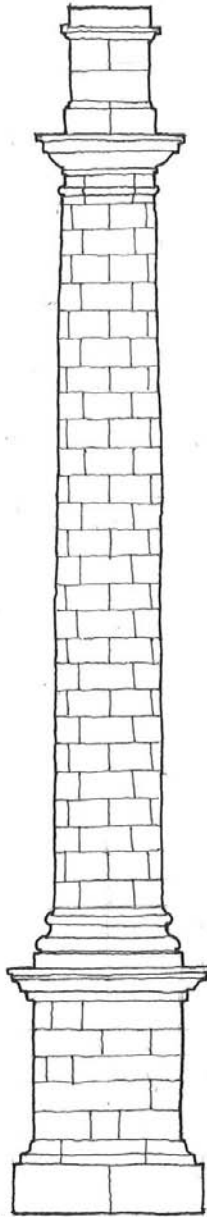


# THE CUMBERLAND COLUMN, BIRR, CO. OFFALY



## CONSERVATION REPORT

By

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*This report has been prepared by Howley Hayes Architects on behalf of the Heritage Department of Offaly County Council. Its purpose is to provide a history and assessment of the cultural significance and current condition of the Cumberland Column that stands at the axial heart of Emmet Square, Birr, Co. Offaly. The statue of the Duke of Cumberland that originally surmounted the column was removed in the early twentieth-century and only fragments of it survive in Birr Castle. Today, despite the loss of the statue, the Column is in a fair state of repair, though various inappropriate ad-hoc repairs using hard, cement rich mortars, have been carried over the years. These repairs have a damaging effect on the structure as they tend to accelerate damage caused by natural weathering of the soft sandstone masonry of the structure. The report also includes a programme of recommended repairs that should be carried out to reverse this damage, together with recommendations about how the column could be better presented within the townscape. The visual surveys on which the second half of this report is based were carried out in December 2008. An additional high level survey was also carried out by John Rainey and Company, steeplejacks and stonemasons.*



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The monumental column that stands in the centre of Birr, which was erected to commemorate the Duke of Cumberland is the first of its type to have been erected in Ireland. It consists of a monumental Doric column standing on a tall square pedestal that rises to a height of 13.5 m or just under 44 feet. It dominates the fine central square in which it stands providing an elegant urban landmark on the principal axes of the town. Constructed in 1746-7, to the design of a young Irish architect called Samuel Chearnley, it was commissioned by a local landowner Sir Lawrence Parsons of the nearby Birr Castle, to commemorate the English victory, under Cumberland, over the Scots at Culloden. In Ireland a number of monumental columns were built, mostly during the nineteenth century, of which several, like the Birr Column, were raised as *Pillars of Victory* following the Roman fashion dating back to the times of Hadrian and Trajan. The stone column is one of the most ancient and important elements in the art of architecture. It is thought to have originated from the earliest, primitive methods of build-



Plate 1: Photograph of Birr Column c.1900

ing, which consisted of simple huts made of tree trunks. The use of stone columns in the monumental buildings of the great early civilisations such as the Egyptians, Etruscans, Greeks and Romans, introduced an exciting new architectural language, which could accommodate a greater articulation of spatial elements through porticos and loggias. However, columns usually form part of a more

complex structural system along with walls, beams and roofs. Constructed in isolation the column form is relatively unstable unless it is constructed at a sufficient scale and mass to assume the proportions of a slender tower.



Plate 2: Photograph of Birr Column today

Around a dozen monumental columns have been erected in Ireland, where they adorn cities, towns or the open countryside as urban or rural landmarks and *eyecatchers*. Of these, most date from the nineteenth century and several of the most important examples were bombed during the civil unrest that occurred in Ireland during the 1960s to the 1990s. The Birr Column is modestly scaled but extremely important as the earliest column erected in Ireland and without doubt a structure of national importance and cultural significance.

Constructed from local sandstone, the structure has survived remarkably well for over 250 years. It is, however, now showing signs of deterioration, exacerbated by past repairs that have been carried out using hard cement rich mortars. The iron cramps are also rusting in places and bursting off the faces of some of the stones. Early action is now required if this important structure is to be preserved. While the visual and architectural impact of the column on the square continues to be most impressive, its immediate setting has been neglected and could be much enhanced by improved paving, seating and lighting around the base of the structure.

