



Kilkea Castle

Est~1180

Our History

SIR WALTER DE RIDDLESFORD

Sometimes here in Ireland's Ancient East, you need to look carefully to find the beginnings of a great story. And so Kilkea Castle begins with Sir Walter de Riddlesford.

Today, Kilkea is known as one of Ireland's oldest inhabited castles and as the erstwhile home of the mighty FitzGerald dynasty. However, it was the Anglo-Norman warrior Sir Walter who was the first owner of the stronghold here.

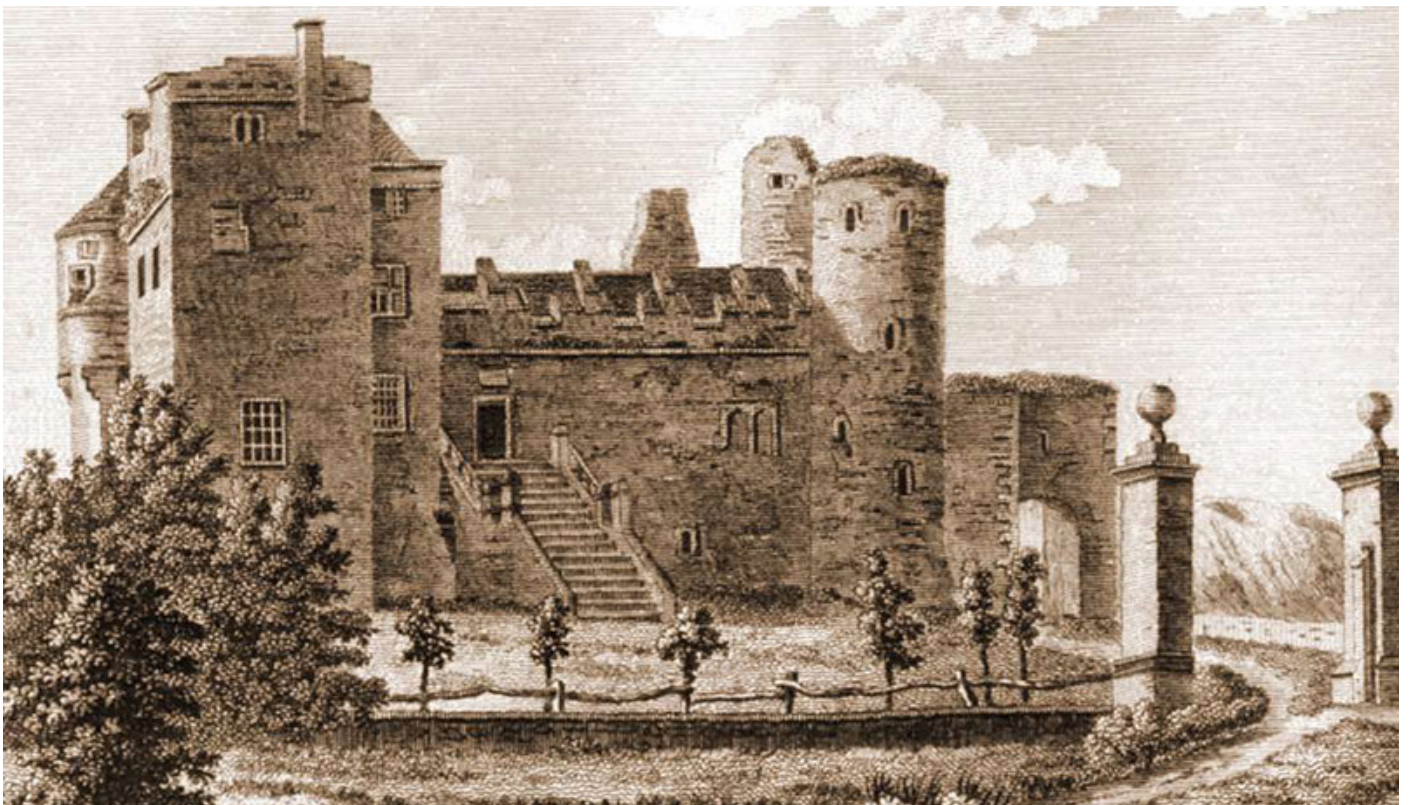
Born into the swashbuckling medieval age of castles and conquests, de Riddlesford rose to prominence following the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169 when fighting men's loyalties were richly rewarded. The redoubtable knight Strongbow, having played a leading role in the invasion, granted de Riddlesford property in the ancient tribal territory of 'Omurethy' in south Kildare, including the barony of Kilkea and Moone. The generous grant was recorded in an old Anglo-Norman poem:

