

DESIGN STATEMENT

Proposed Abbey Gardens Public Park at Abbey Grounds, Wicklow Town

for: Wicklow County Council



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Executive summary

A Design Statement has been prepared on behalf of Wicklow County Council in support of the Part VIII application for the development of a public park at the Abbey Grounds, Wicklow Town.

The design has been developed in consultation with Wicklow County Council (WCC) by an integrated Design Team consisting of:

Architects: MosArt – Architecture, Landscape, Urbanism

Landscape Architecture: MosArt Design – Architecture, Landscape, Urbanism

Structural and Conservation Engineers: Trevor Wood

Ecological Assessment: Faith Wilson

Archaeological Assessment: Yvonne Whitty

Quantity Surveyor: Andrew Carlin

The existing grounds are in the ownership of St. Patrick's Parish. They comprise an area of 11,452 m² and are accessed from Abbey Street. It is proposed that an area of 1,212m², containing the Parochial House, be omitted, leaving the proposed area for the proposed public park of 10,281 m².

This proposal comprises:

- Converting the existing Coach House to a Café/Retail/Exhibition space and public toilets
- A raised amphitheatre
- Multi-modal and new pedestrian access
- Pathways to improve accessibility
- Vehicular access to Parochial House
- Public seating
- Enhanced biodiversity
- Protection of ruined remains
- Lighting scheme
- Associated site works

This Design Statement is to be read in conjunction with all other documents submitted as part of the application.



Aerial image of Abbey Grounds as existing



Location map identifying the abbey grounds within Wicklow Town

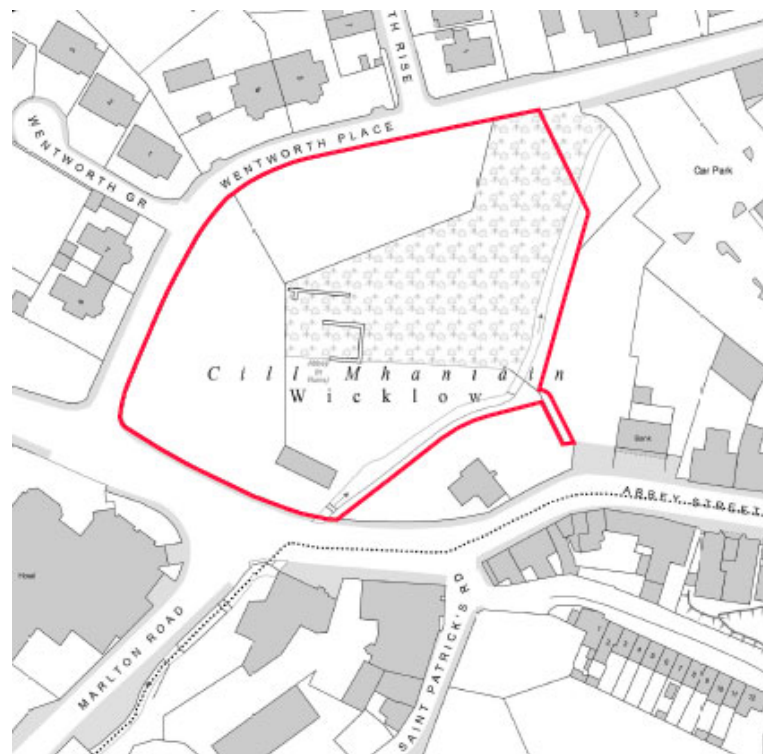
Site description

The Abbey Grounds lie to the west of the Main Street of Wicklow Town and are delineated by Abbey Street to the south and Wentworth Place to the west and north. These grounds comprise an existing parkland with the historical remains of a Franciscan Abbey established between 1250 and 1260 (recorded monument (WI 025 012002) protected through the provisions of the National Monuments Acts.). The Parochial House lies within the existing grounds to the east, sharing with the parkland a single access gateway from Abbey Street.

Besides the Parochial House, the only other building is the Coach House, lying to the south immediately inside the grounds and finished externally in red brick and stone. It is used for the storage of equipment used primarily for grounds maintenance. Due to its position on the grounds, the Coach House impedes the view of the Abbey remains from the public realm, ie. there is no clear view of this historical gem from Abbey Street. This screening from the public realm around the grounds is exacerbated by the height of the boundary walls relative the low level of the surrounding streets and footpaths as well as by mature trees. The Abbey is almost hidden except for occasional glimpses or unless one enters the grounds and walks around the Coach House when it, then, becomes in its full splendour a delightful surprise to the visitor.

The Ashtown Stream runs through the site, separating the Parochial House and its immediate surrounds from the parkland. A traditional stone wall wraps around the site along the southern, western and northern sides. The northeast stretch of this has been altered over recent years, involving a stone wall with railings atop, and continues as a stone wall along the eastern side that separates the grounds from the Abbey Car Park.

