Wicklow Town - A Gallery of Shopfronts

Inventory, and guidance for the repair and renewal of Town Centre Shopfronts

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1. INTRODUCTION

This shopfront study has been prepared by Wicklow Town Forum in response to the stated objectives of the Wicklow Town Public Realm Plan 2008. In keeping with the Public Realm Plan, this study aims to assist local business owners and Wicklow Town Council in their efforts to enhance the streetscape and shopfronts of the town centre which, collectively, contribute greatly to the overall visual appeal of the town. On a practical level, this study describes the characteristics of good shopfront design, makes an inventory of the current shopfronts in the town, and offers specific guidance for building owners on the maintenance, repair and renewal of individual shopfronts.

In a town such as Wicklow, which has a strong historic identity and could be termed a ‘Heritage Town’, shopfronts can have a major impact on the overall character, quality and attractiveness of the town. In this regard it is notable that well designed shopfronts can improve the appearance of the town as a whole, and that every premises, regardless of size makes a contribution to the overall ambience of the town. It is important that any works involving the repair or reinstatement of existing shopfronts, or the development of new shopfronts be informed by the principles of historic shopfront design.

The Historical Background of shopfronts is outlined in Section 2 of this study, while section 3, The Value of Good Shopfronts describes individual components such as design, materials, proportion, fixtures and fittings, signage, advertising and lighting.

Wicklow Town has a compact Town Centre, which, for the purposes of this study is defined as the area from the Market Square along the Mall, Main Street and Abbey Street. There is a good range of retail outlets present in the town centre, with some good examples of well presented shopfronts, and other examples of shopfronts which have undergone less appropriate interventions over the years. Section 4 of this study, Shopfront Inventory and Recommendations describes the existing town centre shopfronts, and makes recommendations on where improvements could be made as part of any planned repair or renewal works.

The purpose of the guidelines is to give concise and building specific advice on the appropriate way to upgrade shopfronts within the Town Centre, and to promote elements of good design and acceptable materials commensurate with Wicklow Town’s Heritage status. Attracting both locals and tourists to the town centre, and encouraging them to spend more time here would help to increase the sense of vibrancy in the town, and would in turn benefit local businesses.

On a wider scale, it is hoped that this study will increase awareness of shopfronts as a distinctive and often unique characteristic of our towns and villages in County Wicklow, and will help to foster greater appreciation of this aspect of our built heritage.

The guidelines offer a model for the development of ‘best practice’ for the maintenance and improvement of shopfronts generally, and for the enhancement of the public realm in which they occur.
2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Shopfronts were originally the workplaces of tradesmen and craftsmen, with goods being made in the workshop and sold directly to the public. By the end of the 17th century the most common form of shop occupied a room within a house. Trading was conducted through a window or opening facing the street. In many cases the shopfront consisted of a heavy hinged board, which divided in the middle. During trading hours half of the board would be raised to form a canopy to protect stock, the other would be lowered to form a shelf.

From the mid-C18 to the early C20, shopfronts evolved through styles broadly categorised as Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian. In spite of changing details, the same basic principles of design and proportion were maintained. Not until the mid-C20 were these principles generally abandoned in favour of poorly detailed designs in modern materials, often ill proportioned and unrelieved by ornament or decoration. The tendency of multiples to impose standardised ‘corporate images’ on their shops, regardless of the character of the building or area compounded the problem.

The surviving traditional shopfronts in Ireland for the most part date from the 19th and 20th centuries. In Ireland, traditional shopfronts are often based on classical architectural features, which were adapted to the practical needs of shops and by changing fashion. A typical traditional shopfront would normally comprise of a display window often divided with decorative glazing bars known as mullions which were surrounded by a stall-riser below, pilasters on each side, and a fascia above. The door was often recessed beside the window. Decorative corbels or consoles were used at each end of the fascia. Good proportions and attractive designs are achieved by following these principles irrespective of style or period.
3 THE VALUE OF GOOD SHOPFRONTS

“A diversity of original and traditional shopfronts is an important part of any streetscape which can add interest as well as authenticity. Retaining many of the proportions, materials and colours of traditional shopfronts, without resorting to pastiche, is an important consideration in designing new shopfronts, particularly in streetscapes that display a high level of distinctiveness.”