*Twenty fiefs in Omurethy,
The noble earl [Strongbow] in the same way
Gave to the warrior
Walter de Riddlesford.*

Castles were quickly established to maintain control of conquered lands and Hugh de Lacy, Chief Governor of Ireland, built a motte and bailey fort for de Riddlesford at Kilkea in 1180. Meanwhile, de Riddlesford and his followers pushed their opponents into the mountains.

The first castle at Kilkea remained in de Riddlesford's family for four generations until his great-granddaughter, the heiress Emmeline, married into the FitzGerald dynasty. Over the following seven centuries, the FitzGeralds held sway, and Kilkea Castle grew in magnificence, while the shadowy figure of Sir Walter and his fort faded from view.

But not completely. Take a look outside, at the bottom of the castle gardens, where the River Griese flows around a raised mound: the still-visible site of Sir Walter's original motte and bailey - the key to the story of Kilkea Castle.



SIR THOMAS DE ROKEBY

Following his return from being a prisoner in Scotland, Sir Thomas De Rokeby first came to King Edward III on 1327 as the squire who pointed out the approach of the Scottish Army during the invasion. As a reward, he was knighted and given lands worth £100 a year. He served in many political offices throughout the years, including High Sheriff of Yorkshire and oversaw Stirling Castle and Edinburgh Castle while they were held by the English.

In December of 1349, Rokeby was made Justiciar, the governor of Ireland. While holding this position, he undertook a general overhaul of the Irish administration, aimed particularly at the detection of corruption and the removal of incompetent officials. He was also successful in defeating the uprising of the Clan MacCarthy.

Several more rebellions occurred and Rokeby suffered many military defeats causing him to be recalled to London in 1355. His replacement, the Earl of Desmond, died a year later and Rokeby was reappointed Justiciar. He returned to Ireland, only to die soon afterwards at Kilkea Castle in 1356.



LADY EMMELINE

Lady Emmeline was the great granddaughter of Walter de Riddlesford, a warrior whose success in the Anglo-Norman invasion granted him the land that is now Kilkea Castle.

She inherited the Castle and surrounding lands after the death of her mother. In 1273, Emmeline married Maurice FitzGerald, the Third Lord of Offaly.

Together, Emmeline and Maurice had one daughter, Juliana. This marriage gave the FitzGerald family possession of Kilkea Castle, which remained in their name for over seven hundred years.



THE FitzGerald DYNASTY

The Old Norman tradition of adding “Fitz” – “son of” – before a father’s name begins to unlock this centuries-old story; while the Germanic compound “Gerald”, from “ger” (spear) and “waltan” (rule) tells of swashbuckling times when might was right. And so it was, in the days of castles and conquests, that the FitzGeralds would become pre-eminent in Ireland, with their fulcrum of power here in Ireland’s Ancient East.

Fadó, Fadó. Long, long ago a Norman adventurer called Gerald Fitzwalter, a castellan in Wales, married a Welsh princess, Nesta, and she bore him famous children “by whom the southern coast of Wales was saved for the English and the bulwarks of Ireland stormed.”

Following the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169 sons and grandsons of Gerald established their family’s fortunes across great swathes of Irish territory. The FitzGeralds divided between two main branches, the Houses of Desmond and Kildare, together “by far the most powerful and illustrious of the Anglo-Norman families in Ireland”, as the iconic Annals of the Four Masters relate.



