



*1 – Castletown, Co Kildare – clerestory window in hall
showing the impressionistic effect of crown glass (photo: the author)*

Capturing the light: window-glasshouses in Georgian Ireland

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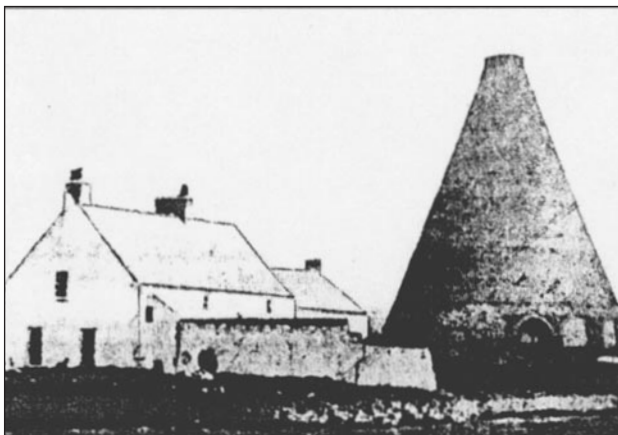
THE SUBLIME BEAUTY OF GLASS OF ANY SORT ARISES NOT ONLY FROM ITS appearance, but from the extraordinary transformation of sand, kelp and other base ingredients into a transparent liquid, capable of being fashioned into almost any shape and colour, for vessels, optical instruments and, of course, windows. Window-glass, by reason of its shimmering surface, is a marvellous, unintentional art form. Despite the ravages of time, many Georgian houses are still enhanced beyond the ordinary by the character of their windows. Variations in quality and tints of colour personalise old glass panes, imparting a life not found in any other element of a building. The mix of ingredients was guarded by each glassmaker in this fiercely private, closed craft, which resulted in endless variations in the ingredients of sand, soda and lime, ensuring that no two pots of molten glass ever contained the same chemically exact mixture. In window-glass, common ‘colours’, and sometimes iridescence, result from these variations, denoting surplus amounts of chemicals present. In combination, the look of whole buildings can be enhanced. Castletown, Co Kildare, is a prime example of the individuality given to the building by blown glass (Plate 1). Tints visible in the Castletown windows include green-yellow, caused by excess of iron in the sand, and a purple-blue or a brownish yellow, caused by too much oxide of manganese used in the first instance to counteract protoxide of iron. As well as the ingredients, the methods used and the individual skills give different appearances.

The best recorded eighteenth and early nineteenth-century window-glasshouses are noted here in brief, to illustrate the scope of window-glassmaking in Ireland. The earliest glasshouses in Ireland date back as far as the 1580s, and a number are recorded in the seventeenth century. From 1745, the exemption of Ireland from the glass tax provided a favourable climate for such enterprises. The curb on Irish glass exports was lifted in 1780, and for several decades from this date Irish window-glass competed favourably at home and abroad. However, advances in technology (and a general depression in the late 1830s) overtook this most labour-intensive



2 – Rocque's map of Dublin, 1756 (detail)
showing the Square Glasshouse, Bachelor's Walk / Abbey Street
and the Williams' Glasshouses, Marlborough Green

3 – Ballycastle, Co Antrim, glasshouse of 1754, pulled down in 1877/1878



industry by the 1850s, in which decade the last mention is found of Irish window-glass.

The earliest crown window-glasshouse known in Dublin was at Bachelor's Quay, set up in 1726. This works, which was sporadically active until the 1740s, also produced bottles. The site of Bachelor's Quay (now Walk) and Abbey Street continued in glassmaking use, with occasional breaks until after 1801 (Plate 2). As part of a larger concern, it produced window-glass from 1760. It is thought that crown glass was made here into the 1790s at least.

Williams and Co, natives of Chester, at Marlborough Green, Dublin, made crown and plate glass from about 1764 until about 1827. While the Williams had been producing flint glass since the 1750s, the earliest mention of window-glass is in two advertisements of 1770 in the *Belfast Newsletter* and *Limerick Chronicle*. In 1777 plate glass for looking glasses, coaches and windows of their own manufacture was advertised; they won premiums from the Dublin Society for both types of glass.

