



# The work of Cork's Wide Streets Commissioners on Washington Street

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WASHINGTON STREET IS THE ONLY STREET IN CORK THAT WAS BUILT TO A SINGLE master plan by the municipal authorities (Plates 1, 2). The street, now comprising Washington Street and Washington Street West, was called Great George's Street and Great George's Street West until 1918 (Plate 3). It was created further to the passing of a local act of 1822 for the 'making of wide and convenient Ways, Streets and Passages in the city of Cork'.<sup>1</sup> This act amalgamated six earlier acts, dating as early as 1765, relating to the establishment of the Wide Street Commissioners for Cork.<sup>2</sup>

The street was set out as ranges of houses along three blocks on the north and south sides of the street. It cut through the axis of medieval Cork and its main street, establishing a new western approach to the city centre (Plate 4). The imposed regularity of the street with its flush redbrick finish was in striking contrast to Cork's characteristic slate-hung façades and local penchant for bow fronts and oriel windows. Today, about two thirds of the original buildings are extant. Much of the original scheme has been lost as a result of modern interventions and demolition. In particular, a significant proportion of the timber joinery has been replaced, with only a handful of original shopfronts remaining.

It seems likely that the surviving archival records for the Wide Streets Commission, held by the Cork County and City Archives Institute, were preserved through the business papers of its secretary, Julius C. Besnard (1776-1846), because the collection deals largely with matters of legal conveyance. None of the minutes of the Commissioners' meetings and none of the survey drawings for a master plan survive.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that the other documents were destroyed, along with many other municipal records, in the County and City Courthouse fire of 1891 and the burning of the City Hall in 1921. For this reason, the history of the building of Great George's Street may be understood by reconfiguring the

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1 – Detail of postcard, c.1930, showing a view of Washington Street and Washington Street West from Grand Parade (printed by Guy & Co; courtesy Michael Linehan)

process of land purchase, analysis of the extant buildings, and comment from contemporary newspapers.

## WIDE AND CONVENIENT WAYS FOR CORK

THE POPULATION OF CORK CITY GREW FROM ABOUT 20,000 IN 1700 TO OVER 60,000 in 1800, as it became the hub for the Irish transatlantic provisions trade during the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> While the city had expanded into the marshes to the east and west of its medieval spine, its physical footprint did not expand greatly from 1750 to 1830, and certainly did not keep up with the rise in population. Overcrowded conditions married with the nature of the city's victualing and provisions trade evidently made for a poor environment. The transit of livestock on the hoof, open channels, lack of sanitation and the byproducts of provisioning such as tallow, hides and offal often resulted in filthy streets and a foul stench in the air. Contemporary accounts of an excessively dirty city with badly paved streets, poor buildings and complaints on the state of the roads are common among traveller and citizen alike.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of trade at this time may be gauged by the introduction, in 1765, of an act which established the Commissioners of Wide Streets of Cork, and suggested that the narrowness of many streets, lanes and passages was a significant obstruction to the trade of the city.<sup>6</sup> This act named sixteen commissioners and set out that the Cork Commission should operate on the same basis as that of Dublin (founded earlier in 1757). Subsequent acts dealt with such matters as the power of the Commissioners for compulsory purchase (17/18 Geo. 4, c.38) and lighting (11/12 Geo. 3, c.18-17). However, it was the apportioning of a third of the butter weighhouse dues (40 Geo. 3, c.100) in 1810 which provided a regular form of funding for the first time.

The 1822 Act amalgamated all of the earlier acts and, critically, it consolidated funding provisions. The Commissioners were now authorised to borrow, and local taxes could be raised for their work. The act also set out powers in relation to street repairs and cleansing, the removal of dirt, building regulations to specify the maintenance of building lines and the removal of projections into the street, the closing-up of streets, the provision of lighting, and the conduct of the business of the Commissioners.

On foot of the new act, the Commissioners took three government loans on their mortgage of the weighhouse dues totalling £19,000.<sup>7</sup> The act allowed for an annual assize

2 – Postcard, c.1930, showing a view of Washington Street and Washington Street West from Grand Parade (printed by Guy & Co; courtesy Michael Linehan)

3 – Detail of the 5" OS map published in 1869 showing Great George's Street and Great George's Street West (courtesy Cork City Council)

4 – John Rocque's *A SURVEY OF THE CITY AND SUBURBS OF CORK, 1759*, showing the line of the new street through the medieval city (graphic by Laura O'Connor; courtesy Local Studies Dept, Cork City Library)



of a maximum of £1,750 to pay for lighting and a tax of 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d for every square yard of paving required in the city.<sup>8</sup> The Commissioners also took out loans payable to private individuals to the value of £26,476 18s 5d, but when the tax on weighing butter was removed in 1827, the Commissioners lost a significant source of income and stopped repaying their government loans.<sup>9</sup>

