



# Bridge House, Kilkenny: tracing the history of a building

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**K**ILKENNY IS GENERALLY REGARDED AS ONE OF THE BEST, IF NOT THE BEST PRESERVED, medieval towns in Ireland. Obvious reminders of the past glories of the town may be seen in many of the larger buildings that still remain standing – the castle, the churches, and on a more domestic scale, Rothe House and the Shee Alms House. However, behind bland eighteenth and nineteenth-century façades, remnants of the many substantial early stone houses enumerated in the Ormonde Rentals and other seventeenth-century documents may still be found. The purpose of this article is to outline the history of the building at Nos 88-89 John Street, generally known as Bridge House. It is not intended to be an exhaustive study; rather it seeks to explore various aspects of the building's appearance through documents, maps and illustrations. Emphasis will be placed on establishing a chronology of the buildings on the site from the sixteenth century, its transformation, and its context within the overall development of the town.

Bridge House stands on the east bank of the River Nore adjoining St John's Bridge in Kilkenny (Plate 1).<sup>1</sup> The building, well known because of its distinctive double doorway and large three-storey bow, has often featured in views of Kilkenny Castle taken from beyond the bridge. The building has two storeys over a basement, with a large bow and late eighteenth-century façade at No. 89, while the façade of No. 88 is of a later date. A double entrance door was inserted in the nineteenth century to give access to both houses. No. 89 is situated closest to the river, with the orientation of both houses towards the street.

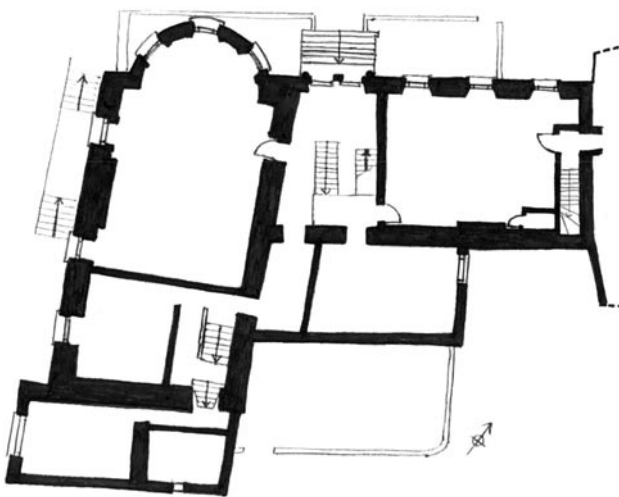
References to Bridge House may be found in any general discussion of Georgian architecture in Kilkenny.<sup>2</sup> However, behind the façade, under plaster-covered walls and decorated ceilings, an earlier thick-walled structure forms the greater part of No. 89. An examination of the current floor plan of No. 89 reveals that the

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*1, 2 – North-west and west elevations of Bridge House, John's Street, Kilkenny, showing the proximity of the house to St John's Bridge and the River Nore (courtesy Blackwood Associates, Dublin)*

earlier building had its gable towards the street, with other heavy stone structures on the east side (Plate 3). In other words, the long side of the earlier building was parallel to the river and there were various other early structures to the east (Plate 2). The later bow front on No. 89 has cloaked the front gable wall that would have faced the street, while the opposing gable, with remnants of early window opes, may still be seen from the rear of the building. In appearance, the street gable of the earlier house would have been similar, albeit on a larger scale, to that of the late sixteenth-century Shee Alms House, which is situated across the bridge in Rose Inn Street.

