

“KNOW YOUR 5 km.”

The Collapse  
of the  
Old Sessions House  
And Market House,  
Market Square,  
Roscommon Town.

By

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## **1.0. INTRODUCTION**

During the third Covid 19 lockdown, Roscommon County Council along with ‘Our Irish Heritage’ and ‘The National Museum of Ireland’ and ‘Heritage Council’ encouraged citizens to visit, photograph, investigate and research some of the heritage which is located within five kilometres of their residences. My investigation looks at probably the most prominent stone building in the town of Roscommon after the Catholic Church. The building stands centrally and aloof in Market Square. The building which I am researching is currently the Bank of Ireland in the centre of Roscommon Town, Co. Roscommon, but has as long history of other uses.

Although I am not a resident of Roscommon town, I do work in Roscommon Town as an historical researcher and as somebody with an interest in the town, I believe I qualify to put in an entry. I have a selection of useful research material on my computer as well as being able to access material on-line, such as the Irish Census and Griffith valuations etc.

This project intends to analyse all what is known about, and the significance of the site before and after the collapse.

## **2.0. A COURTHOUSE, SESSIONS HOUSE, AND MARKET HOUSE**

Roscommon town was the Assizes town for the County of Roscommon. The ‘Sessions House’ was the place where the Court of the Quarter sessions sat for criminal trials, four times a year. The building was also used as a courthouse for the administration of Justice in the Assizes Court. Each county in Ireland probably had such a building, which was also used as a place for the Roscommon Grand Jury to meet, as well as used by the Borough of Roscommon in administering the town. In today’s terms, it was jointly used as town hall and courthouse. In Roscommon, we don’t know when the Sessions House was built.

The Sessions House must have been at least fifty years prior to the events which are described below which would date it to c. 1670. Is this date plausible? Yes, Earl of Ranelagh was Governor of Roscommon Castle 1661 until his death in 1712. From 1668-74 he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and Paymaster-General from 1685-1702. He was definitely resident in Ireland until 1687, when he was replaced as Governor of Athlone by Col. Richard Grace.

Who was the designer of the ‘Sessions House’? It was almost undoubtedly Richard Jones, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Viscount Ranelagh and 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Ranelagh, who had the necessary skills to design a substantial building and as Governor of Roscommon Castle he held a position of power in the town.

### 3.0 THE EARL OF RANELAGH AS ARCHITECT

Richard Jones was not only a politician, a soldier and a Protestant, but he was also an architect. We know of several commissions where he supported other architects or undertook commissions alone. Rolph Loeber in his book *'A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Ireland 1600-1720'* describes the Earl of Ranelagh as follows:

'Richard Jones, 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount and 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Ranelagh (?1638-1712), gentleman architect of Irish birth who is known for his works in England but may have practiced in Ireland. For the first thirty years or more that he lived in Ireland there is little known about his life. He was the son of Arthur, 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Ranelagh, and Catherine, daughter of Richard Boyle, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Cork. It seems likely that he went on a grand tour for he is known to have visited Basle in 1658. (*Dictionary of National Biography*, London 1885-1900, and H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, London, 1978.) However, the extent of his travels is unclear as to the nature of any architectural experience he may have gained in the process.



*Richard Jones 1st Earl Ranelagh.*

At the Restoration, his family regained prominence probably through the connection with Roger Boyle, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Orrery who became Lord Justice, and was also a gentleman architect. Richard Jones was soon awarded several important offices such as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1668 onwards) and Manager of the Irish Revenue. He was one of the burgesses of Roscommon Corporation in 1688. He probably lived in Dublin where his father had a large residence with sixteen hearths in Dame Street. In 1670 Richard, then Viscount Ranelagh inspected the partly finished Royal Lodge, Phoenix House, outside Dublin in the company of lord Lieutenant Berkeley (*Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, 1669-70, 115.) The outcome of this possibly architecturally inspired visit remains unclear.

Ranelagh's relatives and professional colleagues may have enabled him to design buildings in Ireland, but evidence of that effect has not yet come to light. With his known taste for luxury, it seems unlikely that Ranelagh would not have beautified or improved his residences in Ireland. Two of these were old-fashioned fortified strongholds: Roscommon Castle and Athlone Castle of which he became Governor in 1661 and 1672 respectively. (*Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, 1660-2, 440.) it is not known whether Ranelagh executed any repairs to these residences, which as official garrisons fell under the care of the Surveyor General William Robinson. Over the years Robinson and Ranelagh probably developed a friendship, and Robinson assigned £500 to Ranelagh in one of his last Wills. (PRO Del. 1/357/809, dated 1709.)

