

TALBOT'S TOWER, KILKENNY: EXCAVATIONS FOR THE CITY WALLS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK



Excavations underway on the top of the roof of the tower

Below: The 'garden mound' on the roof of Talbot's tower before and after excavation



At the very base of the ditch a rough stone path was found. This was put in place to provide a solid surface that could be worked upon when work was taking place on the tower. Patches of mortar, chips of stone and nails were all found in amongst the stones of the path. One layer within the ditch was particularly interesting. This was right up against the wall of the tower and contained numerous pieces of lead musket shot which had been fired at the tower, probably during one of the sixteenth century sieges of Kilkenny.

By the mid-eighteenth century the town defences had become somewhat obsolete and the town ditch at Talbot's tower was fully backfilled and closed over. In 1816 Ormonde road was built to link Patrick Street with the Callan road. This cut a large swathe through the Town Wall though its ditch is likely to still survive beneath the road.

The Rampart

The stone wall was built on top of an earthen rampart which was found to be 2.5m deep x 6m wide strip of clay that was excavated around 1200 from the town ditch. The clay was banked upon the old ground surface from which charred grains of barley and wheat were recovered. One of these was radiocarbon dated to between 710-890 AD and must therefore be related to the farm of the nearby monastery of Domhnachpatrick. Pottery from layers above the rampart indicate it preceded the construction of the stone defences by about fifty years.



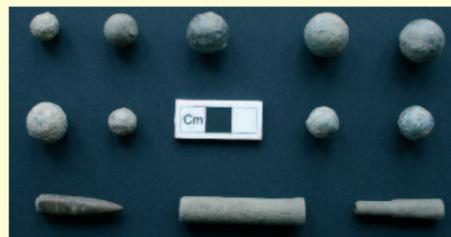
Nearly two-thousand artefacts have been found during the excavations. This is small selection of the finds from the 'garden mound'. Top left to right: birds head terminal, iron key, three musket balls. Middle left to right: Charles II coin, Victorian marble. Bottom left to right: 1868 penny, selection of buttons, lace-chapes, .303 bullet.

The 'garden mound' and roof of the tower

At the top of the tower, was a 5m diameter 'pudding' shaped mound of clay which covered the medieval roof of the structure. When excavated it was found to have been put in place in the late eighteenth - early nineteenth century to cover a large 'gouge' that had been made into the structure of the original fifteenth century roof of the tower. The sod layer which covered the mound contained a multitude of artefacts that showed how the top of Talbot's tower was used over the past two hundred years. Finds included fragments of Victorian wine bottles, clay tobacco-pipes, hair pins, lace-chapes and many ladies buttons all attest to the use of the roof as a place for particularly pleasurable types of recreation! Of interest also were a number of .303 bullets and cases, which may have been used by Free State forces against the Republican occupation of Kilkenny castle during the Irish Civil War.

The fifteenth century roof of the tower was basically a dome that was paved with fine stone flags. The flags had been robbed from the central dome of the roof, revealing the stone rubble core beneath. This was constructed using alternating layers of loose stone rubble and mortared masonry, probably to a thickness of c.0.75m – 1m.

Musket shot and early twentieth century bullets from the 'garden mound'.