## 2.0 HISTORY & SETTING

### Birr

The town of Birr originated as a plantation town in what was formerly known as King's County, during the seventeenth-century. One of the more formal and carefully planned county towns in Ireland, Birr was laid out by the powerful and wealthy Parsons family, whose country mansion and demesne lies at the edge of the town close to its centre. In his *Dictionary of Ireland*, published in 1837, Samuel Lewis provides a detailed description of Birr at a time when it was at its prime:

*Parsonstown, or Birr, a market and post-town, and a parish, in the barony of Ballybritt, King's county, and province of Leinster, eighteen miles south-west from Tullamore, and sixty miles west south west from Dublin, on the road from Tullamore to Roscrea. The place derived its name of Birr from the abbey of Biorra, founded here by St. Brendan Luaigneus; or from Bior, the Irish term for the bank or margin of a river. It formerly constituted part of the ancient district of Ely O'Carroll in Ormond, in Munster, and did not form any portion of the King's county as at first erected into shire ground in the reign of Philip and Mary, being annexed to it under an inquisition of the 2nd of James I.*

*... Parsonstown, the name by which the place was called so early as the reign of Charles I, on the Birr river, formerly called Comcor, a branch of the Lesser Brosna...It is the largest town in the county and Archbishop Usher says, that Birr was considered the centre of Ireland; and Sir William Petty, in his survey, marks the church with the words 'Umbilicus Hiberniae' [or Navel of Ireland which is marked by a stone called the Seffin Stone].*

The earliest recorded settlement in the area dates to the sixth century AD when a monastery was founded by St. Brendan of Birr. A castle was later constructed in 1208 by the Normans who controlled the region until the early fourteenth century when the local O'Carroll clan seized and held power until the end of the sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century an English plantation system had been established in much of the Irish midlands, at which time Co. Offaly was renamed *King's County*.

*In 1619 Sir Laurence Parsons, first Baronet, was granted Birr Castle along with 1,277 acres of land. The town of Birr, or Parsonstown as it became, developed under the steady guidance of Sir Laurence. Despite sieges of the castle in 1643 and 1690 by the Jacobite Duke of Berwick, the town emerged from this violent period into a period of expansion and renewal.*

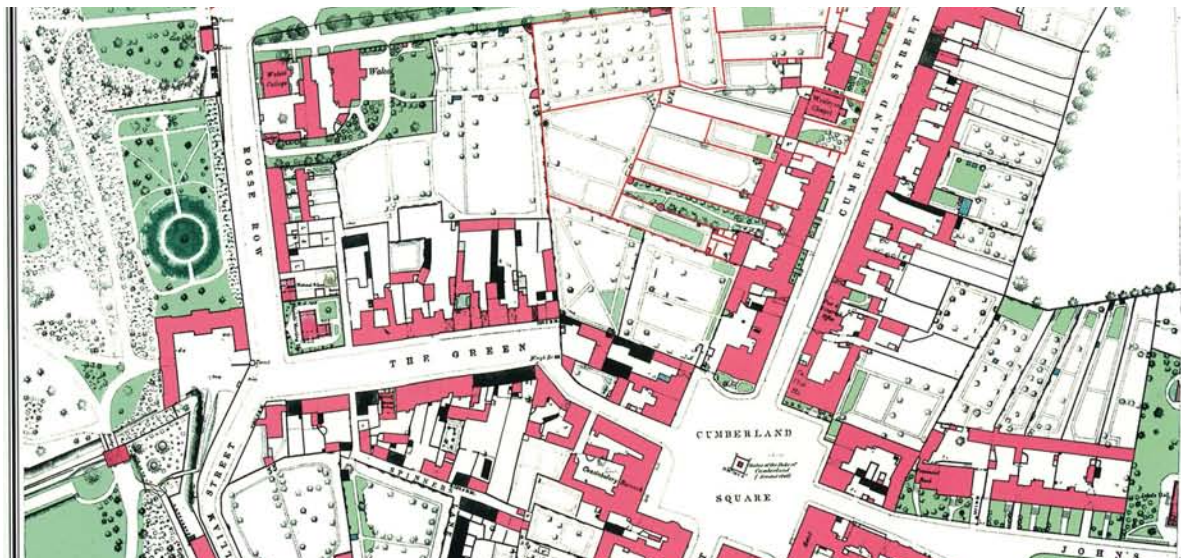


Plate 2: OS Map of Birr in 1877 with the Cumberland Column evident as an axial focal point



