

Tidy Towns Competition 2009

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Portlaoise** Ref: **313**
County: **Laois** Mark: **270**
Category: **F** Date(s): **22/06/2009**

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2009
Overall Development Approach	50	46
The Built Environment	50	40
Landscaping	50	40
Wildlife and Natural Amenities	50	22
Litter Control	50	26
Waste Minimisation	20	12
Tidiness	30	14
Residential Areas	40	29
Roads, Streets and Back Areas	50	33
General Impression	10	8
TOTAL MARK	400	270

Overall Development Approach:

Thank you for your comprehensive documentation including the excellent spiral binder; what was missing was an adequate map. Portlaoise is now a very large town and the three small maps enclosed do not extend to essential areas such as the IDA Park, Western Circular Road, Fair Green Mall, Midway Mall, Kilminchy Lake, Lismard Business Park etc. – you know all these places, but you can not expect the stranger too! – nor do the maps show important new buildings, such as Portlaoise College and the Department of Agriculture. All of the above were impressive, when found. Why not use the A3-size Fáilte Ireland map and pencil-in any additional sites and features which you think we should see. We try to see everything, but we need directions.

Congratulations on keeping the work going with a comparatively small committee: are you encouraging new members to join, and especially new residents? Some committees co-opt suitable students or school-leavers through the colleges – usually young people who have been involved in activities such as nature-watching or litter control – and this can add greatly to vitality and enthusiasm.

The Built Environment:

No town of similar size has such a remarkable inventory of public, official and religious architecture. What is so admirable is that all such buildings, going back to the 18th century, are still in use and so well maintained: the superb neo-classical Court House, the former Jail, the present Prison, St Peter's Church, the former Barracks - now Garda Station, St Fintan's Hospital, the pretty Railway Station, and in modern times the County Hospital, the County Hall and now the new Agriculture Department – all designed by the leading Irish architects of their periods. Among the new buildings, which this adjudicator had not yet seen, are the enticing Leisure Centre, the handsome Portlaoise College, the fine Civic Plaza, the recently built units of the IDA park and the more conventional Lismard Business Park. (It is a pity that the decision was not taken to build the bright and functional units of the latter nearer the public road and locate the dreary expanse of car park behind them.) New shopping malls such as the Midway and the Fair Green are much more imaginatively designed

and laid out than those which line James Fintan Lawler Avenue, which give a tawdry look to this important central thoroughfare in spite of recent efforts to improve it. Fortunately, the charming spine of Main Street, with its adjoining courts and alleys, is well preserved with its mainly attractive shops and business premises. (Of the two adversely mentioned by last year's adjudicator, one has been splendidly improved and the other could not be found.) Main Street, by far, excels Lyster Square in the presentation of its shop frontages. The massive new development at Parkside is somewhat short on allure. It is hoped that the interesting new glazed building on Church Street will have its concrete block flanks clad in a more attractive substance. The Heritage Trail plaques were much admired.

Landscaping:

Almost all public spaces are attractively landscaped, whether with hard landscaping (as at the Civic Plaza) or soft (as at James Fintan Lawler Avenue-Well Road corner). Floral adornments, such as pyramids, hanging baskets, rail brackets, tubs etc., were seen in many locations but in particular, in Main Street, Lyster and Market Squares and James Fintan Lawler Avenue. The most impressive landscaping was seen at Maryborough Village, where the extensive range of plants was most subtly chosen, and at Lismard Business Park where the bright bedding and shrubs enormously reduced the effect of the carparking wasteland. Many residential areas had excellent landscaping, either at their entrances or internally, and in many cases both. Among the small carefully designed displays, that at Our Lady's Shrine impressed. Millview Memorial Park is a most dignified space, with an appropriately restful ambience. The Town Park is pleasant and much frequented by residents. Roundabouts were seen to be attractively planted – an eye-catching example was the prodigious lavender bushes at the Abbeyleix intersection.

Wildlife and Natural Amenities:

Trees are considered under this heading – though the heading overlaps with Landscaping. A great many young trees were seen, though you do not say if they were planted over the last year. (Marks are awarded for annual developments in all categories.) An admirable feature of several housing schemes is the native tree and hedge planting. The Glendowns Nature Reserve (not marked on the maps) was visited as well as the Riverside Walk; the extension of the latter will be looked forward to, as will the Greenmill Lane project. The encouragement of the LCC is very favourably noted. It is an admirable plan to involve schools in wild life projects – this is widespread elsewhere.

