The Origins of Irish Copperplate Printed Fabric

Pictorial content and derivation of such fabric design,
with particular reference to its exponents.

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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with particular reference to its exponents.

A thesis submitted to:

The faculty of History of Art and Design and C.S.

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Faculty of Design,
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by

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Contents.

The 'secret' of printing certain bright colours fast to the wash from copperplates, onto vegetable fibres (linen and cotton) was discovered by a certain Francis Nixon in 1752.[1] Francis Nixon was born in Drumcondra, Dublin and later moved to more profitable pastures in England, naturally taking his discovery with him. In the general annals of fabric printing history, Nixon is referred to as a "British" printer.

This thesis hopes to chart the origins of Irish copperplate printed fabric with specific reference to its exponents. There are only a small amount of fabric examples in existence and while they have been documented, they have not been properly stylistically assessed.

The succeeding chapters will show how, through the favourable financial climate of the 18th. century and the influence of the imported Indian fabrics, an Irish industry came into profitable being.

While this thesis is principally concerned with the Dublin manufacturies, it is worth noting that there were other successful works in Belfast, Cork, Stratford on Slaney and in Mosney, Co. Meath.

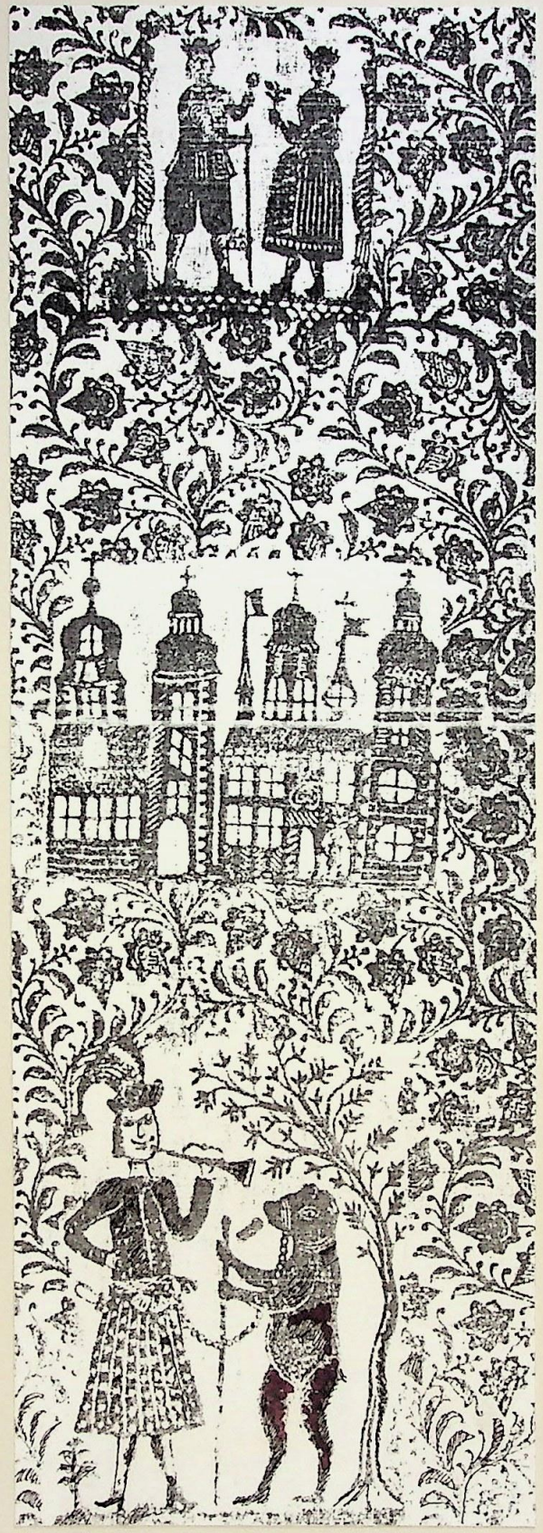
William Kilburn, botanical engraver and fabric designer merits a chapter both because of his origins in the Irish linen and cotton stamping industry and his pre-eminence as a fabric designer.

Chapter 1

Until the discovery of machine spinning and weaving in the second half of the eighteenth century of Britain, the Indian subcontinent was probably the world's greatest producer of cotton textiles. Anglo-Indian commerce in textiles began with the founding of the East India Company in the sixteen hundreds and thus from this date onwards Europe was dominated by the demand for Indian products.

Initially, when European merchants began trading in India, their main interest in Indian cotton goods was as articles of barter for the spice trade, European cargo ships carried bullion to be exchanged for Indian cotton piece goods. Printed fabrics in Europe during the Middle Ages and up until the sixteen hundreds had been rather primitive. The methods used were closely related to book printing via the woodcut. The job was done by individually-cut blocks, the design cut in relief, the raised part then being covered with a type of paint, usually a pigment plus a binding agent. This adhered to the fabric and was then dried. This "dye" was badly absorbed and as black and brown were the easiest colours to use, the materials produced were quite dull (fig. 1). The black or brown was often supplemented by water colour which soon vanished.

Therefore, it is patently obvious that the initial appeal to the European buyer was the brilliance and fastness of the Indian dye colours.



(fig.1)

A Bavarian Woodblocked Print circa 1750

Section of an Indian painted cotton circa 1700's. (fig.2)

(fig.3)

This Indian painted cotton design is composed of serpentine flowering trees. growing from a chinoiserie-type rockery, peopled with English sheperds, and Indian flora and fauna. t This design is typical of those made for the English market.

The fabrics were quite spectacularly beautiful (fig.2,3). These vivid colours were produced in combination with mordants which made them fast to the wash. Mordants were not in general use in Europe where cloth dyes were fugitive and the use of them was indicative of the highly specialized technical skills that the Indian manufacturers possessed.

Indian coloured fabrics were a source of wonder and amazement to the European market and their hold on the continent's textile trade was immediately tenacious, this continued to be so through periods of Government suspensions and protective legislation. It lasted from about the 1660's until the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

In Europe, the use of cotton and silk goods in house furnishing and fashionwear presaged a more civilized and higher standard of living. Printed cottons were, in contrast to the brocaded and embroidered silks of fashion fabrics at the time, cheap, gloriously bright and washable. It provided comfortable and easy to clean inner clothing, for the upper classes it served to distinguish between winter and summer wear and also gave an opportunity for fashion display in womens' clothing which was difficult to achieve with wools.

The exoticism of the fabrics initially found great favour in France, where they were immediately successful. Skilled artisans tried to produce many similar patterns catering for the European Indian craze and these efforts, though favourable, were not as

(fig.4)

Ladies Jacket, French printed 1790

(fig.5)

Childs Jacket , Indian cotton , 1780

(fig.6)

Painting by Joshua Reynolds 1764,depicts Society Lady in fashionable printed muslin gown.

