

# ‘Any style but gothic’: Building a home for the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

H Wheelock

*Keeper of Collections, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, Dublin*

**ABSTRACT** On 15 July 1864 the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland held its first business meeting in its newly built home at 6 Kildare Street, Dublin. Although the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland had been in existence for over 200 years this was the first occasion that a College meeting had been held in a building owned by the College.

**Correspondence to H Wheelock**  
**Royal College of Physicians of Ireland**  
**6 Kildare Street**  
**Dublin 2**  
**Ireland**

**e-mail** harrietwheelock@rcpi.ie

This paper looks at the history behind the construction of a home for the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland. It will examine why it took over 200 years for the Physicians to find a permanent home, how they ended up with the building they did, and what they borrowed from the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh in the process.

**KEYWORDS** medical architecture, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

**DECLARATION OF INTERESTS** No conflict of interest declared

## THE FOUNDING OF THE IRISH COLLEGE

In 1654 John Stearne (Figure 1) submitted a proposal to the board of Trinity College for the establishment of a Fraternity of Physicians to be based in Trinity Hall. Stearne was, at that time, a senior Fellow at Trinity, and had the right to practise medicine in the city of Dublin; he would later be appointed the first Professor of Medicine at Trinity. Stearne’s aim was to establish a college similar to the College of Physicians in London. He also wanted to promote the teaching of anatomy to medical students. John Pentland Mahaffy suggested that Stearne’s ‘anxiety to get his students into a separate Trinity Hall, away from the rest, was that he might be able to teach them this part of their work in privacy and without molestation’.<sup>1</sup>

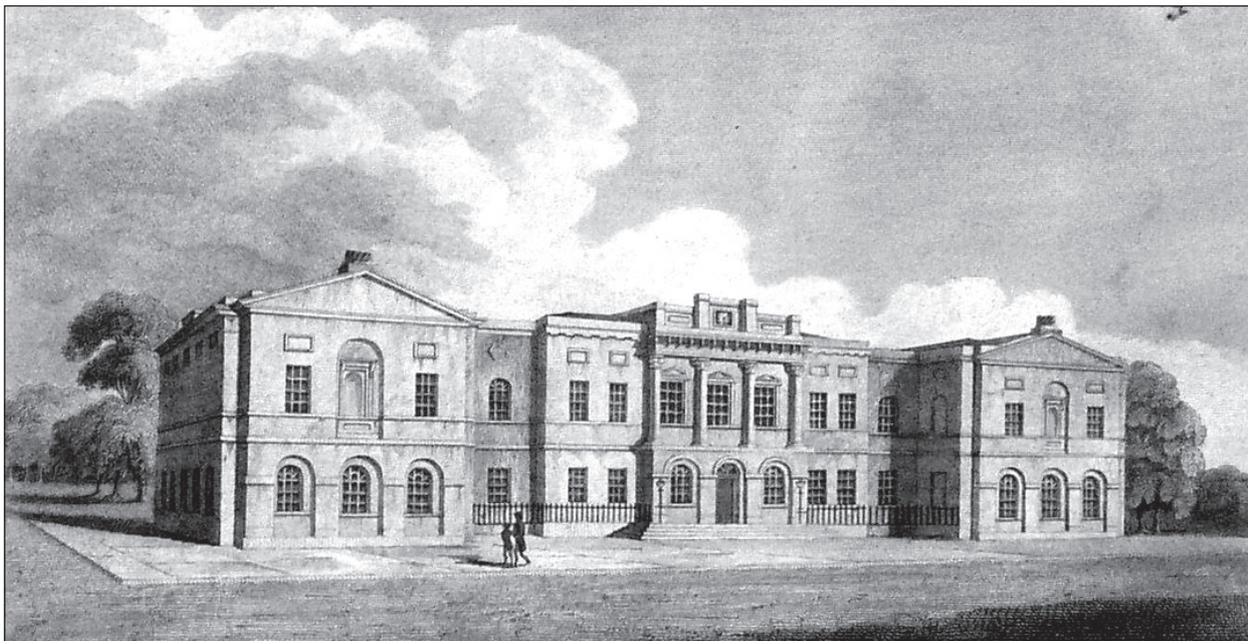
The site selected by Stearne for his new Fraternity of Physicians was ideal for this purpose, as it was situated just outside the main campus of Trinity College. The Hall was built in 1604, by Dublin Corporation, as a bridewell or prison. By 1617 the Corporation had given the building to Trinity College, who turned the prison into a student hall of residence. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the Hall was vacated by the students and, during the Commonwealth, the Corporation demanded its return as it was not being used. Trinity did not have the money to restore the Hall to make it habitable for students again but, in his proposal, Stearne offered to spend over £100 of his own money on refurbishments.<sup>2</sup> The Provost and Fellows approved Stearne’s proposal, agreeing that ‘he might be constituted President of the said Hall during his natural life and accommodated with certain lodgings there in’. Three conditions were laid down by Trinity: Stearne was ‘to keep the city out...repair



