

SHOPFRONT AND SIGNAGE GUIDELINES

Meath County Council Planning Department





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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Guidelines

The Council wishes to promote good quality design in the towns and villages of Meath. It is important to ensure that a good standard of shopfront design is achieved either through conservation of traditional shopfronts or through good contemporary design.

The purpose of this guidance document is to provide assistance to owners, designers, and planners in identifying and implementing the principles of good shopfront design.



Importance of Shopfronts

The shopfront forms an important part of a street's character, as it constitutes a highly visible part of the building at street level. Shopfronts which are well designed and well maintained make for a more attractive street for the shopper and passer-by. Poor quality shopfronts, on the other hand, damage the public perception of a street.

Although poor design can be a result of cheap materials, bad workmanship, and lack of thought, it is often due to a lack of understanding of the proportion and detail that goes to make a good shopfront and how it fits the building. Good design, whether modern or traditional, recognises these elements, and can enhance the building and streetscape, the promotion of the business, and the customer experience.



PLANNING POLICY



The *Meath County Development Plan 2013-2019* includes an objective —CH OBJ 16— *to make available and distribute detailed guidance notes and provide advice on architectural heritage to the public, developers, public bodies, groups and associations.*

The design of shopfronts is of particular importance due to the visually dominant role which retail plays in a town or village streetscape. This guidance document provides an additional level of detail to the policies and guidance in the *Meath County Development Plan*, *Town and Local Area Plans*, the 2012 *Retail Planning Guidelines* and *Retail Design Manual*, 2012.

Every proposal to install, upgrade or replace a shopfront presents an opportunity to improve the appearance of both the building to which the shopfront relates and the streetscape.

These works require planning permission:

- Making alterations to an existing façade or shopfront,
- Fitting a new shopfront,
- Change of use from a shop to a different use, and
- Works to a Protected Structure, or the exterior of a building in an Architectural Conservation Area (ACA).

It is the policy of Meath County Council to require a high quality of design and finish for replacement shopfronts, signage and advertising. Where shopfronts have been altered or removed without a grant of planning permission, Meath County Council will take measures to remedy these unauthorised developments.

On Protected Structures, and in Architectural Conservation Areas, any alterations to the exterior of premises including changes to signage, advertising, or addition of lighting, where this might affect the character of the building or street, require planning permission. An architect or designer with expertise in this area should be engaged for any such proposal.

Where no original detailing survives, a modern solution may be an appropriate alternative. However, it is important to ensure that this respects the details of the building.

ENFIELD



MEDICAL HALL

2

PHARMACY



2



waitrose chemists



Meath County Council encourages shop owners to consider the wider context when contemplating works to their shopfronts. Initially, and in consultation with the Local Authority, the owner will need to make a decision as to whether to retain the existing shopfront or fit a new one. This decision should be influenced by the policies in the development plans for the county, and these guidelines.

In general it is the Council's policy to:

1. Protect and conserve original historic shopfronts and good quality traditional shopfronts, and
2. Encourage good quality contemporary design.

Protecting Original Historic Shopfronts

The towns and villages of Meath contain some historic shopfronts of merit.

It is Council policy to encourage the retention and re-use of all good quality historic shopfronts, whether protected or not. Regular maintenance is essential to avoid deterioration. In the refurbishment of existing shopfronts the removal of street doors to upper levels shall not be permitted unless separate access is otherwise provided.







C. Lorenzen, 2002

Where alterations are proposed to historic shopfronts it is important to ensure that these do not result in damage to the original fabric, or detract from the integrity of the original design. Specialist conservation advice should be sought when dealing with alterations, repairs and improvements to historic shopfronts, particularly when these are located on Protected Structures or in Architectural Conservation Areas.

While a sympathetic well-designed modern intervention will usually be preferable to a poorly proportioned imitation of a traditional shopfront, it may be appropriate when replacing an inappropriate shopfront on a Protected Structure to employ authentic traditional design and detailing. Authentic designs may be copied from good original examples of the period, and should be appropriately scaled in relation to the building as a whole.



The Wine Buff, 2007



Sweets, 2011



When inserting a new shopfront on a historic building or in an ACA it may be more suitable to use traditional shopfront designs of the period of the building as inspiration for a more contemporary design solution.

