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National College of Art And Design

The Changing Face of Ennis

A Thesis
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Bachelor of Design in
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I plan to view the town of Ennis, Co. Clare, especially its central area, as it is undergoing rapid change and development. By close examination of the main streets I will show how their shopfronts play a major role in forming their character. I will look at developments of recent years both good and bad and examine proposed plans, getting an overall view of the direction in which Ennis is heading. As Ennis is my home town I am concerned about the changes taking place. Ennis is an old medieval town with an interesting town plan. It has narrow streets and a rich network of lanes and alleyways. These elements add to the character of the town but its present day shopfronts are lacking in this quality.



CHAPTER ONE

THE IRISH TOWN

Before studying Ennis in detail we must first give ourselves a broad view of the Irish town in general.

The layout and physical structure of a town is fundamental to its character but this is not easy for the lay person to understand. A town should not be viewed like an individual building, a painting, or a piece of sculpture, whose essential qualities can often be perceived from a single viewpoint. It is possible that a view of a town from a high vantage point may give a clear picture of its general layout and size but not of its character. Towns can be best understood by walking through them. Every town has its individual character, among other things, its form and shape are influenced by its original function, the topography in which it is situated and its architectural style. The spacious eighteenth century town plan is in complete contrast to the complex structure of towns with medieval foundations.

Much of the charm of smaller towns lies in the differences to be found among them. But, on the other hand, there are broad general characteristics which many towns share. There are towns which consist of little more than a single street, while others have streets with right angles to the main street. Elsewhere the main feature is a central square with streets radiating out of it. Settlements which were newly established during the seventeenth century and substantially improved in the early nineteenth century generally

have a clearly defined physical pattern. The smaller settlements usually have one central space, a little street or square, with the buildings grouped around it. As towns become bigger the layout is obviously more complex, but the basic pattern of streets and squares is repeated, all on a formal pattern. Occasionally the older medieval town patterns were not disturbed and the new buildings respected the street lines and rights-of-way laid down earlier. In other towns the medieval and classical street styles exist side by side.

As a general rule, Eighteenth century developments catered for the new professional and commercial classes whose businesses and residences were located in newly developed streets. This has given rise to the so called 'Irish' and 'English' towns, as older and newer areas, respectively were called.

The most common element in towns is the street or square. Essentially a street is defined as a grouping of buildings which face on to a public thoroughfare; usually the buildings are physically connected to each other and may be similar but with minor variations, as in Georgian streets and squares. On the other hand, they may be different in size, design, shape and use, as in older medieval settlements and in many small towns today. The common link is the street itself, the public thoroughfare, where all the communal activities take place. In medieval times the street was usually a narrow path suitable only for pedestrians and small wheeled vehicles. In the Renaissance and Georgian periods the street became a symbol of power and majesty and often its scale dominated the nearby buildings.

However, it is the physical attachment of one building to another which is the principal characteristic of older streets of all periods, and this has been a major feature of urban aesthetics. The street is also important to the social life of a community. Now it's the motor car days, which despite its advantages as a means of transport, has brought danger and pollution to the traditional street.

Street names are important in any town, whether they commemorate a local dignitary or an important event or to refer to the original activities in the street. The street was a place where all the action was and walking the street was a very popular pastime a mere generation ago.

The street is essentially of linear proportions but the square is a broad space where the street in effect becomes wider to provide more room for an important activity, for example, a market or the celebration of a great person or event. The square as an urban space has always been considered prestigious and many of the fine urban spaces throughout the world are squares in some form or another.

The relationship between streets and squares is an important aspect of the way in which towns function aesthetically. The contrast between the narrowness of the street and the spaciousness of a square always adds interest to any town. Street architecture is one of the most delightful aspects of our architectural heritage.

It is not uncommon to find shops, public buildings, houses and banks on the same street often different in specific details but form a definite structure because they are physically beside each other. The function can change from building to building, but the overall effect is still pleasing. It is possible to destroy the entire uniformity and character of a street by the insertion of one insensitively designed building. Sometimes damage can be caused by changing the proportions of and design of windows, insignificant as that may appear in relation to a single building.

The traditional building plot reflects the importance of the streets as a social and economic unit. The street is usually long and narrow. Wider plots are unusual and belong mainly to public buildings or may be as a result of the amalgamation of adjacent properties. Narrow frontages allow the maximum number of properties to face onto the street. The entrance to the rear is often through an archway under the buildings, which in itself creates an attractive feature in many street scenes. At present many back gardens are idle and under developed with stone buildings in disrepair. These areas are a great unused resource of architectural potential and there are many opportunities to create new streets and urban spaces.

In recent years we have seen a decline in the social and aesthetic importance of the street, mainly due to the growth of motor traffic. The traffic noise has forced many to take up residence away from the centre of the town and the streets are viewed as a passage-way for traffic and not for community or residential use.

In smaller towns this traffic is only passing through but its speed is a source of danger to the residents and of damage to the buildings. Many Irish streets have declined because of widening to facilitate the passage to traffic. Some streets are not maintained because of a fear of planned widening. But there can be nothing wrong with street improvements if they form a plan of renewal with newly designed buildings with adequate living and social accommodation.

A few years ago, the concept of the traditional street seemed to be disappearing altogether. Only a few urban areas were being created and most existing streets were gradually falling apart, except for a few premises that were well maintained but they looked almost out of place on the street walk. Lately we have seen some encouraging signs that the decline of our towns, urban spaces and existing streets may be reversed, or at least halted. Traders and residents formed action groups to fight back against what developers and designers were doing to our streets and urban areas. The qualities of the older streets were being rediscovered. The action groups see a need for design that will improve the conditions and standards of our streets. The urban street of this age has to cater for a different society from the street of the past, but there is so much to be learned from understanding the design and techniques used by previous generations of town planners and builders.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY OF IRISH SHOPFRONTS

The traditional Irish small shop is a significant item of folk architecture and contributes to the fabric and texture of town and village in an exciting way. The architecture of Irish shops developed over the centuries and was shaped by the same forces, social and economic, which shaped the architecture of ordinary people elsewhere in Europe. The craftsman-designer was influenced by the various movements and styles but adapted these to suit his materials and craft, in doing so he created a shopfront easily recognised and appreciated by the people who lived in and used the buildings.

The forms were simple and functional, the materials local, the results were always harmonious. A craftsman in wood or stone knew the limitations of his materials, appreciated the weight, texture and grain and without any design training produced a work of architecture.

Many of Irelands shopfronts of this era have been wiped out due to road widening and insensitive development. However a large amount have survived and can be seen in the smaller towns and villages throughout the country.

Architects have never been involved in the design of small shops to any great extent and this appears to have been commented on in the past. There

contribution has been in the source books and in style setting and their influence is obviously strong. However the standard of design has sunk to such a low ebb since the craftsman-designer has been wiped out of existence. We will see this more clearly when studying some of the shop fronts in Ennis. Architects must now involve themselves more deeply in the design of small scale buildings for ordinary people.

