

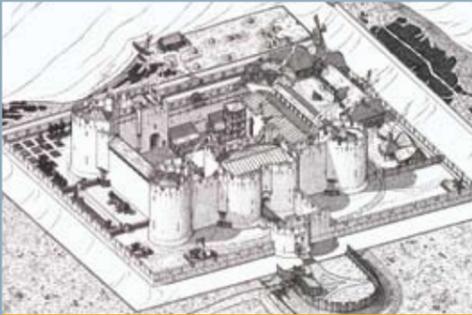
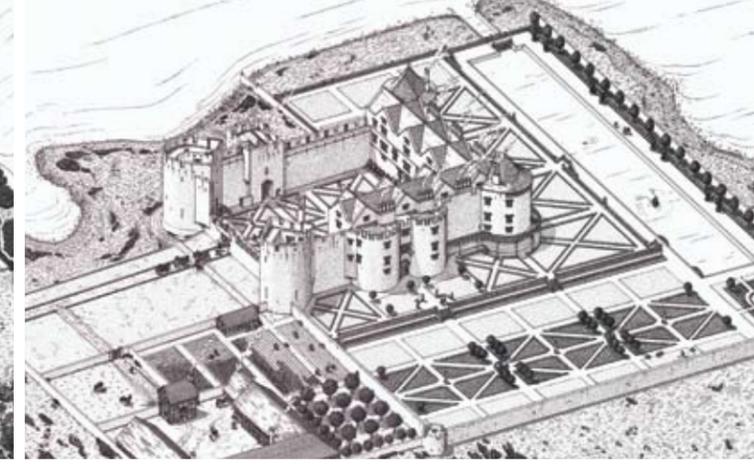
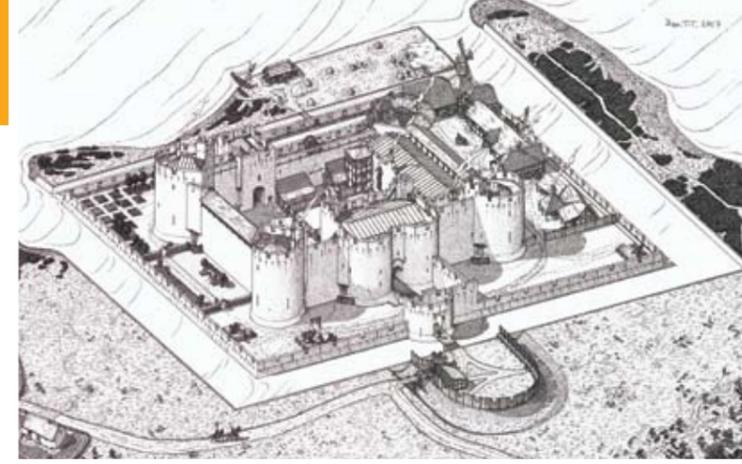


## Exploring Roscommon Castle in Medieval Times

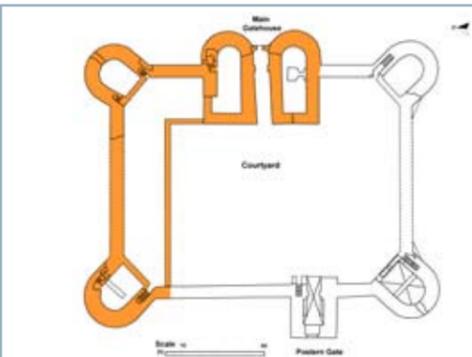
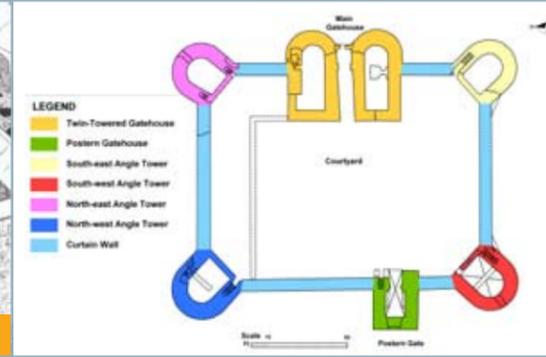
## Roscommon Castle: Two Archaeological Reconstruction Drawings

To ensure the reconstruction drawings are as accurate as possible, reference was made to an early draft of Margaret Murphy & Kieran O'Connor's guidebook, then to a variety of archaeology, architecture and history books, numerous historic monument guidebooks, the internet and other articles in the course of creating detailed pencil drafts of each drawing. As well as making decisions about long-vanished parts of the castle, such as the north and south curtain walls and the accommodation within the castle, decisions were made about the most appropriate style for the architectural details destroyed by men and the passage of time. Finally, the elements that would provide the historical context were decided upon, including ancillary buildings, people, animals and day-to-day objects, garden designs and wider landscape features.