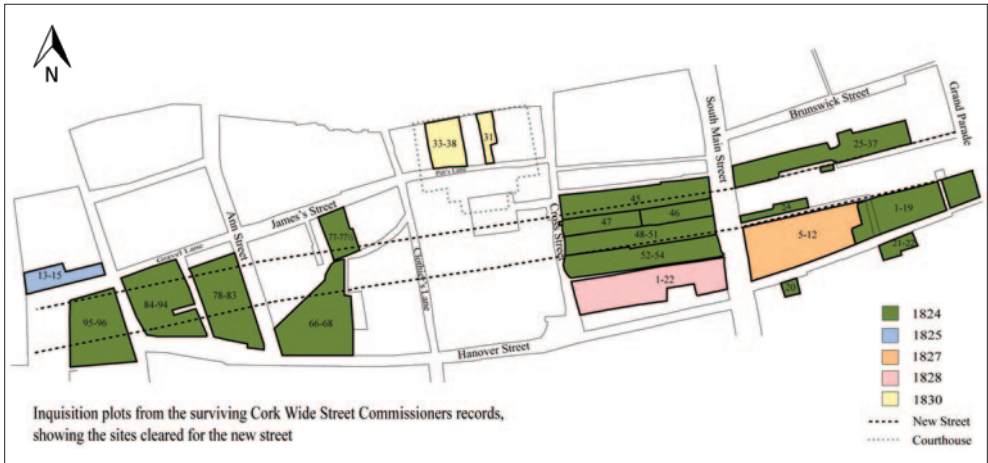
The widening of Castle Street is an example of the earlier work of the Commission in Cork, before the principal act of 1822 and the building of Great George's Street. The meat-shambles on Castle Street in the area close to the Guild Hall, the meeting place of the Commission, was gradually cleared in the 1790s. This was done by means of a process that involved the compulsory purchase of the freehold of the properties involved and the Commissioners then leasing the sites to building developers. The Commission used its authority to specify a minimum street width of thirty-two feet, and required that the buildings should be of a uniform front.<sup>10</sup> At that time the proceeds of the lease of these properties were to go towards funding the Wide Streets Commissioners.<sup>11</sup>

Surprisingly, the Commission was never expanded to deal with culverting the many open channels in Cork, many of which remained well into the nineteenth century. The 1765 Act does refer to the earlier provision for the building of two bridges from Prince's Street to Lapp's Island, and from Lapp's Island to Red Abbey Marsh. These bridges would have been among the first, after the medieval North and South Gate bridges, to connect the island marshes in the flat of the city with the banks of the river. A further act in 1786 provided for the building of a bridge across the North Channel of the River Lee.<sup>12</sup> Dissent recorded in the minutes of the Corporation of the City of Cork reflect concerns about the potential loss of business to traders west of the proposed bridge, and record further dissatisfaction that the same group would have to pay additional taxes to fund its construction.<sup>13</sup>

## THE PROCESS OF PLANNING THE STREET

**T**HE REPORT OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO MUNICIPAL Corporations suggests that maps were procured to set out which areas of the city might be improved.<sup>14</sup> The records also support the idea of a plan for which maps had been drawn and a survey carried out by the Commission's superintendent. This plan dealt with building a new street from Grand Parade to Lancaster Quay. The street was to be carved out of the existing urban form over seven blocks of the old city in an east-west direction, where each block was defined by the pair of streets running to either side of it.

The inquisitions and judgments on sites valued as part of the purchase of ground for the street include maps for individual plots (Plate 5). If these are reassembled, it is possible to get an overview of the progress of building the street in the mid-1820s (Plate 6). The records cover about two-thirds of the street; the remaining area, not covered, includes block three, the current courthouse block, which was not developed on the north side of



5 – Cork Wide Streets Commissioners’ Judgment, Bradley Lane, Tobin Street, South Main Street, prepared in 1827. This is the site of the present-day 17-14 Washington Street.  
(courtesy Cork County & City Archives Institute)

6 – The progress of land valuations along the line of the new street from the records of the Cork Archives Institute (drawn by Laura O’Connor)

the street until the 1830s and on the south side until between 1840 and 1890. Further missing records relate to individual sections in each of the other six blocks. It appears that the overall scheme designated each block from Grand Parade to Lancaster Quay a sequential ‘Lot’, which was then subdivided into numbered plots. Thus, the first block between Grand Parade and South Main Street dealt with the ‘First Lot’ and had plots numbered one to thirty-seven, while the final, and most westerly, block at Lancaster Quay was the seventh lot and contained plots 95 and 96.<sup>15</sup>

To establish the value of a site, the Commissioners would convene a meeting in the Guild Hall and twelve jurors would be sworn to carry out an inquisition or valuation. The meeting would be adjourned to receive the findings of the inquisition. A third and final meeting passed a judgment on the evaluation. The time between the initial meeting and the adjournment could be from one day to twenty-two months, with a majority being decided between three and four months. Less than half of the twenty-four sites have judgments which were contained in a separate document. Judgments took a minimum of one month (this happened towards the end of the process in 1827) and a maximum of four years, which was quite common.

The inquisitions indicate that the majority were initiated on 16th March 1824. These fourteen inquisitions covered the first, second, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh lots, comprising fifty-nine plots, and amounting to roughly seventy-five per cent of the area covered by the surviving records: the westernmost lot, bounded by Lancaster Quay and Little Hanover Street, was valued in 1825; ten plots in the innermost and first block, between Grand Parade and South Main Street, were valued at the end of the process in 1827; and a further twenty-two plots were valued in 1828 on the site of the second block and second range of housing. The two inquisitions for the courthouse site were dealt with in 1830.

The inquisition and judgment records shed light on the land purchase process for the Wide Street Commissioners' scheme, but they also throw up anomalies when the actual timeline for the building of the street is clearly earlier than the valuation. To reconcile this issue, it is necessary to consider when the street was opened, if it opened in its entirety, and when each of the new ranges in the scheme was built. A useful starting point is to establish that the Western Road, the terminus of the new western approach to the city, predates the building of Great George's Street. The city grand jury funded the building of the road to a reported cost of £8,000.<sup>16</sup> It was built by January 1822, when a letter referred to the 'New Western Road' in relation to the state of the Mardyke Walk to the north.<sup>17</sup> The two roads met at Lancaster Quay and must have been part of the same scheme to create a new entrance to the city from the west.

While the act was only at bill stages by September 1821, the archives indicate a flurry of activity in 1820 as Besnard's office carried out extensive legal searches into the properties along the line of the street. Indeed, the 1821 Census refers to both Berry's Lane and Old Post Office Lane as 'New Street', even though the former was not closed as a public passage until February 1828.<sup>18</sup> Arthur Hartland advertised that his premises on Grand Parade was 'opposite the New Street' from 1821 until he eventually moved his gardening emporium to 1 Great George's Street in 1827.<sup>19</sup> These references, along with the aforementioned mapping by the Commissioners, points to the existence of a plan for the street by at least 1820.