The plea of architects Delassaux and Elliott in 1855 is far more relevant today:

"It may not at first sight appear a very dignified employment for the heads of the profession, to use their talents in designing shopfronts and street facades, but in reality, few classes of subjects afford such scope for inventive genius, and none where its efforts would be more appreciated, or exercise so favourable an influence on the taste of the multitude."

(Rothery, 1978 p.14)

Shops were originally the workplaces of tradesmen and craftsmen. The goods were made in the workshop and sold directly to the customers who came to inspect the finished articles or to have their own special orders made up. Shops selling foods of various kinds developed directly from the stalls set up by farmers in market towns to sell their surplus produce. The earliest shops were open fronted, having a counter between the shop and the street. Shops like these existed in second century Rome. Later

developments of larger shops allowed open access to the shop along the front and put the counter on one side at right angles to the street. This plan form still exists today. The open fronted shop lasted well into the eighteenth century and in fact some still operated up until the 1940's. Shops like butchers, poulterers and fish shops needed the circulation of fresh air. The invention of freezers brought hygiene laws into effect, which put an end to this chapter in the history of shopfronts.

Towards the mid-nineteenth century the competition from shop owners for attention and advertisement of each establishment led to an explosion of different designs for shop fronts and a breakaway from the standard and uniformity of the earlier Georgian period. Specialist books on shopfront design now appeared. The most influential of these was probably 'Nathaniel Whittock' who in 1840 produced 'On the Construction and Decoration of The Shopfronts of London.'

(Rothery, 1978, p.25)

The shops of the small towns and villages were much more modest than the shops of the cities. These were generally the shops of the local craftsmen who served the functional needs of the farmers. The earliest shops of small towns would simply have been set up in the ground floor of the house and have used the house window for display. The only remaining shops of this sort in Ennis were situated along Cabey's Lane. Sadly, they have been recently demolished.

The first quarter of the twentieth century saw the rise of many specialist

shop fitting firms. These firms produced standard lettering for name facias and window sections and in some cases offered whole shop fronts of tailor made design. The mid-twentieth century saw an explosion of change. The wood fronted Edwardian and Victorian shops were swept away in the new desire for a glittering chrome and glass surround in the highly competitive world of shop selling. Buglars Medical Hall on Abbey Street, is a good example of this change. The result of this was that the street shapes lost the order and rhythm of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the work of craftsmen was combined to produce an exciting and human texture at pavement level.

The best efforts of modern designers today are concentrated almost exclusively in the show piece city centres. In the provincial towns shop design has been debased to a point where design is practically non-existent. The search for quick turnover and profit has been allowed to determine the environment of our streets.

CHAPTER THREE

The name Ennis derives from the Irish Inis meaning 'an island' and sometimes 'river meadows'. Ennis has been a place of importance since the foundation of the Franciscan Friary in the thirteenth century. Its narrow streets indicate its medieval origin, although there are no surviving fragments of walls or any record of the town having been walled.

Ennis came into prominence in the sixteenth century as the county town of Clare and was created a borough in 1612 with a right to hold fairs and markets. In 1680 Mr Hugh brigdall described Ennis as having 120 houses, and 600 inhabitants. Only 20 of the houses were slated, the others were thatched. Today, there still exists a few houses which show their early seventeenth century origin by their diagonally set stacks, while the narrow lanes off Abbey street, O' Connell street are typical of lanes found in towns of mediaeval origin. Bindon street and Bank Place were created in 1832, presumably at the time of the establishment of the first bank there in the early 1660's. During the nineteenth century ennis attracted large numbers of poor people whose cabins lined the roads into the town. In the mid-nineteenth century Ennis was described by the 'PARLIAMENT GAZETTER' of Ireland as being shabby and having a poor and disorderly appearance.

The streets were described as "narrow, crooked, irregularly edificed and without any feasible claim to cleanliness or comfort." It is interesting to note that present day thinking finds "narrow, crooked, irregularly edificed streets" rather attractive and charming.

James Fraser also wrote on the appearance of Ennis in his 'HANDBOOK OF IRELAND' in 1859:

"The modern additions straggle out along the public roads in long lines of cabins and detached houses so that both the new and old parts of the town, suburbs, and outskirts are ill-defined, scattered and do not present a single good street."

The Town Council seems to have acted on the remarks of such commentators. Although there was little rebuilding in the centre of the town, the surrounding areas were radically replanned in the mid and late nineteenth century. The new straight streets and roads included Cusack road, Clare road, Carmody street and Kilrush road. Along these roads new terraces were built to replace the old cabins. Most of the old cabins were demolished by the 1960's.

Although Ennis is of mediaeval origin there are no ancient buildings apart from the Franciscan Friary and the Tower-House now incorporated in the Old Ground Hotel. Two buildings have early seventeenth century chimney stacks and John Cruce's house of 1658 has its original chimney stacks. However, it would be misleading to claim that more than external walls survive from that century. Abbeyfield House, now the Garda Barracks, The Cloister, Springfield House, the old Catholic church and some of the houses in Abbey street and O'Connell street date from the mid eighteenth century. Buildings of the late eighteenth century include Saint Flannan's College, part of the Old Ground Hotel and some of the houses on the east side of Abbey street which have long, red bricked stacks.

The early mid-nineteenth century was a prosperous period for Ennis with the building of the Catholic Cathedral in the 1830's, the Court House in the 1850's, the Lunatic Asylum in the 1870's, the Church of Ireland church in 1871, a series of Banks in the 1860's and a large number of warehouses.

Most of the dwelling houses appear to date from the mid-nineteenth century and were thatched and rendered with lime plaster up until the beginning of this century. It is often difficult to be exact about the actual dating of these buildings, especially if they have been refurbished with slate roofs and cement finishes.

The majority of buildings in Ennis are built of limestone which came from two local quarries, one at Roslevan and the other at Bushy Park, supply stone for common purposes and large stone for heavier needs. Mellow red brick was made on the banks of the Fergus and was used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

CHAPTER FOUR

In describing Ennis and setting out to assess its present day character a good starting point is the examination of an Environmental study carried out in 1988.

ENNIS ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT STUDY

1. Background

In December 1987 Ennis Urban District Council appointed Brady Shipman Martin to undertake a study of Ennis. The brief asked the consultants to:-

- ... Survey the quality and condition of buildings and spaces.
- ... Identify areas suitable for re-development.
- ... Prepare design and layout guidelines for development.
- ... Advise on visual improvements to existing buildings.
- ... Provide improvement plans for selected streets and laneways.
- ... Indicate the general scope for improvement.

2. Work Programme

The surveys were carried out early in 1988 and the findings reported back in April. Analysis then followed and its conclusions discussed with the Steering Committee in August. Detailed recommendations were presented in December and the draft final reports incorporating various revisions were submitted in February 1989.

It consisted of three documents:-

Strategy for Action.

Design Control guidelines.

Pilot Streetscape study.

Each report is complete in itself and taken together they form the comprehensive study.

3. Conclusions

Surveys indicated that:-

- ... Various parts of the town required different types of action.
- ... The amount to be done varied from design control of minimum intervention by the U.C.C. in certain areas to urban redevelopment in others.
- ... The two major undeveloped areas in the town ('Post Office Field' and 'Convent Fields') need direction as to the shape they should take.
- ... All areas have potential for improvement and the town as a whole has vastly aerialized possibilities for its overall enhancement.
- ... For success there must be joint action between the U.D.C. and Owners of properties.
- ... A great deal can be achieved at little cost and also by utilizing works which are pending ie: Road improvements.

