

Blessington Architectural Conservation Area Appraisal



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Client: Wicklow County Council

Location: Blessington, Co. Wicklow

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MAP OF PROPOSED BLESSINGTON ACA



SUMMARY

The Architectural Conservation Area for Blessington has been developed in accordance with the brief for this project provided by Wicklow County Council. This ACA is a Draft proposal, and intended to form part of the review of the Blessington Local Area Plan.

In developing these Guidelines, the following documents have been reviewed and considered:

1. Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines from the Department of the Environment;
2. Wicklow County Development Plan, 2004-10;
3. National Inventory of the Architectural Heritage for Blessington;
4. Record of Monuments and Places;

Blessington is an estate village that has developed into a linear town, centred on the Main Street that runs in a broadly north-south direction. This Architectural Conservation Area is focussed on the town's Main Street, and fulfils the following roles:

- (a) To protect groups of structures of distinctiveness or visual richness or historical importance;
- (b) To protect the setting of the protected structures in the town, extending beyond their curtilage.

The ACA has been designated in order to protect the most significant part of the historic and architecturally important core of the town. This ACA extends to include most of Main Street and the original Town Square. Although more modern development is not included within this ACA, it is recognised that it is vital to integrate such development and to provide a positive interface between old and new.

This ACA appraisal includes the following components:



Figure 1 View along Main Street looking northwards (towards Church of Ireland church)

- Policy Context
- Physical Context
- Location and Description of Blessington
- Visual Analysis Overview
- Description of Public Spaces, including areas for improvement
- Written Description of the ACA, including significant buildings and features and areas to be retained and improved
- Justification for the Development of the ACA

This appraisal includes guidance for addressing the management of the ACA and a series of policy objectives that the Council may incorporate into statutory documents in regard to this ACA.



1.0 Location and Description of Blessington

1.1 Location of Blessington

Blessington is located in the north west of County Wicklow, on the border with Co. Kildare, approximately 29 kilometres from Dublin and 11 kilometres from Naas. The Poullaphuca Reservoir bounds the village to the east and the East Kildare Uplands and Deerpark Woodlands bound it to the west. The Wild Life Sanctuary and wetlands at Burgage Bridge and Vallemount Road and Bridge are to the south of Blessington.



Figure 2 View along Main Street with characteristic terraced streetscape and mature street trees

Blessington is located just 29 kilometres from Dublin and so finds itself experiencing the associated development pressures that come with being within Dublin's commuter belt. This is one factor behind the rapid growth in the population of Blessington over such a short period of time, which has seen growth from 1,860 persons in 1996 to 3,992 in 2002 - a staggering 115% increase in just 6 years.

In terms of access to the town and road connections, the N81 National Secondary Road links Blessington to Dublin and Baltinglass. The R410 links the town to Naas in the North West. A significant amenity feature, as well as being a barrier to the expansion of the town is the River Liffey, which runs to its east, through Blessington Lake.

The Blessington area is well known for its quarrying industry and there are a number of quarries located in the northern hinterland of the town. Much of this landscape is scarred as a result of many years of quarrying, which has changed the landscape backdrop to the town unalterably, including the visual envelope of the town.



1.2 Description of Blessington

Blessington is a linear settlement, taking its form along the main N81 road. The village was originally developed as an estate town in the late 17th century with predominately terraced housing which opens out into a central market place. The village has mainly developed in a south and south westerly direction with the industrial estate located to the south of Main Street and new residential developments taking place – predominantly to the south and south west of Main Street. The quarries, located to the north of Main Street, have prevented any significant developments from taking place in this part of the village.

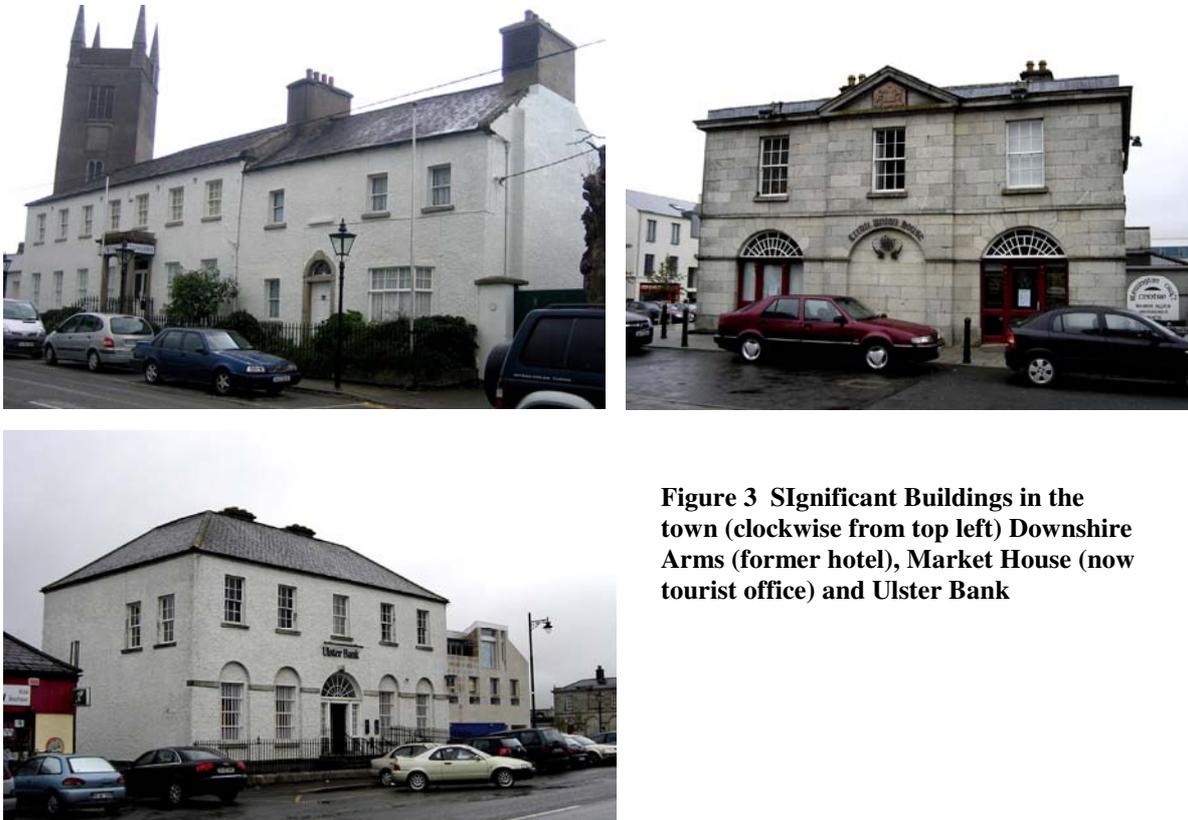


Figure 3 Significant Buildings in the town (clockwise from top left) Downshire Arms (former hotel), Market House (now tourist office) and Ulster Bank

The existing buildings along the Main Street are predominantly terraced, and although not of high architectural quality, their special interest lies in the strong building line and their historic value. Their aesthetic value is generated by the general form of the terraces, with the slight changes in scale, height and roof line. A very attractive Main Street is enhanced by building details such as the materials, door cases, windows, particularly where these are original or older and the carriage arches at intervals along the street. Finally, the regular pattern of the fenestration and the undulating roof lines generates a rhythm along the street that is both attractive and that forms an architectural unit of significance.

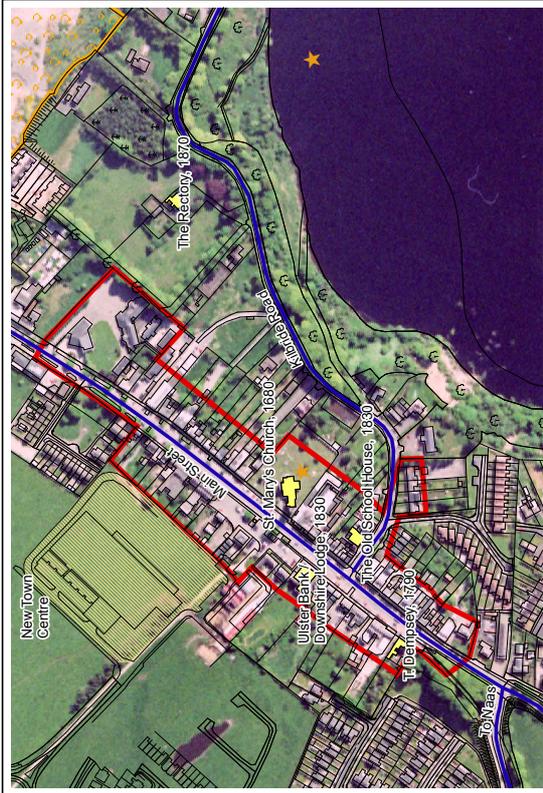


The Main Street is punctuated by several buildings whose civic, commercial and spiritual importance is highlighted by their height, siting or setback from the building line. These would include the Ulster Bank, Credit Union, Downshire Arms, both churches and the primary school. The mid-nineteenth century Neo-Gothic Church of Ireland church is the most noticeable of these buildings, being set back from the road, and at a 45-degree angle to the other buildings on the Main Street. A number of buildings on Main Street have features on their façades, including fine stone doorcases and timber sash windows, which enhance their appearance and add a sense of character and distinctiveness to the town.

The street trees along the northern section of Main Street not only add significantly to the visual attractiveness of the street, but also provide a noise and visual buffer from the significant levels of traffic traversing along the street, particularly large lorries associated with the quarrying activities in the town's hinterland. These trees are an integral part of the character of the town's Main Street.



