

**Tower House
at
Glebe South
Balrothery, Co. Dublin
Archaeological Oversight Report**



CMF23-1-DF003

RMP No. DU005-057006-

License No. 23E0833

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Introduction

The tower house at Glebe South, Balrothery is an archaeological monument protected under the National Monuments Acts and registered on the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP DU005-057006-). It is a small, rectangular tower house with later modifications, with a noticeable amount of brick insertions in window openings and forming the crenellations. It is in private ownership and is at the north end of Glebe South townland.

Funding was made available in 2022 through the Community Monuments Fund Scheme Stream 2 to carry out an appraisal of the monument from a structural, architectural, and archaeological perspective. A detailed report was produced which includes a full archaeological and historical background to the tower house which will not be repeated here.

In 2023 further funding under Stream 1 was awarded to begin the process of conservation and repair of the structure. A condition of the funding is that the works be subject to archaeological oversight and the author was granted an archaeological licence (No. 23E0833).

Location

The tower house is located 30m to the south of the medieval church at Balrothery, RMP No. DU005-057003--and graveyard, RMP No. DU005-057005-- in Balrothery townland. It sits at about 47m OD.

The tower house is situated on an elevation, but the land is slightly lower than that on which the medieval church sits. It is to the south of a laneway which runs E/W south of the church and which also forms part of the townland boundary between Balrothery and Glebe South. The town itself lies NNE of the tower and church and there is a noticeable drop down to the street level. An open green area lies at the NE side of the church on this lower ground and was the site of the Fairgreen.

Conservation Works

Works were carried out to the interior of the main area above the vault, the wall walks and the south and east walls. Re-pointing, repair / consolidation / replacement of brickwork, pinning masonry in window heads and repairing the cracked and damaged quoin stones in the southeast corner were completed (see Conservation Engineer and Architect's report). In the interior damage to the brick flue needed to be repaired and there was unsupported masonry in the northeast corner and over windows to be supported or reinstated. These works were specified by the conservation engineer and the role of the archaeologist was to record the works, but more particularly assess and interpret what was revealed by the removal of vegetation and the closer inspection of the fabric of the building than had been possible before.

The scaffolding was erected at the end of August, but, the west as opposed to the east wall was scaffolded, as well as the interior and the south wall. As a result, the roof over the western third of the tower house which covered the two corbelled ceilings above the stairs and adjoining small room was cleared of vegetation and humus. The subsequent stabilisation of the exposed crenellations and cleaning of the exposed walls and rooftop necessitated additional funding which was provided.

From an archaeological perspective the main interest lies in the evidence for at least two phases of re-modelling of the tower house. Previously invisible features were revealed and based on what was seen a sequence of building events will be discussed.

The roof level

The west roof

During and after the removal of vegetation and humus from the roof above the caphouse and small room it became apparent that the corbelling seen in the ceilings of both of those structures continued seamlessly to form the roof / platform above. The roof surface is composed of overlapping massive limestone flags, sloping from south down to north and from east down to west (Figure 1, plan of roof; Figure 2, profile). The differences in height between the two ceiling levels is seen in the image captured as part of the surveys conducted in 2022, but the depth of flagstones used to make up the corbelled ceilings to roof / platform level must be at least 0.6m.



Plate 1: Cross-section through the west end showing the heights of the corbelled ceilings, stairs to right (Image from Tír 3D)



Plate 2: View looking north from above the stairs, showing the flagstones being uncovered

The roof is 2.23m E/W by 4.55m N/S. It drops about 1.10m from south to north (Plate 2) and 0.6m from east to west at the north end, and about 0.3m at the south end (Plate 3). Previously, two openings high up on the west wall had been interpreted as rainwater goods, although they were at very different levels (O'Carroll 2022, p. 16). At the north end an opening 1.78m below the sill in the crenel is visible on the exterior of the west wall, but before the humus was removed



Plate 3: View to south of roof showing flagstones sloping from east to west and from south to north



Plate 4: View to west of drain feature with groove on the north (right) side indicated by a scale bar and the second internal step in the drain indicated by another scale bar

the difference in height between the interior floor level and this opening was over 1m. At the south end the drip stone at the opening is 0.5m below the sill, but the inside area is covered in mortar.

