

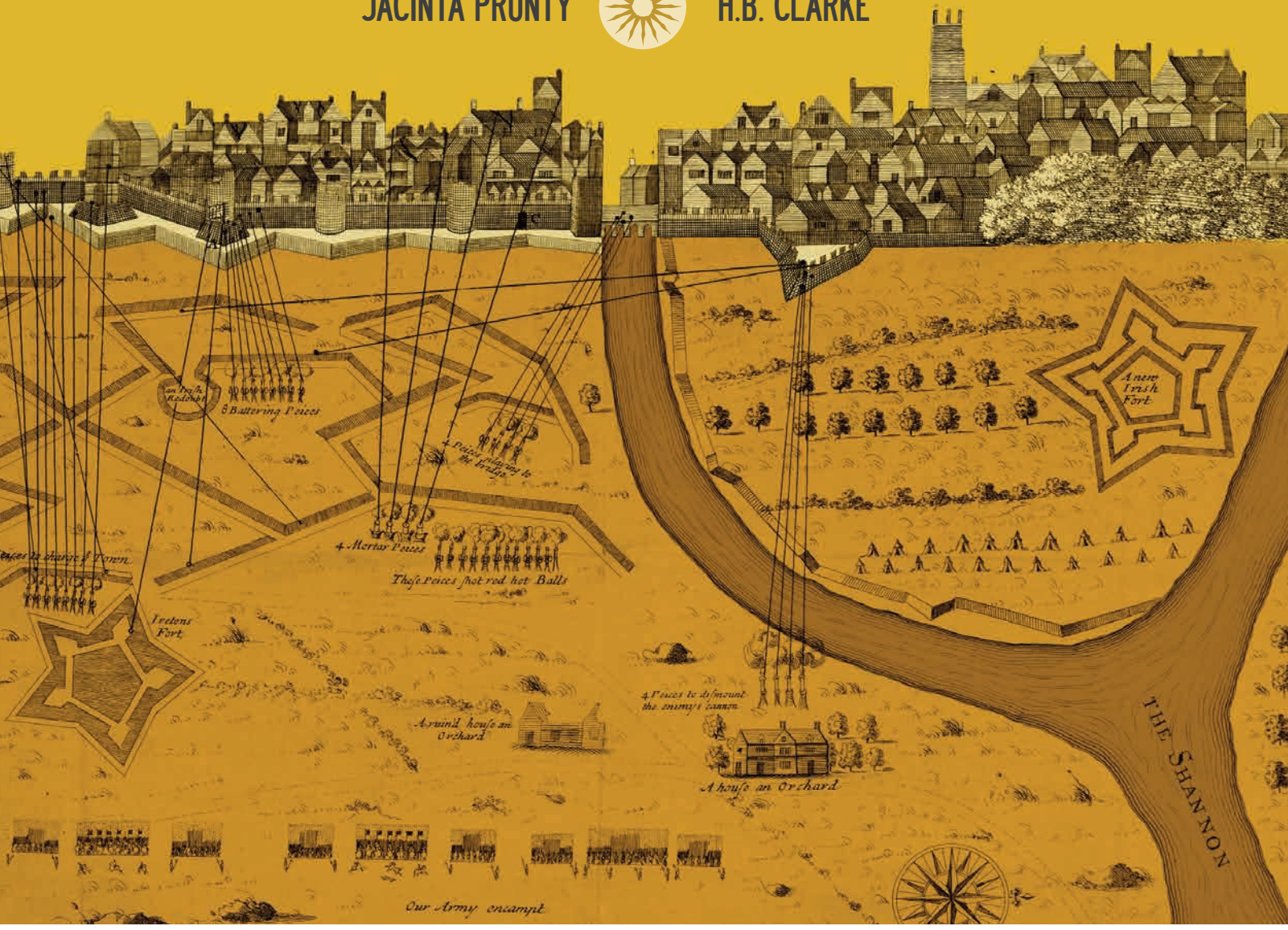
MAPS

READING THE MAPS: A GUIDE TO THE IRISH HISTORIC TOWNS ATLAS

JACINTA PRUNTY



H.B. CLARKE



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A guide to the Irish Historic Towns Atlas

