

The architecture of, and architecture in, the Public Record Office of Ireland

Colum O’Riordan

Irish Architectural Archive

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Image 1: Entrance Front, Public Record Office of Ireland. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Initially planned in 1861 as a ‘General Law Record Repository’ and completed the year before the passing of the Public Records (Ireland) Act of 1867, the Public Record Office of Ireland (PROI) building was constructed from 1864 to 1866 to designs by Board of Works architect Enoch Trevor Owen, assisted by Robert John Stirling. This was not the first time that a purpose-built records office had been proposed for Dublin. The Irish Record Commission, established in 1810 to inquire into the state of public records in Ireland, had considered the need for a central

repository in Dublin on the lines of General Register House in Edinburgh.¹ Begun in 1774 to the designs of Robert Adam, this was the first purpose-built archival repository in Britain.² However, the expense of such a project – General Register House had cost £29,000 by the time it was finished in 1789 – precluded the adoption of such a solution and the public records remained dispersed in various locations including Dublin Castle, the Custom House, and the Four Courts. A further half-century would pass before the necessity of a central repository for Government records was recognised and the building that became the PROI was commissioned.

Completed in 1866, and handed over to the Deputy Keeper of the PROI on 19 November 1867, the PROI building consisted of two distinct parts.³ To the front was the office and reading room block, with caretaker's apartment. This was known as the Record House. Behind it lay the repository or Record Treasury, separated from the front building by a 10 foot wide fire-proof interface intended to prevent any accidental fire in the Record House spreading to the Treasury. Internally five levels of records galleries in ornamental ironwork were disposed around a central atrium. Externally the Treasury read as a two-storey over basement block, with segmental-headed windows in a rusticated ground floor and an impressive arcade of ten massive 30 feet high round-headed windows above. A unique structure in the city, it must have looked to contemporary passers-by like some form of congregational hall.

¹ See Herbert Wood, *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Dublin, 1919, Introduction, p. xiii.

² See <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/about-us/general-register-house.pdf>

³ See Peter Crooks and Ciarán Wallace, *Construction/Destruction: The Public Record Office of Ireland (1867–1922)* (<https://beyond2022.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1.-Construction-Destruction.pdf>).



Image 2: PROI Treasury, June 1922. IAA 10/35X5

The Treasury, and its contents, were destroyed in June 1922 (Image 2). Only the basement and rusticated ground floor were retained when the building was repaired as part of T.J. Byrne's Four Courts rebuilding programme which began in 1925 (Image 3). Although once again housing public records, with three floors of storage fitted into a block which read externally as single storey over basement, the rebuilt Treasury was a truncated, flat-roofed fragment of its former self (Image 4). In 1969 the Land Registry Office (now Property Registration Authority) extension was built over the rump of the repository. Designed by F.T. du Berry and M.F. Crowe of the Office of Public Works, this is a modernist block whose horizontal bands of glazing and granite cladding were designed to contrast 'vigorously' with 'the classical rhythms of the well-mellowed surroundings'.⁴ The architects noted at the time that the remains of the Treasury were 'designed to take the weight of the extra storeys', proof that 1920s reconstruction had allowed for the possibility of a future upward expansion as archival needs grew.⁵ The archival need was there but never acknowledged, and the insertion of the Land Registry extension into the space once

⁴ 'The Land Registry', *Oibre*, No. 7, May 1969, p. 8.

⁵ *ibid.*

occupied by the Treasury's iron galleries can be read as an eloquent summation of the value attached to archives by the mid-20th-Century Irish State.



