

# Fore Gaol

## Archaeological Assessment



GIACOMETTI

13/11/2020

AP2025

**SITE NAME**

Fore Gaol, Fore, Co. Westmeath

**CLIENT**

Heritage Office, Westmeath County Council, Áras an Chontae, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath N91 FH4N

**RMP**

WM004-035005

**PLANNING**

N/a

**LICENCE**

N/a

**PROJECT REF**

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**ABBREVIATIONS USED**

DoHLGH	Dept. of Housing, Local Government & Heritage
NMI	National Museum of Ireland
NMS	National Monuments Service
OS	Ordnance Survey
RMP	Record of Monuments and Places
RPS	Record of Protected Structures
NIAH	National Inventory of Architectural Heritage
LAP	Local Area Plan

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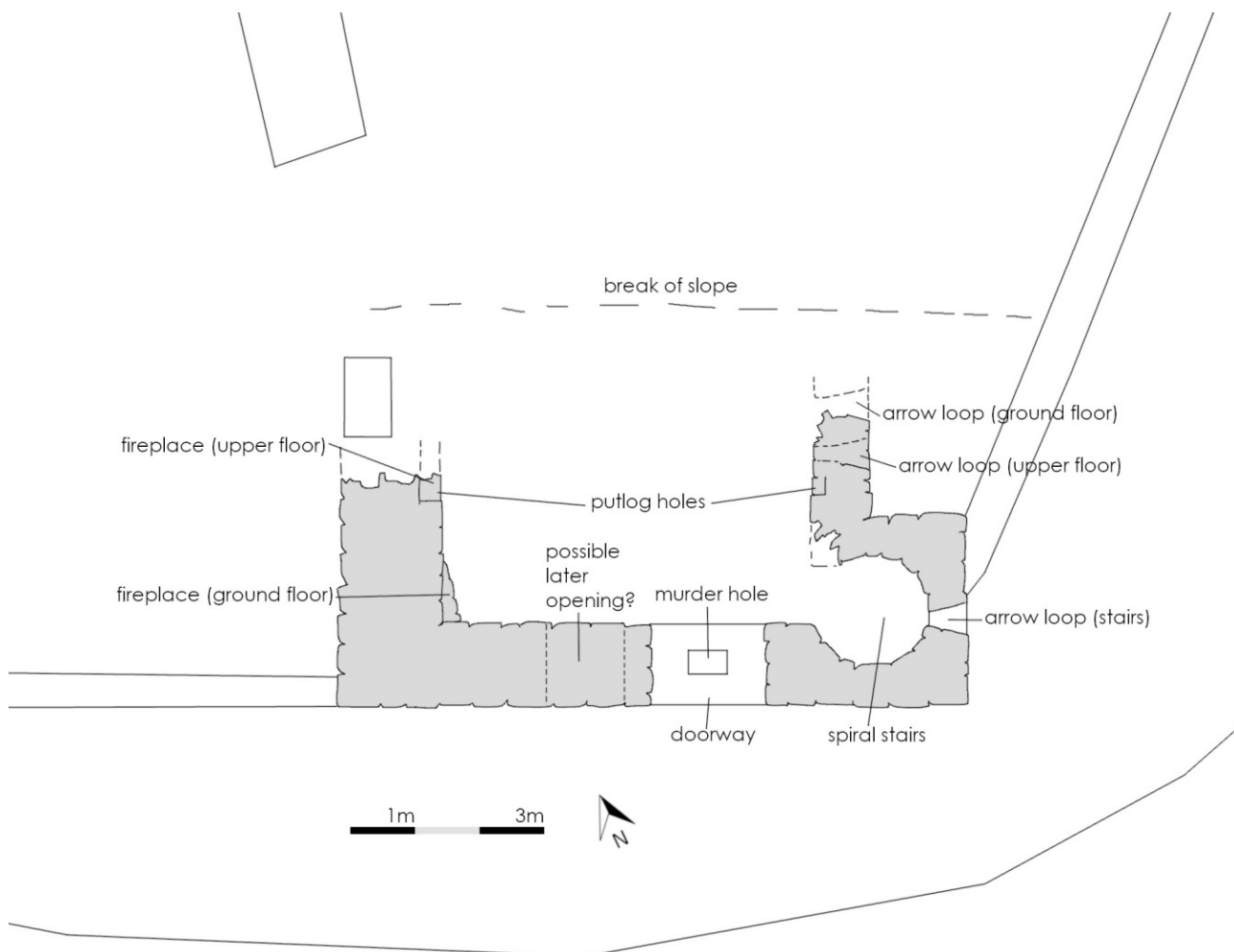
# Section 1 Introduction