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Roscommon Castle as it may have appeared in 1307



Roscommon Castle as it may have appeared in 1584

## Exploring Roscommon Castle in Medieval Times



A series of publications on Roscommon Castle have been produced by Roscommon County Council:

'Roscommon Castle - A Visitor's Guide' by Margaret Murphy and Kieran O'Connor. © Roscommon County Council 2008. Guidebook €10.

'Roscommon Castle...the history of a national landmark' by Margaret Murphy and Kieran O'Connor. © Roscommon County Council 2008. Leaflet. Free. Available to download from the 'Heritage' section of [www.roscommoncoco.ie](http://www.roscommoncoco.ie)

'Loughnaneane Park Roscommon, Primary Schools Education Pack' © Roscommon County Council 2008. Educational Pack CD. Free.

All publications are available from the Customer Service Desk, Roscommon County Council The Courthouse, Roscommon. Phone: 090 6632500. Email: [customerservice@roscommoncoco.ie](mailto:customerservice@roscommoncoco.ie)

## How do I get to Roscommon Castle?

You can get to Roscommon Castle through Loughnaneane Park, Roscommon. A timber ramp provides access into the castle through the Postern Gatehouse.



[www.roscommoncoco.ie](http://www.roscommoncoco.ie)

Roscommon Heritage Poster Series No. 6. Produced by Roscommon County Council © 2010  
An Action of the County Roscommon Heritage Plan. Text based on: 'Roscommon Castle: Two Archaeological Reconstruction Drawings', © Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler, B.Sc., Ph.D., MAAIS. Drawings: Archaeological Reconstruction Drawings © Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler, B.Sc., Ph.D., MAAIS. Aerial Photography © Gerry O'Leary Photography. Plans & Other Photographs © Roscommon County Council. Funded by Roscommon County Council.



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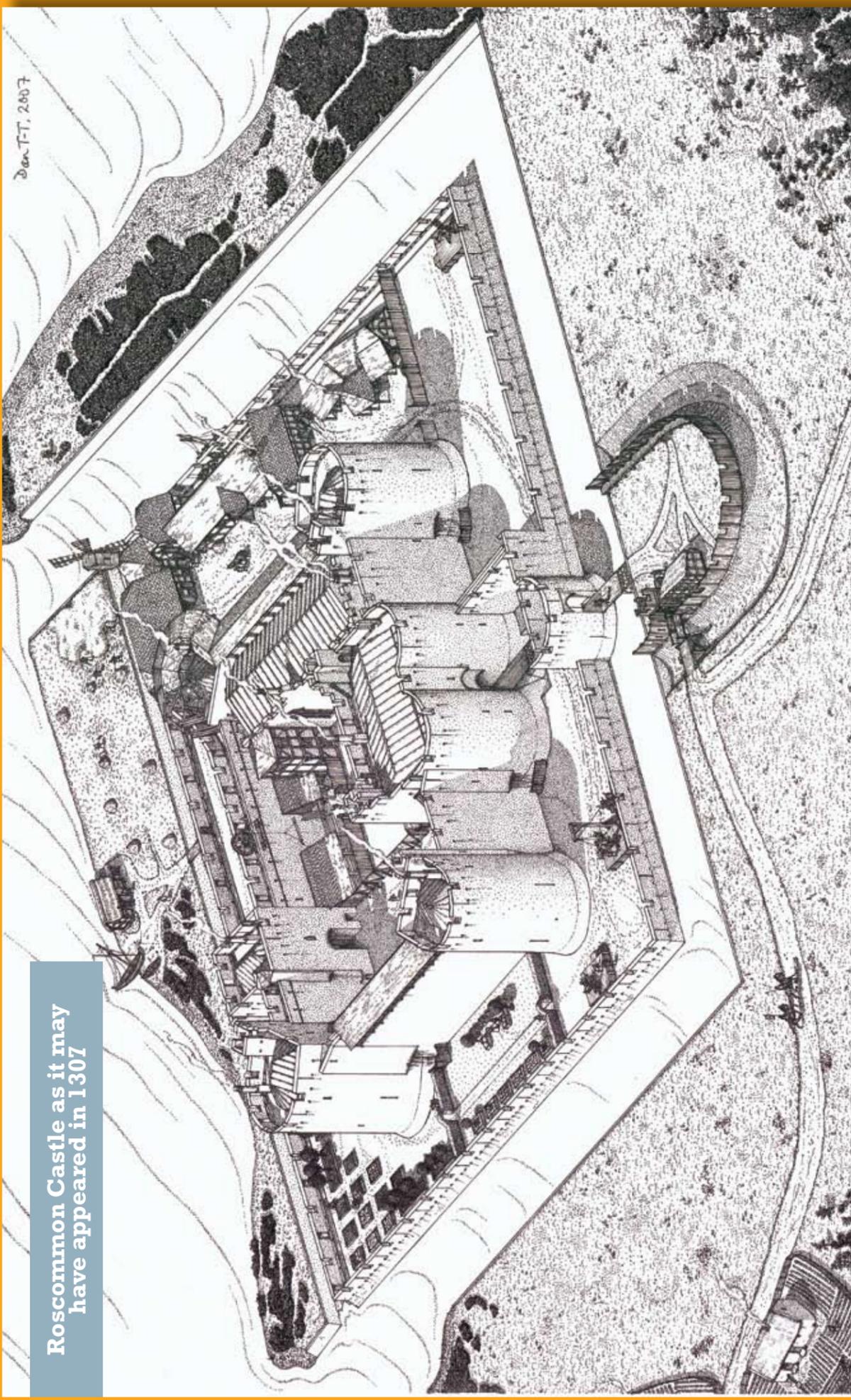




