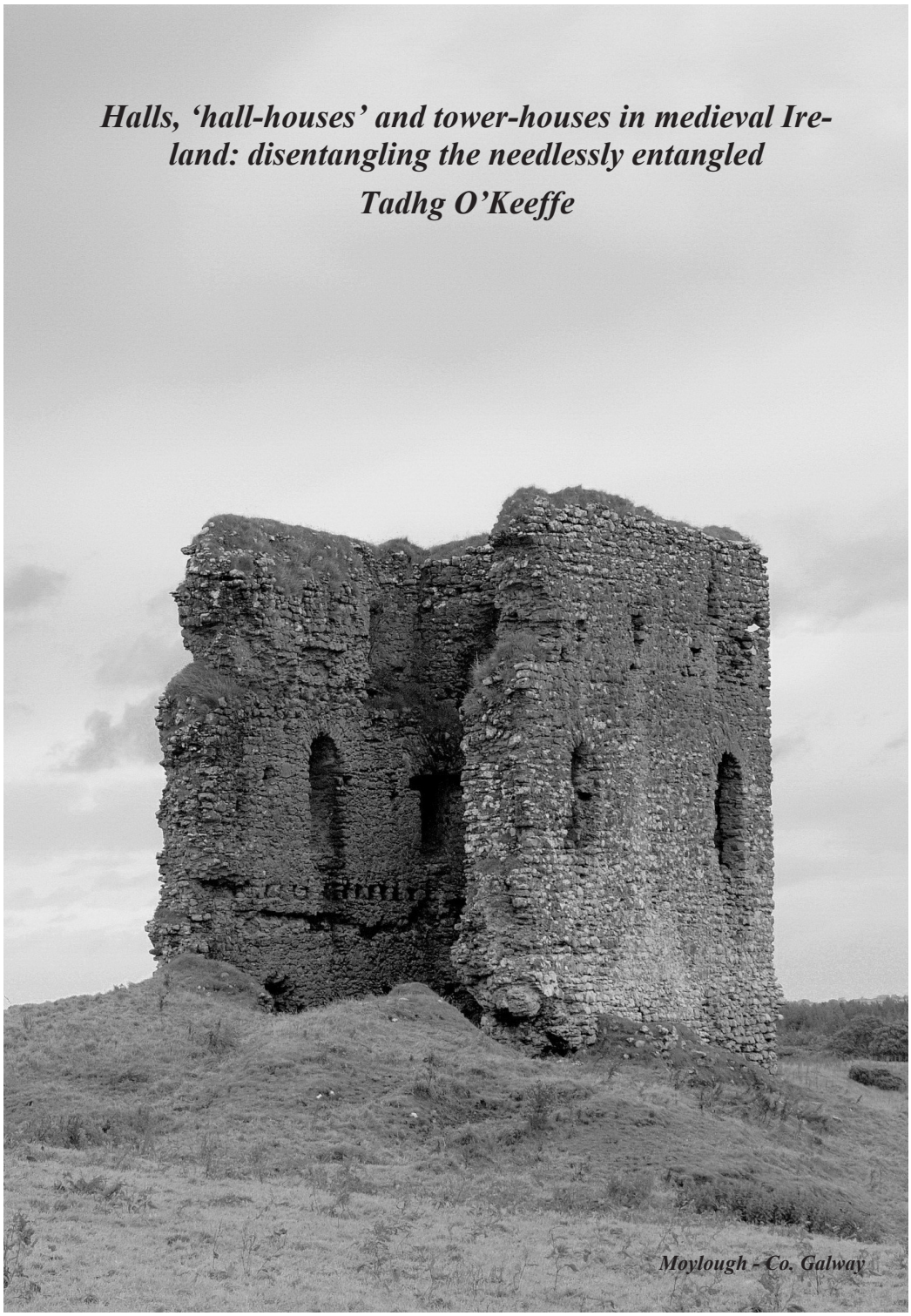
# *Halls, 'hall-houses' and tower-houses in medieval Ireland: disentangling the needlessly entangled*