The Strategy for Action covers all these points in detail. The strategy presents the assets and liabilities of each 'Zone' or area of the town and then makes proposals for improvement.

When taken together, a series of policies is put forward, each with its own objective and the action needed to achieve it.

Arising from the strategy it was also concluded that:-

- ... A considerable improvement in the towns appearance would result from control of signs and utilities and elimination of derilection.
- ... New development of appropriate design could contribute to the quality of the town's environment.
- ... Many existing buildings detract from their surroundings and their owners should be encouraged to alter them for the better.

While the guidelines concentrated on buildings, the spaces between them featured in the strategy:-

- ... A distinctive feature of Ennis are the laneways traversing the streets, yet many of them are not pleasant at present.
- ... New spaces have been created by the main car parks but their overall appearance is not satisfactory.
- ... Some existing spaces (notibably O' Connell Square) have unrealized potential as attractive civic places.

The Pilot Streetscape Study shows how the opportunity to improve one sector of the town's street/ laneway/ parking area could be implemented. An area chosen by the Steering Committee at the Upper end of Parnell street, High street, Salthouse lane and the nearby carpark. Sketches illustrate the suitation before and after action is taken. Detailed drawings show the layout and choice of materials. Planting and street furniture are also detailed.



Fig (1.2)

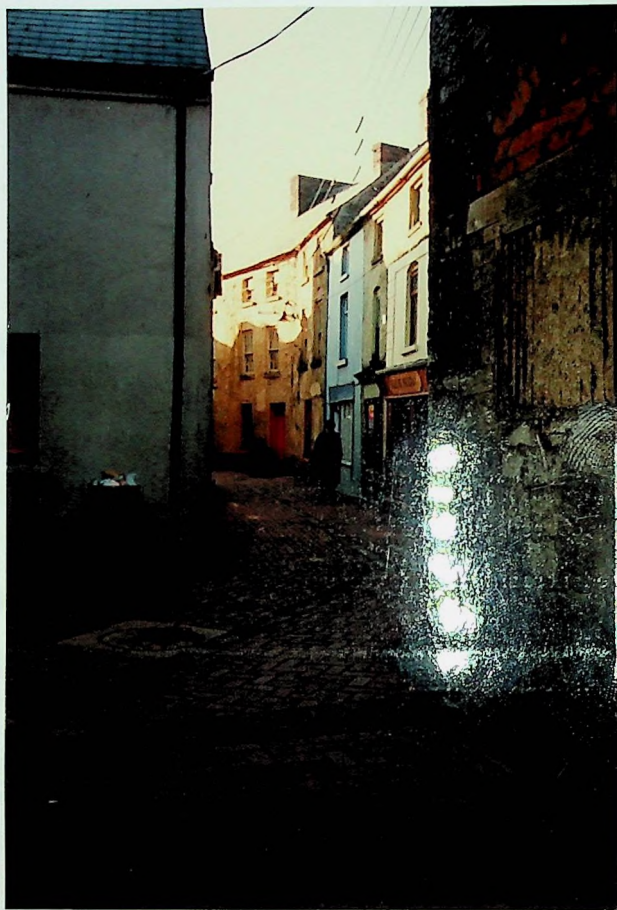


Fig (1.3)

The report set out the following objectives.

- ... The unique character of the narrow streets and lanes of the town centre should be stressed.
- ... The many laneways should be presented as pleasant places to pass through.
- ... As the frontage to the car-park and the river becomes increasingly important there is a need to treat this area as an important civic space in its own right.
- ... A major upgrading scheme to improve the presentation of Parnell street as a pedestrian area is required.
- ... The unsightly clutter of overhead wires should be removed where possible.
- ... The general standard of paving and street furniture needs to be significantly improved.

Since the Brady Shipman Martin report was completed for the Urban District Council in 1988, a lot of work and ideas of the Pilot Street Study have been completed.

(FIG. 1.2) is a drawing of the proposed changes to 'Chapel Lane' that leads onto Parnell street. (FIG. 1.3) is the present day look with the paving completed. Several narrow lanes have been paved in this manner. The lanes are more attractive and friendly. The beauty of their stone walls, old doorways and windows is enhanced considerably. In my opinion these are welcomed developments to the town. The reports suggestions for the Parnell street car park have also been acted on. (FIG.1.4.)



Fig (1.4)

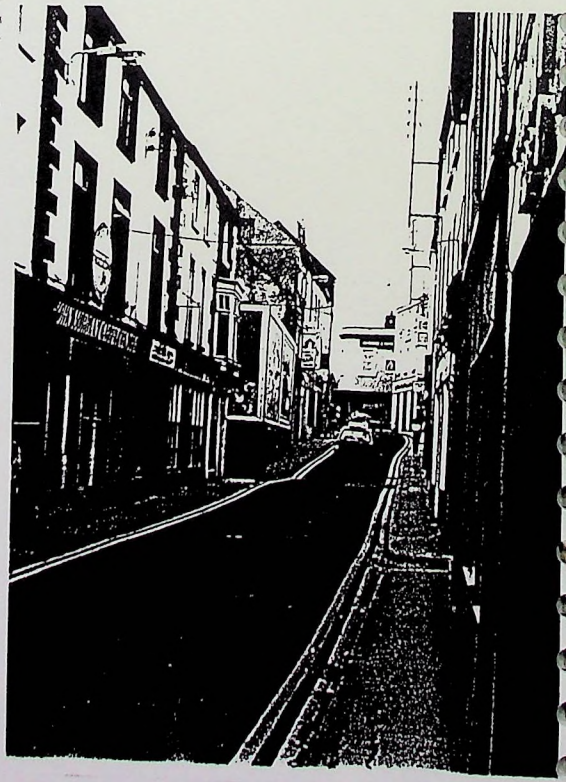


Fig (1.5)

A lot of parking space has been lost, but it has enhanced the area ten-fold. It is now a pleasant place to walk through in contrast to its predecessor which was ugly, dirty and run down.

The report submitted drawings and ideas for the pedestrianization of a section of Parnell street between Caby's lane and High street extends from Salthouse Lane to the Square. Traffic would then circulate through Old Friary Lane, Salthouse Lane and High street. The report proposed that these throughfares be dealt with as shared circulations, ie. well paved but without raised pedestrian footpaths. (FIG.1.5)

The concept of a pedestrian street in Ennis is an adventurous one. I think the proposed area would benefit a lot. Parnell street is uncomfortable to walk through at the moment because of the narrow footpaths and constant traffic. It would also be an incentive for new businesses to set up. It would also act as a catalyst for the development and upgrading of existing premises.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABBAY STREET

On walking through the streets of Ennis and discussing their shopfronts it is possible to slowly build up a view on the overall character they form. The three main streets are O'Connell street, Abbey street and Parnell street.

