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‘ROOMS NEATLY COLOURED’: PAINTING AND DECORATING THE DUBLIN TOWN HOUSE, 1789–1810

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*While the interior colour schemes of town houses designed by neo-classical architects, such as Robert Adam and John Soane, have been comprehensively researched and documented,¹ those of the Georgian terrace, more often representing the cumulative ‘product’ of the various building trades, remain largely elusive. Indeed, Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton’s account of the paint schemes of the ‘typical’ London interior, outlined in their *Life in the Georgian City*, notes only that ‘no one bothered to record detailed instructions... or to fully describe its colouring’.² This article addresses this lacuna by presenting new information regarding the interiors of Dublin’s town houses in the two decades either side of 1800; a period of prodigious building activity in the city.³ Primarily based on evidential documentary sources – principally the extensive papers of the measurer Bryan Bolger (fl. 1787–1818), now held at the National Archives of Ireland – it also reconstructs the colours and finishes allocated to the more important reception spaces.*

Ireland’s close political, artistic and socio-economic ties to Great Britain throughout the eighteenth century ensured that its interior decoration carries a significance beyond the particular. Dublin’s status as second city of the British Empire in the Georgian era, the fact that the neo-classical idiom was introduced to Ireland through the agency of English architects, and, at a consumer level, the great esteem in which London was held as a centre of fashion and taste: all posit the colour schemes described here as

comparable to those executed in the entrance halls and drawings rooms of terraced town houses throughout Georgian Britain.

Of the eighteenth-century building trades associated with interior decoration, that of the house painter was the least circumscribed by degrees of specialisation. The use of lead as a primary raw material for paints, dryers and varnishes gave rise to the provision of multiple services, such as glazing and plumbing, that shared this common denominator. In 1747, Robert Campbell’s opinion of the house-painter stood in marked contrast to that of the carpenter and plasterer, advising against binding apprentices for the customary seven years ‘to a Branch that may be learned in as many Hours’. Indeed, given the preference for plain finishes throughout the Georgian era, Campbell reasoned that house painting required ‘no manner of Ingenuity’ and with ‘the Help of a few printed Directions, a House may be painted by any common Labourer at one third the Expense’.⁴

However, while London plasterers were restricted to ‘White washing with Whitening and Size’, and were not permitted to practise house-painting *per se*,⁵ no such restrictions appear to have been in place in Dublin; this is confirmed not only by trade descriptions listed in the *Dublin Directory* for the period, but also by house-decorating bills which often record both plastering and painting works executed by the same individual or firm. Familiar names from Dublin’s house-decorating industry,

such as the stuccodores Charles Thorp and James McCullagh, were affiliated both to the Guild of St Bartholomew, for bricklayers and plasterers, and to the faculty of painters in the Guild of St Luke.⁶ Francis Ryan, listed in the *Dublin Directory* throughout his career as ‘House painter’⁷ and acknowledging his profession as ‘Painter’ in his will,⁸ is described as ‘Painter and Stucco Man’ and ‘Painter and Plaisterer’ on building leases in 1768 and 1784 respectively.⁹ Similarly, it appears that many house painters also practised as ‘paper-stainers’, seeking the more elevated professional status enjoyed by such highly regarded ‘interior decorators’ as upholsterers. According to ‘A Report on the Trades and Manufacturers of Dublin’, compiled c.1834, there were 386 ‘Operative Painters’ in ‘good and regular Employment’ in the city in 1800.¹⁰ Among the foremost employers at this time were Michael Boylan, James Switsir and George Tinkler, all of whom practised the complementary trades of paper-staining, floor-cloth manufacturing, or both. The house-painter John Pursell, however, confined himself to the ‘Line of Trade he was originally and regularly bred to’, confident that specialisation in ‘all the Varieties of Plain and Fancy Colouring’ would merit his approbation.¹¹

As with the building trades in Dublin and other cities throughout the Georgian period, there is substantial evidence to suggest the passing on of successful enterprises from father to son. The will of the painter and paper-stainer George Tinkler, proved in June 1799, records that he left his son George ‘my Dwelling House and Concerns and the Workshops behind same’ in South Great Georges Street,¹² and the plasterer and painter James Butler’s will, dated 12 March 1802, conveyed his house in Buckingham Street ‘in which I now reside and carry on my trade’, to his son, ‘together with the Several Materials and necessary things belongg. to me for carrying on the said trade and business’.¹³ Furthermore, although the Georgian building industry represented ‘a highly masculine environment’,

it seems that women were engaged with the business of house-painting in a variety of contexts.¹⁴ A bill for new decorative works at the chapel at Trinity College, dated 1800, records ‘Women Scouring’ the existing painted surfaces with potash and sand in preparation for new finishes, a practice recommended by contemporary technical treatises.¹⁵ Others operated in more polite circles. In 1782 Elenor Byrn of Limerick advertised that she ‘Papers and Paints plain Rooms in the neatest and most expeditious Manner’, having ‘engaged some experienced Hands’.¹⁶ However, while women were occasionally listed independently in city directories – such as Ann Risk, described as a ‘House-painter’ of Wood Street from 1796 – it appears that the inheritance of already established practices was more typical. The widow of the painter and plasterer Patrick Wall (d.1762) continued her husband’s business with his former partner, and their son-in-law, the painter Gregory Sproule,¹⁷ and in 1772 Elinor Tommins, widow of the painter Patrick Tommins, assured interested parties that she continued ‘in the same extensive Manner as her late Husband’.¹⁸ Where a natural heir was wanting, successful businesses were occasionally advertised for sale. In January 1786, the auction of the property and concerns of the ‘late Widow Boswell’ in Townsend Street included ‘a large Quantity of Utensils and Tools belonging to the House Painting Business’, comprising ‘large Flags and Mullers, Lead Cistern to hold Oil, a Number of Paint-pots, Tubs, Barrels, Brushes, Oils, dry Colours, Copell [*sic*] and other Varnishes’. Interested parties were further advised of the availability of a house and ‘back Concerns, being very commodious and fit for a Person in the House Painting Business’, which was subject to a small rent.¹⁹

MATERIALS AND METHODS

From the early-eighteenth century materials for general house-painting and other decorative finishes, in the form of oils and varnishes, were typically supplied by ‘Oil and Colour-men’. While manufacturers such as Patrick Flynn, a ‘Copal-varnish-manufacturer’,²⁰ and Classon & Andrews, ‘Linseed-oil-manufacturers’,²¹ evidently specialised in discrete branches of the business, many more supplied a broader range of goods to the tradesman. In 1772, Patrick Tommins provided ‘Oils and Colours of all Kinds, ground and unground, fine Gold Size Lacker, white and brown Spirit Varnishes, also the fine shining Gum Copal and black Amber’;²² in 1774, ‘Linseed Oil, with or without Colours’, ‘Turpentine Oil’, and ‘All Sort of dark Colours’ were available from Thomas Corfield’s premises in Meath Street.²³

