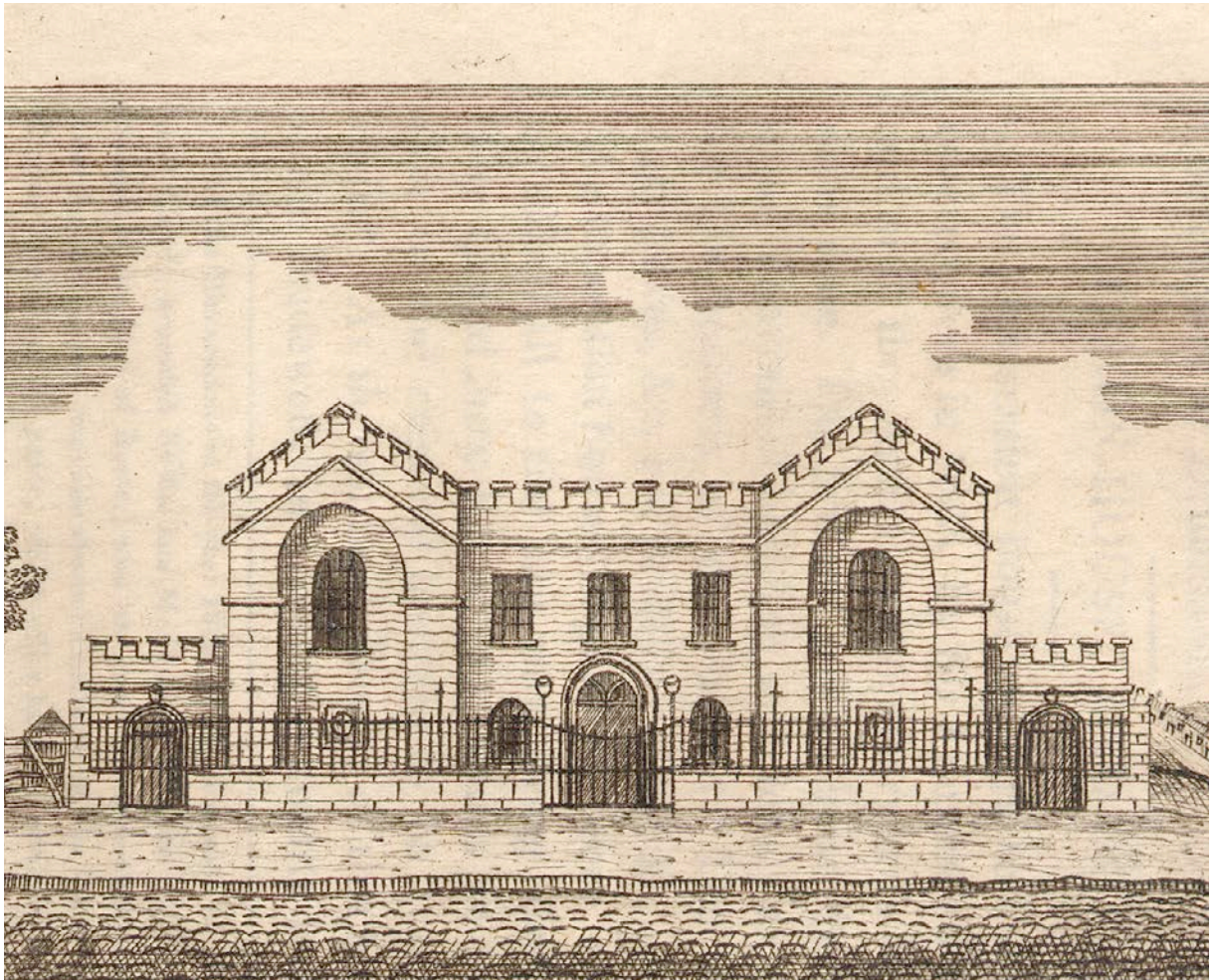


Birr Courthouse

ARCHITECTURE



Conservation Masterplan

October 2021

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council



Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme
2017-2022



This conservation master plan was produced for Offaly County Council by Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture in September 2021 to assess the history, significance and possible reuse of the former courthouse and bridewell in the town of Birr, County Offaly. This plan was part funded by the Heritage Council under the Offaly County Heritage Plan 2017-2021 programme; Creative Ireland and Birr Municipal District.



Sketch of the front of Birr courthouse by HHC Architecture

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1.0 Introduction

Built in 1810, or earlier, the Birr quarter sessions is an early example of a nineteenth-century Irish courthouse. It was constructed at the outset of a very active period of civic and legislative building in Ireland in response to evolving legislative requirements. The front elevation of the courthouse is little changed since it was constructed, and is easily recognisable from the drawing of 1826 in Thomas Lalor Cooke's book on Birr, *The Early History of the town of Birr or Parsonstown*. Cooke described the building as a 'handsome, convenient building, sufficiently extensive for the business of the county.'

The building ceased to function as a courthouse in 2013 when court sittings were transferred to

Tullamore. A symmetrical, five-bay façade, that includes matching castellated gables arranged on either side of a recessed central entrance, add an air of importance and authority to the building. The architect is unknown, but it shares similarities with Daingean courthouse, which was built approximately three years earlier as the county courthouse. Standing on Townsend Street, north of Emmet Square, the Birr courthouse replaced an older sessions house and gaol located just south of the river, at the corner of Castle Street and Main Street. This old courthouse also served as a market house, and accommodated the highest county courts until the mid-sixteenth century, at which point they moved to Daingean, and subsequently to Tullamore in 1835.



Fig 1: External elevation of Birr courthouse today

2.0 Brief history of Birr courthouse

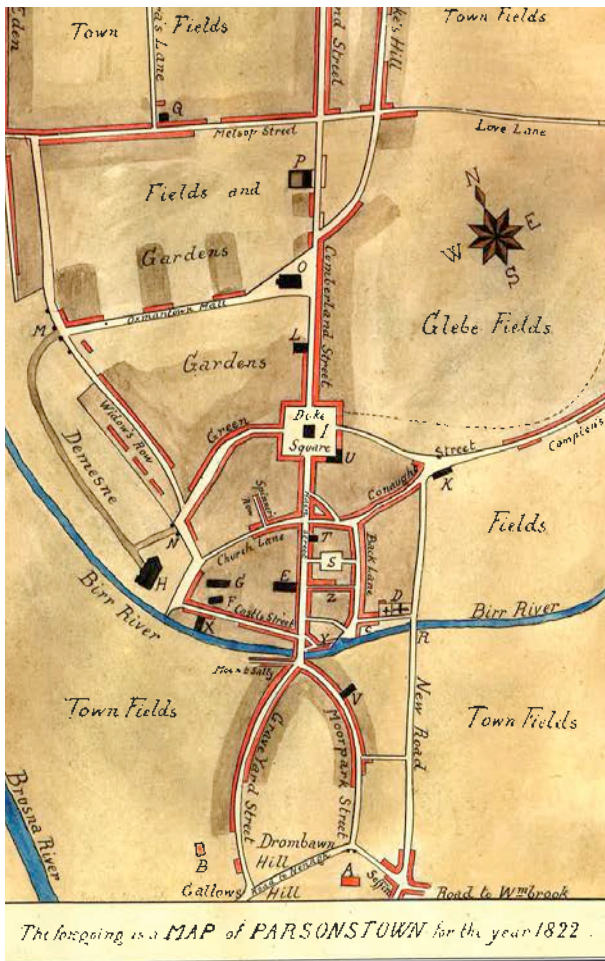


Fig 2: The 1822 Map of Parsonstown

Early History

Birr is an ancient Irish town, which takes its name from the Irish word Birra meaning standing water. It became known as Parsonstown circa 1620, following settlement by the Parsons family. The first session house and market house in Birr, dates to this period, according to Cooke's historical account, 'the Gaol formerly stood on the south side of the old bridge. It was there in the year 1628, and until a recent period. Part of it is yet standing.' In 1800 magistrates were still assembling in the 'old market-house of Birr'. Cooke refers to the building of Birr Barracks commencing in 1809, with completion within three years, and notes that the 'present Sessions House and Bridewell of Birr, were erected about the same time'. He includes an elevation drawing of the courthouse in his book from 1826, one of nine depictions of buildings and places in the town.

The 1822 map of Parsonstown, possibly drawn by Cooke, was the first real map of the town since the completion of a British military map from 1691, the latter clearly noting the old goal south of the river. At the turn of the nineteenth century changes in legislative proceedings led to restructuring of the court system. These changes were particularly evident in the countryside, in smaller courts, with the gradual replacement of the traditional and more informal manor court process, which had been in operation since the seventeenth century. According to the History of Birr in 1797 the first assistant barrister and chairman were appointed for the King's County (former name for County Offaly,) under the newly passed Civil Bill Act. Henry Doyal presided at the first Quarter Sessions held in Birr. The Petty Sessions Act of 1827 divided counties into petty sessions districts, so named to deal with 'petty crime' such as poaching, illegal distilling, licencing and smaller employment disputes.

These sessions were presided over by a magistrate, and without a jury. Quarter sessions were held four times a year in designated quarter sessions courtrooms, often with several quarter sessions districts per county. Juries were present at quarter sessions as more serious crimes were tried within these courts. The highest court proceeding within each county was the assizes, where the most serious criminal cases were heard, and these were typically held in the largest or most established town in the county. In the case of Offaly, assizes were held in Daingean courthouse at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, by 1835 they had moved to Tullamore. Assizes and quarter sessions were abolished in 1924, under the Courts of Justice Act, and the circuit court and district court systems were established in their place.

Thomas Lalor Cooke

Cooke's *Early history of the town of Birr or Parsonstown* is a wonderful account of this interesting Irish town; a rare text, which serves as an excellent foundation for anyone researching the early development of the settlement. Thomas Lalor Cooke was a successful lawyer, a collector of antiquities and a respected historian.

In 1830 he was appointed the first Sessional Crown Solicitor in Ireland. During his lifetime he fell in and out of favour with the Earls of Rosse, mainly due to his involvement in the Crotty Schism, but he was an avid collector, and his collection was noted to be 'next in importance' to that of the Royal Irish Academy.

He describes the session house in his book as; '...a handsome, convenient building sufficiently extensive for the business of the county. The Bench, Jury-boxes, &c. are prettily contrived, and unlike to session houses in general, there is a good outside hall to the one now being described. The Grand Jury Room is spacious in proportion to the criminal business to be transacted in it. At the south end of this building is the Bridewell, in which the county treadmill has been recently erected.

The General Quarter Sessions of the Peace are held in this town four times in every year, viz: in January, April, July and October. In the session house is also held the manor court, in nature of a court baron, before a seneschal, appointed by the Earl of Rosse. Its jurisdiction, as to amount, extended by the original patent to all pleas of debt, transgressions, contracts, detinue, causes and other matters which in debt and demands did not amount to forty shillings Irish arising within the manor. . .



Fig 3: Court in session in the Claremorris courtroom

The present Seneschal holds his Court precisely at twelve o'clock on the First Monday of every month. There is also a power of holding a Court-Leet and Frank-pledge here twice in every year, but it is now disused.'

At the turn of the nineteenth century Birr was a 'thriving town' and the Parsons family, the Earls of Rosse, were much involved in the development of the town. Residing in their newly re-built Gothic Revival castle, the Parsons family was heavily involved in the administration of the county, with Thomas Clere Parsons, brother of the Earl of Rosse, Assistant Barrister for the county.

The Crotty Schism

The early decades of the nineteenth century were fraught with contention between Protestants and Catholics, as people adjusted to the lifting of penal restrictions and the 1798 rebellion. Tensions were evident on both sides, and Sir Lawrence Parsons was considered a radical in protestant circles as he had opposed the Act of Union. In Birr, a dispute over money resulted in a highly publicised local schism, termed the 'Crotty Schism'. This related to a new Roman Catholic chapel which was built between 1817-1824, when a young curate, Rev. Michael Crotty, became embroiled in allegations of mismanagement of funds for the chapel. Cooke was established as chairman of a new committee to manage the funds, though it was never clear if any mis-management of monies had occurred. The dispute escalated and ultimately ended up before the courts, in the Quarter Sessions courtroom, and resulted in a splintering of the Catholic church within Birr. Rev Fr. Kennedy, administrator of the chapel, regained his position from Crotty and held mass in the chapel, while Crotty established his own 'church' in a large rented house, where worship was conducted independently of the parish priest and bishop. In 1836 a new church was constructed under the leadership of Michael Crotty and his cousin William, but this new sect eventually collapsed due to internal tensions about the future of the church, which included considerations to form an alliance with the Church of England.

The town of Birr was as not badly affected economically by the famine as certain other towns, the army barracks provided trade and employment and Birr Castle provided famine relief works.

Historical Maps

The first edition Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1838, notes the 'courthouse' and 'goal', the latter distinguishable by its extended wing to the west. A recessed central bay to the front is visible, while the area between the two wings to the rear is completely infilled.

The second edition Ordnance Survey plan, surveyed in 1908-10, shows only a square plan, with the recessed central bay to the front and the south range or cell block omitted from the plan. This was customary by this time, in order to protect or hide the location or any detail of the bridewell. A separate bridewell is also noted further south of the courthouse and an enclosed rear yard is visible on both. Given the height of the boundary wall, this might have served as the exercise yard for prisoners during internment and the location of the treadmill mentioned by Cooke.

The building plan shown on the 24 inch scale Ordnance Survey maps published in 1879 indicates a much simpler internal arrangement than the current configuration, and could have been based on the original building plans for the courthouse. It is not known if the surveyors visited the interior at the time of mapping, and this plan does not match the earlier OS maps.



Fig 4: Second Edition OS Map, surveyed in 1909, showing the Birr courthouse

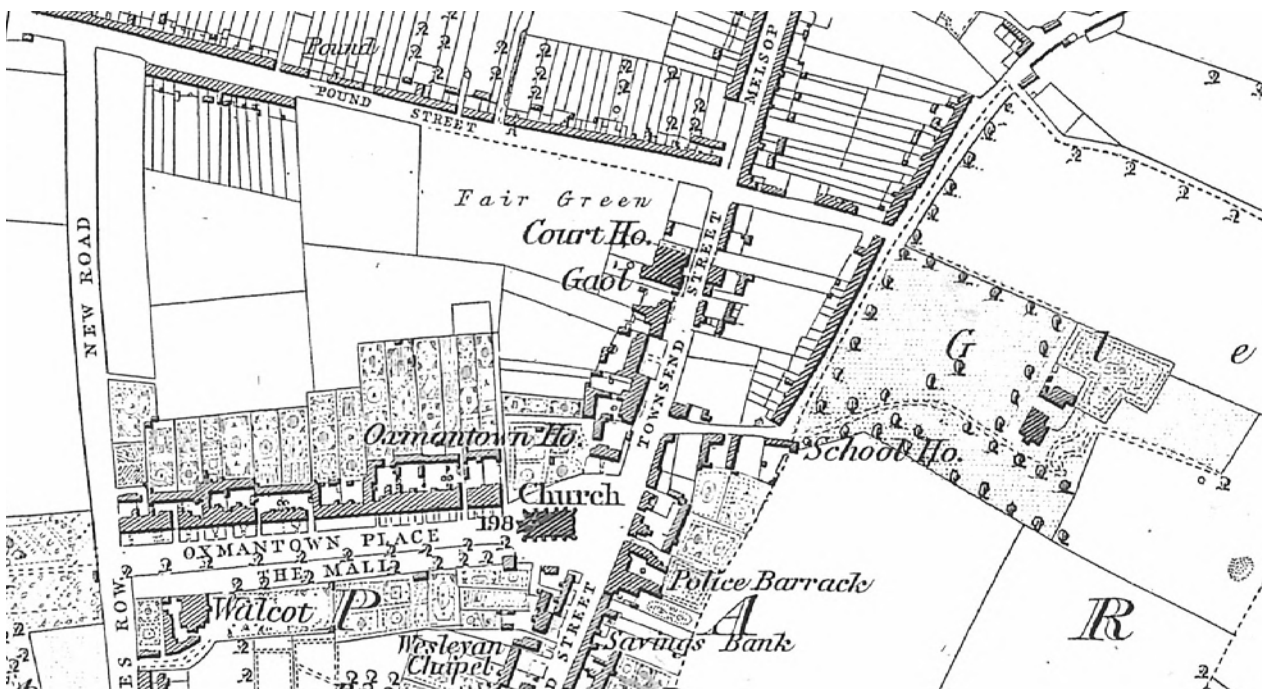


Fig 5: First Edition OS 6 inch map, Surveyed in 1838



Fig 6: Birr Courthouse in 1975, with porch added to the front facade

The Birr Courthouse Exterior

Irish courthouses from the early eighteenth century generally maintained a more vernacular character, however, the employment of the architect James Gandon to design the neoclassical Waterford courthouse in 1784 had a marked impact, becoming a prototype for many of the courthouses which followed, including Daingean and Birr.

In the book, *Courthouses of Ireland*, the Birr courthouse is described by Niall McCullough as a 'classical temple' style, consistent with the vast majority of typically neo-classical courthouses that were constructed in the pre-famine period of the

early nineteenth century. The symmetrical five bay façade and regulated fenestration are still evident on the Birr courthouse today, while the addition of crenulations to the parapets adds a Gothic air, perhaps in an attempt to lend some drama to the façade. Andrew Tierney (*The Pevsner Guide : Central Leinster*) notes that this may be 'deference to the nearby...castle' the notably Gothic Birr Castle.

A photograph of the building from 1975 shows a small crenellated porch to the front entrance which has since been demolished and a poorly placed doorway into the ground floor room of the south range, which has since been infilled.



Fig 7: Daingean Court House

As mentioned previously the courthouse bears a strong resemblance to the one at Daingean, constructed three years earlier. Claims have been made that this courthouse was the work of James Gandon, but this has been repudiated by Edward McParland in 1985 on the grounds of quality. The Courthouse in Ballina, built in 1840, also bears some similarity to Birr, with its symmetrical five bay façade and blind insert round headed windows. Ballina Courthouse has been fully refurbished internally so no original internal fabric remains in the courtroom.

An 'unsuccessful attempt' to burn the courthouse in 1921 resulted in minor internal damage and a broken window in the entrance hall but no known damage to the courtroom, and sessions recommenced in the building shortly afterwards.

