Kilkenny Castle

OPW
The Office of Public Works
Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí

Kilkenny City

Kilkenny Castle

Built soon after the Norman invasion of Ireland, Kilkenny Castle has been remodelled, extended and adapted to meet changing circumstances and functions over a period of 800 years.

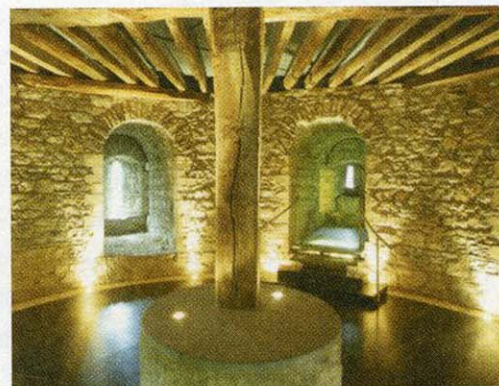Background: Kilkenny Castle c.1172, Illustration by Jenny Baker

There has been a castle on this site since 1172 when the Norman knight, Richard de Clare (d.1186), known as Strongbow built a wooden tower on a rocky height overlooking the River Nore. This strategic location was until then the stronghold of the *Mac Gilla Pátric* the ancient kings of Ossory. Strongbow ensured his succession to the lordship of Leinster by his marriage to *Aoife* (1152-1189), daughter and heiress of *Diarmuid Mac Murchadha* (d.1171), King of Leinster. Some twenty years later, William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke (d. 1219), married Isabel de Clare, Strongbow's daughter and heiress, and it was Marshal who built the first stone castle on this site, much of which survives today. This mediaeval castle was roughly square in plan with drum shaped towers at each corner, three of which still stand. The entrance was located in the now missing east wall, through a twin towered entrance gate.
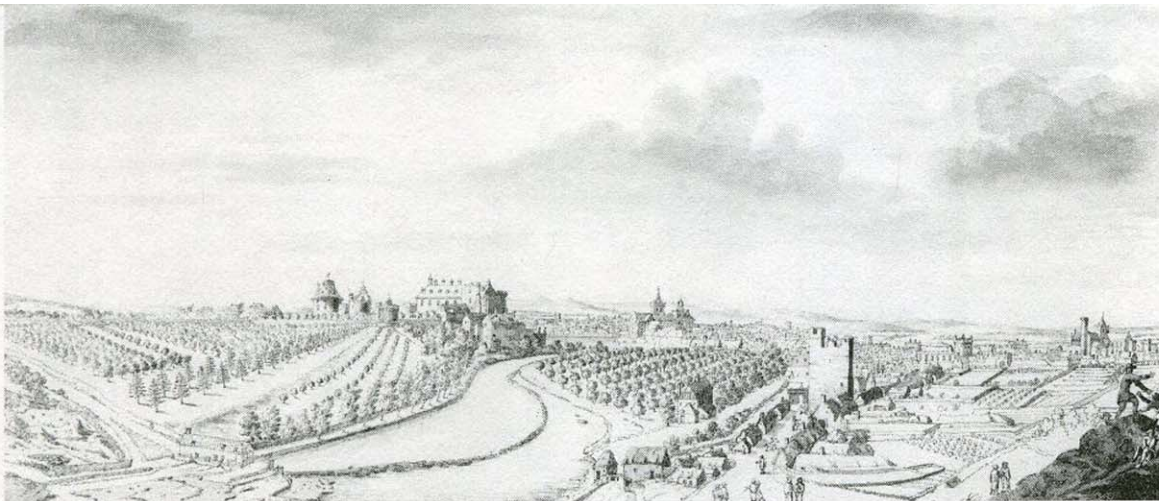
Kilkenny Castle is one of the few keep-less castles built at this time with no free-standing great tower within its walls.

Archaeologists have uncovered substantial portions of the original 13th century building. Under the central block of the Castle, the original stone buttressing was exposed. Part of the eight metre deep dry moat that originally enclosed the castle was excavated and a section of this can now be seen outside the Parade wing. Also visible is the *garderobe* or toilet chute beside the original Sally-port, a side gate, with two flights of steps leading down into the dry moat. In the base of the great south tower dating from c. 1207 is a self-contained chamber called the Mediaeval Room.

Above Centre: Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife. NGI
Above Left: William Marshall, 1st Earl of Pembroke. Cadw
Above Right: Mediaeval Room.

