

Ballyreagh Castle and late medieval society in north Ulster Colin Breen and John Raven

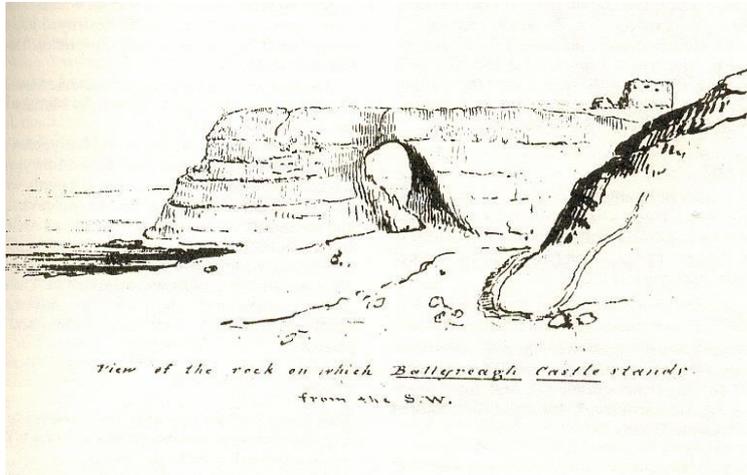
Ballyreagh Castle is an enigma. It is one of many sites across the Irish landscape that tradition records as being the site of a castle or former fortification yet no castle or tower survives. There is very limited historical information pertaining to it and its surface remains consist of a number of sections of masonry that would appear to have originally been part of a wall that had been built across this coastal promontory. It was against this background of limited information that excavations were undertaken in September 2007 at the site. The excavation was part of a broader project examining late medieval Gaelic lordship and plantation activity on the north coast of Ireland. Specifically, we were interested in developing a tighter, and more informed, chronology of the site's occupation and understanding its function within the context of late medieval society in north Ulster.

Ballyreagh sits on a triangular-shaped promontory projecting northwards into the Atlantic one kilometre west of Portrush in Co. Antrim and three kilometres east of Portstewart in Co. Londonderry.



Portrush viewed from Ballyreagh in a Lithograph by Jacob Henry Connop c 1860's

Little now remains of the site apart from sections of a masonry wall protruding from the vegetation at the southern, landward side of the promontory and an east-west running depression marking the former location of an external ditch abutting this south-facing wall.



Originally the site would have been larger but a former sea-arch collapsed significantly reducing the original area of the promontory. Nineteenth-century accounts are vague about the site and its origins. Samuel Lewis records the presence of ‘the remains of Ballyreagh, or the “Royal Castle”, situated on a promontory having a bold façade of rock rising to a height of 296 feet, the base of which is washed by the Atlantic ¹.

The Ordnance Survey Memoirs record that only ‘a very small remnant of this castle is now to be seen. There now stands only a portion of the south wall, 6 feet in thickness and perforated by 3 loopholes. A breach in this wall seems to fix the position of the entrance, but the sides are so broken that conjecture is the only guide towards the supposition.

Nothing remains of this old castle but 47 feet of the wall on the east end, 35 feet of which is about 10 feet high and 5 feet thick; the other 12 feet is about 4 and a half feet high and 5 feet thick. A space of 9 feet is between the standing portion of the walls, which present the appearance of a doorway facing the road which is about 35 yards distant’.² The external ditch abutting the south wall was just over 1m deep at that time. In the 1950s the local authorities removed the upstanding surviving walls in the interests of safety with the exception of a surviving section of rubble core at its western end. This operation also removed a significant quantity of sediment from the inner part of the site and a large quantity of road constructional material including kerbing and tarmac was dumped across the headland.

Further details on the excavations carried out at the site by the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at The Queen’s University, are contained in Dr Breen and Dr Raven’s report which accompanies this Newsletter.

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Colin and John for this excellent contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters.

June 13th 2020

¹ Lewis, Samuel, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), 10.

² Day, Angelic & McWilliams, Patrick, *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland; Parishes of Co. Londonderry XII; Coleraine and the Mouth of the Bann* (Belfast, 1995), pp. 48-9.