

Former Town Hall / Cinema, Loughrea
Architectural Conservation Report May 2013

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View of former town hall from the south-east.



Main staircase.

DESCRIPTION

General

The building is a protected structure and is in the ACA¹ under the Local Area Plan for Loughrea. It has been briefly described in John Britton's Conservation Engineering Report of July 2012. He quotes the description in Galway County Council's Record of Protected Structures: *Seven-bay two-storey former town hall with ground floor blind arcades pierced by window opens and doors. c. 1860, The facade is part ashlar limestone and part rough dash rendered. Corner site. Converted to cinema c. 1940. Now unoccupied.*

The building was designed by Samuel Roberts Ussher in 1862 for the Marquess of Clanricarde on the site of the old Linen Hall. The builder was Henry Stone of Eyrecourt (cost £1500). There was a market on the lower floor and assembly rooms on the upper floor².

The building was donated to the townspeople in 1928. The Loughrea Town Commissioners recorded in their minutes that in October 1928 Lord Lascelles handed over ownership of the Town Hall to the people of Loughrea:

'It having come to our knowledge that Viscount Lascelles was pleased on the occasion of a recent visit to Portumna, accompanied by her Royal Highness, Princess Mary, to make a presentation to the people of Loughrea through the Rev. Mr O'Reilly, C.C., William Duffy, T.C., J Cunniffe and P Cahill. Co. Co.. of the yard and building known as the Town Hall, Loughrea and a gift of £1,000 towards its reconstruction and equipment, we instruct our Secretary to make a full and fitting record of this generous act in the minutes of our corporation. We place on record our deep sense of gratefulness and our warm appreciation of this generous Act, and on behalf of the people of Loughrea we tender to the Right Honourable Viscount Lascelles our heartfelt thanks' (LTC/1/9, p305).

The Directors of the Electric Light Co., were to act as Trustees, and had the power to raise further finance to put the Town Hall in proper repair.

During the years 1931-1939 the building was converted to a cinema and ballroom for Loughrea Town Hall Co., designed by Ralph Henry Byrne of W. H. Byrne and Son³. The contractor was John McNally and Co.

¹ Architectural Conservation Area

² Information from the Irish Architectural Archive (IAA)

³ The design drawings dated 1931 are available in the IAA

The building consists of two large halls, one above the other on the ground and first floors, with their long axes parallel to Barrack Street. They are served by a generous main staircase at the east end and a second staircase in the western part of an annex to the rear which is probably contemporary with the main building, or maybe built very shortly afterwards⁴. The eastern part of the annex containing toilets and cloakrooms appears to date from the 1930's when the building was converted to a cinema and ballroom, and extensive repairs and alterations were made.

Some of the original windows have been removed from their openings but are still on site. The external doors are in need of repair. The full repair and preservation of the external envelope is possible. The interior is remarkable. The survival of its early details and fittings make it a 'time capsule' capturing the atmosphere of the mid 20th century cinema and ballroom above.

The intact interior meant the building was chosen in recent times as a set for a period film.

Description of building parts

The building parts and their condition have already been described in John Britton's Report. The following descriptions attempt to give an architectural perspective.

Main building, roof

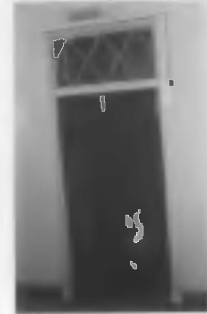
The roof consists of slates fixed to battens fixed to sarking boards supported on timber purlins supported in turn by steel trusses. There is apparently a bituminous felt laid on the boards and below the battens. These details would suggest the roof was recovered in the mid 20th century or later. Perhaps the slates were originally fixed directly to the sarking boards in the Scottish manner as seen by the author on large model farm buildings of c.1860 in east Galway, and on at least one church of similar date.

The projecting eaves have a timber soffit and fascia, and the projecting verge is also of timber. The topmost horizontal member carried across the gable to make the pediment feature also seems to be of timber, though with a metal flashing above it. Much of this timber is in poor condition.



Detail of pediment

External panelled door from inside



Main building, walls

The cut stone of the ground floor street facades is finely jointed and pointed in lime mortar. The roughcast render at the upper level was not closely inspected but its appearance and the detail at window reveals suggest cement based render. There is a smooth plaster band and moulded cornice below the eaves.

Main building, openings

Ground floor windows and doors have cut stone external lintels on the street elevations. Sills are of cut stone. Upper windows appear to have external lintels of reinforced concrete (judging from appearance of exposed spalling lintel above a window towards the centre of the Barrack St elevation). The original two-leaf 5-panel external doors survive on the front elevation, although the eastern door has been altered to two leaves of 4 panels to accommodate the raised level of the internal floor at this end of the building. The original attractive timber latticed rectangular glazed panels above the doors are also extant.