The Birr Courthouse Interior

In plan the building consists of a central entrance hall, with the north wing housing the double height courtroom, judges chamber and jury room. A small mezzanine wrapping the rear walls of the courtroom is accessed via a timber stair directly from the central hall. The south wing, houses the goal, consisting of eight cells, four to each floor, and a larger vaulted cell on the ground floor at the west end. Above this larger cell is a room without brick vaulting which may have been used by guards.

The two rooms to the east end of the south range, at ground and first floor level contain domestic fireplaces, and likely served as the residence for the bridewell keepers, noted as a Mr and Mrs Platt in the late nineteenth century (*Legal Offaly*). A treadmill was also installed in the Birr bridewell. These devices, first seen in England in 1818, were used for punishment or 'hard labour', forcing prisoners to repeatedly climb steps to facilitate the rotation of a wheel.

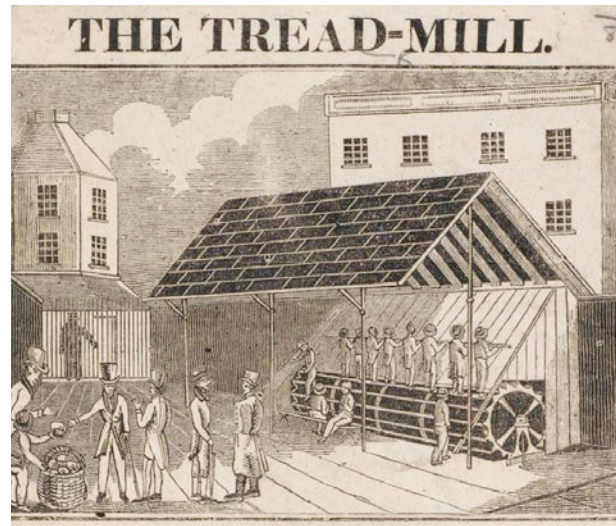


Fig 8: Treadmill at Brixton Prison in London

The Ordnance survey drawing of the building from 1879 shows a courtroom layout of simpler arrangement internally, with a single dog-leg stair leading from the entrance hall to the gallery level in the courtroom. While the accuracy of this plan is uncertain it may indicate a revision to the original design, or an internal restructuring of the courtroom at some point during the nineteenth century. The south range or cell block is likely not shown for security reasons.

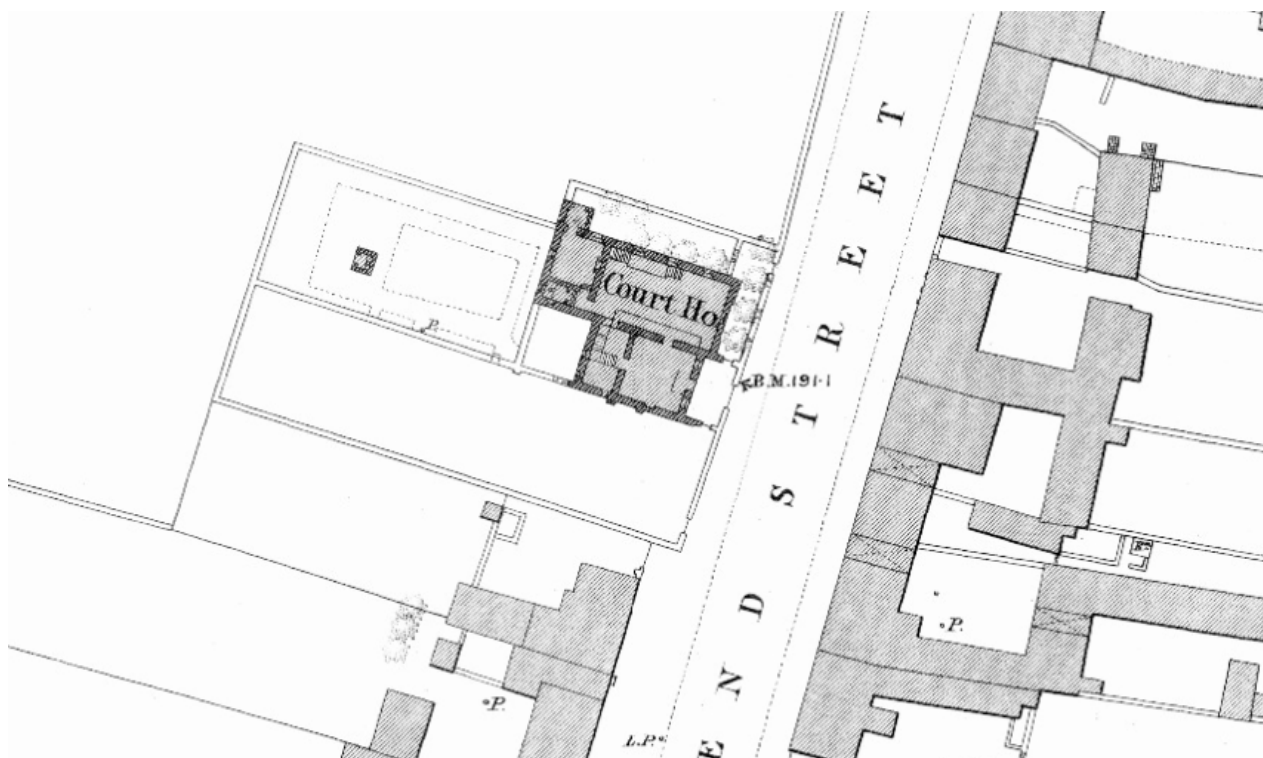


Fig 9: OS Map 1879, 1:500 series, showing the internal layout of Birr courthouse

The Birr courthouse is one of the earliest examples from this period, of an extensive programme of public legislative building across Ireland, during which various progressions in courtroom design were tested and altered. As noted in Ireland's Court Houses 'relatively few new court houses were built after 1850, there was considerable pressure to extend court house buildings and redesign courtrooms', and these courtrooms were often 'redesigned to improve audibility and visibility, provide specified places for those involved in proceedings, encourage separate access and improve lighting and ventilation'. There is reference to the authorisation of 'additional improvements' to the courthouse in the *King's County Chronicle* (12th March 1885) to provide heating and proper ventilation within the building. Though in 1896 Judge Curran was still complaining of the cold in the Birr courtroom (*Legal Offaly*) so we do not know exactly when these improvements took place.

In some cases improvements were made to ensure that witnesses could be heard and seen easily, with the addition of elevated witness stands or boxes. The dock, an enclosed or distinct area



Fig 10: View up to the judge's dias and canopy from the barrister's bench

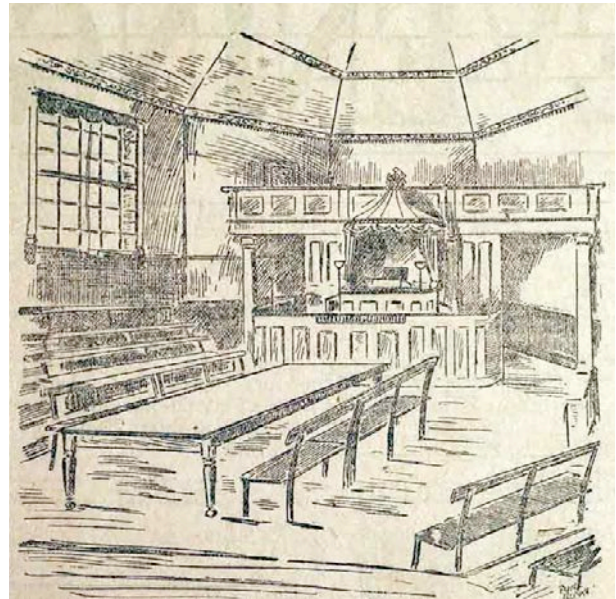


Fig 11: Sketch of the City Assembly House, Dublin, from Ireland's Court-houses

within the courtroom where the accused was required to stand or sit during proceedings, was often connected to an underground holding cell or cells, as at Kilmainham. This was to ensure that the accused did not cross paths with anyone else during proceedings. By the early to mid-nineteenth century these implementations became considered an indictment of guilt, in particular the bringing of the accused directly from a cell, or the containment of them in a dock, which sometimes incorporated rails or spikes around their perimeter. There is no distinctive 'dock' within the current layout at Birr and it is possible that the accused sat at the back of the room, as at the Green Street courthouse in Dublin.

Courtroom Layout

Courtroom proceedings are in a way a form of public theatre. The 'actors' all have different parts of play, from judges, legal representatives, juries, defendants, witnesses, reporters and of course the audience, or general public. Every individual has a role to play and an assigned seat or position within the established set-piece that is the courtroom. The hierarchy, and importance of each role is clearly established through the layout and plan, the judge taking a prominent and centre position, in this instance with an impressive dias and canopy as a backdrop; the witness box and jury box elevated above the ground floor pews, to emphasise their importance to the proceedings; and the gallery providing excellent views for spectators and lending a further air of spectacle and theatre to proceedings.

Arrival and departure points are clearly distinguished, lest the judge and jury should have to mix with the spectators and public alike. In Birr a small timber gate just inside the entrance notes 'solicitors and barristers only' preventing the public from entering the front part of the courtroom. The elevated jury box is indicative of quarter sessions arrangement – with a separate room for deliberation. In later court design the witness boxes were introduced, often elevated. Prior to this it was not unusual for a witness to sit on a chair atop a table in front of the judge.

Trial by one's peers is demonstrated with the inclusion of the gallery space, where the public sits well above proceedings. The original plan for the courtroom (1879) on page 12 shows a smaller gallery, along the south wall, accessed through an opening in the wall directly above the elevated witness box. There is an infilled round headed arch in this location in the courtroom which can be visibly traced today in the plasterwork.

The inclusion of a raised witness box in the design would have required the relocation of this mezzanine and entrance and may account for this obvious alteration.

The Birr courthouse survey drawings (BKD Architects, 2008) include a sub-level below the main courtroom. This has not been investigated yet but could have been the location of an early coke boiler, serving the heating pipes, which are fixed to the benches throughout the courtroom.

Heating was introduced to many public rooms of this nature during the nineteenth century as comfort became more of a concern and 'hot water heating boilers were manufactured in quantity from around 1860 onwards' according to English Heritage *Heating and Ventilation*. This likely explains the late nineteenth century piped heating system in the courtroom.

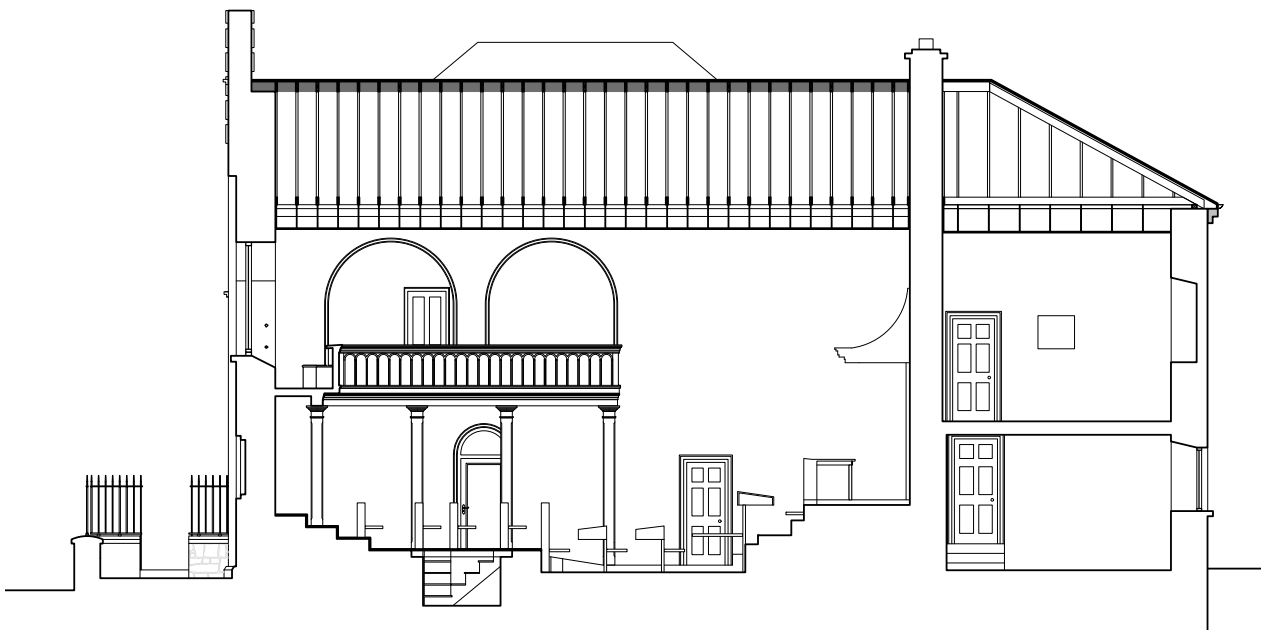


Fig 12: BKD Survey Section through the courtroom, showing sub-floor chamber

3.0 Statement of significance



Fig 13: Interior view of the courtroom from the judge's bench.

Significance is the means by which the cultural importance of a place and its component parts can be measured and compared. Assessing significance can help guide the policies and proposals for the management and future use of a building, which will respect, preserve and enhance the cultural importance of the site. This can assist in the identification of aspects and areas of a place where only the minimum of changes should be considered, and areas where the significance and character of the place could be enhanced by change.

The Guidelines to the Burra Charter state that:

“Cultural Significance is a concept, which helps in estimating the value of places. The places that are likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past; or enrich the present; or which will be of value to future generations.”

There are a variety of categories generally used to evaluate the level of cultural significance of an historic place. For Birr Courthouse this includes – the historical; architectural; and social interest categories.

The assessment of the significance of the Birr courthouse is based on an understanding of its history, phases of development and subsequent alterations. Birr courthouse was built in 1810 to provide a quarter sessions for the town but it ceased to function as a courthouse in 2013 when court proceedings moved to Tullamore. In 2021 the OPW handed the building over to Offaly County Council and it is now in need of full refurbishment.



Fig 14: View of front entrance to the courthouse

Historical Significance

The concept of publicly administered justice has existed within society since the Roman times, and arrived in Ireland during the Middle Ages, with the introduction of the feudal system. Throughout the intervening years the judicial system has undergone change notably at the beginning of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when sweeping law reforms were introduced and with the establishment of the Irish Free State in the twentieth century.

The building stands as a testament to a time of great reform, hardship and suppression in Ireland, during the difficult early years of the nineteenth century and before the onset of the famine.

Presided over by a number of notable barristers, such as Thomas Clere Parsons, Barrister-at-Law, brother to an ancestor of the Earl of Rosse, who held the office of Assistant Barrister for King's County until 1825. He was succeeded by John Gibson, William Peirce, Mr. Barron and Sir John Howley.

After the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s when the midlands were particularly badly affected, land reform became the dominant issue in Ireland with the Protestant Ascendancy owning almost all of the land, which was then tenanted by the Catholic majority. Many significant court cases were held throughout Ireland during this period.

Architectural Significance

The courthouse is an interesting piece of hybrid neoclassical architecture and an early example of a purpose-built courthouse and prison, constructed

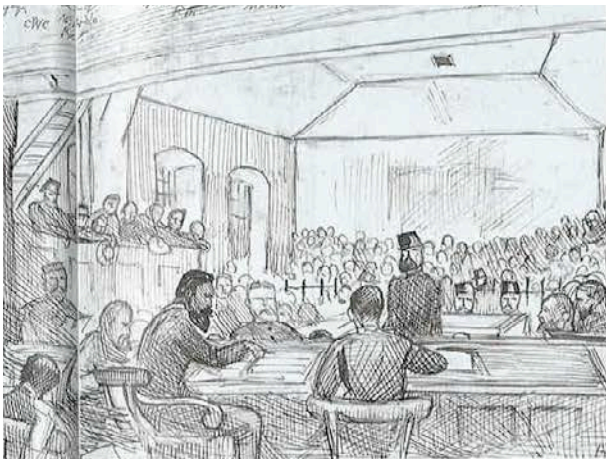


Fig 16: Quarter Sessions, Ballinrobe, Co Mayo, 1880 (NLI)



Fig 17: The witness box at Birr courthouse

during this period of legislative change in Ireland. Impressive in both scale and architectural quality,

the Birr Courthouse bears a striking resemblance to the courthouse in Daingean. No doubt inspired by the impressive Gandon-designed courthouse in Waterford built in 1784, it incorporates a number of architectural features synonymous with legislative buildings from this time.

The Birr courtroom is a rare example of an intact interior from the nineteenth century, including a distinctive jury box, press stand and witness stand, along with the impressive judges dias and canopy. Barristers desks are still in place equipped with recessed ink wells, and the early heating system fixed to the joinery is still in place throughout. The gallery appears to be later, or a modified version of the one originally planned, and was possibly altered to accommodate larger crowds and rearrangements below. Connections between the judges room, jury room and water closets all remain in place, as do the fireplaces in these rooms, although the latter are probably later replacements of the original chimneypieces.

It is a priority that steps be taken to conserve this area of the building, which if neglected any further might be irreparably damaged.

Social Significance

The inclusion of the courthouse in Cooke's History of Birr, as one of nine buildings or places depicted by a hand drawn sketch indicates its significance within the town during this period. Though Cooke's history didn't include the Crotty Schism this was a significant event in the social history of Birr, resulting in a major splintering of local Catholic church. Cooke himself was embroiled in the dispute that resulted in his alienation from the Parson family. The Crotty trial was one of many important trials held in the new Birr courthouse that impacted significantly on the lives of Irish citizens across all social classes when the majority of the wealth was held in the hands of the few.

The architectural quality, historical background and social significance of the Birr courthouse make it a building of regional if not national importance.

Notwithstanding some later interventions, the original form remains largely intact together with the well-preserved courtroom interior; making the building an excellent example of an early nineteenth century provincial Irish courthouse. While the building fabric is relatively well preserved, it is in a very poor state of repair and is currently under threat particularly if steps are not taken to halt the decline of the building caused by a decade of neglect.