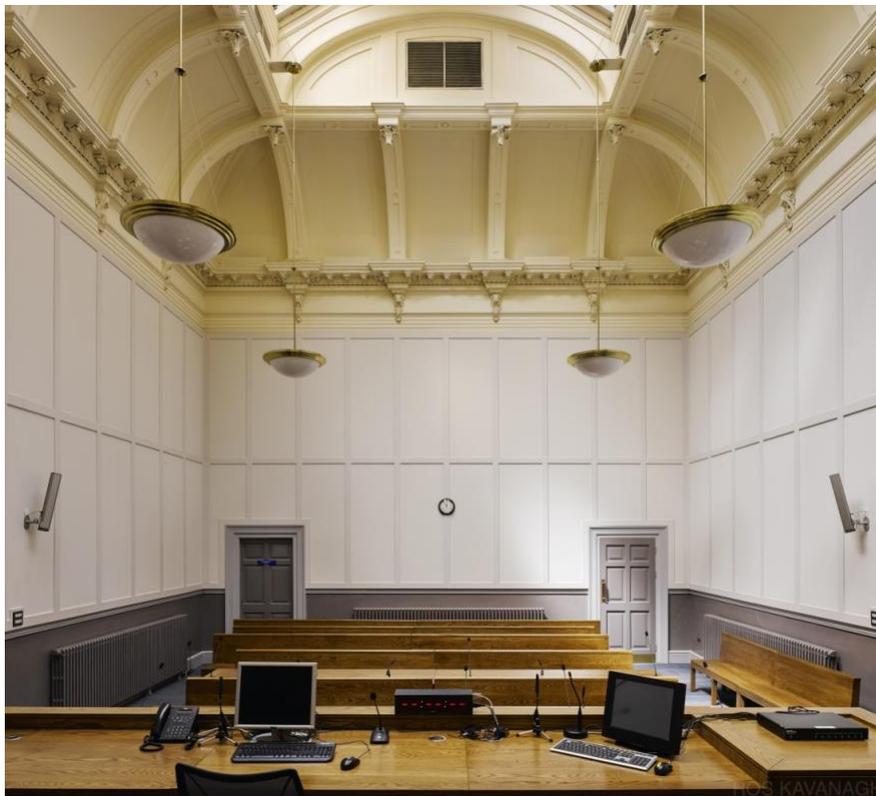
3. PROI Treasury during reconstruction, c. 1926. IAA 2012/51.2/74



4. Aerial view of reconstructed PROI, c. 1950. J.V. Downes Collection, Irish Architectural Archive 97/75.106

The other element of the PRO, the Record House, survived 1922, damaged but basically intact thanks in no small part to the fire-proofing which worked in reverse,

preventing the conflagration in the repository spreading to the front block. The Record House is a three-storey over basement seven-bay by four-bay building in ashlar granite. The central bay to the front is pedimented and advanced with a single-storey tetrastyle Doric porch surmounted by a pedimented tripartite window (Image 1). There are recessed square-headed windows in the rusticated ground floor which is separated from the first floor by a cornice. All the first floor windows have pediments while the second floor windows sit on a sill-level platband. This well-mannered classical façade deserved, and deserves still, to be better known, but its location has always prevented a general appreciation of the Record House’s civic architectural virtues. Initially hidden from view behind a row of quay-front houses which in the 1860s held numerous solicitors’ offices and later, cumulatively, came to accommodate the Four Courts Hotel, it is now obscured by Áras Uí Dhálaigh, the 1987 courts building commissioned by the OPW from Henry J. Lyons Architects.⁶



5. PROI Search Room reconfigured as the Court of Appeal, 2014.

Photo: Ros Kavanagh

⁶ Paul Burns, Ciaran O’Connor and Colum O’Riordan eds, *Ireland’s Court Houses*, Dublin, 2019, p. 276.