Although the specific materials used on site are infrequently referred to in house-building accounts, it seems that a superior quality of interior finish necessarily demanded particular attention. In 1769, Sir William Chambers recommended that the painting of the ceiling cove in the saloon at the Earl of Charlemont’s Casino at Marino should be ‘done with Izing glass & flake white’, indicating that isinglass, a superlative form of ‘size’, and flake white, a finer grade of white lead, were used for ornamental finishes.²⁴ Indeed, while common size was priced at 8d. per gallon in London in the 1770s,²⁵ ‘Choice Isinglass’ was advertised in Dublin in 1780 at the much elevated cost of 6s. 6d. per pound.²⁶ The painting of a house in Henry Street in 1795, executed by Benjamin Hallam,²⁷ notes that the ‘Green painting’ in two rooms was ‘done in Nut Oil’,²⁸ almost certainly a reference to walnut oil which possessed similar properties to the more commonly used linseed oil, but was reserved primarily for decorative work.²⁹

As with luxury goods and domestic furnishings, raw materials imported from England and elsewhere were often deemed superior to those produced in Ireland. In 1783, Messrs. Griffith and Robert Lloyd announced the arrival in Dublin of ‘a large Parcel of Black and Yellow Rosin of best Quality’,³⁰ and in 1787 Matthew Butler of King Street, Oxmantown, sold ‘a large and general assortment of all kinds of Oils, Colours and Varnishes, both prepared and unprepared, as used in painting’, which he had imported ‘from the different foreign markets’.³¹ The divergence in prices between native and imported materials, sold at the ‘Pestle and Mortar’ in Bride Street in 1773,³² further underlines this distinction (Fig. 1).

Importation ledgers also confirm the extent to which Irish suppliers traded in raw materials from overseas: between 1778–80 ‘Painting Stuffs’ exported from Great Britain and France to Belfast, Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Waterford were collectively valued at the not inconsiderable sums of £2,949 9s. 11d. and £1,880 3s. 10d. respectively.³³ Writing from London in 1796, the English stuccodore Joseph Rose assured his client Lord Belmore at Castle Coole, Co Fermanagh, that ‘the Colour Merchants here, informed me that the goods might be got as good and as cheap in Dublin’,³⁴ corroborating the quality of product available in late eighteenth-century Ireland.

Standard labour prices for house painters are not readily determinable and, in common with

	£.	s.	d.
Good Irish White Lead unground, per cwt. at	1	12	0
Ditto, ground on a Flag	1	16	0
Best London White Lead unground	1	16	0
Ditto, ground	2	0	0
Superfine Nottingham White Lead unground	2	10	0
Ditto, ground with Walnut Oil	3	0	0

Fig. 1. Table of materials available from the ‘Pestle and Mortar’ in Bride Street in 1773.

plasterers, they were largely out of work during the winter months. In 1747 Robert Campbell remarked that ‘When they are employed, they have in the longest Days, Half a Crown [2s. 6d.], and for good Hands Three Shillings’ per day;³⁵ corresponding to the daily rate of 2s. per day for skilled practitioners in Dublin between 1753–65.³⁶ Similarly, despite the complexity of the recently-discovered original colour scheme in the Adam-designed eating parlour at Headfort House, Co Meath,³⁷ the painter George Booker was paid at the rate of 11s. 4½d. per week, between May and August 1784, for ninety days work ‘at Painting the Great Parlour’; equivalent to 2s. per day for the customary six-day week.³⁸ By way of contrast, a letter from Lady Sarah Bunbury to her sister Emily, Duchess of Leinster, dated 10 September 1775 and concerning the decoration of Frescati, Blackrock, Co Dublin (demolished), records that ‘There is a man in Dublin who paints on the flat ceiling, and might do common easy ornaments; but he asks a guinea a day.’³⁹

DECORATING THE TOWN HOUSE

As the principal decorative accent within the domestic interior, the ceilings of formal reception rooms were, by the late-eighteenth century, occasionally painted in variegated combinations derived from antique models: an ornamental inflection that also served to emphasise the geometry of plasterwork compositions executed in the shallow relief typical of the neo-classical style. Although they were described by William Chambers as ‘commonplace’ in 1759,⁴⁰ Robert Adam later claimed to have introduced coloured grounds ‘so as to take the glare off the white, so common in every ceiling, till of late’,⁴¹ and formulated increasingly complex, if subtle, compositions with lighter, pastel shades for large unornamented areas. Ian Bristow has suggested that Adam’s palette was inspired by Edmund Burke’s proposal that paler tints were ‘of the most beautiful

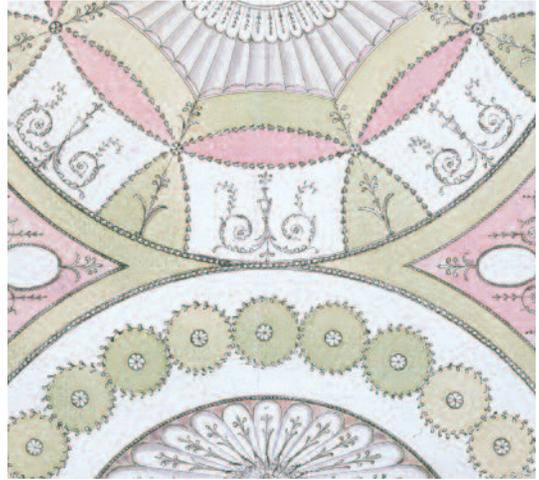


Fig. 2. Coloured ceiling design. Stapleton collection, NLI AD2254. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

sort’, darker colours producing ‘sublime’ effects not suited to the English domestic interior.⁴² In this respect, it is interesting to note that a design in the drawing collection associated with Lucan House, Co Dublin, and annotated by the architect Thomas Penrose, remarks that ‘the green in the Center is too deep’.⁴³

A coloured ceiling design (Fig. 2) in the portfolio formerly owned by the Dublin stuccodore Michael Stapleton (c.1747–1801)⁴⁴ illustrates the eighteenth-century manner of ‘picking in’ colour, whereby the entire surface was first painted uniformly white before tinting the flat grounds between the raised ornament with a ‘pencil’ or small brush.⁴⁵ Although hardly representative of the practice as a whole, this design confirms the preference for bright tints favoured by contemporary English neo-classical architects, here employing grounds of pink, green and pale blue. Indeed, ‘directions’ for the approved manner of colouring stuccoed ceilings were accessible to Dublin tradesmen via the hand-coloured plates of George Richardson’s influential *A Book of Ceilings*, published in instalments between 1774–76: widely subscribed to by Dublin’s building community, ‘sets

with coloured grounds’ were available for purchase from the stuccodore Edward Robbins’ premises in St Stephen’s Green by 1776.⁴⁶

