Ballintober Castle, an early fourteenth-century baronial castle in North Roscommon

View looking East from outside the ditch at the southwest corner tower.

Reverse image of gun loop on north curtain wall. Photograph of Ballintober Castle by Martina Cleary, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, 2122.TX(3)33.

Images on cover page, clockwise from top: Detail from Ordnance Survey six-inch map of 1838 showing the castle; View of Ballintober Castle from outside the east gate in 1779 by Bigari, reproduced

View looking West along ditch and north curtain wall.

Ground plan of Ballintober Castle, after O'Conor Don 1889 (north is facing to the right side of the image).

Unprocessed laser scan image acquired by the Discovery Programme's Medieval Rural Settlement Project, showing a basic plan view of the southwest tower. The sharp lines represent stonework while the less structured grey patterning represents extensive ivy growth on the walls.

The towers that project to protect the entrance have rounded outer walls, and while they are similar to other gatehouses from the late 13th century, they are considered to be small. The outer walls of the corner towers are polygonal in shape, and this is a feature particularly associated with de Burgh work in northwest Ireland, and is a significant indication that the castle was built by Anglo-Normans. Comparison is with the great Edwardian castles in Wales, such as at Caernarvon. Ballintober's southwest tower was built in three storeys, each of which was a self-contained chamber of apartments. The ground floor retains a sequence of recesses in its roof line that may indicate a complex vault structure, while the narrow window lights reflect the importance of defence.

Castles in the 12th century were built with impressive central towers or keeps, which were then surrounded by defensive 'curtain' walls. The design changed in the second half of the 13th century where the emphasis on accommodation focussed on the curtain walls and the towers which project from them, leaving the central area unrestricted. The king's castle at Roscommon is an elegantly designed example. Ballintober Castle is not laid out with such symmetry; all four sides are slightly different in length, giving a sub-square ground plan that is nevertheless quite large in size, measuring c. 85 m in internal diameter North-South by c. 82m East-West. There are four projecting corner towers and a pair of towers protect the principal entrance on the east wall. A corresponding gap in the west wall may represent the presence of a rear, or 'postern', gate, which has been ruined. A large ditch, or fosse, surrounds the site, and survives particularly well on the north, south and west sides. The entrances would have been fitted with drawbridges to cross the ditch, which could be pulled up to guard against unwarranted access.

Ballintober is a privately owned castle under the care of its ancestral occupants, the B'Conors of Connacht, who currently reside some 10 km away at Clonalis House, Castlerea. The castle was built at the very start of the 14th century, and has witnessed a sequence of occupation that extends into the 17th century. Although ruined today, Ballintober Castle is a fine example of a 'keepless castle', and is one of several Anglo-Norman castles still standing in Roscommon, including the royal castles at Rindown built from 1227, and at Roscommon built from 1269 (see Roscommon County Council Heritage Poster, No. 6).

Detail from the Ordnance Survey's 1838 six-inch maps showing the relationship of the castle to the old church yard and the present-day village to the south.

Aerial photography shows a series of earthworks east of the castle that suggest the axis of older settlement, which may indicate elements of the medieval borough associated with the castle.

Ballintober Castle does not stand in isolation. The village today is a planned settlement laid out probably in the 18th century but between it and the castle lies an old church yard dedicated to St. Bridget in which is a series of tombstones, including that of Charles O'Conor Don, died 1634. A holy well is located on the sloping ground to the west and attests to an early foundation, while a market cross, which does not survive today, is indicated on the early Ordnance Survey maps to the north of the church yard and may suggest where the fairs and markets occurred within the medieval settlement.

Aerial photography indicates a sequence of earthwork features lying to the east of the castle and north of the church, highlighting a now disused roadway and associated earthwork features. It is possible that such elements indicate the location of an earlier settlement associated with the castle.

