



# *Donegal* Traditional Shop Fronts & Signage



*This publication was commissioned by Donegal County Council as part of the County Donegal Heritage Plan with support from The Heritage Council. The purpose of the publication is to provide an insight into the character and quality of traditional shop fronts in Donegal, their role as part of the living heritage and built fabric in the county at a variety of scales, and to offer guidance to architects, planners and existing and potential shop owners about how to maintain existing and/or to design new shop fronts which continue the rich tradition of shop front design in County Donegal.*

© County Donegal Heritage Office, Donegal County Council, 2019.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the County Donegal Heritage Office, Donegal County Council.

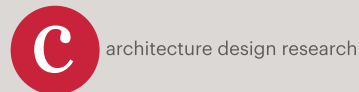
ISBN 978-0-9927708-3-9

This publication was researched and written by Orla Murphy, Custom Architecture and produced by the County Donegal Heritage Office, Donegal County Council. This publication is sponsored by Donegal County Council/Comhairle Contae Dhún na nGall & The Heritage Council/An Chomhairle Oidhreachta under the County Donegal Heritage Plan.

Front Cover Photographs: Buchanan's, Ramelton [courtesy of Laura Buchanan]; John Barr, Buncrana [JG]; McLoone's Bar, Maas Crossroads [OM] & Former Shop Front, Mountcharles [JG].



An Action of the County Donegal Heritage Plan



# Contents

## *Part 1:*

### ***The Shop Front in Donegal*** **2**

**Introduction** 4

**The Evolution of the Traditional Shop Front** 8

**Donegal Shop Fronts** 14

**Shop Front Elements** 20

## *Part 2:*

### ***Guidance & Statutory Requirements*** **30**

**Guiding Principles for Design** 32

**Shop Front Improvement Design Checklist & FAQs** 40

**Planning Guidance** 42

**Image Credits** 43

**Further Reading & Sources** 44





BUCHANAN'S

FRY'S PURE COCOA

*Part 1:*

# The Shop Front in Donegal

*Shop fronts, both individually and collectively have a major impact on the overall character, quality and attractiveness of a place.*



# JOHN BARR



# Introduction

*The traditional shop front is a key element of the built fabric of our towns, cities and rural areas.*

It has developed as an interface between the public world of the street and the semi-private space of the shop. At its most basic, the role of the shop front is a physical advertisement for commercial activity. As a cultural and social element it is much more than this. Shop fronts, both individually and collectively have a major impact on the overall character, quality and attractiveness of place. The proportions, design, craft, and fabric of the shop front reveals a lot about the history and memory of place: it ties the grain of the street together, animates the life of the street, and provides a window to the world of goods and services which are the underlying raison d'être of our urban centres.

Names of family businesses are often displayed above shop fronts, offering a human connection between people and place. Crafts and skills in the manufacture of shop fronts can create identifiable links and a common language that is part of the DNA of an area.

Shop fronts by their nature change over time as the changes in business ebb and flow. This change is part of the dynamic urban morphology. It demonstrates why shop fronts are a delicate part of our built heritage and one that can quite quickly change, or even disappear in a relatively short period of time. Shop fronts are also



one piece of the fabric of the buildings of which they are a part and the care and maintenance of the overall building should be taken into account in any discussion of the shop front.

An understanding of the quality of traditional shop fronts, the principles behind their design and guidance for their protection, maintenance and for the design of contemporary shop fronts is an important step in caring for the best of remaining traditional shop fronts, and ensuring that as businesses continue to change that they do so with an understanding of the value of what remains and how it can be utilised in a way that facilitates successful new business and urban identity.

This guidance document will provide assistance to architects, designers, planners, property owners, retailers and community organisations involved in preservation, conservation, regeneration and design initiatives in our towns and villages.

Traditional shop fronts contribute to the built heritage of our towns and villages in particular. The unique character of a place, when cared for and looked after can be a tangible draw for future business and these guidelines hope to offer achievable and clear guidance for business owners, architects, designers and crafts people. The recognition, protection and conservation of these shop fronts form part of a heritage-led approach to renewal and regeneration.









# The Evolution of the Traditional Shop Front

According to Sean Rothery, the earliest shops were ‘open fronted, having a counter between the shop and the street’ and this type lasted into the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Shops in small towns and villages were much more modest than those found in cities and served the farming communities in the surrounding areas.<sup>2</sup> Many belonged to craftsmen such as carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights and saddlers and were located in the ground floor of houses, using the house windows for basic forms of display. Simple shop forms like this can still be seen in Donegal today for example in the village of Mountcharles.

The most simple examples of this form combine a single timber window and door in one unit forming an ‘L’. A single lintol spans the opening forming a modest entablature. These shop fronts are a part of the domestic scale of the street elevation very much connected to the residential function of the building. The owners both lived and worked in the same space with both functions working side by side. Archways to rear yards and lanes integrated back of site, workshops and outdoor



<sup>1</sup> Rothery, Sean, *The Shops of Ireland*. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin (1978) p.18

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34



space with the commercial space of the shop to the street side. Glazing of shop fronts began towards the end of the seventeenth century.

The development of market towns and villages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was primarily as a place of commerce and trade. Main streets functioned as open market places on Fair Days and buildings lining the streets functioned as both the homes and places of business for permanent shops and services. The traditional form of the main streets consisted of a tight grain of buildings in narrow plot widths, two or three storeys high forming a continuous street edge. Archways and laneways provide access to the rear of the urban blocks.

