

The Normans in New Ross

Isabella, wife of William Marshall and daughter of Strongbow, chose Old Ross as the site of her castle. Sometime later William built the first bridge across the River Barrow. He built the bridge from oak taken from the great Forest of Ross which stretched as far as The Hook and across to Taghmon. The bridge was built sometime around the year 1189 A.D. The bridge was the main route between the South-east and South of Ireland and so people began to settle around it. The new town became known as Rospontis.

A scene of a stag being attacked by a hound while crossing the bridge forms part of the seal of William Marshall, showing us the importance he attached to the bridge. Tradition has it that this event took place as the Earl and King Henry III were crossing it. William Marshall's seal now forms part of the crest or seal of New Ross.

The Forest of Ross was owned by William Marshall and it was reserved for the Lord's chase. The trees were mostly oak. The animals to be found there included many herds of deer, packs of wolves and wild boar.

In this forest the lord and his knights hunted with bow and arrow, spear and trained falcons. As time went on parts of the forest were cleared to make way for farming. Earl Marshall allowed his men to farm the land in return for service.

William and Isabella had three children, William, Richard and Maude. William died in 1219 and Isabella in 1224.

The two sons lived in Old Ross castle but neither of them had any children of their own and so the land passed to their sister. Maude married the Earl of Norfolk, who was the chief baron of England. The Earl of Norfolk had vast lands in England and so spent little time in Ireland. His lands in Ireland were looked after by a Seneschal who got a huge salary of £100 per year. The barons of the various manors in the area came to New Ross to pay their dues. The Treasurer looked after the money and an Auditor came from England each year to ensure that the money was collected. Messengers were frequently sent over from England and an old account tells us that they were paid 2d (1p) a day expenses while in Ireland and 6 shillings passage money back to England.

The income of the Lord was about £750 per year, an enormous sum in those days. The courts brought in about £200 of this money (fines on offenders and payment of debts). Money from rents was very little. Usually the tenant got the land free to farm but had to fight for the lord in times of battle.

The centre of government for this area was Carlow but the principal place for trade was Rospontis. Cloth, furs, wines, beers, spices and iron were some of the things shipped through the port of New Ross, which was then the most important port in the whole country. From New Ross ships sailed to and from Wales, England, France, Spain and North Africa. Hundreds of labourers worked at loading and unloading the ships.

The town would have looked very different from today. The houses were mostly wooden with thatched roofs. There were no streets or roads. Each trader used a stall. The traders were fur merchants, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc.

The annual fair at New Ross seems to have been very important. A special court was held here and a special police force of watchmen was organised at a cost of 10 shillings. Traders and serfs came from all over the South-east to buy and sell. A sheep could be bought for 2 pennies and a horse for 6 pennies. You had to pay money to cross the bridge. This was called a Toll.

Some of the most important Norman families to be found in New Ross were the Nevilles, Bewleys, le Clercs, Devereaux and Tottenhams. Some of these people were buried in St. Mary's and their headstones can still be seen. The Irish peasants or labourers had to live outside the walls - in the Irishtown. There is an "Irishtown" in Dublin and in many other Norman towns around the country.

Some of the stone used in the building of St. Mary's was brought from a quarry in Caen in Normandy.

It is recorded that at Old Ross in the year 1280 the lands were ploughed and the corn cut by the tenants. Oats was the largest crop, then wheat and rye. Gardens were fenced with thorn bushes and the chief crop was apples - used mostly to make cider. The livestock included 500 sheep, 300 lambs, 8 farm horses, 30 cows, 5 pigs, 9 swans, 11 peacocks and hens. Large quantities of cheese were sold. Milk from sheep and cows was used. Seaweed and ashes were used as manure.