

# Tidy Towns Competition 2009

## **Adjudication Report**

Centre: **Birr** Ref: **549**  
County: **Offaly** Mark: **242**  
Category: **D** Date(s): **08/07/2009**

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2009
Overall Development Approach	50	34
The Built Environment	50	38
Landscaping	50	37
Wildlife and Natural Amenities	50	22
Litter Control	50	24
Waste Minimisation	20	10
Tidiness	30	16
Residential Areas	40	29
Roads, Streets and Back Areas	50	25
General Impression	10	7
<b>TOTAL MARK</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>242</b>

### **Overall Development Approach:**

Go raibh maith agaibh go leir! Thank you to all the voluntary workers who have gone to so much trouble this year and in previous years to make Birr an ever improving place in which to live and work, and to enjoy. .

You have a good membership of 12, although you could do with additional members in such a large and busy town. You could also, perhaps, increase the number of meetings you hold in order to maintain momentum. You are assisted by Birr Town Council and Birr Lion's Club. You do not state how you communicate your message locally. That would be interesting to know.

It is great that all the National Schools have the Green Flag.

You sound a bit despondent in your remarks about the competition. We know that it can be very difficult to keep going at times, especially when you do not see a great improvement in your standing in the competition. But do not be downhearted. You have a built and natural environment so many towns would envy so much. You have all the raw materials to progress, but it does take time. With the great heritage which you have, also come challenges and responsibilities. You should perhaps look to help from other agencies other than those two you mention. The Architectural Conservation Officer, and the Heritage Officer, and the Environment Section of the Local Authority will all be glad to assist you with good professional advice - even if funding is not as available as it was in the last few years.

You have the Birr Vintage Week in the summer, and Birr is a lovely venue for this. Well done on its 50th anniversary in 2008. That shows that Birr has staying power.

To increase your marks it is very important to prepare a TidyTowns Plan. A three or five year plan is recommended. A plan need not be prepared professionally. However, you should try to get the views of the

community at large when preparing the plan and take into account other plans for the area such as Local Area Plans / County Development Plans prepared by the Local Authority under the Planning and Development Act 2000/ County Heritage Plans/ Agenda 21 Plans etc.. Unfortunately, not having such a plan automatically loses you marks in this section of the competition as per the adjudication guidelines.

Your map was excellent and very helpful to the adjudicator. Please remember how important it is to have a good map – especially when we are dealing with a large town with which we are not very familiar – or maybe not familiar at all with! You could have marked the sites of your specifically 2009 projects on it. Then it would have been perfect!

### **The Built Environment:**

Birr is probably one of the most architecturally beautiful towns in Ireland. It is a planned town full of trees and wonderful buildings. It is also blessed with its river and parklands and with a new momentum seen in such achievements, as your new sculpture and newly landscaped areas.

Please do not look on your “derelict” Protected Structure buildings as a disadvantage and “the most disappointing aspect” of your town. You have scored well in this section in previous years and this year is no exception.

You will not be faulted by this adjudicator, nor were you faulted by previous adjudicators for not being able, as a group, to restore and conserve such buildings all at once. This will happen in time. All we would ask is that you encourage the owners to weed and tidy around them. These buildings are, believe us, an asset, and will in time become obviously so. And please remember that most of the beautiful houses and buildings in Birr are wonderfully cared for by their private owners and public bodies. Remember the planned town which has won this competition often in recent years, and remember that they too had to start somewhere when dereliction was prevalent, and in less enlightened times, and take heart! Your natural canvas is very like what they also have!

The houses, shopfronts and other public buildings of merit are too numerous to comment upon individually, so the following is a general comment on your built environment, old and new.

Birr Castle itself is a wonderful asset in your town, especially given the fact that it is a living home – which many great houses have ceased to become. The extraordinary achievements and interests of the Ross family, and their tenacity in keeping the estate a living thriving place is also well assisted by the community, and is a great credit to all concerned.

John’s Mall is a delight. The planting sets the entire Mall off to full effect. John’s Hall is a wonderful classical building and has retained its fenestration, and the building and curtilage appear to be well cared for and used. This is what all old buildings need – a new careful owner! The wonderful gas (actual original) lights need restoration. Could you look at this as a project? So many towns have poor reproduction “heritage” lights which do not fit in at all with their architecture. You have the “real” thing. Likewise, the iron poles and chain fence need care.

Oxmanstown Mall –well what can be said? It must be one of the most beautiful streetscapes in Ireland. And well done to all - both, private and public, who own and occupy the houses and buildings here. Their endeavours are appreciated. The gardens and general landscaping is also magnificent and a credit in its maintenance again to all concerned.

Remember too that the smaller items associated with your good buildings are also important – carriage arches, railings, steps, gates, gate pillars, foot scrapers, jostle stones etc. Cherish each and every one!

