Kanturk fortified house

Location: Kanturk, Ir. Ceann Toirc (the head of the wild boar or boar’s head), lies in the townland of Paal East, Co. Cork.

Description: Kanturk Castle stands on land sloping gently down to the Brogeen River to the SE, and the Allow River flows a short distance to the east. It presents as the ruin of a house consisting of a four-storey rectangular block, measuring 27.7m by 11.3m, with a five-storey, 8.5m by 8.5m square flanking tower at each corner. There is a base batter on all external walls except the main west face and the west and inside faces of the SW and NW towers, which have vertical faces. Continuous string courses on all exterior walls mark each floor level except that between the ground floor and the first floor. A row of tapering corbels, formerly supporting continuous machicolations, survive at the top of each wall face. The main entrance is through a first-floor doorway in the centre of the west wall. This has a limestone door surround with a round arch, and with a pilaster column on either side supporting a frieze and cornice. Directly beneath the latter is a ground-floor doorway, almost completely ruined. A second ground-floor doorway in the centre of the east wall has a door surround with a pointed arch, twist-carved moulding, and yett-holes.

The interior had wooden floors throughout, now marked by opposing lines of joist sockets. All floors were well-lit by symmetrically arranged windows. The ground floor has single rounded or semi-elliptically arched lights, but the other floors have larger rectangular lights with mullion and transom divisions, covered by hood mouldings. Most window embrasures have had original flat-arched roofs replaced by concrete lintels. The house contains numerous fireplaces. Those in the main block are positioned near either end of both side walls, whilst most floors in the corner towers have their own fireplace, excepting the NE stairway tower. Most fireplace surrounds have a flat arch and a shallow mantle. However, the surround of the fireplace near the south end of the east wall at Kanturk. View from the south - the shorter gable-end side. By James N Healy, 1987.
3rd-floor level has a mantle carved with ‘bold frieze and cornice’ in the same fashion as the entrance door. The largest fireplace is near the north end of the east wall on the ground floor. It is missing its lintel, but the remains of a domed bread oven on the south side of it suggests this is the kitchen fireplace. Chimney stacks on the side walls of the main block project externally at either end of the front face of these walls, but the stacks do not survive above wall level.

The NE tower formerly contained a wooden stair, probably with a landing at each corner judging by the position of windows, joist holes and plaster-shadow on the inside wall faces. Doorways at the north end of the east wall of the main block give entry to the stair from all four main floors. Similarly positioned doorways at the south end of the east wall and at either end of the west wall give entry to the chambers in the other three corner towers. The towers are defended by a series of splayed gun loops at ground-floor level, one on each face of the SE and NE towers and one on the east face of the NW and SW towers. The loops are positioned under window lights and are circular openings centred on a short vertical siting slit. Lack of loops on the west side suggests the existence of a former bawn on that side.

**Summary History:** A number of legends are associated with the building of Kanturk Castle. It was reputedly built by Dermot Mac Donagh Mac Carthy, Lord of Dulhallow, around 1609, after he was pardoned by the English government following his capture in the aftermath of the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. However, the third-floor fireplace in the east wall is similar in style to a fireplace in Monkstown castle in the Cork city suburbs, which bears the date 1636. This suggests a somewhat later date for Kanturk. It is said that the castle was never completed and remained a roofless shell for centuries, but it is unclear whether this is the case. MacCarthy may have been ordered to stop work by the English, who were suspicious of the purpose of the castle, or he may have run out of finances. Dermot MacCarthy, into whose hands it later came, mortgaged it in 1641 to Sir Philip Perceval who after taking possession took out many of the fixtures and fireplaces to be placed in another of his properties.
Above: Kanturk Castle - from the south. A lightly fortified Jacobean house c. 1610. A four-storey rectangular block with five storey flanking/corner towers, and built on a slope, which shows more significantly than the Healy drawing.

Below: Kanturk - the impressive principal façade and central main entrance, from the west.
Kanturk. The first-floor portal in the centre of the west facade. Limestone door surround with round arch, and with a pilaster column on either side supporting a bold frieze and cornice. Below the (missing) steps leading up to the entrance was a lower door into the basement.

It has been commented that this is a ‘rather barbarous but not unattractive example of provincial classicalism’. The building was never carried to completion after suspicious neighbours complained to the Privy Council that it was too dangerous and powerful place to be in the hands of a subject.
Kanturk. The basement back entrance in the centre of the east facade, with a highly unusual and decorative door surround, with pointed arch, twist-carved mouldings, yett holes, and splayed jambs.
Kanturk. The unusual splayed mouldings are carried though in a consistent style into the smaller rectangular lights. Above and below left: flanker tower lights with gunloops (east facade) and, below, right, another view of the splayed jamb of the rear entrance.
Kanturk. View of the NE (staircase) flanker tower on the east side.