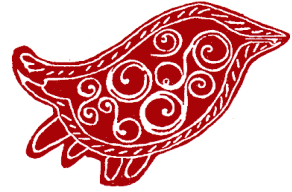


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Blarney Castle, County Cork.

Double Structure of its Keep.

BY CECIL CRAWFORD WOODS, F.R.S.A., COUNCIL MEMBER.

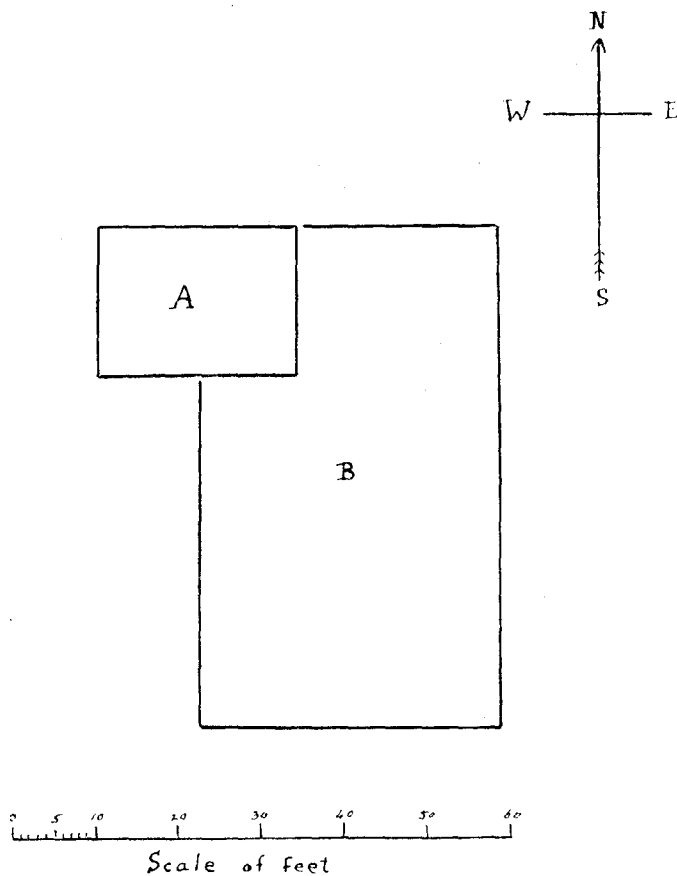


THE external appearance of the keep of this castle is well known. It is a gnomon in shape, consisting of a rectangular tower sixty feet from north to south, and thirty-six feet from east to west, but having another rectangular structure projecting from its north-west corner eighteen feet long from north to south, and projecting twelve feet westward from the west wall of the main tower before mentioned. The external lines of its ground plan are shown in the drawing on following page.

Now, a curious and interesting fact concerning the keep (or great tower) of Blarney Castle is that the pile as it now stands was built at two different periods, with an interval of perhaps many years between them. The slender tower or "peel,"⁽¹⁾ which was the first keep of the castle, is actually embedded bodily in the greater mass of the addition, yet on close examination it is found to be quite distinct from the newer work, for in joining the new to the old very little grafting was done, and

(1) A "peel" generally means a tower devoid of a bailey, but it sometimes means a *small slender* keep, and it is in this sense I use it. It is well to bear in mind that "castle" means a keep and a bailey together.

very few openings closed, and very few made. The original keep (which comprises only about one-sixth of the present one) is that part of the great tower which is nearest St. Anne's Hill, and which includes the north-west angle of the entire pile. In it are the earl's bedroom and the kitchen. The northern wall of the original tower forms about half the



GROUND PLAN OF THE KEEP (EXTERNAL OUTLINE).

A. Original Keep. B. Later addition.

northern face of the present keep, and the western wall of the original part forms about one-third of the western face of the whole pile. Externally the peel and the addition appear much alike, only that the older building is more weather-worn, especially at the corners, but internally various differences between the mode of construction of the peel and of the addition are noticed; thus the great tie-beams of oak which are built into the inner faces of the walls of the original keep do



BLARNEY CASTLE, FROM THE NORTH.

not anywhere show, and do not seem to exist in the fabric of the addition.

