

A Letter written from Limerick County Jail in 1829

In 2012 Limerick City Museum acquired a letter written by William Butts, Brevet Major in the Royal Artillery, to James Wilson MP requesting his help.¹ It reads as follows,

To
James Wilson Esq.
M.P. York City
3 Brunswick Place
Regents Park
London

My dear Sir,

I thank you much for your letter of the 14th Instant which reached me on the 9th following; my last to you will have informed you of my situation; which has been since considerably altered for the worse in consequence of my petition for retiring upon Half pay being refused;- think for one instant how I must feel under the idea of my poor wife and children being thrown upon the world as beggars; God knows I have suffered enough for the faults I have committed & I was in hope the punishment which has been inflicted would have been thought adequate to my offence. You may be able to serve me very materially in interesting yourself to obtain the object of a Memorial to be placed upon Half Pay which I forwarded to Lord Beresford Master Gen'l of the Ordnance on the 23rd of last month; he was

by *Brian Hodkinson*

not then aware of my being subjected to the imprisonment I have undergone since the 31st March; I should hope therefore he would feel inclined to take my case with favourable consideration, particularly when backed with your influence.

You know full well my services in the West Indies & You also know that my pecuniary embarrassments had their rise in the advances I made to an unfortunate brother, whose untimely death at once did away with chance of my obtaining any return; this sum amounted to £1200 & has been the cause of every misfortune which has lately occurred to me & will I fear entail ruin & destruction upon my unfortunate family.

Whatever you do must be done quickly; the smallest delay may terminate fatally; I am sure therefore I need not point out to your generous breast, how much & how deeply we shall be indebted for your interest upon this unhappy occasion.

God bless you, my dear Sir; if the prayers of a miserable family are of any avail. They are offered up for your health and happiness.

Believe me

Yr most obliged

W. Butts

County Jail Limerick, 11th April 1829

If you address me Castle Connell it will be forwarded by Mrs Butts to me; who is residing there for the present.

The letter is annotated that it was answered on the 4th of May 1829.

On the 20th and 23rd of May that year Butts appeared before a General Court Martial in the jail where he faced five charges:-

1) For having on or about the 7th day of May, 1828, dishonourably obtained from the Provincial Bank of Ireland, the sum of £350, being the amount of certain monies then advanced to the said Brevet Major Butts, by or on behalf of the said Bank, by way of discount upon a certain Bill of Exchange, presented by him, purporting to be drawn by himself, the said Brevet Major Butts, and accepted by the Rev. Edward Drury Butts,² and thereby holding forth to the said Provincial Bank of Ireland, that the Rev. E.D. Butts would pay the same Bill when due, or in failure thereof, that he the said Brevet Major Butts, would pay the said Bill, whereas he the said Brevet Major Butts, well knew at the time when he received the said sum of £350 from the Provincial Bank of Ireland, that the said Bill would not be paid according to the tenor thereof, and which said Bill has not, in point of fact, been paid.

2) For that the said Brevet Major Butts, being indebted to Mr Jacob West in the sum of £51 5s 1d. for certain goods,



County Gaol from Fitzgerald and McGregor's History of Limerick published in 1827

he, by false representations, induced the said Mr Jacob West to accept in discharge thereof a certain Bill of Exchange, purporting to be drawn by himself, the said Brevet Major Butts, and accepted by the Rev. Edward Drury Butts, payable at Messrs. Greenwood, Cox, and Company, Army Agents, for £180, thereby holding out to the said Jacob West, that the Rev. E.D. Butts would pay the said Bill, as Acceptor thereof at Messrs. Greenwood Cox, and Company, Army Agents, or that in failure thereof, he, the said Major Butts, would pay the said Bill, as Drawer thereof, and thereby farther inducing the said Mr Jacob West to pay to him, the said Brevet Major Butts the sum of £128 14s 11d. in cash, being the difference between the said debt of £51 5s 1d. and the amount of the said bill for £180 he, the said Brevet Major Butts, well knowing that the said Army agents, Messrs. Greenwood Cox, and Company, had no assets in their hands belonging to the Rev. E. D. Butts, nor to him the said Brevet Major Butts, and that the said Bill would not be paid, according to the tenor thereof, at Messrs Greenwood, Cox, and Company, and the said Bill, or the amount thereof, has never yet been paid to the said Mr Jacob West.

3) For having dishonourably induced the said Mr Jacob West to accept divers orders and checks upon Messrs. Greenwood Cox and Company, in and for the payment of certain sums therein mentioned, and in discharge of the debt due to him from the said Brevet Major Butts, as in the last charge stated, falsely representing to the said Mr Jacob West, from time to time, that the same would be paid and discharged according to the tenor thereof, whereas the said Brevet Major Butts well knew that the said Messrs. Greenwood Cox & Company had no assets belonging to him in their hands and that such orders and checks could not be paid, and the said orders and checks still remain unpaid.

4) For that he the said Brevet Major Butts, being indebted to the firm of Messrs. Alexander of Limerick, for certain goods sold to him, to the amount of £8.10s. or thereabouts, he, by false representations, induced the said firm of Messrs. Alexander to accept, in discharge thereof, a certain bill, or order for the payment of money, purporting to be an order made by him upon J.S. Cooper, Esq. of Dublin, for the payment of £35 10s. thereby holding out to the said Messrs Alexander, that the said J.S. Cooper would pay the said sum of £35 10s. according to the tenor of the said order, and thereby inducing the said Messrs Alexander to pay to him, the said Brevet Major Butts, the sum of £27 in cash, being the difference between the said sum of £35 10s. and the sum of £8 10s. he, the said Brevet Major Butts, well knowing that the said J.S Cooper had no assets, or money, in his hands belonging to the said Major Butts, and

Letter from William Butts to James Wilson MP
(Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

that the said Bill of £35 10s would not be paid according to the tenor thereof; and the amount of the said debt was not paid to Messrs. Alexander by J.S. Cooper, upon their application for the same, according to the tenor of the said order, and the said sum therein mentioned has not yet been paid to the said firm of Messrs. Alexander.

