

Urban Design Study for Ballyragget

Character of the Landscape Setting

The town of Ballyragget is situated within a relatively flat agricultural plain, which is bound by higher lands several kilometres to the east and west. These hills run in along a north-south axis or ridge line, between which runs the Nore River. The town itself is situated approximately 200 metres on the west bank of the river and as such, the town's topography gently falls towards the river. On the western approach, it thus appears that the town is situated on a slight rise, which gives the townscape and the skyline a certain degree of prominence in the landscape setting. In the distance, to the west are the Slieveardagh Hills..

The fields are predominantly used for grazing and silage, though arable farmland, in the form of wheat and barley is common too. Significant field amalgamation appears to have occurred in the preceding decades to accommodate modern agricultural practices, particularly the arable activity. Low lying hedgerows define the field system, with a distinct lack of mature trees, except where these are associated with the former Ballyragget Caste (and later the Lodge House) to the west of the town, the River Nore and the larger country houses. Within the town, significant trees are still to be found in the vicinity of the finer town houses, the Catholic Church and as somewhat formal planting associated with the town's square and the Fair Green.

Pattern and Shape of the Settlement

Ballyragget has a distinctive, deliberate and somewhat formalised layout that is centred on two 'squares' - the Square and the Fair Green. The Square would have originally been laid out as a wide main street which could accommodate the town's market - it is therefore a market square. Virtually all the approach roads to the town run into and alongside the edges of these two 'squares', which are not perfectly square, but slightly skewed, giving an informality to an somewhat formalised layout. This layout would indicate Anglo-Norman origins and it is known that the town was founded by Richard Le Ragget, an Anglo-Norman circa 1220.

The position of the town square and the Fair Green give rise to an intervening block of land - the town's only 'urban block'. Except for this area, the more traditional and historic building formation is created in a frame of a single row of plots fronting onto the main approach roads, with no back streets or laneways (the one exception being Chapel Avenue). Many of these plots run deep, with a significant amount of older outbuildings to the rear - access typically being provide through side passages, rather than archways.

A few small housing estates have provided some in-depth development, virtually all of which focus on cul-de-sac rather



Photo 1: Ballyragget Castle holds a prominent position on the approach road from Durrow.



Photo 2: Landscape Context as viewed from old railway bridge on the Castlecomer Road.



Photo 3: The Square.

Photo 4: The Fair Green.



than extending the existing street pattern further and opening up additional lands for more comprehensive development.

Buildings and Spaces in the Town

Most of the older buildings in the town centre date from the 19th Century, though some of these may reflect earlier settlement patterns, which involved façade or other alterations to buildings of an earlier origin. Typically, the buildings are of two storeys and either two or three bays wide. Notable exceptions to this occur in the group of buildings that lie on the east end of the Square, and buildings in the immediate vicinity. Notable variations in building height occur within buildings of two storeys high - the smaller ones reflecting former artisan dwellings and the larger ones in the form of finer town houses, usually provided with side entrances - this is particularly evident along the north side of Bridge Street and on the south side of the Square. Their backlands reflect some attractive old stone out-buildings, some of which could be suitable for conversion.

Indications in the streetscape suggest that single storey dwellings predominated in former times along High Street and also in the vicinity of the Fair Green. Many of these have been replaced with two-storey dwellings and many have been set-back further from the road, resulting in a weaker streetscape composition - this is evident on all approach roads.

Minor alterations have been made to many of the facades of the buildings in the town centre, which do not respect the character of the buildings, in the forms of pvc windows and doors and enlarged window openings.

Buildings or sites positioned at road junctions, and which are aligned with the approach road are important focal sites and are important at establishing the first impression of the settlement. Similarly, every bend in the road or the street tends to focus the viewers attention onto specific sites or buildings that lie ahead - such buildings therefore require a more careful design approach, as they will usually either enhance or detract from the streetscape.

Areas of Notable Character

The important inter-relationship between buildings and spaces is reflected in distinctive areas around the town, including the Fair Green, The Square, the Castle Grounds and in the vicinity of the old bridge crossing the Nore. Each of these has been identified as areas of notable character on the attached Map. A smaller, though notable space is the splayed shaped lane leading to the Church - Chapel Avenue. Although the road junction onto Patrick Street/Castle Street is narrow, it broadens to give a wide view of the Church to the passer-by.