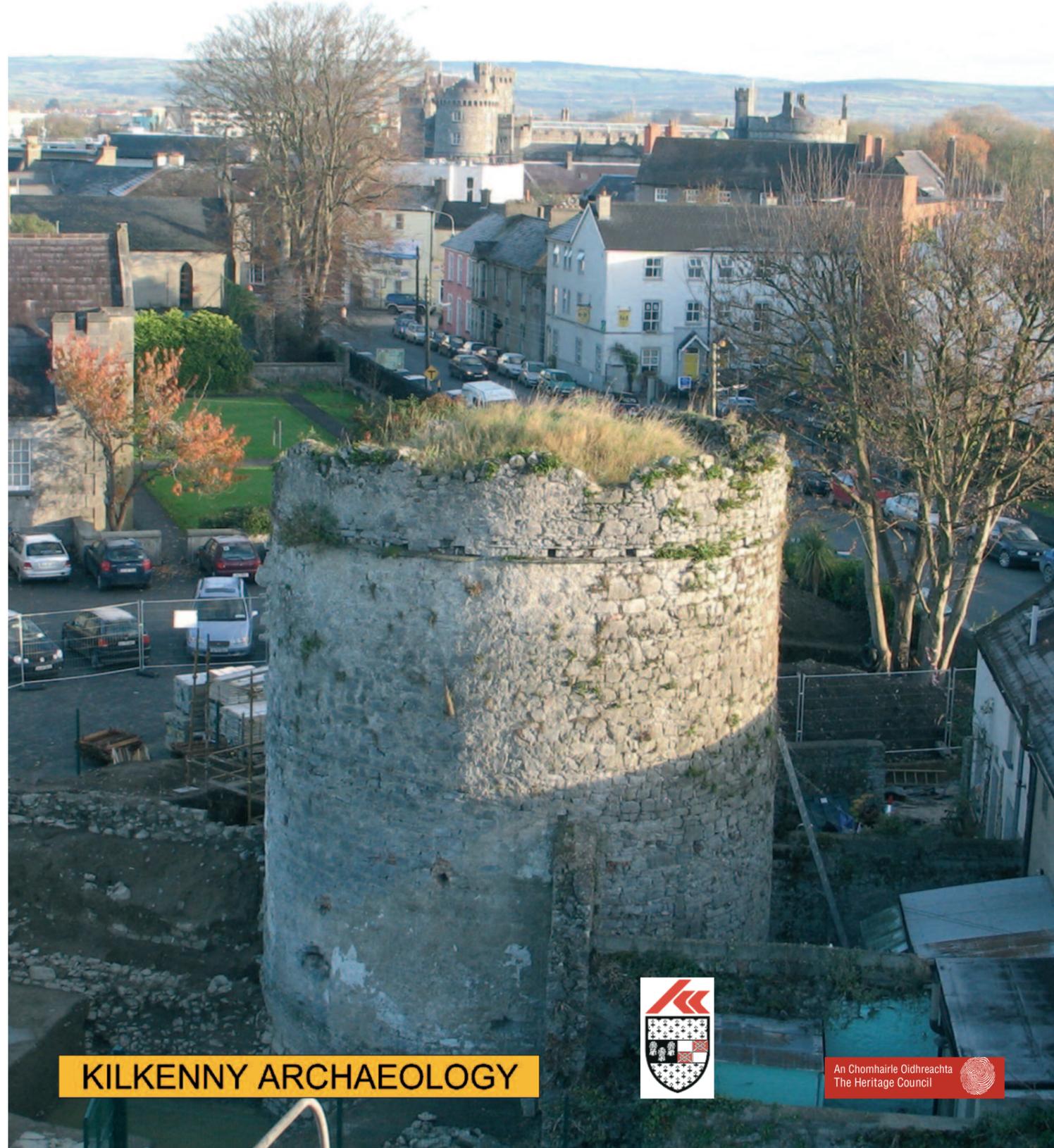
An unusual find from the town ditch was this collection of plaster dental moulds which had been dumped from a dentist's surgery in the nineteenth century!

Talbot's tower archaeological park

By the end of 2011 the section of the Town Wall that fell in 1989 will have been rebuilt and the area around the base of the tower will be transformed into a public 'archaeological park', with information signage and the town ditch open to view. The results of the archaeological work will be published in due course and it is hoped that a proportion of the artefacts can be displayed on the site.

Acknowledgements

Work at Talbot's tower is being overseen by the City Walls Committee of Kilkenny Borough Council (chair: Cllr. Betty Manning) and is funded by the Irish Walled Towns Network and Kilkenny Borough Council. Project managers are Consarc Ltd. and the archaeologists are Kilkenny Archaeology and Ben Murtagh. Kilkenny V.E.C., Lily O Connell and the Smyth family are sincerely thanked for allowing the project to access their properties. This brochure was produced by the site's excavation director Cólín Ó Drisceoil.