After cleaning a drain formed by a gap in the flagstones at the northern end was exposed (Plates 4 and 5; Figure 1). This extends through several layers of stones so that it is 0.32m lower than the adjacent flags at the west end (Plate 4). The drop from the sill of the crenel to the flagstone is 1.36m at this point and beneath the parapet itself the drain drops another 0.12m. There are two more steps in the drain, one 0.4m from the west wall and a second 1m east of that. A large flagstone at the lower NW corner (Plate 5) has been replaced inaccurately, and originally covered the channel. It is correctly shown as a dashed outline in Figure 1.

The flagstones are massive. They range in size from just over 1m x 1m to about 0.8m x 0.6m and from 10 – 16cms thick. The flagstones directly in the NW corner (see Figure 1) has a groove chiselled into it to funnel rainwater into the channel beside it. In the south end a similar, larger groove has been worked into the surface of the large slab in the SE side, (Plate 5; Figure 1) and it is likely the slab west of it would similarly have had a groove in it, but this is obscured by mortar.



Plate 5: aerial view of the roof after cleaning and conservation, north is to the left

Crenellations

In the 19th century two illustrations of the church and tower house in Balrothery were published, the first by Samuel Lover for the Irish Penny Magazine in 1833 (see Plate 31), the second by James Stark Fleming dated to 1890. The earlier illustration depicts rounded crenellations at the corners but the more usual stepped ones elsewhere; the later has only stepped crenellations and seems to be a poor copy of the former. Where enough of the shape of the crenellations remain, it can be seen that they are all of brick and are rounded.



Plate 6: View looking west at the rooftop level, showing brick crenellations in varying states of preservation, and the two different roof scars on the internal west wall, after conservation.



Plate 7: Looking north at the parapet above the wall walk. Steps to higher roof are on the west (left).



Plate 8: Looking south at the parapet with remains of the brick crenellations, and infill of brick

The only complete example is that in the NE corner of the flagstone roof. It stands 1.80m high and is only one brick deep, about 23cms along its eastern side, but on the north the lower third is the stone parapet which carries around the whole roof beneath the brick. The total height above the flagstones of the crenellation in the opposite NW corner is 2.30m, but this is missing some bricks at the top. At the south side the sill of the crenel is actually at roof level (Plates 3 and 5; Figure 2).

Around the larger two thirds of the tower house the battlements are incomplete but would have consisted of a central merlon with two crenels on each of the three sides. These sit on the parapet wall, which is a maximum of 0.3m wide. The wall is constructed of small flat limestones, ranging from 25 – 35cms long by 8 - 16cms high with occasional larger stones (Plates 7 and 8). In places there is brick infilling areas within the stone parapet (Plate 8). The parapet and merlons survive to 1.78m above the wall walk on the south side and 1.75m on the north side.

Roof scars

The larger space within the tower house would have been covered by a pitched roof running E/W. On the interior west wall there are traces of two rooflines, one above the other (Plate 6, see also Plates 7 and 8). The higher roof line consists of the remains of limestone flags between 4 - 7cms thick, butted together and running at a steeper pitch than the lower roof. The lower pitched roof is of slate and immediately beneath the apex is a recessed rectangular niche, possibly to take a roof beam. The distance between the apex of the lower and the upper roof is about 0.65m. Running along the north face of the upper flagstone roofline are a series of four

steps giving access to the higher west roof. These are between 23-27cms wide and 30–33cms long and high. The lowest step is only 19cms wide and the drop to the wall walk is 50cms.

The lower slate roof is the only roof scar visible on the interior east wall (Plate 9). The present height of the centre of the east wall is too low to accommodate the higher ridge point seen on the west side and is just about high enough for the slate roofline.



Plate 9: Looking up at the interior face of the east wall, with roof scar, chimney flue, supported brick arch beside flue, central buttress and window opening visible.

