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Descriptive and photographic report
on
Ballynahinch Tower House
decorative plasterwork

Ballynahinch,
Recess,
Connemara,
Co. Galway

CLIENT : Yelsea Ltd.,
c/o de Blacam and Meagher Architects,
4 St. Catherine's Lane West,
Dublin 4.

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A.1 INTRODUCTION

Ballynahinch Castle is situated on a small island, Castle Island, in the eastern part of Ballynahinch Lake near Recess in Connemara, Co. Galway. The main N59 Galway to Clifden road runs along the northern shore of the lake while the Ballynahinch Castle Hotel is located near the southern side of the lake. There are two conjoined standing structures on the island, a late medieval tower house on the southern side and a late eighteenth or early nineteenth century building known as the 'fishing lodge' attached to the northern side of the tower house. A stony band around the circumference of the island may be associated with an island enclosure.

The tower house is a three-storey structure at present, although it is uncertain if it was originally higher. Although some of the walls are partly rendered, numerous cracks, crevices and other holes are present throughout the building. No roofs or ceilings remain and there was extensive ivy growth with several small bushes present on the tops of the walls.

The adjoining 'fishing lodge' is a two-storey building which is also roofless. There are two kilns in its interior in separate rooms.

A.1.1 General introduction to structural issues

Ballynahinch Castle is a mid-16th century tower house of local coursed, rough-cut stone. A ruined structure of this type and age typically presents a number of structural weaknesses which need to be addressed to preserve the structure and make it safe.

- Vegetation removal (tower house and 18th century fishing lodge)
- Masonry walls (tower house): Typically the walls will require coping, selective rebuilding, deep maintenance pointing and grouting. Deterioration of masonry is related to the moisture profile of walls and grouting is necessary in horizontal bands below cappings, sills and exposed surfaces and on both the internal and external face of the masonry;
- Plaster: Internal plaster with historic graffiti will be temporarily secured while consolidation options are investigated. Failing this, preservation by record will be used as a final option.
- Collapsing lintel (tower house): to be replaced in selected limestone laid in lime mortar

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A.2 CONSERVATION POLICY

A.2.1 Conservation philosophy

1. Protect the special historical character of the tower house and fishing lodge;
2. To respect and conserve historic fabric on the site;
3. Minimum intervention: To avoid any unnecessary interventions to the historic fabric of the site;
4. Where restoration works are required that these works be carried out on a like-for-like basis involving experienced and qualified crafts professionals under the supervision of a suitably qualified conservation professional;
5. Archaeology: To protect the potential sub-surface remains of the earliest development of the site (possible island enclosure or ringfort-cashel)
6. Ensure the ongoing delivery of a tourism experience, whereby the building and its visitors are protected.

The following general principals of conservation have been adopted in this document, and have resulted in a proposed conservation policy for the masonry walls, as follows:-

A.2.2 Preservation:

The primary intention is to halt any further decay of the structure and make it safe for occasional visitors. It is the intention of the owner to preserve the tower house in a state comparable to its existing state, by retaining the original ruined character of the walls in so far as is reasonably practicable with due regard to public safety. These proposals to repair the building where it has deteriorated, using a policy of minimum intervention have been informed by international best practice standards.

A.2.3 Restoration:

This applies to the 18th century fishing lodge structure **only**. A minimalistic approach has been adopted whereby the structure may be re-roofed using scholarly research to ascertain the form of the original roof. There are no proposals to provide services on the island and restoration works will be of a lightweight minimal nature to reroof the structure, restore doors and windows where appropriate and provide a flood resistant floor surface internally. These proposals will be subject to agreement from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the local planning authority, Galway County Council. Consultation with these bodies will take place in advance of any proposed re-roofing works.

A.2.4 Recording:

There are several universally agreed principals of conservation; the first is that no conservation work should be carried out on the building, without a thorough recording of the building fabric and material to be conserved. The importance of recording the Castle is obvious, due to its historical and architectural merit. An archaeological report has been provided and further research and on-site monitoring will be provided by archaeologist, Florence Hurley. A full set of record photos should be taken during the work in addition to updating current measured drawings as the contract proceeds.

