

The Motte and the Normans

The Normans

The Normans that invaded England in 1066 came from Normandy in Northern France. However, they were originally Vikings from Scandinavia. At the beginning of the tenth century, the French King, Charles the Simple, had given some land in the North of France to a Viking chief named Rollo. He hoped that by giving the Vikings their own land in France they would stop attacking France. The land became known as Northmannia, the land of the Northmen. It was later shortened to Normandy. The Vikings intermarried with the French and by the year 1000, they were no longer Viking pagans, but French speaking Christians.

The Anglo-Norman invasion of Ulster began in 1177 when John de Courcy led a private venture of 22 knights and about 300 soldiers north from Dublin and defeated an Irish chieftain named Mac Dunleavy at Downpatrick. His military successes enabled him to occupy most of the lands which today comprise Co Down and South Antrim, and he rewarded his knights with manors defended by mottes and castles. Unlike English medieval barons, the Ulster Anglo-Normans were not lords of demesnes and villages, but lived off rents they exacted from tenants in dispersed settlements. De Courcy had to secure his hold on the land quickly and effectively. He built 2 great stone fortresses at Carrickfergus and Dundrum and his lords erected hurriedly other castles of earth and timber, which had mottes and palisades, trenches and wooden archery towers and in some places baileys. The Anglo-Normans were secure in East Down and South Antrim in the 13th and 14th centuries with the smaller private mottes concentrated in these areas. The situation was different in West Down, where castles like Dromore and Ballyronney were military establishments along a hostile frontier, having garrisons of around 40 soldiers, and acting as outposts to protect the more settled districts of the east.

The Edward Bruce incursion into Ulster 1315-18 devastated the insecure earldom of Ulster, and there followed a long period of gradual decline, until the Anglo-Norman settlements shrank to mere footholds in the Ards and around Carrickfergus. By 1430 the Irish Clann Aedha Buidhe O'Neill commonly known as the Clanaboye O'Neills had occupied most of North Down and South Antrim. Anglo-Norman Ulster always was frontier territory, vulnerable to Irish attacks and liable to collapse under external pressures.

Belvoir Motte



Belvoir Motte today

Belvoir was one of these private mottes. "Motte" is a French word meaning "mound". They were man-made and were constructed by digging earth up from a ditch and then covering it with a layer of clay to stop erosion and slippage. At Belvoir the motte rises on the highest point of the river bank, with the bailey to its North East at a lower slope of the bank. The bailey has been largely displaced, first by the construction of a carriage way, that extends between it and the motte and then by the erection of the ice house. From the top of the motte in Belvoir you can see how they would have been able to defend it from people attacking from the river which would have been one of the main means of access at that point.

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The Keep

On top of the motte there would have been a wooden castle or “keep” which would have housed the knight and his family. The bailey was the area where the ordinary people and all the animals would have lived. It would have been connected to the motte by a wooden bridge or causeway and in times of attack everyone would have retreated into the keep for safety.

The lord could over look the River Lagan and most of his land which would have included most of Belvoir Forest. John de Courcy was based in Carrickfergus so all his knights would have travelled there for important occasions.