On the north side the slate line is not visible at all, and it is likely that the collapse evident in that area from the chimney has impacted the survival of this feature. There is a separate roof scar running E/W and sloping down to the west set into the north wall. This suggests that the space between the chimney and the north wall was slated (Plate 10).

The chimney, when inserted, must have affected the original form of the wall walk in this area.

South wall roof scar

On the exterior of the south wall just below the parapet the remains of a roof scar can be seen clearly on the east side, and there is a possible matching line on the west. The pitch is such that it suggests that the apex would have been to the top of the battlements (Plate 11). As there is no visible sign of a scar above a certain point it is possible that the roof was in effect a partial lean-to / hip roofed structure over a relatively shallow attached building. The question of its form, phasing and impact on existing features will be discussed below.



Plate 10: Slate line in NE corner, before and after conservation



Plate 11: View of south wall showing roof scar to east (right) and possible scar to left.

Wall Walks

Prior to the removal of the vegetation the wall walks were completely hidden. When they were exposed, it was possible to see that those on the south side were damaged, but those on the north are relatively intact (Plates 7, 8, 12 and 13). The stones on the north side are alternately water chutes and higher, shaped slabs which direct water down into the water chutes. The wall walks are 0.41m wide and 3.15m long. On the north side, west end the first water chute is directly below the step from the roof. It is 0.37m wide and narrows down to 0.2m forming a chute which extends beneath and beyond the wall, although this one is incomplete on the exterior, see Plate 13. There is a raised lip on its southern edge. The next slab sits on this and extends east for 0.84m. This also has a raised lip on its south edge which is 5cms wide. Running N/S along the centre is a raised ridge also 5cms wide and the slab slopes down from this ridge to the rainwater chutes to east and west. The chute east of this slab is again lower down and is 0.39m wide with a raised lip on the south side 10.cms wide.



Plate 12: Wall walk on the north side during conservation. The ranging rod sits on replaced brick.

It narrows to a 0.2m wide opening extending beneath and beyond the wall. The next raised slab is also 0.41m wide but only 0.54m long. Its surface also slopes down east and west from a central raised ridge. The third chute is 0.32m wide, again narrowing to 0.2m and extending through the wall. The third raised slab is partly concealed by a step leading up into the NE corner.

On the opposite side the wall walk is similar, but less well preserved (Plate 8). The water chutes have been broken on the exterior (Plate 11). On both sides there is an additional chute at the east end, but higher than the others, (Plates 11 and 13). This must have drained water from the higher wall walk at the east end. There is a possible fourth chute at the east end, north side beneath the higher one, now blocked by brick (Plate 13). An opening was infilled during conservation, and it would be at the correct height for another chute had the walk extended beneath the later modifications.

At the east end the wall walk rises to a flat central platform. A large slab had broken and has been repaired by the addition of further slabs (Plates 14 and 15). While there are definite steps on the south side of this, on the north the insertion of the brick chimney has disrupted the original form of this section.

As noted already the wall would have to have been higher to accommodate the original roof line, and it is unclear whether there was a wall walk east of the wall, or whether there were steps running up the roof as there are on the northwest side, and as seen in castles such as that in Ballindoney West, Co. Tipperary (see Sherlock 2011, Pl. II) where they are set on both sides of the roof.



Plate 13: View of the north wall showing the rainwater goods, with one possible addition at the east end and a higher one above.



Plate 14: aerial view of the east wall top prior to conservation. North at bottom

Plate 15: aerial view of the eastern part of the tower after conservation. Chimney visible in NE corner



Exterior

South Wall

Conservation works including re-pointing and pinning an unsupported window arch on the second floor were carried out. The removal of the vegetation exposed a previously unseen arrow loop on the east side of the enlarged window on the second floor (Plate 16). This is located at the base of the window. Areas of plaster to either side of the opening were cleaned and conserved.



Plate 16: South wall after conservation. Note roof scar and conserved plaster.