In order to better understand the two structures and get a more complete picture of their structural condition, permission was given by the National Monument Service (NMS), the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Galway County Council to cut back the vegetation.

It was agreed by the NMS; the architects de Blacam and Meagher; the client and Southgate and Associates, conservation engineers that a detailed descriptive and photographic survey of the tower house, the 'fishing lodge', the decorative plasterwork within the tower house and the historic graffiti within the tower house be undertaken to inform any future works on the site.

This is particularly important for the plasterwork as this is in a relatively poor condition due to the effects of weathering and the impact of vegetation. A considerable amount has been lost already, particularly in the western and southern walls of the entrance lobby and the eastern and southern walls of the main ground floor chamber.

While the existence of the plasterwork was known prior to this report, it is the first detailed examination and detailing of what is present and what elements no longer survive.

B. 1 METHODOLOGY

A detailed photographic record of all extant coving and locations of where it had been present was compiled. A written record was also undertaken. Profiles of the best preserved sections of the decorative coving were taken using a contour gauge and drawn at a scale of 1:1.

It should be noted that the scaffolding erected to allow for inspection and recording of the site and for vegetation removal does impact on photography in the site. It is generally more difficult to see fully or appreciate features when they are partially obscured by scaffolding. This is particularly the case within the tower house where the scaffolding levels do not respect the original floor levels. In practice this means that the first scaffolding level is approximately 1.25m below the original ceiling level.

C.1 THE PLASTER SURFACES

The general condition of the plaster on the interior surfaces of the tower house varied greatly. It was in generally good condition where it was most protected from the elements in the stairwell and garderobe chamber or passageway. The plaster surface of the main chamber of the ground floor was in good condition except for the interior of the eastern wall where the plaster had come away from the render, exposing the scratch coat.

The plaster surface in the entrance lobby was in a relatively good condition on its southern side, between the entrance doorway and the spiral stairs. On the other side of the lobby the surface of the plasterwork had fallen away and what remained was bulging. This is probably related to the voids visible on the outer face of this wall, the eastern wall of the tower house. Where the surface of the plaster had come away on this wall a brown gritty material was exposed.

On the first floor there is no plaster visible except for a thin coating in isolated areas. There is some evidence from the edges of the plaster coating by the stairs and at the edge of the oriel window that some form of wood panelling may have been present on this level. An impression of a vertical timber is present at the limit of the plastered surfaces of these two areas. This may have been simply two timbers delimiting the stairs and entrance to the oriel window. The irregular coursing of the masonry where a clear vertical break is evident on the inner face of the northern wall would have been an obvious feature if not covered by either a plaster coat or panelling.

The stairwell has a thick plaster coat which ends immediately below a horizontal line of small joist holes on the southern side of the circular stairwell. Remnants of the plaster show that it formed a flat ceiling.

In the oriel window the roof is formed by corbelled masonry. Two joist holes are present as well as traces of the plaster ceiling which appears also to have been flat.

A plastered surface is present in the attic space over both kilns. This is not present in the lower areas of the two rooms. The surface extends as far as the floor line only. The windows present; a larger splayed one in the southern kiln and a smaller segmentally arched one in the northern kiln are plastered internally. The low doorway at first floor level leading into the attic space of the northern kiln is also plastered but much of this is covered by vegetation and soil.

D.1 DECORATIVE PLASTERWORK

An unusual feature of Ballynahinch Castle is the decorative moulded plasterwork that is found in two areas, the entrance lobby and the main chamber of the ground floor. This takes the form of coving or crown moulding. There is no indication that similar plasterwork ever existed in the main chamber on the first floor level. This is relatively open to the elements which could have resulted in the loss of any such plasterwork originally present. However plain plasterwork surfaces cover the stairwell for the spiral stairs and the complete

lack of any evidence for decorative plasterwork suggests to this author that none was present here.

An additional feature described under this heading are two areas which show evidence for wicker centring over the one of the embrasures on the ground floor and another on the first floor.

