



Fanlights

If Dublin is famous for any one decorative feature it must be the beautiful Georgian doors with their delicate fanlights which line the eighteenth-century squares and streets of the city. The doors of Merrion Square or Mountjoy Square were, almost without exception, embellished by fanlights of the most intricate and elaborate designs. These examples are some of the largest in Dublin City. However, many houses, especially Georgian villas in County Dublin, made use of even larger and wider fanlights, as, for example, at Delaford in Firhouse, now demolished. And while fanlights are mainly to be found in houses, there are examples in public buildings too, such as the Custom House.

Fanlights (the name describes its fan-shaped structure) originated out of the need to illuminate an otherwise dark hallway, while incorporating its design into the overall architectural scheme of the entrance. In those days natural light, or the use of candles or oil lamps were the only means of lighting the darker parts of houses, such as the hallways. What is quite remarkable about these semicircular or elliptical windows is that, like snowflakes, one seldom finds two that are identical. Each one is unique because each fanlight was handmade. The doorcase and the fanlight formed the focal point and showpiece of the house frontage.

The first fanlights were of solid timber construction, the glazing bars radiating out from a central point, not unlike the spokes of a cartwheel. The glazing bars were frequently curved to create a Gothic or pointed arch, an example of which may be seen at the Rotunda Hospital. These wooden fanlights date from between 1710 and 1760 and were common in the plain arched doorways of the houses of that period. They were once to be found all over the city, especially in the

older Georgian districts where the houses dated from 1730 to 1760, such as South





Opposite page

Top left: The graceful front entrance to Riversdale House, Palmerstown, with its magnificent fanlight, is a fine example of this decorative feature which can be seen all over Dublin City and county. The fanlight is designed to fill the semicircular arch above the door and its traceried glass lights the hall inside. The ornamental sidelights on this entrance also illuminate the interior of the hall.

Bottom left: A coloured fanlight from Dun Laoghaire, c.1840. During the early nineteenth century coloured fanlights became popular and were much used in the internal halls of houses.

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Top left: An early timber fanlight, of simple construction, from a house dated around 1740–1750. It illustrates the beginning of this type of window, with its simple early origins, before the elaborate and complex designs of the late Georgian period. Such simple fanlights were commonplace in modest houses in Fownes Street, Temple Bar.

Bottom right: This Gothic-style fanlight from the early nineteenth century comes from a terrace of late Georgian-style brick houses in Upper Rathmines Road. The Gothic idiom was fashionable for decorative features for a short time in the early 1800s.

Bottom left: A tear-drop fanlight from Westland Row, c.1840. While people associate the fanlight with the Georgian period, it did in fact remain popular in domestic architecture for more than a century, and there are many examples to be found in Dublin's Victorian suburbs, such as Clontarf, Rathmines and Dun Laoghaire.

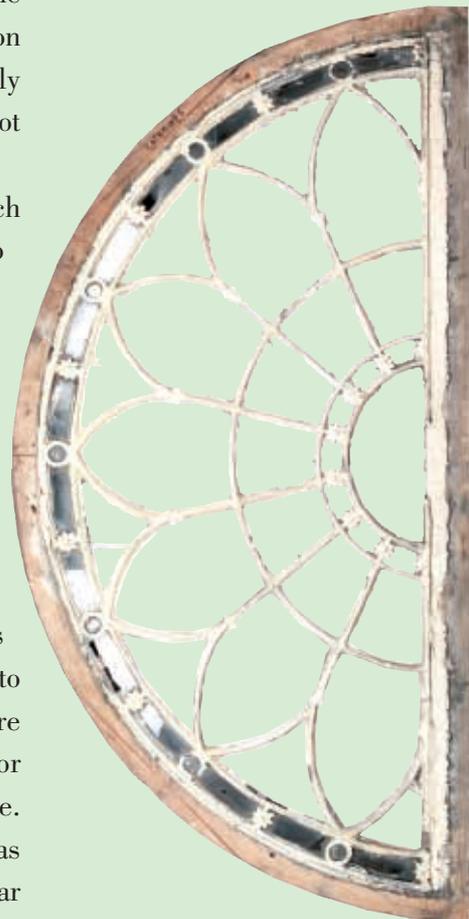
Frederick Street, Fownes Street and Capel Street. This architectural feature was not confined to the most fashionable districts, and was once as commonplace on the quays of the River Liffey as in any other part of the city. Examples can be found in districts as far apart as Dorset Street, Camden Street, Temple Bar and the Liberties. Many houses adorned by such fanlights were cleared away during the past thirty years, and most of the fanlights were simply destroyed.