Shop types included general stores for food and provisions, hardwares, inns and public houses, saddlers, wheelwrights, haberdasheries, cobblers and shoe shops, tailors and dressmakers, butchers and slaughterhouses and later dispensaries, pharmacies, bookshops and other more specialist luxury goods stores.



MARKET SQUARE LETTERKENNY



Pattern books of architectural styles became widespread in the late eighteenth century giving rise to a common language of design and detailing of shop fronts, with advice on the use of architectural orders, proportion, joinery details and materials.

The shop front itself was the best advertisement for the business, with the name of the proprietors above the display windows an important signifier of the personal connection between people and trade.

With the introduction of a wider spanning beam across the display window or windows and door, the presence of the shop front occupied a greater proportion of the ground floor of buildings. In the nineteenth century these larger shop fronts began to form an almost continuous commercial ground floor along main streets that give the characteristic identity to urban 'living over the shop' typology.



The late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century was the key period of development of shop fronts in rural towns and villages. Availability and speciality of services developed and competition between traders encouraged elaboration of shop fronts as the main form of advertisement for businesses. Larger glass sizes and thinner mullions allowed for greater 'transparency' of the display windows. Goods were often also hung or placed outside of shops, or in the recessed doorways, as commonly found in Donegal. Signwriting, which may have been carried out by specialist craftsmen who travelled between a number of towns and villages, gave a local identity to the shop fronts.

Public houses became licensed in the late nineteenth century, formalising the pub as distinct from the now illegal sheebeen. Many public houses also traded in groceries, bottling whiskey and stout on the premises for sale, and selling tea, sugar, flour and other commodities by weight.

Historic photographs offer us a glimpse of what this hey-day of shop front design was like. On market days and fair days in particular the public space of the street is filled with life and trade, as farming communities came to towns to buy and sell livestock and purchase provisions with



their income. In some towns specialist areas traded in particular goods – such as the shambles, butter market or fish market. The memory of these functions can often still be seen in the names of streets or areas within towns today. The absence of street furniture, street signage, lighting poles and cars offer a less cluttered sense of space than that of today.

Access to the living accommodation on the upper floors could be from the space of the shop itself or via a separate doorway that may be integrated into the shop front or separate and to one side. In Donegal single entrances are quite common, indicating the family owned nature of many businesses. This single entrance through the shop meant that the shop entrance was effectively also the front door of the home. As living above the shop became less popular in the late twentieth century, upper levels of these buildings were relegated to store room function or left vacant. Where a single entrance existed it became difficult to have separate occupancies on different levels and this has remained a challenge today in facilitating full occupancy of space in the centre of rural villages and towns.

While increasing car-based commuter patterns have posed a particular challenge to small town based shops, there is however a growing realisation that for retailers a well-designed shop front can increase the value of their products and that customers are looking for a more personal shopping experience and, where possible, locally sourced goods. Towns and villages that have taken up this challenge by focusing on a high standard of shop front design in tandem with other public realm initiatives are reaping the rewards of higher footfall and turnover, as well as the social and cultural benefits of well-designed built environments.







**Mc LOONE'S BAR**  
LICENSED TO SELL WINE, BEER & SPIRITS SEVEN DAYS

BAR



# Donegal Shop Fronts

*Donegal's location in the north west of Ireland lends a unique identity to the character of its traditional shop fronts.*

Its relative remoteness has resulted in a range of quite simple shop fronts, which reflect the vernacular traditions of the area and cumulatively describe the character of the place. According to Donegal sign writer Gerry McGarrigle, 'from the small country shop, which has almost vanished, to the centre feature of most towns, a central hotel, every kind of business, from pubs, bars, restaurants, cafes, estate agents, solicitors offices, hardware stores and bakeries all endeavoured in the day to give an attractive and eye catching front in order to establish and promote that particular business or enterprise.'<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Gerry McGarrigle, sign writer, Donegal

## *The Rural House - Shop - Pub*

This typology describes a house in a rural area which also contains a commercial function, usually as a general provisions shop and/or public house. In some cases a farming function may also be associated with the property. Entrances to the house and shop can be combined or separate. This typology demonstrates a combination of domestic and commercial 'language' – small differences in window details reveal the distinction between the house and the shop. Signage is usually simple, consisting of painted sign writing and raised render panels. Colour can be used to aid visual identity.





## *The Village Shop*

The village shop presents a scale up from the rural house, in that the shop is connected with its immediate small scale urban context and the shop is part of the public space of the street. This may be signified by a recessed threshold, differentiated window patterns or the use of ironmongery for grilles or railings. They are usually associated with a shop as part of a family house and so tend to bear the family name as the 'commercial identity' of the premises. Raised render lettering is a common form of signage for this type.



## The Town Shop

The town shop is part of the fabric of the principal streets of rural towns. Diversity of retail offering creates a greater variety of shop types. The shops may or may not be associated with an integrated dwelling function above. Increasingly upper floors are used for storage only. Retail competition increases the need for eye catching shop window displays and signage. The display windows become larger, as do entrance doorways so that the whole of the ground floor of the building is given over to the shop front. Timber and raised render are the most common materials to be found in these shop fronts in Donegal, with some examples from the twentieth century demonstrating use of tiles, Vitrolite and chrome glazing bars. Lettering is hugely important for the town shop and wonderful examples of signage comprising raised render lettering, timber lettering and painted sign writing can be found throughout the county towns.