Conservation Principles

- Research prior to planning work
- Minimum intervention – repair rather than replace
- Respect the setting





Protected Structures

The guidance in this document applies to all buildings including Protected Structures. However, it is recommended that any design proposals for Protected Structures should be discussed with the Local Authority at an early stage. The following advice is for guidance purposes pending a consultation:



- All works to a Protected Structure must protect the special character of the building and should enhance its architectural qualities. No original good quality detail should be removed or obscured.
- Subtle and restrained design is preferred to loud and flamboyant proposals as this will allow for a better appreciation of the existing building.
- The work must be carried out by suitably qualified craftsmen to avoid damage to the fabric of the building, and it should be reversible.
- Where no original detail survives, a modern solution may be acceptable. However, this must be complementary to and compatible with the design and detail of the existing building.
- Signage must be kept to a minimum. High-level signage is generally not permitted, and corporate signage must be adapted to respect the character of the building and area.
- Projecting signs are not normally permitted. Traditional hanging signs may be acceptable.
- In the absence of a fascia where there are stone, brick or tiled façades, individual letters mounted directly on the façade are preferred to the affixing of flat signage panels. Care should be taken in fixing these to avoid damage to the façade. The letters should be backlit to avoid the additional clutter of light fittings.
- Proposals to install new awnings, blinds, exterior shutters, or canopies need careful consideration to avoid damage to the detail or character of the shopfront.



Encouraging Contemporary Design

The design approach to a new shopfront should provide a contemporary architectural expression relevant to the context, character and tradition of the area, the character of the individual street and of the building itself.



To date there have been relatively few examples of good quality modern shopfront design in the county. Where good examples occur they tend to be crisp, simple and streamlined. While less ornate than their traditional counterparts, the more successful designs comprise strong frameworks which draw inspiration from the traditional forms of good shopfront design.

The traditional shopfront concept has survived because it works. The key to good contemporary design is an emphasis on fine detailing.

SHOPFRONT DESIGN



Function of the Shopfront

The shopfront has a number of functions in a streetscape. Its primary purpose is to attract the attention of the passers-by by means of signage and window displays. The shopfront also has an important part to play in expressing the architectural character of the building at ground-floor level.

In traditional shopfront design, the main structure, which is based on Classical architecture, consists of the following elements:



The following five design principles should be observed in the design of shopfronts:

- Shopfront Structure and Proportion – External and Internal
- Materials and Colour
- Signage
- Lighting
- Security



Structure and Proportion – External

A shopfront should relate to the architectural character of the upper floors in respect of proportion, scale, and alignment. Existing features such as projecting stone or brick courses, arches, or plaster detailing, provide an opportunity to reflect such detail in the design of the shopfront.

Buildings and shopfronts relate to adjoining buildings, and the shopfront should maintain the existing plot size and respect the scale and proportions of the streetscape and the established pattern of openings.

Large expanses of undivided glass should be avoided, and long runs of horizontal façades should be broken up by vertical divisions or features.

A strong framework for the shopfront should be provided, including an appropriately scaled and detailed fascia panel, pilasters, and a well defined base.

Generally, clear glazing should be used, and frosted/tinted/opaque/laminate glass should only be used in particular circumstances where the overall design concept would warrant the use of such materials. Good examples are sometimes found on public house windows.



A WELL PROPORTIONED SHOPFRONT



POORLY PROPORTIONED SHOPFRONTS

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



Fascia is too narrow and does not fit the openings





Windows and Doors

Doors provide an important first impression. Recessed doorways create additional interest. Glass doors should have visual warnings and kickplates.

The proportion of windows and doors should be proportionate to the openings in the upper floors and it is desirable that they should align with other details of the building such as lining the stall riser with the height of a plaster plinth. If the shop is part of a terrace of similar buildings, it should reflect the pattern of openings and proportions to produce a visually coherent streetscape.





Access

All new shopfronts should be designed to make access easier for people with disabilities, the elderly, the very young, people with pushchairs, and the visually impaired. Where possible, level access should be provided. Where this is not possible, investigate the possibility of raising the pavement level in the vicinity of the doorway, or providing a ramp. Revolving doors and folding doors will generally not be favourably considered.



Cornice

On traditional shopfronts the fascia needs a strong moulding at the top. This should provide a drip detail to protect the fascia from weathering.

Fascia

The design of the fascia is a key element of shopfront design and carries the name of the business. In traditional shopfronts the depth of the fascia is quite small. Fascia panels should be proportionate to the size of the building and the length of the shopfront, and should not exceed 20% of the overall height of the shopfront to prevent it dominating the façade.