Abbey street is a busy shopping street with a pleasant curve leading down the hill from O'Connell Square at the south end to the Friary at the north end. It is narrow, though not as narrow as Parnell street, and lined with tall eighteenth and nineteenth century houses which give the street a unity. (FIG. 1.6) is a view of Abbey street from the north end and shows the curve of the street up the O'Connell monument in the distance.

Like the other streets in Ennis, Abbey street has a wide variation of shopfronts, some dating from the turn of the century. Its' facade is constantly changing; the speed of this change has been rapid in recent years. In contrast to the houses its shopfronts do not form a sense of unity. They are a mixed bag of shapes, colours and styles. On closer examination we can see why the street has lost its definite sense of character which can be seen in (FIG 1.7) taken in the 1920's.

On the west side, north end corner is the Beleek shop. The front is based on a traditional design. The striking feature of this front is its doorway. The protruding fascia over the doorway forms a mini-canopy which is out of character with the other elements in the design. If it were half the size it would not look so out of place. The front seems very quiet in its colour, only been saved by the blue of the buildings. In the corner of a street a shop can stand out and hold the street together by the use of strong vibrant colour. In this case the use of pink and grey seems to let the street fade out. The lettering on the fascia is stylish and well rendered and is sympathetic to the goods sold.(FIG 1.6)

Beside the Beleek shop is Philip O'Reilly Insurance Brokers. This is also a newly constructed front on traditional lines, but its fascia seems to protrude onto the street without sufficient visual side support. It looks as if it could fall onto the pavement. This is partially due to its colour contrast with the building it is set in. Black and red, used together form a very noticeable combination, but for an insurance broker it might seem a little 'unfriendly'. The front is a combination of timber and plaster which used correctly can form a very pleasing front. The obvious imbalance of the fascia to the bottom line of timber panels causes friction between these elements. The window and the fanlight over the door do not have any contact with the fascia. This adds to the lack of unity of the shopfront as a whole. Its black colour, however, provides the perfect backing for its gold leaf lettering.



Fig (1.6)



Fig (1.7)

Staying at the north end of the street, west side, we come to 'Enzo's Fast Foods' (FIG. 1.8). It is arguably one of the worst fronts of the town. It is an insult to the street. It makes the efforts of other shop owners seem pointless and irrelevant. It is a sore point on the lower half of the street. Like the others, it is a recent construction but shows a lack of effort with conforming with its neighbours. This shopfront is kitsch; it is mocking a traditional design. Enzo's Fast Foods is best described as a 'Hollywood stage prop', fake, temporary and ready to be wheeled away at a moments notice. The square panels look hideous and no consideration has been given to their proportion or what effect they cause. The timber panels used with an aluminium door and window do not blend together. It just adds to the confusion of the front and shows up how tacky it is. The lettering on the fascia and projected sign do not help in any way. It adds to the problem and puts the finishing touches on a repulsive front. One can only blame the owner for allowing such bad signage on their premises.

Fast food is a quick, throw away business but there is no need to express these traits on the exterior of your premises. some might argue that you need to have a bright and attractive front to lure your customer, I agree with this, but we have to make the distinction between attractive and gaudy. This, front well exceeds the level of 'brightness' needed. An example of a refined but very attractive fast food premises is Beshoffs' in Dublin.



Fig (1.8)



Fig (1.9)

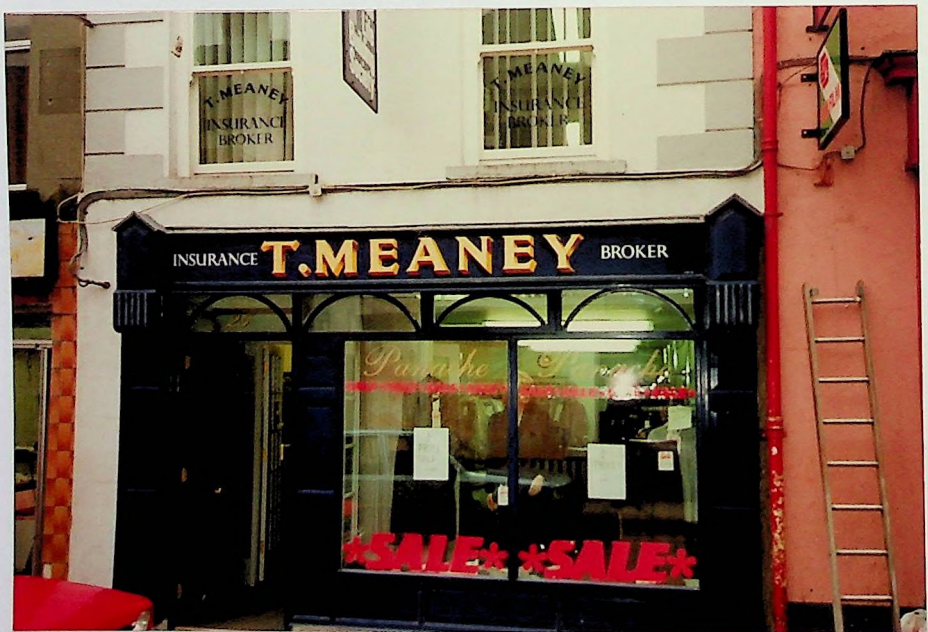


Fig (2.0)

It is sad to see a shopfront like this crop up at any time, especially at a time when the shopowners and general public of Ennis are striving to improve the look of the town.

This front could be improved ten-fold if it were painted in one colour to hide the square panels, a different colour for the fascia and projected sign, with good lettering and illustrations.

Two shops up the street on the same side is a front (FIG.1.9) which is in danger of disappearing. If this front was demolished a copy could replace it, but would be yet another clean sharp front. The present front can be repaired, painted and with sympathetic lettering could be restored to its former glory. The old chipped wood and canopy brackets form a character that would no doubt be lost if this was replaced by a new one. Sadly too many of the shopfronts in Ennis faced with the same options have through their ignorance, demolished fronts of the genuine traditional era and replaced them with second reate copies.

Across the street is a newly built shopfront, T. Meany (FIG. 2.0). This is another reproduction front with a traditional design. This front can be described as neat and friendly. The use of a lot of glass space makes it open and inviting. Unfortunately the right hand panel beside the door does not continue up to meet the fascia board, which would give better visual structure. The three semi-circular panels could be spaced over the two main glass panels so as to give better proportion. The main

point of interest in this front is the lettering. It is traditional to have the proprietors' name boldly displayed on the fascia. This is evident on several of the existing old shopfronts in the town. The inclusion of 'Insurance Broker' for obvious reasons could present a problem, but in this case it is handled with delicacy and restraint. If the letter size were enlarged it would ruin the traditional quality of the 'I. Meaney'. The lettering seems three dimensional. The use of blended shadows adds to the projection of the gold leafing. This sign is hand painted by John Boyd who has done several shopfronts in the town. Letters rendered with gold leaf have a special charm and dignity especially as in this case combined with shadows. It brings prestige to a premises and has a unique sense of dignity. Provided it is applied with the correct procedure gold leaf or gilded lettering should last a lifetime. A hand painted sign of this sort is a once-off job, a chance for the signwriter to do something special that will be there for years to come. The signwriter can add his own individual characteristic serifs and shapes to the letters that will make a sign unique and stand out from its neighbours. Gold leaf comes in book form and has to be rendered meticulously, to the fascia.

