

## **Former ESB building, Main Street, Leixlip**

### **Architectural heritage assessment**



*Plate 1: Former ESB showroom and offices*

The query relates to the former ESB building at the eastern end of Main Street, Leixlip, which is a former showroom and offices that front on to the street. The questions are, firstly, whether the building is within the curtilage of a protected structure and, secondly, whether it is of significance that would stand in the way of the site being developed.

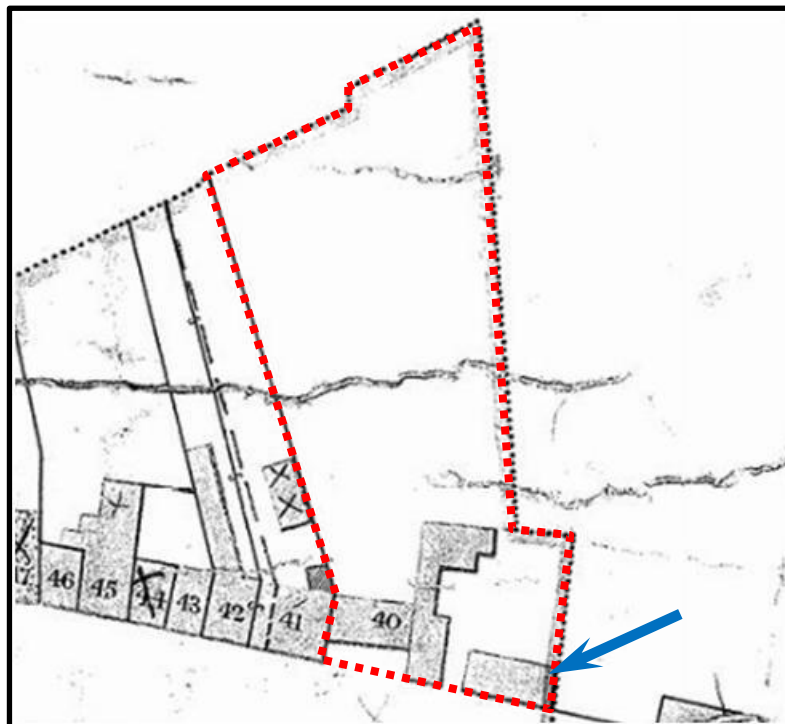
Leixlip is an ancient town, but most of the buildings are of later date and would have been built in the eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth centuries. A problem may arise when a building is erected on a brown-field site and it is not clear whether any of an earlier structure is incorporated in the new build, or whether the site was entirely cleared prior to the erection of the new building. A further common problem in older towns occurs when a property is subdivided; if the original building on the site is now a protected structure, does the curtilage of that protected structure still include all land that was originally part of its grounds? Resolving that issue is not helped by the lack of any definition of the word “curtilage” in planning law. The implications of the curtilage of a property are also not clearly set out in planning law or guidelines to answer the question as to why would it matter whether a building is, or is not, in the curtilage of a protected structure. These issues are extremely unhelpful when clarity is needed as to what is the development potential of a site.

## Background history



*Plate 2: Ivy House with the ESB building at right*

The front part of the ESB site at Leixlip was previously part of the grounds of Ivy House, which stands next to the site, on its western side. The entrance to the grounds of Ivy House still runs between the house and the ESB building. The western corner of the ESB showroom building is built around the stone gate pier on the right-hand side of the access. The map below is an extract from the Valuation Office map of Leixlip, dating from about the 1850s, and showing the grounds of Ivy House outlined in red and a building on the site of the ESB showroom, which is indicated by a blue arrow.



*Figure 1: Valuation map showing grounds of Ivy House*

The land enclosed by the red line remained unchanged for a period of well over a century, extending to approximately 0.28 hectares.

The building marked by the arrow in the map extract is on the same site as the ESB showroom and offices. This building is shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map of 1837 and is seen again on later Ordnance Survey maps, including the larger scale map at 1:2500 scale that was published in 1907. Although it is difficult to be certain from maps of this small scale, the old building and the present ESB building appear to be the same size and in the same location.