An over deep fascia can spoil a shopfront. If there is an internal dropped ceiling, existing steel beam or other obstruction, reducing the height of the fascia can be problematic. However, good design by way of the insertion of a sub-fascia, or other design mechanism, can overcome this.

If a shopfront occupies more than one building, the fascia should be subdivided and relate to the individual character of each.

Fascias extending above the level of first-floor windowsills and obscuring architectural details will not be acceptable.

Pilasters

These are rectangular columns which project slightly from the face of the building. They may stop beneath the fascia, or continue up to the cornice, with decorative console brackets, or scrolls, and capped with finials at the top.





Stall Risers

The stall riser is the horizontal element between the bottom of the window and the ground. The stall riser provides a solid base to the shopfront and has a number of uses:

- It can allow the shop to display goods at waist height.
- It protects the bottom of the shop from splashes, knocks and kicks and can be reinforced to protect against ram-raiding.
- It screens unattractive floor areas from public view.

It is desirable to provide a stall riser of at least 300mm to 600mm in height. Timbers should never run directly to the ground—a small stone plinth should be provided between the timber and the ground.

Stall risers are often omitted from contemporary designs to maximise the display area or for simplicity of form. The visual success of this is dependent on the use of high-quality materials and detailing and the omission of a stall riser will therefore only be acceptable where this can be achieved.

Post Box

A security hatch or slot of a sufficient scale to accept postal deliveries should be incorporated into the design of all new shopfronts. It should be located at or immediately above the level of the stall riser and should not interfere with the general proportions and presentation of the front façade of the shopfront.



Structure and Proportion – Internal

Shopfront displays (this includes gable elevations and upper-floor windows) advertise the products and engage the passers-by, encouraging them to enter. Displays are an integral part of the shopfront design and should be managed and maintained. Dead window displays, e.g. posters, prints, opaque glass or film, create a dead streetscape and are discouraged.

The window display fixtures, fittings, and illumination must be of high quality and complement the shopfront. Display areas at ground-floor level shall be located directly behind the glazed shopfront for its full width, excluding doors, with a minimum depth of 1.75 metres and used to display merchandise associated with the retail unit.

The design of the interior of retail units, including layout, furniture, display cabinets, materials and colour, should have regard to the visual impact on the exterior of the shopfront and the requirement to complement the design of the shopfront and building overhead.

The backs of interior display stands and storage units shall not be positioned up against or close to the window display.





Materials

The materials used should be durable and of high quality. The colour and texture should complement the architectural character of the building and streetscape.

The use of quality flooring at entrances is very important, particularly where these are recessed.

In view of the poor environmental qualities of many modern construction materials, the sustainability of the chosen material will also be considered in planning applications. There are a number of publications and online resources available that can help in the selection process.



Traditionally, shopfronts were made of painted timber. It looks good, wears well and can be easily maintained. If properly primed and painted, timber can be extremely durable. Other materials, such as bronze, cast iron, marble and stone have also had a long tradition in shopfront construction.

There are a number of modern materials whose smooth, shiny and flat texture makes them sit uneasily in historic buildings. Highly-polished stone, stainless steel, natural finish or powder coated aluminium and plastic (uPVC), acrylic, mirrored panels, and poor-quality flat-faced timber panels are unlikely to find approval on Protected Structures or buildings in an Architectural Conservation Area.

Timber Specification

The choice of timber should be carefully considered at the design stage since it can have a considerable bearing on the visual appearance and future maintenance requirements of the shopfront. Good quality detailing from an experienced joiner is just as important as the quality of the timber being used to make the installation of a new shopfront a worthwhile investment.

Softwood

The majority of traditional shopfronts were made of softwood and painted. Many of today's softwoods are of a poor quality not suitable for outside use, and their improper use—with subsequent early failings and high maintenance requirements—has brought wood into disrepute as a material for external joinery.

Generally, the softwoods available today don't match the quality of 19th century (or earlier) softwoods because they are grown relatively quickly, thus are less dense, and often are dried too fast. Both factors affect their quality. Nevertheless, good quality softwoods, such as Douglas Fir or British Columbian Pine, suitable for shopfront design, are still available.

Principles of selection for softwood:

- Ensure that it is suitable for outside use.
- Ensure that it is workable, i.e. it can be worked to the fine detailing.
- Check its moisture content and the likelihood of movement.
- Ensure that it is able to take a finish that will look good and be durable.





Hardwood

Hardwood was only occasionally used in historic shopfronts. They were never painted but finished with a glossy varnish. Today, because of the poor quality of many softwoods available, hardwoods are being used for shopfront construction.