On the other hand people like to change their fronts every few years or so. A new sign, a different colour scheme on the woodwork and the shop is revitalized. Gold leafed signs were usually on established premises but trends are constantly changing.

Mid-way up the street on the west side is one of the finest shopfronts of Abbey street. Set in an early nineteenth century house of Mellow red brick of two bays and three stories, limestone coping and an inset chamfered corner is the shop 'Alexander Knox and Co' (FIG. 2.1). This shopfront dates from the early twentieth century. It has gilded lettering behind glass, fluted pilasters, simple brackets and curved glass on either side of the entrance. The sign is gold leaf gilded onto the glass and came from London at the turn of the century. Even though the ownership has changed, the original sign still remains because it forms the character and tradition of the shopfront and the building. Signage of this quality is hard to come by, but very few lay people are aware of its calibre. In this case conservation should be applied so that future generations can admire its beauty and craftsmanship. A tall rough cast warhouse extends back at the rear, a common feature behind the old houses of Ennis.

Continuing up the hill onto the south side of the street we come to another disaster of a shopfront, 'Tylers' (FIG.2.2). Its adjacent fronts, are, 'A. Honan' (FIG. 2.3) on its left and 'Pynes' on its right. 'Pynes' is a simple plaster front from the early part of this century. 'A. Honan' is a newly built front in traditional style. Set between these two buildings Tylers presents us with the most unsympathetic solution possible. On walking down the street the 'Tylers' shopfront seems to scream at you. It breaks the pattern and singlehandedly destroys any remaining character of the street.

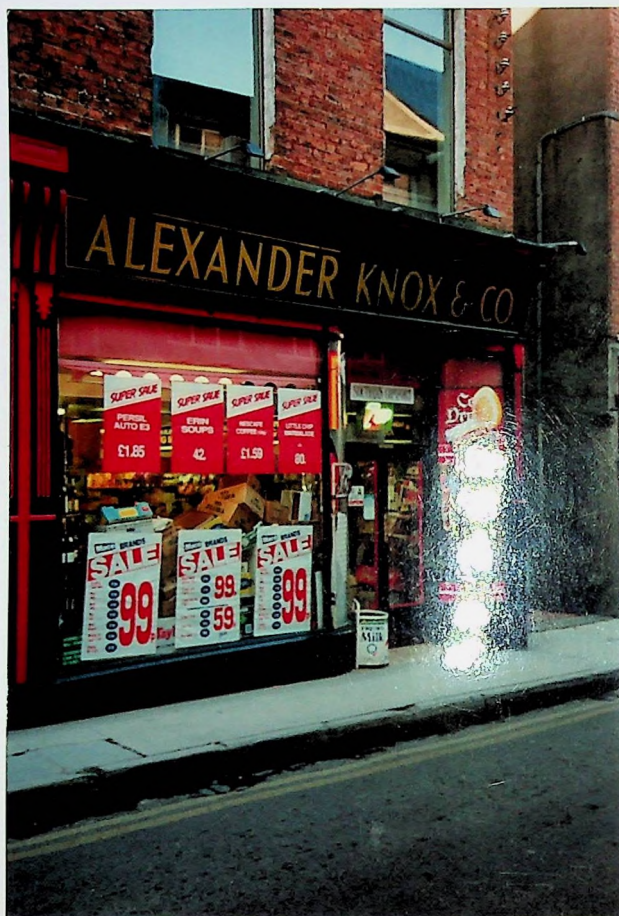


Fig (2.1)



Fig (2.2)



Fig (2.3)

Fig (2.5)



Fig (2.4)

Tylers are not newcomers to Ennis, in fact they were established here in the 1860's, in the same premises as today. (FIG. 2.4) shows the Tylers shop at the turn of the century with a simple timber front and a large sign with relief lettering, 'Tylers and Sons Ltd'. It was customary to hang your merchandise outside and this made the shop attractive to potential customers. In contrast to this we see today's approach of several baskets lining the pavement. The pavement is narrow enough as it is, having to avoid such obstacles makes passage way more difficult. The amount of display signs, stickers, flags, and baskets makes the front look miserably cheap and does nothing for the standard of the street.

It's quite hard to actually see what's on offer in the windows. This is a mosaic style front. It was a trend in the '60's and '70's of this century. It was an American influence on design. Many fronts in Ennis and throughout Ireland were built of this style. Several still exist in the town. These kind of fronts were accompanied with neon signage of one sort or another, box signs, which we will come across on O'Connell street and individual plastic letters as in this case. The other fronts with similar design in town, have the excuse that they were constructed during a period when mosaic was the fashion,, but 'Tylers' is an exception to this. Amazingly, this shopfront was erected in the mid '80's. How anyone can come along and put up a front like this on a street with several traditional shopfronts in the mid '80's is beyond comprehension. I'm not expressing the view that a traditional shopfront is the be all and end all of shop design, but surely a better attempt should have been made. The fact that the shoe company wanted to have all their outlets done in

the same style, is in this case, a lame excuse. Having held a premises for well over a hundred years the company should have more respect than to display a shopfront of such distaste. At the time protests were made to the council to ensure that mistakes like this one would not be repeated in future.

On 'Tylers' left 'A. Honan' (FIG. 2.5) is one of the best examples of a reproduction front that the town has to offer. Even though it is recently built it could be mistaken for a front that was built at the start of the century. This is because it is honest to the traditional design qualities. The simple individual gilded letters are very attractive and work very well. The glass panels with 'Antique' and 'Dealer' are gold leafed. The four pilasters give the front a strong sense of structure. The decorative ironwork is a clever and complimenting approach to security. This shows how a reproduction front when treated properly can reinact the tradition of the past.

Beside 'Honan's' a new building is in progress for the Cork and Limerick 'Trustee Savings Bank', (FIG. 2.6). This building has several controversial aspects in its design. Firstly it does not obey the pavement line. This is the line which the shopfronts meet the pavement. This design has a recess which leaves an opening or dent along the street. This takes away from the line or flow of the street. Abbey street has the advantage of a curve and a slope which form an attractive shape. Buildings that have a recess take piece out of the fasade and disrupt this shape. This



Fig (2.6)



Fig (2.7)

Fig (2.8)