The relationship between the shop front and the building of which it is a part can be more difficult to maintain in this type as tenants of shops and owners of the buildings may not share an overall vision for the maintenance and detailing of the whole building. This is a particular challenge for this type.





D O H E R T Y S

WARNING NOTICE  
Prohibited from entering  
without proper  
identification  
PLEASE  
STAY OUT



# Shop Front Elements

*Traditional shop fronts may include a combination of the following elements:*

**Entablature** is the name given to the horizontal band supported by vertical elements. In shop fronts it comprises the fascia, or signboard, cornice, cappings and consoles. It can vary from the simplest signboard to the most intricate ensemble of moulded elements. The proportion of the height of the entablature to the overall height of the shop front is usually 1:6.

**Consoles** form the end pieces to the fascia and the capitals to the pilasters. They are traditionally in the form of an 'S' from top to bottom and can vary from simple to elaborately carved or moulded.

**Pilaster** describes the attached columns, which provide a vertical frame for the shop front. They are usually detailed with moulded head and base elements.

The **Stall Riser** and/or **Plinth** refer to the area between the bottom of the shop window(s) and the ground. It provides a visually solid base to the shop front and offers protection at ground level.

The **Shop Window** is the most obvious place for display of goods and can be considered in depth as well as elevation. Framing for shop windows can be divided by vertical mullions and horizontal transoms, occasionally with opening vents.

Single glazing is used in traditional shop fronts, occasionally combined with textured glass in fanlights. Shop windows often have a deep internal cill, allowing for the placement of display goods. In some shops where visibility to the interior is not required inner shutters or screens can be used to maintain privacy, for example in public houses. Window lettering can offer extra detailed signage, in particular on fanlights.

The **Doorway** can be single or double leaf, solid or glazed and often has a fanlight above. Doorways are often recessed from the street to allow a threshold space for entry. The surface of this threshold is often tiled or terrazzo, sometimes with the proprietor's name set into it. Ironmongery is usually simple and robust. Some shops have double doorways, or internal porches. This allows the street doorway to remain open during the day, with an inner door providing a weather barrier. Where dual function exists, doors can either be shared by the residential and shop owners, or have separate entrances. Often the dwelling entrance is slightly smaller or less intricate to denote a private function.

When brought together with thought, these elements can be combined to provide an endless variety of shop fronts and contribute to the unique character of place in the built environment. Whether maintaining existing traditional shop fronts, or designing a new shop front, it is vital to take into account the tradition, knowledge and experience that has contributed to an established language of shop front design.







J. DAVIS  
GENERAL  
MERCHANT

# Local Character & Detail

## Material

**Wood** was the primary material used to form the traditional framework for a shop front and its common elements of entablature and pilasters and in some cases the stall risers. These served both functional and decorative purposes: the entablature created the space for the signboard and lettering (and threw rain off the shop front below) and the vertical pilasters supported this horizontal element at either end. Together they frame the shop display window and door and provide much of the character of the shop front. Wood turning skills developed more elaborate details for these elements and for the consoles, which evolved as decorative stop ends for the entablature, often as a double 'S' volute. Wood is also frequently used in rural shops to form lettering and local variation in letter types provides much of the unique character of place.

**Timber** is also the most commonly found material for windows of traditional shop fronts. Timber sections can be profiled to add vertical emphasis and elegance to a shop window that can relate better to the proportions of openings in the building overhead. Donegal sign writer Gerry McGarrigle points out that a range of high quality hardwoods were used in traditional shop fronts, as they were robust, hard wearing and could be maintained to last for many years.





**Raised plaster or Stucco** is a commonly found material in traditional shop fronts in Donegal. Render could be used to form a shop front by adding layers of render giving relief or detail and/or by applying moulded plaster elements such as letters, cornices or consoles to add relief or detail. Often in small rural shops the shop front consists solely of a raised render panel with either painted or raised render lettering. Colour and type are used to define the character of the place in these shops.

**Paint** was used to protect the shop fronts from weathering, but also to give a local identity to the premises. Proper preparation and application of base coats, primers and fillers, prior to final coats was important to ensure the maximum protection of the timber elements.

**Glass.** Shop front glazing uses single glazed panes of float glass. Some shops combine part stained glass to add decorative detail and/or painted lettering on glass. Examples of painted or etched lettering on glass are particularly fragile remnants of traditional shop fronts and where they exist they should be carefully maintained.



**Vitrolite**, which is a solid colour glass panel manufactured by Pilkington between the 1930s and 1960s was often combined with chrome glazing bars and lettering. A few lovely examples of black Vitrolite shop fronts can still be seen in Donegal. Unfortunately as Vitrolite is no longer manufactured repair and maintenance of these shop fronts is challenging. Where it exists it should be carefully maintained as an example of a particular period in Irish shop front design.

**Tile** can be used in recessed thresholds and often includes the shop or proprietor's name inlaid, serving both a functional, commercial and decorative function. Tile is also on occasion used vertically on stall risers, or in some types of shops is carried as an internal surface outward.

