

Ireland's Ancient East

Barberstown Castle

Photos by Ken Mooney and Barberstown Castle

In our last issue, we walked the Ordnance Survey Ireland battlefield trail of Arklow. Like so many areas around the Ireland, Arklow is rich in history. We learned from our visit there that Arklow and the surrounding area played prominent roles in the Confederate Wars and the 1798 Rebellion. For this issue, we are taking you to Barberstown Castle Hotel, Straffan, in Co. Kildare. This heritage site is one of the hundreds of landmark destinations along Ireland's Ancient East.

Barberstown Castle dates to the late 13th

century. Like many sites on our doorsteps people pass it by without any thought to who lived there or what history are behind its walls. Hotel manager Gretchen Ridgeway took us around this medieval site and explained that Barberstown is a, 'unique site, as it has been occupied since it was built. Furthermore, throughout the centuries the owners added on to the existing structure rather than knocking the old one down'. As a result, the building today, both inside and outside, transitions from medieval Ireland up to the 19th century house.

Barberstown is situated between Maynooth and Straffan on land that came into the possession of Maurice FitzGerald at the beginning of the Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland in 1170-1171. In 1288, Sir John Fanning, conveyed Straffan and Ballespaddagh (Irishtown) to Richard Le Penkiston on a deed witnessed by Richard de la Salle, John Posswick and Nicholas Barby. Each of these witnesses were granted lands to administer and in turn gave their name to surrounding townlands: Sealstown, Possextown and Barbystown.

Medieval Banqueting Hall (1550's AD) available for private dining events.



Nicholas Barby is said to have built the first structure, or castle, in circa 1288-1300. It is unclear if this was on the same site as the existing Barberstown Castle. There is no visual evidence to why today's castle is sited where it is, as it is not on a height or beside a river. The original structure was more than likely a defended farmstead with wooden buildings and wooden walls. But unless we start digging we can only speculate.

Local histories give an account of Barberstown, along with other surrounding towns and settlements, coming under attack by the Uí Faeláin clan in 1310. Prior to the arrival of the Normans, the Uí Faeláin clan had dominated the area with their power centered on present day Naas. Their lands corresponded to the baronies of North Naas, North and South Salt, Clane, Ikeathy and Outhternary. Branches of the clan still raided into Kildare from Wicklow and Offaly, much to the upset of the local lords.

In 1473, the Sutton family were administering Barberstown and it was they who built the existing stone castle. At the time raiding from the clans was still

prevalent and general lawlessness existed throughout the land. Laurence Sutton complained to the courts that he had been robbed of a sword and cloak. Strengthening defences seemed like a prudent measure.

At the time the castle would have existed of the existing stone tower and a stone wall (known as a bawn), which would have enclosed the tower and farm buildings. Today historians refer to these sites as tower houses to distinguish them for larger castles such as Trim or Maynooth. Tower houses were essentially a fortified medieval residence constructed from stone, usually four or more stories with enough living space for the immediate family. On maps, they are referred to as castles. It was very prestigious to own such a dwelling.

Tower houses such as Barberstown are dotted throughout the country. The majority however are in ruins. Gretchen proudly told us that, 'over the centuries owners of Barberstown have gone to great care to keep the tower intact. Thus, it is in pristine condition making it a distinctive landmark and place to stay'.

The tower at Barberstown measures 8m by 7m, with walls that are 1.4m thick. The rooms on the upper floors are reached by a 53-step winding staircase. The entrance faces north-west. A corner stair turret projects west and there is an added battered base along with a projecting latrine turret at the south-west corner. Features such as a chimney date to later building periods. The outer stone walls are long gone, more than likely used to build the existing house. Walking around the tower however, it is clear if under attack by disgruntled peasants or marauding Gaelic clans, you could rest assured you are secure behind the thick stone walls.

To enter the tower from inside the hotel Gretchen brought us through a corridor that was like stepping back in time. Walking on original Elizabethan floor tiles you are met at the end of the corridor by a big thick wooden door and a side view of the 1.4-metre-thick tower walls. The tower in its pristine condition, is not far removed from when the Suttons were there.



Barton Rooms Restaurant in the Victorian House (1826).



The Penkiston family forfeited their power in 1581, after being implicated in the Rebellion of Lord Baltinglass. They had, however, in 1480, disposed their Straffan holdings to the Gaydon family, in whose possession the property remained during the two following centuries. Records show the Gaynor family took over Barberstown around this time and built the Elizabethan house attached to the tower. The Sutton family appears to have returned, for in 1630, William Sutton is listed as the tenant of Barberstown.

