

James Gibbs' schemes for the Londonderry family

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IN 1996, WHILE RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF THE STEWART FAMILY OF MOUNT STEWART, county Down, the author came upon a large, leather-bound volume of designs for a magnificent country mansion among the Londonderry Papers in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). There was no indication of either their intended location or date, nor if they had in fact ever been realised. They were also bereft of a specific provenance, but were subsequently proved to be the work of the influential Scottish-born architect James Gibbs (1682-1754).¹ The volume includes three alternative schemes: two for a seven-bay house with flanking, sunken office wings; and another for a nine-bay house with pavilion-ended wings linked by low corridors. They are remarkable, if not unique in the architect's oeuvre, in offering a perspective on an Irish client's architectural requirements.² This article describes the family's circumstances at the likely time of the Gibbs commission, and attempts to throw light on the way in which the commission may have arisen.

The Stewarts of Mount Stewart are descended from a Scottish family who, in the years following the Plantation of Ulster in the reign of James I, acquired a 1,700-acre estate at Ballylawn, near Manorcunningham, on the eastern shore of Lough Swilly in county Donegal. The purchase of estates in county Down by Alexander Stewart (1700-1781), a descendant of the original grantee John Stewart, did not occur until more than a century later, in 1744, by which time Alexander, following the death of his elder brother, was already master of the family property in county Donegal. Being the younger son, Alexander had initially sought to make his own way in life, and became apprenticed to a Belfast merchant. There he built a successful career for himself, becoming a partner in a firm trading in flax with the Baltic and Russia.³ In May or June 1737 he married his cousin

1 – James Gibbs (attrib.), SECTION SHEWING THE ARCHES IN THE PASSAGE & THE HEIGHTS OF THE ROOMS
Reproduction of a drawing from a volume of architectural drawings, c.1740-45, part of the large
Londonderry Estate Office Archive (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D/654/S1/16)

Mary Cowan (1713-1788), who had inherited a landed estate of around 2,200 acres in county Derry and some property in Londonderry city from her father, Alderman John Cowan. In fact, this inheritance was minute by comparison with the large fortune she subsequently acquired from her half-brother Sir Robert Cowan, who had been Governor of Bombay. Robert Cowan died in February 1737 and there was a protracted lawsuit over his will; it was not until 1742 that the Stewarts received the Cowan fortune.⁴ Under the terms of the marriage settlement, Alexander Stewart was required to use Robert Cowan's assets to purchase land in Ireland,⁵ and in 1744 he acquired the manors of Newtown and Comber in county Down from Robert Colvill of Newtown.⁶ At the time of purchase in 1744, the net rental of Alexander Stewart's estate at Comber was £1,098, while that of the Newtown estate realised £809.⁷ When acquiring the Newtown estate, Alexander failed to ensure control of the borough⁸ – which remained with the powerful Ponsonby family – and in 1747 Alexander mounted a legal challenge to redress this, a matter that was not resolved until the British House of Lords ruled against him in 1758.⁹