D.1.1 THE ENTRANCE LOBBY

This is a long rectangular chamber which gives access to the spiral stairs leading to the upper floor on its southern side, on the northern side is a short passageway leading to a recessed storage cupboard and a doorway leading to the later building attached to the northern side of the tower house. Directly opposite the main entrance to the tower is a doorway leading to the main chamber on the ground floor.

A decorative plaster coving was placed around the eastern and northern sides of the lobby. No trace of this is present on the western side where it appears to have collapsed. The wall here did not extend higher than floor level of the first floor. The ceiling of the lobby was wooden at its northern end but comprised of stone slabs at its southern end where the spiral stairs led up to a small corridor at first floor level. The top of this internal wall has become covered with light vegetation and humic material over time which has caused severe damage to the moulding on the inner (main chamber) side of the wall. Some smaller stones have fallen from the uppermost part of this wall face. There is no plaster surviving at the top of the wall on the southern end of the lobby but it is likely that the coving was present here also but has since fallen.

The moulding where most complete (**Fig. 1**) has a projection of 80mm and a drop of 94mm, the face measuring 125mm. The elements of the coving consist of (from the base) an astragal, with a cavetto moulding above with a corona separating the cavetto from another astragal. The upper astragal is not as prominent as the lower one.

The coving is best preserved in the north-east corner of the lobby despite some light vegetation growing on top of it. The general condition of the wall plaster here is poor. Much of this is attributable to the large voids within the wall allowing moisture penetration resulting in the collapse of a large area of plaster and the bulging of some of the remaining plaster. Only the lower part of the moulding survives on the northern wall. On the eastern wall the coving has disappeared completely over the main doorway and to the south of this feature.

