

# Wonderful Barn

## Leixlip, Co. Kildare

ARCHITECTURE



**Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment (AHIA) Report**

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This architectural heritage impact assessment (AHIA) report was commissioned by Kildare County Council as part of the Part 8 planning application for a multi-disciplinary development project, led by Metropolitan Workshop, at the Wonderful Barn site in County Kildare. The structures within the site under consideration in this assessment include the Wonderful Barn, two dovecotes, Barnhall House, a walled garden and two ranges of adjacent courtyards some containing former farm buildings. The barn is a protected structure and prominent local landmark, and the site is two kilometers to the northeast of Castletown House, on the western edge of Leixlip Village.





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## 1.0 Introduction

Completed in 1743, the Wonderful Barn served several different purposes. The primary use was as a grain store, the construction of which was likely as part of a famine relief scheme. In addition, the structure may have fulfilled an ornamental purpose as a monumental eyecatcher closing the great vista on the eastern axis of Castletown House. Like all best follies, it also served the purpose of pleasure, through its impressive high-level, vantage point, making it an impressive prospect tower. The two conical dovecotes, or pigeon houses, connected to the barn by two courtyards which are likely to be contemporaneous to the barn, however it should be noted that the construction of the interior of the upper chamber within the dovecote on the eastern side of the site is of a much lower standard than its counterpart to the west. This would suggest that it was erected by different people,

and / or at a different time. In the courtyard to the west of the site there are two ranges of one and a half storey out-buildings, that once served as stables, and probably date from the nineteenth century. Directly to the south of the outer courtyard is a large walled garden. The house stands adjacent to the Wonderful Barn and appears to date from the early to mid-eighteenth century, albeit some of the internal details hint towards an earlier date of construction. Today the Wonderful Barn complex and associated lands are bounded to the south by the M4, to the east by the Celbridge Road and to the west and north by a large housing development. The survival of some trees along the formal avenue still links the site visually with Castletown House, through an avenue which was established during the nineteenth century.



Figure 1 - Date stone over the front entrance of the Wonderful Barn



## 2.0 Brief History

Castletown House was constructed in 1722 for William Conolly, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons and one of the wealthiest men in Ireland during the early eighteenth century. The demesne was planned in a semi-formal manner with avenues laid out to frame views and vistas, which contrasted with the less formal watercourses within the demesne provided by the River Liffey and the man-made pond. Terminating at a feature known as Gay's Avenue, the Wonderful Barn was constructed on a site to the east of Castletown demesne. Conolly purchased the lands of Loughnamona in 1725 and honoured an existing lease to Patrick Roe (Boylan), who held the lands until 1731. Speaker Conolly passed away in 1729, leaving his estate to his wife Katherine Conolly. His nephew, William, who resided at Leixlip Castle, helped with the management of the Castletown Estate.

A date stone above the main entrance door of the Wonderful Barn confirms the date of construction and names John Glin as the person responsible - "1743 Execut'd by John Glin"(fig 1). The barn is widely believed to have been built by the speaker's widow Katherine, who was widely acclaimed for her philanthropy, and is depicted on the 1752 map of the Court of Kildare by Noble and Keenan (fig 2), though a second theory posits that the lessee of the land at that time, Joseph Cooper, may have been responsible for the construction of the barn (fig 3). It is more likely that a wealthy landowner, such as Katherine Conolly, who was responsible for the magnificent folly, the Conolly Obelisk, would have funded such an unusual and no doubt expensive endeavour, and several sources including ones from 1786 (Wilson) and 1811 infer that Katherine Conolly or her husband was responsible for its construction. There

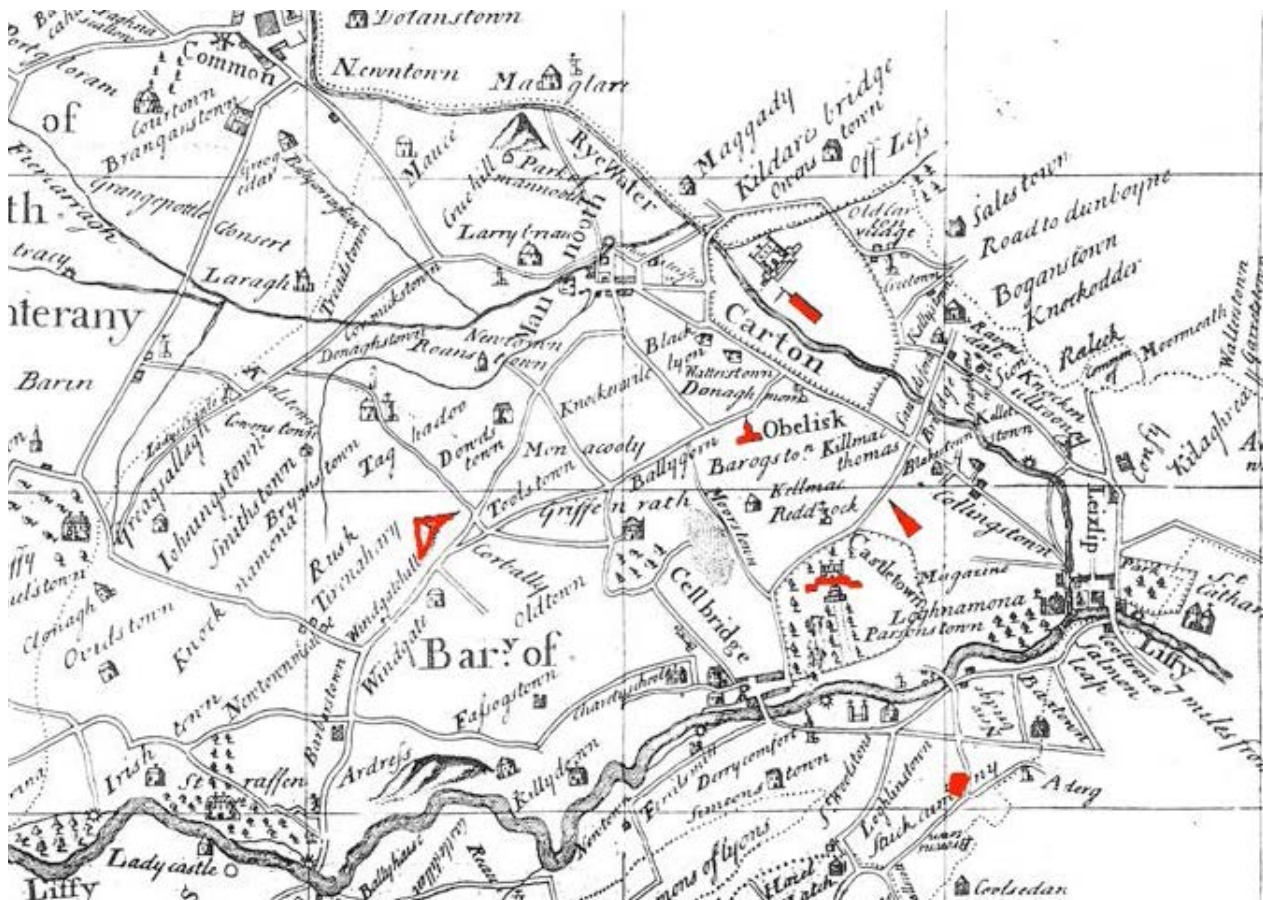


Figure 2 - Noble & Keenan 1752 map with the significant prospects marked in red

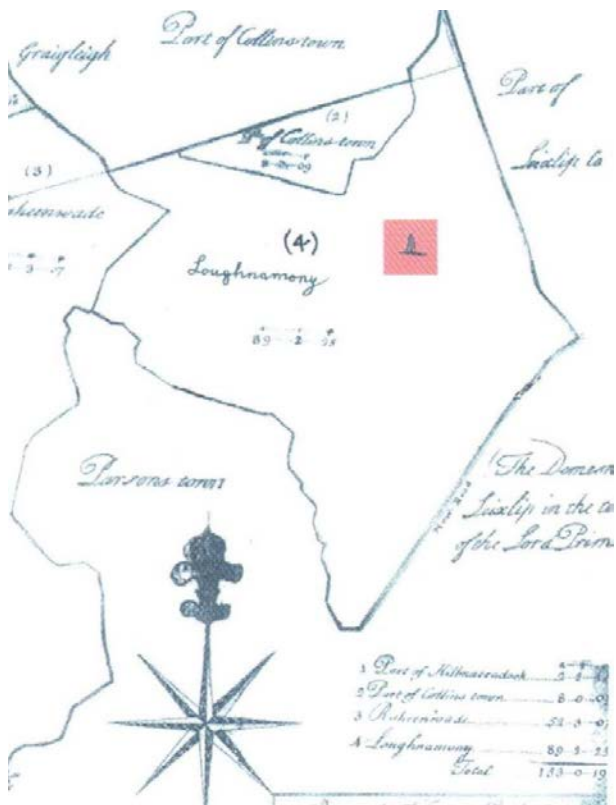


Figure 3 - Lease Map of the land containing the Wonderful Barn (1759)

are no sources which suggest that Cooper was responsible, aside from O’Kane, who puts forward the theory that the axial avenue from Castletown came later, circa 1840, and there are no significant rooms in the house oriented towards the barn, so it is more likely that the barn was designed to provide views over the Castletown Estate, rather than views from Castletown House itself. The structure appears as the ‘New Barn’ on the 1783, Court of Kildare map by Alex Taylor (fig 4). William Duncan’s Map of County Dublin of 1821 (fig 5) also depicts the ‘New Barn’.

Cartographical evidence suggests that the house on the site was built sometime between 1743 and 1748, possibly by Joseph Cooper, although some details of its design suggest an earlier date. Cooper succeeded Patrick Roe as William Connolly’s tenant in Loughnamore and was granted the demesne lands after the death of William Conolly until nephew Thomas Conolly, came of age and occupied Castletown House. In 1759 Thomas Conolly granted, released and confirmed unto Joseph Cooper and his heirs the lease for the site. After three generations of Coopers, the lands passed to the Coley family of Lucan, who were in occupancy by 1850.



Figure 4 - John Taylor map of 1783

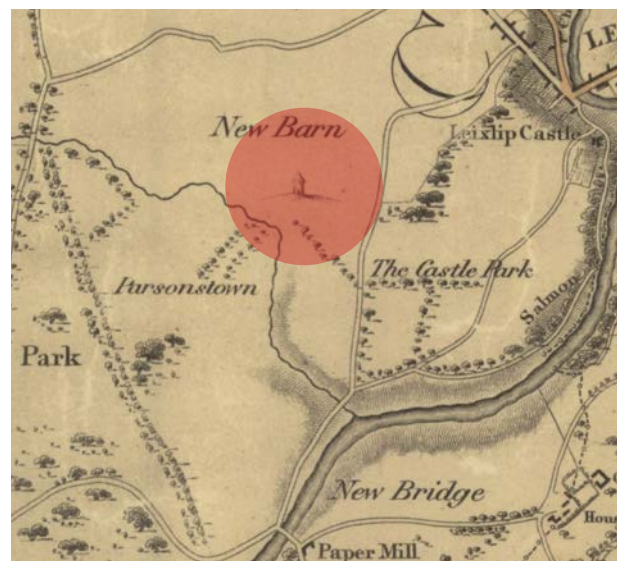


Figure 5 - William Duncan Map of 1821

The full extent of the complex of buildings associated with the Wonderful Barn are first depicted on the 1837 first edition Ordnance Survey map (fig 6). House, sheds, pigeon houses and formal walled garden are shown arranged around two courtyards along with several structures in the yard north of the barn, all documented in the Griffiths evaluation of 1842. A ‘potato house’ also sits directly north of the barn. The second edition OS Map (fig 7) at twenty-five-inch scale shows these structures more clearly, with little change from the first edition. Access to the site is from a road to the west. The first photographic image of the house is in the Lawrence Collection (1870-1914), (fig 8). Currently the house is a two-storey rubble-built structure of seven bays with a central, projecting, pedimented entrance block. Although much of the stone masonry is exposed, there are many areas where a light lime dash or

