



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council

Galway County Council



Loughrea Townhall

Barrack Street, Loughrea, Co. Galway

Record of Protected Structures No. 315.

No. 30337027 in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage

Architectural Survey & Assessment

to accompany Part 8 Application

November 2021
Galway County Council,
Áras an Chontae
Prospect Hill
Galway

1. Overview

The former Townhall building is in the ownership of Galway County Council. It is a Protected Structure (Ref: 315) and National Inventory of Architectural Heritage No 30337027. It is situated on the corner of Barrack Street and Church Street within the Architectural Conservation Area of Loughrea.

Figure 3: Loughrea Architectural Conservation Area & site location



The building was designed by Samuel Roberts Ussher in 1862 on the site of the old linen hall for The Marquess of Clanricarde. In 1928 the building was handed over to the people of Loughrea by Lord Lascelles. During the war years 1931 to 1939 it was converted to a cinema at ground floor and a ballroom at the upper floor designed by Ralph Henry Byrne of W.H. Byrne and Son. The contractor was John McNally and Co.



Photo 1. Townhall building in context

2. General Description of the Building

The structure has two distinct parts: the main building, which fronts onto Barrack Street, and a double storey annex to the rear. The main building is a seven-bay, two-storey building composed in the classical tradition. The ground floor walls are clad in ashlar limestone with the fenestration piercing blind arcades at each bay along the street elevations. The walls at first floor level are rough dash render. The interior consists of two large rooms, one over the other, at ground and first floors. These are served by a generous staircase at the western end of the main building and a utilitarian stairs in the eastern end of the annex.

The construction of the annex building, connected to the northern elevation of the main building, took place in two stages with a period of approximately 30 years between each stage. Construction work at the annex was undertaken each time the main building undertook a change of use. The eastern tranche was most likely constructed some years after the completion of the main building while the western half was added around the same time as the cinema conversion in the 1930's. The external envelope of the annex building, including the roof and walls, are in a serious state of dilapidation and are irreparable.

This sombre building has remained vacant for an extensive period and is consequently falling into disrepair.

3. Description of the Building Elements

3.1. Main Building Interior

3.1.1. Ground Floor

At ground floor level the features from the buildings 1930's conversion to a cinema dominate the interior. The cast iron framed theatre seats are still the room although no longer arranged in neat rows but piled up in the corners. The vintage illuminated exit signage, fixed to walls draped in golden cloth, foster the perception of antiquity. The raked concrete floor, with terrazzo aisles and timber heart, is now covered with thermoplastic floor tiles which contain asbestos (Higgins Demolition asbestos report dated 2014). The raking floor, which was installed in the 1930's over the original level floor, rises toward a small lobby and the projector room above. The lobby doors have ornate pull handles (see photo 39) with a design which signals the former use of the space. A narrow metal ladder has to be climbed to enter the projector room which still houses the large free-standing projectors which should be carefully removed such that they might be preserved (see photo 28). The projector room ceiling rises above the level of the second floor and as such forms the stage in the ballroom above.

The suspended ceiling over the auditorium is of framed timber construction, with asbestos fibre reinforced infill panels with a render coating over (see photo 2). Water ingress, originating at the junction between the chimney stacks and the eaves, has resulted in localised degradation of the building fabric however, the first-floor steel beams appear to be salvageable. The external walls are clad in a dry-lining system which is comprised of metal pegs fixed into the masonry walls supporting timber battens with timber lath secured to

them and rendered over with a lime-based render (see photo 33). The metal pegs have suffered serious corrosion and as such the lining system is not repairable.



Photo 2. The Cinema with the original seating removed and stacked

3.1.2. The Main Stairs

The main staircase in the western-most lobby is of generous width. It has a terrazzo finish which matches the floor finish of the entrance lobby. The balustrade has flat carved uprights, with curvilinear profile exercised with unexceptional craftsmanship, and dates from a later period. The stair leads to the first-floor ballroom and the annex building.



Photo 3 & 4. The main stairs

3.1.3. First Floor

The first-floor ballroom is accessed by way of double doors with glazed infill panels framed by arching timber rails. Unfortunately, these doors are in poor condition and are not fire-resisting and as such will have to be replaced once the building comes into use.



Photo 5 & 6. The Ballroom glazed doors

The ballroom fixtures and finishes still hark to its former use. The northern wall is lined with cast-iron framed cinema-style seats similar to those downstairs. The timber floor boards are well worn and around 50% will need to be replaced with the remainder being salvageable. The translucent white glass pendulum light fittings remain bar a number which have been vandalised. The vaulted ceiling is of painted plaster board on timber battens supported by metal trusses. The walls are dry-lined in the same construction as the ground floor. The stage at the eastern end of the hall, which is of solid construction with a linoleum covering that contains asbestos, is in fact the roof over the projector room.