## *Craft*

A good shop front relies on both quality design and skill in its execution. Many traditional shop fronts did not undergo a formal design, but instead were the result of cumulative skill and craft of local tradespeople, including joiners, plasterers, sign writers, tilers, and glazers. The value and long knowledge of craftsmanship cannot be underestimated when considering maintenance and care of existing shop fronts and the manufacture and installation of new shop fronts. Where possible local skill and craft should be supported in the ongoing process of caring for traditional shop fronts in Donegal.

## *Colour*

Where colour is an important part of the character of a village or town the colour of shop fronts and buildings can play an important role in reinforcing this character. Variety of colour plays an important role in establishing the identity and charm of place. Regular maintenance of painted render facades is an economical way to ensure the upkeep of the visual amenity of streets. It is recommended that shop owners be encouraged and supported to regularly and skillfully maintain painted elements of their buildings.





## Signage

The signage and artwork on a shop front is the key connection for customers with the business of the shop. It is also one of the most important elements that gives the shop its particular character and unique identity, to distinguish it from its competitors. Signage can be painted or applied to a signboard, embossed onto windows or glazing in doors, be repeated on projecting signs and/or detailed into tiled or terrazzo thresholds. Where applied as part of the signboard traditional signage was usually timber, or raised render, but could also be metal (chrome, brass, bronze, steel or aluminium). Each method of sign making and sign writing is a skilled craft. Traditional shop fronts often display examples of bespoke, sometimes slightly crude and oversized typefaces that lend a unique character to the shop but also to the place. Often symbols such as apostrophes, ampersands and full stops are used to give a unique character to the sign. Similar sign and lettering types can sometimes be connected with an area and may have been made and used by a particular craftsman working in one locality. These examples of handcrafted lettering are an important and irreplaceable part of the quality of traditional shop front design and should be treated with care and maintained by skilled painters. Donegal is host to a beautiful range of Irish language painted signs, which contribute to the culture and heritage of the area.

Where the original signage still exists in a traditional shop front it should ideally be maintained. Sometimes new signboards have been placed over the originals that remain intact below. If these older traces survive they should ideally be restored. In making new shop fronts craftspeople should be supported and encouraged to refer to the design language of the area in making new signs. Commonly available modern typefaces, which form a generic look, are not suitable for shop signage.





**Teac Tomás**

**THOMAS M<sup>c</sup> BRIDE (MIDDLETOWN) L<sup>TD</sup>.**

Abharr

FOSCAITE

LADHAIR  
GAELGE  
LITH

Abharr  
Chriocata Calain C

## Accessories

External shop front illumination should not usually be required. Where it is deemed to be necessary, illumination should be discreet and avoid projecting fittings or backlight signboards. Recessed strip lighting may in certain circumstances be used to illuminate the signboard.

Canopies can be an integral part of a shop front but should be designed in such a way (that when in the closed position) as to retract into neat housing above the signboard and below the fascia. Retractable arms should be unobtrusive in both the open and closed positions. The colour, fabric and pattern of canopies should complement the design of the shop front itself and not contain overly fussy advertising or branding. Simple colours and signage work best.

Wiring on the face of a building should be kept to an absolute minimum and avoided or re-routed internally where possible. Where wiring is deemed to be absolutely necessary it should be recessed and fixed neatly and securely in place over the fascia so as not be visible from the street.

Ironmongery includes door handles, letterboxes, railings, guardings and other metal furniture or elements used as part of the shop front. Door handles should be generally simple and of good quality steel, bronze or brass with complementary hinges, push/pull plates, kicker plates, letterboxes and floor springs where needed. Letterboxes may be integrated into solid timber doors. Where existing ironmongery survives it is recommended that it be retained wherever possible, or replaced with similar ironmongery if necessary.





THE CENTRAL





## *Part 2:*

# Guidance & Statutory Requirements

*A well designed, detailed and maintained shop front can serve as the best advertisement for any business. Whether improving an existing shop front or designing a new one the following principles apply.*

