

Chapter 4: Built Heritage

Strategic Aim:

To protect, conserve and manage Birr's buildings, areas, structures, sites and features of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest, by promoting the understanding, enhancement and appropriate development of these assets in order to instigate a heritage-led regeneration of the town.

4.1 Introduction

Birr's built and natural heritage are key and distinctive assets that can be used positively to promote a positive image of the town and attract visitors. The built heritage is a unique resource and represents an irreplaceable expression of the richness and diversity of the town's past.

As stated in the Offaly County Development Plan, our *'built heritage assets are a non-renewable resource that contributes to our understanding of the past. It is important that our components of our built heritage such as our historic planned towns, heritage towns, protected structures, Geashill Architectural Conservation Area, sites and monuments, country houses and demesnes, industrial architecture, vernacular structures and monastic sites are valued and protected for future generations.'*

Accordingly, this Plan will seek to manage and conserve Birr's heritage assets for the benefit of present and future generations. This plan also seeks to promote Birr's heritage assets as generators of economic development and urban regeneration while adhering to the relevant statutory obligations.



Figure 4.1 The Early Medieval Church ruins of St. Brendan, Church Street
(Source: Stephen Callaghan)

4.2 Architectural Heritage

4.2.1 Record of Protected Structures

The Council intends to protect all structures within the County Offaly Record of Protected Structures (RPS) that are of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest. The County Offaly RPS accompanies the Offaly County Development Plan.



Figure 4.2 Cumberland Column, Emmet Square

4.2.2 Architectural Conservation

Birr is a designated 'Georgian Heritage Town' 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 aim of the Council will be based on conserving and maintaining the character and attractiveness of Birr by carefully managing development, in particular, in the town centre and within Crinkill village.

4.2.3 Vernacular Structures

There are some structures within this plan area that are of moderate scale and are important for a number of local reasons e.g. local history or building techniques etc. Individually, or as part of a group of buildings or street, such structures may contribute positively to the character of the area or townscape, which can be diminished by their loss. It is an aim of the Council to encourage the protection, appreciation and appropriate revitalisation / reuse rather than demolition of the vernacular heritage of Birr including their setting and features.

4.2.4 Birr Workhouse

In 2008, a study was commissioned by Offaly County Council supported by the Heritage Council to investigate the current condition and use of workhouses in Ireland generally and Birr Workhouse specifically. The study provided an assessment of how workhouses may be adapted for future uses. The Birr Workhouse experienced fire damage during the last plan period resulting in the building falling further into disrepair. The workhouse has potential to be restored for multiple uses. Any future proposal for the Birr Workhouse shall involve consultation and engagement with Offaly County Council and shall consider all sources of funding to safeguard the structure.

4.3 Archaeological Conservation

It is the Council's aim to protect Birr's archaeological heritage from damage. It is also an aim of the Council to secure the preservation of all archaeological monuments included in the Record of Monuments and Places, together with any other sites and their settings discovered since the publication of the Record.

4.3.1 Zones of Archaeological Potential in Birr

Zones of Archaeological Potential in Birr town are identified in Figure 4.3, including an Urban Archaeology Zone. However, it is accepted that many other sites may remain beneath the surface and possibly may become uncovered following development/excavation work (refer to www.archaeology.ie).

4.3.2 Urban Archaeology

In 1986, an Urban Archaeology Study of Birr town was undertaken by the Department of the Environment which has led to an Urban Archaeology Zone being delineated (refer to Figure 4.4) Elsewhere, however, deposits are likely to survive and there is a strong likelihood of recovering house foundations, refuse pits, industrial area, and workshops of 16th and 17th century date.