*Tadhg O'Keeffe*



*Moylough - Co. Galway*

# Halls, 'hall-houses' and tower-houses in medieval Ireland: disentangling the needlessly entangled

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> There has been a growing recognition that the medieval landscape contained other types of stone fortification, such as hall-houses, first identified in significant numbers by Caimin O'Brien and David Sweetman. These are usually two-storied [sic] horizontal stone structures, with the entrance on the first floor probably accessed by a removable wooden staircase. This made a forced entry to them much more difficult and was thus part of their main defensive characteristic. Although only a small number of hall-houses have been identified to date, it is almost certain that as *a definite class of late medieval castle* many more will now be added to this total." (Barry 2008, 129; emphasis added).

This short paper addresses what I regard as two critical issues in Irish castellological research: the definition of the 'hall-house', and the relationship of buildings so identified with the tower-houses of the later middle ages. I offer this as an opinion - should that be an opinionated? - piece; if it goes somewhat against the tide of current thinking in Ireland, it is because the tide is, I think, generally going the wrong way. Given that references to the castles mentioned herein are easily available, and that citations for my assertions about the Irish literature can be located with little effort, I have opted not to festoon this paper with long footnotes or an especially long bibliography.

**Introducing the hall-house**

Readers who are familiar with the books on Irish castles by Tom McNeill (1997) and David Sweetman (1999), and especially with the inventories of castles in the county surveys published in both hard- and soft-copy by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland, will have encountered the 'hall-house' as a castle-type. Established scholars with long (well, pre-1990) memories will know it as a newly-identified type; Harold Leask, doyen of Irish castle-studies, did not use the term, nor did he regard buildings now described as 'hall-houses' - I will drop the inverted commas hereafter - as constituting any sort of group. To my knowledge, the hall-house was first defined in Ireland in the 1990s when Tom McNeill re-branded as hall-houses the thirteenth-century "first-floor halls" which Patrick Holland had identified at a number of manorial centres in Galway (1987-88; 1997). McNeill presented the hall-house as a predominantly Connacht type, adding Kinlough (marked on his map but not named) and Shrule (**Fig. 1**) in Co. Mayo, as well as Carra in Co. Antrim, to the Co. Galway sites of Annaghkeen (**Fig. 2**), Ballisnihiney, Ballynacourty, Kilskeagh, Kilmacduagh (a bishop's residence), and Moylough. Sweetman, as well as the archaeologists attached to the Archaeological Survey of Ireland, subsequently extended the distribution into other parts of Ireland, and added some fifteenth-century examples to the population. Hall-houses are now identified everywhere, with a current total of 47 in the Republic of Ireland alone according to the online Archaeological Survey of Ireland. There are some marked concentrations of thirteenth-century examples: a Galway-Mayo cluster still stands out, but clusters are now identified in north Co. Tipperary and east Co. Limerick. Where have all these sites come from? None is a totally unknown castle, a new discovery. Most are castles which were simply never looked at carefully by archaeologists before the arrival of the Archaeological Survey, and therefore, by one way of thinking, they have only ever been hall-houses. Others are structures long familiar to Irish castellologists and previously described as keeps; examples include Moylough, Co. Galway and Ballyderown, Co. Cork.

So, what then is a hall-house? For a definition we might turn to David Sweetman who, having devoted one of the six chapters in his book to the subject, not to mention two general overviews (1998; 2003), has unquestionably done more than anybody to give the hall-house the same conceptual security in Irish castellological research as, say, the tower-house. Hall-houses are, he writes,

> "two-storey, rectangular-shaped buildings with a first-floor entrance… They have a defensive ground floor having only slit-opes, while the timbered first floor contained the hall and more open windows. Because of their lack of defensive features it is possible that they should not be classified as castles. However, since most of them date to the early thirteenth century and are virtually indistinguishable from hall-keeps they are included here [as castles]" (1999, 80).

