# Geashill

## Public Realm Study

# Introduction

Geashill is a small and beautiful village in the Irish county of Offaly. It was laid out in the 19th Century by the Digby family and has, unlike many modern day villages, managed to retain much of its original charm and character. It is therefore of great importance that local people, in partnership with the County Council and others, work to understand, protect and enhance these salient qualities, whilst also considering how best to improve the village as a place in which to live.

This document summarises the findings of a short process undertaken with the community in April 2012 to analyse Geashill's public realm and to put forward suggestions about for its future. It serves not as a definitive text, but as a useful starting point for a process to be continued by local residents, Offaly County Council and all those who share a passion for the village.

# Public Realm

Public realm is a term used to describe outdoor areas that are accessible to the public. This includes streets, parks, roads and paths, as well as car parks, play areas, cemeteries and other open spaces. Together with the elements within it, such as trees, benches and lights and with the buildings around it, the public realm plays a major role in determining how a place looks and functions.

# The Process

The local people of Geashill have for many years carried out a number of works to improve the public realm of the village, including the notable success in the Tidy Towns competition in 2011. Throughout that time they have worked closely with Offaly County Council and with the Heritage Officer Amanda Pedlow, a number of initiatives have recently emerged. This includes work with a blacksmith to understand the characteristics of Geashill's distinctive metal work and the process summarised by this document to analyse the public realm of the village.

With funding provided by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, a professional urban design and landscape architecture consultant was appointed by Offaly County Council. James Hennessey of The Paul Hogarth Company conducted a site visit around Geashill and then facilitated a daylong workshop with local residents on Saturday 21 April 2012 in the Old School. The work contained in this document is therefore the result of a collaborative process, driven by local people, guided and collated by the consultant.

# The Facts

The village of Geashill is located along the R420 road between Tullamore, County Offaly, and Portarlington, straddling the border with Laois. It sits in a relatively flat area of fertile arable land, with the exception of a glacial esker upon which the castle is located and peat bogs to the north and south. Geashill has an estimated population of 500 people, housed in around 150 dwellings and supported by a National School, a GAA pitch, a handful of shops and public houses.

The village is formed around a triangular green, comprised of grass, low walls and mature trees. To either side of the green are three roads; including a lesser road to the south used to access houses, National School and Old School. Importantly, the green is also surrounded by a combination of terraced and detached properties, the majority of which are 1 storey 19th Century cottages designed in unison. To the north of the green behind a high stone wall lies St Mary's Church of Ireland and beyond to the ruins of Geashill Castle. Elsewhere in the village houses are located along the 4 main routes out of Geashill and two housing estates to the north and south. Finally two other notable features are the much loved Ballydownan thatch house and the Glebe Walk, a strip of mature woodland and pathway.

# Geashill of Yesterday

During the community workshop, local residents were invited to participate in two exercises relating to the history of the village.   Firstly a timeline of Geashill was jointly prepared, revealing not only the significance of major historical events, but also smaller moments that are important to local people and that have contributed to the evolution of the village.

The second workshop exercise involved an analysis of historic photographs of the village. Viewed together, the photos provided by Offaly County Council courtesy of the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society, paint a wonderfully rich picture of Geashill.   Immediate observations are that the town has remained relatively intact, with the majority of buildings in situ and places easily recognised today.   Another notable feature is the lack of vehicles on the roads. Whilst this is unsurprising, the imagery of streets so quiet that people can walk along them, combined with the absence of modern day infrastructure of signs, lights, railings, cables and road markings, is in stark contrast with the situation today.  Clearly times have changed, but are there lessons that we can learn from the past to inform the future of Geashill's public realm?

# Geashill of Today

Understanding and recording the way in which Geashill looks and functions today is a fundamental first step towards thinking about its future. Only by objectively analysing the village can one identify the specific qualities that combine to create its special identity, as well as those features that detract from it.

