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Moorstown Castle — a Neglected Tower-House near Clonmel

by Leo Wallace★

Moorstown Castle belongs to what Craig refers to as ‘a small class of cylindrical tower houses peculiar to Tipperary’.¹ He goes on to try to enumerate them all (there being so few), but omits Moorstown, one of three strongholds of the Keatings in the immediate locality. The situation of the castle and bawn complex, off the main road from Clonmel to Cahir, may explain how Craig missed it. However, the castle is clearly visible from the main road, although difficult to reach unless one knows the way.

Moorstown is actually on the old road to Cahir, now a boreen, and stands on a grassy limestone knoll commanding a great sweep of land all around the site. From the eastern or western approach the tower-house, showing over the almost complete bawn wall, is a most impressive sight. It has a brooding atmosphere that is almost tangible.

The bawn was possibly the first part of the buildings to be erected. Since security was the main object, the completion of the bawn would have been the first step, as it would give a secure place to shelter cattle at night — not to mention the retainers — and a safe place in which to erect the tower house itself. It would have been important not to have the building operations interrupted by the cattle and other raids, which were a constant feature of those times.

Moorstown bawn has two flanking towers on diagonal corners on the north-east and south-west, which more or less cover all four walls of the bawn. The only entrance is through a complete gate-house, above which is a machiculis over the round-headed arched gateway; from here solids or liquids would be dropped on attackers! This gate had also a kind of portcullis in front of it; the grooves in which it fitted may still be seen.

However, as a defensive entrance the gate-house is badly designed, being flush with the bawn wall. For maximum effect the gatehouse should have been built well forward of the bawn wall, so as to act as a flanking tower and to command all the front bawn wall. The actual opening was closed by two doors opening inwards, doubtless iron-shod and kept closed by a great beam about six inches square. This slid into an opening in the wall when not in place. The doors or gates hung on great stone hinges — still in place.

The door-keepers lived over the gate, and there was also a porter’s lodge in the long entrance passage — no getting through here unseen! The Moorstown bawn is constructed with double-faced limestone and rubble mortar core. Part of the north bawn wall (the outer face) was beautifully re-built in the nineteenth century, giving an unusual chance to compare the work of sixteenth- and nineteenth-century masons.

As indicated earlier, the tower house of Moorstown is cylindrical and standing to its full height, having two gables flush with the main walls and both gables gracefully curved to the angles of the main walls. The gables are roughly facing east-west, with the eastern one finishing in a simple oblong chimney. The tower is of four storeys including the ground floor, with one vault of a domical shape and beautifully built.

1. The Architecture of Ireland (1982), p. 103.

★Revised version of a talk given at an outing in May 1988 to members of Co. Tipperary Historical Society.

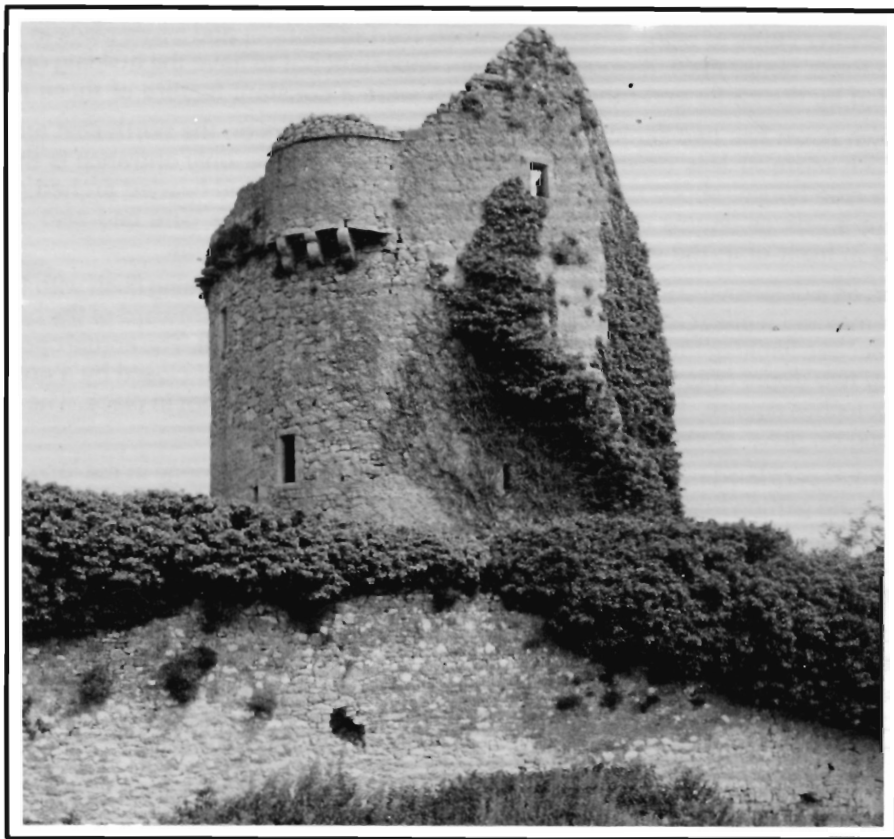


There are only very small window openings at ground and first floor levels, making this part of the building very dark and gloomy. One small window is of the fifteenth-century (ogee) type, showing that at least one mason had a weakness for this lovely (if old-fashioned) style, in a building otherwise very much of the sixteenth century. The ground and first floors follow the general shape of the castle, being thus circular.

The second floor, in which is the main living room, is almost square, with a typically sixteenth-century fireplace of the flat lintel type, with rounded edges, slightly chamfered. Directly over this room is the third floor. This appears to have been a dovecote, doubtless to increase meat rations during the hard winter months.

Windows in the top rooms are all small simple oblongs with one exception, that of the main living-room. This is about four feet square, and had one mullion. There are two other smaller windows in the living-room, all perfectly plain without a single hood moulding. Nevertheless, the general effect is pleasing.

The spiral stairs, garde-ropes and inner doors are all beautifully fitted in between the square of the second and third floors and the curve of the main walls themselves. Over the third floor rise both gables with wall walks and three machicolations at opposite angles, liberally pierced with musket loops. There are also musket loops at ground level and on either side of the entrance door to the castle.



Moorstown Castle - Photo by Kitty O'Donnell

The parapets of Moorstown are finished plainly, with no stepped battlements on the tower or the bawn. However, it can be argued that the building looks best as it is, as the design of the tower would not have taken battlements.

Finally, it remains to be recorded that to a now largely forgotten episode in the War of Independence (1918-1921) is largely due the remarkable state of preservation of the upper story of Moorstown Castle. As a gesture of defiance the local unit of the I.R.A. erected a tricolour on the topmost parapet, which from this elevated position could be seen for a considerable distance. To ensure that the Crown forces could not remove the flag without some risk to themselves, most of the upper portion of the stairs giving access to the flag-pole was removed! The missing steps have also helped to prevent possible vandalism in the subsequent 68 years.

