

Birr Courthouse

ARCHITECTURE



HSF Grant Scheme 2021: Final Report

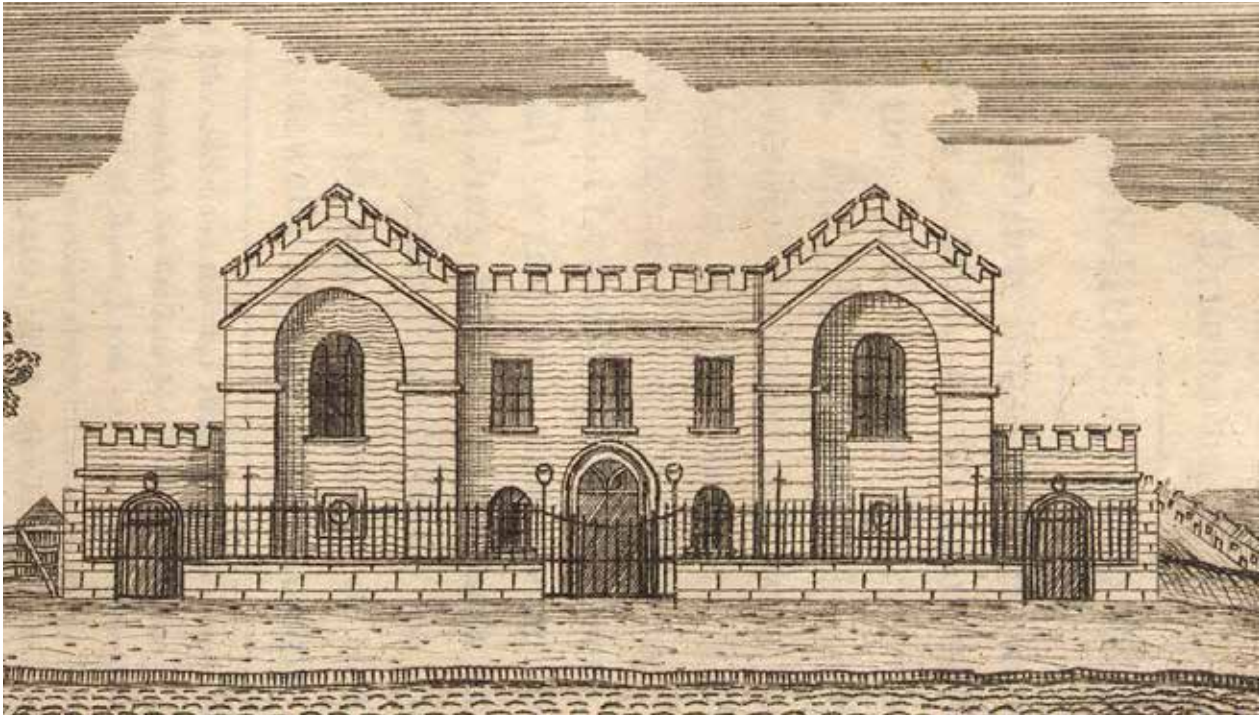
October 2021

This report was produced for Offaly County Council by Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture in October 2021 to determine the extent of repairs carried out at the Birr Courthouse for the Historic Structures Fund 2021. The overall project at this building is also part funded by the Heritage Council.

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1.0 Brief History & Significance