1. The Square

The Square is an attractive feature in the centre of the town,



Photo 5: View east along the Square - the group of three storey buildings act as a focal point, framing off the view on the east end.



Photo 6 and Photo 7: The quality of the urban environment and the sense of enclosure it creates diminishes as space 'leaks' where building lines have been set back on the urban fringe.



Photo 8: Chapel Avenue - splayed shaped street with Church as focal point.



though its' prominence is obscured by the significant area given over to paved roadway, car parking and the parking of heavy goods vehicles. A more attractive approach would see the delineated green space extended on several sides (i.e., out at least to as far as the yellow dashed margin lines of the road, and possibly further with a reduction in the main carriageway). The current paved area gives way to a somewhat random pattern of car parking which could be improved with neatly delineated spaces - this would also give definition to the fine street trees on the southern side of the square (see Sketch 1).

2. The Fair Green

Historically, the Fair Green had an almost continuous building line around the outer edge of the street that delineates it (as is evident on the 1839 Ordnance Survey Maps). As these buildings have become old and obsolete, they have been replaced in more recent times by a variety of building forms, including single and two storey dwellings, some of which have respected the former delineated building line, while many have ignored it completely. The varying of building lines (i.e., the distance a building is set back from the street edge) and the variety of building heights (some single storey and others two) is less satisfactory in providing a frame for the intervening space of the green. There are significant infill development opportunities on the southern side of the Green, a significant redevelopment opportunity at the Ballinakill junction (northwest corner) and new development opportunities on the west side of the Green. In the future, developments should respect the historically established building line. A minimum of two storey developments should be encouraged on all sides and consideration should be given to three and even four storeys on both the southern and western sides so as to frame the intervening space contained within the green.

3. Vicinity of Old Ballyragget Bridge

The old Ballyragget bridge is an attractive stone structure which is thought to date around 1813. The contrast between the open pasture lands and the tighter grouping of buildings on its west end is distinct, yet attractive. A former national school building is also an attractive feature in its vicinity.

4. The Castle

The Anglo Norman Castle, which was founded by Richard Le Ragget is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, standing structure in the town and holds a prominence in the townscape. It is a commanding stone structure, near the edge of the town centre and is bound by impressive high stone walls incorporating corner towers. With the expansion of the town southwards, the prominence of the castle and its setting has diminished, though it remains an important historical and architectural feature of the town, the integrity of which should be retained.

The Nature of Open Spaces

The Square and the Fair Green are the two most prominent areas of open space within the town. Today, their role is predominantly that of passive amenity (i.e., visual amenity, strolling, dog walking, etc.) though the perimeter planting of the



Photo 9: The prominence and attractiveness of the Square is diminished by the amount of paved area given over to vehicular parking and movement.



Photo 10: Weak and inconsistent building lines around the Fair Green.



Photo 11: Ballyragget Bridge and the River Nore—attractive features of the town.

Fair Green enables informal active recreation (i.e., ball playing) to occur. Further tree planting along the perimeter of the Fair Green should be encouraged so as to accentuate the space further and add to its visual amenity.

There are only two other areas of open space in the town. One lies directly between the walled grounds of the Castle and Castle Road, and it appears it may have functioned as a walled garden or orchard associated with the Castle at one time. A row of residential dwellings frame the space on its west and south sides, obscuring the former prominence of the Castle. The space is weak in planting or other features (i.e., seating, benches, play facilities, etc.).

A park has been developed in the vicinity of Ballyragget Lodge/Convent of Mercy, as part of the Aislinn Centre complex. A neat pathway has been developed through this space, which is enhanced by landscaping, tree planting and sculptural pieces.

Further south of the Convent lands, west of the N77, lies the GAA sports ground - the most significant area of active open space in the town.

The River Nore is perhaps the most significant natural amenity in the town, yet the layout of the town practically ignores this important landscape feature, in that there is little public benefit arising from this amenity (historically it appears to have been reserved for use of the demesne associated with Ballyragget Lodge, and the Castle before that period; the 1839 Ordnance Survey Map also suggests that a rath or ringfort may have existed to the west to the Castle in earlier times).