Despite the remarkable sequence of remains, archaeological study of Ballintober has been minimal. The standing remains alone warrant detailed study but the recent addition of the geophysical data highlights the potential whose secrets remain to be realised.
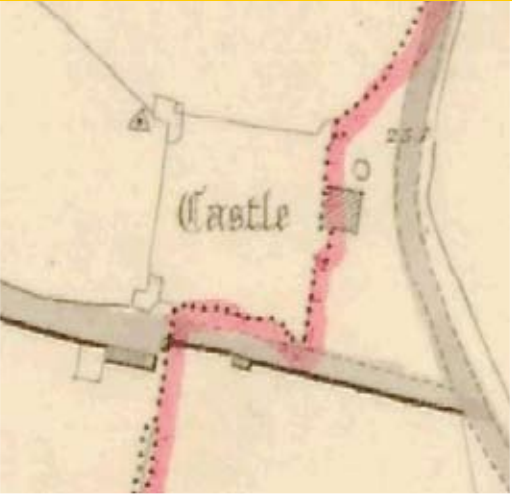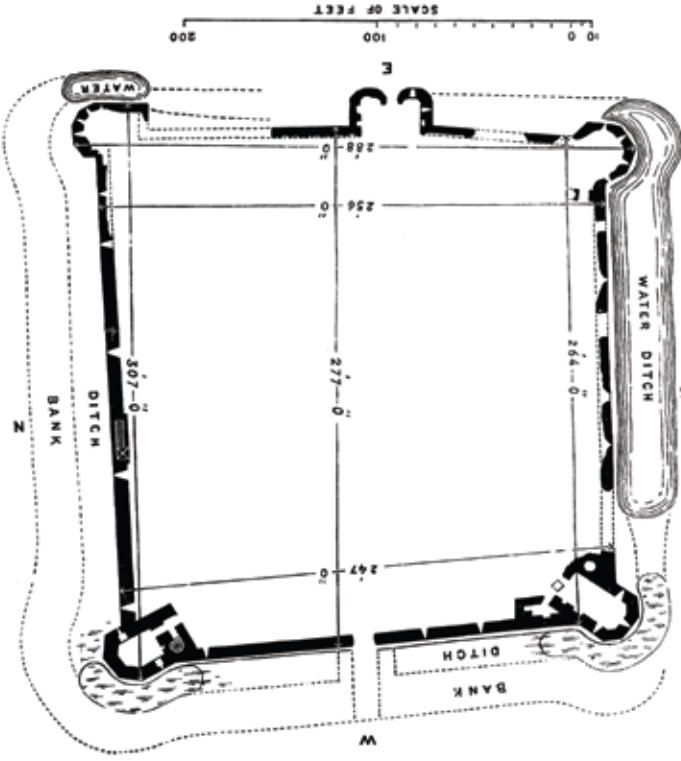
Further Reading

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McNeill, T., *Castles in Ireland. Feudal Power in a Gaelic world*, (Routledge, New York and London, 1997), 101-103.

O'Conor Don, 'Ballintubber Castle, County Roscommon', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 9 (1889), 24-30.

Murphy, M. and O'Conor, K., *Roscommon Castle. A visitor's guide*, (The Printworks, Roscommon, 2008).

O'Conor, K., 'English settlement and change in Roscommon during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in A. Horning, R. Ó Baoill, C. Donnelly, P. Logue (eds), *The Post-Medieval Archaeology of Ireland 1550-1850*, (Wordwell, Dublin, 2007), 189-203.

Ballintober Castle
County Roscommon

Ballintober Castle
Parallel banked earthworks
Old church yard
Modern village centre