Competent as their Indian peers. Nevertheless, there was an eager market which the native manufacturers of silk and velvets noted with dismay. They stated that their own market was being ruined, and besieged the government for protective legislation. French Parliament, in 1686 forbade the import of Indian painted cottons and chintzes and the local centres "for painting of linen and cotton stuffs" were shut down, skilled artisans, carrying their secrets emigrated and assisted in the foundation of rival manufacturing centres in England, Holland, Switzerland and Germany.
2

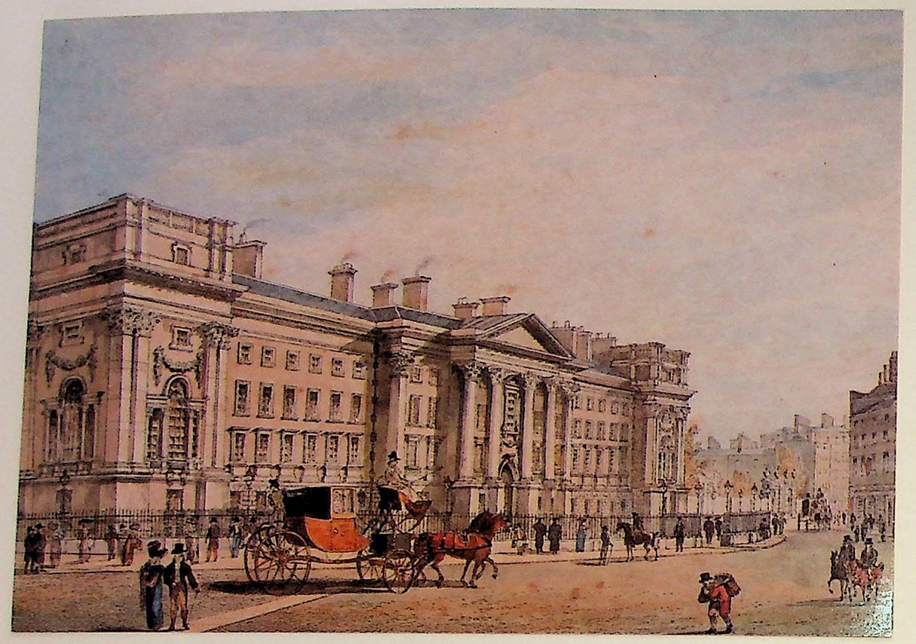
The popularity of the goods was paralleled in England,where in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Indian chintz became highly fashionable for mens gowns and waistcoats as well as for womens' dresses (figs.4,5,6,). The effect that prohibition had was to make them even more desirable. The subject matter of the painted cottons and chintzes that were initially exported was traditional to the Indian craftsman. The patterns reflected the needs of an Indian culture which was alien to the West, and therefore not likely to create a wild demand. The East-India company took it upon themselves to send ideas/designs appropriate to the home market, the intention being for the Indian craftsman to copy or adapt these influences. These European croquis were often derivative of Chinese patterns that were familiar to the home market - a type of home-grown orientalism which, when interpreted by the Indian craftsman became their parody of Chinese inspired western decorative style. A curious melange to which the craftsamn added a dose of Persian decoration and native, purely Indian features which included squirrels, exotic flora and fauna (fig. 3). The resulting hybrid was an immediate triumph and the

inspiration for decades of European fabric printers.[3] It would be entirely true to state that the Indian dominance of the textile trade played a significant factor in the industrial and mechanical development of the English and subsequently Irish industry. The wild success and enthusiasm generated for the imported cloth's displayed to the English entrepreneurs a large demand for the goods. Thus an impetus was generated for the founding of a home industry. Calico printing (by woodblock) as an industrial process was almost completely introduced into England by the 1690's. By 1727 in Ballsbridge, in Dublin, the germ of a linen stamping manufactory was initiated by one David Chappell.[4]

Chapter 2

"Dublin, the second city in the British Empire, though it yields in extent, yields not in architectural beauty to the metropolis of England. For some years previous to the Union, its progress was excessive - the locality of the Parliament (1) the residence of the nobility and commons - the magnificence of the Vice regal court - the active hospitality of the people (1) and the increasing commerce of the Port - all together gave a brilliant prosperity to that splendid and luxurious capital."

Sir Jonah Barrington · Historic memoirs of Ireland 1835



Trinity College in the 18th century

Dublin in the eighteenth century was a thriving morass of human activity and bustle. The struggle between the new ruling class - the ascendancy and the Gaelic landowners, was for the time being over and Ireland, during this period had the longest stretch of peace she had known for hundreds of years. There was a feeling of optimism and rejuvenation in the air. The glorious architecture - the Custom House, Four Courts, the elegant mansions of Stephen's Green and Merrion Square, that now is synonymous with Dublin city was constructed throughout the eighteen hundreds. Handel - the reputed composer first performed his Messiah in Fishamble Street - truly an honour bestowed on an international city. It was the seat of government, here the Lord Lieutenant lived and here Parliament met, it was also the chief port and commercial capital with the main banks and exchanges. The ruling class was almost entirely Protastent-theirs was a stylish and brilliant society which was in sharp and severe contrast to the wretchedness of the lower social orders. Dublin, behind its glittering facade housed a depth of misery that foreign contemporary travellers found shocking. Between these two extremes, there lay a developing business community, bolstered by the influx of new English money and the general air of buoyancy. It was an enterprising community ever keen to expand itself and they were generally aided in their efforts by the establishing of such bodies as the Linen Board in 1711 and the Dublin Society in 1731. The object of the latter was for "the improvements of agriculture and other useful arts". It was one of the first and most successful undertakings of the kind in Europe. Depending initially on voluntary subscription,

later it received substantial parliamentary grants, which were devoted to the encouragement of manufacturing industries and fisheries, as well as agriculture.

Chapter 3

" The Merchants, citizen and Manufacturers in Dublin are very numerous, and many of them rich and in great credit, perfectly well understanding every branch of their trade: of which their linnen, woolen, silken and Hair manufactured goods are excellent specimens."

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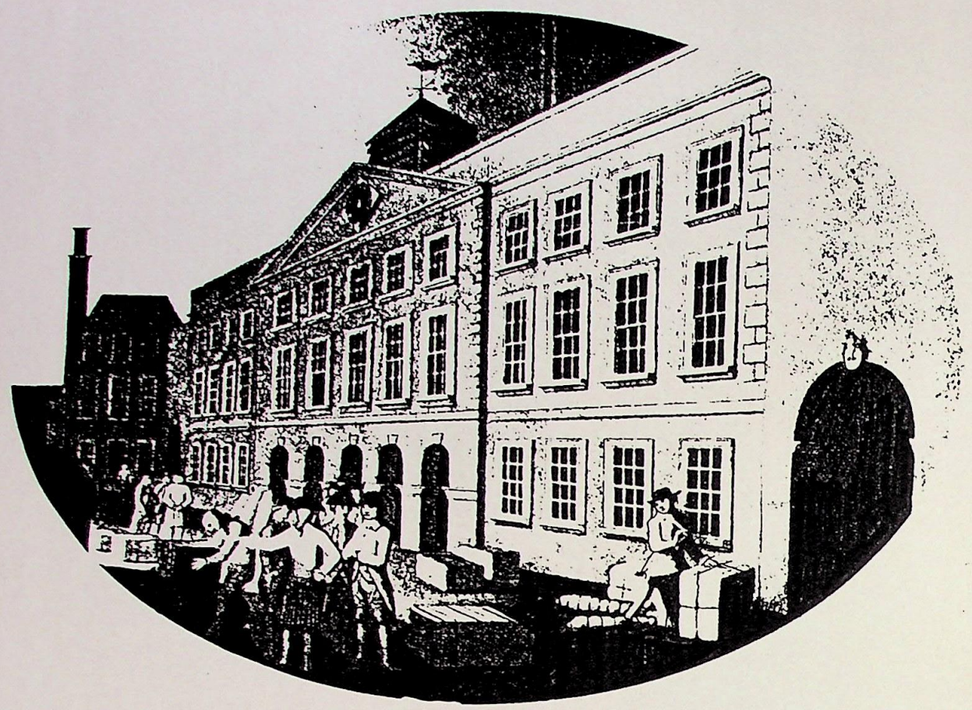
Edward Lloyd. A description of the City of Dublin. London 1732.