One side of an ogee-headed window remains at the west side of the second floor opening, and the arch above needed to be pinned. This is the original arch from the ogee window which was later considerably enlarged.

Plate 17: Detail of second floor opening with half an ogee headed window on the west side.



Pinning this masonry required the insertion of a threaded bar through the stones to the east of the arch above the original ogee headed window, presumed to be a single not double light, and fastening it by means of a metal plate on the parapet above, (see Plates 19 and 20). The newly exposed loop beside the east reveal of the enlarged opening is at or below the bottom of the original ogee window, meaning that that in the interior this would have been between 0.5m and 0.6m above the floor level. The arch above the blocked up opening on the first floor is slightly off-centre, the keystone is not in the centre of the opening, suggesting that this also was an earlier opening which was enlarged.



Plate 18: The repointed opening with infilled stonework; the newly revealed window loop is at bottom right



Plate 19: The screw threaded through the unsupported masonry beside the end of the arch



Plate 20: The plate and head of the threaded bar pinning the masonry beside the window arch on the south wall walk

East Wall

Removal of vegetation, re-building of some brick infill, and re-pointing and consolidation were required on the east wall. The quoin stones in the base batter at the SE corner were repaired and repointed (Plate 21)



Plate 21: View looking west at the SE corner which has been repaired and consolidated.



Plate 22: View of the mid-section of the east wall showing the arrow loops, and consolidated brickwork

Cleaning off the vegetation allowed the masonry to be seen more clearly. The position of the loops at first and second floor levels is interesting. Both have been blocked in and are not visible in the interior (Plate 22). The window openings have been consolidated with the hole in the brickwork of the second floor window infilled by matching brick. Cleaning allows the brick reveals to be clearly seen.

The hole at the north side first floor level which had been partly infilled with brick was consolidated. The damage does not extend into the interior though it may relate to damage to the chimney flue.



Plate 23: Lower section of the east wall exterior showing cleaning and repairs

The Interior

Cleaning and consolidation of window reveals, repair to the chimney flue and to holes in brick infill in the north and east walls were undertaken in the interior of the main part of the building. Several layers of plaster and limewash are now visible on the walls, and the extent of the brick infill at the floor levels suggests that floor levels may have altered somewhat in height and position over the years.

The two loops in the north side of the east wall visible on the exterior are concealed now behind the brick flue and the corbel set into the stone wall adjoining the recess on the left side of the east wall has no corresponding corbel on the right. Where one might have been is taken up by the arch of the window opening. The reason for the wide recess on the left side is unclear, perhaps this was an earlier chimney flue, replaced by a narrower one in brick.



Plate 24: Looking west at the interior wall, entrance to first floor and the entrance to the second floor of the western section.



Plate 25-26: Window reveal repaired, first floor level and window area cleaned second floor level, north wall



Plate 27: looking upwards along the north side of the east wall, chimney flue repaired and stitched with bar through the cavity