Viewing the great tower from the north as one approaches it from the railway station, a perpendicular slit appears running down the centre of the northern face of the castle from just below the parapet to just above the window of the earl's bedroom. The blocks forming the west side of this slit are plainly coigne stones, and they make and mark the north-east angle of the original tower. The peel never flanked the north side of the addition as it does the west side of it. This is proved by an examination of the newer work (five-sixths of the whole pile) which, with the exception of the spur at the south-east angle and a few minor internal details, is palpably all of one date. The reason the slit does not run either above or below the points indicated is—first, that the present parapet of the peel was built when the watch turret on its north-east pinnacle was altered to suit the height of the newer pile, and that consequently the whole of the parapet along the higher part of the northern face of the keep is of one date; and second, that the wall of the original baily (or courtyard), which was built at the same time as the peel, was incorporated with the lower part of the mass of the newer pile at the north side over the cliff. It is probable that weathering has had much to do with the slit being so distinctly visible, for it does not appear inside the castle. Approaching the castle from the east, when one enters the keep and goes a short way up the large newel stair (which is placed in the north-east angle of the newer work) and along the passage which leads from it towards the earl's bedroom, on coming to the six steps (opening to the right of the passage) a glance upwards discloses the fact that this staircase has been *quarried* through the wall. The uppermost of these half a dozen steps opens on the original newel stair of the peel, and a few steps down lands one at the bottom of this stair, locally called "the black stairs." Standing with the back to the window (which is modern), to the left is seen the place where the original entrance door of the peel was, its sill being about ten feet above the level of the ground; and, I think, there are indications of an opening in the ceiling, and that here was a "murdering-hole," similar to the one still to be seen immediately inside the entrance door of the main building. The lower part of the peel is solid, in which particular it differs from the addition, which is hollow down to the rock on which it stands. Opposite the site of this entrance is a jamb of the original door into what eventually became the earl's bedroom, but which at first was probably the guard-room. This doorway was built up to give wall space for the head of the bed, and the little passage which leads to the present door in the division wall was scooped out of the main wall (at this part very thick)

and the present little door made, the level of the floor of the room being at the same time lowered, and an entrance to it—intended to be the principal one—broken through the south wall, near the east end. This entrance communicated by a short passage with the lowest of the three great halls of the castle. The bay window, which makes the earl's bedroom so lightsome was constructed long subsequent to the building of the peel; the original opening in the outer face of the wall was probably a very small one, and it is possible that here may have been situated the first fireplace in the keep; unless there was a hearthplace at this spot there was at first no fireplace in this room; probably it was when the great addition was made to the peel that the fire recess now to be seen was scooped out of the west wall under a little window through which the smoke found its way into the outer world, being guided thereto by a firehood of wood and plaster; a good deal of the smoke found its way back again into the castle through badly-fitting upper windows. In the peel the rooms were too small and the walls not sufficiently thick to construct chimneys, such as have been formed in the great and massive addition, the smaller ones possibly a generation or two after its erection; indeed at the time the peel was built and for long afterwards chimneys were thought unnecessary, in fact a product of over-civilisation. Ascending "the black stairs" one comes to a wardrobe in the thickness of the north wall, and a little higher a close examination of the *east* wall discloses a built-up shooting-hole or "loop." *This window now looks up against the solid masonry of the newer portion of the keep*; it once looked into the courtyard of the castle and defended the entrance door of the peel. A few steps higher one comes to a pleasant chamber which was probably originally the bedroom of the MacCarthy, lord of Muskerry, and afterwards the bedroom of the young ladies of the family. In this chamber, as in the case of the one beneath it, a door was broken through the south wall at the east end into the newer part of the keep. At the southern side of the east wall of this chamber there is a built-up window which once, like the before-mentioned eastern loop in the stair wall, looked into the courtyard. In this room there was certainly at first no fireplace, but in the course of time a hearth recess was constructed in the south-west corner, the smoke hole being similar to that in the room below. In every fireplace in the castle the fuel was laid on the hearthstone, the logs being tilted up against brass or iron "fire-dogs." Mounting higher up the stair one comes to another loop in the east wall. This little window is open and looks into a small room in the newer part of the pile, the opening being near the floor of the room. This room was probably sometimes used as a prison and sometimes as a "sick-bay"; indeed it is but too likely that it was often both a dungeon and an hospital to some

enemy of the MacCarthy. A little higher still up the stairs one comes to a floorless room, which was in all probability used as the private chapel of the castle after the enlargement of the keep, but when the peel stood alone it is almost certain to have been the young ladies' dormitory. When the door of this chamber was left open a prisoner or sick person in the small room just before mentioned could distinctly hear through the loophole the voice of the priest saying mass only a few yards away. It is likely also that this opening was often found useful for the purpose of watching a wretched prisoner. At the southern side of the east wall of the chapel chamber is a built-up window, which, if now open, would simply look up against a mass of stone and mortar. This chamber apparently never had a fireplace in it, but it is just possible that there was one at a partly built-up loop in the west wall. Going a little further up the stairs, where it becomes very steep and narrow, one soon arrives at a spot where there is another built-up loop in the east wall, and a little further still one comes to the top of the stairs and enters the kitchen of the keep—the most important, though probably not the largest kitchen in the castle—the castle of three hundred years ago, which encircled acres within its bailey walls and towers. This kitchen was the “lady's bower” or drawing-room of the original keep. The lower parts of the windows in this room are built up, and the level of the floor, which rests on the vaulting of the chapel chamber, is raised to fit it to its altered purpose. All the changes made in and about this room at the time of the building of the great addition are too numerous to mention here, and I will only say that the original fireplace was probably in the middle of the floor, the smoke escaping through a louvre in the roof. Here in passing I must point out that the frame of the door at the east side of the kitchen is in a tottering condition, but a very small outlay would put it into good repair. The upper part of the south-east coigne of the peel may be seen rising through the floor of the second uppermost of the great halls in the main building to the left of the great fireplace, and no bonding is visible. Thus parts of all four corners and parts of all four sides of the original peel may be seen in the stately tower which forms the present magnificent and venerable keep of Blarney Castle.