Evidence from newspapers and a contemporary directory indicate that the street itself was substantially built by 1824 and opened to the public by March 1826.<sup>20</sup> A newspaper article reporting the architect Thomas Deane's intention to build 'a handsome range of houses between the Parade and the South Main Street' in February 1824 states that

'The space for a new street which had been in part opened from the Parade to the Western Road will shortly be completed.'<sup>21</sup> Leases described in the inquisitions also refer to the new street at different stages of its development. In March 1824, a lease for the south-east corner of the first range, between Grand Parade and South Main Street, is referred to as 'bounded to the north by the new street',<sup>22</sup> and part of the second range between South Main Street and Cross Street is described as 'being in the street commonly called ... the new street'.<sup>23</sup> The Constitution reports the opening of the street to the public two years later, in March 1826.<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, the building of the ranges occupying the first, second and fourth block were subsequent to the laying out of the street, and commenced at the east end, closest to the city centre. With, one would imagine, some degree of pomp, the Wide Street Commissioners made a procession from their office in the Guild Hall for a foundation-laying ceremony to the south-eastern corner of the street on 21st September 1824. There, the mayor, Bartholomew Gibbings, laid the foundation stone with a silver trowel, presented to him by Thomas Deane, and christened the street Great George's Street. The *Southern Reporter* announced that Thomas and Alexander Sharpe Deane had purchased the first lot of ground sold on the street.<sup>25</sup>

The foundations were actually cleared for the first range, between Grand Parade and South Main Street, on 10th May 1825,<sup>26</sup> and houses were ready to let by 13th December 1825.<sup>27</sup> However, many remained unlet until 1827, when advertisements for commercial premises in Great George's Street began to appear in the newspapers.<sup>28</sup> The western section of the southern side of this range may have been developed later as the inquisitions process for the site did not commence until October 1827.<sup>29</sup> They were returned and adjudged, however, by the following month, possibly for the purposes of expediency and because it was the final section of that range to be built. The Commissioners sought proposals to rent or purchase ground on the south side of block one in early 1828, which may refer to this final section.<sup>30</sup>

The two sides of the second block, between South Main Street and Cross Street, were built by Alexander Sharpe Deane between 1826 and 1828. In April 1826, the Commissioners advised that they were 'ready to let eight lots of ground for houses at the north side of Great George's Street between South Main Street and Cross Street'.<sup>31</sup> A later notice in February 1828 requested proposals for 'ground ... opposite those houses lately erected by Alexander Deane',<sup>32</sup> and *Connor's Directory* of 1828 refers to 'the row in forwardness by Alexander Deane'.<sup>33</sup> The closure of Berry's Lane in February 1828, noted above, tallies with this scenario.<sup>34</sup> The inquisition dates for sites along the two sides of the streets also broadly fit with dates of 1826 and 1828.

The fourth block, containing the final and third range of housing in the scheme, which was located between Hanover Place and Anne Street Little, was also built by 1828. A plaque on 3 Washington Street West records the laying of the foundation of the street by Richard Neville Parker, the Mayor of Cork, on 13th June 1827. George Keyburn, listed as a pewterer/brass dealer and a freeman of the city in contemporary trade directories,





7 – Reconstruction of the south side of Great George's Street and Great George's Street West

appears to have developed these houses.<sup>35</sup> They were referred to as 'Keyburne's buildings' in a lease of 1831,<sup>36</sup> and also in *Connor's Directory* of 1828.<sup>37</sup>

The third block, between Cross Street and Court Street, was redeveloped to accommodate the courthouse, which was built between 1831 and 1836.<sup>38</sup> On the south side of the street, many older buildings remained standing by 1841. These were cleared and replaced by a pair of Victorian offices to either side by 1869, and finally completed by Dwyer's Drapery, now known as Victoria Chambers, by 1897. The call of a 'Sojourning Traveller' to create a handsome square in place of 'the unsightly group of buildings in front of the new court houses' would have been an excellent idea in terms of street design but it was never realised.<sup>39</sup> A local commentator echoed this sentiment seven years earlier. He wrote to the Commissioners 'that in such a large and opulent Commercial City, and with all our recent improvements, we could not boast of what may be properly termed a square'.<sup>40</sup>

From this analysis it is possible to conclude that the Western Road predated Great George's Street, which was built to meet it, and that the scheme had a concrete shape by 1820. If the street was opened by 1824, even if not completely, it indicates that the inquiries process for those sites along the route of the street were retrospective, since most started after March 1824. The inquiries for the housing sites are more in keeping with the order that one would anticipate for a building programme that followed compulsory purchase, with most predating their construction, even if only just, and the final judgment also subsequent to building. The fact that the Wide Streets Commissioners had a role in choosing the site for the new courthouse also supports a proposal that there was a master plan for the new street, with three housing ranges of staggered height as a new western approach to the city (Plate 7). It may also have been intended that this scheme should be both punctuated by, and serve as the fitting setting for, a monumental landmark.<sup>41</sup>

## THE DESIGN OF THE SCHEME

GIVEN THOMAS DEANE'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE STREET, THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT he also designed the scheme. The design has traditionally been attributed to the Pain family of architects – James Pain (c.1779-1877) and George Richard Pain (c.1793-1838) – and the manner in which Great George's Street meets Grand Parade has also been favourably compared with the English architect John Nash's composition for



*with the Hive Ironworks showrooms to the west (drawn by Galit Hartston; courtesy Cork City Council)*

Regent's Street and Piccadilly Circus in London.<sup>42</sup> The architecture certainly features fashionable Regency and Greek Revival motifs, such as an attenuated key pattern and anthemion (or honeysuckle), and Greek Doric columns to the shopfronts of the three ranges (Plates 8, 9). Deane was allegedly named the 'Milesian Nash' in his own time for the design of the street, but given the patronage of the county to the Pains and the loyalty of the Corporation to its own, this comment can be the only connection to the latter family of architects who were both pupils of Nash.<sup>43</sup> The attenuated key pattern is also seen in other work by Deane for the Wide Street Commissioners on South Terrace (Plate 10), and on the door of St Mary's Church, Pope Quay, by Kearns Deane.

