

Archaeology
IRELAND

Heritage Guide No. 84



**CARLINGFORD
PRIORY**



Introduction

The town of Carlingford is situated on the sea lough of the same name between counties Louth and Down. Although there is evidence of earlier occupation, the town is associated with the Vikings. The name is derived from the Irish and Norse languages, being a combination of *Cairlinn* (Irish) and *fjord* (Norse). The present town, however, owes its origins to the Normans, who arrived here in the twelfth century. Hugh de Lacy is credited with building the castle that overlooks the town and its harbour (traditionally called King John's Castle after he visited Carlingford in 1210).

The present-day Trinity Visitor Centre, formerly the Holy Trinity Church of Ireland church, has evidence of medieval construction, and the town consisted of a linear development between it and the castle. The urban medieval outline can still be appreciated today, reinforced by the survival of a tholsel (gatehouse), three tower-houses (known as the Mint, Taaffe's Castle and the Watch House) and the remnants of a town wall.

The town of Carlingford was an outpost of English settlement in Ireland and for a period was the northern limit of the Pale (the area of Ireland under English control). It thrived as a port in the Middle Ages but had declined by the eighteenth century, thanks to the ravages of war and the rise of the town of Newry, Co. Down, as a port and commercial centre.

Above: **Image extracted from Robert O'Callaghan Newenham's *Picturesque views of the antiquities of Ireland*. Drawn on stone by J.D. Harding, from the sketches of R. O'C. Newenham (London, 1830), vol. 1, p. 185.**

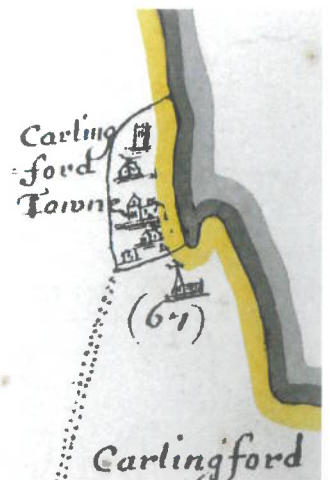
Above right: **Part of Down Survey map of 'barony of Dundalke', c. 1657 (in private ownership).**

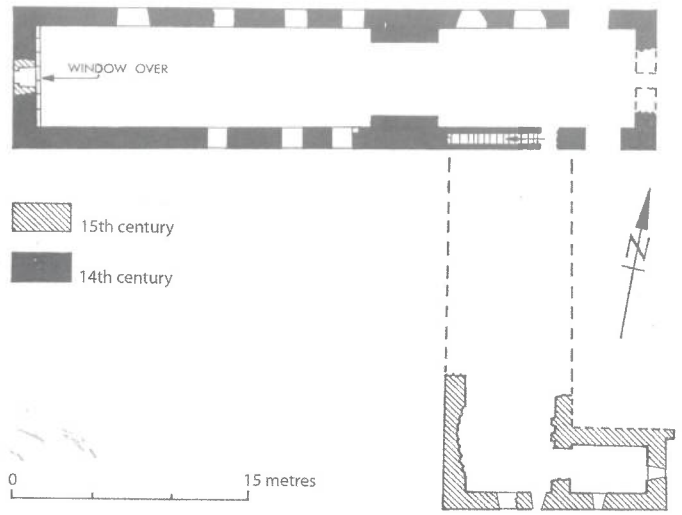
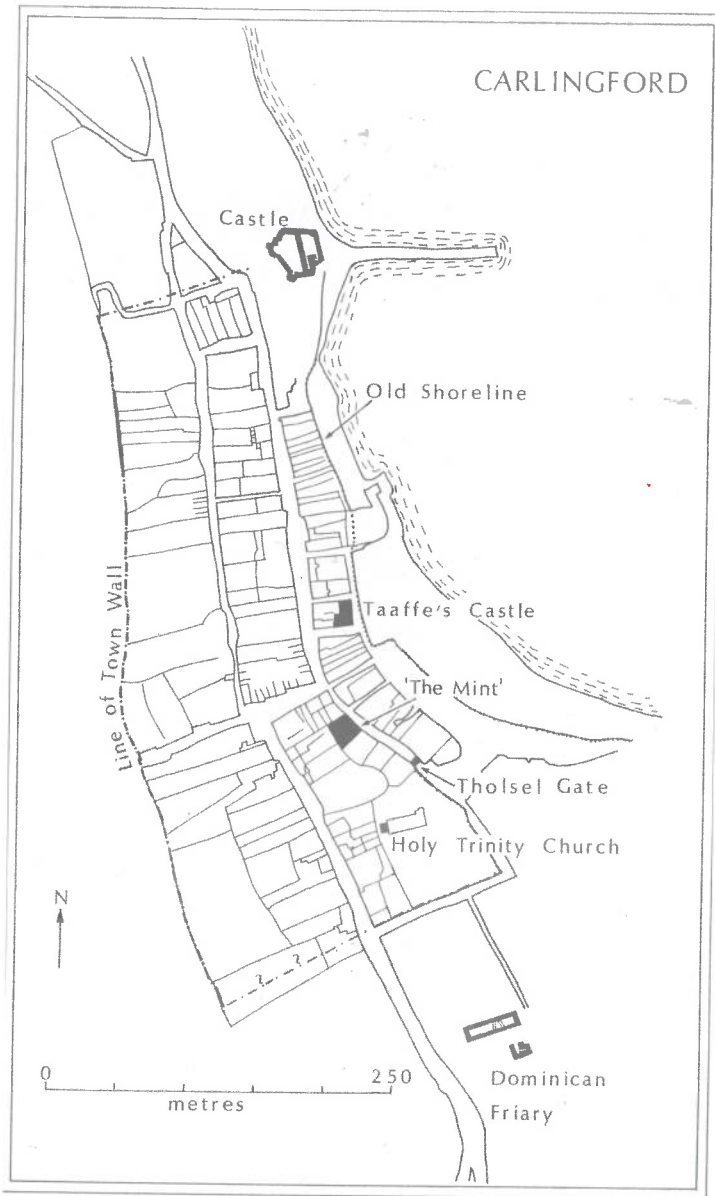
History