Figure 4 Mature Street Trees at regular intervals provide shade and a noise barrier

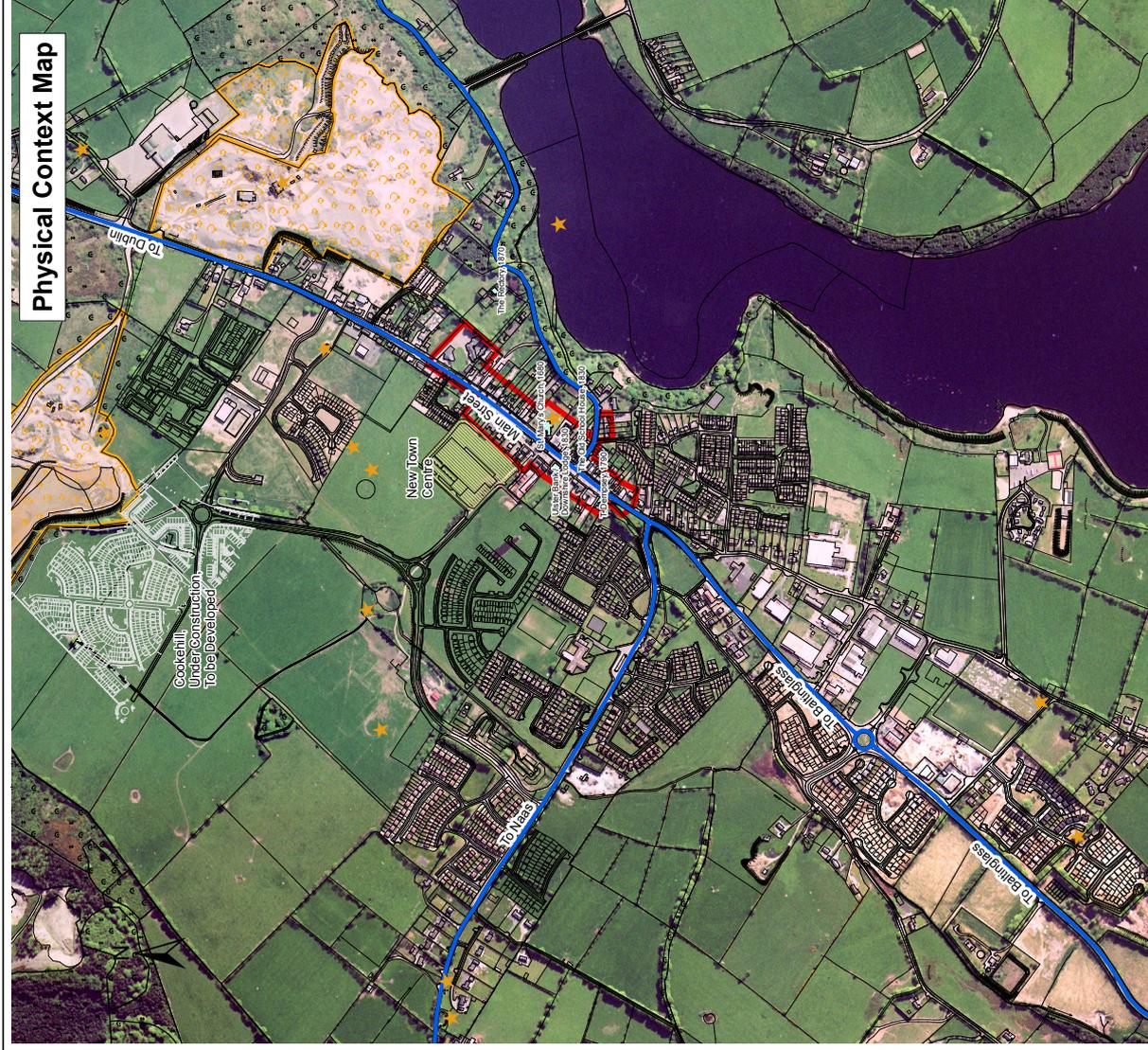


Blessington Town Centre Scale 1:5000

**FINAL
ISSUE**

Legend

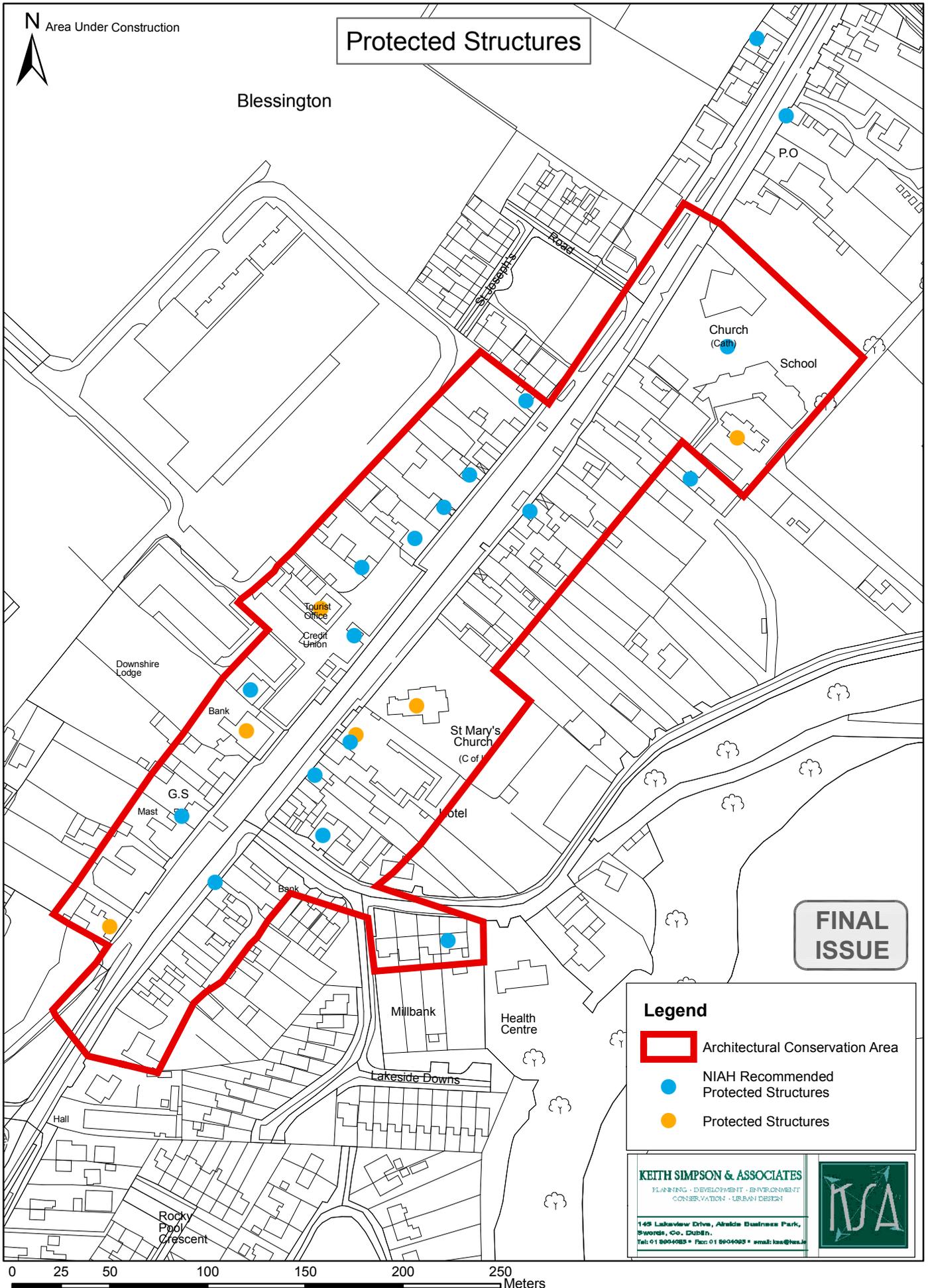
- ★ Recorded Monuments
- Architectural Conservation Area
- Quarry
- New Town Centre
- Roads