The design comprised three ranges of houses that increased from three to four-and-a-half storeys at the terminus of the scheme on Grand Parade. The three ranges may be differentiated by their height and shopfront design. The buildings of the first range at Grand Parade feature a mezzanine, echoing the work of Dublin's Wide Streets Commissioners at Westmoreland Street, built some twenty years earlier and which may have influenced the design (Plate 12).<sup>44</sup> This range has a mixture of three- and two-bay elevations – not organised in any particular order – over eleven plots to the north and fifteen to the south.<sup>45</sup>

The second range comprises buildings of four storeys in height with two-bay elevations and was built over eight plots to the north and south. Here the shopfronts are single storey, with a pair of doors to either side of the shop window, distinguished by a laurel wreath and ribbons in the transom light (Plates 11, 13). The buildings of the third range, with the smallest range of houses, are three storeys high, two bays wide, and have shopfronts of rather compressed proportions with Doric column supports (Plate 14). These were built on eight plots to the north – broken by an access to a rear property – and thirteen to the south.

## A UNIFORM FRONT

**A**LL OF THE HOUSES WERE SQUARED OFF TO A PARAPET AND BUILT OF RED-BRICK TO give a uniform frontage to the street. The desirability of a uniform finish is a recurring theme in the work of the Commissioners, and a significant portion of the 1822 Act deals with the regulation of projections onto the street, boundaries and keeping the streets clear. The Commissioners also had the power to specify for building and



8 – Pilaster detail of the shopfront at 3 Washington Street: this was the design prepared for commercial premises on the first range of buildings between Grand Parade and South Main Street, with incised Greek key pattern and anthemion (all photos by the author)

9 – Greek Doric column on the shopfront of the third range of buildings at 11 Washington Street West

10 – Laurel wreath on a front door at South Terrace

11 – Detail of the laurel wreath and ribbons to the transom light of the second range of buildings between South Main Street and Cross Street at 22 Washington Street



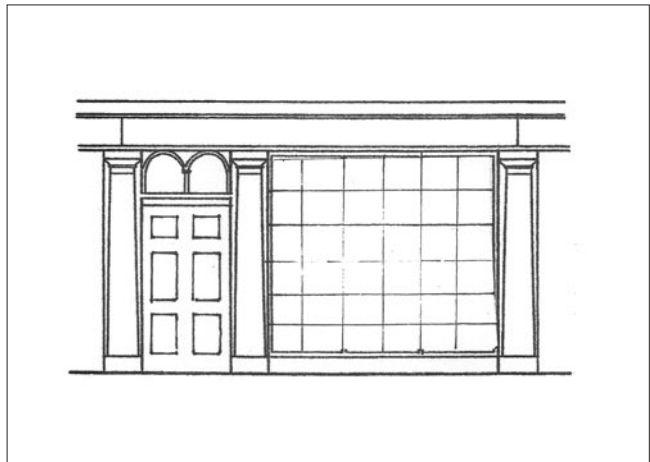
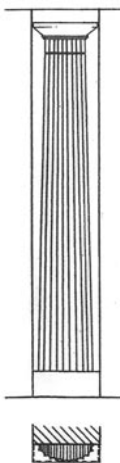
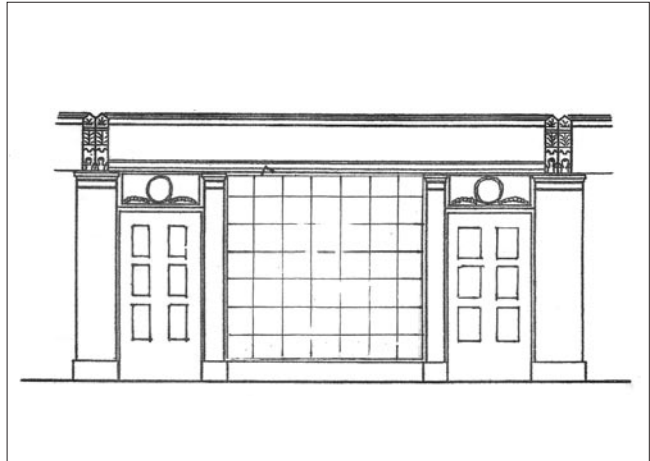
*Schematic drawings of the designs prepared for shopfronts in:*

*12 – First range of buildings between Grand Parade and Sth Main Street at 3 Great George's Street*

*13 – Second range of buildings between Sth Main Street and Cross Street at 18 Great George's Street*

*14 – Third range of buildings between Hanover Place and Anne Street Little, with column detail shown alongside*

*(all drawn by Galit Hartston, amended by Anthony Woods; courtesy Cork City Council)*



rebuilding on land for which they were lessors.<sup>46</sup> While none of the drawings for the houses on Washington Street survive, the archive contains a specification for redeveloping the site of the former city gaol at the North Gate Bridge. John Whiting's lease of 1828 specifies that the 'parts to the street and quay shall of English redbrick [be finished] ... shall have a parapet and gutter with cut stone coping to the street and quay fronts.' This lease also specifies the height of each storey and their proportions.<sup>47</sup>

Earlier transactions of the Cork Wide Streets Commissioners, prior to the 1822 Act, also emphasise design uniformity. In their dealings on Castle Street, the Commissioners required that the plots had to be of a fixed size, and that the new houses had to match the height 'and be uniform in the front, in every particular, with the houses now building by Mr Shaw'.<sup>48</sup>