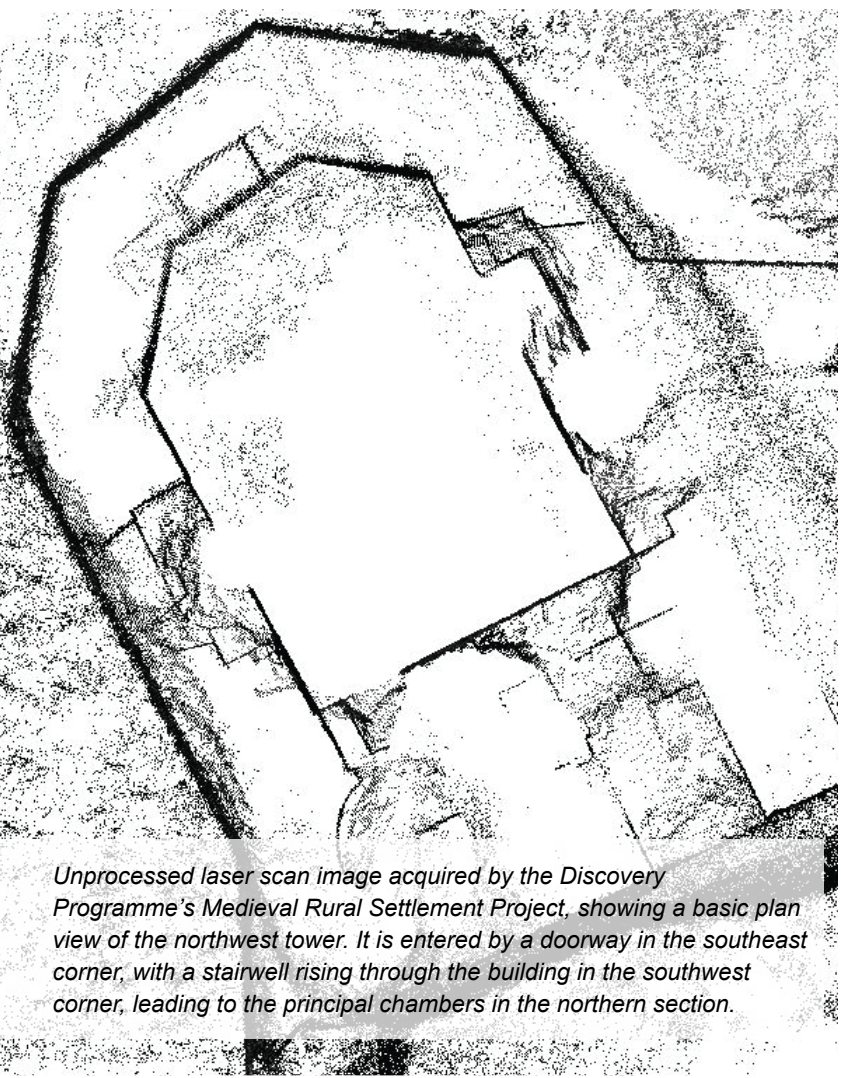Castlerea · Tulsk · Ballintober · 12 km

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Ballintober Castle, built to impose the king's presence on Gaelic lands but quickly passing to O'Conor hands
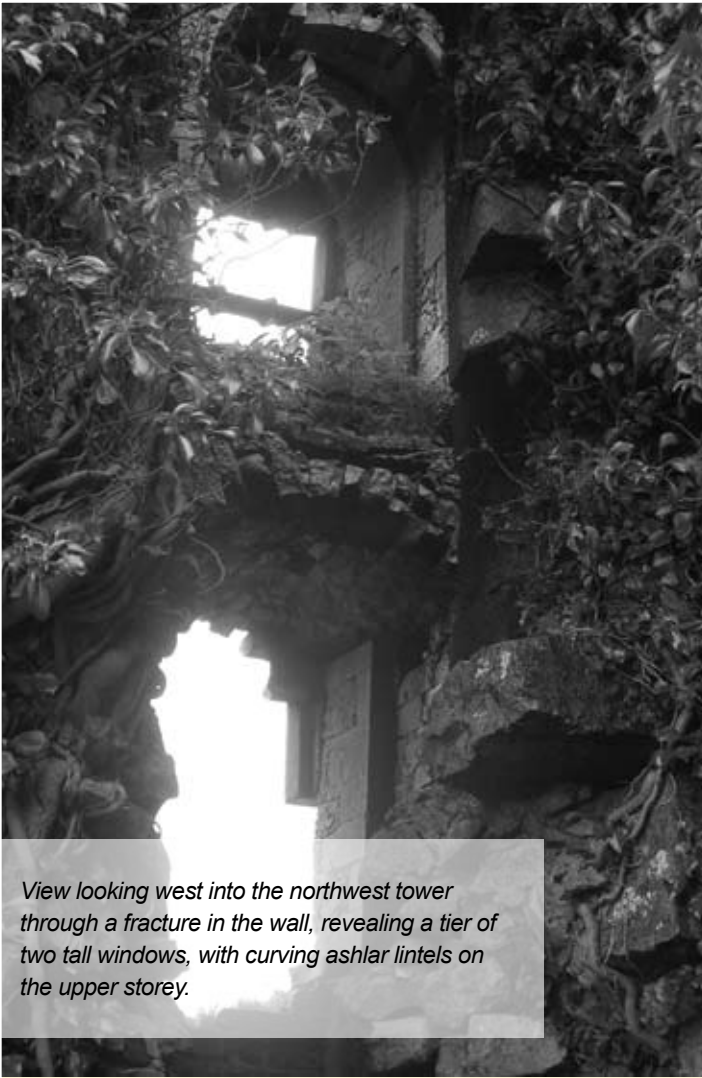
The Anglo-Norman castles in Roscommon were designed to contain the Gaelic lordships in the north of the county. The construction of Ballintober castle is not documented and it has been suggested that it was built by the O'Conors, but current thinking is that the great earl of Ulster, Richard de Burgh, whose family was closely connected to the court of King Edward I, is responsible for its construction. As the most northerly of the great castles in the county, Ballintober was built to impose a presence on the O'Conor lands. The 13th century was a time of expansion in Ireland and across Europe, but this trend was not continued into the 14th century, and during this time de Burgh interests were curtailed with the result that the O'Conors took possession of Ballintober Castle by 1362.