At this stage it may be useful to provide some background history to the site in an effort to establish some form of chronicle for the building. Bridge House is situated across the river from the old 'Hightown' and the castle. The site is close to a crossing place on the river, and a bridge was built nearby as early as 1223.<sup>3</sup> Further up John Street are the remains of St John's church, a fragment of the larger building that had belonged to the Augustinian Priory of St John founded by William Marshall in 1211. At the time of its dissolution in 1540 the priory had extensive out-buildings. St John's was granted, with part of its extensive land holdings, to the mayor and citizens of Kilkenny around 1541.<sup>4</sup> The lands 'in the area of St John's' granted to the Corporation of Kilkenny included a number of buildings described as 'Bake House, Infirmary, Cloister, Chapter House and Hospital'.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1660s when James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormonde, returned to Ireland after the restoration of Charles II to the throne of England, a dispute arose between the duke and the Corporation over the ownership of some houses and lands in Kilkenny. Because both ducal and Corporation lands had been seized by Cromwellian settlers there was a measure of uncertainty about leases. Handwritten lists of the disputed properties

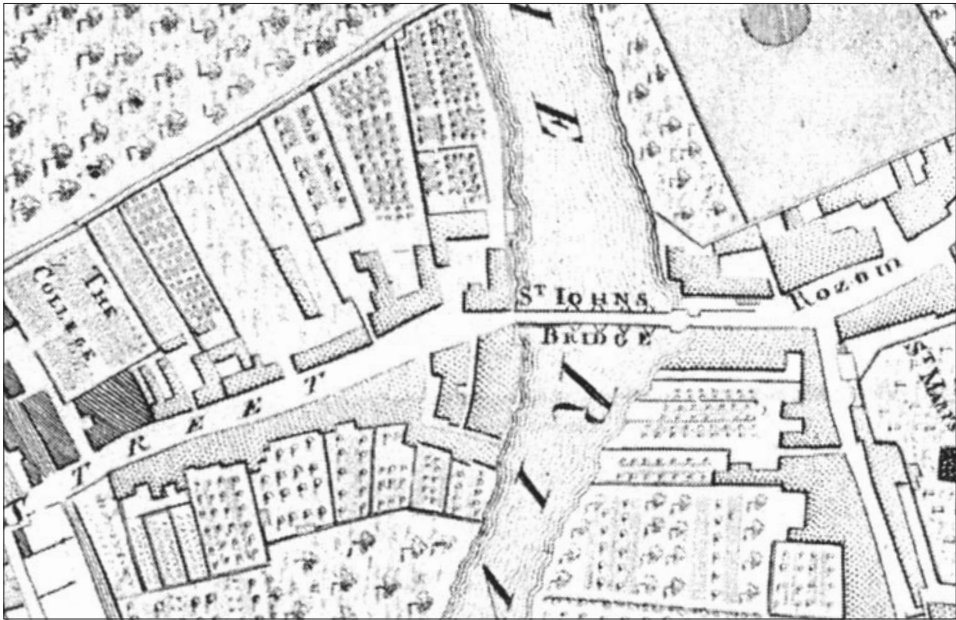


3 – Bridge House: ground-floor plan

(courtesy Blackwood Associates, Dublin)

exist, but these are not always easy to decipher, nor is it possible to identify all of the properties described in the documents.<sup>6</sup> The dispute was resolved in 1676; at that time Ormonde's half-brother, George Mathew (d.1724) obtained a 99-year lease on a property referred to as No. 91 in the Ormonde rental books. In later rentals the property at No. 91 is described as 'The decayed Stone House on the bridge wth another stone house thereunto belonging late the holding of Captain George Mathews', with the additional information that it was 'situate at the end of St John's Bridge south side and is the house wherein Council[illor] Egan now lives in'.<sup>7</sup> The lease had changed hands again in 1722 when Councillor Derby Egan took over from Mathews, and, on the evidence available, the ground rent then continued to be held by heirs of the Egan family until the end of the 1840s.<sup>8</sup> The Ormonde Rentals provide evidence that the Ormondes were ground landlords throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although there is no evidence for the commonly held belief that Charles Butler, Earl of Arran, had ever lived in the property.<sup>9</sup> By 1875, after the expiry of the period of a second 99-year lease, the Marquis of Ormonde was described as 'the immediate lessor'.<sup>10</sup> That this was indeed the site of Bridge House was confirmed by an entry in the Ormonde Rentals of 1830, where No. 91 was described as 'The decayed stone House on the bridge wth another stone house thereto belonging and a garden. This house is the next house to St John's Bridge on the right-hand side as you go over from Rose Inn Street to John Street, and is situated in John's Street where Lewis Anderson Esqr Sherriff of the city of Kilkenny lives March 4th 1830 EH.'<sup>11</sup> The leaseholder for the buildings on the site during the crucial years of the mid-eighteenth century, when major rebuilding took place, was Thomas Barnes, a Kilkenny-born lawyer working in Dublin.<sup>12</sup> It was Barnes who was responsible for the major remodelling of Bridge House which took place following the flood of 1763.

