

# Stafford McLoughlin

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Results of radiocarbon dating of wood samples  
taken from Sigginstown Castle, Co. Wexford  
Monument Ref: WX053-001  
ITM 706247 607073

Clients:  
Liz & Gordon Jones

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October 2017

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Contents	Page
<b>1. Introduction</b>	2
<b>2. Archaeological Background</b>	2
<b>3. Methodology</b>	4
<b>4. Radiocarbon dates</b>	4
<b>5. Discussion</b>	6
<b>Bibliography</b>	6

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## **1. Introduction**

Sigginstown Castle is located in south county Wexford (figs. 1 & 2). The owners, Liz & Gordon Jones, intend to apply for planning permission for the renovation and conservation of the tower-house and attached house. Both structures are recorded archaeological monuments afforded statutory protection under the National Monuments Acts (1936-2014) (archaeological monument refs: WX053-001 & WX053-001001).

The Jones's applied for, and received, a grant from the Castle Studies Group to undertake radiocarbon dating of two samples of timber from the castle. The author applied to the National Monuments Service under Section 12 of the National Monuments Acts (1930-2014) for permission to take samples. Once this was granted licenses to alter and export archaeological objects were applied for from the National Museum. Following the granting of these licenses the timber samples were sent to Queens University Belfast for radiocarbon dating. The results are shown below.

## **2. Archaeological Background**

Sigginstown Castle is located in the townland of Sigginstown, in south Co. Wexford. References to the Siggins family in Co. Wexford date from 1342 when a Thomas Sigin is recorded and Thome Siggen de Siggenstown was on the jury of an inquisition into Tintern Abbey in 1543 (Hore 1900-11, vol. 2, 86). In 1596 Sygen of Sigginstown was listed as one of the gentlemen of Forth Barony and according to the Book of Survey and Distribution of the 1660's Edward Siggins held 106 acres at Sigginstown in 1640 (Jeffrey 1979, 35; Simmington 1953, 304-5).

Edward Sigin along with eight dependents was listed for transplantation in 1653 following the Cromwellian confiscations, and was assigned 306 acres in Connaught in 1655 (Hore 1900-11, vol. 6, 502).

Sigin's land, including the castle, was granted to William Jacob, a soldier from Cambridgeshire, and 553 acres were confirmed to him in 1667 (Hore 1921, 50). The Jacob family lived at Siginstown Castle and held the estate into the nineteenth century (Jeffrey 1979, 36).

Siginstown Castle is a rectangular tower house with external dimensions of 7.5m east to west by 7.3m north to south. The base of the walls is battered and the tower survives in good condition to wall-walk level.

A pointed entrance doorway of dressed granite on the north wall was protected by a machicolation, a portcullis and small cross-loop in the lobby of the ground floor chamber. The doorway is now blocked. The ground floor chamber has three double splayed embrasures, and there are also spy-holes which emerge as small openings on the outer faces close to the angles.

The castle has a mural stairs which rises in the north wall and a blocked doorway gave access to the first floor which has a wicker-centred vaulted ceiling. The first floor was supported on corbels which are still *in-situ*. An antechamber controlling the portcullis is accessed from the first floor.

The second floor has a fireplace of dressed granite, and a segmental-arched embrasure with a slit window on each wall. The embrasure on the north wall has been made into a doorway to access the later adjoining house. This floor also contains a garderobe chamber with a cross-loop. The ceiling of this and the third floor above it were supported on corbels on the north and west walls.

The third floor also has a fireplace of dressed granite, a window within an embrasure on each wall and a garderobe chamber. There is also another antechamber with a cross loop and a spy-hole at the south-east angle.

The fourth floor has four windows in arched embrasures and the stair continues to the wall-walk, the parapet of which no longer survives.

