

The architectural history of Bagenalstown Courthouse, Co Carlow (1826)

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Richard J. Butler

In the absence of archival material, myths and legends can easily congregate around buildings and even whole towns. Many Irish people believe that their local nineteenth-century barracks, hospital, or school was destined to be built in India instead of Ireland, yet these are little more than myths. Local folklore has it that an architect or civil servant accidentally dropped the building's drawings in the 'Ireland' pigeon-hole instead of the 'India' one in some dim imperial office in London, and so an 'Irish' building now stands incongruously in some Asian desert, and an 'Indian' building – often, it is said, with Gothic turrets or polychromatic Italianate belvederes – ended up somewhere in the Irish landscape. It is unlikely any of these stories will ever be proven to be true.

In Bagenalstown, county Carlow, there is an even bigger myth: that the town was to be Ireland's answer to the French enlightenment, and a major new urban centre called either Versailles or New Versailles. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate the history of Bagenalstown from that of its courthouse, which has always played a major part in this urban legend. Over the past few years I have visited Bagenalstown many times by different modes of transport, but really the best experience is gained by arriving by train and stepping off at Ireland's finest polychromatic jewel-box station. By taking the short walk towards the sparkling granite Protestant church it immediately becomes obvious that Bagenalstown is quite unlike the average Irish town: it is planned to a grid. The main streets are so wide the town appears almost deserted: if there have been traffic jams, I have never seen one.

So what is the origin of the Versailles myth? The only source is a book published in 1746, *A tour through Ireland in several Entertaining letters*, which states 'The next Place worth Observation was *Bagenal's-Town*, laid out by WALTER BAGNAL [1671-1745], Esq. ... who once intended to erect one of the finest Towns in this Kingdom or in any of its neighbours by the name of *Versailles*.' Bagenal's efforts were thwarted when the main road was diverted away from his town, putting 'a Stop to the further Progress of the Buildings after an immense Expencc.'¹ But could it really have been a new Versailles? A grid of some five streets by four hardly suggests this to be the case. Much more likely, it must be said, is that Walter Bagenal was speaking in exaggerated terms in what historians will recognise as a typical case of inflated Protestant ascendancy confidence. A descendant, Philip Bagenal, writing in 1925 about his family's history, dismissed what he saw as 'the somewhat ridiculous allusion to Versailles in the [*A tour through Ireland*] sketch'.² And yet the legend has endured, and nine-out-of-ten books or websites will take as fact the anonymous and good-humoured remarks of the 'two English Gentlemen' who dined with Bagenal and his 'several beautiful Children' at their Dunleckny home about a mile north of the town, sometime in the 1720s, and left us this tall tale.³

¹ Anon., *A tour through Ireland in several Entertaining letters...by two English Gentlemen* (1st ed. Dublin, 1746; London, 1748), p. 227. Portions of this text appear plagiarised in Philip Luckombe, *Compleat Irish Traveller* (London, 1788), vol. 1, p. 105, as quoted in Edward McParland, 'The Public Works of Architects in Ireland during the Neo-Classical Period' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1975), p. 127.

² Philip Bagenal, *Vicissitudes of an Anglo-Irish family 1550-1800: a study of Irish romance and tragedy* (London, 1925), p. 147.

³ Catherine Ann Power, 'The Origins and Development of Bagenalstown, c. 1680-1920,' in Thomas McGrath and William Nolan (eds.), *Carlow: History and Society, interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County* (Dublin, 2008), p. 405. NIAH, *An introduction to the architectural heritage of County Carlow* (Dublin, 2002), p. 8. John Gorton and G.N. Wright, *A Topographical Dictionary of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1833), vol. 1, p. 105. Patrick Comerford, 'Visiting Versailles and the Parthenon on the banks of the Barrow,' blog post, 4 July 2011 (retrieved 3 October 2013), <http://revpatrickcomerford.blogspot.ie/2011/07/visiting-versailles-and-parthenon-on.html>. County Carlow