Internally, a fine Portland stone staircase provided access to upper floors while the main internal space of the Record House was located on the ground floor (Image 5). This was the General Search Room or public reading room, a double height, top-lit volume with an ornate coved ceiling. The first report of the Deputy Keeper noted that 'surrounding the central apartment there are eight rooms of minor dimensions on each of the principal stories, making twenty-five apartments in all, for the transaction of the business of the Office'.⁷ In court use from 1995, the General Search Room was refitted by the OPW in 2014-15 as a courtroom for the Court of Appeal, with judge's chambers, meeting rooms and ancillary facilities provided in the rest of the former Record House.⁸

When it comes to locating original archival material relating to the PROI building, you might expect that the Irish Architectural Archive (IAA) would be a good place to look. After all, the IAA was established in 1976 to collect and preserve material of every kind relating to the architecture of the entire island of Ireland, and make it available to the public. As a cumulative body of material, the holdings of the IAA represent the greatest single source of information on Ireland's buildings and those who designed them. The IAA does indeed hold some material relating to the PROI, including photographs of the building immediately after its destruction in 1922, and during and after its rebuilding (Images 2, 3 and 4). However, the records detailing the planning and construction of the PROI are not to be found in the IAA. This is because the PROI was a Government project, or more specifically a project of the Government's architecture branch, the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland, better known as the Board of Works. The IAA acquires the archives of private architects and architectural practices. These may contain records relating to public or publicly-funded buildings, if the architects in question received Government commissions, but the IAA does not generally acquire public architectural records.⁹

The PROI drawings and related material are to be found in the archives of the Board of Works, or Office of Public Works (OPW) as the organisation has been increasingly more commonly known since 1922. The Board of Works was established

⁷ *First report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in Ireland*, Dublin, 1869, p. 6.

⁸ *ibid* p. 277.

⁹ See the IAA Acquisitions Policy <http://www.iarc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/IAA-Accessions-Policy-2016.pdf>.

in 1831, and by rights at least some of its archives should have been transferred to the care of the PROI prior to 1922.¹⁰ There was some Board of Works related material in the PROI, for example 'Exchequer Bills, Public Works, 1836-1844', listed in Herbert Wood's *1919 A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland under Court of Exchequer (Revenue Side): Paymaster of the Civil Services and Paymaster General*, and the 'Public Works Relief Accounts and Papers, 1846-1848' listed under the *Clerks of the Crown and Peace* records.¹¹ However, for the most part the Board of Works had fortunately retained its own records, in particular its architectural drawings. Regardless of age, drawings for buildings in use were, and indeed often still are, considered to be active records required for ongoing maintenance and repair. The Board's archives therefore survived the destruction of the PROI in 1922. Some are still retained by the organisation in its headquarters in Trim, while the rest have been transferred to the care of the National Archives of Ireland.¹²

Given the substantial survival of the Board of Works archives, it is legitimate to ask if the loss of the contents of the PROI in 1922 was particularly significant from an architectural point of view. After all, the main body of Government architectural records post-1831 escaped destruction, and there is no listing for architect or architecture in the index to Wood's *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*. But even a cursory examination of the contents of the *Guide* shows that much of architectural relevance was lost. Scattered through a large number of the records series delineated by Wood are references to architecture in its broadest sense, including Government architecture agencies, engineering, building procurement, construction, and building maintenance. In the very first series of documents detailed by Wood, the *Chancery Enrolments*, there were judgements of the Wide Streets Commissioners about premises in Dublin, 1815-1824, and records of awards of public monies for construction of piers, harbours, canals, and quay walls, 1847-1891. These included maps and specifications of works. *The Court of King's Bench (Crown Side)* series contained more Wide Streets Commissioners'

¹⁰ A.R.G. Griffiths, *The Irish Board of Works, 1831-1878*, London, 1987.

¹¹ Herbert Wood, *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Dublin, 1919, p. 147 and p. 188.