Through marriage, the FitzGeralds of Kildare gained ownership of Kilkea Castle, built from 1180 on lands granted by the redoubtable Anglo-Norman knight Strongbow. They later won many titles and honours: becoming Earls and Marquesses of Kildare, and Dukes of Leinster, the premier dukedom in the peerage of Ireland.

But delve a little deeper. Peel back the layers of history. Tales from Ireland’s Ancient East are rich and complicated. Plots twist and turn. Maintaining position and power was not simply a question of fighting – shrewd politicking, dynamic marriages, making and breaking alliances all played their part too. It was said that the FitzGeralds became so intermingled with the native Gaelic Irish and their ways that they were “Hibernicis ipsis Hiberniores, or more Irish than the Irish themselves.”

And so the names of the FitzGeralds, heroes and anti-heroes, who won, lost and regained family fortunes while playing prominent roles in Irish history, speak volumes to us down the ages: John Fitzthomas FitzGerald “the redoubtable”, rewarded “for his good service” with the Earldom of Kildare in 1316 by King Edward II. “Shaun Cam” or “Hump-backed John” FitzGerald, 6th Earl, who defeated an Irish invasion of the Pale (English lands) in 1421 – Kilkea Castle, between the territories of the native Irish and the Pale, stood in a strategically important spot.

The 8th and 9th Earls: Gearóid Mór (“Gerald the Great”) and Gearóid Óg (“Young Gerald”) each represented the English King as Lord Deputy of Ireland in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The 10th Earl, hot-headed “Silken Thomas” lost the family titles and lands, only for his half-brother the “Wizard Earl” to regain them through a series of romantic adventures. These and many more have written their names and tales into history.

FITZGERALDS ONE AND ALL



EARL OF KILDARE

Originally a Welsh Norman noble family who arrived in Ireland during and following the Norman invasion in 1169, the FitzGerald dynasty established themselves as one of the leading and most powerful feudal rulers of Ireland. They were made Earls of Kildare in the 14th century.

Two senior FitzGerald's, Garret Mór FitzGerald and his son, Garret Óg FitzGerald served as Lords Deputy of Ireland, representatives of the English Crown.

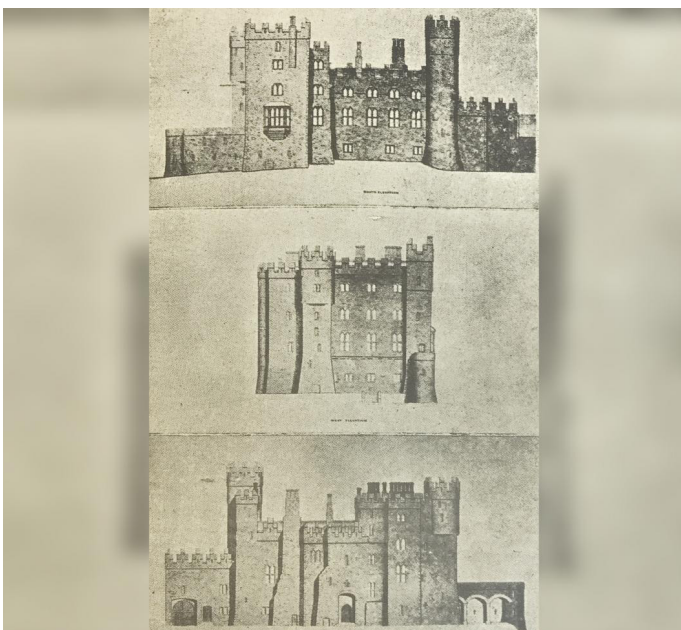
The tenth Earl, Thomas FitzGerald, known as Silken Thomas, was attainted and his honours were forfeit in 1537. In 1554, Thomas' half-brother and only male heir, Gerald FitzGerald, was deemed Earl of Kildare in the Peerage of Ireland.

He was subsequently restored to the original Patent in 1569, as 11th earl. The second earldom, created in 1554, became extinct in 1599, although the original earldom has survived.