Photo 7. The Ballroom interior looking east

3.2. The Main Building External Walls

The ground floor walls are clad in ashlar limestone with fine joints pointed in limestone. The pointing is largely in good condition which, upon inspection, would only require localised repairs. The first-floor walls are finished in rough dash render with a smooth plaster band and moulded cornice below the eaves. There is some hairline cracking in the plaster and some evidence of delamination.

Both ground and first floor walls have hearting stone of random rubble.



Photo 8.
Main building external wall finishes

3.3. The Main Building Fenestration Openings

The fenestration pierces blind arcades at each bay along the Barrack Street and Church Street. The ground floor windows and doors have cut stone lintols and on these elevations. Some of the stone sills require localised repairs. The original 2 leaf, 5 panel timber doors on the Barrack Street elevation have fallen into disrepair as have the windows and need to be replaced. The easternmost door has been altered from a 5 panel to a 4-panel door to accommodate the later installation of the raking cinema floor in the 1930's. The granite steps would have been introduced here at the same time. The timber latticed rectangular glazed panels above the doors remain in position (see photo 12).



Photo 9 & 10 Main building Ground Floor doors and windows on street elevations

The ground floor windows have panelled timber shutters which appear to have been modified using poor quality materials and craftsmanship (see photos 11, 40 & 41). It is worth noting that the first-floor windows have no shutters.



Photo 11 & 12. Ground Floor Cinema windows & Main building entrance doors lattice fan light window

The original window sashes have been removed from the frames at first floor. All the original window timbers have decayed and will have to be replaced. First floor windows are 6 / 6 pane sliding sash whilst the ground floor windows are 6 panes over one large clear pane. Upper windows have reinforced concrete lintols which have started spalling and will either need to be repaired or to be replaced (see photos 13 & 14). The Church Street gable elevation window was boarded up at the time of inspection however Gerry McManus describes it as being ‘...an 8-pane light over two 3 pane casements.’ (2013). A painted metal bar has been inserted into the masonry sides of each window to serve as protection from falling which is made possible by the omission of shutters.



Photo 13 & 14. First Floor Level Ballroom windows with steel bar as protective barrier. Spalling concrete lintol

3.4. The Main Building Roof, Eaves and Verges

The roof construction is made up of slates on timber battens, on bitumastic felt on sarking boards, on timber purlins on a composite steel truss (see photos 22, 23 & 24 for roof construction). In the Architectural Conservation Report of May 2013 submitted with the Part 8 application of the same date, Gerry McManus states that

'These details would suggest the roof was recovered in the mid-20th century or later.' A large number of slates have slipped and there are at least 4 holes in the roof. Recent inspection would suggest that the slates are in good condition generally and a significant percentage should be salvageable. The bitumastic felt will have to be replaced along with the battens. The sarking board could be largely preservable. The steel trusses are in good condition generally.

The projecting eaves and verges are of timber construction. The timber fascia is profiled and along with the timber soffit, is in poor condition. The projecting verges are of timber construction and are flashed in copper (see photo 16). The bottom cord of the triangular feature which forms the gable pediment is also made of profiled timber which is flashed in lead (see photo 15). The verge timbers are in poor condition however, those parts clad in copper could be preserved.

The eastern gable verge is in poor condition. A relatively recent repair was made to it using a bitumastic membrane which was then rendered over with using a sand and cement mix.

The extensive water damage to the interior of the main building originates at the junction between the eaves and the chimney stacks. Surface water runoff is entering the building at this point where the weathering detail has failed – possibly because it is inaccessible and therefore cannot be properly maintained.



Photo 15 & 16. Lead flashing on the eastern gable and copper flashing of the verges



**Photo 17
& 18.**
Eaves
details.

4. The Annex Building

The eastern part of the annex was most likely constructed some years after the completion of the main building between 1860 and 1900 while the western half was added around the same time as the cinema conversion in the 1930s. The 1930's walls are of mass concrete construction and the first floor is concrete with suspended timber below. The earlier western-most walls are of random rubble and are consequently far thicker while the intermediate floor and stairs are of timber construction.

Presently the timber floors, suspended ceilings, and timber stairs have all collapsed. The roof timbers have also collapsed except for a small area over the stairs. Water ingress has damaged the walls and ground floor. The timber fenestration is no longer salvageable and has suffered from vandalism.

Thorough inspection of the annex was hampered by its state of collapse and the amount of debris on the ground which could also contain asbestos from the collapsed suspended ceiling. It is not possible to open internal doors as passage is blocked by debris and is unsafe. The presence of asbestos has previously been reported in the boiler room which is also now inaccessible.



Photo 19 & 20. The Annex interior



Photo 21. The Annex exterior and northern boundary wall.

