

Historical Report & Assessment

St Finian's Study Hall /
Former St Patricks Classical School
Navan, Co Meath

Prepared For:



comhairle chontae na mí
meath county council

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March 2022

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Introduction

The following report is an assessment of the former St Patrick's Classical School and originally the St Finian's Study Hall building at St Finian's Terrace, Dillonsland, Navan, Co Meath. This report has been prepared by OC+C Architects to accompany a planning application for the conservation, restoration and adaptive reuse of the building and site for use as the Meath County Archive.

For ease of reading this report shall refer to the building as the former St Patricks Classical School, noting that a number of different uses and names are relevant to the building and site over time.

The former St Patrick's Classical School is a protected structure, (Reference 90915, Meath County Development Plan 2021-2027, Appendix 6, Record of Protected Structures), under the provisions of the Local Government Planning and Development Acts 2000-2002. The additional site structures are considered to be within the curtilage of the Protected Structure as detailed in this report. The building is also list on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, reference number 14009007.

The author, as a Registered Grade 2 Conservation Architect, has extensive experience in the assessment, careful conservation, restoration and appropriate adaptive reuse of some of Irelands most important heritage including Protected Structures, Recorded Monuments and National Monuments.

Ronan has lectured nationally and internally on conservation practice and theory including at the Architects' Council of Europe conference on the Adaptive Re-Use and Transition of the Built Heritage in Leeuwarden, (The Netherlands) in 2018.

Ronan O'Connor,

MRIAI, BArch, BScArchSc, Conservation Architect Grade 2

OC+C Architects 2021

Executive Summary

St Finian's Study Hall / the former St Patrick's Classical School is an important protected structure. The building has been subject to significant degradation caused by many years of mis-use and vacancy since St Patricks Classical School vacated the building in the 1970's.

In June 2021 a large section of the roof collapsed down onto the first floor of the building, which in turn collapsed, leaving other areas of roof and the masonry walls at significant risk of imminent collapse. Emergency works were undertaken to make the area safe and to protect as much historic fabric as possible. A large quantity of historic fabric, including the original roof truss timbers and purlins, and a large quantity of slates have been carefully sorted and stored onsite for use in the conservation and restoration of the building. At this time support steelwork was installed to brace the now exposed walls of the building and a protective capping was placed over the tops of the external walls. This report will deal with the history of the building, its importance, and the impact of the proposed works on the architectural, historical and social character of the building.

For the reasons set out in this report it is my opinion that the proposed use of the St Finian's Study Hall / former St Patrick's Classical School as Meath County Archive is particularly appropriate and complementary to its original function. The alterations to the historic fabric to enable this change of use are generally superficial and reversible without the loss of original fabric.

The proposed design recognises the special mathematical and proportional character of the building and works to accentuate and expose this special character for a wider audience. The proposed public realm works will create a new, highly visible public landscaped space for Navan, accessed from Circular Road. Overall the impacts of the proposed development are considered significant and positive.

Chronology

St Finian's Academy / Diocesan Seminary

St Finian's Academy was established in Navan, shortly after the repeal of the penal laws in 1802, by the Bishop of Meath Doctor Patrick Plunkett. Plunkett noted at the time that "*as an academy it will furnish the sons of affluent individuals of our persuasion with all the necessary means of a Catholic and genteel education*".¹ The curriculum catered for "*students intended for the priesthood or any of the learned professions*".²

St Finian's was to provide a secondary school education for boys and act as the Meath Diocesan Seminary or a preparatory secondary school for boys intended for the priesthood, essentially a feeder school for the national seminary in Maynooth that was established in 1796.

The seminary occupied a series of building on Academy Street on lands that stretched south west to include what is now St Finians Terrace, Academy Terrace and the old Meath County Hall. St Finian's Academy grew and developed over the following years to become a significant complex of building and is recorded as have 60 boarders in 1821, 100 boarders and 30 day pupils in 1835, approx 130 in 1854 and 118 in 1863.

In 1903 it was decided by the Bishop of Meath, Dr. Gaffney, to relocate St Finian's Seminary to the Cathedral town of Mullingar. This was likely to allow for the modernisation of facilities, provision of additional space and relocation of key diocesan functions closer to the centre of the diocese. St Finian's College opened in Mullingar in 1908.

St Finian's Study Hall

The date of the Elliptical Shaped study hall is not known with any great certainty. It is noted as c. 1840 in the NIAH survey of the building but no firm reference could be found to prove its existence in contemporaneous records around this date. The earliest known map indicating the building is from an 1862 sale of lands map in which the building and grounds are indicated in great detail. It can be assumed that the building was completed, or at a minimum, substantially standing at this time. A slate

¹ Coogan p246

² Samuel Lewis, A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland (London, S.Lewis), 1837, Vol. I., 422.

was also discovered on the building with the date of March 1st 1863 carved into the rear along with the name "T Murray FROCS".

After St Finian's relocated to Mullingar in 1908 the study hall was sold to the representatives of Sir Nugent T. Everard, Randalstown for the drying of tobacco, which was a significant industry in Randalstown at the time. The buildings external undercroft was particularly suited to this. This use continued until 1930 when the study hall was purchased by the newly appointed Bishop Mulvaney to provide a catholic secondary school for Navan, which had no such facility since the relocation of St Finian's in 1908, to much local disquiet.

Bishop Mulvaney opened the new St Patrick's Classical School in September 1930 in the renovated study hall with an initial enrolment of 20 pupils. A new science block was added in 1956 to the south western boundary of the site and the school had a steady student population of circa 50 pupils up to the mid 1960's. With the advent of free secondary education in 1965 the school's population almost doubled to 96 putting significant pressure on the site and its buildings. In 1970 St Patrick's Classical School moved to a new purpose-built school at Mount Rivers Moatlands, Navan, where it remains to this day.

Between 1970 and 2005 the building was used by John Orr & Co Ltd to make textiles for aircraft for export and by Mr Patrick Reilly as a furniture factory. It was during this time that a number of internal structural alterations and divisions were carried out and a second-floor structure was added above the old study hall. The building was acquired by Navan Urban District Council in 2005.