THE LINEN HALL, DUBLIN
From an engraving by William Hincks (1791)

Irelands much maligned climate favours only two of the basic textile fibres - wool and linen. Sheep had always been reared and their wool graded and exported to an appreciative market (Fine Irish woollens were much sought after by the ladies of the Florentine Court!). The Irish climate is particularly conducive to the growing of flax and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the linen industry had thriving home and export markets. It had long been made in Ireland to supply the extravagant needs of the native dress - it being a traditional garment fabric. Indeed an English tradesman - Fynes Morgson wrote of Irish Linen:-

> "Ireland yields much flax, which the inhabitants work into yarn, export in great quantity, and of old, they had such plenty of linen cloth as the wild Irish used to wear 30 or 40 ells in a shirt, all gathered and wrinkled and washed in saffron, because they had never put them off until they had worn out."

By the seventeen hundreds due to discontent among the powerful English woollen workers, the British government had suppressed the local woollen industry and forbidden the export of Irish wool. Because Britain had only a relatively small linen industry it escaped the jealous attention of British manufacturers and the English government felt able to support the Irish linen trade, the industry then became extremely profitable and the London parliament did much to encourage its growth, by the setting up of an Irish linen board in 1711.

It was free from the restrictions placed by the English government on other Irish industries and received extensive grants from the Irish Parliament, almost as if compensation were due from their

earlier suppression of the woollen trade.

Because little linen was produced in Great Britain, the industry had a virtual monopoly of the English market. Linen, Ireland's second most valuable export, worth nearly £500,000.00 in the 1760's . Its phenomenal growth is recorded by the fact that linen production expanded at a huge rate from 2½ million yards in 1720 to over 37 million in 1790. By 1780 linen accounted for almost 70% of all exports.[9]

Because of the British Act which suppressed the printing of pure cotton in 1721 and the subsequent Manchester Act of 1736 which legalized the printing of a linen and cotton mixture, it seems only realistic to suggest that the combination of an excellent indigenous linen fabric industry, the lack of the type of cotton and linen printing restrictions as seen in France and England, the rage for printed fabrics à la East India Company, and the buoyant financial market of Dublin in the eighteenth century would provide a sound foundation for a home printed fabric industry. It is of obvious importance to collate the necessary foundation slabs, so as to build a solid platform on which to expound the formation of the linen stamping industry in Ireland. To understand the eventualities of actions taken many miles from the Irish shoreline and their comprehensive effect on fabric printing production in Dublin is of equal importance.

The gel that provided the cohesion of all these factors was a

startling invention in 1752 by one Francis Nixon of Drumcondra. His invention was of a copperplate printing technique that reproduced images successfully on fabric. It is recognised in all but the most general of tomes on the history of printed textiles that the invention was wholly Irish in origin and that for a short period, Dublin was at the helm of linen and cotton (fustian) printing in Europe.

Chapter 4

A Print and Picture shop at the turn of the 17th. century.

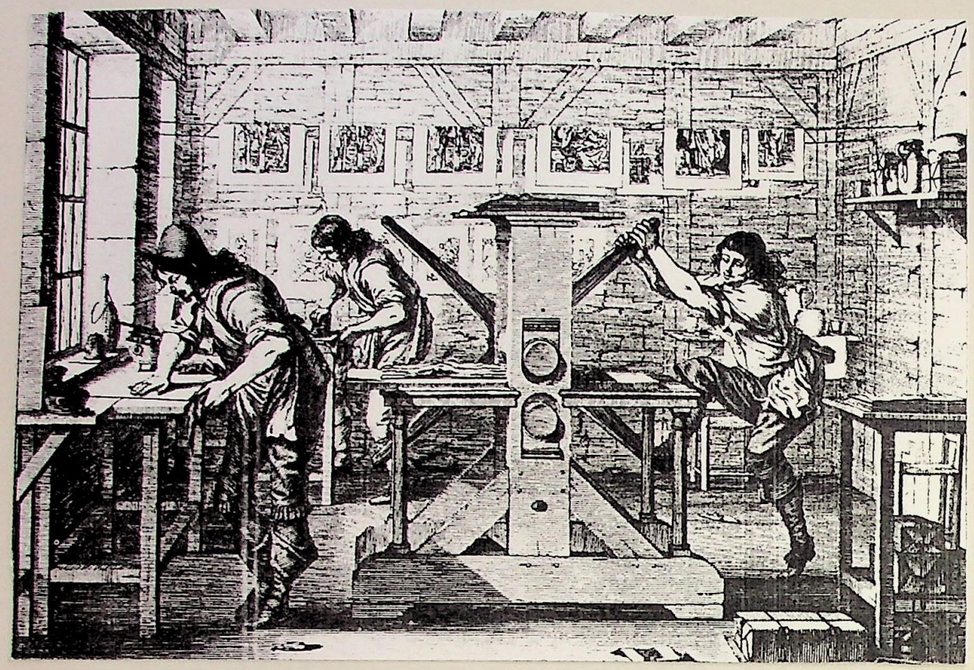
The idea of copperplate printed fabric was startling in its simplicity - the fact that metal engravings and etchings on paper had been practiced in Europe by such luminaries as Durer, Hogarth, Rembrandt et al seemed to pave the route for engraved fabrics.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, the making of prints and expecially the publishing and selling of them became a thriving business. Subjects were hugely varied from portraits, animal and sporting scenes to topographical and architectural subjects. Naturally these were a principal fund of imagery and source material to the designer - craftsman. An engraved line could be so much more precise and well defined than the cruder woodblocked European fabric prints.

While the idea itself seemed plain enough, the practical considerations were not so artless. The two proprietors of the Drumcondra firm boasted in an advertisment in Faulkners Dublin Journal of 1752 that the linens were

> "Done from Metal Plates (A method never before practiced) with all the Advantages of light and shade in the strongest and most lasting colours."

Copperplate printing presses consisted of a flat bed frame with the copperplate placed face up. This method of printing involves a colourant of a different viscosity than woodblock because of depth of lines etched and the extreme pressure put on plates to produce an image on fabric.



Copperplate press for paper.Fabric process almost identical.

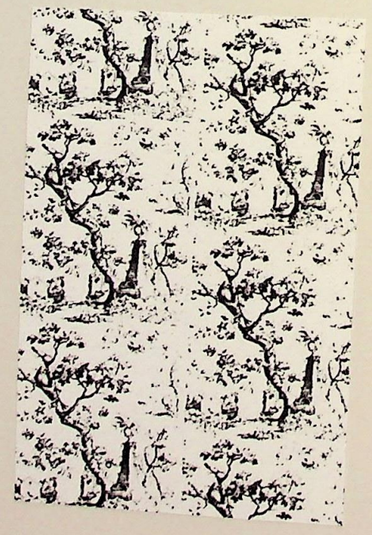
What is unusual with copperplated fabric is that the dye was not placed directly on the plate involved but instead a mordant was used. (A mordant is a metallic salt that reacts chemically when a dye solution is introduced)

The cloth to be printed was laid on the flat bed and pressed so closely to the plate by means of a winch and mangle that the fabric absorbed the liquid mordant resting in the incised lines of the plate. The tremendous advantage of this method was that the height of the repeat in copperplate fabric was roughly one metre square and if two different plates were repeated sequentially, the height would double, giving a much vaster stretch of design.

When the pattern has been mordant printed, it had to be dried for roughly twelve hours, rinsed in running water rolled into large bundles for squeezing the excess water out and only then placed in a dye bath. A colour fast bond is formed when the dye comes in contact with the mordant.