**FIGURE 1** Dr John Stearne by Thomas Pooley (RCPIP/1)

the said Hall, without charge to the College’ and ‘convert the remainder [of the Hall] unto the sole and proper use of Physicians’.<sup>3</sup>

Stearne’s Fraternity seems to have been a success, with an increase in the number of medical degrees awarded by Trinity College. In 1667, further recognition came when a Royal Charter was granted establishing the



**FIGURE 2** Engraving of Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, Dublin (VM/1/4/27)

Fraternity as the College of Physicians in Dublin. This Charter gave the new College the power to license all medical practitioners within both the city of Dublin and a seven mile radius. Trinity College was given the right to approve the appointment of the President of the College of Physicians, and Trinity also executed a deed vesting Trinity Hall in two trustees for the use of the new College of Physicians.

John Stearne died in 1669, and within 20 years of his death the good relationship between Trinity College and the College of Physicians had broken down. For their new President, the College of Physicians submitted the name of Dr John Crosby to Trinity College for approval in October 1687. Crosby had been a Fellow of Physicians since 1674 and had previously acted as Treasurer; however he was a Catholic and, with the heightened religious and political tension of King James II's reign, Trinity refused to ratify his appointment. The Physicians held firm in their selection of Crosby, and requested that Trinity relinquish the right to approve the appointment of the College of Physician's President. Trinity agreed to this on condition that Trinity Hall was returned to them.<sup>4</sup>

### A NOMADIC EXISTENCE

The break with Trinity came just as Ireland was consumed by the war between King James II and King William III. Many Protestant doctors fled Dublin at this time and the lack of a meeting place was not immediately felt by the College of Physicians.

Patrick Dun, originally from Scotland, had settled in Ireland in the 1670s, and was first elected as President of the College of Physicians in 1681. Dun was one of the

Protestant doctors who fled from Ireland in the late 1680s, but he was back in Ireland in 1690 as Physician to King William's army. This position was no doubt of use to Dun when he and the other surviving members of the College of Physicians petitioned King William and Queen Mary for a new Royal Charter. The new Charter was granted on 15 December 1692 and it extended the influence of the newly named King and Queen's College of Physicians of Ireland to the whole country. The College not only had the power to license physicians across Ireland, but also to issue licences in midwifery and to inspect and regulate the apothecary trade. A recommendation was also made that the College be given one of the houses in Dublin, which had been forfeited by supporters of King James, and five or six acres of ground near the city for a physic garden.<sup>5</sup>

By the time of Dun's death in 1713 the recommendation to provide the College with a house had not been fulfilled and, in his will, Dun sought to remedy this. He left his property in trust to his wife for her life, or until her remarriage, at which point it would pass to the College. This included his house on Inns Quay, which Dun wished to become the home of the College. In 1714, Lady Dun wrote to the College inviting them to continue to meet in the house during her life. However, relations between Lady Dun and the College soured quickly, with disputes over Dun's bequest. In 1716 Lady Dun went on a long visit to Bath, locking the College out of her house and their meeting place. They were never to regain the house, which was destroyed by fire in September 1728.

From 1716, when they were locked out of Dun's house, to 1816, when the College moved into new rooms in Sir

Patrick Dun's Hospital (Figure 2), the College was without a settled home, and meetings were held in the houses of the Presidents, Dublin's hospitals or back in the original home of the Fraternity in Trinity College.

