UNIT C.2

Defence and security

In the middle ages towns tended to be concentrations of wealth that was moveable and therefore vulnerable. In addition they were often located at strategic places such as important river crossings, or they controlled vital harbour facilities, or both of these. Townspeople specialised in craftworking and in trading; they were not normally expert fighters. It was in their collective interest, therefore, to find ways to defend themselves against attack. In addition towns tended to be 'owned' by a powerful person, whether king or baron or mere knight. It was also in the lord's interest to defend his town and its inhabitants; it might equally be in a particular lord's interest to attack and destroy someone else's town.

For these and other reasons, a variety of defensive arrangements were made. The earliest of these are likely to have been of earth and timber, in the form of

Fig. 85: *Dublin, part I*, plate 3, National Museum of Ireland excavation site at Wood Quay, 1975. Leo Swan.

banks, ditches and palisades. The first town gateways were probably of timber. Such early features survive only archaeologically, a famous example being the Viking embankments at Wood Quay in Dublin. In due course these defences were replaced by stone ones, at Dublin *c.* 1100 (Fig. 85). The quarrying, transportation and laying of such heavy materials were expensive operations and stone town walls can be interpreted as a major sign of economic success. Even so, as we have already seen, it was common for medieval rulers to assist townspeople in raising funds for this purpose through the granting of murage charters.

Another standard form of defence was the castle. It was relatively common for a castle – whether royal or baronial – to be set in the angle of a town's defensive walls. It was usual, too, for such castles themselves to be located strategically on higher ground overlooking a river crossing. Limerick is a clear case in point, as so many classic views of the town emphasise (Fig. 86). Such castles had in practice a dual purpose: to act as a defensive post of last resort and to protect the lord's own interests against occasionally unruly townspeople! Another type of 'castle' to be found in late medieval towns was the tower house, a private dwelling that was extremely common in the Irish countryside. Rich merchants used them as storehouses for valuable merchandise as well as residences for themselves and their families.
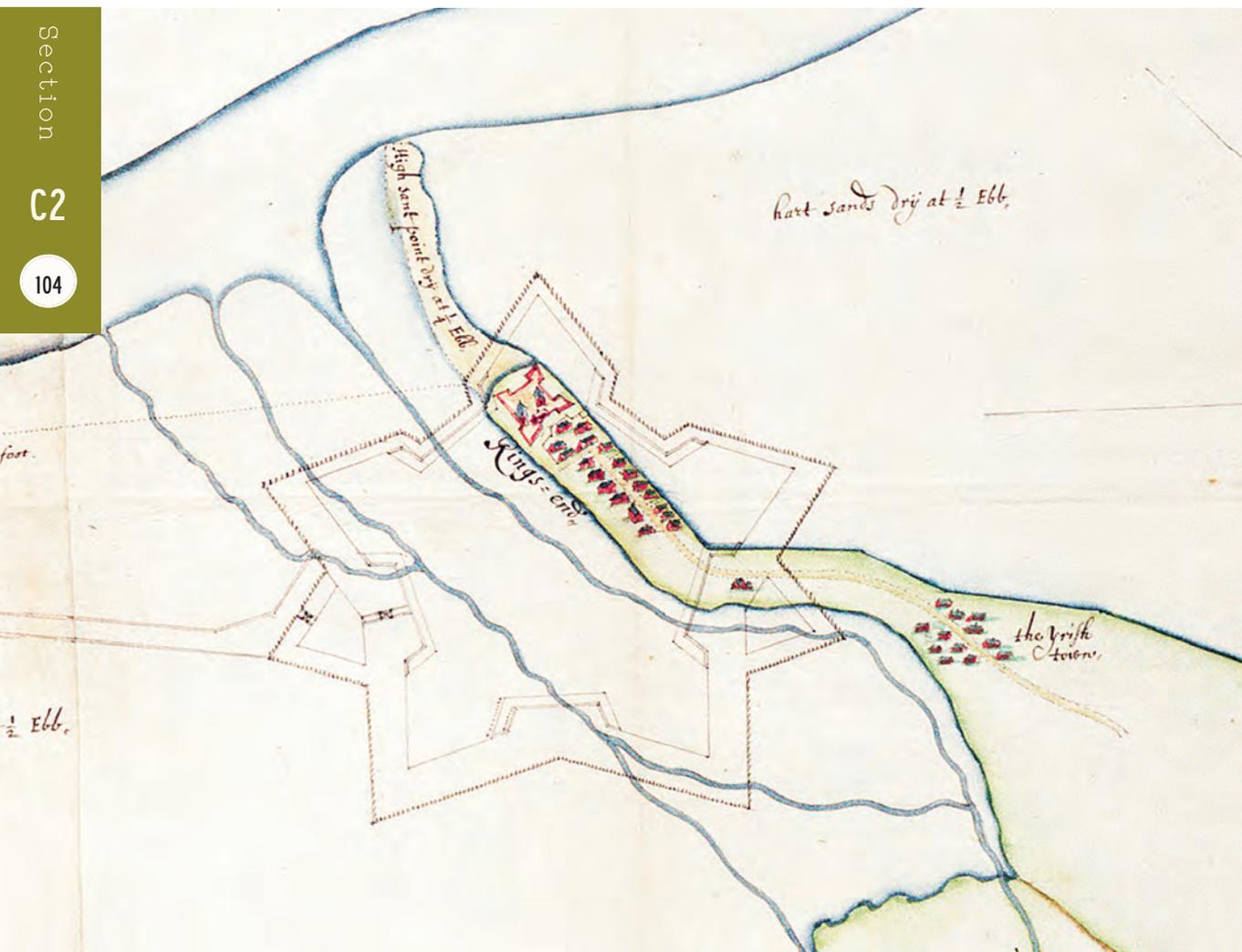
Fig. 86: *Limerick*, cover illustration, Thomond Bridge and Castle, 1826. From R.O'C. Newenham, *Picturesque views of the antiquities of Ireland*.