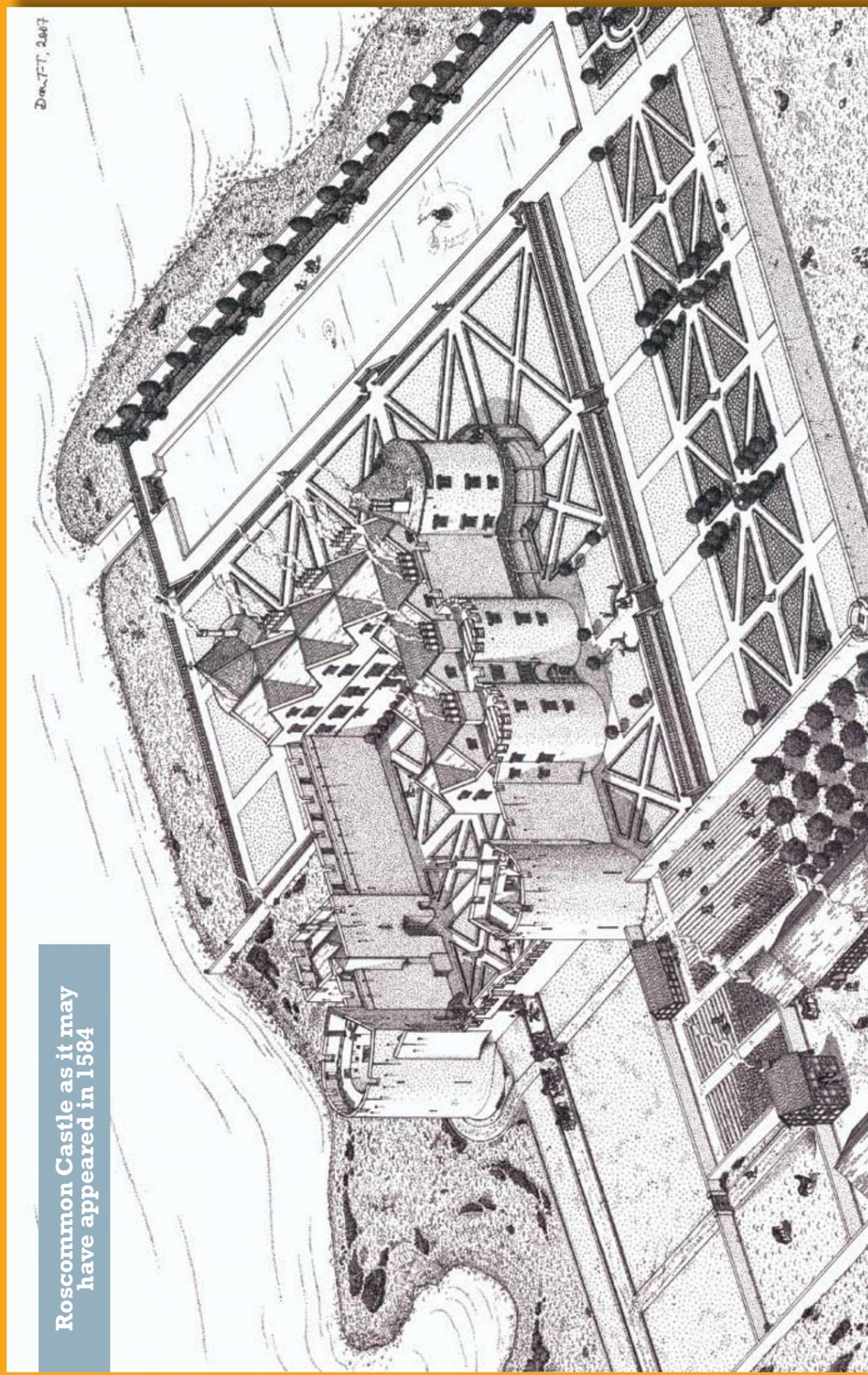
# Exploring Roscommon Castle in Medieval Times