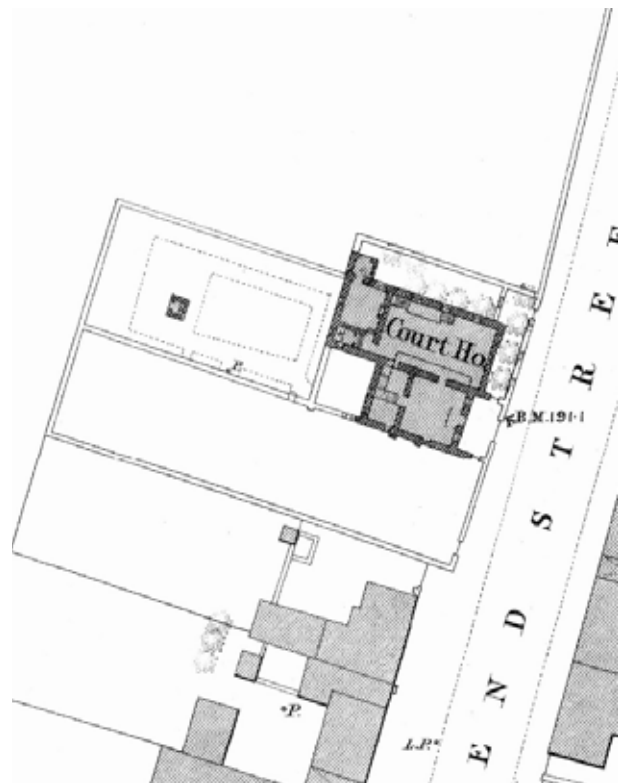


Elevation Drawing of Birr courthouse, 1826, Cooke

Birr Courthouse is located on the mainstreet of Birr town and was built before 1810 to replace an earlier sessions house. It was described by Thomas Lalor Cooke in his 1826 *Picture of Parsonstown* as a “handsome convenient building sufficiently extensive for the business of the county”. This is a building of significant social and historical significance to the surrounding area. The two-storey structure contains a double-height courtroom, judges office, jury room, smaller offices, a number of prison cells with vaulted ceilings, and a rear yard. The courtroom contains some of its original features including a timber balcony and ceiling rose (retained and refixed to the 1990s suspended ceiling) The judges room contains a cast-iron fireplace with a timber overmantle and decorated timber brackets.

This visually distinctive structure sits in a prominent position on the main street of Birr Town. Set back approximately 2.5m from the street behind a low wall with cast-iron railings, the elevation can be split into three bays. With its striking castellated parapet, attractive round-headed windows and the overall symmetry, Birr Courthouse makes for a memorable public building close to the heart of Birr Town.

Birr Courthouse is a protected structure, RPS: 49-252 with a Regional NIAH rating.



Courthouse on 1879 OSI Map



Birr courthouse is similar in style to Daingean Courthouse



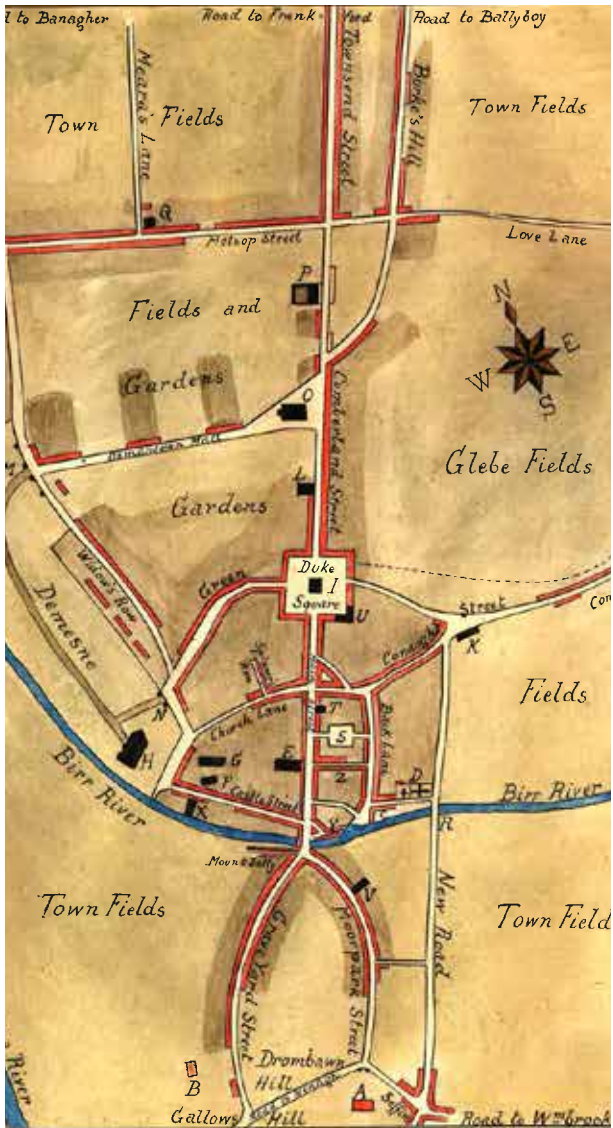
Rounded sash windows on front elevation, NIAH image



Original cast-iron railings to the front of the building, NIAH image



Historical photo of courthouse showing front porch, not original and since removed



1822 Map of birr Town with session house and prison marked with a 'P'



1909 25 inch Map of birr Town with courthouse highlighted in red

2.0 Purpose of Works & Project Details

A Concise Description of Birr Courthouse

Broadly speaking the two storey building can be divided into three bays, the prison range, the entrance range and, the court range. The roof consists of five sections, a central hipped roof over the entrance range, two longer hipped roofs with gable walls to the front facade on both the prison and the court range, and a small hipped roof and single storey lean to roof to the rear of the building.