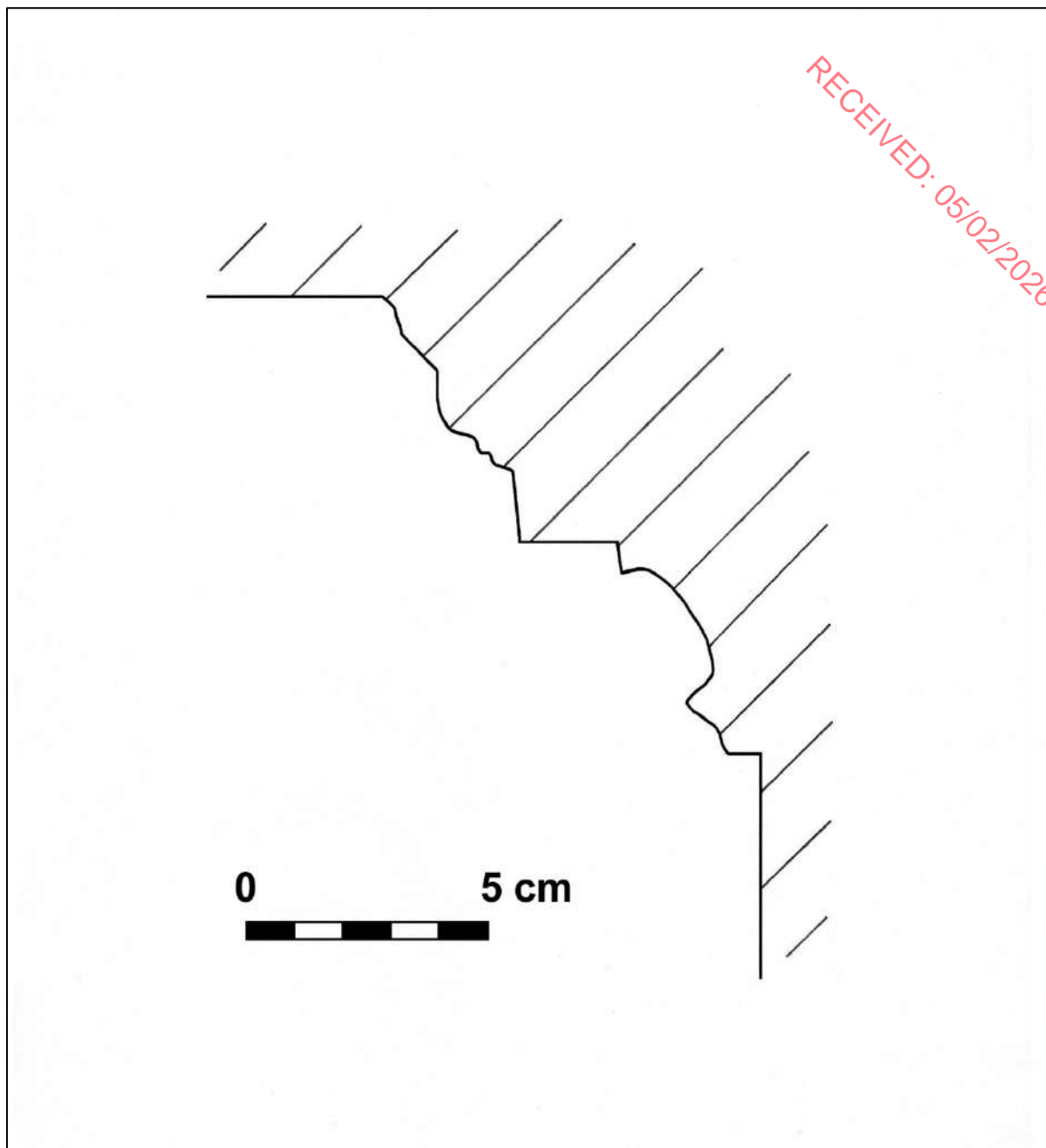


Fig. 1 Section through coving moulding, eastern wall of entrance lobby.

D.1.2 THE MAIN CHAMBER OF THE GROUND FLOOR

The only other place the decorative coving is found is in the main chamber of the ground floor. It was present on all four walls originally but has disappeared almost completely from the eastern wall and much of the southern wall. Part of the plaster finish of the western wall has fallen exposing the render undercoat. This has a prominent cross-hatch scratch coat which is also found on a raised band acting as a foundation for the coving. This can be seen on the western and southern walls where the moulded detail is no longer present.

The moulding is best preserved in the north-west and south-west corners of the chamber. Elsewhere it survives to varying degrees; along much of the western wall the upper part of the moulding has disappeared while very little is left on the northern wall apart from the north-west corner. On the southern wall only a small portion survives beneath the fireplace.

The detail of the moulding is identical to that found in the lobby (**Fig. 2**) with only minor differences in the sharpness of the moulding; the elements of it are exactly the same. The ceiling here was formed by timber joists running in a north-south direction. These presumably supported a lath and plaster ceiling.

Here too the moulded detail forms a lip projecting from the wall surface. There is also a narrow rebate c. 150-200mm wide at ceiling level on the north, west and south sides to give support to the wooden joists. It has allowed small plants to root here and it has accumulated a humic soil from decaying vegetation.

