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‘What round tower?’: the 2014 Ferrycarrig restoration project

‘What round tower?’, was the response that the Wexford native and professional stonemason and conservation expert Pat Hickey received from his neighbours in 2014, when he told them that he was restoring the round tower located within the grounds of the Irish National Heritage Park, Ferrycarrig (hereafter the Park). Pat lives only twenty-five minutes’ drive from the tower, but even his neighbours, who live within the hinterland of Wexford town (and thus the Park), know practically nothing, if anything, about that monument. And they should. Not only because it is a replica round tower – 24.5m high and 3.5m diameter – that was constructed between 1857 and 1858 by local tradesmen, but because it was erected by the people of Wexford as a distinctly Irish, enduring and non-sectarian memorial to the hundred-odd men of that county who lost their lives during the Crimean War.

According to the 7th Earl of Carlisle, who laid the foundation stone on that monument in 1857, the memorial encompassed all of the appropriate topographical, geographical and even historical facets of Wexford. Being was located on a headland it commanded ‘on one side the harbour and sea, on the other the placid, land-locked reach of the Slaney, with an outline of hills all round, and opposite a kindred crag with the ruined Tower, which was raised by the earliest English in Ireland under Strongbow’. The round tower at Ferrycarrig was last mentioned in *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 3, No. 2, in 1989, however, given recent developments in Wexford it is perhaps time that it once again received some attention.

The year 2014 was the 160th anniversary of the outbreak of the Crimean War and coincidentally it was also the year in which half of the cap on the round tower at Ferrycarrig fell down – in August. The war was fought by an alliance of Britain and France (and later Piedmont-Sardinia) against Russia and in defence of Turkey, was fought primarily on the Crimean peninsula on the Black Sea between 1854 and 1856, and cost the lives of several thousand Irishmen. Although the collapse of the monument’s pinnacle was unfortunate, it did prompt a remarkable response. Within months if not weeks the Park, in direct cooperation with Wexford County Council and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, secured €72,500 so as to undertake immediate conservation work.

After the stonework fell the site was closed off and the Wexford conservation firm, Ivor MacElveen & Associates, was hired by Wexford County Council to assess the site. A full scaffolding was erected around the tower (two weeks before the project began in early

September) and a public tender was issued by Wexford County Council in that same month. Pat Hickey, who had previously done work for the Park, was chosen to undertake the conservation. He is a stonemason and restoration expert with over thirty-five years' experience, in, not only Ireland, but also the United States, and utilising the historical masonry technique using 'hot lime' mortar. This is a process that dates back to at least the Middle Ages and has become increasingly popular in recent years in Irish conservation masonry. Thus, he was certainly well suited to undertake this project that is so important to Wexford's and Ireland's history.

The project began in early September 2014 and was undertaken at break-neck speed, being completed in just seven weeks (at seven days a week). It was a race against time because the process was using a 'hot lime' hybrid, which did not set well in damp or wet conditions – winter. The project was succeeding by two weeks of aftercare that involved matching the aggregate, setting the seams, ensure that all of the pointing, stonework and wash had set correctly; in effect checking everything. According to Pat, this part of the process is just as important as the preparation and the application; it is vital for conservation.

The whole endeavour was essentially undertaken by a team of nine people: the Manager of the Park, the Consultant Archaeologist, the Conservation Engineer, the Historical Buildings Consultant (and Project Manager) and the masonry team. The latter consisted of Pat Hickey as senior mason, his son as junior mason, their two apprentices and their intern, a student from the Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Dún Laoghaire. The Buildings Consultant/Project Manager also took a hands-on approach to the work; she helped to apply the shelter coating to the base of the tower during the final phase of the project.

The conservation element of the project began at the top of the tower, the worst-affected area. The most damage was found on the north-west side, facing the prevailing winds. The cap consisted of stones and mortar piled up in a conical shape. The body of the tower was built in a 'band construction' up to twenty inches from the cap and from there upwards an 'arch' technique was used. There were also four iron rods embedded into the stonework perfectly aligned with the four cardinal points. It was considered that they might have met in the middle of the tower and rusted away, but as no iron was found at the bottom of the tower the idea was dismissed. The four rods, along with a number of nails from the original construction that were found in the 'guano' at the bottom of the tower have been taken from the site and may go on display at the Park in the future.