A number of glasshouses were in operation at various dates on North Strand near Ballybough Bridge, Co Dublin, in the 1770s and 1780s, producing plate and flint glass. The information concerning these glasshouses is confusing, and it is not known which one – or perhaps more – produced plate glass. The *Dublin Chronicle*, 18 October 1787, mentioned Chebsey's Venice Glass Works, which produced glass vessels at Ballybough, stating in the same sentence that 'plate glass for coaches etc, is also made and polished near the North Strand. Add to this another glasshouse is erecting on a very extensive scale near the North Wall'. The *Dublin Chronicle* of 10-13 May 1788 included the notice that 'William Williams, proprietor of the new Baths near the point of the North Wall [near the North Strand] first brought to perfection in Dublin the manufacture of flint and plate glass'.

It was proposed to set up a Crown Glass Factory at Ringsend Co Dublin in 1787, especially for export. The *Dublin Journal* noted, in August 1787, that demand from the French market had encouraged an English company to erect a glasshouse at the foot of Ringsend Bridge. The next mention of a Ringsend glasshouse occurs in 1798. The *Dublin Evening Post* of 1 March 1798 stated that 'window glass of a large size and good colour is now ready for sale' from an 'infant manufactory' at this site, the buyers to apply to John Raper's window-glass warehouse in Dublin. No further information is forthcoming.

A barely recorded glasshouse – or series of them, possibly on the same site – was started in Ringsend in the early nineteenth century. This may have been a continuation of that last heard of in 1798. At any rate, in about 1820, a well known flint glassmaker, Charles Mulvany, set up a crown glass factory, which appeared to be short-lived. A whole series of window-glasshouse lease holders follow in unspecified Ringsend locations, the last mentioned being Samuel Davis, window-glass maker, who had a glasshouse for several years until the early 1850s. Davis is listed

as a glass manufacturer in the *Irish Industrial Exhibition Catalogue* (1853) selling glass shades, tables of crown glass and bent glass.

At Gurteens, Co Waterford, one glasshouse after another operated from early in the eighteenth century. In 1711 an advertisement was put in the *British Mercury* for jobs in the ‘glasswork for making crown glass and plate carrying on in Waterford’, which was then producing crown and plate glass. A later work, which more than likely used the same premises – as glasshouse chimneys or ‘cones’ were notoriously difficult to erect safely and properly – also made crown glass. This is known from a notice of sale in 1740: ‘a large parcel of ingredients for crown glass, kelp, etc’ was for sale along with the glasshouse itself. These works have no known connection with the later flint glass business of the Penrose’s, started in 1783.

At Ballycastle, Co Antrim, Hugh Boyd, the local landlord and industrialist, set up a glasshouse in 1754 (Plate 3). It produced bottle and crown glass, employing six blowers. The *Dublin Journal* of 14 October 1755 noted that bottles were ready for sale, with window and plate glass to follow. The only evidence that crown glass was made here comes from archaeological investigations carried out in the 1970s; it had been thought previously that only bottles were made. The works petered out after the death of Boyd, the last notice being that of a cargo of bottles to Belfast, recorded in 1782.

The glassworks of Smylie and Co, at the Long Bridge, Belfast, which operated from about 1784 until about 1797, produced crown glass of a very good quality. Several advertisements in the *Belfast Newsletter* in 1788 noted that crown was now ready for sale. In March 1789, Smylie advertised his prices as being at least fourteen percent cheaper than Bristol and the quality as superior, going on to note that when cut into squares, it was at least fifty per cent cheaper. Smylie went into this business determined to produce on a grand scale, as he erected the largest glass cone in Ireland, standing 150 feet high and 180 feet in circumference. Again, the death of the proprietor caused the enterprise to wind down. Increased industrialisation and the imposition of the glass tax in 1825 forced small Irish entrepreneurs to look elsewhere. Since the 1850s, while bottles have been produced continuously at Ringsend, no window-glass has been made in Ireland.

NESSA ROCHE has recently completed a doctoral thesis on the window in Irish classical architecture. She has worked for the National Inventory, and is currently self-employed in the conservation field. She is writing a book on Irish windows.



*4 – A table of crown glass attached to the punty
(photo from Raymond McGrath, Glass in Architecture, London 1937)*