Attached to the north side of the tower house is a rectangular two-storey with attic house. It has a seven-bay east-facing front constructed of red-brick, with a central doorway and three windows to either side. The western wall of the house is built of stone with brick surrounds to the doorways and windows. The scar of the roof where it joins the tower house on the north wall goes directly over one of the windows and the construction of the house rendered the machicolation ineffective. Pottery built into the west wall of the house is North Devon Gravelled Tempered Ware which indicates a late seventeenth or early eighteenth century date for the house.

### 3. Methodology

The first floor vault and the window embrasures of the castle contain wicker centring (figs. 3-5). Two pieces of this material were selected on visual examination as being large enough to yield a good sample for radiocarbon dating. The samples were removed with the aid of a sharp clean penknife; one piece from the first floor vault and one from the east window of the second floor.

Upon the granting of the relevant permissions from the National Monuments Service and the National Museum the samples were sent to Dr. Ellen O'Carroll for identification prior to dating. Both of the samples are *Ulex* otherwise known as gorse. Following identification, each of the samples (which measured c.8-10cm in length), were cut in half and one half was sent to the Chrono Centre at Queens University Belfast for dating, the other was retained in case of anomalies.

### 4. Radiocarbon dates

The samples were sent to QUB in August 2017 and were returned in September 2017. The results have been added as an appendix to this report, however they are summarised below:

Sample UBA-35488 – this sample was taken from the north-east side of the first floor vault.

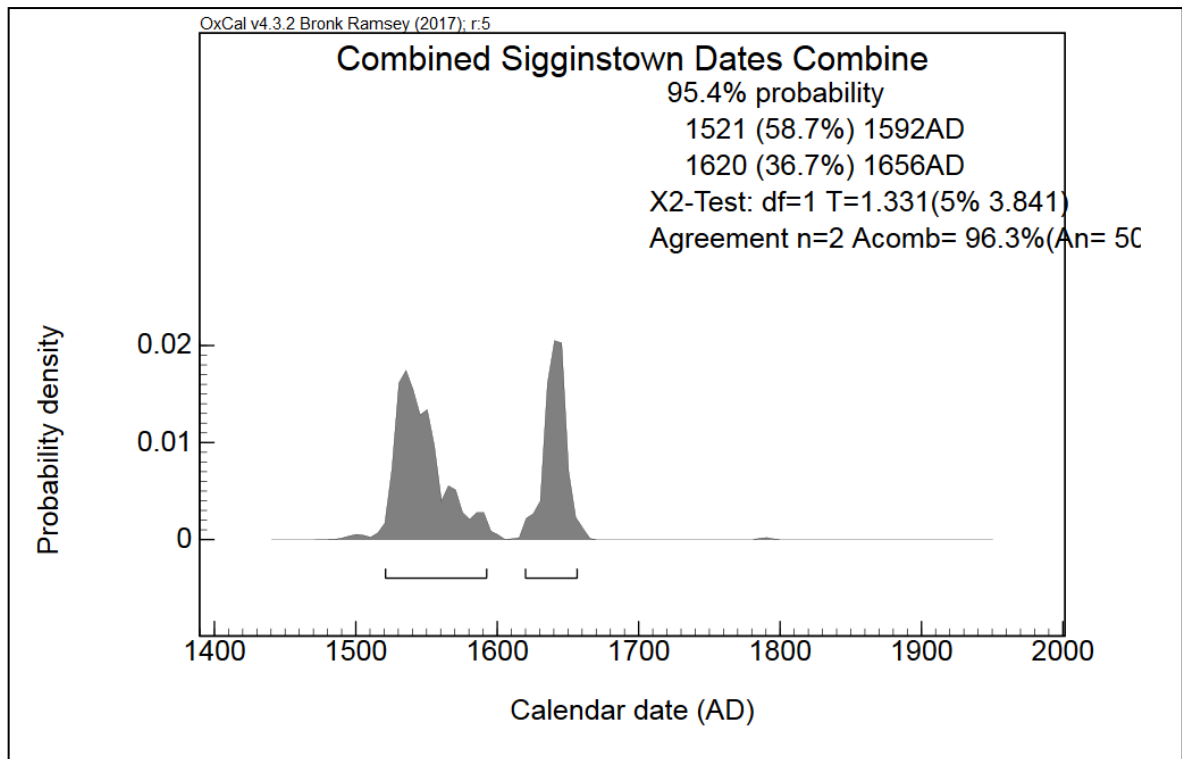
Ulex  
 UBA-35488  
 Radiocarbon Age BP 272 +/- 25  
 Calibration data set: intcal13.14c # Reimer et al. 2013  
 68.3 (1 sigma) cal AD 1528- 1551  
 1634- 1660