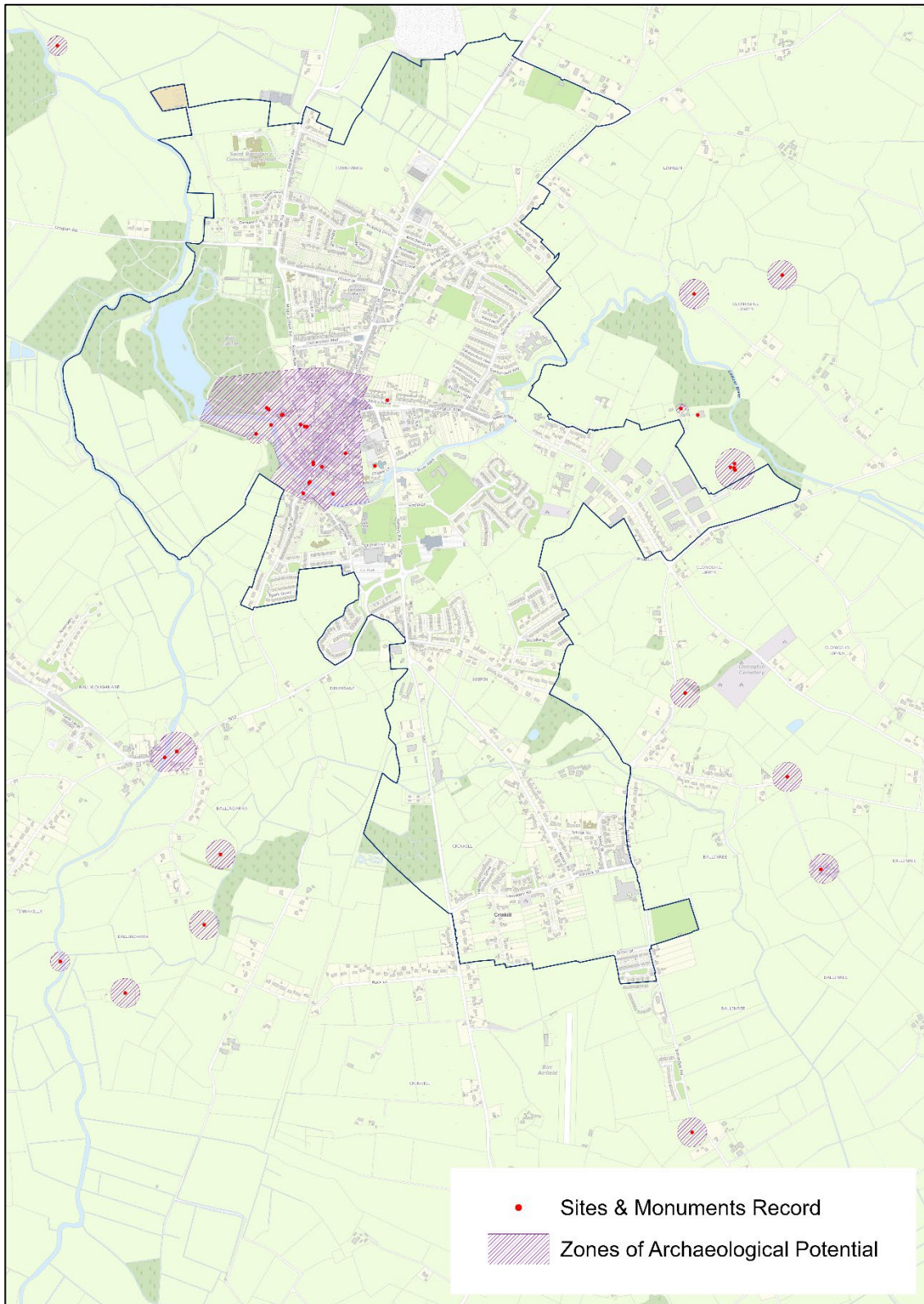


Figure 4.3 Zones of Archaeological Potential

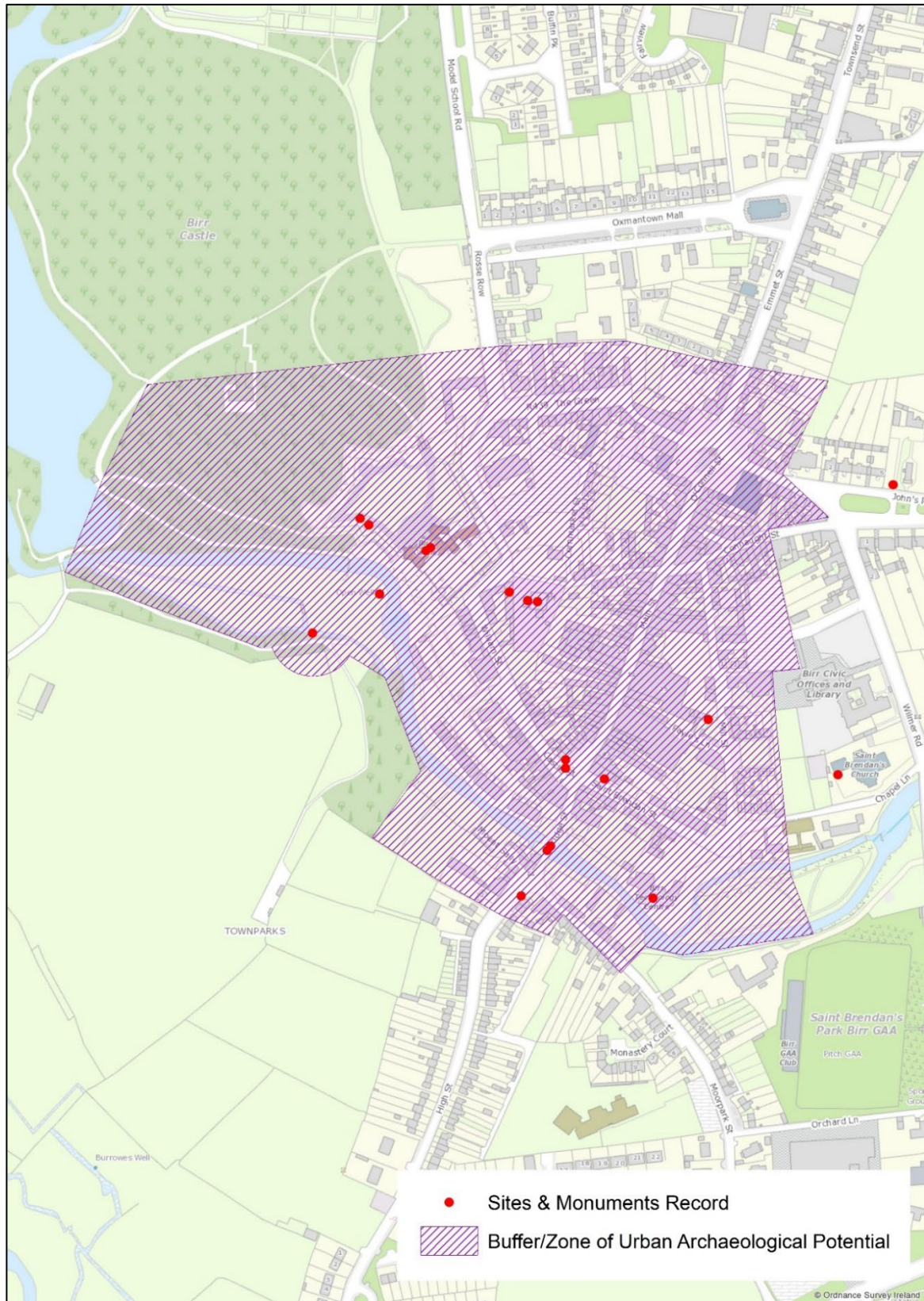


Figure 4.4 Zone of Urban Archaeological Potential

4.3.3 Birr's Burial Grounds

A total of nine burial grounds can be found within a short distance of Birr town. These burial grounds include St. Brendan's Old Graveyard, Bully's Acre, Birr Military Cemetery, Clonoghill Cemetery, Workhouse Cemetery, Quakers Burial Ground, Presbyterian Burial Ground (Crotty's Church), and Burial Grounds to the north of St. Brendan's Catholic Church (Parish Priests' and Nuns' burial grounds). The Council aims to protect the historical burial grounds within Birr town and encourage their maintenance in accordance with conservation principles.

4.3.4 Built & Archaeological Heritage Climate Change

Predicted changes to the Irish climate will have implications for built and archaeological heritage. Wetter winters and drier summers along with increasingly powerful storms have potential to give rise to structural damage of Birr's built and archaeological heritage. The Council will consider the Built & Archaeological Heritage, Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan (2019) prepared under the National Adaptation Framework in this regard. The Council recognises the importance of climate proofing structures and work has been carried out on St. Brendan's Medieval Church and Birr Courthouse in recent years to plan for works to make them more robust.

4.3.5 Consultation with Relevant Bodies

In the interest of conserving Birr's buildings, structures and sites of special interest, the Council will ensure that all planning applications for development, refurbishment, and restoration works etc. are referred on receipt to the relevant statutory bodies. The Council will take cognisance of the advice and recommendations of the statutory bodies, both in respect of whether or not to grant planning permission, and in respect of the conditions to which permission, if granted, should be subject. Wherever practicable, the Council will encourage the provision of public access to sites identified in the Record of Monuments and Places.

4.4 Built Heritage Policies

It is Council Policy to:

BHP-01 Encourage the rehabilitation, renovation, climate-proofing and re-use of existing protected structures, where appropriate, over the demolition of same and new-build on-site.

BHP-02 Encourage the rehabilitation, renovation, climate-proofing and re-use of existing vernacular structures that are not listed on the Record of Protected Structures, over the demolition of same and new-build on-site.

BHP-03 Protect and enhance the urban form of Birr including the character of streetscapes, vistas and squares for example, Market Square, Emmet Street and Square, Oxmantown Mall, Townsend Street, The Green, John's Place, Compton Row, Newbridge Street, Connaught Street, O'Connell Street, Main Street, Castle Street, St. Brendan Street and Crinkill village core.

BHP-04 Protect all structures in Birr that are listed in the County Offaly Record of Protected Structures that are of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest in Birr.

BHP-05 Encourage contemporary development within Birr where the applicant can successfully demonstrate that any proposal will not negatively detract from the special character of the existing built environment.

BHP-06 Ensure that full consideration is given to the protection of archaeological heritage when undertaking, approving or authorising development in order to avoid unnecessary conflict between development and the protection of archaeological heritage.

BHP-07 Have regard to the Zones of Archaeological Potential as shaded on Figures 4.3 and 4.4, and to ensure that planning applications are referred to the appropriate prescribed bodies.

BHP-08 Protect the historical burial grounds within Birr town and encourage their maintenance in accordance with conservation principles.

4.5 Built Heritage Objectives

It is an objective of the Council to:

BHO-01 Secure, where feasible and appropriate, the protection of the character of the existing original carriage archways/access-ways to the rear of existing properties.

BHO-02 Secure, where feasible, the protection of the character of structures of interest, which are part of the town's milling and distilling heritage.

BHO-03 Examine the feasibility of designating Architectural Conservation Areas in Birr over the plan period.