After the O'Conors split into two distinct lines in 1385, Ballintober became the principal place for the O'Conor Don, while nearby Tulsk was the centre for the O'Conor Roe. The castle remained a setting for political intrigue, between O'Conor factions, and between Gaelic and English interests.

The narrative of ownership, construction, attack and rebuilding that can be pieced together from a series of entries made in the contemporary chronicles can also be seen in the archaeology and architecture of the standing remains. The gaps in one source are filled in part by the evidence from the other, making Ballintober Castle a most useful place in which to learn about the complex relationships between the different cultural groups that lived in later medieval Ireland.

Unprocessed laser scan image acquired by the Discovery Programme's Medieval Rural Settlement Project, showing a basic plan view of the northwest tower. It is entered by a doorway in the southeast corner, with a stairwell rising through the building in the southwest corner, leading to the principal chambers in the northern section.

View looking west into the northwest tower through a fracture in the wall, revealing a tier of two tall windows, with curving ashlar lintels on the upper storey.

The ornate principal fireplace on the third floor is one of several features that attest to the opulence of the O'Conor residence.

The northwest tower was substantially reworked in the 17th century. Its four-floor structure is described as a seven-room fortified house. Large mullioned windows and stairs are finished in elegant ashlar stonework, and the principal fireplace, located on the third floor has an inscription of 1627.
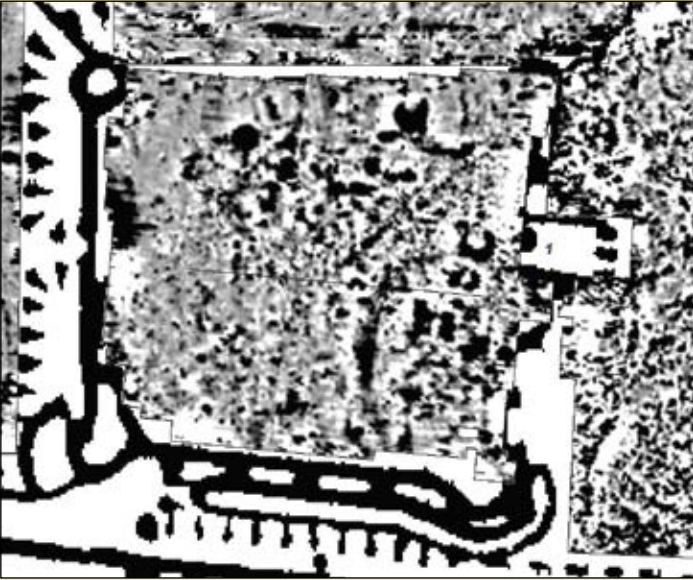
The O'Conors were now significnant landowners in the early modern period, and their investment in such building is a testimony to their growing wealth.
The eastern corner towers are more ruinous today but that on the northeast angle was also a chamber tower.