Fig. 87: *Dublin, part II*, map 6, 1673, by Bernard de Gomme. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, P/49 (11), extract.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries more modern defensive arrangements were adopted. What we call 'new technology' took the form of bastions and berms in order to counter the effects of cannon. The example of Carrickfergus has already been cited in this context and it should be noticed how the medieval castle was incorporated in the new defensive system (Fig. 60). A cheaper option was chosen for Belfast *c.* 1642, a time of political crisis, with the construction of an incomplete circuit of earthen ramparts (Fig. 69). Cost remained a factor in the seventeenth century: a number of star-shaped forts, such as that planned for Irishtown due east of Dublin in the 1670s, were never built in practice (Fig. 87).

The final stage in this theme came in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the construction of military barracks in or very near Irish towns, the intention being to protect the interests and security of the British regime. Barracks would remove the burden on private families of having soldiers billeted on them whilst at the same time ensuring better discipline among the

troops. Towns were targeted partly because of the strategic situation of many of them, partly because the population of some of them was large and increasing, partly because towns could provide services of the kind that army personnel required. Some barracks were occupied by cavalry, others by infantry or by artillery; yet others were mixed. Barracks came in different sizes, some of the later ones being enormous and laid out in a regular manner. They became, in effect, specialised plan units that were part of the townscape.