All roofs in the building are of simple timber construction. It appears that most of the prison range is finished with natural slate with some displacement and damage around the chimneys. The eastern end of the prison range roof which drains into the valley gutter was possibly reslated in fibre cement slates given the smoother darker finish of the slates in this section along with an alternative clay ridge tile to the rest of the roof. The other four roof sections are finished in a variety of fibre cement tiles.

A significant amount of roof repairs took place in or around the 1970s, during which a completely new timber roof structure was constructed over the court range. It is believed that the fibre cement reslating occurred during this period. The suspended ceilings in the court and the jury room may also have been installed at this time. The eaves tiles running along the valley gutters appear newer, suggesting the lead valley gutters were laid at a later date.



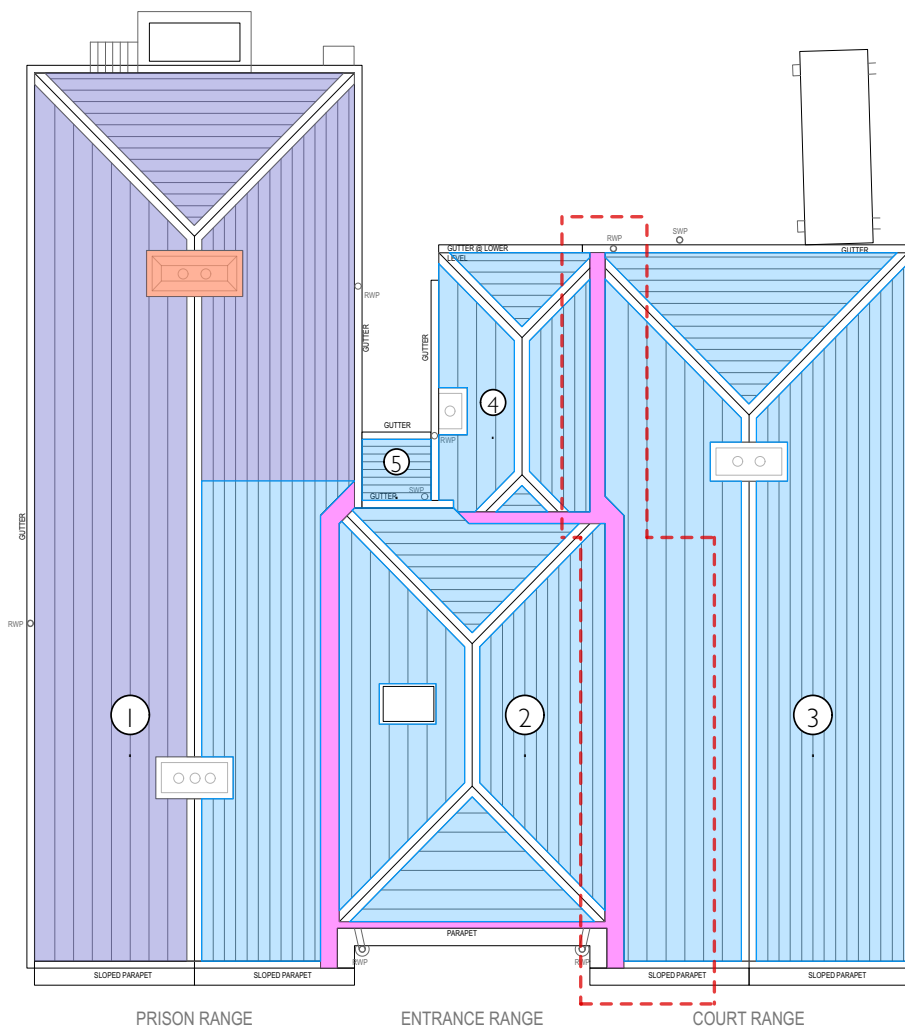
Front facade of courthouse facing east onto the main street of Birr town



Roof of prison range on right with mix of natural and fibre cement slates. Entrance range roof fully slated in fibre cement slates



Interior of former courtroom, significant decay visible in corner of timber gallery.