Blessington Scale 1:10000
Date: 07.11.06

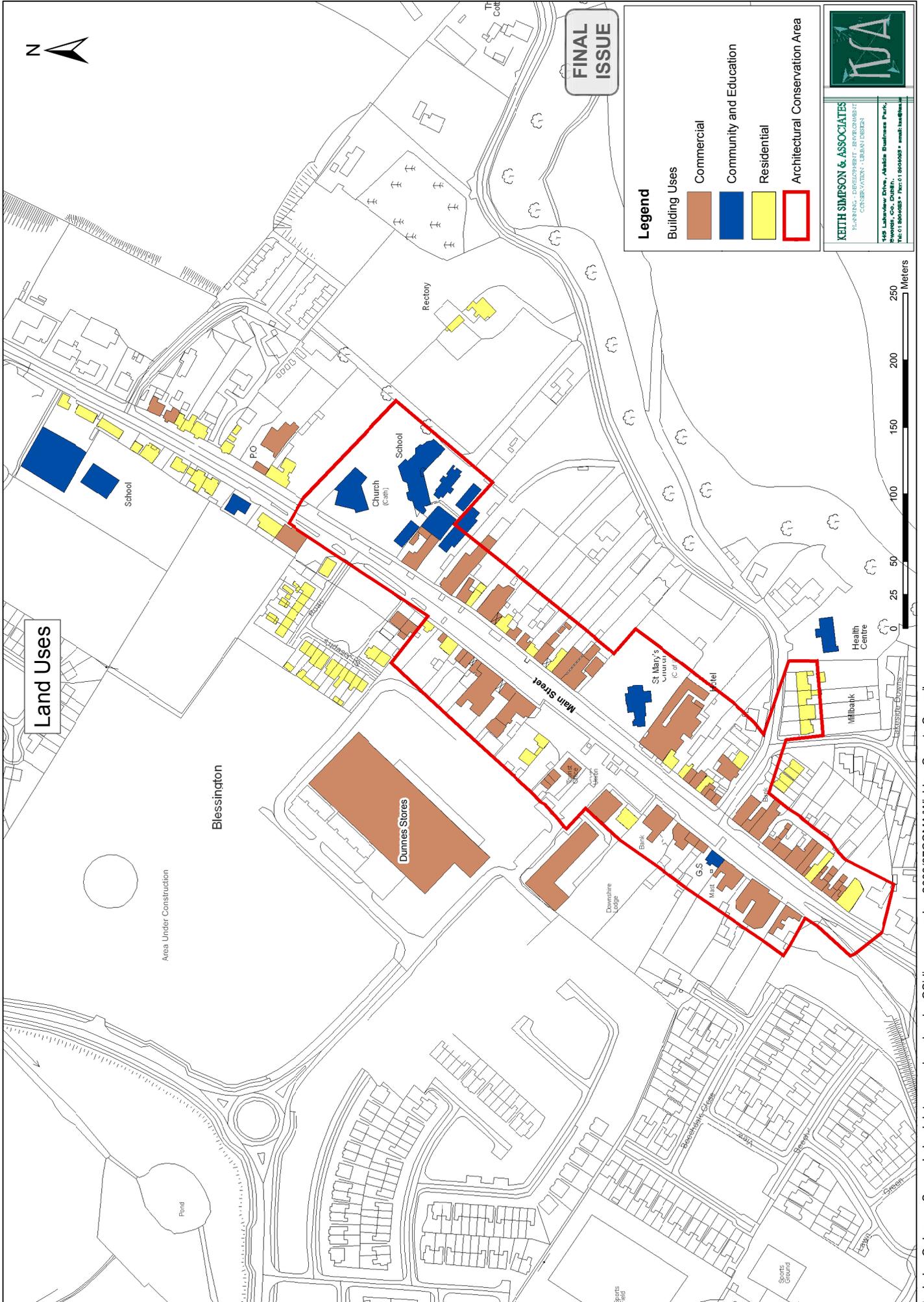
Physical Context Map

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2.0 Blessington's Chronological Development

2.1 Establishment of the Town

The name Blessington comes from the Irish 'Baile Coimin'(townland of Coimin)¹. In early times there were three churches in this area – Kilmalum, Three Castles and Burgage. The district was first called Burgage in 1547, and continued to be known by that name until the erection of the village and a church in 1683.

2.2 Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Development (up to 1838)

The Manor of Blessington was being granted to the Archbishop of Dublin, Michael Boyle, in the late 1660's, by King Charles II. Boyle laid out one street and built the Church of Ireland parish church in 1662. The single street was the beginning of this town, which was originally constructed as an estate village – to reflect the significance of Blessington House and Demesne and to house the workers and tenants. The demesne comprised 410 acres, including a large deer park, and was surrounded by a brick wall. The wall was destroyed by fire in 1760, followed by the House, which burned down in 1798 and was never rebuilt.

The first edition Ordnance Survey Map (dating to 1837) indicates the remains of Downshire House as being in ruins, with its Grand Avenue, and views towards the Market Square and the Main Street from the front of the House. The landscape features remaining include the feature lakes and stands of mature trees. There also appears to be the remains of a farmyard or outbuildings that would have served this demesne.

The 1837 OS map again highlights the developing civic centre at Blessington, with a school house indicated on the Kilbride Road (still standing) and a Hotel on the Main Street. The Market House has been constructed, along with the RIC barracks and approximately 50 houses with the characteristic long plots and narrow street frontage the Main Street. At this stage, the Corn Mill located on the River Liffey (at the bridge) appears to be still in use, highlighting the agricultural nature of the economic base at this time in this area.

¹ Flynn, Arthur (2003), *A History of County Wicklow*, Dublin, p.72

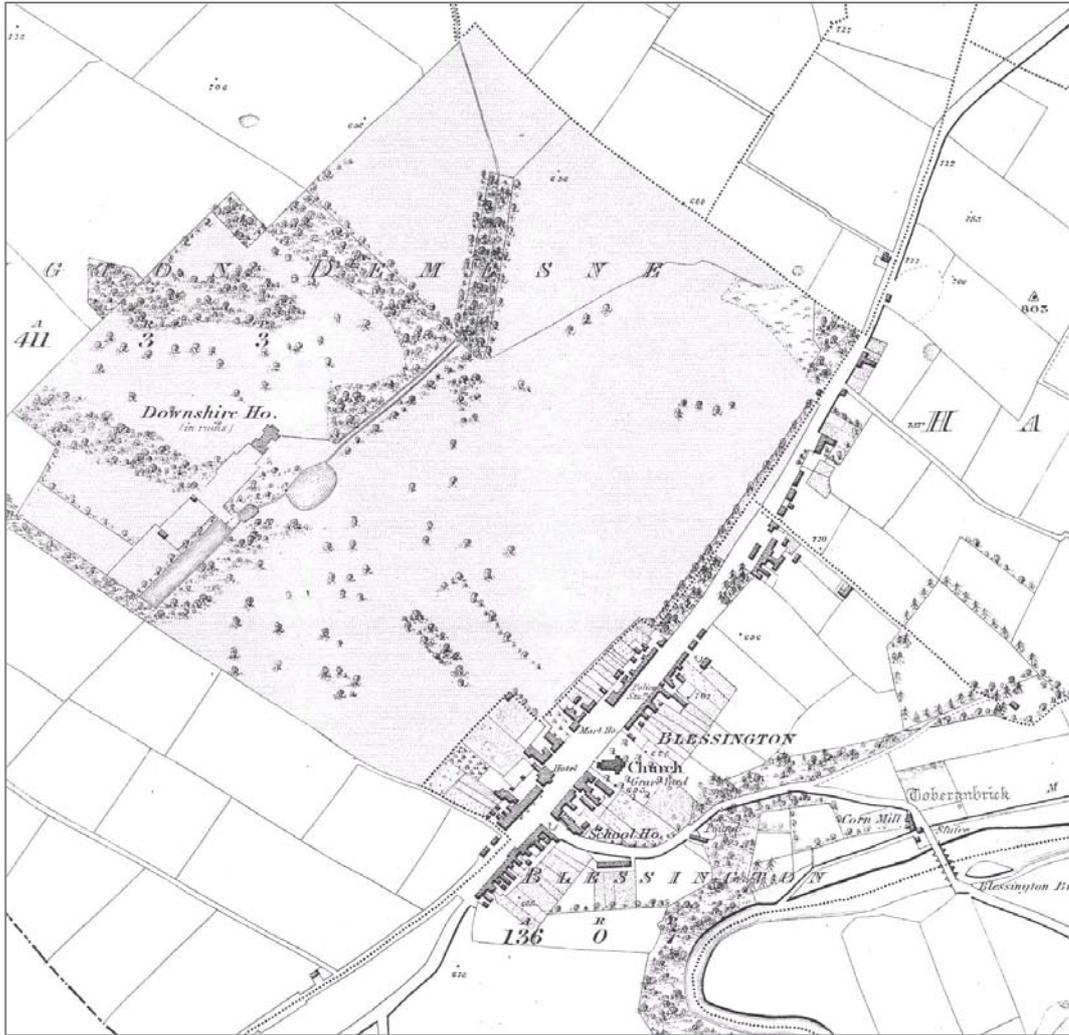


Figure 5 1838 Ordnance Survey Map of Blessington

2.3 Development from 1838 - 1885

By the later-nineteenth century the Hill family (the Marquis of Downshire) were the main landlords at Blessington, living in Downshire Lodge. They were also responsible for the construction of the present-day Protestant Church and the major part of the development of the present form of the village Main Street.

The early to mid period of the nineteenth century saw the commercial core of the town, and associated with that, the more formal style of architecture and grander buildings with a strong presence on the Main Street. These would include the Market House being well established as a local hub of commerce (in common with many Irish towns of this size in this period).

The 1885 Ordnance Survey map indicates that Downshire House has been removed at this date, or is so derelict as not to be noted by the cartographers. In its place,



Downshire Lodge is the major “big house” in the town, which has symmetrical set out gardens to the rear. The Boyle memorial and fountain has been developed, along with other civic supports such as two national schools, the Parochial House associated with the Church and Graveyard and a “Hospital and Dispensary” to the south-west of the town. By this stage, the Corn Mill is indicated as “Old”, and may no longer be in use. The hotel appears to have moved from its previous location, possibly to gain an enlarged premises, as this route would have been frequently travelled by visitors and business men alike.

By 1885, the town has largely taken on the urban form that we would recognise today. The length of Main Street is almost fully developed and development has moved outwards with houses along Kilbride Road. The Main Street clearly indicates the presence of the street trees along its length, particularly on the eastern side, which are still present today as a strong feature. The shaded area to the north of the town may indicate that quarrying had already commenced in this area at this early period.