Apart from the grid layout, what had Bagenal actually achieved? Here again our only source is the ‘English Gentlemen,’ quoted (and sometimes misquoted) by historians ever since. My 1748 copy says Bagenal put up a ‘magnificent Square, Court-House, and several other public Buildings [...] with Stones of different Kinds intermixed with Marble.’⁴ Here we stumble upon the first reference to the town’s *ne plus ultra* oddity: the courthouse. Where is it? You could easily pass it by, or at least miss its best façade. Some directions for visitors to the town, unfamiliar with its layout: from the Protestant church walk towards to the river, then veer right onto Main Street, and soon the courthouse will appear, shunning the street, turning its back on the ordered rhythms of Bagenal’s ‘Versailles’: sullen, hidden, and obscure. You get the most fleeting glimpse of its Ionic portico from the small gaps on either side of its unpromising street façade. These gaps serve to set it apart from the fabric of the town. It seems to be aligned with nothing in particular, facing no-one, contributing who knows what. But – walk a little further on, down an alleyway and around a corner – and it opens up in all its strange glory, perched high over the Barrow on steeply sloping ground; its sparkling granite columns rising from a tended garden surrounded by high walls and railings. This half-hidden space is surrounded, for its sins, by plastic rubbish bins, broken glass, old gas cylinders, mangled rusting construction fencing, and a surfeit of those awful towering plants which are quick to colonise neglected cubbyholes. If there is a Baalbek of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, this is it. After some acrobatics involving an old stone wall it is just about possible to capture a photo of the Grecian portico minus the decay and abandon, but why, we might ask, take an untruthful photo?

There are no known drawings or letters pertaining to this courthouse. We know neither who the architect was nor when precisely it was started or finished. Here the legends and myths have taken off like the surrounding weeds. Firstly, some have suggested the ‘Court-House’ mentioned in 1746 is the building we see today, and that it represents the ‘only legacy of [Bagenal’s] grand dream for a New Versailles.’⁵ Others have added to the confusion by missing out on a critical comma in the important 1746 source and thereby suggesting that the original building was a ‘Square Court-House’ (compare with my quote above).⁶ In truth the building we see today cannot be part of Bagenal’s eighteenth-century scheme: Lewis (1837) and Fraser (1844) both refer to a ‘lately erected’ courthouse, with the latter describing an Ionic portico, and calling it a ‘remarkable object’ (though Lewis mistakenly and confusingly talks about ‘four Doric pillars’).⁷ Whatever the ‘English Gentlemen’ saw in the 1720s, it cannot have been the building we see today. Furthermore it cannot then be the only surviving bit of the grand ‘Versailles’ plan: Walter Bagenal was almost a century dead by 1835, when paradoxically it is said by some sources that he employed the architect Daniel Robertson (who died in 1849) to design the building.

Enough of the legends and myths. It is clear from researching the history of the building, that the year of construction is not *c.* 1835 as currently thought, but almost a decade earlier, 1826. This distinction is important, as it re-attaches the commission to the great national wave of provincial courthouse building, in response to a combination of agrarian unrest, legislative reform, generous grants and loans from Westminster, and Grand Jury competitive pride. The source for this new evidence is, perhaps unexpectedly, buried in the annual reports of the Inspectors General for Irish prisons. Major Benjamin Blake Woodward, inspector for the

Irish Genealogical Project (IGP), managed by Michael J. Brennan (retrieved 3 October 2013), http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlcar2/bagenalstown_town.htm

⁴ Anon., *A tour through Ireland*, p. 227.

⁵ Comerford, blog post.

⁶ Power, ‘The Origins and Development of Bagenalstown,’ p. 409.

