

# Exploring the Architecture and Archaeology of Kilcolman Castle

## Introduction

The architecture and archaeology of Kilcolman Castle, County Cork is framed around the definition of what makes a castle. You might ask your students to brainstorm this before opening the tours. What, to them, makes a building a castle as opposed to either a military fortification or a mansion house?

Once we start thinking about these distinctions we end up with some key differences. Time period is one: castles are buildings of the Middle Ages. In some regions, like Ireland, castles were built and occupied a bit later. Kilcolman Castle is a type of castle known as a tower house. These are not unique to Ireland; in fact, they were built across Eurasia. They are later in date than most other castle types and were built into the early modern period. Kilcolman Castle was probably built by family to the Earls of Desmond in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but of course the Spensers came to occupy it in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century [see “Settlement at Kilcolman” on the *Centering Spenser* website: [http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/settlement\\_situation.html](http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/settlement_situation.html)]

Another distinction is that castles tend to have been owned privately: they were used by a lord, his extended family, and his household of servants, retainers, and a garrison. Castles were not communal structures in that they protected a town or place, but rather they protected people and property. Beyond this, castle scholars tend to settle on three main functions for a castle: Defense, Residence, and Administration. The two VR tours provided here focus on defensive and residential uses of castles in general, and Kilcolman Castle in particular. [Information on administrative uses can be found here: **insert link**]. These three functions varied in dominance from castle to castle and depending on the person accessing the castle. The two avatars —Brian MacCarthy the thief and Elizabeth Spenser the wife— are characters who would interact with a castle in different ways and who would notice the defensive and residential sides of the building respectively.

## Teaching Materials

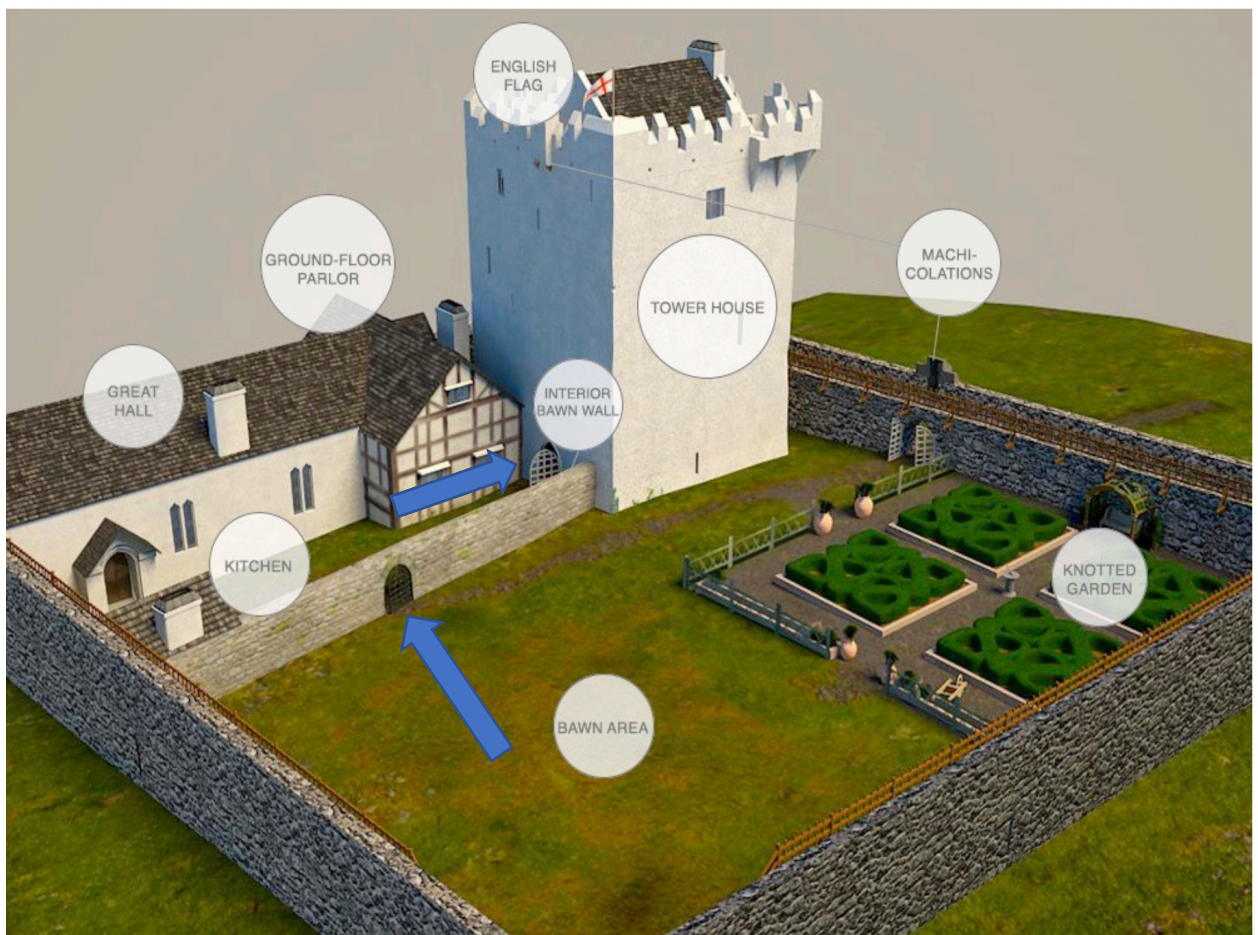
### 1. Teacher pack for the Defense Tour