DUKE OF LEINSTER

Duke of Leinster is a title of Irish nobility with subsidiary titles including: Marquess of Kildare, Earl of Kildare, Earl of Offaly, Viscount Leinster, Baron Offaly and Baron Kildare. The Welsh-Norman branch of the FitzGerald dynasty, who came to Ireland in 1169, were initially made the Earls of Kildare and subsequently the Dukes of Leinster.



The earldom was created in 1316 for John FitzGerald for his service to King Edward I during the Scottish War of Independence. Many prominent FitzGerald's such as Silken Thomas, The Wizard Earl and Lord Walter FitzGerald called Kilkea Castle home. The Castle has also been associated with Lord Edward FitzGerald of the 1798 rebellion.

The coat of arms of the Dukes of Leinster derives from the legend that John FitzGerald, First Earl of Kildare, as a baby in Woodstock Castle, was trapped in a fire when a pet monkey rescued him.

The FitzGerald's then adopted a monkey as their crest. The family motto "Crom A Boo" comes from the medieval Croom Castle and "Abu", meaning "up" in Irish.



LADY ELIZABETH GREY

Lady Elizabeth Grey was an English noblewoman, and the second wife of Gerald FitzGerald, 9th Earl of Kildare.

In 1523, Elizabeth returned with her husband to Ireland, where he served as Lord Deputy of Ireland and as Deputy to the King's Lieutenant of Ireland.

Together Elizabeth and Gerald had at least six children, the most famous being The Wizard Earl. She was also stepmother to Silken Thomas, who led the rebellion against King Henry VII seeking vengeance for the rumored execution of his father and Elizabeth's husband.

Silken Thomas and Elizabeth's five brothers-in-law were executed for rebellion at Tyburn in 1537. Her own brother Leonard Grey, the incumbent Lord Deputy of Ireland, had crushed the rebellion. As a result of the rebellion, the earldom was stripped from the FitzGerald family and her son. Gerald spent years in exile until the lands of Kilkea were returned to him.

After her husband Gerald's death in 1534, Elizabeth retired to her brother Leonard's manor of Beaumanoir, in Leicestershire, while her younger sons were raised at court alongside Prince Edward.



SILKEN THOMAS FitzGerald

If ever a tale should illustrate the dramatic twists and turns of history in Ireland's Ancient East, it is that of "rash and headlong" Silken Thomas.

Thomas FitzGerald (1513–1537) was the son of Gerald FitzGerald, 9th Earl of Kildare and his first wife Elizabeth Zouche. As Lord Deputy of Ireland – the King's representative in Ireland – Gerald wielded immense power that attracted envy and mistrust, not least from the English court.

And so it happened that early in 1534, Earl Gerald was summoned yet again to London to account for various actions to King Henry VIII. Renowned for his intelligence and diplomacy, in all probability, the Earl might as usual have made his peace. Except that this time was different. Before he left Ireland, Gerald had appointed his son as acting Lord Deputy in his absence. Known as Silken Thomas for the rich style in which he and his retinue dressed, the youth was scarcely 21 years old.

Family enemies wasted no time in exploiting Silken Thomas's inexperience and fiery nature. In June 1534 (false) rumours spread that his father had been executed at the Tower of London and the English government were out for Thomas too. He summoned the Council of Ireland to St Mary's Abbey, Dublin, himself hastening there accompanied by 140 armed warriors in their silk-fringed helmets.

Chaotic scenes ensued. Lord Thomas, inflamed by chants from a bard in his retinue, refused to listen to reason and, renouncing his allegiance to the Lord of Ireland (Henry VIII), he cried: "I am none of Henry's Deputy, I am his foe". He threw down the sword of state and rushed out. The rebellion had begun.

Rallying followers, Thomas "did many injuries to the English" and in July attacked Dublin Castle, which was holding out for the King. However, his army was now routed and suddenly his supporters began to melt away – in no small part due to the terrible murder of the Archbishop of Dublin, a longstanding enemy of the FitzGeralds.