Roscommon Castle as it may  
have appeared in 1307



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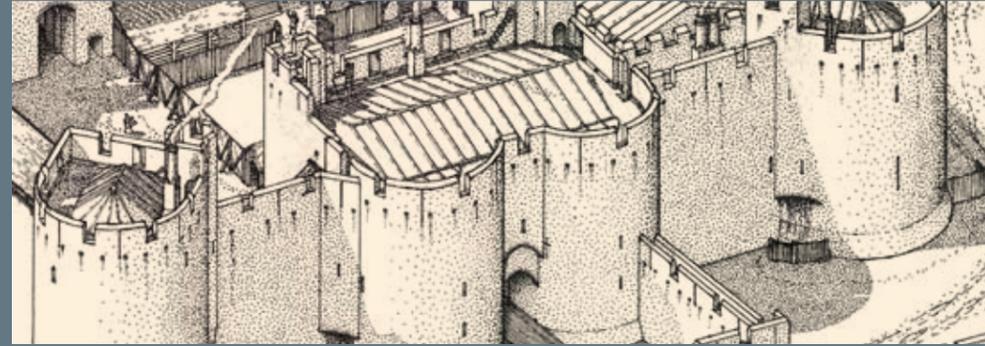


# Roscommon Castle as it may have appeared in 1307

## Introduction

Work began on Roscommon Castle in 1269 and continued in several phases. The first phase included excavation of the moat around the castle, which would have had a timber palisade erected inside it. The foundations of the inner curtain wall and towers were probably begun during this stage. The second stage saw the building of the inner ward up to 8.8 metres at the wall walk. The third stage of building saw most of the curtain walls raised to about 11.5 metres at the wall walks. In the final stage, the two southern towers were raised by another storey.

Roscommon Castle was a Royal Castle, built for the English king and fortified against the threat of Irish rebellion against the King.



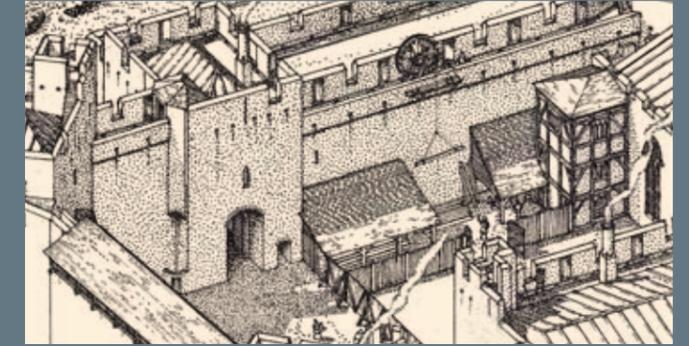
## Walls

The castle was protected by high curtain walls. It is assumed that the castle walls were lime-washed throughout, both to protect and weatherproof the porous local limestone from which they are built and as a symbol of the castle's royal status, making it highly visible to the countryside around it. The battlement proportions adopted for the curtain walls and the towers of the castle are based on remnants still visible in the later-raised northwest tower. The southeast tower suggests the means of access to its former upper storey, via a spiral staircase. The lower stairways in all the towers are intramural stairs. On the evidence of the southeast tower, it is assumed that each tower once had spiral stair access to the roof, with a cap-house or a turret to keep rain out of the stairwell. The towers at Roscommon are all shown capped by a small turret. The great gatehouse is shown with a turret at each of its interior corners.



## Garderobes

The garderobes hang on squinch-arches across the angles between the towers and the adjacent curtain walls. The open-air accumulation of human waste at the foot of the garderobes is shown hidden from general view by timber fences.



## Inner Ward

A fenced yard is shown against the west curtain wall in which material is being prepared for the ongoing construction of the wooden hoarding. As well as showing covered storage and workshops in the yard, timber is shown being winched up to the battlements using a large hand-turned wheel. Outside the yard, a timber fence further divides the ward into a ceremonial area enclosing the hall and great gatehouse, and a service area entered through the postern gatehouse. Half-timbered buildings for the servants and soldiers of the castle and perhaps a stable might have stood against the south curtain wall.



