

The History of the Castle

Roscommon Castle was built in 1269 under Edward I, an English King who was trying to stop the O'Connor family who lived at Roscommon from attacking the Anglo-Norman families throughout Connacht and Leinster. The castle was burned many times after it was built and it changed hands several times between the Anglo-Normans and the O'Conors. The castle was built next to a lake and a moat was built around the castle which was filled with water from the lake. It had two gatehouses which contained drawbridges. They also contained portcullises, which were large gates in the archways in the entrance of the gatehouses that stopped anyone getting in. The postern gatehouse had a murder hole in the roof. A murder hole is an opening in the roof that let soldiers fire down arrows and hot oil from the room above. The castle also had lots of arrow loops which were long narrow holes in the walls so that soldiers could shoot arrows out over the moat at anyone who was attacking the castle.

In the 16th century, the castle was in English control under a man named Nicholas Malby and a lot of changes were made. The castle was surrounded by lots of land and Nicholas Malby wanted to create a large estate with luxurious accommodation. He built a large L-shaped fortified house which was used for accommodation and he incorporated the gatehouse into it. He replaced several of the arrow loops with large transom-and-mullioned windows but he had to keep some arrow loops, gun loops and cruciform loops for defence. Big fires kept his house warm. Most of the moat was filled in at this time as a large fortified garden was built in front of the gatehouse. Part of the moat was kept and this was used as a large fish pond. Defending the castle was still very important and the garden was defended with large walls and two towers.

In the later 17th century the castle changed hands between the Irish and English. By this time, with the development of gunpowder and the use of cannon, castles could no longer survive attack. The castle was eventually dismantled, leaving the ruins we see today.

In 1832 it became the property of the Earl of Essex and by 1893 it was taken into the guardianship of the Office of Public works where it was declared a national monument. A public park was created to one side of the castle and was opened in 2003. It has a children's playground, flowers, trees and a bird watching area.

Another very important building in the history of the county is the old Cavalry Barracks, (sometimes called Blacks House or Edenville Lodge). This building, which once housed soldiers and their horses, was also built by the English, to guard the area and keep it under English control, just like the Castle. This barracks was built in 1702. Look out for it near the railway station. It too has high walls around it.

Roscommon town would not have been as big when the castle was built as it is today. However, there is one other building in the town that is just as old as the castle and that is Roscommon Abbey. Also known as the Dominican Friary, this was founded by Felim O'Connor, Lord of Roscommon in 1253.

Features of the Castle

1	Moat	A large moat or ditch dug around the castle, usually filled with water in order to prevent intruders getting in.
2	Murder Hole	An opening in the roof in the postern gatehouse which allowed soldiers to drop hot oil or arrows on intruders who dared enter the castle.
3	Arrow Loop	A narrow opening in the wall allowing defenders to shoot arrows at attackers.
4	Cruciform Loop	A narrow opening in the wall in the shape of a cross, which allowed soldiers shoot at intruders.
5	Gun Loop	A narrow opening in the castle wall that allowed defenders to fire guns through the wall.
6	Embrasure	A wide opening situated behind the loops that gave the soldiers room to move around while defending the castle.
7	Tower	A tall building attached to the outer walls of the castle, which allowed the soldiers to view oncoming intruders.
8	Windows	In the 16 th century, the arrow loops were replaced with transom and mullioned windows. These windows were rectangular in shape. Transom: The horizontal bar between the panes of glass in a window. Mullion: The vertical bar between the panes of glass in a window.
9	Garderobe	This was the toilet, placed inside a recess in the castle walls. It emptied out into the ditch through shoots in the walls of the castle.
10	Gatehouses	The castle has two gate houses, the main gatehouse and the postern gatehouse. Main gatehouse: A fortified structure built at the front entrance to a castle. This gatehouse has two towers. Postern Gatehouse: A Fortified structure built at the rear of the castle.
11	Portcullis	Large gates found at the entrance to both the main and postern gatehouse that stopped anyone getting in.

Life in the Castle

Daily Routine

At sunrise one of the guards would trumpet the day's start. Servants would be up and about, getting fires lit, sweeping, cleaning and getting food ready. Chambermaids tidied up the apartments of the lord and his lady. Breakfast for all was bread and a drink.

Each day the Lord had business to attend to, looking after the running of his castle, the estates and the surrounding villages. The Lord had a large staff employed to help with this work. The most important of these was the steward, who had to know everything that went on around the castle. There were other important staff in the castle who kept it running smoothly.

