



## **Rectangular chamber-towers and their medieval halls: A recent look at the buildings formerly described as “Hall-Houses”**

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**RECTANGULAR CHAMBER-TOWERS AND THEIR MEDIEVAL HALLS:  
A RECENT LOOK AT THE BUILDINGS FORMERLY DESCRIBED AS “HALL-HOUSES”...**



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## Introduction

The interpretation of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century castles formerly described as “hall-houses” has recently been a contentious topic in Irish (and Scottish) castle-studies<sup>2</sup>. Little interpretive analysis of these buildings had been conducted before Tadhg O’Keeffe’s<sup>3</sup> recent work and this author’s doctoral research entitled *Medieval Halls and Rectangular Chamber-Towers in Thirteenth-Century Ireland*. Many scholars in Ireland labelled these 13<sup>th</sup>-century masonry structures as halls but also suggested that they were also used as residences; which of course, is a contradiction in terms<sup>4</sup>. In studies of medieval architecture we understand that at their most basic function medieval chambers were “private” spaces and their associated halls constituted “public” spaces (in the sense of being places of communal gathering and feasting). Medieval understandings of “public” and “private” were certainly different to our understandings of these same concepts today; however, we can be certain that a hall, acting as a “public” building, could not be a *residence* of a lord. The focus of this short paper is to demonstrate that the revised understandings of Norman domestic planning<sup>5</sup> in France and Britain are thoroughly applicable to the buildings mistakenly described as “hall-houses” in Ireland.

## Blair’s breakthrough

The 1990s and early 2000s was a pivotal decade for the study of the hall and chamber in Britain and France. Discussions between Dr John Blair, Professor Michael Jones and Professor Gwyn Meirion-Jones on Norman domestic planning concluded that previous interpretations, notably that of Margaret Wood<sup>6</sup>, of the “first-floor hall” or “upper-hall” were questionable and that these concepts needed to be investigated and explored. John Blair argued that the “first-floor hall” was an inappropriate model of interpretation for domestic manorial buildings and that the extant structures were actually chamber-blocks which had once been accompanied by wooden ground-floor halls<sup>7</sup>. He also stressed that those genuine first-floor halls which have been found in large and mostly early Anglo-Norman *donjons* functioned in the same way as their ground-floor counterparts. That is to say that the hall was never considered a residential space, whether part of a large tower or built as a separate ground-floor type.

John Blair’s theory<sup>8</sup> was subsequently corroborated by work carried out by Edward Impey and Roland Harris at Boothby-Pagnall, a high-status manor house in Lincolnshire<sup>9</sup>. This building had once been the exemplar of

1. University College Dublin, Ireland.  
2. See STELL 2015; O’KEEFFE 2013; SHERLOCK 2010; SHERLOCK 2014; SWEETMAN 1999; SWEETMAN 2004; MCNEILL 1992; MCNEILL 1997.  
3. O’KEEFFE 2013.  
4. For example MCNEILL 1997, 154.

5. BLAIR 1999.  
6. WOOD 1935; WOOD 1965.  
7. BLAIR 1999.  
8. *Ibid.*  
9. HARRIS & IMPEY 2002.

the “first-floor hall” model<sup>10</sup>. The site was revisited, and geophysical surveys revealed the potential for an associated ground-floor hall, as John Blair had suggested. Its presence was confirmed by excavation which not only revealed the structure of the hall but also a substantial amount of contemporary material culture<sup>11</sup>.

John Blair’s revised model of the hall and chamber block and its subsequent testing by Edward Impey and Roland Harris were partly utilised in the hypothetico-deductive approach of this author’s doctoral study, in which it was posited that the majority of “hall-houses” in Ireland were in fact chamber-towers – the “private” residences of lords. However, to untangle the range of these 13<sup>th</sup>-century castles in Ireland that may have fit this model, a number of factors had to be investigated including their architecture, both surviving and non-surviving, their immediate landscape setting, as well as the geopolitical context of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The scope of this paper does not provide space to recount the results of all those investigations. What can be examined in brief are the interesting revelations of the geophysical surveys conducted as part of the above investigations. The results of the architectural investigations are outlined briefly below but are too complex to be presented here in detail<sup>12</sup>.

## Architectural overview

The architectural survey examined the remaining masonry fabric at over 100 sites largely thought to be 13<sup>th</sup> century in date, of this 83 were identified as possible examples of hall and chamber blocks. Over half (47) of the putative chamber-towers had substantial masonry remains that could be analysed in detail and 10 of which also included the partial remains of a separate ground-floor hall. The architectural signature of the putative chamber-towers typically comprised rectangular blocks with large open spaces at first-floor level accessed by first-floor entrances (fig. 1). Interestingly, a number of the examples also contained an original second-floor level, for example Shrulue in Co. Mayo. Across the entire range 46 (out of a possible 47) chamber-towers had access to a latrine. Latrines and doorways were typically found in oppositional locations facing north and south respectively. No apparent preference for latrine type was realised across the entire range, latrine chutes were the most typical although latrine towers and machicolated latrines were also found. Fireplaces were thought to be uncommon<sup>13</sup> although there were 15 original

examples identified during the course of this study such as that at Lisbunny, Co. Tipperary, and Castlemagarret, Co. Mayo.