## Formal Town Planning

The Parsons family (later created Earls of Rosse) was remarkable, several generations of which established international recognition in the fields of astronomy, photography and engineering. They were also sophisticated and visionary land owners who created a fine mansion in a beautiful designed landscape setting, and an equally impressive planned town that is one of the most impressive historic towns in Ireland. From the mid eighteenth to the early nineteenth century Birr was enlarged in a number of phases, to form what is essentially the town we know today. Cumberland or Duke Square, later renamed Emmet Square, dates from 1747 and represents the earliest phase of Georgian Birr. It provides the central focus and main axis of the town, later phases of which saw the development of Oxmantown Mall (1816), Wilmer Road (1817) and John's Mall (1833). The column stands at the centre of the square providing a sophisticated urban landmark, which is unusual for a small Irish town. Writing in 1837, Samuel Lewis described Birr as follows:

*It has risen to the highly improved state in which it now is chiefly during the period in which the present proprietor, the Earl of Rosse,*

*has superintended its progress. The principal streets, which are formed of modern houses and laid out in straight lines, terminate in Duke Square, in which there is a statue of the Duke of Cumberland, on a Doric pillar, 55 feet high, set up in 1747, in commemoration of his victory at Culloden.*

## Pillars of Victory

Monumental columns, or *pillars of victory* as they were originally called, are more commonly found in cities than in small county towns, such as Birr. In Ireland and the UK they also occurred in the countryside. The tradition started in Rome in the second century AD, where several were built to commemorate military victories won by Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Both of the columns commemorating Trajan and Marcus Aurelius contained staircases, and were decorated externally with a spiralling tableau in bas-relief, representing the unwinding of a parchment and depicting details of their victorious battles. Having fallen out of favour as an architectural form, the monumental column enjoyed a revival during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the earliest and most impressive

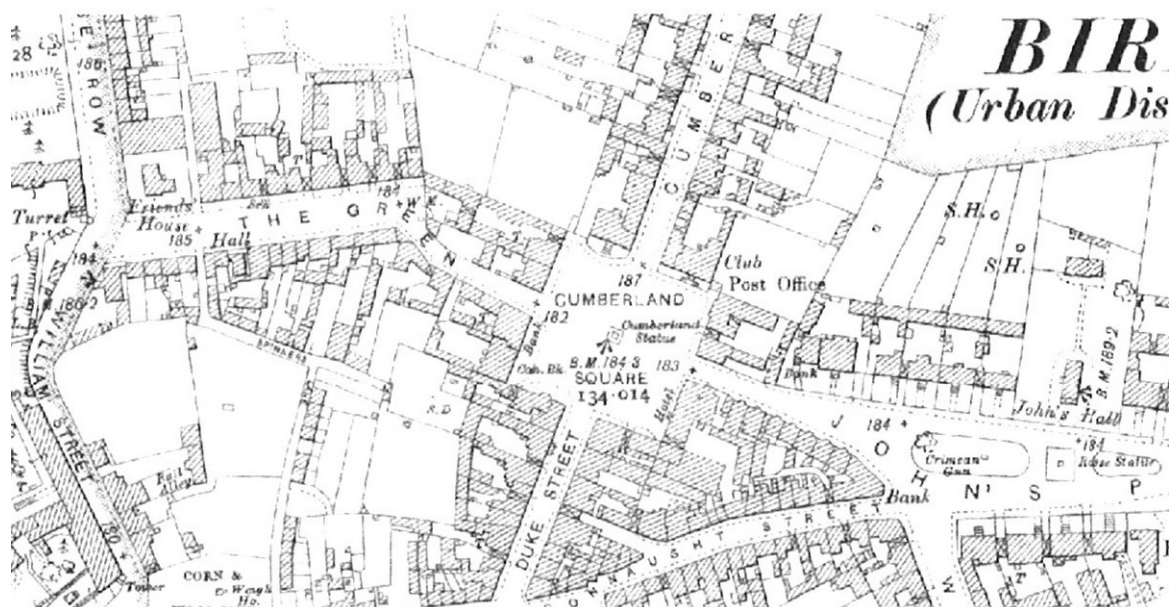


Plate 3: OS Map of Birr in 1897-1919



revivals is Christopher Wren's monument to the fire of London, built close to London Bridge - the point from which the fire is thought to have originated. This magnificent structure is almost twice as high as the early Roman columns and contains a cantilevered, open-well staircase.

Monumental columns were more common in cities, where they were used to commemorate military or naval victories, much like their Roman forerunners. Nelson was a popular subject in England and Ireland after the Battle of Trafalgar, and one of the most famous and impressive examples from this period is the Corinthian column supporting a statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square in London. A fluted Doric column was also erected to support a statue of the victorious admiral in Dublin's O'Connell Street. The Birr column was certainly intended as a pillar of victory, to honour the Duke of Cumberland for his victory over the Scots at Culloden.