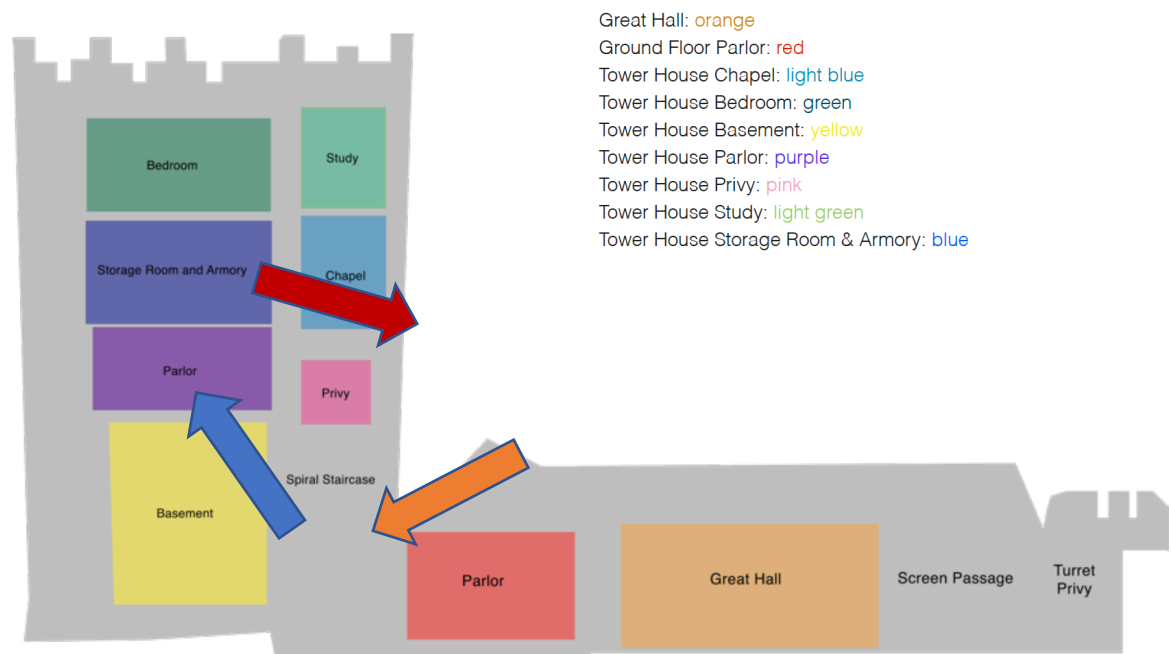
#### *Introduction*

Defense is a key defining element to a castle. It is usually the first thing that students think of when asked what they think a castle is. This tour takes as its avatar the fictional character Brian MacCarthy. MacCarthy is a thief, so his perspective will be interested in things that could potentially impact his life and task success. The choice of a thief has been influenced by the traditional interpretation of tower houses as buildings not designed to withstand major attack by an army or besiegement, but rather as a built response to the political conditions of the day, particularly cattle raiding and small-scale assaults. As a nod to this interpretation, MacCarthy mentions in the tour that Spenser does not have cattle within his bawn.