## Introduction

This is an archaeological assessment of Fore Gaol, a ruined masonry structure in Fore, Westmeath. It forms part of a joint assessment with conservation architect Blair Anderson at MMA Architects and structural engineer Kevin Clancy of Punch Consulting Engineers. The assessment took place at the same time as a limited programme of vegetation clearance, which exposed previously-undocumented features.

Fore gaol is situated in the centre of Fore, Westmeath (NGR 651119 770330). It is located on the northern side of the village green and former marketplace, and at the junction of Fore Main Street and the road leading north towards the Benedictine priory (WM004-035010).

This report was funded by the Community Monuments Fund, an initiative of the National Monuments Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in partnership with Westmeath County Council.



Sketch plan of Fore Gaol



Combined photograph showing front facade (south-facing) of Fore Gaol

Blocked doorway facing south of Fore Gaol

## Archaeological background

Fore Gaol is a Recorded Monument (WM004-035005). It has been recorded in the Urban Archaeological Survey of Westmeath (Bradley et. al. 1985), though the ruin was too overgrown at that time to get an accurate understanding of the layout. It is not listed on the NIAH. A small seventeenth century cross, also a Recorded Monument, (WM008-097001) has been erected on the green (Bradley et. al. 1985, 74).

The medieval history of Fore has been published by Masterson (2014), who documents the foundation of the town by Hugh de Lacy in the 12th century, the establishment of the significant Benedictine monastery there, and the medieval development of Fore.

The RMP File for Fore town notes that ‘none of the houses in the village have diagnostic pre-1700 architectural features but the masonry of some such as the Gaol, some walls at the rear of houses on the north side of the main street, the single storied shed on the east side of the Green, and the two storied house, now used as a farm outhouse, immediately north of the shed, may be of pre-1700 date. In the absence of detailed masonry studies, however, this remains only a guess (Bradley et. al. 1985, 75).’



Protruding masonry on side of road to west of Fore Gaol

## Section 2 Fore Gaol

### Description of Fore Gaol

Fore goal is a ruined masonry structure situated in the centre of Fore, Westmeath (NGR 651119 770330). It is located on the northern side of the village green and former marketplace, and at the junction of Fore Main Street and the road leading north towards the Benedictine priory.

The full width of the front façade survives and measures 9.67m in length (east-west). It has an off-centre round-headed doorway (1.8m wide)

and a possible later window (1.2m wide). The door is partially infilled. The base of the walls are battered, and they survive to a height of c. 4m in most areas, and up to c. 6m at the west end. The west return extends 1.9m and the east return extends 3.70m, but both returns are broken and it the original shape of the building and location of the back wall is unclear. The walls are 1m to 1.6m in thickness and are constructed with facing stones and a masonry core bonded with a lime mortar, and quoins survive at the intact corners.

Front (south) facade of Fore Gaol, showing: 1 - original line of western corner, 2 - large opening, probably later, 3 - round-headed doorway. Note heavy battering along base of wall