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Blackrock Education Centre
Ionad Oideachais na Carraige Duibhe

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FOREWORD

The main title of this guidebook is an intentional echo of the phrase ‘reading the runes’. Runes have a dictionary definition of characters or marks that have mysterious or magical properties attributed to them. Maps have some of the same characteristics. To many people they have an air of mystery about them; they make extensive use of symbols and of conventions that need to be explained. They convey messages about spatial arrangements in a three-dimensional present and early maps do this in a four-dimensional past. Such maps may themselves date from the past or they may be reconstructions of that past. The word ‘reading’ should be understood in its widest sense: not only to take meaning from textual matter on a map, wherever that applies, but also to interpret the conventions, signs and symbols that map-makers employ.

Now that a critical mass of Irish Historic Towns Atlas (IHTA) fascicles has been published, together with ancillary works, the richness of the resource can be exploited. It can be done in a number of ways, using this guidebook to assist the process. To start with, the four main sections can be read as a series of conventional book chapters, divided by headings and generously illustrated. Then a stop-go approach can be adopted by re-reading individual units and answering the questions in the ‘test yourself’ boxes. This method would suit teaching environments on all levels. Finally research programmes could be devised on specific topics, using the material in this book as a starting point. To that end, the book includes suggestions for further reading in addition to the IHTA publications themselves.

As editors of the IHTA it is our belief that the geography and the history of towns and of town life in Ireland need to be better understood. It is also our belief that, made accessible to the widest possible readership, maps are a fundamental tool in that endeavour. In addition, many early maps are beautifully executed works of art. They deserve to be ‘read’ correctly for what they reveal about the past, as well as to be enjoyed as remarkable products of human creativity. Readers will discover that every Irish town in the sample has an interesting story to tell; the IHTA tells those stories through a balanced combination of maps and texts. Hitherto the stories were told individually; now they can be told collectively as well. In this guidebook every town, no matter how small in size or short its history, is the subject of at least one case study featuring part of, or an aspect of, its particular geographical and/or historical story. Reading the maps is a universal exercise.