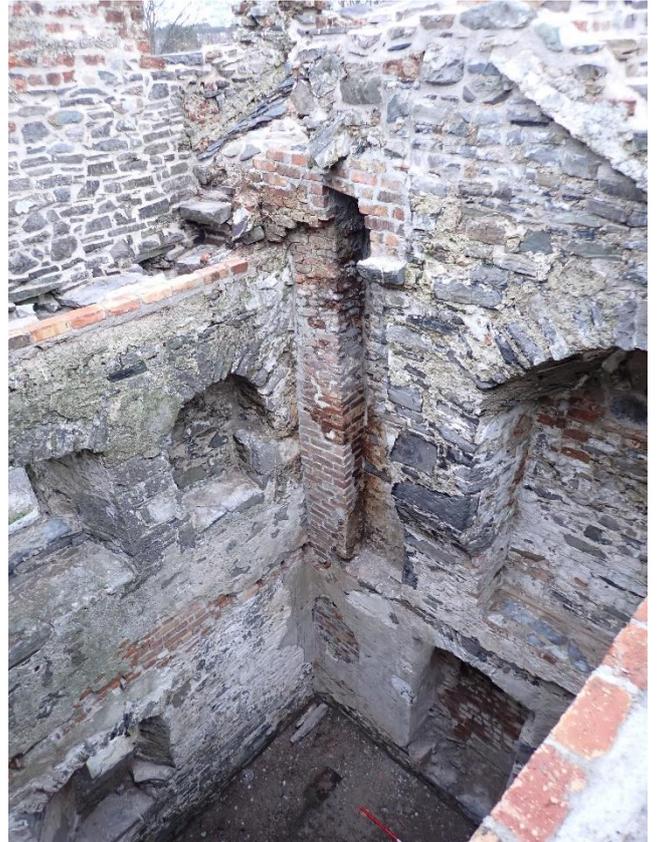


Plate 28: View looking down from the entrance to the wall walk at the NE corner.



Plate 29: First floor window opening, east wall. Repair to brick to left.

Phasing

The evidence from the structure suggests that the earliest building was a tower house with four floors at the west end, and three at the east with the vault above the ground floor. The windows in the west end and those on the north wall appear unchanged. The position of the narrow loops on the east wall are slightly odd, as they would have been at or near ceiling height. The second floor loop is at the level of the wall walk, and the first floor one is again above the level of the top of the window on the north wall, but possible at the same height as a loop in the north wall, east end, now concealed by the brick chimney flue.

The loop revealed on the south wall by contrast is perhaps only 0.6m or less above the floor level.

At some time in the 17th century, or later, the tower was heavily modified. The parapets, which seem to have had standard crow's foot crenellations were given a makeover, and high, curved brick merlons were added.