Much of the cut stonework has been removed from the castle but many elements remain that reflect the quality of the design, such as this door jamb leading from the stairway into the second storey of the northwest tower. Its tooled margin sets out the interior punch dressing, where the mason would have used a chisel to score the stone's surface, with the resulting play of light on the surface contributing to the quality of the architecture.
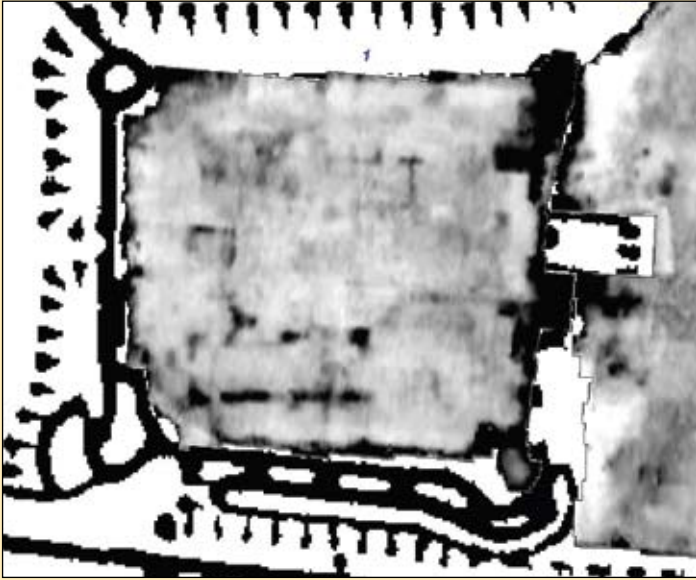

View across the grassy interior looking at the north curtain wall

At first sight, the vast interior space or bawn of the castle today seems empty, but there are gable features built into the west curtain wall indicating the presence of buildings nestled beneath. A series of platform features may represent ruined buildings, and a large irregular hollow lies over the central area; overall however the grassy space gives little indication of what occurred within the castle's interior.

Geophysical survey is a technique that is widely used to 'look' below the surface levels to assess the nature of the buried deposits. Surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009 by Target Archaeological Geophysics were made possible by grants from the Heritage Council and are the first use of this technology at Ballintober; revealing a remarkable sequence of information.

A large curving ditch feature in the southwest quadrant may indicate the presence of a pre-existing enclosure on the castle site. Important locations were continually used and reused over time. In the present instance, the curving ditch might represent a former Gaelic residence that was destroyed and built upon by de Burgh, to establish his mark and that of his king on ancestral O'Conor lands.

The resistance survey in turn revealed a series of clearly defined buildings arranged around a central courtyard. The structure in the northwest measures c. 12 by 8 m in size and appears to have buttresses, suggesting it is a church. The building in the southwest is much more substantial, and measures c. 30-35 m long and 15 m wide. Subsequent survey identified that the foundations are not continuous, and seem to represent a series of piers, and these may have supported a timber-framed structure. It is tempting to see here the sequence of buildings referred to in the Inquisition of 1333, which included a hall, chamber and kitchen.