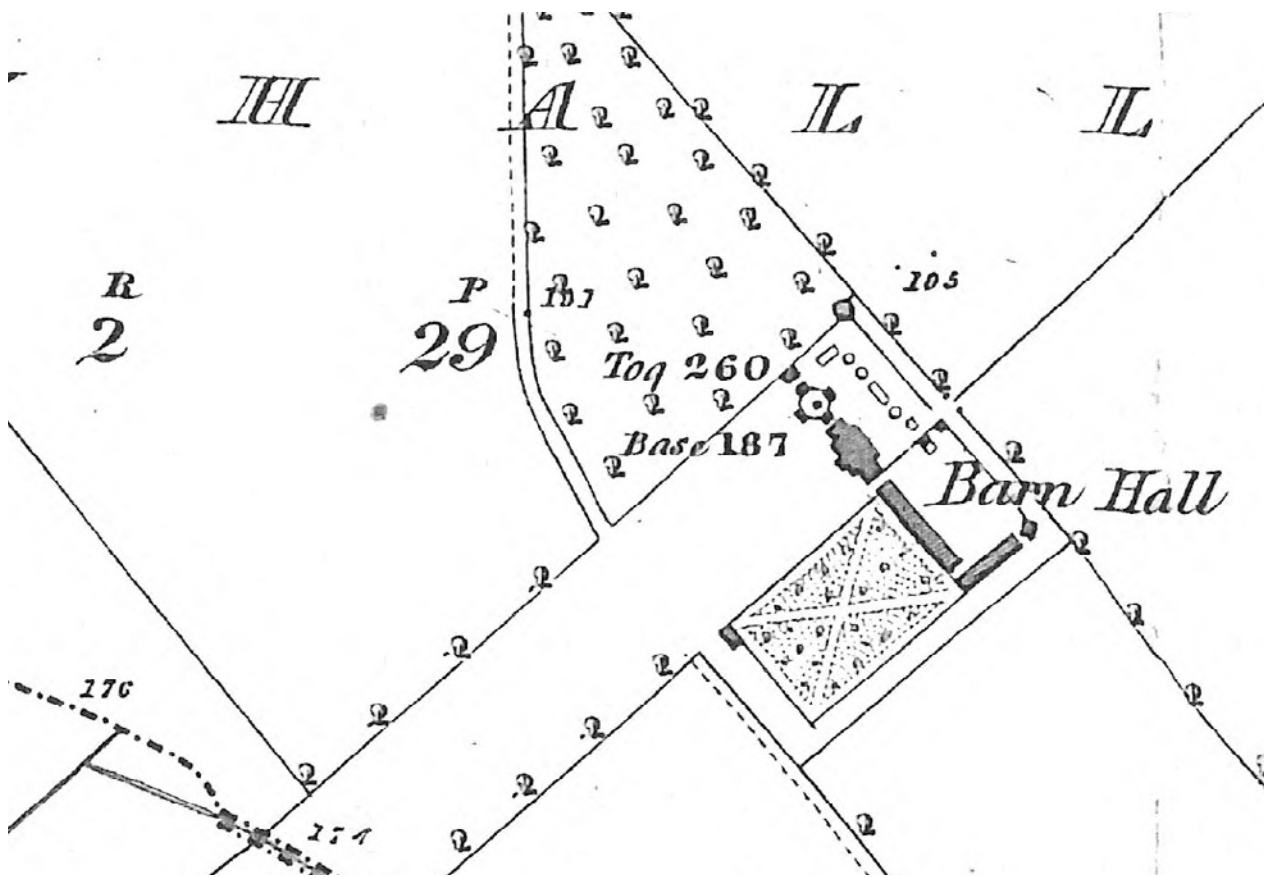


Figure 6 - First Edition Ordnance Survey 1837-1838

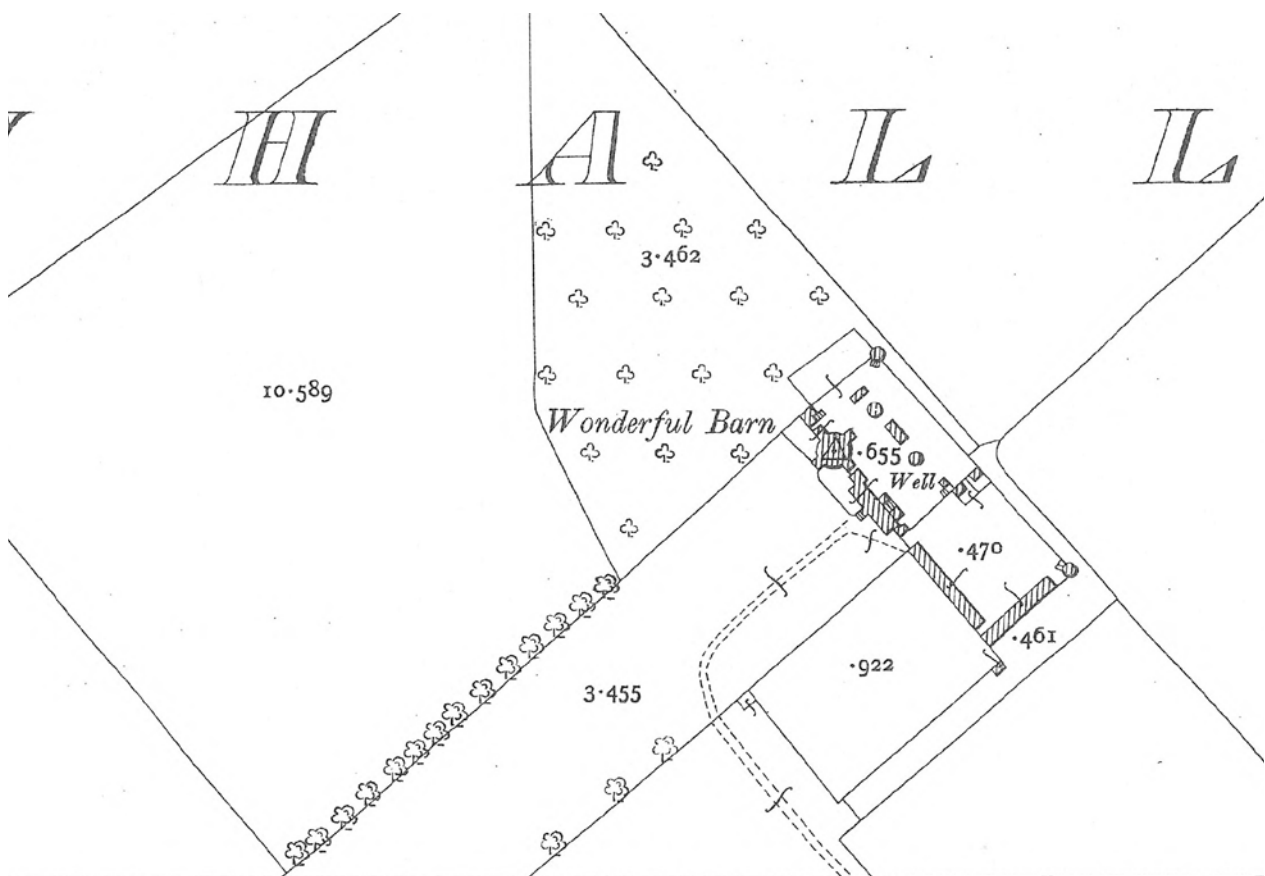


Figure 7 - Second Edition Ordnance Survey 1910



wash remains intact. This finish once covered the entire structure. Three steps lead to a doorway with a fanlight above. A stringcourse delineates the two floors. Single storey hipped extensions are shown at either end of the main block.



Figure 8 - Photo of the Barn and house from the Lawrence Collection (NLI), with timber sash windows

The ground floor windows contained six-over-six timber sash windows set in exposed timber sash boxes, beneath a segmental arch with stone voussoirs. The first-floor windows contained six-over-three sash windows, also with exposed timber sash boxes, beneath a flat arch with stone voussoirs. The fenestration is similar to that found in small Irish Palladian houses from the middle of the eighteenth century, having relatively small window openings relative to the wall plane, and smaller square openings at the upper level. The uneven spacing of the window bays is unusual and may indicate that the house was built in more than one phase.

The single-storey wings projecting from the rear elevation add another Palladian element to the simple composition. These read as recessed wings from the principal elevation. While the house is obviously not a fine gentleman's residence, in its original condition it had stylistic similarities to such houses as Kildrough House in Celbridge, County Kildare and Gaulstown in Castlepollard, County Westmeath. There are also interesting similarities to the two-storey structure known as the Hell Fire Club (fig 9), in the Dublin mountains, that was built by Speaker Conolly as a hunting lodge in the early eighteenth century. The house was purchased in 1909 by George Ronaldson and described in the Co. Kildare House books as being

'in a bad state and nearly the whole used as a store'.

From 1840, the property was divided by the Coley brothers, George and Edward, and it is interesting to note that both brothers shared the main house, with half assigned to each. According to the Griffith valuations from 1842 and 1850, Edward Coley held the 'porch in front' and George Coley the 'porch in rere'. It would explain the presence of two 'stables', either side of the house.



Figure 9 - The Hellfire Club, also built by Speaker Connolly



Figure 10 - Early 20th century photo of the Barn and house from the Lawrence Collection (NLI) with tilt and turn windows



Figure 11 - The house and barn covered in vegetation

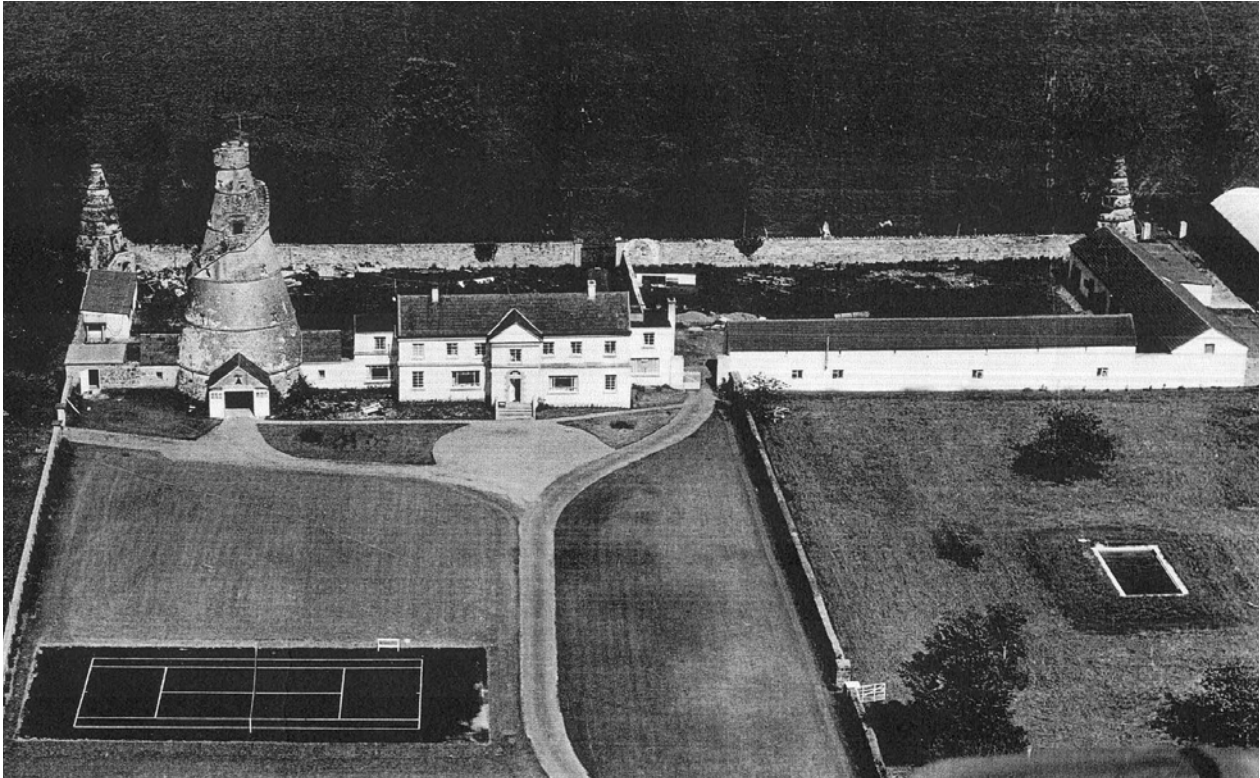


Figure 12 - Aerial photograph of the Wonderful Barn Complex (IAA)

More recent photographs show more invasive alterations that were carried out during the mid-twentieth century, with a change to the windows (figs 10 & 11) and later again, all the window openings to the principal south elevation were enlarged. The timber sash windows were replaced by side hung steel casements, and in some instances large plate-glass windows were inserted. Deep overhanging timber eaves were added, softening the severity of the original cornice. A second storey was added to the single storey flankers. A shallow, flat-roofed, single storey extension was added across the southern half of the south-west elevation, and all the external walls were given a coating of hard cement-rich pebble-dashed render. Another shallow extension was added across the rear elevation, at first floor level (fig 12).

The two dovecotes, or pigeon houses, are almost as impressive as the barn itself, although significantly smaller in scale. Like the barn they are beautifully detailed and combine aesthetics with the functional purpose of providing young pigeons for the table. However, the construction of the interior of the upper chamber within the dovecote on the eastern side of the site is of a much lower standard than its counterpart to the west, which would suggest that it was erected by different people, and / or at a different time. Stores are accommodated at ground floor level. The boundary walls running between these two structures and the barn create an attractive single composition, which extends to the south in the form of the walled garden. This remains largely intact apart from two large breaches formed to accommodate an access road leading to the barn and the house.

### 3.0 Description of the Buildings

#### The Barn

The Wonderful Barn rises to a height of some 70 feet in a delicate tapering cone, encircled by a snake-like staircase, terminating in a viewing gallery surrounded by a delicate battlemented crown (fig 13).

At ground floor level there are four projecting, pedimented wings in a Greek cross arrangement, the pointed arched vaults of which intersect the great dome of the barn. Above the dome of the ground floor room is a series of four more domed chambers, diminishing in size towards the point of the cone. These are all entered from the staircase and lit by four windows, which are rectilinear on the ground floor, triangular on the first, second and third floors and elliptical on the fourth floor. The projecting wings are lit by chamfered rectilinear windows in the side walls and triangular opening in the gable ends. In the centre of each of the upper floors is a circular trapdoor through which the grain was raised in bags using a pulley. Alternatively, these trap doors may have facilitated the raising of bags of grain using a block and tackle. Survey drawings of the structure were completed in 2005 by Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture (fig 14), based on site inspections, and for the purposes of an earlier report.

Internally the structure is a remarkable display of fine brick vaulting, with an outer skin of rubble stone, (fig 15) which for the most part is dashed with lime and sand. On the more exposed westerly face, the exterior is also covered with vertically hung, grey-green, slates like those quarried at Killaloe (fig 16). Projecting stone gargoyles drain the open platform at the top of the stairs, and dripstone weather mouldings are located above all the doors and windows openings. A projecting stone stringcourse runs around under the window sills on each storey and the top of the solid balustrade of the staircase is stepped, adding an extra dynamic to the upward spiral movement.

Despite its great age and long years of neglect, the Wonderful Barn survives in a remarkable state of

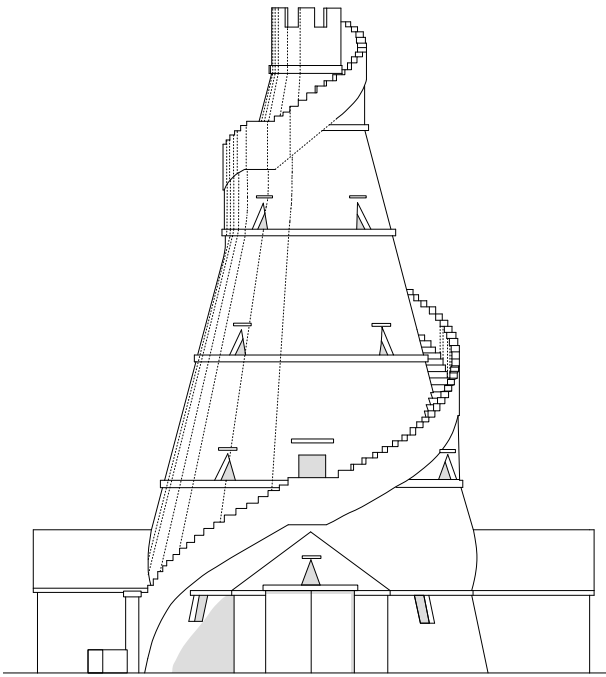


Figure 13 - The Wonderful Barn (2020)

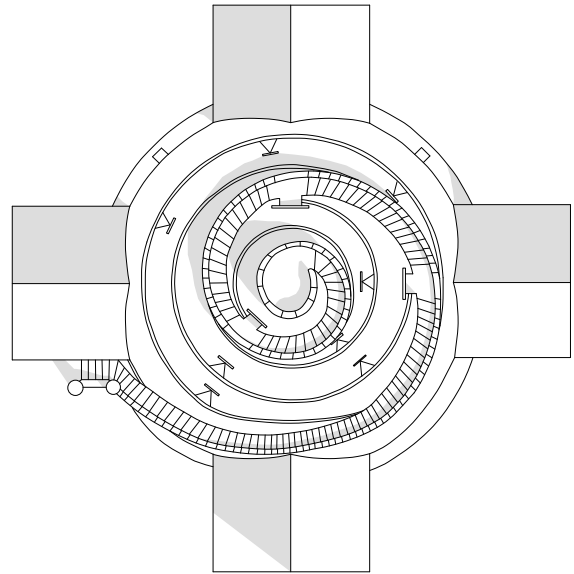
preservation, as a testament to the durability of traditional masonry construction, that has never suffered the damaging consequences of extensive re-pointing in hard, cement-rich mortars (fig17).