95.4 (2 sigma) cal AD 1521- 1578  
 1582- 1591  
 1622- 1666  
 1784- 1795

Sample UBA-35489 – this sample was taken from the north side of the east window embrasure on the second floor.

Ulex  
 UBA-35489  
 Radiocarbon Age BP 319 +/- 39  
 Calibration data set: intcal13.14c # Reimer et al. 2013  
 68.3 (1 sigma) cal AD 1515- 1599  
 1617- 1641  
 95.4 (2 sigma) cal AD 1471- 1648

These results were given to Dr. Rory Sherlock for inclusion in his dating of tower-houses project. Dr. Sherlock refined the dates by running them through the OxCal programme and got the following results:



These results indicate that when the results of the two dates are combined there is a 58.7% chance the tower-house dates to between 1521 and 1592, and a 36.7% chance the building dates to between 1620 and 1656.

## 5. Discussion

The samples from Sigginstown Castle were selected from areas where the wicker centring from the construction process can still be observed. The process involved making a wicker frame or mat on which mortar was laid to form a vault or arch. The timber frame was usually left *in-situ* and can still be seen in many tower-houses and medieval vaults. By the fifteenth century wicker rather than planking was commonly used for centring and the timber used for the frame construction came from a variety of sources such as hazel, willow and ash. In the case of Sigginstown Castle the timber has been identified by Dr. Ellen O'Carroll as *Ulex* or gorse, otherwise known as furze.

Gorse was an important timber during the medieval period and was used for a wide variety of purposes including for fuel and in construction. A description of the barony of Forth in Wexford from c.1683 gives the following:

*'Their farms are so diligently and exactly hedged and fenced that neighbours very seldom trespass each other. They yearly sow furze seeds or plant the same in rows some few ridges distant, which ordinarily in few years grow 8 to 10 feet in height and to that bigness and strength that (better timber there being deficient) dwelling houses are therewithal roofed'* (Lucas 1958, 30). There are also references to *'tithes of furze'* throughout the medieval period.

The dating of the castle is likely to fall within the 1521-1592 AD date range as indicated by the combined dates in the OxCal programme, therefore giving the castle a construction date sometime in the sixteenth century; a seventeenth century date is unlikely.