Athlone, a town with a royal castle

Athlone provides an excellent illustration of most of the general considerations outlined above. Taking its name from an ancient fording place (Modern Irish Áth Luain) in the middle Shannon region, several attempts were made by Irish kings to replace the ford by wicker or wooden bridges in the twelfth century. A decisive advance was made by the Anglo-Normans *c.* 1210, when a start was made on a stone bridge and a stone castle on behalf of the English crown. The lower courses of the surviving polygonal keep may date from this period. Coincidentally, on the more secure east bank of the river, the more commercial side of the town developed. The essential shape of Athlone had been established (Fig. 88).
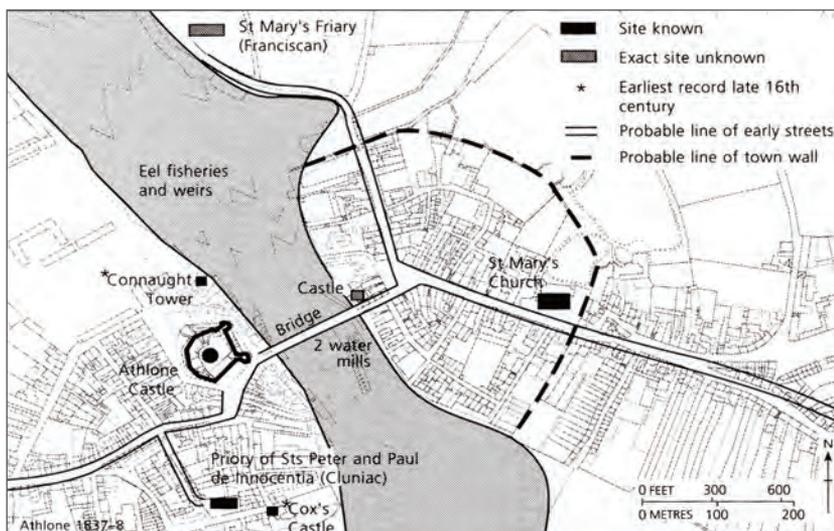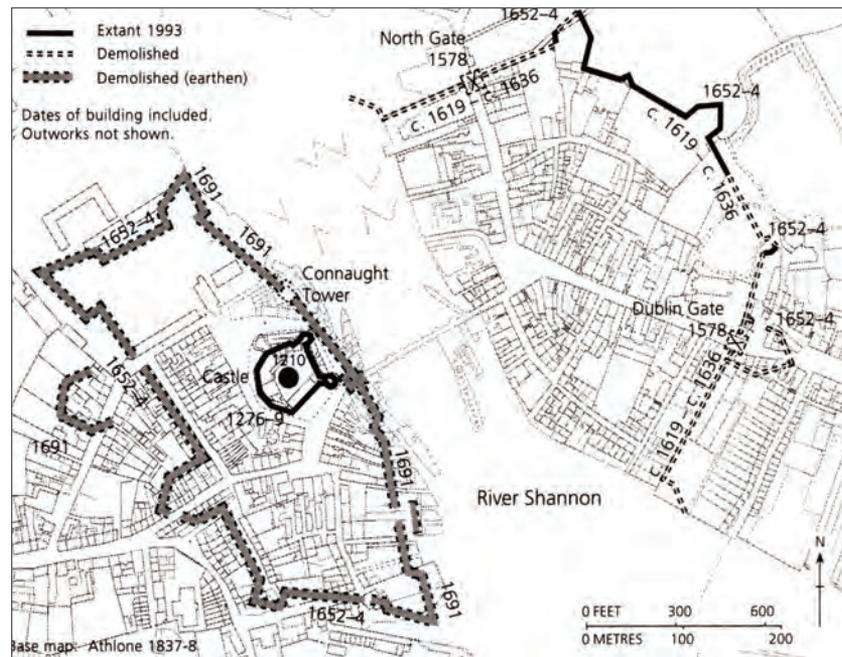
Fig. 88: *Athlone*, fig. 1, medieval sites.

Fig. 89: *Athlone*, fig. 2,
seventeenth-century fortifications.

By the sixteenth century the medieval walls had decayed. New gatehouses were built in the east town in the 1570s, while Cromwellian military engineers added stone bastions to the walls there in the middle of the following century and defended the west town with an earthen rampart, including three bastions and two demi-bastions. In 1691 the fortifications were strengthened again, though in the sieges of 1690 and 1691 the east town proved to be indefensible (Fig. 89). Nowadays only the medieval castle survives upstanding in the west town, together with the evocative name Bastion Street, formerly Royal Bastion.

