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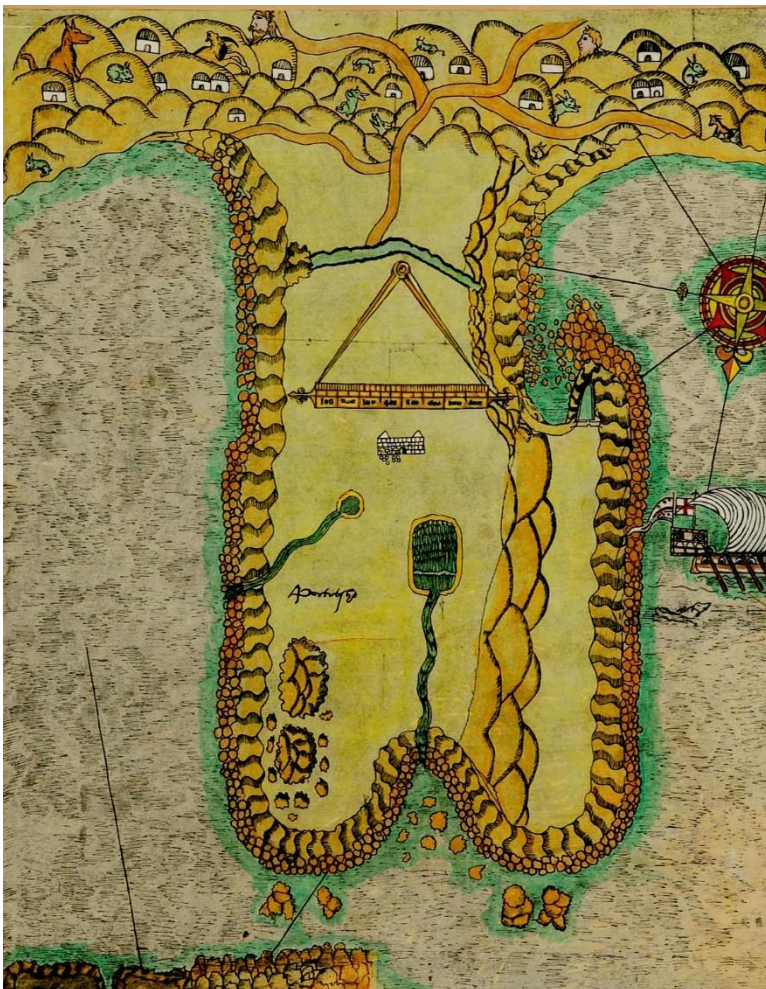
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The earliest known map of Portrush

by Dr Peter Wilson

Ordnance Survey (OS) maps of Northern Ireland have been produced on a semi-regular basis since the 1830's, so how the layout of Portrush has changed over the past c.190 years is well documented. But what was Portrush like before the OS map-makers first consigned its characteristics to a sheet of paper?

There is a map of Portrush prepared by D. Dundas and dated to 1796, but perhaps of greater interest is one that is thought to date from either 1605 or 1580 – depending on who you believe. Although establishing the true date of this map is important for historians, for most of us a difference of twenty-five years matters little for a document that is over 400 years old.



Earliest known map of Portrush

One description of this map, by Ernest Sandford, appeared in volume 12 of the *Bann Disc* (2006). He attributes the map to Sir Thomas Phillips and believes it was drawn up in 1605 as part of a scheme to fortify the promontory of Portrush. Phillips' envisaged Portrush as an English military and naval base that would control both land and sea along the north coast of Ireland.

A more recent description of the map, by Richard B. Warner, appeared in volume 75 of the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (2019-20). He believes the map dates from 1580 and was commissioned by Sir John Perrott to assist him in quelling the influence of Sorley Boy McDonnell of nearby Dunluce Castle.

Irrespective of by whom, when and why the map was prepared, it is a remarkable record of what was present in the late 16th century and/or early 17th century and where it was located. Several aspects of the map are worthy of further comment.

Occupying the top or southern part of the map is an area of sand hills within which 16 cottages are shown.



Today this most likely corresponds to the Glenmanus and Crocknamack areas. The cottages are apparently of simple construction, have thatched roofs, and lack windows and chimneys. Some are semi-detached. Cottages of this style on early maps are usually associated with the native Irish population. The dispersed nature of the cottages may indicate that there was no conventional town and there are certainly no domestic dwellings shown on the promontory itself.