To inform the analysis process, the consultant undertook a site analysis of the village. Participants in the community workshop were also actively involved in the analysis process, walking the village in teams and taking and discussing photographs of the village along the four themes of main streets, back streets, green spaces and edges of the village. The following section summaries the key findings of both these exercises.

# The Green

One of the unique and most attractive aspects of Geashill is unquestionably its triangular green. Greens feature in a number of Irish estate towns, with Killeigh, Cloneygowan, Tyrrellspass and Durrow to name a few. Yet the green at Geashill is an especially fine example, creating a space that is both pleasant to view and to be in. To understand the reasons behind such physical qualities of the green, it is instructive to consider its individual components.

Trees – the green is home to rows of fine mature deciduous trees along its three sides, joined by a singular conifer at its centre. Together the trees play a key role in defining the space, whilst also providing visual and seasonal interest. No doubt the central conifer could be said to mark the centre of the village. Interestingly, the small scale of surrounding architecture means that the trees on the green, as well as in the adjacent churchyard, have a dominant role across much of the village. The trees at the green and indeed at other locations in the village, are therefore a very important component of Geashill's character and their long-term care and eventual replacement requires consideration.

Walls – low stonewalls with rounded copes, charming metal gates and curious 'kissing posts' are a very fine feature of the Geashill and are major contributors to the uniqueness of its character.. The continuous wall around the green creates a sense of enclosure and safety within, particularly from traffic along the adjacent road. Surrounding the green, the walls play a functional role in defining property boundaries. Crucially their low height, combined with the absence of bushy vegetation, gives this part of the village a flowing line of sight across the green, reinforcing its spatial qualities and sense of enclosure. The walls also open views to front gardens around the village, many of which have stunning floral displays. Thanks to the walls and horticultural skills of locals, these exuberant splashes of colour are another great feature of the village.

Grass – an important part of any green is of course its grass. In Geashill's green there is an attractive simplicity to its ground plain, which compared for example to a landscape of paths and fussy flowerbeds, keeps it feeling relaxed and uncluttered. It also gives the space flexibility for many different potential uses.

# Architecture & Urban Design

Forming the green and central streets of Geashill are many fine buildings. Some, such as the Old School and St Mary's Church, are landmark features in their own right. However, it is the relationship and degree of coalescence that the remaining buildings have with one another which is most critical. The consistent use of white render and stone, the similarities in scale and repetition of features, such as tall chimneys, prominent dormers and decorative roof details, create a wonderful built environment  The strength of this character is such, therefore, that buildings that have strayed or entirely departed from this consistency are very noticeable, although few in number. Planning safeguards are urgently needed to ensure that future redevelopment, large or small, does not further erode the unique character of the village.

When new development occurs in Geashill it should add and not detract from its character. The two housing estates in the village are interesting cases in point.  St Oliver's Estate was designed in the 1960s and has an architectural style typical of that era, with few if any discernible design references to the village itself. Only in the layout do we see a nod towards a triangular green, although clearly lacking the finesse of the nearby original. At the other side of the village, the new estate is in fact of a higher than average architectural quality. The buildings are contemporary in style, yet the use of stone and consistency of materials gives the development a certain attraction. What is disappointing, however, is that the urban design of this development takes no cues from the traditional village. Instead, entirely detached properties sit amidst a suburban layout of looped roads, in a style which is alien to Geashill, albeit common elsewhere.

New development in the village should take its cue from both the architecture and the urban design of Geashill. This must not equate to identical copies or pastiche interpretations, which can be as damaging themselves. But architects and planners must demonstrate an understanding of the key elements that make the village so distinctive.

# The Countryside

Geashill is of course a rural village. That means that the surrounding countryside is an important component of its visual character. Views to nearby fields and woodland are a common occurrence throughout Geashill, often through informal visual corridors that exist between buildings and gardens.

