ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IMPACT ASSESSMENT IN RESPECT OF THE PROPOSED CASHEL TOWN PARK (INCORPORATING THE FORMER BISHOP’S WALK) CASHEL, CO. TIPPERARY

PREPARED BY
MICHAEL O’BOYLE, B.Arch MUBC FRIAI
GRADE 1 CONSERVATION ARCHITECT
BLUETT & O’DONOGHUE ARCHITECTS

FOR
TIPPERARY COUNTY COUNCIL

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment (AHIA) has been prepared to accompany a Part 8 Planning application for the creation of a public park in the enclosed field to the immediate south of between St. Patrick’s Rock (The Rock of Cashel). This sloped field is strategically located between the Rock and the Medieval town walls of Cashel and is enclosed by stone walls on all sides. The northern boundary wall abuts ‘Bothar na Marbh’, a pedestrian pathway leading to the Rock from the western end of the town centre. The enclosed field includes a raised pathway, locally known as ‘Bishop’s Walk’, which forms a direct route between the gardens of the former Bishop’s Palace (to the south) and the Rock. The subject site occupies approximately 80% of the entire field. A small rectangular section of the field, in its south-eastern corner, is in separate ownership and falls outside of the site.

![Fig. 1: Aerial photograph of site, with St. Patrick’s Rock to the north](image)

1.2 The proposed town park is intended to provide a high quality recreational amenity for the residents of Cashel, but also to enhance the experience of visitors to St. Patrick’s Rock, which is one of the most visited attractions within Ireland. The proposed development forms part of a north-south public route between St. Patrick’s Rock and the town centre of Cashel. The proposed park includes a number of key elements:

- The consolidation and conservation of the raised ‘Bishop’s Walk’ pathway as part of a publicly-accessible route from the town centre to the Rock. The development will include the restoration of the limestone steps and associated dressed limestone walls at the south (town) end of the pathway.
- A new raised pathway, with timber deck finish, to facilitate universal access between the Rock and the town centre. This raised pathway follows the natural contours of the site and intersects with the historic Bishop’s Walk in a number of locations.
- A maze feature is to be planted in the south-eastern corner of the site (abutting the part of the field that is in separate ownership. This maze will include 2 metre-high hedges, together with a seating/picnic area and a low maze for small children.
- A perimeter pathway is proposed along the northern, western and southern boundary walls of the field.
• Contemporary timber benches are to be introduced in the south-west corner of the site (adjacent to the existing entrance gates from Bothar-na-Marbh). These benches will be arranged following the natural contours of the field to create an informal tiered cluster, which can be used as a gathering and orientation location for visiting groups.

• Play facilities are to be introduced in a number of isolated locations within the proposed park. This will not involve the creation of a designated playground, but rather the low-key introduction of stand-alone play equipment along the north and east perimeter of the site.

• Information signage is proposed in a number of locations within the proposed park. This will interpret the history of the site and its wider context, encompassing the storey of the Rock, the Bishop’s Palace, and the town of Cashel.

• Public lighting is proposed along the new raised walkway and the south perimeter walkway.

• Limited street furniture, comprising cycle stands and refuse bins, are proposed. These will be located along Bothar-na-Marbh, with localised refuse bins within the (screened) seating area associated with the proposed Maze.

• Limestone paving is proposed along the pedestrianised roadway between Rock Lane and the entrance to St. Patrick’s Rock (to the immediate north of the proposed town park).

The southern part of this public route, running through the (‘Boomerang’) car park of the Cashel Palace Hotel (currently under construction) and the public Buckley Car Park (to its south), lies outside of the site and does not form part of this application.

1.3 While the subject site does not include any protected structures, it is located in an area of high architectural sensitivity. St. Patrick’s Rock is a site of international significance and is one of Ireland’s most significant National Monuments in State Care. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage has identified the former Bishop’s Palace as having national significance; noting that its relationship with St. Patrick’s Rock and the Cathedral (on John Street) as making up ‘one of the most significant architectural ensembles in Ireland’. The raised pathway between the former Bishop’s Palace and the Rock is an important component of the site. The Rock and its environs has been identified by the Irish Government as a potential World Heritage Site.

1.4 The proposed development has been the subject of a number of consultations with key stakeholders, including the National Monument Service and the Architectural Heritage Unit of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (now the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage), and the Office of Public Concerns. During an initial site walkabout with these stakeholders, held on 7th November 2019, concerns were raised about the visual impact of the proposed new interventions on the setting of St. Patrick’s Rock and on key views of the historic Bishop’s Walk from the Rock. In preparation for this planning application, a series of 3D photomontages have been generated to illustrate the potential visual impacts of the development from a number of key views. The viewpoints for these photomontages were selected by the writer, a RIAI Grade 1 Conservation Architect, in consultation with the Landscape Architect for the project. This report includes a commentary on the impact of the proposed development as shown in the selected photomontages. The report should be read in conjunction with these photomontages.