### Bibliography

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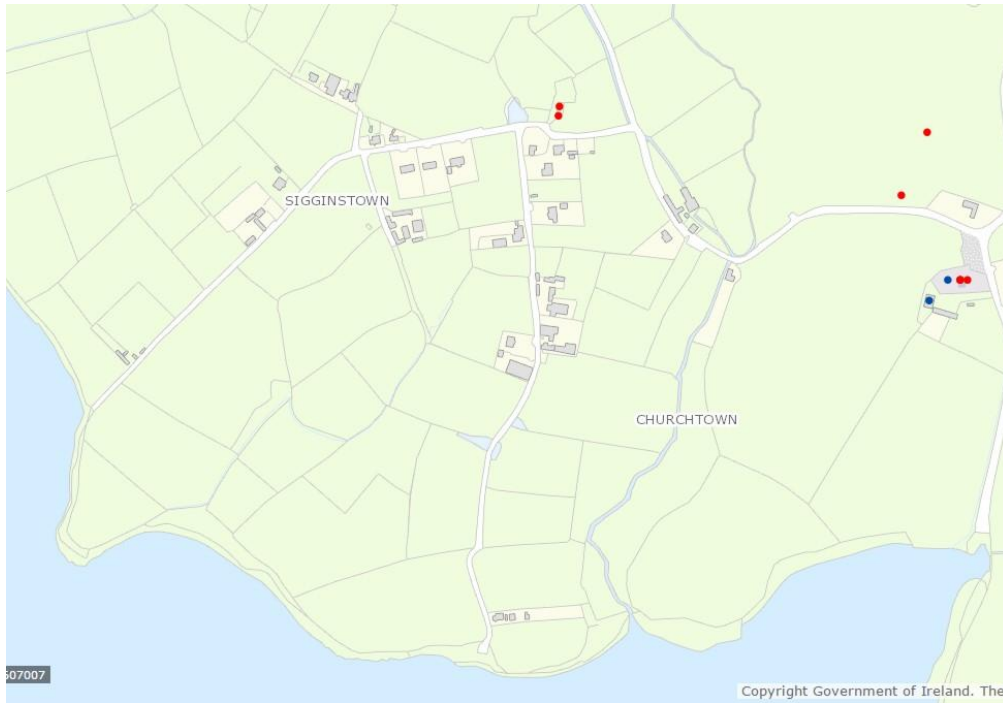


Fig. 1 Location of Sigginstown Castle, Sigginstown, Co. Wexford.

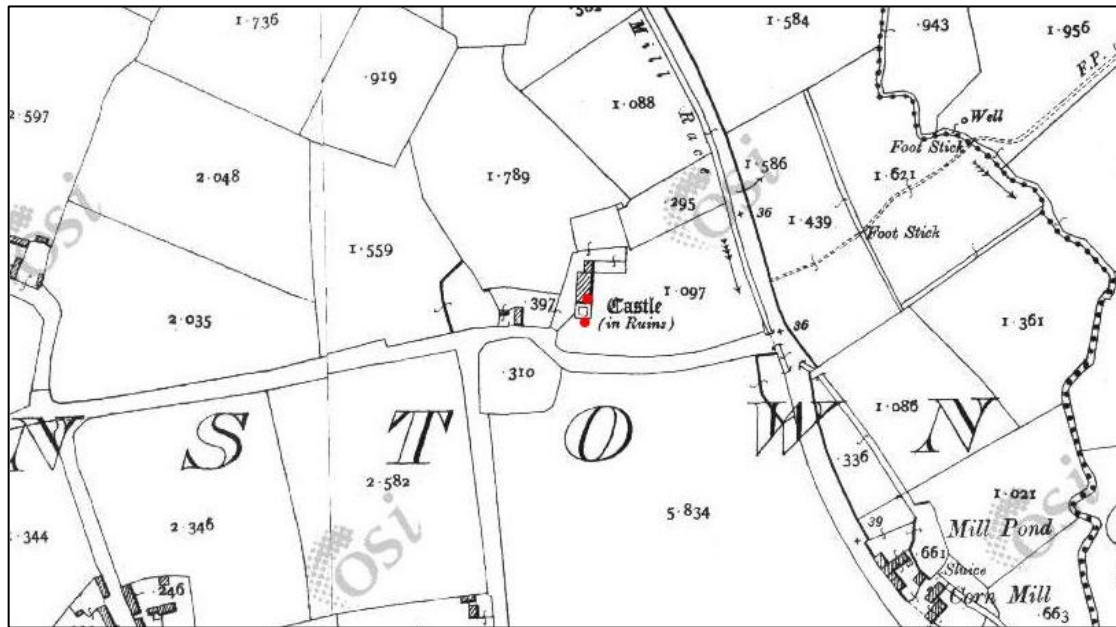


Fig. 2 Location of castle on the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map.



Fig. 3 Sigginstown tower and house



Fig. 4 & 5 2<sup>nd</sup> floor window embrasure (left) and 1<sup>st</sup> floor vault (below). Both with wicker centring.

