

# Cahir Castle

Cahir Castle is one of the largest and best preserved medieval castles in Ireland.

Background: 20th century view from across the River Suir

The location of Cahir Castle, a rocky island in the River Suir, is a natural strong-point reputed to be the site of an early stone fort. The name Cahir upholds this tradition as it derives from the Irish "Cathair" meaning a stone fort.

At the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 the area around Cahir was under the overlordship of the O'Briens of Thomond, the descendants of Brian Boraimhe. In 1192 this territory was granted to Phillip of Worcester by John, Lord of Ireland, who later became King John. The very fine motte and bailey at Knockgraffon, 5.6 km north of Cahir, probably represents the original administrative headquarters or caput of Phillip's lordship: there would have been a substantial wooden tower or bretèche on top of the motte, a high steep-sided artificial mound beside the suir.

The earliest visible remains of building at Cahir Castle belong to the 13th century but how much, if any, was built by Phillip of Worcester and how much by his nephew and heir, William, is uncertain.

Basilia, the great-granddaughter of William of Worcester, by her marriage to Milo de Bermingham, brought the lordship into the Bermingham family.

The barony of Cahir reverted and remained with the English crown from 1332 until 1375.

In 1375 the barony of Cahir was granted to James, 3rd Earl of Ormond, and to Elizabeth, his wife. In 1405 at James' death Cahir passed to his natural son James, (Seamus Gallda) by Katherine, daughter of the 3rd Earl of Desmond, from whom descended the Cahir branch of Butlers. This united two great houses of Butler (Ormond) and Fitzgerald (Desmond). Cahir Castle became the family seat at about that time. The title Baron Caher was created in 1543. The castle was in Butler ownership until 1961, although not their residence since 1650. In 1964, following the death of Richard Butler Charteris, Cahir Castle was taken in to State care as a National Monument.



Above: Butler family coat of arms

## Description of the castle

### The Barbican

This fortified approach is located outside the main line of defence. When part of the attacking force gains entry to this area they were vulnerable to missiles fired by defenders, but would find it difficult to retreat, due to the enclosed nature of the barbican. The Butler family coat of arms can be seen above the main gate.

### Outer Courtyard

This is the largest and most public of the courtyards. In peace times, during the day this would be busy with people working and trading. Access to this area is via the main gate, but access can be limited to one person at a time by only opening the small gate set into the larger one. The gateway to the next courtyard is defended by one of several machicolations in the castle, and the defenders would use this to pour boiling water, hot sand, rocks etc. on to the attackers.

Two round, flanking towers are positioned at its outside corners. These guard towers were accessed via the wall walks that surmount the walls surrounding the courtyard. The outer wall facing the present car park has undergone significant repairs, suggesting that this wall was breached by cannon fire in the 1599 siege.



Above: Outer Courtyard

Cahir Cottage was built in the 19th century by the Butler family. Today it accommodates an audiovisual entitled 'Cahir Castle and the Irish Castle'.

The sally port in the west wall was the only other exit apart from the main gate and acted as an escape route during times of attack.

### Middle Courtyard

This courtyard is dominated by the keep tower which was the inner stronghold of the castle, often serving as the lord's residence. At Cahir, this building was originally the gatehouse of the castle when it was founded in the 13th century, and would have been the main entry point. The shape of the original gateway can be seen, and this was fortified with a portcullis and also likely had a ramp leading to the passageway.

The original entrance through the basement was blocked in the early 16th century following the addition of the outer defences. Entry to the inner ward was through a gateway protected by a portcullis and double machicolation. The round tower was a prison tower and the projection to its east side was the garderobe (medieval toilet)



Above: Middle Courtyard

### Trap Area

Once the attackers gained entry to this area the portcullis would be dropped and they would meet a closed gate at the other side. The defenders would then fire arrows, rocks and other missiles from the walls above.



Entrance to the Trapping Area

### Inner courtyard

The oldest courtyard built on the highest part of the rocky island provided access to a chapel, the kitchen (nothing remains of these), the well, the great hall and to the upper floors of the keep in the 13th century. The northeast and northwest towers were later additions.



Above : 13th century Inner Courtyard

Right : The Great Hall

### The Keep

The core of the building is the original main tower and gatehouse of the 13th century castle. The door to the keep was protected by a machicolation above the door, a musket loop, an iron door (yett) in front of the wooden door and an arrow loop behind. Access to the floors above was also controlled by a narrow circular staircase which ascends clockwise, giving advantage to a right handed defender. This tower originally provided three levels of accommodation for the lord's family and these large open areas were sometimes divided by wooden partitions or moveable wooden screens. The walls of the main rooms at Cahir would have been hung with tapestries while wooden paneling (wainscot) may have been used on the walls from the 16th century.