1.5 The design development also addressed other concerns that were raised during these pre-application consultations – including the visual impact of the proposed play equipment, the potential impact of public lighting on the character and setting of St. Patrick’s Rock, the visual impact of the proposed raised walkway on this historic landscape, the integration of interpretive signage within the site, and the possible physical and visual impacts of the proposed ‘amphitheatre’ at the south-west corner of the site. These impacts, together with the measures to be adopted as mitigation, are reviewed and assessed within this report.

1.6 I have visited the site on a number of occasions since my initial inspection of 7th November 2019. During these inspections, I walked around and through the enclosed field, the neighbouring streets, and looked at the views of the field from various vantage points on the Rock. The purpose of these
site visits was to identify the key features and characteristics of the site and its surrounding
streetscape.

1.7 This AHIA report has been prepared in accordance with the guidance set out in the Architectural
Heritage Protections Guidelines for Planning Authorities. (Department of Arts, Heritage and
Gaeltacht, 2011). The impact of the proposed development has been evaluated and mitigation
measures, where possible and appropriate, have been identified. This report contains photographs
of the site and its environs taken during inspections of the site in November 2019

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

2.1 This report is to be read in conjunction with the detailed history of the town of Cashel and of the
subject site, which has been prepared by Coillín O'Drisceoil of Kilkenny Archaeology as part of the
Archaeological Impact Assessment Report that accompanies this planning application. This report
limits itself to a brief outline of the history of the site, together with a description of its key features
of architectural heritage.

Fig. 2: Extract from 6 inch (Ordnance Survey map of 1840. The subject site (shaded red) is located between the Rock of Cashel and the
former Bishop’s Palace.

2.2 The town of Cashel is dominated by the elevated rock to its immediate north. This strategically
important site was the primary seat of the Kings of Munster during the pre-Norman era. This
natural defensive stronghold was granted to the Church by Murtaugh O’Brien, King of Munster, at
the beginning of the twelfth century. The complex contains a collection of twelfth and thirteenth
century Church buildings that are among the best and most intact examples of their kind in Ireland –
including the round tower (c.1100); Cormac’s Chapel (1127-34), which contains significant
fragments of twelfth century frescoes; and the cruciform thirteenth century cathedral. Collectively
these buildings create a distinctive silhouette profile rising above the agricultural landscape to the
north of the town.

2.3 From the twelfth century onwards the town of Cashel became the seat of the Archdiocese of
Cashel. The Norman walled town of Cashel developed to the south. A significant intact section of
the north town walls survives, running from the rear of the Courthouse east to the Buckley Car
Park, which occupies the site of the walled garden of the eighteenth century former Bishop’s
Palace. The palace is an imposing building, which was constructed in 1730-32 to designs by
Edward Lovett Pearce, and is set back from the main street. The gardens to the rear of the palace
enjoy uninterrupted views of the Rock and include two mulberry trees that were planted in 1702 to
mark the coronation of Queen Anne. Following the religious wars of the post-Reformation period,
the cathedral fell into ruin and was finally abandoned in 1749. The present-day Cathedral of St.
John the Baptist was constructed on John Street, to the south of main Street in 1788.
2.4 The route between the eighteenth century Bishop’s Palace and the ecclesiastical site of St. Patrick’s Rock is an important part of the designed landscape to the south of the Rock. The pathway is shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of c.1840 (Fig. 2 above) and may well date from the construction of the Palace in 1730-32. In preparation for this planning application, a test trench was constructed across the pathway. This revealed that the raised pathway comprises compacted earth and stone and was originally flanked by an excavated ditch on both sides. The path surface comprised compacted gravel on clay. The mature trees on both sides of the route appear to be contemporaneous with the pathway. There are cut limestone steps set into a stone rubble retaining wall at the south end of the path (Fig. 3).

2.5 The pathway continues to a gate opening within the stone rubble enclosing wall of the palace, to the south. There are additional blocked openings within the palace boundary wall, to the west of this route, which reinforce the strong historic connection between the former Bishop’s Palace and the field to its north. The enclosing walls to the west, north and south of this field are generally between 1-1.5 metres high, of stone rubble construction. These are in reasonably intact condition but would benefit from some consolidation and repair work. The southern boundary walls are significantly higher (in the region of 2-3 metres). The pathway runs parallel to the north boundary wall of the enclosed field at its northern end, with a gated opening onto Bothar na Marbh (leading to the Rock).

3. IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

3.1 The consolidation and conservation of the raised ‘Bishop’s Walk’ pathway as part of a publicly-accessible route from the town centre to the Rock.

The presentation and interpretation of the conserved and restored raised pathway as a tangible physical link between St. Patricks Rock and the former Bishop’s Palace is a key objective of the site. It is important that the restoration of the path surface on this elevated feature should be informed by research and accurately reflect the historic build-up of the pathway. To this end, an exploratory archaeological trench was excavated across a section of the raised path – to establish the construction build-up of the path and the historic surface. This revealed that there was an excavated ditch on both sides of the path; and that the path itself was constructed of compacted stone and earth, with a gravel finish. The proposed restoration of the pathway will re-establish the excavated depression on each side of the elevated route. The new pathway surface will comprise...
compacted gravel of local light grey limestone, to closely match the historic build-up. The limestone steps, at the south end of the pathway, will be consolidated; and the associated stone rubble walls, which have partially collapsed, will be carefully repaired. The lime mortar specification for this work should be informed by petrographic analysis of historic mortar samples.

![Fig. 4 View of Rock from north entrance gate (from Bishop’s Walk onto Bothar na Marbh)](image)

The conservation and presentation of the raised pathway is a significant heritage objective of the project. This will enhance the physical and visual connectivity between the Rock and the historic town centre/former Bishop’s Palace. The reinstatement of the historic Bishop’s Walk as a living route, with the option of starting and/or finishing a visit to the Rock of Cashel in the historic town centre (instead of the existing surface car park to the east of the Rock), has potential to set up a new and improved visitor experience.

The archaeological trials indicate that the substructure of the raised path is well compacted and in good condition. It is not anticipated that the proposed works poses a threat of erosion or physical damage to the pathway.

3.2 **New raised pathway, with timber deck finish, to facilitate universal access between the Rock and the town centre.**

The proposed new universal access raised pathway is a significant intervention within the landscaped of the walled field. This pathway is intended to provide equal and safe access from the Rock to the town centre for persons of impaired mobility, parents with buggies, and wheelchair users. The proposed path follows the natural contours of the field and intersects with the raised
Bishop’s Walk a number of times – twice at the boundary wall to Bothar na Marbh (to the north), and in five separate points on the main (north-to-south) section of the route.

![Fig. 5 Drawing showing proposed interface between the historic Bishop’s Walk and the proposed raised deck walkway](image)

The pathway will comprise a raised timber deck with timber support posts, constructed onto concealed pad foundations. The meandering route of this new path was a significant concern during the development of the design. Alternative routes were considered to minimise the number of intersections across the raised pathway. These created a parallel pathway, which was less integrated with the historic route with no significant reduction in the physical extent of the new path. A key requirement was to eliminate the requirement for bulky handrails. The preferred route, which follows the contours of the sloped field, minimises the difference between the natural ground level and the deck. This reduces the height and visual impact of the raised path and eliminates the need for a significant balustrade. It is recommended that the grass on both sides of the raised walkway be maintained as wildflower meadow during the summer months. This will minimise the visual impact of the new walkway and avoid the appearance of an overly manicured park.

The other important consideration was the potential for physical impacts on the historic raised pathway. The new raised path will comprise a floating deck and will cantilever out to the edge of the raised historic Bishop’s Walk. The new deck will not be supported by the historic path structure and the physical impact will be minimal.

3.3 Maze feature (to be planted in the south-eastern corner of the site)

The proposal for a 2 metre high hedge maze will introduce a new feature in the south-east corner of the site. Early versions of the design envisaged a standalone maze abutting part (but not all) of the south-east site boundary. This is a new boundary, that is currently not marked, and will separate the subject site from the south-east part of the enclosed field, which is in separate ownership. Under these initial designs, the area to the east of the maze would comprise an open space with picnic tables and a low mini-maze for small children. A preliminary conservation review of this proposal raised concerns that the new south-east boundary was not strongly defined and that the proposed picnic and play area would result in visual clutter at this corner of the field, which is quite close to the Bishop’s Walk.

The current design addresses these concerns by placing the maze and the picnic/play area behind a contiguous 2 metre-high curved hedge that will run across the full width of the new south-east
boundary. An opening in this hedge will give access to an open clearing, with an enclosed picnic area and a low maze for small children. The intention is to create an attractive concealed space, with the larger maze to be accessible from this clearing.