Anngret Simms, H.B. Clarke, Raymond Gillespie, Jacinta Prunty
April 2011

UNIT D.3

The Anglo-Norman and English town

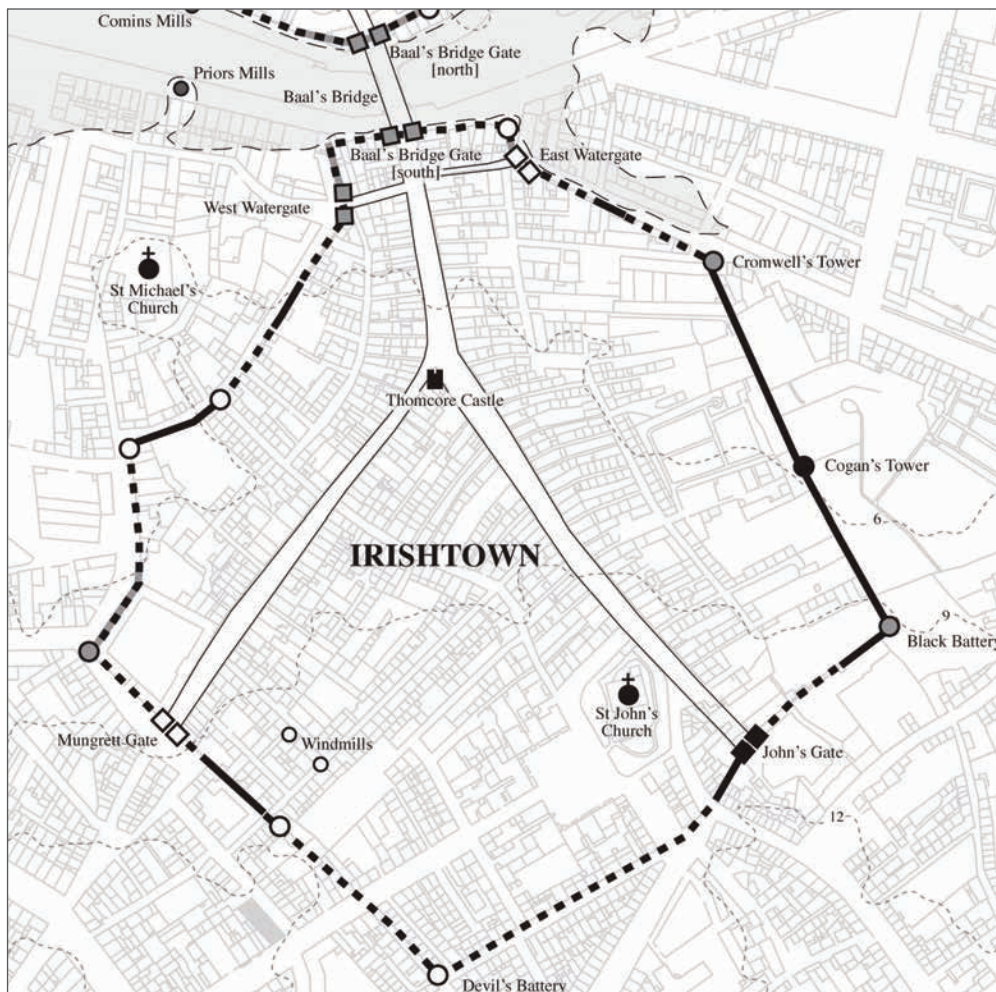
A major instrument of Anglo-Norman colonisation in Ireland was the chartered town. This innovation was borrowed from continental Europe, where it was also employed successfully in establishing new colonies such as those of Flemings and Germans east of the River Elbe. Thus in due course all five Hiberno-Norse towns came to acquire a new legal identity and charters of urban liberties were granted to other places. Many of these were, in practice, speculative ventures by lords, lay and ecclesiastical, who were anxious to make a profit from the craft-working and trading activities of townspeople. Altogether about 250 places fall into this category. The historical evidence for the existence of most of them is very slight, usually amounting to no more than one or two references to burgages (house plots) and/or burgesses (their holders). The majority appear to have been settlements where *some* of the tenants of land belonging to a private lord had been granted the privilege of holding their plots by burgage tenure, entitling them to rights not normally conceded to land workers. Economically most of these places probably continued to function essentially as manorial villages with limited market functions; they are best referred to as market settlements.

The number of genuine towns was far smaller, the most acceptable estimate being in the mid fifties (including the five Hiberno-Norse examples). They were by no means evenly spread through the island, but geographically fell into two main groups (Fig. 126). One of these coincided roughly with the later Pale; the other was focused on the major river system of the Barrow, Nore and Suir. These were linked by a narrow band of colonial settlement known as the Carlow corridor. In addition there were two rather isolated groups of three towns – Athlone, Rindown and Roscommon in the mid west and Athenry, Galway and Loughrea in the west. A few others existed in not so splendid isolation: for example, Carrickfergus, Dingle, Sligo and Wicklow. This uneven distribution reveals something of great importance about the colony – that at its height *c.* 1270 only about one-fifth of the island of Ireland had ready access to genuine town life. It is easy to exaggerate the impact of the new foreigners.

