

Dundrum Castle Tour Script – Compiled by Stuart Alexander and Emma Magee

Welcome to Dundrum Castle, this audio descriptive tour leads you from the front gate and around the castle. Please take note of any safety guidance. To use this audio guided tour please listen to the directions and when to pause.

At the front gate

Welcome to Dundrum Castle, one of the most well-preserved castle ruins in Ulster. This castle was occupied for more than 500 years. It served as a military stronghold and was also the residence of a local lord. The castle's dominance in the landscape was a symbol of the Lord's power and control. It was the administrative centre for the surrounding area and also provided shelter for local tenants during times of strife. Throughout its history it was attacked and ownership changed several times.

The date 1180 has been carved into the stone cap of the gate post on the right of the entrance gate. This references the date the castle was built. The carving is deep and precise and is a more modern addition.

Around the castle grounds there are information points that have text and images. These displays are around 50 centimetres tall and around 1 metre wide.

As you enter through the gates, Dundrum Castle sits on top of stacked grassy hills high up to the left. The ruins at the top of the hill are known as the upper ward and the keep. They sit about 60 meters above sea level, a strategic location with views for miles around in all directions. There is a large circular wall surrounding the keep known as the curtain wall. It has been damaged in places and there are some gaps, most notably in the view from here, a large part of the wall is missing.

The castle is mainly built with basalt stone, which is dark grey in colour. There are irregular rough-cut stones and these are all held together with grey mortar.

On the right as you move up towards the upper ward there is a wall that runs down from the front of the castle. This is part of the original wall that enclosed the lower ward of Dundrum Castle. There are slits in this wall that were used as arrow loops which allowed archers to defend the castle from within. Part of this wall has been used as the gable end of a large building, located to your right, this is known as Blundells house. It is a plantation era dwelling that was erected in the early 17th century. It was originally two stories high, but it is now in ruins and neither the roof nor windows survive.

Please take care as you begin to move up the path, as it is steep, uneven and narrow. The path is only about 1 metre wide and has grass on either side. There is a small plateau at the top of the path with an archway to the right. Here there are different routes to explore the castle grounds.

You may now pause the audio until you reach the plateau.

You have now reached the plateau; the castle's upper ward is directly in front of you, to your right is a stone archway, this is part of the lower ward curtain wall that runs down to Blundell's house. The path through this archway leads into the lower ward. The path straight ahead takes you up to the gate house and the path to the left leads to the public toilets.

The ruins on the summit of the hill before you, date to the late 12th and early 13th centuries. The castle was built by John De Courcy, a Knight from Somerset and his successors Hugh de Lacy and the De Burgh family. Collectively these men established the Anglo-Norman Earldom of Ulster. The Earldom boundaries roughly correspond to those of the modern-day counties Antrim and Down, extending across the North coast to the Inishowen Peninsula.

With the waning of Anglo-Norman power in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the castle passed into the hands of the Gaelic Magennis family who made their own alterations and additions.

Please turn right passing under the archway and continue along the path into the lower ward and stop after about 20 meters. At this location down the steep grassy hill on the right is the lime kiln. Take care if you are stepping off the path here as the walk down to it is across undulating ground.

You may now pause the audio.

The kiln is a round stone structure, the top of which rises about 40cm above the ground. It originally was set against the back of a quarry face and was used to produce the mortar for Dundrum castle. It is about 4 meters in diameter and originally was around 5 metres deep. The kiln gradually filled in overtime as it was used by the inhabitants of the castle to dump waste. During its excavation in 2013, archaeologists uncovered lots of butchered animal bones, shells from sea food and broken pottery.

Please rejoin the path and follow it round to the left, here you will come to a small bridge that will take you into the upper ward. This was the location of the original entrance into the castle, with a stone tower that has since been destroyed.

Please move about 20 metres past the bridge and stop.

You may now pause the audio.

You are now in the centre of the upper ward of Dundrum castle.

This was an extremely busy place filled with horses and their stables, blacksmiths, cobblers, armourers and carpenters. It's likely that the kitchen was here too. Although no buildings other than the keep remain, this area would have been a hub of activity.

The name Dundrum predates the Anglo-Norman occupation of the hill. Dundrum or its Irish name Dún Droma translates as "*hillfort of the ridge*".