The lady of the castle was served by ladies in waiting and chambermaids. The lady had to keep an eye on them, the kitchen staff as well as the spinners, weavers and embroiderers who had the job of making the clothes for the people in the castle.

When soldiers were stationed at the castle they would have included guards, watchmen and men-at-arms. Each soldier had his own place in an attack, some were crossbowmen, archers, lancers, or swordsmen.

The castle would have been noisy and smelly. Animals roamed around the stables. Blacksmiths banged and hammered out ironwork in the forges, soldiers practiced their skills, the children played after their lessons. There would have been lots of craftsmen working at the castle, making shoes, barrels and axes.

The high walls of the castle had buildings inside them, like the workshops and stables. There would have been fires burning around the place. Water would have come from a well.

Dinner was served early, between 10am and 12 o'clock. This was the main meal and would have had three or four courses. There would have been entertainment too. After dinner the work of the day continued. The evening meal, supper, was often eaten just before bedtime.

Fun and Games

People in the castle would have worked hard, but they would have made time for fun too. Children wrestled, swam, fished and played a game that was a cross between tennis and handball. Chess was popular and a simple version of chess was played with dice. Games like blind man's bluff and bowling were played. Cock fights and bull baiting were popular spectator sports. At harvest time bobbing for apples and hunting, if allowed by the lord, was popular. Every castle had a falconer whose job was to train Hawks to hunt game birds. Story telling was popular. Music was popular for times of celebration and festivities, dancing took place as well. Music was usually played at mealtimes because it was believed that, as well as being nice to listen to, it helped in the digestion of food.

Clothes

Peasants (poor people) wore simple clothes, made from wool, linen and sheepskin. The richer you were the more fancy your clothes were. Materials like velvet, furs, silks, lace and cotton would have been used.

Men wore tunics, undershirts and briefs with a sleeveless jacket and additional tunic over them. They wore stockings instead of trousers. Their coats would have been cloaks with a round opening that they slipped over their heads. Shoes designed for wearing in the castle would have been made from silk, velvet, cloth or leather and fastened with a buckle. These indoor shoes would have been covered with wooden and leather outdoor overshoes when they went outside.

Women wore tunics down to their ankles. A shirt was worn under the tunic. Under the tunic was worn a shirt. When out in public they wore a shorter tunic over the long one. Women wore tight fitting caps and nets over their hair. Their hair was long and wound into a 'bun' on their heads. If their hair was not in a bun, they wore veils to cover their hair. Like the men, the women would have had indoor and outdoor shoes. Dye was expensive, but those who could afford it would have had brightly coloured clothes.

Food

What food they ate depended on how well off they were. The lord and his family ate geese, larks and chicken and other meats such as beef, bacon and lamb. Fish would have been fresh or smoked and salted. Lords would have also ate meals made from grain and had cheese and butter.

Peasants would have had a much simpler diet, like bread, peas and beans. Soup would have been made with anything that could be grown like onions, cabbage, garlic, nuts, berries, leeks, spinach and parsley. If they were really lucky they were able to add salt pork or fatty bacon to the soup. Food was cooked on open fires in the kitchen. The castle would have had a garden and fruit trees to supply fruit and vegetables. Water was not always clean and suitable for drinking, so the rich drank ale and wine, the poor just drank ale. Honey was used to make a sweet alcoholic drink called mead which was drank by all classes.

Living Space

The castle had a great hall inside its walls. This would have been painted and had tapestries hanging from the walls. The ceiling would have been decorated and painted. The floor may have been covered with straw and scented with herbs. Wooden benches, long tables, cupboards and pantries would have been the type of furniture in the castle. Silver or pewter pottery would have adorned the long table in the great hall.

There was no central heating. Many parts of the castle were not heated at all. The lord and his family would have had an open fire to keep them warm. Servants, soldiers and others had to make do with tiny lamps and were cold at night. The lord, his family and guests would have had the comfort of heavy blankets, feather mattresses, fur covers and tapestries hanging on the walls to block out the damp and breezes. Servants and workers had sleep on the floor or maybe on some straw if they could get it, using their cloaks for covers.

The castle was fairly dark inside, the only openings in the walls being either loops or windows. The loops were covered by heavy curtains to keep out the cold. There was no glass in the windows so wooden shutters were used to keep out the cold.