### Monumental Columns in Ireland

While Nelson's Column in London did not contain a staircase, the Dublin column, also dedicated to Nelson, did. This provided a much loved landmark and a publicly accessible vantage point in the centre of Dublin until 1966 when it was partially destroyed by an IRA bomb and the remaining portion subsequently demolished. Ireland had three other acces-

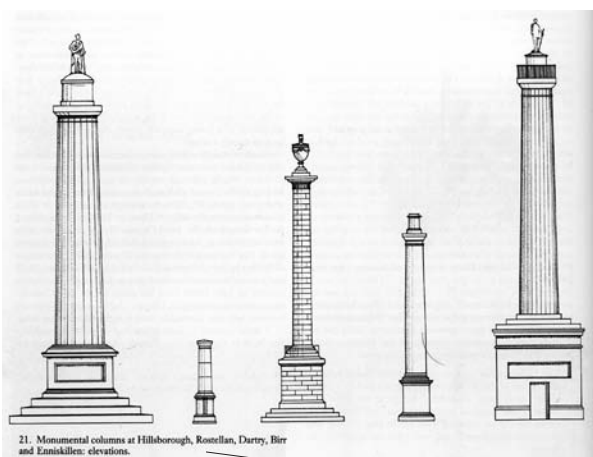


Plate 4: Comparative drawing of some of the surviving monumental columns in Ireland (from *The Follies & Garden Buildings of Ireland*.)



Plate 5: Nelson's Column, Dublin (1808-1966)

sible columns, at Enniskillen, Derry and Caledon, the latter two of which have also been destroyed by IRA bombs. Ireland is notable for a number of monumental columns situated in the countryside that provide the most interesting and highly romantic interpretation of this archetypal architectural form, detached completely from an urban context. Such examples are found in the countryside, at Darry, Co Monaghan, Hillsborough, Co Down and Birchfield, Co Clare, and the Phoenix Column in Phoenix Park, Dublin. All of these are much smaller in scale and do not contain staircases. The one remarkable exception being the Browne Clayton Column between Wexford and New Ross, which is large in scale, designed in the Corinthian order and contains a

staircase. Equally interesting are the columns of more modest scale that occur in smaller towns such as those at Birr, Co Offaly and Trim, Co Meath. Where they occur, these most urbane of architectural ornaments add refinement and antiquity, while creating a real sense of place and a central focus to the town. The column in Birr is also notable as being the oldest surviving column to have been built in Ireland and the first ever to have been built in this country.

### The Architect

Little is known of the short life of the draughtsman Samuel Chearnley (1717-1746). However, it is known that in October 1745, the twenty-eight-year-old Chearnley produced a remarkable, and fantastical, manuscript set of designs for garden buildings entitled *Miscelanea Structura Curiosa*. This collection of drawings was dedicated to his patron and distant cousin, Sir Laurence Parsons. Parsons, who was interested in architectural invention, inherited the Birr estate in 1740. By early January 1744 he had asked his cousin, whom he knew to share his interest in architecture, to collaborate with him on the design of the column for the Duke Cumberland who was at that time engaged in fighting the Jacobites in Scotland. Documentation found in the Armagh Public Library confirms Chearnley as the designer of the Cumberland Column, which sadly was to



Plate 6: The Cumberland Column circa 1900



Plate 7: Original drawing of the Cumberland Column signed by Chearnley found in Armagh Public Library

be his only built project. A letter written by a William Sturgeon to the Bishop of Meath, of 24 March 1743, quotes Chearnley as saying: *I have always been a lover of architecture but this is the first essay which Sir Laurence has put to me.* This makes explicit both Parsons' patronage of Chearnley, but also could be said to hint at their collaborative relationship. This letter also contains Chearnley's acknowledgement of Claude Perrault's *Ordnances des Cinq Espèces des Colonnes*, translated into English in 1708, as the source for his design of his column in Birr. Another contemporary reference to the building of the column appeared in Faulkner's Dublin Journal of 3 June 1746 which notes:

*Sir Laurence Parsons, Bart and other Gentlemen in the King's County, from a Principle of Loyalty, are going at their own expense to raise a marble pillar, fifty foot high, with a statue of the Duke of Cumberland, on the top of it, in honour of his Royal Highness, for defeating and vanquishing the rebels at Culloden-Muir.*

The laying of the Cumberland Column's foundation stone – the first public Monument of Gratitude to Cumberland – is again described in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* of 8 November 1746, as follows:

*The Gentlemen of the King's County assembled at Parsonstown...and as they had before subscribed a large sum for a pillar and statue of his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, they thought no day more proper to lay the first stone of the monument of their gratitude to this young hero, who defended their civil and religious liberties.*

### The Column

The column was not in fact constructed of marble but from a local sandstone. George Wilkinson describes the column in his *Practical Geology and Ancient Architecture of Ireland* of 1844 as having been constructed - *of sandstone from the south-east of the county, and has either been coarsely put together, or it has perished and fractured at the joints.* At the time of its erection, the column was described as being fifty feet high and as costing £182.14s. A poem written by Birr poet, John de Jean Frazer, sometime between 1839 and 1852, refers to a pond or deep moat of water around the Cumberland Column as follows:

*There stood in a square in our fair, old town  
Begirt by a deep moat of water  
A column to Cumberland, damned  
to renown Whose statue on top, in  
'study' called 'brown' Still seemed to  
gloat on slaughter...*

The moat, it is reported, was fed by a conduit leading from the nearby Glebe Fields. Though a map of 1822 shows a water course conveying water to the square, there is no evidence that it fed a moat around the column, as the configuration is essentially the same as it is today. Also, there is no visible archaeological evidence to substantiate the claim that there was a moat. Perhaps, therefore, it was just poetic licence?



Plate 8: Head of the Duke of Cumberland on display in Birr Castle

### The Statue

The statue was designed by John and Henry Cheere of London, but not everything went according to plan. It is reported that when a crack appeared in the Duke's leg, the Cheere's insisted that it could be repaired by a local plumber! When new, it was described by Thomas Wright, author of *Louthiana*, as a *fine Doric pillar*. Erected at the same time as the square that surrounds it, the column relates well to its formal urban setting, acting as a principal eye catcher on the main axis of the town. To some, particularly oppressed Catholics, the statue to the Protestant champion and so-called *Butcher of Culloden*, was an unpopular imperial symbol. William Laffan in his essay entitled *From Paper to Pillar: Miscelanea Structura Curiosa and the Cumberland Column*, in the recently reprinted version of Samuel Chearnley's *Miscelanea Structura Curiosa* (2005), says the following about the removal of Cumberland's statue:

*Cumberland's appreciation of the delights of garden buildings, so appropriate in a Birr context, did not, however, save his statue on*



*Chearnley's column. Scottish (presumably Highland) soldiers stationed at the nearby Crinkhill barracks took exception to his presence overlooking the square and in 1915 the statue was removed. A pretext for this action was found on safety grounds. Cracks had appeared, presumably those in the Duke's leg which the Cheeres had dismissed a century and a half previously. The removal of the statue is documented in early photographs [by George Morrison and MI Carroll] ...Cumberland thus became one of the first imperial statues to be removed in Ireland, many years before Nelson was less ceremoniously toppled. There is no small irony, of course, in the fact that it was done to placate Scottish rather than Irish sensitivities...so the column is now bereft of the divisive figure of Cumberland....*

Reference to the statue's removal appeared in the *King's County Chronicle* of 25 March 1915, in an article entitled - *The Birr Duke Deposed*. This account describes how the Urban Council engaged a firm of Northampton steeplejacks to examine it. It is unclear, however, where Laffan's references to Scottish soldiers comes from.

Cumberland Square was renamed Emmett Square in 1922 in honour of the Nationalist leader, Robert Emmett who was executed in 1803.

### **Cultural Significance**

The historic and cultural significance of the Cumberland Column is considerable as it is the first monumental column to have been erected in Ireland. Its urban function as a central landmark and eye catcher is equally unique for a small county town setting in Ireland. It is also the only built work of a young and imaginative architect, whose early death denied the country of what promised to be a notable architectural talent. Of the remaining nine columns to be found in Ireland only two are situated in towns (Birr and Trim) and of these terms, the column marks an important axis

the formal urban setting of the Birr column is by far the most impressive. In town planning terms, the column marks an important axis and provides the central focus of the town that relates well to the surrounding buildings and as such, is of considerable significance to Birr. On account of its age, type, rarity and streetscape contribution, the Birr Column can be considered to be a structure of national importance and of considerable cultural significance.