The preliminary design proposals included excavation and backfilling of the natural slope of the hill to create a level plateau for the proposed maze. The preliminary conservation assessment raised concerns about the negative impact of altering the contours on the special character of this designed landscape. The current proposals are based on the retention of the existing natural slope of the field. The maze and hedge will be planted with hornbeam, a native deciduous tree with leaves that go brown and remain on the hedge in winter.

In summary, the introduction of the hedge and maze in the south-east corner of the site is a significant intervention that can be mitigated by the retention of the existing ground levels and the use of a native tree with year-round foliage (that goes brown in winter).

3.4 Perimeter pathway (along the northern, western and southern boundary walls)

A perimeter path is proposed along the stone rubble boundary wall to the north, west and south of the side. This is a low-key intervention with minimal visual impact on the immediate setting of the Bishop’s Walk and the wider setting of the Rock of Cashel. No particular mitigation measures are proposed.

3.5 Tiered timber benches (to be introduced in the south-west corner of the site)

The provision of a gathering and orientation area within the proposed park was an important part of the project brief from the outset. The proposed location for this intervention is at the south-west corner of the enclosed field, close to the lower entrance off Bothar na Marbh. A natural dip in the landscape means that this part of the site is not visible from key vantage points on the Rock or from any part of the historic Bishop’s Walk. The visual impact of this proposal on key views is therefore minimal.

Although the proposed seating area is described as an ‘amphitheatre’ in the drawings prepared by the landscape architect, the intention is to provide a less-formal gathering and seating area for story-telling and orientation (for groups visiting the Rock and its environs). There is no requirement that this seating should be facing the Rock and the contours of the ground (sloping away from the Rock) does not, in any event, facilitate this on any part of the site.

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**Fig. 6** Exploration of three seating options based on limited excavation and no remodelling of the natural sloped landscape (Paul Hogarth Company)
Early versions of the design – based on the excavation and back-filling of the soil to create stepped grass amphitheatre – were identified as inappropriate on the basis that the significant remodelling of the natural slope would have a significant negative physical and visual impact on the character of the enclosed field. The landscape architect then looked at three alternative options based on seating that could be placed onto the existing ground – stone slabs, timber tree trunks, and contemporary timber seating. All three of these options would have a minimal and localised impact on the contours and character of the enclosed field. The contemporary timber seating offers the potential for continuity with the materials and detailing of the raised deck walkway and is the preferred option.

3.6 Play Equipment

The introduction of play equipment is an important part of the project brief for the proposed Cashel Town Park. Early design proposals were based on the introduction of a cluster of play equipment, including a swing and slide, along the east boundary wall. This intervention would have been very prominent when viewed from the historic Bishop’s Walk and, to a lesser extent, from the south-eastern corner of the Rock of Cashel.

Revised proposals, which form the basis of this Part 8 planning application, are based on a reduced quantity of play equipment that will be spread out over separate locations around the perimeter of the site. This minimises the visual impact of the play facilities and creates a trail of play opportunities around the site. It is recommended that the play equipment is limited to low-height equipment (i.e. less than 1.2 metres high) to further limit the visual impact on the site.

There is potential to design or select play equipment that is informed by the unique heritage and folklore of Cashel and the Rock. It is recommended that the use of play equipment that adopts international non-site specific themes and motifs is avoided.

3.7 Interpretive Signage

The introduction of information and interpretive signage is a requirement of the brief for the proposed park. Early concept designs were based on the use of an archway structure to frame views, with visitors availing of technology to generate simulated historic views on their smartphones. This approach raised conservation concerns due to the visual impact of introducing these tall frames into the historic landscape.

The current (revised) proposal is based on the use of more discreet scannable QR codes mounted onto low posts (not to exceed 1.2 metres high. This will significantly reduce the potential visual impacts of the proposal.

3.8 Public Lighting

The introduction of any form of public lighting within this visually sensitive setting so close to St. Patrick’s Rock requires particular care. A key concern us the avoidance of light pollution that might diminish the setting and presentation of the Rock.

The provision of limited way-finding lighting is an important and unavoidable requirement of the brief. The proposed design adopts a number of important measures to mitigate and (where possible) to eliminate the potential impact of such lighting. The proposed lights are limited to the route of the new raised deck and the perimeter path on the south boundary. The selected light should be recessed into the raised timber deck, with low bollard light fittings along the south path. The lights should be fitted with directional louvres. The intention is to focus the artificial light on the designated pathways.