One vital aspect of town life, of course, was regular marketing facilities. Our current IHTA sample of towns makes it possible to identify significant variations. Those of medieval origin number fourteen, nearly half of which

had a linear street market (several inside the walls of Dublin and others outside). Limerick had a linear market space in Englishtown and a triangular one in Irishtown where the three main roads converged (Fig. 137). Fethard, Kildare and Tuam had a triangular market place and Kells a rectangular one, while the situation at Athlone, Downpatrick and Longford is uncertain in this regard. Not a single Irish medieval town was provided with a planned and substantial market square of the kind that is found so commonly in continental Europe. The colonists in Ireland followed English models in practice, despite the fact that the standard set of urban privileges granted to towns belonging to private lords was that accorded to the small Norman town of Breteuil-sur-Iton. The privileges of the larger and often royal towns tended to be based on those of London, whose own pattern of market spaces was just like that of Dublin – a series of streets parallel to and at right-angles to the main river.

Fig. 137: *Limerick*, fig. 3, medieval sites in Irishtown, extract.



Markets were places where goods and money changed hands and profits could be made. Agents of both kings and private lords were responsible for collecting tolls of various kinds and a standard location for so doing was a town gate. We tend to think of town walls and gates as defensive features, which of course they were, but they also had fiscal functions. From a lord's point of view, it was far preferable to have a market facility inside the walls than outside them, the better to control the flow of income, and the same was true of relatively self-governing bodies such as Dublin's city council. Fairs, on the other hand, were always held outside the defences and special enforcing arrangements had to be made. As we have seen in an earlier unit (C.2), murage charters were much sought after and we need to keep in mind the double purpose served by defensive walls and gates. Unfortunately indications of such charters survive for only a small number of towns in the present IHTA sample (listed in the gazetteer under Section 2) and we do not know how many others have been lost. Down to *c.* 1300 we have six for Dublin starting in 1221, one for Limerick (1237), three for Kilkenny starting in 1282 and one each for Trim (1289) and Fethard (1291).

The founding of significant numbers of new towns, the granting of charters of urban liberties, the organisation of market facilities and the construction of defensive walls and gates are all features of what historians call the high middle ages (conventionally A.D. 1000–1300). This was a great age of economic growth in most parts of Europe, of which urban expansion was only one aspect. It was followed by a century of general crisis, one notable feature of which was the great plague pandemic that broke out in western Europe towards the end of 1347 and reached Ireland in the following summer. The late middle ages (conventionally A.D. 1300–1500) were a time of decline, stagnation and transformation. All of this impacted on towns and town life in Ireland, as elsewhere, and has a bearing on the terminology used by historians. The IHTA follows the convention of using the term 'Anglo-Norman' by which to refer to the new foreigners in the late twelfth and the thirteenth century. Many of these newcomers were French-speaking, as we see, for example, in a poem commemorating the walling of New Ross in 1265. Gradually, however, the Anglo-Normans came to be identified with England and with English speech; in a later age they became known as the Old English. Not all historians follow this distinction and it has become fashionable in some quarters to refer to the new foreigners as 'English' from the start.

The story of Irish towns in the late middle ages is complicated in other ways as well. First, there are signs of economic decline before the initial outbreak of plague in 1348. By 1312, for instance, Limerick could be described as being 'situated in the dangerous march [borderland] between the English

and Irish'. The settlers' vulnerability was cruelly and dramatically exposed and exploited during the Bruce invasion of 1315–18, one of whose objectives was to stymie the English war machine in Scotland by despoiling the Irish countryside and even the towns if they could be captured. After a year-long siege Carrickfergus Castle, one of the most impressive and supposedly impregnable, was captured late in 1316. A few weeks later, even Dublin was threatened by a Scottish army; the precautionary burning and demolition of its extensive suburbs cost the citizens dear for decades to come. And when the Black Death did strike in and after 1348, the signs are that the more urbanised south-eastern parts of the island suffered most from depopulation.