### SIR PATRICK DUN'S HOSPITAL

In his will of 1713 Sir Patrick Dun had specified that the income from his estates was to be used to fund a medical professorship, appointed by the College of Physicians. By the end of the 18th century, the income from Dun's estate was so substantial it was funding three King's Professorships, and some of the income was also used to fund a clinical hospital in Dublin, which could be used by the professors for teaching. The new Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital received its first patients in 1809, and in 1816 the College of Physicians was given a meeting space in the newly completed hospital.

Although this meant the College had a permanent meeting space, for the first time since leaving Trinity over a century earlier, the physicians were not content. Being lodged in a public hospital outside of the city centre and 'suffering the indignity of entering and leaving the building through its only entrance, in common with patients and their visitors',<sup>6</sup> did not please the College Fellows. In addition there was a certain amount of envy of the building used by the College of Surgeons, completed in 1810 on St Stephen's Green, which had received substantial government grants.

In 1824 the College of Physicians petitioned the State for a grant of £10,000 towards the construction of a hall, library and museum. They stated that their own income (which came from fees for exams and membership) was insufficient to raise the considerable sum needed to build such a hall and pointed out that the College of Surgeons had 'got within a few years £30,000' for a similar purpose. The petition was turned down, Widdess, the historian of the College, suggesting that surgeons were far more indispensable to the government of the time as they were required in large numbers for the armed forces, as well as public institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the reason, the Physicians were still without a home of their own, and were reliant on their own limited resources to find one. In the first half of the 19th century several attempts were made by the College to remedy this situation. In 1814 Dr William Brooke had a circular printed asking the Licentiates and Fellows to fund a new hall by subscription.<sup>7</sup> In 1832 plans were put in place to rent 46 Kildare Street, the mansion of Lord Rossmore, but again the College could not raise the finances. In 1848, as part of the School of Physic Act, Trinity College was approached to provide a grant of land for the construction of a new hall. Trinity offered 'land adjoining the anatomical theatre' which was declined by the College of Physicians, who asked for a

site 'either opposite Kildare Street, or next the house on Leinster Lane', neither of which the board of Trinity would grant.<sup>8</sup>

In 1860 the impasse in finding a home for the College was finally overcome when the College received a letter from the Kildare Street Club offering them their old premises on Kildare Street for £6,000; the Club was about to move to newly built accommodation on the same street.

### THE KILDARE STREET CLUB

The Kildare Street Club had, since 1782, owned two houses on the site of what is now 6 Kildare Street. By 1860 the club had outgrown these premises and was nearly ready to move to their newly constructed home at the bottom of the same street. On receiving the letter from the Club, the College established a committee to investigate the offer and the property, and an agreement was made for the purchase of the building for £5,000. The money was paid on 1 July 1860, with the club remaining in the building for a further few months until it could move.

To fund the purchase, the College asked its Fellows and Licentiates to purchase debentures at £50, with interest at 4%. Several Fellows purchased more than one debenture and the President Dominic Corrigan and Dr John Moore Neligan, who were both on the building committee, purchased ten debentures each. Others, like Dr Fleetwood Churchill would later surrender their debenture to the College, making the £50 a donation.<sup>9</sup>

There was to be one more twist in the story. Early on the morning of 11 November 1860, Police Constable 21B on duty in Nassau Street became aware of a strong smell of burning. Turning onto Kildare Street he found that the old Kildare Street Club building, still occupied by the Club, was on fire. The alarm was raised at 5am, and in just over half an hour the first fire engine was at the site.

There were 15 servants of the club in the building the night of the fire, and all but three were able to climb to safety over the rooftops. One female servant was saved by her presence in the bedroom of one of the male servants... The fire completely destroyed the main building facing Kildare Street. A separate building at the rear of the site, comprising a racquet court and billiard room, survived the fire. In January 1861 the College received the £6,000 insurance payment on the building, and the following month gained possession of the site.<sup>10</sup>

After all the College's trials and tribulations, in search of a home, the College now found itself in the unexpected, and enviable, position of owning a site on the street it had been trying to move to for over 30 years, and with money to build a home to its own requirements.