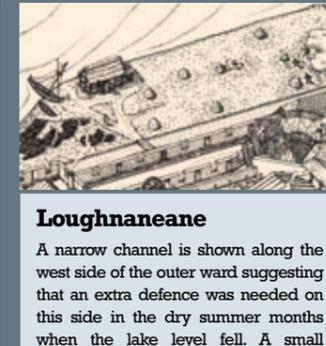
## Hall

In the records for 1304 there is reference to a hall in the castle. The reconstruction shows the hall against the north curtain wall. This allows its large inward-facing windows to face south for maximum illumination. It also places it alongside the probable location for the medieval kitchens, up against the east curtain wall, north of the great gatehouse, where two large fireplaces suggest the later Elizabethan kitchens were also located. Between the kitchen and the lower end of the hall would have been a service passage flanked on opposite sides by a buttery and a pantry. Lead was the most likely roofing material. Expensive to buy in the first instance (less so if the sheeting was manufactured on site), lead was economical in the longer term because it could be stripped off when damaged or worn and simply melted down, reworked and replaced.



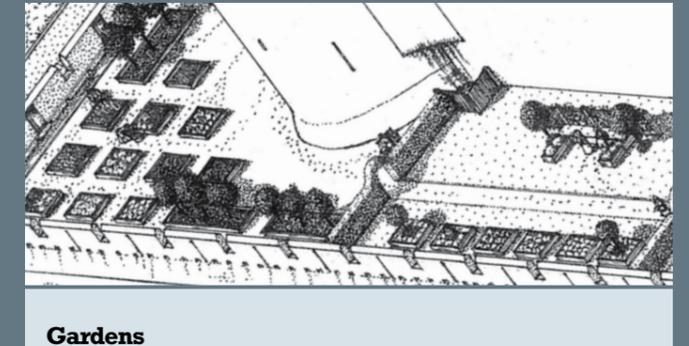
## Oriel

An oriel mentioned in 1304 as in need of repair was probably a projecting wing, most probably on the upper end of the hall. It is shown in the reconstruction as half-timbered with two storeys. The lower storey may have provided a private entrance to and antechamber off the upper end of the hall, perhaps with a stairs up to the second storey. The second storey is likely to have served as a chapel, as was common in medieval oriels.



## Loughnaneane

A narrow channel is shown along the west side of the outer ward suggesting that an extra defence was needed on this side in the dry summer months when the lake level fell. A small postern gate is shown in the west wall to give access across the moat to the ephemeral island just west of the castle, where boats are shown moored beside a temporary shed and also men cutting hay. A simple wooden bridge is shown accessing the island, but steps into the ditch from both sides are just as likely.

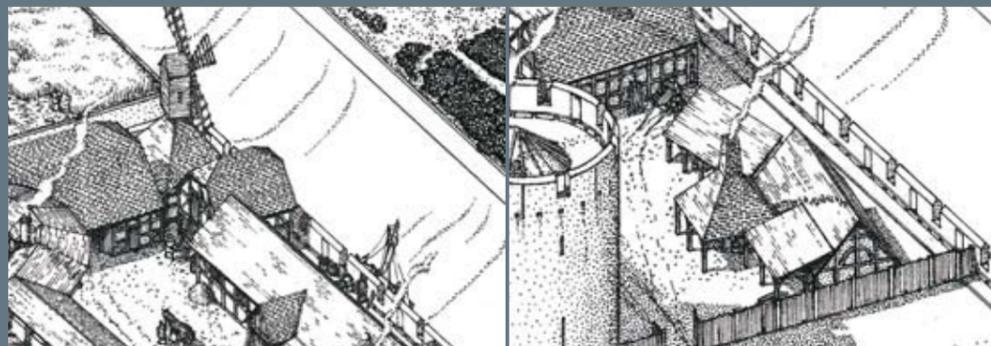


## Gardens

Most castles had one garden or more within their walls. Two gardens are shown here. An arrangement of typical square raised beds planted with herbs, vegetables and fruit trees is shown in the southwest corner. Beside it, beneath the south curtain wall of the inner ward, is a private pleasure garden enclosed between two hedges. This garden comprises a row of raised beds with flowering plants and ornamental trees at the centre of a strip of lawn and, across the path, a second lawn with a turf seat surrounded by raised beds and trees in front of a trellis screen.

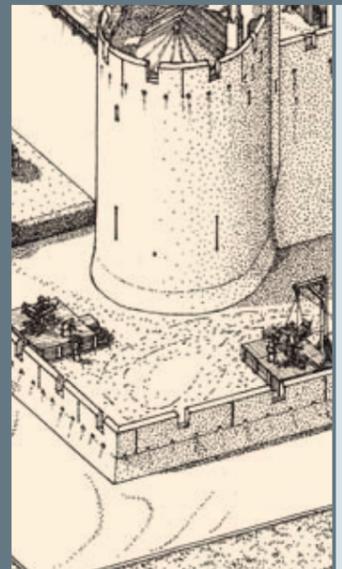
## Road to Roscommon

The road from the castle is shown extending to north and south, skirting the lake and passing peasant cottages outlying the borough of Roscommon.