Before the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1177, the surrounding lands were occupied by the Dal Fiatach, one of the ancient kingdoms of Ulster. It is believed that this hill was the site of one of their strongholds. This would have been a circular earthwork known as a rath, a banked and ditched enclosure that encircled the top of the hill. We know about this earlier occupation because artefacts were recovered by archaeologists working here. During the Anglo-Norman period, Dundrum castle became known as *Castrum de Rath*. This is likely to be a reference to its earlier history.

John De Courcy Invasion

In the winter of 1177 John De Courcy, marched north from the Anglo-Norman base in Dublin with 22 Knights and 300 foot soldiers. His target was eastern Ulster, where he aimed to carve out his own fiefdom. De Courcy and his army marched to Downpatrick, the administrative centre of the Dal Fiatach, where he seized their capital. The Dal Fiatach king, Ruari McDunleavy, was caught unawares and fled. De Courcy fortified the monastic site of Cathedral Hill in Downpatrick.

McDunleavy returned after gathering his forces and gave battle. However, De Courcy's fortified position, along with the superior weapons and armour of the Anglo Normans, resulted in the defeat of McDunleavy. Gerald of Wales, a contemporary chronicler, describes de Courcy as being tall, fair-haired and with great strength. He was described as courageous and a skilful warrior who was always at the centre of the fighting, leading from the front.

Parts of the wall around the upper ward are incomplete, with several large gaps. One of the largest spaces sits to the right of the gatehouse, facing the keep. This is around 6 meters wide and provides an impressive view of the surrounding landscape. The remaining wall on the right-hand side stands to the full height of the original curtain wall, which is about 6 meters high.

You may now pause the audio until you reach the large gap in the curtain wall to your left.

From this location, in the distance the Mourne Mountains rise dramatically before sweeping down toward the sea. Closer to the castle is Dundrum Bay, the surrounding farmland, and the town of Dundrum itself.

Following his victory at Downpatrick, de Courcy began consolidating his power in Eastern Ulster. He did this by establishing new motte and baileys and castles throughout the landscape. The most famous of these being Carrickfergus on Belfast Lough.

At Dundrum, de Courcy refortified the earlier Dal Fiatach Rath. He likely chose this location, not only because of its elevated position, but also due to its proximity to Dundrum Bay. The bay provided a safe harbour for loading and offloading supplies.

When de Courcy and his troops arrived at Dundrum they destroyed the earlier hilltop earthwork and constructed the curtain wall of the upper ward. The upper ward contained the lord's residence, possibly a chapel, stables and some timber buildings. The only remains of de Courcy's occupation is the curtain wall, which includes a double latrine.

The latrine is built into the curtain wall behind the round keep. It is about 1 and a half meters above the ground and about 2 and a half meters wide. Interestingly there are two seats, so that it could be used by two people at the same time. Waste would have exited through shoots to the other side of the wall where it gathered. It was then collected by a servant to be used as fertiliser likely in a nearby kitchen garden. These toilets were located in de Courcy's main residential hall, that was later destroyed.

By the early 1180s De Courcy had consolidated his power in Eastern Ulster. He married Princess Affrica, the daughter of the King of the Isle of Mann. This political alliance, and distance from the English authorities meant that the Earldom of Ulster was a semi-independent power.

During his reign, De Courcy began producing his own coinage. These coins didn't feature the head of the King of England but instead, the cross of St Patrick and De Courcy's own image. This insult to the crown, along with a desire to curb the independence of De Courcy's kingdom, resulted in King John of England instructing Hugh De Lacy to invade and seize Ulster in 1204. De Courcy was deposed of his Lordship and in 1205 De Lacy was granted the title Earl of Ulster.

Records tell us that De Courcy, responded by gathering a large force with his brother-in-law, who was now the King of the Isle of Mann. Together, they sailed to Ulster with approximately 100 ships and laid siege to Dundrum Castle.

However, their efforts were cut short when Walter De Lacy, brother of Hugh, arrived with a substantial army and broke the siege, reportedly "*in great confusion*". From that time De Courcy never recovered his Ulster lands. It was later said that he had built Dundrum Castle "*too well for his own good*".

Hugh De Lacy Tenure

Following Hugh de Lacys acquisition of the Ulster Earldom, he refurbished Dundrum Castle. He constructed a new gatehouse located on a steep slope, which made the castle even more difficult to attack. This gatehouse still stands today. De Courcy's hall was also torn down, and the round keep was built in its place. The circular design of this keep offered an advantage over square keeps in that it could not be undermined.