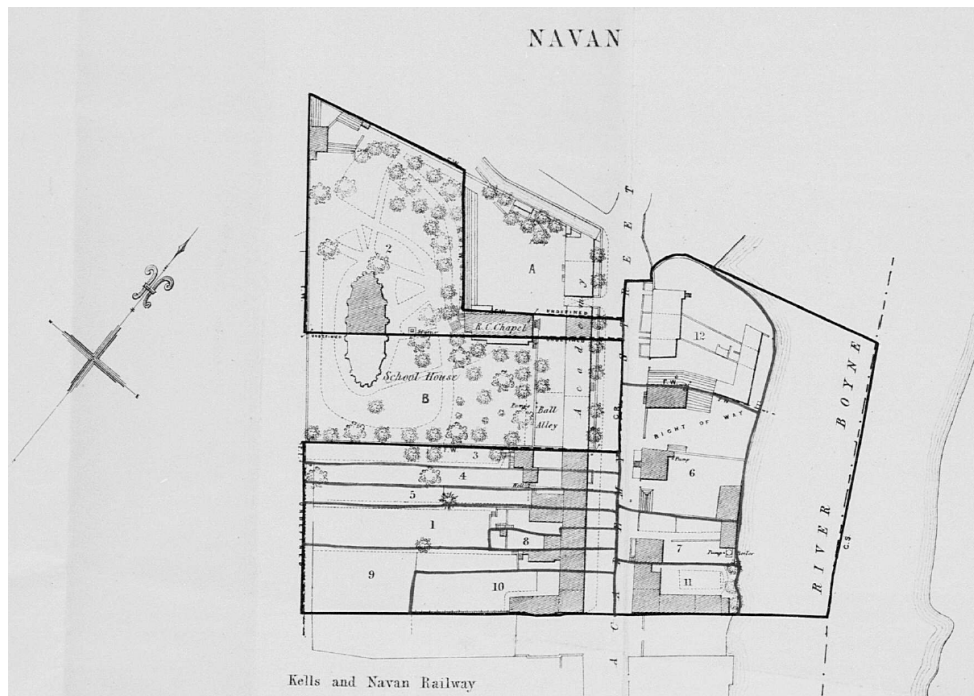
Historic Mapping



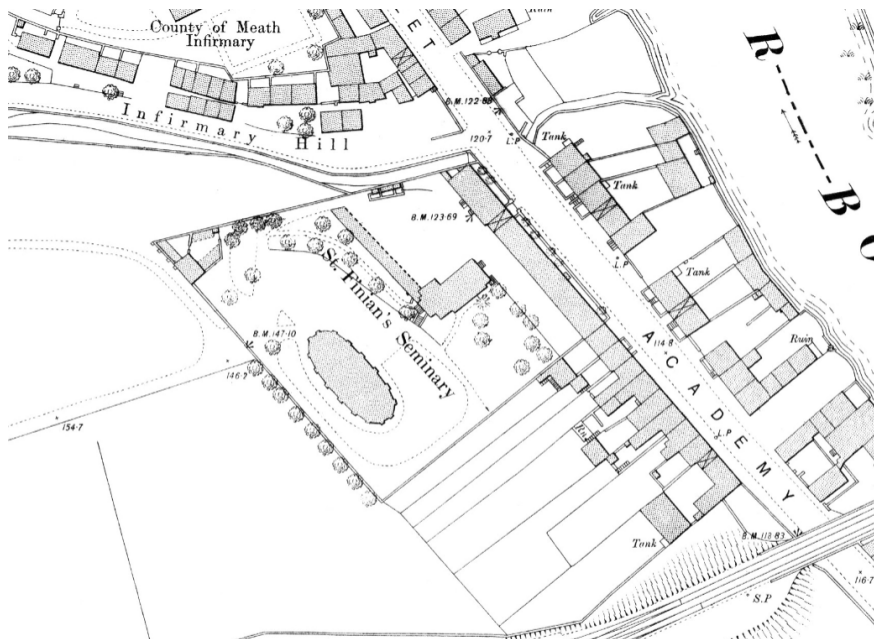
1757 Map of Navan, location approximate



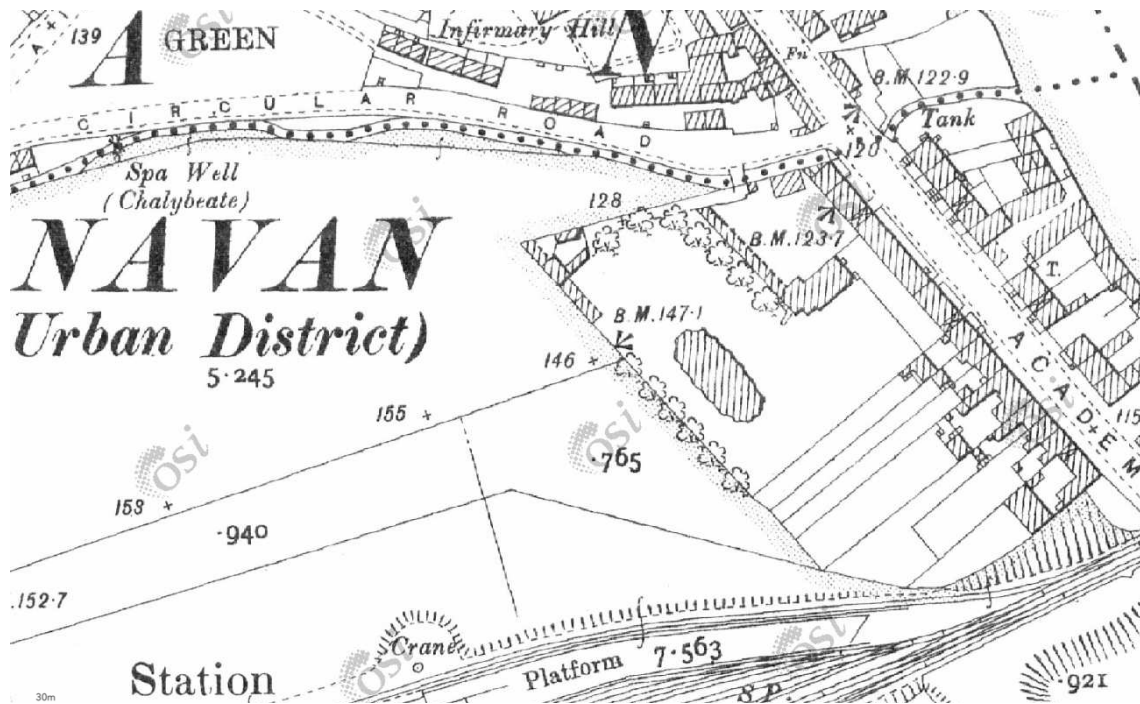
1835, (surveyed date), Ordnance Survey, 6" First Edition