There is also evidence of the right of the Commissioners to specify on Great George's Street. When letting ground on the north side of the street in April 1826, parties were advised that 'Maps, comprising the several lots, with specifications of the terms of letting, and the Plans of Fronts, to which the tenants must conform, can be seen in the Office of the Commissioners of Wide Streets.'<sup>49</sup> This is also referred to by a 'Builder With Moderate Means', who argues for a sale of sites on the first block by auction (as opposed to tender), stating that 'it can make no difference ... as the purchaser will be compelled to build according to your plan.'<sup>50</sup>

In emulating the work of their counterparts in Dublin, Cork's Wide Streets Commissioners were, to a large degree, successful in achieving a single street with symmetry and unity of design at its core.<sup>51</sup> Of course, Great George's Street does not have the monumentality of Dublin's early nineteenth-century wide streets, due to the reduced scale of the project as a whole. The staggered height and broken progression left by the third (courthouse) block also arguably diminish the potential impact of the street as a great western approach. Nonetheless, if the principal objective of the Wide Street Commissioners was to achieve a uniform elevation along this new street, they were entirely successful, producing a design that could not have contrasted more with the character of the existing streetscape. However, it seems that design uniformity had its drawbacks, as an advertisement of 1828 for William Fitzgibbon's woollen goods shop at 9 Great George's Street suggests: 'N.B. You will please observe No. 9, as from the uniformity of the Buildings in Great George's Street, mistakes not infrequently occur much to the prejudice of the

*15 – Bracket detail to the shopfront of the first range of buildings between Grand Parade and South Main Street at 3 Washington Street*



reputation, and often to the loss of the CORK WOOLLEN HALL.' This is a reference to Robert Stack's Hibernian Woollen Hall, also a woollen goods shop, at number ten.<sup>52</sup>

In general, however, contemporary commentators were positive in their reception of the new street. As well as noting that the street had cleared 'some of the filthiest lanes and alleys of the old town', they also referred to the 'pleasing effect' of its shops.<sup>53</sup> The three shopfront designs were very fashionable, in particular, that of first range. Dublin must have been the source for the mezzanine feature, but the stylised key pattern and exaggerated brackets are quite different to Henry Aaron Baker's design for Westmoreland Street.<sup>54</sup> The linear quality of the incised key pattern and the big bold form of the bracket give the few original fronts remaining an idiosyncratic appearance (Plate 15). This flair afforded the design of commercial premises reveals much about the aspirations of Cork at this time, even if it was already in the twilight of its great trading heyday.

Thomas Crofton Croker, a personal friend of Thomas Deane's, returned to Cork from London in 1832 and wrote of the numerous changes that had occurred in his absence, describing 'new approaches ... some old and narrow streets in the very heart of the City ... superseded by a new and wide street, composed of red brick Houses with showy shops, and an attendant arcade'.<sup>55</sup> The 'arcade' refers to a passage that ran from 12 Great George's Street, through numbers 13 and 14, and returning to 12 South Main Street.

## THE COMPOSITION OF THE COMMISSIONERS

THE 1765 ACT PROVIDED FOR THE APPOINTMENT OF SIXTEEN COMMISSIONERS WHO comprised both freemen and aldermen (freemen who had previously served as mayor) of the city, as well as the mayor and the city recorder. Twenty-nine Commissioners are recorded in the inquisitions for the building of Great George's Street. To qualify as a Commissioner, a candidate had to be in receipt of a yearly rent on his estate of £30 or be possessed of a personal estate to the value of £1,000.<sup>57</sup> The act specified that a minimum of five had to attend each meeting, with the mayor of the day as chair.

The membership of the Wide Streets Commission certainly does not contradict Ian D'Alton's description of same as 'a small clique of socially interconnected merchant or quasi-merchant families' that was the largely Tory and Protestant Cork Corporation in the 1820s.<sup>58</sup> Fourteen of the Commissioners served as mayors of Cork at one time or another, while the 'corporate family nexus of Gibbings-Perrier-Besnard' – referring to Thomas and Bartholemew Gibbings and Sir Anthony Perrier as commissioners, and Julius C. Besnard as secretary – feature strongly in the attendance and running of meetings.<sup>59</sup> In the period under consideration, there were five sets of juries of twelve that were charged with evaluating land for the street. Two mayors are recorded in this group, which, like the Commissioners, also featured many of the prominent contemporary merchant and industrial families, such as the Lanes, Beamishes, Newsoms and Crawfords. Catholic participation was

confined to jury membership, including some of the well-known merchants of the period, such as Thomas FitzGibbon, Denis Richard Moylan, Daniel Goold and Daniel Meagher.

Commissioners could not enter into contracts for Commission work under threat of losing their position.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps this is why the Deane family are not recorded as members of either the Commission or its juries. That said, it is highly unlikely that any other architectural or building firm would have won the contract. Our aforementioned 'builder with moderate means' need not have worried himself; tenders, as opposed to auctions, were judged behind closed doors. The Deane family were very much part of the corporation clique.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, it was ironic that they should have lost their chance to complete the design of Great George's Street – specifically, the design for the courthouses – because the power of the county gentry, who had the upper hand in the funding of the project, swayed the competition in favour of their own architects, the Pains.<sup>62</sup>

While a commissioner could not enter into contracts, the act did not proscribe one acting as an agent for a company. Bartholomew Gibbings, for example, was the local agent for the English Gas Lighting Company.<sup>63</sup> The 1835 report of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the municipal corporations in Ireland records issues in relation to the poor service offered by the company under its contract to the Wide Streets Commission. It noted that it would serve little purpose to complain because Gibbings was a commissioner himself and a judge of the court. Furthermore, the clerk of the Wide Streets Commission, to whom the complaint would be made, was also the brother of Gibbings.<sup>64</sup>