### 3.0 GENERAL DESCRIPTION & CONDITION

#### General

The structure stands on a tall stone plinth with delicate mouldings to plinth and cornice. Above this rises the column in twenty six course between base and capital, all finely detailed in an accurate Roman Doric style below the plain Doric capital. Early photographs, prior to the more recent erosion and deterioration, show the great delicacy and sophistication of the carved detail to the plinth, base and capital. Of the three great classical orders the Doric is the most masculine and robust, but the least elegant in its proportion. It is the style generally favoured for monumental columns as the detailing of the capital requires little more than a simple corbel, with no complicated overhanging volutes such as are found in the Ionic and Corinthian styles. The proportions of columns within each order are carefully calculated as factors of the diameter of the column shaft, wherein the Corinthian order results in a more slender column than either the Ionic or the Doric. Doric columns encompass a range of proportions from the squatter Greek Doric to the more elegant Roman Doric. The Birr column is a superb example of the latter and the combination of the tall plinth, Roman Doric shaft, statue base and statue, resulted in a structure of considerable elegance and refinement. An original design drawing of the column, signed by Samuel Chearnley survives, albeit in a poor condition, in the Armagh Public Library. As very few original drawings survive of ornamental structures of this type, the Birr column drawing is extremely rare and adds to its overall significance. The drawing is beautifully executed displaying Chearnley's impressive draughtsmanship and is very true to the structure as built. The only differences being the raised panels to the plinth of the column and the decorative carving to the plinth of the statue, both of which occur on the drawing but were omitted in the erection of the structure.



Plate 9: General view of the Cumberland Column today

#### The Statue Today

The abacus supports a circular stone plinth that originally supported the statue of the Duke produced by Henry Cheere. It was and was approximately one and a half times life size and was composed of plaster cast with a lead surface. Turn of the century photographs of the column in the Lawrence Collection, show the structure with the statue of the Duke still in place, resplendent in the costume of a Roman emperor, left foot projecting, right arm extended, left hand on hip, and on his head the laurel leaf garland of the victor. A wonderful, and very deliberate exercise in pomp, Cheere was an important sculptor and the loss of the statue is regrettable. The head, which is owned by the Hunt Museum, is currently on loan to the Earl of Rosse and housed in Birr Castle, while part of the arm is to be found the Birr public library.

### Historic Deterioration

Today the structure remains largely intact, but eroded and deteriorating due to rusting cramps and inappropriate former repairs. Irish sandstones are not the most durable of building materials, and the choice of a local sandstone for the Cumberland column is surprising. Notwithstanding this general reservation, it should be stated that the structure has survived remarkably well considering that it has been standing for over 260 years. George Wilkinson's comments that the structure - has either been coarsely put together, or it has perished and fractured at the joints is interesting having been made during the 1840s when the structure was about ninety years old. This comment may have been referring more to weathered pointing than failure in the stone, although being the leading authority on Irish building stones, Wilkinson would generally have disapproved of Irish sandstone as a viable material for facing buildings.



Plate 10: Joints exposed where mortar has fallen out

The Lawrence print of around 1900 shows the column in high resolution and from this it appears that the structure has been re-pointed using a dark mortar. A similar dark mortar has been used to make a number of small patch repairs that follow no logical pattern and may be bullet holes caused by indignant nationalists who did not approve of the Duke who was a brother of King George II.



Plate 11: Damage to the plinth caused by the expansion of iron cramps

### Current Condition

Today the main structural problems appear to be caused by deterioration in the iron cramps that are rusting, expanding and shearing off fragments of stone in the ashlar facings of the plinth. In several places the rusting cramps have been exposed where the stone has fallen away and in others hard mortar repairs suggest that this may have been a long term problem. In all cases the failing cramps should be cut out and stone indents inserted to replace lost stone. From the ground there does not appear to be similar problems, however, closer inspection will be necessary to determine this conclusively. There are also a significant number of mortar repairs, which have been carried out using hard cement rich mixes. These



Plate 12: Damaging vegetation growing in the cracks where the mortar is missing and the stone has blown



are not only unsightly but are causing accelerated weathering to adjoining areas, due to the differential hardness between the soft stone and the hard repair. The other problem is in the hard cement rich mortar that has also been used to re-point the structure. This is also unsightly and has the deteriorating effect of trapping moisture within the structure and like the plastic, mortar repairs, can cause acceleration of weathering to adjoining areas of stone. The guiding principal in masonry construction and repair is that the mortar should always be softer than the building unit (stone or brick). This is to allow for the gradual absorption and evaporation of moisture and ensure that the joint will weather back gradually before the arrises and faces of the adjoining masonry.



Plate 13: stone blown by expanding iron cramps

The horizontal weathering surfaces to the plinth (and most likely to the abacus and cornice of the capital) are also suffering from general weathering caused by rainwater run off. To slow down this process some form of weathering should be installed either in the form of a lime mortar flaunching or lead sheet. During recent years a number of fittings have been attached to the column for use as a support for display banners and Christmas decorations. These and the electrical switch gear should all be removed as they detract visually from the structure and are causing damage to the fabric.