## Workshops and activities

Castles were the sites of a host of activities and might have had barns, granaries, mills, stables and oxen-houses, smithies, forges and a variety of workshops within their outer walls (as well as the hall, kitchen, pantry and buttery, bake house, brewery and store-rooms commonly found within their inner walls). In the reconstruction, a number of these are shown as half-timbered buildings grouped in the northern half of the outer ward. Clockwise from west of the northwest tower, these are envisaged as: a barn, a windmill, an elevated granary reached by a ladder and with open storage beneath it, an L-shaped stable block, and a smithy-forge and associated workshops. This whole area is then fenced and gated to provide a measure of day-to-day security. Behind the stable a small postern gate is shown in the north wall of the outer ward, allowing access for delivery of supplies from small boats on the lake.



## Defences

Roscommon Castle was capable of concentric defense, in which archers and crossbowmen on the higher walls of the inner ward could fire over the heads of defenders at the outer wall and, if the outer ward were captured, they could then also fire down on the enemy confined within its space.

Ballistae – crossbow-like siege engines that fired large arrow-like quarrels – are shown being erected on wooden platforms that will permit them an arc of fire over the battlements. The engines are mentioned in records from 1307 when artillerymen were assigned to repair them.



## Gatehouses and Drawbridges

The rectangular wall of the outer ward is interrupted in front of the great gatehouse of the inner ward where geophysics identified an infilled semicircular trench projecting out from the wall. This probably represents the foundation trench for a semicircular outer gatehouse. The gatehouse is represented as an open structure with an arched bridge at the rear to support a drawbridge winding mechanism. The evidence for a drawbridge here is taken from a record for 1304 of money spent to repair three drawbridges, presumably one each for the postern gatehouse, the great gatehouse and this outer gatehouse. Drawbridge pits inside both surviving gatehouses and the absence of openings for chains or lifting beams in the face of the gatehouse show that these were turning-bridges. These pivoted close to the centre so that the inner counterpoised (counterweighted) end would be released to bring the outer bridge up flush with the gatehouse wall. The inner end of the bridge would be winched up to lower the bridge. In the great gatehouse, the raised bridge would have fit snugly beneath the upper round arch and this principle has been applied also to the outer gatehouse in the reconstruction.

The geophysics also revealed a cross-trench just north of the outer gatehouse, connecting the outer wall to the northern of the two great gatehouse towers. The cross wall would have provided a further defence for this northern part of the outer ward.

A timber semi-circular barbican with a gate tower, a small guardhouse and a dry ditch or fosse outside is shown across the moat from the outer gatehouse. Such a barbican not only defends the outer gatehouse, but also, at least early during a siege, provides a bridgehead for counterattack against the besieging forces. The barbican is shown looking out over rough open ground, with woodland cut back to some distance from the castle walls to provide a clear killing ground.

# Roscommon Castle as it may have appeared in 1584



## Introduction

Roscommon Castle was repeatedly attacked by the local Irish and was in Gaelic Irish O'Connor hands for over two hundred years until 1569 when the O'Connor Don of the day surrendered. In 1578 the castle and its associated estates were granted to Sir Nicholas Malby, Governor of Connaught. He transformed Roscommon Castle from an antiquated and probably dilapidated medieval castle into a magnificent fortified Elizabethan house. His son Henry, who died in 1602, inherited the castle and estates.

Despite its transformation, the mansion built by Sir Nicholas remained an important military outpost of the Dublin-based English government. Records show that it endured a three-month siege in 1596 during which the furniture and the stairs of the house were burned as fuel. The garrison was large enough to sustain 150 deaths by starvation, eleven killed in action and twelve captured. In 1609-10, Henry's widow, Lady Sydeley, successfully sought and obtained compensation for damage done by the garrison stationed there.

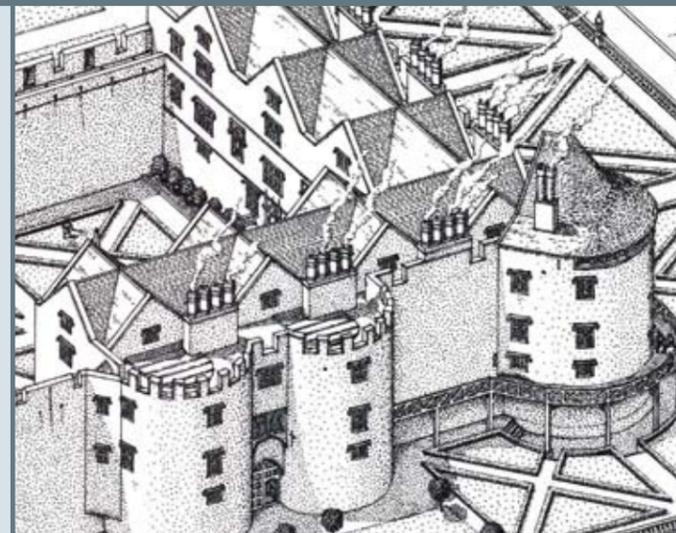
Roscommon Castle remained a military stronghold throughout the 17th century. Today almost nothing remains of the walls of Sir Nicholas Malby's great house. Only the new windows opened in the old castle walls, short lengths of the north wing's walls and the gable capping the gatehouse provide evidence for it. What happened to the rest of the house? It is most likely that the house was taken down stone by stone and used to build something new elsewhere in Roscommon town.