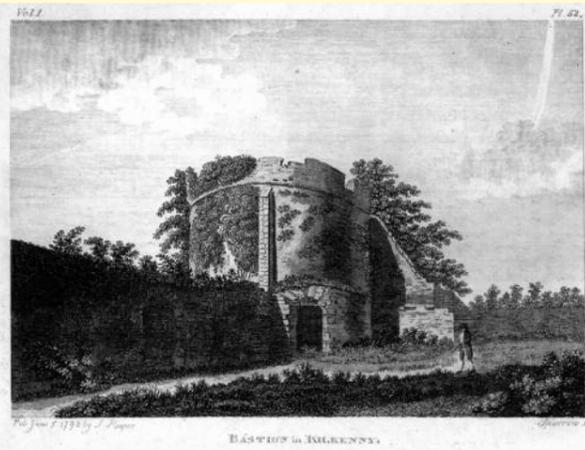
KILKENNY ARCHAEOLOGY



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



An exciting new project to design an archaeological park for Kilkenny's City Walls is nearing completion at Talbot's tower. Kilkenny Borough Council have for many years recognised the importance of the city's medieval defences and have striven to protect, conserve and promote those sections that survive. Talbot's tower and its adjoining walls represent the best-preserved section of the Town Wall in the city but it is also one of the most vulnerable since it suffered a partial collapse in 1989. For this reason the area has been a key priority and in 2006 work began on a flagship conservation project to stabilise the building and present it as a public amenity. Conservation work on the tower has been undertaken in tandem with a major archaeological research programme by Kilkenny Archaeology and buildings archaeologist Ben Murtagh. This is one of the most important archaeological initiatives ever undertaken on any of Ireland's Town Walls and has provided an immense amount of new information on the origins, development and use of the walls over their entire history.



Daniel Grose's illustration of Talbot's tower which was published 1792 shows Talbot's tower from the east.

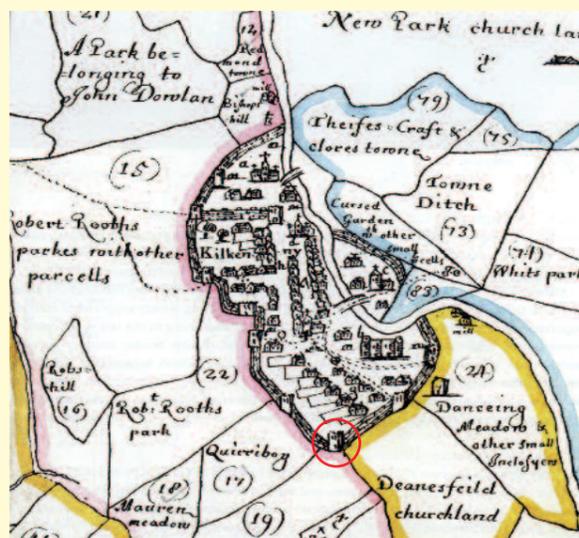
buried below the modern townscape are sections of walls, gates and towers and most of the town ditch.

Talbot's tower

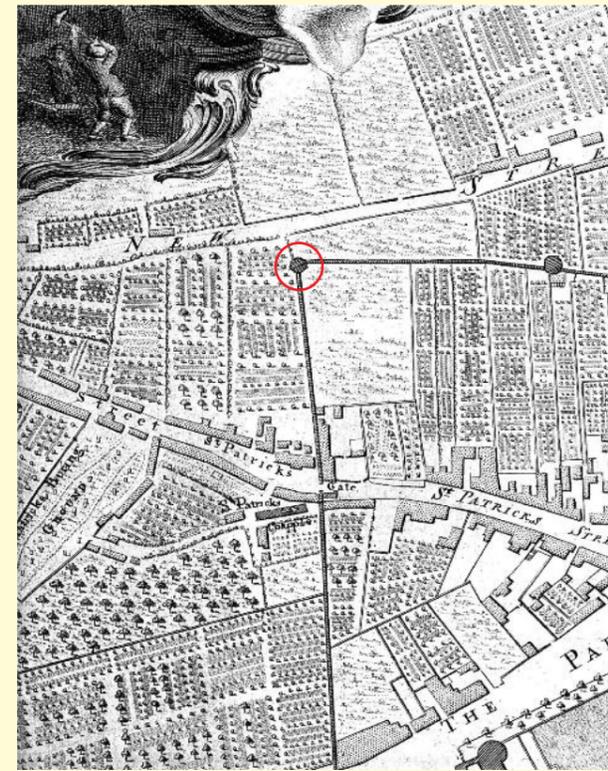
Talbot's tower defended the south-west corner of Kilkenny's Hightown; the wall to the north extends for 850m as far as the river Breaghagh, that to the east for 350m to Kilkenny castle. The tower was strategically sited to take advantage of a low hill and from its parapets there are extensive views in all directions, making it an extremely effective watch-tower. The tower was known throughout the medieval period as 'St. Patrick's Tower' in reference to the nearby suburb of Domhnachpatrick. In the nineteenth century it was known as 'Watter's tower'. The name 'Talbot's tower' is an early twentieth century invention that alludes to Robert Talbot who was mayor of Kilkenny in the early fifteenth century and was traditionally credited with building the city's walls.