Before the year was out, Thomas's father Earl Gerald, hearing of his son's rebellion, had died "of grief" in the Tower of London. Some months later, Thomas was persuaded to surrender and gave himself up to Lord Leonard Grey, new Lord Deputy of Ireland (and coincidentally Thomas's step-uncle) on condition of his personal safety.

Any such assurances soon proved false and in October 1535, Thomas was sent as a prisoner to the Tower of London. There, in a far cry from his Silken riches, he languished in misery, writing piteously to a former servant in Ireland to beg for £20 to buy food and clothes, and complaining, "I have gone wolward [shirtless] and barefoot and barelegged divers times (when it hath not been very warm)".

Thomas, still only 24 years old, and his five uncles were executed at Tyburn in 1537. The rebellion had failed but henceforth it sharpened Henry VIII's focus on Irish matters including curbing the powers of the Lord Deputy.

For the FitzGeralds of Kilkea Castle and Kildare, the rebellion had been a disaster. The Earldom was forfeited, their estates confiscated and their family proscribed. Their hopes for the future lay with Silken Thomas's 12-year-old half-brother Gerald, and spies and enemies were already trying to track the boy down. After many adventures, Gerald (later known as the Wizard Earl) would survive and family fortunes would be restored – but that's another story.



GERALD, THE WIZARD EARL

*If gentle life and high degree
And beauty could avail
To shield from ill, it were not mine
To tell so sad a tale*

So begins a famous local ballad by Thomas Greene, The Wizard Earl - A Legend of Kilkea Castle: a cautionary tale, for sure. But as so often in Ireland's Ancient East, the true story of Gerald FitzGerald, 11th Earl of Kildare (1525-1585), is every bit as dramatic as folklore.

The Earl, so legend tells us, had a passion for alchemy, which spilled over into the "arts of darkness", and he practised them here in his family home at Kilkea Castle (*if you look through the window of the 'The Wizard Earl' bedroom, you can see his private quarters, embellished by the stone carving of a monkey (why a monkey? That's another tale!)*).



One day the Wizard Earl's curious wife Mabel begged him to show her his shape-shifting powers. Unable to resist her entreaties, he agreed: on condition, she showed no fear otherwise "he must from her forever part". He then set about testing her resolve with three demonstrations of magic.

Firstly, Gerald commanded the River Griese to swell until it flooded into the castle and rose up to Mabel's neck. She didn't flinch. Secondly he conjured up a serpent-monster, which coiled around her. Mabel didn't waver. Finally, the Wizard Earl summoned the spirit of a long-departed friend, who greeted the Countess before vanishing through a wall. Mabel remained unfazed. Now, convinced of his wife's courage, Gerald told her to close her eyes and re-open them when he stamped three times. Mabel did. And she found her husband transformed into a little black bird that hopped upon her shoulder and began to sweetly sing. All of a sudden the castle cat appeared and pounced. Mabel fainted. And when she revived, the Wizard Earl's warning had come true: he had vanished, never to be seen again.

History tells a different but no less intriguing tale. Gerald's father, the 9th Earl of Kildare (and Lord Deputy of Ireland), had died amid plots and confusion in England. His older half-brother the 10th Earl (known as Silken Thomas for the richness of his dress) had been tricked into rebelling against Henry VIII and was executed for treason in 1537.

With counsellors advising King Henry that there would never be peace in Ireland "till the bludde of the Garrolde were holy extinct", the FitzGerald heir, 12-year-old Gerald, was hidden by friends and family, and eventually spirited away to Italy. It was here that he was immersed in Renaissance ideas, science and alchemy, astronomy and astrology, medicine and magic. Following a princely education under the guidance of his kinsman Cardinal Reginald Pole, he joined a knightly campaign against the Turkish Empire.

In London, Edward VI had succeeded Henry VIII in 1547 and Gerald, the subject of widespread romantic interest after his escapades, was permitted to the court. There he met and married Mabel, daughter of Sir Anthony Browne, Master of the Horse. Favoured by both King Edward and Queen Mary I, Gerald was restored to his Kildare lands and the Earldom, and he returned to Ireland and Kilkea Castle. Here he pursued his learned interests brought back from the Continent, stoking those rumours of his magical powers.