View of eastern end of building, showing later roadside wall

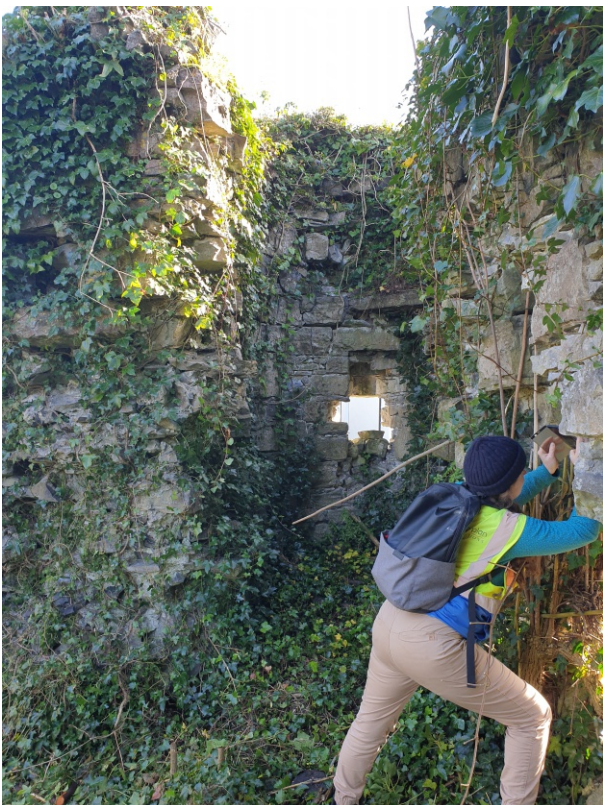
View of rear of building, facing north, showing interior and absence of southern (back) wall





View of east face of building showing: 1 - staircase arrow loop, 2 - upper floor arrow-loop, and 3, ground-floor arrow-loop

View into projecting stair tower, with arrow-loop in centre



Later walls abut the building to the west and northeast. A small slit in the western wall resembles an arrow or gun loop, but the wall is thin and does not look medieval. This may be a vent. A block of masonry to the northwest of the structure appears to be ex-situ.

A chute measuring 600mm by 370mm is located above the doorway and appears to be a murder hole.

The interior of the building measures c. 5.7m east-west (excluding the stair tower) and c. 3.7m north-south (surviving). A sharp break of slope 1m-2m north of the surviving walls may indicate the former rear wall of the structure, in which case these internal dimensions would be roughly correct. Two large putlog holes in the east and west walls located c. 2.3m from the southern wall held beams to hold up the upper floor.

The southeast corner of the building projects out onto the road and contains a spiral staircase and has an arrow-loop. The stairwell winds anti-



Internal western wall facing west showing: 1 - curve of chimney stack, 2 - upper floor fireplace opening, 3, putlog hole for beam holding up upper floor, 4 & 5 - holes to hold up possible mantle piece at ground floor, 6 - protruding masonry relating to ground floor fireplace



Western wall facing north showing: 1 - upper floor fireplace opening, 2, putlog hole for beam holding up upper floor, 3 - protruding masonry relating to ground floor fireplace





Murder hole

clockwise, would have been accessed directly beside the entrance. The arrow loop faces east originally spayed inwards though has been broken through to make it more open. The staircase provided access to the upper floor, but also probably continued upward to a narrow wall walk above the first floor which would have provided access to the murder hole.

A masonry chimney is present in the eastern internal wall. The curve of the masonry gives it the appearance of a barrel vault, however it is certainly a chimney. A protruding masonry feature in the southeast internal corner is likely to represent the ground floor fireplace, and two niches over it may have held up a mantelpiece. The opening for the upper floor fireplace is visible at the broken end of the eastern wall, directly above the putlog hole. It is possible that further remains of the chimney are present higher up in the tall and overgrown western gable of the building.

As well as the arrow-loop in the stair tower, two further arrow-loops are visible in the eastern wall. One is at ground floor

Three of the southeastern quoin stones of the building have been quarried from the same

rock, and this is clearly visible by the mineral seams.

The ruin is bad condition. Despite recent trimming by Westmeath County Council the structure is badly overgrown with ivy, and in many places it appears that the ivy is all that is holding the structure up. The interior of the building is artificially raised approximately 1m above the road surface (which itself is likely higher than the original road, judging by the height of the

door), with vegetation and loose collapsed stones.

Southeast corner showing stones from same rock



## Cartographic

The old gaol is depicted on the 1837 OS map, and shown as 'ruins' on the 1910 OS map. Both maps depict the gaol as set within a larger complex. Buildings are depicted abutting the gaol building to the east and west (extant in 1837 but ruined by 1910), and the 1837 shows two rectangular projections measuring c. 4.5m long and 3.5m wide extending out from the front of the buildings into the market square. One of these appears to be projecting from the doorway. A dog-legged kink on the 1910 map may line up with the projecting stair tower.