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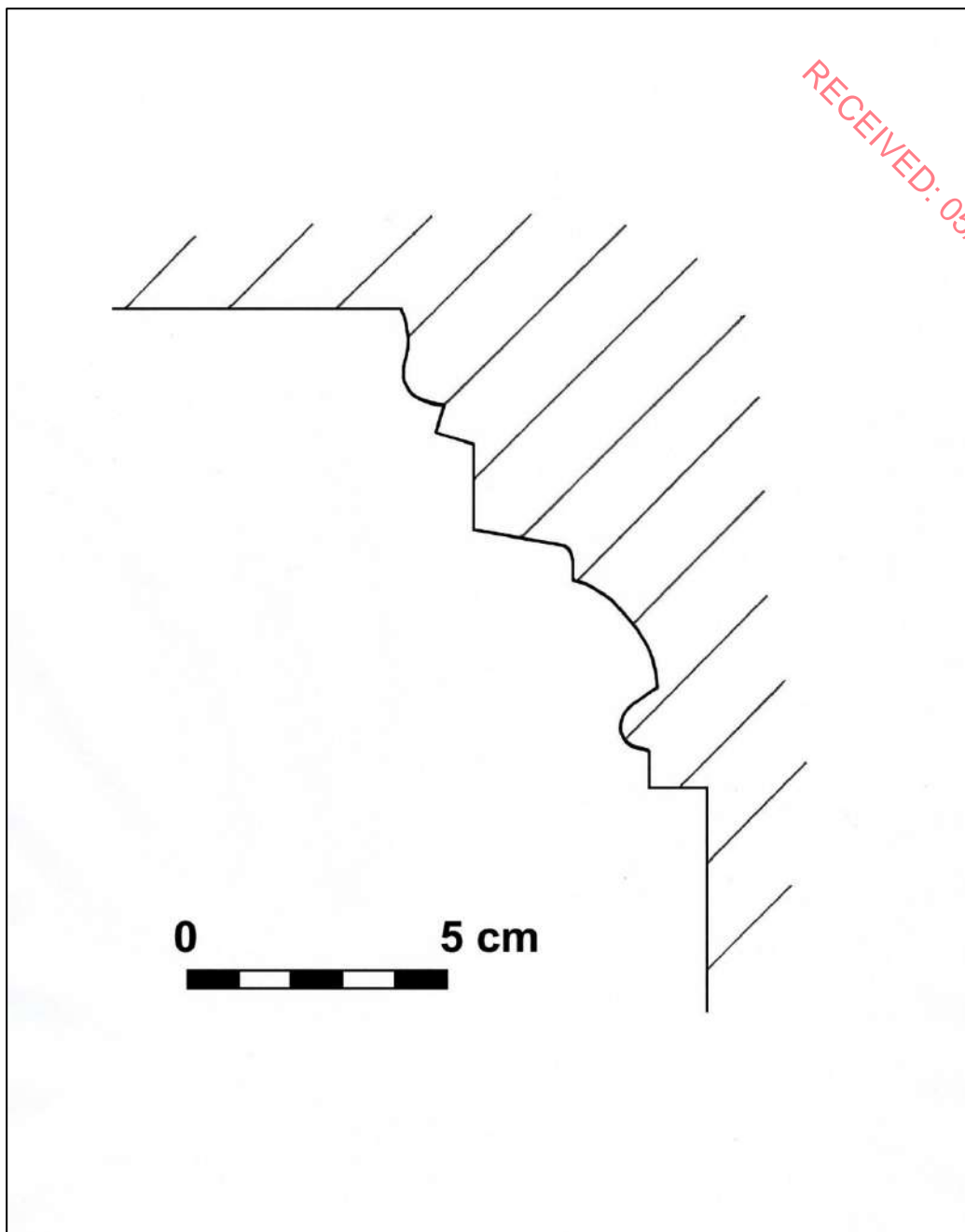


Fig. 2 Section through coving moulding, northern wall of ground floor chamber.

E.1 OTHER EVIDENCE FROM THE PLASTERWORK

The only other decorative plasterwork features are the arched heads over the main entrance to the tower house; the arched head where the entrance lobby meets the spiral stairs and the remains of a similar headed arch over the entrance to the oriel window. These are plain and made by applying a plaster coat over a masonry arch.

The stairwell of the spiral stairs is also plastered with a smooth coat. This continues into the passageway leading to the garderobe. The stairwell was covered by a flat plaster ceiling

supported by timber beams, the slots for which are still present. A window in the south-east corner of the tower house provides light to the lobby and stairs. This is splayed and has a semi-circular head to the embrasure. The oriel is plastered. Here there is evidence for a flat plaster ceiling supported by a short timber joist. Above this was a corbelled stone roof.

The main chamber at first floor has traces of a thin render covering on parts of the southern and northern walls. The large window embrasure on the west wall was plastered as traces of this are present on the northern side of the embrasure. There is a plaster lip projecting beyond the wall face over the embrasure.

Elsewhere at this level there are projecting plaster lips on the vertical northern edge of the stairwell, where it meets the lobby at first floor level, and on the vertical southern splay of the window opening in the eastern wall. Both of these features show the presence of vertical timbers. There is no trace of wall plaster between these two features. This may indicate that some type of timber wall panelling was present. The window on the eastern wall is unusual in that it is quite long in comparison to its width. It has been partly infilled at the base to create a shorter opening. The wall thicknesses on either side of the opening differ with a thicker wall on the southern side of the window. The northern side has been rebuilt, probably when a viewing platform was created in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

In the plaster on the edges of the window embrasures in the main chamber on the ground floor; the inner edges of the window reveals and the inner sides of the main doorway there are impressions of timber corner beading. These were strips of wood, triangular in section that were applied to give a straight edge to the openings and may also have had a decorative function.