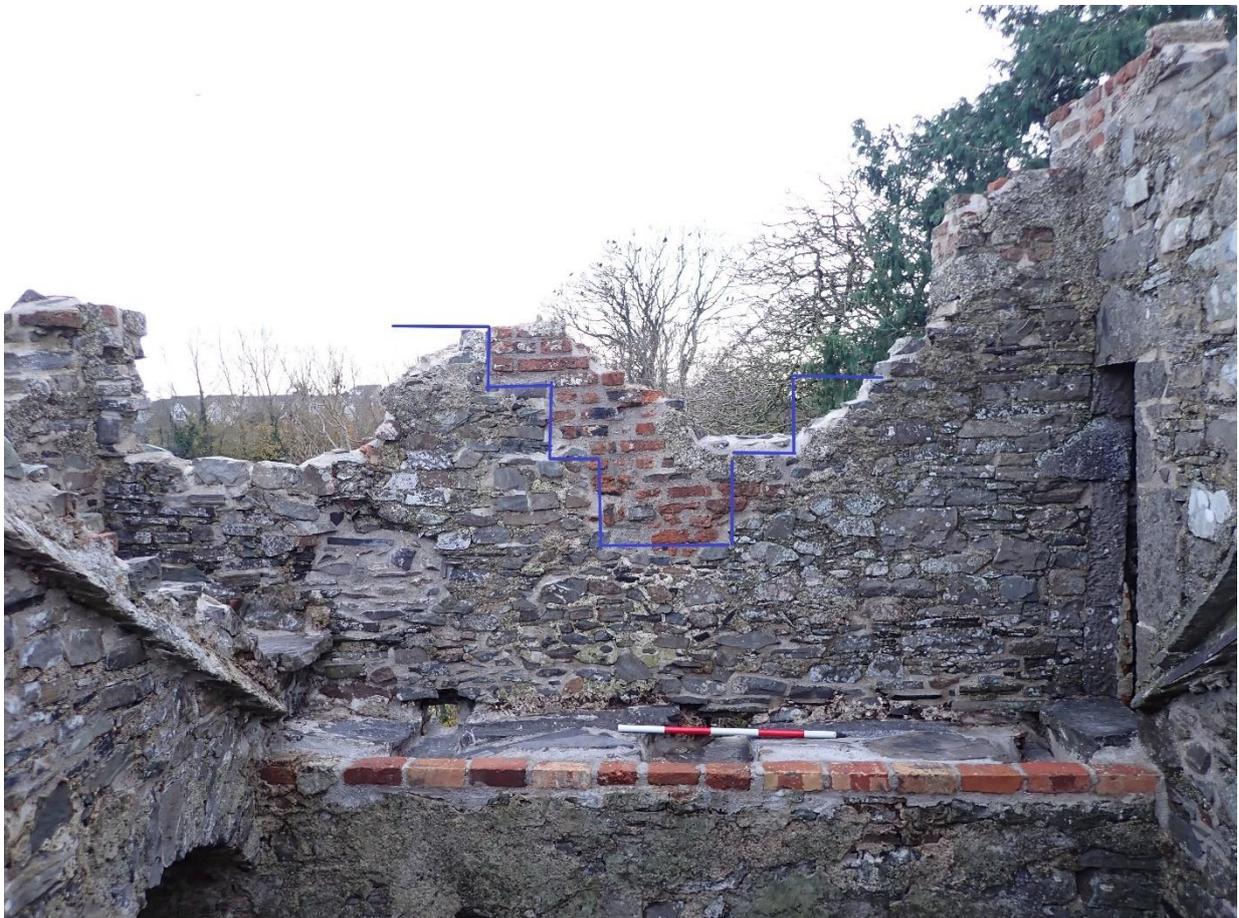


Plate 30: Suggestion of where the original Crow's foot type crenellation can be seen in the south wall parapet.

The roof height was lowered, but as the rainwater goods are integral to the wall walks it is unlikely that that the height of the side walls was affected, though the east gable was lowered also. The lowered, slate roof must have been hidden behind the high, brick crenellations.

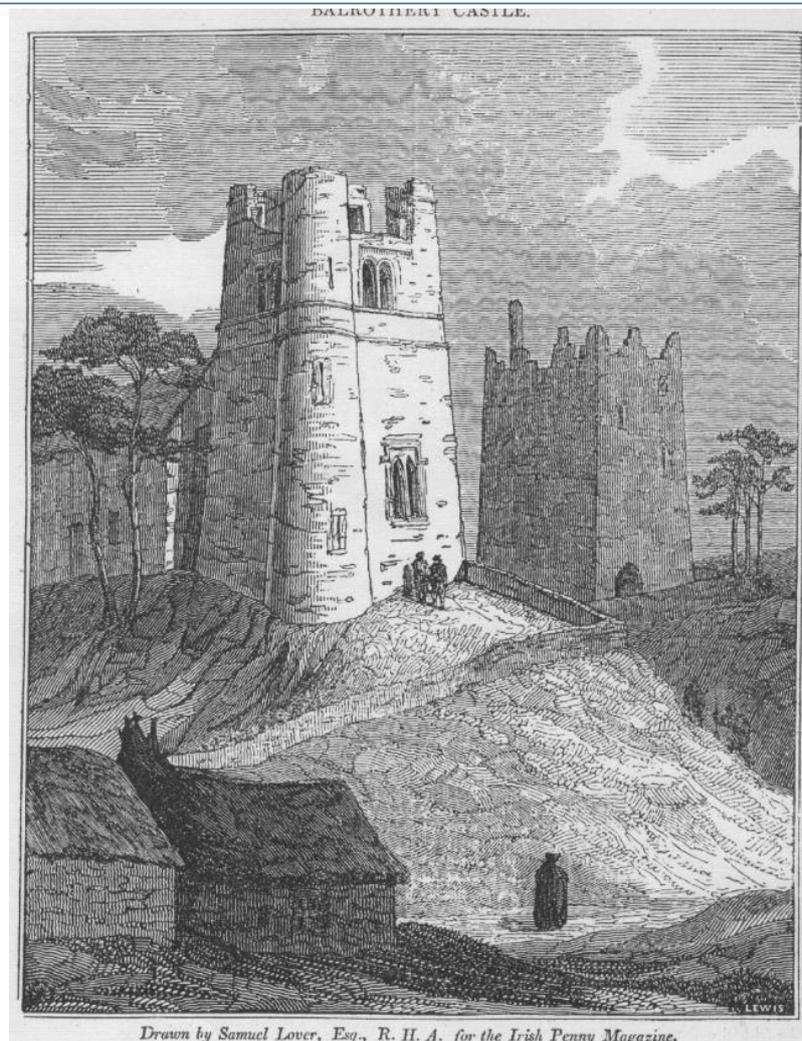


Plate 31: Illustration from the Irish Penny Magazine of Balrothery church and tower house by Samuel Lover, 1833.