The maps appear to indicate that the gaol building measured 9.7m in length east-west (as it does today) and 7.5m deep. The two buildings abutting the gaol to the east and west are depicted as measuring 4m to 4.5m in length east-west and 7.5m deep. A rectangular area to the rear of the gaol appears to be associated with the complex and extends back 25.5m

northwards from the roadside, and 13.5m wide, and is sub-divided into two sections. The 1837 map shows a rectangular structure (10m north-south by 5m east-west) located in the northeast corner of this area, fronting the road leading north to the abbey.

First Edition 6-Inch map c. 1837 above, and 25-Inch OS map c. 1912 below



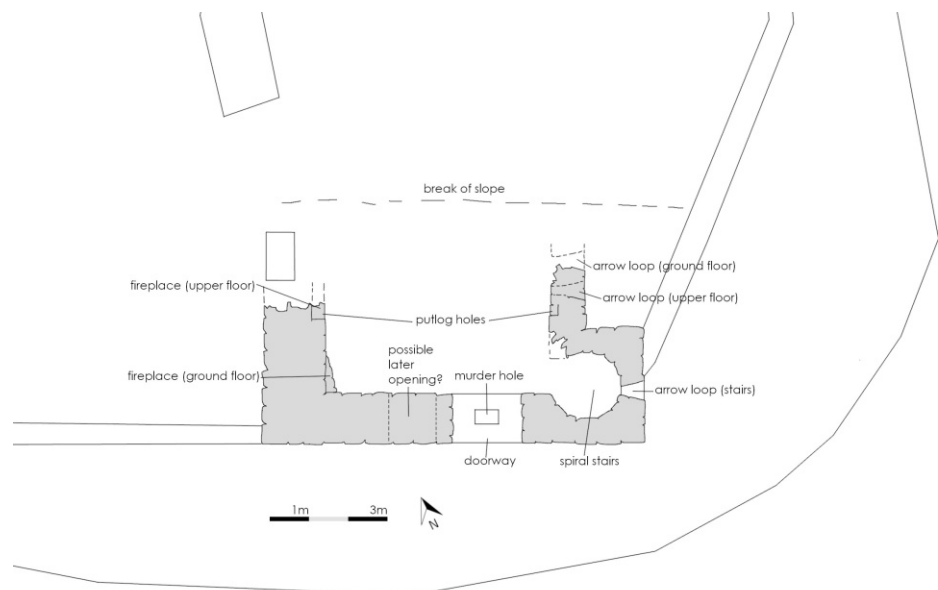
## Discussion

Fore Gaol is a two-level masonry building in the centre of the town. Construction is of masonry and wood, with no evidence for a vault. Both the ground and upper floors appear to have measured c. 5.7m by c. 3.7m in area, and both had fireplaces to the west. A projecting staircase tower provided access between the floors and probably to a roof-walk above. The building has numerous defensive features such as thick-walled masonry construction, battering, at least three arrow-loops, and a murder hole above the doorway.

A number of architectural features at Fore Gaol are comparable to other structures in Fore. The doorway, projecting stair tower with arrow loop, and wall construction, are similar to the 15th century phase of Fore Abbey. The round-headed doorway is comparable in construction to the two 15th century town gates, and the murder hole is comparable to the western gate. The spiral staircase is comparable to the eastern gate. In the 15th century, the priory and town of Fore took measures to protect itself from Gaelic attacks with a town wall or fosse and gates (Masterson 2014, 44-5). Fore was considered to be an outpost of the Pale at this time, and the construction of Fore