¹² Rena Lohan, *Guide to the Archives of the Office of Public Works*, Dublin, 1994.

material, this time 'Certificates, Inquisitions etc 1809-1848', while the *Court of Exchequer (Revenue Side): Chief Remembrancer's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's Offices* papers included a series relating to building sites for barracks.¹³

Architecture was more prominent in the *Court of Exchequer (Revenue Side): Vice Treasurer's and Auditor General's Offices* papers. Here there were 'Inland Navigation Books' including Belfast Harbour records, 1798-1828, and 'Killahy's Survey' of inland navigation between the Grand Canal and the River Suir, 1810.¹⁴ The 'Military' series included 'Barracks Accounts and Regulations 1789-1814', and the 'Ordnance: Accounts 1567-1721' which detailed 'sums expended by clerks general or overseers of works in respect of castles, forts, courts of justice, Dublin Castle, etc'.¹⁵ More details on these Ordnance Accounts were provided in an appendix to *The thirty-third Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records Office of Ireland*, 1901. They included the account of Sir Peter Lewys for building a bridge at Athlone, 1567; the account of Sir Francis Willoughby for completing Galway Fort, 1636-38; the account of Major Henry Owen for building Maryborough Fort and Castle, 1651-52; the account of timber used for various buildings, including Dublin Castle and the old Four Courts, 1697-1700; and the account of Alexander Denton for building the 'Arsenal' in the Phoenix Park, 1711.¹⁶ Also to be found in the *Vice Treasurer's and Auditor General's Office* papers was a considerable series entitled 'Surveys, Maps and Inquisitions' which contained records relating to various land surveys from the sixteenth century onwards, and a category of material entitled 'Public Works, etc., Maps and Plans of, 1683-1811', a collection of maps of 'canals, inland navigation, public works and lands'.¹⁷

The second last series listed under the *Vice Treasurer's and Auditor General's Office* papers was 'Works, Board of: Workmen's Accounts 1802-28'.¹⁸ This is not the Board of Works mentioned above, the organisation established in 1831 whose

¹³ Herbert Wood, *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Dublin, 1919, p. 12, 16, 65 and 116.

¹⁴ *ibid* p. 133

¹⁵ *ibid* pp. 135-136.

¹⁶ *The thirty-third report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in Ireland*, Dublin, 1901, p. 56.

¹⁷ Herbert Wood, *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Dublin, 1919, p. 143 and 145.

¹⁸ *ibid*. p. 146.

records survived 1922. Instead the Board of Works from which the 1802-28 workmen's accounts derive was an organisation better known as the Barrack Board or more correctly as the Commissioners and Overseers of Barracks. Established in 1759 to replace an earlier Barrack Board of 1700/01, also known as the Trustees of Barracks, the 1759 Barrack Board had wide ranging responsibilities for the commissioning, erection and maintenance of military buildings including forts and barracks, royal and vice-regal residences, and public buildings such as Dublin Castle, the Parliament House, and the Four Courts.¹⁹ It was a direct precursor of the 1831 Board of Works, a name by which it was also occasionally known. Aside from the workmen's accounts, the Barrack Board records, and those of its 1700/01 predecessor, were held by the PROI in the *Military Department* records of the *Chief Secretary's Office*. The material included letters and papers, 1802-31, estimates and accounts, 1781-1821, correspondence 1703-93, letter-books, 1782-1831, and papers relating to individual barracks. These covered the period 1698-1830, though Wood noted that they were 'mainly nineteenth century' and that 'several contained maps and plans'.²⁰

The Barrack Board holdings were not the only architecturally relevant records listed in the *Chief Secretary's Office* papers. Under the *Civil Department* the 'Departmental Letters and Official Papers, 1760-1831' included material relating to 'Barracks and Public Works', 'Dublin Castle', 'Dublin Paving Board', 'Dublin Quay Walls', the Wide Streets Commission, 'Forfeited Estates', 'House of Industry', 'Inland Navigation', 'Lighthouses', 'Phoenix Park', 'Prisons', and 'Surveys'. There was also a 1758 inventory of the furniture in Dublin Castle.²¹

A further rich seam of architectural material was to be found in the *Clerks of the Crown and Peace* records. This included the papers of the otherwise entirely unknown and forgotten 'County Buildings Commission', 1791-1870'.²² As detailed in the appendix to *The thirty-second Report of the Deputy Keeper*, 1900, these consisted of the minute books of the Commissioners 'appointed for the erection of

¹⁹ For the origins and responsibilities of the Barrack Board see Edward McParland, 'The office of the surveyor general in Ireland in the eighteenth century', *Architectural History* No. 38, 1995, pp. 91-101.