The retrospective nature of land evaluation, especially for those plots cleared for the street, given that it began in March 1824 and the street would 'shortly be completed' a month before, suggests informal agreements and an understanding among a group of land owners and local officials acting on their behalf. The likely crossover between these two groups is delightfully captured by the aforementioned newspaper report on the foundation-laying for the street by 'the right worshipful Bartholomew Gibbings, Mayor of the City of Cork, during the mayoralty of whose father, Thomas Gibbings, Esq., by an interesting coincidence, the first house of those occupying the street was thrown down'.<sup>65</sup>

The membership of the Cork Wide Streets Commission differed from the Dublin Commission in lacking nationally significant figures such as John Beresford and John Forster.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, the early nineteenth century witnessed a flowering of the arts in the work of Cork artists and architects at home and abroad. The Royal Cork Institution was established in 1808, the Cork Society for Promoting the Fine Arts in 1816, and the Cork Literary and Scientific Society in 1820. Commissioner John Lecky served as president of the latter, and William Beamish was also a member.<sup>67</sup> Commissioner Thomas Cuthbert was a president of the Cork library and, in the company of jurors, Osborne Savage was the publisher of the *Constitution* paper.<sup>68</sup>

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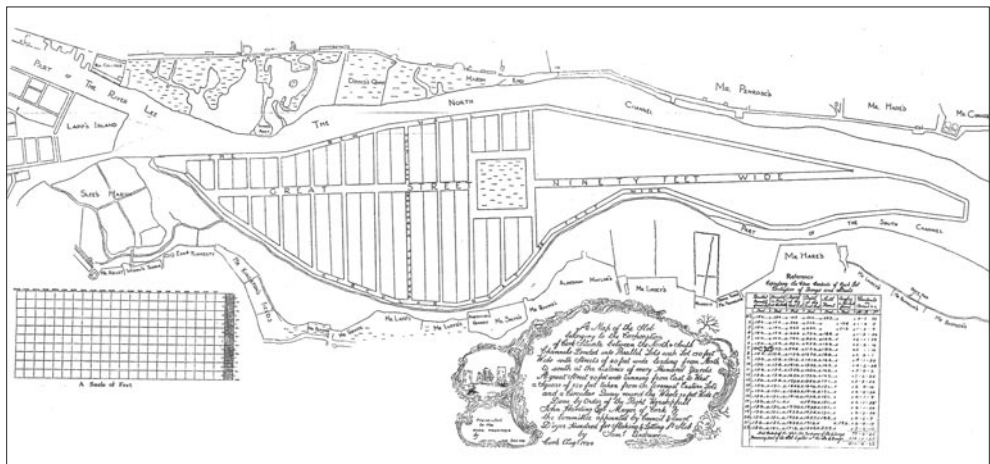
opposite 16 – Map illustrating a 1780 Corporation plan for a new area south of the Navigation Wall traced from original by W.P. Higgins and published in *JCHAS*, xxxiv, no.139 (1929) 116 (courtesy Cork Historical & Archaeological Society)

CONTEXT

THE EXPANSION OF THE CITY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MEANT THAT RECLAMATION, street-laying and bridge-building were never far from the concerns of the Corporation and the business community. The creation of two crossings over the north and south channels of the River Lee, east of the historic city centre, were dealt with by Acts of Parliament in 1761 and 1786.<sup>69</sup> The upper reaches of the harbour were also improved in the 1760s, when the navigation wall was built to guide ships upriver towards the city by altering the currents. The Harbour Commissioners continued the work of improving the navigation of the harbour and its relationship to the city with the construction of many quay walls from the 1820s.<sup>70</sup>

The main commercial and business centre of the modern city was developed on reclaimed land over the eighteenth century. Dunscombe's Marsh, to the east of the medieval core but south of St Patrick Street, had been divided into a regular grid of streets and plots principally by George's Street (St Oliver Plunkett Street), but not to a single master plan. Two important unexecuted plans for new streets were drafted in the 1780s, one at the behest of the Corporation and the other for the Cork Society for Arts & Sciences. In 1780, it was ordered that 'the Corporation slab to the south side of the Navigation Wall be staked and to have a map of the same drawn'.<sup>71</sup> Samuel Andrews set out a new area with eleven blocks on a grid running north-south, traversed by a 'Great Street Ninety Feet Wide' with a square to the eastern end (Plate 16). Although this plan was never executed, it is indicative of the continued move eastwards of the city that was anticipated by the Corporation, and the great axial street with a square is a significant precedent for Great George's Street. It shows an awareness of planning in the Grand Manner.

In the second plan, Daniel Murphy, a surveyor and architect from Cork, presented a map of proposed improvements throughout the flat of the city – the medieval core and its east and westward expansions – to the president and members of the Cork Society for





Arts & Sciences. Murphy anticipated the building of a bridge at the site of the present-day Christ Ring Bridge. More important, however, is that his bridge connected to a wide new street that ran from the Custom House (present-day Emmet Place), along a widened Paul Street, on through the north of Castle Street, Fishamble Lane and Mill Street (the latter pair subsequently cleared to create Liberty Street). This would have been a new wide street cutting through the medieval spine of the city. The last section of the proposed street runs parallel to the line of Great George's Street. The course of the River Lee may have determined that the Western Road would be the main entrance to the city and that the eventual site of the street, if aligned to it, would have achieved a more unified single approach.

It is also likely that the time for the inevitable abandonment of the city's municipal and historic trading centre at Castle Street had arrived. Murphy's proposed route to some extent still maintained a link with the old centre, as it passed the exchange and the Guild Hall. However, by 1820, the city barracks had moved out of Barrack Street to the Old Youghal Road at the edge of the northern suburbs. The city and county gaols were rebuilt to the west of the city and, most symbolically, the Custom House had moved east to Lapp's Island. These events and the idea of a new building accommodating the county and city courthouses would have formed the context for decision-making in the choice of a route.