The church and Scoil Iosef Naofa look well, but both could do with more landscaping/softening. However, the base of the school wall at the St. Brendan Street end could do with a repaint.

The Teagasc building is a lovely piece of architecture with a most splendid doorcase. Again, this architectural gem has found a new use.

We are glad that you are going to get more bilingual signage.

There are some lovely shopfronts – like the Spar on Wilmer Road (despite modern signage), which remain intact. The timber carving and old pulleys here are quite extraordinary.

The old Railway Station on the Roscrea Road sits amidst a mature landscaped site. Unfortunately, its original windows have been replaced with inappropriate PVC insertions.

We look forward to your interesting project of replacing the sluice gates at Mill Island. Seek professional industrial archaeological advice here.

McKeons is derelict and boarded up, but it has good original style timber windows.

Spinner's street elevation and internal courtyard are an excellent example of the successful use of a vernacular building (Mill) and its precincts in a new and successful enterprise.

The building opposite "Peak Physique" on Castle Street/ Moorings corner (Crotty's Church?) appears to be going to be conserved/renewed. The gate opposite the entrance needs painting and the wall with the horse head could do with re-lime mortaring

The Marian Hall looks well.

We hope that the Conservation Project at Syngefield Gate will be the start of many other necessary and worthwhile architectural conservation projects. Well done to both, the Town Council and to Offaly County Council, for leading the way in a professional manner.

The Older Peoples' Dwellings in Mill Street area were admired, and the Supervalu site was clean and tidy.

There are some nicely designed new riverside apartment buildings in Birr which were admired, and these have been very well landscaped.

Bagnall's Bridge in the riverside Park is a lovely older pedestrian bridge in need of restoration. Don't let it get any more rusty! The detail of the steps and the name sign, all executed in metal, is very attractive.

### **Landscaping:**

The riverside Town Park is a most wonderful amenity and is accessible to the town centre. It is a pity that it is not marked on your Town Trail Plan (found at our guesthouse).

The riverside walk is absolutely delightful, and a real hidden gem. It is well respected as there was little evidence of litter, (just one or two pieces under a seat.) even to the point of there being none in the grassed area/ path pedestrian way leading to the local housing estate. The riverside edge of the private gardens leading down to the river on the other bank was also delightful.

Both Malls are examples of good landscaping and are beautifully maintained, publicly and privately. They need no additions, other than some occasional judicious replanting of native trees to keep the heritage alive in years to come. The lovely single colour red planting bed in John's Mall green was admired.

Try to concentrate on maintaining the landscape which you have and adding to it with natural indigenous native trees and shrubs. Birr does not need hanging baskets or planters. Its own beauty of streetscape speaks for itself, and too much adornment can actually complicate the scene and make the entire place look fussy and untidy. We are pleased that you sowed trees this year. The planters inside the railings at the Church Of Ireland are a good idea, as a hard surface space like this can take a planter box. Perhaps, you would consider shrub planting at the Technology Centre Walk instead of planters. Apart from giving a more natural look, they will be easier to maintain, as generally they will not need to be watered.

The new seat and planter at the newly laid out set-down area for Scoil Iosef Naofa was admired.

There is some good planting on the left along the high road from the Riverstown Road to St. Brendan St. The landscaping in the Hollypark area is very nice, with a lovely boundary treatment to the estate.

There is a nice small park at the bridge at the bottom of High Street, and another small landscaped area opposite the exit from the Business Park.

The car park opposite the Castle – off Castle Street/The Green is well planted.

The lovely roses outside John's Hall on John's Mall were admired. The trees in the same Mall are great.

Your sowing of one hundred whitethorn cuttings at the Mart area will reap dividends in time, and is applauded. We hope that you got some volunteers on board for that project

The John Farrell's Field Monument was admired and the information supplied was interesting. Hopefully, you will add this to your Town Trail, as many people visiting, who don't go shopping, could miss it. And it is of major interest to most Irish people! Is the low wooden fencing around it a temporary fence? But the area around it was littered. What a pity!

The hard surface landscaping and seating and semi-mature planting at the Tesco area is very pleasing. However, its maintenance in a litter free state will have to be agreed between those with an interest in keeping Birr litter free.

### **Wildlife and Natural Amenities:**

We are sorry that there are less herons in the Maltings area this year. Talk to Birdwatch Ireland or your local County Council Heritage Officer to see what can be done to entice more back. The four mile walk along the Camcor River will be a great asset to Birr. It is also good that it is near the new community hospital, as nature has very restorative powers and recuperating patients or visitors to the hospital will be very glad of this facility as well.

You have wonderful natural habitats, so, like last year's adjudicator, we would say you have the potential to do well here.

