

14 Henrietta Street: Georgian Beginnings, 1750-1800

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Reviewed Draft Manuscript, extract.

14 Henrietta Street: Beginnings

14 Henrietta Street was built in the late 1740s, during a boom in Dublin's building industry that followed a decade of war and economic hardship at home and abroad. It formed part of a row of three houses which Luke Gardiner built concurrently, on the south side of the street. Then in his seventies, these were Gardiner's last works at Henrietta Street, and as he had purchased the ground almost three decades earlier he had been waiting quite some time to make a return on his investment. Despite its slow development, by the 1750s Henrietta Street had firmly established its position as Dublin's premier address, and Gardiner's newest tenants included a baron, a viscount and an earl.

Building 14 Henrietta Street

14 Henrietta Street was speculatively built, which meant that as the money man Luke Gardiner had to shoulder all of the financial burden and risk involved until he could secure suitable tenants. Although neither the original lease for 14 Henrietta Street nor financial records of its building have been discovered we know this outlay would have been considerable. In 1748 Sir Robert King purchased the large new 'dwelling house', which Gardiner was then 'building or finishing' next door at number 15 Henrietta Street.¹ By Gardiner's calculations more than £853 had already been spent in constructing this house, and though he is bound to have marked up this figure, and even gave King mortgage finance to sweeten the deal, the cost of building at this scale was great, so much so that

many building operators went bankrupt during the course of such developments. The speed at which he was able to secure tenants – even before some of the houses were built – and the rents received show that Gardiner would ultimately have made a tidy profit on this group of houses and so the risk, it seems, was worth it.

Like so many other speculative ventures it is not known who the building tradesmen involved were; their identities have gone unrecorded or relegated to the margins of history. The fact, however, that this row of houses was contemporary with other domestic developments on Luke Gardiner's St Mary's estate at Great Britain Street, Marlborough Street and Sackville Mall offers a list of the possible contenders. These new residential streets were laid out in the late 1740s, and many of the houses were built by local building fraternities such as the Darleys and Ensors, and a tight-knit group of craftsmen – Robert Ball, Alexander Thomson and John Chambers, to name a few – who had previously worked with Gardiner on other projects.² These tradesmen regularly joined forces in such speculative building projects, working on a *quid pro quo* basis, swapping labour for materials and exchanging the work of one trade for another.

Design and Planning

Construction began on number 14 Henrietta Street about 1747, when parish records show the site under development, and took three years to complete.³ The site itself was large, at 49 feet wide and 130 feet long, allowing for formal gardens to the rear of the house, and a stable yard and coach houses on an additional piece of ground on the other side of the stable lane. The house was of a similar scale to the rest of the street, measuring almost 50 feet wide and four storeys high over basement. Though extremely large, such size was not unusual for a Dublin house of that period. In fact, in terms of scale, many of Dublin's Georgian terraces surpassed contemporary examples in London's West End.

Large scale aside, the exterior of 14 is extremely plain, certainly compared to the bespoke designed houses at the top of the street. As with much of Dublin's mid-eighteenth-century terraced housing, the large unadorned brick expanses of its front are almost entirely devoid of ornament. Only the light rubbed brick arches over windows, and the earthy-red hue of the coursed brickwork enlivens the otherwise austere façade. Cut stone is sparingly used, only for the Portland limestone window sills, parapet roofline, and the finely carved pedimented door-case. There is a degree of standardisation, too, to the plain wrought-iron railings that surround the basement areas at both 13 and 14 Henrietta Street.

Although economically treated, even by Georgian standards, there is still an elegance to the exterior, with its controlled classical proportions and geometry. Neat sash windows are evenly distributed across the box-like façade, each pane once filled with hand-spun crown glass. The window sizes differ on each storey, marking out the varying proportions of the levels within. The largest windows and therefore highest ceiling heights are on the first-floor level, or *piano nobile*, where the principal reception rooms are located, and get progressively smaller above and below.

If the exterior of 14 Henrietta Street was somewhat minimalist, the interior was magnificent in scale and decorative splendour. Like the other houses at Henrietta Street it followed established conventions in the layout and function of space. The ground-floor and first-floor rooms were given over to public use, and therefore received the greatest attention in both decoration and furnishings. The ground floor contained two large parlours at the front and rear, with the adjoining space subdivided into a smaller room and closet, and the back stair compartment. A projecting wing extended along the side of the formal gardens to the rear, with almost a quarter of the plan taken up by the double height entrance-cum-stair-hall in the front. By the 1750s this arrangement was a somewhat old-fashioned and impractical use of space, but still striking in its effect. The recently reconstructed decorative scheme reflects the original mid-century arrangement, with raised plaster panels to the

walls, an enriched wave-like Vitruvian scroll dividing the upper hall from that below, and bulging oak-leaf frieze in the heavy classical entablature block above.

The first floor of 14 Henrietta Street contains an impressive circuit of interconnected reception rooms leading off the upper landing. The large, brightly lit drawing room to the front was re-decorated in the 1780s, with a lighter low-relief plaster frieze of musical instruments. This leads into what was once another drawing or dining room overlooking the garden at the rear, with a smaller adjoining antechamber completing the circuit. This movement from large public spaces into smaller, more private rooms ultimately derived from French palace planning, and demonstrates the corresponding hierarchy of scale and social function. As is seen on the exterior, the relative scale and proportions of the different levels of the house were also determined by these conventions, the first floor being the tallest, becoming progressively smaller in scale as one ascended or descended. The upper floors at 14 Henrietta Street were divided into a larger number of smaller-scale rooms, denoting the more private and in some cases utilitarian functions they served. The squattest rooms were in the basement and garrets, and were generally given over for services and servants' use.

Extract Endnotes:

¹ Registry of Deeds 136/297/91449, 14 April 1748, articles of agreement between Luke Gardiner and Robert King.

² Melanie Hayes, 'Anglo-Irish Architectural Exchange in the Early Eighteenth Century: Patrons, Practitioners and *Pieds-à-terre*' (PhD thesis, TCD, 2015), 171–172, 175–178.

³ RCBL P276.10.8–9 'St Michan's Dublin 1711–1962', Cess Applotment Books, returns 1747–1750.