## THE BUILDING COMMITTEE AND THE EDINBURGH COLLEGE

On 6 May 1861 the Building Committee met to discuss the requirements for the new building. It was decided that six architects would be asked to submit designs based on the following specifications:

- The building was to cost no more than £5,000, although this might be stretched to £8,000
- The building was to be two stories over a basement level
- It was to contain a grand college hall, a museum and a library, as well as a Reading Room, Registrar's office, committee room and Beadle's room
- The front was to be of cut stone, either limestone, granite or a mix of the two
- The plans were to be 'of any style but gothic'.<sup>11</sup>

This last stipulation on style is perhaps the most intriguing – no explanation is given in the minutes as to why it was included. It could simply have been a question of the taste of the building committee. Or it may have been about the statement the College wanted to make: that its building of a permanent, stable, prosperous and serious organisation was not compatible with a gothic building. It should be noted that comparable medical buildings, including Surgeons on Stephen's Green and the College of Physicians in Edinburgh were all built in the classical style.

The design of the College of Physicians building in Edinburgh was to have a profound effect on the design of the Irish College's building. On 16 November 1860, just four days after the fire, with the Irish College now facing the prospect of having to design a new building, Dr John Moore Neligan applied to the College of Physicians of Edinburgh to borrow the architectural plans of its building. The Council of the College in Edinburgh acceded to Dr Neligan's request and the plans were dispatched to Dublin.

The request to Edinburgh reflects the strong links there were at this time between Irish and Scottish medicine. In the early decades of the 19th century, many Irish medical students, including Neligan and Corrigan, studied in Edinburgh. As a result, they would have been familiar with both the College and its building. Neligan seems to have requested the plans on his own account, not as a representative of the Irish College. The Edinburgh plans were never mentioned in the minutes of the building committee, and it is not clear if they were seen by any of the architects who submitted designs. However, the similarities between the Edinburgh and Dublin buildings would suggest that they were seen by, at least, William Murray, whose design was accepted. What is certain is that the plans were sent to Dublin, and unfortunately it is equally certain that they were never returned. When I

started at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland as archivist five years ago, one of the first requests I received was from the Edinburgh College asking for their architectural plans back! Unfortunately, despite extensive searching, we have been unable to find them.

### WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN?

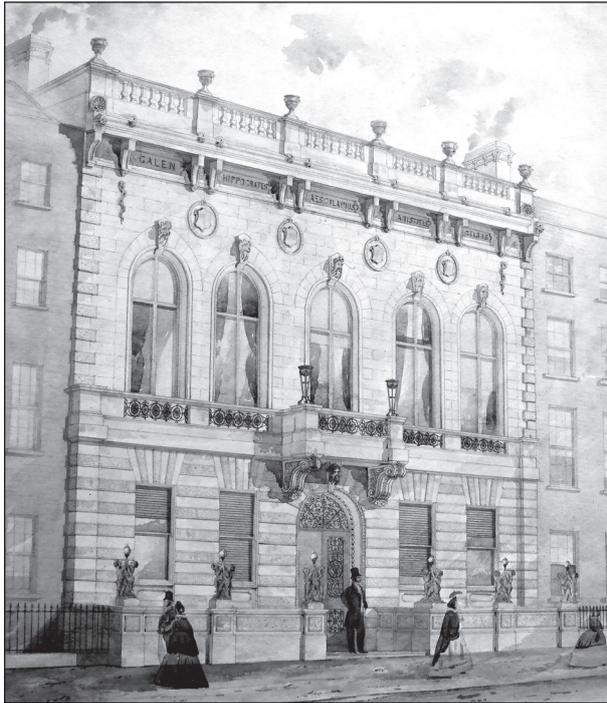
Six architects were chosen by the College to submit designs for the new building; William George Murray, Charles Geoghegan, Thomas Turner, John Butler, John McCurdy and Duncan Ferguson. They were given just over two months to submit, the winner would receive 5% of the construction costs, with a premium of £50 for the second place design.

On 17 July 1861, the building committee met to make the final decision on the submissions. The committee 'having carefully examined the several plans and designs of the buildings, and read the descriptions given by the several architects are of opinion that the design and plan by William Murray are best and most suitable for the purposes of the College and that those of John McCurdy are the second'.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, no further details are given of why the College made this decision or what they thought of the plans. However, all six entries were displayed by the College in Dun's Hospital, and the *Dublin Builder*, the leading trade magazine, published a review. This paper, combined with the surviving plans and the letters submitted to the College by the architects, gives some idea of what the alternative designs were, and why they might have been found less suitable.