This rural relationship is made stronger by physical access to the countryside. In particular the Glebe Walk is a fine feature of the village. This rare strip of mature woodland is clearly of ecological value, with diverse flora and fauna. It is also, as discussed at the community workshop, of great value to local people who enjoy the looped walk it offers. The school also have a strong attachment to it. Such value means that the care of this route is paramount. A woodland management plan is required to ensure that trees are looked after and that through managed natural succession and planting, it remains an attraction for centuries to come. Further more, the walk has potential to be enjoyed by visitors to the village. The walk's eastern entrance feels private and would benefit from some delineation between it and the private driveway it shares. And the walk lacks something of destination. Whilst great care must be taken not to 'over design' the walk, some appropriate seating, interpretative signage and possibly a modest art piece could add to its attraction.

Such is the success of Glebe Walk as resource for local people, one is led to ask are there other opportunities around the village to create similar pathways?

# The Roads

As a village located on a cross roads, Geashill has always experienced through traffic. However, over the years as numbers of vehicles on the road have increased, so has their impact on the village. The main problem with is one of road safety associated with vehicles speeding through the village. This negatively impacts upon the village's otherwise relaxed ambience, introducing a real and a perceived element of danger to pedestrians.

Road safety is a serious issue and a number of traffic accidents, particularly around the cross roads, have necessitated the introduction safety measures. Whilst they will have, no doubt, improved safety to some extent, they have also had a negative impact on the character of the village. Extensive road markings, over scaled signs, traffic lights and other elements jar with the village character described thus far. They introduce a design language that is at home on a busy city bypass and quite foreign to the centre of a small rural settlement.

A challenge is therefore presented to Geashill to find ways in successfully slowing traffic and making it safer, without compromising the unique character of the village. Efforts are required to reduce speeds sufficiently on entrance to the village, thereby reducing the need for overly engineered solutions at its historic core. This could involve a range of measures some of which may involve some traditional highway solutions, but many others that would be public realm led, such as new surface treatments, narrowing roads widths with kerb realignments, trees and low walls, the use of rumble strips and possibly table top crossings. Further detailed research into techniques used elsewhere in Europe would be of benefit in this regard.

First impressions of any place are important and Geashill is no different. Reducing spaces and increasing safety at entrances to the village should form part of a wider project to improve the quality of approach roads into the village.

# Street Elements

Earlier reference was made to signs and lights associated with highway engineering. This relates to a wider issue of street elements throughout the village, which vary greatly in number, location and style. In some areas of Geashill a proliferation of signs detract from its character. This is largely associated with road safety issues which if addressed as suggested earlier, should result in a reduced need for signs. However, scope exists to further limit the use of signs where they play a limited role and detract from the quality of their surroundings.

Geashill has a variety of different benches, bins and bollards, which are generally not in keeping with the style of the village. This lack of consistency and quality is at odds with that described of the village as a whole. Inspiration should be drawn from the many wonderfully rich details, such as the delicately proportioned metalwork and the stone 'kissing posts', to design a family of street furniture elements that belong to Geashill.

# The People

Much reference has been made to the substantive physical qualities of Geashill.   It is, however, the people that make a place most special, generations past and present.

Earlier in this document the importance of Geashill's history was noted, with both major and minor events combining to create the village we see today. Historic interpretation panels were introduced to the village a number of years ago and are relatively successful in giving the visitor a good introduction the history of the Geashill.  However, considerably more scope exists to tell the stories of Geashill, its buildings, open spaces and its people.  This can be achieved through additional, appropriately designed and written interactive panels, taking care not to add to clutter noted previously.  More imaginative solutions should also be considered, with the use of art pieces to convey snippets of the history of the village in a manner that is accessible to all.  Once established, linking these elements and key features of the village together with a town trail would be easily achieved.