Of particular significance in the description of the house given in the lease of No. 91 is the reference to it being 'on the bridge wth another stone house thereunto'. This suggests that the house was in close proximity to or even an integral part of the bridge. There is evidence for a tower situated on the west side of the bridge, described as 'the bridge of St John's Castle'.<sup>13</sup> This 'castle' served as a gateway into Hightown, with a tall tower built above it. When the River Nore flooded in 1564 the bridge and 'castle' were damaged, and probably other buildings that were close to the river at that time. John Rocque's map of Kilkenny of 1758 (Plate 4) shows a bridge that may have been an early seventeenth-century rebuild, as the plan of the 'castle' was depicted on the west end where it was aligned with Rose Inn Street.<sup>14</sup> Bradley has made the suggestion that there may have been another gate on the opposite or east side of John's Bridge. This would seem a reasonable assumption, because he also tells us that 'the suburb of St John's functioned throughout the mid-



4 – Map of Kilkenny, 1758, by John Roque  
(courtesy Board of Trinity College, Dublin)

dle ages as a separate ward with its own annually appointed provost who was responsible to the Sovereign of the Hightown for its administration'.<sup>15</sup> Town gateways such as those in the walled Hightown of Kilkenny served two functions: they could be closed for protection, and also used to collect tariffs from traffic passing through. Gateways in walled precincts were a feature of large religious establishments like that of St John's priory, where Bradley has identified two gatehouses and a suggested third, 'at the junction of John Street and John's bridge'.<sup>16</sup> The position on the river of the earlier building on the site of Bridge House, in such close proximity to the bridge, would suggest that it was built for a purpose linked to that structure.

Kilkenny city was a favoured subject for illustrators from the 1690s onwards. The earliest of these was Francis Place (1647-1728) from Dunsdale, near Durham in England, who visited Kilkenny c.1699, and, happily, several of his drawings of the city with its buildings have survived (Plates 6-8). The other early illustrator was Henry Pratt (fl.1695-1708), a mapmaker who published a panorama of 'The City of Kilkenny' in 1708. Rocque's map provides a basis for understanding some of these early illustrations of the town. For instance, on his map the footprint of the earlier building within No. 89 was depicted without a bow, and the street elevation was aligned with the south side of the bridge in 1758. Also shown on the map was the position of Bridge House relative to Kilkenny College and the square tower/gate