1862, Landed Estates Court Lease Map



1895, (surveyed date) Ordnance Survey

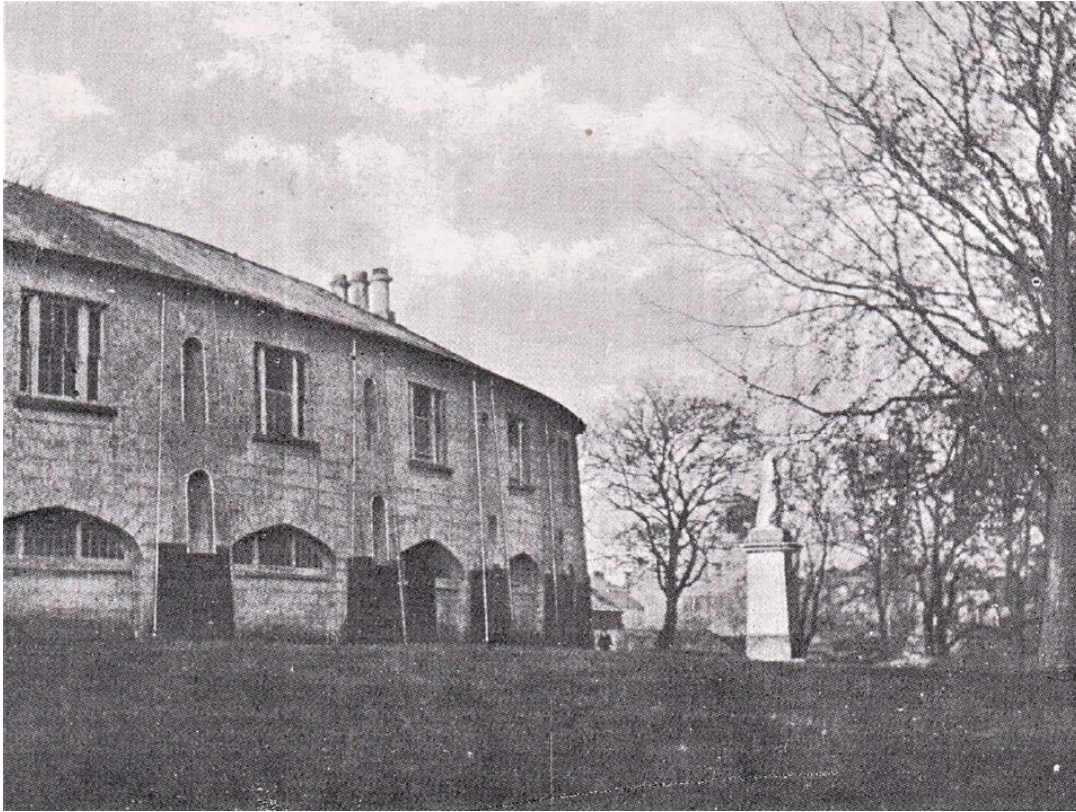


1910, (surveyed date), Ordnance Survey, Historic 25"



Modern Day Ordnance Survey Map

Architectural Description



The O'Growney Memorial Volume, 1904. View from the north east of the building

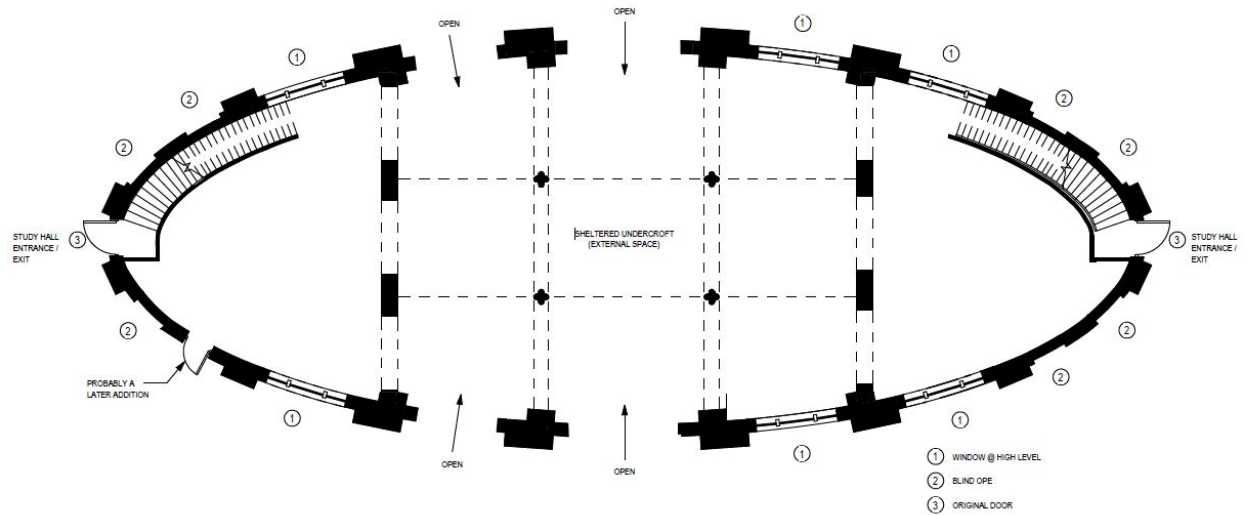
St Finian's Study Hall is a unique building. It's elliptical plan and highly mathematical proportional relationships are unmatched in any surviving building of its age in Ireland.

The Study Hall occupies a raised piece of ground behind the original seminary buildings on Academy Street in Navan. Set almost in a landscaped parkland, this was where the seminary met the wide-open fields behind, outside the town walls, before the growth of Navan came to encapsulate the site with the construction of St Finian's Terrace and Academy Terrace.

The building itself is based on the pure mathematical form of an ellipse. This plan form, used widely in classical architecture for auditoriums, theatres etc, (ie the Colosseum in Rome), is typically manipulated by architects using an oval shape instead of an ellipse, for the simple practical reason that one cannot offset an ellipse and retain its pure elliptical form – the offset would itself be an oval and not another ellipse.