The recently-discovered original colour scheme of the saloon ceiling at Headfort House is of similar complexity, with white relief ornament on grounds of green, pink and yellow.⁴⁷ As with decorative plasterwork, prices for such ornamental finishes were evidently subject to a range of variables; an edition of *The Modern Measurer*, published in Dublin in 1793, noting only that ‘Stucco Fancy Cielings in variegated Colours, according to Richness and number of Colours’ were priced ‘per agreement’.⁴⁸ The ‘picking in in fancy Colours’ for both the ‘Large Drawing Room Ceiling & Center piece in Grand Stair Case’ at Lord Lismore’s house in Temple Street (demolished) cost £3 8s. 3d. in 1790,⁴⁹ while the whitening of the ‘hall ceiling and flower’, and the ‘picking in the outside of ditto in Blue’, for a house in North Great George’s Street, executed by George Potter in the same year, cost 5s. 6d., thus reflecting this broad divergence.⁵⁰ The cost of colouring ‘Stucco fancy entablatures’ was, however, subject to more standardised price structures; estimated at 1s. to 2s. per running foot including materials, ‘according to their depths, and the number of Members picked in’.⁵¹

A sheet of frieze designs in the Stapleton collection (Fig. 3) contains four individual options for decorative details with tinted grounds of yellow, pink, green and blue: no doubt the decorator proposed myriad combinations of ornament and colour to the client, although the cost implications per yard of blue and green (‘8d. and upwards’), ‘Lemon’ (3d.), and ‘Peach or Bloom’ (4d.), was perhaps an equally significant factor in the decision-making process.⁵²

Annotated designs in a collection of drawings associated with the English architect James Wyatt and his Irish ‘agent’ Thomas Penrose, now held in the National Library of Ireland, reveal how directions for such ‘fancy’ painting schemes were communicated in myriad ways. One such design comprises a light green colouring for the ceiling plane, while the grounds of the voids between the guilloche and the border of the foliated centrepiece are marked ‘C’ and ‘D’, corresponding to a handwritten note requesting ‘C & D purple’.⁵³ Another design (Fig. 4) relies on written instructions alone, here annotated with ‘Pale Green’, ‘Pale Pink’ and ‘Ground Dark Brown’, but also, on one specific area, ‘Pink or Green’, suggesting that decisions about colour were occasionally left to those responsible for overseeing the work as it progressed.

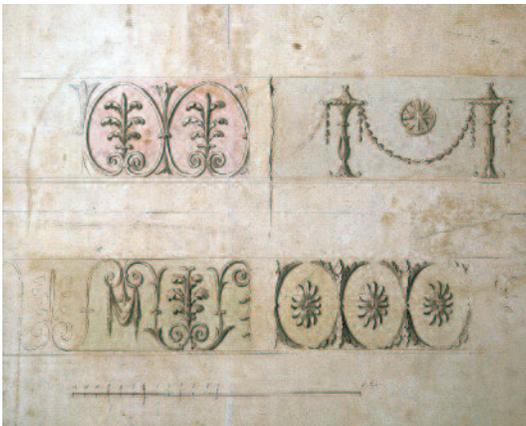


Fig. 3. Four frieze designs with coloured ‘picking in’ options. Stapleton collection, NLI AD2279. *Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.*

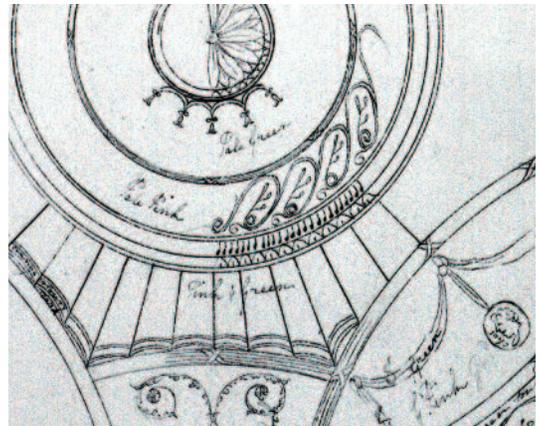


Fig. 4. Annotated ceiling design (detail). Penrose Wyatt collection, NLI AD3141. *Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.*

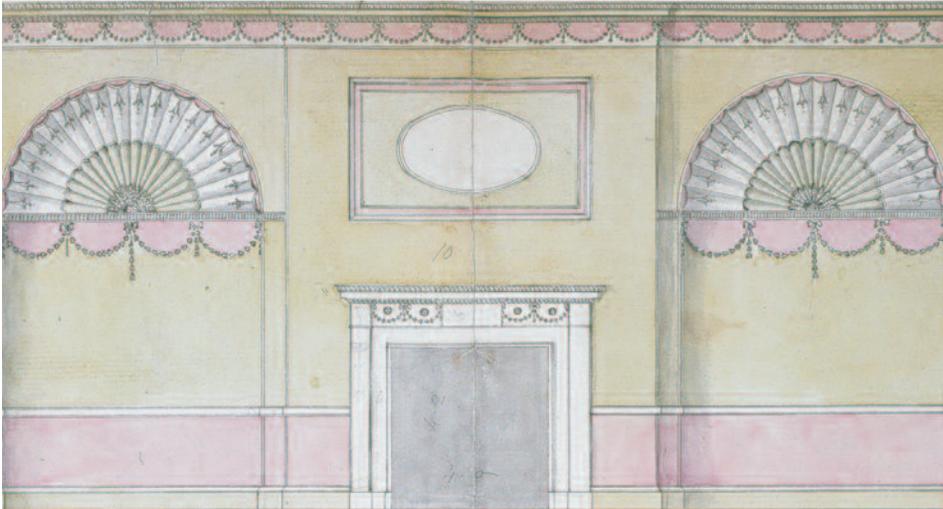


Fig. 5. Coloured room scheme (detail). Stapleton collection, NLI AD2230.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

While the Dublin measurer Bryan Bolger's building accounts record, albeit laconically, equivalent schemes – for example the 'painting 2 Ornamental Ceilings in drawing Rooms, & picking in in fancy Colours' executed by Benjamin Hallam at No.19 North Great George's Street in 1790, or Charles Thorp's 'staining the great ornamented ceiling' in the front drawing room at No.34 North Great George's Street (demolished) in 1792⁵⁴ – it appears that ceilings and entablatures whitened 'in Statuary', most probably a superior form of distemper,⁵⁵ represented a more customary decorative finish for even the grandest town house. In this regard, it is perhaps significant that the painter and paper-stainer Michael Boylan was advertising 'Cieling and Cornices done in the best White' from 1777.⁵⁶ An undated bill for 'Painting & Whitening' executed by the stuccodore and painter Patrick Connolly⁵⁷ for the Earl of Milltown's house, the present No.17 St Stephen's Green, included 'Whitening the Ornament Ceiling in Large Drawing Room in Statuary';⁵⁸ work for 'his Grace the Arch Bishop of Cashell' at No.47 St Stephen's Green

