



Cork's new town (1780) and its afterlife

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THOMAS SAUTELLE ROBERTS'S AQUATINT VIEW OF CORK CITY PUBLISHED IN 1799 portrays a bustling port and a sublimely peaceful prospect (Plate 1).¹ Two of the most prominent features in the middle distance are St Patrick's Bridge and the Navigation Wall that stretched eastwards down the River Lee from the city. The bridge was only a few years old and had been a long time coming. In an echo of the bitter disputes in Dublin, controversy had raged over the possible effects of a second crossing on the Lee's North Channel, but eventually the bridge received statutory authorisation in 1786.² However, before it was completed it was severely damaged in January 1789 in the city's worst floods of the century. Michael Shanahan, the peripatetic architect who had learnt his trade under the patronage of the Earl Bishop (of Cloyne and then Derry), was heavily involved. He had recently returned to the city to run a marble and stonecutting business, but as 'architect and contractor' he oversaw the successful completion of the bridge over the next two years.³

The Navigation Wall was also breached in the great flood of 1789. John Hely-Hutchinson, long-time MP for the city, informed the House of Commons in 1790 that 180ft of walling had been lost, and he pleaded for £1,000 to repair the damage. He had been one of the city's representatives in Parliament for almost thirty years (as well as serving as Provost of Trinity College since 1774), and he was the principal lobbyist for Cork's commercial interests in Dublin throughout his political career. Just as his fellow parliamentarian Edmund Sexton Pery had secured a remarkable flow of public grants to transform the infrastructure of the city of Limerick, so Hely-Hutchinson obtained many grants of public money for Cork's improvement, but the wall was the most visible legacy. Between 1761 and 1783, £19,500 was allocated by Parliament in ten separate grants to improve the navigation of Cork Harbour, and nearly all of this was spent on the wall. However, no further public funding was forthcoming in 1790 in response to the old politician's plea.⁴

The idea of a great wall cast into the tide had, of course, a Dublin precedent in the

1 – Thomas Sautelle Roberts (c.1749-1778), *CITY OF CORK*

c.1790 [publ. 1799], mezzotint (detail, see also page 54)

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Great South Wall piercing Dublin Bay, which was still under construction when the first round of funds was secured for Cork's wall. No drawings of this survive, but it seems that the earliest sections had a stone base 16ft wide, and on top, 'including the masonry and the gravel', they were 20ft wide. The end result was never going to be as formidable as Dublin's Great South Wall, but the context was of course different. Unlike Dublin Bay, Cork's upper harbour was sheltered from the extremes of offshore conditions, but it was menacing nonetheless because of hidden shoals along its ever-busy channel. By 1760 small commercial vessels, and even lighters, were encountering constant difficulty in reaching the city quays in a timely fashion, what with narrow lines of access, uncertain shoals, increased silting and the frequently adverse winds.⁵

Like all such projects, the wall cost far more than its promoters had expected, and it remained unfinished when Roberts surveyed the scene in the 1790s. The earliest depiction of the structure and its location is in Joseph Connor's 'Map of the City and Suburbs of Cork' of 1774 (Plate 2). Nevertheless, his image suggests that ships large and small were clustering along the line of the wall. The project was the subject of recurring parliamentary scrutiny, and there was criticism both of procurement and of the excessive number of overseers, but the quality of the work itself was not challenged. Those involved in the parliamentary hearings praised the skill of the hundreds of labourers who had learnt on site to do everything, even the stonecutting, so that qualified masons had not been required. Its advocates could fairly claim that by 1790, even though it remained unfinished, 'the shoals have been deepened and partly removed, the ill-effects of contrary winds have been guarded against, [and] expense and delay injurious to commerce have been diminished'. A much greater proportion of ocean-going vessels was now docking at the city quays rather than discharging onto lighters at Passage or Cove (now Cobh). And, in addition to its practical functions, the wall – 'its long white line of solid limestone masonry ... very pretty in the sunset' – had become a promenade for the adventurous. But despite a flurry of petitions for further grants to complete the project, the latest of them tabled in the dying months of the Irish parliament, no more public funding was forthcoming after 1783 to extend the wall, and no alternative sources of finance were identified.⁶

The wall lay along the south side of the main course of the Lee, starting close to where the North Channel and the main section of South Channel came together after flowing through the city, and the route the builders chose was just south of the deepest channel in the river. Thus the distant expanse of water shown in Roberts' aquatint lying beyond the wall was something of a backwater. It was fed by a distributary arm of the South Channel, but most of the ground was marshland, only fully visible at low tide. Roberts wisely chose to present the panorama at high tide.

