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Author(s)	Dempsey, Karen
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Lea Castle: Looking Outwards

Karen Dempsey

1 - INTRODUCTION

Lea Castle, Co. Laois, is located on the River Barrow where it occupied an important position close to the borders of three medieval territories: Leix, Offaly and Kildare. The impressive design of the castle and landscape suggest that Lea's patrons had a desire to create a very particular monument, at a distinctive place, for themselves. It was (and still is today) a significant site. However, the castle and landscape are currently neglected and in a poor state of repair. Some recent funded research at the castle, including community outreach, spearheaded by the Lea Castle Conservation Group, has succeeding in drawing attention to this situation ¹. The premise of this paper is to introduce the castle and discusses aspects of this recent work at Lea Castle.

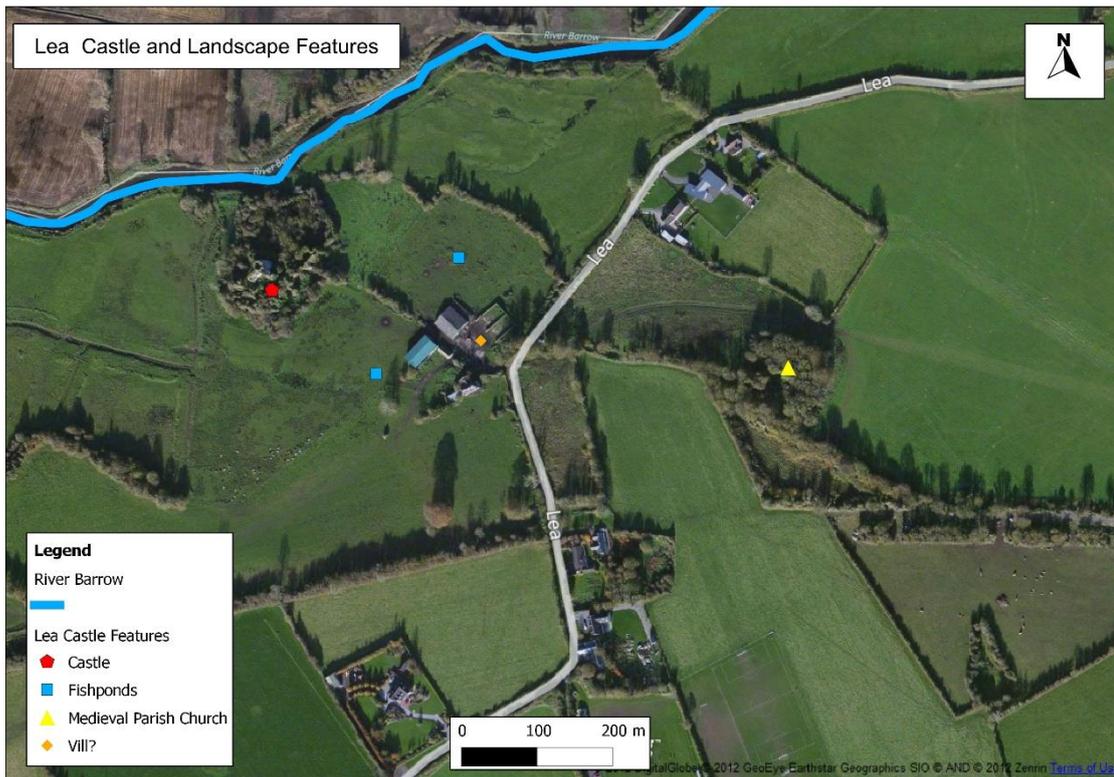


Fig. 1 - Lea Castle, Co. Laois: interpretative aerial image indicating the landscape arrangement and potential features. Photograph Karen Dempsey. Bing Images

2 – THE CASTLE

It is likely that the initial earthwork castle at Lea was constructed over a pre-existing, but smaller scale, Gaelic-Irish monument similar to castles such as Dunamase, Co Laois and Adare, Co Limerick ². The earliest castle was eventually succeeded by a large masonry focal building comprising an almost square central block with four large corner towers, followed by associated outerworks including a large twin-towered gatehouse and an extensive surviving masonry curtain wall ³.

Of particular interest, in the context of this paper, are questions relating to the potential survival of the castle's medieval landscape and complex waterscape. It's most obvious features comprise a silted-up moat surrounding the castle complex, earthworks in fields adjacent to the castle, the surviving footings of a medieval church *c.* 300m to its south-east and a possibly documented – but visually absent – *vill*. This may be located beneath an extensive modern farmyard situated between the church and the castle (fig 1). Although no immediate evidence of parkland features such as dovecotes, warrens and a deer-park have been revealed, a castle of this magnitude would likely have contained these ⁴.

