

DUBLIN THROUGH THE AGES
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH Ó RÉ GO RÉ
THE CITY WALLS
MÚRTHA NA CATHRACH

An Action of the Dublin
City Heritage Plan
Gníomh de chuid Phlean
Oidhreachta Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath

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Dublin City
Baile Átha Cliath

Introduction

Reamhrá



From earliest times Dublin would have been an attractive place of settlement, the combination of the Liffey and the sheltered waters of Dublin Bay creating a rich and diverse landscape, suitable for exploitation. The earliest evidence of settlement at the mouth of the Liffey can be dated to the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period, but the first historical evidence comes a great deal later.

Unfortunately, very little is known about the first settlement apart from its two early place-names, Duibhlinn meaning 'black pool' and Áth Cliath meaning 'the ford of the hurdles' – names still in use today. The 'black pool', thought to have been located just south of Dublin Castle on the Poddle waterway, remains an open space to this day and was recently transformed into the tranquil Dubh-linn gardens adjoining the Chester Beatty Library. The 'ford of the hurdles' can also be roughly identified in the modern landscape, having been replaced first by a medieval bridge, and later by the contemporary Father Mathew Bridge. A reference to an abbot of Duibhlinn in



Top: The presumed site of the ford, west of Father Mathew Bridge.

Below: Dublin Castle with the Record Tower and the Dubh-linn Gardens. (DoEHLG)

790, suggests that a monastery was sited somewhere on the banks of the 'black pool'. The complex probably consisted of an oval enclosure surrounded by earthen banks, similar to other early Christian monastic foundations in Ireland. Recent excavations have identified an early Christian cemetery at Chancery Lane where a small stone church was built in c.1100, probably on the site of an earlier wooden version. This cemetery was presumably part of the monastic complex.

The Viking Raiders

Na Creachadóirí Lochlannacha

The arrival of the ‘scourge of the seas’, the raiding Vikings, in the late 8th and the 9th centuries, was to change Dublin life forever. Prime targets were the monasteries, the equivalent of modern-day banks with their holdings of treasures, cattle, food and, most significantly, people who could be sold as slaves. Dublin was presumably plundered, and the raiders settled along the river and set up camp.

The first camp, or longphort, was probably on the southern banks of the ‘black pool’. Excavations at South Great George’s Street have revealed traces of Viking habitation and a section of the pool where the invaders probably docked their boats. The remains of at least six young Viking warriors were found buried around the rim of the pool – some complete with weapons and personal effects.

By the 10th century, the settlement – known as Dyflinn – had expanded in size and was surrounded by high earthen banks. The famous excavations at Wood Quay revealed fascinating details of everyday Viking life. For example, their

houses, built of ‘post-and-wattle’ and with straw and sod roofs, were huddled together in groups and set within fenced property plots or gardens. Dyflinn was a wealthy trading emporium, importing luxury items such as amber, jet and ivory, and exporting animal hides, items of personal jewellery and a variety of agricultural products.



The massive fortified settlement must have been an impressive sight, especially when seen from the Liffey, and it is no wonder that The Book of Leinster describes the dún, or stronghold of Dublin, as one of the seven wonders of Ireland (Clarke 2002, 5). Yet fortification was not enough in these troubled times. When the Dubliners rebelled against Brian Bóruma of north Munster in 1014, the result was the famous Battle of Clontarf, when Brian’s victory earned him the cult status of the Irish hero. It was he who finally defeated the Vikings – but victory came at a heavy price. Brian Bóruma was killed.

Above: A bone comb, purse and the blade of a knife buried with a warrior at Sth Great George’s Street (L. Simpson).

Right: Fresco of Viking raiders from the frieze of City Hall, Dublin.