The chimney rose high above the roof and parapets as can be seen in this 19th century illustration, although the shape of some of the crenels is inaccurate.

The most significant intervention was the addition of a structure onto the south wall. This must have been wooden as there are no traces of a stone structure in that area. A corbel projecting from the wall on the west side of and above the present entrance door may have provided some support for this structure, and although there isn't a second corbel, an odd alignment of stones at the east end of the wall may indicate the former location of one.

The building would have enclosed the rainwater chutes from the south wall walk and some means of diverting the water out of the building must have been deployed. The fact that all the chutes have been truncated suggests that this was deliberate, and perhaps a timber gutter was employed to drain the water either to east or west.

The windows in the south wall, first and second floors, were drastically modified. The upper floor opening has steps leading up to it from the second floor level, (Plate 32), and this suggests that it was used as a door into the adjoining extension. Similarly, the window on the first floor may also have been remodelled as a door, and this suggests that the extension may not have had internal stairs although it was the full height of the tower house.



Plate 32: steps leading up to the remodelled window, second floor, south wall.

The windows in the east wall were enlarged considerably, probably to replace the light lost when the south facing windows were obstructed and altered by the extension. A window with an ogee head at ground floor level was possibly also enlarged, it is now blocked up. It is unlikely that this was an original feature and may date to the later enlargement of the building. As a result of the significant impact of creating large openings in both the east and south walls, quite close to each other, it seems that additional masonry was added to the SE corner internally, thus also concealing the recently uncovered loop at second floor level. At the same time a fireplace was built into the ground floor and a brick flue and chimney extended the full height, and beyond, of the building. It is not possible to say if a previous fireplace had existed on the first floor, but it is worth considering.

The flagged roof above the west end is original to the first phase of the building, and the flagstones are integral to the walls, and resting on the top of the wall where it narrows to form the parapet. It is this roof to which Lewis must have been referring in his Topographical Dictionary (1837, 171):

Near the church are the remains of Balrothery castle, the date of which is unknown; the roof is covered with flag-stones of great thickness, and the general style of the building refers it to a period of considerable antiquity

Current Condition and Future Needs

The fabric of the building is now in much better shape than before, but the west and north walls still need attention, as do the internal rooms at the west end, and the stairs. The brick in the crenellations is weathering badly where the render has come away, the erosion of the faces of the brick is severe, and most crenels are incomplete. The rainwater channel at the south end of the flagstone roof has been blocked by mortar, it is clear that water is still percolating through, but this means that it is likely to get into the wall itself also.

Water is making its way through the vault to the ground floor room and while the first floor level is covered in humus thus absorbing rainwater, it is also allowing it to percolate through the vault.

Further exploration of the probable floor levels and means of accessing the third and fourth floor levels in the west side would be interesting, especially as it appears that the second floor in the main area cut over the arch of the entrance to the second floor room at the west end, possibly not reflecting the original layout.

As far as it can be determined this is a unique tower house, showing a clear transition from a defensive form of habitation to a purely domestic one, and as such it deserves preservation and further study.