## Sir Nicholas Malby's House

The main features of the late 16th century transformation are the replacement of the medieval accommodation in the castle with a large modern house and the modification of the towers and curtain walls to incorporate them into the house. With this went removal of the outer ward and moat and its replacement with a system of geometrical gardens. The new house built in the castle by Sir Nicholas Malby was big, as big as any of the great houses built in Ireland around this time.

The house comprised four storeys capped by attic rooms in triangular-gabled roofs. In keeping with its continuing defensive role, the lowest storey is unlit by windows and access to storage rooms at this level was probably from the gatehouse passage. The position of windows in the new house is largely unknown except where new ones were opened up in the medieval walls. It is assumed that fireplaces and chimney flues were all within the thick outer walls of the house as we see them today in the east curtain wall of the castle. Towers were transformed internally to incorporate them into the new accommodation.

With construction of a large new house to replace medieval accommodation that was to include the great gatehouse and the two northern towers, it is likely that the roofs of these towers were remodelled. In keeping with the fortified nature of the house, the reconstruction shows the gatehouse and the curtain walls capped by crenulated battlements, but in a more ornamental style than the relict medieval battlements on the rest of the castle. The gatehouse lies mostly within the new house, while the two northern towers project from it entirely.



## Roofs & Chimneys

The house is shown as having pitched slate roofs, with the long ridges at the axis of each wing intersected at regular intervals by shorter ridges between opposing pairs of attic gables. Square chimneys arranged diagonally in clusters of four on rectangular stacks are shown at regular intervals that correspond to the valleys between the gables atop the curtain walls.

## Windows and Doors

Window design is comparable to contemporary and slightly earlier designs in England, but not in Ireland where older Tudor or flat-arched windows were the norm until after 1600. This suggests that Sir Nicholas was influenced by contemporary English style rather than the local style of the day.

The lowest windows and the attic windows are simple two-light mullioned windows. Between these, the windows of the third and fourth storeys are either four-light or eight-light mullion and transom windows, diminishing in size from the third storey up to the fourth storey in a very elegant proportional arrangement. The full length of the third storey on both sides of the courtyard was framed above and below by two carved string courses.

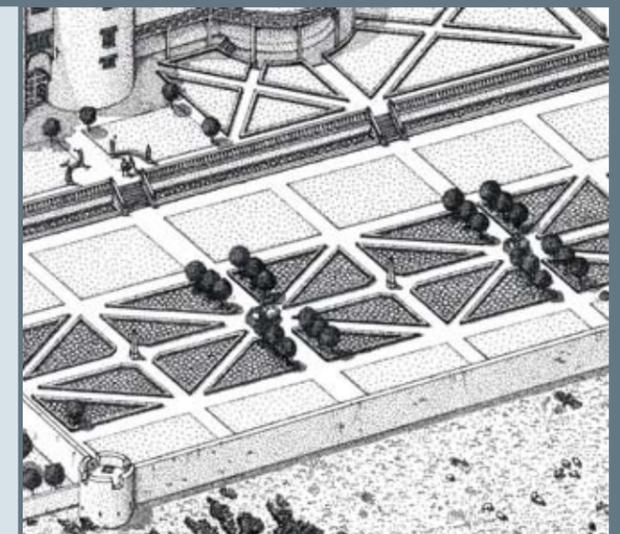
Just visible at the centre of the second storey is an ornamented entrance. Also visible is one of two tall four-light windows placed either side of the entrance and a balustrade at the top of the staircase up to the entrance. Two round-arched semi-cylindrical niches with statues are shown on either side of the window above the entrance.



## Ornamental Gardens

A couple of features of the ground outside the castle indicate that ornamental gardens were installed there to complement Sir Nicholas Malby's great house. One of these is the walled enclosure to the east of the castle. The wall is up to four metres tall and had a cylindrical flanking turret at its southeast corner, originally one of a pair with the other probably at the north end of the east wall. The southern stretch of this wall extends across the line of the medieval moat to join the southeast tower of the castle, indicating that the moat was filled in at this time.

