

ROSCOMMON CASTLE

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TIMETABLE OF MAIN EVENTS:

- 1268 A.D.: Built by a Norman, Sir Robert de Ufford, Lord Justice of Ireland.
- 1272: Destroyed by Hugh O'Conor, King of Connaught.
- 1276: Restored.
- 1280: English garrison in possession.
- 1315: Destroyed by Rory O'Conor, son of Cathal Roe O'Conor, later crowned King of Connaught.
- 1375: Roderick O'Conor takes possession, in exchange for his castle at Ballintubber.
- 1384: War between two branches of the O'Conor family.
- 1490: The Earl of Kildare besieges the castle, then held by O'Conor Roe.
- 1512: The Earl of Kildare takes possession in the name of Henry VIII.
- 1514: O'Conors retake possession.
- 1554: O'Conor's retake Castle.
- 1569: Restoration by O'Conor Don. Sir Henry Sidney takes possession on behalf of Elizabeth I.
- 1573: O'Conor's take possession.
- 1576: Sir Henry Sidney seizes castle for the second time.
- 1578: Castle granted to Sir Nicholas Malby.
- 1585: Sir Richard Bingham, President of Connaught, is offered the Castle.
- 1641: Rebellion. Castle attacked.
- 1652: After being taken by the Irish, the castle was surrendered to the Cromwellian army. Fortifications dismantled.
- 1691: Castle finally destroyed after the Battle of Aughrim.

INTRODUCTION:

Much blood has soaked into the soil surrounding Roscommon Castle. The words 'siege' and 'destroyed' in old histories of the fortress are clean and neat; euphemisms for deprivation and death amidst all the screaming chaos of medieval war.

This stout Norman castle changed hands several hands times during its four hundred years of strategic importance, against a backdrop of rebellion and rising, internecine struggle among the native Irish, and the horror of the infamous Cromwellian era.

Located on the proverbial doorstep of the county town itself, Roscommon Castle is one of a chain of similar fortresses stretching across the west of Ireland. It was destroyed at least three times in four hundred years and was finally allowed to decay as its strategic importance to the English Crown lessened.

It would appear, from information contained in the Irish annuals, that the Anglo-Normans looked on Roscommon as a place where a permanent military presence was desirable, if not essential, to ensure the subjugation of the native Irish. The reason for this is contained in a mountain of early military theory, but an ordinary map of Roscommon and Sligo shows a line of fortresses from Athlone to Sligo town - a line that goes through both the heart of the province and the heart of Ireland. Today, the ruined remains of Roscommon Castle still silently guard the Western and Northern approaches to the bustling county town, Only a few hundred yards from The Square, with the spire of

the Church of the Sacred Heart clearly visible in the distance, the castle maintains its vigil over the plains of Roscommon.

HISTORY:

Roscommon Castle was first erected on a patch of low-lying land west of Roscommon town in **1269**, by a Norman, *Sir Robert de Ufford*, the then Lord Justice of Ireland. At the time, the most powerful Irish chieftain, *Hugh O'Conor*, King of Connaught, was laid low by illness, allowing de Ufford to build the fortress without fear of attack from the natives.

Until O'Conor's recovery, the people of the province were trodden underfoot by the English forces, but by **1272**, *Hugh O'Conor* was back to full strength. He marshalled his forces and attacked the castle which was then occupied by the new Lord Justice. According to the records, the castle was either demolished or simply seized by the Irish

By **1280** however, the castle was again in Anglo-Norman hands in the person of the Constable, *Jordon de Exeter*, and had been re-built. *Sir Robert de Ufford*, the man responsible for building the castle in the first place, fortified it, losing considerable money in the process.

The year **1288** saw a brief 'alliance of convenience' between the native Irish and the Anglo-Normans who controlled the castle. The alliance became necessary because of an outside invader; the Annals of the Four Masters state that an army led by *Richard, the Red Earl* and son of *Walter, Earl of Ulster*, marched against Connaught.

He arrived at Roscommon, where *Manus O'Conor*, son of the King of Connaught; the *Fitzgerald Clan* and the King's garrison were waiting. The combined defending forces openly defied the *Red Earl of Ulster* to pass beyond Roscommon, whereupon he may have thought that discretion was the better part of valor. For whatever reason, the Red Earl retired and dispersed his forces.