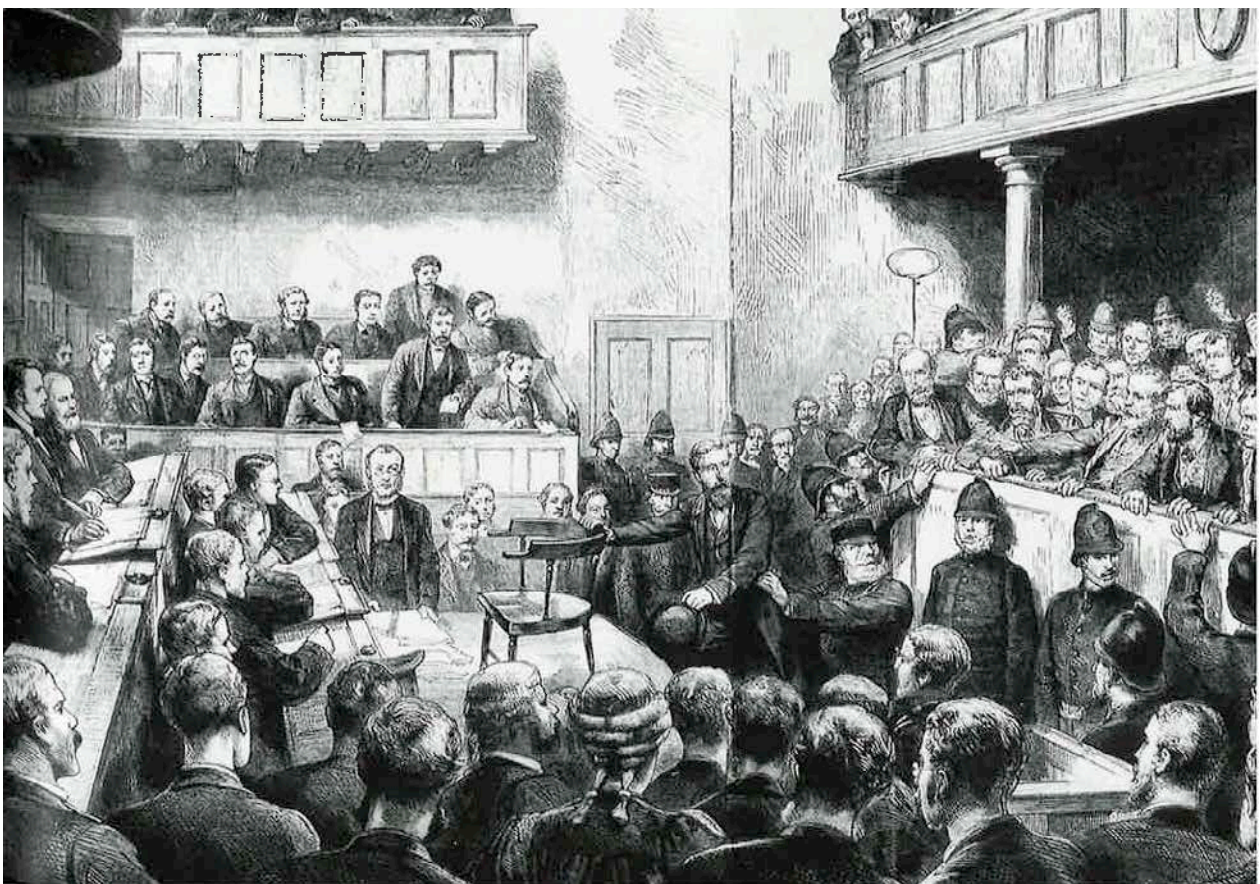


Fig 18: Mid 19th Century engraving of courtroom interior

4.0 Condition of the building

Roofs

The building consists of two long ranges, joined by a central block with a later rear extension constructed in brick. A small single storey lean-to shed has been built beside the rear extension. The two-storey building has four separate simple pitched roofs, reflecting the floor plan below, with hips to the centre roof and rear extension, and hips to the west ends of the north and south range roofs. The roofs are separated by lead valleys, with the majority of rainwater discharging to the back of the building. A lead gutter behind the front parapet on the central block, discharges to two original downpipes.

All four roof areas were inspected externally from a MEWP in June 2021, and internally through a limited number of opening in the ceilings. Over the courtroom, the north range roof has been fully replaced, with new creosoted timbers visible above the suspended ceiling. This roof is covered with a Tegral, mineral fibre, artificial slates fixed to timber battens on a roofing membrane. Failure in roof timbers is evident on the west end of this roof, at the junction with the rear extension, where

the lead valley above has failed and is letting in a considerable amount of water.

Based on limited inspection from below, the roof to the central range also appears to have been replaced during the twentieth century with new timber members. The south range appears to contain original timbers and is covered with Welsh slate, although the eastern end has some Tegral replacements. It is not possible to inspect all of the south range from below due to the brick vaulting above the cells, although the room at the east end has no vaulting, and the roof timbers in this location are in very poor condition, are in danger of imminent collapse and should be replaced immediately. The rear brick extension appears to have its original slate roof.

On closer inspection it can be seen that some slates have been poorly repaired in the past with inferior quality or ill-fitting slates, or the insertion of artificial Tegral slates, and this unsightly patching is clearly visible across the south range roof in particular.



Fig 19: Photo of roofs of Birr courthouse taken from a MEWP

The roof valleys have been replaced in recent years and the leadwork has been inadequately installed, to incorrect falls and with poor detailing. This is causing leaks and ponding across the roof, in particular behind the front parapet, where the water is gathering and failing to discharge adequately through two undersized chutes that drain the front parapet into hoppers on the front façade. A significant leak has occurred at the junction between the north range, central range, and the rear extension. Valleys and gutters are also blocked in a number of locations throughout the roofs due to general lack of maintenance.

There is an ad hoc mixture of roof ridge and valley tiles with lead rolls in some locations, such as on the south range roof, and which should be replaced. A small lean-to extension between the rear brick extension and the south range is covered in cement tile and appears to be in fair condition. The asbestos survey from 2018 noted the presence of asbestos in this tile, and it is possible that some of the other fibre cement tiles, found elsewhere on the roofs might also contain asbestos.

There is a small modern skylight to the south pitch of central range, over the first floor corridor which appears to be in fair condition. The south range roof, and the roof valleys in general are failing and in need of urgent attention, repair and renovation, while the north range roof, though inappropriately covered with Tegral slate, is in fair condition.



Fig 20: Underside of south range roof

Chimneys

There are four existing chimneys stacks on the building, one on the north range, which serves the judge and jury rooms, one to the rear brick extension serving the small rooms at the back of the building, and two on the south range, which serve the east and west end rooms to the cell block. All three stacks to the north and south range are constructed in a clay, red brick with a dash render finish. The stack to the rear extension is narrower and taller and was most likely a later addition. All four chimney stacks have been rendered in cement, with the addition of cement flaunchings and modern pots.

The west chimney to the south range is in a precarious condition, and close to collapse. It has been extended upwards with the addition of some additional brickwork, most likely undertaken to deal with a down-draught. The rear extension chimney is also quite tall, and was most likely also extended, probably to address the same problem of down-draughts.

Rainwater goods

The rainwater goods to the building have been replaced, badly repaired, or are clogged with debris or plant growth. Throughout the majority of the roofs the rainwater goods have been replaced with aluminium gutters and downpipes and uPVC soil vent pipes. These generally consist of half round

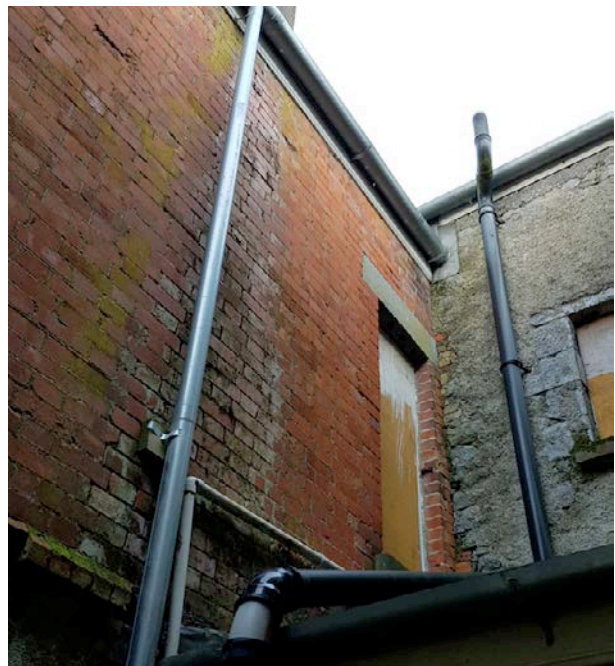


Fig 21: Aluminium and uPVC downpipes and SVPs to rear of courthouse

gutters with 100mm diameter downpipes. Also several gutters and downpipes can be seen to be weeping at joints, which is a sign that the sealant has failed.

Original cast iron hoppers and downpipes remain on the front façade, although the northern downpipe is badly corroded and leaking, causing water ingress into the wall behind. This has resulted in severe damp and mould growth inside the building behind this leak. The location and position of pipes is random and largely ill-conceived, and a full overhaul and rationalisation of the rainwater goods should be undertaken alongside an analysis of the size and number of downpipes required to adequately drain the roofs. It is notable that there is no downpipe along the north façade of the building; a lengthy gutter run without any break or point of discharge. The extent of rainwater goods and number of downpipes appears to be inadequate for a roof of this size and complexity and should be assessed further.

External Walls

There are two pedimented gable ends to the front facade linked by a three bay screen wall, all of which are crenelated. The two bay-ends correspond to the courtroom volume and the cell block, each with a large blind round-headed niche. A limestone string course sits just below the castellated parapet that runs across the entire façade, while a second lower stringcourse further defines the bay ends, located at the springing point of the round headed blind niches.

There were originally two blind windows to the ground floor of each projecting bay, as shown on Cooke's 1826 elevation, but a window has been added to the south range room, to allow for more natural daylight into the this room. A later opening is also evident beside this window, which has since been infilled.

The main walls appear to consist of load-bearing masonry walls with a cement rich, painted pebbledash render on the front (east) and north elevations. In contrast the render finish to the south and west elevations is a softer lime coating that has come away from the facades in a number of locations.



Fig 22: External view of the back of the courthouse

The application of the unsightly cement based pebbledash render is damaging, and can disfigure and hasten the decay of historic masonry behind, as the underlying stone or brick is softer than the render. A common problem with hard cement coatings is that over time sections of render may crack or detach from the skin of the building, which will result in the trapping of water behind. This will cause the masonry to decay or become water-logged. Portland cement became particularly popular after the Second World War, often replacing the softer lime renders that were used originally. Older layers of render are evident on the front facade and should be analysed to determine the original mix and colour of the render, a yellow sand is certainly visible within the mix. The condition of these coatings, both historic and more recent, is poor in certain locations, particularly where there are failing rainwater goods. This is due to water getting trapped within the masonry walls and is particularly evident on the gable wall to the south east corner of the courtroom where the wall is considerably saturated.

Much of the rubble masonry is exposed along the south range and to the rear areas of the building. The north façade, the courthouse, is fully rendered and painted. The original window openings remain fully intact, along the front, south and north facades.

External Doors & Windows

There is one main set of double entrance doors to the central entrance lobby on the front façade. These panelled doors appear to be in a reasonable state of repair but require repainting and some localised replacement of timber, likely to the bottom rail. These are a modern insertion as are the frame and fan-light above, which differ from the doors shown in Cooke's front elevation. A short flight of steps leads up to the front door.

There are a number of other exit doors, around the perimeter of the building which vary in age and style. The exit door from the judge's chambers has been boarded up from the outside, for security purposes, but the original six panel door and architrave is evident internally. This is in contrast to the heavy timber boarded exit door to the rear of the south range or cell block, which provided access to the rear yard. Some timber repairs will be necessary and regular painting and maintenance routine is essential to ensure all external joinery is kept in a reasonable state of repair.

There is an ad hoc collection of windows from different periods across all four façades. Three original timber sashes with an elegant, lambs tongue profile remain on the front of the building, and these should be retained and repaired.



Fig 23: Double entrance doors to the courthouse



Fig 24: Timber cell window with rusted iron bars in stone sill



Fig 25: Historic window with lambs tongue profile on ground floor of courthouse

Later replacement windows with an oval profile have been installed elsewhere, and the large spoked windows in the courtroom have been replaced with poorly detailed single glazed modern replicas. Secondary acrylic screens have been installed to the internal side of these windows as a measure to prevent heat loss. Tooled limestone sills are still in place throughout.

Smaller window openings to the cells contain rusted iron bars, which are causing damage to the stonework. The condition of the timber framing behind is also quite poor and these windows should be repaired. A number of the windows to the rear façade are boarded up likely due to the on-going problems with leaking and security.

Roof Space

There is a roof space running the length of the north and south ranges; although this was not accessible during our site visits, some features could be made out through openings in the ceilings. The roof structure to the north range is a simple A-frame structure of collared rafters, of recent construction. Cement repairs are also visible to the wall tops and there appears to be a new wall plate has been installed. A loosely fitting, insulation blanket has been placed along the roof joists.

The roof over the central bay also appears to contain relatively new timbers, although it was only possible to inspect this roof space from one location from the stair landing below it. Most of the south range roof could not be inspected due to the presence of brick vaulting below.

A careful inspection of each roof space should be carried out to check for insect attack, and water damage to the timber structure. It would also be prudent when roofing works are carried out that the contractor thoroughly clean the roof space and remove any bird habitation and guano over the trusses and above the ceilings. Due to the lack of any access route into the roof space it may not be practical or safe to carry this out until re-roofing works are completed and the attic space can be inspected from above. Given the period of neglect the south range roof has undergone it is likely that there may be a large amount of original carpentry that, which will need to be replaced.



Fig 26: View into roof space over courtroom with concrete ring beam, modern creosoted timbers and blanket insulation



Fig 27: View of suspended ceiling in the courtroom with the original ceiling rose

Ceilings

A modern suspended ceiling dating from around 1990 has been installed in the courtroom at a lower level than the original plaster ceiling, which has been lost. The original plaster ceiling rose has been retained and relocated to sit on this suspended ceiling. Recent suspended ceilings are also in place in the jury and judges rooms, which also appear to have lost their original plaster ceilings. These unsightly suspended ceilings detract from the architectural quality of the spaces, in particular the courtroom, where they sit too close to the window openings.

The main entrance hall retains its plaster cornice and ceiling, as do the rooms to the rear, although the latter is badly damaged on the first floor due to water ingress. Laths are exposed in this first floor room and the whole ceiling will require full repair once the leaking valleys above have been relined.

The ceilings to the cells on the ground and first floor of the cell block are plastered brick vaults and appear to be in good structural condition. These should be fully inspected from above when roof repairs are carried out to the south range roof.

Walls & Plaster

The internal wall finishes in most cases consist of the original painted plaster walls applied directly onto the underlying masonry walls, albeit much affected by water ingress and mould growth in certain locations, such as in the entrance lobby and courtroom. These are areas of severe damage and organic growth is clearly evident. The remaining

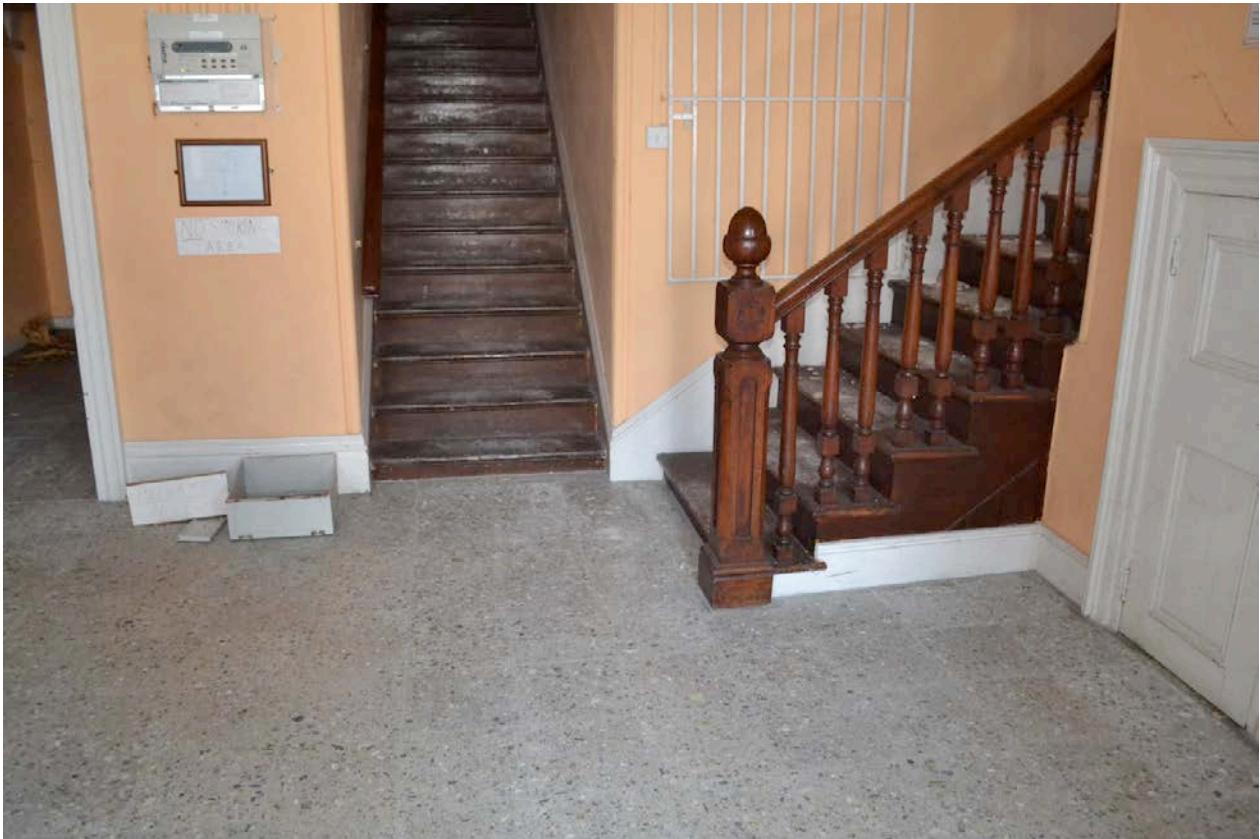


Fig 28: Two sets of timber stairs in the main entrance lobby

plasterwork throughout the building appears to be in a reasonable state of repair but further opening up will be necessary to identify areas of modern re-plastering that may have to be reversed.

Floor Finishes

The terrazzo floor in the entrance lobby, has been raised by at least two inches, as evidenced by the bottom step of the timber stairs. This flooring should be lifted and the existing level below reinstated. There is a raised boarded floor with carpet cover throughout the courtroom, and the eleven different levels throughout vary by over a metre between the judges platform, the jury stand and raked bench seating. The floor to the gallery in the courtroom is also covered carpeted.

The original stone flags are still in place throughout the cell block and are in need of localised repair, and cleaning. They are likely bedded on a lime base, but this should be investigated further. The remaining rooms throughout the central range and rear extension contain timber floors with carpet.