It is recommended that a conservation-led management plan is devised and implemented to minimise the potential for light pollution. The requirement to switch on the external lighting can be minimised by limiting access to the park to daylight hours.
3.9 Street Furniture

It is proposed to introduce street furniture in a limited number of locations that will have minimal impact on the visual presentation of this important side. Cycle racks will be located off-site, adjacent to Bothar na Marbh. Bins will generally be located outside of the site. Provision is made for the introduction of bins within the picnic/play area within enclosing hedge of the maze.

All street furniture is to be powder-coated black and should be of a consistent simple design. A robust management plan will be required to avoid the accumulation of litter within or adjacent to the proposed park.

3.10 Limestone paving is proposed along the pedestrianised roadway between Rock Lane and the entrance to St. Patrick’s Rock (to the immediate north of the proposed town park)

The existing asphalt road surface is to be excavated and replaced with limestone paving. This will create a strong visual arrival point on the approach to the Rock (from Rock Lane) and creates a high quality gathering area at the north end of Bishop’s Walk. The proposal is modest and will have a minimal impact on the character of St. Patrick’s Walk.

4. PHOTOMONTAGES

4.1 The Part 8 planning application drawings include a set of ‘before’ photographs and ‘after’ photomontages showing the impact of the proposed development from key viewpoints. These viewpoints were selected by the writer, during an inspection on 27th November 2019. The selected viewpoints were chosen to explore key views from on the Rock of Cashel and from the Bishop’s Walk and within the enclosed field. The baseline photographs were taken during wintertime to show the impact of the proposal when there is no leaf cover on the trees.

4.2 A number of key points emerge from these views:

- The visual impact of proposed new raised timber path on views looking down from the Rock into the enclosed field is limited.
- The raised timber path is an obvious new intervention when viewed from the historic raised pathway of the Bishop’s Walk. The selection of an appropriate low-key material (such as weathered timber) will help to ensure that the historic route is the dominant pathway.
- The maintenance of longer unmown grass significantly reduces the visual impact of the new raised pathway. The decision to follow the natural contours of the site keeps the pathway close to the ground and helps to minimise the visual impact.
- The avoidance of balustrades and heavy handrails helps to minimise the visual impact of the raised universal access pathway.
- The tiered seating (referred to as ‘amphitheatre’ in the landscape architect’s drawings is not visible from the viewpoints within the Rock or along the historic Bishop’s Walk.
- The use of a continuous hedge is very effective in concealing the maze and its associated picnic/play area. The brown leaves of the proposed hornbeam hedge planting will be more appropriate than evergreen planting in proximity to the bare branches of the larger trees on the site.
- The avoidance of a large cluster of play equipment minimises the visual impact and helps the low-key assimilation of play opportunities into the site.
- The mature native trees are part of the designed landscape of the Bishop’s Walk field. The planting of new trees (as shown on photomontage 09) would significantly alter the character of the landscape over time and should be avoided. The planting of replacement trees to take the place of older fallen trees is acceptable.
5. Conclusion

The introduction of a new town park within the sensitive environs of the Rock of Cashel, a site of international significance, is challenging and requires special and non-standard design solutions. A key requirement is that the new park should not feel like a typical manicured urban or suburban park. The open uncultivated character of the enclosed field should be retained and strengthened as part of any proposal.

The current scheme has been developed following stakeholder consultation and considerable conservation-led analysis. The design significantly cuts back on new visual components that would distort the reading of the historic landscape, which comprises a walled field with a raised path running through it. The proposed new raised pathway follows the existing natural slope of the field, thereby minimising the need for visually intrusive raised balustrades. The materials and detailing of this pathway will be subservient to historic Bishop's Walk, which should be presented as the dominant visual component within the landscape. The same materials and low-key contemporary design should also be used on the tiered seating (in the south-west corner of the field). The other components of the design are low-key and are unlikely to significantly impact on the character of this very special historic landscape.

The adoption of carefully-considered measures to mitigate the impact of the design is important. The implementation of a robust conservation-led management plan to ensure that the design philosophy is not diluted over time through incremental change. For this reason, it is particularly important that the initial planting regime – with longer unmown grass and wildflower planting – is maintained. A lighting management plan is required to minimise the requirement for night-time lighting. An effective refuse management plan will also be required. These measures, together with the adopted adjustments to the design, have potential to deliver a unique site-specific public park that responds to the special character of St. Patrick's Rock and its environs.

Prepared by:  
Michael O'Boyle B.Arch MUBC FRIAI  
RIAI Grade 1 Conservation Architect  
Bluett & O'Donoghue Architects

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