KEY : EXISTING ROOF & PREVIOUS WORKS

- Natural slates with some displacement around chimneys.
- Fibre cement slates, laid in approx. 1970s.
- Chimney: inspect and repair chimney stack.
- Lead valley gutters laid after 1970s.
- General areas of significant interior damage due to water ingress.

Existing roof plan showing extent of fibre cement slates on structure in light blue, area of suspected water ingress highlighted with red dashed line
Elevation of structure can be divided in three bays, Prison Range, Entrance Range, Court Range

Existing Condition

The building has been in a vacant state since it was last used as a public courthouse in 2013. A site visit was carried out in January 2020 by James Howley of Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture to assess the condition of the structure and compile a list of the most urgent repair and conservation works. A series of roof works were deemed the most essential to address the significant level of water ingress and subsequent damage to the interior of the structure. It was determined onsite that this work should be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

During the visit, one panel of the suspended ceiling in the courtroom was missing, allowing for an initial visual inspection of the roof structure above. Sections of the ceiling have fallen away in other rooms as a result of water damage. Three sections of wall plaster were previously removed in the courtroom, at both the gallery and ground floor level. Other than this, no recent opening up works have been carried out on the roof structure or the interior.

In the stairwell serving the court gallery, a portion of the plasterboard ceiling has collapsed. Flaking and bacterial growth can be seen on the wall adjoin-



Decay continues below to ground floor level and in direct contact with timber beams. Previous plaster opening up works visible beneath beam of gallery.

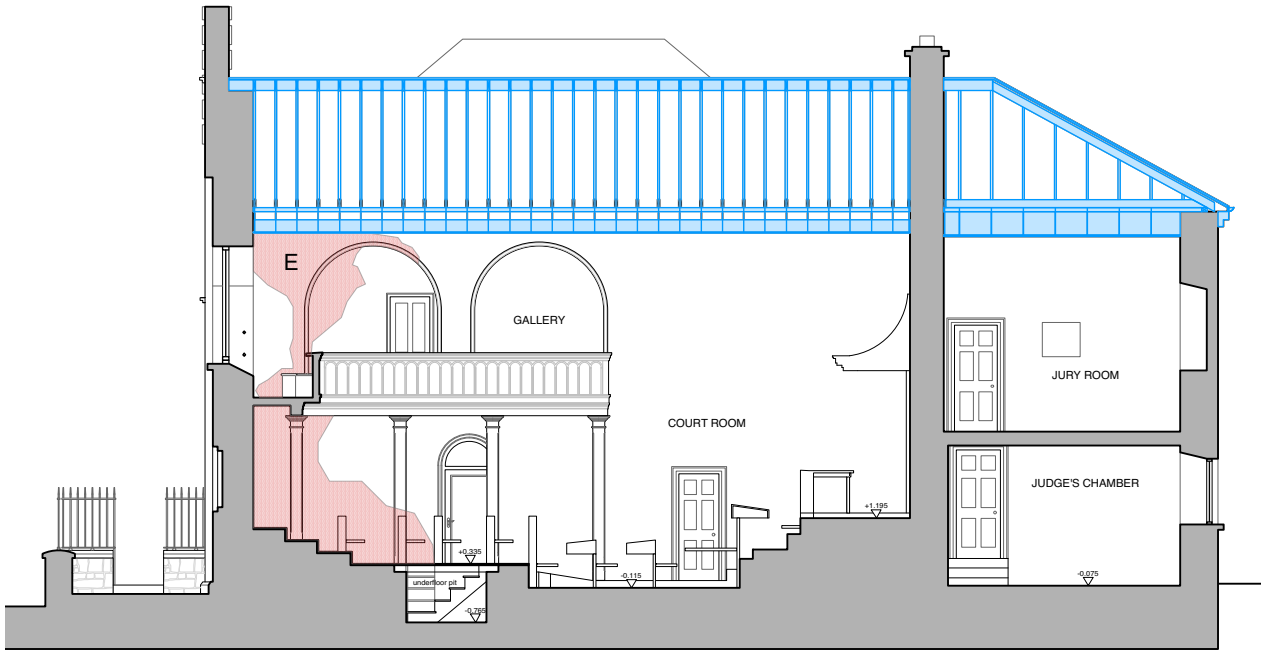


*Area of significant decay on corner of courtroom gallery
Water ingress and rot in direct contact with joinery*

ing the courtroom. Within the courtroom itself, this section of wall shows significant bubbling, missing sections of plaster, and bacterial growth in direct contact with the courtroom joinery. This has led to areas of timber decay. At ground floor level large cracks and mould can be seen in the plaster. On the other side of this wall at ground floor level flaking and bacterial growth can be seen in the ceiling above a fuse box, on the surrounding walls, and around an adjacent window reveal.