Analysis of the mortar indicated that, not only was a 'hot lime' mix used during the original construction, but also, a variety of bonding agents were used within it. These included

charcoal, ground-down bricks and iron slag. Throughout the restoration Pat and his team kept a keen eye out for such pieces, so that they might better understand the processes used to originally build the tower. They were especially keen to see if any pieces of brick could be found. This was because, about two feet from the very base of the outside of the tower, a quarter of a brick was found in the wall. As was later discovered this was the only such piece of brick. This may simply have been due to a mason cheekily using the piece, as it may well have been the perfect size to fill a gap and he may well have thought it would not be seen due to the rendering (plaster covering). Either way, the practice was not replicated thereafter. Perhaps the foreman gave him a scolding.

Neither the body of the tower or the roof were completely solid structures. The body had five apertures within it, in the form of four windows at various heights, each pointing towards a cardinal point, and a doorway about ten feet above ground level. All standard features of a round tower. The stonework around the door and the four windows was different from the rest of the tower; it consisted of 'conglomerate stone'. The cap on the other and had a four inch hole built-in to it, directly above the fourth and uppermost window. This may have been covered by a loosely lodged stone that could be easily dislodged from within. What is worth noting here is that when dislodged this hole allows light to shine into the tower. A similar design element was actually incorporated into the replica round tower at the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Messine in Belgium, whereby at eleven o'clock on 11 November every year the light shines in through a hole in the cap and illuminates the interior. Whether or not this was done without knowledge of the Wexford tower's feature, or if this was a feature of some other traditional towers, is unclear.

The base of the tower consists of only a shallow foundation (eight inches) similar to most traditional towers; like other towers this was due to the fact that the base is solid stone and mortar. This appears to have originally been covered in a rendering, which today has about fifty or sixty different names carved into it, but only on the north side of the tower. As it is unclear if this is simply graffiti or an attempt by local people to unofficially record the names of soldiers who died in the war it has been covered over by a protective 'shelter coating' of plaster. Although those engravings may be later additions, one carving on the base appears to be very purposeful and contemporary, and as a result one of the stones in the base has not been rendered. It is a single stone turned on its edge (the opposite to the rest of the tower) and it appears to have some initials engraved in it. According to Pat these appear to have been

professionally carved and in a script common in the mid-Victorian period, when the tower was built. These may be the initials of the original architect and surveyor.

As part of the project a lightning rod was also placed on the top of the tower and a line run down the tower and connected to a large copper cage buried in the ground at the base. In order to facilitate this a small amount of excavation had to be undertaken. That digging uncovered found four large fishers in the base of the tower, each eight inches big. It is unclear what caused those cracks, but there are three theories. First, it was simply owing to the downward pressure of the tower onto the solid base. Second, the tower was struck by lightning in the past, and third, blasting undertaken nearby as part of road works in the 1940s may have been a factor. Or indeed all three. What the restoration has also highlighted is that due to the nature of the stone used to build the tower, a rough sedimentary rock (shift or shale), a certain amount of rendering was done during the original construction in order to ‘soften’ the tower’s appearance. This was done by adding extra mortar at certain points. The local shale rock was not the traditional material used to build medieval round towers.

Another element of the construction discovered during the restoration was the process by which the cap was built. In the very centre of the cap part of a wooden peg was found. This would have formed the apex of the construction and from it would have been extended a string to the edge of the tower. That string was then used to create the appropriate angle and the stone and mortar was built up in line with the same. As the string moved around the top of the tower, so did the cap. Once the cap was finished the peg was simply broken and covered over. The aforementioned iron bars found in the walls near the top of the tower were pushed into the stonework, which was twenty inches thick. The bars penetrated about seventeen inches into the stone and the last three inches of the bar, on the inside of the tower, was then turned upwards.