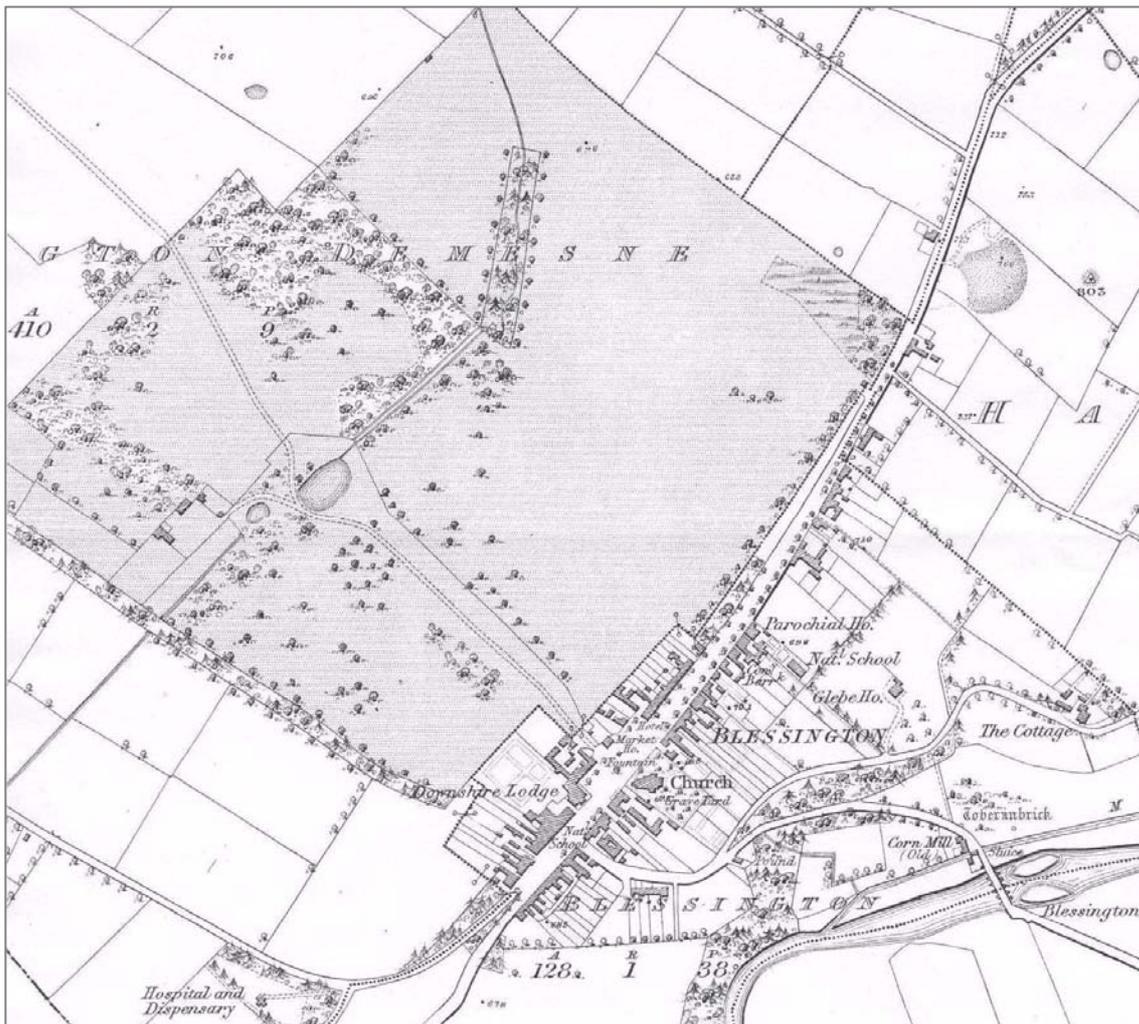


Figure 6 1885 Ordnance Survey Map of Blessington

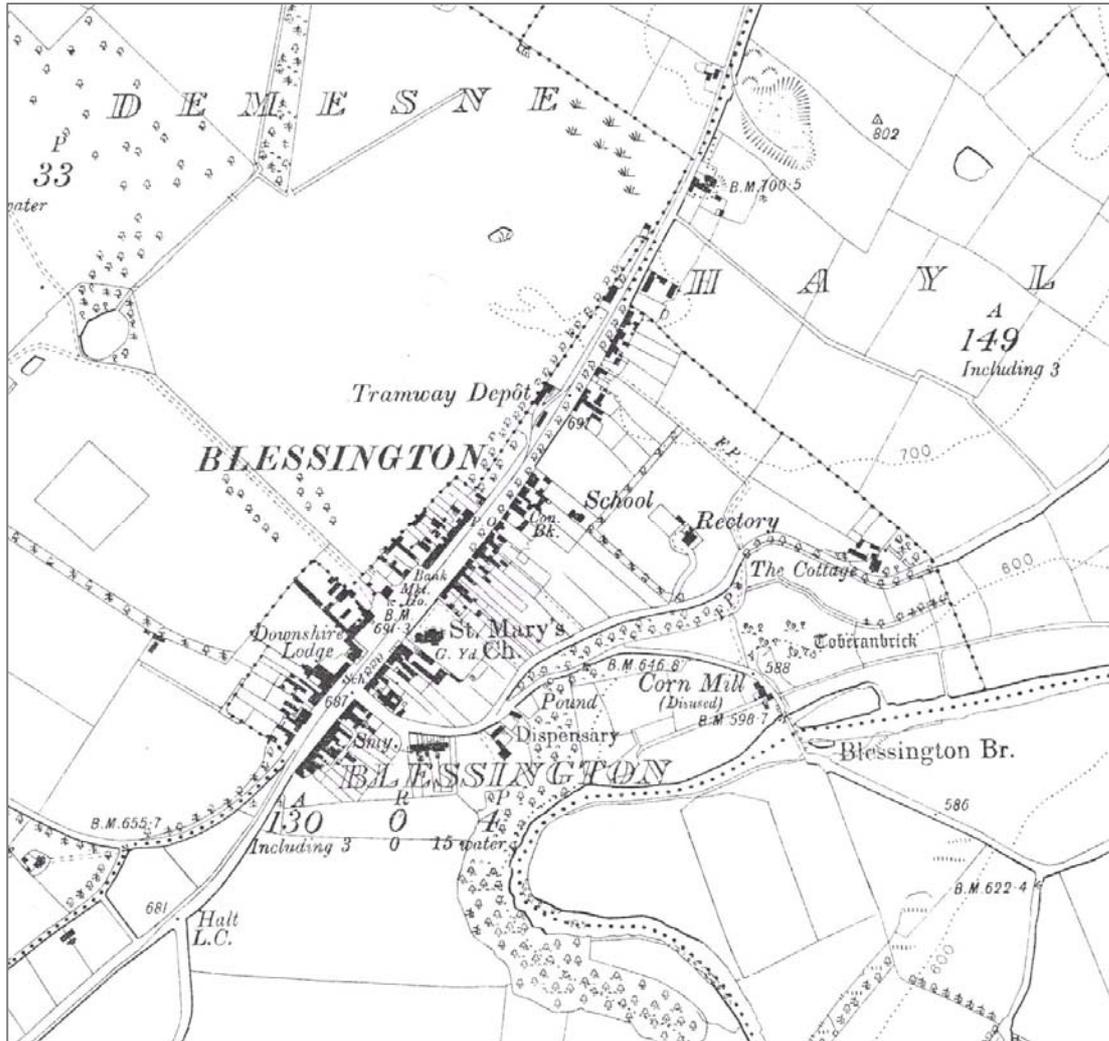


Figure 7 1908 Ordnance Survey Map of Blessington

2.4 Development from 1885 – 1908

By 1908, the town's commercial strength is indicated by the introduction of a bank and the "Smithy" is noted. This again highlights the agricultural nature of the area, reliant on horse-power, and the location of the blacksmith was through stone-carved inverted horseshoe arch still present (dated 1852) on the south-east of the Main Street.

One of the other major changes and paradoxes is the fact that by this date, Blessington was served by a steam tramway to Dublin, which began operating from the town to Terenure in 1888. The tramway depot is noted on the map, albeit short-lived. Sadly, the tram ceased on 31 Dec 1932, and the Tramway Depot to the west of the Main Street is completely gone. The tram was replaced by a bus service.



The only evidence of this tramway remaining in the town is a triangular stone on Main Street containing the letters D&B and B&P, denoting the boundary between the Dublin and Blessington steam tramway with the Pollaphuca extension (which was closed in 1928). This stone is an important local feature, and is evidence of the local tourist traffic that undoubtedly visited here in the early twentieth century and is a good example of the late-Victorian expansion of mass transit and public transport in Ireland.

There are few other changes evident from the ordnance survey maps. The former “dispensary and hospital” now seems to be called “Beech Grove”, which probably coincides with its conversion to residential use. Finally, the corn mill is now noted as “disused”, again charting the changing nature of local economic activity.



Figure 8 Detailed section of 1908 Ordnance Survey Map of Blessington (Scale of 1: 2,500)



3.0 Written Description of Blessington Architectural Conservation Area

3.1 Buildings of Special Importance

Within the town of Blessington there are several buildings of local and regional significance that are located within, and form part of the Architectural Conservation Area. These buildings are listed below with a brief description as being of importance due to their architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, technical or social value. All of these buildings are included in the National Inventory of the Architectural Heritage for Blessington.

Ulster Bank (Downshire Lodge), Main Street, Market Square

A detached, five-bay, two-storey former house, dating to circa 1830. The building was converted to a hotel in the later nineteenth century and became a bank on 1918. The building is finished in roughcast render and has an arcaded feature of shallow niches within which the windows are located on the ground floor. The central doorcase is a round-arched surround with a glazed fanlight and sidelights with a timber panelled door. Six-over-six pane timber sash windows with stone sills. Hipped slate roof with a pair of chimneys.



Figure 9 Former Downshire Lodge (Ulster Bank), Main Street

House, Market Square, Main Street

Detached, three-bay, two-storey house, built c.1830. Finished in roughcast render with recently installed uPVC windows and door (original were timber sliding sashes and panelled door). Stone sills and stone barge boards with a pitched, man-made slate roof with large, roughcast-rendered chimneys with terracotta pots to each gable. Longer ground-floor windows give elegant proportions.



Figure 10 House on Market Square, Main Street



Credit Union House (former Marker House), Market Square

Detached, three-bay, two-storey, former market house, built c.1820, now in use as a credit union. The building is constructed in ashlar granite with a strong course articulating the change from first to second storey. To the centre of the front elevation (to the south-east) is an advanced, pedimented, gable-fronted bay with the Downshire coat of arms in relief within the pediment.