View of Kilkenny Castle and City c.1695. F. Place, NGI

Original mediaeval defence features include five plunging arrow loops, with sightlines for bowmen along the external walls and down into the moat. Inside, a central oak column supports a 15th century post and beam ceiling. The upper area of this tower housed the Great Council Chamber where the Confederate Parliament sat in the 17th century. Today, the Tower accommodates conferences, meetings and cultural events.

Above: Butler Coat of Arms. © Kilkenny Castle

The Butlers

The Butler family came to Ireland with the first wave of the Norman invasion, rapidly acquiring great wealth and influence. Originally called Walter, they changed their name to Butler on acquiring the royal privilege of Chief Butler of Ireland in 1185. The family accumulated vast tracts of land in Tipperary and Kilkenny and, in 1391, James Butler, 3rd Earl of Ormonde (d. 1405) bought Kilkenny Castle, installing himself here as undisputed ruler of the area. This Butler dynasty was to dominate the south east of Ireland for over five hundred years. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Butlers were politically and socially closer to English lifestyles than that of the native Irish chieftains. Black Tom or *Tomás Dubh* (1531-1614) was a typical young earl of the time. Raised as a Protestant at the English court, this handsome cousin of royalty established himself as one of Queen Elizabeth I's favourites. He built a beautiful manor house at Carrick-on Suir, Co. Tipperary, one of the first un-fortified houses in Ireland. Known as Ormonde Castle, it is now in State care.
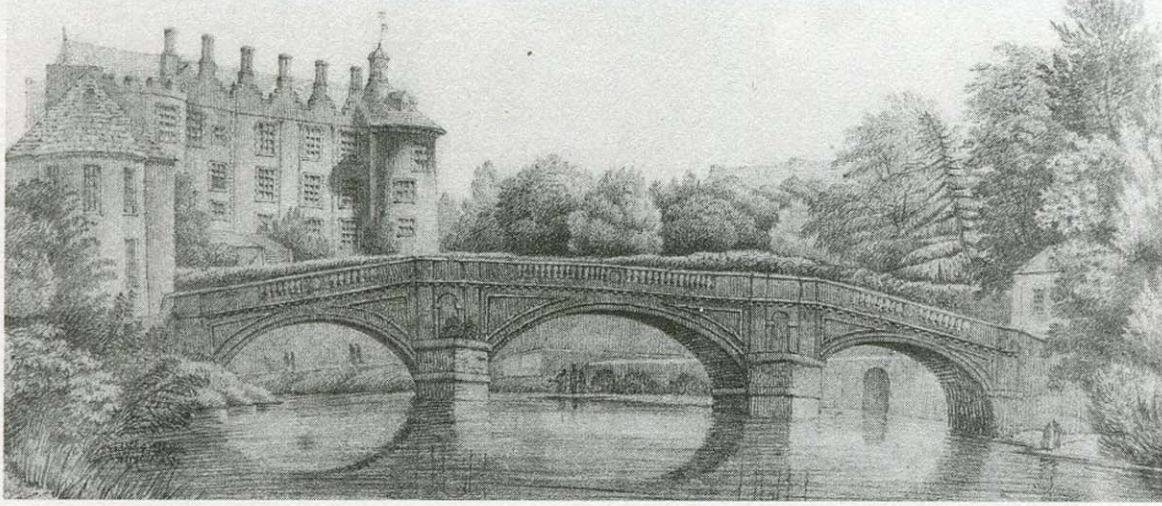
Black Tom was succeeded by his nephew James Butler, 12th Earl and later 1st Duke of Ormonde (1610–1688). James' political attachment to Thomas Wentworth, King Charles I's Lord Deputy, brought him Court connections and command of the Royal army in Ireland at the age of 30. Appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1644 during the struggle between the King and the English Parliament, James negotiated unsuccessfully with the Confederate Parliament in Ireland on the King's behalf. After a civil war, King
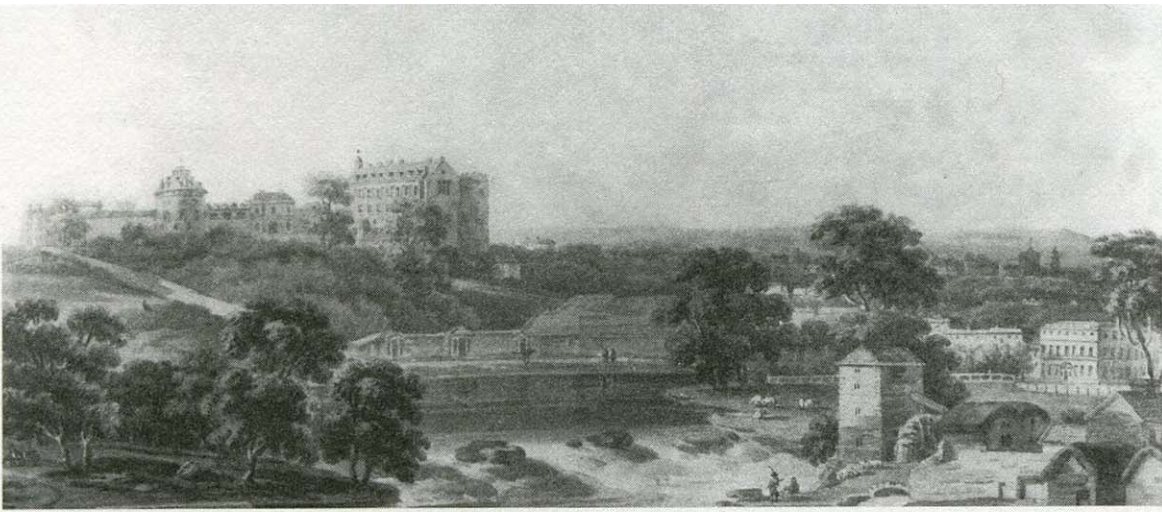
Kilkenny Castle c.1807. R. Gibbs