You are maintaining your wildlife habitats well. However, there is much more that you can do in this regard to increase the enjoyment and educational value of these areas. You will be well advised by, for example The Heritage Section of Offaly County Council. Do you have a young person studying Environmental Science in a 3rd level institution from the area who might require a thesis topic? The provision of a wildlife survey and management plan contributes to the marks in this section. Remember to endeavour to do this for 2010! Findings can subsequently be made public on information panels. This more detailed information would add to the enjoyment of your town for local and visitors alike, and would serve good educational purposes. In relation to this, please be sure to put design research into the proposed notice boards themselves. With such a good record architecturally in the town, be consistent in having such new street furniture designed in an innovative and appropriate fashion. And you should also ensure that the Irish names for all species are included. Remember too that with street furniture, black is the most difficult colour for the visually impaired to see.

A single wild orchid was noted by this adjudicator in the overgrown garden of the disused house at the Wilmer Street end of John's Mall. Sightings like this are memorable!

It would appear that some of the hedge cutting on the AFC approach road took place quite recently and you are reminded that it is an offence under the Wildlife Act 1976 and Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 to cut vegetation in a hedge or ditch, or on lands not cultivated between the 1st March and 31st of August annually. This is for the protection of nesting birds.

### **Litter Control:**

The recycling area at Tesco is poor with little screening and bins with detaching signage. There was also litter thrown on the ground between and beside the bins.

You left this section in the application form blank, and we wonder why? It is difficult for us to assess what your approach is to litter, and how you are working with the local authority on this issue, and also what anti litter promotional activities you are engaged in. However, you do say (under Tidiness section) that there is daily cleaning of the streets. Does Birr Town Council actually provide this great service?

Well done to the children who were involved in the April clean-up (mentioned in Overall Development Heading).

Some litter was noted on adjudication day in the roadway leading to the AFC Club.

There was litter around the sign base at the Renault Garage sign on the Roscrea Road.

There was quite an amount of litter on the Riverstown approach. This is a pity as the area is quite beautiful. There was further litter on the high road, which cuts off from the Riverstown Road and joins the town in the area of St. Brendan Street. And there was more litter in the lower part of High Street.

There was a little litter in the area of the Marian Hall on the footpaths.

There is a lot less litter in the centre of the town. You do certainly seem to have improved in that area since last year, but have disimproved elsewhere. So you would appear to need to concentrate extra efforts on the periphery.

The litter at the new Farrell Monument and the overflowing bin beside will have to be tackled, as it creates a very poor impression.

The road down to the new riverside apartments near the GAA pitch had litter.

There was litter in the riverside park, but mostly in the area of the seating, and not scattered throughout the grass. Still, this is poor.

### **Waste Minimisation:**

Your school policy with regard to only unpackaged foods allowed - so as not to create litter is an interesting project that certainly works with regard to Waste Minimisation, and gives very good example to the children. Well done to those concerned in thinking of this idea. You are talking to different groups about litter and segregation.

However, waste minimisation is about more than segregation of litter. It involves the prevention of waste accumulation in the first case. It is really what it says – to minimise on waste production before we, as a community, private or public create it in the first case. You can refer to the Race Against Waste booklet available from the Tidy Towns Unit of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Consider organising or attending a Waste Minimisation Workshop with your Local Authority.

You could increase your marks considerably in this section. Perhaps, you might prepare a flyer/newsletter on this subject? As a local community, you could look at some innovative and simple ideas such as organising a "Bring and Take Day". This would involve using a local hall / community Centre for instance for a day - where everybody brings items they have no further use for, but which other people might want (and which under normal circumstances they might get rid of as waste), and puts them on display. The corollary is that somebody else needs these items. No monies change hands. Website versions of this idea have been set up in places also. Another group collected all broken crockery, and made a mosaic in a local park. (Not the Green!) You can gain marks by doing something like this for 2010.

### **Tidiness:**

Cleaning up graffiti is good, as it discourages the perpetrators eventually! Your efforts in weeding are applauded. How do you share this workload with the Town Council?

On the Tullamore approach the Failte Go Biorra / Welcome to Birr sign is dirty. On the Roscrea approach the same is also the case. And beside the Roscrea road sign, the airfield sign is almost obscured with growth.

The overgrown space between the Rugby Club and the residential cul-de-sac needs cutting.

The frame around the Birr Stone sign outside John's Hall needs renewal. The Town Trail sign here (and elsewhere) is completely decrepit. This really is quite poor! The remediation of these signs is surely not an insurmountable project to undertake!

There were some rusty poles near Scoil Iosef Naofa and nearby Church.

The back area where the Camcor Business Park and Birr technology Centre are located was well cared for. There is a broken litter bin in the little park opposite the Camcor Business Park,

The Wan Lin restaurant at the bridge facing downhill traffic requires painting.

The building hoarding at the town end of Castle Street is dirty and has too many signs attached.

Surfacing and increased landscaping is required around the large hard surface space at the rear/behind the split level houses (which front Castle Street) in the area close to the Maltings.

