

BALLYPORTRY CASTLE

The 15th Century Gaelic Tower House

BACKGROUND

Ballyportry is larger, more spacious and architecturally interesting than most tower houses. The American architect Bob Brown restored Ballyportry in the 1960s and we continue with the conservation.

Our hope is that Ballyportry will remain as a house for a long time and that it can come to represent the 16th century Gaelic world.

It is said that it was used by the Tánaiste or deputy leader of the O'Brien's who were the rulers of the Burren for many centuries. It was built in the 15th century at a time of comparative peace and prosperity, and would have been surrounded by orchards, had gardens and a dairy, a forge and stables for horses. It is said that its name in Irish comes from a placename in Gaelic meaning 'the place of the Harpists.' Ballyportry is one of a number of O'Brien and O'Loughlin castles scattered throughout the Burren part of County Clare.

The castles and tower houses in the West of Ireland were strongholds and gathering places where chiefs and their followers gathered for feasting and song.

Tower houses were fashionable in the late medieval period. About 2000 survive in Ireland. They are generally roofless and with crumbled walls. Many had corners shot off by cannon, which lead to their gradual disintegration. These days there are a very small number of tower houses and castles in use as private residences.

The remains of a cashel or stone enclosure from an older time survive in the woods of the 5 acres of land that Ballyportry now stands on. The landscape surrounding the tower house is similar in many ways to how we think it might have been when it was built. The small hilly fields bounded by blackthorn and hazel hedges provide grazing for cattle and horses as they always did.

A stream runs at the foot of a small hill. From the roof, at least 7 lakes can be seen with the hills of the Burren in sight at an easy distance of just 10 minutes reach by car. The distinctive stony slopes of Mullaghmore, shaped by glacial ice age movement are in view from the gateway into the bawn and from the front door of Ballyportry.