The First City Wall

An Chéad Múr Cathrach

Ruled for 40 years by Muirchertach Ua Briain, the great-grandson of Brian, Dublin's earthen defences were replaced in stone between 1100 and 1125. The new wall provided the increased protection essential for facing down constant political challenges from enemies, such as King Magnus Barelegs of Norway. Magnus Barelegs conquered the settlement in 1102 and ruled for a year until his death. Yet despite this interruption, Dublin flourished. It spread to the west, increasing its size three-fold, and the new stone circuit was expanded to encircle the additional lands. This first city wall represented a coming of age for Dublin in keeping with European developments, and indicates the degree of social organisation and wealth of the port in the early 12th century.

Although only limited sections of the wall survive today, almost the entire circuit can be traced in modern streets: Cook Street and Essex Street West mark the northern limit, while Ship Street Little and Lamb Alley mark part of the southern and western lines respectively. When completed, the circuit would have been very imposing, the limestone structure towering to between 5m and 7m in

height by a massive 1.50m and 3m in width. The construction of the new wall probably also included a stronghold in the south-east corner, most likely on the site of an earlier wooden fortification.

An extensive section of the wall survives at Cook Street, in a stretch extending for 83m in length and towering to at least 10m in height (although the upper levels are rebuilt). It is from this vantage point, high on the battlements, that one can get a true sense of how formidable the city walls of Dublin once were. The continuation of this early wall, measuring c.100m in length, was exposed during the Wood Quay excavations and is still partly intact, preserved in the basement of the Dublin Civic Offices. One of the most significant recent discoveries was made at Ross Road where the massive wall, measuring 1.60m in width, was cut into the earlier earthen bank defences and was then used as a footing for a later Anglo-Norman tower known as Geneval's Tower.

Left: Section of the refurbished city walls at Ship Street Little from the west.

Right: The impressive surviving section of the wall at Cook Street, along the original Liffey frontage.



The Anglo-Norman Conquerors

Na Concairí Angla-Normannacha

The year 1170 represents a watershed in the history of Dublin. On the face of it, the action appeared as another internal attempt to secure supremacy. The reality, however, was to have far-reaching effects, not just for Dublin, but for the entire island of Ireland. Diarmait Mac Murchada, King of Leinster, travelled to England to seek help from the English king, Henry II, in his struggle for supreme control. It was an action that provoked the wholesale invasion of Ireland by English troops. When Diarmait returned with a force led by the Earl of Pembroke (Strongbow), Dublin was attacked, in September 1170. High King, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, sought to protect the walled fortress with his substantial force far outnumbering the invading army. Yet in a dramatic turn of events, Strongbow and his army 'made an enthusiastic assault on the walls, were immediately victorious, and valiantly overran the city, with considerable slaughter of the inhabitants'. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Dublin was under new rule.



Diarmait's personal victory did not last, however. By 1171, he was dead, and in that same year, the city walls were again sorely tested. The former Hiberno-Norse ruler at Dublin, Ascall Mac Torcaill, launched a surprise attack on the city from the sea, but the Anglo-Normans retaliated unexpectedly by sortieing out 'the southern postern' and capturing Ascall. He was promptly beheaded in his own hall, which finished all hope of a Hiberno-Norse recovery.

An even more serious trial followed soon after this, with the famous siege of Dublin by Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, which lasted two whole months. The situation inside the walls grew desperate with all supplies, including water, being cut off. But yet again, the new Dubliners launched a surprise attack, catching their besiegers off guard, and completely routing them. This was the last serious challenge to the invaders, who set about conquering the rest of the island.