These grounds are endowed with mature vegetation. A mix of predominantly broadleaf trees, typically Sycamore, runs along the boundaries to the south, west and part of that to the north. Occasional isolated mature broadleaf and conifer trees as well as clumps of native shrubs, such as Elder, are located across the grounds. A grove of mature Yew lies to the east, laid out in an approximate skewed grid. Drifts of unmown vegetation connect many of the features mentioned above, increasing biodiversity and forming wildlife links around and across the grounds. There are faint hints from subtle undulations on the surface of the grounds of the more complete Abbey complex as well as of gardens laid out to the south in the nineteenth century.



Proposed site outlined in red in relation to the urban context



LEGEND

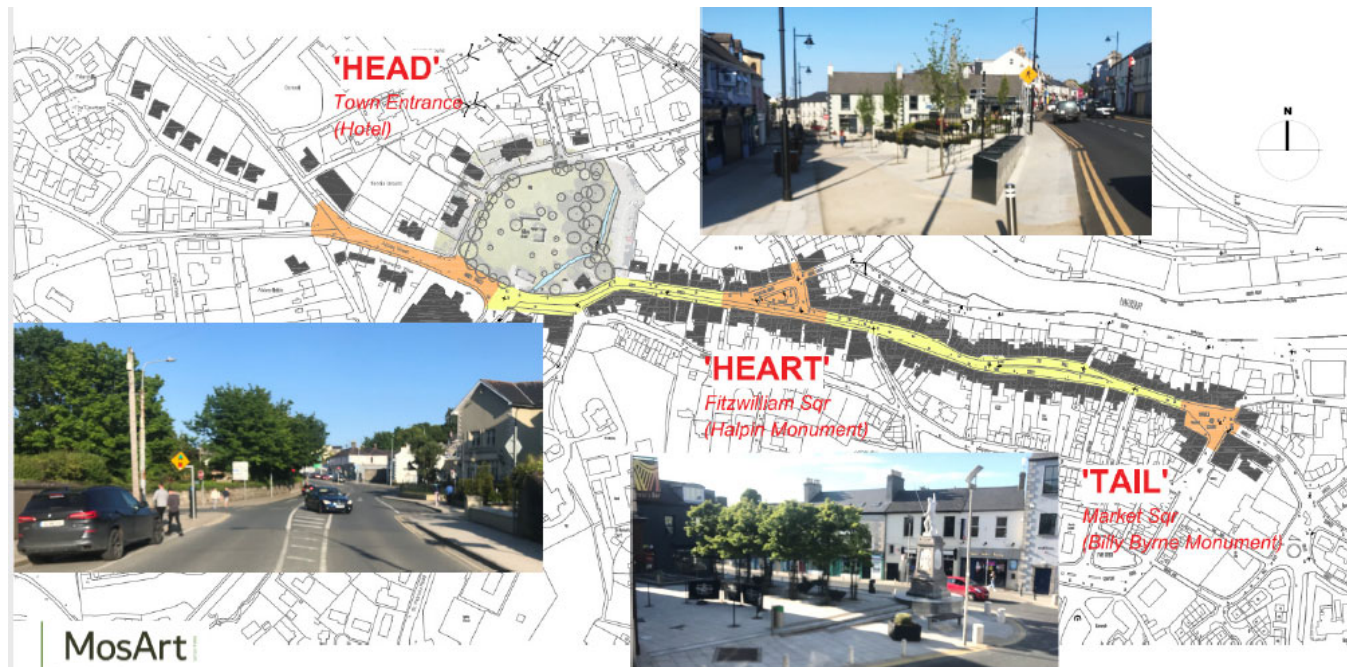
- ① IDENTIFICATION OF ORIGINAL WALLS: RIDGED STRIP OF UN-CUT GRASS TO INCREASE BIO-DIVERSITY
 - ② EXISTING TREES
 - ③ EXISTING SCRUB
 - ④ BENCH
 - ⑤ SEATING POD
 - ⑥ NEW RAILING EDGE PROTECTION
 - ⑦ NEW GRASSCRETE SERVICE ROAD
 - ⑧ REINFORCE EXISTING BOUNDARY WITH 1.1m METAL FENCING PLANTED WITH 1.5M HEDGE (RAILING TYPE 1)
 - ⑨ I LECTERN INFORMATION BOARD AT BOTH ENTRANCES
 - ⑩ BIN STORE & GENERAL STORE
 - ⑪ STORE AT PAROCHIAL HOUSE
 - ⑫ EXISTING TREES TO BE REMOVED
- Red Alder
 - Weeping willow
 - Aspen
 - Whitethorn
 - Blackthorn
 - Mountain Ash
 - Elder
 - Hazel
 - Holly
 - Spindle
 - Birch
 - Specimen Oak

Proposed site layout

The proposal

The proposed site for this park excludes the Parochial House and its immediate surrounds. This site comprises an area of 10,281 m². The key aspects of the proposed public park are outlined below.