The Keep from above

### The Great Hall

In the 13th century this building was attached to the keep, but in 1840 it was shortened, leaving the original fireplace in the open. This is where meals and other communal events would have taken place. Food was prepared in the kitchen, which possibly stood against the wall adjacent to the well.

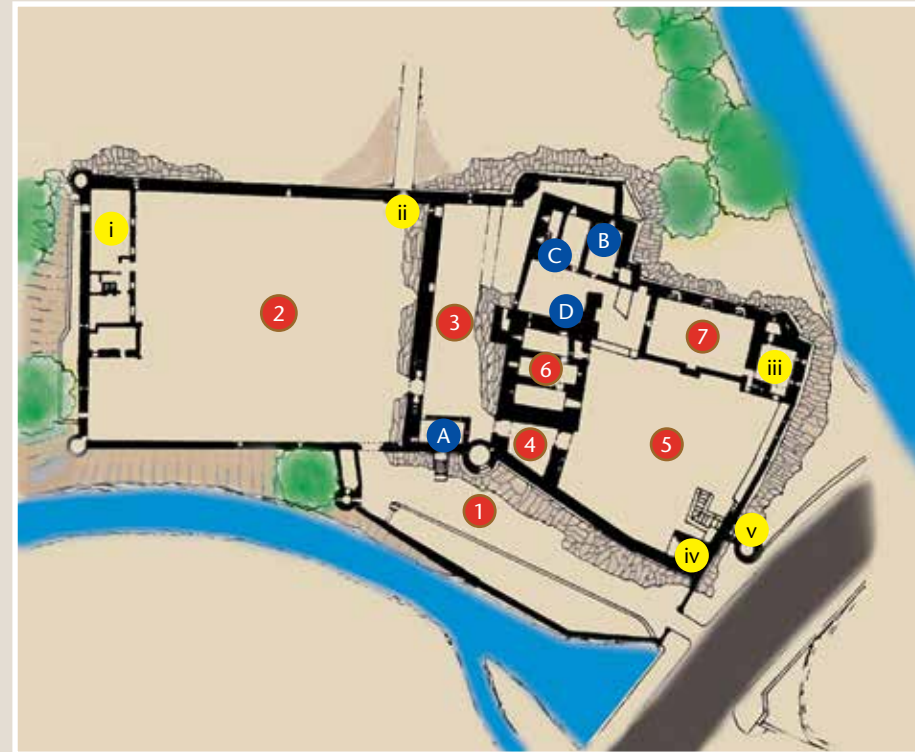


# Cahir Castle

## VISITORS' GUIDE



### Cahir Castle ground plan



- |                     |                      |               |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| 1. Barbican         | i. Cahir Cottage     | A. Reception  |
| 2. Outer Courtyard  | ii. Sally Port       | B. Toilets    |
| 3. Middle Courtyard | iii. Northwest Tower | C. Exhibition |
| 4. Trap Area        | iv. Northeast Tower  | D. Exhibition |
| 5. Inner Courtyard  | v. Well Tower        |               |
| 6. Gatehouse/Keep   |                      |               |
| 7. The Great Hall   |                      |               |

### Major historic events at the castle

#### The Siege

In 1599 Robert Devereaux, the 2nd Earl of Essex was sent to Ireland by Queen Elizabeth 1st to defeat Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. Instead of invading Ulster, Essex marched south and arrived in Cahir on 25th May with around two to three thousand men, a cannon and a culverin (a smaller and more accurate piece of heavy artillery).

Although, Lord Cahir was with the attacking force, the castle was held by his younger brother, James Gallda Butler, who refused to surrender. During the three days the castle was besieged little damage was done, mostly because the larger cannon broke down on the first day.

When the Earl of Essex eventually took control of the castle 80 of the defenders had been killed, although James Gallda Butler and a few of his followers escaped by swimming under the water mill. This siege was to be the only time the castle was taken by force.

James Gallda recaptured the castle the following year, and held it for some months. The Butler family regained possession of the castle in 1601.



Siege 1599 (Pacata Hibernia)

#### Oliver Cromwell

When Oliver Cromwell arrived in Cahir in February 1650 with a large force and artillery, he offered the garrison one chance to surrender, which was accepted. As the castle occupants had offered no resistance, they were allowed to leave without hindrance, with all their arms, colours and baggage.

It was at Cahir Castle that the articles of agreement between local Confederate leaders and Cromwellian commanders were signed. The Butlers were reinstated in 1662 after the restoration of Charles II.

*"Before Cahir, 24th February 1650.*

*Sir - having brought the army and my cannon near this place, according to my usual manner in summoning places, I thought fit to offer you terms honorable to soldiers; that you may march away with your baggage, arms and colours, free from injuries or violence. But if I be, notwithstanding, necessitated to bend my cannon upon you, you must expect the extremity usually in such cases. To avoid blood, this is offered to you by Your servant, Oliver Cromwell."*

Cromwell's original letter is in the British Museum