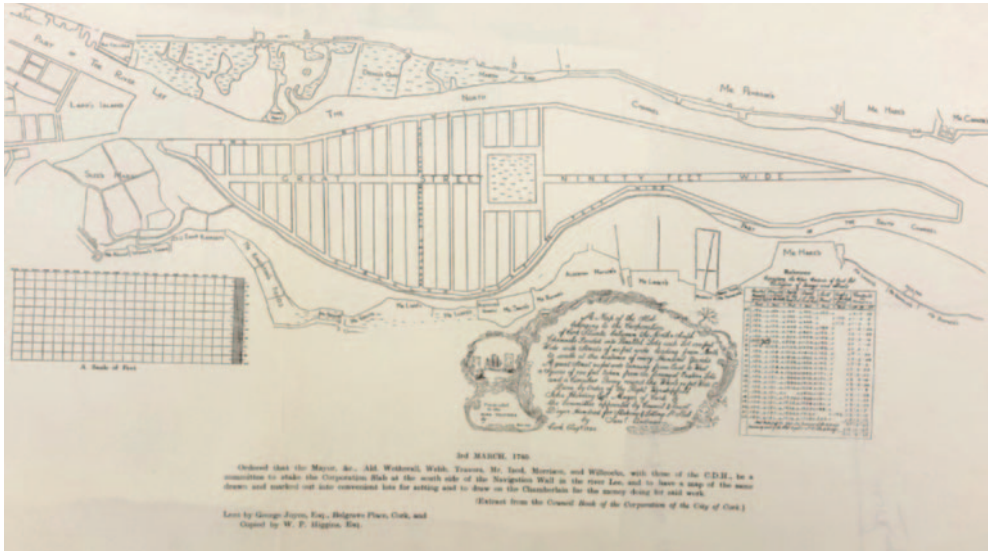
The marsh remained a well-watered expanse after the first sections of the wall were built because there was no link between it and the mainland, and no obstruction prevented the tide from flowing around the structure. But as the wall grew in length, what lay beyond became a tempting prospect for development. Since the mid-seventeenth century, Cork city had slowly expanded onto mudbanks to the west and east of the old walls, and by the 1790s the commercial centre of gravity lay firmly east of the medieval city on privately reclaimed land or on culverted canals, bounded by Grand Parade, St Patrick's Street and the South Mall. This long history of reclamation meant that the city's carpenters



2 – Joseph Connor,
 'A Map of the City and Suburbs of Cork', 1774

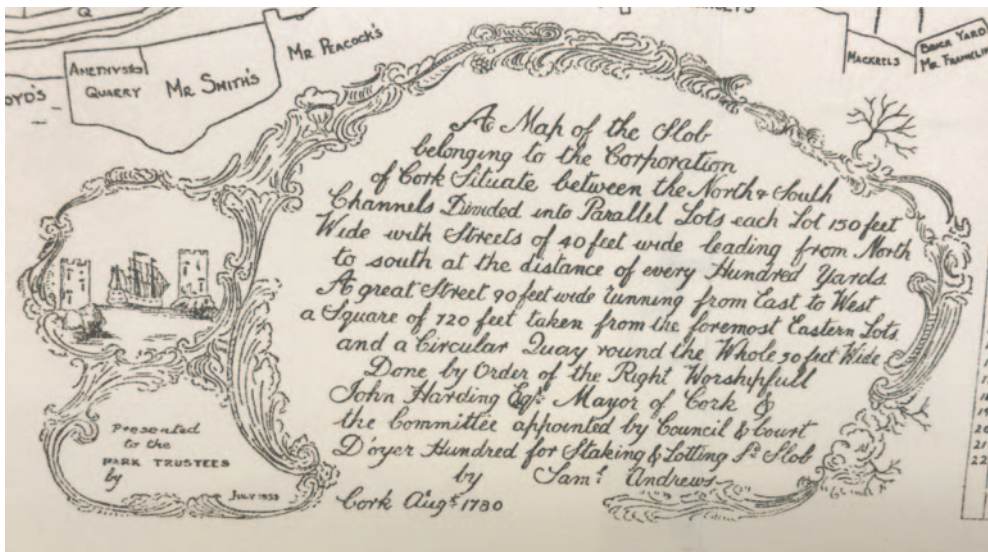
and masons had a high level of expertise on how to manage alluvial foundations, high-water tables, and the risk of sudden flooding.⁷