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, timber fanlights became more delicate, resulting in a refined spider's-web effect made up of the thinnest strips of wood. The bent element was tacked and puttied into place. Ornaments formed from gesso or putty were attached to various joints or extremities, and included urns, rosettes and heads. Gesso beads fixed to strong thread were glued to the timber's glazing bars. An example of these are the fanlights on Leeson Street. After more than 200 years, these timber fanlights are usually heavily overpainted so that the thinness of the structure is not apparent, and the refinement of the detail is almost invisible.

In some houses, usually larger ones, sidelights were added at each side of the door and these were also made of wood with similar gesso ornamentation. Such sidelights presented a security risk to the house and were often protected internally by a wrought-iron grille, or a shutter, or both. In some cases decorative iron grilles were also placed behind the fanlight to provide additional security.

From the 1770s onwards delicate, almost frail-looking fanlights were constructed in metal and faced with lead ornamentation. The designs of Robert Adam and other architects of the period utilised neo-classical elements in refined details, such as rosettes, garlands, swags and small urns. The ornaments

were cast in lead and soldered on to lead comes, and those were attached to a thin iron, or sometimes zinc structure. This metal structure was fastened to a semicircular





wooden frame, which in turn was fitted to the brick arch of the doorway.

Fanlights were generally painted in an off-white or stone colour, similar to the doorcase below, so that the decorative design stood out against the background of dark glass and brickwork. They were especially popular in the terraced houses and villas of the 1820s and 1830s, when front doors were decorated with columns and approached by a flight of granite steps, thus forming the chief decorative feature of the house. Lead fanlights remained popular in Dublin houses right up until the 1840s, and many examples can be seen in the suburbs – Dun Laoghaire, Blackrock, Howth and Lucan. Fanlights appear in the grandest mansions, such as Lucan House, and in the humblest farmhouses, gate lodges and even cottages. Designs include petal forms, tear-drops and anthemions, as well as the better-known spider's-web shape.

Although the semicircular fanlight is the most well-known feature of Dublin's Georgian streetscapes, they were sometimes made in rectangular or even oval shapes. A good example of the rectangular fanlight, composed of crossed arrows and an oval, is to be seen in Molesworth Street, where it forms part of Whytes shopfront. Another interesting rectangular window may also be seen on Bachelor's Walk, comprising four circles. Certain regional characteristics developed in fanlight-making, for instance, in Clonmel and parts of Munster the circle and oval is a favoured motif, but it is rare in Dublin. A number of fanlights were designed with oil lanterns incorporated so that the hallway and doorstep were simultaneously lit at night. Examples include York Road, Dun Laoghaire, and 35 North Great George's Street.

Catalogues exist for some English fanlight-makers of the late eighteenth century, but it seems certain that most of these delicate artefacts were made locally. The skill involved in their making and

glazing would have been easily accomplished by the many cabinet-makers in eighteenth-century Dublin. Furthermore, the transport of such a delicate artefact from England would have posed many problems in the eighteenth century.

Designs for Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street) drawn up by the Wide Streets Commission in the early nineteenth century indicate shopfronts which incorporate fanlights over their entrance doors. These fanlights, fitted to rectangular spaces, are similar to the restored example at 4 Castle Street, the home of the Dublin Civic Trust. No doubt the published designs of Robert Adam (1770s) and English fanlight-maker Joseph Bottomley (c.1795) provided inspiration for the Dublin manufacturers who were, in any case, very inventive and produced an unending variety of designs.

The use of coloured glass was rare before 1830, as all fanlights were glazed with delicate, clear glass that was hand-blown. At this time the production of glass was exclusively handmade, and irregularities in thickness and colour were commonplace. In some instances fanlight glass was as thin as eggshell, and often the curve of the concentric circles of the glass-blower's disc can still be seen. Known as crown glass, such original glazing gives subtle reflections to an original fanlight.

By the 1830s the use of coloured glass had crept into fashion, and by the middle of the nineteenth century acid-etched glass and coloured panes were the norm in fanlights, which were now being used internally in hallways, on staircases and landings, too. Stars and rosettes and trailing vine tendrils appear in bright orange, crimson red, ultramarine blue and deep yellow-coloured glass.



Opposite page: A large fanlight with its accompanying sidelights from a demolished villa in Sandymount. This spider's-web pattern, from the 1830s, was one of the most frequently used designs and can be seen in Merrion Square and elsewhere.

Above: A more robust style of fanlight remained in use until the middle of the nineteenth century, as seen here on a house in Monkstown. The narrower sidelights have been simplified to a series of roundels.