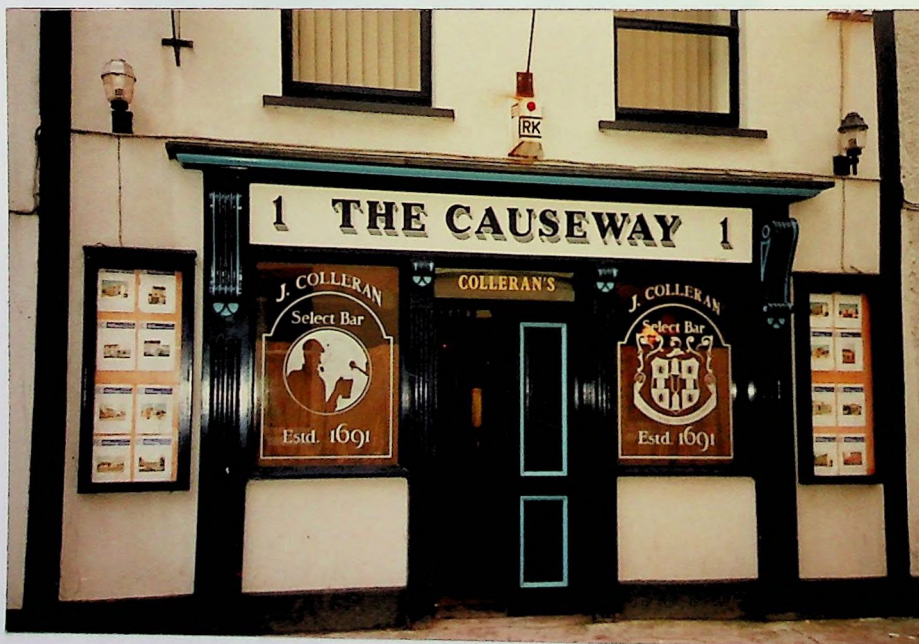


Fig (2.9)

unwelcomed void is unfortunately emphasised by the bay window, directly above. This window serves no purpose to the front. It is very isolated and out of character with the other buildings. Most of the shopfronts on Abbey street have low level windows. The Bank's design has also neglected this aspect. From the photograph we see the contrast of the Bank's bottom windows to 'Honan's' street level windows directly beside it. This front has a gable showing out onto the street, another feature out of character with it's neighbours. The Bank's front ensures easy access to the building and to the credit card machine but overall it is a selfish and unsympathetic design.

(FIG. 2.7) is view from the south end of Abbey streets west side. These three shopfronts are recent developments. 'Farrells' is a pleasing and inviting front. It holds the corner of the street very well. Like 'Honan's' this front is honest to traditional design. It decorated with gold leafed sinage and stained glass. The larger glass panels are hand sandblasted designs. This form of decoration can also be seen on the Causeway Bar windows (FIG. 2.8). Beside 'Farrell's' is a front with individual lettering 'T. O' Donnell' (FIG. 2.9). The projecting sign directly above the facia does not complement the shopfront. It is completely out of proportion and looks gaudy.

Beside this is traditional style front '2000 and 1' news agency. The letterstyle on this front is a modern digital like front. On a front of this style it is valid to have a very modern typeface? A shopfront built

along traditional lines, in my opinion should be accompanied with traditional lettering otherwise the concept is undermined. Modern style lettering should be left to modern style fronts.

Abbey street needs quite a lot of changes some, major and some minor, before it will gain a definite character. Acquiring a character is a process, the speed of which is in the hands of the owners of the shops. The conversion of 'Tylers' and 'Enzo's' would make a good start. The fact that some of the buildings and shopfronts are here to stay is unfortunate and in some ways undermines this process.

CHAPTER SIX

O'CONNELL STREET

O'Connell street is the main street in Ennis. It was formerly called Jail street because the old jail was situated on the site of the 'Old Ground Hotel'. Eighteenth century Jail street was an important residential street and still has several substantial houses dating from that era. (FIG. 3.0) is a view from the start of this century. (FIG. 3.1) is the present day view. Most of the original shopfronts have disappeared while a lot of the houses can be seen in both of photographs.

Like Abbey street, O'Connell street has seen a rapid change on its facade since the 1960's. From studying the two photographs the most noticeable changes are the thatched roof on the right and the shopfront of the Ennis Cash Company on the left. This was built in 1968/69. The design of the shopfront was based on one from Cologne, Germany. This was adventurous to have such a design in a small town in Ireland. Foreign influence was high at this period. Modernization was the main factor that led to the destruction of the "Irish Look" of our towns and cities. The public now realize this loss, and are reverting back to original, local designs and their ideals, thus, the reproduction shopfronts. From (FIG. 3.3) The Ennis Cash Company took the place of three separate shopfronts. A marble facade of this size is not complementary to the street of a medieval town that has held its original lines for several centuries. Oliver Moylan,



Fig (3.0)



Fig (3.1)



Fig (3.3)

the proprietor, said in hindsight it was a mistake, and if he were to reconstruct the front it would not have a recess - it would come out to the original street line, a development that would greatly improve the unity of the street.

"All buildings should aspire to architectural character. Few builders set out to purposely create ugly architecture although this may often be the result of their work. Ideally, a building should be suitable for its function, achieve a standard of craftsmanship appropriate to its use, have a rational architectural expression and respect the surroundings in which it is located."

(Shaffrey, 1983 p.120)

The main street has some fine examples of original shopfronts from the 1920's. The most noticeable of these is No. 21 'M.F. Malone Victualler' (FIG. 3.4) is an example, rare for 1929, of a house and shop being built at the same time. From the photograph we see the pebble dashed walls with a pair of oriel windows. It also has a parapet with a cornice containing a dentil course, and a flat roof. The shopfront has pilasters with inset tiles (a close up in (FIG. 3.5) and doric guttae on the brackets. Under the display window is a tiled front with a bullock and a cow. The tiles are of German origin. The window was originally designed to be open by day and shut by night. The shopfront has been restored and the lettering repainted by Davala in its original colourful and vigorous style. (FIG. 3.6) shows the front when the butcher was allowed to display their meats outside.



Fig (3.4)



Fig (3.5)



Fig (3.6)



fig(3.7)

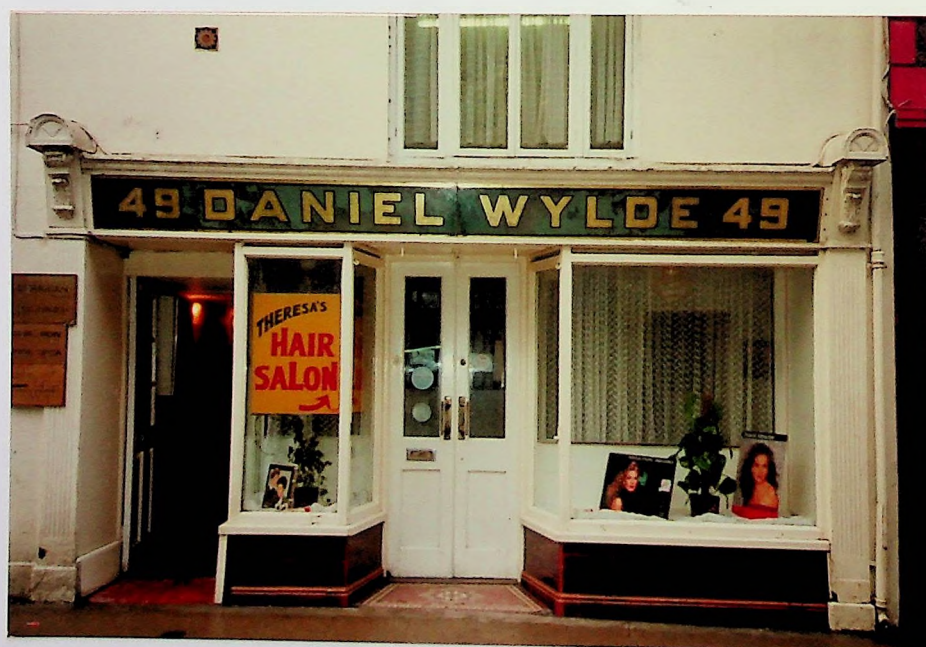


fig (3.8)



fig (3.9)

The brackets for holding the bar still remain. This front is a pleasure to look at, it recently recieved an environment award for retaining its traditional beauty.

