

## Roodstown Castle

Adèle Commings and Daithí Kearney

Roodstown Castle is a prominent feature of the built heritage of Co. Louth. Its excellent state of preservation gives it added stature and it provides an excellent example of a tower house in Ireland.

National records provide an interesting account of the change of name of the townland of Roodstown since 1301. Over the years the following variants of the name existed: Rotheston (1301), Routheston (1305), Rotheston (1582), Roothstowne (1635), Roothtowne (1655), Roothestowne (1658), Roods towne (1659), Rootstowne (1664), Roodestowne (1666), Roodstowne (1667), Roothstowne (1670), Roothtown (1685), Rootstown (1777), Roodstown (1836). At this time it was noted that Rooth was a family name.<sup>1</sup> The 1837 *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* noted that the townland contained 25 houses at the time with 148 inhabitants and described it as a village.<sup>2</sup> This dictionary also suggested that the townland was called Rootstown or Ruthstown. In the Barony of Ardee and Civil Parish of Stabannan, the townland of Roodstown is surrounded by a number of other townlands including Gudderstown, Rock, Broadlough, Drumcashel, Philibenstown and Irishtown.

Roodstown Castle is the most prominent structure today in the townland. The castle overlooks the N33 and the River Dee and is an imposing feature in the landscape visible today from a number of surrounding roads including the N52 and N33. Roodstown Castle is positioned on the roadside at a junction. To the right of the castle is Ardee and to the left of the castle is Stabannan. In days gone by this was the main road from Ardee to Castlebellingham.

Children contributing to the School's Collection project in 1938 from Stabannan Primary School wrote about the castle in their accounts of the area. An informant, a Rev. J.B. Leslie MA, noted that it was built by the Taaffes who were a 'powerful family for hundreds of years in the parish of Kilsaran. But the family is not in the parish now.' They commented that 'nothing is left but a high square turret.'<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-fifteenth century men living in the Pale and who were loyal to the English crown were offered a subsidy of £10 by the government to build a fortified house within the Dublin Pale. Minimum sizes were indicated and this resulted in a large number of these tower houses built during the fifteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Roodstown may have been built under these conditions.

In their account of Ardee Bog, Frank Mitchell and Breeda Tuite noted that in November 1596 Roodstown Castle was burned. With the plague raging in Ardee many castles were left unguarded; Smarmore Castle on the other side of Ardee town had been burned in 1577.<sup>5</sup> This was a terrifying period for the people of Ardee and the surrounding areas and many people abandoned their homesteads. By 1600 'forty years of warfare and of garrison life had left its mark. The hospital, chantries, college, priories and vicarage had disappeared, and the town had been assaulted, sacked and burned several times over. The thriving merchants had become paupers through the exactions of the soldiery and the dearth of customers.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.logainm.ie/ga/33627>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.libraryireland.com/topog/R/Rootstown-Ardee-Louth.php>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5008856/4961294/5082734>

<sup>4</sup> Rowan, Alistair, 'The Irishness of Irish Architecture', *Architectural History*, 1997 Vol.40 pp.1-23, p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, Frank & Tuite Breeda, 'The Great Bog of Ardee', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1993, Vol.23 No.1, pp.7-95.

<sup>6</sup> Dolan and Murray, n.d., p.75 in Mitchell, Frank & Tuite Breeda, 'The Great Bog of Ardee', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1993, Vol.23 No.1, pp.7-95.

