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GEORGIAN  
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Thomas Lloyd, 'Carmarthen Town Hall,  
a Suggestion for an Architect', *The Georgian  
Group Journal*, Vol. IV, 1994, pp. 74-75

# CARMARTHEN TOWN HALL A SUGGESTION FOR AN ARCHITECT

Thomas Lloyd

Carmarthen, historically the chief town of South West Wales, has won no praise from conservationists in recent years, which in turn has done little to encourage historic building seekers. A building thus deprived of the consideration it deserves, is the old town hall (or Guildhall) at the higher end of the town's principal open space. Though somewhat altered and, since the 1950s, made enormously less appealing by the removal of its stucco (save today in the arched heads above the windows, which create incongruous eyelids), it merits attention for the unusual triplet of Venetian windows across the front, which look back to no less a source than the north front of Chiswick House.

The subscription list was opened in 1765. The first stone was laid in 1767. Through lack of cash, the hall itself, with a high coved ceiling, was not fitted out till 1777 but the corn market underneath was functioning from 1772. Early descriptions are sparse. The best is in "Wales Illustrated in a Series of Views" by Jones (1834):

"The principal public edifice is the Guildhall, situate in the middle of the town. It is a large and handsome modern building, raised upon pillars, and having a covered market underneath. The entrance was formerly from a narrow passage behind, which formed a very inconvenient access; but a grand staircase had been made in front, which is highly ornamental to the structure."

The architect has never been known and building records are lost save for scattered references in the main corporation accounts, which do not help. The town's assiduous historian, William Spurrell, knew nothing when writing in the 1860s.

An attractive, though quite speculative attribution can, however, be suggested from studying the two Members of Parliament for the town and county in the early 1760s. M.P. for the county from 1754 to 1779 was George Rice of Dynevor Castle, also Lord Lieutenant. His mother



Fig. 1. Carmarthen Town Hall. A photograph of 1882, before the removal of the render. (The Victorian clock has also been removed.)

was a Trevor of Glynde Place, Sussex; his wife Cecil, daughter of 1st Earl Talbot, Steward of the Royal Household, was created Baroness Dynevor in her own right in 1782.

The town M.P. from 1761 was a complete outsider, elected unopposed through some unexplained accommodation. He was Ralph, Earl Verney (an Irish peerage) of Claydon House, Buckinghamshire, already a seasoned Parliamentarian. He was unexpectedly active in Carmarthen's interests, earning praise for his hard work in getting a new Charter for the Corporation through Parliament in 1764, the achievement of which was the stimulus for the new hall. So it is reasonable to suppose that Verney, whose love of building is amply known from Claydon, took an interest in this too. A stray Corporation account of 1767 in George Rice's papers shows Verney as a substantial lender, though the purpose is not given.

Verney's architect at Claydon was Sir Thomas Robinson, an association of long standing. George Rice also had connections with him, at one step removed admittedly, but still significant. His mother's brother, John Trevor, lacking issue, had bequeathed Glynde Place in 1743 to his father's much younger first cousin, Rev. Richard Trevor, Bishop of St David's from 1745 to 1752 and of Durham from 1752 to 1771. He was only 20 years older than George Rice and must have known him well while at St David's. Indeed, Trevor left part of his estate to Rice. Robinson was the Bishop's architect as well, working for him at Durham in 1760 and designing a new church at Glynde in 1763-65. Rice, whose name heads the subscription list, can hardly have been unaware of these projects when the new Carmarthen hall was being considered.

So could Robinson have designed the town hall? And if so, how could his name, well known, even if only as a sophisticated amateur, have been forgotten? On the second point, the fact that no architect is mentioned in the admittedly incomplete accounts or elsewhere, may positively be evidence for a gentleman designer rather than a paid professional. It would quite suit the situation to guess that Verney paid privately for plans or even had them gratis from a friend. Was this perhaps his gift to a town that had put him back in Westminster just after losing his previous seat at Wendover? Moreover, it is clear from the 1834 account that the building was ill-fitted to its site, suggesting that the architect had never visited Carmarthen. As a result, the new stairway had been needed on the front in 1811 (removed in 1864, the market having gone elsewhere in the 1840s). The basic plan was also simple, a plain rectangle, seemingly safe to draw up site unseen. The indelible mark of a sophisticated hand lies only in the windows and here again a line to Robinson can, somewhat tangentially, be drawn.

Burlington's use of triple Venetian windows at Chiswick derives from a drawing by Palladio, which was in Lord Burlington's collection. This shows the three windows, most unusually, beneath a triple broken-based pediment. As Giles Worsley (to whom I am indebted for this information) points out, Robinson must have known this drawing as he used such triple pediments at his own home, Rokeby Park, Yorkshire. Burlington and Robinson were friends so the source can hardly be in doubt.

Three Venetian windows are not unique to Chiswick and Carmarthen, though very rare. James Paine, also in Burlington's circle, used them at Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh's house in Whitehall in 1754-58, but no other architect can claim at this period even the slightest connection with Carmarthen, save perhaps the obscure Edward Oakley of London who was born in Carmarthen about 1700 but quite likely dead by 1765. The argument presented here, however, may well be open challenge or comment: indeed this would be quite welcome. It has come about through research for the Dyfed volume of the Buildings of Wales series, in which there will obviously not be space to rehearse all the evidence above. Further thoughts would therefore be of value.

## NOTES

1. Jones, *Wales Illustrated in a Series of Views*, 1834.