As part of a Conservation Report commissioned by Lea Castle Conservation Group, an historic landscape assessment was carried out ⁵. It identified three key areas of interest: the moat system, the potential survival of the *vill*, as well as a possible multi-period mill complex located further east along the River Barrow. This study, coupled with work by the author recommended that the landscape of the castle would benefit from further non-invasive archaeological investigation ⁶. Subsequently, two campaigns of geophysical survey were undertaken at select locations within the castle landscape ⁷. Extensive anomalies were present in both geophysical survey campaigns.

The first completed in 2015, concentrated on the areas west, south and south-east of the castle, including the areas adjacent to the modern farmyard (fig 1). This revealed the return of the moat, over four depressions, both linear and sub-circular in shape that may be a series of interlinking fish-ponds and rectangular features which are interpreted here as possible house plots. However, all of these potential archaeological features are as yet unconfirmed. In 2016, the survey area was expanded to include a large field east and north east of the castle, which had some

obvious earthworks. In particular, the field east of the castle indicates past activities that are industrial in scale. While it is not clear if these are medieval, post-medieval or modern, they warrant further investigation.

From both geophysical surveys, continuous fieldwork and complimentary analysis, it is very clear that Lea Castle has, at least, a partially intact medieval landscape, which subject to further investigation, has much to reveal. Together, these studies are the focus of a larger research project led by Lea Castle Conservation Group. In the following section, only two aspects of the castle's landscape – the waterscape and the possible medieval *vill* – will be very briefly examined.

3 – A WATERY LANDSCAPE

Today, the landscape of Lea Castle is criss-crossed with modern drainage ditches; however, initial observations of the archaeological remains and study of the cartographic evidence, including an antiquarian plan from the 18th century, indicate evidence for an intricate waterscape which is re-imagined for this paper (fig 2).

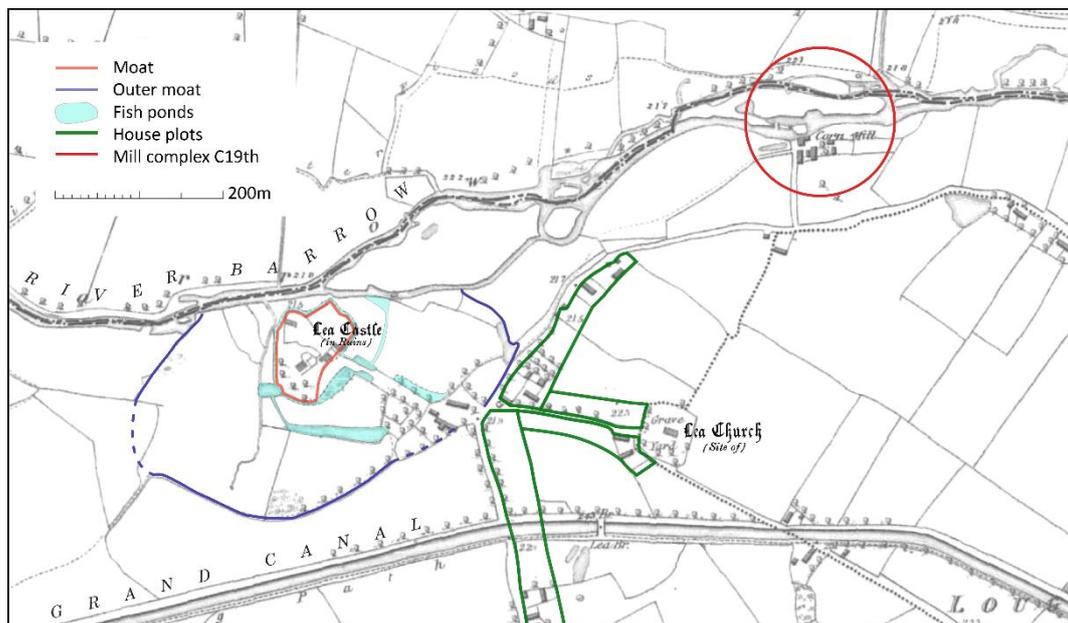


Fig. 2. Lea Castle, Co. Laois: interpretative image based on historic mapping exploring the potential medieval landscape. Source: First Edition Ordnance Survey mapping (1841). After Myles 2015; drawing K. Dempsey and C. McDermott.

Research suggests that at some point in the life story of the castle, perhaps during the thirteenth century, it likely contained watery features comprising a moat adjacent to the walls of the castle complex, an inner moat, a possible outer greater moat and fish-ponds, as well as a possible mill race and pool that were all interconnected and dependent upon the River Barrow (fig 2). Lea Castle's location along the River Barrow in an area of low-lying ground meant that these attributes could be relatively easily executed and also very effective in providing a high-impact vista.