5. Architectural Assessment and Principles of Conservation

The Townhall is a Protected Structure (Ref: 315) and is recorded in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage as No. 30337027.

The Townhall has particular social and historical importance for the town of Loughrea and its proposed renovation and repurposing would bring it back into community use and save it from further dereliction. The classically composed elevations make a significant contribution

to the streetscape particularly the finely proportioned gable elevation on Church Street with its commanding presence along the Barrack Street vista (see photo 53 of gable elevation).

The two large halls in the main building are remarkable in the magnificence of their proportions. Their characteristic volume speaks to their place in history. Sunlight entering halls illuminate the graceful rhythm of the tall, elegant windows. The views across the Grey Lake from the ballroom are spectacular and enrich the grandeur of this space.

Gerry McManus's 2013 report notes '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 townhall has important cultural significance and should be conserved. Conservation is defined: "conservation means all the processes of looking after a place 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.

6. Comment on Proposed Scheme for Conversion of the Former Town Hall

The proposed scheme is described in the accompanying architects' drawings and specifications. The proposed uses were determined by prior community consultation and consultants' input. The design approach places emphasis on the conservation of the main building, treating this structure as sacrosanct by accommodating all the service elements in the new annex, and accentuating its extraordinary characteristics. Whereas the previous design for this building involved the insertion of a passenger lift into the main building, the proposed new annex building will now accommodate the lift, leaving the fabric and volume of the main building unaffected. Samples of the mortar used in the main building walls, from the internal face of external walls, the pointing of stone cladding and rough dash render, will be taken for analysis prior to the commencement of works.

6.1. The Ballroom

One of the noteworthy features of the ballroom is its volume which is accentuated by the vaulted ceiling. It is being proposed that this ceiling be removed, to expose the existing steel trusses above it, and to bring greater emphasis to the perception of volume. This will add drama to this space, as light from the tall windows floods the void, reflecting off the new

sloping ceiling, bringing attention to the restored antique trusses. This will also benefit the proposed use which requires the inclusion of cellular, enclosed meeting spaces which would not extend to the full height of the space thereby prohibiting the truncation of the grand volume. If needs be these works could be reversed should future adaptation require this. Cinema-type fold-up seats line the northern wall. These are in better condition than those downstairs and could be repurposed. The stage at the eastern end of the room, which is finished in herringbone pattern parquet, will be removed to facilitate the new use (see photo 45). Asbestos has been found in samples taken from this location. It is proposed to install a window in the blanked window opening in the gable elevation, which would not compromise the architectural composition, and would afford visual connection between Barrack Street and the transformed interior.



Photo 22, 23 & 24. Rood construction & steel trusses



Photo 25. The Ballroom interior looking east (note water damage at ceiling)

6.2. The Cinema

The cinema will be adapted to become a multi-function performance space. This would allow the remarkable volume to remain undivided. The 1930's sloping concrete floor, finished with terrazzo aisles (which matches the finish of the western lobby and main stairs) and timber in the centre section, will be removed to adapt this space to the new function which will make use of retractable seating. This will effectively return the floor to its original 1860's level which will necessitate the removal of the 4 stone steps (see photo 26) outside of the eastern-most entrance off Barrack Street. A new radon barrier will be introduced below an insulated, concrete slab and sprung timber floor. A lobby to the rear of the hall is access by way of double doors which have ornate pull handles which will be salvaged and reused within the space. The projection room will be removed and be replaced by a control room from where the technical aspects of productions will be managed such as sound and lighting. The projection room is accessed by way of steel ladder stairs (see photo 27) which do not provide access to a wide range of persons with a diverse range of ability. The removal of the projection room will facilitate the provision of a new 'dog-leg' stairs and the control room under croft will form an alcove to store the retractable seating system. The items of interest, such as projectors, will be made available to collectors. The curtains lining the walls will be removed however heavy drapes are proposed at the windows to darken the interior upon occasion and to dampen sound from the adjacent street.



Photo 26. Stone steps at eastern entrance to be removed



Projector Room photos
Photo 27. Metal ladder stairs



Photo 28. Projector

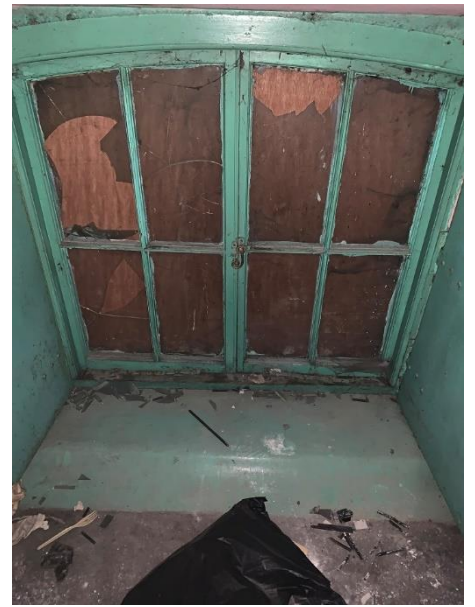


Photo 29. Hatch to cinema room

6.3. The Main Staircase

The lobby floor and stairs are finished in terrazzo which will be cleaned. The timber balustrade, which is of crude design and execution, will be removed and replaced with a code compliant balustrade. The existing timber handrail will be scrutinized upon its disassembly to determine if it can be reused. Its profile is not unique and if necessary, could be reproduced to suit the new balustrade. The ticketing hatch below the stairs will be retained.



