

# Ashtown Castle

Ashtown Castle, situated within the Phoenix Park, is a fine example of a small tower house.

Background: Ashtown Lodge as the Papal Nunciature. c.1975

In the late 12th century, the lands of Ashtown were granted to the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, Dublin by Hugh Tyrrell, first Baron of Castleknock. The hospital, belonging to the order known as the “Crutched” Friars (Brothers of the Cross), was one of the earliest city charities. Walter Foster was leasing the lands for £4 a year when the monastery was dissolved in 1540.

The date when Ashtown Castle was built is unclear. It was certainly in existence in the early 1600s, although it is possible that it is of an earlier period. Under a statute of King Henry VI in 1429, a grant of £10 was made available to every man in the Pale who, within ten years, built a castle of certain minimum dimensions. It has been suggested that Ashtown Castle could have been built around that time. Evidence from the roof timbers supports the view that it was roofed and partly rebuilt in the early 17th century.



Fallow Deer in Phoenix Park

John Connell, known as John of Ashtown, a distant ancestor of the Liberator, Daniel O’ Connell, owned the castle in 1641. At that date the estate consisted of 200 acres, valued at £100. Of this, 160 acres was designated as arable land suitable for tillage, 23 acres was pasture, 10 acres of meadow and 7 acres were wood or scrub. Records show that there were also two thatched cottages and a small orchard on the estate.

Ashtown Castle now stands within Phoenix Park; the largest enclosed recreational space within any European capital city (707 hectares). In the early 17th century, the development of a deer park was considered on lands attached to Phoenix House, *“the abode of the King’s representative in Ireland”*. However, nothing appears to have been done until James Butler, 12th Earl of Ormonde, was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in July 1662. Initially the deer park was to extend to about 400 hectares comprising the existing Crown lands and 178 hectares whose purchase King Charles II had sanctioned. However, this was considered insufficient and further acquisitions were made by the Earl of Ormonde including Ashtown Castle



Ashtown Lodge c.1800. John Henry Campbell (1757-1828) Private Collection

and its lands. In all, over 800 hectares were originally enclosed which included lands on the southern bank of the River Liffey. However, there was a problem of deer escape from the Chapelizod road, which ran through the park. With the building of the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham in 1680, lands south of the river were excluded from the deer park, as well as the narrow strip of parkland next to the river, through which the Chapelizod road ran.

In 1668, Marcus Trevor, Viscount Dungannon, was appointed Ranger. Along with two Keepers, he was responsible for overseeing the Fallow deer imported from England. Ashtown Castle became the residence of one of the Keepers whose duties included preventing the *“spoil and embezzlement of the vert and venison”*.

In the later years of the 18th century, the two-storeyed house, built in 1751 by the Right Hon. Nathaniel Clements following his appointment as Ranger in Phoenix Park, and which had subsequently been considerably improved, was deemed suitable as the Viceregal Lodge. Deerfield, the fine Georgian mansion, built in 1774 by Colonel John Blacquiere when he became Bailiff of Phoenix Park, was acquired as the official residence of the Chief Secretary to Ireland. Around this time, too, Ashtown Castle was modernised and incorporated into



Ashtown Lodge as the Papal Nunciature

a new building, called Ashtown Lodge. In 1782 this became the official residence of the Under Secretary for Ireland. It is said that tunnels ran from Ashtown Lodge to the Viceregal Lodge and Deerfield, to allow unseen and secure movement between these buildings.

In 1922, Ashtown Lodge became the first residence of the United States legation to the Irish Free State. However, in 1929, Deerfield became the official residence of the U.S. ambassador. Ashtown Lodge became the residence of the Papal Nuncio. In 1978, the then Papal Nuncio moved to a new residence in Dublin. Plans were then mooted to make Ashtown Lodge into the official residence for the Taoiseach but on architectural inspection, the house was found to be in very bad condition and the decision was taken to demolish it.

## Restoration

Restoration works on Ashtown Castle started in the autumn of 1989 when a survey of the structure and the removal of the modern plaster began to reveal clues to the original form of the castle. The alterations of the 18th and 19th centuries had included the insertion of Georgian windows, new floors and the replacement of part of the roof. The discovery of the remains of a roof truss in the east gable provided a historical date for the roofing of

the castle using the process known as dendrochronology or tree-ring analysis. This showed that the oak used in the construction of the roof truss was felled in the early years of the 17th century.

Other features uncovered were the corbels that carried the floors, portions of the fireplaces on the first and second floors and a piece of a window jamb on the first floor.

The restoration works including all the new stonework and the Irish oak floors and roof were carried out by craftsmen attached to the National Monuments depot in Phoenix Park.

## Description

Ashtown Castle has undergone extensive rebuilding at least once in each century since its original construction. There are few identifiable features of the 15th century tower but the modest dimensions of Ashtown are similar to those specified for the “£10 castles”. Throughout the 16th century the scale and design of tower houses varied greatly. They became such a common feature of the landscape as to cause a French visitor to comment that the houses of the Irish nobility *“consist of four walls extremely high”*. The larger towers of those of higher rank included stone vaulted and divided chambers with elaborate defensive features. Some towers of great prestige incorporated a hall and a brightly-lit chamber at the uppermost floor.



