

Roscommon Castle

...the history of a national landmark



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Historical Map provided courtesy of The National Archives, Kew, London.

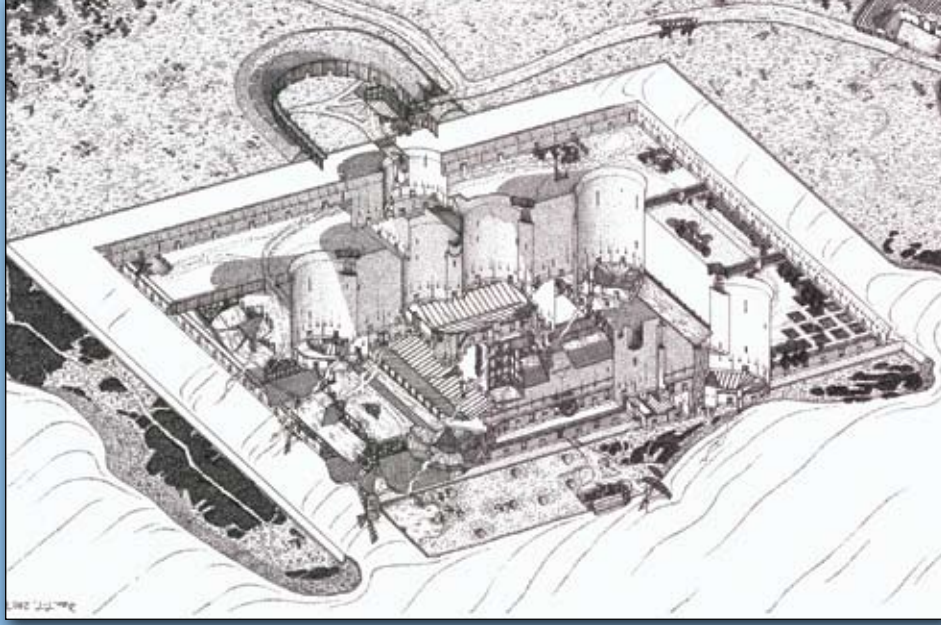
Funded by The Heritage Council and Roscommon County Council. Produced by Roscommon County Council.



The first reconstruction drawing shows the castle as it may have appeared around 1300. The historical sources, architectural analysis, geophysical survey and excavation suggest that Roscommon Castle was originally provided with concentric defence (two closely-spaced lines of defence), as well as Inner and Outer Wards.

This all suggests that the castle was once much larger than it now appears. This reconstruction shows the lake to the west and north of the castle and the wet ditch that surrounded it. The buildings on the north side of the Outer Ward were constructed of timber and cob. This is why there are no visible traces of them today.

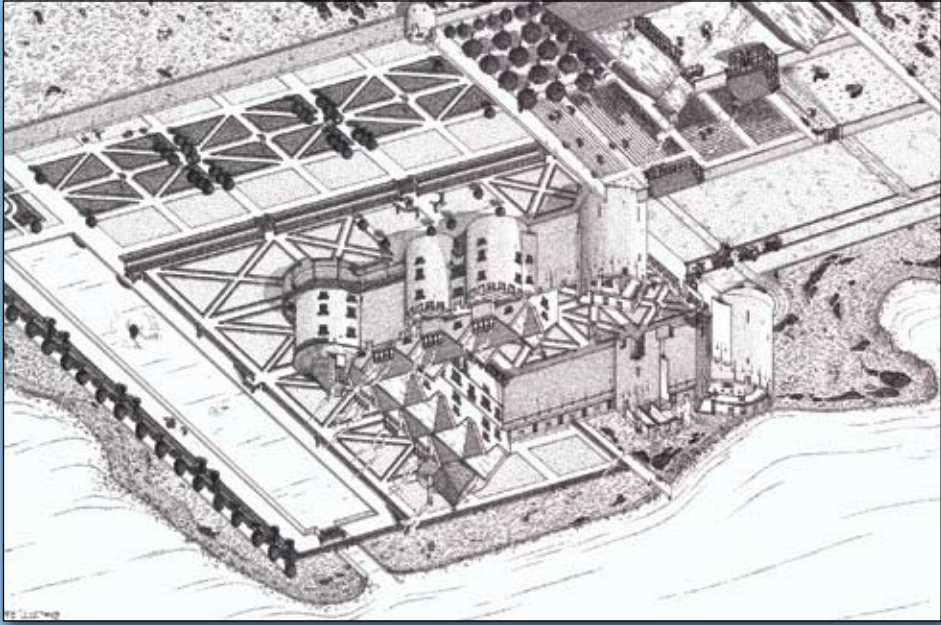
Roscommon Castle c.1307



The northern half of the late 13th-century Inner Ward might have appeared towards the end of Sir Nicholas Malby's life in 1584. Malby seems to have turned the northern half of the late 13th-century Inner Ward into a very imposing Renaissance-influenced fortified house. Much of the original castle ditch was filled in and a fortified garden was built to the north and east of the castle.

