



# Were the gardens at Killruddery designed by a pupil of André Le Nôtre?

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THE GARDEN AT KILLRUDDERY, COUNTY WICKLOW, IS REGARDED AS THE MOST complete surviving example of the classic geometric Restoration garden in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> It is now part of garden history orthodoxy that Killruddery was created for Edward Brabazon, 4th Earl of Meath (1638-1707), by a French gardener called Bonnet, possibly a pupil of the renowned landscape architect André Le Nôtre (1613-1700), who had served as principal gardener to Louis XIV from 1661.<sup>2</sup> But is there any documentary evidence to support this extraordinary claim? It would indeed be very significant if a landscaper who was apprenticed to the greatest of *grand siècle* gardeners – the creator of both Vaux-le-Vicomte and Versailles – had worked in Ireland; unfortunately, it seems that this long-held assertion may be the result of a simple misunderstanding.

Killruddery, which lies south of Bray in county Wicklow, has been the seat of the earls of Meath since 1618. Laid out in the 1680s, the earliest description of the formal gardens dates from 1711:

Killruddery ... being a large House with 4 flankers and Terres, and a new Summer-House Built by the said Earl ... with Pleasure Garden, Cherry Garden, Kitchen Garden, New Garden, Wilderness, Gravel Walks, and a Bowling-Green, all Wall'd about and well Planted with Fruit Trees, with several canals or Fish-Ponds, well stor'd with Carp and Tench ... with a Deer-Park.<sup>3</sup>

The garden was later lauded by the nineteenth-century travel writer James Brewer as an Irish version of a great seventeenth-century French landscape:

From the natural grandeur of the surrounding county, the formality of the mode stands revealed with peculiar distinctiveness. The enclosing mountains rise boldly

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1 – Detail of an eighteenth-century painting of Killruddery Hunt  
(courtesy Earl of Meath; photo: Anthony Ardee)



and at once, with all their brilliance of purple and brown colours, above the long avenues of stately elms, the close cut ewe hedges, the regular terraces of this St. Cloud.<sup>4</sup>

The gardens were certainly designed in the grand manner made fashionable by Louis XIV, but the evidence concerning its supposed French gardener, and more particularly his association with the renowned Le Nôtre, is problematic. The prevailing myth appears to have its origin in some confusion concerning a reference among the papers of Sir William Petty (1623-1687). It has been stated that in 1686 Petty wrote ‘ruefully in his diary’ that he had ‘lost his gardener of twelve years standing’, a Mr Bonnet, to the Earl of Meath.<sup>5</sup> In fact, no diary exists among Petty’s manuscripts. Indeed, by 1685 Petty was an absentee landlord, having removed from his house in George’s Lane (now George’s Street), Dublin, back to London. The reference in Petty’s ‘diary’ is actually found in a letter from Petty’s agent Thomas Dance, dated 28th August 1686, which states that a ‘Bonel’, not Bonnet, ‘goes to live with my Lord of Meath’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Dance does not describe this Bonel as being in Petty’s employ. Petty did, however, employ a gardener called Bonel or Bonet for his town garden in Dublin, according to a letter of 27th March 1684.<sup>7</sup>

If Petty’s gardener, Bonel or Bonet, was in fact the same person as that engaged by the Earl of Meath, it is unlikely that he was the instigating designer of the formal garden at Killruddery, the landscaping of the estate being already well underway by 1682. The only direct source we have about the garden’s creation is from Oliver Cheyney, agent to William Brabazon, 3rd Earl of Meath (1635-1685). On 12th February 1682/3, Cheyney

3 – *Nineteenth-century estate map of Killruddery showing the formal garden layout with wilderness to the west of the twin canals, and angles to the east of the canals*  
(courtesy Earl of Meath)

opposite

2 – *An eighteenth-century painting of Killruddery Hunt showing the canals, angles and wilderness*  
(courtesy Earl of Meath; photo: Anthony Ardee)



wrote that the work was proceeding apace and that it was being carried out by the future 4th Earl, Edward Brabazon:<sup>8</sup>

I went on fryday last to receve yue remainders of rents in ye county of Wicklow & lay at kilruddry two nights... Capt. Ed Brabazon has & will make new great improvements there, the park for his coults is long time since finished & he is making also a deer park & decoy. Ye decoy will be the finest in ye kingdom or I beleve in ye 3 kingdoms. the pond is already made & ye reed wal is making, round about which he wil builld a wal at soe great a distance that ye fowl shal not be frighted therat, ye south and north ends of which wal shal be of lem [lime] and stonn the other two dids a dry wal. against the south wal without and against ye north wal within he wil plant frut of al sorts and wil make a treble ditch without ye south wal and quickset the fen to ye end that ye deer may not get to ye frut and that ye park may be completed.<sup>9</sup>

From this we can see that the essential elements of the seventeenth-century garden – its walls, the decoy, the fruit garden and deer park – were already present at Killruddery by 1682, four years prior to Dance’s letter announcing Bonel’s departure from Dublin.

