Built in the environs of the site of a 12th-century Cistercian abbey, Bagenal’s Castle is an early example of a fortified house, a type of residential building favoured by the gentry in Ireland and Scotland in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Original drawings from a survey of the Castle completed c.1568 show that the Castle originally had a projecting stair turret and latrine turret, thus embracing elements of both a 16th-century fortified house and a medieval tower-house. Documentary evidence also indicates that the Castle was surrounded by a bawn (a walled enclosure containing outbuildings) as well as a garden and an orchard.

Bagenal’s Castle was built by Sir Nicholas Bagenal, an English settler from Staffordshire, who was granted the confiscated estates of the Cistercian abbey at Newry, along with land at Greencastle and Carlingford, by King Edward VI in 1552. Appointed Marshall of the Army in Ireland, Sir Nicholas Bagenal and, subsequently his son, Henry, played an important and influential role in late 16th-century Irish government and politics. Henry, who took a leading part in the military campaigns against...
Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, during the Nine Years War, was killed when English forces were defeated at the Battle of Yellow Ford in 1598.

Historical records provide us with some tantalising glimpses of a lively social life at Bagenal’s Castle. In 1575, Sir Henry Sydney, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, reported that Turlough Luineach O’Neill had spent £400 in three days celebrating Bacchus’ Feast at Newry and it took the Lord Deputy some hours to get him sober and admit him to the Castle. Bagenal’s Castle was probably the scene for the courtship of Henry Bagenal’s sister, Mabel, by Hugh O’Neill in 1591. Although she has been described as ‘the Helen of the Elizabethan wars’, Hugh more likely asked for Mabel’s hand to neutralise Henry’s growing power in Ulster rather than out of a romantic attachment. Nevertheless Mabel fell in love with Hugh and they were eventually married after having eloped in the face of Henry’s opposition. Unfortunately life at O’Neill’s castle at Dungannon was not to Mabel’s expectations and she died unhappy a few years later in 1596.

After the ravages of the Nine Years War, Bagenal’s Castle was re-established as the centre of the Bagenal estates as part of the Ulster Plantation. After it was attacked during the 1641 Rebellion, historical evidence for the Castle becomes scarce making it difficult to know how far the Bagenals maintained the Castle as an important residence. By the time of his death in 1712, Nicholas Bagenal (great-grandson of Sir Nicholas Bagenal) had a well-appointed house in London and his County Down estates passed to his cousin, Robert Nedham. A map accompanying a lease from Robert Nedham to Robert Hutcheson, a Newry merchant, in 1746 shows that the Nedhams may have been attempting to re-establish the Castle as a centre of commercial enterprise. The map shows a tree nursery and a tanning meadow at the rear of the Castle. This lease may also have initiated significant alterations to the original Castle structure. A cellar and steps in the ground floor may date from this period and it is possible that the stair and latrine turrets were demolished at this time. Subsequent to this lease the Castle was converted into two dwelling houses.

The warehouse adjoining Bagenal’s Castle on the north side was added in the early 19th century and was used by Joseph Doyle, a seed merchant. In 1894 the complex became the home of Arthur McCann Limited and functioned as a bakery until the mid 1990s.

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