(demolished),⁵⁹ executed by the painter William Smyth in 1790, included twice 'whitening in Statuary the Ornamental ceiling in front drawing Room', charged at 13s. 9d.⁶⁰ Robert McBride's paintwork at No.2 St Stephen's Green for John Evans Esq. in 1789,⁶¹ equally records that the '16 inch Cornice' in the front drawing room, 'with 3 Carved Mouldings & Cove fully enriched' was twice 'done in Statuary' at 3d. per foot.⁶² Not all decorative work was afforded such a distinction: the painting of the 'Ceilings & Strings of Staircase & hall' at No.7 Parnell Square for Major Cockburne in 1792 records that Benjamin Hallam simply used 'Whiten & Size'.⁶³

The late-eighteenth century practice of colouring the individual architectural elements of a room – creating what Robert Adam described as 'a harmony between the ceiling and the sidewalls'⁶⁴ – is also consistent with surviving tinted designs and measured bills. A room scheme for an unidentified town house, contained in the Stapleton collection (Fig. 5), is coloured green and pink, that most ubiquitous of Adamesque combinations: pink reserved for the dado, frieze ground, raised door panels, and as an

ornamental accent for the mouldings of the decorative stucco panels.⁶⁵ In 1795, Andrew Callnan’s ‘whitening & painting’ in the rear parlour at No.5 Grenville Street (demolished) included green distemper on the walls and skirting fascia.⁶⁶ A bill for painting the drawing rooms of a house in York Street (demolished), executed by Christopher Humphrys in 1805, records that the walls in ‘French Green Distemper Colour’ were complemented by ornamental entablatures with friezes ‘pickd in Green’.⁶⁷ William Parker’s ‘Painter’s Bill’ for work at No.54 Merrion Square, measured in October 1809, similarly records that the stucco ‘Frieze Ornaments’ in the rear parlour had been ‘Coloured as Walls’, in this instance a ‘Peach Distemper Colour’.⁶⁸ Indeed, it seems that both materials and techniques demanded – despite Robert Campbell’s contention – much skill and deliberation. In 1781 the painter and plasterer Benjamin Hallam advertised that he had recently returned from London and executed ‘Ornamented stucco ceilings, and walls finished and painted with fancy colours in oils in the same so much approved method now practised in London’;⁶⁹ later, in 1793, the painter and paper-stainer John Finlater promoted ‘rooms neatly coloured’.⁷⁰ Robert Burnett also engaged to finish ‘Plain Rooms neatly coloured’ in ‘the newest fashion and most approved manner’, advising potential clients that ‘House Painting and Ceiling Ornaments’ were done ‘in the neatest and most lasting manner, having in his employment some of the best workmen’.⁷¹

Notwithstanding such intricate, architecturally endorsed colour schemes, the approved manner of painting the interior architectural framework uniformly white – a practice established by mid-century – largely prevailed. It has already been noted that ‘Statuary’ was typically reserved for superior decorative finishes, particularly enriched stuccowork ceilings and entablatures. Equally, ‘flat white’ or ‘dead white’, referring to a matt finish in oil, became standard for high-quality interiors including joinery.⁷² This is confirmed by a letter from barrister and

connoisseur Andrew Caldwell to his mother, dated 10 July 1777, observing that ‘the skirting Boards are all painted white in the genteel Houses [in London]’.⁷³ Christopher Humphrys’ bill for painting and whitening at an unidentified house in Summerhill, measured in 1803, records that the ‘painting on wood work’ in the two parlours, hall and staircase was ‘done in flat white’,⁷⁴ while at No.47 St Stephen’s Green (noted above), the joinery in the drawing rooms, parlour, study and hall was painted ‘Dead white’.

TYPOLOGIES OF DECORATION

Although characteristically economical with descriptive details, it is possible to reconstruct a number of complete room schemes from Bryan Bolger’s house-decorating accounts and, by extension, to tentatively map out typologies of decoration within discrete interior spaces for the period 1789–1810.⁷⁵ In this regard, it is hardly surprising that a distinction between ‘common’ and ‘fancy’ colouring confirms the hierarchical decorative emphasis characteristic of the Georgian town house. Writing to his client Gilbert Meason in May 1770, regarding the decoration of No.26 St Andrew Square in Edinburgh, Sir William Chambers advised:

With regard to the painting Your parlours if they are for Common use Stone Colours will last best & is Cheapest but if you mean them to be very neat pea green & White, Buff colour & White or pearl or what is called Paris Gray and White are the handsomest.⁷⁶

The colours designated for the fasciae of the skirting boards at one of Arthur Darley’s ‘New Built Houses’ in Temple Street, executed by Richard Salisbury in 1791, suggest such a considered, albeit subtle, system: green for the drawing rooms; ‘Mohogany Colour’ in the attic storey, parlours, staircase and hall; and ‘Chocolate Colour’ in the ‘passage to Back Door’.⁷⁷ The prevalence of London schemes as exemplars of fashion and taste is also noteworthy here: a letter

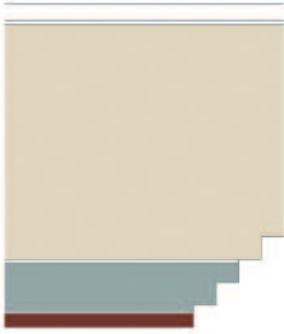


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of colour scheme in stair hall at Frederick Darley’s house in Lower Abbey Street, executed by Charles Thorp in 1792–3.

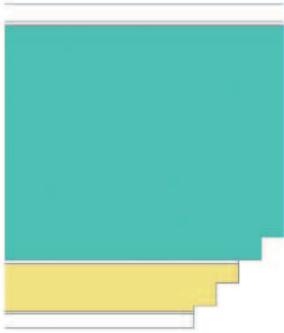


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of colour scheme in entrance hall for house in Townsend Street, executed by Christopher Humphrys in 1803.

from Lady Sarah Bunbury to her sister the Duchess of Leinster, c.1775–76, recounts how ‘Lady E[lizabeth] Clements has seen three rooms painted in a new house in London that she is charmed with: one of them is all greens, the other purples and greens, and the other showy colours.’⁷⁸