Edward Brabazon had already some experience of managing great landscapes. In 1665 he was appointed ranger of the Phoenix Park at a time when Charles II was walling and developing the park as a large pleasure ground for the nobility of Dublin.<sup>10</sup> Later, in 1693, in his capacity as Master of the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, he was charged

with preparing ‘an account of what is necessary to be done in the garden’.<sup>11</sup> From this it may be presumed that the Earl was cognisant of continental ideas, and there is no reason why he may not be given full credit for the formal design at Killruddery. By this date it was, in fact, commonplace for landowners to act as designers, often drawing on their experiences of visiting France and the Low Countries. Unfortunately it is not known whether Edward Brabazon travelled in Europe, although he may have done so during his service in the army.<sup>12</sup> ‘Bonel’, then, remains something of a mystery. If he had been a driving force behind the creation of Killruddery, it is curious that his name does not appear in any other letters or related literature for the period. The gardener Bonel or Bonet, referred to by Petty’s agent, was possibly a jobbing gardener, albeit one that was evidently respected by his employer. If such a man existed and was employed by the Earl of Meath, it is more likely that he would have realised plans drawn up the Earl himself.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> ‘[A]t Killruddery, County Wicklow, the seat of the Earls of Meath, there still exists intact the most complete late-seventeenth- or early-eighteenth-century formal garden in the country.’ Desmond FitzGerald, ‘Irish Gardens of the Eighteenth Century I – Baroque’, *Apollo*, LXXXVIII, 79, September 1968, 186. See also Mark Bence-Jones, *Burke’s Guide to Country Houses: Vol. 1 Ireland* (London, 1978) 172.
- <sup>2</sup> ‘Sir William Petty was complaining that Bonnet, his French gardener, who had been in his service for twelve years, had gone to live with the earl of Meath’, Keith Lamb and Patrick Bowe, *A History of Gardening in Ireland* (Dublin, 1995) 22. ‘It is known that a gardener called Bonet, thought to be French, entered the service of the 4th Earl of Meath in 1684’, Tim Richardson (ed.), *The Garden Book* (London, 2000) 299. ‘In 1684, the 4th Earl employed a noted French gardener, Monsieur Bonet, who was inspired by King Louis XIV’s garden designer, Andre Le Notre, at Versailles’, Oida FitzGerald, *Irish Gardens* (London, 1999) 162. ‘[I]n 1682 Captain Edward Brabazon, the 4th Earl of Meath, employed one of the oldest tricks in the gardening book and poached a Versailles-trained Frenchman named Bonet away from his English employer, Sir William Petty, to design the grounds at Kilruddery’, Marianne Heron, *Gardens of Ireland* (London, 1999) 60. According to Kilruddery’s own website, ‘Bonnet’ was both a ‘landscape architect’ and ‘a pupil of [André] Le Nôtre’, [www.killruddery.com](http://www.killruddery.com).

ruddery.com /gardentour\_ireland.htm.

- <sup>3</sup> *The Dublin Intelligence*, 14th April 1711.
- <sup>4</sup> J.N. Brewer, *The beauties of Ireland being original delineations topographical historical and biographical of each county*, 3 vols (London, 1825) I, 284-85.
- <sup>5</sup> This statement appears in Patrick Bowe, *The Gardens of Ireland* (London, 1986) 102.
- <sup>6</sup> Marquis of Lansdowne (ed.), *The Petty Papers*, 2 vols (Boston, 1927) II, 103. Dance appears to have been acting as chief agent in Dublin for Petty's Irish estates. The letter is addressed to James Waller, Petty's brother-in-law (and some time amanuensis) in England, and dated 28th August 1686.
- <sup>7</sup> British Library, Add. MS 72856, f. 230, William Petty to Lady Petty, 27th March 1684.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Brabazon succeeded to the title upon the death of his brother William in March 1684/5.
- <sup>9</sup> Killruddery, Earl of Meath Papers, J3/2.
- <sup>10</sup> H. Doubleday and H. De Walden (eds.), *The Complete Peerage*, 11 vols (London, 1932) VIII, 614.
- <sup>11</sup> National Archives of Ireland, OPW 5/HC3, Minutes of the Royal Hospital of Charles II, 1st April 1693.
- <sup>12</sup> Brabazon was Captain of Foot in 1661, and subsequently of Horse.

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