E.1.1 WICKERWORK CENTRING

The only other evidence to be gleaned from examining the plasterwork is the impression of wickerwork centring over the western window embrasure on the ground floor. This is only present in two areas, on opposite sides of the embrasure with the larger, clearer piece on the northern side. This measures 340mm in length by 110mm in width. The other piece is less distinct and is covered by mould. It measures 210mm long by 80mm wide.

Another small area where wickerwork centring was located is on the southern side of the intrados of the western window embrasure on the first floor. This measured 270mm by 170mm.

A close examination was carried out of all other areas where such centring could have been used to support an arch. No other centring was visible. Where these arches were intact a solid coat of plaster obscured any such feature underneath, The small areas where the wicker impressions were found are where the plaster coat has deteriorated.

F.1 DISCUSSION

Decorative plaster mouldings are known from Irish castles and manor houses such as Ormond Castle, Carrick on Suir, Co. Tipperary; Portumna Castle, Co. Galway and Bunratty Castle, Co. Clare. These can be relatively closely dated to the mid-sixteenth to the early seventeenth century. Their subject matter varies from heraldry, cartouches and plasterwork portraits with foliage being a popular motif. Geometrical patterns and moulding became common features in houses of the gentry by the late seventeenth century and by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had become popular in middle class houses as well.

The decorative coving found at Ballynahinch Castle owes more to the later tradition of this type of work where simple bands of different moulding are combined to give a pleasing result. Such moulding can be seen in the main house (Ballynahinch Castle Hotel) built by the Martin family and it is not surprising that when the decision was taken to adapt the tower house on Castle Island into a summer house style retreat, that a relatively simple, quick and cost effective method of elevating the appearance of the interior should be chosen. Thus it was added to the structure purely for aesthetic reasons. It would have linked with similar decorative elements in the larger house nearby and created a unity of design between the two.

Other aspects of the modification of the tower house would have reinforced this design similarity. The window openings received new timber framed windows. The design of the original medieval elements is unknown but the large embrasures and the relative security offered by the island site could have meant that large mullioned window surrounds could have been present. The main doorway was given an arched head, perhaps with a plain fanlight or else a simple wooden panel over the door. This arched head was repeated inside the entrance lobby on the approach to the stairs and over the entrance to the oriel chamber. It is unknown if a ceiling rose was present, however given the small size of the main chambers a candelabra would have provided sufficient light.

The continued existence of the moulded coving is problematical given its poor condition and the ingress of water into the ruined structure. This may be alleviated to a limited degree if coping is placed on the walls but this is more likely to slow the deterioration rather than stop it. The rebate that supported the timbers of the first floor acts as a vegetation and water trap and as this is directly over the moulding it has caused much damage. Clearance of the vegetation from this area might be of short term help.

The advice and expertise of the conservation engineer, the architects and the staff of the National Monuments Service would be necessary in dealing with this challenging issue.

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G. 1 PHOTOGRAPHS

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PL. 1 View of entrance lobby decorative coving looking north.



Pl. 2 Entrance lobby looking south. Coving has disappeared from wall over stairwell.



Pl. 3 Detail of coving on interior of northern wall of the entrance lobby.



Pl. 4 Detail of coving on interior of eastern wall, entrance lobby. Note deterioration on right.



Pl. 5 The coving on the north wall of the main chamber of the ground floor. The band of vegetation across the centre marks the position of the ceiling of the ground floor and floor of the first floor. Only the portion on the western side (on left) survives to any extent.



Pl. 6 The eastern end of the ground floor chamber. There may have been a partition wall where the vegetation is growing. No coving survives below that level. The stairs is on right.



Pl. 7 The interior of the southern wall. The vertical masonry is infilling of the western side of the fireplace. The coving survives on the extreme right with the scratch coat evident elsewhere.



Pl. 8 The western side of the ground floor chamber. The coving on either side of the window survives in reasonable condition.