The surviving documentary evidence indicates that the wall surfaces of circulation spaces, such as the entrance hall and staircase, were typically painted in various shades of grey or ‘stone colour’ – described by Ian Bristow as a tint of ‘general application’⁷⁹ – while plasterwork ceilings and other enrichments were simply whitened. This grey/white palette was almost certainly chosen for both practical and economic reasons, but also reflects the preference for plain, austere decorative finishes for such spaces favoured by architects throughout the eighteenth-century. The stair hall at Frederick Darley’s house in Lower Abbey Street, painted by the firm of Charles Thorp in 1792–3, represents such a case in point, comprising a ‘Slate Colour’ dado, walls of ‘Stone

colour’, and varnished mahogany colour doors within a white framework, save for the mahogany colour ‘plinth’ or skirting fascia (Fig. 6).⁸⁰ Michael Boylan’s account for work in the entrance hall and staircase at No.1 Parnell Square in 1801, records almost identical finishes. Here, the walls in both spaces were painted in ‘Queen’s Grey’⁸¹ – four times in oil in the hall and three times in distemper in the staircase – while the joinery and plasterwork were ‘whitened’ throughout, apart from the painting ‘in statuary’ of the ‘stucco ornament urn & drapery’ above the drawing room door. A further distinction between the doors, painted mahogany colour, and the ‘real’ mahogany staircase handrail, here cleaned and varnished, illustrates the specific finishes assigned to materials of different qualities.⁸² The painting of the equivalent spaces at No.25 Mountjoy Square, executed by Kearn Duggan for Mrs Preston in 1801, represented an even more pallid variation on the standard palette, the customary white framework extending to ‘Distemper Colour’ walls, relieved only by the stone colour dado.⁸³ Conservation work at Mornington House, No.24 Upper Merrion Street (built c.1765), undertaken in 1997, revealed that the painting of entrance hall, stair hall and first floor landing had ‘always been treated as a unit’; here the walls and joinery were painted in a ‘cool grey’, while the ‘bright green’ ground of the frieze represented ‘the only spot of colour’.⁸⁴ In stair halls with cantilevered stone steps it appears that blue was employed for the ironwork balustrade ‘almost to a convention in high-class interiors’⁸⁵ although the American diarist Margaret Boyle Harvey recorded ‘an elegant stairs of white Portland stone, with iron banisters painted green’ at No.22 South William Street c.1810.⁸⁶

Exceptions to this ‘rule’ for halls include a scheme for a house in Townsend Street, executed by Christopher Humphrys in 1803, which comprised the customary whitening of ceilings and cornices but ‘Green Distemper Colour’ on the walls and ‘Lemon Colour Distemper’ on the dados (Fig. 7);⁸⁷ and Alen

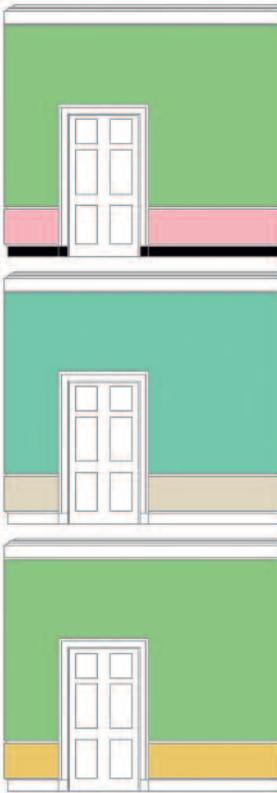


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of three drawing room colour schemes, executed by Christopher Humphrys between 1804–8.

Top

Grafton St (1804)

Walls: Green (O)

Dado: Pink (O)

Skirting: Black

Middle

Sth Gt George’s St

(1807)

Walls: Green (D)

Dado: Stone (D)

Skirting: White

Bottom

Townsend St (1808)

Walls: Green (O)

Dado: Buff (O)

Skirting: White

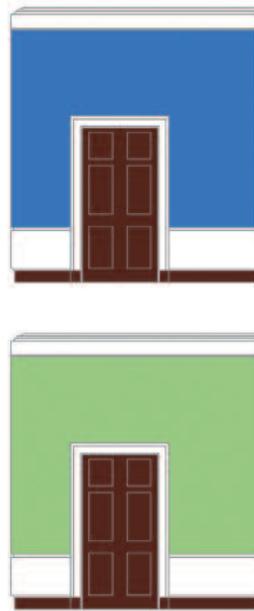


Fig. 9. Reconstruction of colour schemes in the drawing rooms at a house in Henry Street, executed by Benjamin Hallam in 1793.

Note: the colours employed in these schematic drawings are approximations only, based on samples in 1. Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology 1615–1840* (1996).

Jackson’s bill for painting at No.48 St Stephen’s Green, measured in January 1805, which records ‘Light Blue’ walls and a ‘Bottle Green’ skirting fascia.⁸⁸ The hall and staircase of Lord Lismore’s house in Temple Street evidently formed an intrinsic part of the sequence of ‘parade’ rooms and were thus afforded an appropriate ornamental inflection; both the walls and staircase ceiling here being painted in ‘fancy Colours’ in 1790.⁸⁹ Henry Keating’s ‘Black & White Diamond painting’ on the floor in the entrance hall at No.42 Dawson Street, measured by Bryan Bolger in October 1789, represented an equally singular enrichment.⁹⁰

For formal reception rooms it appears that various shades of green and blue were perennially popular for walls – the Bolger papers occasionally recording identifiable hues such as ‘Olympian Green’ for a house in Sackville Street in 1794⁹¹ – and *The*

Modern Measurer emphasises the difference between ‘Common Blue or Green’ and ‘Best Blue or Green, done with Verditer, flat’.⁹² Such a distinction between qualities of pigments and their appropriate designation is confirmed by a painting bill for a house in York Street, dated December 1805, recording ‘Green Distemper Colour’ on the walls of the front parlour and ‘French Green Distemper Colour’ in the drawing room.⁹³ In 1770, the ‘Paper Warehouse of Ryves, Darkin and Co.’ on Ormond Quay painted ‘in all Sorts of plain Colours now used, particularly the much esteemed Verd Blue and Pea Green’,⁹⁴ and recent conservation work at No.10 Henrietta Street, one of the foremost town houses of the entire Georgian period, revealed successive redecorating schemes of identical hues dating from the early 1770s.⁹⁵ Three separate drawing room schemes, all executed by Christopher Humphrys between 1804–8 (Fig. 8),

confirm this preference for expanses of plain colour (the addition of ‘D’ or ‘O’ referring to the use of distemper or oil).

An account of ‘Whitening & Painting’ for a house in Henry Street, executed by Benjamin Hallam and measured by Bolger in 1793, records the complete colour schemes for a suite of four reception rooms (Fig. 9).⁹⁶ The joinery throughout was painted ‘flat white’, save for the fasciae of the skirting boards and the doors, painted ‘Mohogany Colour’ and ‘Vaneer Mohogany Colour’ respectively. All walls were painted four times in oil, two rooms in a ‘Deep Verditer Blue’ and the remainder in a ‘Rich Brunswick Green’, while the plasterwork, including the ornamental ceilings and enriched cornices, was uniformly ‘whitened’, presumably referring to a common, chalk-based distemper.