If obtained from an approved sustainable source their use in principle is acceptable, though a stained and varnished finish might not always be considered appropriate within a traditional high street. If your building is protected or within an Architectural Conservation Area, check with the Conservation Officer first before selecting such timbers.

Hardwoods can contain high amounts of natural oils and thus can be extremely difficult to paint and glue effectively. Because they have larger pores, the final appearance of painted hardwood is much more irregular than softwood.

Principles of selection for hardwood:

- Ensure that it is suitable for external use.
- Ensure that it is able to take a painted finish in case a varnish is not acceptable.
- Ensure that it is supplied from environmentally sustainable sources.



The Timber Research & Development Association (TRADA) provides advice and technical information regarding the availability, quality and performance of timbers.

Plywood

Composite materials such as plywood and Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) are not usually acceptable on Protected Structures or for general use in Architectural Conservation Areas. Otherwise, plywood has often been used for modern shopfronts, and where it is thought to be acceptable, attention should be given in selecting a grade of plywood suitable for outside use, e.g. marine quality ply. Note that plywood is not intended for direct finishing unless it is veneered or has received an adequate preservation treatment prior to priming and painting.



Further Reading:

Building Research Establishment *Green Guide to Specification*:
www.bre.co.uk

English Historic Towns Forum *Book of Details & Good Practice in Shopfront Design* (1993)

GreenSpec Directory: www.buildinggreen.com

Pharos Project (by the Healthy Building Network: www.pharosproject.net)

Technical information of TRADA: www.trada.co.uk/techinfo/

Finish: Varnish and Exterior Wood Stains

Traditionally, timber shopfronts were painted. Transparent finishes, such as varnish, have been used occasionally for small external timber components where a high gloss natural finish is required. Exterior wood stains have been in common use in the UK only since the 1960s. Their use as a finish might not always be acceptable within the context of a Protected Structure or ACA, and should be checked with the Conservation Officer first.

Varnish and wood stains allow the wood grain and character to show as part of the finish. Because they have essentially no pigments (varnish) or only a low amount of pigments (i.e. stains, which are semi-transparent), they are susceptible to discolouring from water and sun. Suppliers' specifications should be carefully checked for these effects.



Colour

The architectural unity of an Architectural Conservation Area, in whole or part, may depend on the use of specific colours for the decoration of external rendered walls, joinery, or railings. It is important therefore that original colour schemes are retained or reinstated. Walls and stone detailing which have traditionally not been painted should remain undecorated.

Colour schemes for historic shopfronts were kept simple, often single coloured, which put the goods of the window display at the centre of attention. Today, colour schemes are often used to make the shopfront itself a form of advertising. Corporate schemes in particular are often

imposed without any regard to the design and location, which can contribute to the erosion of the character of an area. Thus, in historic areas, corporate retailers are expected to modify their standard design and colour scheme where this would be desirable.



- Dark shades of green, grey, blue, red, browns, or black are traditional colours for historic shopfronts. Bright shades of yellow, orange and pink are inappropriate in sensitive historic areas.
- Minimalist and monochrome paint combinations combined with the use of a stylish script can result in high-quality schemes. Garish colour combinations should be avoided altogether.
- The change of colour of a shopfront which is part of a Protected Structure may require planning permission. It is advisable to contact the Conservation Officer to discuss the colour scheme before an application is submitted.

Examples of colours: in a historic context muted paint colour tends to be most appropriate. A heritage range of colours is available on the market, for example, from the following suppliers:



- Dulux Heritage Range: <http://www.heritagepaints.co.uk/>
- Farrow & Ball Manufacturers of Traditional Papers and Paint: www.farrow-ball.com
- www.icipaints.co.uk
- The Little Greene Paint Company (English Heritage Colour Range): www.thelittlegreene.com/shop_colour_card.html
- Muted colours of the British Standard (4800) Range and the Dulux Trade Colour Palette Range are equally suitable.



Corporate Image / Logos

Corporate design packages, including shopfront designs, colour and material palates, corporate signs, logos, and colour schemes, may not be acceptable unless fully compatible with and complementary to the character of the building and adjoining buildings. The context for the proposal is considered more important than uniformity between branches of one company.



Signage

External signage is important for commercial activity. Good signage is discreet, complements the architecture of its background and can enhance the appearance of the shop and streetscape. The common theme in successful contemporary detailing is a restraint in signage size and type. The choice of lettering can evoke an image and provide decorative interest.