Tower houses had the appearance of defense more so than being truly defensive; most would not have lasted long if seriously attacked by even a small army. Experimental archaeology conducted by students and faculty at Queen's University Belfast indicated that a tower house door could be broken down with a battering ram in a matter of minutes. But even simple architectural additions could be effective. Castles in general, with a few exceptions, did not have an offensive role: they were not intended to help conquer land for example, but rather to secure what had been acquired. The features MacCarthy encounters reflect another transition: Military technology switched to gunpowder after the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its expense meant that by the time Kilcolman was occupied, gunpowder was not consistently encountered.

Progression of the Defense Tour: bawn -> kitchen exterior -> tower entrance -> cellar -> staircase -> internal parlor -> staircase -> armory -> **exit**.





*Features encountered:* bawn wall, mural tower, machicolation, bartizan, crenellations, battlements, yett, murder hole, spiral staircase, mural staircase, gun loop, arrow loop, gunpowder fired matchlock gun, bastion, star-shaped forts.

*Extra textual context and sources*

Numerous historical primary sources refer to siege defenses when missiles were dropped from atop castle battlements, including the following narrative from the fifteenth century. This is excerpted from Barbaro’s account of the siege of the Byzantine city of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks, in 1453. Constantinople fell to the Turks after this long attack, but the defenders were able to push the Turks back on numerous occasions, including by the method of throwing items off the battlements of the city walls.

Nicolo Barbaro, *Diary of the Siege of Constantinople 1453*, trans. John Melville-Jones (New York, 1969), <https://deremilitari.org/2016/08/the-siege-of-constantinople-in-1453-according-to-nicolo-barbaro/>

*All this day the tocsin was sounded in the city, to make everyone take up their posts, and women, and children too, carried stones to the walls, to put them on the battlements so that they could be hurled down upon the Turks... they tried to raise the ladders up, and at once we threw them to the ground with the men who were raising them, and they were all killed at once, and we threw big stones down on them from the battlements, so that few escaped alive; in fact, anyone who approached beneath the walls was killed... When the Turks got inside the barbicans, they quickly captured the first row of them, but before they managed this, a great number of them died at the hands of those who were above*

*them on the walls, who killed them with stones at their pleasure... As I have said before, those on the walls killed great numbers of Turks with stones, casting them down from above without stopping, and so many were killed that forty carts could not have carried away the dead Turks who had died before getting into the city.*

#### *Additional resources*

<https://deremilitari.org> is the website of The Society for Medieval Military History. They have many free primary sources and articles about medieval warfare available. The materials come from across Europe and the Middle Ages, but are a reliable place for students who are interested in knowing more about warfare before and during Spenser's time, including how castles were used.

#### *Teaching plan*

##### *Discussion questions*

1. This tour focuses on the defenses at Kilcolman and at castles in general. Why do you think we describe castles as defensive structures, and not offensive structures?
2. How do you think the experience of the military architecture of Kilcolman Castle would vary depending on the ethnicity of the person accessing it? And how would it change depending on their social status?
3. Which feature do you think would have been the most effective defensively, and why?

##### *Exercises and activities*

#### Exercise 1: Label a castle

Leamaneh Castle in County Clare in the west of Ireland has a similar history to Kilcolman Castle. It originally was a five-story 15<sup>th</sup> century tower house. In the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (a bit later than when Spenser made his changes to Kilcolman), the tower house was remodeled into a fortified house. This site has a lordly landscape surrounding it, with a courtyard, garden, and fishpond.

Label the picture with the following defensive features also present at Kilcolman Castle that you learned to identify during the tour:

Bartizan

Entrance

Location of crenellations

Battlements

Location of yett

Arrow slit

Gun loop

Original tower



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*Tips for teachers:*

There are no surviving yett nor crenellations at this castle — both will have been lost or destroyed over the years. This is very common at castles more generally. The original tower that was part of the tower house is on the far right — this is where the arrow slits are. This is because this is the oldest part of the building. The gun loop is a small hole to the left of the doorway — your students will need to be eagle-eyed to spot it!

Ask what the benefit of loops and slits being so small might be. They can be compared to the bigger windows, which are called mullioned windows.

