



# Medieval walls of Kilkenny City

## The walls in the modern streetscape

The walls of Kilkenny City are not hard to find in the modern streetscape. As they were intended to do some 700 years ago, they still define property boundaries and, where they still survive above ground, are imposing features.

In the former Hightown, Kilkenny Castle dominates the south-eastern portion of the city. Now a property in state care, in its original thirteenth-century condition it would have formed an important element of the defences, with four large circular corner towers and a massive ditch, part of which can still be seen today on the Parade. Construction of the stone castle was begun by William Marshall in the early thirteenth century. The castle and town passed from the heirs of William Marshall to James Butler, 3rd earl of Ormond, in 1391 and remained the home of that family until the twentieth century. Excavations and building surveys by Ben Murtagh in the 1990s revealed traces of an earlier earthwork castle, exposed a postern gate (side entrance) and section of the castle ditch facing on to the Parade (now visible), and also partly uncovered the lost south-east side of the castle.

On the southern flank, part of the walls survive to the rear of the Castle Stables (now the Kilkenny Design Centre), including an arrow-loop visible on the external elevation of the wall. Further along, on the corner of Lower New Street and Ormonde Road, Talbot's Bastion forms the south-western corner of the city wall circuit. The name is of modern origin: this tower was known as Wattles Bastion in the nineteenth century and as Patrick's Tower during the seventeenth century. It is a circular structure with a maximum height of 9.7m, an internal diameter of 5.58m and walls 1.65m thick. Internally, the ground floor is an open, vaulted space. The mortar on the underside of the vault bears the traces of the wickerwork retaining frame used in its construction. This ground-floor room was defended by three arrow-loops, whose form suggests a construction date in the early thirteenth century. The upper level or parapet of the tower was accessed from a stairway on the inside of the western curtain wall. Conservation works on this tower are ongoing and access is restricted at present.

Further portions of the walls survive to the east of Lower New Street, but one of the finest stretches is at James's Street, where a 50m length of wall, over 4m in height, stands close to a new block of apartments. A base batter and two cross-shaped arrow-loops can be seen on the external face of this wall.

A substantial portion of the walls, almost 100m in length, survives at the north-west corner of Hightown, near the Dominican Black Abbey. A run of wall extends from the western end of New Building Lane to Abbey Street and on to the River Breaghagh. The only remaining gate from the medieval walls, Black Freren Gate, survives at the western end of Abbey Street. Documentary references indicate that there was a gate here from the late fourteenth century. While all that now remains is an arch, it would originally have had a tower and room over it. A length of wall runs parallel to the River Breaghagh, and several opes within this may be of late medieval date. At the point where the Breaghagh meets the River Nore (now within the Diageo/Smithwick's brewery) a small polygonal structure known as Evan's Turret can be found, although it is best viewed from the eastern bank of the Nore. This tower, which marked the north-eastern limit of the Hightown, appears to have been modified as a garden terrace, perhaps during the eighteenth century. A length of city wall runs east from this tower and forms the riverside wall for the present-day brewery.

In Irishtown little remains of any walled defences, apart from the sections forming the northern and western boundaries of the graveyard of St Canice's Cathedral. Murage grants for Irishtown are known from the fourteenth century, and this part of Kilkenny was certainly defended against Cromwell in 1650. It may well be that the earthen embankment built up against the inner faces of the northern and western graveyard walls of St Canice's represents seventeenth-century works to improve the masonry defences against cannon fire.

The suburb of St John's appears to have grown up in association with St John's Augustinian Priory. References to defences here date from the early sixteenth century. In 1650 Cromwell described it as 'another walled town on the other side of the river', and a section of wall survives on the north-east side of John's Street, in the carpark of Langton's Bar, running northwards for some 75m. A small circular open-backed tower on Maudlin Street represents the northern terminus

of this wall and would have acted as a flanking tower for musket shot on the north-east corner of the St John's walled circuit. A second tower, that of Maudlin Castle, can be found some 120m along Maudlin Street. This late medieval tower-house formed part of the medieval hospital of St Mary Magdalen and was not part of the urban defences.