The O'Connor Family

- There are O'Connor families all over Ireland. The O'Connor's in Co. Roscommon get their name from Conchobah, a King of Connacht who died in the year 971.
- In the O'Connor family there were 11 High Kings of Ireland and 26 Kings of Connacht since the time of Christ. Turlough Mor O'Connor was High King of Ireland in the year 1119.
- His son, Roderic (or Rory) was High King after him. Rory was the last of the Irish High Kings. He died in the year 1198, before Roscommon Castle was built. Turlough and Rory are both buried in Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly.
- Hugh O'Connor was King of Connacht when Roscommon Castle was built. He attacked the castle many times and the O'Conors held control of the castle for over 200 years.
- Clonalis House in Castlerea is the family home of the O'Conors.
- The O'Conors kept their Catholic faith and stayed at Clonalis all through the Penal Laws, when other Gaelic families left Ireland.
- Clonalis is the only house open to visitors that is old Irish, unlike Strokestown Park House, for example, whose family came after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland.

Design a Coat of Arms

The O'Connor Coat of Arms



The sword stands for justice and military honour.

The arm, wearing armour, stands for a person fit for leadership and high deeds.

The helmet stands for wise defence and security.

The tree, an Oak tree, stands for antiquity and strength. The Oak tree was the most noble of the Chieftain trees.

The lions stand for courage.

The crowns stand for the O'Conors, Kings of Connacht and their association with Rathcroghan.

The harps stand for Ireland.

The green colouring stands for hope and loyalty in love.

The shamrock stands for time without end, eternity.

The motto 'Ó Dia gach cúcabrach' means from God every help.

The County Roscommon Coat of Arms



The Blue background stands for truth and loyalty.

The Sheep's head stands for the long tradition of sheep farming in the county.

The Crown stands for Rathcroghan and the association of the O'Conor's, Kings of Connacht, with the county.

The Oak Leaf with acorns stands for growth and continuous fertility. It also represents Douglas Hyde, first president of Ireland, born in Co. Roscommon. He wrote under the pen name of 'An Croabhin Aoibhinn', which means little oak.

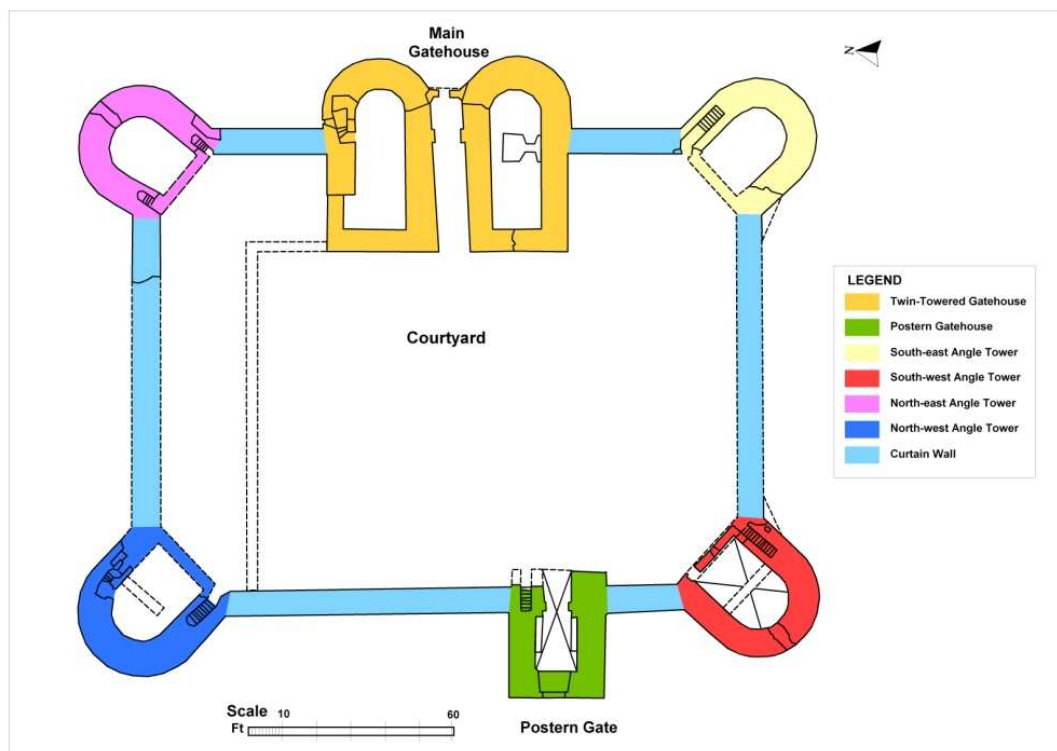
The Green in the triangle represents 'Ros' meaning wood, from Ros Comain - the Irish name for Roscommon, which means the wood of St. Coman.