Three round-headed niches on the ground floor on each elevation, some of which have entrance doorways. Front elevation has two timber and glazed doors with glazed fanlights above. Timber, six-over-six pane timber sash windows with stone sills. Evidence of original timber shutters inside.



Figure 11 Former Market House (Credit Union House), Main Street

West Wicklow House, Main Street

End-of terrace, six-bay, former pair of 3-bay houses, now joined together, built c.1830. The houses were converted to a bar in the later nineteenth century and later converted to a public house. The replacement front door is set within a wide, flat-headed opening. Rouchcast-rendered façade on smooth-rendered plinth. Painted stone sills with modern windows with vertical opens and timber shutters affixed to the exterior. Man-made slate roof with stone barge boards and rendered chimneys to gables of original properties. Roller canopies affixed to the exterior.



Figure 12 West Wicklow House, Main Street



St. Mary's Church of Ireland, Main Street

Detached, six-bay, single-storey Church of Ireland Church, dating to c. 1860, but extended in later years. The church is constructed of rubble granite with a three-stage bell and clock-tower being roughcast-rendered with a parapet wall surmounted by pinnacles at the 4 corners.

Gable-fronted end bays to the transepts with pairs of lancet windows and small rose-type windows above. Paired lancet windows are located along the aisle.



**Figure 13 St Mary's Church of Ireland,
Main Street**

Harvest Fare/ Hair Creations, Main Street

Terraced, three-bay, two-storey former house, built c.1840, now in use as a pair of shops. Roughcast-render, with smooth-rendered plinth. Two-over-two pane timber windows with two-over-two pane appearance with painted stone sills and central timber door, dating to c.2000. Pair of shopfronts with painted timber fascia, timber and glazed door and plate-glass shop window, dating to c.2000. Man-made slate roof with chimneys to gables.



**Figure 14 Harvest Fare & Hair Creations,
Main Street**



T. Dempsey, Main Street

Detached, three-bay, three-storey former house, built c.1790, now in use as a shop with apartment above. Finished in smooth render with a sill course to the first floor windows. Timber, panelled central door with fanlight over with moulded surround. This door is flanked by 2 large plate-glass windows. Six-over six-pane timber sliding sash windows to the first floor and three-over-three pane sashes to the attic storey. Pitched slate roof with rendered chimneys to gables.



Figure 15 T. Dempsey, Main Street

Blessington Garda Station, Main Street

End-of-terrace, five-bay, two-storey former house, built c.1830. The building is finished in smooth render with timber and glazed central door (c.1990). Projecting, flat-roofed stone portico over door supported on Tuscan order columns. Timber casement windows with stone sills. Pitched slate roof with rendered chimneys to gables and stone barge boards.



Figure 16 Blessington Garda Station, Main Street

Ace Flooring, Main Street

Terraced, five-bay, two-storey former house, built c. 1790, now in use as a house and shop. Smooth-rendered ground floor and roughcast-rendered first floor. Timber panelled door with glazed radial fanlight set within fine dressed-stone doorcase with keystone. Two-over-two timber sliding sash windows with painted stone sills. Modern shop frontage inserted into two bays of ground floor with large plate-glass window and timber paneled door and fascia, dating to c.1990. Pitched slate roof with rendered chimneys.



Figure 17 Ace Flooring, Main Street



Downshire Arms, Main Street

End-of-terrace, seven-bay, two-storey over basement former house, built c.1820, latterly in use as a hotel and now in use as a gallery. Finished in roughcast render. Off-centre front door accessed up stone staircase with projecting stone portico. Six-over-six time sliding sash windows throughout with stone sills and evidence of internal shutters. Slate roof with rendered chimney to south gable. Single-storey extension to north gable



Figure 18 Downshire Arms, Main Street

House, Main Street

End-of-terrace, four-bay, two-storey former house, built c.1830. Roughcast rendered with round-headed doorcase with dressed stone surround with protruding keystone and segmental-headed fanlight. Timber panelled door with blind window above. End two bays on ground floor have been modified into canted bay window, c.1940. Ground and upper floor windows with single-pane timber sliding sash and stone sills. Slate roof with rendered chimneys. Small front garden and railing to street.



Figure 19 House (adjacent to Downshire Arms), Main Street

House, Main Street

Detached, three-bay, two-storey house, built c.1910. To the ground floor is an almost full-width hipped roof projection which provides a sheltered porch and covers two canted bay windows. Rendered walls. Timber sliding sash windows to upper floor with narrow central comes. And stone sills Evidence of timber shutters inside. Timber central door with glazed sidelights. Hipped man-made slate roof with pair of rendered chimneys.



Figure 20 House, Main Street (north end)



Church of Our Lady, Roman Catholic Church, Main Street

Detached, multiple-bay, single-storey, Roman Catholic church, built in 1981. The building is L-shaped in plan with two large mono-pitch roofs set at right angles to each other. The door is set within a flat-headed opening within a small, lean-to porch. Roughcast rendered exterior with small windows. One pitch of roof comprises entire fixed glazed area. Bell mounted on external gable.



Figure 21 Church of Our Lady, Main Street

Blessington National School, Main Street

Detached, multiple-bay, single-storey school, build c.1936. To the north and south are slightly lower, flat-roofed entrance wings – traditionally to separate the genders. The walls are finished in roughcast render with a smooth-rendered plinth. Timber doors in flat-headed surrounds. Long windows with painted sills with multiple panes. Tall, narrow brick chimneys to front pitch of hipped slate roof.



Figure 23 The Old School House, Blessington

The Old School House, Blessington

Semi-detached, three-bay, two-storey former school, built c.1830, now in use as a restaurant. Roughcast rendered with smooth-rendered block-and-start quoins. Advanced, gable-fronted,



Figure 22 Blessington National School, Main Street

ted central porch with replacement timber door to side. Flat-headed window frames to ground floor and pointed-arched to first floor, all with stone sills. Separate entrance doorway to side gable, inserted c.1995. Man-made slate roof with rendered chimneys to gables.



3.2 Other Features of Special Importance

This section includes features and landmarks that are not buildings that are of local and regional significance that are located within, and form part of the Architectural Conservation Area. These features/ structures are listed below with a brief description as being of importance due to their architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, technical or social value. Most of these structures/ features are included in the National Inventory of the Architectural Heritage for Blessington.

Boyle Monument, Market Square

Freestanding carved stone monument, built 1865. The monument is inscribed “the water supplied at the cost of a kind and generous Landlord for the benefit of his Attached and Loyal Tenants”.

The monument comprises a large square ashlar block of granite with recessed, round-headed niches to all four elevations surmounted by a decorative pinnacle. There are moulded string courses above the base and the pinnacle rests on a block with a stone volute at each corner. There is a stone trough located to the south-east elevation of the monument with a lion head holding the water spout in his mouth above.



Figure 24 Boyle Monument, Market Square, Main Street

Stone Archway to Former Blacksmith, Main Street

This archway is a very fine example of the earliest type of advertising, with the decoration of the inverted horseshoe in dressed granite illustrating the services that were carried out within. Carved with date “1852” in the keystone, the archway is situated within a terrace of buildings and provide access to a laneway.



Figure 25 Stone Archway to Former Blacksmith, Main Street

KSA

Draft Blessington ACA Appraisal, Sept. 2006



Seating Area at Town Square, Main Street

This area, although not part of the historical part of the town square, is nonetheless an attractive amenity feature that is constructed of long-lasting materials that are sympathetic to the older buildings in the area.

The seating area is located adjacent to the local bus stops, at a busy part of the Main Street, and it also provides an opportunity for sheltered seating.

The low-level of the seating and table frames views through to the new civic plaza and the countryside beyond.



Figure 26 Seating Area at Market Square, Main Street

Tree at Town Square, Main Street

The considerable local importance of this lime tree, which is a landmark on the Main Street due to its height and its prominent location at the entrance to the Town Square, is highlighted by the presence of 4 stone balls at the base of the tree.

A significant local feature, this tree is reputed to be well over 100 years old and appears to pre-date many of the modern interventions taking place around it.

This tree not only provides an attractive and valuable aspect of vegetation to the Main Street but is also a landmark and a focal point for orientation in the town. The main bus stops and the Town Square are located nearby, highlighting its significance.

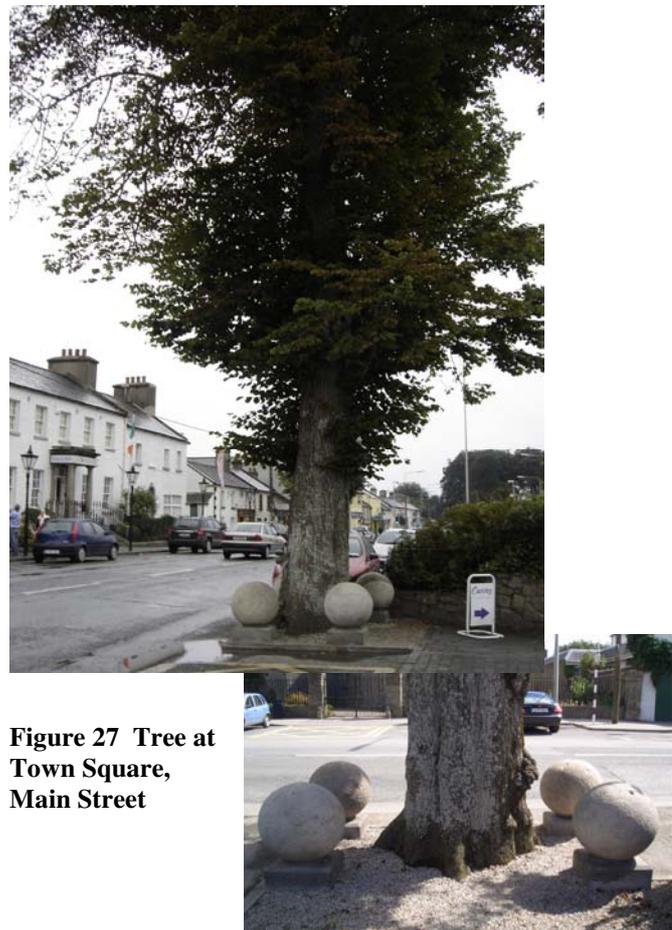


Figure 27 Tree at Town Square, Main Street



3.3 Streetscape

The streetscape of the Blessington ACA is comprised predominantly of terraces of early nineteenth-century buildings with occasional landmarks and prominent civic, spiritual or commercial buildings, whose presence on the street is highlighted by their location within their own site or protruding from the building line. The Market Square and the Downshire Arms form the central pivot and focal point on the Main Street with the Market Square and Civic Plaza being the town's gathering and commercial centre – both historically and in modern times.