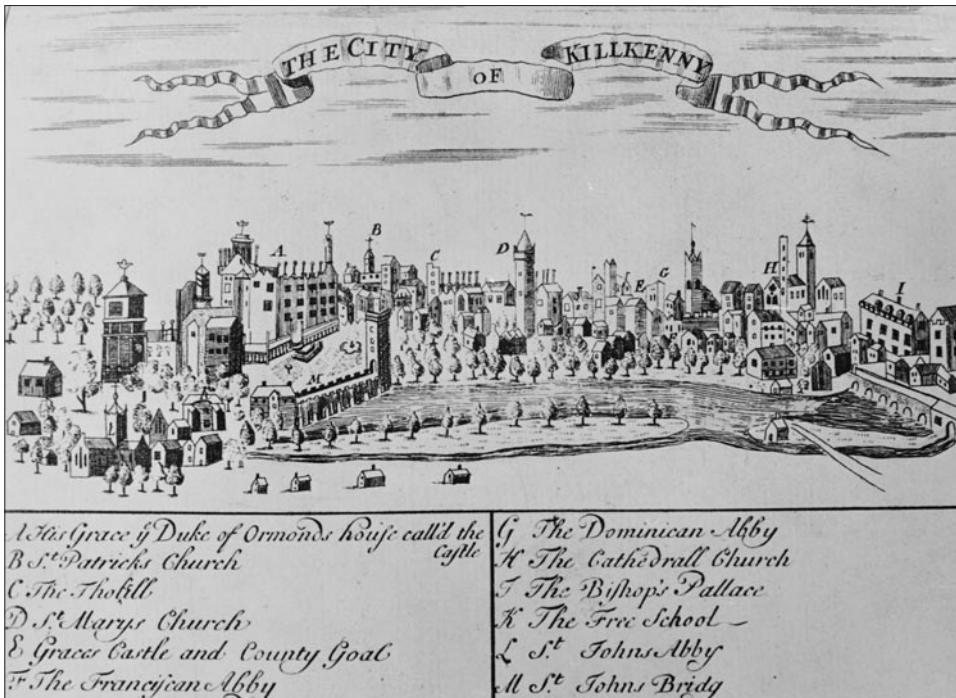
that was called the Castle of St John's Bridge. Questions always need to be asked regarding the topographical correctness of any illustrator's work, and about the inaccuracy, or otherwise, when studying their depictions of buildings. In this case, however, by using Rocque's map combined with local knowledge when comparing these two illustrators' work, some shadowy images have emerged for the earlier buildings on the site of Bridge House at the turn of the seventeenth century.

At first glance the Pratt illustration might be dismissed as fanciful. However, on closer examination it may be seen that several features that appear on it are also depicted on the more accomplished and detailed drawings by Francis Place of 1699. The aim of the Pratt illustration would seem to be more in the way of a catalogue of the principal buildings of Kilkenny city rather than any attempt to provide an accurate topographical representation of the city (Plate 5). The key at the foot of the drawing would seem to confirm that this was so.

Although the artists have taken their renditions from different viewpoints, comparison may be made between the appearance and location of the principal buildings. Place took as his viewpoint Wind Gap Hill, a height (although somewhat exaggerated) beyond the point where present-day Maudlin Street meets the Dublin

5 – Henry Pratt, *THE CITY OF KILKENNY*

(courtesy National Library of Ireland)



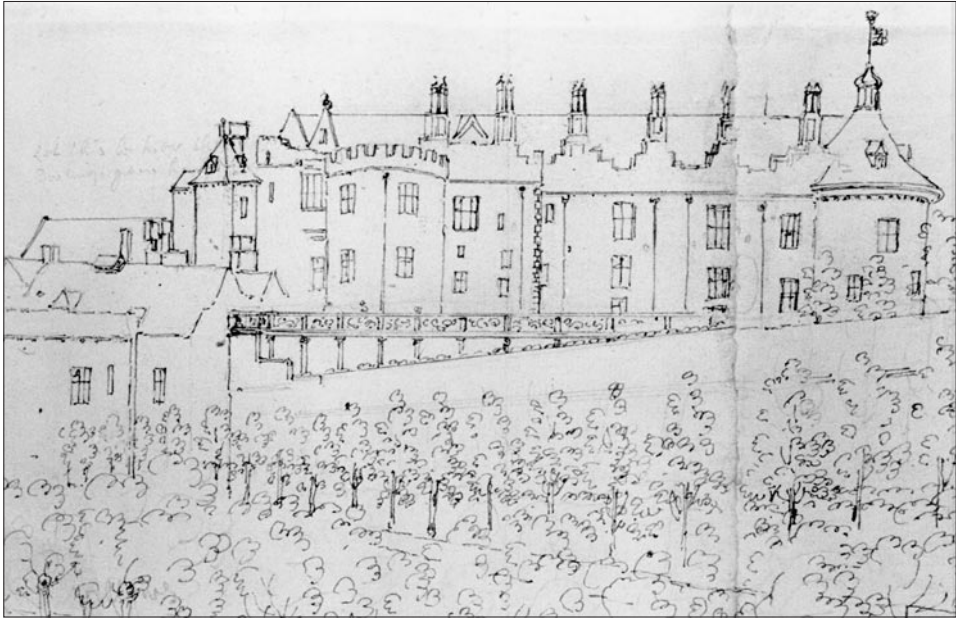
Road (Plate 6), while Pratt used a bird's-eye view taken from an imaginary point between Green's Bridge and St John's Bridge. Kilkenny Castle is probably the most prominent starting point, and while Pratt's drawing of that group of buildings is awkward and often out of scale, it does include most of the components that Place uses. These include six tall chimneys on the main residential block, ancillary buildings, raised terrace, and the small banqueting house with its classical peristyle (Plates 5, 7). At the other end of the town, St Canice's Cathedral and the cap-less round tower, with the Archbishop's Palace to the east, may be seen in both views. The lantern on the tholsel, with St Mary's church, occupy the central space, and the ruined St John's Priory, marked L in Pratt's panorama, is elegantly drawn by Place. Kilkenny College, the old building, may also be seen in both images. Pratt's view of the college building, marked K, shows it situated to the east and slightly south of St John's Bridge, while Place depicts it closing the end of the view down Maudlin Street. The position of the school is reasonably accurate in both drawings. Overall it could be said, based on Place's drawings and on Rocque's map, that Pratt's buildings and topographical positioning were not all that fanciful.