On the east side of O'Connell street across from Malones is another shopfront dating from the early part of this century (FIG. 3.7). 'J. Maurer' is a simple shopfront with flat pilasters, an engraved glass door and stylish gilded channelled lettering under glass.

Further down the street on the south end is No. 49 'Daniel Wilde' (FIG. 3.8). This is an elegant looking front because of its simplicity and restraint. It has elaborately carved foliate brackets and a facia with gilded lettering on glass. This sign , was made by 'P. Meehan and Sons,' ennis. These were local signwriters who done a lot of work around the '50's. A fine example of their craftsmanship was a large gilded sign that hung in the archway between Tierneys and Buglers Medical Hall on Abbey street. Sadly the sign has been destroyed by vandals.

Beside Malones Victualers is a shopfront from the 1920's 'Mc Namara' (FIG. 3.9). This front is in need of immediate repair, its destruction should be avoided if at all possible.

Some shopowners are slow to reform. On O'Connell street there are a lot of lighted box signs mostly projecting but some larger like (FIG. 4.0) and (FIG. 4.1). Council incentives has encouraged many owners to take down such signs and replace them with better alternatives. When a front with a lighted sign is viewed beside a shop with a traditional style front, as in (FIG. 4.2) its ugliness becomes even more obvious. Lighted signs were very popular in the '70's. C. Signs of Ennis, produced a large proportion of them. Unfortunately the lighted signs were destined to be doomed by the way in which they were treated. The design input was minimal and unadventurous. (FIG. 4.3) 'Gail Travel', red type on white, 'Martins Fashions' black type on yellow. From a design point of view this sign is terrible rubbish, can you imagine what it is like when it is lit. One can only presume, that the shopowners at the time were ignorant to this fact and were willing to accept work of such poor quality. It can be argued that certain businesses warrant a lighted sign for example an electrical shop or a fast food premises. When properly designed these signs could work quite well. For the moment signs of the 'Gail Travel, Martins Fashions' calibre should be replaced as soon as possible.



fig (4.0)

fig (4.3)



fig (4.1)

fig (4.2)



fig (4.4)

Traditional shopfront design was based on human scale and its charm derived from these elements. This comes into play when discussing (FIG. 4.4) 'Pat Mac Carthy shoes' on the south half of O'Connell street. This is a very recent development and considerable cost must have been incurred. Even though it has traditional elements in its design its size and scale are in no way human, this makes the front look overgrown and stretched. In this case two individual fronts were amalgamated - thus leading to the large frontage. The fascia board is the connecting element in the design, and is decorated with goldleaf lettering and dark green drop shadows. In this case the fascia colour of pale mint green does not help to project the gold lettering. A dark fascia, usually black is the traditional complementing colour to gilded lettering.

Many owners have fixed ideas on what their fronts should look like, ideas that are not without fault. Their employees can put forward more constructive solutions but if they are rejected there is not a whole lot that can be done. Everyone needs to survive.



fig (4.5)



fig (4.6)



fig (4.7)



fig (4.8)

Several of the new reproduction shopfronts have a different 'look' to them, from the others. (FIGS. 4.5, 4.6 4.7). These shopfronts have a different purpose in a way to 'Honans' or 'T.Meany' of Abbey street. It can be said that the idea of putting up an old style front is fashionable at the moment, but fronts like these give the fashionable aspect a new dimension. These fronts are not trying to look old and full of character, but clean, new, sharp and trendy. It is no surprise that the business of these shops is fashion of one kind or another. The fronts would not achieve their effect only for the type of sinage that they display. It is modern, well rendered designer sinage. 'ZAX' and 'Paul Martin' is the work of Dermot Kelleher and 'Club Dangan' was done by John Boyd. (FIG. 4.8) is a front that attempts the same effect, but fails in a way because its sinage does not have the same qualities and is lacking the 'edge' that the others hold.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARNELL STREET

Parnell Street, formerly called Mill Street is the narrowest Street in Ennis. (FIG 4.9) is a view from the west end. Parnell Street has not prospered as much as the other streets in recent years, many of the houses and shopfronts are idle and in desperate need of repair and are running a risk of destruction.

Parnell Street has easily the most 'confused' looking facade of the town with many contrasting shopfronts uncomfortably side by side. The mid-section of the street is a good representation of the street as a whole. This area is from 'Gleeson' on the west end to 'John Dalys' which is roughly half way.

If we start with 'Gleesons' (FIG. 5.0). This is a front from the turn of the century, still in operation and also retaining its original interior. This is a fine example of perpendicular shopfront design. It has terefoils in the spandrels and simple raised lettering overall a very pleasing shopfront. The problem associated with 'Gleesons' is its neighbouring fronts. The three adjacent shopfronts have been influenced by the 'Gleesons' window style, (FIG. 5.1). They tried to imitate them but the result is a crude copy based on the original. This seems to have been a pointless exercise for these owners and it only makes a mockery of 'Gleesons'. Influences is a great thing provided that it is treated with care.



fig (4.9)



fig (5.0)



fig (5.1)



fig (5.2)

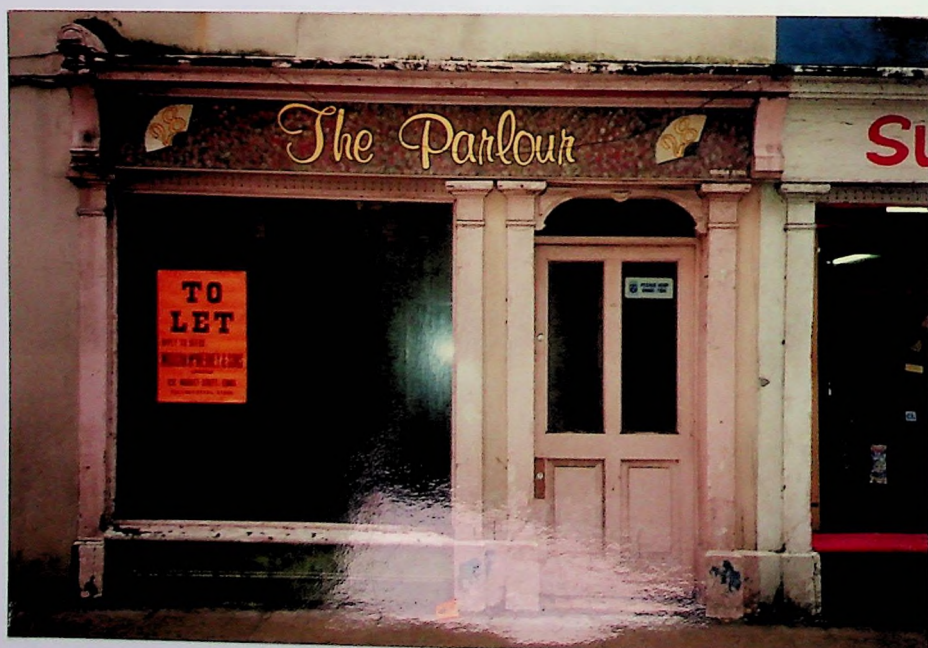


fig (5.3)



fig (5.4)



fig (5.5)

In this case I feel that a completely different design than 'Gleeson's' should have been used, because the recreation of an exact 'Gleesons' design would be practically impossible and the result takes the splendour away from the old shopfront. A different design on traditional lines would complement Gleesons and not make the other fronts look so much second class citizens, as they now seem.