The railings, opposite Spinners outside the Castle Wall, are in urgent need of renewal, and the signs for the castle at this point need straightening/upgrading.

You do appear to have taken note and attended to some of last year's comments in this category, but you still have a lot of work to do.

The yellow and black markings on the bridge at the town entrance from the Kinnitty Road require repainting. And there is a rusty pole at this bridge.

There is a lot of painting required in Mill Street. Gilmartin's Furniture Stores splay entrance and surface and gate require renewal. A building gable facing on coming traffic/walkers in this area is stained.

There is some graffiti on a gate near the Topaz garage, on the Banagher approach.

The timber in the park seating needs renewal.

The Spar shop on Wilmer Road has too many objects on the footpath which looks untidy, but also can be an obstacle for those with special mobility needs.

### **Residential Areas:**

The housing stock in the town centre is in general extremely well presented in Malls and streets.

Westgate estate is well kept and has a nice small Celtic design motif on its stone namesign. The grass in the estate is neat and well trimmed.

Highgate Banks needs trimming and completion. Otherwise, it looks well with landscaping.

A new estate (no name) near the Rugby grounds needs final surfacing (manholes protruding), and it needs more planting.

Hollypark Avenue is new, but well planted.

Cappaneale Park could do with tree planting in the open space facing the main road. There were also rusty signs at its entrance.

### **Roads, Streets and Back Areas:**

The Tullamore approach road is a busy Euroroute, so it should be looking well. Outside the speed limit, there is an impression of untidiness because of caravan parking and signage. Inside the speed limit, there is a forest of signage, which looks very untidy and seriously needs rationalisation. At the outer end of the approach, the edges are trimmed. Nearer the town, the edges need trimming. There is a nice planted area at the 60 kph sign. The "Tourist Centre Ahead" sign is surrounded by nettles. The lovely semi-mature tree planting on the right hand side needs the surrounding grasses cut. There are gates in need of paint.

The Lidl store has excellent planting which is well maintained. The other side of the Lidl junction is untidy.

The caravan park has neatly cut grass, but could do with screening on this important approach road. There are two vacant building sites at this point, one of which has old building materials on it, and both of which require screening. One site had a planning site notice erected. There was a very poor barbed wire fencing on both sites. Good new timber fencing was located on the other side of the road, beside a new footpath

Off this road is the approach from the AFC grounds. On this approach, there is a rusty pole at the speed limit sign. Near this are two lovely gardens with a splash of lovely pink shrubbery. Two properties on this road look quite untidy and need screening. These are a fitted kitchen/wardrobes premises and Flaherty's Oil. Poor security fencing here also needs screening and weeding. Some gates on this approach need painting, and a certain amount of weeding is required, especially in the new footpath area.

The Roscrea road is also the Euroroute. There are nice prospects inwards to the town along this road. The whole signage issue is again a problem along this approach. Trimming and weeding is required on the Roscrea side of the Crinkle junction. Weeding is required near the Crinkle Junction. The Oliver Douglas site needs screening. A wall needs painting nearby. The rusty security fence at this point needs paint. There is scaffolding on the Renault garage sign, which looks as though it has been there for quite some time.

There was nice planting at the Euroroute sign.

The Garden Centre has a good stone wall, but too much signage.

The Riverstown Road approach, with its well painted and planted "Welcome to Offaly" sign, is the approach from the West, and is also important. There is a dirty wall just beyond. The 50kph speed limit sign is located quite close to the town. This area is full of magnificent mature, deciduous trees with lovely old stone walls. A "stop" sign is obscured by another sign opposite the old stone splayed entrance at the entrance to the town. The gates and walls here are very good.

At the point where the road divides towards the Roscrea Road (2 approaches) the black/white house requires weed cutting in the grounds. A closed up garage on the final approach to the town needs painting.

The Kinnitty approach has good stone walls and many trees. The Hyundai garage is neat with well painted railings, but could do with a little softening. The signage at "Expert" is dominant and not in keeping with the surrounds.

The Banagher Road is quite rural, and is the location of the Community School.

There is a good terrace of estate type cottages in the immediate approach to the town, some of which are in need of care.

A manhole cover was protruding on Oxmanstown Mall.

### **General Impression:**

The general impression of Birr is that you are worrying too much about things over which you have little real control. Just liaise with owners of properties which are awaiting conservation and ask them to keep them tidy and weed free. It would be very important for you to concentrate your efforts for now where there is a serious lack, and you can have a real and immediate effect – in the areas of tidiness and litter control, not forgetting meanwhile to keep working on each category, and influence and indeed work where you can. You need new members and you need extra person power. Try to source people with varied interests and skills. Engage particularly with your youth, and with new residents. They will welcome being invited to become part of the team that helps Birr go forward in every way.