Photo 30, 31 & 32. Main stairs, balustrade detail, & ticketing hatch

6.4. Thermal Upgrade works

As part of the thermal upgrade of the external envelope, the existing dry-lining system will be removed to accommodate the installation of a vapour permeable insulation system supported on metal studs. Gerry McManus notes that: 'The dry-lining system is interesting as an example of construction of a particular era, but it is not of particular merit otherwise.' In addition to this, the steel pins, which are fixed into the rubble walls, and support the timber battens have corroded to a point where they are beyond repair.

The roof repairs afford the opportunity to add insulation within the roof structure. The strategy will be to install insulation over the steel trusses, between the timber purlins. There will be a slight increase in the ridge level to accommodate a thin layer of insulation over the timbers as a thermal break.

The ground floor insulation and the replacement of windows and doors has been described elsewhere in this document. The new annex will be constructed in line with contemporary energy efficiency standards. The heating and ventilation systems will be designed with both low energy demand and conservation of historical fabric as the primary objectives.



Photo 33. Dry-lining system with timber panelling

7. Design for Fire Safety and Accessibility

The removal of the existing annex will afford the opportunity to design a replacement structure with fire safety and universal access as core principles. The new annex will have a simple and legible layout, with adequate corridor and door widths, to facilitate safe, efficient evacuation and movement within this public building. Some existing doorways between the annex and the main building will be widened to suit emergency exit width requirements and a small number of new openings will have to be formed. As mentioned previously, the existing annex stairs, which has collapsed and whose arrangement was not fit for purpose, will be replaced with a code compliant stairs with suitable refuge spaces within the protected core. The main staircase will be enclosed in fire rated construction which will extend above ceiling level to the underside of the roof finish. These works will not adversely affect the character of the main building and could be reversed should the need arise. The previous Part 8 design showed the public lift located within the main building. The construction a new annex provides the opportunity to install the lift outside of the envelope of the main building. This solution also allows for the inclusion of adequate clear, unobstructed space in front of the lift doors to manoeuvre a wheelchair.

8. Conclusion

Once renovated, this sombre building will once more provide accommodation for the numerous community groups in Loughrea and act as an attraction for visitors to the town. The proposed adaptation of the Townhall will allow it to retain its essential characteristics while honouring its cultural and historic significance much the same as its

previous adaptation did in the 1930's. The energy efficiency works will demonstrate how considered implementation of these measures can serve to protect this historic structure and conserve the natural environment for future generations.

206-01 TOWN HALL CINEMA
LOUGHREA
NIGHTLY RETURNS

FILM *110 So Midnight*
DAY *19 Aug* 19 *83*

FINISH	968	<i>1/100</i> £91.50
START	907	
No. SOLD	61	
FINISH	951	<i>2/100</i> 11.00
START	940	
No. SOLD	11	
FINISH		
START		
No. SOLD		

COMPS. Total £ *103.50*
No. *Lea 23%* *23.46*
79.04

REMARKS

Weather *fine*

Signed *M. Scully* Cashier.
P. Fahy Manager

No. 1376

ALWAY PRINTING CO. LTD.

Photo 34. Cinema nightly returns docket found on site dated 19 August 1983

9. Supplementary Photographic Record

Main Building Interior Ground Floor



Photo 35. Cinema interior



Photo 36. Cinema ceiling and water damage



Photo 37. Original signage



Photo 38. Lobby terrazzo



Photo 39. Ornate door handle



Photo 40. & 41. Ground floor windows

Main Building Interior First Floor



Photo 42. Ballroom interior



Photo 43. Drylining detail



Photo 44. Fireplace



Photo 45. Ballroom stage



Photo 46. Ceiling and wall damage

Main Building Exterior



Photo 47. Downpipe



Photo 48. First floor fenestration



Photo 49. Verge detail



Photo 50. Circular window



Photo 51. Door opening stonework



Photo 52. Light over door



Photo 53. Gable elevation composition

10. Appended Documents:

LA0613 Part 8 Architectural Conservation Report by Gerry McManus – May 2013

(See also herewith LA0613 Archaeological Assessment by Arch Consultancy – July 2013 and Design Statement by Galway County Council)