Ireland went through massive turmoil in the mid-17th century. The 1641 Rebellion led into the Irish Confederate Wars. Large armies devastated the countryside and prolonged sieges starved defenders. Barberstown Castle survived relatively intact compared to others. Many of the Kildare landowners had sided with the Confederates, including the FitzGerald. In early 1642, James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormonde led his Royalist forces to subdue Kildare. Butler's men swept through the county; the village at Lyons was burned,

Naas was plundered, Kildare cathedral was reduced to ruins through cannon fire and parties burned Kilcullen, Castlemartin, and all the county for 17 miles in length and 25 in breadth. Barberstown is said to have been attacked now by men commanded by George Monck, 1st Duke of Albemarle, who had been commissioned lieutenant colonel of an infantry regiment raised by his kinsman the Earl of Leicester. The Kildare Confederates under Lord Mountgarret, were defeated by Butler at the Battle of Kilrush on April 15th.

North Kildare was at war again in May 1646, as Confederate forces marched through the county to besiege Dublin. The following year Owen Roe O'Neill took Woodstock Castle in Athy briefly and Thomas Preston took Maynooth Castle and hanged its garrison. However, in August Preston's Leinster army was destroyed, losing 3,000 at the Battle of Dungans Hill, on the road between Maynooth and Trim. Confederate cavalry officer and prominent landowner Garret Cron FitzGerald was killed in the battle. Confederate power in the county was severely crippled. With the arrival of Oliver Cromwell and his Parliamentarian Army, Kildare surrendered in 1650.

The Gaydons, like the later Tyrconnells, became dispossessed as a result of the Confederate Wars. The then Patrick Gaydon's sons however, went on to fight for

James the II. Later fleeing to France John fought at Ramillies in 1706, Oudenarde in 1708, and Malplaquet in 1719. His distinguished conduct earned him in 1719, the rank of Maréchal de camp. Richard, was an officer in Dillon's Regiment

Throughout this period the population at Barberstown Castle was 36. With all the political upheaval ownership changed several times with lands being confiscated. In 1660, Barberstown Castle was granted to John King, Lord Kingston, who had been a general in Cromwell's army but then supported the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, when he was given a peerage. But after James II came to the throne, the Earl of Tyrconnell confiscated the castle from Robert King, 2nd Lord Kingston, in 1689. Tyrconnell would in turn lose his lands after the Jacobite defeat.

In a period at the beginning of the 18th century the castle changed hands six times in six years. Most notably in 1703, when the castle and its 335 acres, was bought by Bartholomew Vanhomrigh, a Dutch merchant, for £1,033. He had been Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1697-1698. Vanhomrigh's principal residence was nearby at Celbridge Abbey. He was the father of Esther Vanhomrigh, the Vanessa who was the focus of the passionate letters and amorous attention of Dean Jonathan Swift.

Shortly after the castle was sold on to the Henry family and by the end of the 18th century the Cairncross family were tenants. Around 1830, Straffan estate and Barberstown Castle were bought by the wine merchant Hugh Barton of the wine firm Barton and Gustier. The Bartons had fled France due to the turmoil of the French

Medieval Tapestries (replica) displayed in the Medieval Banqueting Hall.



Revolution and its aftermath. Barton built the next phase in Barberstown Castle and then went on to build Straffan House.

One interesting tenant of Barberstown came in 1836, was Admiral Hercules Robinson. He was a son of the Reverend Christopher Robinson, Rector of Granard, Co. Longford. Robinson fought alongside Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and from 1817 to 1820 he commanded the HMS Favourite on the Cape of Good Hope and St. Helena station.

'The Bartons sold the castle to the Huddleston family,' Gretchen added, 'whom farm the land surrounding the castle to the present day'. In 1971, the castle was sold to Mrs. Norah Devlin, who converted it into a Hotel. It was then purchased by possibly its most famous owner, Eric Clapton who sold it on to the present owner, Kenneth C. Healy, who today maintains the old Geraldine tradition of generous hospitality to all who enter its ancient vaulted rooms and sixteenth century Banqueting Halls.

With its historic backdrop Barberstown Castle is one of Ireland's most sought after wedding venues. Kenneth has gone to great lengths to maintain the ambiance of Barberstown's rich historical past. Each room is named after one of its 37 owners and tenants of Barberstown. The rooms, along with four poster beds, mirror those of the Elizabethan and Victorian periods and guests can still enjoy wine from Barton and Gustier, or dine at a medieval banquet.

So the next time you are spending the night, dining in the restaurant, or attending a conference, take a walk around the castle and explore its ancient past.

Barberstown Castle

Straffan
Co. Kildare
Tel:(01) 628 8157
E: info@barberstowncastle.ie
Web: www.barberstowncastle.ie
For more on Ireland's Ancient East see: www.irelandsancienteast.com