It is clear that there was a temptation to apply that expertise to the several hundred acres of marsh beyond the wall. Indeed, large quantities of gravel and silt had already been deposited there since the beginnings of the project, so a process of piecemeal reclamation had begun by default. Thus, in 1780, Cork Corporation, the owners of the tidal ground, commissioned a survey and plan. Our principal evidence for this is a copy of a copy (Plate 3). The original survey was presumably lost in the City Hall fire of 1920, but a copy had been made for the 'Park Trustees' dated 1853, and that in turn was redrawn by W.P. Higgins for publication in the *Journal of the Cork Historical & Archaeological Society* in 1929, where it appeared without editorial comment. The cartouche attached to the plan, however, is quite informative, declaring that it was commissioned by the city mayor, John Harding, 'and the committee appointed by Council & Court [of] D'Oyer Hundred for staking and lotting' the slob that lay 'between the North and South Channels' that belonged to the Corporation, and that it was executed by Sam[ue]l Andrews (Plate 4).⁸ Such a decision had indeed been taken by the Council, on 3rd March 1780, 'to stake the Corporation Slab [*sic*], at the south side of the Navigation Wall in the river Lee, and to have a map of the same drawn and marked out into convenient lots for setting'. The resulting map is dated August of the same year. In the extant version it appears as a somewhat naïve piece of work, but Samuel Andrews had been trained by John Rocque and had been advertising his services as a surveyor and 'topographer' since 1760. He had been employed by the Corporation to produce surveys at various times between 1767 and



3 – Samuel Andrews, ‘A Map of the Slob belonging to the Corporation of Cork... Aug[us]t 1780’
(copy redrawn by W.P. Higgins, JCHAS, 2nd series, XXXIV, 1929, facing 116)

4 – Cartouche on Andrews’ map



1790, including one of what became the prestigious new city markets beside the Grand Parade in 1786 (the English Market). But, more to the point, Andrews was the long-serving ‘engineer’ (in effect, the project manager) of the Navigation Wall for at least nineteen years (from 1764), and he seems to have combined the roles of hydrographer, clerk of works and accounting officer. However the ‘architect’ of the wall, at least in the 1780s, was none other than Michael Shanahan.⁹

The plan drawn up by Andrews in 1780 envisaged 42 lots with varying street frontages. All lots were to be allocated with a plot depth of 150ft, and the new settlement was to be bisected by 'a great street ninety feet wide' that would run from the city end (the west) towards a small square offering downstream views; the possibility of further development on the land east of the square was left open. Each lot opened out onto one of ten 'cross streets', and each of these streets was to be 40ft wide. The whole development was to be surrounded by a circular quay 50ft wide – something far more substantial than the Navigation Wall itself, but apparently incorporating it.