Fig 29: Original cell door with strap hinges



Fig 30: Plastered walls inside the cell



Fig 32: View of damaged plaster on gallery level in courtroom



Fig 31: View of corridor down cell block with brick vaulted ceiling and stone flag floor



Fig 33: Damage to plaster due to excessive water ingress



Fig 34: The stone cantilever stair in the south range with rusted handrail



Fig 35: The underside of the stone cantilever stair in the south range



Fig 36: The jury box and press box in the courtroom

Stone Stairs

There is one cantilevered stone stair in the building, in the south range or cell block. It is in fair condition, aside from a badly rusted handrail. There is some evidence of repair to the underside of the landing in the stair, and it has been plastered in a number of locations. See structural assessment for further information.

Internal Joinery

Of particular note in the building is the old courtroom interiors, which retains its original plan, and form. The room retains the judge's platform, dias and canopy, timber gallery structure, timber panelling and timber seating. There are striking similarities to the timber joinery retained in the Daingean courthouse, in particular the arcade effect to the gallery, and the square shaped Tuscan columns supporting it. On the ground floor level some of the original gates are still present together with the original stairs to the jury box, and the witness stand. There is evidence of a third arch on the south wall of the courtroom which has been infilled with plasterboard.

This might relate to a different stair and gallery arrangement as shown on the 1879 plan of the courtroom.

Leading to the courtroom and the rear extension from the central entrance hall are two timber stairs. Both appear to be nineteenth century with pine turned balustrades and the stair to the gallery has a substantial newel post. This staircase is partially supported by the walls of the storage cupboards, which stand either side of the entry route to the courtroom. Both timber stairs remain in reasonable condition.

Decorations

There are areas throughout the courthouse complex where paint can be seen to be lifting from the walls and ceilings. This is caused by moisture, and water ingress. This condition will be improved by the repair of roofs and rainwater goods, the removal of the suspended ceilings to the courtroom areas and reintroduction of ventilation to the building through the external windows and circular ceiling openings.



Fig 37: View of the courtroom interior from the judges platform

Fireplaces

There are at least two original fireplaces, both with plain stone surrounds and shelves, and inset cast iron grates, remaining in the building. In the judge's room behind the courtroom and in the east end of the south there are more decorative fireplaces, also in stone with decorative console brackets. These are both painted and hard to date, they may be historic or good quality replica. Fireplaces have been removed from the ground floor rooms in the west end of the cell block, but these were likely very rudimentary in nature. It was not possible to inspect the fire place in the first floor room to the west end of the cell block due to the ceiling collapse in this room.

A later Edwardian style fireplace is in place in the first floor room in the brick extension to the rear, with glazed brick reveals and a simple low grate. All of the fireplaces have been painted over the years, and these paint schemes should be removed and the fireplaces and hearths retained and refurbished as important parts of the building fabric from a time when the space heating was created by open fires.

Heating & Mechanical

The heating system consists of wall mounted storage heaters located in a number of rooms around the building. These are expensive to run and were likely installed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Prior to this the only heating to the building would have been the fireplaces, and a piped heating system within the courtroom.



Fig 42: Heating pipes mounted to the back of the courtroom joinery



Fig 43: Electrical panel in entrance lobby

This latter system appears to be fully redundant and currently there is no boiler attached to this system. If it was installed in the nineteenth century, which it appears to be, the boiler might have been located in the lower level below the courtroom – as indicated on the survey section of the courtroom.

A number of heavy duty surface mounted radiant heating units have been added around the perimeter of the courtroom at high level, along the gallery and walls. These were probably inserted either to supplement the existing heating or when the boiler became redundant and was removed. There are a number of wall vents in the external walls which would allow for passive air ventilation – there is no mechanical ventilation within the building. The long-term solution to heating problems is the installation of a new condensing, high efficiency boiler and central heating to meet modern environmental standards in lieu of expensive electrical and mobile gas heaters. This could be powered by air source heat pumps located to the rear of the building to create a more environmentally friendly system that would be cheaper to run.

Lighting & Power

The electrical installation throughout appears to date from a range of periods and conditions. The main ESB boxes and fuse boards are located within the central entrance hall, and should be fully



Fig 38: Painted Victorian fireplace in the jury room



Fig 40: Painted fireplace in the front room of the south range



Fig 39: Cast Edwardian fireplace in the rear extension, with brick reveal



Fig 41: Painted Victorian fireplace in the first floor room in the central range

replaced as there is considerable water ingress behind the boxes. There are a number of poorly located conduit runs throughout the entrance lobby although fortunately, these have been placed away from the historic cornice.

The lighting to the old courtroom includes modern fluorescent spot lights set within the suspended ceiling and one central modern globe pendant fitting hanging from the historic ceiling rose. There is a matching pendant in the entrance hall. There are three modern desk lamps, one at the judges desk, and two on the barristers bench.

There is surface mounted florescent lighting in place throughout the remaining rooms and to the corridors in the cell block, with wall mounted fixtures within each cell. One bakelite switch remains to the top of stair to the rear extension and a bank of six bakelite switches remain on the wall inside the courtroom. It would appear that the OPW installed full security and fire alarm systems in recent years, though these have not been fully tested or assessed from a building regulations standpoint. The security system is operational and there are security contacts on a number of ground floor windows and doors.

It is unlikely that the current electrical installation complies with current safety standards and we

would highly recommend a full survey of the electrical and mechanical services within the building, all of which requires substantial upgrading.

Curtilage

To the rear, the site is contained within the confines of a stonewall, approx. 5.5m in height, which remains intact. This once contained an exercise yard for prisoners, as indicated on the earlier historic maps. There are remnants of an old wall running from the north west corner of the south range to the west wall of the yard, indicating the original smaller yard area.

The main access route to the enclosed rear courtyard runs along the south side of the building, under a square headed stone opening, supported on steel lintels with stone crenulations above. This opening has been modified somewhat crudely, probably to facilitate access for large vehicles. The castellated top is mirrored on the north side of the building, where it defines the entrance to the judges laneway that provided a dedicated route to the judge's chambers. An original arched opening is still in place within this masonry wall. A second square-headed opening sits further west along the south lane, precariously supported on a heavily rusted steel beam. This may relate to the small extension on the south side of the building shown on the first edition ordnance survey.



Fig 44: View of the north facade of the courthouse - four windows to the courtroom



Fig 45: View of rear yard looking west, includes boundary walls



Fig 46: The judge's laneway to the north side of the courthouse



Fig 47: View down the south laneway alongside the cell block / south range

The primary entrance route to the building is via three shallow stone steps leading up to the front entrance doors. Low level stone walls separate the public pavement from the shallow forecourt areas in front of each projecting bay. A simple painted iron railing is fixed on the cap stone of the walls. The concrete surfaces in these front areas are unsightly and will require upgrading or replacement.

Limitations and Further Surveys

1. All heating and electrical systems were not tested and drains not inspected.
2. Roof inspection from within the roof space where accessible and from a MEWP.
3. No assessment of roof timbers undertaken.
4. Structural Engineer should assess damage the roof and floor structures following opening up / investigations.
6. Asbestos survey of the main building wasn't provided by the OPW.
7. Fire safety survey of the building not undertaken.

Health & Safety Considerations

As a public building and an historic structure, Health and Safety considerations are extremely important. The current legislation places full responsibility on the building owner to ensure that all works to the building, including regular on-going maintenance

are carried out safety and in accordance with best health and safety practice.

Access to the first floor levels, via internal stairs is relatively safe, although certain areas of upper floors should be closed off to prevent access where there is a danger and risk of injury, due to rotten timbers in the floors caused by prolonged water ingress. This is particularly notable in the rear brick extension, and in the WC closet behind the courtroom.

Considerations must also be given for the presence of hazardous materials such as asbestos, which has been used as a roof covering to the lower roof to the rear of the courthouse.

There does not appear to have been an internal asbestos survey undertaken in the building, the refurbishment asbestos survey undertaken in 2018 notes that the survey covers the 'yard and toilet lean-to roof of the Birr courthouse' but no internal areas. As there are internal works which date from the mid twentieth century, it may be likely that there is further asbestos to the interior of the building. A full asbestos survey of the building should be carried out before any internal works are carried out.



Fig 48: Front entrance steps to the Birr Courthouse

5.0 Defining issues & threats

Redundancy & Neglect

Redundancy and neglect present the greatest single threats to the significance of an important historic building or place. When a building no longer serves its intended purpose and viable alternative uses cannot be found, maintenance is neglected and deterioration sets in, eventually leading to dereliction and loss. Such was the situation at Birr Courthouse when Offaly County Council took possession in 2021. Lack of maintenance to the roof and rainwater goods had led to significant water ingress and damage to roof timbers, ceilings and internal wall finishes.

The challenges faced by the Council will be to find a viable use and long-term tenancy for the building. During the recent recession in Ireland it was determined that all the courthouses in Offaly, with the exception of Tullamore, should close. Improvement works scheduled for the building in 2011 also failed to materialise and the courthouse finally shut its doors in 2013, during a three year period, which saw the closure of a number of local garda stations, post offices and other municipal buildings around the country. These important and socially significant municipal buildings were often placed in prominent positions within Irish towns, and viable future uses must be found for them in the coming years.



Fig 49: Evidence of continual deterioration in the south range



Fig 50: Single storey lean-to shed with asbestos tile roof to the rear of courthouse

Unsatisfactory Interventions

One of the most important qualities found at Birr Courthouse, is that the building structure and courtroom interior remain largely intact, but with a few unsatisfactory encroachments. The main encroachments that detract from the building are interventions such as the insertion of modern windows, the application of cement render and the installation of modern services such as heating and security systems placed clumsily throughout. Inappropriate modern finishes such as carpet tile, suspended ceilings and paint colours are indicative of the implementation of very rudimentary upgrade works which did not consider the historic qualities and character of the spaces.

Fortunately, all of these interventions can be reversed or modified quite easily to reduce or remove the negative impact they have on the historic character of the Birr Courthouse.

Local Authority Zoning & Statutory Protections

The Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027, will be formally adopted in October 2021, and it lists the Birr Courthouse as RPS 49-252.

The Architectural and Archaeological Heritage Policies under the current plan include:

BHP-01 It is Council policy to ensure the protection, sympathetic and sensitive modification, alteration, extension or reuse of protected structures or parts of protected structures, and the immediate surrounds included and proposed for inclusion in the Record of Protected Structures that are of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest, together with the integrity of their character and setting.

BHP-02 It is Council policy to ensure the protection of the curtilage of protected structures or proposed protected structures and to prohibit inappropriate development within the curtilage or attendant grounds of a protected structure which would adversely impact on the special character of the protected structure including cause loss of or damage to the special character of the protected structure and loss of or damage to, any structures of architectural heritage value within the curtilage of the protected structure.

BHP-04 It is Council policy to favourably consider the change of use of any structure included on the Record of Protected Structures provided such a change of use does not adversely impact on its intrinsic character and is in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

BHP-05 It is Council policy to actively encourage uses that are compatible with the character of protected structures.

BHP-11 It is Council policy to ensure that measures to upgrade the energy efficiency of Protected Structures and historic buildings are sensitive to traditional construction methods and materials and do not have a detrimental physical, aesthetic or visual impact on the structure. They should follow the principles and direction given in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht's publication Energy Efficiency in Traditional Buildings.

The courthouse site including rear yard is zoned for 'public/community/educational' use by the Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2018 (extended to 2020). The surrounding sites are zoned for 'town centre /mixed use'.

Its plan also states that:

Birr is a designated "Georgian Heritage Town"

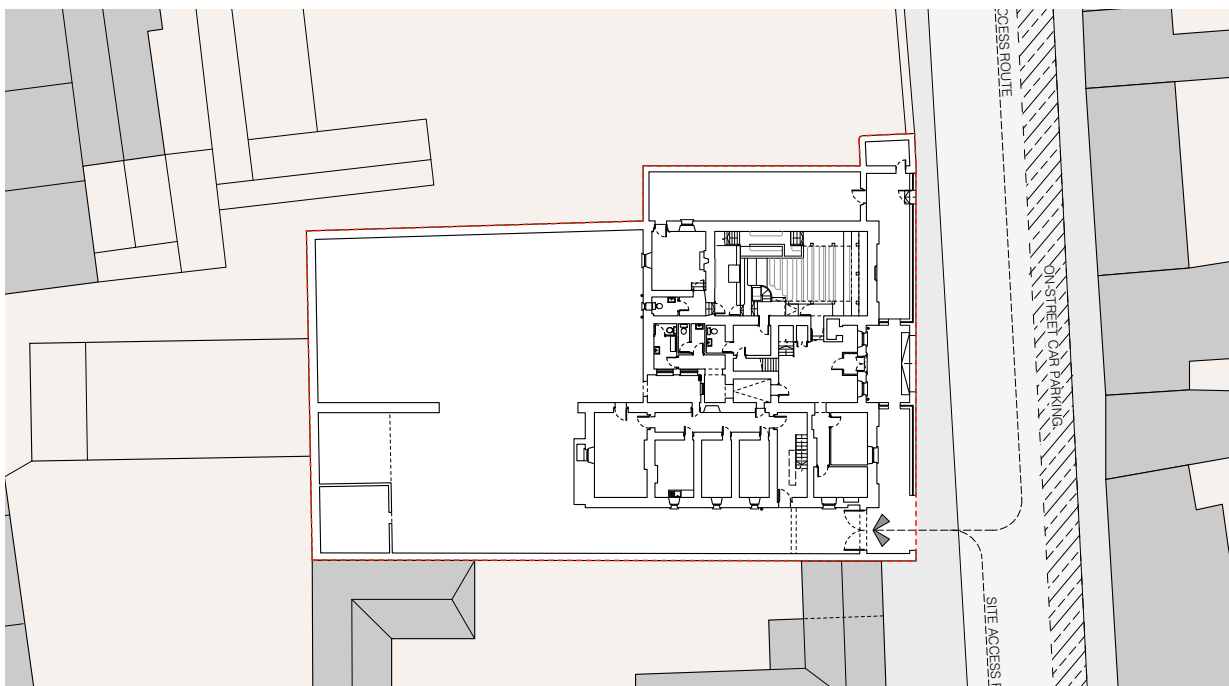


Fig 51: Existing site plan of Birr courthouse, including rear yard and side lanes

because of its unique and largely intact architectural character and setting.

Birr town's built environment is characterised by a compact historic core, but also by wide streets, defined squares and tree lined walks. It contains many fine buildings and terraces dating from the 18th and 19th Centuries. It is essential that any renewal or new development should respect and compliment this character. The overall policy of the Councils will be based on maintaining the character and attractiveness of Birr by carefully controlling development, in particular, in the town centre and within Crinkle village.

The site is zoned for Community Facilities and Amenities.

The DRAFT Offaly Development Plan states the following for this type of zoning;

Community Facilities and Amenities:

In assessing planning applications for leisure facilities, sports grounds, playing fields, play areas, community halls, organisational meeting facilities, medical facilities, child-care facilities and other community orientated developments, regard will be taken of considerations such as:

- Overall need in terms of necessity, deficiency and opportunity to enhance or develop local facilities;
- Practicalities of site location in terms of relating to uses, impact on local amenities and ensuring safe access for pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles and safe public parking for cars and buses;
- The potential multifunctional use of community facilities, including daytime and night-time usage;
- Cater for all levels of disability;
- Conformity with the requirements of appropriate legislative guidelines, for example, childcare facilities.

Legend

 Open Space, Amenity and Recreation	 Existing Residential
 Enterprise and Employment	 New Residential
 Business or Technology Park	 Strategic Residential Reserve
 Industrial and Warehousing	 Town Centre/Mixed Use
 Community Services/Facilities	 Constrained Land Use



Fig 52: Birr courthouse zoned for mixed use (Birr Town & Environs Development Plan)

6.0 Conservation Strategy

The building has been unoccupied for over eight years, and the lack of maintenance during this period has resulted in localised areas of significant damage, due to uncontrolled water ingress. Despite this, the structure is generally quite stable, no doubt due to its robust construction.

All conservation works considered within this plan are guided by the principle of minimum intervention as set out in the Burra Charter, under the general aim of doing – as little as possible, but as much as is necessary. The general approach and objectives for Birr Courthouse can be summarised as follows:

- To provide effective maintenance of the building, including an on-going maintenance plan and strategy,
- To provide guidance on best conservation practice for the repair of its historic fabric, such as windows, plasterwork, roofs etc,
- To record the existing buildings and site, with a record of past interventions.

- To ensure that interpretation of the building is well-researched and accurate,
- To increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of the place (buildings and settings),
- To recognise the use of the place as a cultural and educational resource,
- To promote the site as an important heritage asset for the town of Birr, and identify possible funding sources that might be applied for to assist with future conservation,
- To provide for long-term enhancement of the setting of the building through planning policies and identification of key strategic themes

Protection of Built Heritage

Ensure the protection of the built heritage through its repair and preservation, and where possible, the improvement of its settings. Document and record all repair and intervention works, as part of the history of the buildings and site.