Secondly, as the administrative reach of the colonial government retreated, all but the biggest towns became subject to Gaelic and Anglo-Irish control and influence. This was recognised in a parliamentary petition of 1463 when representatives of four leading Munster towns stated that 'the profit of every market, city and town in this land depends principally on the resort of Irish people bringing their merchandise to the said cities and towns'. Permission was duly granted 'that the inhabitants in the cities of Cork and Limerick, Waterford and Youghal may lawfully buy and sell all manner of merchandise from and to Irishmen'. Indeed the most dynamic urban centres in late medieval Ireland were probably ports for the most part, suggesting that the economy had moved away from grain-based marketing and towards international trade in other products. The prevailing exchange system was now geared to the demands of the new dominant aristocracy, both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, whereby hides, skins, wool, flax and fish were being exported in return for wine, salt, iron and luxury items. Grain-producing manorial hinterlands had mainly disappeared, along with the great majority of the former market settlements. A new economic dynamic was being created.

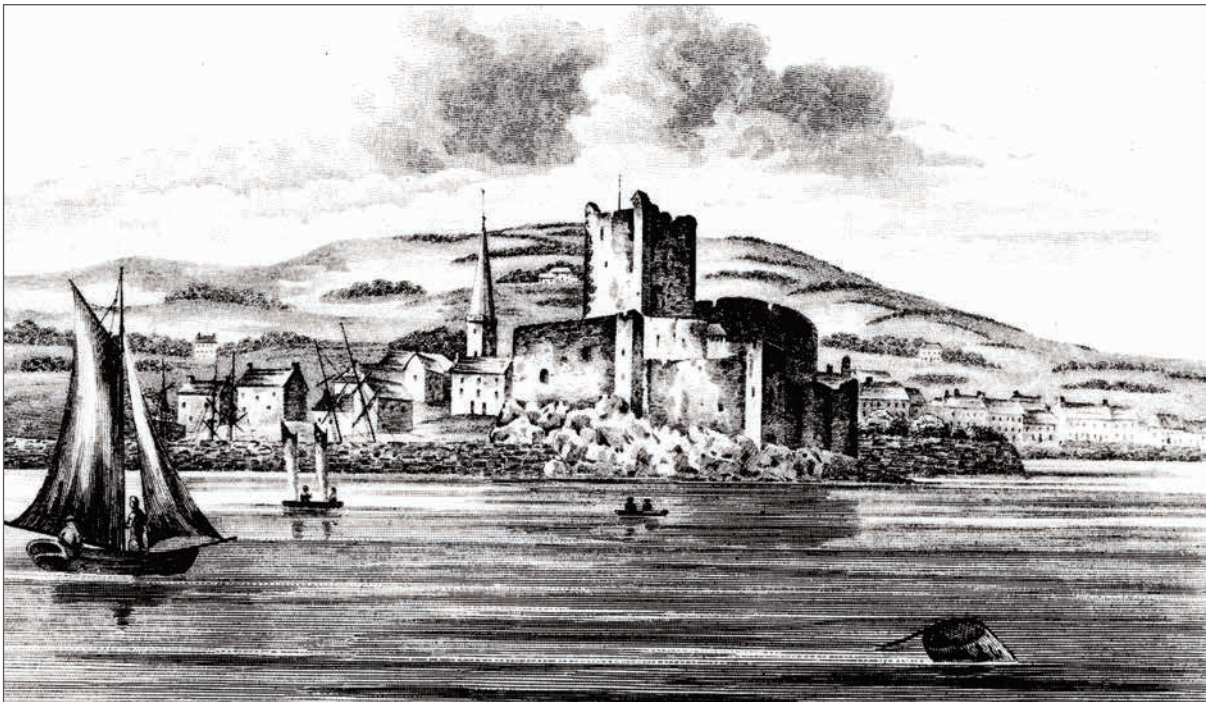
TEST YOURSELF

1. Why was the geographical distribution of Anglo-Norman towns in Ireland so limited in practice?
2. What do the shape and size of market places suggest about Anglo-Norman attitudes to towns?
3. Have the colonial initiatives of the Anglo-Normans been exaggerated by historians?
4. What negative factors affected Irish towns in the late middle ages?
5. What positive factors affected Irish towns in the late middle ages?