Even after his death, there's a twist in the tale of the Wizard Earl. For legend says he slumbers an enchanted sleep in a cave beneath the Rath (fort) of Mullaghmast, north of Kilkea Castle, and that on the 7th day of the 7th month of every 7th year he rides his silver-shod white horse across the Curragh to Kilkea accompanied by his men. After spending the night here, he leaves before dawn. When the white steed's silver shoes have worn to nothing, so it is foretold, the Wizard Earl will return to life and rid Ireland of all her enemies. If you see him, check the state of those glittering hooves.



COUNTESS MABEL OF KILDARE

Mabel was the wife of Gerald FitzGerald the 11th (“Wizard”) Earl of Kildare: for in both legend and life, through love and loss, she was loyal to the end. It’s usually the men who steal the headlines in stories of castles and conquests in Ireland’s Ancient East, but there have been many leading ladies too. So hear the tale of Mabel (c. 1536-1610), “a lady of great worth and virtue”.

You may already know how the Wizard Earl (1525-1585) came by his nickname through his reputation for dabbling in the “dark arts” here in Kilkea Castle – boundaries between alchemy and occult could be somewhat blurred at the time. In the legend telling how the Earl disappeared, it is Mabel who stands at the heart of events. For as the old ballad by Thomas Greene relates, it was she who urged her husband to demonstrate his powers by shape-shifting in front of her very eyes and she who sealed his fate.

Warning his wife that if she showed any fear he would have to leave her forever, the Wizard Earl set her three tests before changing form. First, he caused the River Griese to flood into the castle and rise around the Countess, but she stayed resolute. Second, he conjured up a serpent-monster from the water that coiled around her. She didn’t flinch. Finally, he summoned up the spirit of a long-departed friend who greeted Mabel. She remained steadfast.

Convinced of his wife’s courage, the Earl now told her to close her eyes and re-open them when he stamped three times. She dutifully did so and beheld her husband transformed into a little black bird that hopped upon her shoulder. But as Mabel went to stroke the creature, the castle cat suddenly appeared and pounced. Fearful for Gerald’s safety, she fainted, and so as prophesied, the Earl vanished forever.

Whatever the legend, life was colourful for Mabel too. Born in Sussex, England, the daughter of Sir Anthony Browne, Knight of the Garter and Master of the Horse, she was well connected and her family prospered in the Tudor courts, despite their Roman Catholic faith at a time when the Reformation and Henry VIII were overturning the old order.

Then onto the scene, burst handsome young Gerald FitzGerald, fresh from years on the run on the Continent after his elder half-brother Silken Thomas had upset Henry VIII and been executed for treason, losing their family their Irish lands and the Earldom of Kildare. With Henry dead (1547), Gerald dared appear at the court of Edward VI where, cloaked in an aura of romantic adventures, he cut a dashing figure. A teenaged Mabel, it’s said, promptly fell in love with the “valiant, affable” youth at a royal masked ball and the couple were married shortly afterwards early in the 1550s.

Marriage to Mabel helped Gerald to be accepted back into public life, and while Mabel became a gentlewoman of Queen Mary’s Privy Chamber, Gerald won thanks from the Queen by helping to suppress the Wyatt Rebellion. Through the reigns of both Edward and Mary, Gerald’s titles and lands were restored and the 11th Earl of Kildare – the Wizard Earl – and his Countess came to live again at the FitzGerald family seat of Kilkea Castle. Mabel bore her husband five children and although he sired a further seven offspring out of wedlock she remained a loyal wife. Gerald oscillated in matters of faith as different political winds blew, but Mabel remained true to her Roman Catholic upbringing, even at risk of personal danger. She would outlive her husband by 25 years.