Carlingford Priory, popularly referred to as an abbey, is said to owe its origins to Richard de Burgo, who in 1305 invited the Dominican Order to establish a priory in the town. The *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* records, however, that the Dominican priory was endowed by the merchants of Carlingford in 1352.

The priory, dedicated to St Malachy, was established along the general plans for such institutions across Europe: a church, a cloister and domestic buildings such as dormitories, kitchen and refectory. It is likely that the nearby watermill (in ruins) to the east and the mill-race that flows alongside the priory also date from this period.

Originally the priory was situated inside the town's precincts; later, however, the town's defences were moved inward as its population shrank in the wake of the Black Death, leaving the priory outside the town. As a result of the constant warfare on the frontiers of Ulster, the buildings were fortified with battlements in 1423. In 1540, after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, Carlingford Priory was officially dissolved. A survey conducted at that time described the priory as a 'strong mansion in need of no expenditure on repairs' and on 'every side strongly fortified', with seven tenements on the site.





Orange, set fire to Newry and Carlingford. Extensive damage was done to the town and presumably the priory, since a visitor in 1703 described it as being an old chapel and monastery in ruins.

Over the subsequent decades it was utilised for a number of purposes, including as housing for local herring fishermen. We are told that in 1726 it was defaced by Mr William Stannus, who presumably used some of the masonry in the nearby Ghan House, which he was constructing as his family home at the time. In the nineteenth century the ruins were used as a handball court. Despite its physical deterioration, the priory remained an important symbol of Carlingford and its ruins continued to be represented on maps and to be the subject of paintings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The chancel

What remains today of the original priory is the shell of the nave and chancel divided by a tower, with ruins of domestic buildings approximately 20m to the south. These would have been the

It is likely that the priory was further fortified when Carlingford was granted to Nicholas Bagenal in 1552, along with Newry and various other lands in the area. In a petition to Queen Elizabeth I in 1570 Bagenal, who was marshal of the queen's army in Ireland, says that he built a castle at Carlingford. The castle referred to may be the eastern part of the surviving domestic range, which in all likelihood was built as a tower-house. Whatever the case, after the defeat of the Irish in the Nine Years War (1593–1603) it would appear that the priory was no longer of military value. By 1613 the Franciscans, who were at the forefront of the Counter-Reformation surge in Ireland, had occupied the building. The town was the scene of battle in the Cromwellian war and during recent conservation work a cannon-ball was found on the battlements of the priory.