#### The Dovecotes

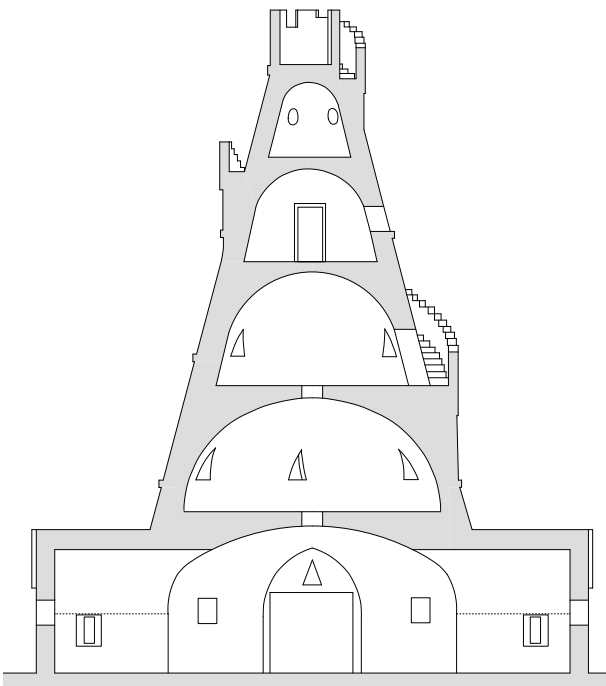
The barn stands at one corner of a rectangular, walled courtyard, on two of the other three corners of which are found conical dovecotes (fig 18). These are built in a similar manner to the barn, in rendered rubble-stone with roughly hewn stone dressings. They stand two and three stories high, with domed ground floor chambers entered through doorways in the side of the external stone staircases, which in turn lead up to the domes first floor rooms. The western structure has a top storey that consists of a tall cone-shaped volume lined with a honeycomb of nesting boxes accessible only by a small square opening at high level, framed by deeply projecting stone dressings. A series of four stone string courses of shallower projection, encircle the upper half of each one, terminating in a flat circular cap. Triangular stone edges for the pigeons to land on are supported on triangular stone brackets. The eastern structure was previously believed to have been badly vandalised and in need of repair works,



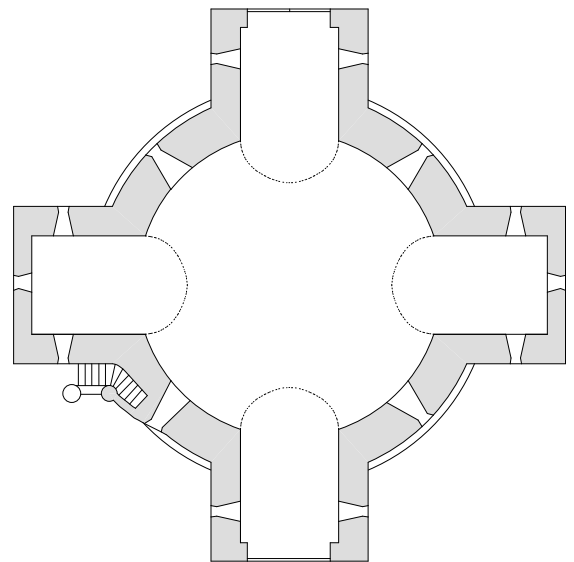
Front elevation of the barn



Roof level plan



Section through the barn



Ground floor plan of the barn

Figure 14 - Survey drawings of the wonderful barn by HHC





Figure 15 - The vaulted brick ceiling of the ground floor with central opening for grain

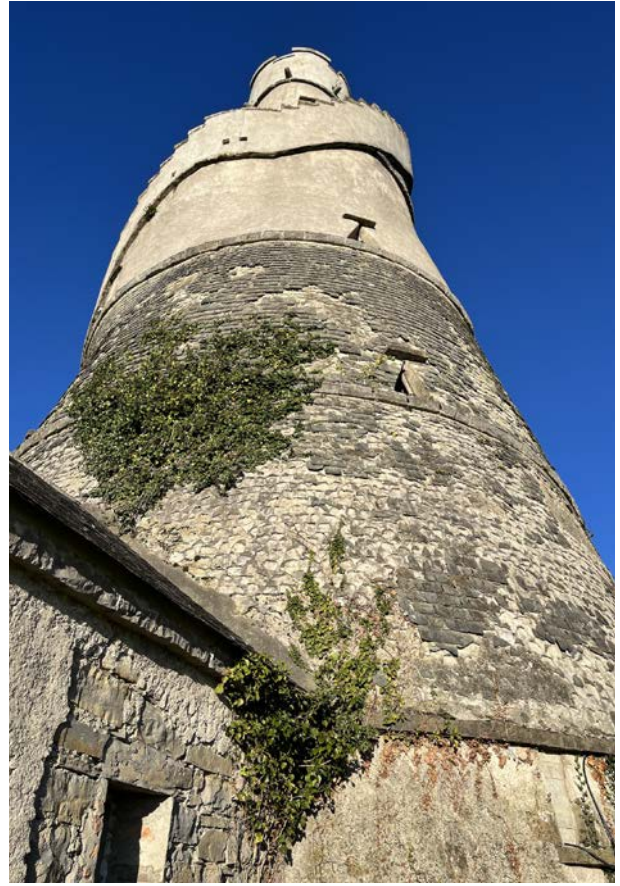


Figure 16 - Slatework visible to the facade of the barn



Figure 17 - The first floor chamber

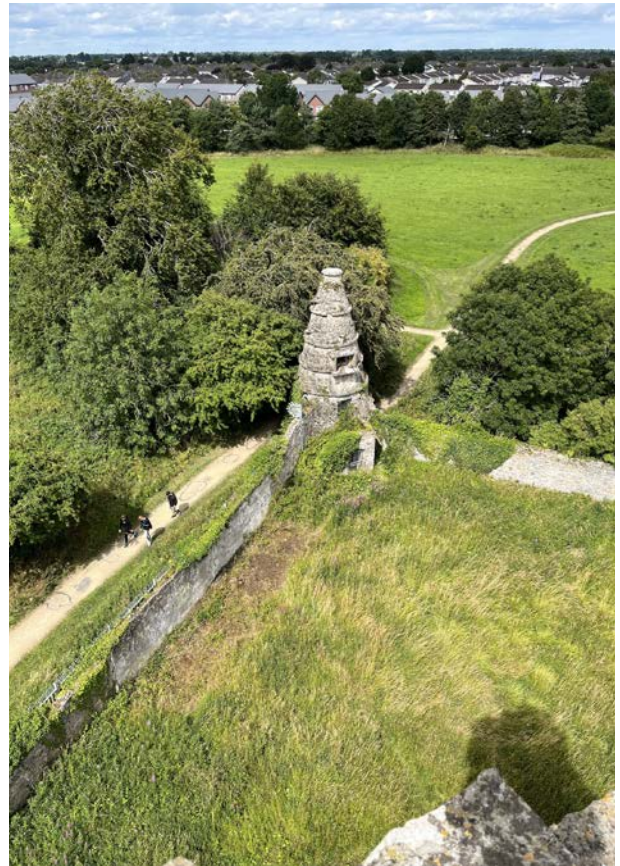


Figure 18 - One of the pigeon houses (dovecote)





Figure 19 - Parquet brick floor to the pigeon house

as there is no corresponding top storey, and the nesting boxes and string courses are crudely constructed, often with jagged sections of stone. However, following further inspection, it is now believed that the interior of this structure was simply constructed with less care and skill than its counterpart to the east.

### The House

Standing immediately adjacent to the Wonderful Barn, the house appears to be a mid-eighteenth-century house that has been subjected to many unfortunate alterations.

The house, as it stands is a seven-bay, two-storey structure with central pedimented breakfront (fig 20). A similar breakfront occurs at the rear elevation, with an identical limestone door surround, but is placed off-centre (fig 21). The roofs are covered with natural slates and when compared with the historic photos of the house (fig 10), we can see that a second storey has been added to the flanking projections either side of the house.

The external walls appear to be of rubble stone construction, with a projecting string course at first floor level. A corbelled stone cornice is continued across the face of the gabled breakfront, creating a simple pediment. The external walls and string courses have been given a coating of hard cement-rich pebble-dashed render.

The narrow entry door is topped by a semicircular fanlight for which evidence of radiating glazing bars survives. A single window survives above this at first floor level.



Figure 20 - Front elevation of Barnhall House





Figure 21 - View of the rear of the barn

A shallow, flat-roofed, single-storey extension was added across the southern half of the south-west elevation. Another shallow extension was added across the rear elevation, at first floor level. These can be seen in the photo from late twentieth century (fig 12).

### Internal Plan and Features

The internal arrangement, as far as it can be interpreted from the surviving fabric, echoes the unorthodox character of the external elevations. Only one room deep, the house has a central hall with a masonry cross-vaulted ceiling with rooms leading off to either side. At the end of the hall is an unusual solid masonry staircase, which includes a round pier in the form of a robust Tuscan column, a thick central wall with flat stone capping and an engaged ramped stone dado rail (fig 22 & 23). The detailing is not unlike that found in the adjacent barn and pigeon houses, having vaulted spaces relieved by stone dressing and simple rendered finishes. A tall window originally lit the landing but has been altered to form a door leading into the modern rear corridor. As originally built, this would undoubtedly have been a unique and interesting space.

Flanking the hall, at ground and first floors, is a pair of large rooms, beyond which were originally a pair of smaller chambers. A corner chimney breast survives in the rooms to the north-west of the central hall (fig 24). It is presumed that a similar feature originally existed in the rooms across the hall.



Figure 22 - View of the stone stair and tuscan column



Figure 23 - The unusual dado rail on the stair





Figure 24 - Corner chimney piece on the first floor

### Important Surviving Elements

Despite considerable modification, much of the original building fabric has survived, including several important elements. The rubble stone structural walls appear to have survived relatively intact. Many of the window openings have been altered, but it is believed that the arched external heads have largely survived. One of the cast iron multi-paned windows probably dating from the final quarter of the nineteenth century has survived at the first floor of the rear elevation, along with its original rough limestone sill. At least two of the small round openings have survived, in the front pediment and to the side of the front entry door. It is likely that other such openings will be revealed when the modern render has been stripped from the walls.

The carefully carved limestone door surrounds to the front and rear entry doors, have survived fully intact (fig 25). These are arguably the finest architectural features of the house, they once included glazed fanlights with thick timber glazing bars. The stone staircase is another important feature, the surviving fabric of which should be carefully analysed and conserved, along with the adjacent vaulted hallway.

### Dating Barnhall House

Several features survive that in isolation would not establish a conclusive case, but that when viewed collectively present a plausible case for an earlier construction date for the house. The walls are thicker than would normally be found in an eighteenth-century house of this size, and the general plan arrangement of a single stack with enfilade rooms, also suggests a late seventeenth or early eighteenth-century date.

Seventeenth-century houses in Ireland were generally constructed with careful consideration of defence, and the two projecting wings to the rear of the house are not dissimilar to the defensive flankers found in early houses, which were constructed with pistol or rifle loops, from which to defend attacks on the doors and windows in the adjoining façade. The narrow projecting bay to the front of the house also contains narrow splayed openings that may have served a similar purpose in protecting the front façade.



Figure 25 - External doorcase - to the rear porch, with stone steps below



Other early features include the stone newel/column and the masonry dividing wall to the staircase, the stone vaulted ceiling to the hall and the corner fireplaces. The wider window openings to the upper storey are also an unusual feature, that would be unlikely to appear in a Palladian or classically inspired house of the early eighteenth century. Seventeenth-century houses, with an eye on defence, were also often built into a walled



Figure 26 - Aerial view of the stables with Barnhall House in the foreground



Figure 27 - Archway in the north-south running stable range, infilled with blockwork

enclosure, in an arrangement close to that found at the house.

One final point worth considering is the overall composition of the house and its juxtaposition to the Wonderful Barn. The Conollys, who commissioned the Wonderful Barn, were amongst the richest families in Ireland in the early eighteenth century. They were experienced patrons and prolific builders, who generally employed the leading architects of the day. It would seem unlikely that they would permit such a modestly designed structure to be constructed on their land, with such an uncomfortable visual relationship to an important ornamental landmark as the Wonderful Barn. A more plausible explanation might be that the barn and dovecotes were constructed after the house, taking advantage of the existing walled farmstead, and the final position of the barn dictated by the east west axis of Castletown House.

### The Stables

These two structures probably date from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. They consist of two, two storey ranges, one running roughly east to west and the other north to south (fig 26). A carriage way occurs in the centre of the north to south range (fig 27), which appears to have contained barns or storage sheds. The east to west range contains numerous openings that suggest it once served as stables. Neither building is accessible at present but from a first inspection, it is clear that concrete first floors have been added to all the north south range and part of the east west range.

In addition, both structures have, (like the house) been coated in a cement rich dash, all of which should be removed. Headroom, generally restricted on the ground floor of these buildings, may restrict their use unless significant alterations are carried out. The first floors also have limited head height, particularly within the north-south stable range where the upper floor is a hay loft, within the roof space. The original slate roof coverings have been replaced with cement tiles, and are in an advanced state of collapse, but the walls of the buildings are in a reasonable state of repair and could readily be renovated to give them a useful future.

## Evolution of the Site

A wider site plan indicates the various structures across the site (fig 28) as they stand today, and a series of historic maps, which exist for this site, have been represented as figure diagrams to show the evolution of the site (fig 29). The maps date from the first edition Ordnance Survey map (1836-38) through to 1970 and show the various changes which have occurred throughout the past 180 years. On the first edition map (fig 6), the structures north of the barn are evident, which aligns with findings in the Griffiths evaluation, and an interesting diagonal path arrangement is shown in the walled garden. An orchard is located to the north-west of the barn. The primary route to the site is from the south-east, along the south boundary of the walled garden.

Between 1872 and 1908, extensions were added and removed from the rear of the house, and by 1939, another long-range building has been added

within the south stable yard, along the north boundary wall, and a second building north-east of the potato house. The structures to the north of the barn – the stores, fowl house and circular buildings have been demolished. A pool within the walled garden, and tennis court to the front of the barn, are visible by the 1970s, along with several larger shed structures to the east of the stables, which can all be seen in the aerial photograph in fig 12. Historic photos clearly indicate the later alterations to the house, and interestingly, the potato store, just north-west of the barn, was once a two-storey pitched roof structure, as depicted in fig 10, an early twentieth century photo of the barn and house from the front.

The route through the walled garden appears to have been added after the 1970, but before 1995, as it is visible in aerial photography from this time.