First, however, it is important to consider the site in the context of Wicklow Town. The urban core comprises, essentially, a main street with a strong traditional character. If one were to identify the Market Square at the eastern end as the end or 'tail' of the town and Fitzwilliam Square as the 'heart', the obvious question would have to be asked as to where might be the 'head'? Indeed, where is the start of the town in the sense of an identifiable gateway? The public realm immediately to the south of the Abbey Grounds, where Abbey Street is joined by the Marlton Road, is also where the commercial core begins and, thus, might reasonably be seen as a gateway location. Design proposals at the Abbey Grounds offers an ideal opportunity to initiate the establishing such an identity.



Simple study of key parts of Wicklow Town, highlighting the absence of a Gateway to the west

It should also be mentioned that in developing designs, a decidedly light-handed approach underpins the proposed new features. Foremost in the minds of the designers was the importance of heritage on the site, both natural and cultural, that needs to be preserved and, where possible, enhanced. Thus, while the design brief sets out the intention of creating an amenity to be used by the public, opportunities for engendering appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage were identified and reflected in the design. To this end, close communication between MosArt as Architects and Landscape Architects and the Ecologist (Faith Wilson), Archaeologist (Yvonne Whitty) and Structural Conservation Engineer (Trevor Wood) proved invaluable for the exchange of concerns and the cross-fertilisation of the creative process that ensured a balancing of conservation, preservation and development potential. Pragmatically, the various design options were subjected to the rigours of a budget estimate by a Quantity Surveyor (Andrew Carlin).

Coach house

The existing Coach House is to be converted for uses as a Café/Retail/Exhibition space and public toilets. Besides these new functions, the opportunity was taken to turn a critical problem into a strategic advantage. The Coach House, rather than visually blocking the view into the grounds and especially of the Abbey remains, is to become a visual portal by being opened up and framing this view. It is proposed to incorporate into much of the long walls to the north and south with continuous glazing. Thus, the passer-by or visitor will see from Abbey Street into the Café/Retail/Exhibition area but also through the space to the park and the historical remains beyond.



Looking at the Coach House from Abbey Street, depicting view impediment

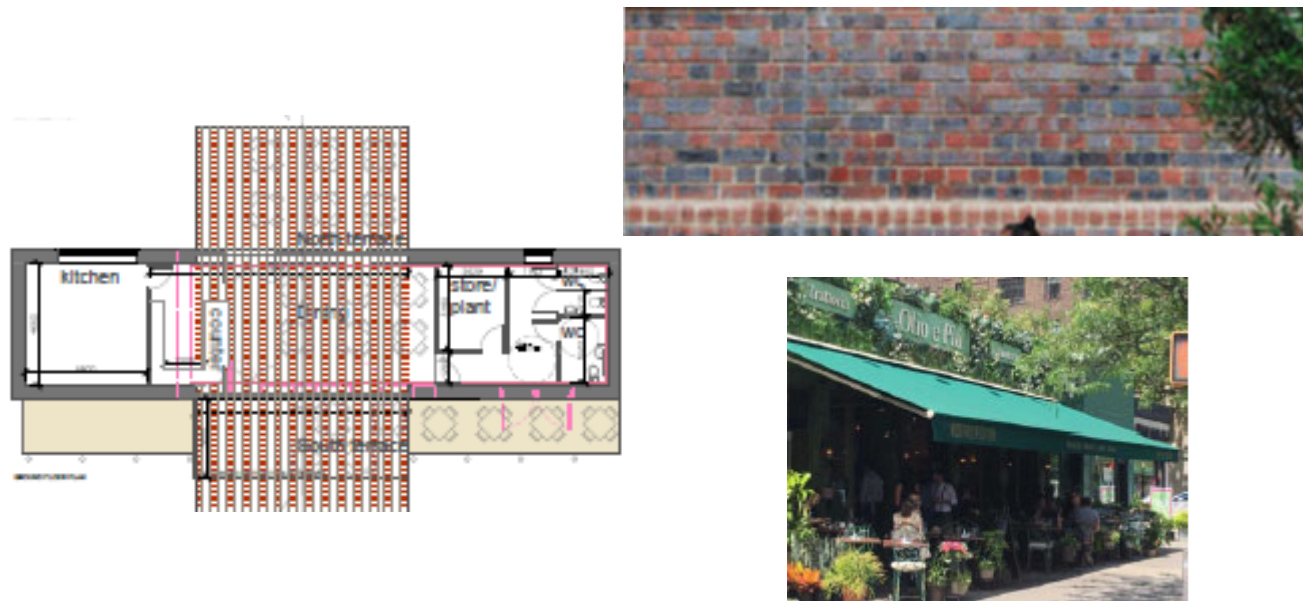


Proposed view from park entrance (Abbey Street), though proposed Café./Retail/Exhibition space to Abbey remains beyond

Moreover, the intended uses of the building will, in themselves, prove a draw to those on the street – the attraction of people-viewing-people, especially as the Café/Retail/Exhibition activities are intended to spill out in both directions onto new paved areas. This is articulated by the proposed broad strip of paving stretching from the gateway, through the building, northwards towards the abbey remains, as if a carpet that welcomes and leads. This paving will comprise a striped pattern composed of terracotta pavements matching the existing brick in the walls and a dark grey referring to the colour of the existing stonework. In order to accommodate the intended uses, it was necessary to extend the building westwards for the purpose of a Kitchen. This extension is identifiable in form and simplicity, yet its exterior is designed to reflect the existing Coach House in respect of the brick and colours.