## CONCLUSION

**C**ORK CORPORATION WAS COMPLETELY OVERHAULED BY THE MUNICIPAL CORPORATION Act of 1840 (3/4 Vic., c.108). Wealthy city Catholics, along with liberal Protestants, had agitated since the first decade of the nineteenth century for reform of the Corporation. The inquiry into the operation of the existing corporations had partly been in response to one of the demands of the Repeal Movement. Twelve years after emancipation, Thomas Lyons was elected the first Catholic mayor of a new corporation with a Catholic majority, taking over from Julius Besnard. The work of improving the city continued until the Towns Improvement Clauses Act of 1847 took over many of the functions of the Wide Streets Commissioners in terms of cleaning, paving and lighting. This was followed by the Cork Improvement Act of 1868.

Great George's Street / Washington Street is the greatest legacy of the Cork Wide Streets Commissioners in the city. It created a great entrance befitting a city. The progression in the buildings, from three to four-and-a-half storeys in a single, regular street creates a grand sense of arrival in a way that the existing entrances from the west could not. Blarney Street to the north and Bandon Road/Barrack Street to the south had developed in an organic ribbon-like fashion from the seventeenth century. Their scale and variety of housing types is more suggestive of a country town than a city. While Great George's Street/Washington Street has lost a significant proportion of its original building stock and detailing, it still retains this impressive character.

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## ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

CCCAI	Cork City and County Archives Institute
CC	<i>The Constitution</i> , later <i>Cork Constitution</i>
SR	<i>Southern Reporter</i>
WSC	Wide Streets Commissioners

- <sup>1</sup> 3 Geo. 4, c.85.
- <sup>2</sup> 1 Geo. 3, c.19; 3 Geo. 3, c.17; 5 Geo. 3, c.24; 11/12 Geo. 3, c.18; 17/18 Geo. 3, c.38; 26 Geo. 3, c.28; 40 Geo. 3, c.100.
- <sup>3</sup> Two drawings survive for the commercial showrooms of the Hive Ironworks, both different to the final design of that building. CCCAI, WSC Acc/99, box 10, 1, drawing of the showrooms of the Hive Ironworks Foundry at the west end of the street.
- <sup>4</sup> David Dickson, *Cork Old World Colony* (Cork, 2005) 662.
- <sup>5</sup> John Windele described Great George's Street in 1839 as 'the site of this beautiful street a few years ago was occupied by some of the narrowest and filthiest lanes and alleys of the old town'. John Windele, *Historical and Descriptive Notices of the City of Cork* (Cork, 1839) 20. A French traveller, Baron Charles Etienne Coquebert de Monbret, who visited Cork in 1790, found the city excessively dirty, with badly paved streets and poor buildings. Cited in Gina Johnson, *Laneways of Cork* (Cork, 2002) 7.
- <sup>6</sup> 5 Geo. 3, c.24.
- <sup>7</sup> *First Report of the Royal Commission to inquire into Municipal Corporations in Ireland* (London, 1835) 50. Available at [http://eppi.dippam.ac.uk/documents/10925/eppi\\_pages/244722](http://eppi.dippam.ac.uk/documents/10925/eppi_pages/244722) (accessed 5th May 2012).
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Caulfield, *The Council Book of the Corporation of the City of Cork from 1609 to 1643 and from 1690 to 1800* (Guilford, 1876). See entries for 28th April, 26th May and 15th July 1791.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> 26 Geo. 3, c.28.
- <sup>13</sup> Caulfield, *Council Book*, 8th December 1773, one Thomas Browne was of the opinion that the proposed bridge 'would render almost useless above threefourths of the quays, where colliers and other vessels generally lie, would materially injure in their trade and properties all the inhabitants of Mallow and Blarney lanes, the Main street from the North to the South Gate, and all the Western parts of the City'.