To return to Bridge House, in the Pratt drawing St John's Bridge is clearly marked M. On the west end can be seen a tall tower, representing the tower of St John's Bridge Gate, while on the east side, seemingly part of the bridge, a tall house with two chimneys and a projecting central bay is illustrated on the site of the present Bridge House. Place also has a house in this position, but it is insubstantial in the finished work, and we must go to his preparatory drawings of the area in order to clarify details of these buildings.

In one of a series of preparatory sketches carried out by Place for his finished drawing of Kilkenny may be seen (as in the Pratt drawing) St Mary's church, the

6 – Francis Place, a view of Kilkenny from Wind Gap Hill  
(courtesy National Gallery of Ireland)





7 – Francis Place, north elevation of Kilkenny Castle

(courtesy National Gallery of Ireland)

tholse], the Magdalen gate and Kilkenny College (Plate 8). Also in this drawing the tower/gate on St John’s Bridge is depicted as a tall tower with three windows, one above the other, on each of two elevations, the east side shadowed in dark wash. St Mary’s church is visible in the group of foreshortened buildings similar to that shown in the Pratt illustration. In front of the tower/gate, Place has drawn a building with a pointed gable on the east side, with another building attached to the south gable and a smaller lower building to the east of it. I would suggest that in this drawing Place has provided a sketch of the form of the buildings that were on the site of Bridge House in 1699.

Further verification that Place and Pratt were reasonably accurate in their representation and placing of buildings may be confirmed by details in another illustration of the area. Kilkenny College, as illustrated by Place and Pratt, may be compared with the same building which features in an oil painting of about 1757, attributed to Thomas Mitchell (1735-1790) (Plate 9). In this work the college building may be seen just to the left of the Maudlin gate and tower, where it is shown with two gables to the south and three to the east elevation. This painting is said to have been in the collection of the Marquis of Ormonde in 1850, and ‘that it was painted in oil about eighty or ninety years back’.<sup>17</sup> A more detailed drawing of the college, taken from the painting attributed to Mitchell, is provided in a lithograph of





8 – Francis Place, preparatory drawing of a view of Kilkenny from Wind Gap Hill, 1699  
The buildings on the site of Bridge House are on the left, with the 'castle' of the bridge and St Mary's church rising up behind them. (courtesy Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design)

9 – Thomas Mitchell (attrib.), A VIEW OF KILKENNY, c.1757 (courtesy NGI)