Evidence for moats at the castle are straightforward. In the area immediately adjacent to the curtain wall, a silted up U-shaped ditch is obvious. This feature continues for most of the circumference of the castle, including the early earthwork castle to the west. A drawbridge provided access to the inner space of the castle complex through a twin-towered gatehouse; the scars of the pulley system and the slight remains of the corresponding pit are still evident today. It is likely that this feature crossed the castle moat mentioned previously. Slightly further to the south, a curvilinear feature, visible today as a broad but shallow ditch, indicates a potential second moat around the castle complex. The eastern end of the curvilinear feature leads towards a water-filled field boundary that today flows into the Barrow River (fig 2). The western end of the moat is less easy to follow and modern disturbance appears to have almost erased its path. However, geophysical survey has indicated the potential former path of this feature. It is likely given the size, profile and orientation that this was a partially encircling moat complimenting the River Barrow to the north, as is shown on historic mapping and interpretative mapping in this article (fig 2). As suggested by Myles, the final moat may have acted as an outer enclosure for the wider castle landscape⁸. Using cartographic evidence, as well as current topographical features, the outer moat can be traced south of the castle, alongside the modern road (which has been slightly straightened) and northwards along the water-filled ditch of a field boundary which also contains the eastern end of the inner moat, both leading to the River Barrow. Outside of the putative inner moat but within the outer moat, geophysical survey revealed a large anomaly to the south-west of the castle. Its signal strongly resembled that of the other potential moats and it was visible as a slight depression. This was depicted as a water feature in historic mapping (fig 2). Further similar but smaller anomalies were revealed to the south and south-east; it is possible that these were once water-filled features consistent with fish-ponds.

Centrally placed within this landscape, traversing the putative moats and possible fish-ponds, a potential raised route-way may once have given access to and from the castle. Parallel field boundaries, only partially extant today but visible in historic mapping and noted on an antiquarian drawing represent this. Interestingly, it leads east-southeast towards the medieval church. It seems to create a physical link between the church and castle. Indeed, this could be read as a material statement of the ongoing, inseparable dialogue between the sacred and profane in the medieval world. The raised route-way terminates at the putative medieval *vill* beyond which further east is access to the church lane and medieval church (fig. 2).



Fig. 3 - Lea Castle, Co. Laois: view across watery landscape facing west-northwest. Photograph Karen Dempsey.

4 – THE MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT: *VILL* AND HOUSE PLOTS

Undoubtedly there was a medieval settlement connected to the castle and located at Lea. Whether this was the ‘Newtown of Leys’ mentioned in the historic sources but

argued to be associated with the nearby tenant-in-chief castle of Dunamase, we cannot say for sure⁹. However, we can hypothesise that owing to the location, scale and composition of the castle that there must have been a permanent settlement of significance here.

Historic mapping of the area where the modern farmyard is located shows that a housing cluster was visible in the 1830s at the junction of the proposed raised route-way and the possible outer moat. This small settlement lay almost centrally between the medieval church and castle. If the presence of the outer moat can be accepted, then a bridge or fording point would have been necessary to access the castle and it is posited here that it was at this significant boundary a settlement or *vill* was established. Currently, owing to the location of the modern farmyard, it is not possible to ascertain the presence of housing platforms or other features that would be typical of a medieval *vill*. Adjacent areas were deemed suitable for investigation.

Geophysical survey was conducted in three small sites close to the church, as well as south and south east of the modern farmyard. These areas are also located near the modern roadway whose curving nature suggested a much more ancient pathway. The surveys revealed small rectangular enclosed spaces with a central magnetic response possibly indicative of burning. The rectangular features abutted or were orientated towards the road. Their spatial arrangement ('gable-end' towards the road), including sizing and location, in addition to the possible central hearth lends to their potential as house-plots. Cartographic and historical research indicates significant post-medieval settlement in this area but it is possible that this may have utilised the older house plots. This landscape has much to reveal and requires further research.

5 – FINAL WORDS

The suggested arrangement of Lea's landscape is complex: wrapped by the River Barrow to the north with three moats rippling outwards to the south, interspersed with fish-ponds and traversed by a raised walkway. It would have stood out from the flat surroundings of Co. Laois, perhaps with the castle complex mirrored repeatedly in the surrounding water (fig 3). It appears that the patrons of Lea made a deliberate decision for water to be the dominant landscape feature. Indeed, during very wet weather, Lea still appears to float upon this landscape (fig 3). If this composition is accepted for Lea, it is possible to say that the intricate design of this waterscape

reflects the particular ideas and desires of a patron or generations of patrons who also chose to construct a particular focal building at the heart of this complex castle ¹⁰.

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