

A New Conservation Project at South Tipperary County Museum

South Tipperary County Museum in Clonmel received a grant from the Heritage Council under the Heritage Management Scheme 2010 to conserve one of the most remarkable remaining examples of local traditional Irish shop fronts, which is now part of the museum's collection. "Cooney's Bar" was located in the centre of Clonmel, Co. Tipperary in the seventeenth century Main Guard building. The decorative, wooden elements date from the first half of nineteenth century and were part of an elaborate shop front from a well known local grocery shop and pub run by the Cooney's family which traded in the town for many generations.



Fig 1. A postcard with a view of The Main Guard in Clonmel with Cooney's Bar shop. The postcard dates from 1951. South Tipperary County Museum collection, inv no. 1995.718.

The shop front elements are not complete and unfortunately consist only of a few but highly representative parts: nameboard, one large console, two small consoles, and the entrance door. There is also a little storage drawer with an interesting printed paper label inside, which was part of the bar's furniture. All these unique elements are in bad preservation state and their conservation is vital for the retention of our knowledge about identity and character of the town's past streetscapes. Traditional shop fronts display the vernacular architecture and are an important expression of local history. Such shop fronts are living examples of local craftsmen; the carpenter, painter and sign writer, working at their best and with quality materials.



Fig 2. The nameboard of the shop front. The wooden panel is 445 cm long and 37 cm wide.

Through the years the shop front elements were normally exposed to the external atmospheric conditions which with rapid changes of relative humidity and temperature were the main cause of deterioration. All elements are very dirty with stains and water leaks. The colour of the wooden material has been changed and is now very dark. The overall construction of the large console is unstable with loose joints, breaks, splits, rusting and broken nails. The wooden material is extremely weak and soft, due to additional insect activity. The multiple paint layers on all of the shop front elements are flaking, revealing past paint schemes or direct wooden support. The paint layers on all of the elements have many abrasions and scratches. The paper printed label which is attached to the divider of the drawer is also brittle. There are also tears and missing sections and the entire surface is covered with grime.



Fig 3. Front and side of main decorative console. The wooden construction has many oblong splits. The paint layer has many losses and extensively flakes unveiling previous paint schemes.

Before any conservation treatments can begin, a complex research study is being carried out to establish the technique, technology, history and causes of damage. Some preparatory work has been done in the past few months. The elements have been photographed and samples of the flaking paint and timber were taken from different areas of the elements for technical examination.

All of the examined parts of the shop front were made of *Pinus sylvestris* – Scots pine. A *Picea abies* – Norway spruce was identified in the drawer. The layers structure has been examined on the cross section, casting a light on the previous painting schemes of the shop front. Their parts were repainted many times with different colours. The binding medium and pigments used in the last painting scheme was identified by micro-chemical tests. Thus it is known that an oil paint was used and the identified pigments are: zinnober, ochre, bone black, chalk and lead white. A study on dating the previous painting schemes of the elements is ongoing and is carried out by comparison of

cross-sections of the painting layers with historic prints and photographs illustrating “Cooney’s Bar” in the past.

The primary aim of the conservation treatments is to halt degradation by eliminating the causes of damage and conservation of the existing material. At present, at this very preliminary stage it is clear that five core treatments will need to be carried out and these will consist of removal of dirt from the back and front of the elements pest control, consolidation and minor repairs of the wooden material reattachment of the flaking paint inpainting losses of the painting layer and conservation of the paper label from the drawer.

The important part of the conservation process will be preparing the storage area for the elements. Their size and weight will determine the storage conditions and this problem will be solved during the project. All research work and conservation treatments are thoroughly documented by means of micro and macro digital photographs.



Fig. 4 The front of the entrance door.



Fig. 5 One of the small consoles. The photograph shows the front and side of the console.

The other, very important element of this project is to promote our local heritage, craft and traditional skills through education program associated with shop fronts. The project has enormous potential in engaging the public at local level during the course of the conservation work. A series of different activities involving the local community are already planned by the museum staff in conjunction with South Tipperary Heritage Office. These activities can help to promote local heritage, highlight changing townscapes and conservation as a skilled discipline.

Further information about the project will be soon available on the museums website <http://www.southtippcoco.ie/en/museum/conservation/>. More detailed information about the research study and conservation issues are hoped to be published later after completion of the project.

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All photographs taken by the author.