The architectural arrangement of the doors, windows and latrines suggested that the first-floor spaces of these buildings were likely to have been divided into “rooms”. Evidence for this includes the arrangement of certain internal features such as the grouping of latrines and fireplaces together at one end of the chamber<sup>14</sup>. Owing to the presence of latrines, internal divisions and first-floor entrances we can assume that the first-floor spaces of these chambers were residential in function. If we acknowledge that these buildings were residential, we can then take the next step and ask – where were their accompanying halls?

## Geophysical survey overview

Inspired by Edward Impey and Roland Harris’ success at revealing the medieval hall at Boothby-Pagnall, geophysical surveys (earth resistance) were conducted at several sites in Ireland to see if (a) there were any missing buildings, and (b) if those buildings answered the descriptions of a hall. The first sites selected for survey were buildings that were long thought of as being typical “hall-houses”: Shrulue and Ballisnahyny, both located in Co. Mayo, and Annaghkeen, Co. Galway. Later, two Roscommon sites – Castlemore and Castlesampson – were also surveyed. It is important to say at this point that these buildings had long been considered isolated with no enclosing elements or other associated structures.

At all sites a substantial amount of archaeology from potentially numerous phases of use was revealed and crucially a significant amount is likely to represent 13<sup>th</sup>-century activity. At each site, apart from the upstanding masonry remains, there was one sub-surface dominant rectangular structure revealed. These were located either at a right-angle, on a similar axis or adjacent to the upstanding masonry structure at the site. This juxtaposition infers a direct relationship to the upstanding masonry structures (the putative chamber-towers) especially when compared to other sites of a similar date in Anglo-Norman Britain.

Internally, these rectangular features typically contained a slightly off-centre, somewhat circular, feature. These rectangular structures have been interpreted as the putative foundations of medieval halls that contained central stone-lined hearths. The examples at Shrulue, Annaghkeen and

10. WOOD 1965.

11. HARRIS & IMPEY 2002.

12. DEMPSEY forthcoming.

13. MCNEILL 1997; SWEETMAN 1999.

14. DEMPSEY forthcoming.

Castlesampson show the most obvious indications of this format. However, it is important to note that while Ballisnahyny and Castlemore show clear evidence of associated structures, the results are not as conclusive in indicating the former presence of a medieval hall.

### Case study: Shrule, Co. Mayo

Shrule Castle is a turriform chamber-tower located in the modern town of Shrule, Co. Mayo (see fig. 2). It was the first of the author's case-studies, chosen because it had long been described as a "hall-house". It also is one of the relatively few castles to have an associated history. We know that it is associated with a branch of a well-known Anglo-Norman family – the FitzGerald – and therefore must have once had all the trappings of a castle of relatively high-rank.

The castle itself is turriform in appearance with chamfered corners (figs. 2 and 3). Originally the castle was three-storeyed with a first-floor entrance in the south-western corner. It also contained a latrine chute that served both the first and second floors. The spaces at all three floor levels were well-designed and there are intricate patterns of access with a number of mural stairs and passages at first and second-floor level (fig. 3). The castle was altered a number of times; a ground-floor entrance was inserted and late medieval bartizans added to the upper walls among other changes. However, the integrity of the original castle was largely maintained perhaps because it functioned very well as a residential space.

Given the relative complexity of the architectural plan of this chamber-tower and also its continued importance as a residence into the early modern period, it was identified as a good candidate for geophysical survey. The immediate area surrounding the castle was surveyed in so far as possible. A number of features were revealed including a large rectangular structure that contained internal divisions and a central stone setting. It is posited that this is the putative medieval hall. It conforms to the expected architectural design of a medieval hall. Its positioning close to the chamber also supports this.

The survey revealed a large number of anomalies (fig. 4). The area to the south of the castle had a number of high pockets of resistivity (shown in black) – these are most likely due to the underground geology which is evident at ground level as small rocky outcrops. Further to the south, a large area of very low resistivity sweeps from east to west which is very likely to be the former path of the Black River, a river flood area or an old paleo-channel. The river was reportedly moved during post-medieval alterations of the landscape for industrial purposes. The southernmost extent of the survey area has areas of high resistivity which are related to the recent use of cement walling as a boundary marker.

A few linear high resistance areas occur in the south-east and south sections which also are part of this wall.

The north-western section of the survey contained a large area which did not contain many anomalies except for a rectilinear formation of high resistance which shows as low resistivity (white) due to the large amount of rainfall that fell on the day this area was surveyed (in other words the water became logged on the stone feature). This appears to form a rectangular outline measuring approximately 10 m x 8 m with an internal division (fig. 4, marked in red dots).