Original window sashes have been removed from their openings but remain on site. Upper windows are 6/6 pane sliding sash type, ground floor windows are 6 pane over one large clear pane. The Church St window has an 8 pane light over two 3 pane casements.

As noted in John Britton's Report windows and doors require attention but are not beyond repair.

⁴ This part of the annex appears on the c.1890 OS map

Main building, interior

The building interior is fascinating. It has not been altered since the time of its fit-out as a cinema in the 1930's. Features dating from the time of building in the 1860's remain but the details and fittings from the later period dominate. Early features include panelled double doors and moulded architraves and panelled shutters on ground floor windows. The main staircase with its terrazzo finish and flat carved timber balusters dates to the later period as do the cast iron framed cinema seats which are extant on the ground floor (though no longer in position). The glazed doors from the ballroom to the main stairs also seem later. The more decorative cast iron framed seats lining the walls in the ballroom may be earlier?

Early light switches and fittings, and early radiators hark back to another era at the detail level. The projection room equipment is of special interest to particular enthusiasts.



Ballroom.



Ballroom seating

*Door from ballroom to main stair.
2 original window sashes.*



1st floor fireplace in annex



Ticket hatch in main stairwell



Early light switches

John Britton refers to the 'dry lining system' on the external walls. The plaster finish is supported on what appears to be expanded metal lath. This would date the finish to post 1890 at the earliest. The plaster itself appears to be lime based which suggests the system is certainly not later than the first half of the 20th century. The ceilings are also of interesting construction. They appear to be made of an early type of backing unit reinforced with a 300mm (approx) grid of timber laths which supports the plaster coats.

Annex

John Britton has discussed the annex at some length though its poor condition prevented thorough examination.

The construction of the western part appears to be contemporary or near contemporary with the main building. The style of windows match, the upper room contains a late 19th century fireplace and surround.

The later eastern part of the annex has 2/2 and 4/4 timber sash windows. However, the ceiling construction appears to be the same as, or very similar to that in the main building. Indeed it seems likely that the entire building interior was refurbished around the time when the eastern part of the annex was built. The ceilings and 'dry lining' probably date to this time, though the iron pins and the studs backing the dry lining described in John Britton's report are almost certainly earlier.

Inspection of the 1931 drawings prepared by WH Byrne and Son would be very informative.

ARCHITECTURAL ASSESSMENT and PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATION

The building exterior is a pleasing architectural composition in the classical tradition. Its quality details include its fine cut stonework, its original sliding sash windows and panelled doors. It makes a significant contribution to the streetscape.

It was not apparent during the recent inspections due to the boarding up of the windows, but the quality of the space in the two large halls is magnificent. This is due to their scale and proportion and particularly to the quality of light from the tall south facing windows. The interest and quality of the building interior fittings and finishes are described above.

The building has particular social and historical value in the town. As a public building with various uses through the years, it was part of the social and political fabric of the town.

The building is recorded by the NIAH⁵. It is no. 30337027 in its record for County Galway. To use NIAH criteria for assessing the building: it has *Architectural* value; it has *Group* value in that it makes a significant contribution to the streetscape; it has an *Interior* of value; its design at the level of *Detail* is noteworthy; and the cinema equipment is interesting from a *Technical* point of view; the building is of *Historical* and *Social* interest. The building merits an importance rating of *Regional*.

The Burra Charter defines cultural significance: "*Cultural significance* means aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. Cultural significance is embodied in the *place* itself, its *fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places* and *related objects*. Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups." The former town hall has important cultural significance and should be conserved. Conservation is defined: "*Conservation* means all the processes of looking after a *place* so as to retain its *cultural significance*."

In order for a building to be successfully conserved it must be adapted for a new compatible use. The charter defines adaptation: "*Adaptation* means modifying a *place* to suit the existing use or a proposed use." And compatible use: "*Compatible* use means a use which respects the *cultural significance* of a *place*. Such a use involves no, or minimal, impact on cultural significance."

Good conservation practice involves the practice of reversibility. Where a significant intervention must be made, it should be *reversible*, so that at a future time when circumstances allow, the building can be returned to its former condition.

COMMENT ON PROPOSED SCHEME FOR CONVERSION OF FORMER TOWN HALL

The proposed scheme is comprehensively illustrated and described by the Design Architect. The proposed uses were 'given' but the design approach makes every attempt to ensure compatibility with the existing building. The main uses are accommodated in the two large halls with ancillary accommodation in the rear annex, which follows the pattern of the original building.