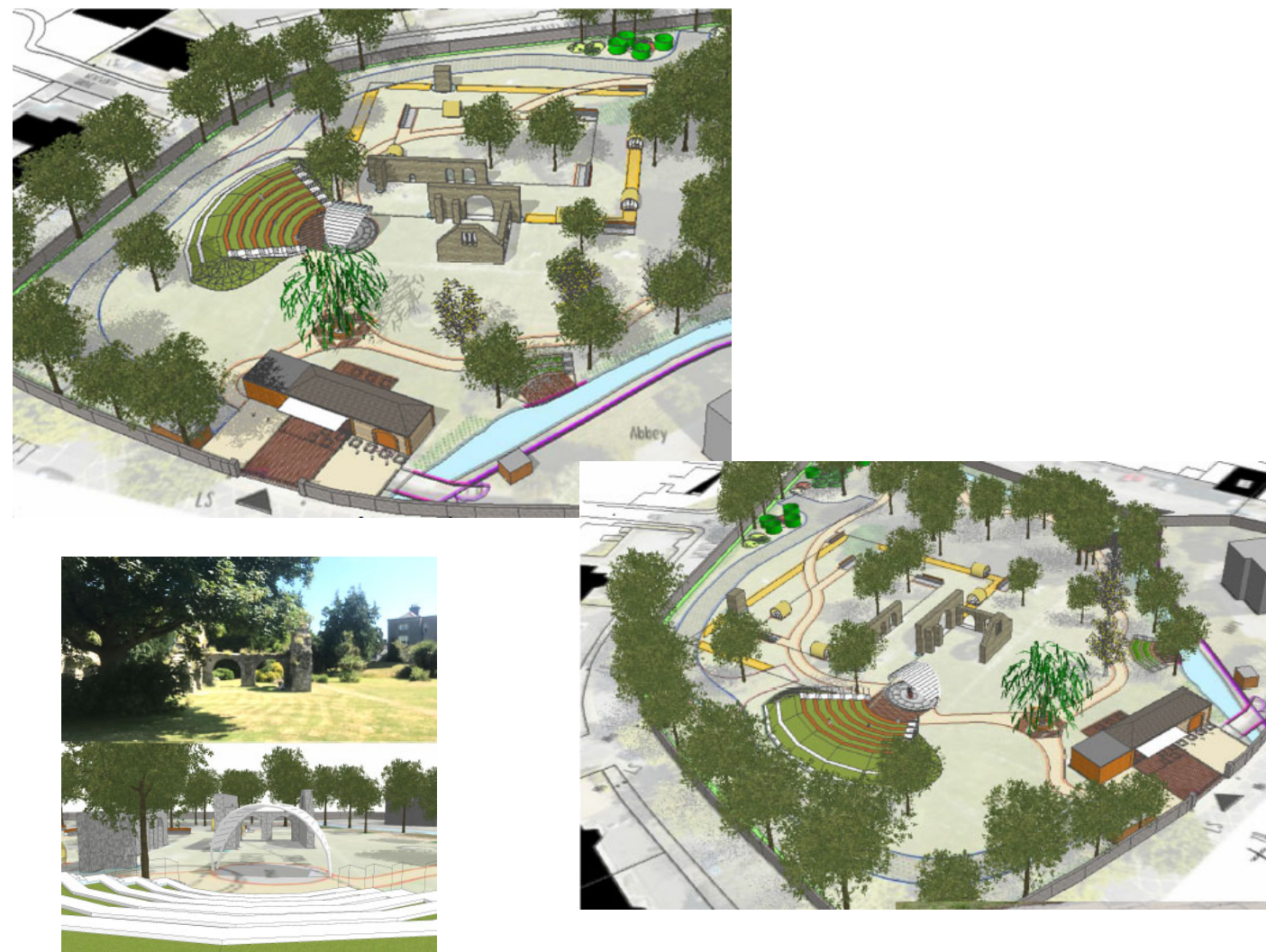
Indicative cross-section from Abbey Street (right) through proposed Café./Retail/Exhibition space, to Abbey remains



LEFT: Plan of proposed conversion of Coach House to Café./Retail/Exhibition space, with toilets to the east
 RIGHT: Sample brickwork combining terracotta and grey colours and an exemplar demountable canopy proposed for the south side (Abbey Street) of the building

Raised amphitheatre

The amphitheatre cited in the Brief is intended primarily to provide for public performance events. It comprises concentric terraced seating flanked by two sets of steps, one on either side, and handrails. Depending on demand for such events, the terraced seating can be supplemented by additional seats located on the flat ground on either side. The requirement for an amphitheatre presented a potential challenge in respect of a possible disturbance of historical remains beneath the surface of the ground. It was, therefore, decided to form a terraced ‘hill’ lying above the existing ground, so providing the required facility while conserving possible cultural heritage beneath.



