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Carmarthen Town Hall: The Architect Revealed!

Thomas Lloyd

Alas the perils of attribution!

In last year's Journal (see pp. 74–5), the present writer put forward a suggestion for an architect of the Town Hall at Carmarthen, an important piece of Georgian civic architecture in Wales, whose origin had never been recovered.

Despite efforts to construct what had seemed a tolerably robust proposal for the authorship of Sir Thomas Robinson, nonetheless the theory fell down flat within a few months of publication, when the writer, happily browsing in an antiquarian bookshop, came across a printed source that stated plainly who designed it. The architect in fact was Robert Taylor.

The evidence is in *Summer Excursions* by E. I. Spence (London 1809), a rare and little noticed tour of the southern Midlands of England and South Wales, published in two tiny duodecimo volumes. Spence was in fact a lady, Elizabeth Isabella (1768–1832), a Scottish doctor's daughter who, orphaned young, wrote professionally for a living, though with only limited success. Even so, it seems still a little remarkable that no-one in the last 185 years had picked up what she had to say.

At page 79 of Volume II, she states in her brief account of Carmarthen: 'The Town Hall is spacious: it was built after a plan of the late Sir Robert Taylor's'. It is not clear how the author came by this information as she does not otherwise show much interest in architects. Her statement is nonetheless quite definite and is perfectly acceptable on stylistic, date and other grounds.

With respect to style, several illustrations in Marcus Binney's biography of Taylor (London 1984) show devices that are key to the Carmarthen work – the triplet of Venetian windows in arches as at the Bank of England Court Room (plate 12); the blank panels above such windows, as at the Salisbury Guildhall (plate 23) and the balustraded balconies as at Ely House, London (plate 79). The date of *c.* 1765 for the Town Hall places it exactly beside Taylor's work at the Bank of England, which provides much the most important of the above parallel features.

How then did Taylor receive a commission in distant West Wales? There is no such clarity of link as there was with the Robinson theory, who was known to both the then MPS for town and county. However, there is an important indirect one. In 1761 the ancient estate of Alltycadno, some six miles south of Carmarthen had come into the possession of none other than Sir William Clayton of Harleyford, Buckinghamshire, Taylor's first important country house commission (1755). This arose from Clayton's second marriage that year to Maria Lloyd, the heiress and Clayton immediately showed a considerable interest in improving the agricultural quality of his Welsh acres. The old house at Alltycadno was in decay and though Clayton stayed there sometimes on his visits, he was as often found lodged with his wife's cousin, George Rice of Dynevor, one of the two MPs who promoted the building of the new Town Hall. So they would have had every opportunity to discuss the project.

Clayton himself never employed Taylor in Wales but now other matters arise from the Carmarthen connection. First, there is a large unsigned, undated elevation for a stable block for John Vaughan of Golden Grove, Carmarthenshire (1757–1804) among his papers. He was the county's largest landowner and succeeded George Rice as MP and lord Lieutenant. He is remembered in architectural circles as the patron who restarted the career of John Nash by giving him 50 guineas for the bath house commission Nash allegedly poached from Cockerell (a quite nonsensical story as there are drawings for this project by Adam in the Soane collection). The elevation has been tentatively considered to be Nash's for obvious reasons, but with three ball finials on the pediment of its advanced central (of thirteen) bays and two large paterae flanking the arched had of the entrance (cf Ely House, London as above), it can claim Taylorian hallmarks, though it lacks any rustication that one might expect to see. The project was not executed.

The second matter will by now be obvious. In 1783 Nash fled from London to Carmarthen, bankrupt. His actual connection with West Wales has always remained mysterious: he certainly never gave a straight account of it. He was only twelve when he foundation stone of Carmarthen Town Hall was laid in 1767 but it was not finished until 1777, by when Nash would have been in Taylor's office for several years and clearly competent to be despatched to finish off a project for his by then extremely busy master. Did Nash put an unrecorded early spell in Carmarthen to fruitful later use, making friends who would later shield him in his bankruptcy? Did he get to know John Vaughan, perhaps then precociously drawing out for him a stable plan, when still fully in the thrall of Taylor's style? Why else should the most important man in the county give Nash house room during his ignominious financial failure and wretched divorce, when he was by all accounts (except his own) a nobody?

For the present writer, the matter had better be left here to rest, lest he has to pen an article for next year's Journal that opens like the present.

Postscript

It was the similarity of the Carmarthen Town Hall façade (with its blind panels over triple Venetian windows) to the drawing for the Bank Court Room reproduced in Binney, that prompted me, on reading Mr Lloyd's piece in last year's Journal, to suggest to him in conversation that the architect could well be Taylor.

Now that this has been confirmed by Mr Lloyd's chancing upon the reference in Spence's *Excursions*, it can also be shown that the link to Taylor is less indirect than Mr Lloyd feared. While Clayton's second wife, Maria Lloyd, was related to one MP for the town, at whose house Clayton sometimes stayed on his Carmarthenshire visits, the other MP, Lord Verney, was married to the sister of the wife of Clayton's elder brother. These links were strengthened by Clayton's appointment as JP and in the 1764 election as a burgess of the town, which must indicate involvement in the town's affairs. Clayton's name does not appear in the subscription list opened the following year, but what more plausible than that, having employed Taylor first at Harleyford and secondly for a monument to his first wife (d. 1760) in Marlow church, Clayton should introduce him for Carmarthen Town Hall.

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