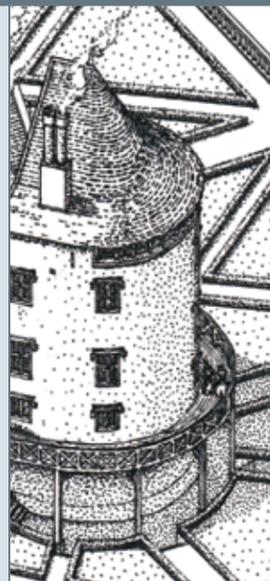
The gardens are shown as simple design, while still trying to evoke the idea of a geometrically designed garden of the period. Thus, gravel paths divide the garden into squares or rectangles, themselves often subdivided by diagonal paths. The gardens as a whole are shown terraced on two levels to allow for the slope immediately outside the castle walls. Stone balustrades are shown at the edge of the upper terrace as well as along the garden edge facing the lake to the west. The upper terrace, which embraces the castle on three sides, is divided simply into hedged and un-hedged lawns except in front of the gatehouse, where some ornamental trees and statuary define the main avenue into the garden. The lower terrace is divided into two parts.



## Towers

It is likely that the castle towers were capped with conical roofs in the French style. In light of Sir Nicholas's early military service in France, it seems reasonable that he would have done something similar at Roscommon, thus making the towers very much part of his modern new house.

The reconstruction shows the battlements of the northeast tower with an open viewing platform, the roof above supported on wooden posts. This would have provided long views out over the gardens and the surrounding countryside. There is a second storey door in the east curtain wall just north of the gatehouse, this door has no useful purpose other than to open onto a platform running along the outside wall. This is interpreted as a wooden viewing balcony, and is shown to extend around the northeast tower and along the north face of the castle. From it, household members and visitors could view the gardens on both sides of the house.



## Inner Ward

For the most part, the rest of the medieval inner ward of the castle remains unchanged. The curtain walls on either side of the postern gatehouse and on the south side of the great gatehouse are also shown unchanged as they are today but for the loss of their battlements.

The courtyard of the castle is shown as a geometrically designed garden of lawns and low hedges divided by gravel paths into squares and rectangles, themselves subdivided by diagonal paths. To break up the severity of the windowless lower storey of the house, a raised flowerbed planted with flowering plants and ornamental trees is shown extending along the façade of the house from either side of the entrance staircase.



## Postern Gatehouse and Southern Towers

The postern gate, clearly unchanged today, is shown only with a new slate roof in line with that on the new house. The two southern towers have not been changed, but they are shown unroofed and their turrets removed.

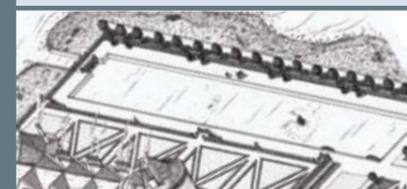
## Workshops & Activities

To complete the historical context for such a large house, the drawing includes a kitchen garden and orchard just outside the walled ornamental garden, with access to and from the walled garden for gardeners and anyone wishing to walk in the orchard. On the nearside of the orchard, is shown stables and associated workshops that must have existed nearby to service so large a house. To reflect their total absence today, they are shown as half-timbered buildings. Outside the walls of the gardens and stable yard, the terrain is shown as rough ground, little changed from its 14th century predecessor. The house and garden thus appears as probably intended, an island of civilization in an otherwise barbaric world.



## Fishpond

North of the castle, the lower terrace is dominated by a large rectangular fishpond corresponding to the northern arm of the medieval moat, shown here with a broad gravelled promenade along each side. The narrow channel that supplied water to the western end of the pond from the lake is still visible on the ground today. The pond is shown enclosed to the north by a tall sheltering wall, in front of which is a hedged flowerbed with trees and periodic bench seating. The depression along the line of the moat along the north side of the castle remains a marked depression in the ground surface today, and clearly was not filled in when the rest of the moat was. Taken together, these features suggest that a contemporary walled garden flanked the castle to the north and east. Walled gardens such as this also acted as a defensible outer enclosure in the case of an attack on the house, taking on something of the role of the medieval outer ward.



## Avenue

In keeping with the remodelled castle's new role as a stately home, a long straight gravelled avenue was created about this time between the town square in Roscommon and the castle. To make the most of the stately new approach to the castle, it is likely that the south curtain was taken down and replaced with a lower wall. This would make the fenestrated upper storeys of the new house clearly visible to visitors as they approached up the avenue. The south curtain is shown replaced with a low wall, battlemented in the style adopted for the exterior walls of the new house and with, at its centre, a new ornamented gateway, complete with machicolated parapet over the gate.