Fig. 138: *Carrickfergus*, essay head illustration, early nineteenth century. From Samuel M'Skimin, *The history and antiquities of the county of the town of Carrickfergus*.

Carrickfergus in the high middle ages

As readers will by now appreciate, every town has a somewhat different story to tell, but there are some common patterns as well. To illustrate the contrast between the periods of growth and decline, Carrickfergus has been chosen here simply by way of an example without too many complications. The physical assets of the site were minimal: a rock on which to build a castle and an adjacent harbour (Fig. 138). The foundation of Carrickfergus as a castle town is a classic case of Anglo-Norman aristocratic initiative. Having marched into eastern Ulster in 1177, John de Courcy commenced the massive keep probably in the following year. In such an exposed location, defence was at a premium. De Courcy may also have built St Nicholas's Church (note the dedication) and the Premonstratensian abbey of St Mary at a certain distance away. He would have seen himself as a moderniser. He was, however, expelled by a rival aristocrat, Hugh de Lacy, in 1205 and the earldom of Ulster was created for the latter by King John.



Some sort of urban settlement is thought to have come into existence alongside the castle in the first years of the thirteenth century. As a town, Carrickfergus was a fairly typical medieval colonial foundation. King John stayed in the castle during his visit to Ireland in 1210 and the presence of

burgesses is recorded in 1221, probably as a result of royal initiative in this instance. The market place was established in the main street leading up from the small harbour and past the castle. What became High Street terminated in a Franciscan friary, founded by Hugh de Lacy in the early 1230s. The core of Carrickfergus had been established and can still be identified centuries later on Map 2 (Fig. 139). During the siege of 1316, the Scottish army is said to have advanced 'through the principal street', whose appearance in the late nineteenth century is recorded photographically (Fig. 140).

Fig. 139: Carrickfergus, map 2, c. 1840, extract.



TEST YOURSELF

1. What was the role of aristocrats in the establishment of Carrickfergus as a town?
2. Why were the Premonstratensians based outside the town and the Franciscans inside it?
3. Why was the urban fabric of Carrickfergus in the thirteenth century so minimal?
4. Why was so much attention paid to the castle at Carrickfergus?
5. Is it surprising that the Scottish army spent a whole year in besieging the castle?

There are no documentary references to town walls, including murage grants, for Carrickfergus and our only resource for the period of growth is archaeology. The first defences seem to have been of earth and timber. Near the friary site a section of ditch 4 m wide with a wooden palisade on the inner side has been excavated; this alignment continued in a north-easterly direction under the seventeenth-century town wall (Fig. 60). Otherwise most of the medieval defensive line is conjectural, but is presumed to have enclosed St Nicholas's Church towards the west. Another medieval arrangement may have been the diversion of the Woodburn River to make a mill race and mill pond, driving what became known as the 'west' corn mill. Effectively only the great castle was defensible, as its known building history demonstrates. Thus in the period 1226–42 the curtain walls were enlarged northwards (towards the town) to their present extent, covering the entire surface of the rocky outcrop, with a new gatehouse incorporating two cylindrical towers.

Fig. 140: *Carrickfergus*, plate 2, c. 1895, by R.J. Welch. Down County Museum.



Carrickfergus in the late middle ages

With the collapse of the earldom of Ulster after 1333, Carrickfergus came under threat both from the Irish and from the Scots. The inhabitants were left to their own devices, rather like those of other peripheral outposts of the English colony such as Dingle and Sligo. They had to become more self-directed than before, though some sort of garrison was maintained in the castle. The town itself, however, suffered repeatedly from warfare. In 1386 it was burnt by a Scottish force and again, reportedly totally, in 1402. Its effective hinterland was reduced to a radius of about 7 km, the area beyond having been taken over by a Gaelic clan known as the Clandeboye O'Neills. One consequence of this was that relations with Downpatrick and with towns farther south could be maintained only by sea. The harbour at Carrickfergus was a vital lifeline. Another consequence was that some measure of security was achieved by paying the O'Neills 'black rent' or protection money.