Interior Ashtown Castle



Fireplace in Ashtown Castle

**The Ground Floor** of a Tower House was described as *“having such small apertures as to give no more light than a prison”*. This description could well be applied to Ashtown Castle where the chamber is sparse and without a fireplace. The recesses and niches set in the walls may have served as cupboards and lamp shelves. The original position of the door in the south wall next to the stair tower was identified during conservation work when the locking chain ducts of the “yett”, an iron door grill, were found along with the draw-bar socket. In the alterations in the 18th or 19th centuries, the entrance to the castle was moved to the western side of the castle with musket loops covering the approaches to the door. The ground

Background: Oak Roof Truss





the heart of the estate, where the family enjoyed the benefits of their place in a society protected by the network of tower houses. It is here that the conventions of medieval hospitality and courtesy were observed by the family.

floor accommodation was extended to a building abutting the tower which may have served as a kitchen and washhouse, thus separating the service rooms from the apartments. Now only the blocked connecting archway survives in the masonry of the north wall.

The stair tower may have replaced an earlier tower or wooden stair within the house. The stone dressing (parallel groves) of the treads indicate a late medieval date for the spiral stairway.

#### The First Floor

This contained one of the principal living chambers of the tower. Access from the stair is through a round arched doorway with dressed stone jambs. Along with the main doorway, this is one of a set at each of the four floors. The chamber is well lit and was warmed by a plain finely crafted fireplace. The chamber could be partitioned or screened as needs required to provide space for living and managing the household and farm, as well as lodgings.

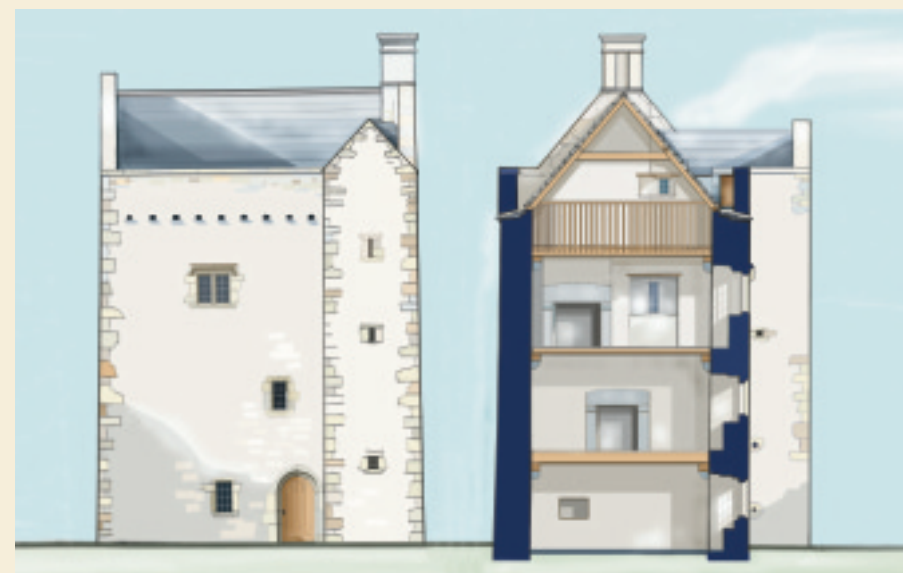
#### The Second Floor

The principal apartment, the great chamber or “Solar,” was contained in the upper floors of the tower. This was

Secure, high above the ground, elegant twin-light windows light the “great chamber”. In the gable walls are plain single opes. The fireplace was reconstructed to the design of the surround on the first floor. Above the “great chamber” and partly in the roof space of the tower was a “garret” or attic. This is now partly floored and reconstructed as a gallery. This space is lit only by a single loop in the eastern gable and is unheated. The use of the roof space varied in tower houses and was adapted to many uses such as a place of safety or lodging. As a gallery, it enhanced the grandeur of the great chamber.

#### The Roof and Battlements

The stair tower extends above the roof level giving access to the wall walks. The battlements were removed during the building of Ashtown Lodge. These have now been reconstructed without the crenellations of the 15th century or the decorative curvilinear parapet popular in the 17th century. The roof frame is based on the fragments of the truss discovered during the conservation work. The original gables survived and the chimney was modelled on existing examples in 17th century houses.



South Elevation

Section

0 5m



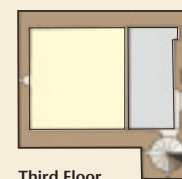
Ground Floor



First Floor



Second Floor



Third Floor (Gallery)



0 5m



Background: Ashtown Castle  
Above Left: Aerial view of Ashtown Castle. The plan of Ashtown Lodge is outlined in box hedging.

The assistance of Mr C.E.F. Trench is acknowledged in the preparation of this leaflet

# Ashtown Castle

## VISITORS' GUIDE