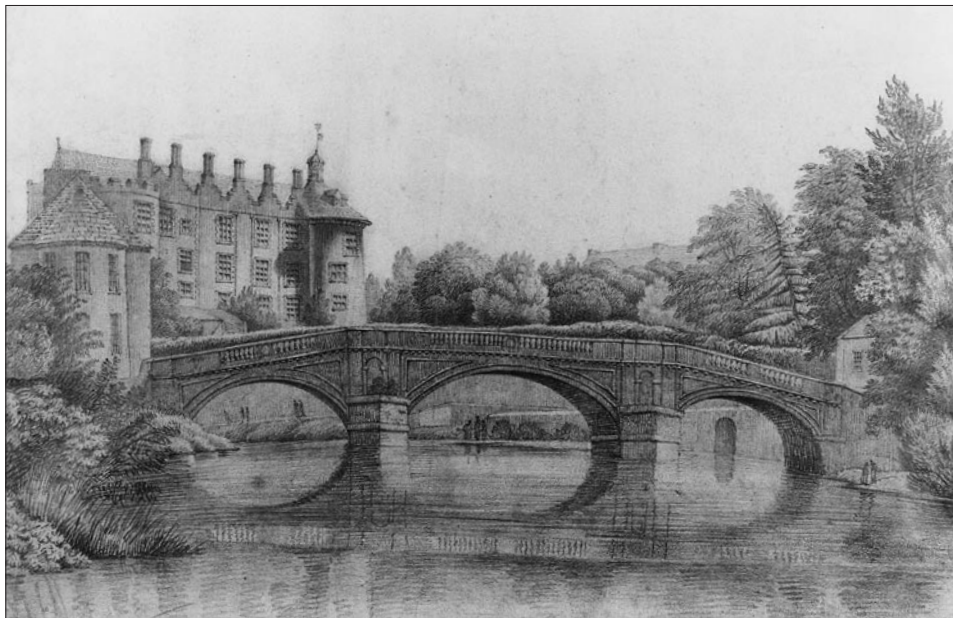


that drawing by the Rev James Graves, the eminent Kilkenny antiquarian who identified it as being ‘the Old Kilkenny School’.<sup>18</sup>

The position of St John’s Bridge over the River Nore was crucial to the development of Bridge House. The alignment of the structure was sometimes altered when it was being renewed through the centuries. St John’s Bridge is known to have been destroyed by flood in 1564, but a definite date for rebuilding the bridge has not been discovered. There was a bridge referred to as St John’s Bridge in 1707, illustrated by Pratt in 1708, and it also appeared on Roque’s map of 1758. That particular bridge, which was aligned with Rose Inn Street, was eventually destroyed by flood in 1763, when widespread damage was also reported in the area. Following the flood it seems that the Corporation took a decision to make good use of the opportunity afforded by erecting two fine bridges with handsome classical details over the River Nore, on adjacent sites to the earlier Green’s Bridge and St John’s Bridge. When the new St John’s Bridge was built after 1763, the structure was not aligned with Rose Inn Street, but was moved northwards along the Horse Slip. This allowed the approaches to the bridge to be widened on the east side. On Ordnance Survey maps of 1841-42 the entrance to John Street was shown as wide and expansive, providing a suitable situation for an important house.<sup>19</sup> This additional space would have allowed plenty of room for the insertion of the bow and a projection, probably a set of wide steps, that appear on the 1841 map. In Griffith’s Valuation of 1850 there were two houses on the site at 88-89 John’s Street, and these were valued as greater than £20 each for rateable purposes.<sup>20</sup>

Within the houses there is evidence of major alterations to the structures at different periods. In No. 89 the roof height was increased using red-brick walls, chimneys were moved, a bow was added, the floors raised, and decorative plasterwork installed. Additions were also added to the rear, and a front façade was constructed, apparently in two phases – the first phase being coeval with the bow, the second when an additional storey was added and the double doorway inserted sometime after 1820 (Plate 10). The style of the first phase of alterations is suitable to a date c.1770. The 1763 flood had probably caused considerable damage to the building on the site – at least flooding of the basement areas and perhaps even some structural injury, if, as suggested, the house was attached to the bridge in some way. The new St John’s Bridge was not completed until 1782 when the palisade was finally added.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, I would suggest that the original structure on the site of Bridge House had been one of the ancillary buildings of the Priory of St John. A building on the site was described as decayed in the seventeenth century, which would indicate that it was at least of sixteenth-century date. With the dissolution of the monasteries, when church properties were granted to Kilkenny Corporation, some of these may not have been inhabited immediately and so fell further into decay. Then in the



10 – R Gibbs, *Kilkenny Castle*, c.1820, showing Bridge House to the left of St John's Bridge.