This seems rather odd because other authorities have claimed that in earlier centuries a sizeable community occupied the promontory and the taxable value of the church exceeded that of Dunluce or Coleraine. Medieval ecclesiastical taxation was usually a reflection of the importance attached to a religious house and its wealth. There is also evidence that a substantial trade in fish was carried out with neighbouring Scotland. Either, this settlement had declined or been abandoned, or, if still in existence, it was deliberately excluded by the map maker.

The sand hills also figure a number of animals – a wolf or dog, goats, cows and rabbits. In addition two 'wild Irishmen' are also illustrated along with some meandering roads or, more likely, earthen trackways.

One of the trackways leads towards the centre of the promontory but stops at a linear feature that extends across the narrows from West Bay to East Bay. This has been interpreted as an entrenchment or wide ditch that was intended to be the defensive southern boundary of the military promontory. But it has not been established for certain if the ditch was ever dug, although anecdotal evidence suggests it could have been.



To the north of the line of the ditch the map shows several interesting features. A boulder-strewn harbour on the west is overlooked by a small castle or fort on the hill spur above. This hill was known as Crannagh Hill and is evident in some early 19th century sketches and paintings. It, along with the remains of the castle, was quarried away when the harbour walls were constructed between 1827 and 1835.



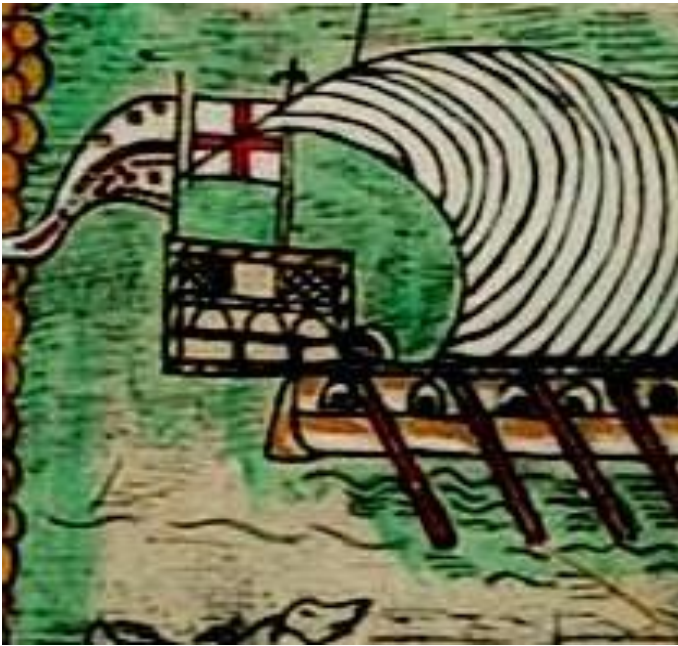
The castle appears to have consisted of a wall, with gateway, that crossed the neck of the hill spur and another wall that enclosed the area to the south. No buildings are shown within the castle walls or immediately outside.



A partly ruined building regarded as a church is shown mid-way between the boulder-strewn harbour and the eastern shoreline. This location would place it close to Antrim Gardens but its exact position is a matter of some speculation. Excavations in 2005 failed to find any trace of foundations that could have been the church.

It has been suggested that it may have been sited a short distance northwest of the Gardens and now lies beneath more recent buildings. To the north of the ruined church a circular pool and probably a marsh are indicated and both are shown as being drained by streams. The pool may be the well that was found during the Antrim Gardens excavations or may be the former water source on Lansdowne Green at which a Victorian pump previously existed. The marshy area seems to be the present-day location of the tennis courts. There is still a water source (now culverted) beneath this area; it enters the sea at the head of Portscaddan.

Near the northeast corner of the promontory, in the Reviggerly area, the map shows two large mounds, the northern one having large stones arranged around it. Whether these mounds were natural rock features or man-made ones is unknown. They are no longer present.



A final feature of interest is the oared, rigged and armed (half) ship to the west of the promontory. The ship has a substantial stern castle and is flying the flag of St. George. English warships may have visited Portrush as part of a show of Elizabethan naval power. Alternatively, its inclusion may simply represent artistic licence on the part of the map-maker. Although some elements of this map remain to be verified, it nevertheless provides a fascinating glimpse of a time about which there is still much to understand.

Sources

Sandford, E. 2006. What was Portrush like in 1605? *The Bann Disc* 12, 35-44.

Warner, R.B. 2019-20. The Portrush, County Antrim, promontory as depicted on a map of c.1580 and its archaeological and historical significance. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 75, 1-15.

We are indebted to Dr Peter Wilson for this most interesting article on “The Earliest Known Map of Portrush”.

29th January 2022