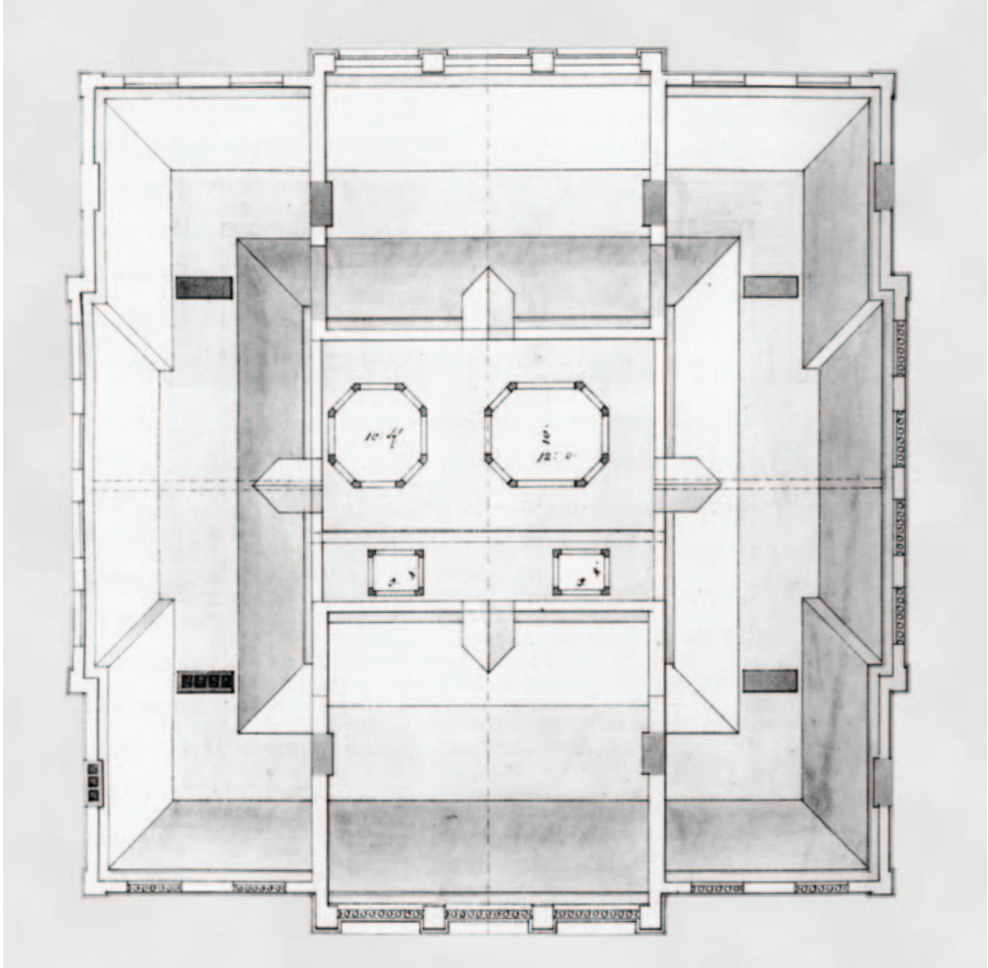
The manor of Newtown included the attractive demesne of Templecrone, which overlooked Strangford Lough and offered distant views of the Mourne mountains to the west. Here, Alexander is believed to have erected a modest dwelling, known as Mount Pleasant.¹⁰ Living for much of the years between 1737 and 1746 at Robert Cowan's former London residence in Craigs Court, Westminster, and retaining a house in Dublin from at least the 1740s,¹¹ Alexander may never have intended Mount Pleasant to be anything more than a temporary structure.¹²

Following his marriage, Alexander Stewart strove to secure power and influence in Ireland by political means, attempting to become a candidate in a by-election for the City of Derry in 1743.¹³ Later, for a few months of 1760, he represented Londonderry City in the Irish House of Commons, but failed to become elected as a Member of Parliament for Belfast.¹⁴ A contemporary described him as:

A man of polite and pleasing manners, a clear and comprehensive understanding, and principles truly liberal, both in politics and religion. It is true he had no small share of ambition; but it was an ambition to raise his family to honor and influence, in his country, for his country's good.¹⁵

Public opinion was, inevitably, divergent. The social commentator and prolific letter-writer Mrs McTier, who was capable of being highly critical on occasion, described Alexander Stewart as Mary Cowan's 'honest old spouse'.¹⁶ A different, almost certainly biased view was held by William McCartney, the agent who advised Stewart on the purchase of the Newtown and Comber estates but later turned against him:

As is clear from everything he did, solely for the whole course of his life employed in no other work or thought but how to advance himself and family in worldly matters. As a means to gain gold and power he put on sanctified appearances, but the whole of his acts were ever unsanctified.¹⁷



2 – James Gibbs (attrib.), *PLATFORM OF THE ROOF OF A HOUSE SHOWING HOW IT IS TO BE COVERED*
 (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D/654/S1/16)

Alexander was also a man of some considerable culture. His interest in the arts was demonstrated by his zest for collecting pictures, and he owned about a hundred really fine paintings, including works by Rubens and Maratti. His house at 28 Henry Street, Dublin, was filled with his picture collection, the best china, plate and books.¹⁸ In 1773 he wrote thus to his younger son, Alexander Stewart, then abroad on his Grand Tour:

By the time you have made some progress in Italy, I hope you will have acquired a taste and skill in paintings, wherein – as opportunity offers and leisure permits – you will do well to be adverting [sic] ... as you proceed further in your tour, if you should chance to meet with what you think a very good picture for sale, and not at

too high an estimation in your own judgement as well as that of others with whom you may consult, I would be well pleased to be acquainted therewith, and you shall immediately have my further directions about the same; for I own I would be well pleased to show a picture in my collection of my namesake's choice. I must likewise desire, when you come to the place where your own portrait can be best painted, which probably is Rome, that you will sit for the same, and as you remember the size of your brother's portrait, I think it will be best to have it about the same dimensions; and whenever you go where the best miniature pictures are painted, you must get two of yourself, one for your mother and another for your sister...¹⁹

Alexander Stewart did not visit his estates in county Down either before or at the time of their purchase in 1744. Not until 1750, his fiftieth year, was he to take up residence in Newtownards, the heart of the newly acquired estates, where he built a house for himself and his family. He also developed the town by laying out a large market square, erecting a market house and building a considerable number of modest dwellings.²⁰

During the years immediately following his marriage, Alexander Stewart was clearly preoccupied with legal battles concerning the securing of his wife's inheritance, coupled with the rights relating to the estates he had subsequently purchased with it. Nonetheless, he must surely have been sensible of the need for a substantial house in which to display his fine collections to best advantage and, more critically, reflect his family's status as major landowners: if they were to become key political figures in the county, they would need a home in which to entertain and impress those in positions of influence. Despite this, the personal circumstances outlined above would have necessitated or counselled delay, while the economic climate of the 1740s, together with a corresponding rise in the cost of building materials, deterred any sensible gentleman from building.²¹ These then were Alexander Stewart's personal, economic and social circumstances around the likely time of the Gibbs commission – namely, the years following his acquisition of estates in county Down in 1744.²²

James Gibbs was one of England's most prolific country-house architects in the 1720s and early 1730s, but after providing designs in 1735-36 for Quarrell, Stirlingshire, he had virtually no such work for more than a decade. A new house at Hampstead Marshall, Berkshire, was begun in 1739 but abandoned incomplete in the same year, and three other schemes came to nothing. It was only in 1749 that his country-house practice picked up with two new houses – at Bank Hall, Lancashire, and Patshull Hall, Staffordshire – and a major remodelling at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire. By then it was too late to revive his domestic practice, and his death in 1754 brought an end to this late rally. Gibbs' biographer, Terry Friedman, suggests that this break was largely self-imposed, arguing that Gibbs was so taken up with the Radcliffe Camera, Oxford (1737-48), that he devoted less time to his country-house practice and consequently accepted fewer commissions. However, the number of rejected schemes suggests that Gibbs, despite being unable to gain employment, was anxious to maintain this aspect of his practice. Gibbs was

not alone in this situation, and a survey of other leading architects, such as Roger Morris, William Kent, John James and James Leoni, reveals a similar pattern.²³

There is no evidence to indicate that James Gibbs ever visited Ireland, and until recently it was thought that he received no Irish commissions. It was thus suggested that the Gibbs schemes found in PRONI had been intended for Wynyard Park, county Durham,²⁴ a property which came into the Londonderry family upon the marriage of the 3rd Marquess to Frances Anne Vane-Tempest in 1819. Such an intention has, however, been questioned by Friedman,²⁵ and further evidence suggests that Gibbs was the architect of Newbridge House, near Dublin (*c.*1747-52), which was built by the Rev Charles Cobbe (1686-1765) during his tenure as Archbishop of Dublin from 1742 to 1765.²⁶

With the foregoing in mind, Gibbs was evidently involved in building work in Ireland during the remaining years of his life, the time also posited for the Stewart commission. Unfortunately, it has proved impossible to trace whether Gibbs was paid out of the income of the Londonderry estates in county Down, as no estate accounts exist prior to 1781.