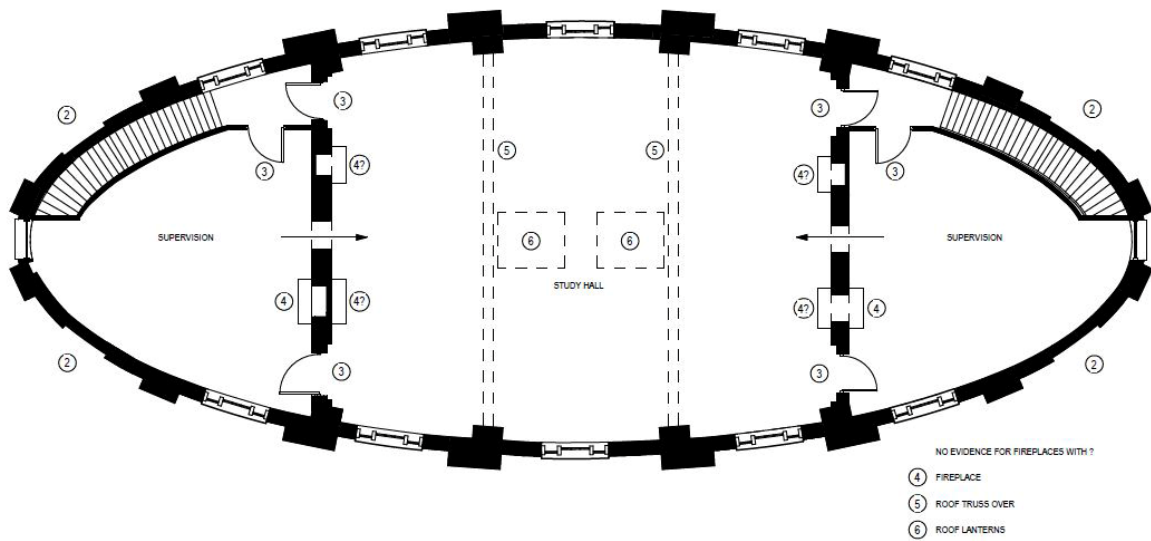
Externally the building is a seven bay two-storey structure with sixteen inclined buttresses, each with two levels of classical niches. At first floor the building had tripartite, Wyatt-style, ten over ten sash windows of which there are some remaining vestiges in two locations, as well as four blind windows, two at either end. These are located above two blind doorways at ground floor level at a location where the curve of the building sweeps in to an elliptical end, changing the rhythm and width of the standard building bay.

At ground floor the original openings had slightly pointed heads externally, timber windows and doors with a number of the openings left unglazed to create a covered external space for the students to congregate, protected from the weather. In some instances, these openings have been altered to more pronounced point-headed arches, likely when the building was converted to St Patrick's Classical School in 1930. There were also likely a number of blind door openings to match the blind window openings above. In each case these openings have been created in the brickwork with great care and then infilled with brickwork of the same age, likely at the time of construction or very shortly thereafter. It is not known if these openings were always planned to be blind openings, perhaps to maintain the architectural rhythm of the building whilst omitting windows and doors that were not required, if these were cost savings at the time or if the openings originally contained doors and windows and were later blocked up. In the author's opinion the most likely answer is the former. As the building has been so carefully set out to precise proportions and to a specific rhythm it is considered most likely that these openings were always planned to be blind openings as they differed slightly in dimension from the majority of the openings of the long sides of the building and there was no need for a large number of openings at the ends of the building.



GF - Historic Floor Plan

Original Ground Floor Plan of St Finian's Study Hall



FF - Historic Floor Plan

Original First Floor Plan of St Finian's Study Hall



Teaching Staff at St Finian's, circa 1867. Note the lined stucco and pointed arched window.

Externally the masonry walls were originally finished in a lined stucco render, since replaced with a cement based roughcast render and lime render internally, which remains in part. Original limestone cills remain in most instances.

The roof consisted of a double pitch with natural slate finish, curved in plan throughout its length to negotiate the elliptical plan shape. The slates to the ends of the building were also tapered to accommodate the more pronounced curve at this location. A flat section on top of the roof, likely installed to prevent the roof from having a curved ridge profile, was weathered using rolled lead sheet, (removed at an unknown time post 2005) and contained two modest sized lanterns over the central study hall at first floor. The building doesn't seem to have ever been fitted with gutters or rain-water goods and has a series of paired decorative timber eaves brackets supporting the deep timber eaves, the overhang likely sufficient to prevent water damage to the walls below. The roof structure internally consisted of four large trusses, two at either end to negotiate the curved end of the building and two in the middle section of the building to clear span across the space. The trusses in each case sat on pairs

of inclined buttresses at either side of the building. The truss designs were somewhat bespoke to cater for the unique nature of the building and its unusual planametric shape, The two central trusses a type of queen post truss with a flat top and the two end trusses being a compound truss - a modified king post truss with an additional leg at 90 degrees to the truss to negotiate the curved ends of the buildings.



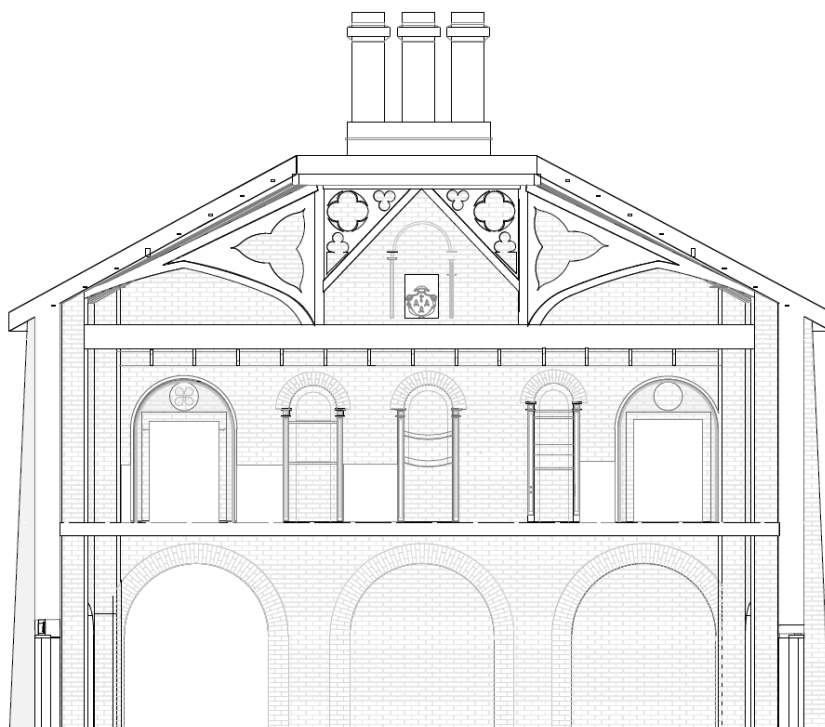
2005, Con Kehely. Central trusses on the left with end trusses on the right. The decorative inserts are modern painted plywood.

The masonry walls of the building, both internal and external are primarily of brickwork construction with some random rubble infill within the two large chimney stacks. At ground floor level this brickwork, which has been set out with great care as discussed in detail below is formed into semi-circular arches to allow for a permeable ground floor plan. A staircase at either end of the building brought the student or teacher up to the first floor study hall, which had two rooms at either end, likely for staff and/or storage of study materials. The first floor study hall itself must have been one of the finest rooms in Navan at the time with its unique shape, high ceilings, decorative mouldings and, (likely), roof lanterns above. This space, measuring some 14m by 11m, was likely one of the largest rooms in the town outside of its churches and it is curious that it does not appear more frequently in the written record.

At first floor level the two central walls rise to create the edges of the study hall, each with five arched openings/niches to provide doors for circulation, fireplaces and likely viewing windows from the rooms at either end into the study hall to allow for surveillance of the students. An additional central arched recess in located at high level.