The other great echo of Athlone's past history is Custume Barracks, built originally as temporary accommodation for 1,000 cavalry and 1,500 infantry in 1691. Roughly a century later, at the time of war with revolutionary France, this barracks was elaborated into something like its present form. The medieval castle was repaired and adapted to artillery use. Early in the nineteenth century a system of eight 'batteries' or gun emplacements was built between 0.5 and 1 km beyond the west town. Some of these were quite complex: the one known as no. 3, for example, was equipped with a magazine (weapons store), officers' guard room and soldiers' guard room. Military life was probably rather dull for much of the time, however, hence the provision by 1912 for battery nos 2–6 of a golf course!
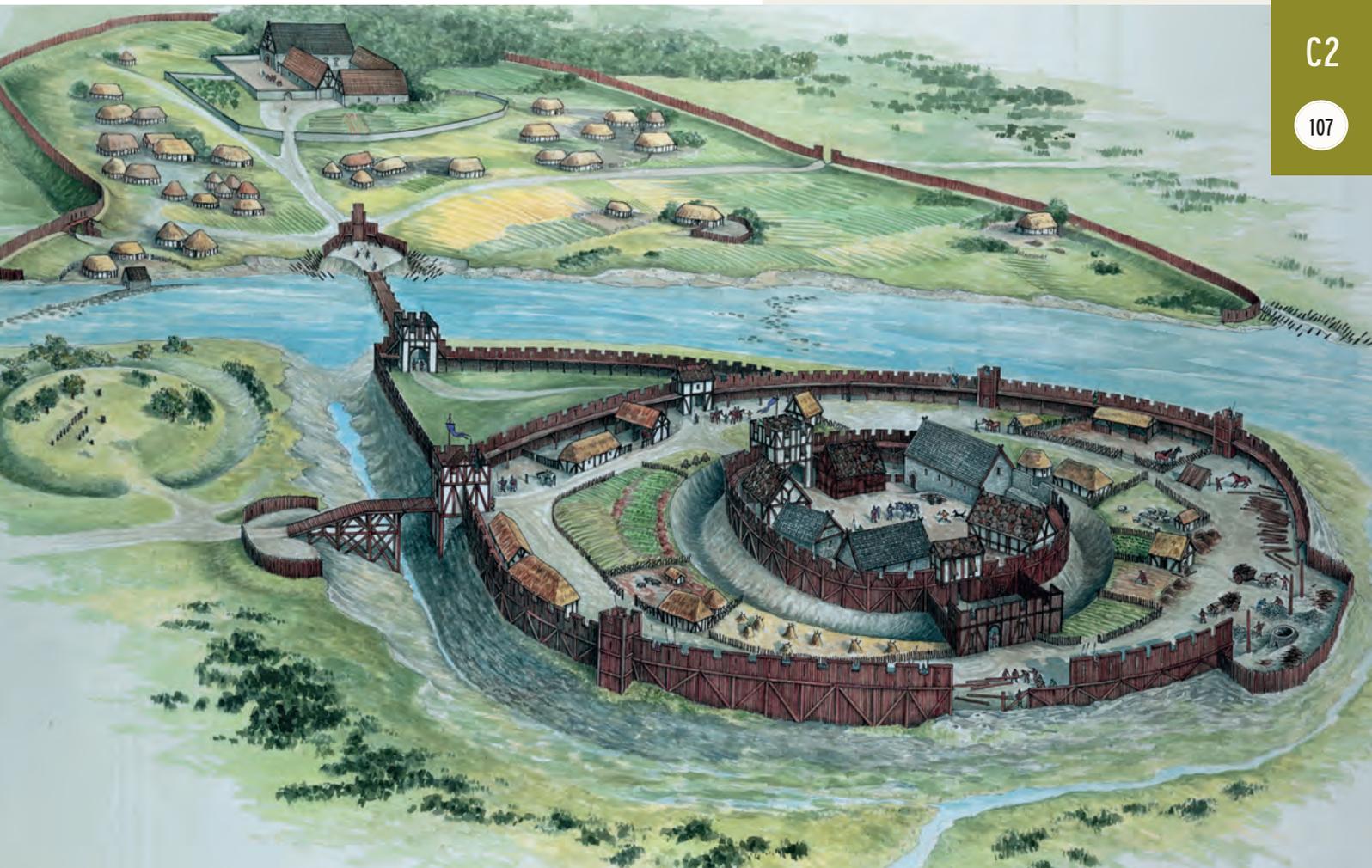
Trim, a town with a baronial castle