There was nothing revolutionary in Andrews' design and it can be compared with Dublin Corporation's 1717 North Lots scheme, planned for the foreshore of Dublin Bay to the north-east of the port. That had been divided up into 266 units, and Dublin Corporation undertook to build an outer sea wall, quays and 'all the streets ... [to] be walled foundation high'. Lessees were obliged to fill in and build up their lots using rocks and sand purchased from the Ballast Office. Progress in the Dublin project was very slow and plans to reclaim the mudflats north of the Tolka (modern Eastpoint Park) had been abandoned by the 1740s. But eventually – two or more generations later – the lots south of the Tolka from East Wall and Sheriff Street south to the Liffey began to attract speculative interest – a collateral effect following the decision to locate Gandon's Custom House on a site nearby.¹⁰

Maybe it was the sight of the first buildings on these Dublin sloblands that inspired Cork Corporation in 1780. Or perhaps it was a case of home-grown exuberance in the months after the winning of Irish 'free trade' from London, a time when many Cork merchants were enjoying swollen wartime profits from the boom in military and naval provisioning. And John Harding seems to have been one of the more enterprising Cork mayors, with a string of other initiatives recorded during his time in office. But if the Andrews plan was to create a residential rather than a commercial district, was this initiative an attempt to emulate Limerick's Newtown Pery? Limerick's new town may still have been largely at the planning stage in 1780, but the Pery estate's ambition that it become a high-status residential and business district was no secret.¹¹ However, unlike the situation in Limerick, the haute bourgeoisie of Cork already had an attractive residential alternative – on the heights overlooking the city, stretching from Sunday's Well in the west all the way down to Glanmire, and on the southside above Douglas and Blackrock. This drift to sites overlooking the city and the river was already well established. However, the 1780 plan may simply have been motivated by financial need (as had been the case in Dublin in the 1710s). A project of this sort promised windfall benefits to the Corporation if tenants willing to pay large 'entry' fines for the marshland lots could be found, or indeed if outright purchasers could be secured, for the city had a string of capital projects that were unlikely to be paid for by Parliament (new markets, the new bridge, street lighting and much else).

The Andrews plan never went any further, although the idea may have circulated for a few years among the 'Cork Society for Arts and Sciences', a shadowy group active in the 1780s. They commissioned another surveyor, Daniel Murphy, to produce a fresh map of the city outlining a 'new modelling of Cork' (Plates 5, 8). His map appeared in 1789 and came with a series of suggestions for new streets, including one to run from



Fenn's Quay west of the old city through Main Street, then via a widening of Paul Street and Half Moon Street to Coal Quay and cross the North Channel into Shandon. However, it seems that there was no public money and no local patron to champion such radical interventions; all the focus at the time was on the completion of St Patrick's Bridge and the Navigation Wall.¹²

But what of the site of the phantom town? In 1792 Samuel Andrews published a 'Chart of Cork Harbour' (first advertised back in 1768), but it gave no hint of plans for the new town, nor was there any sign of development near the wall on William Beaufort's 1801 map of the city and environs (Plates 6, 7). Very little, it seems, happened until the creation of Cork Harbour Commissioners in 1814. At that time, near the end of the Napoleonic Wars, port congestion was more acute than ever, despite major reclamation and quay development downstream on the north shore of the river (reflecting the impact of St Patrick's bridge and the vigorous management of the Penrose estate). The Harbour Commissioners almost immediately turned to Alexander Nimmo to advise on strategic port improvement. In his report he questioned whether the Navigation Wall had been of any benefit to the harbour, although he did advocate an extension of the wall to enclose the marsh for development. He also made the case for the construction of two 'wet docks' on the western end of the marsh, and linked to them he suggested a small network of streets. Perhaps coincidentally, as in 1780, the 'cross streets' in his plan were to be 40ft wide, but the buildings he envisaged were presumably entirely commercial. Most of his plans also went no further at that time, being rather too ambitious for the Commissioners.¹³

However, once they had adequate powers to raise port taxes and to borrow, the Commissioners did commence a capital programme of quay reconstruction and intensive downstream dredging. The profuse supply of mud and gravel generated by dredging



6 – William Beaufort, 'Plan of the City & Suburbs of Cork according to the latest Improvements', 1801