In the western survey section, *ca.* 5 m to the west of the tower, a large rectangular outline of high resistivity with indications of internal divisions occurs. However, its north-western section could not be surveyed due to the presence of tree coverage and debris. The outline, though not perfectly continuous, is *ca.* 18 m x 27 m and slightly irregular, the western ends splays outwards (however this could be owing to the large amount of rainfall and the spread of the foundation wall). The internal area shows higher resistivity indicating a possible masonry floor. There appears to be a double line of high resistivity at the eastern and northern edge outline with a lower level sandwiched in between but this is due to the rainfall; it really is an area of high resistivity banded by two low areas. There are a number of internal divisions towards the eastern end, including a circular area of high resistivity along the south side towards the eastern end. Central to the entire shape is a small regular area of high resistivity (infilled red dot).

### Interpretation and significance

The survey results from Shrule show an abundance of archaeological features, confirming that it is a multi-period site. It is clear that there were a number of structures in the past that once surrounded the tower suggesting that it was not an isolated building, but it is impossible to assign a conclusive date to these features without excavation. However, if we assume that some of these were contemporary with the castle, is it possible that the large structure to the west of the chamber was the medieval hall of this site? With dimensions approaching 2:1, it is large enough to be a strong contender and it also has an area of high resistivity at its centre, which could indicate a stone-lined hearth. Although the internal divisions are not perfectly indicated in the survey results, there is a clear partition towards the western end which in turn is possibly divided into two smaller sections, perhaps a service area consisting of a buttery and pantry. The circular area of high resistance on the south wall (outlined in red dots) could be the remains of a small laver set on a stone pillar (hand cleanliness was an important part of the ritual of entering and eating in the medieval hall).



Fig. 1 Annaghkeen Castle, Co. Galway. Looking north-west. Photo K. Dempsey.



Fig. 2 Shrule Castle, Co. Mayo. Looking north-east. Photo T. O'Keefe.

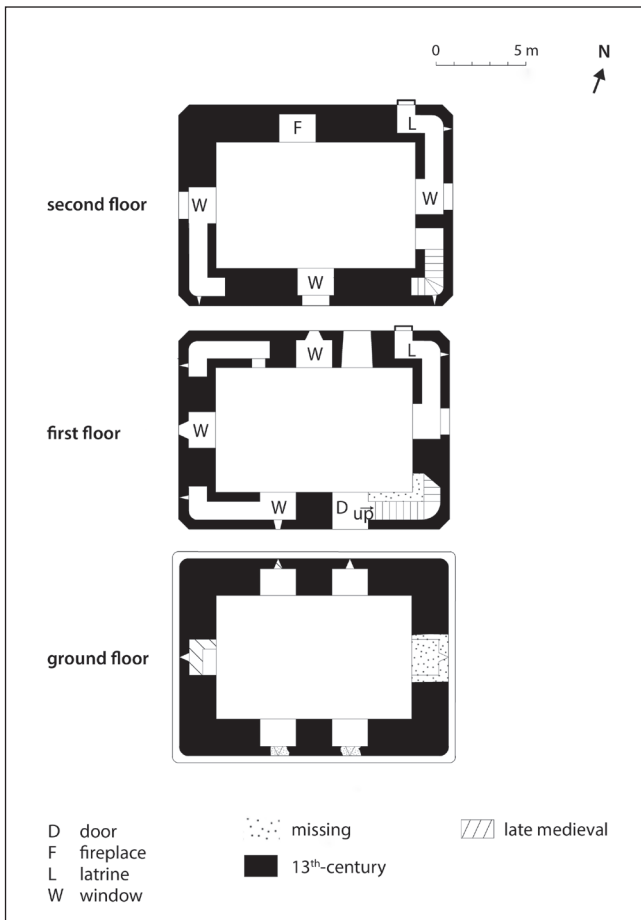


Fig. 3 Sketch plan of Shrule Castle, Co. Mayo. Doc. K. Dempsey.



Fig. 4 Earth resistance results Shrule, Co. Mayo. Original results and interpretation. Doc. K. Dempsey and C. McDermott.

## Implications for castle-studies

It is now known that there was an increased emphasis on the separation of the hall and chamber during the 13<sup>th</sup> century and this need for separateness is evident in the layout of domestic spaces<sup>15</sup>. The evidence presented here reinforces the argument that these castle-buildings mistakenly described as “hall-houses” were parts of complexes of buildings, and we see evidence that detached halls – probably ground-floor – were present within those complexes.

This argument is supported by the results of this author’s research. There is clear evidence for the presence of a residential chamber-tower and a now lost detached medieval hall at almost all sites investigated through geophysical research. If we accept now that the “hall-house” model was incorrect and the buildings visible today were chambers, the residences of lords, we can move onwards and develop more nuanced understandings. We can ask exciting questions around the social uses of space in these buildings. We can try to understand the people who occupied them and the choices they made living within the constraints of their traditions.

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15. BLAIR 1999; JOHNSON 2002; GARDINER 2008; O’KEEFFE 2013.

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