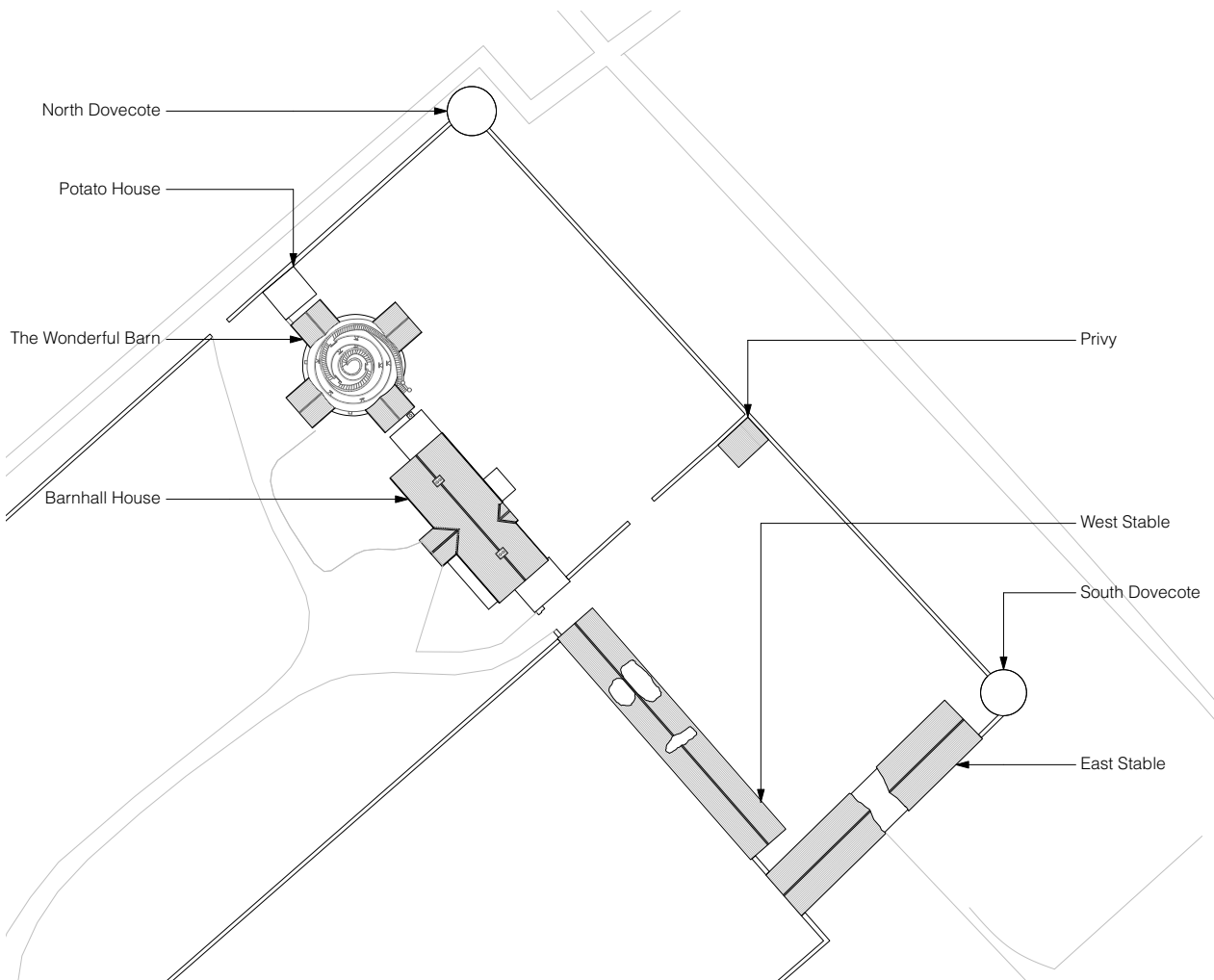
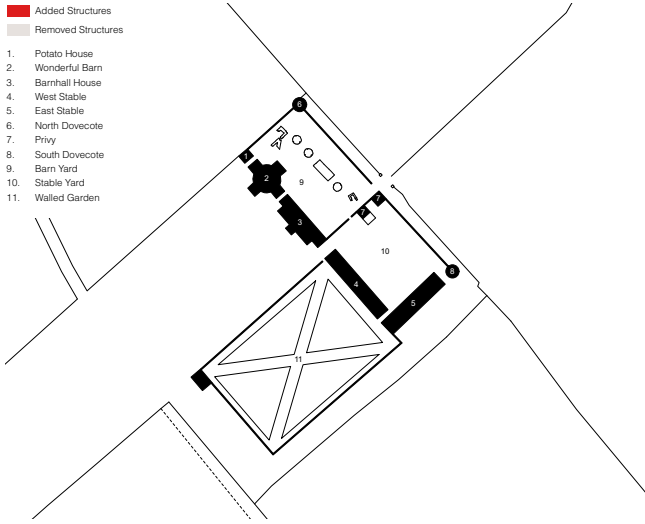
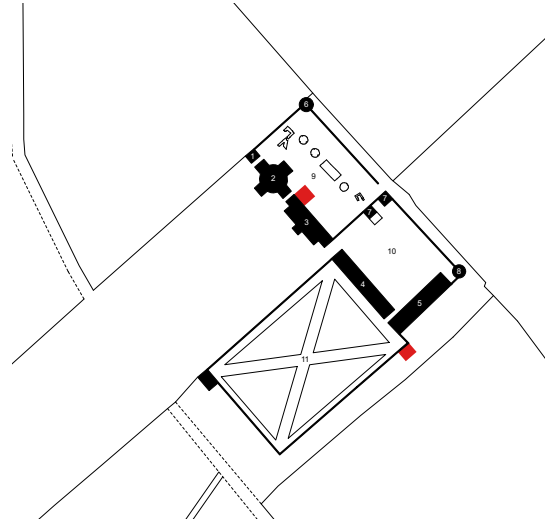


Figure 28 - Present day site plan

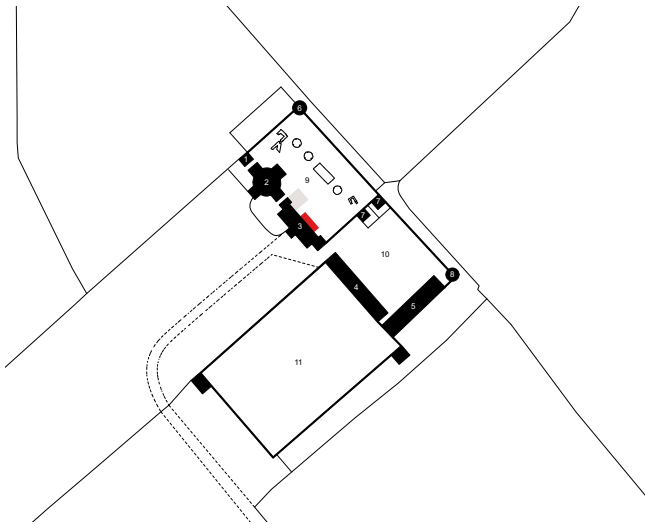
- Added Structures
  - Removed Structures
1. Potato House
  2. Wonderful Barn
  3. Barnhall House
  4. West Stable
  5. East Stable
  6. North Dovecote
  7. Privy
  8. South Dovecote
  9. Barn Yard
  10. Stable Yard
  11. Walled Garden



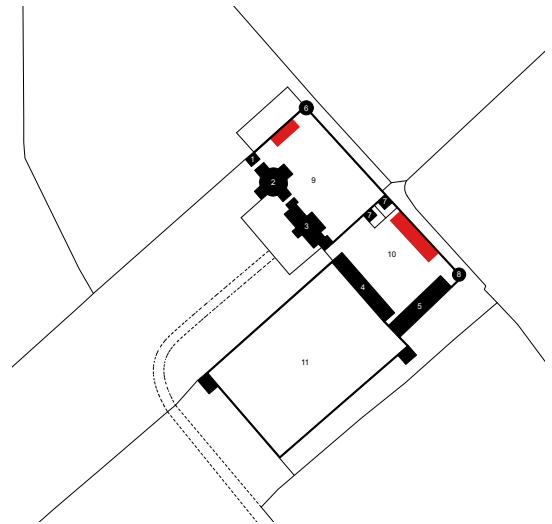
1837 - 1838  
6 inch (first edition)



1870 - 1872  
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1908 - 1910  
25 inch (first edition)



1939 - 1953  
Cassini 6 inch

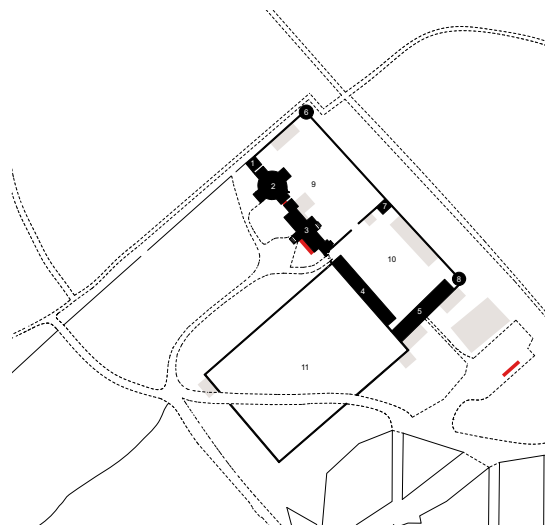
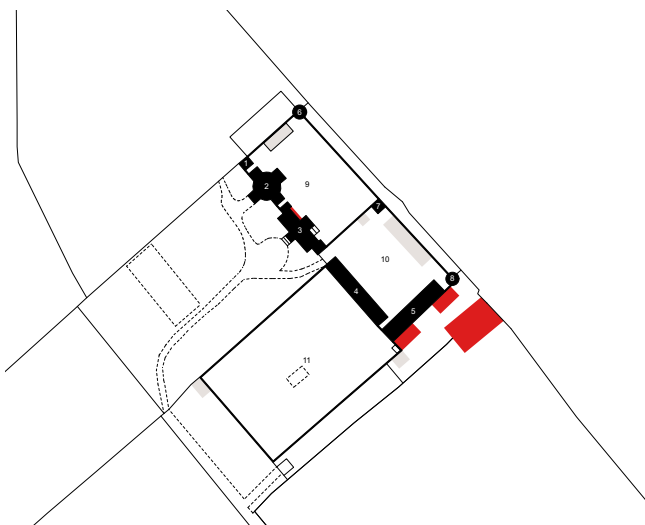


Figure 29 - Evolution of the site



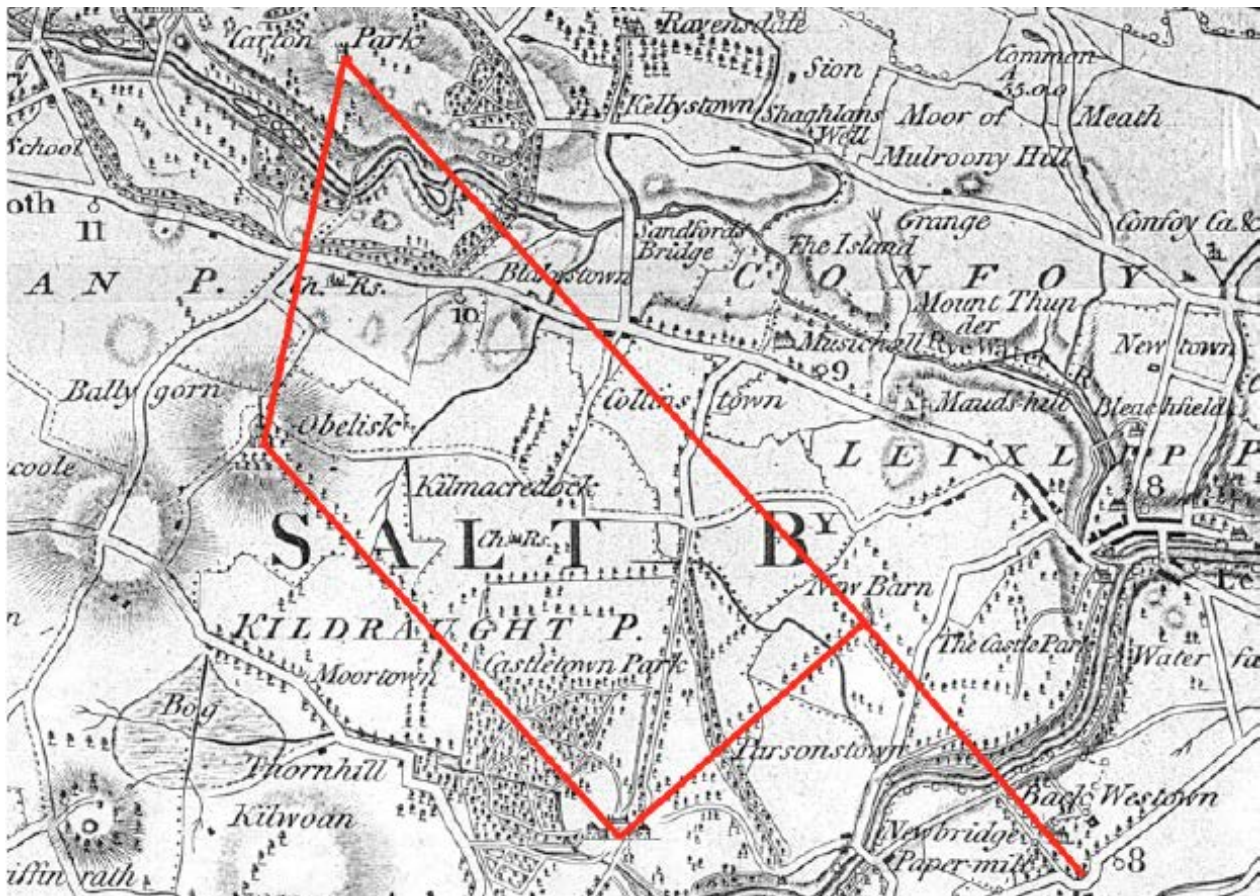


Figure 30 - The alignment between the barn, Carton House and Black Weston, with Castletown and the obelisk

### Historic Landscape Assessment

In a Historic Landscape Assessment from 2011, Dr Finola O’Kane notes the importance of the Wonderful Barn complex, which she considers to be of national significance. She also notes the dual purpose of the structure as a practical agricultural building, a large eyecatcher and a prospect tower, and suggests its exact location might be determined by an additional axial relationship, in the alignment between Carton and Back Weston (fig 30). The importance of the formal planting on the wide avenue, now gone, at the house end, is noted as is the reinstatement of the formal planting of the walled garden and the orchard to the northwest of the complex. She also emphasises the importance of the surviving historic character of the place, which reveals much about the history of farming practice and design in Kildare during the first half of the eighteenth century. Dr O’Kane also identifies the original driveway to the house, which ran from a small gate lodge to the southeast, along a straight line running past the southwest wall of the walled garden. The wide tree-lined forecourt to the house was most likely used for arable, agricultural

purposes. Further archaeological investigations are recommended within the report together with restoration of historic planting patterns. Also noted is the impact of the new housing development, the planning of which had been approved at that time. Appended to the report are some records of plant and gardening equipment purchased by the Castletown estate in the 1763, which also provides valuable insight to farming practices that were once common in this area some twenty years after the Wonderful Barn was constructed.

The walled garden contains quite low boundary walls, lower than one would expect in a traditional walled garden, where walls were usually high to provide protection and height to allow plants to grow vertically up the walls. Perhaps these walls were reduced in height, and a cement capping is evident along the top. The walled garden is also unusually large for a house of modest size, and likely served as a working vegetable garden for Castletown.