He elaborated elsewhere on the differences between his "hall-houses" and "hall-keeps", saying that:

> "The main difference… is that the [hall-keep] is only one element of a larger castle complex while the [hall-house] appears to be an isolated structure, although they are sometimes found

*Fig. 1. Shrule, Co. Mayo. The parapet has been altered but the original height of the tower can be gauged from the chamfered corner.*

*Fig. 2. Annaghkeen, Co. Galway. A rectangular chamber-block with an original latrine tower on the left, the projection of which gives the impression in this photograph of a larger, square-plan, building.*

> associated with earthworks and/or churches and can therefore be seen as manor houses as well as defensive structures" (1998, 14).

Few could dispute that the first definition above begs some serious questions. Do the buildings enfolded in this category really "lack… defensive features"? (Are their ground-floors not described as "defensive" elsewhere in the very same definition?). Should a lack of defensibility, were it capable of irrefutable demonstration throughout the population of hall-houses, threaten the 'castle' status of the buildings? Is "hall-keep" a secure category in and of itself? Is it sufficient to use the purported 'virtual indistinguishability' of hall-houses and "hall-keeps" as a criterion for bestowing, but only after some agonising, 'castle' status on the former? Should that 'virtual indistinguishability' not lead to doubts about the need to make a distinction between hall-houses and "hall-keeps" in the first instance? Is a distinction between architectural types based on the presence or absence of other structures (as in the second quotation above) of any value, especially given the loss of timber buildings? Do most of the hall-houses even date from the early thirteenth century, given that most of the Connacht examples are unlikely to date from before 1240? And, finally for now, we might ask the biggest question of all: are the first-floor rooms of the hall-houses correctly described by Sweetman as 'halls' in the sense in which that word was understood in medieval culture or in the sense in which modern castellologists understand it today? There is nothing in the quote to make one think that the use of the term is problematic here, but I think there are problems of clarity in his discussion of the buildings as it unfolds, and the fact that such fundamental questions can be asked of this definition undermines my confidence - let others speak for themselves - that a word so central to our castellological discourse is used here with due care.

The definition of a hall-house offered by the online Archaeological Survey of Ireland, the place wherein one finds listings and descriptions of the biggest number of examples, differs very little from Sweetman's, but it gives a slightly different take on the function of the upper room: a hall-house, it observes, is:

> "a building, usually two storeys high with a first-floor entrance, which leads to *a single undivided chamber/hall* open to the roof