To the rear of the building, along the same central wall, a considerable section of the lath and plaster ceiling has collapsed at first floor level. Water damage and mould can be seen on the walls and skirting boards in a toilet on the level below.

A roof inspection was carried out from a MEWP in June 2021 and the roof was inspected by Howley Hayes Architecture and the roofing company Bar-bary / Skyline. The leadwork to the roof is relatively recent but has been installed poorly.



*Roof of courtroom replaced in late approx.1970s, shown in blue
Area in red denotes extent of decay, plaster cracking, and mould due to failing valley gutter*



Water ponding on the existing leadwork valleys



Poorly detailed leadwork - excessive water ingress noted at this location



View of the chimney on the west end of the south range roof



View of the leadwork valley between the south range and central range



View of the roofs from the MEWP



Area B: Collapsed lath and plaster ceiling



Collapsed ceiling in stairwell, decay around window.



Area D: Collapsed ceiling in stairwell



Area A: Mould and bubbling plaster in window reveal on ground floor.



Area D: Collapsed ceiling in stairwell



Birr courthouse prior to commencement of works on site

Completed Works

The main project consists of repair and conservation works to the roof of Birr courthouse along with works to the front facade, which includes the refurbishment of the windows. The Historic Structures Fund grant has contributed to the installation of new leadwork valleys on the courthouse roof, while the remaining works are being funded by other sources.

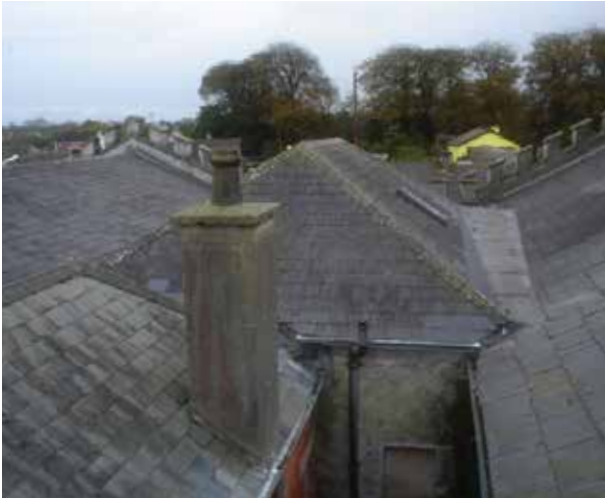
New Valley Gutters

The existing valley gutters were a 20th century failing addition and are not considered to be of historic value. They were not installed correctly, laid to shallow falls with shallow steps. They were removed and the timber boarding beneath was fully inspected and replaced where necessary with 18mm marine ply. New code 6 leadwork valleys were installed throughout detailed in full accordance with the Lead Development Association guidelines by experienced an experienced heritage contractor. The eaves level fibre cement slates running along the valley will were removed and replaced during this process. The lead & copper works were carried out in full accordance with all guidelines.

Details of On-site Supervision & monitoring

This protected structure dates from the early 1800s and is of significant architectural and social importance. It contains original furnishings of particular value and interest. Works were carried out with the utmost care and all necessary precautions to protect the existing historic fabric were taken throughout the entire construction process.