Figure 31 - The excavated area to the north of the barn

### Archaeological Report

Following on from Finola O’Kane’s recommendation, an archaeological report and excavation was produced by Cólín Ó Drisceoil and Barry Fitzgibbon, of Kilkenny Archaeology, in May 2017. This comprehensive study combined documentary and archival research with extensive excavation the finding of which are included in a detailed report. There were four main excavations in the north courtyard (behind the Wonderful Barn and the house;) the south courtyard; the walled garden; and a final smaller area in the forecourt in front of the Wonderful Barn. Both the archival and on-site research uncovered valuable information about the former use of both the standing and buried structures found within the complex. Of particular interest was the discovery of the foundations of a line of five small structures that are aligned north to south in the north courtyard, (fig 31), the outlines of some which also appear on the first edition of the ordnance survey of 1839. These include the footprints of three rectangular buildings identified as – a fowl house; a store; and a well; together with two circular structures that are thought to have been pigeon houses. A distinctive cobbled path running between the Wonderful Barn and the pigeon house that survives in the northeastern cover of the north court, was also uncovered. At the north end of the south courtyard, close to the boundary

wall that divides it from the north courtyard, the footings of two privies were revealed. In one of the pigeon houses, the skull of a horse’s head was unearthed.

The excavations in the walled garden revealed much information about the layout of linear planting beds together with confirmation of many of the different types of species that had been grown there over the years. In contrast the small area excavated in the forecourt to the barn and the house revealed relatively little information other than part of a metaled area with a curved edge that may have been a carriage turn. Other information gathered from the Griffiths valuations identified the presence of a potato house, north of the barn, and a forge in the south facing range of out buildings in the outer courtyard. Stables and a hay shed were also identified in the eastern range. All the excavated archaeology was recorded in high quality stone accurate drawings, which provide an excellent record of these early historic buildings that predate the eighteenth and nineteenth-century buildings on the site. These early structures suggest the presence of a much earlier homestead in this location, which supports the theory that the house predated the construction of the barn.

## 4.0 Statement of Significance

### The Barn

The Wonderful Barn is without doubt one of the finest follies to be found in Ireland, and a protected structure (RPS no. B11-15). Like many of the best follies and garden ornaments it satisfies the contrasting demands of function, aesthetics and pleasure. The conical form of the structure with its circular external staircase, is strikingly original and seemingly without precedent in any architectural language. Ancient and exotic precedents from the middle east have been suggested including - Mesopotamian ziggurats, in particular biblical depictions of the Tower of Babel, together with the minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra. In Ireland the only structure of similar form, is the White Barn, today more commonly called the Bottle Tower, in Rathfarnham, which is a smaller copy of the Wonderful Barn that was constructed around the same time (fig 32).

### The Dovecotes

The two dovecotes are almost as impressive as the barn itself, although the sheer scale of the barn contributes greatly to its uniqueness. These little structures, like the barn, are also beautifully detailed and combine aesthetics with the functional purpose of providing young pigeons for the table (fig 33). The boundary walls running between these two structures and the barn create an impressive single composition, and it is possible that the enclosed space once contained a garden.



Figure 32 - Halls Barn in Churchtown (1795)



Figure 33 - The pigeon house

### The House

As originally built, the house was an impressive strong farmhouse designed without much serious architectural pretension, and certainly with little of the fine detailing found in the barn and pigeon houses. The formal architectural quality of the building has been compromised by the subsequent alterations to the building, which detract significantly from its character and importance. These unfortunate interventions can, none the less, be quite easily reversed and as a mid-eighteenth-century dwelling at the core of this interesting farmstead, this house retains a strong cultural significance. This significance would be greatly further enhanced if, after further opening-up and investigation, the structure proved to pre-date the barn, having been constructed in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.



The considerable wealth and large estate of the late Speaker Conolly's clearly demanded large barns to store the harvested produce. His large house also required great long vistas, with eyecatchers of an appropriate scale to terminate them. The barn was clearly intended to be seen from the park around the house, and was no mere product of function alone, as it provides a much-needed vertical element in a county renowned for its flatness. During the early eighteenth-century Ireland and England led the world in the new

style of landscape design widely referred to as the 'natural style.' Castletown was one of the first great landscapes in Ireland to be laid out in this fashion and like the magnificent Conolly's Folly, that closes the vista on the northern access of the house, the Wonderful Barn is a very significant part of this design. Based on the historical, architectural, designed landscape and social importance of the place, the Wonderful Barn complex is most certainly a place of national significance and possibly an historic place of international significance (fig 34).



Figure 34 - The Wonderful Barn and Barnhall House

## 5.0 Condition of Buildings

Following completion of a conservation report on the site in 2005, Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture was commissioned to carry out a sequence of emergency repairs and anti-vandalism measures to the barn and the house. The first was a programme of complex masonry repairs to the brick staircase that spiralled around the external wall of the barn. This was in a very poor condition and on the verge of collapse, as was the castellated crow's nest feather at the top of the stairs, which was designed as a viewing platform. Many of the coping stones of this feature had been pushed over and had fallen onto the slate roofs to the four-projecting single-storey wings below. A successful programme of masonry repairs, re-plastering and slate repairs was duly completed to a high standard (fig 35).



Figure 35 - Repair works carried out to the Barn in 2005



Figure 36 - Internal brickwork in the ground floor of the barn

### The Barn

As the main structural repairs to the barn have been completed, there is no longer a structural risk, although further conservation works are necessary throughout. The internal brickwork, within the ground floor in particular is starting to degrade (fig 36), and the removal of cement pointing should be undertaken. A minor leak is evident in the entry way which should be investigated. Repairs are required to many of the small window openings. Externally the vertical slating, added to the southeast portion of the structure has started to come loose and detach.

While the access deterrents, such as the stainless-steel fencing, installed more than fifteen years ago were not entirely successful, the degree of vandalism to the roofs of the barn has lessened. Fencing and anti-climbing measures were installed to prevent access to the staircase of the barn, which was a popular destination for vandals who would then drop large stones down onto the repaired slate roofs below, and this has now been curtailed.



## The House

Having been subjected to an arson attack, was badly damaged, particularly to the roof structure, while much of the interior was scorched with some timber floors also suffering structural damage (fig 37). A major programme of works was completed in 2005 to re-roof the house and to undertake an initial “clean and sweep” operation for a preliminary clear out of the house. Since the completion of these works, nothing further has been done other than to add services to the ground floor of the house to make useful as a store to serve occasional community use of the complex. The house now has an effective roof, which has prevented ongoing deterioration due to weather, but it remains blocked up with a semi-derelict interior (fig 38).



Figure 37 - Fire damage in Barnhall House



Figure 38 - Derelict interior of the house



Figure 39 - Historic stables in the north-south range



Figure 40 - Opening the walled garden to accommodate a vehicular route

## The Stables

These historic structures have changed little since the three phases of works to the barn and the house, apart from the two ranges of out-buildings in the western courtyard, the roofs of which had deteriorated badly. These roofs are now beyond repair and at risk of complete collapse. It is not possible to access much of the interior though some parts are still accessible. The east range (running north-south) contains historic stalls for horses, (fig 39) which are in poor repair, with a small hay loft above. The interiors are in poor condition, with ongoing water ingress.



### The Dovecotes

These structures are for the most part surprisingly intact, although suffering from the effects of unmanaged vegetation growth.

### The Courtyards

These are overgrown and many of the boundary walls are covered with a thick growth of ivy, all of which combined with the physical and electronic security measures that have been put in place, create an air of abandonment and decay. In 2005 many of the loose rocks and stones found in the adjoining courtyard, during the archaeological excavation, were covered with a layer of topsoil to safeguard these findings.

### The Walled Garden

The walled garden remains largely intact apart from the two openings made within the wall to accommodate the driveway, an unfortunate intervention which has resulted in the loss of historic masonry (fig 40), over the two smaller historic openings in the west wall (running north-south) are still relatively intact and only require minor repair (figs 41 and 42).



Figure 41 - Arched entrance to the walled garden, from the house



Figure 42 - Stone piers remain either side of this previously gated entrance to the wall garden

### Landscape Features

The landscape features surrounding the site, have in contrast improved somewhat during recent years. Mainly because of a new paths network created by Kildare County Council and a more regular grass cutting regime. Also noticeable is the increased number of walkers and cyclist enjoying this improved access to the hinterland of the barn. The most successful landscape use, however, is undoubtedly the very successful allotment scheme that has not been established for over ten years to the southeast of the building complex. This area and land use appears to be thriving and is reminiscent of the original use, as historically the Wonderful Barn and surrounding site served as a produce farm for the estate of Castletown.



## 6.0 Conservation Strategy

### Importance of Beneficial Use

“Historic buildings have to be capable of beneficial use if they are to survive” is a well-established principle of conservation. Economically viable and appropriate use are the optimum aim, and this can be challenging for large architectural follies, like the Wonderful Barn. Fortunately, the barn is in a sound structural state that requires relatively low levels of maintenance, and further minor repairs, which makes it less urgent on the list of priorities.

All the other structures, following a full programme of repair and refurbishment, have every chance of serving meaningful purposes, that can be achieved without having to compromise the integrity of the historic place.

### Preserving Historic Structures

The key to preserving historic structures is to find suitable new uses that can be successfully accommodated with minimal intervention. A good starting point is to seek to use the structures for purposes as closely as is possible to their originally intended purpose. Old houses can generally be upgraded to facilitate contemporary living, old farm buildings, new farm uses, and walled gardens are best used to grow plants. Across several of the reports prepared for the site one theme is consistently mentioned, which is the suitability of the site as a farm or place for outdoor endeavour. This use is already partially in place on the site as can be seen in the highly successful allotments scheme.

### Passive Surveillance

“Eyes on the Street” and “Feet on the Ground” are the best ways to get effective, low-cost surveillance. If a place is valued, frequented and used appropriately, there is less likelihood of anti-social behaviour and vandalism, as the place becomes a community asset, that will enjoy a good level of self-policing. Creating a community use would bring increased day time activity, and creating a residential use of some sort in the house would help provide essential nighttime security.

### Residential Development

Minor improvements to the setting of the building complex have resulted from the large low-density, residential development that encompasses the north and east sides of the wider site area (fig 43). This development numbers 450 dwellings, the closest of which lies some 190 meters from the building complex. The visual impact of these houses on the Wonderful Barn complex is not significant and there are also several positive benefits from the development. Of these the most important is that the lands between the new houses and the building complex, together with the building complex, are now owned and managed by Kildare County Council (fig 44). A second benefit is that the large number of new residents who have moved into the area have improved security and will avail of any proposed community use for the Wonderful Barn site.

### Current Threats

The current threat to both the buildings and surrounding landscape is redundancy. If suitable and viable uses cannot be found for the building complex it will remain an unused, deteriorating eyesore rather than the central focus, aesthetic jewel and community hub that it should be. Ambitious commercial attractions are neither beneficial to the historic fabric and landscapes of the historic place, nor to the residents of the new estate. A more nuanced approach is necessary that will respect the heritage, meet local and community needs.

### Conservation Strategy & Priorities

#### Statutory Requirements

The Wonderful Barn is a protected structure (RPS B11-15), and its ancillary buildings are protected as they sit within the curtilage of the barn. These structures are afforded statutory protection under the Planning Act (2000), and the barn is also included on the National Inventory for Architectural Heritage (NIAH) (Ref: 11901102) where its rating is noted as being of ‘national’ importance.

It is noted in the Kildare County Development Plan 2023-2029, under AH 025, that views between Castletown House the Wonderful Barn are to be maintained, which is further demonstrated by protection corridors shown (fig 45). The development plan sets out a range of policies for protected structures to ensure the ongoing protection of architectural heritage in Kildare, to ensure works align with best conservation practice.

- To recognise the use of the place as a cultural and educational resource,
- To promote the site as an important heritage asset for the county of Kildare, and identify possible funding sources that might be applied for to assist with future conservation,
- To provide for long-term enhancement of the setting of the building through planning policies and identification of key strategic themes.

All conservation works should be guided by the principle of minimum intervention as set out in the Burra Charter, under the general aim of doing – as little as possible, but as much as is necessary. The general approach and objectives for the Wonderful Barn site can be summarised as follows:

This report has identified and described the history, significance, current condition, and guiding principles about how the Wonderful Barn site should be conserved, maintained, developed and preserved into the future. Opportunities for the development of the buildings and site are included in the next section of the report.

- To provide guidance on best conservation practice for the repair of its historic fabric, such as windows, plasterwork, roofs etc,
- To record the existing buildings and site, with a record of past interventions.
- To ensure that interpretation of the building is well-researched and accurate,
- To increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of the place (buildings and settings),

An outline of the conservation works required to the various buildings is included below, and it is noted that there are minimal works required to the Wonderful Barn, as repairs were carried out to this structure in 2005. A larger scope of conservation works is due to commence on site this summer; to carry out repair works to the Wonderful Barn, dovecotes, and boundary walls to the walled garden, which are partially funded under the Historic Structures Fund.



Figure 43 - Existing site plan with housing development (based on planning drawings) shown around the site





Figure 44 - Parkland walk north of the barn site

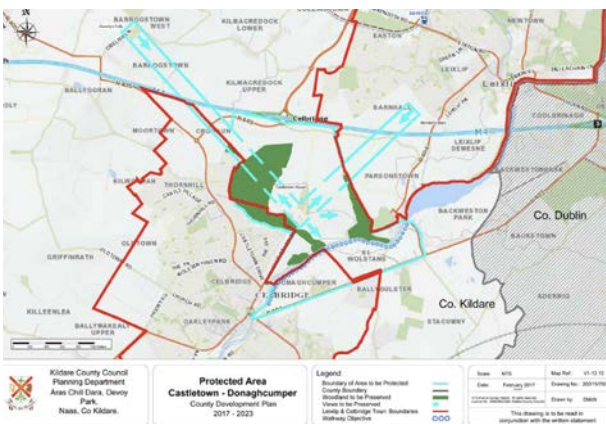


Figure 45 - Protection corridors to and from the Wonderful Barn and Castletown (from KCC Development Plan)

### The Barn

Previously completed conservation works to the barn have ensured that it is generally in stable condition, with minimal evidence of weather ingress. Repairs are required to the internal brickwork on all levels, along with minor repairs to the wall openings and floors. The removal of the cement floor at ground floor level will be undertaken to determine if the original floor could be revealed throughout (fig 47). The application of a lime coat, to consolidate the remaining slate on the southeast facades, will preserve what remains of this interesting weathering feature. Re-opening of the northeast doors will also be undertaken, which will reinstate the link between the park to the front of the barn and the yard to the rear.



Figure 47 - A small portion of the original brick floor is visible in the ground floor of the barn



Figure 46 - The east-west stable building in advanced state of dereliction



Figure 48 - Barnhall House Dorothy Stokes Collection 1940-50 (NLI)

### The Dovecotes

The dovecotes require a programme of repairs which will include removal of vegetation, consolidation of masonry, careful steam cleaning and full repointing throughout, which should be executed by an experienced heritage contractor. These works will be undertaken over the course of the summer of 2024.

### The House

Careful demolition of modern elements to the house including the external corridor to first floor rear facade, the single storey extension to front, and first floor extensions to rear flankers are proposed to be undertaken. This will bring the house back to its historic configuration and allow for the reinstatement of the historic windows across the front façade. The house was heavily modified during the latter half of the twentieth century, its general form and fenestration arrangement was intact as late as 1950, (fig 48).