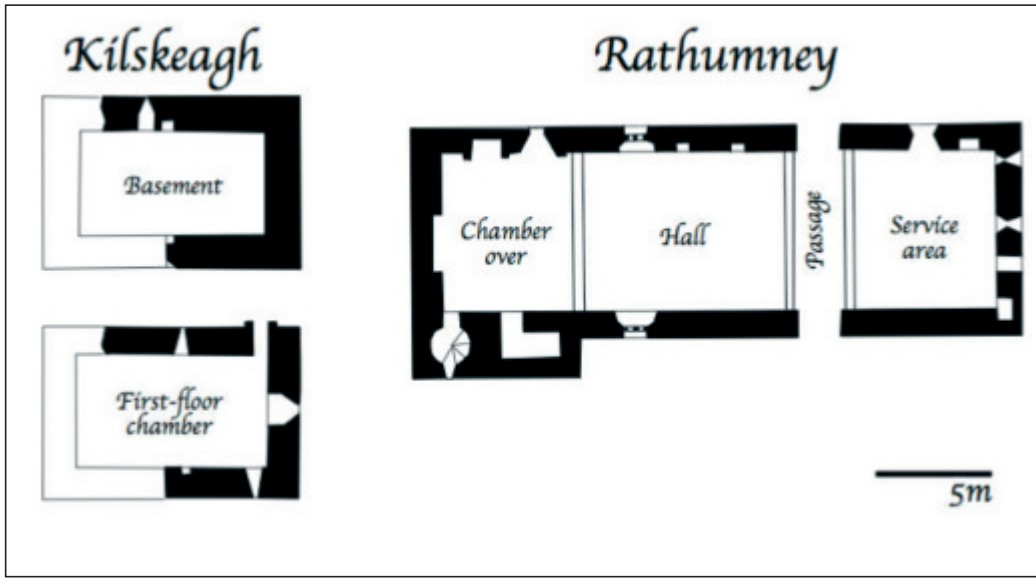


*Fig. 3. Plans of Kilskeagh Castle and Rathumney "Hall", with my interpretations of the use of their internal spaces indicated. No attempt is made here to distinguish in the case of the latter between original and repaired masonry, and the partition lines are reconstructed.*

> and extending the length of the building. They date primarily to the 13th and 14th centuries in Ireland, often continuing to be occupied, in a modified form, throughout the medieval period" (emphasis added).

If the date-range is merely questionable - none of the examples dates obviously from the 1300s - the highlighted words raise a flag. Is the upper room to be interpreted as a chamber *or* a hall, depending on the particular building? If it is to be interpreted as a chamber-*cum*-hall, which seems to be the intended meaning, are we to understand that the trestle-table was cleared away at night and the bed wheeled in? Or is it to be interpreted like a modern bed-sit, with a table at one end and a bed at the other? Can a chamber-*cum*-hall thus understood really be conceived of as "undivided"? (Students of church architecture use the word "undifferentiated" when there is no obvious demarcating feature between two spaces – the nave and chancel – *known* to have been separated functionally). Are the terms "hall" and "chamber" even understood here in the way that the terms are understood by most other castle-scholars, which is as metonyms for "public" and "private" respectively?

None of these questions is asked flippantly. The point that I am trying to make here is a very serious one, and needs to be made with some force. Definitions matter hugely: the act of categorisation in archaeology is often treated as a common-sense process but is in fact a sophisticated process, as profoundly theoretical in its own way as, say, phenomenology. In creating categories by which we might better understand medieval architecture, we need to be cognisant of such factors as practical function and stylistic heritage, and we need to respect the inherent ambiguities which make some buildings difficult to shoehorn into any categorisation. To my mind, an entire category of medieval castle-building in Ireland is buttressed by definitions which are transparently problematic, and the nonchalance with which free-standing thirteenth-century (and, increasingly, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century) rectangular castle-buildings have been re-branded as hall-houses all over Ireland is simply alarming. The hall-house category has already been metaphorically 'black-boxed' (sealed as incontestable reality, in other words) by most medieval archaeologists in Ireland, but there is a powerful argument that the black-box needs to be opened, and that we need to prevent any black-boxing of the currently-popular narrative of post-1400 castle-development which is based in part on presumptions about hall-houses.