Charles I was executed and Oliver Cromwell (1600-1658) came to power, James went into exile with the royal heir Prince Charles, while James' wife Elizabeth Preston (1616-1684) managed to hold on to the Butler lands and properties in Ireland. During the Cromwellian siege of Kilkenny in March 1650, the north east tower and east wall of the Castle were damaged. Later these were completely removed to open up the view to the landscaped parkland.

In 1661, following the restoration of King Charles II to the throne of England, James Butler returned to Ireland as Duke of Ormonde after ten years in exile. With all their powers and wealth restored, the Duke and Duchess remodelled the old feudal castle in Kilkenny and it became an elegant château, decorated with the most up-to-date furniture, tapestries and paintings.

James was succeeded by his grandson, also James, as 2nd Duke of Ormonde (1665-1745).

It appeared that the Butler family fortunes were now secure and it was at this time that the classical entrance gateway to the Castle was built. When King James II vacated the throne in 1688, his daughter Mary and her husband, William of Orange became joint monarchs. In the subsequent Williamite war in Ireland, James 2nd Duke of Ormonde fought with King William against King James. He was appointed Viceroy of Ireland at the age of 35 during the reign of Queen Anne. In 1712, as a distinguished military commander, he replaced the 1st Duke of Marlborough as Captain-General of the allied forces during the War of the Spanish Succession. However, his career was cut short in 1715 when he was attainted for treason by the English Parliament for his support of the Stuart cause. He fled to France where he lived in exile until his death in Avignon in 1745. By the second half of the 18th century Kilkenny Castle was run down, as were the fortunes of

Above Left: Portrait of James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormonde. © Kilkenny Castle
Above Right: Portrait of James Butler, 2nd Duke of Ormonde. © Kilkenny Castle