Afterwards, the fabric was unwrapped and stretched on the grass outside to be bleached. This lasted five or six days during which it was watered several times a day to maintain the vivid colour. As Nixon and Thompson stated, the colours were certainly fast to the wash and this was a major factor in the Pair's success with their discerning Dublin clientele. That famous eighteenth century diaryist Mrs. Delaney wrote of visiting the "unique"Drumcondra factory and of seeing" excessively pretty floral fabrics there."

(fig.7)



In this process, only one colour could be printed on a white ground and the depth of colour depended on the strength of mordant use e.g. an iron mordant and madder dye will yield black, an alum mordant and madder will yield red.[10]

Much evidence of Nixons and Thompsons work is to be seen through the advertisments that they placed in Faulkners Dublin Journal. One such advertisment proudly boasts

> "linens, cottons, lawns and cambrics printed from engraved metal plates in the newest and most elegant patterns and in beautiful and lasting colours/fit for womens gowns, mens waistcoats, covers of chairs, screens and hangings, the printings and engravings of which are executed by the ablest artists that can be procured at Paris"

The only physical evidence remaining of Nixons 1752-55 period is a single length (fig. 7) it is a design of superior sophistication for what is presumed to be among the first ever copperplate printed textile with a repeating design.[11] The design of Nixons fabric repeats vertically with no discernible plate breakline, the plate having been cleverly engraved so that elements at the top and bottom overlapped during printing. The design is not centred on the plate but has a flowering tree diagonally separating an architectural column with urn and a small rustic cottage with bovine animal chewing foliage. Parts of the pattern creep in from either side, creating a continuous flow to the fabric. Printed in a single colour, it is extremely well etched with a plethora of artistic influences to be plainly

Furnishing chintz probably designed by John Baptist Jackson. About 1750.

(fig.8)

seen. Considering that theirs was the first factory to copperplate on fustian, they had no fabric printing peers of their ilk as regards inspiration. The architectural motif - tapering scrolled folly with an urn on top, is a recurring one in both wallpapers and later printed fabrics of the time (fig. 8). John Baptist Jackson - the eminent English wallpaper and fabric designer made this style extremely fashionable in Britain. But the motifs were principally borrowed from illustrative etchings of the day. Just discernable is a grouse - like bird looking over its left shoulder, its tail partially concealed by the twisting bark - the grouse is looking across to a chattering parakeet. This is indicative of the painted Indian fabrics already mentioned. Nixon's birds are a type of home-grown exotica. The flowers are plainly of indigenous origin - carnation and exuberant dahlia types. The cottage to the extreme left is quite English in appearance, slate roofed, certainly it is untypical of an Irish construction at that time. The entire plate does not appear to be deeply etched, the draughtsmanship is well executed - its intricacies plainly cross-hatched. The pattern is in red on a bleached ground. This curtain has a certain light quality and is quite rhythmic in its repeat. Nixon's singular example is in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, "Drumcondra," in large letters was once seen printed on a part that has since been cut off.

The Drumcondra factory grew into such immediate international repute that according to the Universal Advertiser of 1757, Nixon and Thompson "were prevailed upon by large sums to take their secret to another kingdom (i.e. England)". They left Ireland for a calico printing works near Phippsbridge in Surrey.

On practical grounds, cottons has long been able to compete with wool and silk. In the 1750's, for the first time, the fustian and calico printers were able to produce a fabric that could compete with silks in the most fashionable markets and was itself a fabric with which neither silk nor wool could compete. The design of these early cotton and linen prints epitomises the best in eighteenth century decorative art with a balanced mixture of decorative and naturalistic elements, tastefully arranged. It is no small wonder that Nixon was enticed to more profitable pastures in England.

Nixon left behind an immediate "family" of calico printers. There was an important works at Templeogue run by John Collins, Francis Sandys and a Francis Donovan. Contemporary sources tell us that copperplate printing of a high standard was done here for a period of roughly three years. In 1761, Collins, possibly under Nixon's influence, also left for England.

Another factory of which we have certain documentary evidence

(fig.9)

Samuel Dixon 1756.

(fig.10) Leixlip,1758-65.

was a large establishment in Leixlip, set up in 1758. A trio consisting of Francis Johnston, Thomas Tyler and one Samuel Dixon. Dixon has the distinction of a mention in Walter Strickland's "Dictionary of Irish Artists." He became noted for his flower and bird pieces in bas relief. The designs were impressed on coarse paper, by copperplates from the back, so that the design stood out in relief - afterward being coloured by hand. These flower and bird pieces were very popular although Strickland primly writes that they were done in a "stiff and formal manner" (fig. 9). Dixon was also the proprietor of a fine Art shop that sold "paintings, drawings, busts and statues." Obviously the financial rewards of copperplate printed linens was deemed to be great, because he sold this enterprise in order to embark on this new trade.

Dixon supposedly made improvements to the Drumcondra technique, discovering a method of fixing the colours, so as not to fade in subsequent bleachings or washings. Much information is to be seen from his lengthy petitions to the Irish House of Commons, praying for financial aid in 1759 and 1763. He said that he had spent "upwards of £7,000 " on buildings and equipment and had produced upwards of "500,000 yards of the said impressed linens." The lengthy process involved in copperplate printing already described in further corroborated by the fact that Dixon "taught and constantly retained between forty and fifty girls" in hand, painting and chintzing his fabric.

There is much praise of his work in contemporary accounts -

> "They have finished a most elegant plate for furniture, such as hanging of rooms, beds and window curtains, which for design, drawing and engraving exceeds anything as yet done in this way."

Mrs. Leask, in the Journal of the Co. Kildare Archaelogical Society (1975-6) suggests that an engraved copperplate could, by stylistic impression, be tenuously linked with Samuel Dixon's 1758-65 (fig.10) period at Leixlip. This copperplate has an interesting provenance, because on the other side of the plate impression, there is a map of the Curragh of Kildare (1807). Seemingly, when the Leixlip factory was eventually abandoned and the contents auctioned in 1786 that "a curious collection of copperplates" were bought by Henry Walker, a surveyor, whose name appears on the Kildare Map.

The design comprises of floral interwoven scrolls arranged in a decorative manner. The airy quality of design and abundance of sinuous curves owes a debt to the popular style.

It is a very charming design and shows itself to be a contemporary fashion fabric in that the designer has used his obvious draughting skills in adapting borrowed material. The exotic parakeets and smaller birds were definitely inspired from "The Natural History of Uncommon Birds" by George Edwards (fig.11). The Ladies Amusement of 1762 seems to have been a source also.

The aeriness of the pattern is also reminiscent of Pillement like wallpapers (fig.12) that were so modish at that date. Dixon was catering to the Irish market of the day, juggling various popular elements - the rococco scrolls and numerous exotic birds. The result is a well-spaced fabric with good separation between light ground and engraved line - more than likely intended as a window or bed hanging.

(fig.11)

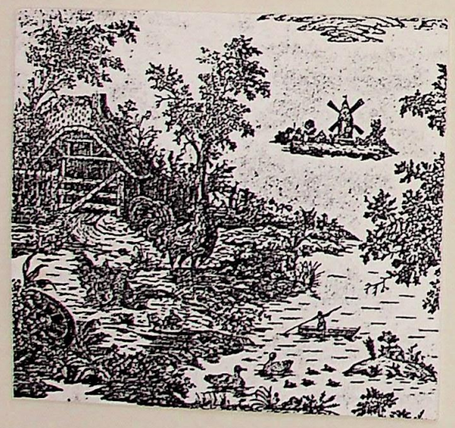
^date

(fig.12)

Wallpaper design in the manner of Pillement

^date

(fig.13) Leixlip 1770-80's.



English copperplate print by Robert Jones of Old Ford, 1761.