Left: 'Strongbow' (Dublinia Medieval Trust)

Below: Henry II receiving the Irish chieftains in 1171 (Waldré)



New Defences at Dublin

Cóir Chosanta nua ag Baile Átha Cliath

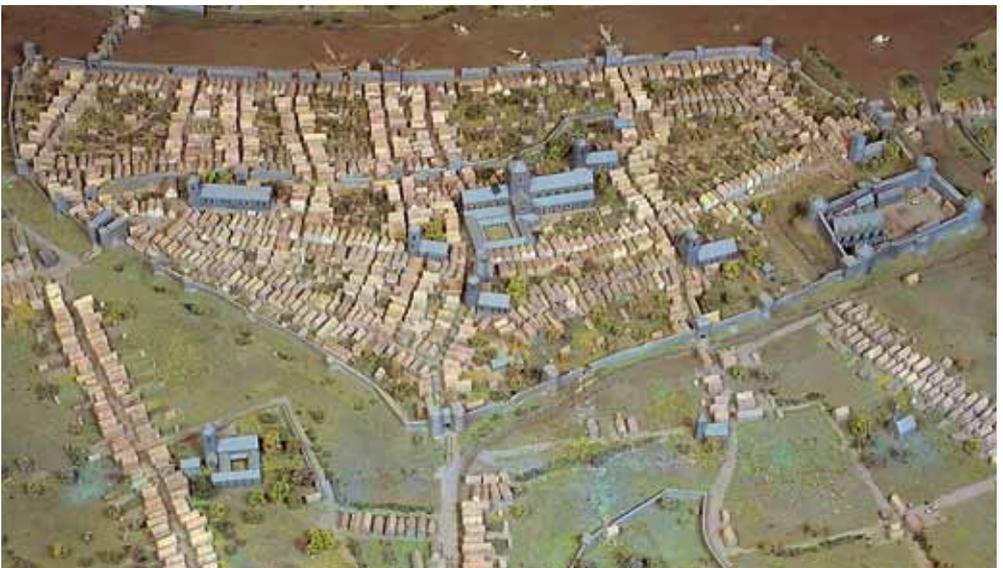
Although the new Dubliners settled quickly into their royal city, they were aware of weaknesses in the city defences, and work began to strengthen them. The Viking wall was demolished and replaced at Ross Road in the late 12th century, while the sources tell us that 'Newgate, the western gate, had been rebuilt and renamed by 1177. New plans included a deep city moat, which was water-filled by the Poddle, on the south-east side. It measured between 15m and 22m in width by between 6m and 9m in depth and encircled the entire city, apart from the Liffey boundary. The existing walls were also bolstered by the construction of mural stone towers, which varied in type and structure: some were D-shaped while others were rectangular or square in plan. Each entrance to the city was also protected by a strong city gate.

Several sections of the Anglo-Norman wall still survive in the landscape. The most impressive section, along Ship Street Lower, extends for 39m and stands 4m high. A second smaller stretch, at

Lamb Alley, stands 5m in height and has recently been conserved by Dublin City Council. The remains of a mural tower, known as 'Genevel's Tower', were found during the excavations at Ross Road. The discovery of the tower – which survived to first storey in height, buried in rubble deposits – was so unique it has been preserved in an underground chamber. This will be accessible to the public in the near future.

The jewel in the crown of the defences, however, was Dublin castle, built in 1204 by order of King John. The massive rectangular structure, probably completed by the 1230s, was a formidable defence. It consisted of a substantial curtain wall with rounded corner tower and a massive double D-shaped gatehouse, complete with causeway and drawbridge. The castle was comprehensively demolished in the 18th century. Only one tower – the Record Tower – survives.

Scale model of medieval Dublin (Dublinia Medieval Trust)



The Northern Extension Wall c.1240 - c.1260 Síneadh an Mhúir ó Thuaidh

The success of the port of Anglo-Norman Dublin can be charted by the rapid expansion on the northern side, where land was reclaimed along the Liffey. This newly-settled area, however, was very exposed as it was outside the city wall and practically on the sea. An ambitious project was developed, by the mayor and commonalty, to expand the city wall around the reclaimed stretch, encompassing the vulnerable bridge at the western end of the town (built c.1215). Work on the new wall had probably begun by the mid-13th century, and was evidently completed by c.1260 as it is referred to as the 'new wall towards the Liffey'. This new structure was added onto the old wall, with most of the original left intact, which created a second line of defence within the city. Gates were cut through the old wall, one of which still survives. It is known as St Audoen's Arch, at Cook Street.