The designs submitted by John Butler and Duncan Ferguson were dismissed by the *Dublin Builder* in a few sentences. The journal found 'Butler is hardly as happy in his design for the elevation of this building as in others of his works'.<sup>13</sup> Ferguson received even harsher criticism for his two designs in which he 'seems either to have not carefully studied his subject or to have entrusted the drawings to less competent hands; in candour and with regret we must say there is not a particle of architectural merit in either'.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly Ferguson's two designs were of different styles, one classical and one Italianate. In the letter accompanying his submission Ferguson promotes the classical style 'as most suitable to the dignity and gravity of the profession' while the Italianate is 'so much the rage of the present day',<sup>14</sup> suggesting that Ferguson may have thought the College would prefer the classical, while he would have liked to build Italianate.

Like Ferguson, Turner and his partner Drew, submitted a couple of options for the design. Design A in the Italianate style seemed, to the journal, the most suitable for the purpose. Design B is 'equally commendable as an architectural composition, but unsuitable for the indeed

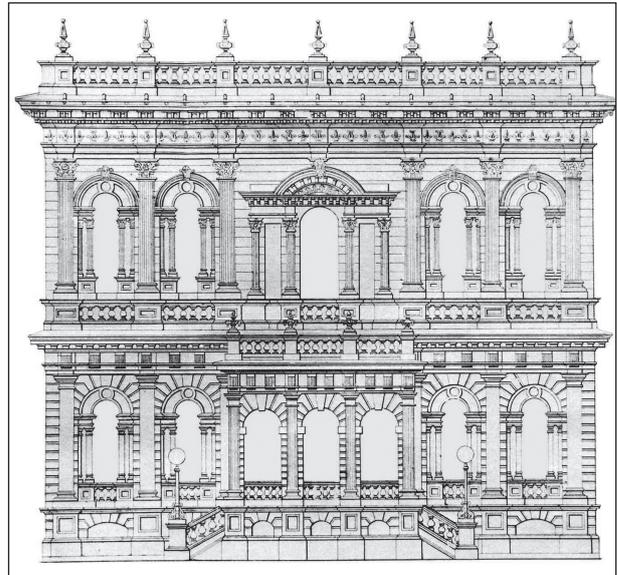


**FIGURE 3** Charles Geoghegan's proposed facade design for a building for the College of Physicians on Kildare Street, 1861 (Courtesy of the Irish Architectural Archive)

purpose. The application of the latter to a concert hall, arcade or bazaar entrance would find numerous admirers'.<sup>13</sup> This comment suggests that design B was of a much more elaborate and decorative style.

The Irish Architectural Archive holds a perspective of the façade of the proposed design, submitted by Charles Geoghegan (Figure 3). This design, also in Italianate style, has five bays and two stories. The names of some of the founding fathers of medicine are inscribed under the top balustrade. The written submission by Geoghegan to the College is the most detailed and gives full details of the materials he intended to use, including blue limestone from Skerries. The *Dublin Builder* was not in favour of Geoghegan's designs: they felt that 'considerable labour seems to have been incurred in elaborate and various coloured patterns of tiles on the floors of halls and passages, admittedly very well executed, but a superfluous work.' The façade was judged to 'have some merit, but is too light for the purpose, though we have no wish to put the architect out of conceit of his design, which is about the best of these we have been by him'.<sup>13</sup>

Of the five unselected designs, the *Dublin Builder* devoted most attention to the design of John McCurdy (Figure 4), which was awarded a £50 second place premium by the College of Physicians. In describing McCurdy's proposal, the *Dublin Builder* commented that 'it would seem in description to suggest a similarity in design to that approved. But it is not so, for the elaborateness of its ornamentation contributes a character of club house architecture which the other has not; and in viewing this