3-D computer generated views of proposed Amphitheatre, stage and canopy, illustrating the relationship with existing Abbey remains

The amphitheatre arrangement focuses on a stage demarcated by a shallow paved platform that is both sheltered and celebrated by a simple arching tentlike canopy. While set at a respectful distance from the Abbey remains, the positioning of the amphitheatre and its canopied stage corresponds spatially to the south-most three-sides space of those remains which opens westwards. In other words, a relationship is created between the old and the new while ensuring the autonomy of each and without any direct impingement either way.



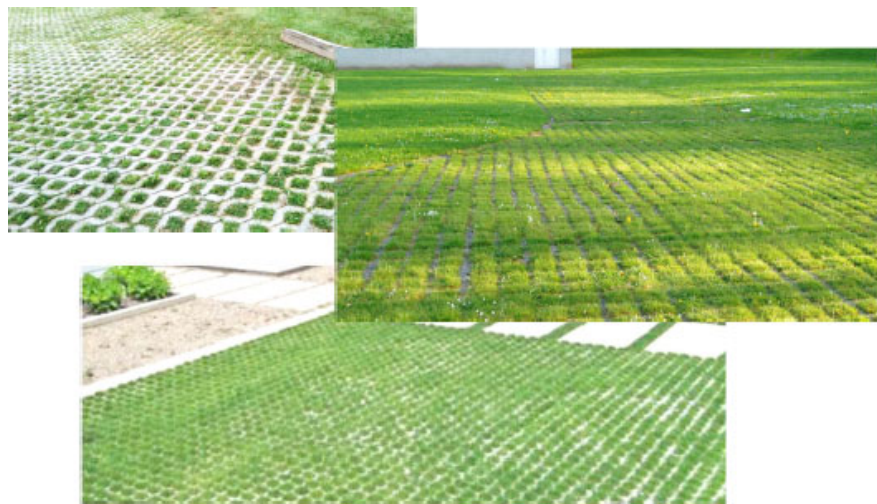
Section through proposed Amphitheatre and stage canopy



Exemplar images of an amphitheatre and stage canopies

Multi-modal and new pedestrian access

The existing main access to the grounds from the south will be retained, albeit widened for ease of the manoeuvring of small trucks and for enhanced visibility into the park from both Abbey Street and the Marlton Road. This gateway will, therefore, be for multi-modal access. It will not only be used by pedestrians intending to visit the Café/Retail/Exhibition space and the grounds, but also for vehicles that will, on the occasion of special public events, need to enter the park to set-up, for instance, performance equipment and/or market stalls. Such activities and movement will further be facilitated by the inclusion of a grass-reinforced service route running close to the western and northern peripheries. This route will incorporate grass to achieve a degree of blending into the parkland context while bearing the movement of vehicular wheels. It will also provide a pathway for park users generally, not least for the movement of wheelchairs and prams.



Exemplar images of 'grasscrete' / fortified grass areas for motorised vehicle movement

A second point of access is proposed from the Abbey Car Park to the east, comprising a protected slightly ramped route leading to the existing stone bridge over the Ashtown Stream, immediately inside the grounds. This will establish an important link to the Town Centre and will afford the visitor a good view into and across the park, revealing the key attractions and ensuring a sense of orientation.



Left: **View of location for new access gate**



Right: **Computer image of proposed access ramp**

A lectern, such as that existing at the main entrance will provide interpretative information at both entrances.



View of existing lectern interpreting the original Franciscan monastery

Pathways to improve accessibility

In addition to the grass-reinforced vehicular route outlined above, pathways will be incorporated around the grounds. The layout of these routes adopts a relaxed organic approach, whereby one can meander between the historical remains and among the Yew trees as well as moving close to the Ashtown Stream where views of the water will be afforded. These paths will be surfaced in compacted grit and it is proposed that they are slightly elevated by, say, 100mm in order to reduce excavation impact regarding possible historical remains below.



Exemplar image of grit-surfaced path

Vehicular access to Parochial House

The existing sloped route leading from the main entrance to the Parochial House will be retained. However, in order to safeguard the privacy of the house, a gate will be included at the existing concrete bridge and will be under the control of the Parish Priest. The existing balustrade will require additional Balusters for reasons of safety.