If students have already completed the Residential Tour, you can tell them that the mullioned windows are similar to the ones Spenser might have had in his external hall. Both those at Leamaneh and Kilcolman will have had glass in them. Unlike Kilcolman, Leamaneh did not have an external hall (that we know about!). Ask the students where they think the functions of this space would have been in Leamaneh (it would have been inside, on one of the floors. Leamaneh also has many fine fireplaces).

Exercise 2: Find more castles

One of the main archaeological resources for Irish monuments is the National Monuments Service, <https://archaeology.ie/>. They administer the Archaeological Survey of Ireland. Using the map-based platform at <https://maps.archaeology.ie/HistoricEnvironment/> students can search for other examples of tower houses to compare and contrast with Kilcolman Castle. Just be aware that not all Irish counties have been completed yet and the level of details varies by county, too.

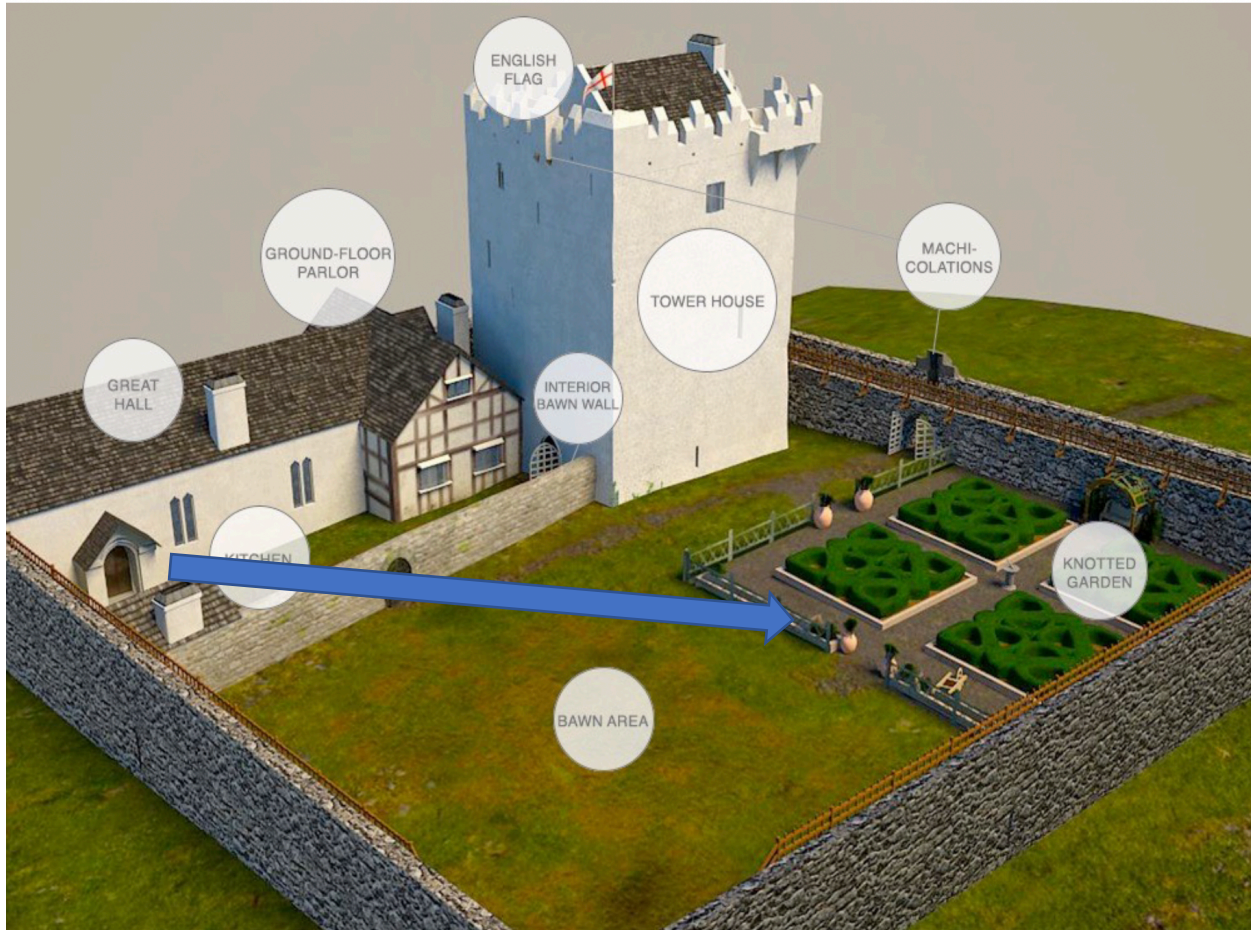
## 2. Teacher pack for Residence Tour

### *Introduction*

Castles also needed to serve as the homes of the lord, his family, his household, and possibly some retainers. This residential function is essential to our understanding of castles – without it a building is merely a fort and not a castle. Castles are inherently private. Traditionally, castle scholarship has emphasized the defensive roles of castles with residence and administration less considered. The so-called “revisionist” interpretation of the last 30 or so years has encouraged castle specialists to integrate their other uses with a military understanding. Only more recently has there been a concerted attempt to place women and the family within castles, instead castle studies interpretations have been very male-focused. This tour offers students the opportunity to engage with more recent academic developments. It might also be of use as part of a wider discussion as to who gets to write history. Can we ever completely know the past? How can personal biases color our interpretation of past events? Who else is missing from popular views of history?

Progression of residence tour: Bawn -> internal bawn -> tower entrance -> cellar -> internal parlor -> bedroom -> internal bawn -> great hall -> external parlor -> garden -> **exit**





*Features encountered:* castle walls, keys and “chatelaine,” high-status trade goods, tapestries, portraits, dinner items, mether cup, ogee-headed “Raleigh window” seat, crib, toy knight, bed with hangings, clothing, great hall service space, fireplace, plants.

*Extra textual context and sources*

As this tour explains, women had specific tasks within a castle. However, where these tasks took place usually overlapped with where the men were, as well as where lower-status people worked. This is probably partly why scholars have struggled to identify the places of women in castles. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with increased room division and privacy, we might be able to see rooms specifically dedicated to female use. Women were not sidelined in tower house culture, but played a key role in the successful operation of the building, as this extract from a contemporary observer visiting a Gaelic Irish lord’s tower house for a feast shows:

*The lady of the house meets you with her trayne [train: her servants and retainers]. I have instructed you before how to accost them. Salutations paste [past], you shall be presented with all the drinkes in the house, first the ordinary beere, then aquavitae, then sacke, then olde-ale, the lady tastes it, you must not refuse it. The fyre is prepared in the middle of the hall, where you may sollace yourselfe till supper time, you shall not want sacke [a type of wine] and tobacco. By this time the table is spread and plentifully furnished with variety of meates, but ill cooked, and with out sauce. Neyther shall there*



*be wanting a pasty or two of redd deare (that is more common with us then the fallow) [two types of deer were present in Ireland: red and fallow. Fallow were introduced to Ireland in the Middle Ages, whereas red deer were indigenous]. The dishe which I make choyce of is the swelld mutton, and it is prepared thus. They take a principall weather [a wether is a castrated male sheep], and before they kill him, it is fitt that he be shorne, being killed they singe him in his woolly skynne like a bacon, and rost him by ioynts with the skynne on, and so serve it to the table. They say that it makes the flesh more firme, and preserves the fatt. I make choyce of it to avoyd uncleanely dressing [making a mess of one's clothes]. They feast together with great iollyty and healths around; towards the middle of supper, the harper begins to tune and singeth Irish rymes of auncient making. If he be a good rymer, he will make one song to the present occasion. Supper being ended, it is at your liberty to sitt up, or to depart to your lodgeing, you shall have company in both kind.*

Luke Gernon, *A Discourse of Ireland, anno 1620*, at CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts, <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/E620001/index.html> at pp360-1.

*Teacher tip:* have your students read passages like this aloud. They might feel silly at first but then they quickly realize it helps them sound out the words; people writing in the early modern period often spelled the way a word sounded, unlike today.

By the time of Edmund Spenser's occupation of the tower house, the woman's role as described by Gernon would have been an activity associated more with Gaelic Irish high-status women. Feasting and hospitality was integral to Gaelic Irish culture, but less so to the English newly settled in Ireland. Elizabeth in some ways bridged two worlds: her husband was newly arrived from England and grew up in London, whereas her family had been in Ireland for some time by then and interacted with locals. Therefore, she likely would have served the role described by Gernon when necessary, particularly if Spenser had higher-status Gaelic Irish guests arriving to dine.