The proposed lift shaft

The only exception to this is the lift shaft which could not successfully be located in the annex without increasing corridor space to a degree that would have reduced the area of ancillary accommodation to unworkable levels. This insertion seems a significant compromise to the main spaces but with the careful design of other inserted elements and fittings this will be overcome. The intervention is not reversible but the area affected is small and if the lift shaft were removed in the future the repair work would not be extensive. The insertion will involve the removal of a small proportion of the existing 'dry-lining' system but as extensive areas of this construction will be left in place; this is not unacceptable. The dry-lining system is interesting as an example of the construction of a particular era but is not of particular merit otherwise. It is acceptable that a large area of the construction will be preserved. The shaft will involve the removal of the 6 steps and other minor elements inserted to serve the stage which was added 20th century but these are not significant. The shaft will not penetrate the first floor ceiling. This being the case, the proposed location was judged the best compromise. A lift providing access for people with disabilities was essential. The location chosen does not interfere with any significant finishes or fittings in the building.

⁵ National Inventory of Architectural Heritage

The ground floor – main space

The main space on the ground floor is to be a Heritage Display area which will mean that the space will not be permanently subdivided and will still be perceived as a whole. The existing sloping floor which was inserted when the space was converted to a cinema is proposed to be removed. This will involve the removal of the later stone steps added at the east end entrance and the relocation of doors and frames down to the new lower level. The existing external door was shortened to accommodate the raised floor. It is proposed to repair this door or remake it to match its original dimensions.

The detailed design of the proposed Heritage Display area is not yet determined but it is expected that the curtains lining the walls will be removed and the windows brought back into use. This will restore the space to its earlier character. It is likely, however, that an audio visual display may recreate the feeling of the cinema in one part of the room. There some of the cinema seats can be reused and the projection room equipment displayed.

First floor layout – main space

On the upper level in the former ballroom where offices are required, the design approach is to insert the offices as 'boxes' in the space. A corridor occasionally opening into wider sitting areas will allow some appreciation of the space as a whole, as the office walls will not extend to the original ceiling. The proposal involves the removal of the existing raised stage which has an attractive parquet floor but it is proposed to re-lay this floor finish at the lower level. These office 'boxes' will be removable with relative ease. The walls of the offices will butt into the rear wall of the former ballroom with a fire/sound seal, but will not be fixed to the walls. The 'boxes' will be insulated themselves so there will be no need to interfere with the fabric of the original walls and ceilings. Fixings to the floor will be necessary which would involve some repair if they were removed in the future.

Fireproofing

Fireproofing of the first floor will be necessary but this can be done by the addition of material below the ground floor ceiling following the principle of reversibility. Cavity barriers to prevent spread of fire will have to be introduced into the cavity behind the existing dry lining. This will entail making a narrow vertical cut in the plaster and backing board in two locations along the front and rear walls of the main spaces. A suitable barrier will then be inserted and the wall finish repaired. This work will not be reversible but seems unavoidable in the interest of fire safety and the area involved will be minimal. It is also in the interest of the building fabric to minimise fire spread.

The main staircase

The main staircase is to be preserved intact including the nostalgic detail of the ticket hatch for the former cinema. The handrail and balustrade does not meet present safety standards, so it is proposed to add a second handrail at a higher level supported on a light steel structure (to detail) which should be visually attractive.

Other fixtures and fittings

In general it is proposed to retain all joinery and internal fittings in the building. This will contribute to the preservation of the cultural significance. The vast majority of details from the earlier era including light switches and radiators will be retained though not used. Windows, shutters, and other internal joinery will be preserved in the main building. A new window is proposed to be introduced in the present first floor blind opening on the Church St elevation. This window is proposed to match the other 6/6 first floor windows and should therefore have no negative impact on the façade.

The rear annex

The annex staircase which is plain and unremarkable will be replaced to provide a new staircase complying with fire regulations. Annex windows will be refurbished and retained where possible where openings are not proposed to be altered. Windows in new and altered openings will be of modern but compatible design (see drawings). Doors will be replaced by glazed modern doors where required to provide additional light inside. As this rear elevation is hardly visible from any public area it is proposed that this is acceptable. The ground floor fireplace and range in the annex will be retained but not used; the 1st floor fireplace surround will be relocated due to adjustment of floor levels. Otherwise the annex will be gutted due to its very poor condition. This is essential to preserve the rest of the building fabric.

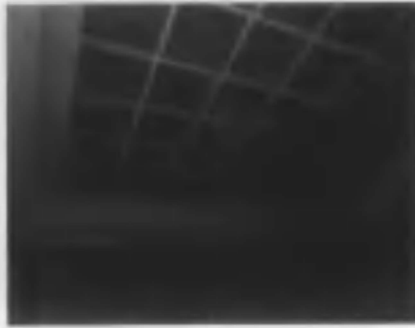
Conclusion

From the above discussion it is apparent that the proposed design provides the accommodation required to allow the new uses, while at the same time substantially retaining the building's heritage and cultural significance.

Some additional photographs.



Ground floor window.



Cinema ceiling.



Door from lobby to cinema.



View of equipment in projection room.



Door from ballroom to annex stairway