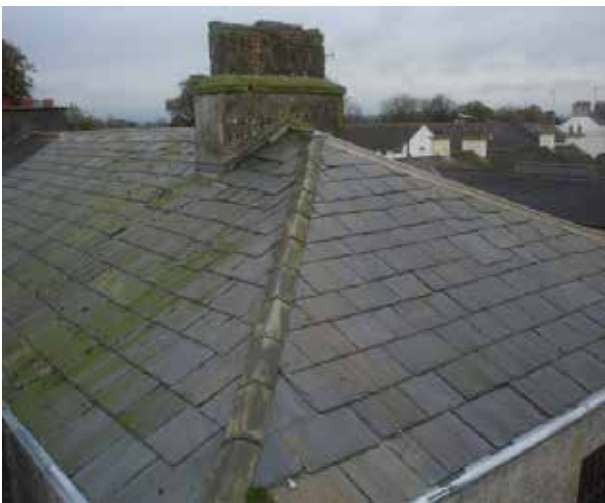
All works onsite were supervised by James Howley, a Grade 1 accredited Conservation Architect and his team. The works were carried out by a roofing contractor and subcontractor with previous experience working on historic protected structures and were completed in accordance with detailed documentation provided by the Conservation Architect. All works were fully photographed and documented by the architect and contractor while onsite. All works were fully inspected by the Conservation Architect during the construction process and before the contractor finishes onsite.



Approximately 60% of the roof has been reslated in fibre cement slates, lead valley gutters are a defective 1970's intervention



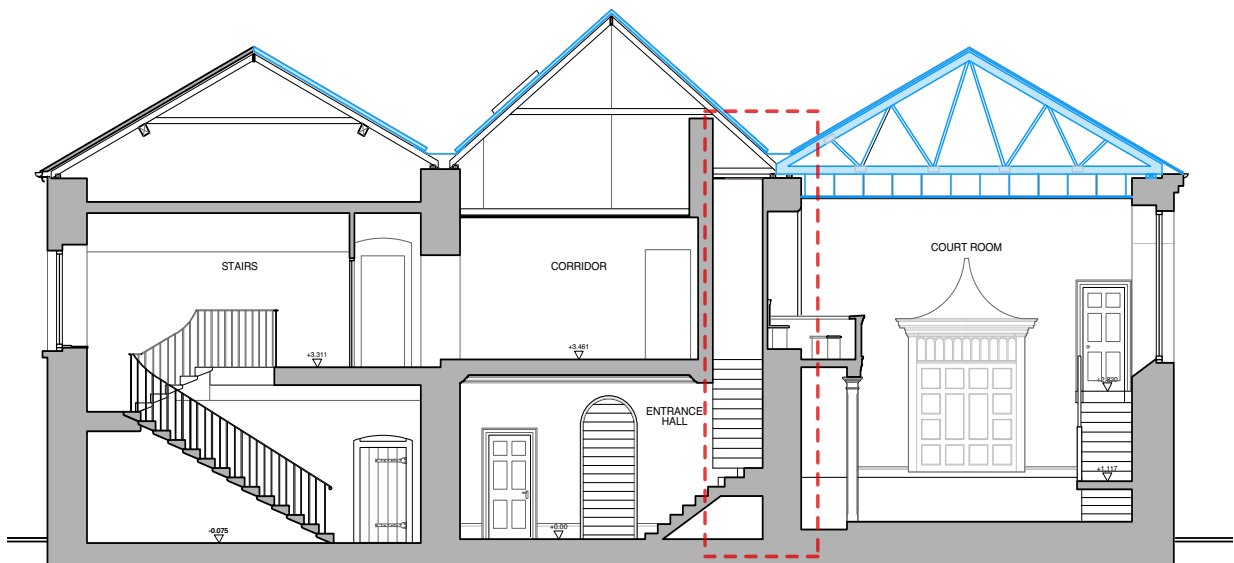
Cast-Iron rain water goods to be labeled, carefully dismantled, repaired, and reinstated