A more elaborate, if arguably less sophisticated, drawing room scheme is represented by John Lynch’s bill for decorating a house in Great Charles Street (demolished), measured in 1800; the walls here painted blue with a ‘Lemon colour’ dado, with green reserved for the fasciae of the skirting boards and ‘Window Backs’.⁹⁷ A year later, in 1801, the ‘painting in Blue Distemper Colour the Elliptical Niche head in Back parlour & picking in the Ornaments’, executed by Lynch for Mary Billing at No.36 Belvedere Place (demolished), represented a distinct ornamental accent within an otherwise plain white and ‘Distemper Colour’ backdrop.⁹⁸ Indeed, the particular attention afforded the painting of the dining parlour and saloon at the Provost’s House in Trinity College Dublin, undertaken by the firm of Michael Stapleton in 1790, reflects the decorative significance attached to such ‘public’ domestic spaces throughout the Georgian era: the palette of white, pearl and stone employed in the dining parlour corresponds chromatically to Adam’s recommendation for a stuccoed finish,⁹⁹ while the intricate colouring and picking in of the architectural mouldings and applied decorations in the drawing room – in white, green and lilac – approaches the

complexity of the most accomplished contemporary neo-classical schemes (see Appendix).¹⁰⁰

The quality of painted finish occasionally merited a distinction in property notices – the interiors of No.10 Harcourt Street described as ‘fitted up in the most fashionable manner, and decorated in the first stile of painting’ in 1799¹⁰¹ – and in this regard it is perhaps unsurprising that ‘Finger Plates of different Patterns, for Drawing Room Doors, so much approved of in London for the keeping the Servants from dirtying the Paint on Doors’, were advertised for sale in 1792 by John Clarke, a ‘Grate and Gate Maker’ originally of London but then operating from Clarendon Street in Dublin.¹⁰²

It appears from house-decorating bills and newspaper advertisements that the late-eighteenth century preference for single-tinted wall finishes was also reflected in the fashion for plain wallpapers. Michael Boylan undertook ‘Plain Rooms done in the neatest Manner’ in 1777, selling ‘the fashionable Plain Papers now so much used in London and Dublin’,¹⁰³ and in July 1778 James Dunn advertised the sale of ‘a great Variety of Paper-Hangings of the newest Fashions; also, an Assortment of plain Verditer Blue Paper, Green Ditto, and other Fancy Colours’.¹⁰⁴ Evidently, blue remained perennially popular, William and Henry Whitestone of Capel Street advertising ‘Blue Paper for Rooms of a fine Colour’ in 1780 and again in 1787.¹⁰⁵

That plain papers were deemed suitable for the most important reception rooms may be determined by numerous references contained within the Bolger papers. The decoration of No.47 St Stephen’s Green by William Smyth in 1790 records ‘Distemper Colour on papered walls’ in both the drawing rooms and study, the latter room enhanced with ‘Borders’; in the same year Benjamin Hallam, at the request of the Countess of Longford, painted the ‘plain paper’ in the dining room, drawing room and ‘his Lordship’s Study’ at No.10 Parnell Square, in French Grey, green and buff respectively.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

Despite Robert Campbell’s contempt for the house-painting trade, it evidently had the potential to represent a lucrative business enterprise. The probate will of George Tinkler, noted above, records a substantial property portfolio, enumerating leasehold interests in Sackville Street, Ship Street, Fade Street, ‘Several Houses and buildings’ in Stephen Street, and ‘a large Lot of Ground’ in Dame Street.¹⁰⁷ Michael Boylan kept thirty full-time employees – as well as ‘many more additional hands’ – and died wealthy, leaving a reported £45,000 to his heirs who maintained the business into the early decades of the nineteenth-century.¹⁰⁸ Others, however, appear to have turned to house-painting as a means of survival. Abandoned by his business partner in 1786, Angelo Bigari found himself in financial straits, calling in his debts and requesting that his creditors ‘give him some little Indulgence’. Although ‘equal to the highest Ornamental Painting’, Bigari advertised his continuation in the house-painting business alone, ‘in a most extensive manner’ and ‘at the most reduced and reasonable Prices’.¹⁰⁹

The documentary evidence presented here indicates that, in many respects, the interior colour schemes of Dublin’s late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century terraced houses emulated palettes generated by the foremost English architects and designers of the neo-classical style. It is also apparent that commercial house-painters in Dublin were quick to respond to a demand for ‘rooms neatly coloured’ in the London manner, a further corroboration of the acknowledged consumer preference for imported luxury goods in Ireland throughout the Georgian period.¹¹⁰ However, while the designs from portfolios of architects and artisans might indicate that stuccoed ceilings were customarily painted in a variety of hues, the documentary evidence indicates that decorative plasterwork was more typically whitened, and that wall surfaces carried the principal chromatic accent. Furthermore, confirmation of the distinction between the pigments

used to decorate circulation spaces and formal reception rooms serves to underline the pragmatic approach to materials characteristic of the nascent building industry.

Given the technological advances in period conservation and restoration, and the committed preservation of eighteenth-century town house and streetscape, it is expected that further material evidence will emerge to elucidate the character and role of colour in Georgian domestic spaces.

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APPENDIX

A bill recording the ‘Painting, Whitening & Repairs’ executed by the firm of Michael Stapleton in the ‘ball room’ (saloon) of the Provost’s House in Trinity

College Dublin. This short excerpt refers to the painting of the coved ceiling and was endorsed by the architect Graham Myers in December 1790.¹¹¹

<i>feet</i>		£—s—d
	To Whitening & repairing the flat of Cieling & Flower in Do. & flat Cielings in ends between Columns	0—8—6
63½	of Cornice with 6 Enrichments Modillions & inside of frame at flat of Cieling repair’d & Whiten’d @ 5 per	1—6—0
72¼	of Fret in Do. repair’d Whiten’d & Painted in Green @ 5 per	1—10—1
74½	of bedmold top of Cove 3 Enrichments repair’d & Whiten’d @ 1½ per	0—9—3½
	Whitening and repairing 144 Pannels, carved Moldings round Do. & Flowers in do. & picking in the Ground of Do. Lilac @ 6 per	3—12—0
207	of Great Entablature of foot of Cove repair’d, Whiten’d & pick’d in Green & Lilac @ 14 per	12—1—6

NOTES

- 1 See Ian Bristow, *Architectural Colour in British Interiors 1615–1840* (New Haven and London, 1996).
- 2 Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (London, 1991), p. 180. This account has been superseded by Ian Bristow’s published work in this field. See note 1.
- 3 Christine Casey, *The Buildings of Ireland: Dublin* (New Haven and London, 2005). The most pervasive decorative style of Dublin’s eighteenth-century town house interiors is the neo-classical or ‘Adamesque’.
- 4 R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman*. (London, 1747), p. 103.
- 5 James Ayres, *Building the Georgian City*. (New Haven and London, 1998), p. 197.
- 6 See C.T. Keatinge, ‘The Guild of Cutlers, Painter-Stainers and Stationers, better known as the Guild of St Luke the Evangelist, Dublin’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 30 (1900), pp. 136–47. For information on Thorp and McCullagh, see C.P. Curran, *Dublin Decorative Plasterwork of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (London, 1967), pp. 71–78.
- 7 Francis Ryan is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as ‘Painter’ in 1762 and 1764, and as ‘House painter’ in 1765 and 1768–86.
- 8 National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), T19806.
- 9 Registry of Deeds (hereafter RD), 359/7/240400 and 263/597/171888.
- 10 Royal Irish Academy (hereafter RIA), Holiday MS 4.B.31.
- 11 *Hibernian Journal*, 12 April 1784. John Pursell is listed as a ‘House-painter’ in the *Dublin Directory* from 1762–91.