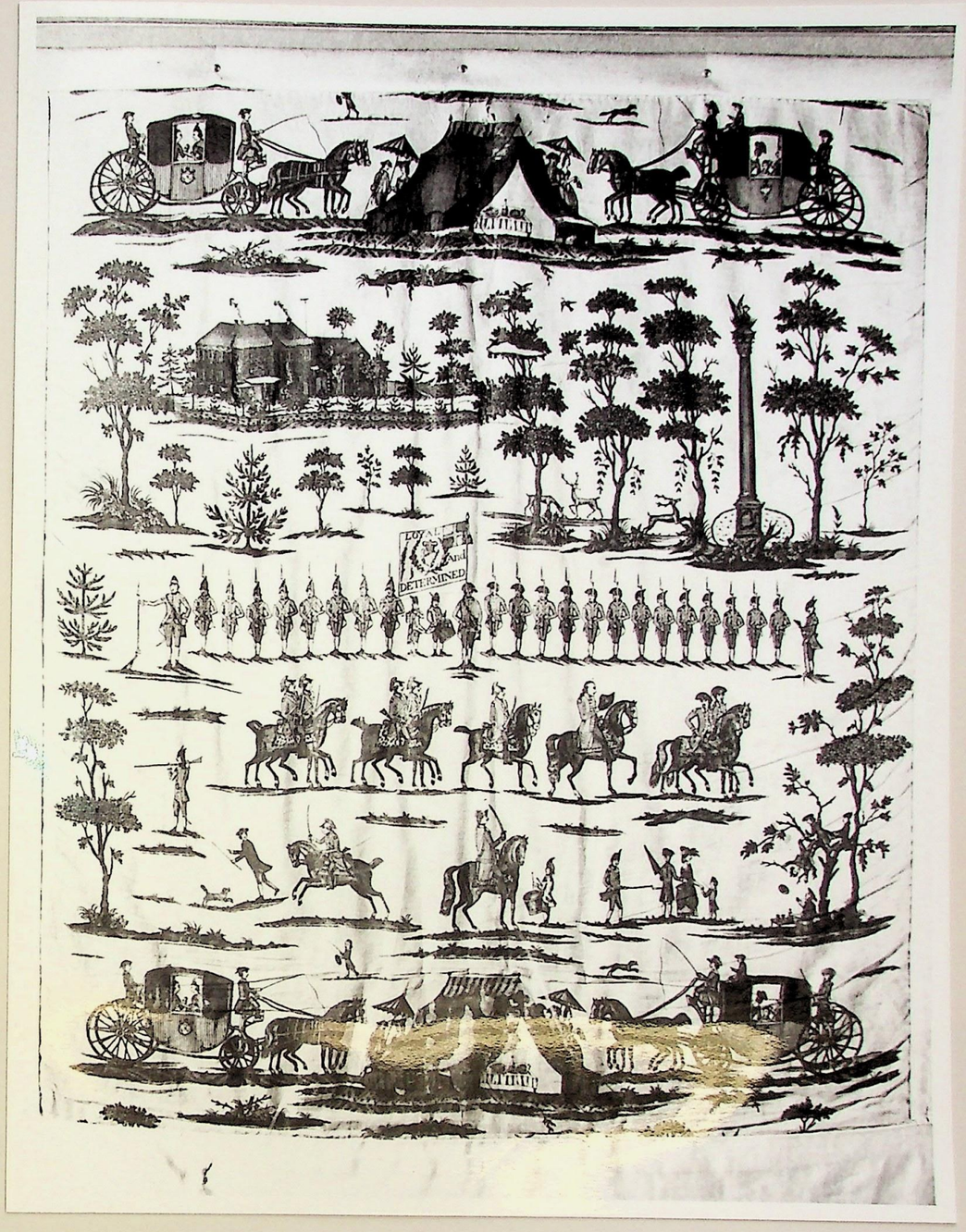
(fig.14)

Financial aid was severely lacking and Dixon abandoned his large manufactory at Leixlip, removed himself to London and resumed his original trade as a picture dealer.

The Leixlip factory, vacant in 1765, was immediately acquired by George Moore - a linen draper. Moore received much Parliamentary Aid and had a prodigious output, none of which remains. He appears to have quitted the premises by 1768 when ownership was carried on by Thomas Harpur and Nathanial Cunningham. Their business was highly lucrative.

There are two fabric patterns extant, one of which has been attributed to the enterprise and the other, which by contemporary documentation, is definitely theirs.

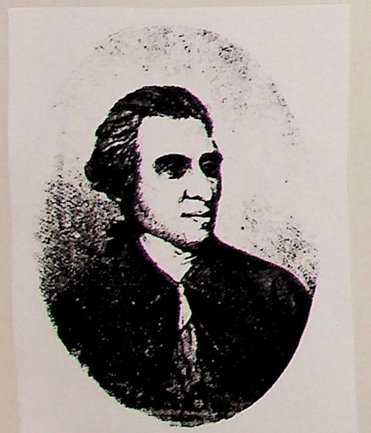
The first pattern (fig.13) has the same provenance as the aforementioned Samuel Dixon plate. It is a pastoral- type engraving - similar to those practiced by Robert Jones of Old Ford (fig. 14). The plate has been cut down from a square metre to roughly 20" x 24". It consists of various rural buildings - barns, windmill, castle, foliage and multitudinous ducks and roosters arranged randomnly. The windmill appears to be floating in mid-air and the levels of the repeat are cut off rather abruptly from each other. This plate would appear to be the work of an experienced pattern drawer rather than an artist/designer (as is the case with Dixon). This would point to an extremely professional operation at Leixlip



(fig.15)

The Volunteer Furniture.

(fig.17) Detail (Note individual expressions.)



GABRIEL BERANGER

(fig.16)

(fig.18)

- maybe a foreign designer or certainly one who was familiar with the styles prevalent abroad. Previous to his stint in Leixlip, Nathianal Cunningham is known to have been a pattern drawer in a Ballsbridge factory although it is not possible to say whether he was responsible. ? (for what?

The second fabric which can definitely be attributed to Harpur and Cunningham's factory is the famous "Volunteer Furniture." This fabric, because of its unusual content, has been preserved in Scotland, America together with a number here in Ireland (fig.15). It is a furnishing fabric and its production was much advertised in the papers of the day. The factory proclaimed that:-

> "Mr. Harpur of Leixlip, cotton printer, has now nearly finished on cotton from copperplate, for Mr. Clarke, prop. of the Irish furniture cotton warehouse in Werburgh Street a Volunteer Furniture in "chintz colours" which is an exact representation of the last Provincial Review in the Phoenix Park." ? ref.

The pattern was almost certainly drawn by the artist Gabriel Beranger (fig.16). ? ref.

Beranger, who was French, settled in Ireland in 1742, and ran a picture shop. He travelled around the country and engraved much of his Tours.

As an "exact representation of the last Provincial Review," it is likely that Beranger would actually have been in the

Phoenix Park and have drawn in situ - allegedly a striking likeness of Lord Charlemont as reviewing General!

The Volunteers was a movement organized by Irish Protestants under the threat of a French/Spanish invasion (much of the army had departed to fight Britain's cause in America). Several corps were founded in each county. Few had more than fifty men and each individual corps accorded their leader full military titles. Presumably, the countryside was resounding with generals and colonels! The volunteers took great pride in their appearance, wearing colourful uniforms - they drilled regularly and had frequent parades and sham battles. Initially, each corps was a separate body, but they then unified, making Lord Charlemont commander in chief.

The Review depicted here was for the Province of Leinster on the 3rd. June 1782. An exact event - a military event - recorded on fabric intended for such a mundane purpose as curtains and wall-hangings. Its more suggestive of a humorous cartoon than a pattern design.

