

CLENAGH CASTLE

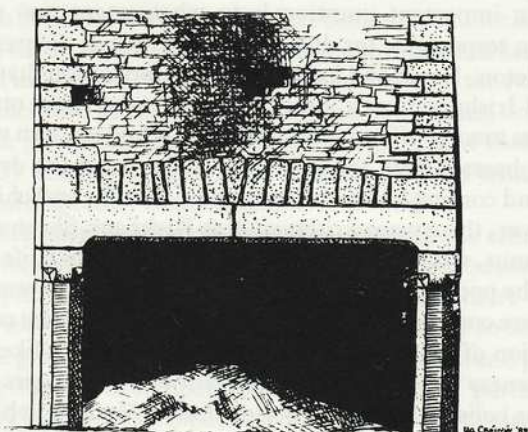
Claonadh - (slope)
Parish of Kilmaleery, Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare.

The castle of Claonadh is a very large late sixteenth century tower house on the banks of the river Fergus. It is best reached by turning right off the old Newmarket-Shannon road about half a mile past Carrigoran House.

The tower house itself is built on a rectangular base (50 ft. x 34 ft.) and consists of four main storeys and a garret. Only the first floor rests on a stone vault which rises three feet from the ground while all the other floors were wooden. A reason for this design may have been the potential danger of the walls being forced outwards by the lateral pressure of so large a stone vault at any greater height.

The ground floor is probably the most interesting with its beautifully carved semi-circular door arches. The main door is recessed both inside and out and could have had an additional door or iron grill, which may have closed in against the conventional wooden door. Above this is the usual murder hole.

On the outside wall to the right of the main door is a crude representation of a Síle na Gig (female figure representing lust). Most of the carving is simply inscribed on the stone save the head which is in false relief. Though these figures are common in the walls of mediaeval churches (e.g. Kilnaboy, Rath), they are rare in castles; however another can be seen in Bunnatty Castle at the side of a window in the great hall.

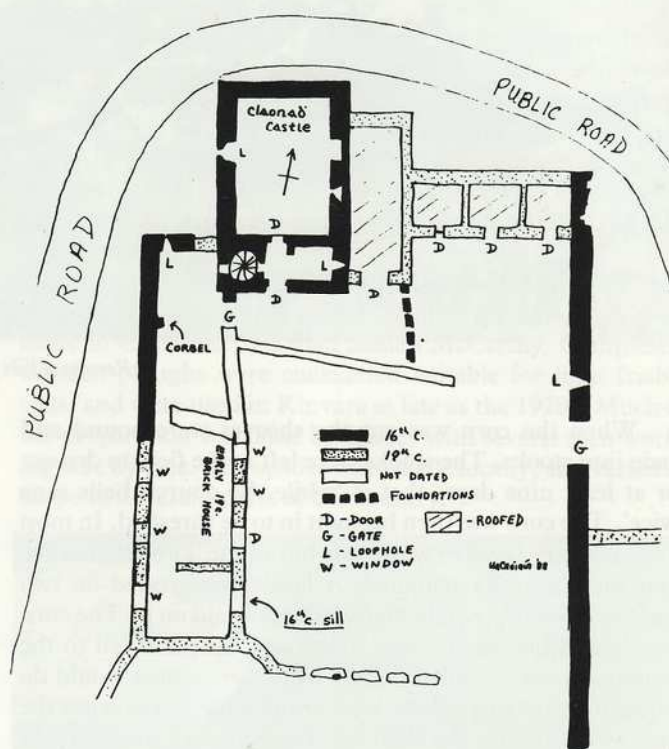


GREAT FIREPLACE CLAONADH GROUND FLOOR
0 1 2 3 4 FEET

Another interesting feature of the ground floor (usually called the cellar) is a little chamber, four feet square, in the thickness of the wall. This may be a well, but it was full of rubbish when we visited in 1988. If this is proven to be true it may be the first instance of indoor plumbing in the county!

Also in 'the cellar' is a great stone fireplace (over ten feet wide) which was probably a seventeenth century innovation but it was partially bricked up again a century or so later, perhaps to conserve fuel. A strong lamp is needed to inspect this, as there is no light whatsoever in the cellar.

RISTEÁRD UA CRÓINÍN and MARTIN BREEN

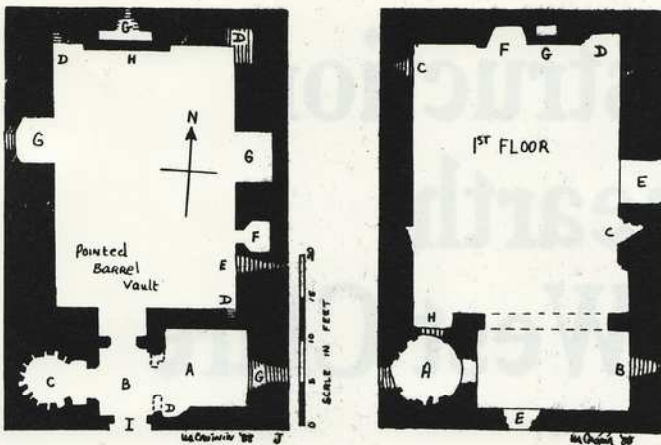


The stairs are completely dismantled and a ladder is required to visit the next level. Legend states that it was the last resident of Claonadh, Colonel Donough McMahon of the Austrian Army, who broke the stairs when he was forced to leave Ireland due to his involvement in Jacobite plots. He made sure that the castle would never again be used as a residence. Donough died in Australia in 1753.