By **1290**, *William de Oddingales* was custodian of Roscommon castle. He was followed in rapid succession by *John Fitzthomas*, *Walther de Joythorne*, *William de Poer*, *John de Fresingfield*, *Walter Wogan* and *William de Exeter*. *John de Exeter* took over the post in **1304**, was keeper of the castle while more fortifications were installed and repairs carried out.

The need for these repairs is explained by a requisition taken by *Tristledermot* in **1305** before *Sir John Wogan*, Justiciary the requisition recounts that an Irishman, *Felim O'Conor*, who called himself King of Connaught, kept the peace and paid his rent faithfully during his lifetime. Upon his death, his son Hugh became a rebel to the English King, slaughtered many of the English settlers in the area and finally attacked the castle at Roscommon. *Hugh O'Conor* was outlawed and *Sir Robert de Ufford* arrived with an army to protect and re-fortify the stronghold.

In **1308** most of the English settlers in the area were killed at Ahascragh, County Galway, by *Donogh O'Kelly*, and by **1340** Roscommon Castle appears to have been in the possession of the O'Conor's the foremost clan in the county. The Annals for that year record that *Hugh*, the outlawed son of *Felim O'Conor*, was taken prisoner by the King of Connaught and sent to be imprisoned at Roscommon Castle.

The following year, the castle was seized by *Turlough O'Conor* and prisoner *Hugh* was released following the payment of a ransom - a usual procedure at this time. *Turlough O'Conor* appears too have been in constant possession of the castle between **1341** and **1375** when he swapped it for Ballintubber Castle, then owned by *Roderick O'Conor*.

All was relatively peaceful in the county until **1476** when *Tadhg, son of Own O'Conor*, was slain by his own people, who then took control of the castle only to lose it again. In **1499** the *Earl of Kildare* (also the Lord Justice of Ireland at the time) led an army into unruly Connaught and took the castle, returning to do the same again in **1512**.

But the O'Conors persevered and were again in control of Roscommon Castle by **1544**, when *MacWilliam Burke* petitioned the Lord deputy (the English King's representative in Ireland) for the fortress. His request was granted with alacrity, but before taking possession. *MacWilliam Burke* found himself in the unenviable position of having to drive out the O'Conors.

Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Justice of Ireland, took Roscommon Castle in **1569** and seized it from the O'Conor's again in **1575**, when the *O'Conor don* (chief of one branch of the clan) came to see him. "...Yet during my abode at Roscommon O'Chonnor Donn came unto me, whose ancestor they say was called King of Connaught. The castle of Roscommon I took from him in my former government," wrote *Sir Henry Sidney* in **1576**.

In **1578** the castle was granted to *Sir Nicholas Malby* and in **1614** Oliver St. John reported that: "...the county of Roscommon hath none of the ancient English races, only at the portion on the east of the River Suck. Of the new English, there are *Sir Henry Maltbye*, who has the Manor of Roscommon, and *Sir John King*, who has the Abbey of Boyle."

During the reign of *Phillip* and *Mary*, Roscommon Castle was appointed as one of the official residences of the Lord Deputy, but it is not known if any Lord deputy actually stayed there.

During the rebellion of **1641** the castle was again attacked by the Irish. By the end of the Cromwellian wars it was again in Irish hands. The castle was surrendered to the English *General Reynolds* for the last time by the Irishman, *Captain Daly*, in **1652**.

It is commonly believed that the castle was set alight following the Battle of Aughrim in **1691**, never to be restored.

TO THE 1990s AND BEYOND

Today, as we approach the start of a new millennium, Roscommon Castle is still attracting attention - thankfully of a more peaceful nature than when it housed a fully-armed garrison for almost 400 years.

Thanks to the interest of the County Roscommon Historical and Archaeological Society and the community of Roscommon, the future of the castle is assured. Despite the damage caused by war and the decay caused by the relentless passage of time, Roscommon Castle is still an imposing and impressive fortress, and is of considerable interest to both visitors and inhabitants of the town.

Access to the castle is free, and several improvements have taken place to allow greater enjoyment for visitors. A graveled path has been laid down just inside the walls, providing visitors with a pleasant way of viewing the castle's interior. An explanatory plaque is located inside the castle, near a huge piece of masonry which serves as a reminder