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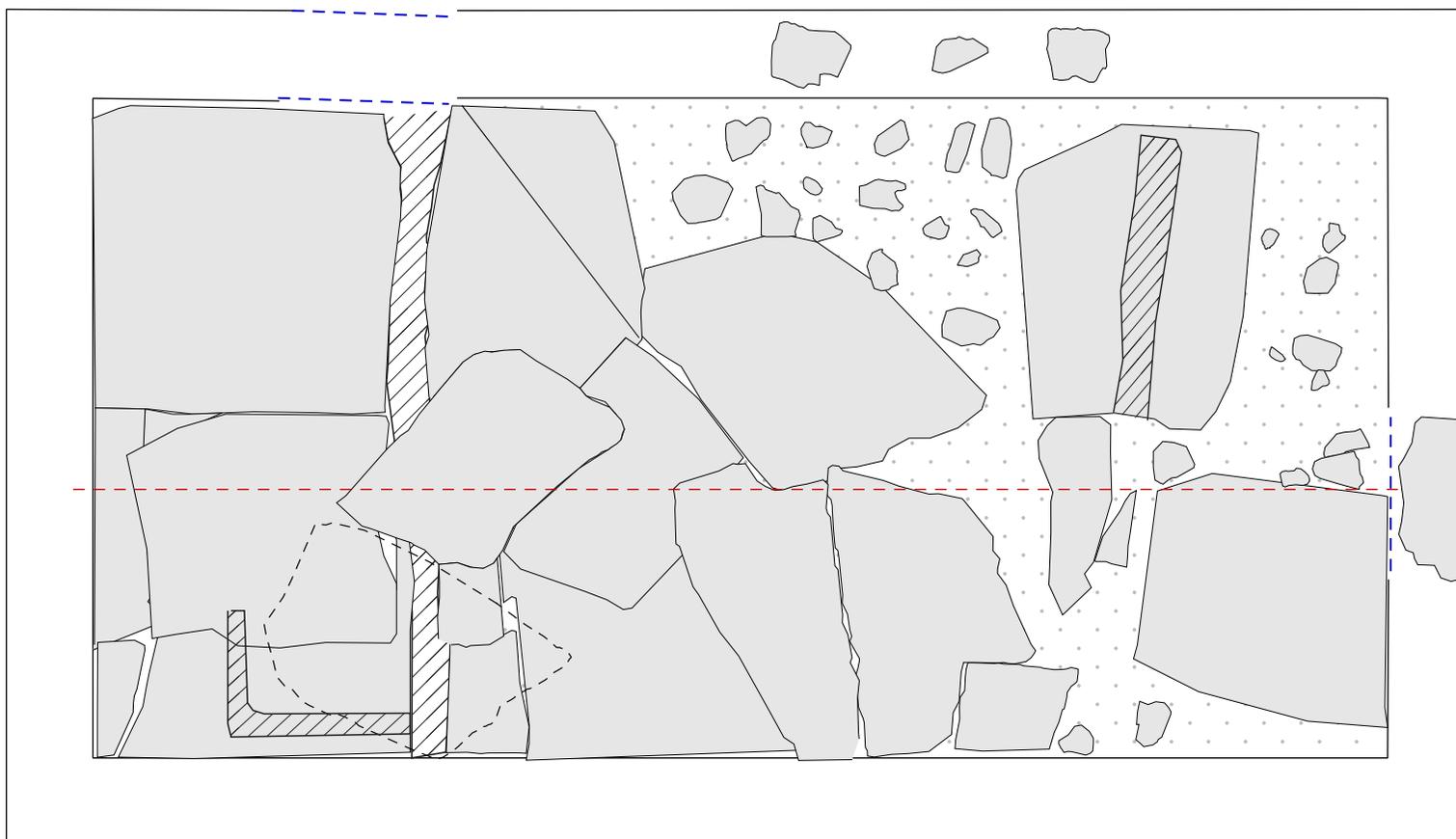
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Figure 1: Plan of rooftop



SCALE 1:25



Finds

 Stone

 Drain

Boundaries

 Boundary of Wall

LEGEND

 Openings

 Level line

Site: Balrothery Tower House

Date: October 2023

Drawn by: LC



Greenanstown
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Figure 2: E-W profile of roof at the west side



SCALE 1:25



Finds



Stone

Boundaries

- Boundary of fill
- Boundary of cut

LEGEND

- - - Limit of excavation
- - - Level line

Site: Balrothery Tower House

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