As a defended place, Trim presents us with a rather different story. Here the initiative came not from kings but from a great baronial family, the de Lacys. To start with, a ringwork castle making wholesale use of timber was constructed (Fig. 90). Work on the stone keep began in the mid 1170s and Hugh de Lacy, while inspecting progress in 1186, was assassinated when on the wooden scaffolding by an Irishman. By that time, however, castle keeps were going out of fashion and the system of stone outworks belongs to the thirteenth century. Only some parts of all of this are now visible above ground, but extensive archaeological investigations have provided the basis for a wonderful reconstruction of Trim Castle in its medieval prime (Fig. 91).

Fig. 90: *Trim*, plate 1, conjectural view of Trim Castle, *c.* 1175, by Uto Hogerzeil.

TEST YOURSELF

1. What significance would you attach to the interest of Irish kings in bridging and defending the Shannon crossing at Athlone?
2. What significance would you attach to the interest of English kings in bridging and defending the Shannon crossing at Athlone?
3. Why has Athlone Castle remained such a constant feature of life in the town?
4. What do street names in Athlone tell us about military life there?
5. What elements of continuity and change do you detect in Athlone's defensive role over the centuries?
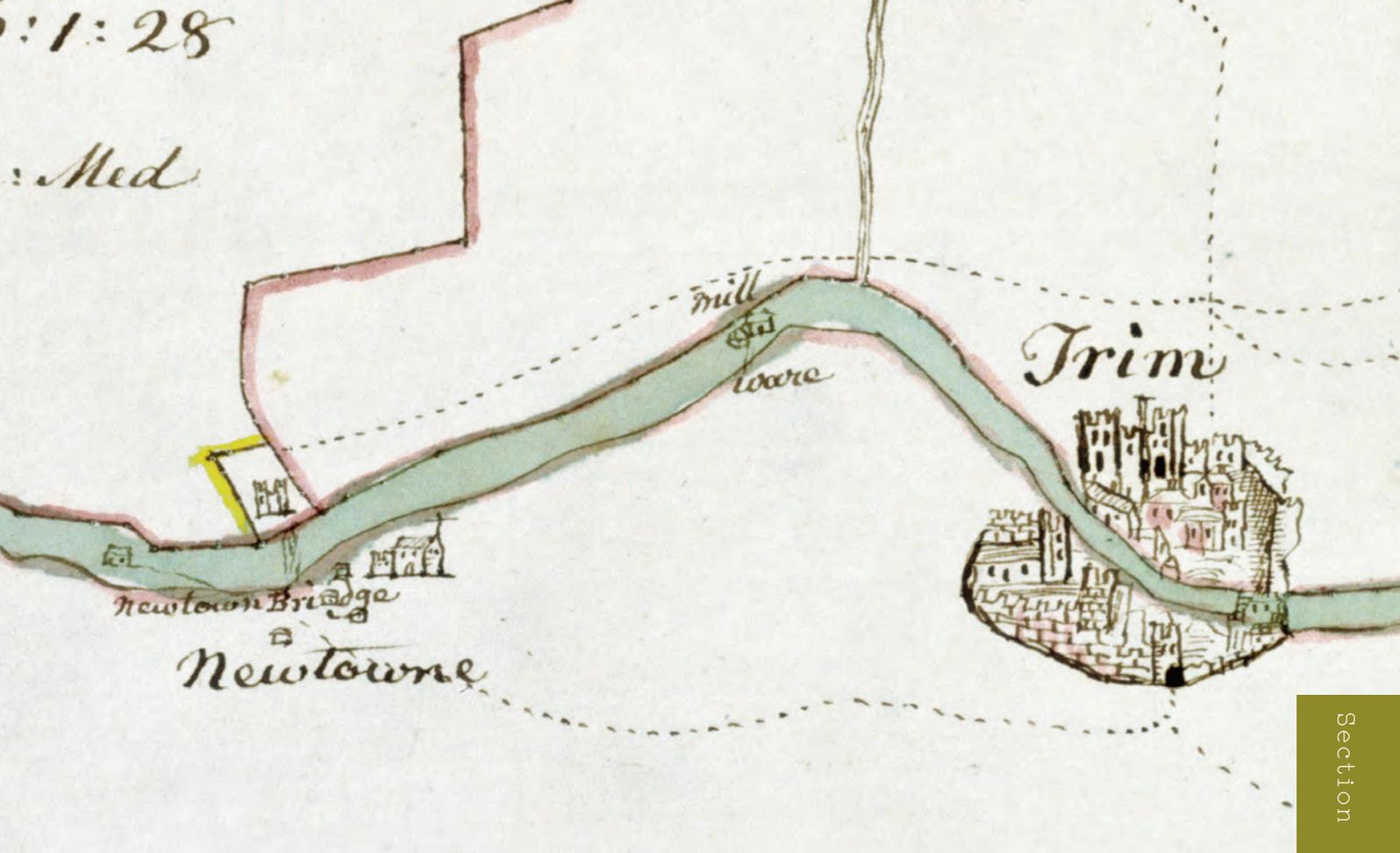
Section