### High Level Survey

A high level survey was carried out on 11 February 2009 by John Rainey and Company, a firm of steplejacks and experienced conser-

vation stonemasons. Ladders were erected up the side of the column and the top of the structure inspected in detail. The survey found loose stonework, open joints and plant growth



Plate 14: Delaminated surface of the sandstone column

mainly in the circular plinth of the former statue base. Action is required and John Rainey and Company has recommended that for health and safety reasons the high level stonework should be consolidated as a matter of urgency. The survey also revealed that the sculptor's name, CHEERE, was carved in large Roman script into the topmost stone of the statue base

### Reinstating a Statue?

In more recent years there have been several proposals for the replacement of a statue on the column. In his 1965 article on Birr for *Country Life*, *The Irish Town at its Best*, the architectural historian Mark Girouard noted the then current desire to erect a statue of St. Brendan on the column was a neat way of simultaneously exorcising its political connections and restoring its visual point. In more recent times, William Laffan also speculated on the matter in his essay *From Paper to Pillar* mentioned above. Following his account of how the Duke was removed by the disgruntled Scottish soldiers in 1915, he suggested another interesting alternative to the divisive figure of Cumberland, which was to leave the column unadorned as a symbolic memorial to the tragic early death of its young designer:

*Perhaps then, like Pearce's [Edward Lovett Pearce] column to his own memory, the trun*

*cated pillar, that evocative emblem of a life cut short, may be far better seen as an appropriate memorial to the elusive, but delightful, figure of its architect Samuel Chearnley.*

In conservation terms, there is a guiding principle to *conserve as found*, in order to allow a building or structure to tell its own story for locals and visitors alike. The only statue that could, however, be justified for reinstatement on conservation grounds would be the Duke of Cumberland. However, as only fragments of the Duke survive, this is no longer possible. To erect another statue of a different subject would require planning permission and would doubtless prove to be controversial.

### Structural Implications

Reinstating any statue on a 250 year old column of this type would also require some very extensive and onerous investigation to assess the capacity of the supporting structure. The additional weight of a new statue is not so much the issue as the wind loading and pressure this would exert at the fixing points. For any structural engineer to take responsibility for the design of these details, extensive investigation and opening up would be required to provide information on bonding of the masonry, the condition and frequency of the metal cramps, the nature of the foundations; and the accurate surveying of any deformation in vertical alignment. Some of these investigations would involve opening up or taking down parts of the structure and would be expensive to carry out. As authors of this report, we would not recommend this course of action. It would be hard to justify the expense of these costly works, with no guarantee that such invasive action would result in the column being able to support a new statue.

### Setting

The original design drawing for the column shows the structure standing on a slight mound with nothing indicated to enclose or surround the base. By the end of the nineteenth century

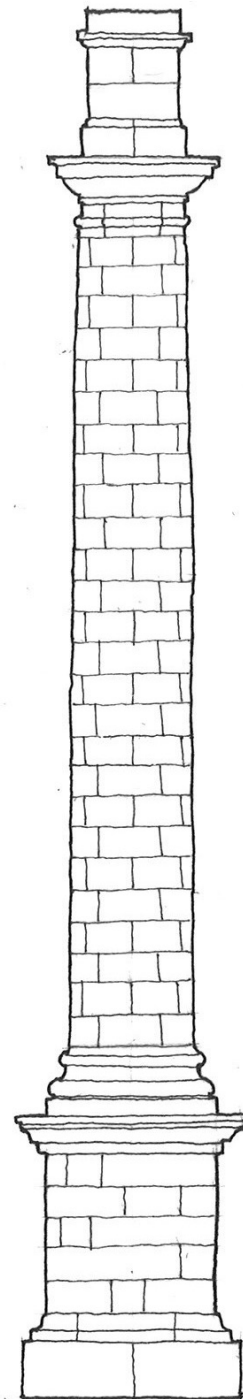


Plate 17: Elevational drawing of the column today

a square enclosure had been erected, no doubt to protect the plinth of the column from damage by carts and carriages in its exposed location at the centre of the open square. This square-planned enclosure consisted of wrought iron metal railings set in a low stone plinth with cast iron gas lamp standards located at each corner. This effectively hides the base from view and its subsequent removal is to be commended. Three sides of the low stone kerb of the railings survive, together with inappropriate replica historic light standards. As the column is now incorporated into a safe pavement area, there is scope to upgrade and improve this area, to provide an interesting seating area and stopping off point at the base of the structure.