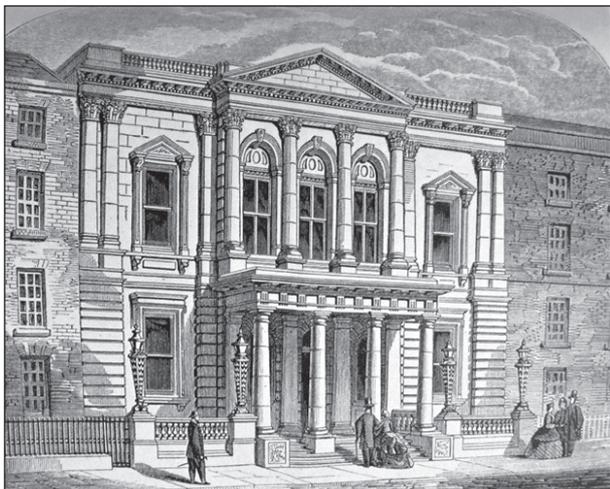
**FIGURE 4** John McCurdy's proposed facade design the new College of Physicians building, published in the *Dublin Builder*, 1861

we confess to have been temporarily transported in imagination to Pall Mall and the neighbouring districts, where palatial structures abound like trees in a forest'.<sup>13</sup> McCurdy's more elaborate style continued in the interior, and he was castigated for this by the *Dublin Builder*. 'His elevation is considerably more elaborate and his general arrangements more extensive and costly – indeed so much so, that he would seem to have lost sight of one of the conditions of the competition as regards expenditure'.<sup>13</sup> The question of cost seems to have been a problem for several of the architects, and the *Dublin Builder* recorded an anonymous comment from one of the architects that 'the work could not be completed for double the price'.<sup>13</sup>

The interior of McCurdy's design, although more elaborate than Murray's, is similar in the focus on a grand central staircase, well-lit from above. Small reception rooms are found on either side of the entrance Hall, with larger grand accommodation at the rear. McCurdy's entry was one of the most detailed and the *Dublin Builder* conceded that 'the drawings – seven sheets in number – are very creditable, and represent such an amount of labour as the premium awarded will hardly do more than moderately requite'.<sup>13</sup>

## WILLIAM MURRAY'S WINNING DESIGN

It seems that the *Dublin Builder* agreed with the College in their selection of William Murray's design (Figure 5): 'we have no hesitation in saying, without disparagement to the other designs, that this building will prove in every respect suitable, and an acquisition to the architecture of the city'.<sup>13</sup> The grand staircase is central to Murray's design (Figure 6), with the small office rooms on the ground floor, the



**FIGURE 5** William Murray's winning facade design for the new College building, published in the *Dublin Builder*, 1861.

large hall on the first, and the library running the full width of the building at the front. The layout of Murray's design had many similarities to the design of the College of Physicians in Edinburgh (Figure 7), suggesting he may have seen the plans requested by Dr Neligan. Murray was not the first in his family to work for a medical College: his father William Murray Senior had designed the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland's building on St Stephen Green, 50 years earlier.

Having selected the design, the College then called for tenders from builders, accepting that of James Beardwood, which was the lowest. The foundation stone was laid on 7 July 1862, by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, George Howard 7th Earl of Carlisle. The College hoped to be in their new building by the end of the following year, and the date 1863 was included in both the decorative plaster and stained glass.

As with many building projects, there were problems. James Beardwood was taken seriously ill and, in October 1863, the College received a letter from him arguing that in any case 'the time originally named in the contract was too short for the proper completion of such a building as the College'. This explanation was dismissed as 'not satisfactory to the College'.<sup>15</sup>

The premises were finally handed over to the College in June 1864, 10 months after the original completion date and, on 15 July 1864, the first meeting of the College took place in the building. It was recorded in the minutes that we 'cannot permit the present occasion of a meeting for the first time in our new Hall to pass without expressing the satisfaction we feel at the altered circumstance in which the College is now placed from what it has been for so long a period.'<sup>16</sup> On St Luke's Day, 18 October 1864, Sir Dominic Corrigan stood down after five years as President. His time in that office had corresponded with the purchase and construction of

the new building, and he had devoted much of his own time, energy and money to the project. At their Annual Stated Meeting that day, the College paid tribute to Corrigan, and he, in return, presented a stained glass window to the College.

## THE RACQUET HALL

Murray's designs for a new building covered only half the site, and it left an existing building at the back of the site, containing a racquet court and billiard room, untouched. The question of what to do with this building was a constant one for the College during the 1860s and 1870s. As early as 1863 Murray submitted a proposal for linking this rear building into his new design. He suggested removing the central window from the main hall to create a vestibule which would lead to a museum space. The proposal was rejected by the committee who 'did not consider it expedient to make the proposed alteration in the window of the new College Hall'.<sup>17</sup>

Over the next ten years, the College continued to examine the possibility of connecting the two buildings on their site and, on different occasions, asked Murray, McCurdy and Geoghegan to submit designs, which suggests that they were the architects who had most impressed the College in 1861.