Natural slate on roof of prison range, some displacement around chimney

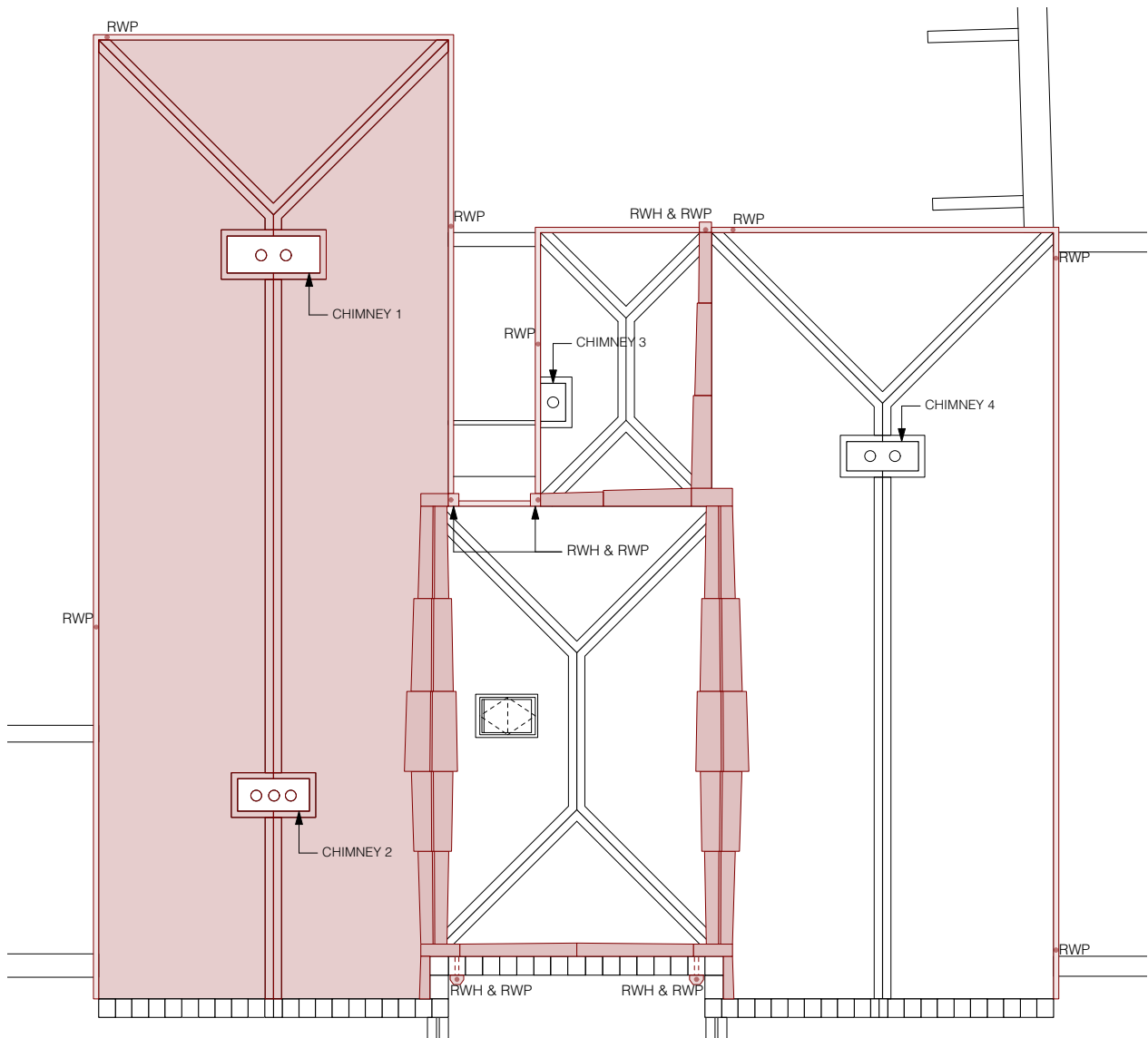
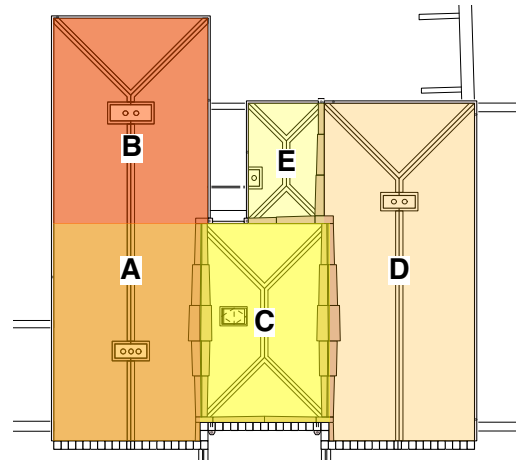


Cast-Iron rain water goods to be labeled, carefully dismantled, repaired, and reinstated