John Colgan, in his book *Leixlip, County Kildare*, published in 2005, gives very little information about the background history of Ivy House other than to list some of the occupiers. Significantly, however, the book says that “the adjoining ESB premises (dating from 1966) was formerly a shed, with a solid wall to the street”.

The records of the Valuation Office can sometimes show whether a building was demolished before a new building is erected. Unfortunately, however, in this instance the records are not helpful. No changes to buildings on this site are recorded in the manuscript records, which run up to the year 1967. In subsequent records, which are computer print-outs, the presence of the ESB is noted, but there are no details to show the transition of the site or building from Ivy House to the ESB.

## **Visits to site**

The site was first visited to assess the building on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014. It was possible to get inside the building on the upper floor, though on that occasion there was no access to the lower floor. There is no staircase in the building and at that time the only access to the ground floor appeared to be via the shopfront. A key was available that fitted the lock on the shutters, but they would not open. This may have been due to a lack of power supply to run the motors that lift the shutters.

Examination of the outside of the building showed that it is entirely faced in materials dating from the 1960s, except for the gate pier embedded in the corner. The facade is a mix of roughcast render and smooth render, which is cement-based and is typical of a form of architecture that was common in the 1960s.

Internally, the upper floor is dry lined and is divided by partitions that would be typical of the late twentieth century. There was no visible evidence of older masonry on that visit. Hence, the result of that visit to the site was inconclusive, as it was not possible to rule out the existence of an earlier stone wall beneath the internal dry lining and the external render.

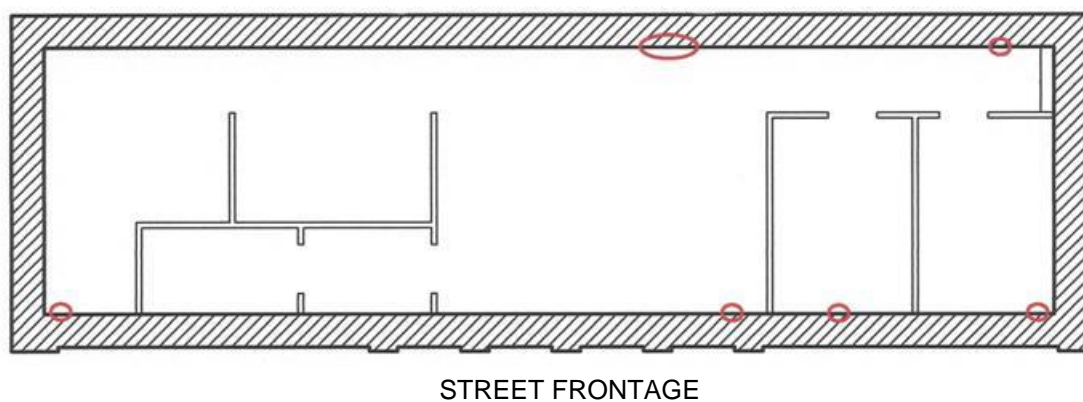
The site was visited again on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2014 with a view to removing some of the later wall coverings to establish what was beneath them. The results are given below.

Further visits were paid to the site on 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> September 2023. By that time vegetation had been removed from the rear of the building, revealing doors that had not been apparent on the previous visits. Entry was gained to the ground-floor level and this proved that the fit-out at that level also dated from the 1960s, with stud partitions and modern dry lining and plaster.