²⁰ Herbert Wood, *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Dublin, 1919, pp. 215-216.

²¹ *ibid* p. 209 and 211.

²² *ibid* p. 182.

county gaols, court houses, and bridewells, together with the papers connected with the purchase of sites and the erection of the buildings, such as leases, conveyances, architects' reports, tenders, vouchers for expenses of Commissioners, minute books, solicitors' costs, maps, and specifications'. The building-specific material related to four counties (Armagh, 1791-1849; Carlow, 1828; Monaghan, 1856-57; and Wexford, 1839-49).²³ Other Clerks of the Crown and Peace records included 'Gaol Contractors' Bonds and Contracts, 1815-1878' and 'Lunatic Asylum Reports, etc., 1839-1887' with associated plans of lunatic asylums filed under 'Maps'.²⁴ And then there were the Grand Jury records. Grand Juries had extensive architectural responsibilities from building and maintain roads to commissioning county court houses. The Grand Jury 'Presentment Papers' included 'Presentment Maps and Road Sections, 1795-1883' with 'maps and sections for bridges etc. sent up to the Grand Jury with the application of the contractor'. In the 'Presentment Papers and Rolls, 1636-1895' were papers relating to the fiscal administration of each county, recording expenditure not only on making and repairing of roads and bridges, but also on the maintenance of county buildings.²⁵

The Court of Exchequer (Revenue Side): First Fruits Office papers included a listing for 'Building Churches, etc., 1801-1812', records relating to Parliamentary payments for building churches and glebe houses.²⁶ The *Incumbered and Landed Estates and Land Judges' Courts* records series included building leases, maps (although just 'a very small collection'), rentals, and sales lists, c. 1850-c. 1890, all potentially containing material of architectural interest.²⁷ The *Parliamentary Records*, the records of the Houses of Parliament abolished by the Act of Union, included financial accounts from 1708 to 1800, which referenced expenditure on public works, papers relating to harbours, quays, piers and inland navigation, and returns relating to public buildings, 1676-1785, to churches and glebe houses, 1731-1779, and to gaols and prisons, 1784-1799.²⁸ The 'Concordatum Fund Accounts, 1701-1790' in

²³ *The thirty-second report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in Ireland*, Dublin, 1900, p. 45.

²⁴ Herbert Wood, *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Dublin, 1919, p. 184 and 185.

²⁵ *ibid* p. 187.

²⁶ *ibid* p. 158.

²⁷ *ibid* pp. 172-179.

²⁸ *ibid* pp. 190-193.

the *Privy Council Office* records, detailed expenditure under this special fund at the disposal of the Lord Lieutenant and Council for payment of 'extraordinary expenditure' which included 'repairing and upholding sufficiently Our houses, maintaining our Forts', repairs of fortifications and provisions of hospitals.²⁹ The Diocesan Registries, listed in the *Ecclesiastical and Testamentary Collections*, each contained an entry for 'Building Charge Application Papers' and for 'Building Papers' generally covering the period 1700-1870. As detailed under the entry for the Diocese of Clogher, these 'Building Papers' included 'memorials and petitions for building and repairs, commissions of dilapidation and reports thereon, commissions to value improvements, licences, specifications, estimates, accounts, maps, plans, etc.'³⁰ Under *Extinct Commissions*, material of an architectural interest was to be found in the papers of the Lord Lieutenant's School Building Fund Commission, 1819; the Commission for Valuation of Dublin, 1826; and in particular the Irish Railway Commission, 1867-1868, whose papers included 'maps, plans and sections'.³¹ The Carpenters' Guild papers are listed under *Miscellaneous Documents*.³²