Future development layout should preserve the river corridor as a broad linear park area for passive recreational use. This would also benefit wildlife along the riparian corridor but will also keep the floodplain free from development. A number of east-west connections in the form of additional areas of open space should be encouraged at intervals south of Bridge Street - such as in the vicinity of the Castle; south of the Convent Buildings and perhaps even providing a link between the River and the GAA sports grounds. A tree lined verge (avenue planting) of approximately 5 metres or more could also be provided on the west side of the N77, through which a segregated walkway and/or cycle lane could be provided. Thus, safety and amenity is provided along the main approach to the town, while the riverside linear park and the proposed east-west connections provide a number of amenity walks in the form of loop trips of various distances from the town centre. A similar pattern could be examined to the north of Bridge Street in association with any zoning of lands in this area.

Roads and Traffic

The N77 which connects Durrow to Kilkenny runs from



Photo 12: Attractively laid out and well maintained park adjacent to the Convent .



Photo 13: Ballyragget Castle and the giant Cedar of Lebanon.* These lands slope down to the banks of the River Nore.

Photo 14: View along south side of The Square - road surface is in poor condition. The area would be suitable for new pavement and kerbing with delineated parking bays and additional tree planting.



*The Cedar of Lebanon is associated with Richard Pococke, who became Church of Ireland Bishop of Ossory in 1756. Prior to this he toured the Middle East extensively, bringing back from one of his trips seeds of the Cedar of Lebanon, which can be found in County Kilkenny



Photo 15: There are few examples of traditional paving types around the town - here stones are used to give a cobblestone effect.



Photo 16: Poor road surface associated with housing development at 'The Orchard'.



Photo 17: A very attractive traditional style shopfront on the Square.

Bridge Street along the Square and onto Castle Street. This national primary route draws significant traffic volumes. The Avonmore Creamery, situated approximately 1.5 km out of town on the N77 also draws a significant volume of heavy goods vehicles, which frequently stop off in the town centre and park at The Square. This detracts from the overall visual and environmental amenity of the area.

In general, road and footpath surfaces throughout the town are in good condition. A notable exception is the cul-de-sac road south of the green that lies immediately east of the Castle and the parking verge on the south side of The Square. Some areas of concrete footpath in the vicinity could also do with upgrading.



Photo 18: Ballyragget displays a significant number of fine town houses, of two storey, two storey over basement and/or three storeys high. Most are designed in the Georgian style. Note the attractive Ionic columns, fanlight window and limestone pillars in this example.



Photos 19 & 20: The castle grounds, though close to the town centre, remain relatively obscured from view and poorly connected or promoted as a feature of interest.



Design Principles based on distinctive local character.

The following principles will apply and should be read in conjunction with the Urban Design Map:

- Examine the feasibility of providing a linear park along the east bank of the River Nore.
- Ensure that in any development proposals south of the Convent lands (between the River Nore and the N77), that options for east-west linear park connections are explored.
- Implement avenue tree planting on the west side of the N77 on approaching the town from the south.
- Examine the feasibility for re-designing the Square, to:
 - enable the central amenity area to be extended;
 - reduce road carriageway widths
 - delineate car parking spaces and define existing trees through appropriate pavement treatment.
 - Formalise tree planting along the perimeter of central green space.
 - Provide additional tree planting on the south side of the street/The Square to extend the existing line of trees westwards.
- Provide additional tree planting along the perimeter of the Fair Green.
- Ensure that all buildings on the south side of the Fair Green maintain the traditional building line.
- Maintain views of the Castle on the approach to the town from the Durrus Road (N77)
- Examine future road options that would facilitate more comprehensive backland development to the rear of Bridge Street (and west of the Fair Green).
- Examine the feasibility and cost of providing overhead electrical and telecommunication wires underground, in the vicinity of Patrick Street/Castle Street/The Square.
- Promote infill development of an appropriate scale, composition and character, in accordance with guidelines contained in Appendix A.
- Ensure that any new infill development respects traditional building lines in the vicinity. New infill developments will be expected to have regard for the Design Guidelines on Development (Appendix A).