The terraces along Main Street are made attractive by the following features:

- (i) Undulating roofline;
- (ii) Strong building line;
- (iii) Gable-ended properties
- (iv) Regular chimneys, breaking up the expanses of slate roof;
- (v) Natural materials – slate, stone and timber;
- (vi) Details such as multi-paned windows, most particularly original sliding sash windows, of which few remain;
- (vii) Original timber doors - particularly those with original glazed fanlights, of which few remain;
- (viii) Carriage arches, particularly where these are retained in their original state/usage;
- (ix) Individual buildings of note;
- (x) Street furniture, some of which is original and some modern but sympathetic.



Figure 28 Various Views of the Streetscape in Blessington ACA



3.3.1 Areas for Improvement in the Streetscape

There is a certain level of visual clutter generated by the electricity wires running along and across Main Street. Under-grounding or other proposals to remove these cables from visual prominence should be considered positively.

There is also certain visual and aesthetic confusion generated by the presence of many types of litter bins, lamp standards and other utilitarian types of street furniture. While an entirely homogenous appearance may not be desirable throughout the town, it would be preferable to streamline the number of different types of styles chosen for such objects, as they have a potential to have a negative impact on the streetscape and on the ACA.

Development initiatives such as shopfront improvement schemes may also benefit the Main Street, in terms of creating a civic pride and awareness of undertaking regular maintenance and upkeep on historic features of buildings. While modern shopfronts are considered appropriate for historic areas, the most important issue will be the quality of design and materials and an illustration of how the design is shown to respect the context – for example, using the same proportions for openings as adjoining properties, or minimizing artificial light on the elevation.

A significant problem on the town's Main Street is the high level of on-street parking. Given the new areas of parking within the civic plaza, the Council should consider initiatives to remove parking from the old Town Square, and rejuvenate this area for pedestrian and local use, such as possibly market stalls on certain days.

Furthermore, the requirement for such extensive parking along the Main Street should be reviewed and possibly pay and display parking introduced or a reduction in parking spaces that would not only have a positive visual impact but would also have a beneficial impact on quality of life of residents and reduce traffic problems caused by people parking and pulling out of spaces.



Figure 29 An example of the visual clutter generated by various types of lamp standards. Within a short space on the Main Street, there are 4 types of public lighting, visible in this photo above



Figure 30 Two types of litter bins along the Main Street - different colours and materials



3.4 Plot, Urban Grain and Orientation

Due to the origins of the town as a planned estate village, the Main Street was developed within a short period of time, and is relatively homogenous. One of the features that highlights this is the regular plot pattern, with long, rectangular plots running back from the Main Street at right angles on both sides. The carriage arches in the buildings are the means to address issues of access to the backland (rear of plot) areas. In the case of wider plots, these are generally the width of two combined plot, which gives a regular rhythm to the streetscape.

The urban grain is not dense, as would be the case in a medieval settlement, but has a typically regular building pattern, which again gives the street a symmetrical appearance across from east to west. Intensification of use in the backland areas, within the normal considerations of the Development Plan and subject to zoning and planning permission, may be permitted. However, the new development should create new “streets” or lanes to the rear of the existing properties and should respect the existing grain, scale, materials and density along the Main Street.

The orientation of almost all buildings on the Main Street is towards the street. The few exceptions to this are the churches and the more modern buildings, which use an offset angle of orientation to the street to give them more prominence and allow for a setback from the buildings line.

In terms of new development, allowing setbacks and angled orientation to the street should only be allowed where the building’s civic importance justifies this type of treatment and where the design supports the type of prominence that such a siting ensures.



Figure 31 Various Views of the Streetscape in Blessington ACA



3.5 Town Square

The town square is a key feature of note with the Blessington ACA, as it both the physical centre of the ACA and the focal point within the centre of the Main Street. The square was the heart of the former planned estate village (just north of the Ulster Bank), and its architectural and former civic prominence are allied. The square, as well as being the location of several Protected Structures (including those “proposed”), is a centerpiece of the town.

The square has recently changed considerably with the addition of the civic plaza to the rear in the context of the Cooke Hill development. While this newer civic plaza has not been included in the ACA, it should be noted that the interface between these two areas is of great importance, both for the ACA and for the statement that this area makes about the town and its legibility, permeability and attractiveness.

The dominance that the Ulster Bank building, Tourist Office and Credit Union enjoyed has been altered and their stature within the Square appears to have been diminished, due to the sheer change in scale from this older square to the new civic plaza.

The treatment of the old Town Square needs to be addressed separately in a sympathetic means, through an urban improvement scheme or a village design statement.



Figure 32 An area of not particularly successful interface between the old Market Square (and former Market House) and the new civic plaza, Main Street



3.5.1 Areas for Improvement in the Town Square

There is a pair of telephone boxes very inappropriately located in the centre of the Town Square, which are ugly, damaged and out of place. They obstruct views towards the square and its fine buildings. Relocating these phone boxes or replacing them with a more stylish or more discrete alternative would be of benefit.

Other areas for improvement have been noted above, and relate to visual amenity and the use of many types of paving materials, lighting and street furniture which would be more streamlined.

The removal of the toilet block would considerably open the views from the Main Street towards the new Civic Plaza and would also have the effect of opening up the market square.



Figure 33 Two areas for improvement in the Town Square: the interface between old and new



Figure 34 Pair of phone boxes inappropriately located in the Town Square

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3.6 Landmarks and Features

Carriage Arches on Main Street

The carriage arches on Main Street are one of the streets more interesting architectural features. A common practical inclusion in buildings that are predominantly long terraces, to provide rear access, these arches are increasingly converted to other uses or removed in modern times, yet their presence creates a rhythm along the street that adds character while the arches are clearly an integral part of the building within this they are situated.

Normally segmental-headed or flat-headed these are normally erected in roughly-dressed stone that would have been rendered. Some have dressed stone heads or keystones. This motif has been used in more modern erections as a means of enclosing an access or laneway (below).



Figure 35 Examples of Carriage Arches on Main Street

Original Street Furniture

Increasingly, with urban improvement schemes, road widening programmes and the replacement of footpaths, original street furniture and manufactured items such as coal hole covers and old post boxes are removed and destroyed. There are some older pieces of street furniture in Blessington that add to the character of the ACA, and that have artistic and aesthetic merit in their own right. These would include water main covers, lighting, cobbles and setts and any other features within the ACA.



Figure 36 Attractive timber sash windows of the type to be retained and encouraged in the Blessington ACA



Other Original Details

There is a wealth of original details in the town, all of which contribute to the character and importance of the ACA. These original features would include doorways, particularly those with stone doorcases, fanlights and other architectural detailing.

The retention of original windows also add considerably to the streetscape, with the multi-paned timber sash windows being the traditional and appropriate type of fenestration for the Blessington ACA. This type of window appears to be becoming increasingly rare in the town, and the remaining examples should be preserved.



Figure 37 Two examples of utilitarian elements that are also decorative - ends to reinforcing ties on building facades



Figure 38 Two examples of fine doorcases in the Blessington ACA



3.7 Street Trees

Without a doubt, a major contribution to the attractive appearance and the architectural and historical character of Blessington's Main Street is made by the presence of the street trees. They not only provide a noise and pollution barrier to the properties from the passing traffic but they also filter views along the linear Main Street that otherwise would appear unrelieved due to the presence of long terraces. The trees provide dappled shade on sunny days and they also attempt to mitigate the impact of the extensive lengths of on-street parking along the Main Street, which is visually intrusive.



Figure 39 An example of the positive contribution made to the ACA by street trees, Main Street

3.8 Boundary Treatments

There are some very attractive boundary treatments within the ACA, including that along the street in front of the school adjacent to the Roman Catholic Church. This features three-pronged finials to the railings and recessed three-lobed carving to the fine stone columns.

Given that most of the buildings' front elevations form the Main Street, there are few other boundary treatments, but the railings in front of the Ulster Bank would be another example, as these enclosed a small area to the front of the building.