*Ladies Fashions*

ERNEST

SPEER

*Gents*

*Outfitters*

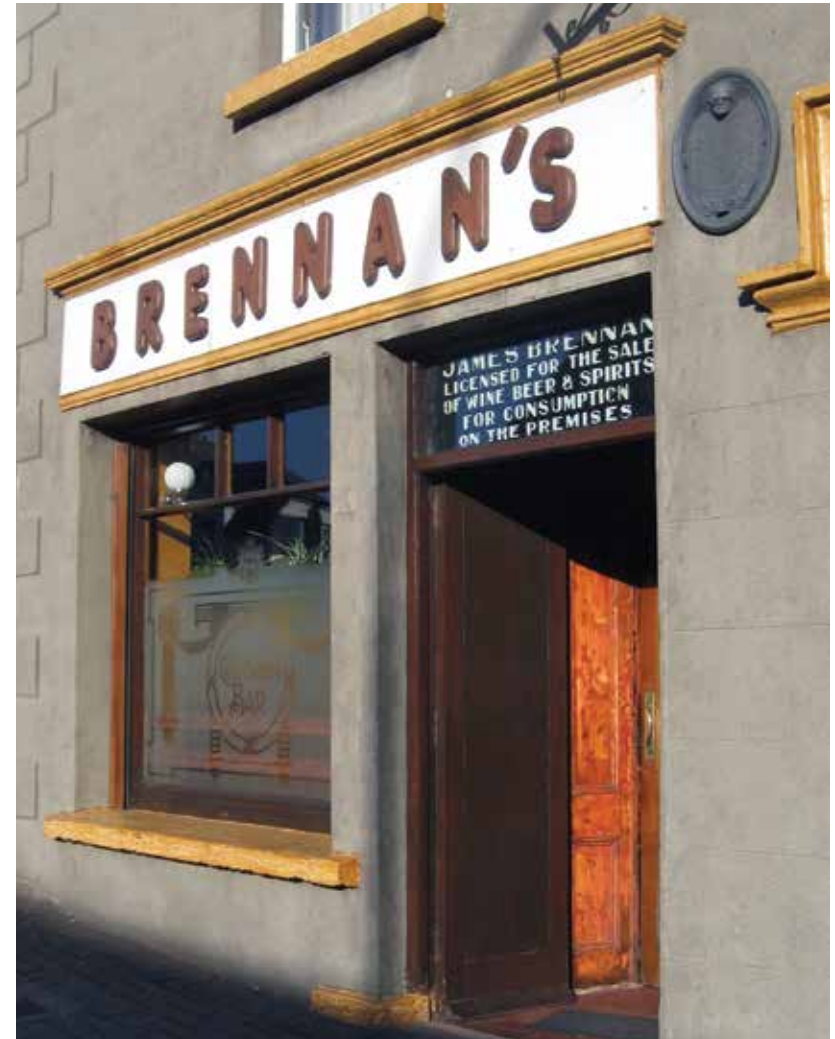
GOLDSMITHS

# Guiding Principles for Design

*The shop front can be considered at two distinct scales: that of the context and that of the detailed shop front design.*

*Design of the shop front at the scale of the **Context** should consider the shop front in relation to:*

1. **The Shop front and the street/town/village**
2. **The shop front and the building overhead**
3. **The shop front and its immediate neighbours.**



## 1. The shop front and the street/town/village

Shop fronts do not exist in isolation. They are part of the fabric of the place where they are situated. This may be a town, a village or a local rural crossroads. In each case shop fronts have traditionally evolved and responded to this context and in turn contributed to the overall morphology of place. This explains why the form of the shop front in Donegal may be different to that in other counties, or why the form of shop fronts in Letterkenny may differ in character and design to those in Mountcharles, for example. The scale, historic development, availability of materials and skills and commercial character of a place, all contribute to the local tradition in shop front design.

It is therefore important that surviving traditional shop fronts be retained, maintained and cared for as shops change hands and that new signage be sensitively designed to take this broader context and character into account. Shop fronts may be afforded statutory protection under a variety of designations, for example Protected Structure designation, or listing on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage. They may also be designated under broader designations of Architectural Conservation Areas or recognized as part of an important streetscape, such as Area of Special Townscape Character within Local Area Plans.

New shop fronts should firstly address this overall context of the town or village when considering the appropriate scale, materials and design of new shop fronts. An understanding of the historical development of the place can help to inform the appropriate use of materials and details that comprise the shop front. Local variety, for example in the use of particular sign writing, raised render lettering, or use of tiles in the stall riser for example, could inform the design of new shop fronts that complement the existing character of a place.





## 2. The shop front and the building overhead

The shop front is just one integral part of the fabric of its building, but other details of the building play an important role in the support of both the integrity of the shop front and the overall character and attractiveness of the place. The principle supporting elements of buildings include the windows, render, rainwater goods (gutters, downpipes, fascias and soffits), chimneys, roof materials, and building accessories, which include cables and wires, lighting, canopies, shutters and alarms.

Where traditional shop fronts remain, supporting building elements including windows are an important part of the reading of the shop front. As such inappropriate pvc or aluminium windows are discouraged, and high quality timber sliding sash windows are preferable. Cables on the elevation should be kept to the interior of the building where possible, and where it is unavoidable to run them on the face of the building, they should be kept to a minimum and discreetly fixed along the top of entablatures or sign boards where they remain visually unobtrusive. Security shutters and boxes on the outside of the glass line are to be discouraged. Projecting lighting and signboards are generally not appropriate. Timber fascias and soffits should be used and gutters and rain water pipes with simple neat profiles are recommended. Existing doorways and entrances from the street level to upper floors should be maintained where they exit to facilitate future upper floor uses.

In the case of new buildings and shop fronts, details of the building overhead should complement the design of the shop front. The proportion of openings, the detailed design of cills, jambs, quoins, raised render details, and rain water goods should read as an integral design, of which the shop front is the strongest visual feature, complemented by the detailed design of the building. Failure to consider the design and detail of the building as a whole, and in relation to the street, can result in the building and/or its parts appearing out of proportion.

## 3. The shop front and its immediate neighbours

New shop front and building design in rural towns and villages should respect the streetscape, plot width and parapet height of the neighbouring buildings. It is particularly important to consider the junctions of the shop front conditions at its edges and how it relates to the adjacent shop fronts. Size and proportion of entablatures, sign boards, stall risers, doorways should be considered in the context of the adjacent buildings, so as to complement but not to imitate the neighbouring design. The character of many rural towns' streets derives from a complementary variety of shop fronts, which differ in detail but avoid clashes and abrupt or crude junctions.

## *Design of the shop front at the scale of the **Detail** should consider the following:*

### **Simple Design**

The traditional shop front in Donegal is generally quite simple and robust. Avoid over-design, clutter, overly fussy detailing.