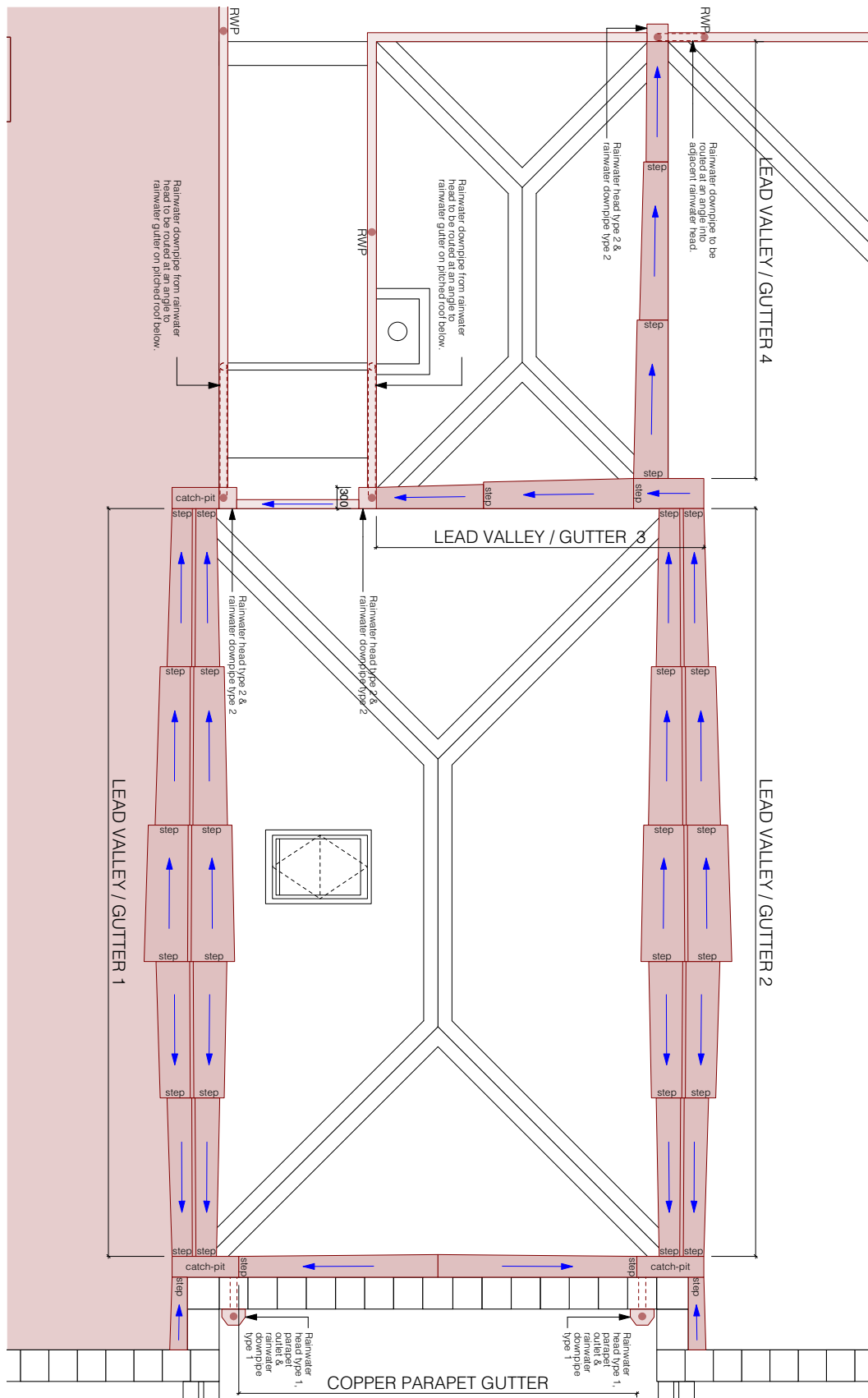


Blue denotes areas of fibre cement reslating and new timber roof structure over courtroom range
Red denotes general area of decay, plaster cracking, and mould due to failing valley gutter

3.0 Completed Works



Overall roof plan prepared by HHC Architecture



Central range roof plan prepared by HHC Architecture showing leadwork valleys to be replaced



Lead Valley / Gutter 1 - Before works were carried out.



Lead Valley / Gutter 1 - During works being carried out.



Lead Valley / Gutter 1 - Upon completion of works.



Lead Valley / Gutter 2 - Before & during the works.



Lead Valley / Gutter 2 - Upon completion of works.



Copper Parapet Gutter - Before & during works being carried out.



Copper Parapet Gutter - Upon completion of works.



Lead Valley / Gutters 3&4 - Before works were carried out.



Lead Valley / Gutters 3&4 - Before works were carried out.



Lead Valley / Gutters 3&4 - Upon completion of the works.

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.