## Conclusion

The medieval walls around the city of Kilkenny are an important legacy that we should cherish and protect. They are a vital element of the historic fabric that also includes buildings, the streetscape, ancient property boundaries and buried archaeological deposits. The historic evolution of Kilkenny—and indeed of other Irish urban centres—has left us a rich resource that we have a responsibility to understand and conserve for future generations. It is envisaged that the recently published Kilkenny City Walls Conservation Plan will ensure a new phase in the life of Kilkenny's defences.

### Acknowledgements

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### Further reading

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Above: **The earthen rampart behind the western section of the city wall bounding St Canice's Cathedral graveyard in Irishtown.**

Above left: **The city wall at James Street, flanking the former Presentation Convent garden, viewed from the south west.**

Cover picture: **The Black Freren Gate viewed from outside the circuit. The arch is all that remains of what would have been a gate-tower.**



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## Introduction

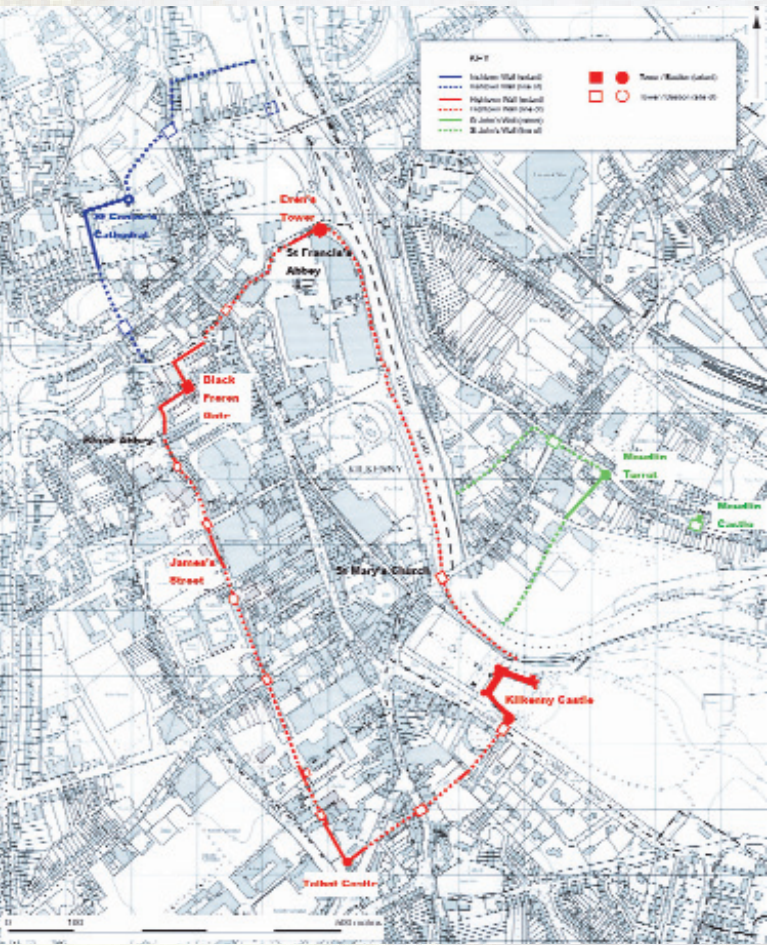
The historic urban centre of Kilkenny City retains much of its medieval fabric. Prominent buildings such as the Shee Almshouse, Rothe House and the imposing Kilkenny Castle are some of the better-known secular buildings about the streetscape, while numerous medieval religious buildings, such as St Canice's Cathedral, the Dominican Black Abbey and St Francis's Abbey, also survive. Buildings such as these, and other less well-known later medieval structures hidden behind Georgian and Victorian façades, are a feature of the surviving medieval streetscape.

This historic streetscape developed and was contained—and still is, to a very large degree—within a defensive circuit of stone walls. These walls, once a source of great civic pride, were a major undertaking in terms of construction and maintenance by the medieval inhabitants of Kilkenny. A conservation plan for these ancient walls has recently been prepared by the Heritage Council and Kilkenny Borough Council, and it is hoped that this will initiate a new phase of care and conservation for this valuable legacy.