The roof was repaired in 2005, to prevent ongoing water ingress, and further repairs will now be undertaken if required using like-for-like

materials. New traditional cast-iron rainwater goods will be installed where necessary.

Careful removal of all sand and cement external render will also be undertaken, with minimal damage to original stone masonry and the original window openings will be expressed, including any segmental arched heads and stone sills. The original carved limestone bull's eye window surrounds will be exposed and repaired. The existing masonry walls will be raked out and repointed with a lime and sand repointing mortar. As this building would have been fully rendered in the past, it would be prudent to limewash the facades, to create a pleasing uniform colour, but allowing the masonry detail to remain evident below this soft coating.

The front and rear stairs will have their cement coatings removed, to reveal the existing stone steps beneath which were discovered as part of opening-up works carried out in 2023. The front steps will be re-laid with a new guarding on both sides, and the rear steps will be incorporated



into the proposed ramp at the rear of the house. Traditional timber sash windows will be reinstated throughout, with the insertion of slim-profile double glazing to improve the energy efficiency of the building. The front and rear entry doors will be traditional raised and fielded panel doors.

Internally the intention is to remove sand and cement plaster from walls and ceilings, if this is possible, and to demolish all modern partitions. Existing timber rafters, floor joints and joinery will need to be carefully assessed to determine the extent of historic fabric which can be retained. Reinstatement of missing fireplaces and diagonal chimney breasts with suitable historic replicas or salvaged fireplaces will be explored.

### **The Stables**

The removal of all roofing slates and concrete tiles will be undertaken – many of which have already fallen from the collapsed roofs. Careful grading should be undertaken of any historic slates if found and they should be stored for reuse.

After the installation of new roof structures, new traditional slate roofs over new treated timber battens and breathable membrane will be installed, with new robust cast iron or aluminium rainwater goods throughout.

Internally the existing concrete slabs will be removed, to allow for the insertion of insulated floors, and any historic timbers, if found in the roof or loft levels should be retained and reused if in acceptable condition.

Careful removal of sand and cement external renders and pointing, taking care to minimize damage to original rubble stone masonry and carved stone door and window surrounds will be undertaken, if the render can be easily removed. The application of a new lime and sand wet dash to all external surfaces will be implemented, taking care to protect exposed stone elements such as window sills, door and window surrounds.

### **The Walled Garden**

The historic boundary walls will be repaired under the 2024 summer works, with the removal of the cement capping and application of a new soft capping throughout. The two large inappropriate openings, which were inserted to accommodate the driveway, will be closed-up, with masonry, following the re-routing of the driveway. The existing opening along the west wall, which is flanked by two piers, will be retained, and will serve as part of the pedestrian route through the site.



Figure 49 - Barnhall House Dorothy Stokes Collection 1940-50 (NLI)

## Services

Sympathetic and compatible energy efficiency upgrades to the barn, the house and the stable buildings will be implemented, with the insertion of suitable insulation to the roofs, and to the external walls where possible. Insulation to the walls will consist of insulating plasters or fibre boards, though these will only be applied if they do not obscure internal historic features. Possible options for the installation of an insulated limecrete floor will also be explored, along with slim profile double glazing within new timber windows. Higher performance windows for the stable buildings, contemporary in nature, would improve the energy efficiency of these structures.

The heating of these buildings will be provided by air source heat pumps, strategically positioned across the site. Sections of the historic brick floor are still intact, with a concrete floor slab installed elsewhere which should be removed. The brick floor could be carefully lifted and re-laid with salvaged brick above a new floor build-up including an underfloor heating system, which would remove the requirement for wall mounted radiators. Underfloor heating will be installed throughout Barnhall house and the stable buildings, with radiators to the first floors of the house.





## 8.0 Impact Assessment

The Wonderful Barn is a nationally significant protected structure, and the site previously served as a working farm and domestic residence. In line with good conservation practice, impacts on such a significant structure must be kept to a minimum, while allowing for some intervention to allow it to be opened to the public and brought into use. Under the Burra Charter processes, it is acknowledged that change may be necessary, but that this change should not reduce the cultural significance of a place. Compatibility of use is also very important, and we have ensured, that in accordance with article 1.11 of the Burra Charter, the proposed new use for the barn and other structures have 'minimal' impact on the cultural significance of the place. Interventions and alterations are generally proposed within the less significant parts of the buildings or site, to ensure the most significant elements, such as the barn itself, are left relatively untouched, and simply

conserved. This has been the guiding principles for all proposed developments on the site.

The setting of the barn will be enhanced, and its presentation improved by landscaping, with little to no alteration to the barn itself. Within the barn itself minimal servicing will be introduced sufficient to allow the ground floor to be accessed by the public. An accessible W.C. will be provided within the small potato house adjacent to the barn. Improvements to the façade of the house with the reinstatement of the original fenestration pattern will have a positive impact on the exterior of the building, reinstating its original configuration and presentation of the collective structures upon arrival from the south. Within the house the original room layouts will be retained including the position of the original staircase. The interiors of the house were much altered in recent years with modern finishes



Figure 51 - Overall Landscape Site Plan by AECOM

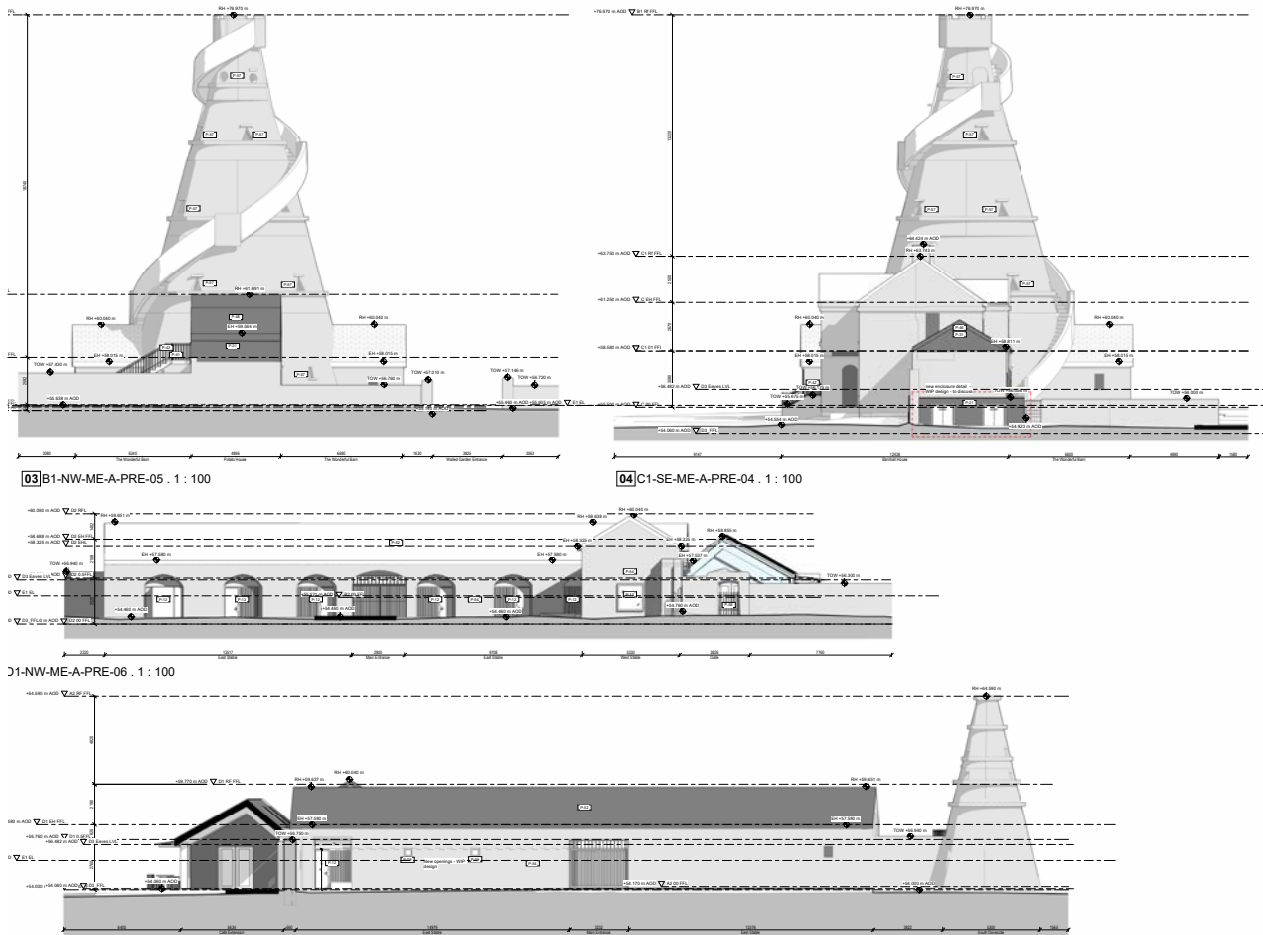


Figure 52 - Proposed Elevation 03 +04 + 05 + 06 by Metropolitan Workshop

and later interventions, and new services will be introduced throughout the rooms, along with fire safety related upgrades. As there is little historic fabric remaining internally, aside from the structure, these interventions will have minimal impact on the cultural significance of the building.

The existing stable buildings are simple rectilinear masonry structures and retain almost no historic interiors aside from some badly damaged stalls. Both structures have been re-roofed with modern materials in recent years. These buildings will do the ‘heavy lifting’ on site, housing many of the visitor facilities such as the café, a kitchen, W.C.s, exhibition spaces and storage. As less significant structures than the barn or house, it is wholly appropriate that the stables should be refurbished to accommodate the more heavily serviced uses on site. A single storey pitched roof extension to the café will take advantage of the sunny south facing aspect overlooking the walled garden, and it is designed

to echo the historic glasshouses often found within walled gardens.

Serving an agricultural complex, the walled garden at the Wonderful Barn site would not have been part of a formal designed garden landscape, rather it was a simple enclosed productive space, used to grow vegetables, herbs and flowers. Historically, working gardens often contained single storey lean-to glasshouses and potting sheds, positioned against the boundary walls. With this precedent in mind, the introduction of a new single storey glass structure within the walled garden should be viewed as a positive impact, as it will allow visitors to appreciate the stable complex and walled garden. It will be structurally independent of the stable building and could be easily removed in the future with minimal impact on the historic structure.

Accessibility is important for historic sites, allowing an equal opportunity for everyone to visit such a significant site. However, the





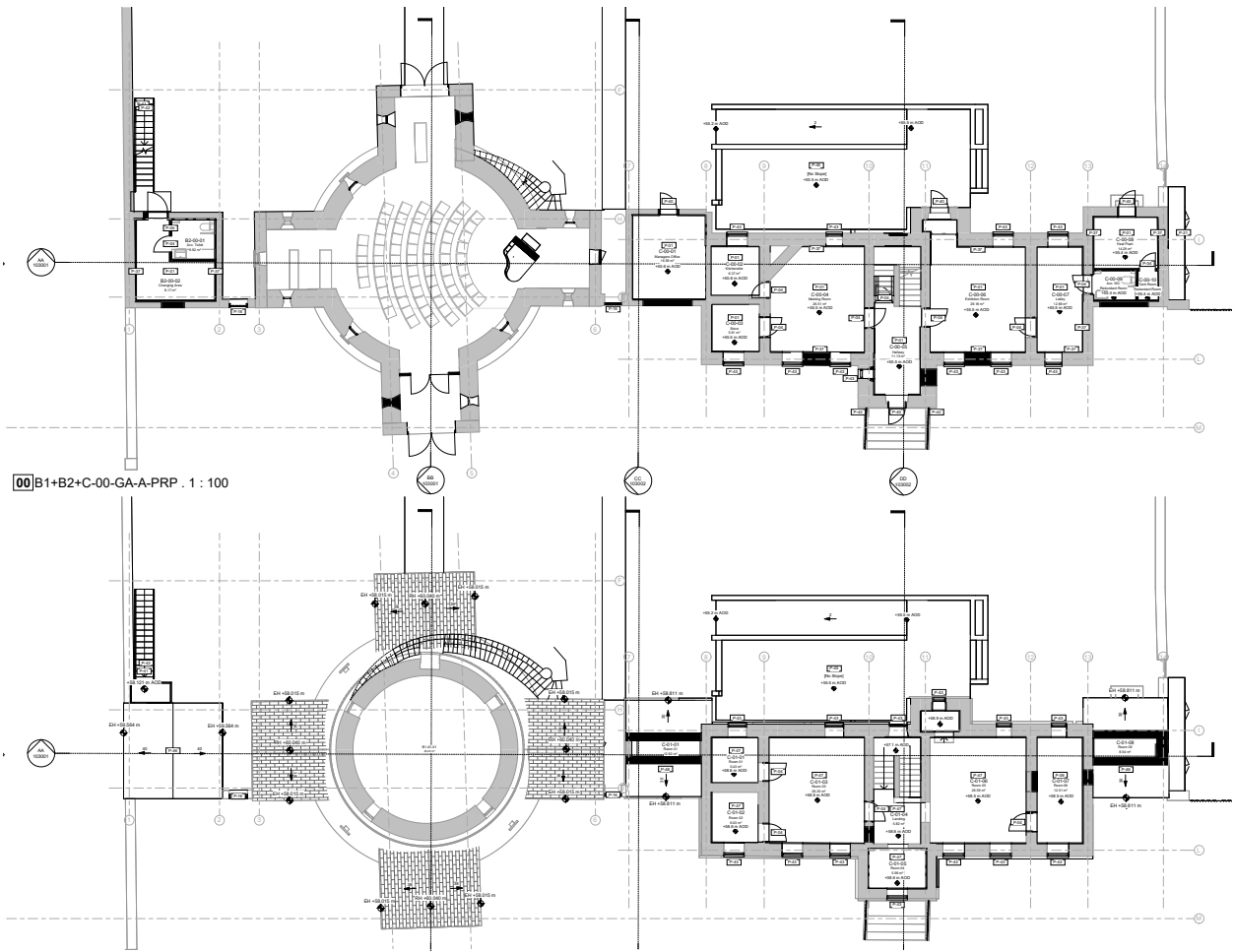


Figure 54 - Proposed GA Ground + First Floor Plan - The Wonderful Barn + Barnhall House by Metropolitan Workshop