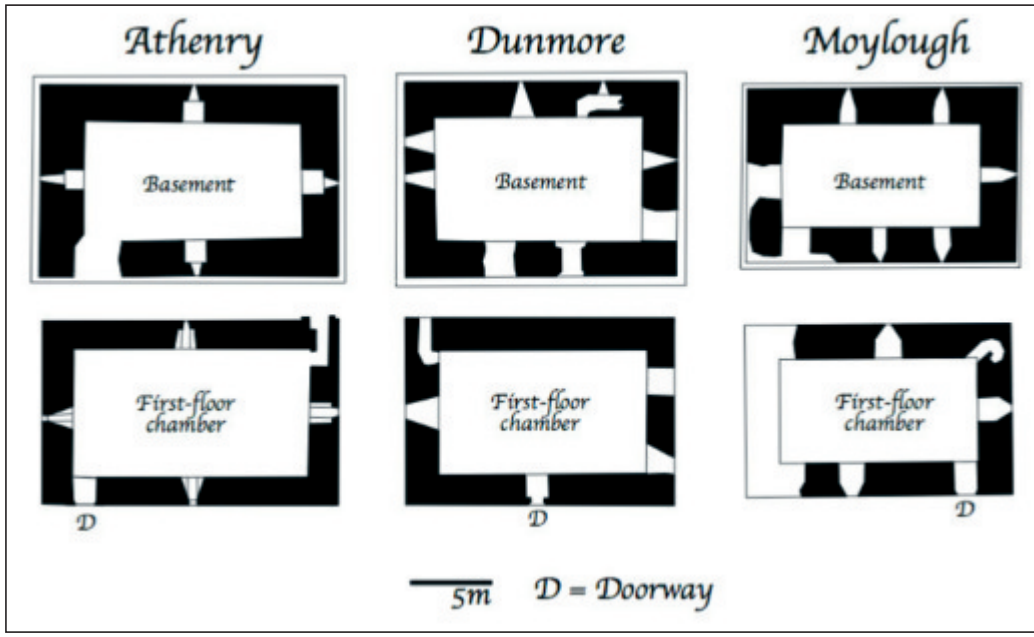


*Fig. 4: Athenry, Dunmore and Moylough, with my interpretations of the use of their internal spaces indicated. Small alterations made post-1300 are not distinguished here.*

**Three problems with hall-houses**

**1**. Scrutiny of the castles described as hall-houses by Sweetman and by the archaeologists of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland makes one thing abundantly clear: the category is presumed to be real, and the task identified for archaeologists is to work out which castles properly belong within it. This methodology is back-to-front. Given that 'hall-house' is not a medieval term, or more precisely that it has no apparent medieval equivalent, the proper archaeological method would be to observe the evidence and determine morphological clusters based on that evidence. Yes, many archaeologists will argue that this is exactly what has happened and is still happening, but the evidence indicates otherwise. It is instructive to look, for example, at the inclusion in the hall-house category by Sweetman and the Archaeological Survey of both Kilskeagh (a.k.a. "Witches") Castle, Co. Galway, and Rathumney "Hall", Co. Wexford (**Fig. 3**). The first, probably built 1240-50, is a small two-storeyed 'tower' of near-square plan with a (presumed) 'hall' at first-floor level. Were it in England it would be identified as a small chamber-tower, and lost timber buildings, including a hall, would be postulated. The second site, Rathumney, probably built 1280-1300, has a ground-floor hall – there is no need for inverted commas in this case – flanked by a two-storeyed chamber-tower at one end and by a two-storeyed service area (with ground-floor kitchen) at the other. English colleagues will be familiar with the scheme. Sweetman's comments on Rathumney in particular betray the illogicality of its designation as a hall-house, and its placement in the same category as Kilskeagh: "This structure is atypical of Irish hall-houses in that it has a ground-floor entrance and the hall occupies the whole of the central area of the building, whereas the norm for this type of building would be a first-floor hall" (2003, 128). If it is *that* atypical, should it be included at all? How will we ever advance our understanding of medieval Ireland if our readings of its key buildings are so lacking in nuance?

Lest anybody think that this exemplification is selective, similarly indicative of inherent problems with the category is the labelling of the three important east Galway castles of Athenry, Dunmore and Moylough (**Fig. 4**). The first of these, built 1235-40, has been spared re-labelling as a hall-house by the Archaeological Survey (indeed, Sweetman describes it as a "hall-keep"), but the other two, both almost identical to Athenry and younger by a few

*Fig. 5: The donjon of Coonagh Castle. Only the top few metres of this huge tower of the de Marisco family are later than its construction date of c. 1225.*

years only, have not. It matters little which categorisation is the more correct with respect to these three monuments, if indeed either is correct at all; what matters is that the categorisation is lazily conceived. The presence at Athenry alone of a stone-walled enclosure should not be the grounds on which its free-standing rectangular-plan focal building is kept apart in a classificatory system from its close cousins; anyway, most of that walled enclosure at Athenry is probably a little later in date than the rectangular chamber-building inside it.