Kilkenny Castle c. 1810. Unknown Artist, Private Collection

the Butler family. The marriage of John Butler, 17th Earl of Ormonde (1740-1795), to Anne Wandesford (1739-1795) of Castlecomer restored the family fortunes and the Butlers began to re-establish their prestige in the area. Anne's inheritance was spent on landscaping and planting the parkland and building the beautiful stables, courtyards and the dower house, now Butler House across the road from the Castle.
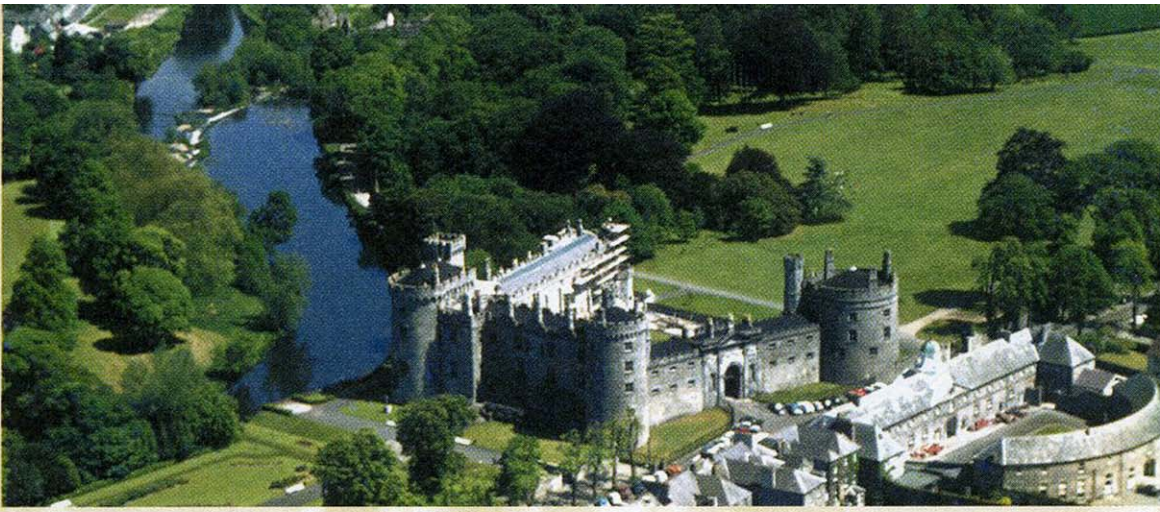

The 19th–century Butlers embarked upon a major programme of work on the Castle in 1826 to restore it to its supposed 'mediaeval' appearance and also to update it as a country house with all the appropriate modern conveniences. The north wing was completely rebuilt to house the large family picture collection in a new Long Gallery, and the south curtain wall was built out to provide

more bedrooms. In 1854, further work to the Castle saw the earlier *porte cochère* extended to become the entrance hall, today's visitor reception area; also added was a Moorish staircase and many other decorations. In the early 20th century, James Butler, 21st Earl and 3rd Marquess of Ormonde (1844-1919) entertained King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra and later King George V and Queen Mary here.

Two world wars in the 20th century transformed the entire social order throughout Europe. Ireland changed dramatically too and elite families like the Butlers found their political and economic power eroded due to these upheavals. These changes affected the viability of remaining in Kilkenny Castle and in 1935 the family decided to leave. A ten-day auction disposed of its contents and the building was abandoned for the next thirty years. In 1967, Arthur Butler, 6th Marquess and 24th Earl of Ormonde (1893-1971) handed Kilkenny Castle over to the Castle Restoration

Above Left: Entrance to Kilkenny Castle c.1810. R. Gibbs, Private Collection
Right: Portrait of James Butler, 3rd Marquess of Ormonde. © Kilkenny Castle

Kilkenny Castle. Aerial View

Committee for the nominal sum of £50 stating that: *"The people of Kilkenny, as well as myself and my family, feel a great pride in the Castle, and we have not liked to see this deterioration. We determined that it should not be allowed to fall into ruins. There are already too many ruins in Ireland"*.

By 1969, when the building came into State care, lack of basic maintenance had resulted in structural decay and dilapidation. The first phase of restoration in the 1970s saw the Long Gallery and north wing refurbished, in the 1990s the second phase restored the central block interiors to the style of a grand country house of the 1830s period. The third phase of restoration was completed in 2000 and developed the Parade Tower (south) wing as a purpose built conference and function area.

Within the walls of the Castle the exuberant spirit of the Victorian age has been recreated. In the Ante Room, Drawing Room and Library, carpets woven to historic designs and walls hung with yellow silk are complemented by gilded pelmets and mahogany bookcases. All have been faithfully reproduced to recreate the elegance of the 1830s splendour. Throughout the Castle the colour schemes provide a fine backdrop for the internationally important collection of Ormonde portraits. This is illustrated particularly in the Long Gallery with its hammer-beam roof, displaying hand painted pre-Raphaelite style female figures and naturalistic scenes. The oriental fashion of the 19th century is reflected by the Chinese bedroom and furniture pieces throughout the building.

Kilkenny Castle Park contains 20 ha. of rolling parkland and mature trees, including a formal terraced rose garden, and an artificial lake that was added during the 19th century. Paths provide access to all the features in the park including the small family burial ground, the woodland and the children's playground.

Today, Kilkenny Castle captures the 19th century lifestyle of the Butlers of Ormonde while, simultaneously, many architectural elements of the building set within its walled demesne reflect eight hundred years of Kilkenny Castle's history.