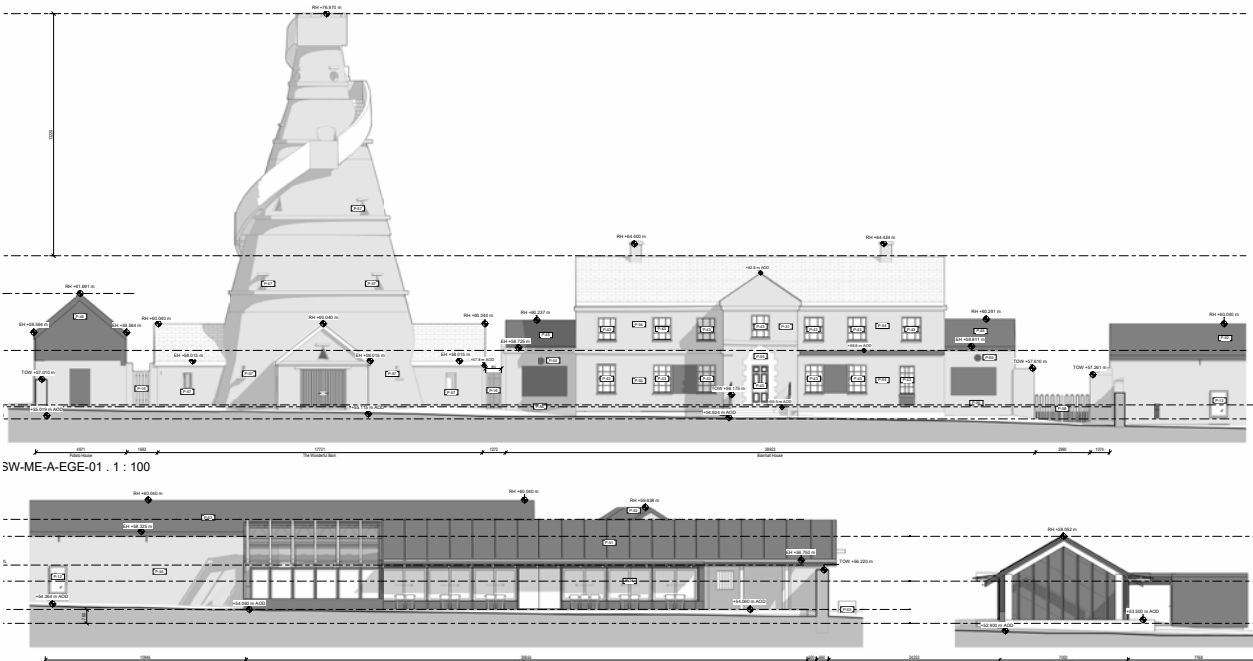


Figure 55 - Proposed Elevation 01 by Metropolitan Workshop

## 9.0 Summary of Conclusions

- Completed in 1743 the Wonderful Barn served several different purposes including - grain store, eyecatcher and prospect tower.
- The house stands adjacent to the Wonderful Barn and appears to date from the early to mid-eighteenth century.
- The Wonderful Barn is one of the finest follies in Ireland and with the adjoining house, courtyards, dovecotes, stables and walled garden, combines to create an historic place of national and possibly international cultural significance.
- Following emergency repair works to the barn and house between 2010 and 2012, the buildings have lain unused and are now in a semi derelict state and anidism has been a persistent problem.
- One very positive use of one part of the wider site has been the creation of allotments to the southeast side of the building complex, which appear to be both popular and productive.
- The key to preserving historic structures is to find suitable new uses that can be successfully accommodated with minimal intervention. A good starting point is to seek to use the structures for purposes as closely as is possible to their originally intended purpose.
- Creating a community use would bring increased day time activity, and creating a residential use of some sort in the house would help provide essential nighttime security.
- Ambitious commercial attractions are neither beneficial to the historic fabric and landscapes of the historic place, nor to the residents of the new estate. A more nuanced approach is necessary that will respect the heritage, meet local and community needs.
- All conservation works should be guided by the principle of minimum intervention as set out in the Burra Charter, under the general aim of doing – *as little as possible, but as much as is necessary.*
- The design proposals for the Wonderful Barn site combine sensitive conservation with assured intervention to create a new, viable and sensitive use for the barn, house, stable buildings, and wider landscape. The intention is to develop the site as a destination site for local and wider community, which includes a café, flexible event and gathering spaces, and a new allotment building for the allotments, and to sensitively develop the wider site to provide a variety of outdoor activities.
- Existing building stock will be repurposed with meaningful new uses, with interventions to be subtle, sensitive, and modest. This will be achieved by removing unsatisfactory accretions, adding subtle new contemporary interventions and by uncovering and repairing original historic fabric to underline the significance, beauty and spirit of the place.
- In line with good conservation practice, impacts on such a significant structure as the barn must be kept to a minimum, while allowing for some intervention to allow it to be opened to the public and brought into use.
- The setting of the barn will be enhanced, and its presentation improved by landscaping, with little to no alteration to the barn itself.
- Accessibility is important for historic sites, allowing an equal opportunity for everyone to visit such a significant site.
- The proposed works will also facilitate much needed repair works to these historic structures, which is a hugely positive aspect of the project. Bringing new uses into these derelict buildings should also be considered as a very positive impact as it will ensure their ongoing preservation.







# Appendix A

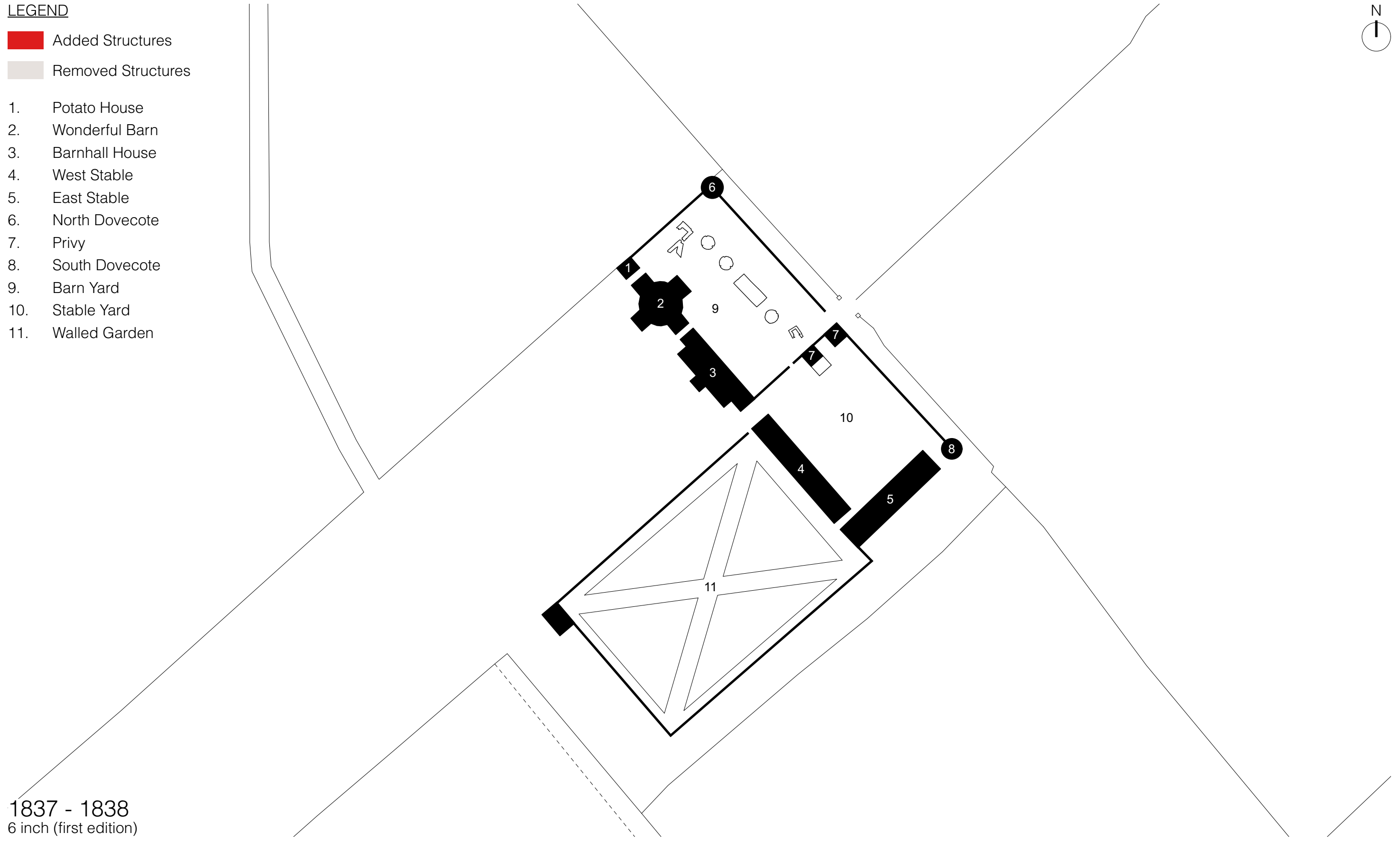
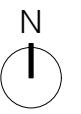
Site Development Maps



**LEGEND**

- Added Structures
- Removed Structures

- 1. Potato House
- 2. Wonderful Barn
- 3. Barnhall House
- 4. West Stable
- 5. East Stable
- 6. North Dovecote
- 7. Privy
- 8. South Dovecote
- 9. Barn Yard
- 10. Stable Yard
- 11. Walled Garden

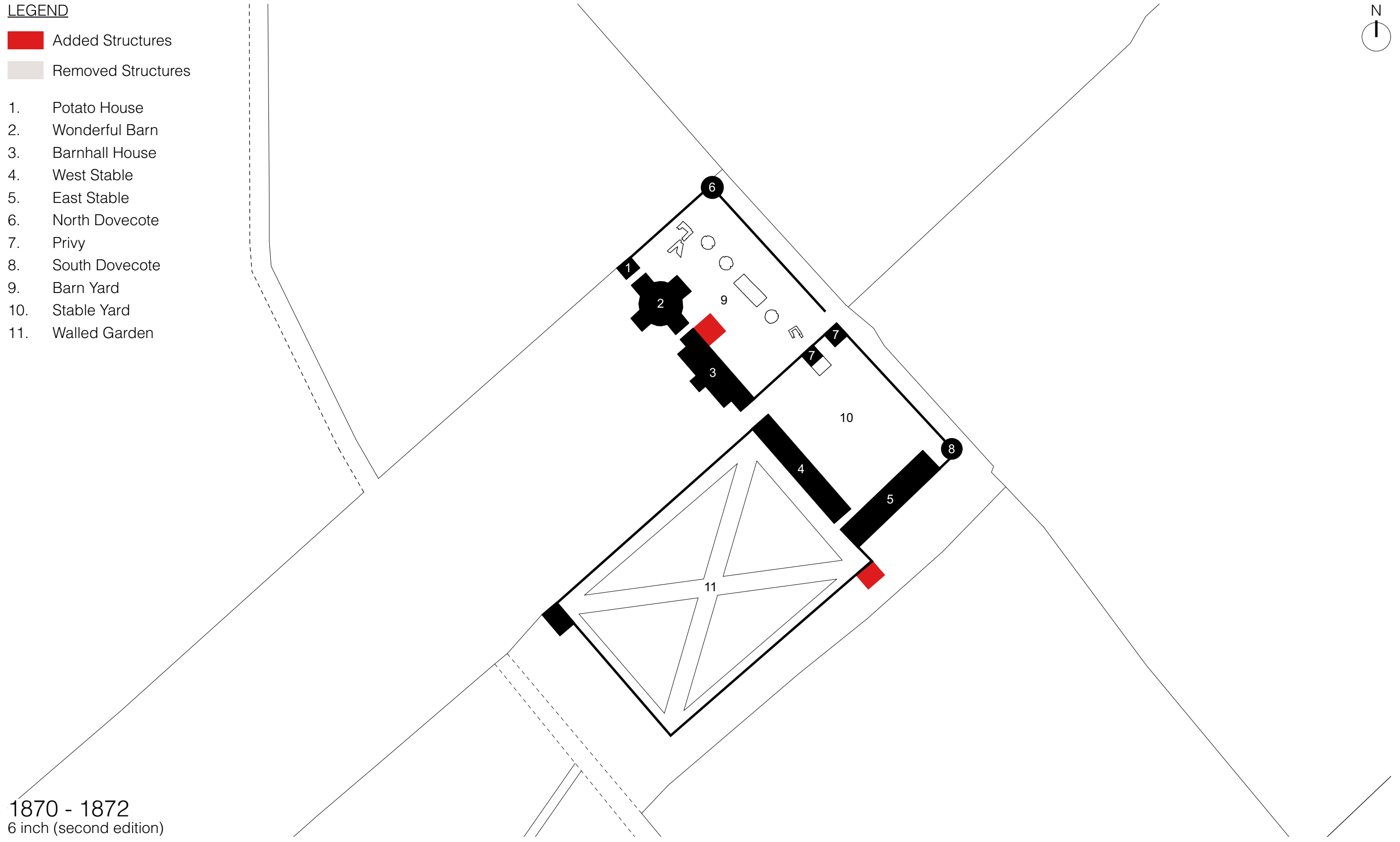
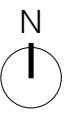


1837 - 1838  
6 inch (first edition)

**LEGEND**

- Added Structures
- Removed Structures

- Potato House
- Wonderful Barn
- Barnhall House
- West Stable
- East Stable
- North Dovecote
- Privy
- South Dovecote
- Barn Yard
- Stable Yard
- Walled Garden

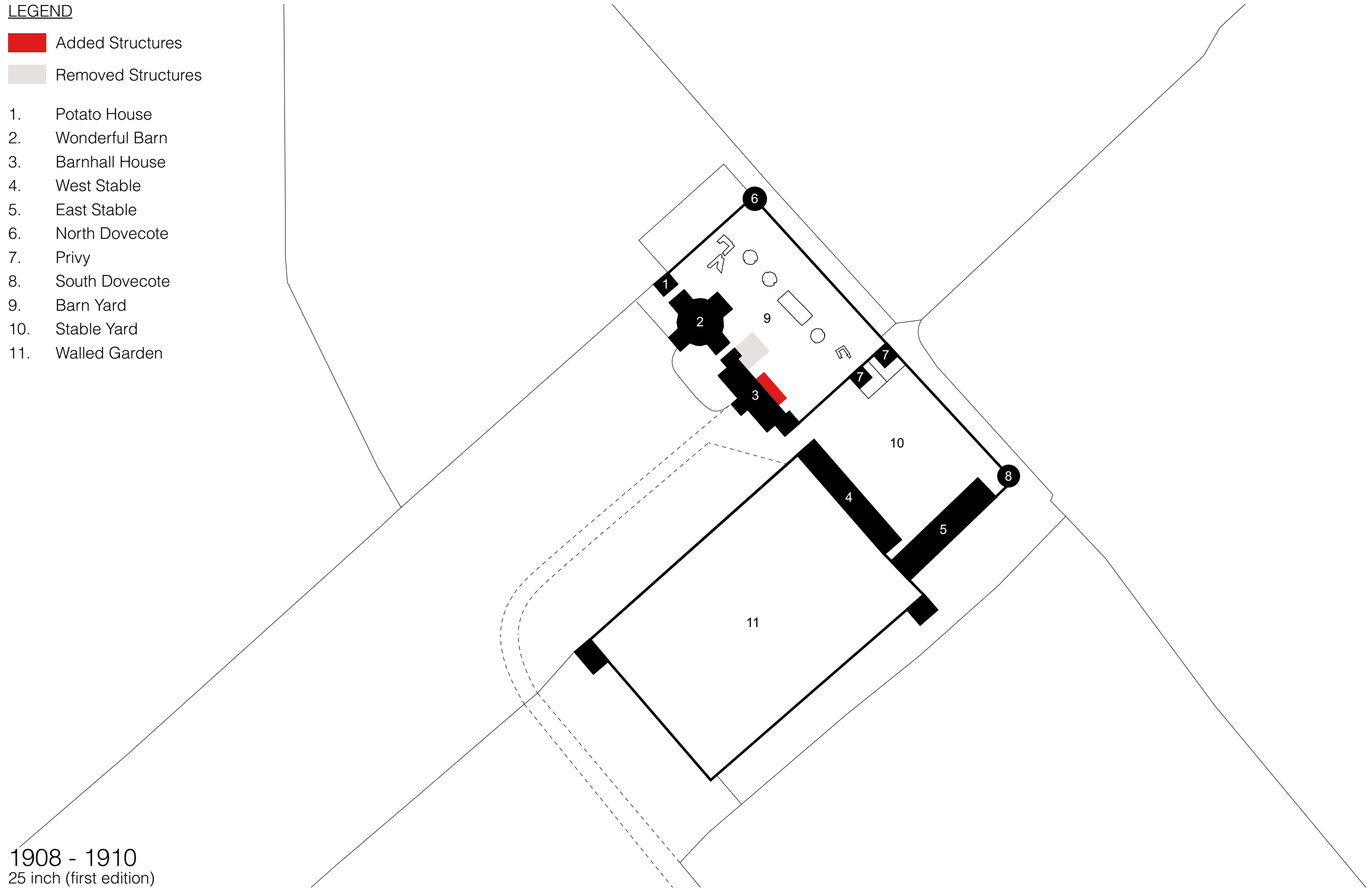
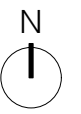