Below: **Plan of the medieval defences of Kilkenny** (after Munby and Tyler 2005, with additions).

Above right: **John Rocque's survey of Kilkenny from 1758, showing the urban defences around the town. Rocque did not show any defences around Irishtown or St John's.**



## The early town of Kilkenny

Kilkenny is located on a fording-point of the River Nore and at the junction of several routeways. A church dedicated to St Canice was in existence by the late seventh century AD and rose to such prominence that it became the principal church of the diocese of Ossory. On the eve of the Anglo-Norman incursions this ecclesiastical settlement, located north of the little River Breaghagh in the area of the current cathedral, consisted of a church in the Hiberno-Romanesque style, a round tower and likely associated domestic habitation. Following the invasion it came to be known as Irishtown and was a possession of the bishop of Ossory.

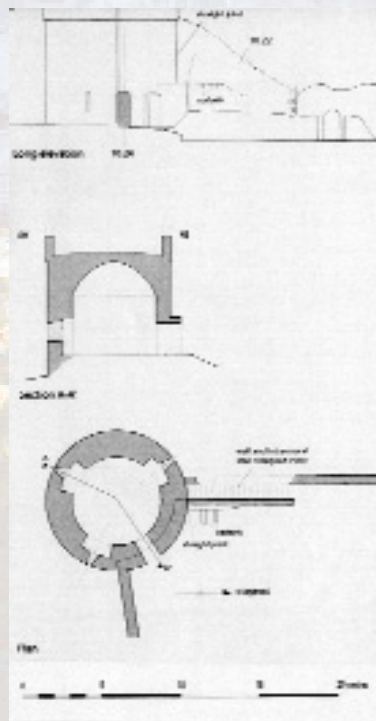
The Anglo-Normans established a castle at Kilkenny in 1173, possibly on the site of an earlier residence of the Mac Gilla Pátraic kings of Ossory. Kilkenny formed part of the lordship of Leinster, which was granted to Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare, better known as Strongbow. On his death in 1176 these lands passed into the hands of the crown; thereafter very little is known about Kilkenny until Isabella, Strongbow's daughter and heiress, married William Marshall in 1189. The Earl Marshall owned large estates in Ireland, England, Wales and France and managed them effectively. He appointed Geoffrey fitz Robert as seneschal of Leinster and so began a major phase of development in Kilkenny, including the construction of Kilkenny Castle and the agreement of rents and privileges with burgesses or citizens of the borough. A charter of 1207 from Marshall confirmed these privileges, and the town was extended northwards as far as the River Breaghagh by an exchange of lands with the bishop of Ossory. The Anglo-Norman borough came to be known as Hightown and by the mid-fourteenth century the town was based on a main route, High Street, from which stemmed two streets (Walkin Street, now known as Friary Street, and James's Street). To the south of the city High Street formed a crossroads with Patrick Street, Castle Street (since widened and renamed the Parade) and Rose Inn Street, which led across John's Bridge over the Nore. A suburb known as St John's grew up around the Augustinian monastery on the eastern bank of the River Nore.

## Building and managing the medieval defences

The Hightown defences enclosed a rectangular area with dimensions of 800m by 350m and a perimeter of approximately 1.45km, enclosing an area of c. 28 hectares. To the north the walls were bounded by the Breaghagh River, where Evan's Turret is located at the north-east corner of the circuit. No quay wall or riverside defences are known to the east by the River Nore, but it may well be that medieval timber revetments or harbour walls and jetties remain to be discovered on this eastern flank. Some four mural towers and two turrets defended the western wall, and there are traces of an external ditch along this section. A substantial mural tower, known as Talbot's Bastion, at the south-west corner of the walls is likely to date from the early thirteenth century. The southern stretch of wall ran from Talbot's Bastion across to Kilkenny Castle. In places the walls survive to a height of some 4.5m, along with parts of the wall-walk, where watchmen would have been afforded some protection by the stepped crenellations or battlements. Additional defence was provided by arrow-loops in the walls.

