

The Walls of Londonderry

Among the many historic monuments in Derry, the massive city Walls on the west bank of the River Foyle are the most striking and memorable. Built between 1614 and 1619, the original Walls are almost perfectly preserved today, making Derry one of the finest examples of a walled city in Europe. Using earth, lime and local stone (some from ruined medieval monastery buildings) Peter Benson from London skillfully constructed the thick defensive ramparts and angular artillery bastions following closely the design of Sir Edward Dodington of Dungiven.



The entire cost of the building was met by the Irish Society comprising London businessmen who were responsible for the Plantation of Derry. It was their duty, under a Royal Charter of King James I, to build and maintain the Derry Walls to help control the local

Irish rebels. In return they were given large parcels of land in the region for themselves. Despite sieges in 1641, 1649 and the Great Siege of 1689, Derry's Walls were never breached - proof indeed of their careful planning and excellent construction, and reason for the title 'The Maiden City'.

Originally there were only four entrances (or Gates) into the walled city i.e. Bishop's Gate, Shipquay Gate, Ferryquay Gate and Butcher's Gate - arranged in a cross pattern with the Diamond as its centre. Drawbridges and portcullises were used to protect some of the Gates when under attack. Later were added New Gate (1789), Castle Gate (1803) and Magazine Gate (1865). The original Gates were themselves re-built in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Writing in 1855 the Whig historian Lord Macaulay summed up the importance of the Walls of Londonderry to the Protestant people of Ulster. He wrote: "Five generations have passed away and still the Walls of Londonderry are to the Protestants of Ulster what the Trophy of Marathon was to the Athenians."

The city walls were built between 1614 and 1618, and still to this day are owned by the Irish Society, are completely intact, making the walls of Londonderry unique the world over. Indeed, it is the only remaining Irish walled city of the 43 that existed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

They were designed by Sir Edward Dodington of Dungiven, although having neglected his duties, he was replaced by Captain John Baker. The walls were built by Peter Benson and cost £10,757 to construct. For taking on the job Benson was also granted 1,500 acres of land in Donegal alongside his fee. But it was to be money well spent in the eyes of the citizens of Londonderry. The walls have withstood three sieges, the first during the massacre of Protestants in 1641, the second in 1649 and the third and most memorable in 1688-89, during the Glorious Revolution. The city has never been taken on any association, hence her title 'the Maiden City'.

Of the walls the Rev George Walker wrote in his diary in the late 17th century: "The form of the town comes somewhat near an oblong or long square, and its situation lengthways is NW and SE, or a diagonal drawn from the church, through the Market House to the Magazine is near upon a N and S line. "The length of the town through the middle of Shipquay to Bishop's Gate is about 300 paces or 1,500 feet, The wall on the W side of the town 320 paces;

wall of the E about 380. The breadth at the NW end 140; at the SE end 120; from Butcher's Gate to Ferry-Key-Gate, where the town is broadest 180 paces. The wall is generally seven or eight feet thick, but the outside wall of stone, or the battlements above the terraplane is not more than two feet in thickness. The four corners each have a bastion. On the side to the west-ward, are two other bastions, one demi-bastion and two works, which are commonly called platforms."

The Rev Walker continued his description: "There are four gates; Bishop Gate at the SE end, Shipquay Gate at the opposite end, Butcher Gate at the NE side and Ferry-Key-Gate over against it. In the middle of the town is a square called the Diamond, where the Market House stands (during the siege, turned into a Guard House).

"Near the SW end of the town, stands a church on the top whereof, being a flat roof were placed two of our guns, which were of great use in annoying the enemy. In the SE angle of the town, was the principal magazine within the town.

"Also were several wells; before Bishop's Gate was a ravelling built by Lundy and the ground on forwards to the Windmill-Hill was taken in by the besieged distance of 260 paces from the town, and about the same distance across from the river, and for fear this ground should be taken from the besieged by the enemy, another line was industriously drawn from the SW quarter of the town to the river to secure the retreat. The number of guns planted on the bastions and lines was eight sakers and 12 demi-culverins."