Also, in order to ensure free vehicular movement between the main gate and the house, ground markings will preclude the parking of vehicles that could otherwise prove an impediment. It's also worth noting here that a low fence will be included extending from the new gate on the concrete bridge along the Ashtown Stream to the eastern boundary with an approximately 1.5m setback. The proposed park will extend across the stream up to that fence.

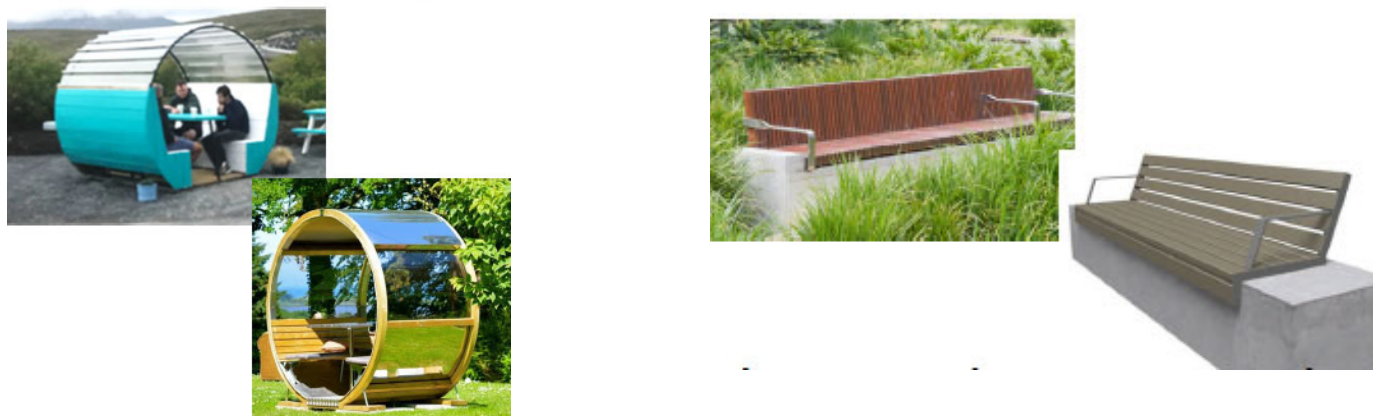


View of existing concrete bridge leading to Parochial House depicting the balustrade that poses a safety risk

Public seating

Three types of public seating are proposed, as follows:

- One of these comprises solid concrete bases with heavy wooden seating and backs. The seats are located along the lines of the original Abbey buildings, as if rising from the ancient, long disappeared, walls. They are, thus, a gesture of memory and historical narrative. In addition, two pairs of these seats are located on the western banks of the Ashtown Stream, to one side of the pathway and looking onto the water at the eastern side of the park.

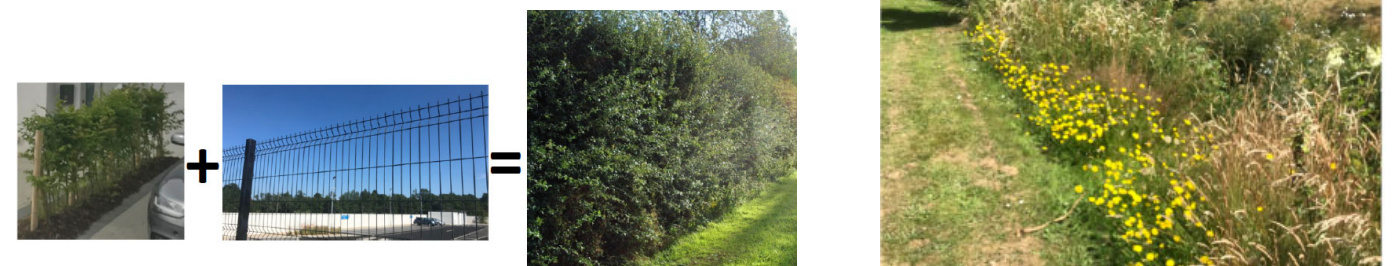


Exemplar image of concrete and wood type seating and seating pods

- Another comprises a light-weight seating pod which integrates seats and a vaulted shelter. While somewhat autonomous, like the solid type of seating outlined above, they are located along the lines of the original Abbey. They provide a variation to the seating provision as well as a modicum of shelter from wind and rain. These seating pods also offer an opportunity of introducing colour.
- The terraced seating of the amphitheatre, besides facilitating crowds for performance entertainment, provides seating as a permanent and every-day feature. In addition, a small set of terraced seating is also proposed on the northern bank of the Ashtown Stream, close to the /Retail/Exhibition space, as a recognition of this water course and a means of opening it up for viewing but is set sufficiently back and guarded with railings for safety.