During its early development it is likely that the town was defended by a ditch and rampart of earth. To facilitate the construction of stone walls a series of murage grants were obtained from the crown between c. 1250 and 1460. These allowed the collection of tolls or taxes at set rates upon such items as wine, hides, firewood, wool, cloth, meat, fish and food. The skins of squirrel, fox and badger are mentioned in the murage grant of 1282.

The main justification for enclosing the town was defence against attacks by the Irish and by feuding Anglo-Norman barons. But a surrounding wall was also an important means of ensuring the collection of tolls by restricting the points of entry into the town, and allowed a close watch to be kept on visitors entering and leaving. In addition, it was a symbol of status and a clear means of impressing upon visitors the standing and importance of a town. Such walls created and reinforced a sense of identity for the people who lived



Above: **Talbot's Bastion viewed from within the circuit of the walls. Despite its current appearance, this is an impressive piece of medieval engineering and construction and was clearly designed to dominate the south-west angle of the medieval defences.**

Left: **Plan of Talbot's Bastion** (after Munby and Tyler 2005).



within them. The ability to obtain from the crown the right to levy and administer tolls for the construction of the walls marked an important stage in the development of municipal government and decision-making. The construction of such urban defences was part of a wider trend in Anglo-Norman Ireland and across western Europe as urban life expanded and developed.

References to Kilkenny's defensive walls are found in documents relating to the leases of gates dating from the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The *Liber Primus Kilkenniensis* lists the gates as the Irishtown or Hightown Gate, Black Freren Gate, St James's Gate, Walkyn's Gate, St Patrick's Gate, Castle Gate and St John's Gate. From the rents paid for these gates (between two and twelve shillings per year) it is fair to conclude that they were seen as valuable residences. Throughout the medieval period there are further references to the renting of the gates and the keepers of each gate. Surviving illustrations of the gatehouses suggest that they were rectangular structures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with an open vaulted passage at ground level. As in other Irish towns, many of Kilkenny's gatehouses were removed in the period spanning the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. The gate at Patrick's Street was removed c. 1895 to facilitate the free movement of traffic, and today only a portion of Black Freren Gate survives in the modern streetscape.

The defence of the walls changed as the nature of warfare developed in the later medieval period. By 1517 we learn that 'several guns were made, and diverse hauberks [armour] bought for the inhabitants of the town for their defence'. Additional works were carried out to the defences in 1642, when Kilkenny became the seat of the Confederate parliament. It is recorded that 'Dutchmen' strengthened the defences by adding sods to the base of the wall so as to create earthen ramparts that would absorb cannon fire. In 1650 a parliamentary army under Oliver Cromwell besieged Kilkenny. During the week-long siege entry was gained into Irishtown after a struggle, the suburb of St John's was taken without serious resistance, but Cromwell's soldiers suffered heavy losses while trying to enter across John's Bridge, which was defended by a gate at its western end.

## Depictions of the walls

John Rocque's map of Kilkenny, published in 1758, provides the earliest reliable evidence for the circuit of the walls. It shows the walls of Hightown as three sides of a rectangle, with the River Nore to the east acting as the fourth side. Four towers are shown along the western length of the wall and seven gateways. Rocque's map does not show either Irishtown or the suburb of St John's as walled. The Ordnance Survey draft plan of 1841 indicates the surviving lengths of wall and, like Rocque's map, does not show any walls in Irishtown or St John's.



Above: **The circular tower in Maudlin Street formed the north-east corner of the defences around the suburb of St John's. The tower, likely to be of sixteenth/seventeenth-century date, would have provided flanking fire for the walls.**

Below left: **Evan's Tower rising from the Breaghagh River, with the modern brewery buildings visible in the background. The stringcourse, visible about two-thirds of the way up the walls, may indicate the base of an earlier parapet.**

Below right: **In this antiquarian illustration (1851) Evan's Turret peeks through trees to the left of the tower of St Francis's Abbey. As can be seen, it was considerably higher than it is today.**