But that’s not quite the end of the story. Because the ballad Legend of Kilkea Castle and the Wizard Earl says that far from vanishing forever, the spirit of the Earl will awake from an enchanted sleep and return to Kilkea Castle riding a white charger shod with silver shoes on the 7th day of the 7th month of every 7th year.

*And when he comes, oh then let all
True men and women pray
That his good wife may meet him at
The Castle of Kilkea.*



SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON

Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton was a polar explorer who led three British expeditions to the Antarctic, and one of the principal figures of the period known as the “Heroic Age” of Antarctic Exploration. He was born in Kilkea, not far from the Castle grounds.

Rejecting his father’s wish that he become a doctor, he joined the Merchant Navy when he was 16 and qualified as a Master Mariner in 1898.

In 1901, Shackleton was chosen to go on the Antarctic expedition. He trekked towards the South Pole in extremely difficult conditions, getting closer to the Pole than anyone had come before.

Back in Britain, Shackleton spent some time as a journalist and was then elected Secretary of the Scottish Royal Geographical Society.

In 1908, he returned to the Antarctic as the leader of his own expedition, on the ship “Nimrod”. During the expedition, his team climbed Mount Erebus, made many important scientific discoveries, and set a record by coming even closer to the South Pole than before. He was knighted on his return to Britain.

In 1914, Shackleton made his third trip to the Antarctic with the ship “Endurance”, planning to cross Antarctica via the South Pole but the ship became trapped in ice and had to be abandoned by Shackleton and his crew.

His fourth expedition aimed to circumnavigate the Antarctic continent but in January of 1922, Shackleton died of a heart attack off South Georgia Island. He was buried on the island, which is part of the South Sandwich Islands.



THE RENT TABLE OF SILKEN THOMAS

The Rent Table dates back to 1533, and it was used for tenants to pay their rent to the landlord. Initially in the home of Gerald FitzGerald at Maynooth Castle until 1534, the Rent Table remained there for a significant period until it was placed on Leinster Lawn in the Duke of Leinster's house in Dublin. Then it moved to Carton House following the sale of Leinster House.

The table remained at Carton House until 1949 when the house went up for sale. It was re-erected in the Castle Garden at Kilkea castle, the large table of cut stone outside edges are bevelled up, and the surface falls slightly towards the centre, by way of preventing the coins from falling off. Around the sides is a finely carved inscription which states;

GERALDUS COMES KILDARE FILIUS GERALDI MCCCCXXXIII. SI DIEU PLET

'Gerald Earl of Kildare, son of Gerald 1533. If it please God'

Today it's stored at the National Museum of Ireland, and the table plinth is still on the grounds of Kilkea Castle.



THE GRAVEYARD & STONE CARVINGS

The Graveyard is a short walk from the Castle; it's a circular raised area enclosed by a stone wall and trees. There are several fascinating carvings within the Graveyard; one is a stone plaque which is in the west wall of the church called 'The Monkey Stone' which dates back to the 16th/17th century. The plaque represents a monkey wearing a collar and holding a helmet.

Another carving is of a mermaid touching a piece of her hair while holding a comb with her other hand. She is seated on or leaning against a mythical creature, which resembles a sea-horse.

The third plaque represents the 'Cost of Arms' of the FitzGerald family, which portrays a monkey. It derives from the legend that John FitzGerald, First Earl of Kildare, as a baby in Woodstock Castle, was trapped in a fire when a pet monkey rescued him.



The Monkey Stone Carving



Coat of Arms Plaque

The Church ruins are still visible today beside the Graveyard. There were initially two Chapels: The FitzGerald Mortuary Chapel on the west side of the nave of the church and the Lady Chapel to the North wall of the chancel. The church remains of a broken late medieval chest tomb are also found within the Lady Chapel. The nave of the church has opposed entrances and a chancel attached at the east.

A small pet cemetery belonging to Lord Walters features under a tree by the road leading you to The Clubhouse, it features two cut stones. One is a memorial stone for Jessie, a Dandi Dinot and the other memorial stone is dedicated to multiple pets 'Shaun, Murtach and Teige'.



Church Ruins



Top of the original Steeples of a Church





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