- 12 NAI, 1124/9/3. George Tinkler is listed in the *Dublin Directory* at No. 42 South Great George’s Street from 1783–1800. His wife Jane is listed at this same address in 1801.
- 13 NAI, T15482. James Butler is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as ‘Stucco-plasterer and painter’ at No. 32 Lower Abbey Street between 1785–88, and as ‘Stuccodor’ at Buckingham Street from 1795–1801.
- 14 Ayres, *op. cit.* Elizabeth McKellar has similarly described the early Georgian building industry as ‘overwhelmingly male’: E. McKellar, *The Birth of Modern London: The Development and Design of the City 1660–1720* (Manchester, 1999), p. 93.
- 15 J. Pincot, *Pincot’s Treatise on the Practical Part of Coach and House Painting* (London, c.1811), pp. 11, 15–16, cited in Ian Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology 1615–1840* (New Haven and London, 1996), p. 107.
- 16 *Limerick Chronicle*, 13 June 1782.
- 17 National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS 12125.
- 18 *Hibernian Journal*, 13 May 1772. See note 21 below.
- 19 *Dublin Journal*, 7 January 1786.
- 20 Listed in the *Dublin Directory* at No.13 Whyte’s Row, Dorset Street in 1796.
- 21 Listed in the *Dublin Directory* at No.110 The Coombe from 1785.
- 22 *Hibernian Journal*, 23 March 1772. Tommins is described as residing in King Street, Oxmantown.
- 23 *Hibernian Journal*, 5 September 1774. Thomas Corfield is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as a grocer from 1773.
- 24 Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology*, p. 84.
- 25 Ayres, *op. cit.*, 208.
- 26 *Dublin Evening Post*, 11 March 1780.
- 27 Benjamin Hallam is listed as a ‘Painter’ in the *Dublin Directory* from 1789 and was a member of the Faculty of Painters in the Guild of St Luke. See entry in ‘Dictionary of Irish Architects’ (available online at www.dia.ie).
- 28 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘G’.
- 29 Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology*, p. 67.
- 30 *Dublin Journal*, 27 February 1783. Rosin refers to amber dissolved in oil for clear varnishes.
- 31 *Dublin Evening Post*, 3 April 1787. Matthew Butler first appears in the *Dublin Directory* in 1787 as a ‘Druggist’; from 1789 he is listed as an ‘Oil and Colour-man’.
- 32 *Dublin Journal*, 16 January 1773.
- 33 National Archives, Kew, Cust 15/82 and 15/83.
- 34 Public Records Office Northern Ireland (hereafter cited as PRONI), Belmore papers, D/3007/D/2/17/5.
- 35 Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, p. 104.
- 36 F. D’Arcy, ‘Wages of Skilled Workers in the Dublin Building Industry’. *Saothar*, 15 (1990), table 3.
- 37 Ongoing conservation work at Headfort House, undertaken by the conservator Richard Ireland, has revealed that the original colouring schemes in the principal reception rooms were complex, if somewhat idiosyncratic, with much labour-intensive ‘picking in’.
- 38 NLI, Headfort papers MS 25,307 (26). George Booker was evidently from the nearby town of Kells.
- 39 B. Fitzgerald, *The correspondence of Emily Duchess of Leinster* (Dublin, 1949–53), II, p. 152.
- 40 Bristow, *Architectural Colour in British Interiors*, p. 95.
- 41 R. and J. Adam, *Works in Architecture* (London, 1774), I, description of plate 8 for ‘Cieling of the great Room’ at Kenwood.
- 42 Bristow, *Architectural Colour in British Interiors*, p. 98.
- 43 NLI, AD 1592.
- 44 See C. Lucey, *The Stapleton Collection: designs for the Irish neo-classical interior* (Tralee, 2007).
- 45 In 1772, Patrick Tommins advertised the sale of ‘London Pencils, Filches, and Tools of all Sizes’ (*Hibernian Journal*, 23 March 1772). See note 21 above.
- 46 *Hibernian Journal*, 19 June 1776. ‘Sets with coloured Grounds are sold for sixteen shillings the Number, those coloured and touched up, in Manner of furnished Drawings, at six Guineas each Number’.
- 47 Information from Richard Ireland. See reports B929, B929b, B946, B946b–d and B2027.
- 48 P.L. Hodgson, *The Modern Measurer* (Dublin, 1793), p. 107.
- 49 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘L’.
- 50 *Ibid.*, bundle ‘R’. The work here relates to one of four houses, the present Nos.5–8 North Great George’s Street, built by Samuel Read from 1784. George Potter first appears in the *Dublin Directory* in 1798 as a ‘Painter and Glazier’.
- 51 Hodgson, *The Modern Measurer*, p. 107. In *The Complete Measurer* (1779), Hodgson advised ‘Allowance to be made to the Workmen for Mouldings’.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 53 NLI, AD 3165.