An example of this method of attack was during the siege of Rochester Castle. Here King John ordered a tunnel dug beneath one corner of the tower, this was then packed with fifty live pigs and set alight. Pig fat burns at extremely high temperatures, and the resulting blaze caused the entire corner of the keep to collapse. This tactic cannot be used against a round keep as there are no corners to undermine.

The keep is a large round building ahead of you. It stands about 16 meters tall and 14 meters wide. It is a round tower structure with steps and handrails that lead up to a doorway. This doorway is a modern addition to allow visitors to access the interior.

High on the outer wall of the keep, facing the gatehouse is another opening. This was originally the main entrance into the tower, positioned on the second floor. A wooden staircase would

have led up to it from the outside. Should the castle walls be breached during an attack the staircase could have been destroyed by those taking refuge in the keep, thereby hampering the assault of any attackers.

Today the entrance into the ground floor of the keep is up 7 steps and down 5 on the other side. There is a low ceiling here and there are handrails on both sides. Take care as the steps are uneven.

You may now pause the audio, please feel free to explore the upper ward and then move into the keep.

The floor on which you are situated now would have been a functional space for storage.

High up on the first floor there are the remnants of a grand fireplace built into the wall. The bottom of the fireplace is about 3 meters wide and it continues up into the flue which goes through the wall and out the top of the keep.

There are many holes in the walls known as 'put logs' indicating where the beams for the floor levels were located.

On the first and second floors there are window openings built into the deep walls. People living in the castle may have sat here to make use of the natural light for their crafts or work.

What also makes Dundrum so strategically important is what is located beneath the keep. Below the tower is a massive rock cut cistern that was dug out by the Anglo-Normans. This provided a vital lifeline during any sieges. The people taking refuge in, and defending the castle, would have had unlimited access to this fresh source of water.

There is an interesting story from 1538 when Lord Deputy Lenoard Grey campaigned in the Lecale area to expel Scottish settlers. He raided the monastery of Down and stole the relics of Saints Patrick, Columcille and Brigid. Accounts state that "a Saxon captain" took the relics to Dundrum where he went into the castle and fell into a hole by the miracles of God. Rather than being a divine chasm that opened, it can be assumed that the Saxon captain took the relics into the keep and fell through the floorboards into the cistern. He and the relics were obviously retrieved because when the cistern was excavated by archaeologists in the 1960s no trace of either was found.

In the centre of the floor there is a glass panel that allows light into the cistern. However, due to Health and Safety its is closed to the public.

Hugh De Lacy ultimately had his own issues with King John and in 1210 during the King's expedition to Ireland, De Lacy abandoned Dundrum. The castle, and De Lacy's earldom, were then taken into Royal possession. The Earldom was administered as a Royal holding until 1223, when De Lacy decided to reclaim his Ulster lands by force. He and his Irish allies launched attacks on Anglo-Norman territories in Ulster, Leinster and Meath. By 1227 he had regained his lordship which he held until his death in 1243.

The De Burghs

In 1264 the Earldom of Ulster was granted to Walter de Burgh, Lord of Connaught. He and his successors governed the Earldom for the next 70 years and attempted to suppress the rising power of the Gaelic Lords of Ulster. However, in 1315 Edward Bruce, brother of Robert the Bruce, invaded Ireland. This war lasted for three years and although it was unsuccessful, it severely weakened Anglo-Norman control in Ulster.

In 1333 William de Burgh, the 4th Earl of Ulster, was murdered by some of his own barons. The subsequent civil war was widespread. Following this conflict Dundrum castle was described as being ruinous and of no value because of the substantial repairs required.

It is still possible to access the wall walk at the top of the keep. As you leave the tower via the steps, a spiral staircase is on your right. This is built into the wall of the keep. Before you decide to go up the stairs, please be aware that the steps are narrow and uneven with few places to rest and the top of the keep is difficult to navigate.

If you decide to climb the spiral staircase, please note, there is a handrail on the left hand side as you move up the stairwell. There are 21 steps leading to the first floor, it is only possible to stop here at a small alcove that overlooks the inside of the keep. There are 2 steps down to the barrier at this alcove.

You may now pause the audio if you are planning on climbing the spiral staircase to the first floor.

From the first floor continuing up the winding stairwell, there are a further 21 steps to the opening at the 2nd floor barrier.

You may now pause the audio if you are planning on climbing to the second-floor opening.

If you plan on climbing to the top floor of the keep there are 16 more steps. Here you can access the wall walk.

Please pause the audio if you are planning on climbing to the top of the tower.

