

TECHNICAL NOTE No. 35

March 1990

Updated January 2006

Fanlights

The generic term of fanlight, applied at first to radiating panes, now embraces all glazing over doors. Its function is to provide light to a hall or lobby beyond,- an invention associated with formal architecture though later adopted for many vernacular buildings. At first most over door windows were plain or simply sub-divided rectangles, but once curved shapes were introduced decoration followed naturally and the fashion spread to compliment the new Palladian style of architecture. The materials used followed an identifiable pattern with metal glazing bars replacing those of timber section as early as the 1740s. The Adam brothers promoted the use of cast iron from about 1760. The introduction of composite bars made up of wrought iron and lead, possible initiating-about 1770 in Dublin, allowed a great variety of curved glazing bars and ornament to be incorporated into the designs. After the 1790s radiating designs were replaced by curves and the shapes changed to three-centred or elliptical. Teardrop or batwing form was used often relieved by a minimum of applied ornament. The introduction of inexpensive plate glass in the 1850s saw the demise of the decorative fanlight and its replacement with plain glass. It will be found that many iron fanlights are not glazed but are set simply in front of a sheet of glass. Alternatively lead comes are fixed directly to the surface of the glass but this method was used only for relatively unimportant buildings.

Fanlights often contain much original glass which is precious due to its rarity and they are best repaired by removal of the complete unit, including the timber frame to the workshop. Attempts to remove the metalwork from its sash in situ will result in serious damage. Minor repairs of ornaments, fractures of cast iron or loose glazing bars can be refixed in situ using epoxy resin but resoldering is the only way to repair a lead fanlight in a lasting manner. In the workshop putty may be softened by use of a proprietary system which consists of a paste used in conjunction with protective sheeting to prevent drying out. An alternative method involves use of an infra-red lamp. As much as possible of the original glass should be salvaged and reused. New panes are cut using cardboard templates. It is worth obtaining old glass from redundant windows to match the distortions of the original. Modern substitutes, such as greenhouse glass, are available but unsuitable products are also on the market. The tradition of painting the lead comes, set by the earlier timber fanlights, has been perpetuated despite changes in materials. Unpainted lead may be acceptable.

Further Reading:

Period Houses, A Conservation Guidance Manual. Dublin, CivicTrust 2001.
Chapter 17 Fanlights .

Roche, Nessa, The Legacy of Light, A History Of Irish Windows. Wordwell Ltd.
Wicklow 1999.

Environment and Heritage Service

Built Heritage

Protecting Historic Buildings

Waterman House

5-33 Hill Street

BELFAST

BT1 2LA

Tel: 028 9054 3145