

Kells Historic Core Architectural Conservation Area

Historical Development

The uniqueness of Kells is derived from its origins as a Monastic settlement, dedicated to St. Columba, and rates among the important early Monastic sites of Armagh, Cashel and Kildare. It is one of the country's most culturally significant historic towns, and unlike many historic Irish towns much of its archaeology is visible.

In the ninth century the Columban community of Iona accepted the donation of land in Kells as a place of refuge from the Viking raids and built a monastery there in 804 AD. It is assumed that the site of the Church of Ireland is the site of the original monastery of which only the round tower remains.

In the middle ages Kells was a frontier town on the edge of the Pale and came under attack from the native Irish. It was burnt in 1203 and 1315. In the 12th century period of Anglo-Norman settlement Kells developed as a walled market town - to the north along Carrick and Maudlin Streets, to the east on Castle Street, John Street and Kenlis Place, and to the south on Farrell Street and Suffolk Street. In 1598 it was listed among the walled towns of Meath and prospered into the 17th century. There are few upstanding remains of the town walls with the exception of a section at the mural tower to the rear of Cannon Street.

Layout

The periods of growth of the town are reflected its different streetscapes. The area of the monastery forms the nucleus around which the town grew. Its significance as a religious centre is shown by the siting of the church and monastery at the top of the town. The curving narrow streets of Cross St., Castle St. and Carrick St. formed around the monastery, and are indicative of the 11th C. period as a market town.

The shape of the town reflects its location. It has a star shaped plan, which developed around the convergence of the major historic routes of North Leinster, from Dublin and the east coast to the northern and western counties. In the late medieval period there were five gates on the town's walled defences.

Built form

The initial period of growth from 9th to 13th C is most important archaeologically for its intact street pattern and burgage plots, the town walls, and the Church of St Columba.

The town's present visual character was formed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with little major development taking place in the 20thC. The character of the town is modest yet elegant with the streetcapes generally composed of two storey late Georgian buildings, but with some nice doorcases and interesting shopfronts.

The last 15 years has seen the gradual erosion of architectural character by the removal of traditional sash windows, plaster, and rainwater goods. However, there is the potential to retain, and restore where necessary, the distinctive quality and historic character of the town.

Materials

The buildings in Kells are predominantly plastered and painted in a variety of colours, however the more important institutional and commercial buildings typically have dressed stone facings, and a small number of late 19th century commercial buildings have brick facades with interesting detailing. In common with all small Irish towns, the roofscape of Kells consists of pitched slated roofs.

Landmark views include the medieval tower and 19thC spire and the round tower on Cannon St.

Objectives:

It is the intention of the Council by the designation of this Architectural Conservation Area,

1. to preserve the historic street pattern within the core of the town,
2. to require that all new developments shall observe the existing scale of the town.
3. to protect the character of the existing streetscape by giving consideration to the suitability of style, construction materials, colour and decoration to be used in any proposals for development taking place within this area.
4. To encourage appropriate new uses for empty and under-utilised buildings.
5. To avoid the destruction of minor historic elements whose cumulative loss would severely erode the cumulative cultural significance of the town