### **Composition**

The shop front should be designed as part of the overall composition of the street, the building and the shop front itself. Openings should relate those overhead heights and edge details should be composed in relation to neighbouring shop fronts. A continuous shop front across multiple buildings is to be avoided. The aim is to achieve harmony, not uniformity.

### **Proportion**

Proportion of the shop front, and the proportional relationships of the shop front elements to each other, and that of the whole shop front to the building is one of the most important principles of good design for shop fronts. The height of the fascia is generally  $\frac{1}{6}$  the height of the shop front. Avoid overly wide shop fronts, the general rule of thumb is a height to width ratio of the roughly 1:1.25.

The shop front should not project too far from the façade of the host building; fascias generally project no more than 150mm and pilasters no more than 50-60mm (not including consoles). Shop windows are usually in proportion to the windows of the whole building, a height to width ratio of 1.6:1 is usual. Overly wide door or window opes should be avoided.

### **Shop Type**

Particular types of shops can have their own character. Traditional shop fronts for pharmacies differ from those for hardware or butchers shops for example. Where possible the shop front should reflect the type of premises. This adds to local variety and street life. Choice of materials and colour can reinforce the function, for example the timber in pubs and general shops, tile in butchers, or glass and chrome in pharmacies can help to underline the diverse tapestry of shop fronts.

### **Materials**

Materials should be chosen for their quality and appropriateness. Quality hardwoods from sustainable sources are a robust and

hardwearing choice. The use of consoles can master the end grains to prevent water ingress. Raised render is a common material used in traditional shop fronts in Donegal and can provide simple and elegant relief. Tile is less commonly used, but can be very successfully employed in recessed thresholds to provide a unique character to a premises, that is also hard wearing. Stone is generally only suitable for use in institutional premises such as banks and public buildings. It is generally not appropriate as a cladding on an everyday shop front.

### **Signage & Lettering**

Signage should be clear and simple and generally only contain the name of the premises or proprietor and the street number. Where traditional signage exists on a shop front it should be maintained. Signage and lettering can be applied hardwood or plaster letters, fixed directly to the signboard without spacers. Traditionally these were handcrafted to local typefaces and given unique character by the use of apostrophes, ampersands and full stops. Commonly used contemporary typefaces as used for body type in publishing are generally not appropriate in shop front

TEAC  
MASSIE  
OAN

design. Hand painted signs can be an elegant and local distinctive way of identifying a shop and use of skilled sign writing is encouraged. Colour and style is important and clues for design can be found in the local choices in the area, village or town. Hand painted signwriting is particularly common in Donegal, where finely designed and executed examples still exist, from which inspiration can be drawn. Irish language signs are encouraged, particularly in Gaeltacht areas.

### Detailing

Good design of the elements of a shop front, including the sign board, fascia, glazing mullions, doors, plinths and stall risers can ensure that the shop front will be hard wearing, and importantly create a good impression of the attractiveness of the place and of the goods on sale within the shop. Shop fronts should be detailed so as to repel water away from the façade; sign boards should angle slightly inwards from top to bottom; cornices should project beyond the sign board to throw rainwater off and should be flashed with lead into the main façade. Cills should be deep enough and lipped to throw rainwater off and stall risers should be detailed to provide a robust junction between the footpath and the shop front.

In addition to the above, detailing should reflect the overall language of the area, and in most cases in Donegal this is generally a relatively simple unfussy language, that allows elements such as lettering, window proportion or colour provide most of the visual identity and interest.

### Skills & Crafts

The skills and crafts associated with quality traditional shop fronts should be considered when maintaining existing shop fronts or designing and detailing new ones. These skills include joinery and woodturning, sign writing, raised render work (or stucco), metalwork and tiling. It is recommended that specialist craftspeople be involved in any conservation or restoration work to existing traditional shop fronts, and that where possible new shop fronts avail of these crafts and skills, which remain a relevant and valuable resource of experience and knowledge and which can inform designs which are hard-wearing, robust and beautiful.

### Maintenace & Repair

Well designed and constructed shop fronts will aid the efficient removal of water so that it does not lodge on the shopfront where it may eventually rot woodwork. Painted shop fronts should be cleaned regularly to remove any dust, dirt or organic matter which might hold water against the paintwork or prevent efficient water throw off. The flashing over the cornice is usually lead or copper and prevents water getting behind the woodwork. It is important to inspect flashings to ensure that they remain impenetrable to water. Micro-porous paint is recommended, particularly in south facing locations as this paint will tolerate greater thermal and moisture movement in the timber shopfront. Cracks and joints should be filled with flexible filler suitable for external use. When re-decorating, prepare the surface well to ensure there is a sound background surface. Fill and renew any badly damaged timber or mouldings. Avoid a heavy build-up of paint which can conceal problems and hide elaborately carved details. Flaking paint due to age should be removed, sanded, primed, undercoated and painted.