An extensive search has revealed no family or social circumstances to link Alexander Stewart with James Gibbs. He may have been introduced to Gibbs by friends in London, or by Gibbs' patron, Sir John Perceval, 1st Earl of Egmont, or by Archbishop Cobbe, with whom he may have been acquainted in Dublin. Although it is tempting to infer that Stewart's near neighbour in county Down, Sir John Rawdon, Archbishop Cobbe's stepson,²⁷ would have been the obvious candidate to recommend Gibbs to him, this appears unlikely in light of a remark made to Rawdon by his brother-in-law Lord Hillsborough that:

however disagreeable the father [Alexander Stewart] may in general have made himself I have always understood the son to have been a very worthy and unexceptionable young man; and I confess I do not approve of setting a mark of everlasting exclusion upon any body.²⁸

Notwithstanding these possibilities, a study of the diaries written by Mary Delany (1700-1788), the talented and influential second wife of Dr Patrick Delany, Dean of Down, presents us with an interesting alternative.²⁹ The nature of the link between Mary Delany and Alexander Stewart is made plain in a letter she wrote from Dangan, county Meath, on 3rd June 1752, to her sister Anne Dewes (*née* Granville):

Mr Stewart, a gentleman of this country who has a fine collection of pictures, has lent me, through Mrs Fortescue's interest, a fine picture of the Transfiguration, an original of Carlo Maratti's – the figures small: Our Saviour, Moses and Elias, St. John, St. Peter and St. James. I shall make a beginning of it before I go to Mount Panther to secure the picture, for the gentleman is whimsical and may change his mind.³⁰

There are many aspects and details of Mary's life that suggest she could have played a role

in the commissioning of Stewart's new country house,³¹ acting as the conduit from which the Gibbs commission emanated. She was already familiar with the work of leading Irish architects of the day, such as Edward Lovett Pearce and Richard Cassels,³² and her residence in London and acquaintance with Archbishop Cobbe would have made the work of James Gibbs equally well known to her.³³ Indeed, she may have been introduced to Gibbs by her best friend from her London days, Anne Donnellan, who had spent her girlhood in the home of Philip Perceval, the brother of Gibbs' patron, Sir John Perceval.³⁴

There remains the question of why Alexander Stewart never executed any of Gibbs' schemes, one that must inevitably continue to be a matter for speculation. By the time of Mrs Delany's letter regarding the loan of the Carlo Maratti painting, Stewart was in his sixth decade, his eldest son was approaching manhood, and the family was well settled in their new home in Newtownards. In light of these domestic arrangements, the disruption and effort involved in the construction and furnishing of a fine country house may have appeared an increasingly unpalatable and ill-considered undertaking. The 1750s was certainly an expansive decade for new country-house building. Although the Seven Years War of 1756 to 1763 witnessed some falling off, the underlying strength of the economy was demonstrated by the subsequent economic boom, which enabled a new group of talented architects to launch their careers. However, by this date, the Palladian designs prepared by Gibbs may have appeared unfashionable in view of the emerging taste for neo-classicism promoted by a younger generation of British architects.³⁵

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the Deputy Keeper of the Records at PRONI for permission to reproduce drawings included in this article.

ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

PRONI	Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
PRONI Londonderry Estate	Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, The Londonderry Estate Office Archive, 1629-c.1940, D654
Delany Diaries	Lady Llanover (ed.), <i>The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany: with interesting reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte</i> , 6 vols (London, 1861-62)

- ¹ PRONI Londonderry Estate, D654/S, Household Inventories, Accounts etc: D654/S1/16, Mount Stewart Architectural Plans, n.d. I am indebted to Dr Terry Friedman, author of the standard biography, *James Gibbs* (New Haven and London, 1984), Tim Knox and the late Sir Howard Colvin for affirming the attribution to Gibbs.
- ² Private correspondence between Terry Friedman and Anne Casement, 30th January 2010.
- ³ PRONI Londonderry Estate, 'Londonderry Estate Office Archive (D654)', 2007, 3-4; H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Londonderrys: A Family Portrait* (London, 1979) 1; Joanne Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart, Co. Down, 1770s to 1820s: the social and political rise of an Irish landed family', unpublished doctoral thesis, Roehampton University, University of Surrey, 2006, 6-9.
- ⁴ Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 10-11; PRONI Londonderry Estate, 'Londonderry Estate Office Archive (D654)', 2007, 4.
- ⁵ PRONI Londonderry Estate, D654/F, Marriage Settlements: D654/F/6, Alexander Stewart and Mary Cowan, 30th June 1737. The settlement was revised in 1740 to include land in Ireland or England; Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 45-46.
- ⁶ PRONI Londonderry Estate, 'Londonderry Estate Office Archive (D654)', 2007, 4. See Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 13, for possible reasons for selection of estates in this locality.
- ⁷ Comber estate £1,110 gross (PRONI Londonderry Estate, D654/C, Personal Documents: D654/C/1/1, Deed of Sale, 9th July 1744 (ENV5/HP/8/1 part 1) and of the Newtown estate £869 gross (D654/C/1/1, Indenture, 14th September 1744).
- ⁸ Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 12.
- ⁹ Anthony Malcomson, 'The Newtown act of 1748: revision and reconstruction', *Irish Historical Studies*, XVIII, 71, March 1973, 313-44: 314, 320.
- ¹⁰ Montgomery Hyde, *The Londonderrys*, 2.
- ¹¹ Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 11, 14.
- ¹² Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'Mount Stewart, Co. Down – I', *Country Life*, CLXVII, 4313, 1980, 646-49: 646.
- ¹³ Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 12.
- ¹⁴ H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Rise of Castlereagh* (London, 1933) 14; Montgomery Hyde, *The Londonderrys*, 2.
- ¹⁵ W. Steel Dickson, *A Narrative of the Confinement and Exile of William Steel Dickson...* (Dublin, 1812) 6-7.