Magnetic gradiometry highlights cuts and fills in clay. Anomalies are highlighted as darker patches. Many represent pits. A significant anomaly in the southwest quadrant is a curving ditch feature that may indicate the presence of a pre-castle enclosure.
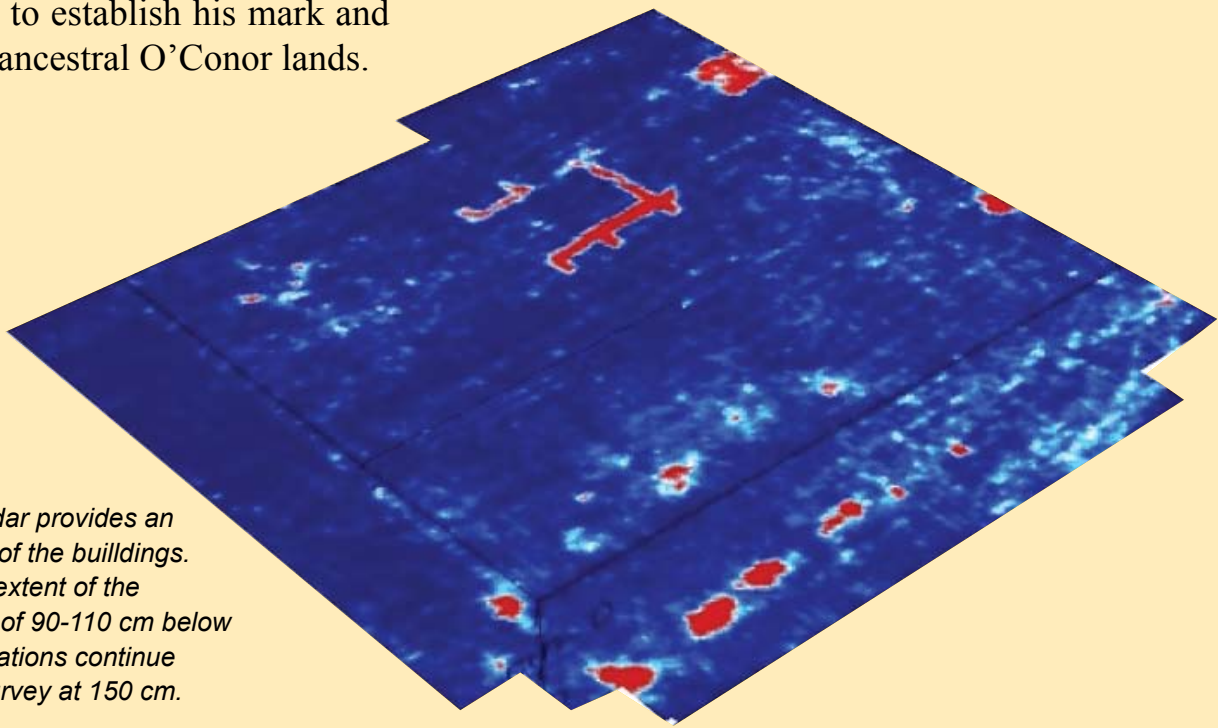

Resistance survey in this limestone landscape is useful for detecting stone features, and has revealed a series of large internal structures arranged around a central courtyard. Ballintober may be a keepless castle, but the geophysical data illuminates the nature of settlement within the walls.

Ground penetrating radar provides an indication of the depth of the buildings. The red highlights the extent of the foundations at a depth of 90-110 cm below the surface. The foundations continue beyond the depth of survey at 150 cm.

The O'Conor lands of Sil Murray are divided between O'Conor Don and O'Conor Roe

1311 — The first reference to Ballintober is when a mercenary killed a Gruelach/ warrior, and was himself killed. It does not suggest who owned the castle at that time.

1333 — An Inquisition following the death of the Earl of Ulster records 'an old castle surrounded by a stone wall, which would be very useful for keeping the peace of those parts...In the castle are ruinous buildings, a hall, a chamber, a kitchen, and other houses, worth nothing beyond cost of repairs, because they need great repairs'.

1362 — The first annal entry indicating that the Irish possessed Ballintober notes that Cathal Óc and Aodh son of Felim O'Conor, king of Connacht, from the family that was later to be O'Conor Roe, seized Ballintober.

1385 —

1434/5 — O'Kelly, Mac Dermot, and Teige son of O'Conor Roe attack Ballintober; a battle was fought in which many were wounded, both within and without the town. One of the attackers took a chip from the end of a wattle and set fire to it, casting the wattle into the bawn. It stuck in the side of a house, and was burned, as was the adjoining house, and finally the greater part of the town. The bawn was also burned.

1570 — Sir Richard Bingham, President of Connacht, captured Ballintober. Sir Edward Fyton desired a ward to be placed there.

1596 — Ballintober is among a list of English castles burned by rebels in the Nine Years War of the Elizabethan Age.

1617 — The Castle of Ballintober is the demesne of Sir Hugh O'Conor Don.