Beranger, Walter Strickland, says drew his landscapes rather lifelessly and it was only his small human figures that were imbued with a sense of life and animation. Certainly true here - each volunteer is an (fig.17) individual - look at the smiling men on horseback. In the bottom right hand

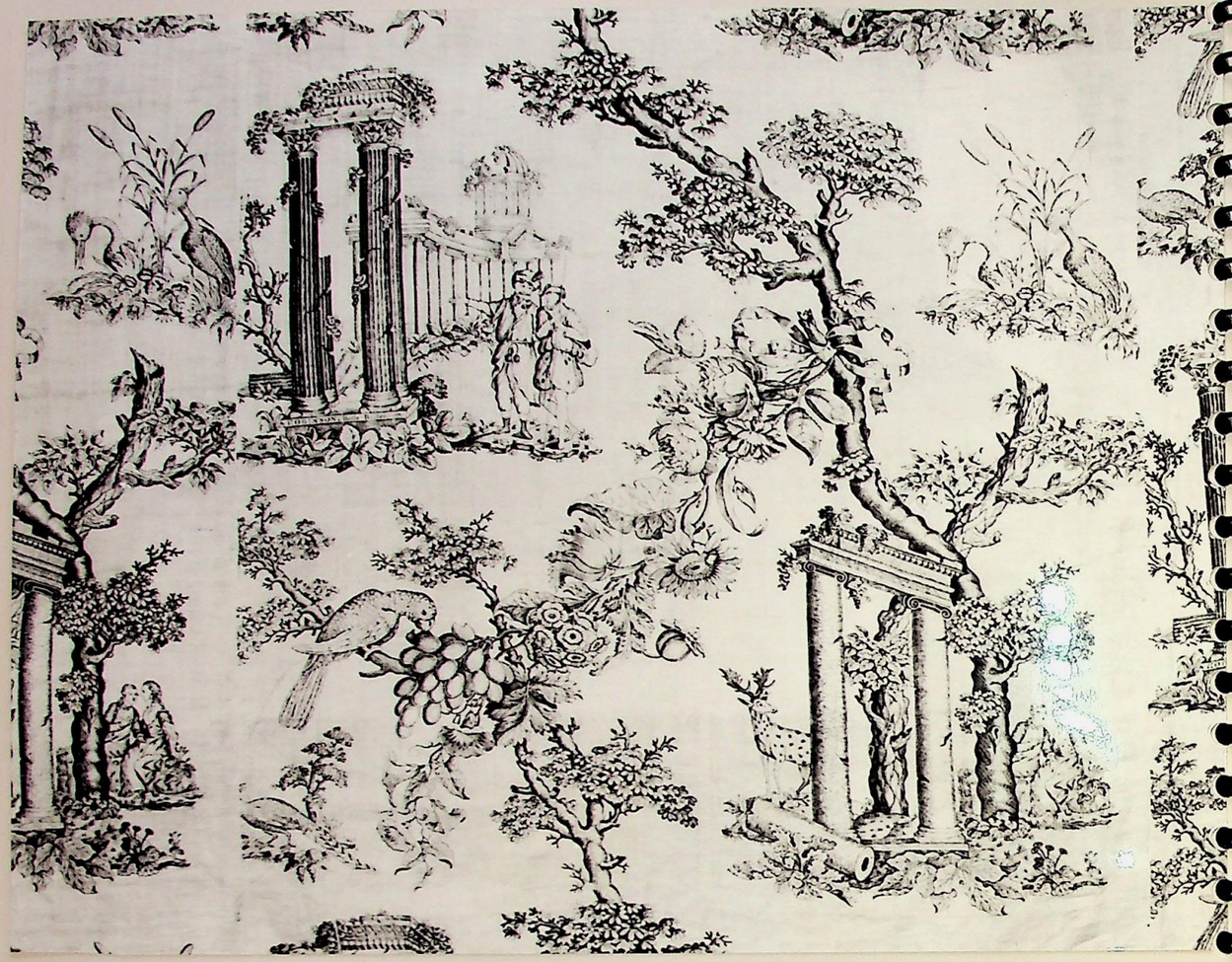
corner there is a curious tree-bound trio, one of whom has just slipped, losing his headgear in the process. Directly opposite, a volunteer is chasing some individual from the parade ground, a yapping dog adding to the confusion.

This example is printed in three colours - brown, red, and blue - on a thick linen and cotton blend. Probably primarily printed in one colour, the rest being added by woodblock or handpainting. Visually, the repeat is composed of five tiers - the Tent, Flag and Volunteer, scabbard standing to attention beneath provide a central symmetry around which the prancing deer, trees, Phoenix column and the lodge of the Chief Secretary are pretty exact references and are ornamental features of the design.

Quirky individual touches are what make this example of Irish printed fabric so unique. It would be true also to say that there is no English or French example yet seen that betrays such a refreshing naivety, which nonetheless does not detract from the accomplished execution of the pattern. Already mentioned are the humorous antics of the characters. The Chief Secretary's mansion is puffing little plumes of smoke from its miniature chimney pots. Through the open swag of the tent can be perceived a table speed with viands and wine. The fashionable ladies behind, chatting under very triangular umbrellas. Lord Charlemont's likeness or not can be seen from (fig. 18).

Harpur and Cunningham's sojourn at Leixlip could be reckoned to have been a profitable one as it lasted from 1768 - 1785. They employed approximately 220 work people - a rather substantial workforce. In 1783 they turned out over 8000 pieces. Harpur is also credited with having invented an "ingenious watering engine," used for watering linens and cottons on the bleach. There is much documentary evidence of their work to be had through contemporary newspapers and proceedings from the Dublin Society and Linen Board.

From the few examples extant, the Irish copperplate printing industry seems to have reached a zenith during the latter decades of the eighteenth century, particularly the 1780's. The Volunteer Furniture is one example. Harpur and Cunningham had many compeers e.g. Jonathon and Jacob Sisson in Lucan. The Sisson factory was among the initiators of the printing enterprise in the Dublin environs. They were among the primary three factories to receive parliamentary aid (£500 in 1757) and they won several Dublin Society premiums for their work, none as yet indentified. If Sisson's factory was to be remembered for one item only, it would be that they employed the famous William Kilburn as an apprentice. If his later work in England is indicative of any which he might have produced in his formative years as a designer, then it is no wonder that the Lucan factory was held in such high regard. Sisson's main output seems to have been woodblock with a small



(fig.19) Roman Ruins,Late 18th century.(1784-90)

percentage copperplated.

There were several factories in the Ballsbridge/Donnbrook area. The only Irish linen stamping establishement to actually incorporate the factory mark into the pattern was Robinson's of Ballsbridge - this enterprise was established around 1764 and appears to have be-n a family operation. Robinson's was contemporaneous with both Sisson's, Harpur and Cunningham's and the product of this manufactory would appear to have been as highly regarded as both aforementioned establishments.

There are two examples recorded. The first, in the National Museum, (fig.19) is an example of the popular "Roman ruins" style that was prevalent at the time - the archaelogical discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum led to the advent of the neo-classical tradition in France. French painters, architects and designers quickly espoused this new style - and here is a dilution of that fashion.

Because of the similarity of the foliage and the spotted deer, it has been suggested that Beranger, designer of the Volunteer Furniture, also executed this pattern. The standing columns are interspersed with floral vines and tree branches that convolute in semi-sinuous curves. This repeat would appear to be the definition of Hogarth's famous "Line of Beauty" -

(fig.20) Background of delapidated cupola and pillars

"observing the line of Beauty, so as to make it the foundation and support of all his designs in ornament, flowers, branches, leaves etc. the designers fancy ought to be unlimited, neither strictly tied to or swerving entirely from nature."