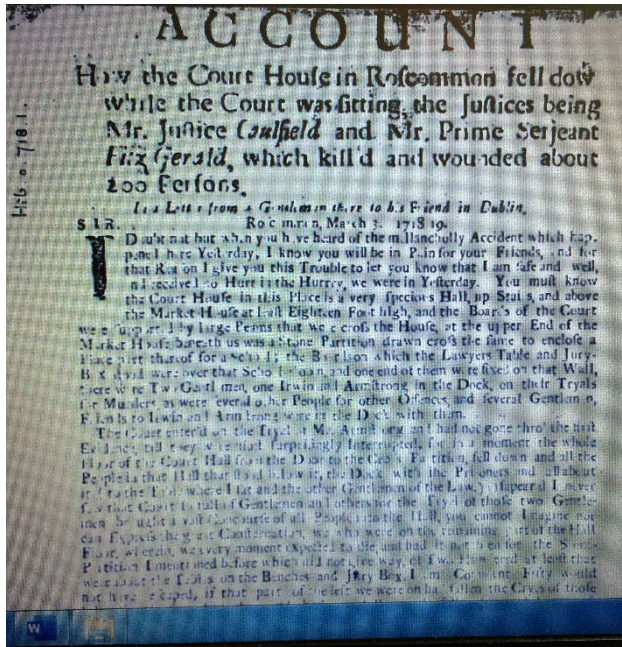
Ranelagh was appointed as one of the Commissioners for the building of the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, which was designed by Robinson.'



*Ranelagh House in Chelsea London designed by Earl of Ranelagh.*

#### 4.0. COLLAPSE OF THE ROSCOMMON COURTHOUSE 1719

(Note: To assist in reading this document - the letter 'F' should be pronounced 'S'  
and the letter 'Y' should generally be substituted by the letter 'I'.)



*The original printed pamphlet describing the collapse of the courthouse.*

**'How the Roscommon Courthouse fell down While the Court was fitting, the Justices being Mr. Justice Caulfield and Mr Prime Sergeant Fitzgerald, which killed and wounded about 200 felons.'**

This letter from the National Library of Ireland (NLI MS 10,770) describes what happened when the courtroom upstairs over the market hall was overcrowded with accused citizens. The excessive load on the ancient structure caused it to collapse.

Letter from a Gentleman in there to his friend in Dublin:

Roscommon March 3 1719

'I doubt not but when you have heard of the melancholy accident which happened here yesterday, I know you will be in pain for your friends, and for that reason I give you this trouble to let you know that I am safe and well, and received no hurt in the hurrey, we were in yesterday. You must know The court house in this place is a very spacious hall upstairs and above The Market House, at least eighteen foot high and the boards of the court were supported by large beams that were cross the house, at the upper end of the Market House beneath us was a stone partition drawn cross the same to enclose a place part thereof for a school; the beams on which the Lawyers Table and Jury box stood were over that school room, and one end of them were fixed on that wall, where were two gentlemen, one Irwin and Armstrong in the dock on their tryals for murder, as were several other people for other offences, and several gentlemen friends to Irwin and Armstrong were in the dock with them. The Court entered on the tryal of Mr Armstrong and had not gone thro' the first evidence; till they were ??? surprisingly interrupted, for

in a moment the whole floor of the Court Hall from the door to the cross partition, fell down and all the people in that hall tha? floor below it, the dock with the prisoners and all about it (to the table where I sat and the other gentlemen of the law) disappeared I never that court so full of gentlemen and others for the trial of those two gentlemen brought a vast concourse of all people into the hall, you cannot imagine nor can express the great consternation, we who were in the remaining part of the hall floor wherein we every moment expected to die, and had it not been for the stone partition I mentioned before which did not give way, of two hundred at least that were about the tables, on the benches and jury box, I am convinced fifty would not have escaped, if that part of the left we were on had fallen the crys of those some of the prisoners that were in the dock are killed, others had their leks, arms, or thighs broke, and very many bruised and cut, in short every house in town had less or more of the wounded people I bear of no gentlemen of note killed or much wounded, but the fright was so great that we could do no business, besides some of the prisoners that did not suffer at the fall, ran away, and the evidences against those that remained were so bruised and wounded that the judges were obliged to adjourn The Assizes till the 25<sup>th</sup> March, after that of Galway and Ennis are over, there is not any of our friends hurt. The cryer that sat at top of the lock fell with it, but received no hurt, which is a miracale,

I am yours F.S.