Across the way are more shopfronts from the '20's, (FIG. 5.2) 'C. Ryan' and (FIG. 5.3) the 'Parlour'. 'C. Ryan' was a general grocery shop that appeared in posters like 'The Shopfronts of Ireland' and on biscuit tins. It is in reasonable shape but still needs a lot of maintenance. 'The Parlour' lying idle is in risk of disappearing and is in desperate need of repair.

(FIG. 5.4) on the opposite side to these is 'Twomey Walsh'. This is a '70's mosaic tiled front with large plastic letters. This is a typical front for its time and was acceptable. Present day attitudes and feelings towards these fronts is one of repulsion to both tiles and lettering. Many of the reproduction fronts recently constructed have replaced fronts similar to this and people are glad to see them go. Adjacent to this is a reproduction front (FIG. 5.5) 'Talty's), which shows the confusion of our streets. This front has computer cut lettering reversed on glass with a black background of good quality by Dermot Kelleher. This is in competition with gilded lettering, the effect is not the same, but to a lay person who, possibly does not know what gilded lettering is in the first place, this is a convincing and good alternative.



fig (5.6)



fig (5.7)



fig (5.8)

Confusion being created by an original shopfront and its' imitators is one thing, confusion between two different styles is another but confusion between two new reproduction fronts makes the street a toytown. (FIG. 5.6) 'The Local' with its pink and grey colouring looks as out of place as 'Twomey Walsh' orange letters. This newly built front is almost like a puzzle where you have to find a path between two different points to get the prize. How can one justify a colour scheme like this. Its signage with the interesting three dimensional O is wasted on a front like this. But unlike a lot of fronts in town that need major renovations all that is needed here is a sensitive paint job. Being set between two black and white, and brown mosaic fronts does not help its cause.

This type of confusion is repeated throughout the street to the very end. In the past few weeks building on Parnell Street at the corner of Caby's Lane leading to the market have been demolished. These were not any average buildings, because they contained the only remaining eighteenth century shopfronts in the town. (FIG. 5.7) shows the delightful arched fronts with dashed stonewashed walls. The destruction of these fronts is a disaster. Here we have a Council that gives incentives to make the town look traditional and then tear down the oldest shopfronts in the town, it just does not make sense. The Council planning authorities said "the buildings were derelict." The cost of demolishing these and building some structure in their place would have helped to restore and refurbish such shopfronts of great historic value. The shopfronts were also victims to the traffic problem. 'Caby's Lane' is a busy passage way from the Market onto Parnell Street and the Council felt that road widening was necessary.



fig (5.9)



fig (6.0)



fig (6.1)

(FIG. 5.8) is a cleared view of the area. Two large support buttresses have been constructed against the nest building to keep it standing. One wonders of a possible deck of cards affect. At present there is no sign of building a replacement building if any. This leaves a large gap in the street that breaks it up and makes it look miserable. We can only hope that some interesting structure be built to hold the corner.

These are not the only 'derelict' buildings to be demolished, in 1991 several areas of old housing have been cleared away for new developments. For example, (FIG. 5.9, 6.0, 6.1)

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SQUARE

The central or focal place in Ennis is O'Connell Square. The streets all meet at this point. (FIG. 6.2) shows the O'Connell monument overlooking the town. It is the most elevated point, enclosed by facades and gables with views down each street O'Connell Monument, a doric column 74 feet high set into a heavy square base, was inaugurated on 3rd October 1865 to commemorate the election of Daniel O'Connell. Although it is the focal point of the town it is treated like any busy traffic intersection and has little to detain the resident or visitor as a place to enjoy, in which to relax, meet people and view the passing scent. The buildings and facades are uninteresting. Across from the monument between O'Connell and Parnell Street is the view of (FIG. 6.3).

'Griffins' has an incredibly boring shopfront for a premises in the heart of the town. The concrete canopy's do not fit in with the local architecture. The slope and corner are not taken advantage of, the two stories above the shopfront are the best part of the building 'Mc Mahons' destroys the three storey qualities of Griffins by a completely unsympathetic building. The roof splits the level of its neighbour and display bold quite ugly windows. Its ground floor is not better mosaic tiles, slanting windows and like 'Griffins' an unsympathetic canopy. This is an area that could be developed to brighten up the square considerably.



fig (6.2)



fig (6.3)



fig (6.4)

The O'Connell monument seems squashed or stored in the corner and would benefit from more space.

On the Abbey Street side of the Square is 'Cassidys Pharmacy'. This is a very neatly designed shopfront, (FIG. 6.4). It is a mix of tile, glass, marble, wood and metal. The pillars are very attractive when incorporated into the windows. The recess of the tiles under the window creates a stage for the window and its commodities to rest upon. Its by far the best front in the Square and possibly the best front in the Square and possibly the best in the town. I say this because it has a modern and traditional look at the same time, its fresh white colour gives it a clear edge and the recessed door is very inviting. The trend of old style traditional shopfronts is rampant in the town at the moment. People are playing extremely safe. No one wants to take the risk of putting up a modern designed front. It is more valid to put up a piece of twentieth century modern architecture than to reproduce a traditional front.

CONSERVATION

"In the modern world, money determines many matters. Conservation policies are often in the final analyses evaluated against the resources available to them, and the returns they may take. To many people this is an unfortunate state of affairs and in the long run will prove to be a short sighted policy. There are different opinions expressed with regard to conservation - "conservation is alright but not just today, lets wait until tomorrow" - "conservation can prevent progress," - "a country requires above all else a programme of economic expansion. Wealth must first be created before it can be diverted to conservation projects". These indeed are of course pertinent and relevant questions which conservationists must be aware of, and understand.

(Shaffery 1975, p.170)

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have painted a pretty gloomy picture of Ennis. We have seen from discussing the shopfronts that the central core of Ennis has lost its definite character that it held in the 1930's. Ennis has so much unrealized potential. It has the advantage of being a medieval town that has kept its lines. It has attractive narrow streets with several buildings of architectural value. Ennis has a growing population and a favourable economic structure. The town is only at the start of its new transformation. A transformation that will take time, money, pressure and patience. The public should realize this potential and work towards developing Ennis into a uniquely attractive place. One can imagine what the town would look like with a pedestrianized street and a newly developed square; and this could just be the start. Ennis has a lot to look forward too. I hope this thesis is an educational benefit to the public and helps them to come to terms with the confusion of change taking place in Ennis today.

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