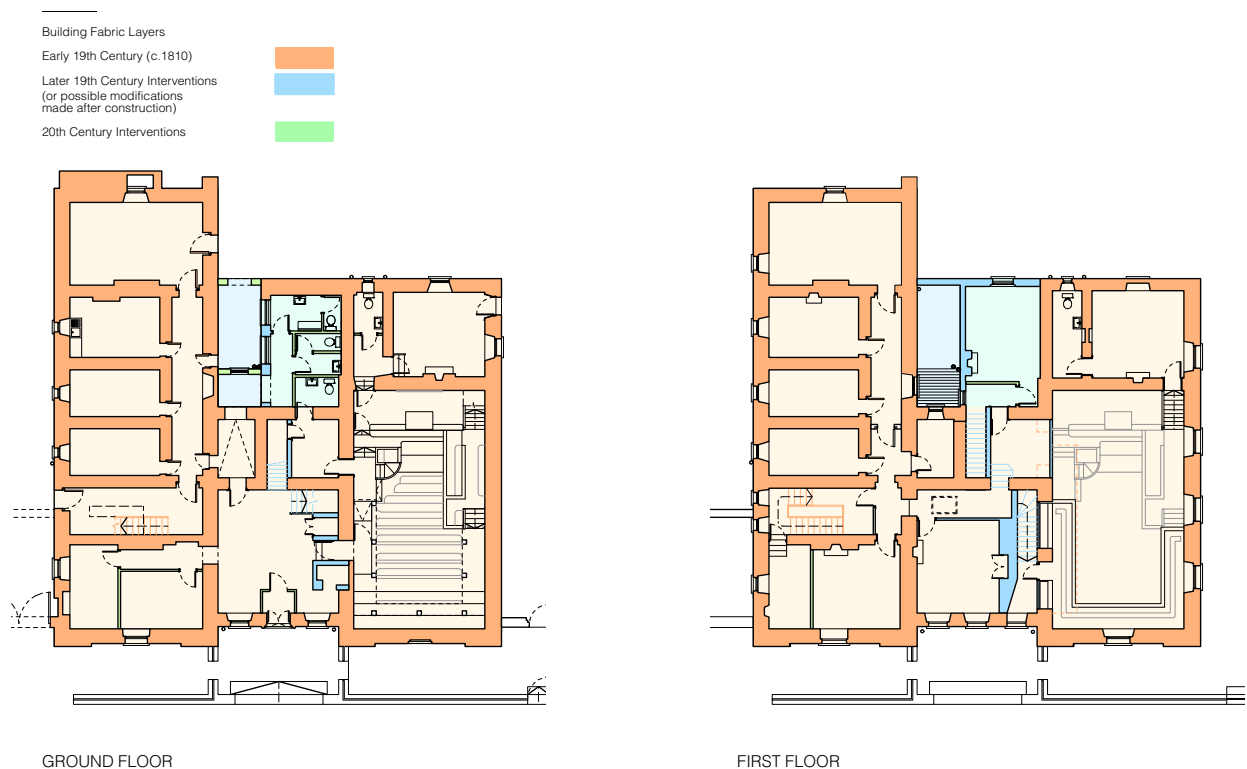


Fig 53: Chronology of the building based on visual assessment on site

Repair & Maintenance

Provide regular on-going maintenance as the most effective way to preserve historic buildings and places. Repair works are to be prioritised in terms of urgency, and informed by regular inspection and expert advice.

Intervention

Where interventions are found to be necessary to improve services, structure, or to repair or stabilise the building, these are to be designed to the highest standards of best conservation practice and should not detract from the appreciation and preservation of the architectural heritage. Interventions should be justified, weighing the impact against the desirable improvement.

Reversibility

All necessary interventions that might affect or compromise historic fabric should follow the principle of the reversibility, so that any new work can be easily removed at some future time should this ever be required.

Expert Advice & Skills

Ensure that all conservation works are carried out under the direction of suitably qualified professionals (conservation architects and specialist structural and environmental services engineers) and ensure that conservation and repair work is undertaken only by suitably skilled and experienced tradesmen. Contractors should demonstrate experience working on similar buildings prior to the commencement of any works on site.

Inspections

Carry out regular on-going inspections to monitor the condition of the building, to ensure that regular on-going maintenance is being carried out and urgent repairs completed without delay. Inspection reports should be issued by suitably qualified professionals.

Stakeholder Consultation

Encourage good communication and cooperation with the Council, the surrounding community and the public and national authorities, about conservation strategies and proposed interventions

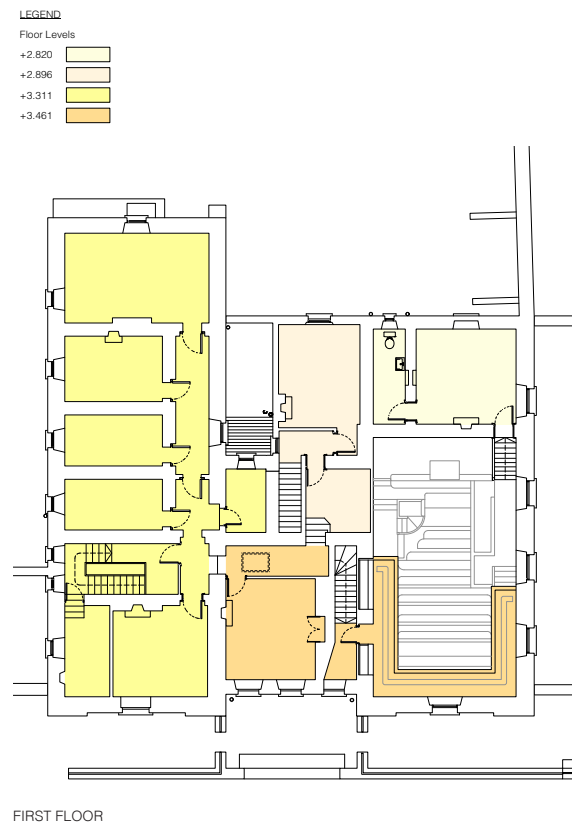
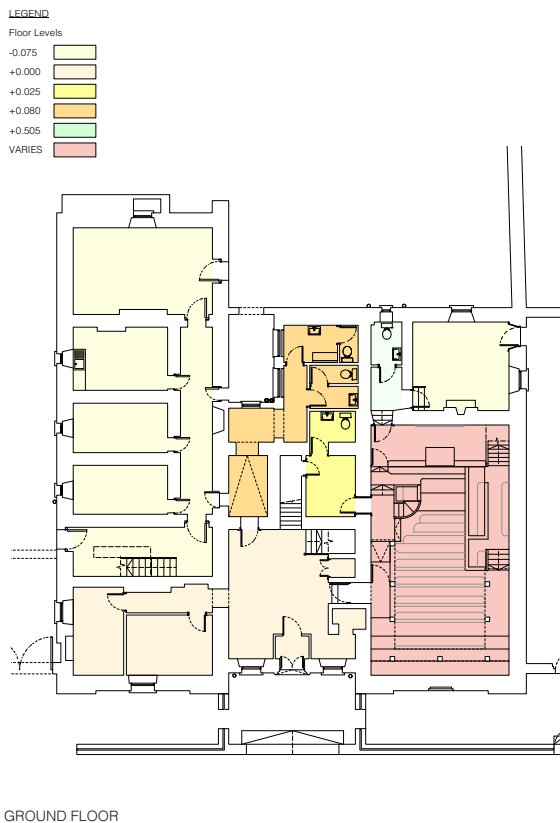


Fig 54: The various existing floor levels throughout the courthouse

in the best interest of the preservation of the building and its surrounding landscape.

Access For All

Buildings which are to be developed for public use, should provide access for people with disabilities where possible, without compromising the historic character of the buildings and surrounding areas. Temporary ramps could be used for access to the ground floor entrance lobby and future interventions should take account of universal access throughout as much of the building as possible. Options for the installation of a lift should be explored. In order to achieve Part M access to the courtroom three benches would need to be modified as shown below.

Sustainability

Promote and support development of measures that will operate and develop the buildings in a sustainable manner, which also respects the historic character of the building, and its setting.

Conservation Strategy & Priorities

This conservation masterplan has identified and described the history, significance, current condition, defining issues and guiding principles

about how the Birr Courthouse should be conserved, maintained, developed and preserved into the future. Opportunities for the development of the building and site is included in the next section of the report.

Urgent Works

The most important initial works to be undertaken are listed as follows:

Roofs

Repair and replacement of the existing roof valleys and rainwater goods should be undertaken, to prevent further water ingress into the building. This will involve the stripping of the end slates to the roofs which will allow the architect to assess the condition of the rafter ends and wall plates. It would be appropriate to assume that due to the poor condition of the roof valleys, and in some locations the coverings, the underlying timberwork will have suffered from the effects of long-term water ingress. Works required may include the complete replacement of a number of rafters and decayed rafter ends and the cutting out of timber wall plates. Also valley boards and substructure at the junctions of the chimney will likely require complete replacement.

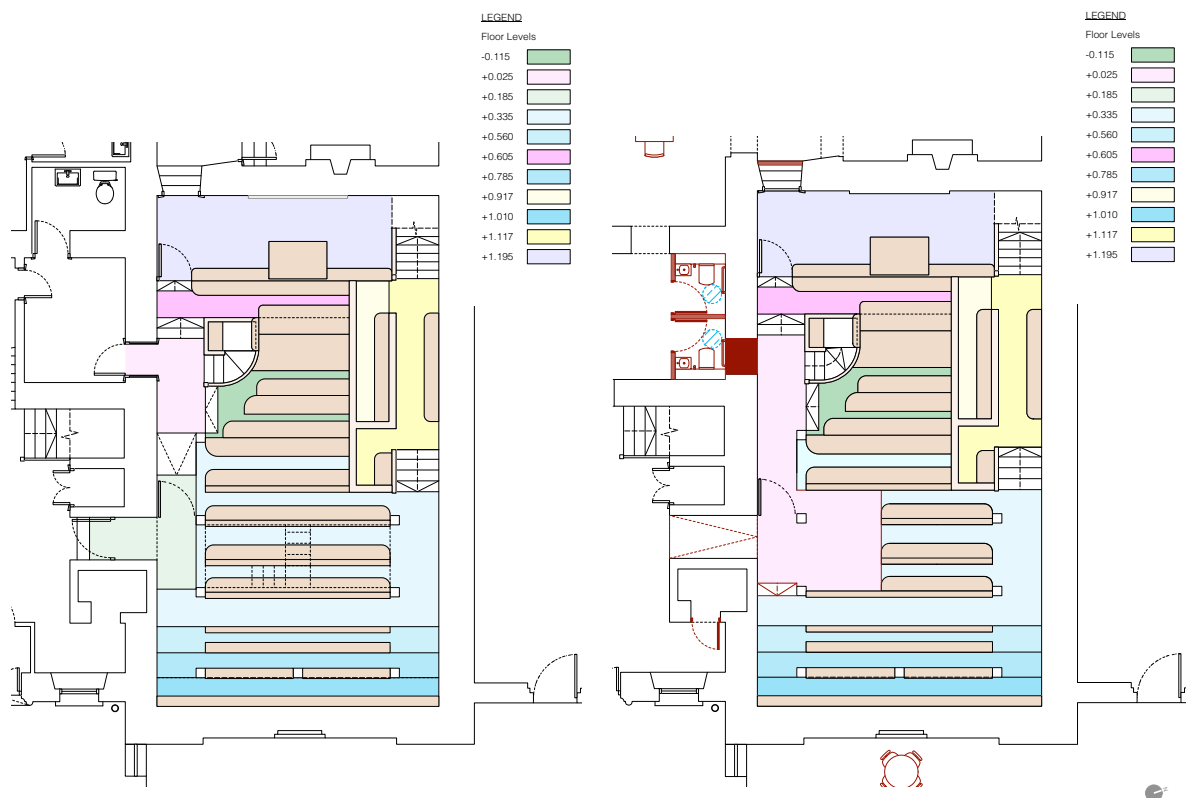


Fig 55: The various existing floor levels within the Birr courtroom (top right) and the required removals to achieve Part M wheelchair accessibility, (top left)

The south range roof should be fully re-slatted on new treated 25 x 25 battens and a new breathable membrane introduced, on a new timber structure, finished with a salvaged slate. This roof is starting to fail, with visible dipping along its length. The valleys and gutters should be replaced with suitable leadwork, traditionally detailed.

It would be prudent to repair all chimneys, each chimney should be finished with a new lime mortar flaunching and three replacement clay chimney pots. The south west chimney is in urgent need of repair and should be prioritised within any future repair works.

Overall the current rainwater disposal system should be considered redundant and in urgent need of full refurbishment. Although new pvc and aluminium rainwater goods were added in the last twenty or so years, the system is still over-loaded in some areas, e.g. at the front parapet and along the north wall of the courtroom, and should be rationalised at the rear of the building.

Masonry Walls

The cement render should be removed from the front of the building and the walls behind repaired as required. Due to failing rainwater goods and blown

cement render the walls to the front façade have taken in a considerable amount of water and now need to be dried out and repointed. This work should include the removal of plaster to the inside of the most damaged areas of the wall, to facilitate drying out from both sides of the wall. A new lime render coat should be applied to the front façade following a period of drying out for the masonry. Existing render on the front façade should be tested to determine the original lime render mix.

Windows

The windows throughout the whole building should be fully overhauled and repaired or replaced, to prevent any ongoing water ingress. Rotten timbers are evident in particular along the south façade, as are rusted bars causing damage to the stone sills. The windows to the courtroom are modern and poor replicas and these should be replaced with historically appropriate replicas. In an effort to improve the efficiency of the building and as a more sustainable approach, the use of slim-line double glazing should be considered on the north, south and west facades. The windows to the front façade should be repaired and replaced with a suitable lambs-tongue profile, to match the ground floor window just south of the entrance door.



Fig 56: Survey of existing front facade windows

Short to Medium Term Works

Roofs

Replacement of the Tegral slate on the north roof and central roof should be undertaken in the short to medium term. These roofs are not currently failing but this is an inappropriate material for this building and it should be removed and traditional slate installed in its place. Removal of the asbestos containing roof tile from the lean-to shed to the rear of the property. Insulation of the roof space should be carried out in tandem with this work, to improve the thermal efficiency of the building. The existing roof light should be removed and a more inappropriate conservation style roof light installed in its place.

Masonry Walls

Cement render should be removed from the north façade, and the older renders on the remaining façades should be inspected and tested to determine a new lime render coat for the remaining elevations of the building. All elevations should be fully repointed and a new appropriate lime render coat applied.

Heating

In the short term, the existing storage heating system should be assessed, kept in use and maintained as a form a low level heating, particularly during the winter months, to ensure that the building does not deteriorate further due to high levels of relative humidity internally, which can have a detrimental effect on plasterwork, joinery and painted surfaces.



Fig 57: Ramped entry to front of courthouse

Internal Floors

Removal of modern internal finishes such as carpet tile and suspended ceilings to facilitate inspection of the fabric behind. A new plaster ceiling should be installed in the courtroom at its original height, with the historic ceiling rose reinstated. Repair of existing plaster finishes throughout the building, in particular areas where paint has started to peel away should be inspected.

Stairs

Repairs to the cantilevered stone stair and handrail should be carried out following a structural assessment by the structural engineer and any remediation works required should be carried out. The metal balustrade should be fully repaired, sanded and coated to prevent ongoing rust damage.

Services

Removal of redundant services throughout the building and repair of historic fabric impacted by services runs. This would include the removal of all surface mounted conduits and wiring.

Wider Site

Clean out of the rear yard area, with the removal of redundant oil storage tank supports, vegetation and other debris. Inspection and repair of the boundary walls and implementation of a repointing and stabilisation programme to the walls.

Medium to Long Term Works

In the longer term options to heat and power the building by sustainable means should be explored as noted in the Development Strategy section. The reinstatement of historic features internally such as cornices to the public rooms, including the courtroom should be considered, to enhance the historic character of these areas.

7.0 Development Strategy

Outline Brief

Having taken ownership of the building in 2021, Offaly County Council will be guided by this conservation masterplan to establish the parameters for the future development of the building and site. An initial scoping report, titled Birr Creative Court, was prepared in June 2019, by Birr 20:20, which establishes the potential use of the site as a 'creative space', 'to facilitate sustainable collaboration between local and visiting professional practitioners, and the wider community, in the pursuit of creative excellence'. This has provided a good basis for an initial development brief.

Extracts of the Birr 20:20 brief are included in Appendix A, and three key objectives were as follows:

- Four broad categories to be catered for; Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Digital Arts and Curious Minds.
- While the creative hub will be based in the Courthouse its support activities will range across a variety of local institutions and networks.

- A purpose-built multifunctional space in which to box, dance, rehearse – constructed in the rear yard.

The proposals outlined within the document indicate ways and means to utilize the existing rooms and spaces as they are currently configured, which is a very positive starting point. Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture have developed two design proposals for the existing courthouse for further consideration within this document, both of which advocate a 'light-touch' approach to the conservation of the interior. We have also included a proposal for the construction of a two-storey flexible use space which can be linked directly to the rear of the courthouse building.

According to the Birr Creative Court Scoping document the business model will be 'not-for-profit, utilising, while minimising as far as possible, the costs to the working artists.' To this end our proposals for the existing building have been tailored to achieve a sustainable yet affordable refurbishment with appropriate upgrades to ensure the needs of the artists are met, while still being mindful of budget constraints.

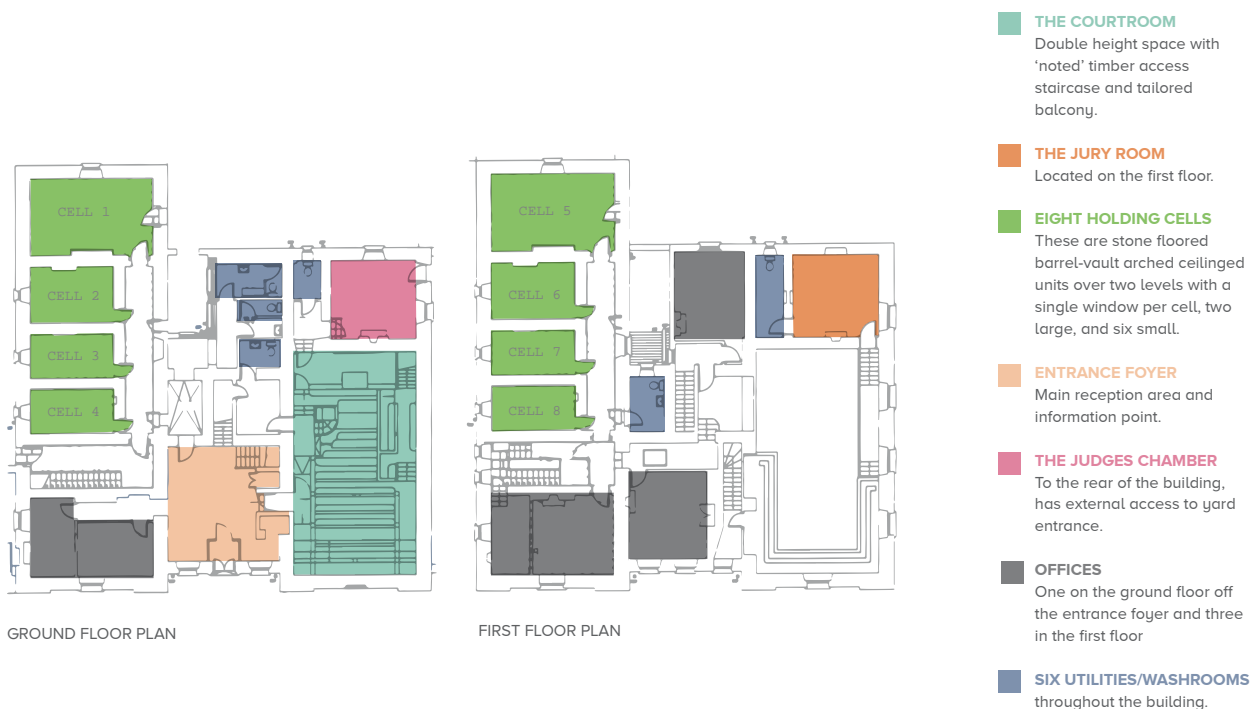


Fig 58: Extract from Birr 20:20 scoping report

Birr Courthouse is no longer required for legislative or court use, and will not be required to fulfil this function again. As its original use is now redundant, it is important to assess suitable new uses for the building, taking account of its existing form and internal arrangement.