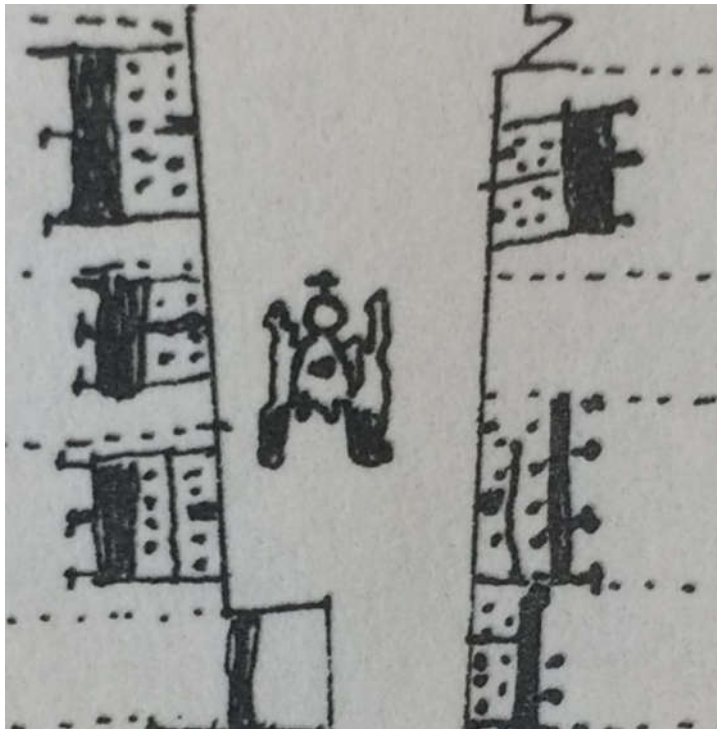
P.S. 'til said that there is 30 killed and about 200 wounded, people walk'd over their shoes in blood.

This extraordinary description tells us of the size of the upper room and the carnage which occurred on that awful day.

## **5.0 THE 1736 DRAWING OF THE SESSIONS HOUSE.**

It would appear from the above eye-witness report that that the floor of only half of the Sessions House collapsed in 1719. Yet, it wasn't until forty-four years later, in 1763 that a Contract was signed with George Ensor for the construction of a replacement courthouse building. What happened in the intervening period? The courts must have been relocated to another building in the town, or operated in the part of the building which survived. We don't have and information on this at present. Without a floor to support the external walls, half of the building must have been unstable, and requiring to be taken down. Such works would have needed to be done without delay in order to avoid injuring the people of Roscommon Town and surrounding area who used the Market Square every week to sell their animals, goods and produce.

Francis Plunkett prepared a drawing of Roscommon Town in 1736 which was a cross between a map and a perspective drawing. It was prepared seventeen years after the collapse of the Courthouse. Does it show the building as it would have been before the catastrophe? Or did it show the building as it stood at the time when the drawing was prepared? I would suggest the latter. His sketch embodies the following features:



*Francis Plunkett's drawing of 1736, probably shows the market house as it was after the collapse.*

a) The building is raised up on tall legs. I would suggest that these legs could be in timber, and the space between the legs could have been used for market sellers to shelter from the rain or the sun.

b) The building has tall decorative finials extending above roof level.

c) The building has a pitched roof, terminating in a gable, covered with thatch, or more likely for an important civic building, slates.

d) There is one window in the gable.

e) The roof or gable is surmounted by a large orb surmounted by a crucifix, symbolising that all civic power comes

from the King, and the King acquires his power from God.

f) Francis Plunkett draws the building larger than it really was in the space, and makes a point of locating the building off-centre, suggesting that there was previously another part to the right.

I have taken the liberty to prepare a conjectural drawing showing what the Sessions House / Market House could have looked like prior to its collapse. I have incorporated all of the features listed at (a) to (f) above. Based on Francis Plunkett's sketch, the building was raised up off the ground, possibly on substantial timber posts. The upper part of the building had one window, and featured finials on each corner. I have assumed that one bay of the building had been removed by 1736, leaving only half the building standing, so I have drawn a building two bays wide. The style of building shown is probably more English than Irish in style, but Ranelagh

would have been aware of courthouses, market houses and sessions houses in England and would have wanted to impose Protestant English ideas in Ireland.



*My conjectural drawing of Roscommon Courthouse reconstructed to it's condition prior to its collapse in 1719.*

## CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the collapse of the crowded courthouse was ‘mana from heaven’ for a few of the accused people of Co. Roscommon, who escaped the rigours of the law, but for most, they lost their lives in dreadful circumstances. The building was probably designed by the First Earl of Ranelagh who have a position of importance in the town. It took many years before the town authorities agreed upon a new design, prepared by George Ensor architect, which was built in the 1760s.



## REFERENCES:

Loeber, Rolph, *A biographical dictionary of architects in Ireland, 1600-1720* (London, 1981).

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