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Like Athlone, Trim was a town built on both sides of a river and both parts needed to be defended. The earliest murage grants date from the last years of the thirteenth century and much later, in 1584, Trim was described as 'strongly walled'. This aspect of the town shows up clearly, if crudely, on the Down Survey map, which also features the undefended Newtown (Fig. 92). Military life in medieval Trim therefore had a dual character: the private life of an aristocratic family with their great hall and chapel, and the public life of the townspeople inside their town walls and worshipping in northside St Patrick's Church.

In 1461, however, Trim Castle came by dynastic accident into the hands of King Edward IV and was managed thereafter by a series of constables and other custodians. Perhaps fortunately, it was never modernised in the age of cannon, with the result that Map 2 (*c.* 1836) shows an essentially medieval pattern of private and public defensive arrangements (Fig. 65). What this map does not show, because too far removed from the town, is the small infantry barracks that had been erected on the southern perimeter, on Summerhill Road, about eight years earlier. This was closed as a military installation before the century ended and was converted into a constabulary or civil barracks. Nowadays the building, much changed, is even more salubrious, as a hotel. After its medieval phase, therefore, Trim was not viewed as militarily significant when compared with Athlone; it was on the edge of the Pale, on the long-term colonial frontier, and near enough to Dublin not to require modern defences.

Fig. 91: *Trim*, plate 2, conjectural view of Trim Castle, *c.* 1400, by Uto Hogerzeil.

Fig. 92: *Trim*, map 4, 1655, Down Survey. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, MS 715, extract.

TEST YOURSELF

1. To what extent, do you think, was military life in medieval Trim dominated by its great baronial castle?
2. How would you define the relationship between private and public defensive arrangements at Trim?
3. Given the choice, would you have preferred to live on the north side or on the south side of the River Boyne at Trim in the middle ages?
4. Why were the medieval defences of Trim never effectively modernised?
5. Why was Trim not the location of a major military barracks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?