⁷ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. 1, pp. 99 & 584. James Fraser, *A hand book for travellers in Ireland* (Dublin, 1844), p. 171. Power repeats Lewis’s error in referring to the order of the portico as ‘Doric,’ see ‘The Origins and Development of Bagenalstown,’ p. 409.

southern district, noted in 1824 that ‘A GAOL and court-house are to be established in [Bagenalstown], but are not as yet built’ (by ‘gaol’ he meant a small bridewell, in effect a few holding cells).⁸ Then, in a report dated 1 February 1827, he says ‘In both these places [Bagenalstown and Tullow] new court houses and places of confinement have been built since my last inspection [c. 1825]. The court houses are on a good plan, quite suited to the importance of the use for which they are intended. But the Prison Act has been wholly overlooked in the plan of the Bridewells attached’.⁹ Three years later, he notes ‘The two cells at Bagenalstown are no longer used for prisoners, which is quite right, as the accommodation was illegal.’¹⁰

Accounts from the Board of Works show that money was loaned to the Carlow Grand Jury to help build Tullow courthouse around this time, but none was offered (or sought) for Bagenalstown.¹¹ Nationally this is unusual – Grand Juries regularly part-financed their building projects with central government money, generally repaid over 10-20 years.¹² Lewis (1837) says the new courthouse was ‘erected at the expense of Philip Bagenal,’ who inherited much of the Bagenal family property (and indeed changed his surname to Bagenal by Royal Licence) in 1832.¹³ This, coupled with Woodward’s condemnation of the attached bridewell, gives a valuable insight into the building and its context: it seems likely the courthouse was a pet-project of the young Philip, who financed it from his own private income. He appears to have cared little for the new government regulations for small prisons, in place since 1822. The fact that the cells in Bagenalstown were shut down just three years after construction speaks volumes for his lack of cooperation with the prison inspectors. His concern, as is evident from the building itself, was with the external appearance of the courthouse, and not with the attached small prison. The grandeur of the façade suggests that he saw it as important to continue the ‘improving’ work of his great-grandfather. Or perhaps, we might think, the building is a kind of folly. After all, the best view of the Greek portico is gained from the northern outskirts of the town, on the road to the Bagenal family’s Dunleckny property. Here the pediment rises spectacularly above the surrounding buildings, and entering by the banks of the Barrow, there is a sense of anticipation that surely echoes the grandest of enlightenment planning. The Bagenals would have seen it every time they entered their town, every time they acted as magistrates in their courthouse.¹⁴

In spite of the lack of any definite evidence, it seems very likely Robertson was indeed the architect. Myles Campbell at Trinity College Dublin has recently found evidence that Robertson was active in Ireland much earlier than previously thought – as early as 1818 – and so the construction date of 1826 does not necessarily exclude him as architect.¹⁵ Some of his other commissions, in particular Upton House in county Carlow, and the older of the gate lodges at Castleboro, county Wexford, are stylistically very close to Bagenalstown courthouse (the appearance of an Ionic portico at the former is especially striking). If not Robertson it is unclear who else the architect could have been: Thomas Cobden (1794-1842), perhaps, but the skilful

⁸ *Second report of the inspectors general on ... the Prisons of Ireland*, p. 40, H.C. 1824 (294), xxii.

⁹ *Fifth report of the inspectors general on ... the Prisons of Ireland*, p. 43, H.C. 1827 (471), xi. Woodward is referring to the Prisons (Ireland) Act 1822 (3 Geo. 4 c. 64).

¹⁰ *Eight report of the inspectors general on ... the Prisons of Ireland*, p. 46, H.C. 1830 (48), xxiv.

¹¹ *An account of all Sums of Money placed at the disposal of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, for Public Works, during each of the last Four Years*, pp. 4-5, H.C. 1828 (464), xxii. Listed on p. 3 are applications which were rejected, and in which Bagenalstown does not appear.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-7.

¹³ Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, p. 584. Bagenal, *Vicissitudes of an Anglo-Irish family*, ‘Pedigree of the Irish Branch of the Bagenal Family,’ attached folding sheet.