A good shopfront represents the business behind the shopfront and is an external expression of that business. The shopfront is present 365 days a year and 24 Hours each day carrying out this important task. The shopfront can therefore be considered as your best most loyal and faithful salesperson deserving respect, care and attention.

Streetscape
Shopfronts and the building in which they are located form an important component of the town / streetscape and create a pattern and rhythm on the street reflecting the plot and premises size and nature of the shop and goods being offered.

The quality of the shopfront should therefore reflect the quality of the product displayed and poor design, quality and excessive advertising serve to detract from the retail environment.

Shopfronts act as a frame for a 3 dimensional display of goods contained beyond the shopfront. The shopfront has a relationship to adjoining shopfronts to each side and to the one to three stories overhead. Shopfronts must therefore be considered in the context of what surrounds them and should relate sympathetically to the surrounding context.

Character
A particular characteristic of Wicklow Town is the use of the carriage arch providing access to the courtyards behind where, due to the topography of the town there is no service access to the rear of the property. Carriage arches not only serve this practical purpose but also visually link adjoining buildings and increase the sense of enclosure afforded by the street.

The character of shopfronts is defined by many different elements which together define the character of the streetscape. Shopfronts are not individual items but have to be considered in the context of the building of which they form part.

The Main Street of Wicklow Town is a high-density street with two, three and four storey nineteenth century terraced buildings on each side giving a sense of enclosure and without views or glimpses of the nearby river and sea. The street is generally east – west oriented with one side of the street facing south and the opposite side north facing. The street is relatively narrow with restricted pavement in some locations and this narrow street coupled with gentle horizontal changes in direction results in increasing the sense of enclosure by closing vistas and adding to the sense of anticipation of what is around the next corner. The street widens at Fitzwilliam and Market squares and almost uniquely there is a

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1 Historic Towns in Ireland – Maximising your tourism potential: Failte Ireland; 2011
vertical separation where the road level changes at “The Mall”. Buildings are generally linked at street level with carriage access predominantly on the south side of the street and with lanes leading to the South Quay on the north side of the street.

**Inappropriate Alterations**

Many of the buildings in the town centre have suffered from inappropriate alterations over the past. In many instances this has involved the installation of new frames for shops, that are far removed from original specifications or design. Structural changes such as creating larger display areas or wider doorways can lead to a lack of symmetry with the upper floors. It should also be noted that such design where it is of poor quality, may hide important areas of the buildings fabric, which, in turn can damage the character of the building to the detriment of the streetscape.
Elements of Good Shopfront Design

- Pilasters
- Entablature
- Cornice
- Fascia
- Bracket or Capital
- Sliding sash windows
- Set-back shutter
- Cill
- Stall Riser
- Plinth and pilaster bases
- Gutter with brackets

Entablature
**Entablature**
This derives from Greek architecture and Roman architecture and comprises the cornice, - frieze (fascia) and architrave

**Cornice**
The cornice is the projecting feature, which runs along the top of the fascia. It provides the upper level visual termination to the top of the shopfront. The cornice provides a practical function of shielding the fascia from weather and can be used to discreetly incorporate lighting over the fascia. Where canopies are required they can be incorporated into the shopfront between the cornice and the fascia.

**Fascia**
The fascia is the wide board over the shopfront carrying the shop name. The design of the fascia should be appropriate to the character and period of the building as it is the link between the ground and upper floors. The fascia should be proportioned correctly to visually support the span between pilasters and can be appropriately inclined downwards so that, particularly on narrow street, the name can be read more easily and also corrects perspective distortion. Consoles brackets with plain or decoratively carved ends can also be used to frame the ends of the fascia.

**Capital / bracket**
The top of a column ends with a capital or as illustrated here a carved bracket, typically modelled on the Acanthus leaf. The capital or bracket widens and serves to “receive” the weight of the fascia and the building above. The capital can be one of the classical orders or a stylized cap and collar.