The tower stands to 9.7m height, is 5.6m diameter internally, and its walls which are 1.65m thick slope to the bottom of the town ditch. The structure that can be seen today is an amalgam of at least three different building episodes.

Before the stone tower was built a timber tower on the corner of an earthen rampart stood in its place. This was probably built around 1200 by the then lord of Leinster William Marshal. It was William's grandson Gilbert de Clare who was



Talbot's tower on the 1654 Down Survey map

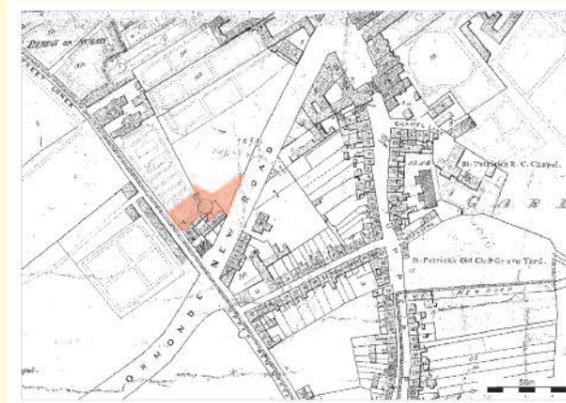


Talbot's tower marked on Rocque's map of Kilkenny 1758

responsible for replacing the earth-and-timber defences with a larger and stronger stone circuit. The first stone tower was an open-backed turret with a battlemented parapet and a wooden roof. In the 1400s the back of the tower was filled-in and the structure was heightened by placing a domed roof over the older battlements. A well-preserved example of wicker centring – the wooden framework which supported the vault during its construction - can still be seen inside the tower. Access to the top of the roof was gained by a stone stairs that ran inside the wall. There were no major modifications to the tower until the 1700s when its parapets were remodelled to make the tower appear as a garden folly.

The excavations

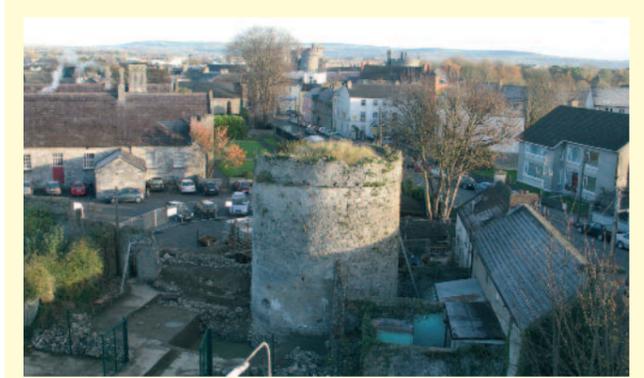
Very little of the history of Talbot's tower was ever documented and therefore archaeological excavations have been taking place to allow a much fuller history of the tower to be told. The archaeological work has concentrated on three main areas namely the town ditch, the earthen rampart and a curious 'garden mound' on top of the tower.