7 – Detail of Beaufort's map showing the Navigation Wall along the North Channel



8 – Reorientated detail of Murphy's map (Plate 5) (dotted lines show proposed widening of Paul Street leading round towards proposed new bridge)

opposite

5 – Daniel Murphy, 'A Survey of the City and Suburbs of Cork', 1789



hastened the reclamation of the marshland site. Despite Nimmo's scepticism, the Commissioners began to strengthen and extend the wall, spending in the region of £20,000 by 1839 on that specific work so that it extended almost as far as the shore below Ballintemple, and now enclosed the whole marsh. It took a legal action by Blackrock property owners, concerned at their loss of access to the river, to halt the wall at that point. The reformed Corporation in the 1840s followed this up by investing heavily in draining and new embankments, thereby drying out much of the marsh. The work of these two agencies is evident on the 6" county map for Cork, published in 1845, at which point the old marsh had been divided into two halves, the larger western section then called 'City Park' (still a treeless expanse), separated from a smaller wasteland to the east described by the map-makers as 'mud'.¹⁴

All this activity revived the question of how the newly reclaimed land was to be used. Over the next three decades there was a long-drawn-out struggle between the Harbour Commissioners, close to the shipping companies who were on the lookout for additional dockland space; the reformed Corporation, many of whom were anxious to create an attractive park for the poorer citizenry and who were at times suspicious of the 'speculators' and the shippers; a scientific lobby (linked to the new College), planning botanical gardens and a zoo on at least part of the site; and railway promoters searching for the cheapest route to Passage and the lower harbour. There was also a more inchoate lobby promoting various sports. A tree-lined walk along the river, the Marina Walk, was laid out on the wall in the 1850s, and boathouses, bathing houses and bandstands began to appear from that time. In the 1860s the Corporation made considerable efforts to landscape City Park (for a while it was renamed Victoria Park). But one sporting interest trumped the others – that of racing, led by the redoubtable Sir John Arnott. For a while other sports were accommodated, but from 1869 Arnott's friends developed and expanded the great racecourse that for several generations came to dominate the western half of the site. That indeed remained the case until Henry Ford's representatives came and successfully negotiated the purchase of most of the land from Cork Corporation in 1916.

However, east of the embankment, the old marshland was put to a great variety of uses – agricultural and sporting – and from the 1890s part of it was leased by the GAA. They built their first small stadium there in 1898, and have of course remained and established their own illustrious primacy on the site while nearly all their neighbours, commercial, industrial and recreational, have come and gone.¹⁵ And now, in the era of anticipated rising sea levels, ever more ambitious plans for the development of Cork's 'South Docklands' are in the news once again, complete with skyscrapers and the promise of 'an entirely new docklands village'. The will-o'-the-wisp of 1780 still flickers.¹⁶

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ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:
JCHAS *Journal of the Cork Historical & Archaeological Society*
JHCI *Journals of the House of Commons of Ireland*