**Pilaster**
Pilasters are shallow piers or rectangular columns projecting only slightly from the wall. They frame the side of the shopfront and emphasize the subdivision of the frontage into separate units of plot width. Visually they provide the means to support the fascia. Original pilasters should always be retained or repaired where possible. They should never be covered as such action destroys the character of the original design.

**Display window**
The display window can be divided in to practical glass sizes by window frames. Display windows should preferably be vertically proportioned and the width of window frames should be narrow, and painted a dark colour not to detract from the window display. Window frames should be profiled to present a narrow customer facing side and the strength of the frame can be achieved by increasing the depth inside the window. Windows should be kept clear of clutter and advertisements on the face of the glass and
specialist glass can be used to reduce the reflectance of standard glass which is particularly useful in jewellery displays.

Window Cill
The horizontal ledge below a window. The outside is weathered outwards and has a throat or drip underneath to protect the top of the stall riser from rainwater and to reduce water streaks on the wall. The cill can be formed in timber as for the shopfront or in stainless steel or brass, incorporating lettering advertising the business within.

Stall riser
The stall riser is the vertical surface below the display window. It provides a means to protect reduce the height of the window, to present the window display at customer eye-level and to protect the window glass from pedestrian and animals, and rain splashes. Often constructed in the same material as the wall above in when is should be painted to match the shopfront colour or can be panelled timber, again painted to match the shopfront.

Doorway (recessed)
Recessed doorways were often a feature on shopfronts. These doorways were recessed to afford shelter to shoppers at the threshold of entering and leaving the shop and provided and to allow for more window display space. Externally the recess provides an opportunity to advertise the business at pavement level often with mosaic tiles.

Plinth
The shopfront often stands on a plinth formed of granite, tile, marble or wood from the pavement to the bottom of the stall riser. In Wicklow Town this plinth typically reflects the floor level of. It provides the building with a visual anchor to the ground as well as giving protection to the shopfront. Where the plinth is constructed of timber it should be considered as being sacrificial requiring periodic renewal.

MATERIALS
The typical wall finish in Wicklow Town is a painted lime plaster render on a rubble stone masonry wall as illustrated below. Untypical materials include brick and polished tile or stone finishes and should generally be avoided. Main street buildings typically have flat facades without significant projections. Windows are typically vertical sliding sash painted timber windows recessed from the façade. Projecting windows or outward opening sash windows are not typical. Materials which cannot be readily painted should be avoided.

The typical material for shopfronts is painted timber. Varnished timber is untypical and should be resisted. The advantage that these shopfronts have is that they are easily adapted by changing the paint colour to reflect the nature of the shop; they are easily repaired and maintained without the need for specialist skills or equipment.
PROPORPTION
One of the most common flaws in the design of shopfronts in historic towns is a lack of visual links with the upper floors of the building. It is clear that when the design of the ground floor shopfront does not relate to the upper floors. While it is noted that shopfront design is usually predicated on attracting passing custom, the effect of the shopfront on the overall look of the building and also the public realm is of significant importance, especially in a town like Wicklow.

Proportions of shopfronts derive from classical proportions and detailing, and the elements of shopfronts should retain this classical origin. Proportion refers to the relationship between the width and height of elements of shopfronts. Proportion also relates to the orientation of openings – whether they are horizontal or vertical. Openings in walls should typically have vertical rather than horizontal proportions. The design of the shopfront can help to create a vertical emphasis in a horizontal opening, some guidance is illustrated below.

A well proportioned shopfront

Poorly proportioned shopfront
Fascia is too deep and lettering is too dominant. The pilasters are too thin and do not support the visual weight of the fascia

Poorly proportioned shopfront
Fascia is too narrow, and does not “fit” the openings.
**FIXTURES AND FITTINGS**

The building façade needs to accommodate many practical items, but when the use of the shop changes redundant fittings, fixtures and cabling should always be removed.

**Brackets**

Brackets are used for projecting signs. These should be craft-made of wrought iron and should be attractive rather than utilitarian. They can be designed to represent the nature of the activity being carried on the premises.

Brackets for hanging baskets should similarly be made of wrought iron to a consistent style and should not be made of simple box section steel.

All steel fittings should be galvanised and painted for durability and to reduce the risk of rust staining.