- 54 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundles ‘A’ and ‘D’.
- 55 The nature of ‘Statuary’ as a pigment is unclear. Ian Bristow had not come across the term but suggested that it may have been similar to a superlative form of white distemper known as *blanc de Roi* (letter from Ian Bristow to the author dated 26 September 2007). Richard Ireland has similarly suggested that it was almost certainly a ‘pristine white’, and ‘the best white possible’, made from crushed chalk with no black added (in conversation with the author 1 April 2008).
- 56 *Dublin Journal*, 24 June 1777. Michael Boylan first appears in the *Dublin Directory* in 1781, operating from Grafton Street.
- 57 Patrick Connolly is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as ‘Stuccodore and painter’ from 1794–1803, and as ‘Painter and plaisterer’ from 1807–1816.
- 58 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘M’.
- 59 No. 47 St Stephen’s Green (demolished) was, from 1775, the residence of Charles Agar, Archbishop of Cashel. *Georgian Society Records* (hereafter *GSR*) (Dublin 1909–13) II, p. 75.
- 60 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘C’.
- 61 *GSR*, II, p. 56.
- 62 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘B’. This corresponds to Hodgson’s price for ‘Cornices dead white, or stone colour, according to Depth’, priced between 2d. and 4d. Robert McBride is not listed in the *Dublin Directory*.
- 63 *Ibid.*, bundle ‘C’.
- 64 Adam, *Works*, I, description of plate 7 for ‘Cieling of the great Room’ at Kenwood.
- 65 NLI, AD 2230. The measurements – 25 ft. x 17.3 ft. wide, 12.5 ft. high – suggest the proportions of a ground floor room in a small town house.
- 66 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘B’: see C. Lucey ‘In very good business’: Andrew Callnan’s house-decorating practice, 1790–1804’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 137 (2007), pp. 117–30.
- 67 *Ibid.*, bundle ‘S’. Christopher Humphreys is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as a ‘Painter and Glazier’ from 1781, residing at Drury Lane.
- 68 Copy of a bill from the Kilruddy papers, now in a private collection. William Parker is listed as ‘Painter and Glazier’ in the *Dublin Directory* between 1810–12, residing at No. 191 Abbey Street.
- 69 *Hibernian Journal* 12 March 1781.
- 70 *Freeman’s Journal*, 23 March 1793 and *Hibernian Journal*, 17 April 1793. John Finlater is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as a ‘Paper-stainer & House-painter’ between 1793–96, residing at Golden Lane.
- 71 *Freeman’s Journal*, 12 May 1791 and *Dublin Chronicle*, 19 May 1792. Robert Burnett is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as a ‘Painter & Stucco-worker’ between 1783–85, residing at Clarendon Street.
- 72 Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology*, p. 102. Hodgson’s *Modern Measurer* notes ‘Flat White, done in Walnut oil and best Lead, once done, 4d. to 4½d. – twice 7d. – thrice 9d. and four times 11d.’ and ‘Best Linseed Oil and Lead, (White) once done, 3½d. to 4d. – twice 6d. – thrice 8d. and four times 10d.’
- 73 Caldwell MSS, private collection, Andrew Caldwell, London, to Mrs Caldwell, Dublin, 10 July 1777. Cited in J. Meredith, *Andrew Caldwell, A study of a Guardian of taste and genius* (M.Litt. thesis, University of Dublin, 2005).
- 74 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘W’.
- 75 This time period reflects the span of Bolger’s professional life.
- 76 British Library, Add MS 41133–6 (Sir William Chambers Letter Books, I), f. 12r. See also J. Harris, *Sir William Chambers: Knight of the Polar Star* (London, 1970), p. 216.
- 77 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘P’. Richard Salisbury is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as ‘House-painter’ between 1794–97, residing at Cole’s Lane.
- 78 Fitzgerald, *Correspondence of Emily, Duchess of Leinster*, II, p. 158.
- 79 Bristow, *Interior House-Painting Colours and Technology*, p. 173.
- 80 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘D’.
- 81 Bristow records no information on this colour.
- 82 PRONI, Caledon papers, D/2433/B/1/3/27.
- 83 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘P’. References to ‘distemper colour’ abound in the Bryan Bolger papers, often in tandem with references to specific hues, such as ‘Green distemper colour’, and thus suggesting that it was a discrete ‘tint’. Richard Ireland suggests that ‘Distemper Colour’ was powdered chalk alone with an animal glue binder. (Letter from Richard Ireland to the author, 12 July 2008.) Kearn Duggan is not listed in the *Dublin Directory*.
- 84 The conservation work at this house was supervised by the paint conservator Mary McGrath, with pigment analysis undertaken by Catherine Hassall (Report No. B587, dated July 1997).

- 85 Bristow, *Architectural Colour in British Interiors*, p. 148. Bristow also notes that tints of grey and ‘stone colour’ represented a fashionable alternative.
- 86 Friends Historical Library, Dublin, Margaret Boyle Harvey, *On a visit to Ireland, 1809 to 1812*, p. 96.
- 87 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘M’.
- 88 *Ibid.*, bundle ‘O’. Alen Jackson is not listed in the *Dublin Directory*.
- 89 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘L’.
- 90 *Ibid.*, bundle ‘C’. A Henry Keating ‘House-painter’ is listed in the *Dublin Directory* between 1761–67, and may have been related.
- 91 *Ibid.*, bundle ‘J’.
- 92 Hodgson, *The Modern Measurer*, p. 107. ‘Best Blue or Green, done with Verditer, flat on Walls, also Pink or Lilach on walls, 4 times done in best Manner’ was priced at ‘from 18d. to 2s.’ per square yard. The equivalent use of ‘Stone Colour or Pearl’ was less expensive, priced at ‘from 14d. to 16d.’
- 93 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘S’.
- 94 *Freeman’s Journal*, 10 March 1770.
- 95 R. Skinner, ‘Flocks, flowers and follies: some recently discovered Irish wallpapers of the eighteenth century’, *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, 6 (2003), p. 13.
- 96 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘C’.
- 97 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘B’. John Lynch is not listed in the *Dublin Directory*.
- 98 NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘O’. Two undated chimneypiece designs attributed to the architect Francis Johnston, and now held in the National Library of Ireland, indicate similar colour schemes. The first design (AD 1850) has pale grey-green walls, white chair rail, light blue dado, and white skirting with a pink fascia; the second design (AD 1851) has dark blue-green walls, white chair rail, light blue dado, and white skirting with a black fascia.
- 99 See Eileen Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam: His Interiors* (New Haven and London, 2001), p. 6.
- 100 Trinity College Dublin (hereafter TCD), Mun P/2/152, item 14.
- 101 *Dublin Evening Post*, 24 January 1799.
- 102 *Hibernian Journal*, 18 January 1792.
- 103 *Dublin Journal*, 24 June 1777.
- 104 *Dublin Evening Post*, 16 July 1778.
- 105 *Hibernian Journal*, 8 November 1780 and *Dublin Evening Post*, 7 July 1787. The latter advertisement was placed by Henry Whitestone alone, then operating from a premises in Dame Street.
- 106 Some ‘plain’ wallpapers were apparently colourless: in November 1801, John Lynch charged for hanging plain papers in the attic rooms and rear drawing room, and painting them pearl, yellow, pink and green (NAI, Bryan Bolger papers, bundle ‘H’). William Smyth is listed in the *Dublin Directory* as ‘Stucco-plasterer & Painter’ from 1784, residing at 23 Denmark Street.
- 107 NAI, 1124/9/3.
- 108 RIA, Holiday MSS., 4.B.31.
- 109 *Hibernian Journal*, 17 February 1786. See also W.G. Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Painters* (Dublin, 1989), II, pp. 61–62.
- 110 See S. Foster, ‘Going shopping in 18th-century Dublin’, *Things*, 4 (1996), pp. 32–62.
- 111 TCD, Mun P/2/152, item 14.