- 1 A mezzotint of Roberts' original watercolour of Cork in the Crawford Gallery collection (CAG 1629) has been dated 'c.1790', but aquatints in the National Gallery of Ireland (20838.10) and the British Library (K.Top.52.18.b) carry the date of publication as 1st July 1799.
- 2 26 Geo. III, c. 28.
- 3 Francis H. Tuckey, *The County and City of Cork Remembrancer...* (Cork, 1837) 199-203, 241; William O'Sullivan, *The Economic History of Cork City from the Earliest Times to the Act of Union* (Cork, 1937) 206; Kieran Hickey, 'Flooding in the city', in J.S. Crowley, R.J.N. Devoy, D. Linehan, P. O'Flanagan (eds), *Atlas of Cork City* (Cork University Press, 2005) 28-29; Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects, 'Michael Shanahan', www.dia.ie/architects/. Shanahan's Bridge was completely washed away in the next great flood in 1853, *Cork Examiner*, 22nd Aug 1855.
- 4 *Freeman's Journal*, 6th Feb 1790; O'Sullivan, *Economic History of Cork*, 207-10; David Dickson, *Old World Colony: Cork and south Munster 1630-1830* (Cork, 2005) 105-06.
- 5 JHCI, VII, appendix, lxiii-iv; VIII, appendix, cclxxxviii-ix; XI, appendix, xciv-v.
- 6 JHCI, XI, appendix, xciv-v, ccxcii-ii; XIX, 11th July 1800, 281; Votes of the House of Commons... ([Dublin], 1790) 114; John Fitzgerald, 'The made grounds of Cork city', *JCHAS*, 2nd series, II, 1896, 487. Cf. Alexander Nimmo, *Report on the Means of Improving the Road and Harbour of Cork* (Cork, 1815) iv-v.
- 7 Joseph Connor, 'A Map of the City and Suburbs of Cork' (n.p., 1774), www.corkpastandpresent.ie/mapsimages/corkinoldmaps; John Windele, *Historical and descriptive notices of the city of Cork and its vicinity...* (2nd ed, Cork, 1849) 25-27; Richard Caulfield, *Council Book of the Corporation of Cork...* (Guildford, 1876) 970; Eugene Carberry, 'The development of Cork city', *JCHAS*, XLVIII, 1943, 73-79; Mark Bence-Jones, 'Old town revisited: A city of vanished waterways', *Country Life*, CXLII, 1967, 250.
- 8 Caulfield, *Council Book of the Corporation of Cork*, 953-54; Samuel Andrews, 'A Map of the Slob belonging to the Corporation of Cork &c., dated August 1780', *JCHAS*, 2nd series, XXXIV, 1929, facing 116.
- 9 JHCI, VIII, appendix, cclxxxviii-ix; XI, appendix, xciv, ccxcii; Caulfield, *Council Book of the Corporation of Cork*, 823, 986, 1009, 1055; J.H. Andrews, *Plantation Acres: An historical study of the Irish land surveyors* (Belfast, 1985) 164, 250, 263n; IAA, Dictionary of Irish Architects, 'Samuel Andrews'.
- 10 Sir John T. Gilbert (ed.), *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin*, 19 vols (Dublin, 1898) VII, 30-34, 51, 259-60; Lady Gilbert (ed.), *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin*, 19 vols (Dublin, 1902) IX, 120-22; B.P. Bowen, 'The North Strand', *Dublin Historical Record*, XI, 1950, 53-57, 83-84; Nuala Burke, 'Dublin 1600-1800: A study in morphogenesis', PhD dissertation, University of Dublin, 1972, 283-84, 398; Colm Lennon and John Montague, *Rocque's Dublin: A guide to the Georgian city* (Dublin, 2010) 30-33. Even in 1773 there were almost no buildings shown on the North Lotts; Bernard Scalé, *Survey of the City, Harbour, Bay and Environs of Dublin* (Dublin, 1773).
- 11 Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland...*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1780) II, 2-3.
- 12 J.H. Andrews, 'A Cork cartographer's advertising campaign', *JCHAS*, LXXXIV, 1979, 113; Andrews, *Plantation Acres*, 263n. Murphy's map is reproduced at www.corkpastandpresent.ie/mapsimages/corkinoldmaps.
- 13 Nimmo, *Report on the Harbour of Cork*, v, 6, 8-9, 20-26; *Cork Examiner*, 30th May 1849. Beaufort's map is reproduced at www.corkpastandpresent.ie/mapsimages/corkinoldmaps. For Andrews' 'Chart', British Library Maps, K. MAR.IV (18-2).
- 14 *Southern Reporter*, 5th Nov 1842, 9th Sept 1845; Mary Leland, *That Endless Adventure: a history of the Cork Harbour Commissioners* (Cork, 2001) 24-25. The Ordnance Survey 6" map of Co Cork (1845), with details of the harbour, can be viewed at <http://map.geoheive.ie/mapviewer.html>. This can be compared with the state of play nine years earlier as set out in Charles Vignoles' map accompanying the first application for parliamentary sanction for the Cork & Passage Railway in 1836; reproduced at www.corkpastandpresent.ie/media/Cork%20to%20Passage%20Railway.pdf.
- 15 See, for example, *Cork Examiner*, 26th April 1844; 12th and 19th May 1845; 25th Feb 1853; 8th Jan 1858; 18th Jan 1862; 2nd Jan 1866; 14th and 21st Nov 1868.
- 16 *Irish Independent*, 26th April 2018; Cork Beo, 9th July 2019, www.corkbeo.ie/news/property/major-development-corks-docks-landmark-16553275.