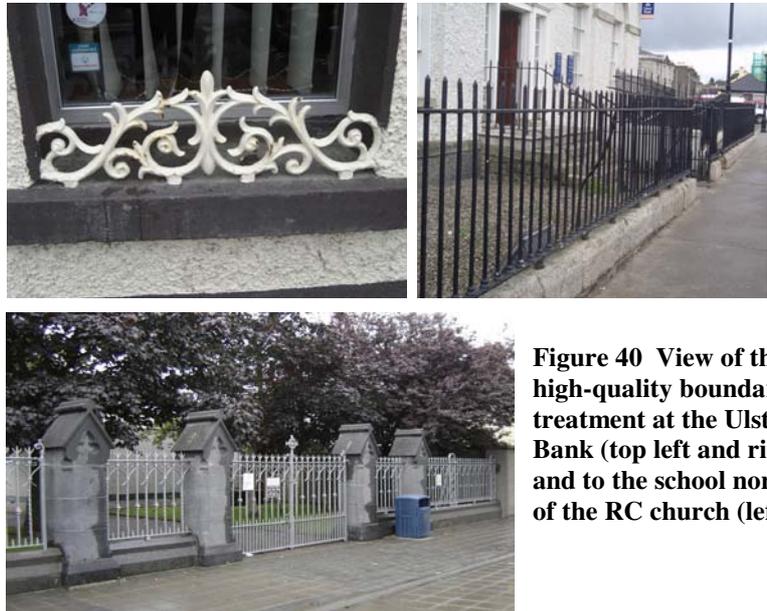


Figure 40 View of the high-quality boundary treatment at the Ulster Bank (top left and right) and to the school north of the RC church (left)



4.0 Visual Analysis Overview

4.1 Context

Blessington is located within County Wicklow's scenic landscape and is surrounded by wooded hills and the Poulaphouca Reservoir. The Wicklow County Development Plan categorises the County by landscape type. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Special Amenity Zones, Rural Area Zones and Access Corridor Zones are identified. Blessington is located in a Corridor Area immediately adjoining an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

A number of views and prospects in and around Blessington are identified as providing special amenity value. These include the Lake Drive around the Poulaphouca Reservoir.

Wicklow has a rich and diverse natural heritage. Of importance are designated wildlife habitats and species (e.g. NHA's, SAC's), areas of geological interest, and non-designated habitats for wildlife such as coastlines, trees, hedgerows, stone walls, rivers and lakes. The Wicklow County Development Plan 2004 contains policies for the protection of these features. Proposed NHA's, SAC's, SPA's, Nature Reserves, Geological Areas of Scientific Interest, trees subject to Tree Preservation Orders and trees worthy of preservation are listed in this plan.

In this regard, there is one SPA/pNHA in Blessington and its surrounds at the Poulaphouca Reservoir. The town is also in close proximity to the



Figure 41 Figure 1: Views of landscape surrounding Blessington and the Poulaphouca Reservoir

pSAC/pNHA of the Wicklow Mountains National Park. There is one group of trees considered for preservation in the area - Broadleaf trees at Burgage Mor.



4.2 Visual Amenity

Policy HL6 of the Wicklow County Development Plan 2004 states that

“it is the policy of the Council to preserve views and prospects as identified in schedule 10.6/10.7 to protect the natural beauty of the county”.

A number of such views are listed for Blessington and its surrounding areas. Blessington town centre is located on a high point in context with the overall town. The location of the town centre is such that only certain framed views of the surrounding landscape are obtainable from within the town centre. At no point within the proposed ACA area are views of the Poulaphouca Reservoir possible.

Opportunities to enhance/create views are located at the centre of the town centre looking outwards to the surrounding scenic landscape from the new town centre development and from the junction of the Kilbride Road. Views within the town are closed views within the town centre area of the built form and certain landscape features. Views of landmark buildings and framed views outwards of the surrounding landscape need to be protected in order to maintain and improve the visual amenity present in Blessington.



Figure 42 Views from the town centre outwards to the surrounding landscape

4.2.1 Framed Views

Within the town centre there are limited views presented of the surrounding landscape. This is mainly due to the built form of the town centre with terraced two-storey building blocks obstructing views outwards. Views that do occur are brief glimpses of the surrounding hills between the different building blocks. These views add a certain sense of character to the town and should be improved upon or maintained where possible. Views outwards are of wooded hills which surround the town of Blessington.



4.2.2 Closed Views

Figure 45 shows views to the north and south along the Main Street from the centre of the town. These photos give a good indication of the closed nature of the views from within the proposed ACA area. Both views north and south are blocked by mature trees and the curving nature of the existing roadway. The terraced nature of the built form closes the views up and down the street even further. From both viewpoints no view is presented of the surrounding landscape or of the Poulapoucha Reservoir.



Figure 43 View from Kilbride Road junction (above) and view from the new town centre (below)

4.2.3 Areas where view could be created and enhanced

Figure 46 shows the existing view from the junction of the Main Street with the Kilbride Road (above). Removal of selected trees behind the old cottages would open up a greater view of the surrounding landscape. The wooded hills surrounding the town would come into view and form an impressive backdrop. Removal of Eircom/ESB pole and wires would also be necessary in creating this view.



Figure 44 View north on Main Street (left) and view south on Main Street (right)



Figure 44 also highlights the interface of the new town centre and civic plaza with existing development. New development that will obscure existing views towards the surrounding hills should be prevented. There are currently panoramic views of the landscape from this viewpoint. In order to enhance these, views attention would need to be paid to building heights of new developments surrounding the town to ensure they do not impinge upon these panoramic views.

4.2.4 Areas where views should be protected

The images above illustrate views that need to be protected from further development. The Protestant Church is a landmark building situated at the centre of the town that forms an impressive backdrop from the new town centre development. New housing estates surrounding the town centre need to be strategically located so as not to spoil any views from the town centre of the surrounding landscape.

4.3 Conclusion

The challenge when it comes to planning for the future management of the landscape is to ensure developments occur in a manner that is sustainable, that is, that heritage and scenic qualities are protected in tandem with the need to encourage sustainable settlement and economic development.



Figure 45 View types to be Protected

The consideration of the visual amenity should form part of any consideration for development proposals within this ACA. The advantages for the proposed ACA within the town are that most new development occurring cannot be viewed from the town centre due to the existing built form and mature trees present. Opportunities exist to create and enhance certain framed views of the surrounding scenic landscape.



5.0 Public Spaces

This section sets out some of the key public spaces within the Blessington ACA, which are indicated on the Map entitled “Visual Amenity and Public Spaces”.

5.1 Green Spaces

Pocket Park at St. Joseph’s Road, Main Street

The space consists of a grassed area, interspersed with mature and recently planted horse chestnut, lime and beech trees. An uncompleted footpath runs through the space connecting the public pathway with the residential area. This area would be classified as a passive public space.

It is well maintained with grass mowed and no litter present. Although not located within the ACA, this space contributes significantly to the character and the amenity quality within the ACA, and is located on its western fringe.

Improvements could be made by finishing the uncompleted path and by adding some park benches and street lighting along footpath.

Pocket Park at Main Street/ Naas Road

Although located on the southern fringe of the Blessington ACA, this park consists of mature Beech and Lime trees, which act as an attractive screen/boundary between the existing town centre and new development occurring at this end of the town. The



Figure 46 View of Public Open Space in front of St. Joseph's Road (Main Street)



Figure 47 Pocket Park at Main Street/ Naas Road



trees provide an attractive foil or backdrop against which the ACA can be seen.

A public path runs through the space connecting the Nass Road with the town centre. Some street furniture is present, consisting of park benches and public lighting. This would be classified as a passive space - serving as a connection between the town centre and the new housing estates located in the Nass Road area.

Improvements could be made by the addition of more traditional style street lights, more park benches and better overall maintenance.



Figure 48 View of Public/ Private Open Space located at the Roman Catholic Church and School, Main Street

Draft Blessington ACA Appraisal, Sept. 2008

Space at Roman Catholic Church & Primary School, Dublin Road

This space consists of grassed areas around the primary school interspersed with tree planting, mainly at the boundary of the space. This is classified as an active space.

The area around the Catholic Church consists of a mix of hard and soft landscaping with attractive shrub planters interspersed with paving, which would be categorised as a passive space.

This open space also contributes significantly to the Blessington ACA in creating an “open” area on both sides of the Main Street at this northern end, balancing the open space across the road at St. Joseph’s Road.

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5.2 Urban Spaces

Market Square, Main Street

This public open space is situated in Market Square at the centre of town, across the road from the Protestant Church. The space consists mainly of hard landscaping with some landscape features interspersed around a public monument. The monument is currently under repair.

This space is characterised by hard landscaping, and is more urban in character. Features include traditional style lamp posts, street trees, attractive tree grates and large planters. An attractive seating area is located at the centre of this space (see view above). Car parking is permitted, but no clear parking spaces are marked out. This area would be classified as an active public space.

This space is pivotal and of significant importance to the Blessington ACA. Not only is the Town Square physically located in the centre of the ACA, it is also the pivot or hub around which the Main Street ACA is situated, and is a significant point of reference. This square had undergone some improvements some years ago, and would now benefit greatly from some attention that would integrate the new, modern civic plaza better with this space that represents the historic commercial and civic importance of this town, and this square in particular.



Figure 49 View of Town Square from Main Street

Improvements to space could be made by restricting/prohibiting parking, using all similar types of street furniture and improving the paving details in the area. There is no order to the location of landscape features within the space.



Civic Plaza, Main Street

This new public open space has been developed as part of new town centre development situated adjacent to the Market Square. This space connects new (and future) development with the Market Square and Main Street.

This space consists of a contemporary-type design with a mix of soft and hard landscaping. Modern benches, street lamps, tree grates and guards etc are in use. Attractive paving is used. Mature Lime tree in market square acts as focal point to this new space. This space would be classified as both an active and passive space.

Although significant design input has gone into the development of this square, there is maybe too much emphasis placed on the landscape features. This space seems to be cluttered, and suffers from the use of many different colours and types of material in the paving alone.

Further improvements could see the integration of this space better with the Town Square, including the selection of a more muted palette of street furniture and materials, which would allow the architecture to be placed against a user-friendly backdrop and congregation space, rather than the historical architecture vying for visual prominence with the newer surface treatment.



Figure 50 Civic Plaza to the rear of the Town Square, off Main Street



Figure 51 An example of the various types of paving, materials and colours in the new civic plaza, Main Street



6.0 Justification for the Development of an ACA

Statement of Significance

Blessington is a town with late-Medieval origins which was substantially constructed during the mid-nineteenth century. Due to the historical origins of the town as an estate-type town, much of the Main Street was developed as an architecturally coherent unit. This gives it a harmony and character that is unlike many other Irish towns, whose development would be more organic and therefore lack the type of homogeneity that makes Blessington both interesting and attractive.