Enhanced biodiversity

Careful consideration was given to the conservation and enhancement of the biodiversity of the grounds. The proposal involves minimal removal of existing vegetation. A Sycamore or two will need to cut to accommodate the amphitheatre and likewise regarding remedial works to the boundary wall at the southwest of the site. Otherwise, clumps of native trees are to be planted along the northern boundary and unmown naturalistic swathes of native herbs (eg. nettles, docks, and brambles) are to be encouraged around the periphery, between existing and proposed trees as well as within the park. In particular, such swathes are to predominate along the banks of the stream. It is also proposed to form low ridges along the lines of the original Abbey buildings as a recalling of the past and to allow them to undergo minimal management in order to further enhance the biodiversity of the park. In form and vegetation cover, these will become a visually powerful delineation of the original Abbey while also enhancing the park ecologically.



*LEFT: Images indicating the combination of fencing and Whitethorn for safety reasons along the boundary
RIGHT: Exemplar image indicating a low ridge with enhanced biodiversity due to minimal maintenance*

Due to the higher level of the majority of the park compared with the level of the external public road wrapping around the northern and western boundaries, for reasons of health and safety it will be necessary to incorporate a fence. Notwithstanding, the latter is to be sandwiched between two lines of Whitethorn hedging to both screen the fence and introduce a native species that will enhance the biodiversity of the park, especially with its Spring flowers and Autumn berries.

For further information, see the Ecological Impact Report and Appropriate Assessment Screening Report accompanying this application.

Protection of ruined remains

The protection of the historical remains, concerning archaeological integrity and historical narrative, is considered in respect of ground treatment and structures. The focus of the proposed works typically avoids ostensible interference with the visible historical remains and otherwise involves shallow excavations. A notable exception to this is the proposed extension to accommodate a kitchen for the Café/Retail/Exhibition space where caution will need to be exercised due to the necessary depth of foundations. Here especially, but probably at other locations too, test trenching will be important as a precursor to construction works. A light-hand approach is adopted for paved areas (amphitheatre stage, paving outside Café/Retail/Exhibition space and the terraced seating by the stream), paths and the service road where shallow excavations are required and, also, with the possibility of raising these routes slightly to further minimise such penetrative works. Appreciation of the Abbey buildings and the engendering of a historical narrative are encouraged also by the proposed low ridge features mentioned above under *Public seating* and *Enhanced biodiversity*.



View of part of Abbey remains where projecting parts are vulnerable to damage and in need of protection from direct access, involving railed protection

The existing historical structures, at least where protruding and vulnerable to be climbed upon, are to be protected by railings. The latter are to comprise a very minimalist design of simple vertical bars. Regarding the structural integrity of these structures, the Structural Engineer's report has identified areas of structural concern. These involve the southwest corner of the boundary wall due to its leaning outwards as well as an arch at one location and parts of the Coach House external wall where cracks are evident. Remedial action can be implemented over time without affecting adversely the progress of these proposals in general.

For further information, see the Archaeological Impact Report and the Conservation Engineer's Report accompanying this application.

Lighting scheme

It was recognised during the design process that public use of this proposed park will likely be limited to daylight hours and that the grounds will be closed at night, so obviating the need for a public lighting scheme. It should be noted that public parks are not normally provided with lighting. That said, there may be some rare occasions where an entertainment event will take place in the evening when night might fall. For this reason, a modest level of lighting has been proposed for this development, focusing on areas that are most likely to involve use by the public during evenings rather than attempting to flood light the entire park.



Exemplar lighting on pathways (bollard lighting) and Amphitheatre steps

Lighting is proposed around the two entrances, not only to create a modest nocturnal identity for the park, but especially to create an illuminated entrance and route, via the Café/Retail/Exhibition space and stone bridge to the east, leading to the Amphitheatre for reasons of safety. Likewise, the steps on either side of the Amphitheatre are to be illuminated as are the Abbey remains (previously designed by Wink). The lighting design is cognisant of the need to minimise both light spillage and adverse impact on bats. Accordingly, the majority of the proposed scheme comprises indirect downward directed lighting with only a few narrow beam fittings proposed for uplighting.



Computer generated views into the park from Abbey Street with daylight (top) and artificial night lighting of the Abbey remains

Associated site works

The works associated with the above proposals for developing the park have, to some extent, been mentioned. These works include, for instance, the widening of the main entrance that necessitates also the moving of contiguous services. They will include the opening up of the new entrance to the east along with its ramp and railings which will, therefore, extend beyond the grounds and require some rearranging of car parking provision there as well as the re-painting of a few of the existing murals on the boundary wall. Excavations for the kitchen extension to the Café will be required as well as, to a more modest degree, for paved areas and route and for services. These include the provision of Wifi at key locations, such as the Café/Retail/Exhibition space and Amphitheatre.