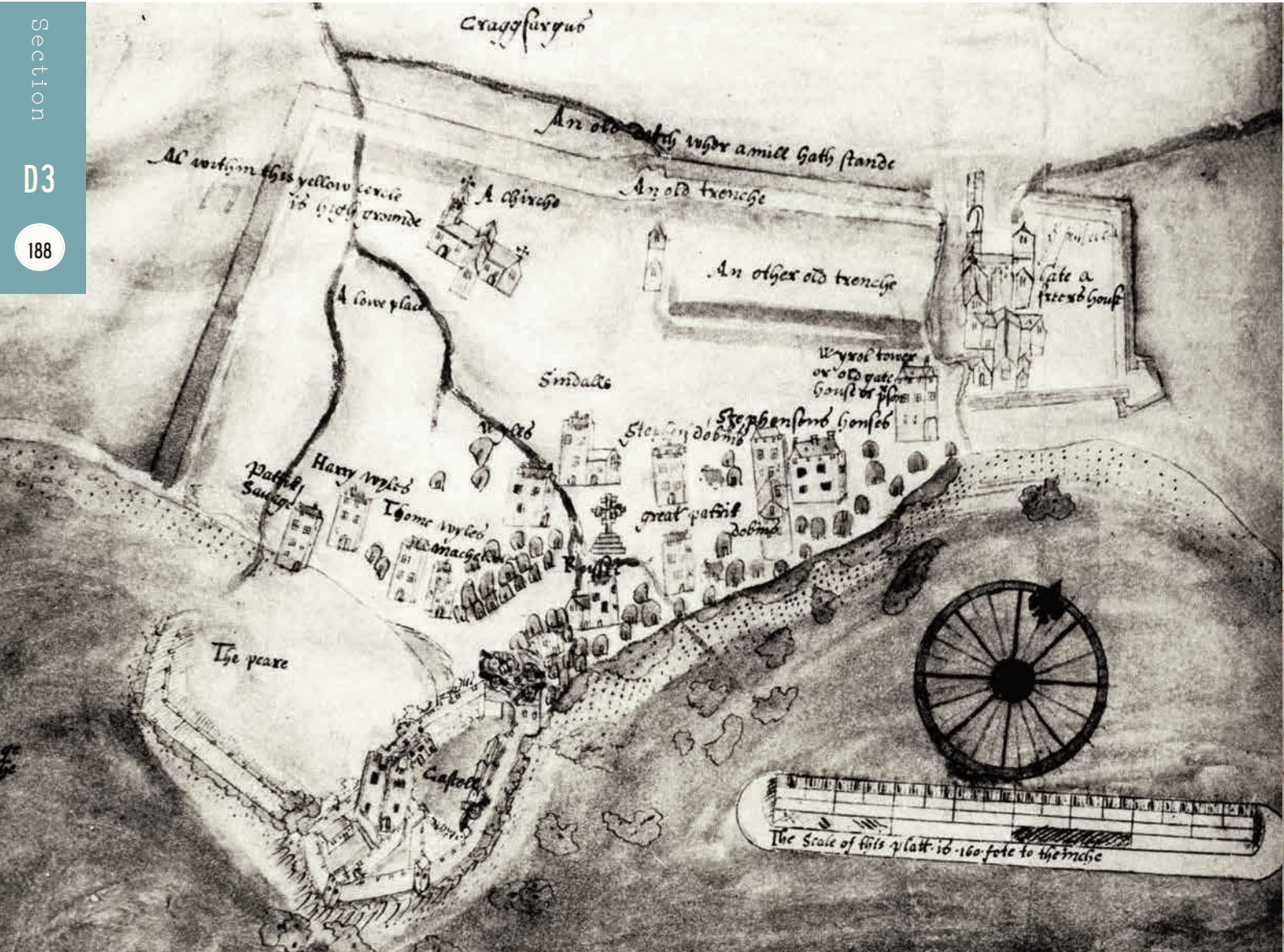
Carrickfergus stands out among the smaller towns of Ireland in the fortunate survival of a number of maps dating from the late sixteenth century, that is to say, from an earlier period than those of the largest towns attributed to John Speed. Indeed, so impressive are these maps that a special appendix devoted to them was provided in the fascicle. Before we look at them, it is important to know that all of these maps depict a system of fortifications for the town that was constructed in the middle of that century, marking a considerable improvement on those of the late middle ages (Fig. 60). Nevertheless the nature of the built environment inside the defences can be assumed to belong to the latter period and there is a remarkable consistency in what these maps have to tell us.