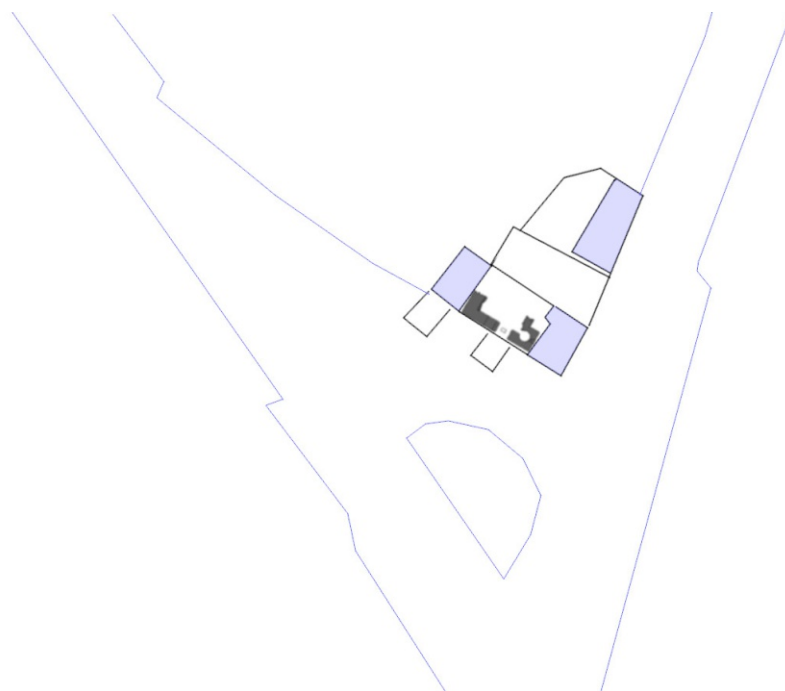
Gaol may date to this period.

A prison in Fore is listed in the extent of 1540 (Masterson 2014, 28). Presumably this is the same building as Fore Gaol, and it seems likely it was in use as a prison from that time. Medieval prisons were both purpose-built (for example in Hertford) or adapted from pre-existing buildings (for example Westminster Gate-House in London), and it is unclear which is the case at Fore.



Sketch of Fore Gaol based on survey showing key features

Reconstruction of complex of Fore Gaol based on historic maps



## Section 3 Recommendations

Fore Goal is currently in danger of further collapse and degradation. The ruins should urgently be stabilised to prevent this. Particular care needs to be taken during ivy removal, as per the Conservation Engineering Methodology by Kevin Clancy (2020).

Historic mapping shows that Fore Gaol formed part of a larger complex of structures and enclosures extending east, west and in particular south of the current ruined building. These need to be considered as part of the setting of Fore Goal, and should be included in any surveys of the monument.

Archaeological investigations may provide further information on the monument. Three test pits or trenches are proposed here. These are located outside the building, away from the danger of falling or unstable masonry.

I A 2m (east-west) long and 1m test-pit in the front of the building at the west doorjamb. This test-pit is intended to confirm whether the opening is an original doorway, and identify the threshold and possible street surface, and to assess the underground evidence for the buttress-type features shown on the 1837 OS map.

II A 6m long and 1m wide test-trench running from the southeast corner of the building eastwards to the end of the street. This trench is to confirm the original level of the street outside the building, to investigate

masonry visible in at the existing road kerb, and to investigate the presence of a building depicted here on the 1837 map but no longer present.

III A 20m long and 1m wide test-trenching running north-south to the south of the building, running up to the southern outside wall of the building but not entering the building. This trench is designed to a) identify the walls depicted on the historic maps to assess if they form of the wider complex of the monument, b) identify the rear wall of Fore Gaol to ascertain its width, and c) to assess the quantity of ex-situ masonry surrounding the monument to inform future conservation and interpretation of the complex. The trench should be excavated from north to south, so that it comes onto the southern wall of Fore Gaol vertically to ensure the rubble core of the wall is not disturbed. An sub-trench could be excavated eastwards off this trench to identify the building shown on the 1837 OS map if desired.

Proposed trenches in red



# References

Bradley, J., Halpin, A., and King, H. 1985 Urban archaeological survey - county Westmeath. Unpublished report commissioned by the Office of Public Works, Dublin.

Masterson, R. 2014 Medieval Fore, County Westmeath. Maynooth Studies in Local History No. 112, Four Courts Press, Dublin.