#### *Additional resources*

Halls are often the first space we try to identify in tower houses. It is probable that most tower houses had an external hall, as discovered through excavation at Kilcolman, as well as an interior hall for more personal gatherings and business transactions. Kilcolman has been interpreted as a transitional space between the public life expected of lords in the Middle Ages, centered on the hall, and the more private domestic spaces that may have appeared in the castle in the Renaissance. The hall is still a prominent space at Kilcolman, but it is more evocative of the Gaelic Irish than of Spenser's family. Overall, Kilcolman has a lot more individualized space than earlier tower houses, which often had one room at each level: such rooms were therefore more multifunctional.

This image, taken from Sherlock (2011), p. 120, shows locations of halls within tower house types.

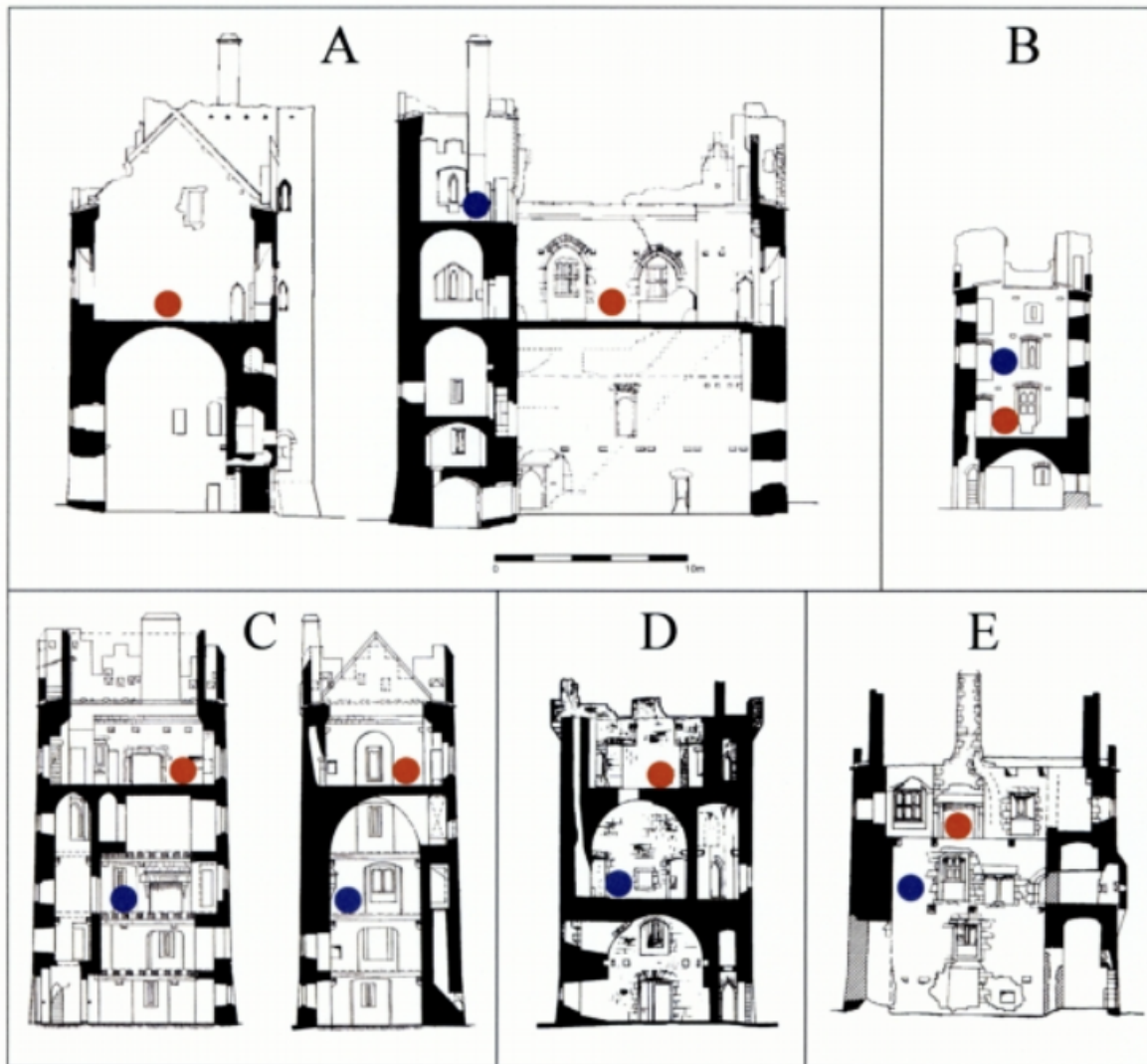


FIG. 1—Examples of tower-houses in Groups A (Barryscourt, Co. Cork), B (Roodstown, Co. Louth), C (Clara Upper, Co. Kilkenny), D (Ballynahow) and E (Ballymallis). The red dots indicate the hall location, while the blue dots indicate the suggested location of the principal private apartment. (A, D and E after Sweetman, *Medieval castles of Ireland*, 160, 154 and 170 respectively; B after V.M. Buckley and P.D. Sweetman, *Archaeological survey of County Louth* (Dublin, 1991), 338; and C after H.G. Leask, *Irish castles and castellated houses* (Dundalk, 1951), 83.)

Along with a potential increase in privacy, choices were made in early modern buildings to separate rooms according to gender. Hence Kilcolman may have been another manifestation of the Tudor elite household more than a medieval one. Accordingly, the interior and more private chamber has been interpreted as being Elizabeth's room, since it has window seats, rather than as being an internal hall. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century a trend had emerged whereby rooms were named for people rather than function, including female rooms. For example, a lady's study with books and a couch was basically a copy of the lord's private room. At Spenser's Kilcolman, the bedroom is placed at the top floor. This was the most difficult room to access from the entrance and this guaranteed more privacy. Garderobes (toilets) are present at a lower level in the tower and in the great hall, but not at the uppermost level. By the early modern period the elites were choosing to

have a so-called “close stool” with chamber pot in their private space, leaving garderobes for more public uses.

Kilcolman has more rooms at each level than many other tower houses, many of which have only one room at each level. Fireplaces were enthusiastically added to tower houses in the early modern period. We can roughly date a tower house based on whether a fireplace was an original part of the building, or a later insertion. The addition of fireplaces reflects greater interest in privacy and intimate spaces. Before fireplaces, people used central open hearths. This will have impacted where the hall was — a fire was needed for the last cooking during a feast and the smoke needed somewhere to escape. Factor this in when examining the plans above.