Under Charles II there was a relaxation of the laws restricting the practice of Catholicism and the Dominicans reappeared in Carlingford. In the 1670s they attempted to reclaim ownership of the priory from the Franciscans. The dispute was settled by St Oliver Plunkett, the presiding bishop, in favour of the Franciscans. Under Franciscan control, it became known as a friary, a designation still used by some. Not long after, in 1689, the Jacobite army, under the command of James II's illegitimate son, the duke of Berwick, in retreat from the forces of William of



Above left: **Map of medieval Carlingford, showing the principal sites. The Dominican priory lies to the south of the town defences** (Urban Archaeological Survey).

Above right: **Plan of Carlingford Dominican priory** (from Urban Archaeological Survey, after Beth Cassidy).

Above: **Dramatic view of the church overlooked by Slieve Foy, the highest peak in the Carlingford Mountains** (Chris Corlett).

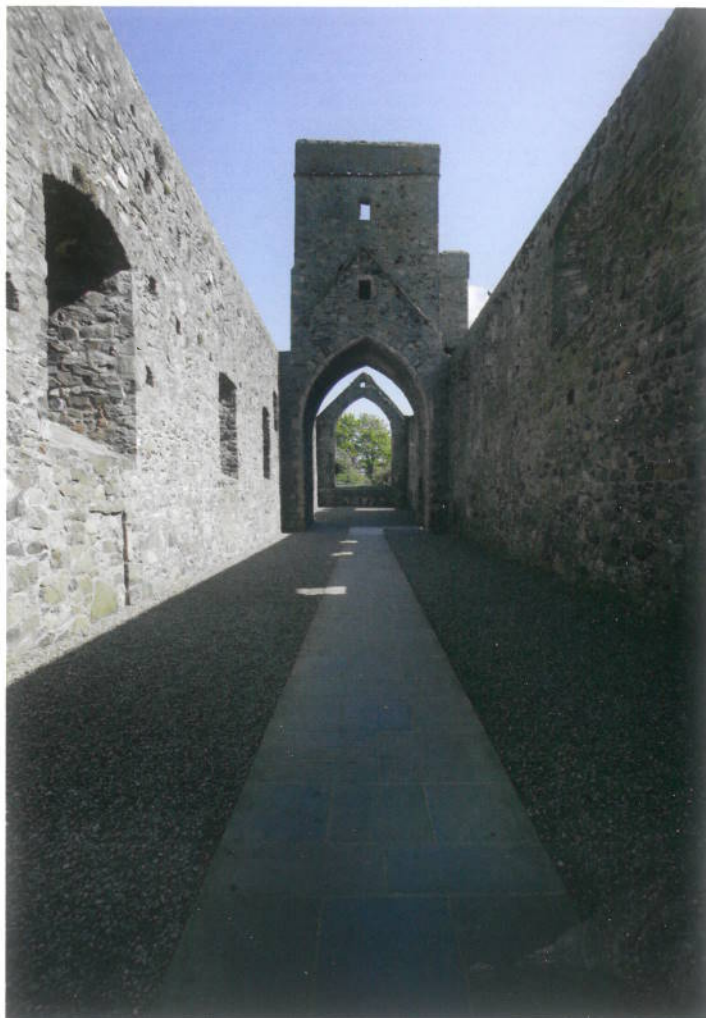
dormitories, kitchen and so on. The church is built of limestone and greywacke. In the east wall of the chancel is a large opening that would once have contained a stained-glass window. There are three windows in the north wall and one in the south. Of the three windows in the north wall, two are open while the central one is blocked up.

The large opening in the south wall would also originally have housed a window. Unfortunately, time and weathering have left no indications of any moulding or carving on what remains of these windows. On the outside of the eastern window, however, there is some remaining decoration, including a carved stone head on the northern rim. Finally, there is a partially blocked doorway in the centre of the chancel's south wall

The nave

Being on the frontier between Gaelic Ireland and the Pale, Carlingford was often subject to attack, resulting in the fortification of the priory. Crenellations were added to the west wall and small towers built at the south-west and north-west corners of the nave. In the west wall there are the remains of a two-centred rounded arched window. There are three large windows in the northern side wall, with a smaller one higher up on the eastern end of this wall. There are also the remains of three small windows high up in the nave's south wall. At the east end of the south wall there is a small niche with a high, narrow, inverted V-shaped arch.