Clearly the architectural contents of the PROI were extensive and complex. Ranging from administrative and financial records to actual architectural drawings, they would have provided multiple perspectives on the evolution of the construction industry in Ireland, and the emergence of the discipline of architecture, as well as key information on a myriad of builders and architects, and on an array of buildings. The final record series worth noting could have been the most architecturally interesting of all. These are the papers of the Office of Surveyor General, listed in the *Court of Exchequer (Revenue Side)* records.³³ From at least 1670, when the architect William Robinson assumed the role, until its abolition in 1762, the Surveyor General was the chief state architect in Ireland with principal responsibility for military and civil public buildings. Unfortunately, however, the entry in the *Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland* hints at very little of this. Instead Wood delineates survey records, including considerable original documentation relating to

²⁹ *ibid* p. 198.

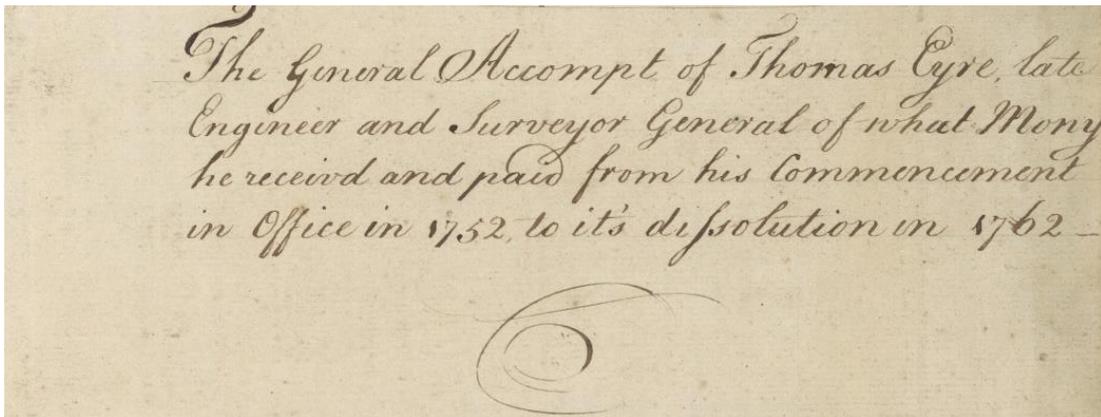
³⁰ *ibid* pp. 225 ff.

³¹ *ibid* p. 271, 273 and 278.

³² *ibid* p. 281.

³³ *ibid* pp. 149-152. For a history of the office see Edward McParland, 'The office of the surveyor general in Ireland in the eighteenth century', *Architectural History* No. 38, 1995, pp. 91-101.

the Down Survey, 1656-1658. He even includes the tale of how a set of original baronial maps made by Sir William Petty in the 1650s was captured by the French while being transported from Dublin to London in 1707, the French refusing all subsequent requests for their return and only allowing copies to be made in 1908.³⁴ Nothing specifically architectural is mentioned. However, there is an intriguing listing for 'Miscellaneous, c. 1714-1765', a period during which the position of Surveyor General was held by Thomas Burgh (1700-30), Edward Lovett Pearce (1730/1-33), Arthur Dobbs (1734-44), Arthur Jones Nevill (1744-52) and Thomas Eyre (1752-62). Perhaps it is here that the details of the architectural activities of the Surveyors General were to be found?



6. Thomas Eyre Account Book, title page. IAA 86/149.1/1

Thomas Eyre was the last holder of the office of Surveyor General, and in the collections of the Irish Architectural Archive are to be found two bound volumes in green leather covers, one containing a set of Eyre's accounts from the time he assumed the office until its abolition (Image 6), and the other copies of outgoing correspondence from Eyre in his capacity as Surveyor General.³⁵ The accounts and letter-book can now be digitised and added to the virtual PROI as part of the Beyond 2022 project, thus restoring a little of the lost architectural content of that vast repository.

³⁴ They are still in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. See <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc100234g>

³⁵ IAA 86/149.1-2. The blank pages and spaces in each volume were subsequently used as a letter and account book in the 1830s and 1840s by a certain E.F. Powell.