Talbot's tower on the 1872 Ordnance Survey map of Kilkenny

The Town Ditch

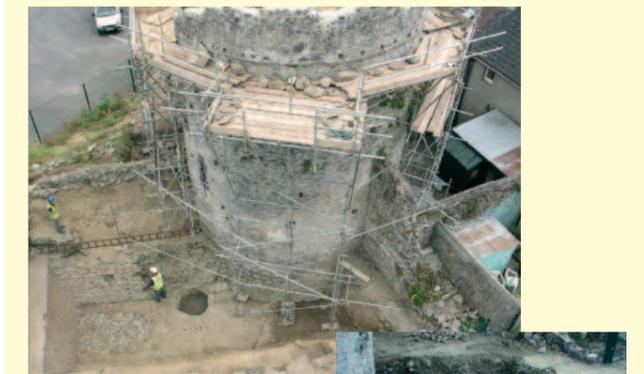
A 10m long stretch of the town ditch outside the walls was excavated and found to be 5m wide x 1.5m deep. Its inner edge was protected by a sloping stone wall, a 'base batter', that prevented attackers from tunnelling beneath the wall. Excavation of the ditch also uncovered the bottom quarter of Talbot's tower and it too was found to have thick base-batter



View of Talbot's tower with Kilkenny castle in the background (photo: Airshots Ltd.)

that extended to the base of the ditch. Sections of the original lime-mortar render were found adhering to the wall, reminding us that the entire Town Wall would not have been exposed as it is today.

The town ditch was filled with many different layers of soil, some of which had naturally silted into it and some of which had been deliberately dumped. During the medieval period the ditch would have been cleaned out intermittently though it was never completely emptied, which left layers of soil towards the bottom of the ditch that date from the thirteenth century. The ditch would also have been used by the townsfolk as a refuse dump and this is probably where the vast majority of the large quantity of artefacts and animal bones derived from.

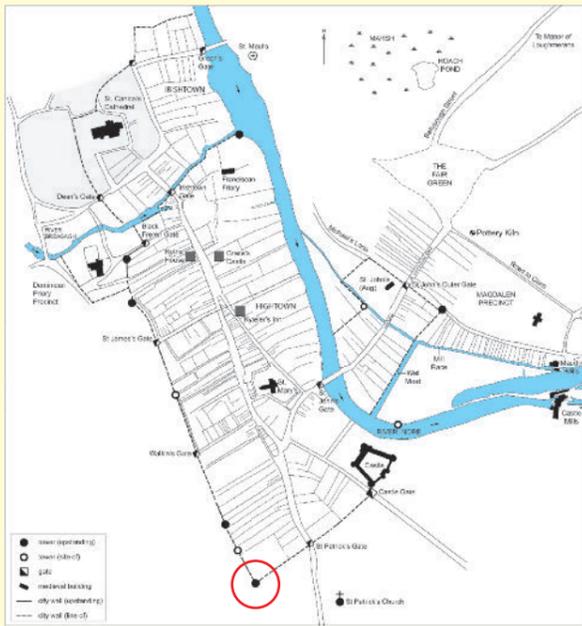


Excavations in progress on the town ditch and rampart of Talbot's tower (photo: Airshots Ltd.)

Excavations underway in the Town Ditch

Kilkenny's Town Walls

By the year 1300 Kilkenny had reached the zenith of its medieval development and was Ireland's most important inland town. To defend the Anglo-Norman burgesses and protect their market-place walls were built around the town. This walled circuit included the boroughs of Irishtown and Hightown and the suburb of St. John's, and at over two miles in length it was the largest walled town in Ireland, larger than Dublin and comparable in size with York and Chester. A continuous stone wall 2m thick and 8m high encircled the town, seven gatehouses controlled the entry routes into the town and nine look-out towers guarded over the hinterland. One of the most important of these was Talbot's tower. Over eight hundred years after they were first built much still remains of the city's medieval defences, indeed a lot more than is generally thought: about 25% (c.800m) of the curtain wall still stands, as do six of the original nine towers and a fragment of a remodelled gatehouse on Abbey street. Also



Location of Talbot's tower on Kilkenny's Town Walls (map: Kilkenny Archaeology)