Like the very first textile by Nixon discussed, this example is diagonally separated by the curving branches. The focal point appears to be the "Turkish" guide and the tourist (fig 20) looking at these comical "ruined" runs. The delight in the drawing of the parakeet and flora are plainly seen. They are gorgeously overblown. The superfluously - leaved dog roses and sunflowers meandering towards the grape nibbling parakeet. It is excellently drawn even if the standing pillars on the right are a trifle peculiar in aspect. What makes this example so singular in itself is the magic inscription at the base of one of the pillars - "Robinson's BALLS BRIDGE". One of only two properly authenticated Irish examples and both emanating from the same factory.

The second, in the Victoria and Albert Museum is copperplated cotton in (fig. 21) dark blue and is a primary example of the Euro-dictated Chinese/Indian parody discussed in chapter one. Again, the popular diagonal branch device separating the curious Chinese pagodas. This is a brilliant example of Irish copperplate-printed fabric at its ultimate - all the hybrids are stirred together and its excellently draughted -

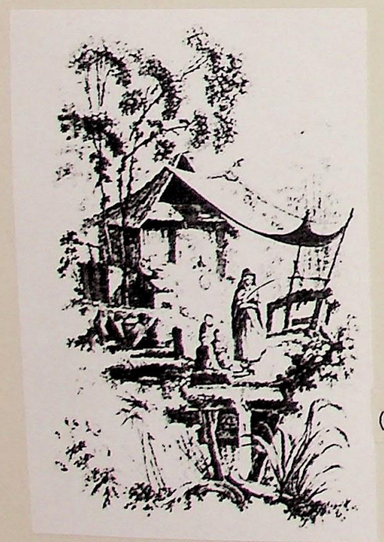
(fig.21)

Cotton, plate-printed in dark blue. Inscribed "Robinson Balls Bridge" (see detail).
Dublin, about 1780–90.

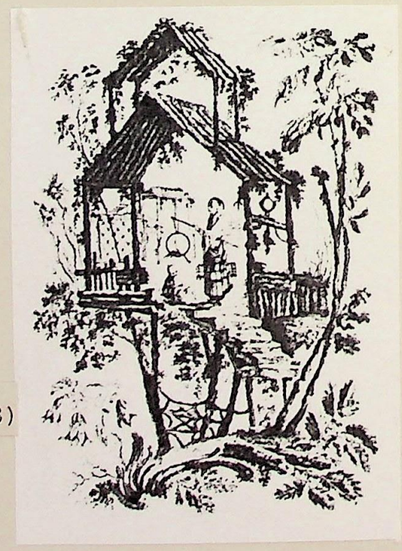
factory mark on rock of chinoiserie design

(fig.22)

French. Jouy, late 18th century.



(fig.23)



Album of chinoiserie *designs by Jean Pillement. French, 1773. Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.*

sheer decoration! Parrots and peacocks perched among beautiful peonies and frothy leaves. The pagoda does not overtake as the Roman ruins did in the last Ballsbridge textile - instead it is subtly integrated.

It resembles very closely a contemporaneous French pattern executed in Jouy (fig. 22). The reason for the stylistic similarities being, that Jean Pillement, a French wallpaper designer, published an album of chinoiserie designs in 1773 (fig. 23). The album featured various "native" Chinese vignettes and was intended as a source book for the designer/ craftsman. It was enthusiastically used by French, English and as we can see here, Irish designers.

Chapter 5

(fig.24)

In the last chapter, there was mention of a famous William Kilburn. In evidence given before a Parliamentary committee in 1833, it was stated that "Raymond, Kilburn, Wagner and Edwards are regarded as the old Masters of the English school of design in calico printing."[13]

The visual evidence that can be gleaned from the large leather-bound book of some 223 paper patterns in the Victoria and Albert Museum shows that Kilburn was extremely worthy of the title "Master".

William Kilburn was born in Capel Street, Dublin in 1745. He is reputed to have shown a remarkable talent for drawing and it is possible that he received formal Art instruction. Around the age of 14, Kilburn was apprenticed to the previously mentioned fabric printing works run by Jacob Sisson in Lucan. He worked here for approximately eight years, where he drew and engraved designs for fabric and wallpaper.

Kilburn moved to London around 1766 where he came in contact with the botanist, William Curtis. Curtis employed him to engrave some 25 plates for his famous "Flora Londinensis" (figs.24). His work is of a high standard and botanically exact.

The influence of these botanical plant forms is readily apparent

(fig.26)

(fig.25)

(fig.25)

in Kilburn's fabric designs. A paper impression of a Kilburn inspired plate (fig.25). The quality and clarity of line is awesome. Beranger, in "The Volunteer Furniture" drew his representation of real life which in no way matches the botanically exact representations of the plant forms fashioned by Kilburn.

The Dictionary of National Biography states that "the beauty of his designs" established him as "one of the most eminent calico printers in Europe." Certainly, the excellence of his design, the high quality of his printing and his shrewd business sense caused his printworks to flourish when many others went bankrupt. Kilburn's pieces of muslin sold for the astronomical sum of one guinea a yard.[14] Queen Charlotte was presented with some of his highly original seaweed pattern work (fig. 26). Charles O'Brien states in "The British Manufacturers Companion and Callico Printers Assistant" that Kilburn's"patterns for 1790 run chiefly on an imitation of seaweed, and in effect, at least, excelled what any other printer exhibited."

Kilburn's range of seaweed patterns shown in the pattern book range from loose airy design with the seaweed clumps scattered over the page to densely interwoven fronds creating an all-over pattern on a pale ground (figs.27,28). The fine tracery of the seaweed is varied with various flowers, corals,

(fig.27)

(fig.28).

mosses or skeleton leaves. It is difficult to appreciate his superb draughtsmanship from these small reproductions. Kilburn's drawing ability is literally gasp evoking! One wonders how the minute quality of tracery could be achieved by a paint brush. Perhaps if the brush holder held a single human hair?. While not being flippant, it is hard to make any other efficient analogy.

The vivid, yet subtly chosen colours are immediately seen from the original volume. This would have been carried, as was humanly possible, through to the final printed fabric. These vibrant colours are in marked contrast to the monotone copper-plated fabrics of Kilburn's Irish contemporaries. The difference being, that woodblock, Kilburn's method acquired from his Irish apprenticeship, can utilize several colours.

Kilburn's superlative draughtsmanship, would, no doubt have lost some of its fine intricacies through the woodblock technique. By the 1790's however, the standard of block cutting had improved considerably and by hammering thin copper strips into the block, the printers were able to achieve an extreme fineness of and detail. O'Brien writes that Kilburn achieved "the nearest approach to nature that cutting would allow".[15]

It is possible to trace the fashions for printed fabrics through Kilburn's designs. From the spare,economical,

(fig.29)

(fig.30)

31

32

light patterns (fig.29,30-1) of the 1780's, the highly stylized leaves (imitating rococco - inspired ribbons) through to the modish dark grounds of the 1790's. The flowers and plants are for the most part executed in a naturalistic fashion. Kilburn's skill as a draughtsman is obvious, his design ability is also beyond reproach. He can disguise a repeat so successfully in both simple and elaborate designs that a break line is not discernible (fig.32). The extravagance of the multi-leaved background pre-empts William Morris by a hundred years! The confident ability to combine all the naturalistic elements so successfully marks Kilburn's genius.

All the illustrations shown represent the versatility of William Kilburn's style. They prove that the influence of his study of plant forms was instrumental in his success. And Kilburn was extremely successful. Paradoxically, it was this success that led ultimately to his fall from grace. Because his fabrics were so gorgeous, they were widely plagiarized.