Background: Detail from the carved Carrara marble fireplace in the Long Gallery
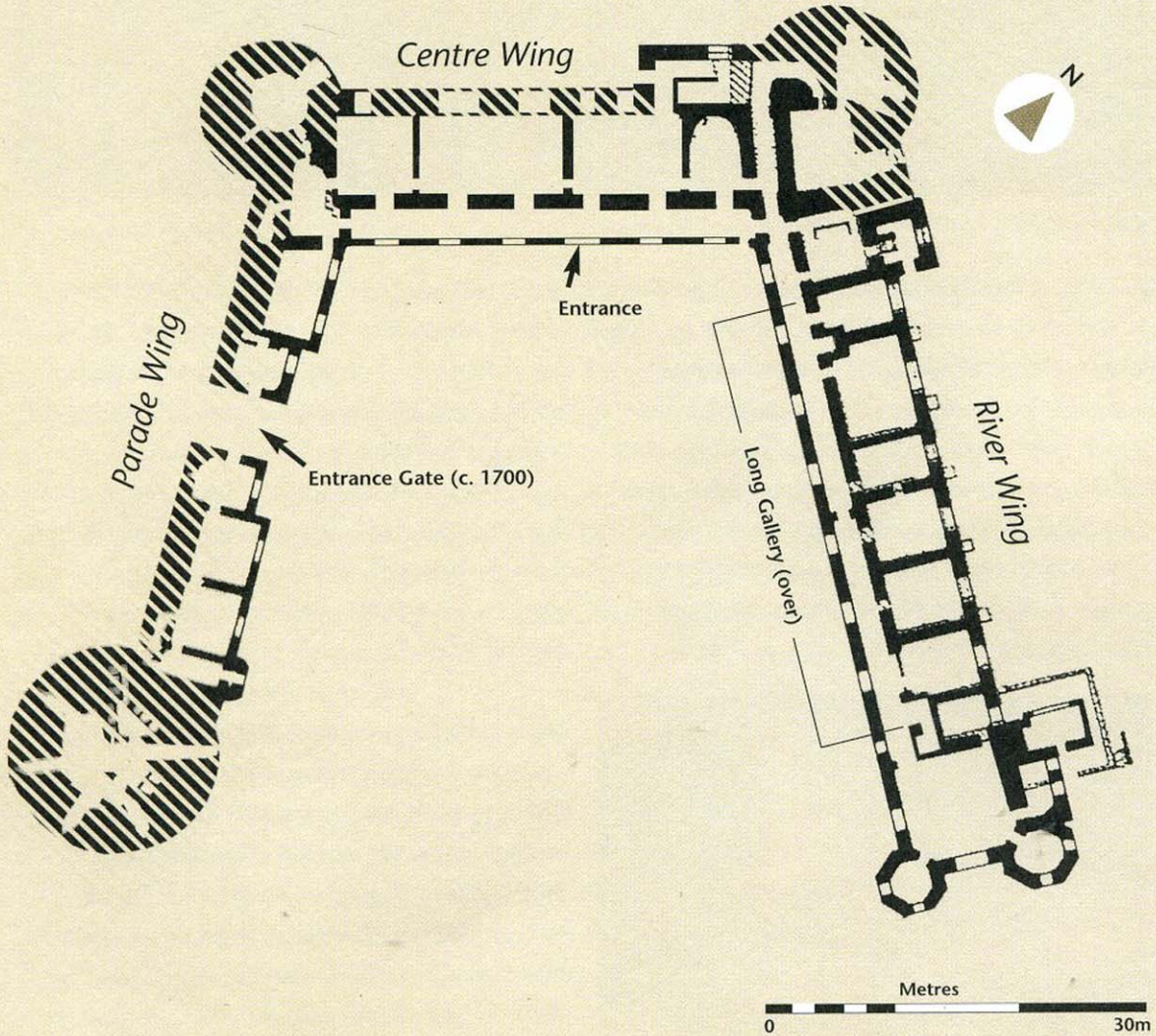
Long Gallery

Library and Drawing Room

Below: View of the Castle from the Rose Garden
Background: Figure of Diana, the Huntress

Ground Plan Of Kilkenny Castle

Mediaeval foundation
1830 - 1860

Centre Wing

Parade Wing

River Wing

Entrance

Entrance Gate (c. 1700)

Long Gallery (over)

N

Metres
0
30m

Belfast

Galway

Dublin

Limerick

Kilkenny Castle

Cork

Kilkenny Castle
Kilkenny City
Ireland

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