The tower house above the vault is rather uninteresting as all the floors and many windows etc. are missing; however there are some very good, if plain, examples of seventeenth and eighteenth century fire places set in the walls. There are also a couple of beautiful four-light stone windows although these are without their mullions. Westropp mentions carved finials on the gables but we could not find them. They are probably covered by ivy.

In spite of much vandalism and damage over the centuries, the tower house is in a fair state of preservation; the walls being solid and still well pointed, but the ivy which has taken hold almost everywhere is starting to eat slowly but surely into the fabric of the building.

In the yard beside Claonadh castle many interesting little details can be seen, such as shotholes in the bawn wall, or part of a fire place in a gate pier and sixteenth century window sills in the ruins of an old farmhouse. How much of the courtyard or out offices are contemporary with the old tower house is difficult to say but it lends itself to interesting speculation.



CLONADH CASTLE

KEY: GROUND FLOOR PLAN.
 A PORTER'S CHAMBER (VAULT)
 B ENTRANCE HALL (LINTELLED)
 C STAIRS BROKEN
 D BUMBREYS
 E SLOP-OUT STONE
 F SMALL ROOM (WELL?)
 G LOOP RECESSES (LINTELLED)
 H GREAT FIRE PLACE
 I MAIN DOOR
 J SIDE WALL CORNER

KEY: 1ST FLOOR PLAN
 A STAIRS BROKEN
 B OGEE HEADED LOOP
 C REMAINS OF OLD LOOP EMBRASURE
 D RECESS
 E WINDOW BROKEN OUT
 F FIRE PLACE
 G FLUE FROM GROUND FLOOR
 H GOTHIC DOORWAY

HISTORY

Clonadh Castle was built towards the end of the sixteenth century. It was owned by a branch of the family of Mac Mathghamhna (McMahon) of East Corca Baiscinn who settled in this part of Bunratty Lower presumably with the consent of the Earl of Thomond.

The first mention of Clonadh in history comes from an inquisition on the death of Toirdhealach O'Brien in October 1611 when Terelagh Mortogh McMohowny (Toirdhealach Muircheartach MacMathghamhna) of Clenagh is named as one of the jurors. By 1614 the castle and lands seem to have passed to his son Mortogh McTerrelagh McMohowny as he is mentioned in a conveyance dated August 3rd of that year. Legend states that the famous Máire Rua O'Brien was born in Clenagh castle in 1615 and spent much of her youth here. She was the daughter of Máire Ni Brien and Toirdhealach Rua McMahon of Clonderlaw who were close relatives of the McMahons of Clenagh. She is said to have played as a child on Brian Boru's harp which is depicted on all Irish coins and official stamps. According to folklore the harp was presented by Donnchadh son of Brian Ború to the Pope with the regalia of Ireland about 1050. It was given to Henry VIII when he received the title 'Defender of the Faith'. He gave it to the 1st Lord Clanrickard. From that family it passed to the McMahons of Clenagh and through marriage to John O'Connell brother of 'The Liberator' and later to the Rt. Hon. M. Conyngham who presented it to Trinity College where it can be seen today. Although it is most unlikely that the antiquity of the harp reaches back to Brian Ború it is quite possible that it was part of the furniture of Clenagh castle during Máire Rua's visits.

By 1642 the Catholic Rebellion had spread to Clare and for the next ten years Toirleach Óg McMahon of Clenagh played an important role in the minor civil and military affairs in the county. He received his commission as captain from the Supreme Council of the Confederate Catholics and is mentioned in numerous documents throughout the course of the war.

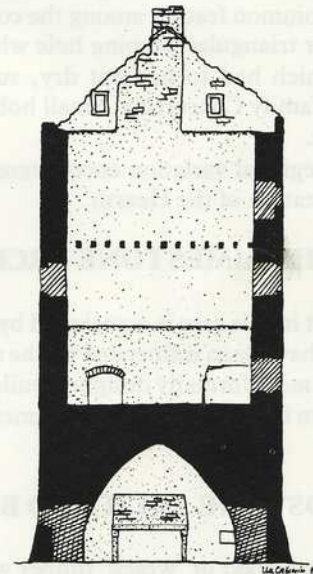
Clenagh is mentioned in an interesting letter from Richard Wilson, Minister to Sir Donat O'Brien, dated 4th February 1701 as follows:

The old Lieutenant Donough McMortogh (McMahon); dyed on Friday last, and 'tho he was 'minded of his obligations to you, yett he has by will left his cousin Daniel McMahon heir to all his expectations; who thereupon brought him home and waked him at Clenagh and buried him at Kilmaleeragh ...

The payment of taxes to the Established Church seemed to be a matter of contention for the McMahons, but the same Richard Wilson was not one to give in, as can be seen from the note to his agent Donough McConnor in 1713. He remarks that 'Madame McMahon is said to be selling her stock and moving from Clenagh'. He asks McConnor to apply for two years tithes which her husband owed him . . . 'If you cannot get payment in money you may take it in anything that's vendable!'

The castle passed from Donough McMahon to his brother Henry who died in 1747 leaving it to his nephew Stanislaus who passed it to his son the Abbé Donough. The Abbé sold the lands before his death in 1784 but by this time the castle had fallen into ruin and has not been inhabited since.

Some interesting headstones of the residents of Clenagh castle can be seen in nearby Kilmaleery churchyard, particularly one erected to the memory of Bridget wife of Donough (the colonel) who died in 1733, and Ann, wife of Henry McMahon who died in 1735.



Clonadh section from South

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