¹⁴ As they regularly did: 27 Petty Sessions were presided over by members of the Newton-Bagenal family in 1835. *A return of the courts of Petty Sessions in the several counties of Ireland ... for the year ending 31st December 1835*, p. 16, H.C. (415), xxxiii.

¹⁵ Myles Campbell, ‘British architects and the Tudor-Revival country house in Ireland, 1825-50’ (forthcoming Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin).

rendering at Bagenalstown courthouse of the Greek Erechtheion Ionic, with a turned corner volute, is more sophisticated than the rudimentary quality of much of Cobden's work. Until new evidence comes to light, the attribution seems reasonably safe: during the 1830s and 40s Robertson built houses for many members of the Newton-Bagenal family, including not least a new Dunleckny, in a Tudor Revival manner.¹⁶

In the ten-year period 1825-35 the Grand Jury of county Carlow, with the notable help of some of the landed elite like Philip Bagenal, rebuilt all the courthouses and gaols in their county.¹⁷ Accounts show over £15,000 was spent in this period, a figure which does not include some government loans or indeed private munificence. Over the next twenty years, only a third of this sum was expended: in other words, there is a discernible (and as yet, I would argue, underappreciated) great decade of provincial building. Bagenalstown fits into this broader context, but clearly it also stands out as odd and perplexing for many reasons. Critically the date of 1826 places it *before* the County Courthouse (1827-32) in Carlow town, the celebrated Neo-Classical edifice designed by William Vitruvius Morrison. Bagenalstown's courthouse is lovable and strange, a gleaming granite folly in the Carlow landscape, or perhaps a light-hearted piece of civic architecture in a county which escaped much of the agrarian violence and outrages which racked Cork, Tipperary and the midlands for much of the 1820s and 30s. 'I am always rejoiced,' the indomitable Lord Norbury said addressing the Carlow Grand Jury in 1826, 'when I come to this part of Ireland which enjoys so much happiness and tranquillity, at a time when other parts of the country are overwhelmed with criminal excesses.'¹⁸ And what came of Robertson, the architect? His later life was less cheery: declared bankrupt in 1841,¹⁹ he is memorably depicted by Mervyn Wingfield, 7th Viscount Powerscourt: 'He was much given to drink, and always drew best when his brain was excited with sherry. He suffered from gout, and used to be driven about in a wheel-barrow with a bottle of sherry; while that lasted he was always ready to direct the workmen, but when it was finished he was incapable of working any more.'²⁰ Perhaps similar shenanigans took place on the banks of the Barrow.

Further reading

Frederick O'Dwyer, "'Modelled Muscularity': Daniel Robertson's Tudor Manors,' *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, vol. 15 (1999), pp. 87-97.

NIAH, *An introduction to the architectural heritage of County Carlow* (Dublin, 2002).

Thomas McGrath and William Nolan (eds.), *Carlow: History and Society, interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County* (Dublin, 2008).

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¹⁶ Frederick O'Dwyer, "'Modelled Muscularity': Daniel Robertson's Tudor Manors,' *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, vol. 15 (1999), pp. 87-97.

¹⁷ Tullow courthouse (c. 1825-27), Bagenalstown courthouse (c. 1826-27), Carlow courthouse (1828-32). Carlow county gaol (rebuilt 1828-32). This is evident from compiling the sums spent on courthouse and gaol building work given in the annual *Grand Jury presentments: abstracts of accounts of presentments*, H.C. 1824 (258), xxii, onwards.

¹⁸ Anon., 'Lord Norbury's Charge,' *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Mar. 1826, p. 4.

¹⁹ Anon., 'Insolvent Debtors,' *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Dec. 1841, p. 4.

²⁰ Mervyn Wingfield, 7th Viscount Powerscourt, *A Description and History of Powerscourt* (London, 1903), p. 77.

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