New Uses

Birr courthouse, like many protected structures, has wonderful potential for adaptive re-use, but also comes with limitations, in terms of the extent of alteration which can be accommodated. Finding the right balance between intervention or alteration and the retention of historic character and fabric is of the utmost importance, and it is imperative that the new use compliments and enhances the building, rather than detracting from its impressive historic character. For Birr Courthouse it is important that the new use avails of the many separate rooms and spaces, utilising these as independent rooms or hubs. Due to its robust construction it would not be easy or appropriate to open up areas of the building or try to create substantial new, connections between rooms. Where possible, and particularly for buildings previously in civic use, it also important to try to find a new public use, or at least to facilitate public access. This will ensure that buildings of this nature can remain rooted in the community of the town. The use proposed by the Birr 20:20 group

is highly appropriate, as it seeks to use individual rooms and spaces as places for local residents, or those from the wider community, to assemble, work, collaborate and create.

Use of the individual prison cells, which contain plastered brick vaulted ceilings and are more spacious than one might imagine, as artists studio spaces should work well, as there are other examples of successful conversions of historic cell blocks for office or hotel use. Other rooms throughout the ground and first floor could perform a variety of flexible uses. A small coffee dock for visitors could be provided in the ground floor room adjacent to the entrance lobby, with some external seating to the forecourt of the building.

Connections to the rear of the building should be considered, where there is an opportunity to provide secluded outdoor space, a garden or event space for performance. With its high boundary walls, and immediate sense of enclosure, this area could play host to outdoor cinema or dramatic performance, with some form of temporary cover provided. This type of use has provided successful in many other locations across Ireland and the UK, particularly in summer months. The site is located conveniently on the edge of the town, and accessed easily by pedestrians along the south laneway.



Fig 51: View from front of proposed usage of the courthouse

The courtroom was the most important space within the building, providing a place of spectacle, drama and public interest. New interventions should complement this historic use, and the space could be used to host lectures, presentations and small dramatic performances. The original historic joinery is well preserved and partially supported by the structural columns of the gallery, which connect the two levels.

As one of the few remaining intact courtrooms in Ireland from this period it is important that this significant room be retained and preserved with only minor intervention or alteration where absolutely required. Improvements to the comfort of the existing seating could be achieved to make the space viable as a flexible working forum using laptops or more traditional sketch pads and notebooks. Introducing cushioned seat pads, good power and data connections, and clip on work surfaces, will allow people to use the space in comfort for extended periods. The raked seating, and the elevated height of the judges platform will make the space ideal for presentation purposes for lectures, films or debates.

Services

While the upgrade of services to the building is dealt with through a separate report in Appendix 3, the intention in summary is to provide a more efficient and sustainable means of heating and powering the building, through the introduction of air source heat pumps at the rear of the building. Lighting should be provided through efficient fixtures such as LEDs, and appropriate fixtures should be selected for the more important historic rooms such as the courtroom. The use of wireless technology

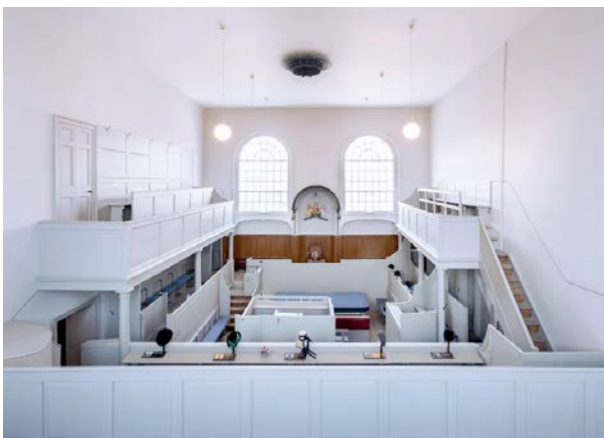


Fig 60: Refurbished historic courtroom at Shire Hall in Dorset, UK

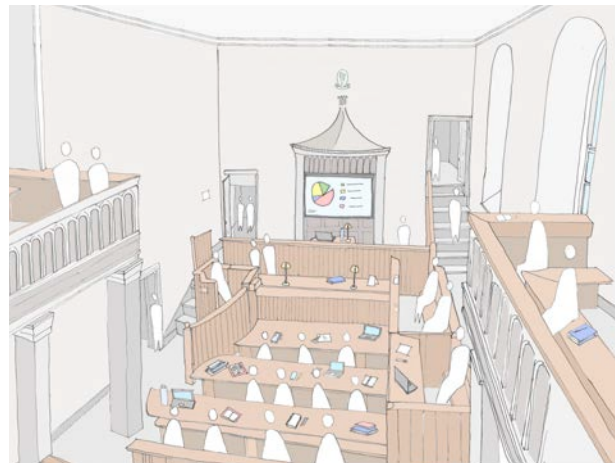


Fig 61: A sketch of the courtroom in proposed use for presentations - sketch by HHC Architecture

for security systems should be explored, as this will minimise impact of wiring conduits on historic fabric.

The services report contains a cost estimate and running costs for the building in its current use and its proposed use.

Accessibility

An accessibility audit should be carried out to establish a suitable strategy for compliance with Part M of the Building Regulations. Although a protected structure, the building will remain open to the public and should be made accessible where reasonably practical. Unfortunately this structure was not designed to facilitate an easy flow of circulation as it was deliberately intended to separate people, including the public, the accused, and the members of the judiciary. This is apparent in the complexity of the plan and the multiple levels throughout the ground and first floors of the building.

It should be possible to achieve accessibility at the main entrance, through some re-grading works externally, and with the use of a temporary ramp at the door, to facilitate access as and when required. The ground floor of the lobby should be lowered to its original level which will facilitate level access throughout the central and south range. The courtroom could be modified to provide a wheelchair accessible zone, as shown on page 31, but this would require the modification of three historic pews, which is not desirable. This should be assessed further when the final use of the room is determined, and for the moment we have included in our proposals the minimum removals required in order to achieve a fully accessible room.

The entry route from the centre lobby to the courtroom would also have to be re-graded to provide a suitable ramped entry to the room.

It will be difficult to achieve level access throughout the first floor due to the variation of existing levels found within the building. However, a significant portion of the first floor could become accessible through careful positioning of a platform lift. This type of lift is very suitable for use in protected structures, as it does not require a deep pit, nor a large area to accommodate the lift mechanism. While it operates at a slower pace than a passenger lift, it would be suitable for this building given the small numbers of people expected to use it. A suitable design would be a through-lift at first floor level, with doors on the north and south sides, providing access to both the south and north ranges.

The rear of the building could accommodate a single parking space for a disabled driver, with an accessible rear entrance or this could be accommodated on the street. It should be noted that any new extension to the rear of the site will also need to be fully compliant with building regulations and this includes for the provision of accessibility to ground and first floor levels via a Part M compliant stair.

Fire Safety

The re-purposed courthouse building must comply with the Irish Building Regulations following refurbishment. As this is a protected structure it



Fig 62: Converted vaults used for artists studios

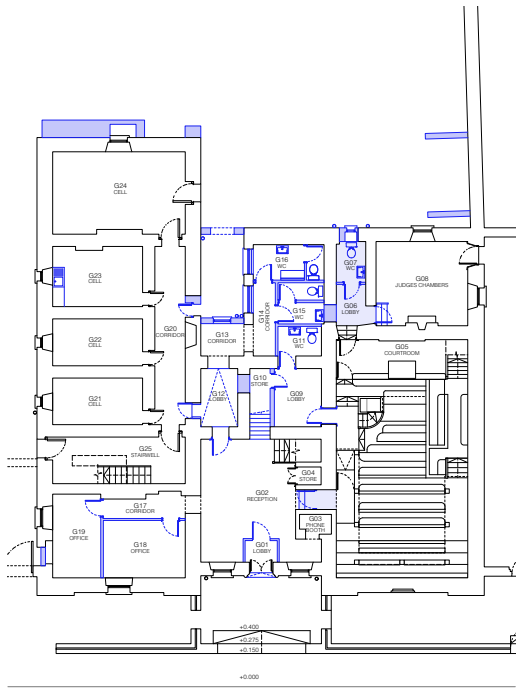


Fig 63: View of single storey lean-to, and proposed location of platform lift

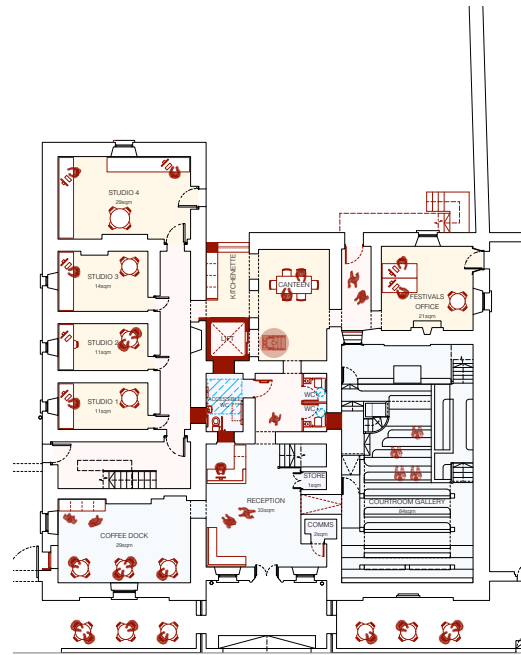
is required to comply with the regulations where practicable. In the case of Part B (Fire Safety) the building will require a Fire Safety Certificate, as required by the Fire Safety Act, and in this area there is no exemption due to its protected structure status. However, there are ways and means to achieve a design that will be sympathetic to the historic character of the building while ensuring it also achieves a fire safety certificate. We have shown the removal of one of the timber stairs from the central lobby.

This might be considered controversial, but it is required to deal with the fire safety problem of having an open stair to the entrance lobby, directly adjacent to another stair that leads to the courtroom mezzanine.

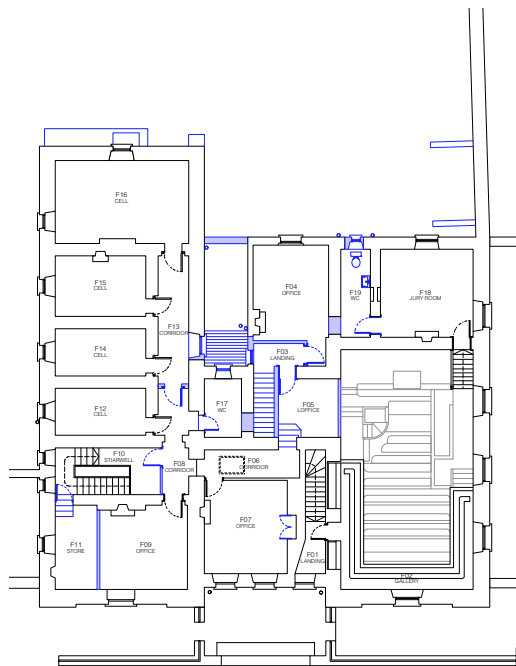
Due to the travel distances at first floor level, and the fact that escape routes cannot pass through occupied rooms, it is likely that a new external escape stair will be required to the rear of the building to facilitate escape from the first floor rooms in the north range. This stair could be replaced in time with a stair incorporated into the new extension, so that it can serve as an escape stair for the courthouse, and the first floor of the new extension.



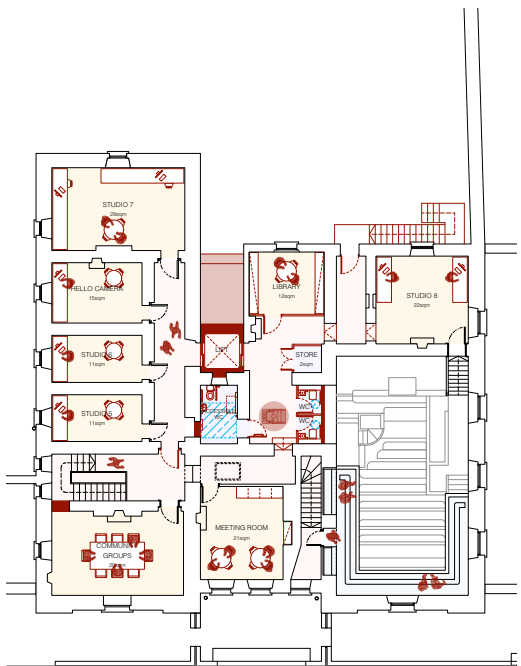
Ground Floor Plan - Demolitions



Ground Floor Plan - Proposed



First Floor Plan - Demolitions



First Floor Plan - Proposed

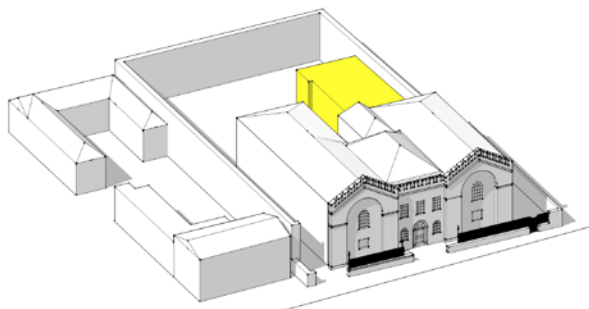
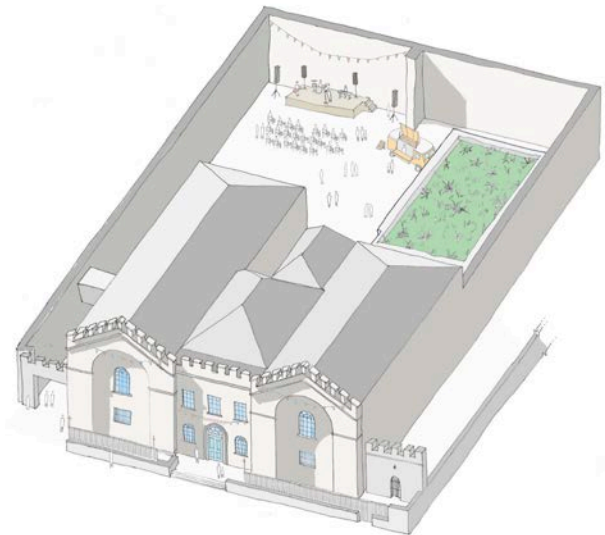
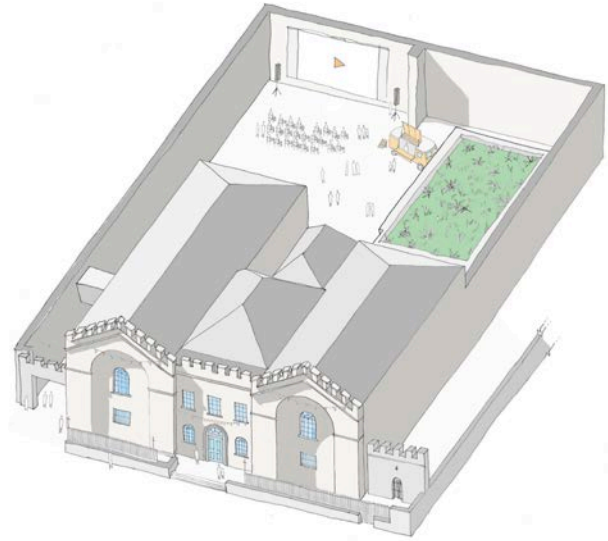
Fig 64: The preferred option for the upgrade of the existing courthouse is shown above, with the demolition plans on the left, and proposals on the right

Potential Expansion / Extension

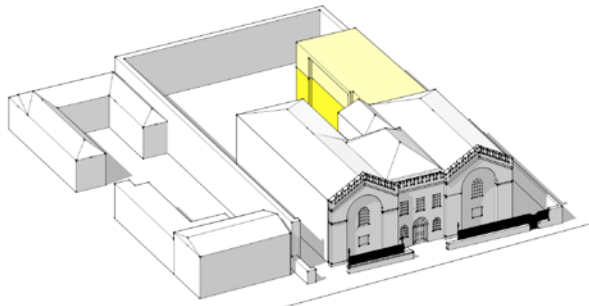
A number of possible options for the construction of a new building or extension to the rear of the courthouse were explored under the masterplan study. Extension to the courthouse should only be considered following refurbishment of the main building. In the first instance the feasibility of building a boxing facility to the rear, as outlined in the Birr 20:20 scoping document, was considered.

An outline brief for this facility was established based on a typical boxing ring size, and adequate clearances around it. Changing facilities and WCs were also incorporated as these are required for a new-build facility of this nature. This resulted in a building of substantial size in the rear yard, which would not be of an appropriate scale for this historic prison yard.

A boxing facility is also difficult to utilise as a flexible use space, as boxing rings are not readily demountable, which would restrict the flexibility of this space. Options to house this facility elsewhere in the town should be explored. It could also prove to be expensive to build, and a cost estimate for this option is included in Appendix C.



Proposed Mixed-Use Space (Single-Storey)



Proposed Mixed-Use Space (Two-Storey)

Fig 65: 3D study of a proposed extension to the rear of the courthouse

Fig 66: Outdoor events hosted at the Birr courthouse by HHC Architecture

A more appropriate option would be the inclusion of a two storey flexible use space, connected to the rear of the building on the north side. This would allow for the incorporation of an outdoor space which could be used for events, and provides a south facing facade for the flexible use spaces. The courtyard could become a venue for concerts, dramatic performance or outdoor cinema during summer months, located within easy walking distance of the town. Temporary canopies or temporary structures could also be erected to facilitate outdoor use, with the flexible use building providing facilities for visitors. Drawings for the proposed use of the courthouse building and site are included in Appendix A.