**2.** The second problem is the presumption, often inherent but sometimes articulated very clearly (as in Sweetman 1998), that most of the buildings described as hall-houses belong at the lower end of the castle spectrum. Research may actually show it to be true in many cases, and to be truer of some districts or regions than of others, but until there is proper research it must be regarded as a presumption. The much-reduced and ivy-strangled (and therefore *un*-photogenic) Castletown Conyers in Co. Limerick is a good example of the presumption being unfounded. Identified as a hall-house in the 1990s and therefore interpreted implicitly in the following decade as the focal building of a lesser castle, and by extension as an indicator of a "sub-manor" (Keegan 2005, 31), it was in fact the *donjon* of the castle of the capital manor of the large cantred of Corcomohide, and was built in the 1220s by John de Marisco, the son of the justiciar. Extremely close parallels with the largely-extant *donjon* of Coonagh, Co. Limerick (**Fig. 5**), built by John's brother William (who later achieved infamy as a pirate patrolling the Irish Sea from a base on Lundy Island), prove that it was a very substantial tower indeed, closer to the spirit of later twelfth-century English *donjons* (in its use of clasping pilasters, for example) than to the small houses of minor manorial lords. The term hall-house is not only wholly inappropriate to Castletown Conyers but is wholly misleading.

**3**. The third problem relates most directly to the title of this paper. There is an assumption, stated explicitly by Sweetman in his work and more recently by Rory Sherlock (2010), that the upper rooms of 'hall-houses' were indeed halls, and therefore spaces more 'public' than 'private'. There is, however, no strong case for this.

First, there is the architectural evidence itself. These upper rooms lack the order, the sense of an architecture equipped for ceremony, for showing-off, that one recognises repeatedly in indisputable castle halls in England and France. Their windows are generally relatively small (and single-light), are sometimes asymmetrically-placed, and are few in number; by the standards of thirteenth-century halls outside Ireland, the interiors of these rooms would have been pretty dark. They usually have latrines, accessed by dog-legged passages via small corner doorways, and this suggests chamber rather than hall-function. Given that halls had high ends and low ends, one's eye should perhaps be drawn consistently, and with help from the regularity of the fenestration, towards the gable wall that is most distant from the point of entry, but this is rarely the

*Fig. 6: Graystown, Co. Tipperary. A vault above the penultimate chamber, as seen here, is common in southern Irish towers. Somewhat typically for a tower-house site, the house on the right is slightly later in date than the tower-house (the chamber-tower) on the left, and is, I suggest, a rebuilding of an earlier and less durable "hall".*

case. In those examples in which inserted vaulting allows one stand at original first-floor level, it is often rather hard to convince oneself that one is standing in a space that was anything other than private. I am sure that were these buildings in England they would be regarded as first-floor chamber-buildings, some of them in the tradition of Boothby Pagnell but more of them in the tradition of the 'single chamber format' *donjons* described by Pamela Marshall (2002, 31), and that accompanying *ground-floor* halls of timber would be confidently assumed.

Second, there is the documentary evidence. I will not rehearse the evidence here (see O'Keeffe *forthcoming a*), but in the later 1200s and early 1300s, when descriptions of the buildings on castle-sites first become available in any quantity, it is apparent that castles had separate halls and chambers, not halls-*cum*-chambers, and that the halls were often of timber and chambers of stone. Thus, to cite just one representative example, we have in 1307 in Callan Castle, Co. Kilkenny, "a *hall* constructed of wood covered with wooden shingles, a stone *chamber*, a kitchen and other wooden chambers" (*Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland 1302-07*, 190).