The Gold Cross stands for the Abbeys in Roscommon, St. Coman and the Cross of Cong, which was made for High King Turlough Mor O'Conor in 1123.

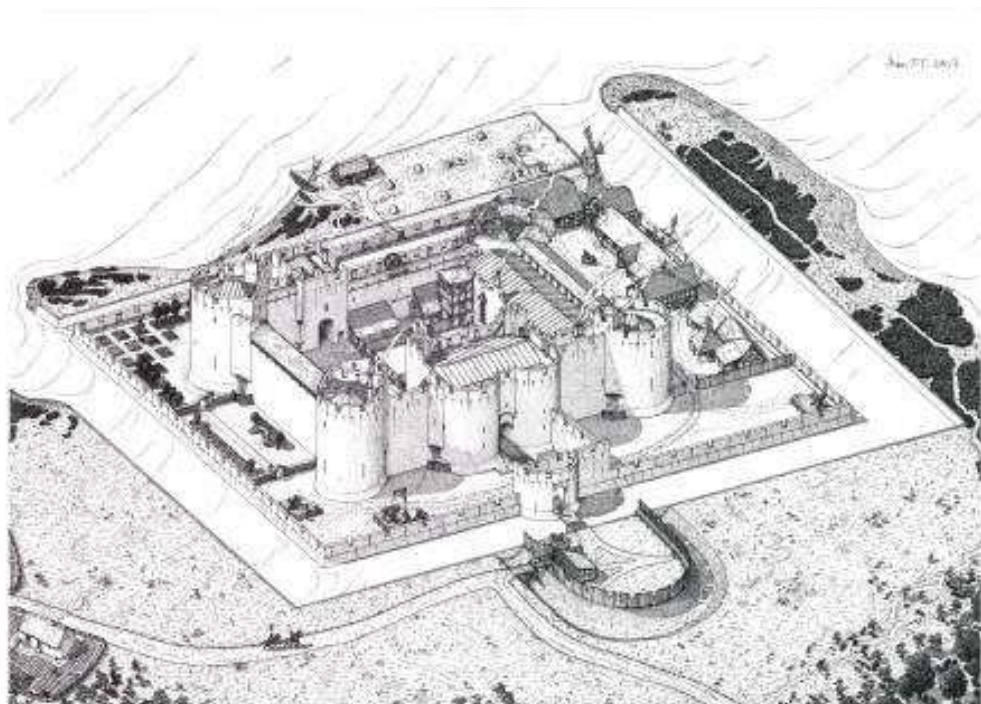
The words 'Constans Hiberniae Cor' are latin and they mean *Irish, steady, firm, unchanging, constant and unwavering.*