**Rainwater goods**

Rainwater gutters and down pipes should be well maintained in order to avoid water discharging onto passers by or customers entering shops. Many rainwater down pipes discharge onto the pavement and this can cause water-ponding on the pavement. Consideration should be given to diverting rainwater below the pavement level to discharge to the kerbside gutters.

**Canopies**

Canopies are necessary on certain types of retail premises to protect the product - in particular butchers shops and to a lesser extent clothes shops from sunlight and this should be the primary purpose. Where canopies are used, they should be placed on the south side of the street only and they should be incorporated into the design of the shopfront. The use of canopies as advertisement should be secondary to the primary purpose, while perambulator and closed ended canopies should not be used. Canvas fabric should be well maintained and replaced if frayed or damaged.

**Security**

The night time appearance of the street is important, with shops making a significant contribution to the overall feeling of security. Shuttered shopfronts give the impression of a dangerous place which needs to be defended, while open and illuminated shop display windows invite the passer by to linger and engage with attractive well lit window displays. A well lit, monitored street is the best form of security and every effort should be made to discourage or remove roller shutters from the front of display windows and to locate them to the rear of the sacrificial display. Some types of shop such as jewellers require the use of
shutters and it is also possible to have shutters set on timers to lower late at night when pubs and restaurants have closed. Some shops in Wicklow town use manually erected security grilles and these are preferable to shutters.

**SIGNAGE AND ADVERTISING**

Signage is most appropriately incorporated into the fascia over the shopfront. The fascia is often angled downwards towards the street and this corrects perspective distortion and, in Wicklow’s narrow street environment allows the passerby to recognise the shop name by looking upwards and not having to look from a distance. Lettering should be clear identifying the name or type of business. Block typefaces should be selected in preference to elaborate or stylised typefaces which are often difficult to read. The shop number should be incorporated in the fascia as it is important for customers and visitors to be able to locate a business easily.

**Active Shopfronts**

The purpose of improving town centre shopfronts is to engage with the passerby both during the daytime and night-time through attractive and welcoming premises and window displays. Dead window displays should be discouraged and should be restricted to use on side-streets. Posters, screen printed windows and opaque panels serve to repel the passer-by and such window treatments are discouraged in main street locations.

**Fascia Signage**

The fascia should be correctly proportioned to suit the shopfront and the building into which it is incorporated. Lettering should be clear and legible reflecting the corporate image of the business. Hand painted lettering on the fascia is the most appropriate manner in which to reflect the personality of the business and results in a satisfactory appearance. Other forms of lettering such as raised or incised gilt or painted lettering and 3 dimensional signage is also appropriate to the character of the town.

In some instances, where the building does not lend itself to a shopfront-such as on a stone building or where the building has a plain surface it is appropriate to place individual lettering to the wall surface or to incise lettering into the background.

inappropriate lettering and signage which should be removed and discouraged, includes; tarpaulin or banner signs; signs fixed to buildings advertising a remote business; box signs fixed to the face of a building; applied PVC signs inserted into a shopfront fascia.

**Projecting / Hanging signs**

This type of sign is appropriate for use in narrow streets but they should be used sparingly hung from decorative wrought iron brackets. These signs should be illuminated by discreet lighting incorporated in the bracket or mounted on the building and should never be internally illuminated, animated or neon signs.
Corporate Identity
Many multiple retailers insist on a strong corporate identity, which is easily identifiable to the public and have a standard signage programme which is applied without regard to its context. The result is discordant and does not relate to the appearance of the traditional town centre. However, where the brand image is strong, it can be adapted and used with subtlety in harmony with the town centre. This will typically require the use of more appropriate materials retaining the essence of the brand identity but making it subservient to the shopfront in which it is incorporated. In the above example from overseas, the “Golden Arches” are reduced to an outline and are printed on an awning matching the predominant colour of the stone building.

Gable–end signage
Gable ends can be used for signage and some forms of signage are more appropriate than others. Appropriate forms of signage suited to the design of the building are illustrated here. Inappropriate signage includes standard poster panel signs which should be phased out over time. A good example of the removal of such signage in Wicklow Town is “Inverdea” on Bridge Street, where the gable end advertisement was replaced by an attractive hand painted building name, and this should be repeated where these signs continue to exist.