The new wall was also a quay wall at Wood Quay, where the main dock was located. There were a number of mural



towers, including Isolde's Tower at the north-east corner, projecting out into the sea. The massive foundations of this circular tower were found during excavations, the walls measuring 4m thick, but only surviving to 2.50m in height. The remains are now preserved in an underground chamber, with viewing access from the street. The tower was also used to display the heads of criminals who had been executed in the city: the skulls of several young males were found during the excavation. One skull bears testimony to a horrific and cruel death as the execution was clearly botched, the executioner aiming badly and catching the victim's jaw rather than this neck. This blow would not have killed him instantly, and at least one more fall of the axe would have been required.



Above: St. Audoen's Arch

Left: The well-preserved remains of Isolde's Tower found during excavation.

Dublin in the Later Medieval Period

Baile Átha Cliath sa Mheánaois Dhéanach

The documentary sources record a marked display of neglect with regard to the city defences during this period. The stone towers within the walls were leased out, which often blocked access to the wall circuit, vital for the defence of the city. Other transgressions are also listed: there were illegal postern gates, stonework was removed, and the ditch was infilled with rubbish. It was a period of relaxation, reflecting a time of prosperity. But Dublin life changed in the 1270s when war broke out in the Wicklow mountains, instigated by the rebellious O'Byrnes and O'Tooles. The city became subject to persistent attack, and by the early 14th century much of the surrounding hinterland was depopulated and lying waste.

The 1315 invasion by the Scots, led by Robert the Bruce, send panic throughout the country. In February 1317, when the Scottish troops were poised to attack Dublin, the Mayor finally took action and began to repair the walls. He also ordered the burning, in advance, of



the suburbs. While catastrophic for the Dubliners, this act was enough to turn the invaders away.

Despite the renewed interest in the city defences, the trend of neglect and decay continued. The 16th century saw the introduction of heavy ordnance, which, by its very nature, posed a serious threat to the walled defences. Heavy ordnance was to the fore during the Silken Thomas Rebellion of 1534 when Dublin Castle was attacked, although the city defences were not breached. A second attempt to take Dublin in 1580 was also unsuccessful. A more significant threat emerged during the Nine Years' War, when the defences again fell under scrutiny, with orders issued that all postern gates were to be in-filled and breaches of the wall repaired. Despite these improvements, the walls were described as insecure in 1598, with the south wall ruinous by 1603. The quay was also described as ruinous by 1607.

Left: Robert the Bruce (G. Jamesone, c. 1588-1644)
Below: Silken Thomas' siege of the city stronghold in 1534 (Raphael Holinshed, *The Histoire of Irelande*, 1577)