Kilcolman Castle, when occupied by the Spensers, would have had a smaller household population (servants, garrison, retainers, etc) than it likely would have had under its previous medieval occupants, the Gaelic Irish. Spenser could have allowed non-family members to sleep either in the armory or out in the bawn buildings, whereas in the medieval occupation the hall could also have served this purpose.

### *Teaching plan*

#### *Discussion questions*

1. What items do you think the thief from the defense tour would be interested in that are included in this tour?
2. How is the daily life of a woman different between the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and today? Give three examples. Give one example of how the daily life of women in the tower house period and today are similar.
3. Visit <http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/diagrams.html> and examine the image from Sherlock, above. What are similarities and differences between the layouts? Why do you think these changes happened?

#### *Exercises and activities*

##### Exercise 1: Artifacts recovered from Kilcolman Castle excavations

Where do you think these items recovered from excavation came from? Visit <http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/excavation-diagrams.html> for images to help you.

Archaeologists use artifacts to help determine what a building or a space was used for. It can be difficult to do this though. People dropped things as they passed through — how can we be sure that wasn't the case when we recover an item? Most of the time archaeologists are digging the below-ground parts of a building's remains. That usually means the foundations. Think about what a small snapshot of a bigger building this might give: the building could have multiple stories and we not even know!

<b>Excavated item</b>	<b>Describe what you think this was used for</b>	<b>What room do you think it came from?</b>
Tuning peg		
Clay tobacco pipe		

Foot of a tripod candle stick		
Pewter spoon		
Wooden mether cup		
Prick spur		
Sewing pin		
Chape from a dagger/toy dager		

*Teacher tips:*

The tuning peg was found in the great hall. The archaeologists thought it was a tuning peg for a musical instrument, maybe a lute. Such an object would likely have been used for entertainment during feasts. This helped them define this large building as having been the external hall. The lute was a Renaissance instrument that likely arrived in Ireland at the end of the Middle Ages. It originated in medieval Spain where Islamic and Christian cultures existed side-by-side and culturally influenced one another. (See also here on the *Centering Spenser* website: [http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/objects/P\\_lute.html](http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/objects/P_lute.html)).