Pl. 9 Detail of south-east corner of the ground floor. The plaster line at right marks the level of the ceiling.



Pl. 10 Detail of the moulding on the northern wall, north-west side. Vegetation accumulates on the lip where the floor joists sat, this eventually leads to a deterioration of the plasterwork.



Pl. 11 Part of a tree trunk on top of the internal wall which separates the entrance lobby from the main chamber on the ground floor. The scratch coat base for the coving can be seen directly below the tree in the centre of the picture.



Pl. 12 Detail of the scratch coat band applied to give support to the decorative moulding. This is deeply scored to allow the plaster to grip. Southern wall, ground floor.



Pl. 13 Detail of the moulding on the northern wall, north-western corner. This is one of the best surviving sections.



Pl. 14 The moulding on the northern wall of the ground floor chamber. Most of this is in poor condition.



Pl. 15 Moulding detail in the north-west corner of the ground floor chamber. Note how the upper part of the moulding has fallen away.



Pl. 16 The scratch coat that lay under the plaster top coat exposed, this finish can be seen on the southern window embrasure on the far right. East face of internal wall of tower house.



Pl. 17 The inner side of the main doorway arch.



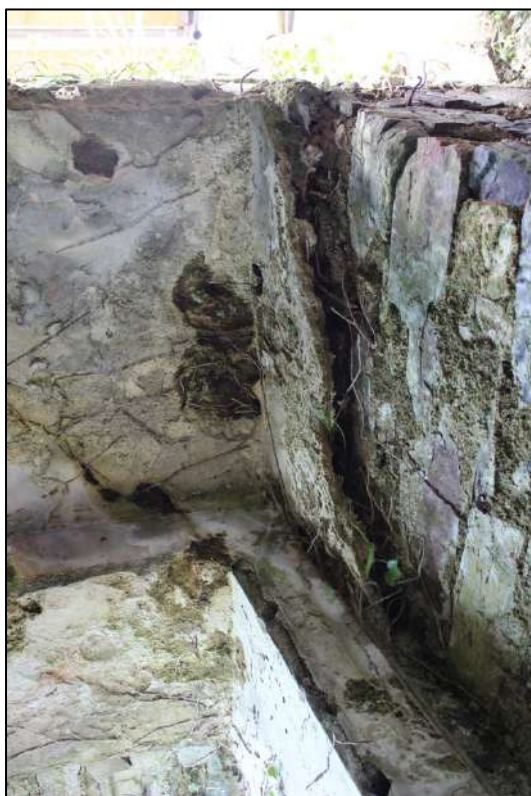
Pl. 18 The upper part of the stairwell. Note the plaster coat on the lower part of the photograph. The small holes held the timbers that supported the ceiling. The small opening is likely to be associated with the late-medieval occupation of the tower house.



Pl. 19 The roof of the room containing the oriel window. This was entered through a doorway with an arched head, the remains of which are visible on right. There was a flat

plaster ceiling, the remnants of which can be seen in the centre of the photograph. This was supported by a timber at the base of the corbelling.

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PI. 20 While there are very scant remains of any plaster on the walls of the first floor chamber, it is present on northern side and top of the western window embrasure.

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Pl. 21 Impression of a timber upright in the plaster on the southern side of the eastern window at first floor level. The wall on the left of the window is thinner, having been rebuilt.

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Pl. 22 Southern side of western window embrasure, first floor. Note the impression of a timber corner bead on the inner side of the reveal. The holes on the edge mark where timber plugs were used to attach the beading to the stonework.

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Pl. 23 This is the southern side of the main entrance where the impression of the corner beading can be seen.



Pl. 24 Detail of corner beading, south side of western window embrasure, ground floor.



Pl. 25 Impression of wickerwork centring for head of embrasure, northern side of western window. This is the best example of this technique visible in the tower house. All examples occur in embrasures.



Pl. 26 Another example of the preservation of the impression of wickerwork centring for the window embrasure, in this case the southern side of the western window, first floor.



Pl. 27 Plastered surfaces visible in the attic space over the northern kiln, foreground, and the southern kiln, in the background.



Pl. 28 Another view of the plastered walls of the attic spaces of the two kilns.