Certain types of business place excessive reliance on the use of signage and advertising to promote their goods and services—for example, fast food outlets and bookmakers.



Notwithstanding Schedule 2, Part 2, Article 6, of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001, as amended, or any regulations revoking or re-enacting these regulations, all signage and advertisements on a Protected Structure or within an ACA, require planning permission.

The size, shape, and position of signs should reflect the scale and façade of the building on which they are situated. Hand-painted signs or illumination by bracket or wash lighting are preferred to internally illuminated signage.



Signage shall form an integral part of the overall design for the shopfront. Well-designed fascia signage can provide decorative interest and project an image of quality. The signage relating to any commercial ground-floor use shall be contained within the fascia board of the shopfront. Minimum text should be used, and in general only the name and street number of the shop should be on the fascia panel. In some cases a simple graphic motif may also be appropriate. The lettering employed shall either be painted on the fascia, or consist of individually mounted solid letters on the fascia board. The size of the lettering used should be in proportion to the depth of the fascia board and should not normally exceed 300mm in height. In no case should lettering exceed 400mm. Lettering designs should be kept simple and legible.

Lettering or logos shall not be affixed directly to the glazing of any shop or business windows, other than etched lettering. All sign displays inside the shop should be kept back a minimum distance of 500mm from the glazing. Lettering or logos shall not obstruct the window display and shall not exceed one quarter of the area of the window through which the advertisements are exhibited.





Projecting and Hanging Signs

Projecting signs tend to be bulky, constructed of inappropriate materials, and are frequently internally lit. These shall not generally be permitted as a profusion of such signs in a confined area can lead to visual clutter in the streetscape. Hanging signs are a traditional feature of shops and can add interest if well designed. Positive consideration may be given to the use of a hanging sign if a building is in multiple occupancy, and the proposed sign would lead to a significant overall reduction in the number and scale of advertisement structures on or projecting from the face of the building. In this circumstance the following guidelines must be observed:

- Not more than one hanging sign should be displayed on a building.
- Signs should not be fixed directly to the face of a building but should be fixed by a bracket.
- Projecting signs should be fixed at fascia height adjacent to the access to the upper floors.
- Signs should depict a pictorial feature or symbol illustrating the trade or business being undertaken and should be as transparent as possible.
- Signs should be individually designed to complement the scale, materials and design of the building.
- Signs should not obscure important features of a building or adjacent buildings.



Banners and Flags

These are considered to be unsuitable forms of identification and will not be permitted.



Murals

Murals will always require planning permission, but may be acceptable in particular situations.



Lighting

The shop window should be the most brightly-lit part of the shopfront. Internal lighting of window displays is helpful for after-hours window shopping and creating an atmosphere of warmth in the street

External lighting of the shopfront will only be considered where it is modest and subtle, and preferably can be concealed by the fascia or other details of the building. Spotlights supported on projecting brackets will be discouraged.

The colouring and intensity of illumination should be complementary to the overall shopfront design and architectural context. Illuminated projecting signs and flashing signs in the shop window are unacceptable.

Neon illumination around windows is generally unacceptable. Internally-illuminated fascia panels or projecting box signs will not be permitted. Concealed strip or flood lighting of fascias or traditional hand-painted hanging signs lit by spotlight may be an acceptable alternative.



Rainwater Goods

Traditional rainwater goods, gutters, hoppers and downpipes are generally of cast iron, and where existing, should be retained. Where replacement is necessary, cast aluminium can sometimes be a suitable substitute.

Extruded aluminium and plastic have a shorter life, are easily damaged, and always unsuitable on a Protected Structure or in an ACA.



Security

There are a range of options available which provide a balance between securing the premises and maintaining an attractive appearance. This is particularly important after normal opening hours, when window shopping can generate night-time and weekend activity.

Laminated Glass

Laminated glass offers protection without affecting the appearance of the shopfront. This should be the first choice solution.

Security Shutters

The installation of security shutters requires planning permission.

Roller shutters will not be considered acceptable on historic shopfronts as they detract from the proportions of the shopfront and damage historic details. The use of solid roller shutters will not normally be considered in retail development in central areas.

Open mesh shutters cause less intrusion on the appearance of the building or shopfront, allowing views into the shops after working hours. These have the further advantage of letting light shine onto the street at night, making it more attractive to passers-by.