**The hall-house and the tower-house**

The heterogeneous collection of buildings described as hall-houses generally contained private spaces, so we should call them chamber-buildings. Better still, given that they must have been parts of larger complexes originally, we might call them chamber-blocks. Some we might even call chamber-*donjons*. Their upper rooms were not halls as commonly understood in the middle ages; the move away from first-floor halls in Angevin castle-owning society elsewhere should perhaps have warned Irish castellologists not to think that upper-level halls were being built with any frequency in Ireland during the 1200s. Such is the ambiguity in the definition of hall-house that supporters of the category might claim always to have known this, and might point to the word 'house' as evidence that the upper rooms were always regarded by them essentially as private, but this defense is paper-thin. In any case, it would be difficult to square this defense with the frequency with which spaces described as halls and interpreted as having the public functions of halls are claimed for the interiors of later medieval tower-houses. Rory Sherlock, for example, has argued strongly that halls shared space with private chambers inside

tower-houses: expressly influenced by the interpretation of hall-houses as containing actual halls, and expressly of the view that an evolutionary line joins the hall-houses to the tower-houses, he asserts that "examples of tower-houses which had halls within them… and which had halls alongside them… existed side-by-side in late medieval Ireland", and he claims evidence that halls in tower-houses were sometimes the upper rooms, perched *above* the more private chambers, and at other times the middle-rooms *below* a chamber or two (2010, 117).

I respectfully disagree with his view. It is abundantly clear from documentary sources that the late middle ages saw a continuation of the thirteenth-century pattern of halls and chambers in physically-separate (if sometimes connected) buildings, a pattern which had started in Ireland immediately after the first-generation stone *donjons* had copied the old Norman side-by-side arrangement (see O'Keeffe 2013). The following description from Mallow from 1584 (see Berry 1893 for the text and context) illustrates the point more than adequately. Incidentally, one might note first that the hall is to the left of entry into the castle's inner court, which is a pattern that we commonly observe from the thirteenth century in Ireland, and second that the penultimate room in the tower-house at the end of the description has a vault which, we are not told but can deduce, provided a stone floor to the very grand and open-to-the-rafters uppermost room (just as we see at Graystown in **Fig. 6**):

> One castle containing in itself two small courts and one great barbican, namely, where the howse standeth, the entrance in is on the north side ffyrste into one of the said courts, and then turninge one the lefte hande ye enter by a doore, beinge in a highe wall, into the Balne or Barbican, which is reasonable and large, and then goinge a little way, turninge one to lefte hande, have ye an entrance by an other stone wale, wher as the castell or howse standeth, the lower rooms whereof ar sellors vaulted over. And in the wall one the lefte hande there be stayres of stone of XII. stepps in heyght that leadeth one the right hande into the Hall, which is about LX. foote longe and XXVI. foot wyde, within the howse, and is deepe, with a highe roofe, the Tymber whereof seemeth to be sounde, and is covered with thacke, somethinge decayed at the north ende; towards the west corner there is a square buylding vaulted as the other is but not so broade, and riseth somewhat higher than the roofe of the hall in which, over the sellor, ar fower strong rooms that may be made meete for lodgings; the uppermost, savinge one, is vaulted.

Except perhaps in the case of Bunratty Castle, Co. Clare, where rent was paid "in the hall of the mansion house" in - note the date - 1629 (see also **Fig. 7**), the documentary evidence does not support the theory of halls inside towers, even in the case of Luke Gernon's famous account (O'Keeffe *forthcoming b*). Anyway, the comparative evidence from across northern Europe would not support Sherlock's assertion that halls and chambers could have interchangeable places on the vertical axis in turriform buildings. Gillian Eadie's thesis, which holds that tower-houses were "wholly private" (2010), is correct.