A second floor structure was crudely added, likely in the early 1970's to provide additional space for the buildings new industrial use. The insertion of this floor required some additional steel beams and columns to be installed and also created significant damage to the heads of the arches at first floor

level. New openings were also cut into the two large central chimney breasts to access spaces at either end, destabilising the structure. This second floor structure was removed circa 2005.



Record drawing of the building, circa 2000

Within the ground of the former St Patricks Classical School there also remains the external walls of a handball alley. It is not known with certainty when this was built but it was present in the 1950's, (there was also a different ball alley noted in the 1862 map of the property to the rear of the Seminary buildings on Academy Street – no trace of this ball alley remains) . The handball alley has mass concrete walls and is built into the existing rubble stone wall of the south western boundary to the site. This structure, of great interest in itself, has suffered from neglect, overgrown vegetation and an ad-hoc storage shed was constructed within the handball alley using block work and corrugated tin roof. There is also the remains of an more recent blockwork toilet block, to the north western corner of the site. This structure is of no particular merit.

The site boundaries have undergone significant alteration over the years. It would appear that the original rubble stone wall, likely from the mid 1800's is still extant to the south eastern boundary of the site. This wall would have been the original boundary of St Finian's Seminary. A number of concrete buttresses have been added to stabilise this wall at an unknown time. There are also signs of the original rubble walls of the seminary grounds to the south western boundary running from the existing

entrance gate to a more modern blockwork boundary wall that runs along the north western boundary to the site. Elsewhere a more recent single storey industrial unit was constructed and is in operation adjacent to the existing site entrance off St Finian's Terrace. This land is in separate ownership and no alterations are proposed to this structure.

Statement of Significance

This section addresses the significance of the building in terms of its architectural, historical and social heritage. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage survey of the area includes an assessment of the significance of the surveyed structures, providing an importance rating and identifying the areas of special interest which pertain to each structure, using the criteria and guidance set out in the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines. As such it is a key element in defining the significance of the buildings. The NIAH survey assessment of the building is set out below followed by a summary of the significance of the building. Further assessment of the hierarchies of significance are provided by the author on the following pages.

St Finian's Study Hall / former St Patrick's Classical School

Register Number – 14009007

Rating – Regional

Date – 1835 - 1850

Categories of Special Interest – Architectural, Historical, Social

Description

Detached seven-bay two-storey former school, c.1840, with elliptical plan, inclined buttresses, classical niches, eaves course of paired timber brackets and tripartite sash windows. Converted to furniture factory, c.1975. Double-pitched roof, natural slates, two rendered chimney stacks with tall triple-flues, paired timber eaves brackets, lead rolled lead ridges, no gutters. Roughcast rendered walls with inclined nap rendered buttresses with inset aedicules, metal tie bar plate, brick structure. Limestone cills, ground floor openings, round and point-headed - some altered first floor Wyatt-style sash windows and eight over eight pane sash window openings. Rubble stone boundary wall to south-east with concrete buttresses, low concrete block wall to north-east.

Appraisal

The St Finian's Study Hall building / the former St Patrick's Classical School is a significant and unique protected structure dating from the mid 1800's. The building has retained its original form, with an impressive elliptical plan and was constructed using high quality materials.

The pure elliptical form of the building has thankfully remained unaltered over the years and its original layout, in large part, can be ascertained by investigation of the extant building itself.

Construction Date:

No firm historical record has been found to verify the various dates assigned to the building. The NIAH notes a date of 1835 – 1850 and a date of 1842 is widely quoted anecdotally. The first specific map evidence for the building is from an 1862 deed of sale where the building and its grounds is drawn to a high level of detail. A slate was also recovered from the roof with an inscribed date of March 1st 1863. A review of the local and regional newspapers was undertaken to see if further evidence of a construction date could be uncovered. It is noted that the diocese seemed to publish its tenders for contractors in the Drogheda Argus but no such advertisement has been found to date from a detailed search of its archive material, (it is noted that 1840, 1842-1843 and 1851-1864 are not available). There is an article in The Tablet dated Saturday, August 8th 1857, where it is stated that *“about eight o’clock the theatricals commenced in the large study-hall of the seminary, which was tastefully and most appropriately fitted up for the occasion....and every accommodation was provided for the spectators, which numbered some hundreds.”* Also uncovered from the documentary record was reference to a large banquet in May 1845 as part of a series of large scale demonstrations in Meath led by Daniel O’Connell. This makes reference to a *“pavilion of exceeding beauty and task was erected for the banquet within the grounds of the seminary”*. It was capable of dining 900 persons, (another article of the same date makes clear that this is tented structure and not a permanent building. Had the study hall been available at this time it might well have been utilised.

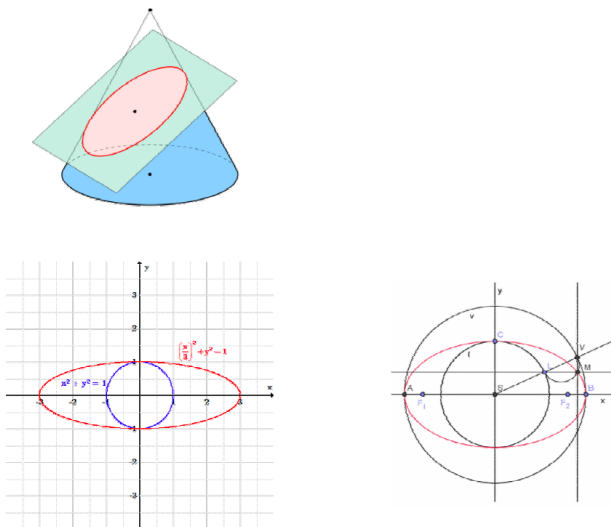
Based on the documentary evidence available it is certain that the building was standing in 1862, and very likely that it was standing in August 1857. That would place the most likely construction period at some point between 1845 and 1857.