There is another portion of the castle about which I must say a few words, namely, what is called “the dungeon.” Now, this never was a dungeon (meaning a prison); it was simply the castle *well*, around and over which was built a tower from which a covered way (now stopped) led up into the courtyard (probably the innermost of two or even three courtyards) of the castle. This tower and covered way were necessary for the protection of the servants, whose duty it was to draw water for the garrison in time of siege. It is a pity that the wall which stops the

covered way is not removed and visitors allowed to amuse themselves by going through this curious passage, which I know was open less than a hundred years ago.

Perhaps I ought also to say something about the uses of the principal rooms in the main portion of the keep, and a few words with reference to the roof and the parapet. The room to the left of the entrance door of the keep was the guardroom. The chamber opposite the entrance door was the store room. The large chamber (now floorless) immediately above the store room was probably divided by timber partitions seven or eight feet high into sleeping places for the young gentlemen of the family and for honoured guests. I must say it would be a great improvement if the built-up windows of this now very gloomy hall were opened. The fine stone-floored apartment above this was the drawing-room; here the MacCarthy, his family, and his guests spent most of their time when indoors; here they played the harp and lute, and danced and sang, and here the younger people made love, and the elders talked over the politics of the day—the politics of four hundred years ago; and in winter here they all gathered round the mighty hearth filled with blazing logs, and discussed (in Irish) such items of news as the discovery of a new world by a man named Columbus. The floor was strewn with rushes, and on it doubtless many a night when the gentlefolks had retired to their sleeping rooms the maid-servants spread their humble pallets and slept—often more comfortably than their betters did in the less airy bedrooms. Above the drawing-room was the banqueting-hall (now floorless and roofless). This was a splendid room, made lofty by the rise of the massive oaken roof. Here the Lord of Muskerry, his family, his guests, and his retainers all sat down together at one table, and eat and drank and made merry, the gentry being placed above (that is at the master's side of) the principal salt cellar, which was generally about the size of a quart measure, and the servants and their friends sitting below it. The plates and dishes were all either pewter or timber, and, with the exception of a couple of large carvers, *there were no forks*; glasses were unknown, except as curiosities, silver cups, and pewter, horn, wooden, and leather goblets being the drinking vessels of those days. The floor of this room also was strewn with rushes, and on it at night, wrapped in blankets or their cloaks, the men-servants slept the sleep of the weary. For the first hundred years or thereabouts of its existence there were probably not more than three or four chairs in the castle—one or two in the banqueting-hall, and one or two in the drawing-room; all the other movable seats were either stools or forms. Indeed in the fifteenth century there was but little furniture of any kind even in the grandest residences. The roof was covered with either tiles or lead, most likely the latter; slates, I believe,

were then never used in Ireland, and very little used anywhere ; and the near proximity of the great kitchen chimney would have rendered thatch extremely dangerous. As to the parapet, the merlons or blocks of masonry between the embrasures or gaps in the parapet were each crowned in the centre by a chisel-shaped stone similar to those which still remain in the upper parts of the merlons, so that formerly the parapet presented the appearance of two steps up and two steps down all round.

In this hurried paper I have made no attempt to give a technically accurate account of any portion of the castle. I have simply tried to draw attention to one very unusual—perhaps unique—peculiarity in a building, every portion of which is full of interest, and over all of which hangs the halo of romance.

The keep of the castle of Carrignamuck, which was admirably described by our learned Vice-President in vol. i., first series of this *Journal*, is externally of the same shape as that of Blarney Castle ; but in the former the projecting portion is a part of the structure itself, all being built together at the same time. This projection contains the newel stair, which fits very conveniently into it. As the two castles were built by the same lord of Muskerry, who was killed in 1495, and as Carrignamuck keep is a finished copy of what the Blarney keep became with its later addition, it may be inferred that the order of building was, first, the original small keep (*a*) of Blarney, next the addition (*b*) bringing this keep to its existing form, and last a smaller copy of this form in Carrignamuck.

It may be added that Kilcrea Castle, built by the same lord of Muskerry, has two keeps, detached however, and not united except by the curtain walls of its bailey, or courtyard, and that one of these keeps is much older than the other, and of about the dimensions of the original small keep (*a*) of Blarney, and that it has, like this latter, its entrance at the first floor at a height of ten feet or so above the ground level, an arrangement found oftner in the older castles than in those of later times.