It seems clear that the old Anglo-Norman chamber-tower or chamber-block was transformed (through pan-European processes of 'privatisation' which still need exploration) into a complex suite of rooms, stacked vertically in a tower. The associated halls generally reduced in scale and pragmatic importance from the thirteenth century on, to the extent that they were effectively transformed into "houses" by the end of the middle ages, and were sometimes so described. They were retained as places of occasional communal eating, and were observed as such by people like Richard Stanihurst, who described them as **"**reasonably big and spacious palaces made from white clay and mud" (Barry & Morgan 2013, 113).

That the hall survived at all into the late middle ages, and was arguably rebuilt in stone in some cases (**Fig. 8**), testifies to its deep-rooted symbolic and legal importance. The symbolic dimension is difficult to capture, but one need only read the descriptions of halls in Gaelic-Irish literature (see Simms 2001) to get a sense of the enduring value of the tradition of building them in medieval society. Regarding the legal need for a hall, suffice it to report here two stories about halls, recorded three-and-a-half centuries apart. In 1288 a near-death Thomas Leon was carried at his own request to the door of the hall in his manorial complex, and he bequeathed his estate to his son by grabbing its door handle (*Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland 1285-92*, 198). The hall was not just the space within which the administration of the estate was carried out. It legally represented the estate. In 1631 an attorney "actually enterd into a dwelling house wthin the bawne of Castlepook" to witness a quitclaim (Ainsworth & MacLysaght 1958, 66). Recent archaeological excavation by Eamonn Cotter (pers. comm.) has uncovered a house in the castle's small bawn, and it is a modest structure indeed. One would imagine that the attorney's business would have been better conducted inside

*Fig. 7: Barryscourt Castle, Co. Cork. Under the shadow of an exceptionally large, complex-plan tower-house, presumed (like Bunratty) to have an interior 'public' hall, is the actual castle hall. It is unusual in having had one long wall in stone (visible in the photograph) and the other long wall, where it faced onto the garden in the bawn, timber-framed (see Pollock 2007).*

the tower, but the house, small as it was, appears to have been adjudged the more appropriate place. It is hard not to think that an ancient (even pre-Norman) land-transfer ritual necessitating a hall or a house, a building of some designated public function, was played out in this small and little-known Cork castle.

**Summing up…**

One could argue that the intrusion of the hall-house into the narrative of Irish castle-development is one of the two most significant changes to have been made over the past three decades to our understanding of castle-building in medieval Ireland; the other significant change is, of course, the (alleged) 'discovery' of Anglo-Norman ringwork castles in great numbers. Models – and we should regard 'ringworks' and 'hall-houses' as models, since neither term was used in the middle ages – of such importance really should not be accepted without serious interrogation, but both 'new' types of castle have been metaphorically black-boxed without the requisite scrutiny.

Critical comments on the ringwork model have already been made by Tom McNeill and myself, and I have spelled out the problems of identification and the dangers of false identification more than once over the past two decades (O'Keeffe 2005, 191-2), but my objections have been noted (if even) rather than addressed or rebuked, and the process of identifying new examples has continued regardless. Given that this paper is heralded as an opinion piece, I can confess here to intense frustration that the number of suggested examples keeps rising, and that the more 'possible' examples are identified the more archaeologists seem to think that the problem is with identifying examples rather than with the category itself. This is *exactly* the same problem as we have with the hall-house. It is fundamentally a problem of methodology.

This short paper is in essence a plea to Irish castle-scholars to release buildings from the hall-house category, to think about where individual buildings might fit on the sliding scale that balances the medieval understanding (as distinct from *our* understanding) of 'private' at one end and 'public' at the other, and to think afresh about how these buildings contributed to the development of the types of later medieval chamber-tower which we bundle into the category of tower-house. The bottom line is this: if we are to understand properly the medieval settlement history of Ireland, we need to approach the evidence of settlement phenomena, such as the buildings now branded hall-houses (and earthworks now branded ringworks), with a considerably sharper critical awareness.

*Fig. 8: Srah Castle, Co. Offaly. As at Graystown above, the house post-dates the tower, and is likely to be a stone replacement of a timber house.*

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