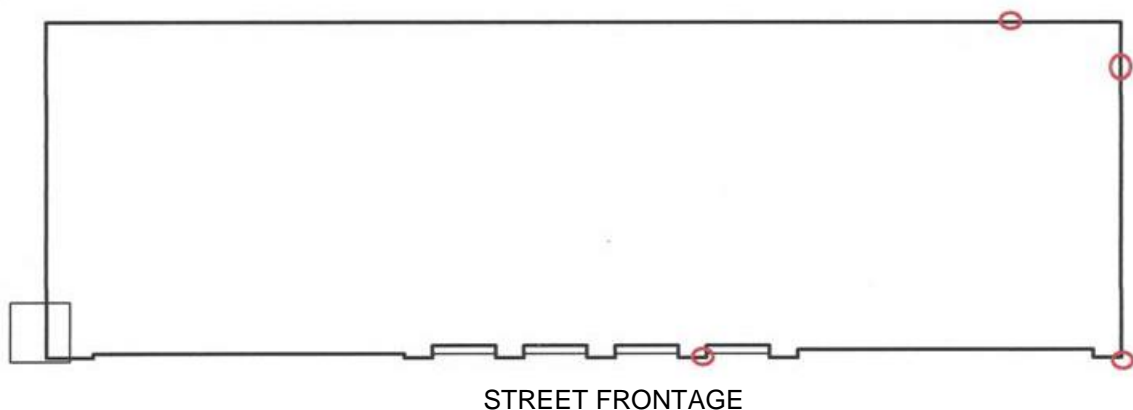
## Opening up of fabric

The diagrams below show the locations of the fabric that was opened up in July 2014 to investigate the building on each of the floors. As before, access was not gained to the lower floor at that time, though the findings on the upper floor were such that viewing the interior of the ground floor was not necessary.

The upper diagram shows the first floor, with the layout of partitions. This is for guidance only and is not to scale. The door and window apertures in the external walls are not shown. Only the external faces of the walls are shown at ground floor level, as no access was gained to the interior at that time. The red rings indicate where the surfaces of the walls were removed to investigate the nature of the masonry beneath. The numbers indicate the descriptions of the findings as set out below.



*Figure 2: Sketch plan at first floor showing locations of opening up*



*Figure 3: Sketch plan of external face at ground level showing opening up*

Before describing the findings arising from the opening up of the wall surfaces a description is given below of an examination within the roof space.



## Roof space



*Plate 3: Timber structure of roof*

The roof has a comparatively steep pitch and is constructed with coupled rafters and collars, which are set high. Hangers are suspended from the collars to support the ceiling joists at mid-point. The ceiling joists are set well above the eaves and would function as a second line of collars to cross-brace the rafters. All of these timbers are of mid-twentieth century date, suggesting that the roof was entirely rebuilt during the conversion to ESB showroom in the mid-1960s. The ceiling attached to the joists is entirely of plasterboard.



*Plate 4: Inner face of eastern gable*

At either end of the roof the inner face of the gable is visible and is constructed for the most part from rubble limestone set in lime-based mortar. The outer portion of the gable rises higher than the inner portion, leaving a recessed section of masonry which originally held the end rafters. On the northern slope of the eastern gable one of the rafters is still in place, though serving no purpose. This is visible in plate 4 above, to the left of the photograph. The overall height of the gable has been raised with the addition of two courses of concrete, raising the gable by 360mm from the top of the stone gable to the underside of the present roof.