LIGHTING
Display windows should be the most brightly illuminated part of the premises, the shopfront is a frame to the display and can be successfully illuminated in a variety of ways including fluorescent strip or recessed miniature lights incorporated into the cornice above the sign fascia. Stalk lights projecting from the face of the building should be limited in number and size and are vulnerable to physical damage. The first floor of the building can be illuminated with bracket mounted wall lights and these should be located at a height consistent with neighbouring buildings. Display windows should be illuminated at night and the lighting connected to a time clock. The light from the windows or building will illuminate the pavement and results in an attractive night-time environment.

COLOUR
The buildings in Wicklow Town are typically render finished, often with ashlars lines incised into the render finish, with painted surfaces, and with quoin stones defining the building plot. Some buildings incorporate attractive architectural detailing in plaster around windows and over doors. These details where they are present should be accentuated in a complimentary colour to the main body of the façade and should generally be consistent with the predominant colour of the shopfront.
The shopfront colour serves to distinguish one business from another, but also serves to harmonise a building or group of similar buildings, particularly at an upper level.

There is no typical range of colours in Wicklow Town, with each building expressing its own personality. While many businesses throughout the town choose muted or restrained colours, the use of vivid or vibrant colours is to be encouraged, and should be considered by owners when redecorating or when establishing their business. There are many examples where vibrant colours are used to good effect in the town, distinguishing different elements of the same business in some cases, and generally creating a sense of vibrancy. Harsh primary colours such as Canary yellow, Signal red and Royal Blue should be resisted in preference for more subtle warm but still vibrant colours.
GUIDANCE FOR MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR

The main enemy of shopfronts is water and a well designed and constructed shopfront will aid the removal of water so that it does not lodge on the shopfront where it will eventually rot woodwork.

Cleaning will also allow you to inspect the condition of the shopfront at close quarters. Painted shopfronts should be cleaned regularly to remove any dust or dirt which might hold water against the paintwork. Pay particular attention to any crevices or level places where dust could accumulate.

Cleaning the pavement in front of the shopfront to stop dust being thrown up on to the shopfront.

Exhaust gases from vehicles when combined with the damp atmosphere; contribute to create a harsh environment. These marks should be washed off as they stain stonework and paintwork, and become impossible to remove later.

Remove lichen, moss or leaves from the flashing over the shopfront with a stiff fibre brush. Water falling on the shopfront from higher up must be stopped at source, for example by cleaning and repairing gutters and downpipes.

Simple repairs to timber shopfronts can be carried out without elaborate tools or equipment or materials to extend life of the shopfront.

The flashing over the cornice is usually lead or copper and prevents water getting behind the woodwork. It is important to inspect the flashings to ensure that they are securely fixed to the building and the shopfront forming a weather tight seal. Bituminous roofing felts have a limited life span and should not be used as flashings.

The caps over the brackets must be kept watertight as for the cornice or the brackets will rot. This rot usually begins at the joints on top and then works through the centre. Normally, it is not noticeable until the damage is extensive.

Filler used in timber joints in woodwork eventually dries out and allows water ingress. Cracks and joints should be filled with flexible filler suitable for external use.

When re-decorating, prepare the surface well to ensure there is a sound background surface. Fill and renew any badly damaged timber or mouldings. Avoid a heavy build-up of paint which can conceal problems and hide elaborately carved details.

Paint blisters should be cut out with a knife, sanded flat, primed, undercoated and painted. Flaking paint due to age should be removed, sanded, primed, undercoated and painted. Paint should be micro porous paint, particularly in south facing locations as this paint will tolerate greater thermal and moisture movement in the timber shopfront.

If undertaking more extensive repairs or maintenance, remember that your shopfront may conceal a traditional shopfront behind it, so take down any existing shopfronts carefully as you never know what you might reveal!
4. INVENTORY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SHOPFRONTS

The following section describes existing shopfronts and makes recommendations for their first improvement. The recommendations are not exhaustive and should be seen as a first step in the improvement of the physical retail environment. For more detailed recommendations building owners and tenants should contact the planning officer at Wicklow Town Council.