HARDWARE  
W.H. RAITT & SON

BUILDERS PROVIDERS

W.H. RAITT & SON FIREARMS DEALERS

CAR PARK

RECORD POWER  
Clearwood

# CAMPBELLS

AIDAN CAMPBELL



**WARNING**  
THESE PREMISES ARE PROTECTED BY  
CLOSED CIRCUIT TELEVISION WITH VIDEO  
REPLAY FACILITY AND ARE ELECTRICALLY  
SECURED BY  
SECURITY SYSTEMS LIMITED  
0800 200 000

**Aidan Campbell**  
M.A.P.A.V.  
Auctioneers & Valuers

N56  
DUNGLOE  
TO  
LEITIRMACAWARD  
CPO'S  
NEGOTIATED  
ON YOUR BEHALF

**Auctioneer &  
Property Valuer**

# Shop Front Improvement Design Checklist & FAQs

## Context

### 1. How do I assess the existing character of my building?

You should firstly establish if your building is a Protected Structure, included in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, and if the building is located in an Architectural Conservation Area. If the answer to either question is 'yes', you should consult your local Conservation Officer and Planning Officer before considering any works to an existing or new shop front. Assess the quality and design of the street and the host building to consider how any new shop front or work to an existing shop front might best be informed by what is already there, in relation to composition, colour, material, detail and design language. Professional design advice from an architect familiar with the local area and best conservation practice is recommended.

## Existing Shop Fronts

### 2. I want to change the use of the building. What should I do?

Change of use may require Planning Permission, so you should firstly establish whether the change of use you are proposing requires, or is exempt from Planning Permission. You get advice on this requirement from your local Planning Officer. If Planning Permission is required, professional advice from a registered architect should be sought and consultation with the local Planning Officer on any specific requirements,

is advised. If Planning Permission is not required, you should assess the character of the building and follow the recommended steps outlined (see Point 1 above).

### 3. I want to make changes to the fabric of the building.

#### What should I do?

You should firstly assess the quality of the building and shop front. Helpful criteria include the following:

- a. *Is the premises important as part of the architectural heritage of the area?*
- b. *Is the shop front original?*
- c. *Does the shop front still display any original or unique details or features including opes, entablatures, lettering or sign writing, recessed thresholds, window details? Bear in mind that some may be covered over by later additions but still present.*
- d. *What condition are these features currently and do they require skilled conservation or restoration?*
- e. *Are there any features in the host building that could be improved in order to better highlight the shop front? For example could pvc windows be replaced or upgraded with timber sliding sash windows, could wiring be relocated internally, could additions such as projecting signs, fixed extraneous signs, lighting or canopies be removed to allow the shop front and building to integrate more sensitively with its context?*



#### 4. I wish to change the signage and lettering on my shop front.

##### What should I do?

You can firstly discuss this with your local Planning Officer who will offer advice about how best to go about this. It may be possible to retain existing lettering in a new premises in a way that highlights the heritage value of the previous shop. New lettering where required, should adhere to the design principles described in this document and executed to a high standard. Replacement of existing shop fronts with inappropriate materials such as pvc or aluminium is to be avoided. New shop fronts and/or new shop front elements should benefit both the host building and the context of the area. Any new design should augment and not detract from the existing character of the place. Irish language signs are encouraged, particularly in Gaeltacht areas.

#### 5. I wish to add a shop front as part of a new building. What should I do?

Similar principles of consideration of context, composition and proportion apply to new buildings as to existing ones. The building and the shop front should add to the character of the area, whether this is part of an existing street or a new urban context. Professional design advice is recommended. Detailing of materials can be simple and the best possible materials and skilled craftsmanship should be used. Timber, render and tile are among the most suitable materials in the Donegal context. Sign writing and lettering can add a unique local character to the shop.

Lighting, visible wiring and services, canopies and other accessories should be minimized and where possible avoided. The proposed use of the shop can inform the design and detailing. Simple, elegant shop fronts can add value to an individual shop front and to an area, make the place more inviting thereby increasing footfall and adding value to goods for sale. It is therefore also in the commercial interest of shop owners to

achieve the best possible shop front.

#### 6. What common pitfalls should I try to avoid?

Common mistakes to be avoided in relation to shop front design include the following:

- a. *Lack of consideration of the context of the host building and area*
- b. *Discarding of existing features*
- c. *Badly proportioned elements – too large or too small*
- d. *Overly wide and/or low shop windows*
- e. *Use of poor quality materials such as plastic, aluminium, plywood mdf.*
- f. *Use of inappropriate materials such as thin-cut stone cladding*
- g. *Poor quality or excessive signage using generic typefaces.*
- h. *Poorly detailed weathering preventing water throw off from cornices and cills.*
- i. *Projecting lighting, visible wiring, PVC replacement windows in host building and extraneous accessories adding to overall sense of 'clutter'.*
- j. *Badly designed window vinyl advertisements*
- k. *Unconsidered 'imitation' shop fronts, sometimes referred to as pastiche.*

#### 7. Who should I ask for more advice?

Your local Conservation Officer, Planning Officer and the Heritage Officer, Donegal County Council, can offer you further advice. Professional design advice from a registered architect should also be sought. The following contacts may be also be useful:

##### Donegal County Council

[www.donegalcoco.ie](http://www.donegalcoco.ie) | Tel. 074 915 3900

##### The Heritage Council

[www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie) | Tel. 056 777 0777

##### The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland (RIAI)

[www.riai.ie](http://www.riai.ie) | Tel. 01 676 1703



# Planning Guidance

*The following works with regard to shop fronts require Planning Permission:*

1. **New shop front**
2. **Alterations to an existing façade including an existing shop front**
3. **Change of use to a shop**
4. **Works to a Protected Structure, a structure on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage or a structure within an Architectural Conservation Area**

The Planning and Development Acts and Planning and Development Regulations set out the statutory requirements regarding the need for planning permission and include some exemptions in the case of change of use, advertisements, and changes to the external fabric of buildings. Therefore, if you are considering undertaking works in relation to a new or existing shop front, it is advisable to contact your local planner or conservation officer or to discuss it with a registered architect.