1870 - 1872  
6 inch (second edition)

**LEGEND**

- Added Structures
- Removed Structures

- 1. Potato House
- 2. Wonderful Barn
- 3. Barnhall House
- 4. West Stable
- 5. East Stable
- 6. North Dovecote
- 7. Privy
- 8. South Dovecote
- 9. Barn Yard
- 10. Stable Yard
- 11. Walled Garden



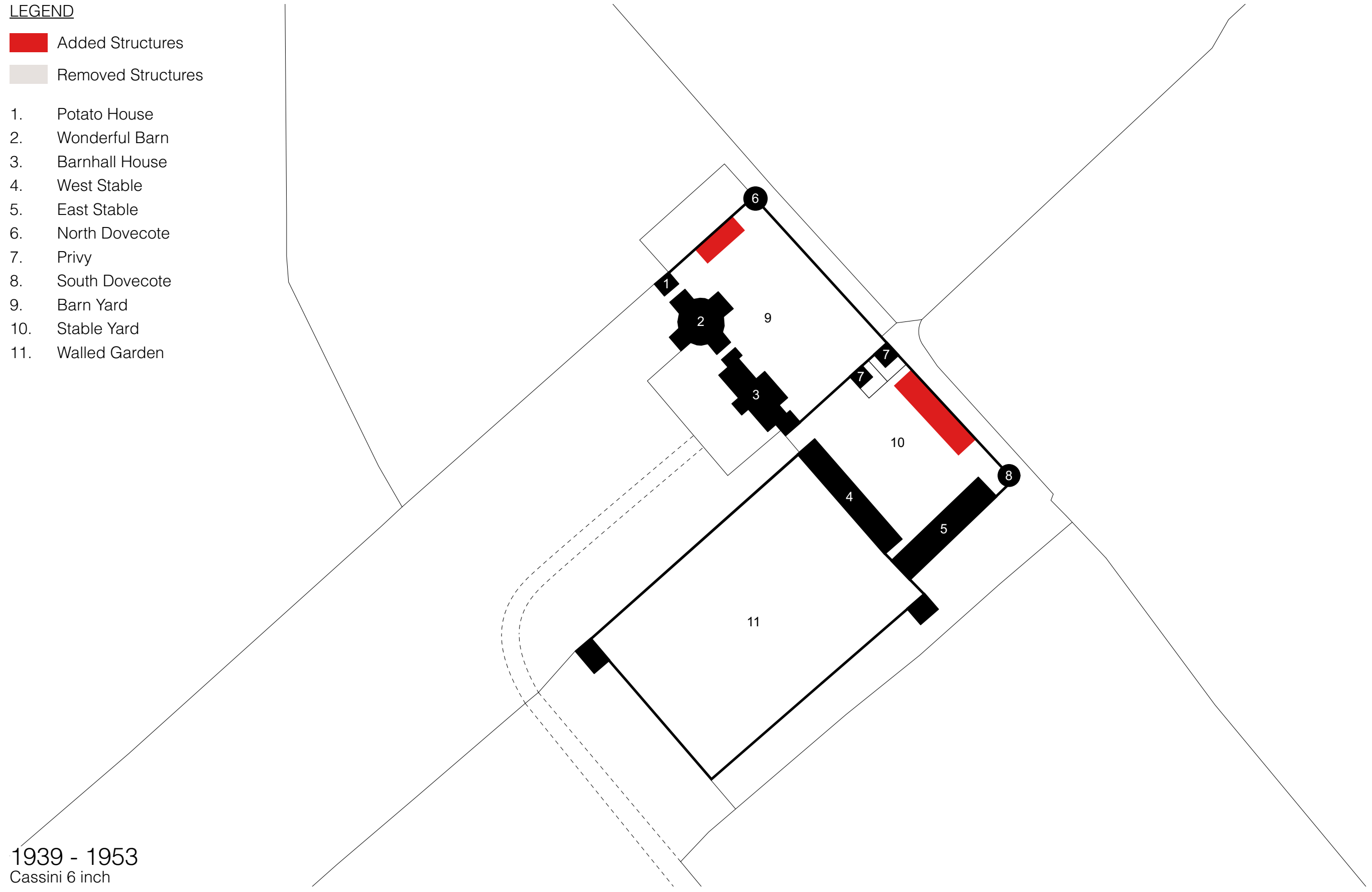
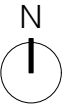
1908 - 1910  
25 inch (first edition)



**LEGEND**

- Added Structures
- Removed Structures

- 1. Potato House
- 2. Wonderful Barn
- 3. Barnhall House
- 4. West Stable
- 5. East Stable
- 6. North Dovecote
- 7. Privy
- 8. South Dovecote
- 9. Barn Yard
- 10. Stable Yard
- 11. Walled Garden

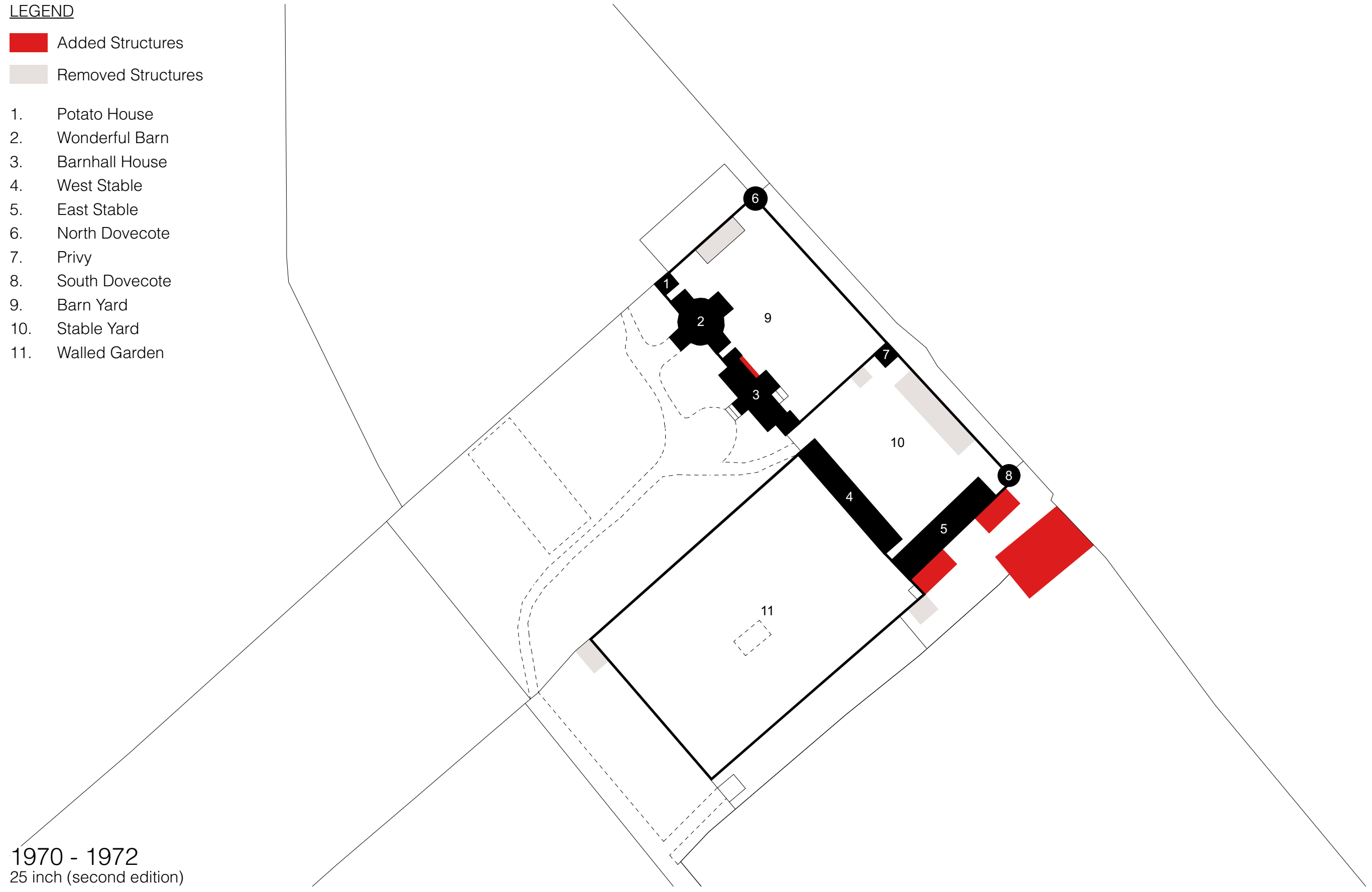
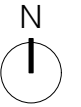


1939 - 1953  
Cassini 6 inch

**LEGEND**

- Added Structures
- Removed Structures

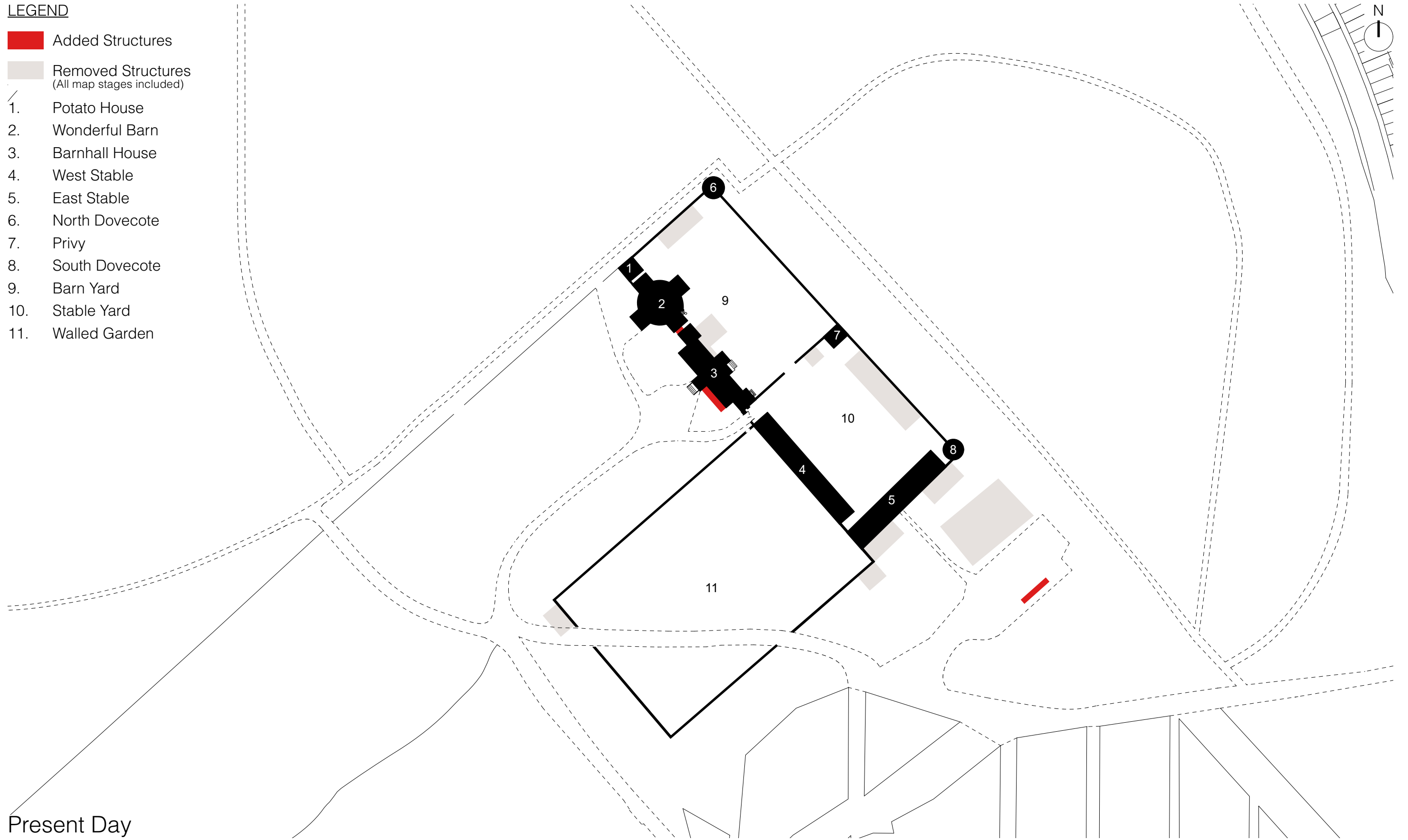
- 1. Potato House
- 2. Wonderful Barn
- 3. Barnhall House
- 4. West Stable
- 5. East Stable
- 6. North Dovecote
- 7. Privy
- 8. South Dovecote
- 9. Barn Yard
- 10. Stable Yard
- 11. Walled Garden



1970 - 1972  
25 inch (second edition)

**LEGEND**

- Added Structures
- Removed Structures  
(All map stages included)
- 1. Potato House
- 2. Wonderful Barn
- 3. Barnhall House
- 4. West Stable
- 5. East Stable
- 6. North Dovecote
- 7. Privy
- 8. South Dovecote
- 9. Barn Yard
- 10. Stable Yard
- 11. Walled Garden





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ARCHITECTURE

We are a design led practice working at the intersection of contemporary design and creative conservation. Throughout thirty-five years of practice we have established a strong design ethos with particular emphasis on creativity, collaboration and context. Our work includes - the design of new contemporary buildings; the adaptive reuse of existing buildings and the creative conservation of many important historic buildings and places. Each project is approached with an open mind as we develop our designs in close conversation with our clients and other designers. We have earned a strong and trusted reputation from our clients, peers, consultants and others with whom we collaborate, and the quality of our work has been recognised through many national and international awards.

