trace.

In summarising the architectural evidence we can see that it is quite meagre but much more could be revealed if the wall was properly cleaned. Three portions of the wall — sections A, B and D — were constructed in the late thirteenth-early fourteenth centuries. In section A the arrow embrasure was filled up and a rampart placed behind the wall, probably in the seventeenth century.

⁸³NMAJ II (1940-41), 102-103.

⁸⁴JRSAI XX (1890-91), 276-9.

⁸⁵OKR, no. 7 (1953), facing p. 36.

⁸⁶Birch, Rev. P., "St. Kieran's College," facing p. 1.

⁸⁷OKR, no. 18 (1966), 7.

⁸⁸Hogan, op. cit., 211.

The study of town fortifications provides an insight into the social and economic life of the townspeople, and is a method of examining the early growth of towns. In this paper I have tried to trace the development of the defences of Kilkenny with these aspects in mind.

Our knowledge of the course of the hightown wall is based on the map of John Rocque (1758) which shows it as having four towers and seven gates. The courses of the Irishtown wall and the wall of St. John's ward are based on the field boundaries on this map. Irishtown had four gates and there is evidence to show that Troy's Gate was defended. The medieval town was crystallised by its defences, and because of this it has been possible to trace the town's early growth in outline. The hightown wall was begun in the mid-thirteenth century and its construction took approximately 100 years. The dateable parts of the existing defences — Talbot's bastion and the arrow loops in sections A and D — indicate a period in the late thirteenth-early fourteenth centuries. The granting of murage continued until the fifteenth century, suggesting that some efforts were made to keep the wall in repair. The Irishtown wall was probably completed in 1400, when the whole of the town on the west bank of the Nore would have been walled, and I have suggested that this may explain why the chroniclers of the seventeenth century attributed the building of the walls to Robert Talbot. The ward of St. John's was probably not walled until the seventeenth century. The introduction of artillery did not bring any new form of fortification to Kilkenny and the medieval defences continued in use until the arrival of Cromwell. After the excitement of 1689-90 the walls fell into decay although they were still used to gain revenue for the town in the form of rent and tolls.

The sections of the wall which survive today are not of great architectural merit, but they do deserve preservation (and conservation) because of their historical associations and role in the development of the city. This role can best be seen by the way in which the walls have influenced the subsequent building of roads and by the fact that the medieval town has remained the life centre of today's city. Finally, it must be remembered that because of the tentative nature of the evidence, and the light which an excavation or the discovery of new documents may throw on the problem, my conclusions may be invalid, but at least they are a contribution to a sadly neglected topic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Note on Maps I—VI:

These plans are conjectural reconstructions and are not meant to be taken as accurate maps of the medieval city.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CDI—Calendar of Documents relating to Ireland, 1171—1307, ed. H. S. Sweetman, 5 vols. London 1875—86.
 CLAJ—County Louth Archaeological Journal.
 Curtis—Calendar of Ormond Deeds, 6 vols. Dublin, 1932—43, edited by Edmund Curtis.
 JCHAS—Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society.
 JGAS—Journal of the Galway Archaeological Society.
 JRSAI—Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.
 LPK—Liber Primus Kilkennensis, ed. and trans. J. Otway-Ruthven, Kilkenny, 1961.
 NMAJ—North Munster Antiquarian Journal
 OKR—Old Kilkenny Review.

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Diary of Robert Chaloner Knox

Caherleske House

STORY OF A BICYCLE

- 16 April, 1877:** Sir James went to Dublin on mid-day train. Started from Knocktopher $\frac{1}{4}$ hour after him and met him at Kilkenny Station !!
- 9 April:** Rode bicycle to Knocktopher to ride with Herchy to Curraghmore races.
- 10 April:** Sir James and Conchy went to Waterford but did not get bicycle for Herchy.
- 11 April:** Went to station to meet early train, got Herchy's bicycle. Started from Knocktopher to Waterford. Road very bad from Kilmacow. Went to races but came home by train — with bicycles !!
- 15 April:** Sent bicycle to Callan to be mended !!!
- Sir James = Sir James Langrishe.
 Herchy = Sir Hercules, grandfather of present head of house.
 Conchy = Miss Langrishe, sister of Herchy.