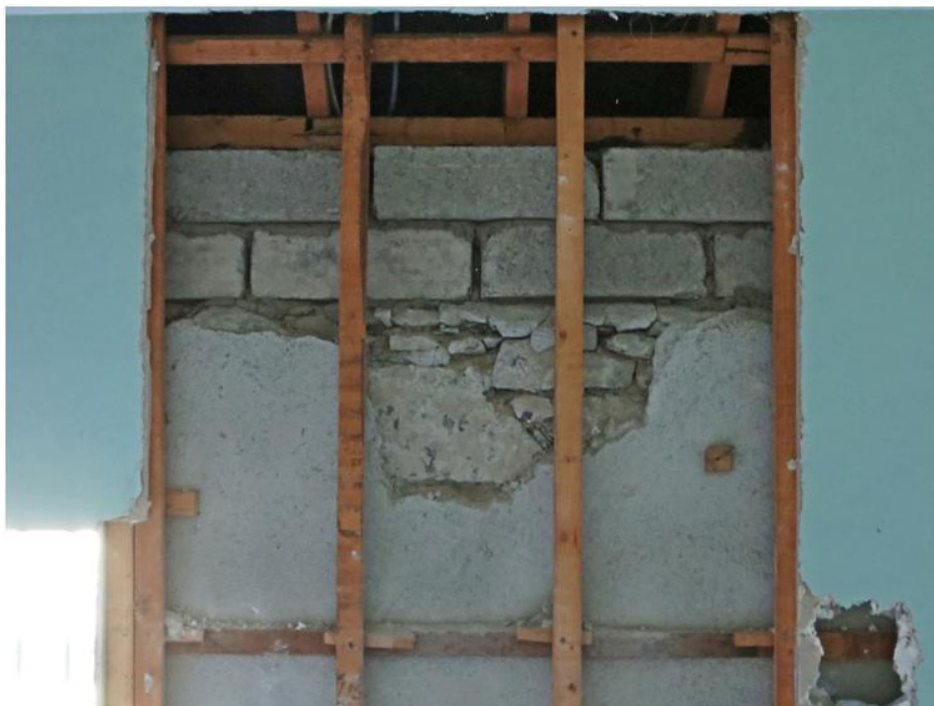


*Plate 5: Detail of inner face of western gable*

In the photograph above the inner face of the western gable is seen, with the two different levels in the stonework. Part of the concrete which raised the gable is seen on either side of the gable, while below this on the left-hand side it may be seen that the slates are still in place, indicating the nature of the roof covering prior to the reconstruction of the building in the 1960s.

## First floor interior

As indicated in the diagram above, dry lining was broken open in six places around the perimeter of the building at first floor level during the visit in 2014. The findings may be summarised in the photograph below, which is of the area opened near the mid-point of the rear wall.



*Plate 6: Opened area of rear wall at first floor level*

The investigation shows that the wall had been raised by the addition of two courses of concrete blocks, thereby raising the eaves by about 450mm. Below this the inner face of the walls had been rendered with sand and cement. Beneath this render the walls are of limestone rubble, with a poor quality of stonework comprised of a mix of stone sizes, including a significant number of relatively small stones, all set in a lime-based mortar that is relatively soft and friable. The coursing did not appear to be particularly regular, though the areas opened up were too limited to be sure of the exact nature of the coursing.

Rubble stone masonry appeared in all six areas where the wall was opened up at first floor level.



*Plate 7: Detail of stonework on front wall*



## Ground floor exterior

Given that stone masonry had been found on both gables within the roof space and in all six areas opened at first floor level it may be reasonably assumed that the greater part of the ground floor will also be of limestone rubble masonry. Opening up on the external face of the ground floor walls was thus confined to investigation of the area around the shopfront and two accessible areas at the side and rear. For the most part the rear of the building was not accessible due to very dense growth of vegetation, including brambles.

Surprisingly, the one area at the rear of the building that was investigated proved to have concrete blockwork beneath the roughcast render. It is concluded that there is a blocked doorway at this location and the blockwork is merely the infill of the ope.

A small area on the eastern gable end was opened up and revealed limestone rubble beneath.



*Plate 8: Detail of pier at front of building*

There were several breaks in the south-eastern corner of the building where it appears that vehicles entering the gates had impacted on the wall. Examination of the revealed masonry showed that this corner of the building consists of a mass concrete pier with a facing of sand and cement render. One of the piers to the west of the shopfront was opened up, as seen in the photograph above, and this also revealed a concrete core with a sand and cement render.



## Interpretation

It is clear from these investigations that the greater part of the original shed was retained when the ESB showroom was provided in the mid-1960s. The presence of limestone masonry in the gables, as seen in the roof space and in all six areas opened up in the internal faces of the first floor confirm that the whole building was retained, though it was modified by the raising of the roof.