### Conclusions & Recommendations

While the column is not in any serious structural risk, the level of deterioration is significant, particularly in the on-going damage being caused by the rusting cramps and hard mortar repairs and re-pointing that have been carried out over the years. The weathering of horizontal shelves is also an urgent requirement to slow down the steady erosion due to rainfall. It is essential

that all of these matters be addressed as soon as possible to arrest the on-going deterioration of the structure and improve its presentation in the square. The immediate area around the base would also benefit from upgrading and during this exercise, more attractive and



Plate 16: The degraded area at the base of the column

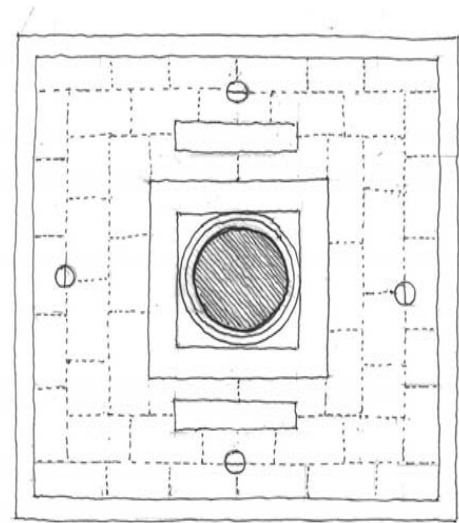


Plate 17: Plan showing the proposed upgrading of the area around the base of the column

less intrusive lighting should be installed and a pleasant urban stopping-off point created at the heart of this attractive historic square.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- The monumental column, formerly known as the Cumberland Column, is an important historic landmark that adorns the formal square found at the centre of the town of Birr.
- Erected in 1747 as a Pillar of Victory to commemorate the military successes of the Duke of Cumberland, it is the oldest monumental column constructed in Ireland.
- Around a dozen columns of this type were erected - some in designed, *natural-style* landscapes, others in cities, and two in small towns, one of which is Birr.
- The column was designed by Samuel Chearnley, a promising young architect who was patronised by the local land owner, Sir Laurence Parsons. Chearnley, who died in his late-twenties, left a beautifully executed design drawing for the column that survives in the archives of the Armagh Public Library.
- Originally the column supported a statue of the Duke of Cumberland, sculpted by the brothers John and Henry Cheere of London. This was removed in 1915 and only the head now in Birr Castle, while an arm is on display the local library.
- Built of local sandstone the column is an elegant example of Roman Doric that dominates the fine formal square found in the centre of Birr, where it provides an impressive and highly sophisticated urban landmark.
- Due to its age, rarity, refined design and urban presence, the Birr Column is of national importance and considerable architectural and cultural significance.
- In view of its age and sandstone construction, it is remarkable that the column has stood for more than 260 years. Currently, however, it is seriously weathered and deteriorating due to rusting clamps and hard cement mortar repairs and re-pointing
- The current setting of the column is quite poor and could and should be remodelled to provide an attractive stopping off point with some seating and lighting.
- An urgent programme of masonry repairs is required to remove all previous cement rich interventions and to replace them using lime and sand mortars. The rusting cramps should be cut out and stone indents be inserted to replace areas of damaged stone.
- Without a full and careful programme of masonry repairs the stonework will continue to deteriorate and the future of this impressive structure will be seriously threatened.
- The loose stonework and plant growth found at the top of the column during the high level survey pose a health and safety risk, which should be addressed urgently.
- The proposal to reinstate a new statue is not recommended, as this would require expensive and invasive structural exploration and analysis to test the structural feasibility, with no guarantee of success.
- Miscellaneous items of work required include - installing lightning protection, installing lead flashing to all weathered ledges and upgrading the immediate setting.





*Howley Hayes Architects is recognised for its work in both contemporary design and for the sensitive conservation of historic buildings. The practice has been responsible for the conservation and reuse of numerous buildings of national and international cultural significance, several of which have received RIAI, Opus or Europa Nostra Awards. Environmental sustainability through energy efficient design, in both conservation and the design of new buildings, is of central importance to the work of the practice. Under the RIAI Conservation Accreditation System, Howley Hayes Architects is accredited as a Conservation Practice Grade 1 and its director James Howley is a Conservation Architect Grade 1. Howley Hayes has (to-date) been responsible for over ninety conservation reports and plans for clients such as the Heritage Council, the World Monument Fund, the Office of Public Works plus numerous local authorities and private clients.*