

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



THE BLACK CASTLE, WICKLOW.

The ancient castle at Wicklow Town, called the Black Castle is built on a rocky promontory overlooking the sea and is separated from the mainland by a large artificial fosse. The date of its construction is unknown but it is believed to have been commenced by Maurice Fitzgerald, Baron of Naas, ancestor to the Earls of Kildare. The earliest reference to the castle is in 1174, “contained in a grant from Henry II to Earl Richard.” The presence of the castle, occupying a prominent position overlooking the town from the east was paramount in the subsequent development and formation of Wicklow. The low-lying nature of the coast north of the castle left the area open to invasion. Such a vulnerable situation led to the erection of the castle on a rocky outcrop overlooking the river estuary, with the intention of protecting the initial settlement.

After the Normans had settled the area and up to the 17th century the town’s historical evolution is largely the story of the castle and its struggle for survival against the indigenous clans who inhabited the nearby mountains and who made many incursions into the lowlands with drastic consequences both for town and castle. Located in close proximity to the Wicklow uplands which were inhabited by the O’Byrnes and the O’Tooles, the Norman fortification was the object of many bitter attacks by the Irish who resented the intrusion of an alien culture into lands they considered to be rightfully theirs. 1295 saw the burning of Newcastle by the O’Byrnes and in 1301 and again in 1315 Wicklow suffered the same fate. Gradually as the 14th century progressed, Norman power declined and it appears that the castle at Wicklow fell into disrepair. It is likely that the town had come into the possession of the clans after the 1315 burning. In the 15th century it seems the castle was again neglected owing to the dominance of the Irish in the area. Nevertheless, throughout these troubled times the town survived and trade flourished.

It was during the reign of Henry VIII in 1543 with the recovery of the English again to superiority in arms that the town and castle were surrendered to the King by the clans. The Confederate Wars broke out in 1641 and once again the castle and the town became prominent in the ensuing struggle. The castle was attacked and besieged by the clans under the command of Luke O’Toole but was relieved by the advance of Sir Charles Coote and his army who retaliated by a brutal massacre of a large number of townspeople in the part of the town now known as “Melancholy Lane.” In 1645 the castle was again attacked and burned to the ground. It was rebuilt sometime afterwards but it never assumed its former importance owing to the confiscations of the period and the gradual extinction of the native clans. From the latter part of the 17th century it went into disrepair and finally into decay. In the 18th century its lands were given to the Portreeve for the benefit of the Borough.

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Today, very little remains of the castle – just a few small, forlorn wall fragments. However, the ruins are quite dramatic as they sit on top of a rocky promontory whose seaward edge forms a breathtaking and spectacular sea cliff.

Brendan Cullen