- ¹⁶ Jean Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan-McTier Letters 1776-1793*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1998) II, 477.
- ¹⁷ Malcomson, 'The Newtown act of 1748', 316.
- ¹⁸ Montgomery Hyde, *The Rise of Castlereagh*, 14. The travel writer Richard Twiss thought it one of the few collections worthy of his note. See Richard Twiss, *A Tour in Ireland in 1775* (London, 1776), 23-24, and Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 14. The collection remained in Alexander's town house until his death, but was sold in 1790; Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 105.
- ¹⁹ PRONI, Stewart-Bam Papers, D4137, D4137/A. Correspondence of Alexander Stewart of Ards House, Dunfanaghy, county Donegal (1746-1831), younger brother of Robert, 1st Marquess of Londonderry, 1771-1829; D4137/A/1/18, Alexander Stewart to his son Alexander Stewart, 4th March 1773. Alexander Stewart junior sat to Batoni in Rome in 1773; J. Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1701-1800* (New Haven and London, 1997), 897; Anthony M. Clark, *Pompeo Batoni: A Complete Catalogue of his Works* (New York, 1985) 357.
- ²⁰ PRONI, D1613/3, typescript copy of genealogical account of Stewart family by Samuel Stone, Culdaff, by the request of his cousin Robert Stewart, first Viscount Castlereagh, 21st June 1788, 12, 14. Stone, 'The Stewarts of Mount Stewart', 102; Trevor McCavery, *Newtown: A history of Newtownards* (Belfast, 1994) 87-88.
- ²¹ The years between 1710 and 1730 were an unusually peaceful interlude in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English history. This resulted in a marked economic boom, which paid for a major expansion of London, financed the expensive porticos of the new London churches, and allowed the wave of country-house building which ushered in neo-Palladianism. The 1730s were less prosperous, and the last years of the decade saw the economy in marked decline. War with Spain in 1739, quickly followed by a general European war, the War of the Austrian Succession, which lasted until 1748, turned this into a slump. During this war, Government expenditure trebled and interest rates rose, particularly in 1744-45, making it difficult to borrow and uneconomic to realise capital held in stocks, and they did not recover until 1749. Agricultural incomes declined due to poor harvests and disease, and the cost of timber imports increased. Such circumstances would of course have affected the income of Alexander Stewart's estates and business interests. See Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age* (New Haven and London, 1995) 223.
- ²² Various reasons might have governed Alexander Stewart's choice of a British architect such as Gibbs and not one of the leading practitioners working in Ireland at the time. Edward Lovett Pearce had died in 1733; Richard Castle, who designed Knockbreda Church, county Down, for Lady Middleton in 1737, and may have also worked at Belvoir for her son, Arthur Hill, would, on paper, have been a strong candidate, but he was a notorious drunkard. Another possibility might have been John Ensor who succeeded to Castle's practice following his death in 1751, but unfortunately was committed to Newgate Gaol in 1752.
- ²³ Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain*, 223-24.
- ²⁴ David Huddleston, 'James Gibbs at PRONI (D/654/S1/16)' in *Statutory Report 1996-97 of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1997) 98-100: 100.
- ²⁵ Private communication between Terry Friedman and Anne Casement. Examples of work in the north-east of England, cited by Huddleston, were never executed, or if they were, were merely extensions or alterations, not full-blown schemes. No other architectural drawings relating to Wynyard are thought to exist in the Londonderry Papers in PRONI.
- ²⁶ Alec Cobbe and Terry Friedman, *James Gibbs in Ireland: Newbridge, his Villa for Charles Cobbe, Archbishop of Dublin* (Dublin, 2005) 31.
- ²⁷ Sir John Rawdon married Lady Helena Perceval, daughter of Gibbs' patron Sir John Perceval in 1741.