Where security shutters are considered necessary, in cases where the premises is in a high-risk area, or is a high-risk business, and if there is evidence from insurers that no other type of shutter would be acceptable for insurance purposes, they may be permitted, provided they meet the following criteria:

- They must be open grill type, not solid, or perforated.
- They must be painted or coloured to match the shopfront scheme.
- Where possible they must be housed behind the window display.

Alternatives to roller shutters are:

Timber Shutters and Metal Grilles

Externally-fitted detachable timber shutters were the norm on traditional shopfronts, and were designed as part of the window detail. This type of protection is most easily used on historic shopfronts, where they may have been previously fitted.

Detachable, externally-fitted iron grilles, and internal open mesh grilles, which can be fitted behind the glass, are also effective and not visually intrusive.

Alarm Systems, CCTV

An alarm can be an effective security measure if adequately monitored. Alarm boxes should be carefully located to avoid being visually intrusive, and the colour should complement the background. Sensors on the windows can be linked to an alarm or CCTV for a more comprehensive security system.



Canopies and Blinds

If a shopfront needs protection from the sun, a traditional open ended blind is still the best method. It also provides some shelter from the rain. Blinds should be of a traditional design in canvas or similar non-reflective material. Plastic fabrics are not considered suitable. Blinds should be incorporated into the shopfront fascia and designed to retract into a blind box recessed into the fascia panel. Closed-end canopies reduce the view to adjoining premises and disrupt the streetscape.

Shop names or advertising on the blind may be permitted if appropriate to the overall design of the building and its surroundings.

Glass canopies may be considered, subject to agreement on design and maintenance. The curved, or Dutch canopy is unsympathetic to the traditional streetscape as it obscures the original detail of the shopfront, neighbouring advertising, and will deteriorate with age. However, there may be particular locations where these would be acceptable.

For more detailed guidance, building owners and tenants should contact the Planning Department at Meath County Council.

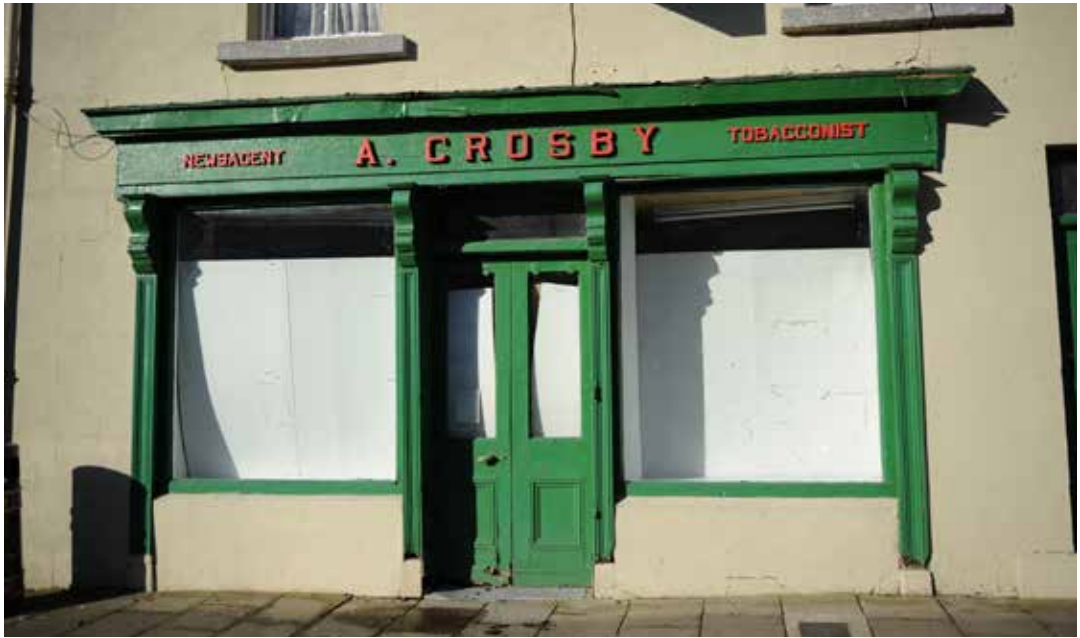




SLANE
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SLANE BAKE



Shopfront images

Front cover Bermingham's, Navan – excellent and well-maintained example of traditional shopfront

Inside
front cover John Street, Kells – corbel detail

Page 2 P.J. Dargan, Longwood – simple sign with raised letters

Page 3 Market Street, Kells – now the Bookmarket

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Contemporary shopfront, Kells

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Old Bridge Tea Rooms, Trim – new shopfront with hand-painted signage

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An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



comhairle chontae na mí
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