The Early Modern Period

An Nua-Aois Mhoch

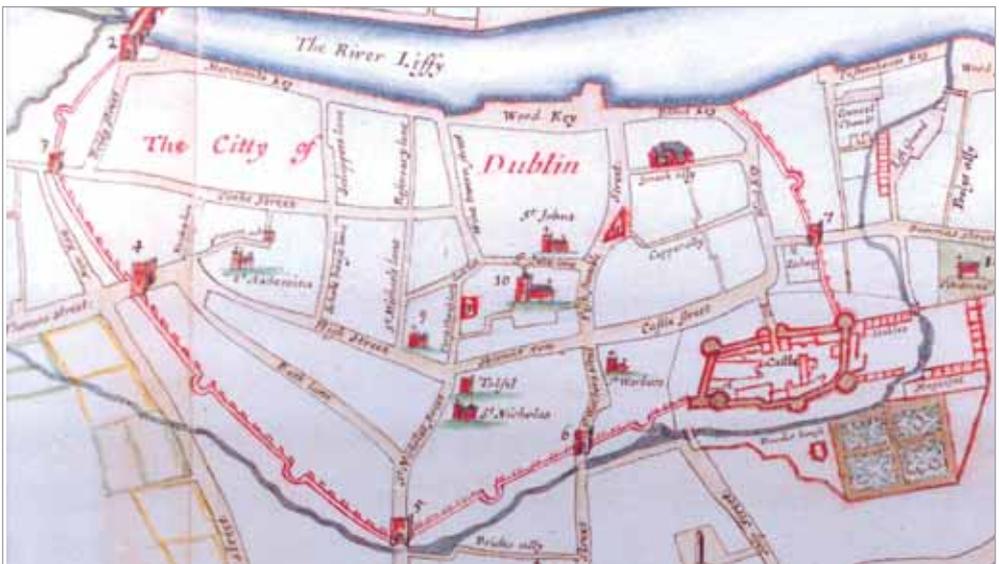
Although the city's defences had deteriorated, Speed's 1610 map of Dublin indicates that the wall circuit was still intact, in what was a period of relative calm following the Flight of the Earls in 1607. The rebellion under Phelim O'Neill in 1641, however, was to plunge the country back into political strife, the flood of refugee Protestants to Dublin causing immense pressure, especially for the Catholic population. Many of these were expelled. The next five years was to prove challenging for Dubliners, with numerous sieges and confrontations culminating in the arrival of Oliver Cromwell in 1649. The city itself, however, escaped Cromwell's brutality. Dublin also suffered natural disasters at this time, including severe depopulation after an outbreak of plague in 1650. One thousand three hundred people died of plague in a single week.

The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 heralded a new beginning of expansion for the city. In 1651, the Corporation

publicly invited any interested Protestant English to come and settle in Dublin – which they did in large numbers. The increased population led to expansion, especially on the eastern side of the city where the Poddle confluence was infilled. De Gomme's 1678 map documents the sweeping changes that had occurred in Dublin since Speed's map of 1610.

The increased prosperity generated a new type of town planning. There was an introduction of public open spaces, on both the north and south sides of the river. The old part of the city and city defences became an impediment to this new policy and demolitions began in the 17th century. The destruction continued into the 18th and 19th centuries, greatly aided by the formation, in 1757, of the Wide Street Commissioners. As their name suggests, the Commissioners were never going to be sympathetic to the narrow streets and laneways of the historic core.

De Gomme's map of Dublin, 1673



The Defences Today

Cóir Chosanta an Lae inniu

By the 18th century, the expanding suburbs had engulfed the historic core. The shift to what is now O'Connell Street signalled a continuation of the neglect and decay so marked in the preceding years. The stone defences became less and less important to the people of Dublin, the past glories forgotten as they were viewed as an impediment to expansion and improvement. But not all the defences disappeared. Dublin Castle, the centre of English administration in Dublin since the early 13th century, remained the bastion of British rule in Ireland, right down until 1922. Today, the Castle maintains its place at the hub of Government affairs, providing a venue for EU Heads of Government, and other visiting dignitaries.

Although Dublin Castle is the most visible, remaining manifestation of the medieval city defences, there are other gems around the city. These have survived

unnoticed either because they were hidden from view, were incorporated into new buildings, or were fortunate enough not to be in the way of entrepreneurial property developers, of whatever generation. Their rediscovery, as part the new and dynamic redevelopment cycle of Dublin, has allowed them to be reinstated once again, not as isolated and hidden fragments of history, but as part of a meaningful reconstruction of the city's past. They re-emerge under the protection of Dublin City Council, (whose predecessors were responsible for their very construction) which now strives to protect and promote them. Thus, it is now possible for the intrepid explorer, or the casual visitor, to walk the streets of old Dublin and piece together the circuit of the walls, once so important and now a poignant remainder of a thousand or more years of this city's extraordinary history.

Upper Yard, Dublin Castle



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