Various historic maps indicate the existence of the castle with some noting that it was in ruins. The maps also indicate the presence of a smithy nearby and Roodstown House.<sup>7</sup> The Down Survey of the 17<sup>th</sup> century indicates the castle in the townland of Roothtowne.<sup>8</sup>

Roodstown Castle is a fine example of a surviving tower house. Tower houses were residencies of the gentry in rural Ireland between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and were defended. Harold Leask has suggested that over 2500 of these may have been built around Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Similar structures are found in Scotland. Most tower houses are built in the shape of a square or rectangle and span three or more storeys. Roodstown Castle stands four storeys and approximately 15m high. Other examples of tower houses in Co. Louth can be found in Termonfeckin, at Dunmahon, Killincoole and Milltown and in the neighbouring town of Ardee, and there are many others speckled throughout the hinterland. One wonders was the castle at nearby Cookstown also a tower house with a similar structure. However, despite a reference to this castle in an historic map of the area no trace of this castle is evident today. A total of 26 tower houses have been identified in Co. Louth.

Built with rubble masonry with limestone trim the towerhouse has two square turrets diagonally opposite each other. Colm Donnolly writes that side turrets were particularly common in North Leinster and he notes Roodstown Castle as an example of this design.<sup>10</sup> One of the turrets contained the garderobe with the other containing the staircase. As one would expect the floors between each storey are no longer preserved except for the vaulted entrance. Many of the interior floors on the upper levels would have been wooden.

The door is at ground level. Single ogee-headed windows are positioned on the first and second floors with the second floor having a window on each wall. Two sides have double ogee-headed windows on the first floor, with one side also having a transom bar. The rooms with the larger windows may have represented the main living quarters. The ground floor also features splayed windows which would have provided light to the vaulted entrance. The staircase would have led to the living quarters and the battlements which are still evident today. There is a murder hole just inside the doorway which was not uncommon. It is probable that there was a machicolation but this has since disappeared. A machicolation was an opening through which objects could be thrown at attackers of the castle. A detailed floor plan and design of the castle is available on askaboutireland.<sup>11</sup> Clear pictures of the interior of the castle are provided by another visitor which depict the vaulted entrance area and the gap leading to a staircase which is still intact.<sup>12</sup>

A number of historic publications featured drawings of the castle.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Wright included a drawing of the castle in *Louthiana: An Introduction to the Antiquities of Ireland* in 1758.<sup>14</sup> Another sketch of the castle was copied by William Frazer from an original drawing by George V. Du Noyer from the Kilkenny Archaeological Society Collection.<sup>15</sup> These sketches in antiquarian books by Wright, Fleming, Frazer and Du Noyer clearly show that despite the passing of time, Roodstown Castle has been very well preserved and has maintained its original exterior structure, with the exception of the roof which is no longer intact.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://geohive.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9def898f708b47f19a8d8b7088a100c4>,

<sup>8</sup> <http://downsurvey.tcd.ie/down-survey-maps.php#bm=Atherdee&c=Louth>

<sup>9</sup> Leask, Harold G., *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses*, 1951, Revised 2nd ed., Dundalgan Press, Dundalk p.75.

<sup>10</sup> Donnolly, Colm J., 'Frowning Ruins: The Tower Houses of Medieval Ireland,' *History Ireland*, Vol.4 No.1, Spring 1996, 11-16, p.14.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/environment-geography/physical-landscape/louth-louthiana/louthiana-archaeological-/ardee-roodstown-castle/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://theirishaesthete.com/tag/roodstown/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000240043>, <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000621016> and <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000740366>

<sup>14</sup> Wright, Thomas, *Louthiana: Or an Introduction to the Antiquities of Ireland*, 1758, Dundalk: W. Tempest Limited.

<sup>15</sup> <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000740366>

The imposing nature of Roodstown Castle is evidence of the wealth of the original owners of the castle and the workmanship of the builders over five hundred years ago. The detail on the windows and door openings is similar to other structures of its time and represents the craft of the workers in the area. Travelling around the countryside today the castle is prominent in its look out position and continues to stand tall. Its presence in the countryside reminds us of a past time and we wonder about life at Roodstown. Was it regularly attacked or did the inhabitants enjoy a life full of music and merriment? Who were the builders of this fine structure? When was it last inhabited? The stories of the castle are hidden in the walls and have been lost with the passing of time. For now we can but admire and wonder.

## References

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