The northern side of the old ditch was turned into a formal fishpond. A grand avenue was constructed to the south of the castle. This was probably lined with lime trees. Decaparks also existed around the castle at this time. In all, Roscommon Castle was one of the most imposing residences of its day in Ireland.

Roscommon Castle c.1584



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History

Roscommon Castle consists of a quadrilateral enclosure with a D-shaped tower at each of its four corners, a twin-towered gatehouse along its east wall and a smaller postern gatehouse in the west wall. It is regarded as scholars as one of the finest Anglo-Norman castles in Ireland.

A rich monastery, a well endowed Dominican Friary and a lay settlement existed at Roscommon prior to the construction of the castle. The importance of this centre on a local and provincial level was the main reason Roscommon was chosen for what was to become one of the most important royal castles in Ireland during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

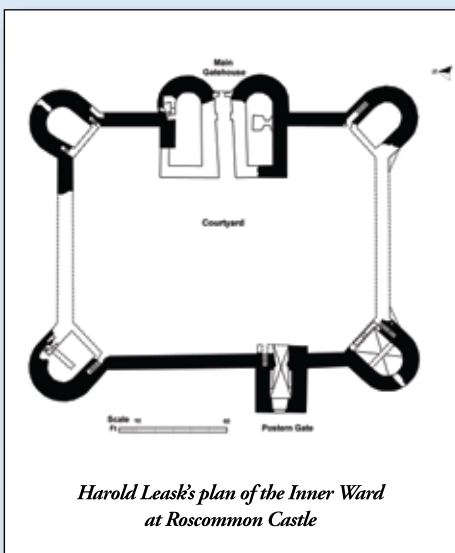
eastern sides. The lake itself protected the western side of the castle. An excavation in front of the postern gatehouse, carried out in advance of the Town Park development, confirmed that this fosse was once 1.5 m in depth. Excavation also picked up another ditch that once existed between the shores of Loughnaneane and the curtain wall of the castle on its western side. The foundations of a stone wall were uncovered immediately inside this ditch.

Defensive structure

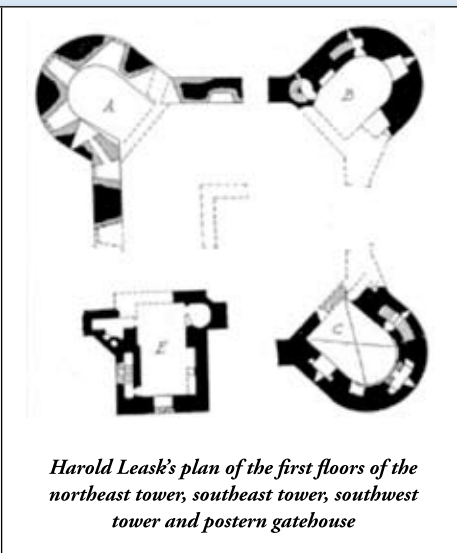
A geophysical survey was also conducted on the eastern side of the castle directly in front of the twin-towered gatehouse.

English rule

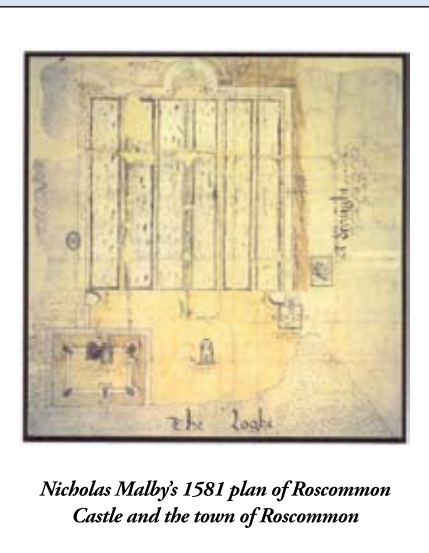
Roscommon Castle was regarded by the English government from the mid 16th century onwards as being of strategic importance in restoring their control of western and midland Ireland. The castle was surrendered to the Dublin government by the O'Connor Don of the day in 1569. In 1577 the crown granted the castle and 17,000 acres to an English soldier and administrator, Sir Nicholas Malby. The latter turned the northern half of the inner ward of the castle into a symmetrically designed, Renaissance-influenced fortified house. This made Roscommon Castle the centre of one of the largest New English