A series of square holes in the walls indicates that at some time there were wooden structures inside and outside this building—for example, to support the roof of the cloister walk on the south side, of which no other evidence is visible. The present entrance to the priory is from the street through an original arched doorway, surrounded by medieval stonework, in the west wall. Above this is a machicolation resting on two corbels, part of the later defensive works. The outline of a (blocked-up) window is also visible above this door.



Above: **View along the nave and chancel, looking east.**

Below: **View of fortified portion of the nave, showing the crenellated west wall, a machicolation above the arched doorway and the added corner towers.**





Top: **View of the south wall of the church, showing large flat-headed window and doorways leading to nave and chancel. The external string-course along the western portion of the south wall marks the position of the cloister roof. The gable lines of the east range can be seen to the right of the south wall.**

Above: **The central tower and the eastern gable, viewed from the west** (Chris Corlett).

The central tower

The central tower is a later addition, probably dating from the first half of the fifteenth century. It is rectangular, with the remains of a stairwell in its south-east angle. It has two floor levels above the arch, with rectangular openings in the western and eastern façades at the lower level and in the upper at the west side. Access to the tower was gained from the first-floor level of the domestic range, which adjoined the south side of the chancel via a doorway (now blocked).

There must also have been access to the chancel via stairs from the first-floor level and from the domestic range. A limestone corbel at the first-floor level indicates the former existence of a wooden gallery and stairs, which would have led to the choir. The rectangular openings would have been doorways giving entrance to the lofts over the nave and chancel. In the east and west walls of the tower can be seen the original line of roofs. Below the south side of the tower a doorway leads outside.

Domestic dwellings

Situated about 20m south of the main building are the remains of what would have been the priory's domestic buildings, clearly consisting of two parts. The eastern part is butted against the remnants of the western building, indicating that it was added on at a later date (probably by Nicholas Bagenal). This eastern building is the one that resembles a tower-house and has a combination of slit and rectangular windows. The other half is what remains of the priory's domestic range and consists only of the southern gable wall with the remnants of another wall at right angles to it, in which there is the lower half of a doorway. The *Archaeological Survey of County Louth* (1991, 236) states that the standing gable has 'a window which was later converted into a fireplace', although there is no sign of this now. Originally the domestic range would have extended northwards to join onto the chancel, fitting the standard pattern of a Dominican priory.



National Monument

The site is now a National Monument in the ownership of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Nat. Mon. no. 623). Conservation work was carried out on the buildings, including the laying down of gravel on the floor of the nave and chancel and paved footpaths through the site. There was also some reconstruction of masonry, the reopening of windows and doorways and the delineation of the original walls of the complex. Unfortunately, weathering has deteriorated some of the more ornate features of the stonework, especially the carved head on the outside of the east window.

Documentary evidence suggests that the priory owned a watermill; to the east of the present site (but outside of the National Monument) are the ruins of a watermill over the mill-race that flows there. This was in use as a corn mill until the eighteenth century. It is believed that the mill-race follows the outline of what would have been an earlier defensive ditch when the priory was within the precincts of the town.

Further reading

- J. Bradley with contributions by H. King 1985 *County Louth Urban Archaeological Survey*. Unpublished report, Office of Public Works, Dublin.
- V.M. Buckley and P.D. Sweetman (eds) 1991 *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*. The Stationery Office, Dublin.
- Carlingford Lough Heritage Trust 1992 *Medieval town trail of Carlingford*. Carlingford Lough Heritage Trust, Carlingford.
- H. O'Sullivan and R. Gillespie 2011 *Irish Historic Towns Atlas No. 23: Carlingford*. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

Above: **View of the surviving portion of the priory's domestic buildings, which would have extended northwards to join the chancel. A tower-house-like addition is located on the right of the domestic gable.**

Right: **Location map.**

Cover: **The impressive scale of the large, pointed east window, viewed from the east.**



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