The clay tobacco pipe will date to after Columbus’s contact with the Americas. Tobacco was a luxury good in the early modern period and smoking tobacco through a clay pipe was extremely popular by Spenser’s time (although these particular examples date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century). Archaeologists expect to find clay tobacco pipe fragments from places where anyone might sit and smoke. Perhaps the parlors or the hall? Clay pipes broke easily when they were dropped, but they were among the first items to be mass produced and so were comparatively inexpensive. If the bowl survives unbroken, archaeologists can look for the stamp in the clay that indicates where it was manufactured. They can then use this to establish a date and maybe where the place it was found had trade connections with. In this way we know that one of the clay pipe fragments found at Kilcolman was made in Cork city.

The pewter spoon and wooden mether cup came from places where there was eating and/or feasting.

The prick spur could be from an armory or place where dressing took place. It could also have fallen off while someone was walking.

A sewing pin may have been used by a woman, either of low or high status. Elizabeth explains this item more in her tour.

A chape is the metal bit at the end of a sheath to stop the tip of something sharp from wearing through. As this one is quite small, we presume it came from a small blade like a dagger or a toy replica of a sword or other such larger item. Elizabeth explains this more in her tour, but male children would have started military training at a young age. A dagger would have been a personal item, carried always for personal defense but also to help with eating.

**Reading list**

*Further Reading on Tower Houses and Defense:*

T. B. Barry, *The Archaeology of Medieval Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1987), Ch. 7.

Duncan Berryman, "The Defensibility of Irish Tower Houses," *The Castle Studies Group Journal* 24 (2010-11), 260-268.

Colin Breen, *An Archaeology of Southwest Ireland 1570-1670* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), Ch. 6.

Eric Klingelhofer, *Castles and Colonists: An Archaeology of Elizabethan Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

Vicky McAlister, "The Death of the Tower House? Reasons for the Decline of the 'Late Medieval' Tower House in Seventeenth Century Ireland," in *Space and Settlement in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Vicky McAlister and Terry Barry (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 130–50.

*Further reading on residential uses of tower houses:*

Oliver Creighton "Room with a View: Framing castle landscapes," *Chateau Gaillard* 24 (Caen: Publications du CRAHM, 2010), 37-49.

Jane Fenlon, "Moving Towards the Formal House: Room Usage in Early Modern Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 111C (2011): 141-68.

James Lyttleton, *The Jacobean Plantations in Seventeenth-Century Offaly: An Archaeology of a Changing World* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), Ch. 5.

Rory Sherlock, "The Evolution of the Irish Tower House as a Domestic Space," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 111C (2011): 115–140.

Rory Sherlock, "The Spatial Dynamic of the Irish Tower House Hall," in *Space and Settlement in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Vicky McAlister and Terry Barry (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 86-109.

*Further reading on material culture:*

Susan Flavin, "Consumption and Material Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland," *Economic History Review*, 64/4 (2011): 1144–1174.

Susan Flavin, *Consumption and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland: Saffron, Stockings and Silk* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014).

Gillian Kenny, "The Wife's Tale," in *Tales of Medieval Dublin*, ed. Sparky Booker and Cherie N. Peters (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 102-111.

Margaret Murphy, "Possessions, Objects, and Identity in Late Medieval Ireland," in *Rethinking Medieval Ireland and Beyond: Lifecycles, Landscapes, and Settlements*, ed. Victoria L. McAlister and Linda Shine (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

*Further reading on gender and castles:*

Charles L. H. Coulson, *Castles in Medieval Society: Fortresses in England, France, and Ireland in the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Part IV.

Karen Dempsey, “Tending the ‘Contested’ Castle Garden: Sowing Seeds of Feminist Thought,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 31/2 (2021): 265–279.

Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past* (London: Routledge, 1999), Ch. 6.

Mary McAuliffe, “The lady in the tower, the social and political role of women in tower houses,” in *The fragility of her sex? Medieval Irish women in their European context*. Ed. C. E. Meeks and M. K. Simms (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 153-62.

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