Harold Leask's plan of the Inner Ward at Roscommon Castle



Harold Leask's plan of the first floors of the northeast tower, southeast tower, southwest tower and postern gatehouse



Nicholas Malby's 1581 plan of Roscommon Castle and the town of Roscommon

The site for the castle was selected by the Dublin government in 1262 during the course of a hosting against Aedh O'Connor, son of Feilim O'Connor, the Irish king of Connacht. Robert de Ufford, the justiciar or chief governor in Ireland for Henry III, ordered work to begin on the fortress in 1269. Aedh had succeeded his father as king of Connacht and was deeply hostile to the Anglo-Normans. Roscommon Castle represented a threat to his power and he repeatedly plundered and burned it in the early 1270s.

These attacks slowed down building works on the castle and really very little of it had been completed by the time of Aedh's death in 1274. The sources suggest that most of the castle was erected in the late 1270s. It was to be the centre of Anglo-Norman power in this part of Ireland until the mid fourteenth century.

Loughnaneane

The townland in which the castle stands is called Loughnaneane. A lake, which once existed here during the whole medieval and post-medieval periods, was known as 'Lough Nea' or 'Lough Nen', which translates into English as the 'Lake of the Birds', due to the large number of waterfowl which once nested on it. A crannóg once existed on Loughnaneane and it has been suggested that this was the site of an O'Connor residence prior to the coming of the Anglo-Normans to Roscommon in 1269.

A ditch or fosse once surrounded the castle. A topographical survey conducted by an NUI, Galway MA student at the site showed that this originally wet fosse, fed by the waters of Loughnaneane, surrounded the castle on its northern, southern and

This indicated that an outer line of defence existed between this latter building and the ditch. The results showed that a trench curved outwards directly in front of the gatehouse in a semi-circular fashion indicating the presence of an outer gate-tower or barbican. This outer line of defence also included either a stone wall or timber palisade between the ditch and the standing curtain wall of the castle. This suggests that concentric defence (two closely-spaced lines of defence) once existed at Roscommon Castle making it similar in its design to more-or-less contemporary royal castles in Wales, such as Harlech Castle.

The D-shaped angle-towers of the castle were originally well supplied with arrow-loops at first- and second-floor levels. Evidence from the north-western tower would suggest that the merlons on the battlements of these towers were also looped for archery. The battlements on the wall walk of the curtain wall were also pierced with arrow-loops. The twin-towered gatehouse was originally three storeys in height and would have had many important public and private rooms within it. Its entrance passageway, along with that of the postern gatehouse along the western wall, was defended by portcullises and drawbridges.

Under siege

The castle was repeatedly attacked by the local Irish and was in O'Connor hands by the mid 14th century. The O'Conors, usually the O'Connor Don branch of the family, held the castle for over two hundred years. There is virtually no physical evidence in the fabric of the castle for this long native Irish occupation and our knowledge of it comes purely from surviving historical sources. Roscommon Castle saw many sieges during the course of the 15th century in the constant low-scale warfare that characterised this period.

estates in Ireland at this time. The twin-towered gatehouse, northern curtain wall, the north-west and north-east towers were joined together into a magnificent four-storey L-shaped house.

Defensive features

Defence at the castle was still a priority due to political conditions in Ireland at this time, which were far from stable. Gun loops and other defensive features can be seen in this house. Many of the defensive features of the original 13th-century castle were retained as well.

Renaissance-style houses, like the one erected within Roscommon Castle, often had gardens attached onto them. In this respect, a fortified walled garden with two flanking towers was built to the east and north of the castle. The construction of the fortified wall of this garden also saw the filling in of most of the 13th-century ditch. The northern part of this fosse, however, was retained as a fishpond. Later cartographic evidence suggest that a formal grand avenue, flanked by mature trees, led from the town to the south of the castle and was possibly built at this time.

Malby was correct to maintain the defences of Roscommon Castle as it was attacked and besieged by Red Hugh O'Donnell for three months in 1596 and again in 1599 during the course of the Nine Years War. The castle also saw action during the Confederate Wars of the 1640s and surrendered to a Cromwellian force in 1652. It seems to have fallen out of use after the Williamite Wars in the last decade of the 17th century.