Conclusion

This proposal concerns the development of the existing Abbey Grounds into a public park, namely the Abbey Gardens, catering for contemporary needs while ensuring appreciation and enhancement of both natural and cultural heritage. As an urban entity within the fabric and structure of Wicklow Town, the design of this park, particularly where it interfaces with the urban core at its main entrance, affords a unique opportunity to address the lack of a gateway to town. It is submitted that a first step towards this is the creating of a distinctive entrance to the park that provides an identity to both the park and the town and that this might be achieved by framing a view of the Abbey remains. To this end, the existing Coach House is to be transformed into the framing device that dramatises these – possibly the most culturally valuable, elegant and memorable feature of the town.

This urban / architectural devise has, however, other uses. It will accommodate a Café, Retail and Exhibition space as well as toilets. These facilities, in turn, will be complemented by the provision of an attractive Amphitheatre with its canopied stage, while a pathways and a service route provide for multi-modal movement. A secondary entrance extends the park into the Abbey Car Park, drawing the public more directly from the Main Street. A range of seating types is provided at different locations. Lighting proposals are modest, ensuring sufficient illumination for special events only and at limited locations, thus ensuring economy in equipment and operation. Certain ideas for this development arose from a concern to respect both the natural and cultural heritage, resulting in the creation of features that enhance both, namely, the forming of minimally managed low ridges that demarcate the original Abbey buildings and enhance biodiversity.

The structural assessment highlighted areas for remedial action that can be implemented over time without affecting adversely the progress of these proposals in general. While on-going monitoring of structural cracks is required, such works could become part of the intended construction contract for the realisation of these park proposals. Part of the conclusion in the Conservation Engineer's Report (Page 10) accompanying this application is quoted below, confirming that there is nothing proposed that prevents the proposals from proceeding, other than possibly maintaining some of the existing (window and door head) masonry in the Coach House:

With regards to the remedial structural works none of the proposed works remove any existing fabric and all the proposed remedial works are required to stabilise and prevent any further structural damage or potential for collapse. Materials proposed are all sympathetic to those originally used and do not pose a future threat to the structural integrity of where they are proposed to be used.

In relation to works to enhance the public space for the Abbey Grounds the only structural intervention that has an impact on the existing structures is the works to the Coach House. The proposal to create two large openings for glazing, to provide some view to the Abbey Ruins from Abbey Street does result in loss of fabric on both the front and external facades. Best practice when undertaking such interventions is to maintain some of the existing wall to allow where original doorways and windows are located to still be noted.

The Ecologist produced an Appropriate assessment screening Report concerning the possible impacts of the proposals on areas of international importance (Natura 2000 sites), such as The Murragh SAC and Wicklow Head as well as an Ecological Impact Assessment Report which focuses on the local ecology of the site and the possible impacts of the proposals on it. Extracts indicating important conclusions presented in the latter are as follows:

The increased public access and utilisation of the Abbey Grounds as a public park will have negative consequences for wildlife as until relatively recently these lands were private and undisturbed which ensures that they became a haven for fauna.

... Significant mitigation measures have been implemented through the development of the project layout and design to avoid and reduce direct impacts (for example on the boundary treelines, scrub and the stream), to ameliorate impacts (through the timing of works, lighting design, etc.) and to ensure that the design protected these areas and the watercourse, the strengthening and creation of existing habitat (through planting a new native hedgerow to complement the site boundary and existing trees) and to ensure the appropriate grassland management of the lands in the future.

... No habitat designated for nature conservation purposes, or plant species protected under the Floral Protection Order 2015, will be impacted by the proposed development of these lands, which would be deemed of high importance for biodiversity within the town.

Notwithstanding, The Ecologist recognises that:

Ultimately the Abbey Grounds will be developed as a public space within the town rendering what was a previously undisturbed environment for wildlife to one utilised by people. Species which adapt readily to urban and developed environments will remain in the general area.

Regarding the Appropriate Assessment Screening Report, the Ecologist concludes:

The report finds that the project will not, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, give rise to significant effects on the integrity of any Natura 2000 site. A full Appropriate Assessment is therefore not required in this instance.

We conclude, also, that a full Environmental Impact Assessment or EIA is not required for this proposal, given its limited size and containment. Various impacts are identified by the Ecologist, Archaeologist and Structural Engineer but none of these is critical in the sense of precluding development of the park as proposed. It is worth noting that not all of the concerns of the specialist consultants concur. For example, remedial works to the peripheral wall could result in an impact on the contiguous biodiversity though loss of one or two trees as well as of the herbaceous swathe and its provision of a wildlife corridor. Notwithstanding, sensitive advanced planning, involving the creation of alternative routes could be possible as one mitigating device. The important thing is that creative thinking can usually obviate many such problems and, in any case, none of these issues pose a critical impediment to the realisation of these proposals.

Wicklow town, besides benefiting from a gesture towards the forming of an urban gateway, badly needs a park that facilitates peoples' needs regarding tranquillity, connection with nature, recreation and entertainment. The proposed Abbey Gardens park will create the basis for fulfilling these needs while protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage, even to the point of celebration.