In 1868 McCurdy was requested to submit proposals. His first was an ambitious plan to connect the two premises via a corridor running from the Registrar's office (now the reception area) under the main hall, with steps rising up the back building. This was immediately rejected, and he submitted a second proposal for a small vestibule joining the two buildings through the rear of the main hall, very similar to Murray's 1863 proposal. Although no record is given as to why this proposal was not carried out, the most likely reason seems to have been finance. In 1873, when the debentures for the purchase of the Kildare Street site were finally paid off, the question of the rear building was again raised. On this occasion a design submitted by McCurdy was finally accepted by the College.

McCurdy's design of 1873 provided a simple link corridor between the two buildings, with the refurbishment of the racquet court and link corridor in the Italianate style favoured by McCurdy. As with the previous building work, this project was financed by debentures purchased by Fellows and Licentiatees. The work on the rear building was completed in 1875, and the window that had originally been presented to the College by Corrigan in 1864 was moved to its current position in the hall that now carries his name.

The work was the last major building work carried out by the College in the 19th century but during the 20th



**FIGURE 6** Main entrance hall, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland



**FIGURE 7** Main entrance hall, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

century more works were carried out in the basement areas. Murray's original plans included a caretaker's flat at basement level, facing Kildare Street, but the rest of the cellars on the site were unused. As the College expanded these were converted to office space and teaching rooms, which they still remain as today.

The biggest change came in the early 1960s when the College was informed that Murray's original limestone façade had become detached from the brickwork behind it, and was in imminent danger of falling onto Kildare Street. As with the previous building project, finance was a major stumbling block and debentures were again issued to Member and Fellows. Desmond FitzGerald

was commissioned to produce designs for a new façade, and he submitted a range of options. In the end, the conservatism of the College once more came through and the design chosen was an almost like-for-like replacement of Murray's façade, but made from the more hard-wearing Portland stone.

The most recent building project was carried out between 2003 and 2006, when the building was closed and a major restoration and conservation project was carried out by Scott Tallon Walker. The building reopened in 2006 with Murray and McCurdy's designs restored to their full original glory.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Mahaffy JP. *John Stearne: An address delivered in the theatre of Trinity College at the bi-centenary celebration of the medical school*. Dublin: Dublin University Press; 1912. p.1–17.
- 2 Coakley D. *Medicine in Trinity College Dublin. An Illustrated History*. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin; 2014. p.20–2.
- 3 Widdess JDH. *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 1654–1963*. Edinburgh; E & S Livingstone; 1963. p.9–10
- 4 Coakley D. *Medicine in Trinity College Dublin. An Illustrated History*. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin; 2014. p.29–31
- 5 Charter of the King and Queen's College of Physicians of Ireland, 15 December 1692 (RCPI/1/1/2).
- 6 Widdess JDH. *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 1654–1963*. Edinburgh; E & S Livingstone; 1963. p.192.
- 7 Physicians Hall Petition, 1814 (RCPI/9/1).
- 8 Widdess JDH. *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 1654–1963*. Edinburgh; E & S Livingstone; 1963. p.193–4.
- 9 Debenture Book, 1861 (RCPI/9/3/4).
- 10 Widdess JDH. *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 1654–1963*. Edinburgh; E & S Livingstone; 1963. p.196–7.
- 11 Minutes of the Building Committee, 6 May 1861, in Occasional Committee Minutes (RCPI/2/2/1/1/1).
- 12 Minutes of the Building Committee, 17 July 1861, in Occasional Committee Minutes (RCPI/2/2/1/1/1).
- 13 New College of Physicians. *The Dublin Builder* 1 August 1861; p.589
- 14 Letter from Duncan Ferguson, July 1861 (RCPI/9/3/1).
- 15 Letter from James Beardwood, October 1863 (RCPI/9/3/3).
- 16 Minutes of the meeting of 15 July 1864, College Journal Vol. XXII (RCPI/2/1/1/14).
- 17 Minutes of the Building Committee, in Occasional Committee Minutes (RCPI/2/2/1/1/1).