Litter Control:

Litter control was remarkably effective, considering the visit was made at that awkward time of week Sunday-Monday. There was considerable disposable litter however, in the vicinity of the Market Square and the Railway Bridge. There was also litter at the Ridge Cemetery. It is very interesting to read how many agencies undertake litter picks as well as the Tidy Towns Committee. Has the Enforcement Officer identified who, in the main, drops litter? Well publicised fines can act as a deterrent. Having to pick up litter takes so much time and energy that could be effectively spent on more interesting projects.

Waste Minimisation:

Heartiest congratulations to pupils of St Francis School, Sacred Heart National School and Scol Brid, and to their teachers and parents, for achieving Green Flag status, incidentally influencing the increase in marking. In your documentation, you appear to confuse Waste Management with Litter Control, though they are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Please read the Tidy Towns guide on waste minimisation and consider how you can contribute to this increasingly important issue. You might work with businesses to encourage waste reduction programmes and minimisation initiatives. You might make contact with the Local Authority to run a joint scheme regarding, eg glass, tin, printer cartridges batteries, fabrics etc. Perhaps, you are already doing this, but you do not say so in your submission. You may be due additional marks.

Tidiness:

It is clear that you are continuing to discourage advertisement hoardings, mass-produced product signs and plastic shop signage. There seems to be less dereliction than heretofore, which is immensely encouraging. An eminently untidy yet fascinating area is the Ridge Cemetery which is prominently located and open to the public; it is full of interesting headstones and deserves better. It could be taken up by some organisation as a Heritage project. There are areas where one housing estate ends and another begins, or where boundaries have not been sorted out, or road schemes left unfinished. These are mainly on the outskirts of the town, especially in the Limerick direction. In an unusually number of spots, builders' debris has been let lie after a development has been completed.

Residential Areas:

Portlaoise is distinguished by a number of fine 19th century houses, mainly in the streets near the Railway

Station, most but not all maintained to a very high standard. These are of immense importance architecturally and historically. Over the past quarter-century, a number of smaller homes deriving from the same style have appeared, greatly adding to the attractiveness of the town-centre housing stock. Street houses, where people lived 'over the shop', are also what gives the town its particular character in a way which peripheral estates, however well designed, do not. Many of the former are attractively painted. It is good to read that you run a Tidy Estates Competition, and this may be partly why there are so many of them. Among the estates/neighbourhoods particularly admired were: Several unnamed intercommunicating roads of bungalows, off the Stradbally Road; Individual bungalows of quite a different and distinctive style at Kylebrook, that have a similarly attractive human dimension; Chantier Gate, which impressed by its abundant and well nurtured greenery, leading to the new Foxborough with its reproduction Edwardian homes, where beech hedges and elegant lamp standards are already in place; Bellingham, a neo-Georgian enclave of pretty homes with a welcome variety of house types and dimensions, as yet unfinished. Maryborough Village has already been praised for its landscaping – the housing lives up to the highest suburban standards. An unnamed development on the Tullamore road caught the eye because of its crisp modern design. Rossadaragh and adjoining estates have every appearance of developing into a fine, though car-dependent suburb, street name signs were abundant (a feature not usual in Portlaoise); Kilminchy has matured immensely since this adjudicator's last visit, with excellent landscaping, a featured lake and also name signs. The Downs is as perfect a residential areas as one could wish as indeed, is the neighbouring Glendowns. It was good to see a number of small enclaves or courts designed to keep the town centre populated – such as a new unnamed court at the inner end of Timahoe Road. To the north, the neatly signposted De Vesce Court, Cosby Court, Glenkeen Crescent etc., comprise a charmingly laid out 'garden village' with pretty homes on very small plots of ground. Mid 20th century Local Authority estates, such as St Brigid's Place, come out of the mix surprisingly well and possess a real sense of community. These are just some of the housing areas seen.

Roads, Streets and Back Areas:

Generally, street surfaces are of a good standard, with the exception of the neighbourhood of Coote Street. Paving, especially in the town centre and some of the newer estates. Street furniture, including railings, bollards and lamp standards, also in the town centre and some of the new estates, is of high quality. The area of Father Brown Avenue and Clonminan is as well kept, as one could expect in an industrial area. The Western Circular Road is a real blessing for traffic; roadside planting is already making its presence seen, much credit must go to the Local Authorities. Roundabouts are exemplary. Clearly a lot of work has still to be done, especially on the Limerick road due to new housing and commercial developments, and to new traffic lay-outs.

General Impression:

It was truly interesting to have the opportunity of revisiting Portlaoise after a space of several years and of seeing the extensive developments which have taken place, some of them causing the normal problems which are expected from rapid development, most of which are clearly being contained. Every good wish to the Tidy Towns Committee and associated bodies in their challenging work.