Drawings which design professionals might prepare to support applications in relation to shop fronts include context plans and elevations at a scale of 1:100; plans, sections and elevations at a scale of 1:20, details of joinery sections at key junctions at a scale of 1:5, and written and drawn specification for signage, materials, ironmongery, lighting and/or canopies.

In general Donegal County Council will encourage and support retention, conservation and good maintenance of existing traditional shop fronts. Where a new shop front is considered to be appropriate, a high quality contemporary design, in accordance with the guidance within this document may be considered.

# Image Credits

- |      |  |      |  |
|------|--|------|--|
| P.i  | Main Street, Letterkenny [courtesy of National Library of Ireland]   | P.19 | A. Gamble & Co. Ltd., Ramelton [OM]            |
| P.1  | Buchanan's, Ramelton [courtesy of Laura Buchanan]                    | P.21 | Blue Stack Lounge Bar, Donegal Town [JG]       |
| P.3  | John Barr, Buncrana [JG]   | P.22 | J. Davis, Liscooley [JG]                       |
| P.4  | Corner House, Ardara [OM]  | P.23 | G.D. Cassidy, South Donegal [JG]               |
| P.5  | Gillespie Bros., Mountcharles [JG]                                   | P.24 | Joinery detail, Ernest Speer, Letterkenny [OM] |
| P.6  | Main Street, Letterkenny [courtesy of National Library of Ireland]   | P.24 | Dunlevy's, Donegal Town [OM]                   |
| P.7  | Main Street, Mountcharles [OM]                                       | P.25 | Mulhern's Corner Bar, Dungloe [JG]             |
| P.8  | Mulhern's Footwear, Dungloe [JG]                                     | P.26 | J. Henderson & Son, Donegal Town [OM]          |
| P.9  | Market Square, Letterkenny [courtesy of National Library of Ireland] | P.27 | Teach Thomáis, Derrybeg [JG]                   |
| p.10 | Main Street, Ballyshannon [courtesy of National Library of Ireland]  | P.28 | Doherty's Fishing Tackle [OM]                  |
| P.11 | Main Street, Glenties [courtesy of National Library of Ireland]      | P.29 | The Central, Ardara [JG]                       |
| P.12 | Vacant shop, Killybegs [OM]  | P.31 | Ernest Speer, Letterkenny [JG]                 |
| P.13 | McLoone's Bar, Maas Crossroads [OM]                                  | P.32 | Brennan's, Bundoran [JG]                       |
| P.14 | The Scotsman's Bar, Donegal Town [JG]                                | P.33 | The Bridge Bar, Ardara [JG]                    |
| P.15 | J. Davis, Liscooley [JG]   | P.33 | George Irwin & Sons, Donegal Town [OM]         |
| P.15 | Conway's Off License, Ramelton [OM]                                  | P.36 | Teach Maggie Dan, Gort an Choirce [JG]         |
| P.16 | Young's General Store, Ardara [JG]                                   | P.38 | W.H. Raitt & Son, Stranorlar [JG]              |
| P.16 | Ferguson's, Dunkineely [OM]  | P.39 | Campbell's, Glenties [OM]                      |
| P.17 | M. McGettigan & Sons, Donegal Town [JG]                              | P.44 | Mulhern's, Mountcharles [JG]                   |
| P.17 | A. Gamble & Co. Ltd., Ramelton [OM]                                  | P.45 | Mourne Antiques, Letterkenny [JG]              |
| P.18 | Doherty's, Donegal Town [OM]   |      |  |

All photographs are credited to Joseph Gallagher [JG] or Orla Murphy [OM] unless otherwise stated.

# Further Reading & Sources

- Sean Rothery, *The Shops of Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin (1978)
- Heike Thiele and Winifred McNulty, *High Shelves and Long Counters: Stories of Irish Shops*, The History Press Ireland (2012)
- Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, *Architectural Heritage Protection – Guidance for Planning Authorities*, Chapter 13 (2011)
- National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, *An Introduction to the Architectural Heritage of County Donegal*, NIAH (2014)
- Mayo County Council Heritage Office, *Mayo Shopfronts*, Mayo County Council (2011)
- National Library of Ireland Photographic Archive: <http://www.nli.ie/en/photographs-introduction.aspx>



## Further Information

If you would like further information or advice in relation to the conservation of traditional shop fronts and vernacular signage in County Donegal, please contact the Conservation Office or the County Donegal Heritage Office, Donegal County Council. Free copies of this booklet are available from:

County Donegal Heritage Office,  
Donegal County Council,  
Station Island,  
Lifford,  
County Donegal.  
Telephone: (074) 917 2576  
E-mail: [heritage@donegalcoco.ie](mailto:heritage@donegalcoco.ie)

This publication can be downloaded free-of-charge from the County Donegal Heritage Office website at: [www.donegalcoco.ie/heritage](http://www.donegalcoco.ie/heritage)



**Comhairle Contae  
Dhún na nGall**  
Donegal County Council

An Action of the County Donegal Heritage Plan



architecture design research

An Chomhairle Oidhreacht  
The Heritage Council



ISBN 978-0-9927708-3-9



9 780992 770839