The large house and associated Demesne that generated the impetus for the development of this town, as well as its original focal point, was demolished over two centuries ago. However, the town itself has clearly become a focal point for the surrounding countryside as its spiritual, civic, commercial, social and cultural focal point. This is evident in the surviving nineteenth century fabric, including the Church of Ireland church, the Ulster Bank building, the Market House, the Downshire Arms (former hotel) and the features in the town's square including the stone obelisk structure.

The rationale for the development of this Architectural Conservation Area has been based on the following considerations:

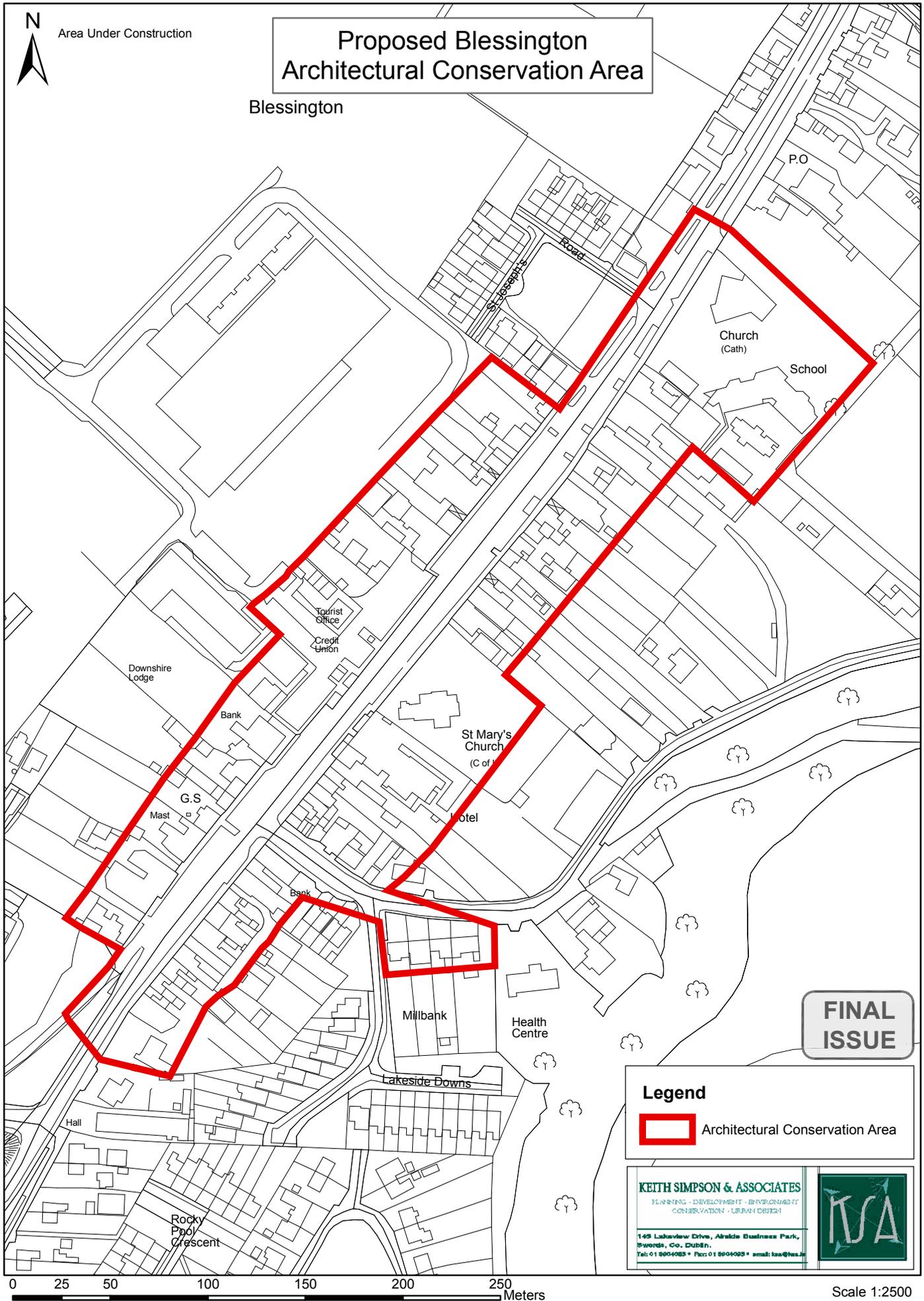
1. **Historical Importance:** The majority of buildings located within the ACA are dating to the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and as such have historical merit.
2. **Architectural Importance:** Apart from the single attractive and imposing buildings on the Main Street (which have been listed above), there are very attractive terraces of buildings that form a strong streetscape with many original features, such as carriage arches, stone doorcases, timber sash windows, slate roofs and other details.
3. **Setting:** The setting of this ACA is very significant, given the town's location and its visual prominence from the surrounding countryside, particularly the hills. Externally, the preservation of the boundaries of the ACA will be important, including the interface and the integration of new development with existing buildings. Internally, the ACA is largely confined to internal, enclosed views, which are nonetheless attractive and which have the potential to be greatly damaged by inappropriate demolition along the Main Street, unsympathetic backland development and the removal of the street trees which significantly enhances the character of the ACA.
4. **Features and Landmarks:** Undoubtedly, the street trees are a significant feature along the northern part of the Main Street, and this theme should be continued along the rest of the street, should the opportunity arise. These trees should be preserved and replaced, if necessary, with new trees of mature status that are of a similar species and height/ cover. Other features are the older granite setts, cobbles and the stone obelisk/ fountain at the town square. The stone archway dated 1852 on the



south-eastern part of main Street should be retained, as this is an attractive local feature and is a remainder of the historical activities in the town.

5. **Presence of Archaeological Remains:** The town of Blessington has several Recorded Monuments, which indicates that there has been settlement at this location for several millennia. This long-established presence of settlement at this location adds to the interest of the town.

6. **Categories of Special Interest:**
The *Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities* recommend that the character of an ACA be identified and assigned categories of special interest. In the case of Blessington, this ACA has architectural, historical and archaeological interest.



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7.0 Proposed ACA Policies for the Local Area Plan

Given the particular nature of an ACA, the Department of the Environment Guidelines refer to the fact that the County Development Plan and any other relevant plans should have reference in their policies to supporting and protecting any designation Architectural Conservation Areas.

We would propose that the following policy objectives be incorporated in the Blessington Local Area Plan in regard to this proposed ACA in Blessington:

ACA 1	The Council shall ensure that development in the Blessington Architectural Conservation Area will be controlled in order to protect, safeguard and enhance their special character and environmental quality.
ACA 2	Within Architectural Conservation Areas, all those buildings, spaces, archaeological sites, trees, views and other aspects of the environment which form an essential part of their character, will be protected.
ACA 3	<p>It is Council policy to protect and enhance the character and appearance of the urban public domain within Architectural Conservation Areas.</p> <p>The Council recognises that the treatment of the old Town Square needs to be addressed separately in a sympathetic means, through an urban improvement scheme or a village design statement. The Council will undertake to prepare or commission the preparation of the most appropriate of these mechanisms during the life of this Local Area Plan. In addition, the Council will seek to work in partnership with local community and business groups to implement proposed environmental or other improvements within this ACA.</p>
ACA 4	It is a policy of the Council that planning permission will be required for extensions to residential dwellings within Architectural Conservation Areas.
ACA 5	The design of any development in Architectural Conservation Areas, including any changes of use of an existing building, should preserve and/or enhance the character and appearance of the Architectural Conservation Area as a whole.
ACA 6	The Council will actively support and promote schemes for the conservation and enhancement of the character and appearance of this Architectural Conservation Area.
ACA 7	It will be Council policy to retain, restore and repair historic items of street furniture and paving within this Architectural Conservation Area.
ACA 8	It will be Council policy to seek the placing underground of all electricity, telephone and television cables within this Architectural Conservation Area.



ACA 9	<p>There is great potential for shopfronts to contribute positively to the character of the ACA proposals for modifications or insertion of new shopfronts should consider using materials and design aspects appropriate to this ACA.</p> <p>While traditional-style shopfronts are acceptable, the Council will favourably consider high-quality design proposals for shopfronts that are more modern in style, providing that they respect the established pattern, scale, materials and proportions of the buildings within the ACA. Modern design that makes a positive contribution to this ACA will be considered.</p>
ACA 10	<p>Views have been noted as being of significance within Blessington as part of the ACA designation. The consideration of the visual amenity should form part of any consideration for development proposals within this ACA.</p>
ACA 11	<p>No development shall be permitted that in any way negatively impacts on the Town Square, including any proposals that would dwarf the square's prominence, that would cause visual impacts or any development that would negatively impact on the current vibrancy and pivotal nature of the square in the town.</p>
ACA 12	<p>No further off-street parking will be permitted on Main Street and in the case of future developments requiring parking, its impact shall be quantified and minimised through planting, sensitive design, screening or other means, as appropriate.</p> <p>The Council will review the requirement for the areas of on-street parking in the town and will consider alternative mechanisms such as pay and display and limited, designated parking areas.</p>
ACA 13	<p>The designation of an Architectural Conservation Area does not prejudice against innovative and contemporary design, on the contrary in principle design of a contemporary and minimalist style will be encouraged within ACA's provided it does not detract from the character of the area.</p> <p>It is considered that new buildings should be of their own time in appearance and should not replicate the style and detailing of heritage buildings. The replication of historic architectural styles is considered to be counter productive to heritage conservation in principle as it blurs the distinction between what is historic and what is contemporary and can lead to the emergence of poorly considered and inauthentic buildings.</p>