The public realm must serve the needs of a community and be useful in its social, cultural and educational wellbeing.  Local residents highlighted the lack of play area as a major absence in the public realm of the village.  Also, scope would appear to exist in Geashill for its public spaces to be put to greater use.  The classic example is the centrally located green, which is ideally suited to hosting all sorts of community events from the recently recreated pig fair, to outdoor coffee mornings, exercise classes, concerts or sculptural exhibitions.    Other less high profile spaces, such as those associated with both housing states, have much potential for greater relevance to, and therefore use by those who live beside them.  The Parish Field is another attractive, well-located space with many possibilities and the grounds of the school have scope for enhancement as play facilities, outdoor learning and teaching spaces.

Tidy

Green

Unique

Historic

Welcoming & Friendly

# Planning for the Future

It is almost a natural progression to begin thinking about future ideas for the public realm of Geashill, having studied to some detail the way it currently looks and functions today. A temptation should be avoided, however, to advance individual projects in isolation from others, as this can lead to missed opportunities with regards design or allocations of resources, be they financial or otherwise. For example, introducing traffic calming measures at an entrance to the village should only be done with a shared objective of improving the aesthetics of the approach. This highlights the need for a strategic framework for improving the public realm of Geashill, so that efforts can be coordinated and their benefits maximised for the greatest good of the village and its people.

# A Shared Vision

The first step in developing a strategy is to arrive at a shared understanding of the ultimate goal – what kind of place do we want Geashill to be in the future? In order to explore this further, participants at the community workshop were invited to take part in a visioning exercise. Three teams were given envelopes containing over 60 paper slips, upon which different adjectives were written. Each team were then asked to select 8 adjectives that best described in their view, qualities they would like to see in Geashill. Words ranged greatly in meaning, from urban to rural, lively to quiet, pretty to functional.

This process proved very helpful in providing some definition to the priorities of local people. It highlighted clear similarities between the different groups, with the following six words reoccurring between the groups: Tidy, Green, Unique, Historic, Welcoming and Friendly.

# Identifying Priorities

Using the common themes identified during the visioning exercise as broad aims for the village, participants in the community workshop were then invited to list ideas under each heading for public realm projects in the village. The result is a whole host of imaginative ideas, which subject to further consideration and development, have potential to make a major difference to the village, delivered as part of a coordinated strategy.

## TIDY

Limit road markings /yellow lines
Limit road signage
Remove overhead wires and poles
Remove old dashing to reveal stonework
Castle gates not appropriate
"Tidy up" the nature of entrance road to reduce traffic speed and make village more pedestrian friendly
Garda station
Footpath bollards removed
Signs of people cleaning up

## HISTORIC

Care of features /buildings
Future development taking this into account without replicating
More information lectures about history of Geashill
Proximity to Boglands
Forge
Historical booklet/brochure
Incorporate railway station in plans
Encourage traditional crafts
Windows traditional – no PVC

# WELCOMING & FRIENDLY

Cup of coffee

Play facilities in visible area

Traditional signage

More Failte signs

Glebe Walk entrance made inviting

Tullamore Road "Presence"

Sense of arrival

Provision of co-ordinated walk

areas to link Glebe, Old Tullamore

Road & picnic area

Extended walk by GAA to top of

Curragh Hill to link with Mill Road

and Ballingar Road

Public art/ sculpture

Signage saying "Welcome"

# GREEN

Information boards at Glebe Walk

entrances describing the trees/birds

that habitat there

More planned landscaping and

planting of green areas

Trees of substance for future

Blocks identified

Parish field?

Lay by/picnic area

Specific planting for wildlife, insects,

birds, bees etc

# UNIQUE

Village layout

Stone walls

Tree planting

Flower gardens

High stone walls v low stone wall

Quality of future work

Old world lighting

Nice flowers and rose

# Conclusion

Geashill is a special place.  It has a rich and distinctive character, stemming from its original layout, its fine buildings, public spaces and not least,  its residents.  Like all villages, however, Geashill has room for improvement. An opportunity now exists to safeguard these special qualities for future generations, and to enhance Geashill's public realm for all those who call the village home and share a passion for its future.