The first in the sequence depicts the town and the castle, and dates from *c.* 1560 (Fig. 61). The spelling of the name as Kragfargus possibly implies something about local pronunciation at that time: map texts can convey messages as well. The anonymous map-maker chose to give prominence to the castle, placing it in the foreground and equipping it with three cannon and a patriotic St George's cross on one of the towers. The harbour had been formed by sinking two lines of wooden piles and by infilling the space between them with large stones. Two sailing ships and four rowing boats hint at small-scale trading. Houses are of three types: a dozen stone-built tower houses (one of them cylindrical), single-storey terraces parallel to the street and an extraordinary number of beehive cabins. The social implications are that there was a mixed population comprising a merchant elite and others of English descent living side by side with a substantial Irish underclass. This was probably a common pattern in late medieval Ireland. St Nicholas's Church stands in its own

Fig. 141: *Carrickfergus*, map 5, 1567, by Robert Lythe. Reproduced with permission of the board of Trinity College Dublin, MS 1209 (26), extract. Opposite page: Fig. 142: *Carrickfergus*, map 6, c. 1596. The National Archives: Public Record Office, MPF 1/98, extract.

enclosure, which contains some impressive trees and a broken cross. Although the Franciscan friary had been suppressed in 1542, the buildings were apparently still in good order. Finally the market cross stands on a stepped plinth.

Later in the 1560s Robert Lythe drew a less accomplished but nevertheless highly informative map of Carrickfergus (Fig. 141). Again the castle and the harbour occupy the foreground. The twelve tower houses have their owners' names written in; otherwise the housing consists of large numbers of beehive cabins. The Wyrol Tower is described as an old gatehouse or prison. 'Old trenches' seem to refer to earlier earthen defensive arrangements. The parish church is now provided with a tower at the west end. Most interestingly, the former friary is labelled 'Ye palace, late a freers house' and we happen to know that in 1566 the complex had been converted into an entrenched depot for storing supplies for the castle garrison. The market cross appears as before standing on its plinth.



The final product of the Elizabethan age is datable to *c.* 1596 (Fig. 142). Its perspective is similar to that of Lythe's map, with the castle and harbour in the foreground. Three types of housing are again shown. The parish church is completely roofless and one wonders about the state of religious observance in the town. On the other hand the former friary site is well protected, though the buildings' apparent state of being in good order is somewhat belied by a documentary reference to decay and need of repair in 1601. There is no sign of the market cross, even though we know that it survived down to the middle of the following century. A small building with an unknown purpose is shown instead at the west end of High Street. The former Wyról Tower at the east end had been repaired and converted into a courthouse in 1593; it was apparently serving also as the town's tholsel or administrative headquarters. Despite previous devastation and the prevailing political uncertainty at the time of the Nine Years' War, Carrickfergus had survived.

TEST YOURSELF

1. What effects did warfare and political instability have on late medieval Carrickfergus?
2. What do the perspectives used in the Elizabethan maps tell us about the map-makers' sense of priorities?
3. What do the Elizabethan maps suggest about the social composition of Carrickfergus?
4. How historically accurate do you think the Elizabethan maps are?
5. How helpful are the textual labels on Robert Lythe's map?