The investigations at ground floor level were intended to establish whether the front elevation was the original building, though pierced with new openings. What the investigation has shown is that two-thirds of the elevation to the street has been replaced with concrete and opes. The full length of the facade is 19.86 metres, while the shopfront and the area of concrete piers and windows to the west of the shopfront occupy a total of 13.25 metres of the street frontage. The smooth rendered area above the shopfront and windows would represent the substantial beam that supports the masonry above. The opening up at first floor level included three locations above this beam, the purpose of which was to establish whether the facade was demolished and rebuilt at first floor level as well as on the ground floor, as this would seem to have been the simplest way to have carried out the construction, particularly as the roof was removed and a new roof structure provided. However, the finding was that the limestone rubble wall extends over the top of the shopfront and the ground floor windows.



*Plate 9: Front facade showing area where original walling has been removed*

The photograph above shows with red hatching the area that was opened up during the construction in the 1960s, and which has been replaced with concrete and openings. As has been noted above, the roof was reconstructed in its entirety, with the total height of the roof raised by about 450mm.

## Implications of earlier structure

As the investigations have confirmed the information in John Colgan's *Leixlip, County Kildare* (2005) that the present building incorporates an earlier shed, converted for use as a showroom and offices, what are the implications for a possible proposal to demolish it and redevelop the site? Before answering that question, the issue of curtilage should be considered.

## Curtilage and protection

The Planning and Development Act, 2000, which is the basic legislation under which buildings are protected, states that in the case of a protected structure the term “structure” includes “any other structures lying within that curtilage and their interiors”.

Unfortunately, the planning acts do not define “curtilage” and neither do the *Architectural Heritage Guidelines for Planning Authorities*. However, the guidelines offer the helpful statement that “for the purposes of these guidelines it can be taken to be the parcel of land immediately associated with that structure and which is (or was) in use for the purposes of the structure”. It is the function of the planning authority to define the curtilage if this should be necessary and in the case of the ESB showroom this could go either way. Clearly the showroom building is not immediately associated with Ivy House, but equally clearly it was associated until the mid-1960s.

In this context the ruling in by Mr Justice Humphreys in the High Court in the cases of North Great George's Street Preservation Society and An Bord Pleanála in May 2023 would seem to be relevant, where the judge ruled that:

Whether property B falls within the curtilage of property A should be determined by reference to the legally relevant time for the purposes of the determination of the issue. This may vary from legal context to legal context. For determining the legal effect of an entry in the RPS, the “legally relevant time” is the date on which the structure on property A was first listed prior to the establishment of the RPS system or first included in the RPS, whichever was earlier, unless the wording of the RPS has changed in a relevant way in the meantime or has made express relevant provision to determine the curtilage.

In the present case it appears that the ESB building was alienated from the property at Ivy House prior to Ivy House being added to the record of protected structures and hence it would not be considered to lie within the curtilage of the protected structure.

It is my opinion that the ESB site and the former showroom building should not be considered to be part of the curtilage of Ivy House as there is no functional connection between the two properties and as the showroom building was not part of the curtilage at the time that Ivy House was listed or added to the record of protected structures. Furthermore, that part of the shell of the original shed that still survives beneath the later facade of the showroom has been altered to such an extent that none of its original character survives.

## **Historical significance of building**

As noted above, while the shell of the original stone shed or barn still survives within the showroom building its original character has been entirely lost through the works to turn it into an office and showroom. About two thirds of the ground floor of the street frontage is either an ope or a concrete pier between opes. The roof level has been raised significantly. At least part of the rear elevation has been altered to put window and door opes in and to block up other opes. Whatever features may have existed in the interior are likely to have gone, as the conversion to showroom has not been done in such a way as to preserve features such as cobbled floors, stable stalls and so forth.

In essence, it is my belief that this building has little or no surviving significance.

## **Conclusions**

Arising from the above, I would conclude that while the former ESB showroom and offices is based on an earlier stone-built shed, the building has been altered to such an extent that it retains none of its original character. It would appear that the original building, prior to the conversion works in the 1960s, was not of any great significance in itself, being merely a simple shed, while those elements of the original masonry that have been inspected show that the standard of the masonry was of poor quality, suggesting that this building was not of any significance.



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10<sup>th</sup> October 2023