The original damage to the cap of the tower, which necessitated the restoration work, consisted of about 50% damage. Due to the weathering and the damage caused to the stone by the fall, new stone had to be sourced to create a new cap, and to fix lesser damage throughout the main body of the tower. Given that the tower was constructed using, not only (perhaps) the stones of the Norman castle that stood on that same site, but also, stone from the locality more generally, the team were able to simply walk down to the base of the cliff and collect buckets of stones from the edges of road and the River Slaney. Yet large pieces were needed to complete the cap, but these could not be found in the immediate vicinity. By sheer luck, while taking a cross-county stroll during the course of the work, the Project Manager came across the side of a hill where a tree had fallen down and consequently exposed a substantial shale seam near the

estuary of the river. This provided the much needed large pieces of stone for the pinnacle. Although a lot of work had to be done with the cap of the tower, the body required only sporadic ‘patch pointing’ from top to bottom. This, as Pat pointed out, was due to the extremely good state of the original ‘hot lime’ mortar. The principal work of the project was completed by mid-November 2014 and a follow-up examination was undertaken in early 2015 (after the first winter) to assess the shelter coating, and to add a second application, to reassess any issues and to simply ‘tidy up’ anything that was amiss.

Speaking to Pat Hickey in June 2015 said that the Ferrycarrig round tower restoration was ‘one of the best projects I have ever worked on’. This he put down to the great team with which he worked, specifically those at the Park and at Ivor McElveen & Associates. They were, he said, very dedicated and operated a well-planned and efficient setup from the very beginning, owing largely to the efforts of the latter. As a result both he and his masons were able to hit the ground running. He felt that the support and positivity were second-to-none. ‘With every project’, he said, ‘you will always have your good days and your bad, on this project there were no bad days’. In fact, as Pat happily added, ‘I lost ten pounds during the project’. The work also afforded him a great insight into the construction of medieval towers. Pat Hickey always undertakes extensive research, both before and during any project he does. He also believed that such research and attention to detail during the 2014 Ferrycarrig project as a whole was especially necessary, owing to the fact that there was no detailed record of the construction of the original construction of the tower. All we have at present is a date for the laying of the foundation stone, start and completion dates for the construction, the year in which the information plaque was erected (1868), and various scraps of information in between.

According to the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage the replica round tower at Ferrycarrig – the Crimean War memorial to Wexford’s war-dead – is ‘[a]n impressive monument making a dramatic statement on an outcrop overlooking the River Slaney’. It is also ‘widely recognised’ (at least among architects) ‘as a particularly important component of the mid nineteenth-century commemorative architectural legacy of County Wexford’. Yet as the experience of Pat Hickey shows, people in Wexford (or indeed Ireland) know very little about this monument, or the war in general. It is hoped that this essay, created with the assistance of Pat Hickey, will highlight the existence, origin, purpose, symbolism and history of that war memorial, but also of war’s memorials in general located across the island of Ireland in multifarious forms and sizes. For more on the origin, foundation-stone ceremony and the

‘unfinished’ nature of the Ferrycarrig monument see the most recent literature on Ireland and the Crimean War.

Further Reading:

Paul Huddie *The Crimean War and Irish Society* (Liverpool, 2015).

Isabel Bennett, ‘The Crimean War memorial, Ferrycarrig, Co. Wexford – a precisely dated round tower’ in *Archaeology Ireland*, iii, no. 2, (Summer, 1989), pp 58-60.

Billy O’Brien and John Canning, ‘Wexford Heritage Park’ in *Archaeology Ireland*, ii, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp 112-114.

David Murphy, *Ireland and the Crimean War* (Dublin, 2002).

Brian Griffin, ‘Ireland and the Crimean War’ in *Irish Sword*, xxii, no. 89 (Summer 2001), pp 281-312.

Biography:

Dr Paul Huddie is a history graduate from University College Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast. His research principally focusses on British and Irish societies’ relationships with war, during both peace and wartime, in the areas of recruitment, memorialisation and military philanthropy.

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