Ecology

The building is in an urban setting, with little to no green space or vegetation growth around it. A bat survey was undertaken in the Summer of 2021 and the findings are included in Appendix E. Bats were found foraging in the rear year and possibly roosting in the courthouse roof. Before any further works are undertaken at the courthouse the bat survey should be consulted and additional surveys undertaken as required. One recommendation put forward by the ecologist is the inclusion of bat tiles in the roofs at the courthouse – which would allow bats to continue to access the roof spaces and roost in the building.

The Offaly Swift Report of 2017 showed that Birr is a stronghold for swifts in the county, though largely based around Birr Castle. It is proposed to erect swift boxes to the rear of the building in order to provide alternative nest sites in the town.

Current Works at Birr Courthouse

At the time of completion of this conservation masterplan external repair works have commenced at Birr courthouse which include the following:

- Repair and replacement of the front façade windows to reinstate the original lambstongue profile
- Replacement of the modern fanlight over the door with a historic
- Painting of the front door
- Renewal of the leadwork throughout all roofs
- Repair and reslating of the south range roof
- Renewal of all the rainwater goods on the building
- Repairs to the chimneys on the south range roof

These works are funded by the Heritage Council of Ireland, under the Historic Towns Initiative, and the project also received a grant under the Historic Structures Fund, from the Department of Housing,



Fig 67: Outdoor cinema event in Montjuïc Castle, Barcelona, in the estate.



Fig 68: Outdoor cinema event at Elizabeth Fort, Cork

Local Government and Heritage. The cost of this phase of work is c. €350,000. Additional funds were provided by Offaly County Council. Howley Hayes Cooney Architects are overseeing this work on site throughout the summer and autumn of 2021, and works are due to be complete in early November.

Cost Estimate

The cost estimate is included in Appendix C and in order to provide the most accurate estimate for the building, at this early feasibility stage, the works outlined above, which are currently on site, have been excluded from this cost estimate.

The quantity surveyor has put forward an estimate cost of €1,950,252.34 including VAT for the full refurbishment of the courthouse, based on the schematic layouts provided by Howley Hayes Cooney Architects. This includes the estimate costs provided by the Mechanical and Electrical engineer. With regard to the options for extensions to the rear of the building, options for a boxing facility, which were noted within the Birr 20:20 were explored and costed, and these costs have been included in the report. An option for a multi-use two storey extension to the rear, which is more appropriate in scale and provides a more flexible future use, were also costed and are included in the report.

Conclusion

The adaptive reuse of Birr Courthouse, as a creative work hub, is both appropriate to the building in terms of its historic fabric, and would be a welcome use for the town of Birr. Use of the courtroom for lecture and presentation purposes, and the establishment of a coffee dock facility in the south range would also allow for a degree of public access at certain times, as would the hosting of outdoor events to the rear.

The latter has the potential to become quite a special and characterful public space, to date hidden away from local residents.

The establishment of a good business plan and progressions of proposals for the use of the building should be undertaken on the basis of the contents of this report and the appended drawings, cost estimates, and services report.



Fig 69: View from front of proposed usage of the courthouse



Fig 70: Sketch of section through Birr courthouse by HHC Architecture

8.0 Summary of Conclusions

Built in 1810, or earlier, the Birr quarter sessions is an early example of a nineteenth-century Irish courthouse. It was constructed at the outset of a very active period of civic and legislative building in Ireland in response to evolving legislative requirements.

Thomas Lalor Cooke's *Early history of the town of Birr or Parsonstown* is a wonderful account of this interesting Irish town; a rare text, which serves as an excellent foundation for anyone researching the early development of the settlement.

Irish courthouses from the early eighteenth century generally maintained a more vernacular character, however, the employment of the architect James Gandon to design the neoclassical Waterford courthouse in 1784 had a marked impact, becoming a prototype for many of the courthouses which followed, including Daingean and Birr.

In plan the building consists of a central entrance hall, with the north wing housing the double height courtroom, judges chamber and jury room. A small mezzanine wrapping the rear walls of the courtroom is accessed via a timber stair directly from the central hall. The south wing, houses the goal, consisting of eight cells, four to each floor, two small halls and two ancillary rooms with fireplaces.

The Birr courthouse is one of the earliest examples from this period, of an extensive programme of public legislative building across Ireland, during which various progressions in courtroom design were tested and altered.

The architectural quality, historical background and social significance of the Birr courthouse make it a building of regional if not national importance.

The south range roof, and the roof valleys in general are failing and in need of urgent attention, repair and renovation, while the north range roof, though inappropriately covered with Tegral slate, is in fair condition.

The rainwater goods to the building have been replaced, badly repaired, or are clogged with debris or plant growth. Throughout the majority of the roofs the rainwater goods have been replaced with aluminium gutters and downpipes and uPVC soil vent pipes.

The main walls appear to consist of load-bearing masonry walls with thick cement rich, painted pebbledash render on the front (west) and north elevations. In contrast the render finish to the south and east elevations is a softer lime coating that has come away from the facades in a number of locations.

A modern suspended ceiling dating from around 1990 has been installed in the courtroom at a lower level than the original plaster ceiling, which has been lost. The original plaster ceiling rose has been retained and relocated to sit on this suspended ceiling.

The internal wall finishes in most cases consist of the original painted plaster walls applied directly onto the underlying masonry walls, albeit much affected by water ingress and mould growth in certain locations, such as in the entrance lobby and courtroom.

The terrazzo floor in the entrance lobby, has been raised by at least two inches, as evidenced by the bottom step of the timber stairs. This flooring should be lifted and the existing level below reinstated.

Of particular note in the building is the old courtroom interiors, which retains its original plan, and form. The room retains the judge's platform, dias and canopy, timber gallery structure, timber panelling and timber seating.

The building has been unoccupied for over eight years, and the lack of maintenance during this period has resulted in localised areas of significant damage, due to uncontrolled water ingress. Despite this, the structure is generally quite stable, no doubt due to its robust construction.

The long-term solution to heating problems is the installation of a new condensing, high efficiency boiler and central heating to meet modern environmental standards in lieu of expensive electrical and mobile gas heaters.

An initial scoping report, titled Birr Creative Court, was prepared in June 2019, by Birr 20:20, which establishes the potential use of the site as a 'creative space', 'to facilitate sustainable collaboration between local and visiting practitioners, and the wider community, in the pursuit of creative excellence'.

An accessibility audit should be carried out to establish a suitable strategy for compliance with Part M of the Building Regulations. Although a protected structure, the building will remain open to the public and should be made accessible where reasonably practical.

For Birr Courthouse it is important that the new use avails of the many separate rooms and spaces, utilising these as independent rooms or hubs. Due to its robust construction it would not be easy or appropriate to open up areas of the building or try to create substantial new, connections between rooms.

Use of the individual prison cells, which contain plastered brick vaulted ceilings and are more spacious than one might imagine, as artists studio spaces should work well.

Connections to the rear of the building should be considered, where there is an opportunity to provide secluded outdoor space, a garden or event space for performance. With its high boundary walls, and immediate sense of enclosure, this area could play host to outdoor cinema or dramatic performance, with some form of temporary cover provided.

The courtroom was the most important space within the building, providing a place of spectacle, drama and public interest. New interventions should complement this historic use, and the space could be used to host lectures, presentations and small dramatic performances.

An appropriate option for expansion to the rear would be a two storey flexible use space, connected to the rear of the building on the north side. This should only be considered after full refurbishment of the courthouse. This would allow for the incorporation of an outdoor space which could be used for events, while retaining a south facing external space.

9.0 Bibliography

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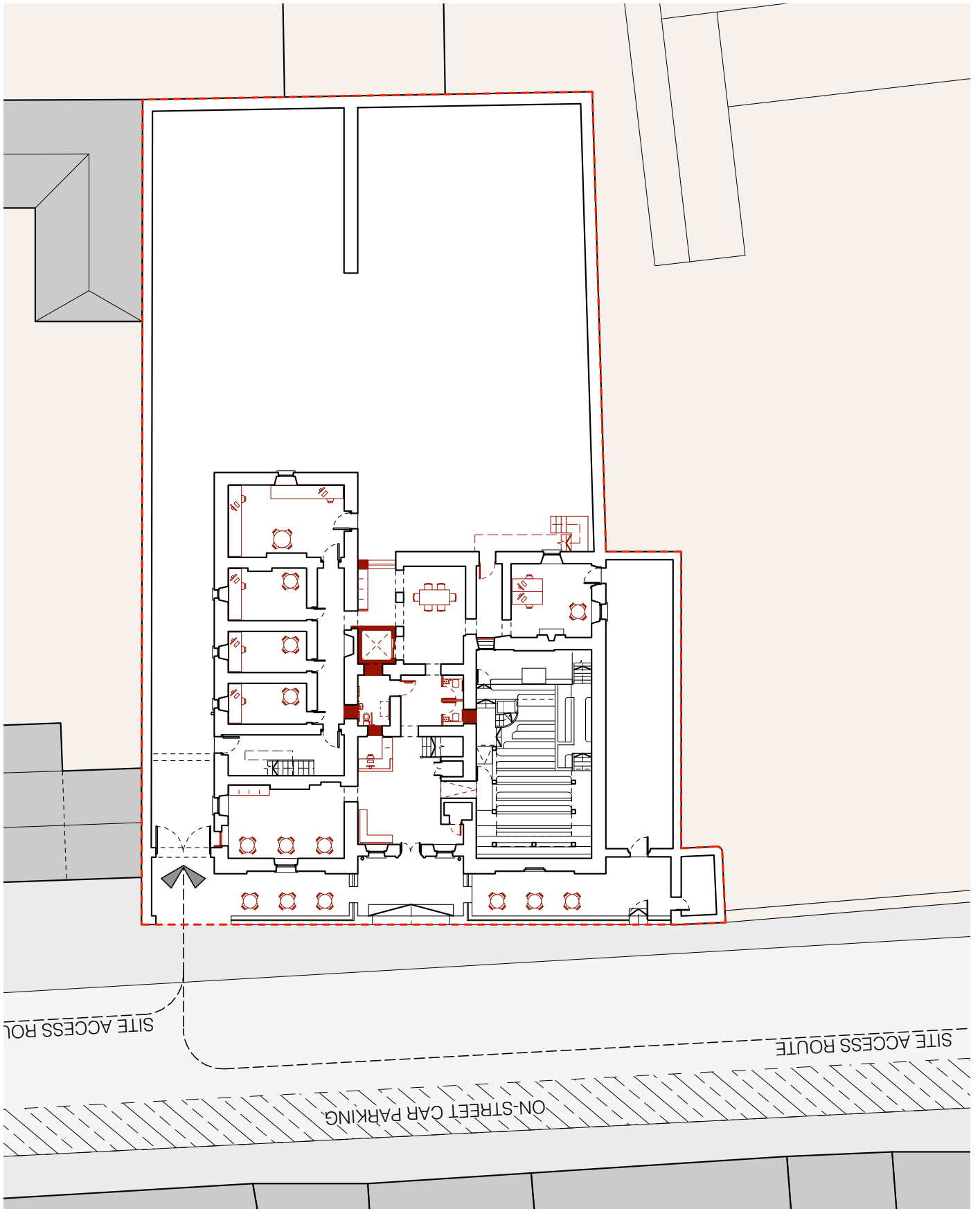
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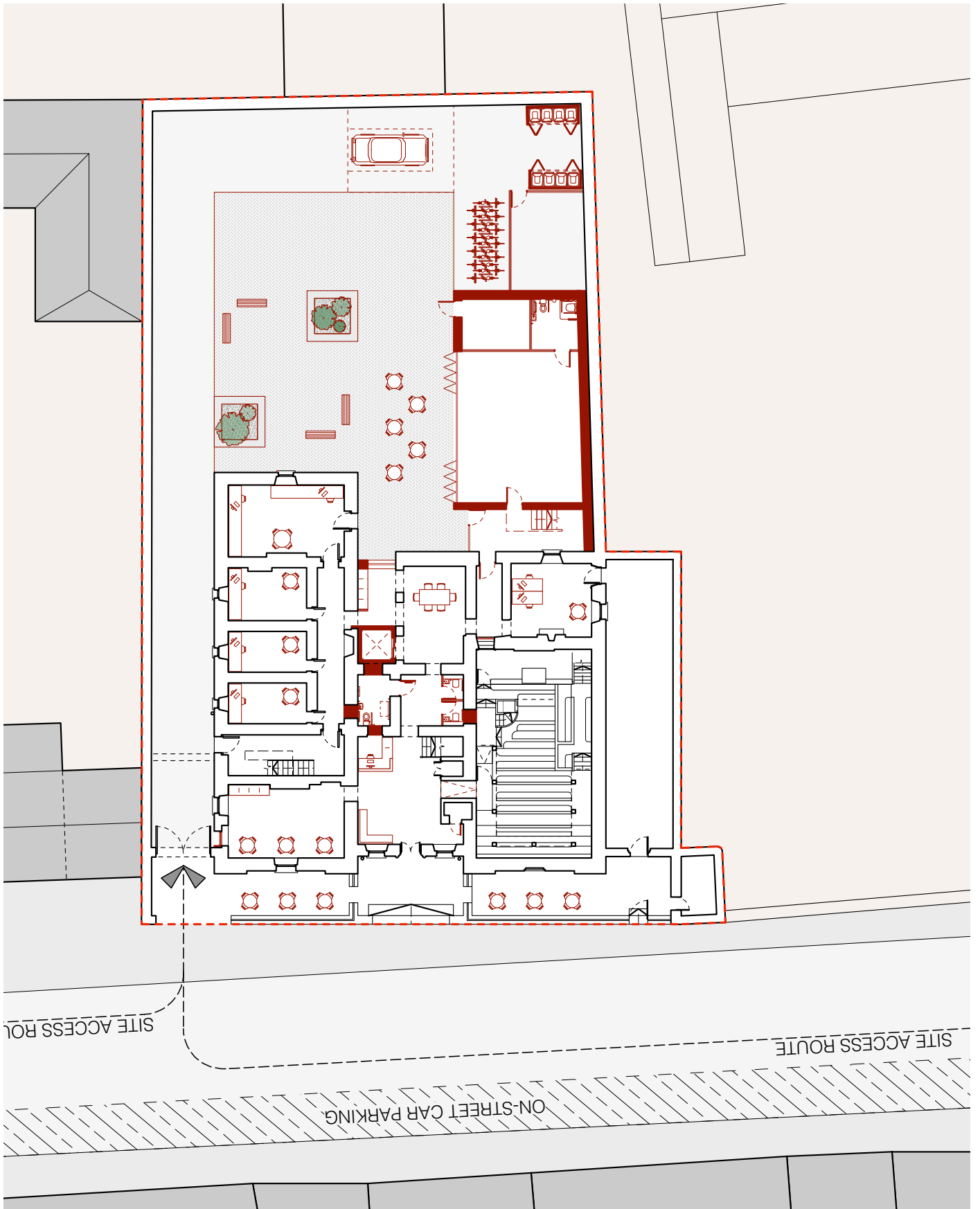
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APPENDIX A