Photograph of slate salvaged from north western end of St Finian’s Study Hall

Architectural Proportions:

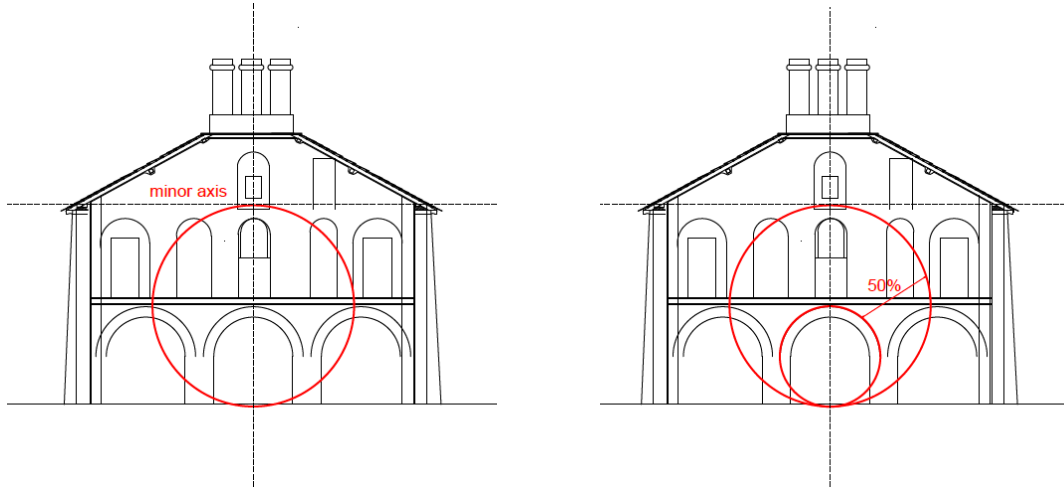
The elliptal plan of the building, which has been verified by survey, has been set out using very specific mathematical proportions. There is almost no chance that these proportions are arbitrary or coincidental. Ellipses have long interested mathematicians and architects alike, although most buildings that appear elliptical are actually oval, owing to the great difficulty in setting out buildings to an elliptical shape as an ellipse cannot be offset to create another ellipse. In effect one side of the wall would be a true ellipse and the other side of the wall would be an oval.



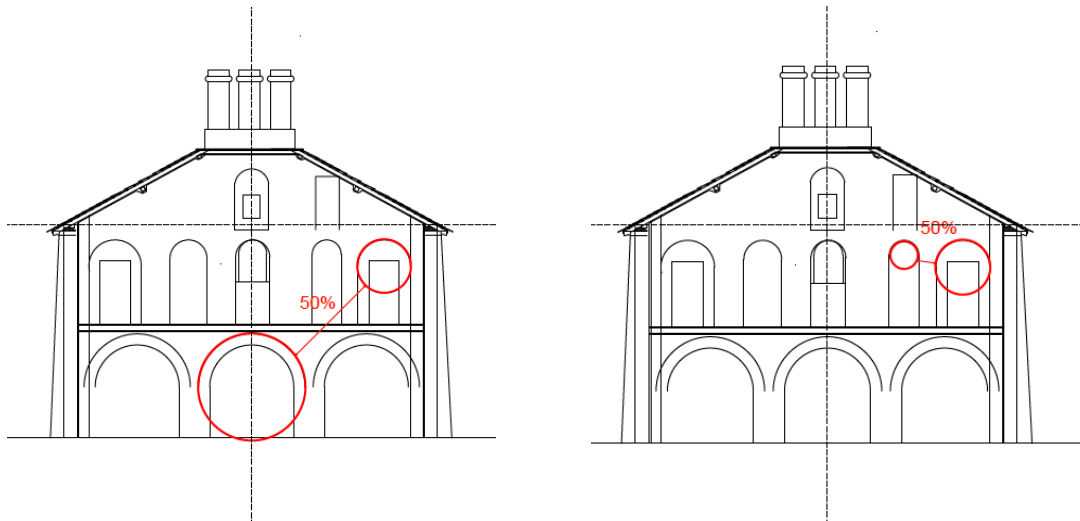
An ellipse is a conic section, with a circle being a special or “pure” ellipse taken horizontally to the base of the cone. An ellipse is created by the intersection of a plane at an angle to a cone’s base and is described by two foci. Ellipses have a special property that any line drawn from one foci to another foci and touching the perimeter of the ellipse will have an identical length.

Verified by survey, the major axis of the ellipse in St Finian’s Study hall is 110ft. The minor axis is 40ft 5 inches. This gives a very specific ratio between the major axis and the minor axis of e , or Euler’s Constant of 2.71828... Euler’s Constant has a particular importance in mathematics and is the base of the natural logarithms. It is very unlikely that this proportional relationship is arbitrary or occurred by chance.

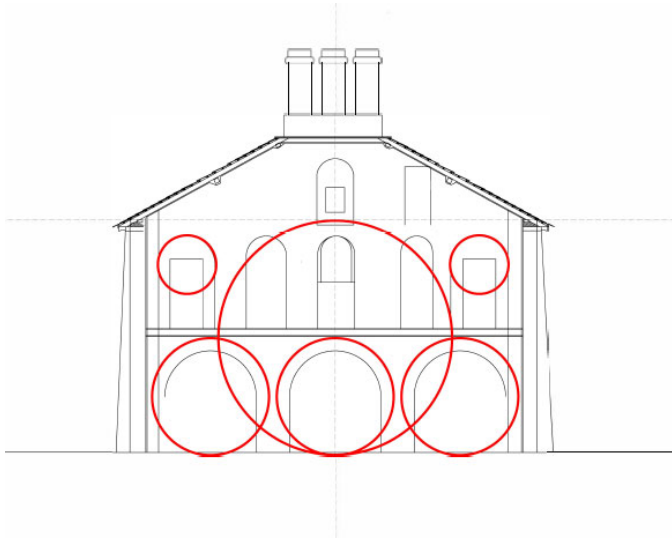
A further study of the proportions of the building lead to numerous other relationships. For example, the height of the building to the eaves is equal to half the length of the minor axis of the ellipse, shown by the circle below.



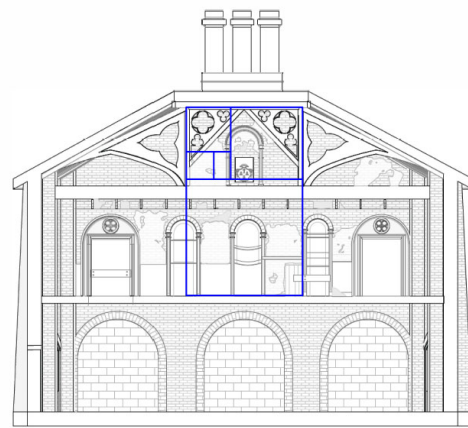
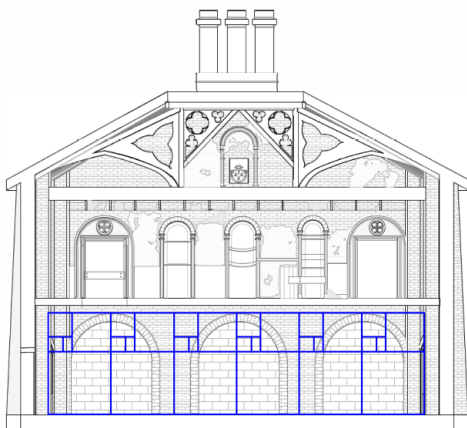
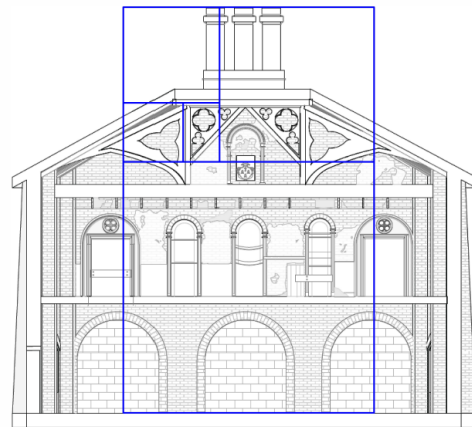
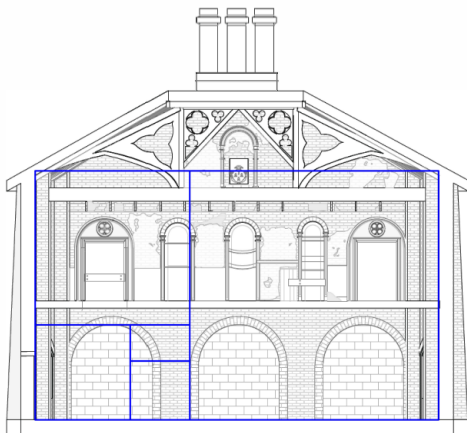
If one takes the circle of 50% this size it precisely describes the size of the arches at ground floor.