To your right, there are 5 further steps to a small lookout area. Please note this is only large enough for one person. To the left there is a short metal walkway with 11 steps down to the wall walk. As you move through this space, there are low lintels and projecting stones so please take care and mind your head.

When you have finished exploring the keep and wall walk you may now descend the spiral staircase to exit the tower.

The Magennis'

The Black Death reached Ireland in the late 1340s, with further outbreaks occurring regularly in the decades that followed. These repeated waves of plague significantly weakened the country's economy. The effects were felt most sharply in the east of the island, where the population was

more dense in towns and villages and therefore more vulnerable to the rapid spread of disease. Across the island many Anglo-Normans had integrated themselves with Gaelic families and culture. Over time, these settlers, often referred to as the “Old English”, were said to have become “more Irish than the Irish themselves”. At the same time other Anglo-Norman landlords lived in England, taking little interest in their Irish holdings. This set of circumstances paved the way for a Gaelic Revival.

In the early 1400s Anglo-Norman power in Ulster was waning. The Scottish MacDonnell Lordship in North Antrim was exerting more influence, and the Clandeboyne O’Neills were becoming the prevalent power in Eastern Ulster. In south Down, Dundrum Castle passed into the hands of the Gaelic Magennis’. The family’s main residence was the round keep that you have just been exploring.

You can now leave the upper ward by exiting through the gate house or back down the path and past the lime kiln. Please note that the exit through the gate house is up two steps and the floor running across the bottom of the gatehouse is uneven stone. There are two steps down out of the gate house and a very steep winding path with two low steps with handrails will take you back to the plateau beside the archway.

You may now pause the audio until you reach the plateau beside the archway.

The Nine Years War

In 1594 Ulster, and soon all of Ireland, was engulfed in a bloody and costly conflict known as the Nine-Year War or Tyrone’s Rebellion. It was fought between an alliance of Gaelic Lordships under the leadership of Hugh O’Neill, 2nd Earl of Tyrone, against the Tudor forces of Queen Elizabeth I.

At the onset of the war, Dundrum castle appears to again be in the hands of the English crown. However, a lack of records from this time means we do not have an exact date of when this happened. It is possible that Hugh Magennis surrendered the castle to the Crown ten years earlier, in exchange for being granted the lordship of Iveagh.

Nevertheless, during the conflict the Magennis’ again come to hold the castle, taken either by siege or subterfuge. During the war, Dundrum was left vulnerable, as its crown garrison had been reduced to only 20 men. With such a small force defending it, it would not have been difficult for the Magennis’ to reoccupy the castle. However, in 1601 as the war drew to an end, the Magennis’ were compelled to surrender the castle to the Crown once more.

You may now pause the audio and move from here back to the front gate.

Following the Nine Years War, Dundrum castle was once again a crown possession. In the late 1620s early 1630s it passed to the Blundell family, who constructed the large manor house in the Lower Ward. The castle and manor house are recorded as being captured by Irish Rebels led by a Sir Con Magennis during the Irish rebellion of 1641. Con is said to have overwhelmed the 30 defenders with a force of 1500. These numbers are probably exaggerated, as Con only held onto

the castle and manor house for a matter of days. He was displaced by Sir James Montgomery of Ards, who placed a strong garrison in the castle owing to its strategic importance. During Cromwell's campaign in Ireland between 1649 to 1653, parliamentary forces damaged the castle to ensure that it could never again be used for defence. Regardless it is recorded that the Blundells still enjoyed the property.

It's possible to explore the inside of Blundell's house but there is no formal path to it, walkways or handrails in the building. The ground is uneven and there are very steep steps inside.

The building is L shaped with two large rooms. On the front elevation facing Dundrum Bay there are two entrances each flanked by windows around 1 metre square. Above the right doorway there are another two frames for windows or possibly doors for the 1st and 2nd floors.

The entrance on the right takes you into a large open space, there are holes in the walls where the upper floors were located. There were two floors here and the remains of a fireplace on the first floor is high up on the right-hand side. In the left of this room there are 6 steep steps that leads into another part of the house where there is another fireplace and the remnants of a partition wall.

As time passed the manor house was abandoned and the castle became a picturesque ruin visited by local people, families and tourists. In 1954 the Marquis of Downshire granted guardianship of Dundrum Castle to the state, who will ensure that this wonderful site is preserved for future generations to enjoy.

Thank you for visiting Dundrum Castle, we hope that you enjoyed the tour; please feel free to further explore the castle grounds. If you are now leaving, we would like to wish you a safe onward journey.