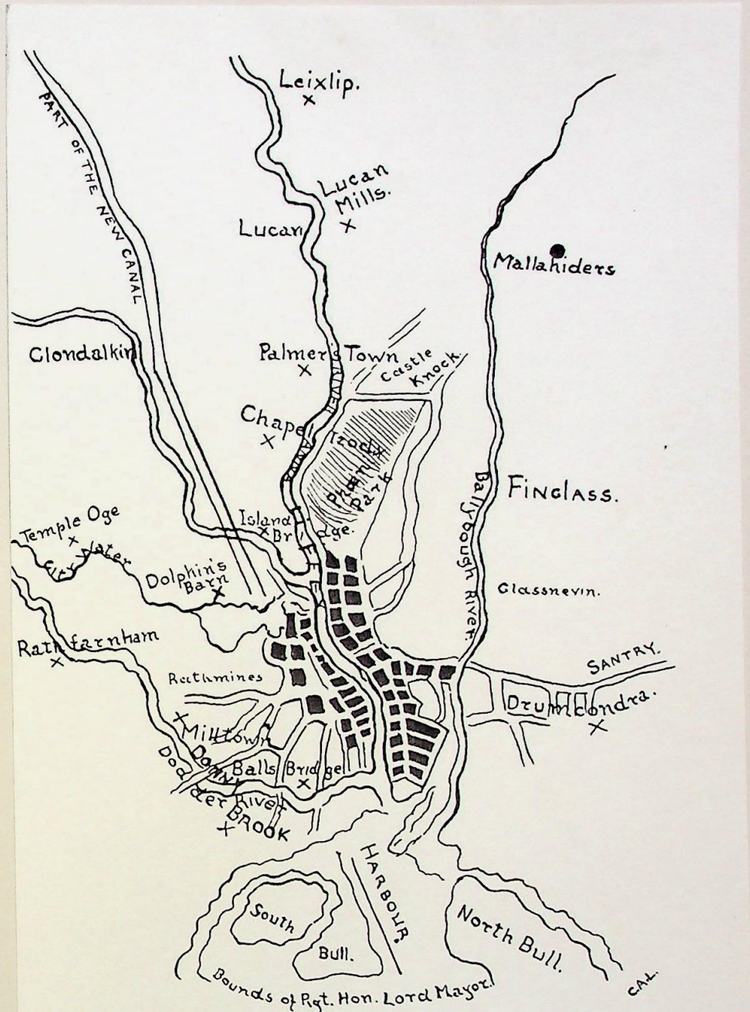
The high quality of Kilburn's work deemed it very expensive. Rival firms, on noting its popularity, produced imitative fabrics that sold for two to three shillings less than the original. Although Kilburn headed the struggle to obtain legal protection for original designs, which was initially successful - the over-riding cheapness of the imitative designs eventually won him out. Demand for his superlative work diminished and Kilburn was forced to close down in 1802.

He died in 1818.

It might appear to have diverged from the discussion on Irish copperplated fabric to include a chapter on William Kilburn, who executed his chintz/calico work in woodblock.

Not so, for Kilburn, for all his woodblocked excellence, received his formative training in one of the premier Irish factories of the era. He would certainly have been guided by the example of his countrymen, (Nixon, Dixon et al).

As with the previous Irish patterns discussed, it is the quality of Kilburn's work as a designer that concerns us. The Dublin fabrics, in the main, were derivative of the Fashion and style of the minute. Kilburn, however, while heeding the current mood, was purely original in his pattern drawing he relied on his draughting ability.It is this ability that marks him apart from his working peers.



Map showing location of printing yards near Dublin.
Adapted from Rocque's maps of Dublin and environs,
C. 1760.

The linen and cotton stamping industry in Dublin was prolific from its conception in 1752 until its demise, in the dwindling years of the eighteenth century. It was certainly a thriving market and much of the goods produced were intended for home consumption. A certain amount was exported to America. Portugal and Spain would appear to have been the recipients of a sizeable quantity of smuggled goods. Copperplate stuffs were exported to Britain although they sometimes fell foul to British imposed trade restrictions.

Dublin's merchant classes hardly became hugely rich over the copperplate printing industry as is corroborated by the evidence of factories constantly changing ownership. Neverless, the financial rewards must have been more than usual, when it is realized that there were over 70 fustian printers functioning in the Dublin environs. This is hardly an insignificant total. The map (fig.33) shows the concentration of the printing yards on the banks of the Liffey and it's tributaries.

Mrs. Leask has written and researched extensively about the Irish Linen and Cotton Printing Industry. While the majority of her tracts are concerned with the documentative and social history of the industry, I have endeavoured to assess graphically the only Irish fabrics existing. From the small

number of examples yet seen, it is virtually impossible to say whether the Irish fabrics had an effect - design - wise - on their European and British peers.

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the "Volunteer Furniture" none of the fabrics discussed are particularly 'Irish'. They are all directly influenced by the fashion from abroad, whether Indian or French in origin. During this period, anything Irish, for example - the language, the music, the religion was regarded as being for the ignorant and poor. The upper echelons of society could not and would not associate itself with purely Irish motifs.

But, what <u>is</u> verifiable is the importance of Nixon's invention and its subsequent alteration of the fabric - printing industry. It would be entirely true to state that the initiation of Francis Nixon's copperplate - printing technique was one of the first dominoes to fall towards the Industrial Revolution in England. In effect, copperplated fabric gave birth to a new ideal. Now, the lower social orders could imitate the upper strata of society. Printed cottons and linens, to an extent, levelled the classes. Both mistress and maid, for the first time, could dress practically the same. It even became fashionable for society ladies to dress in their floral chintzes like milk maids and sheperdesses (fig. 6) (the unfortunate Marie Antoinette was one subscriber to this fashion). The emergence of the merchant classes, the nouveau riche of the eighteenth century, came about with the

advent of various mechanical, time saving, cost effective devices (such as copperplate printing). Although the copperplate method was finally superceded by cylinder printing, this cannot detract from the importance of a wholly Irish invention.

Footnotes

1. "Irish Printed Textiles Country Life", December 1975
   A. K. Longfield.

2. See K. N. Chaudhuri "Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company"
   pages 212 - 228.

3. "Indian Painted and Printed Fabrics"
   Introduction, pages 37, 38, 39.

4. "History of Irish Linen & Cotton Printing Industry in 18th Century"
   J.R.S.A.I. 1937
   A. K. Longfield.

5. "Dublin under the Georges"
   Constantia Maxwell page 1.

6. See Bibliography for general reference to Dublin.

7. "Dublin under the Georges"
   Constantia Maxwell page 75.

8. "Anglo Irish Trade in 16th Century"
   A. K. Longfield page 189 - 196.

9. Information on Linen Industry
   W.H. Crawford "Linen Industry in Ireland" 26/30, 31/32, 45.
   Jonathon Bardon "Belfast, an illustrated History" page 42 - 43.

10. Technical information:-
    "A History of Textile Art" page 209 - 211
    Agnes Geijer.
    "Notes on Linen and Cotton Printing Industries in Northern Ireland in the 18th Century"
    A. K. Longfield.

11. "Irish Printed Textiles"
    Country Life, December 1972.
    Burlington Magazine
    July 1942, June 1949
    A. K. Longfield.

12. All documentary information about Irish copperprinting industry in Bibliography under
    A. K. Longfield.

13. "Rococco Silks" V + A Publication pages 7 - 12.

14. Ibid.

15. William Kilburn and his book of designs
    Irish Georgian Society
    A. K. Longfield.

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