- <sup>14</sup> *Municipal Corporations* report, 49. Available at <http://eppi.dippam.ac.uk/images/pages/13040/0000231.jpg> (accessed 5th May 2012). Apparently, this decision was made on the basis that after the allocation of the weighhouse dues, they would have a regular source of funding.
- <sup>15</sup> There are exceptions to this numbering, whereby the third lot is north of the seventh lot, and the numbers of plots are not unique to each lot – for example, number ten is used on more than one site. The main gaps in the records are for the fourth lot, between Clothier’s Lane and Anne Street, and along the line of the street itself in the first block or lot.
- <sup>16</sup> SR, 21st August 1830. Quoted in Patrick Holohan, ‘Cork Courthouses: The Pains, the Deanes, the Stonecutters’, *Journal of the Cork Historical & Archaeological Society*, 111, 2006, 9.
- <sup>17</sup> SR, 15th January 1822.
- <sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Laneways*, 28 and 120.
- <sup>19</sup> SR, 21st October 1821, and CC, 12th January 1828.
- <sup>20</sup> SR, 5th February 1824, and John Connor, *Connor’s Cork Directory for the Year 1826* (Cork, 1826) 9.
- <sup>21</sup> SR, 5th February 1824.
- <sup>22</sup> CCCAI, WSC Acc/99, inquisition box 11, ‘First Lot’, 8-10, inquisition dated 26th June 1824.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, inquisition box 14, ‘Second Lot’, 48-51, inquisition dated 14th July 1824.
- <sup>24</sup> CC, 4th March 1826.
- <sup>25</sup> SR, 21st September 1824.
- <sup>26</sup> CC, 10th May 1825.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 13th December 1825.
- <sup>28</sup> CC, 12th January 1828.
- <sup>29</sup> CCCAI, WSC Acc/99, inquisition box 15, inquisition for ‘5’, dated 13th October, 1827; judgments for ‘No. 6’ and ‘7, 8, 9, 10-12’, both dated 6th November 1827.
- <sup>30</sup> SR, 12th February 1828.
- <sup>31</sup> CC, 27th April 1826.
- <sup>32</sup> SR, 12th February 1828.
- <sup>33</sup> John Connor, *Connor’s Cork Directory for the Year 1828* (Cork 1828) 11.
- <sup>34</sup> CCCAI, WSC Acc/99, box 8, 57, a draft order for the closing of Berry’s Lane, dated 26th February 1828.
- <sup>35</sup> Pigott & Co, *Provincial Directory of Ireland 1824* (Cork, 1824) 6.
- <sup>36</sup> CCCAI, WSC Acc/99, box 6, bundle 5, 2.
- <sup>37</sup> Connor, *Directory*, 11. Here they are referred to as Keyburn’s buildings. A corner building was added to the south side of this third range of housing, on its eastern side, in about 1900. The north side was never fully built as intended, being shorter, and was completed by the building of a Victorian commercial warehouse sometime between 1840 and 1869.
- <sup>38</sup> Holohan, ‘Cork Courthouses’, 80-89.
- <sup>39</sup> SR, 31st March 1835.
- <sup>40</sup> Letter from ‘A Citizen’ in CC, 29th January 1828.
- <sup>41</sup> This is not to discount Holohan’s description of the contemporary debate on the choosing of a site principally between the present-day Emmet’s Place, adjoining Winthrop Street off St Patrick’s Street, and Great George’s Street. See Holohan, ‘Cork Courthouses’, 77-79.
- <sup>42</sup> Michael Gough, ‘A history of the physical development of Cork city’, unpublished MA thesis (UCC, 1974) 201, 359. This is repeated in Kevin Hourihan, ‘The Evolution and Influence of Town Planning in Cork’, in Patrick O’Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer (eds), *Cork: history and society* (Dublin, 1993) 941-61. However, it is more likely that the route of the street was determined more by the occurrence of channels or culverted channels to both the north and south of the final route.
- <sup>43</sup> C.P. Curran, ‘Benjamin Woodward, Ruskin and the O’Sheas’, *Studies*, 29, 1940, 258.
- <sup>44</sup> Writing in 1861, the Revd C.B. Gibson stated that it was ‘on the same plan as Westmoreland Street,

- Dublin, but not so wide nor so sunny'. C.B. Gibson, *History of the County and City of Cork*, 2 vols (Cork, 1861) II, 324.
- <sup>45</sup> The north side of the first range of housing was always affected by the presence of the Augustinian chapel. Originally, a passage was left between houses to allow access to it. The chapel was subsequently extended, and rebuilt entirely in 1942. The priory was built in the 1870s and rebuilt in 1982.
- <sup>46</sup> 4 Geo. 4, c.85, sections 38-40.
- <sup>47</sup> CCCAI, WSC Acc/99, box 7, bundle 1/12, copy of a lease of a lot of ground at the North Gate Bridge, dated 8th July 1828.
- <sup>48</sup> Caulfield, *Council Book*, 26th May 1791 and 15th July 1791.
- <sup>49</sup> CC, 27th April 1826.
- <sup>50</sup> SR, 7th June 1828.
- <sup>51</sup> Edward McParland, 'The Wide Streets Commissioners: their importance for Dublin architecture in the late 18th-early 19th century', *Quarterly Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, XV, 1, 1972, 12.
- <sup>52</sup> CC, 12th January 1828.
- <sup>53</sup> Windele describes how the street was in an area that had been 'densely inhabited by a squalid and impoverished population'. Windele, *Historical and Descriptive Notices*, 20.
- <sup>54</sup> McParland, 'The Wide Streets Commissioners', 22.
- <sup>55</sup> Trinity College Dublin, MS 1206, Thomas Crofton Croker, 'Recollections of Cork' [about 1832/33] 6.
- <sup>56</sup> McParland, 'The Wide Streets Commissioners', 21 and 27. McParland concludes that 'London was the model but not London alone'.
- <sup>57</sup> 5 Geo. 4, c.85, section 68.
- <sup>58</sup> Ian D'Alton, *Protestant Society and Politics in Cork, 1812-1844* (Cork, 1980) 97.
- <sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>60</sup> 5 Geo. 4, c.85, section 71.
- <sup>61</sup> D'Alton, *Protestant Society*, 93. D'Alton refers to Sir Thomas Deane forcibly ejecting one Thomas Palmer who claimed admission as a freeman of the city at one of the sessions of Court d'Oyer Hundred, a meeting of the members of the Corporation whose functions included the admission of freemen and the sale of Corporation property. When Palmer subsequently took a case for assault against Deane, the corporation paid the latter's costs. Frederick O'Dwyer outlines Deane's service to the Corporation and his involvement with the middle-class Tory elite that controlled the city until the passing of the Municipal Reform Act in 1840. Frederick O'Dwyer, *The Architecture of Deane and Woodward* (Cork, 1997) 15-16.
- <sup>62</sup> Holohan, 'Cork Courthouses', 77-84. Holohan definitively attributes the authorship of the design to the Pains.
- <sup>63</sup> D'Alton, *Protestant Society in Cork*, 98.
- <sup>64</sup> *Municipal Corporations* report, 50.
- <sup>65</sup> SR, 21st September 1824.
- <sup>66</sup> McParland, 'The Wide Streets Commissioners', 3. McParland points out that a number of the Dublin commissioners were important architectural patrons.
- <sup>67</sup> *The Cork Literary and Political Examiner*, March 1818, and CC, 27th December 1822.
- <sup>68</sup> CC, 17th January 1823.
- <sup>69</sup> 1 Geo. 3, c.24 and 26 Geo. 3, c.28.
- <sup>70</sup> Colin Rynne, 'Industry 1750-1930', in John Crowley, Robert Devoy, Denis Linehan and Patrick O'Flanagan (eds), *Atlas of Cork City* (Cork, 2005) 201.
- <sup>71</sup> Caulfield, *Council Book*, 3rd March 1780.