50% of that size in turn gives the size of the arches above the doors of the study hall at first floor and 50% of the size of that circle gives the size of the arches over the niches at first floor.



The golden ratio is also seen heavily throughout the proportions of the building and is used to set out the height of the chimneys, the spacing between the large ground floor arches, the proportions and setout of the central trusses and the height of the study hall at first floor.



Roof Structure

The designer(s) of this building had a number of interesting challenges to address in terms of the planimetric setout used, the large spans involved and the complexity of placing a roof over such an unusual shape. As noted above this was achieved through the use of four bespoke trusses, each very carefully considered and set out within the larger proportional system of the building. The knowledge and workmanship required to execute these trusses was significant. Further complexities arose for the builders in the complex compound curves required of the purlins to ensure that the rafters sat true on the roof. This workmanship is more reminiscent of shipbuilding than architecture and was executed onsite with some accomplishment. This unique and well-crafted roof structure adds significantly to the character and importance of the building. A full 3-dimensional model of the original roof structure has been prepared to aid with the restoration of the roof profiles onsite, together with the restoration of the historic roof timbers to the northwestern end of the building.

Summary of Importance

In the author's opinion St Finian's Study Hall / the former St Patrick's Classical School building is a nationally important Protected Structure and a key part of the architectural, social and cultural history of Navan, County Meath and Ireland.

The study hall, likely constructed in the years prior to 1857, sits largely within its original curtilage of the wider St Finian's Seminary complex, much of which has subsequently been lost. The study hall's architectural design is the built embodiment of the modern, progressive, scientific, classical and European looking ethos of St Finian's under the stewardship of Rev Nicholas Power³.

It is not known who the architect for the building was, but it is almost certain that the architectural design was informed, and perhaps led by, the contemporary teachings of St Finian's Seminary in relation to advanced mathematics and astronomy. This implies a significant input from the teaching staff of the time in the design of the building. The anecdotal nickname of the building as "*Power's Duck Egg*" may lead one to surmise that Rev Nicholas Power was the genesis of the design, although no documentary evidence could be found to directly support this. It is also almost certain that a practicing architect was involved in the design, drawing and specification of the building, given the modern and specialist roof trusses, the large spans involved, the use of cast iron support columns and the complexity of the works generally. The Diocese was constructing a number of buildings at this time and reference is often found to the architect responsible, (generally in the tender to contractors published in local newspapers). It would seem logical that an architect was also available for the design and construction of the study hall, which was a significant undertaking for the seminary both in construction and financial terms.

The quality of construction of the original building is significant for that of an ancillary building to a diocesan seminary in the mid 1800's, and has generally stood the test of time.

The special character of St Finian's Study Hall should be seen in the context of the growth of Catholic Church provided secondary education after the abolition of the penal laws and the slow growth of secondary education generally in the country. The mathematical and proportional nature of the building is also the physical manifestation of the educated Irish looking towards Europe for academic and

³ See Endowed Schools Ireland, Commission, Report, Vol 3, Minutes of Evidence, Documents, and tables of schools and endowments, pg 708-711

scientific advancement and the embodiment of a modern, progressive and scientific ethos in place at the time in St Finian Seminary.

The unique nature of its mathematical geneses, the pure planimetric shape of the building, the well-considered proportional relationships and the quality and complexity of construction elevate the special character of this building and the legibility of each should be protected in any future development.

Legal and Planning Protections

The Planning and Development Act of 1999 defines a Protected Structure as;

(a) a structure, or

(b) a specified part of a structure,

which is included in a record of protected structures, and, where that record so indicates, includes any specified feature which is within the attendant grounds of the structure and which would not otherwise be included in this definition;

The Act also defines “protection” as follows;

“protection”, in relation to a structure or part of a structure, includes conservation, preservation and improvement compatible with maintaining the character and interest of the structure or part;

Legal and planning policy protection for a Protected Structure extends to the land and structures lying within its curtilage and attendant grounds.

Curtilage & Attendant Grounds:

The Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, Guidelines for Planning Authorities, issued under Part IV of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, sets out the considerations to be taken into account by planning authorities in making a decision as to the extent of the curtilage and attendant grounds of a protected structure. It is noted that this decision is taken on a case-by-case basis and may be revised in line with case law on curtilage, which is also its own separate legal concept apart from its heritage protection status.

The Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines notes the following in relation to the Curtilage of a Protected Structure;

The notion of curtilage is not defined by legislation, but for the purposes of these guidelines it can be taken to be the parcel of land immediately associated with that structure and which is (or was) in use for the purposes of the structure.

It is noted that “curtilage” also has a meaning in common law and as such its definition may be revised with emerging case law.

The Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines also defines the Attendant Grounds of a Protected Structure as;

The attendant grounds of a structure are lands outside the curtilage of the structure but which are associated with the structure and are intrinsic to its function, setting and/or appreciation.

Curtilage and Attendant Grounds of St Finian's Study Hall / former St Patrick's Classical School

It is clear from a review of the historic mapping that the original curtilage of the study hall is largely intact, within some more modern modifications along the south western boundary. Elsewhere the original boundary walls are still largely intact to the southeast and the southwest. The boundary to the northwest appears to be very close to its original location, however it has been replaced with a more modern concrete wall in the last forty years or so.

Any planning application on these lands must be assessed in line with The Planning and Development Act of 1999, the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines and the Built Heritage and Culture Objectives of the Dublin City Development Plan 2016 – 2022.