*No. 89 is seen to be freestanding, at least on the upper storey. Other illustrations of the time, such as J.E. Neale's lithograph KILKENNY BRIDGE AND CASTLE (1819), confirm that this was so. (courtesy Kilkenny Archaeological Society)*

latter half of the seventeenth century there was the dispute between the Duke of Ormonde and the Corporation over ownership of properties that had continued from 1660 to 1676. Following the resolution of that dispute and the change of tenant, there may have been some rebuilding/restoration carried out. The major repair/rebuilding work, which included the addition of the bow, was put in place after the 1763 flood. The appearance of the building now called Bridge House is essentially Georgian in style, and these changes may be dated to two phases of work probably carried out from the 1770s onwards. Within the context of buildings in the town, Bridge House could be compared with Butler House – the dower house of the Ormonde family that was also remodelled about the same time. These houses appear to have been the only two examples in the town at that time with large curved bays. Those on Butler House are on the rear elevation of the building.

Although some of the problems concerning Bridge House have been addressed in this essay, more questions remain to be answered. For instance, did the early building on the site of Bridge House originally form an integral part of one of the bridges? Ironically, when St John's Bridge was replaced in 1910 it was again aligned with Rose Inn Street, thus creating the rather cramped position for Bridge House that exists today.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although the bridge is now called John's Bridge, it was known as St John's Bridge, and for the sake of consistency this is the form that has been used throughout this article.
- <sup>2</sup> P. Smithwick, 'Georgian Kilkenny', *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, iv, 4, (1963) 93; K.M. Lanigan and G. Tyler, *Kilkenny: Its Architecture and History* (Belfast 1987) 97.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Bradley, *Kilkenny, Irish Historic Towns Atlas* (Dublin 2000) 21.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>5</sup> NLI, Ormonde Papers, Ms 11,934.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, also Ms 11,048/36,7,8.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, Ms 7864.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, Ms 23,790-797, Ms 11,048. Kilkenny Castle, document no. 72 from the collection at Kilkenny Castle, catalogued by John Kirwan. In the Ormonde Rentals from 1722 to the 1840s the same description of the house is repeated and the tenant's name throughout is Derby Egan.
- <sup>9</sup> Some of the Ormonde Rentals were transferred into the Earl of Arran's name by his brother, the 2nd Duke of Ormonde, and this may be the basis for the misunderstanding.
- <sup>10</sup> Valuation Office Dublin, Lessors of Bridge House, Kilkenny, post 1875.
- <sup>11</sup> NLI, Ormonde Papers, Ms 25,027; list of rentals 1830/31, descriptions copied with annotations.
- <sup>12</sup> Barnes features as a character of that name in Sir Walter Scott's novel *Guy Mannering*. The novel, although located in Scotland, is based on the famous Annesley court case of the 1740s. In it Barnes features as a valet.
- <sup>13</sup> NLI, Ormonde Papers, Ms 11,934.
- <sup>14</sup> NLI, Ms D3620b (Ormonde Collection), Blake Butler Transcripts, Tithes of Corporation, 'To the masons for building St John's Bridge...', 1618-19
- <sup>15</sup> Bradley, *Kilkenny, Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, 4.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> J. Browne, 'Kilkenny College', *JRSAI*, vol. i, no. 1 (1849-51) 221-9.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, plate facing page 229.
- <sup>19</sup> National Archives, Dublin, Ordnance Survey maps, Kilkenny 1841 (Kilkenny c.1842).
- <sup>20</sup> Bradley, *Kilkenny, Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, map 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Kilkenny Corporation minute books 1763-1782.