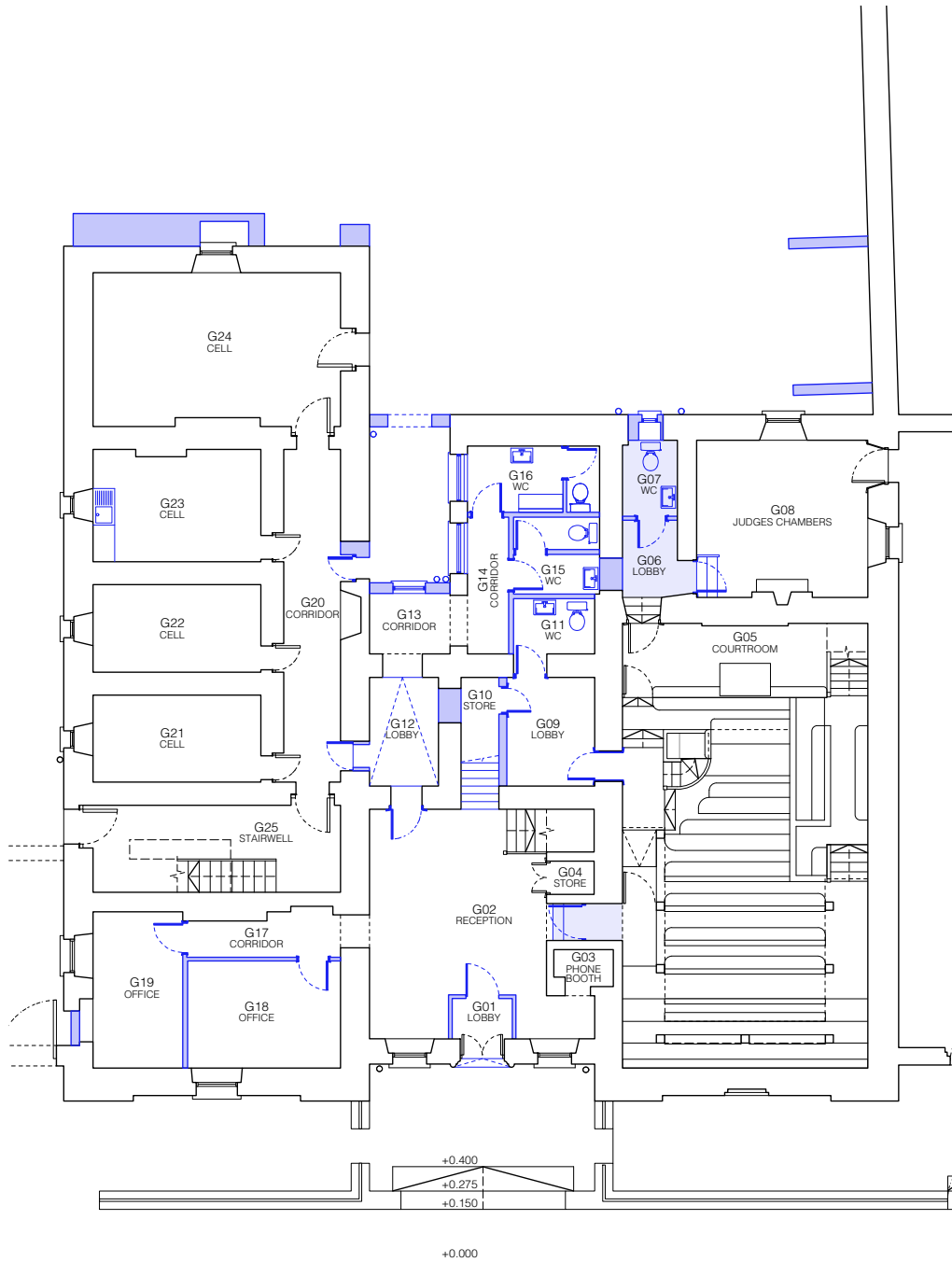
Drawings



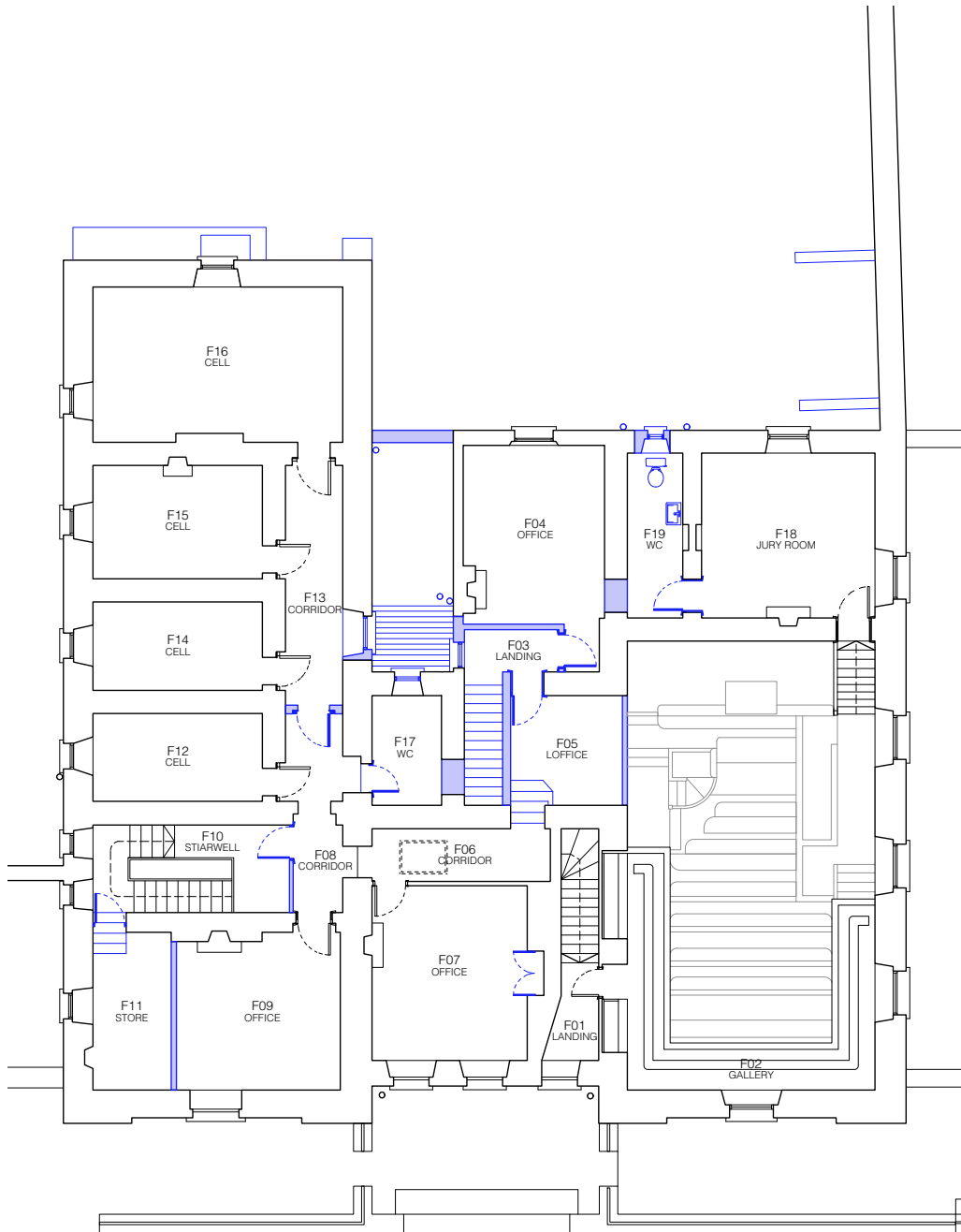
Site Plan: Proposed Option 1



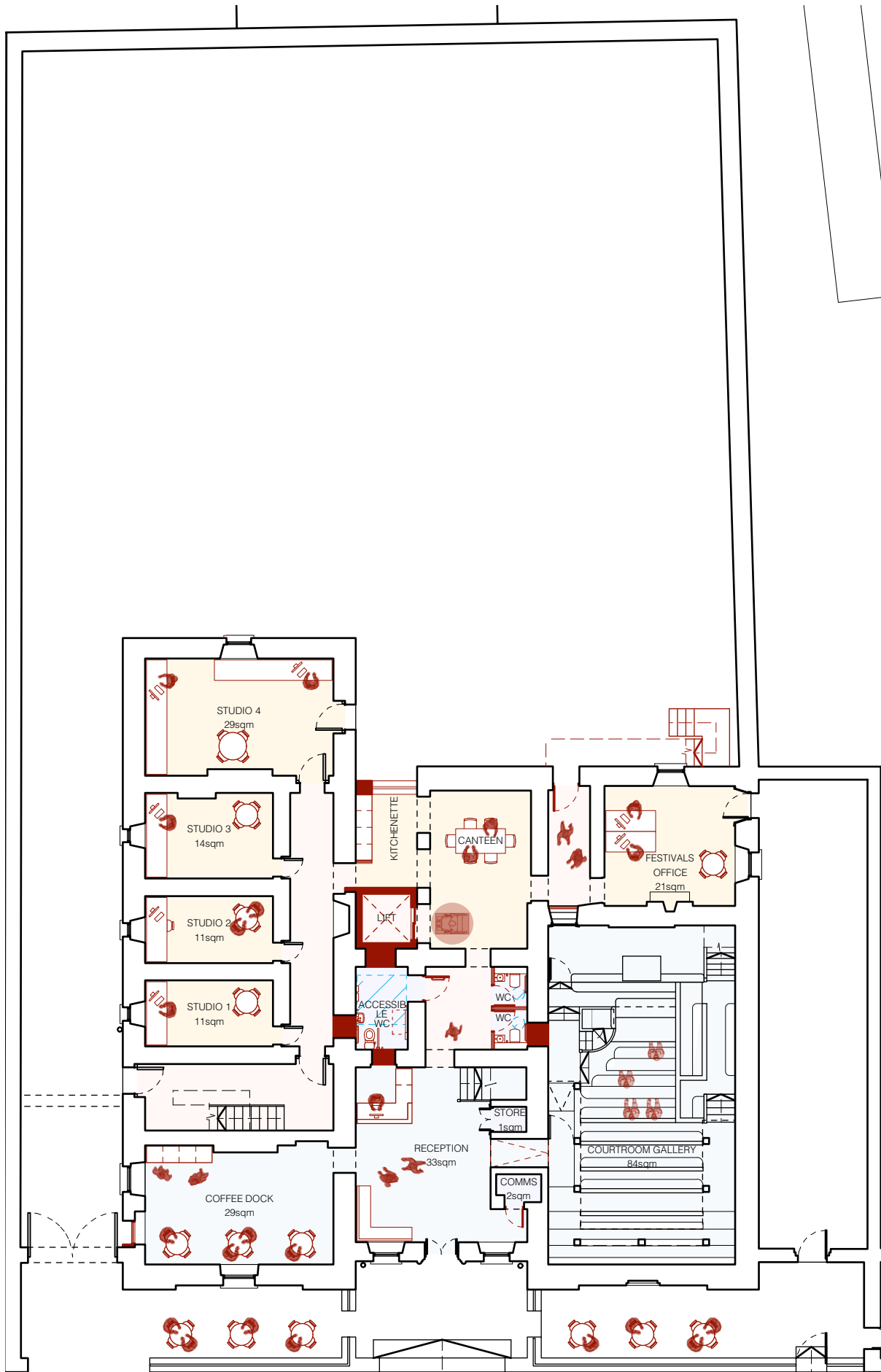
Site Plan: Proposed Option 2



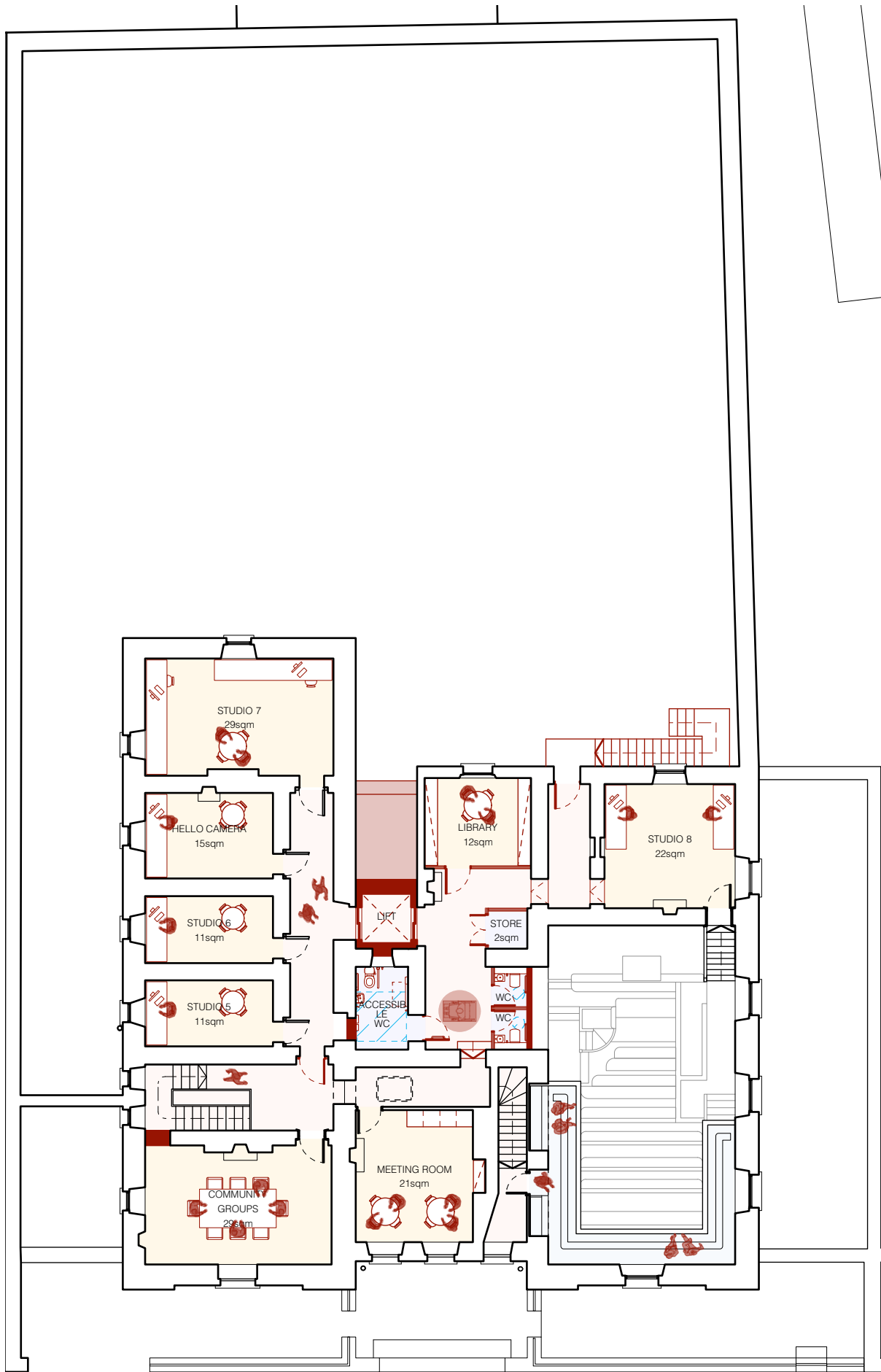
Ground Floor Plan: Demolition



First Floor Plan: Demolition



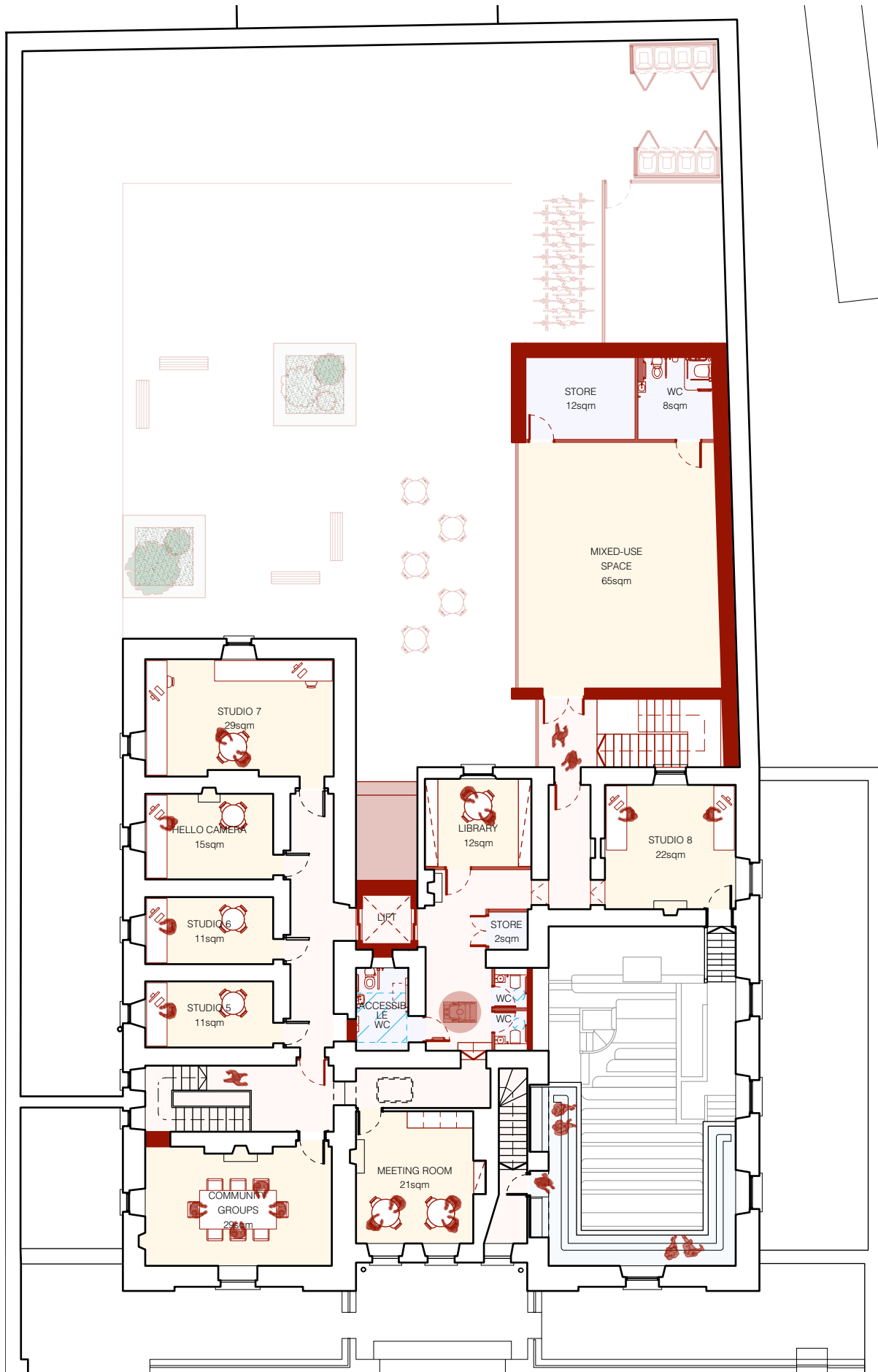
Ground Floor Plan: Proposed Option 1



First Floor Plan: Proposed Option 1



Ground Floor Plan: Proposed Option 2



First Floor Plan: Proposed Option 2

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ARCHITECTURE

APPENDIX B

Services Report

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APPENDIX C

Cost Estimate

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APPENDIX D

Photographic Survey

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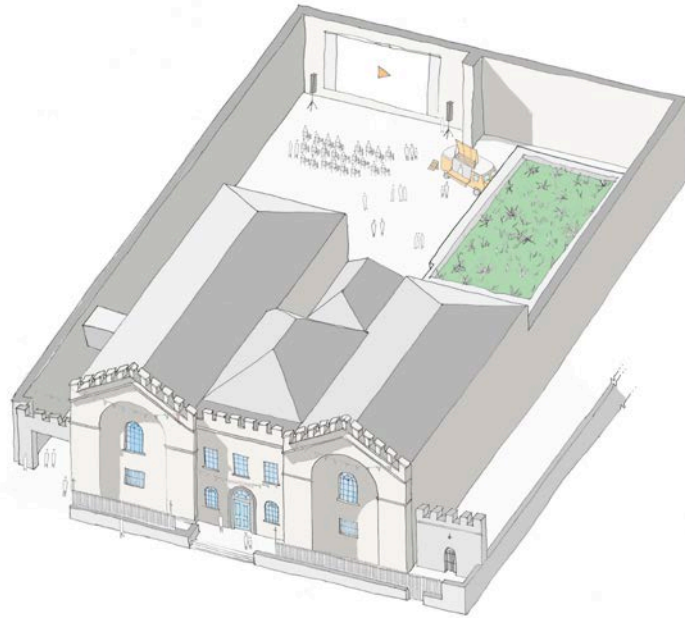
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APPENDIX E

Bat Survey

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Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture are recognised for their work in both contemporary design and for the sensitive conservation of historic buildings, structures and places. Over a thirty year period, the practice has been responsible for the conservation and reuse of numerous buildings of national and international cultural significance, many of which have received RIAI, RIBA, Irish Georgian Society, Opus or Europa Nostra Awards. These include – Russborough, Lambay, Charleville Forest, Buncrana Castle, Hotel Ard na Sidhe, the former Blue Coats School (now headquarters of the Law Society of Ireland), St Catherine’s, Meath Street, and Marsh’s Library both in Dublin and the People’s Park Dun Laoghaire. Under the Conservation Accreditation System, implemented by the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland, Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture is accredited as a Conservation Practice Grade 1 and director James Howley a Conservation Architects Grade 1. Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture have, to date, been responsible for over two hundred conservation plans, reports and feasibility studies for clients such as the Heritage Council, the World Monument Fund, the Office of Public Works, the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the Law Society of Ireland, the Alfred Beit Foundation, Diageo Ireland, and Liebherr International, together with numerous local authorities and private clients.

