**Ballintober Castle, some background information**

Ballintober is a privately owned castle under the care of its ancestral occupants, the O’Conors of Connacht, who currently reside 10km away at Clonalis House, Castlerea. The castle was built at the 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.

Ballintober Castle is not laid out as symmetrically as the royal castle of Roscommon; all four sides are slightly different in length, giving a sub-square ground plan that is nevertheless quite large in size, measuring *c*. 85m 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 largeditch, or fosse, surrounds the site, and survives well on the north, south and west sides. The entrances would have been fitted with drawbridges. 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.

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. De Burgh interests were curtailed in the 14th century and 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. 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. Ballintober Castle is a useful place in which to learn about the complex relationships between the different cultural groups in later medieval Ireland.

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 significant 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.

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 conducted in 2008 and 2009 under the applicant’s direction revealed a

large curving ditch feature in the southwest quadrant that may indicate the presence of a pre-existing enclosure on the castle site. Resistance survey in turn revealed a series of clearly defined buildings arranged around a central courtyard. One structure in the northwest measures *c.* 12 by 8m in size and appears to have buttresses. A building in the southwest is much more substantial, and measures *c.* 30-35m long and 15m wide. The foundations are not continuous, and seem to represent a series of piers; 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 following de Burgh’s death, which included a hall, chamber and kitchen.

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 attests to an early foundation, while a market cross 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. Despite the remarkable sequence of remains, archaeological study of Ballintober has been minimal. The standing remains warrant detailed study while the geophysical survey data highlights the potential whose secrets remain to be realised.

**References**

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