- ²⁸ PRONI, Granard Papers, T3765/M/2/13/1-13, 1747: 1757, 1764-70, Letters to Rawdon from his brother-in-law, 1st Earl of Hillsborough (T/3765/M/2/13/9, 17 Nov 1768). The major landowning families in county Down clearly resented the introduction of an ambitious Presbyterian merchant into their midst. See Edith Mary Johnston-Liik (ed.), *History of the Irish Parliament 1692-1800...*, 6 vols (Belfast, 2002) VI, 332.
- ²⁹ Delany Diaries. Details of Mary Delany's life and pursuits have been preserved in her diaries, painstakingly transcribed and edited for publication in 1861-62 by her relation, Lady Llanover.
- ³⁰ Delany Diaries, Dangan, 3 June 1752, III, 130. It appears from the letter that Mary and Alexander Stewart were unacquainted, an introduction being afforded via Elizabeth Fortescue, the sister of Mary's godson, Garret Wesley, later 1st Earl of Mornington, whose father Richard was the owner of Dangan. The introduction may, however, have been effected some time before the letter was written, as it expresses concern for Mrs Fortescue's precarious state of health, and she died shortly afterwards, leaving a young family. See Delany Diaries, Dangan, 3 June 1752, III, 128-29; Mount Panther 20 Oct 1752, III, 165-66. The reason Mrs Fortescue was used to execute the introduction is unclear: it predates the marriage of her brother, Garret Wesley, to Anne Hill of Belvoir, county Down, in 1759. Mrs Delany was always trying to promote her friends' interests, and may have felt under a special obligation in Alexander Stewart's case as the copying of such a large work took forty-six days of five hours at a sitting, and she retained his picture for more than eight months. See Angélique Day (ed.), *Letters from Georgian Ireland: The correspondence of Mary Delany, 1731-68* (Belfast, 1991) 43; Delany Diaries, Delville, 24 Feb 1753, III, 209. Only one other instance of her borrowing a picture to copy has been noted in the diaries, when in 1759 she borrowed another Maratti, the 'Riposo' in Egypt, this time from Lord Rawdon. See Delany Diaries, Delville, 5 May 1759, III, 552.
- ³¹ The Delanys occupied an elevated social position, both in Dublin and county Down. This, together with their keen interest in music, drama and the fine arts, and acquaintance with some of the leading practitioners of the day, must have assisted their impression within polite circles as arbiters of good taste. Indeed, the renowned political theorist and thinker, Edmund Burke, described Mary Delany thus: 'She was not only the woman of fashion of the present age, but she was the highest bred woman in the world, and the woman of fashion of all ages.' See Day (ed.), *Letters from Georgian Ireland*, 289.
- ³² *ibid.*, 24; Delany Diaries, Dublin, 22 Sept 1731, I, 288-89; 4 Nov 1731, I, 309; Left Dublin, 24 Aug 1732, I, 376-77; Delville, 12 May 1764, IV, 25; Dublin, 11 March 1731-32, I, 342-43.
- ³³ Archbishop and Mrs Cobbe dined with the Delanys at the very time work to Newbridge was commencing. See Delany Diaries, Delville, II, 13 June 1747, 465.
- ³⁴ Anne was of Irish extraction, having been born in Dublin around 1700 to Nehemiah Donnellan, Chief Baron of the Exchequer, and his wife Martha Ussher, granddaughter of Sir William Ussher. Nehemiah Donnellan died in 1705. In 1712 Anne and her mother moved to London upon Martha's remarriage to Philip Perceval, Member of Parliament for Askeaton in 1713-14.
- ³⁵ Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain*, 226-27.