Plan of Roscommon Castle

Roscommon Castle around 1307

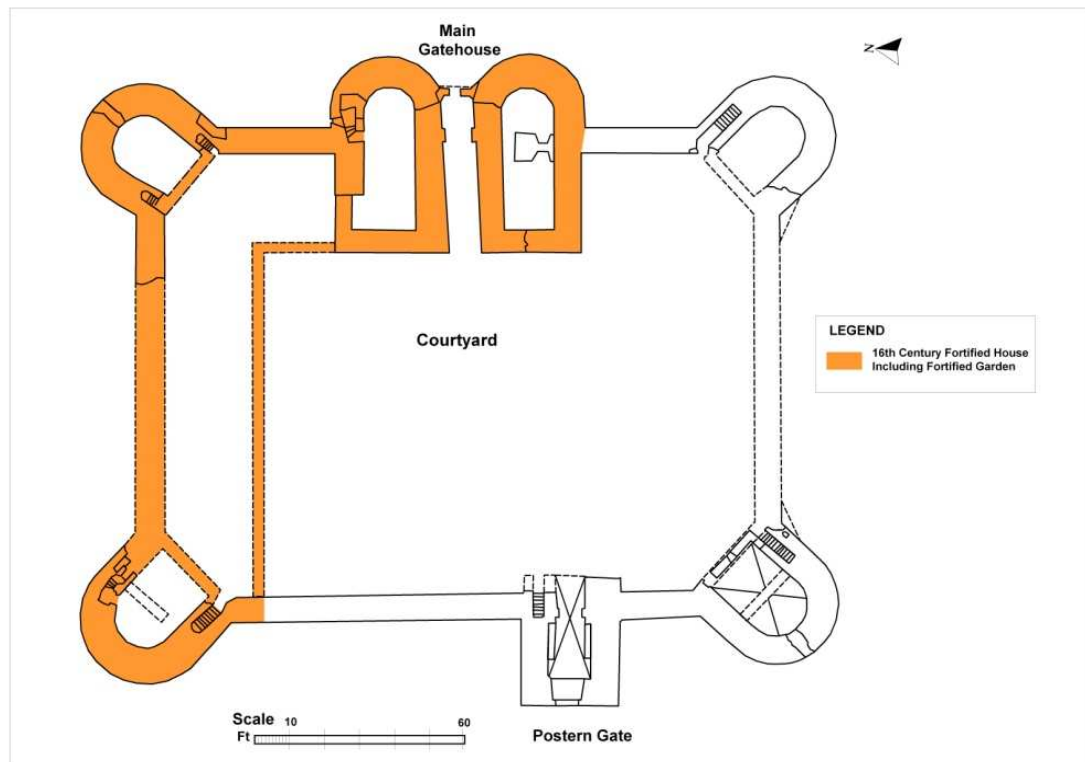


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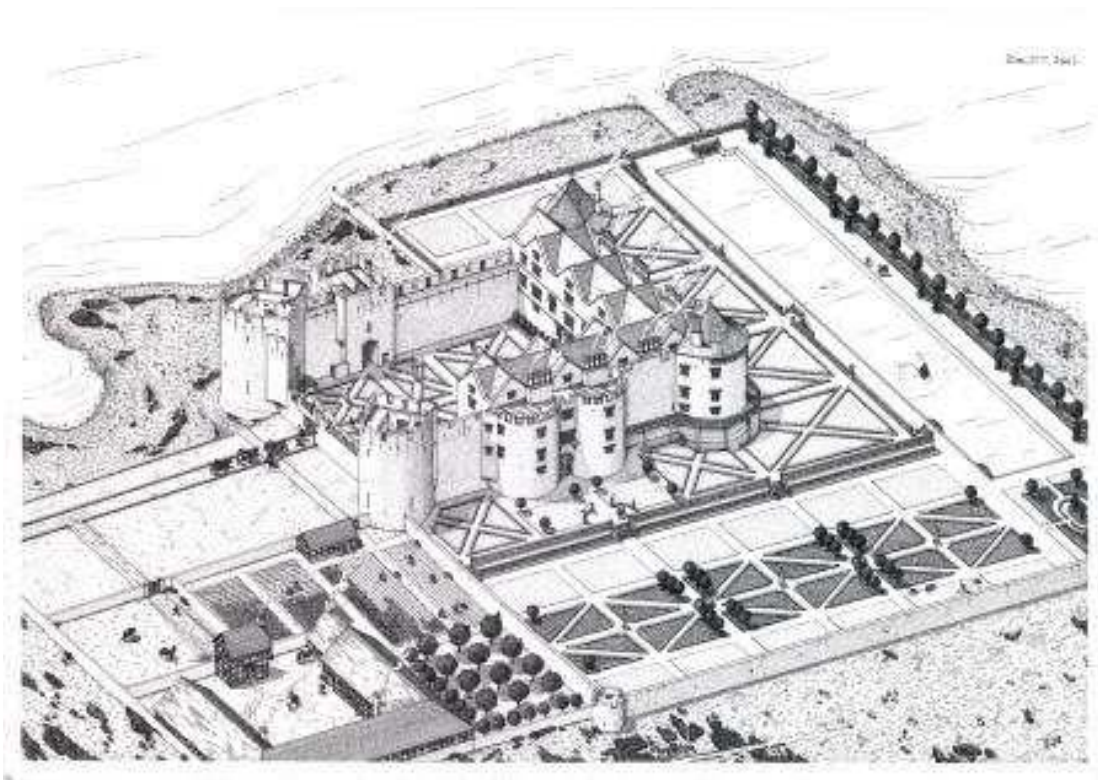


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Roscommon Castle around 1584



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