Protected Structure Impact Assessment – Context, Character and Fabric

“New works should not adversely impact on views of the principal elevations of the protected structure Boundary Features” , (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011).

“Proposals for new development within the curtilage of a protected structure should be carefully scrutinised by the planning authority, as inappropriate development will be detrimental to the character of the structure” (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011, 13.5.1).

“Where a formal relationship exists between a protected structure and its ancillary buildings or features, new construction which interrupts that relationship should rarely be permitted. There may be a designed vista between a building and a built or landscape feature within its gardens or a less formal relationship between a house and its outbuildings. Similarly, the relationship between the protected structure and the street should not be damaged. New works should not adversely impact on views of the principal elevations of the protected structure” (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011, 13.5.2).

“Where a large house or an institutional building has a garden which contributes to the character of the protected structure, subdivision of the garden, particularly by permanent subdividers, may be inappropriate” (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011, 13.5.3).

“The designed landscape associated with the protected structure can include other buildings or structures associated with the functioning of the main building such as stables, icehouses, dovecotes, walled gardens, greenhouses, gate-lodges or bridges” (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011, 13.6.2).

“Important or intact features should be identified and located where they survive. These may not always be readily visible. For example, early gardens or other features may have been simply grassed over and survive below the surface. These could easily be lost through uninformed alterations” (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011, 13.6.4).

“It is essential to understand the character of a site before development proposals can be considered. Where attendant grounds of particular significance are proposed for development, a conservation plan could be prepared in advance of any planning application which would identify the significance of the site and locate areas within the designed landscape, if any, which could accept change and

development and those areas which could not without damaging the architectural heritage of the place” (Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines, 2011, 13.7.1).

Development within the Curtilage

Boundary Features – Impact Assessment

The extant original boundary walls to St Finian’s Study Hall are to be protected in-situ. The only amendment sought to the original boundary wall is to facilitate a new accessible entrance to the site, required due to the natural levels of the site preventing level access from the proposed new circular road main entrance. This new opening will be carefully made through the existing wall with all original stone retained for use in repairs elsewhere on the site. A modern surround to this new opening will be provided to create a clean visual break in the existing wall, clearly identifying it as a modern intervention. This intervention would be fully reversible in future in required.

No other amendments other than repair and renewal are anticipated to the original boundary walls to the site. These works, where required, will be carried out in accordance with the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines.

Architectural Impact Assessment

Proposed Use

St Finians Study Hall / the former St Patrick’s Classical School building is an important protected structure which is currently at risk. The most important first step in protecting the building is to identify a suitable, sustainable and long-term use that is compatible with its protection. In the author’s opinion the proposed use of County Archive is an excellent use for this building that is highly compatible with its original purpose as a study hall. The proposed archive use does not require significant alterations to the external envelope of the building, nor any unsuitable extensions that would detract from its original, pure, elliptical form. It would also return the great study hall room at first floor into civic use.

Fabric Protection

The design of the new County Archive building proposes to retain the greatest amount of historic fabric possible, as well as to re-use historic fabric that was salvaged from the unfortunate collapse of the roof in June 2021. This historic fabric is currently stored under cover onsite in a safe manner awaiting its re-use.

It is proposed to retain all of the extant masonry walls of the building and to add modern partitions to create the functional spaces required of a modern archive building. It is also proposed to express, in a modern form, the original openings at ground floor level that gave access to the undercroft of the study hall. These will be internal spaces in the new archive and the blocked up central arches will be reopened and with high quality, modern glazing placed in these openings. It is proposed to remove the modern cement roughcast render and to re-apply the original lined stucco render visible in the early photographs of the building. This is required to protect the existing masonry fabric. In all interventions it is proposed to create a very clear juxtaposition of original and modern fabric, retaining the clarity of expression of the original building.

The original roof structure was surveyed in great detail, both prior to its collapse, (by Con Kehely), and during the emergency safety works immediately post collapse, (by the author). A full three-dimensional model has been generated of the original roof structure and the original timbers to aid in the restoration of the building. As noted above three of the original four trusses are not in a serviceable state. The primary timbers were retained onsite however, due to long term rot and degradation they are not in a usable state. These trusses will be re-instated using modern materials. It is proposed to faithfully restore the roof profile and to maintain the original materiality of the roof finishes, ie rolled lead sheeting and natural slate throughout. It is also proposed to re-instate the original decorative paired timber eaves brackets which are safely stored onsite from the emergency works, (some also remain in-situ and will be retained in-situ).

In the area of the roof to the north western end of the building it was possible to dismantle the original primary roofing timbers and it is proposed to re-use and expose these timbers in the construction of the new roof. This area will form a double height space inside the public entrance area of the archive, bringing these previously hidden timbers into public view. As historic fabric is not available for the remaining roofed areas of the building it is not proposed to re-create these areas of roof using modern fabric to mimic the historic fabric. These areas will have an identifiably modern roof structure, to the original, historic profile, and using traditional construction details – ie a cut timber roof. It is proposed

that this design solution of re-using historic fabric where available and clearly identifying modern fabric etc, is the most suitable design solution given the historic fabric, performance and historic legibility imperatives. It will be clear to the trained observer, in 100 years time, which elements are original fabric and which elements are later additions.

Planametric “Memory”

One key aspect of the proposed adaptive reuse of the building is to retain the planametric memory of the building. The ground floor was once a largely external space, the detailing of proposed archive will reflect this with a stone paving to ground floor level and floor to ceiling glazing in the original openings, making a very clear connection between inside and outside. Critical services such as bathrooms etc are kept to the centre of the plan so that the elliptical shape is experienced at all times as one circulates around the building.

At first floor we propose to return the building to its original form with the grand study hall restored to its original proportions, providing expansive views over the town from its elevated position. One of the service rooms to the north western side of the building is used as a double height entrance space and to provide a lift to make the building accessible to a full range of users. The other space to the north eastern end reverts to its original use as an anti room for staff to observe readers in the new archive reading room.

Summary

For the reasons set out in this report it is my opinion that the proposed use of the St Finian’s Study Hall / former St Patrick’s Classical School as Meath County Archive is particularly appropriate and complementary to its original function. The alterations to the historic fabric to enable this change of use are generally superficial and reversible without the loss of original fabric.

The proposed design recognises the special character of the building and works to accentuate and expose this special character for a wider audience. The proposed public realm works will create a new, highly visible public landscaped space for Navan. Overall the impact of this development are considered significant and positive.

The author would like to thank the large number of local and interested parties that have provided information, anecdotes and historical records to aid in the preparation of this report. I would like to thank in particular the Navan & District Historical Society and Vincent Mulvaney, Mr Con Kehely and Mr Paul Leech whose help was invaluable to the production of this report,

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