5) For that he, the said Brevet Major Butts, being indebted to one William O'Donnell, a Butcher in Limerick, in the sum of £9, for goods sold to him, and having, notwithstanding repeated solicitations by the said William O'Donnell, for a long time dishonourably neglected and omitted to discharge the said debt, he, the said Brevet Major Butts, in the month of March last, induced the said William O'Donnell to accept, in payment of the said debt, his Promissory Note for £9 4s. whereby the said Brevet Major Butts undertook to pay the amount of the said debt mentioned therein, according to the tenor of the said Note, but which note was not paid when it became due.³

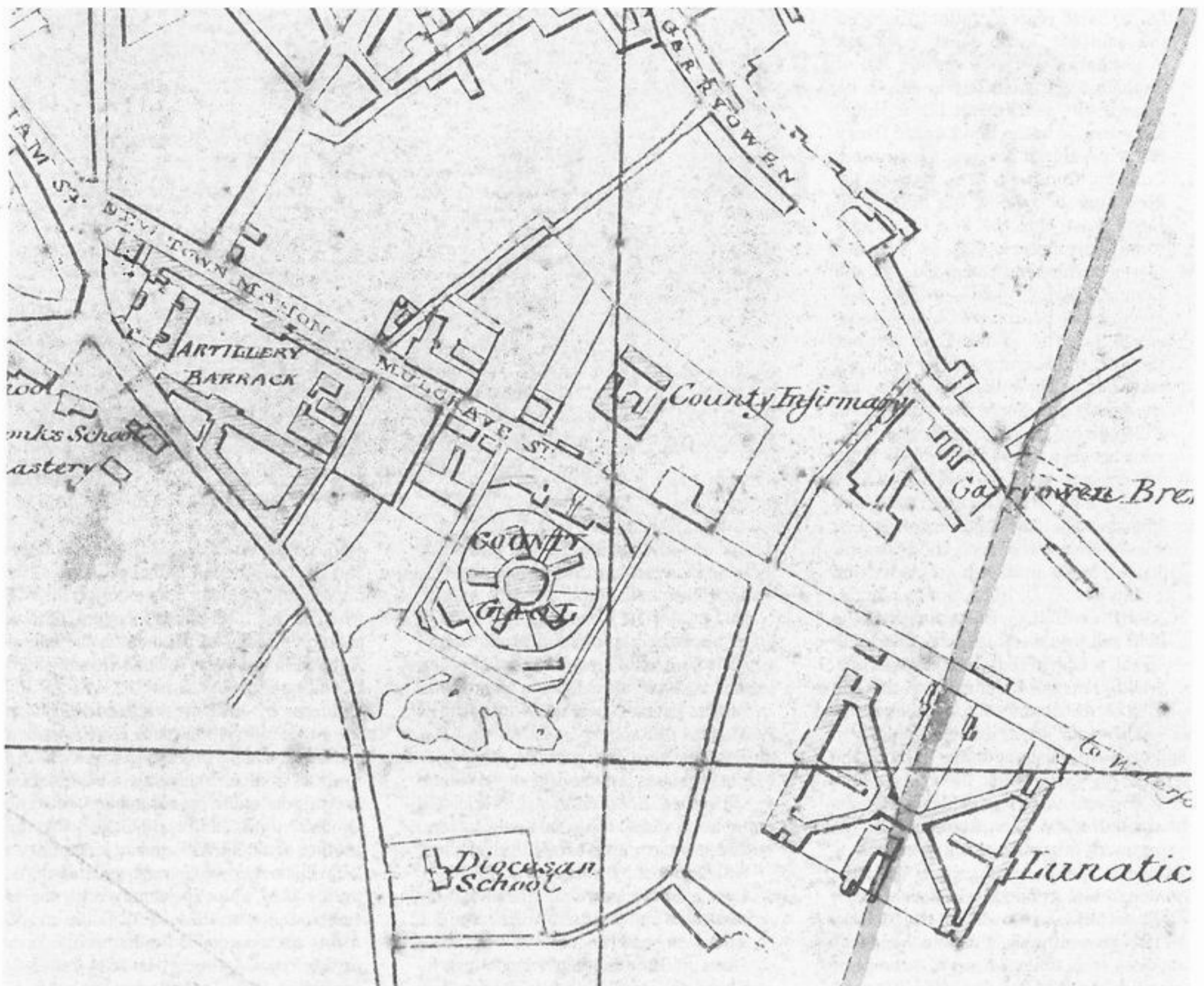
Alderman West, Mr Alexander, Mr Hunter of the Provincial Bank in Limerick and a clerk for Greenwood Cox all gave evidence for the prosecution. Butts gave evidence on his own behalf but did not call any witnesses of his own.⁴ He was found guilty on all charges and dismissed from the service for conduct unbecoming an officer. The Court added that "having performed a painful and unavoidable duty in passing the above sentence on the prisoner, [it] begs leave in the strongest manner, under the distressing circumstances in which his large family is placed, his length of service in the army, and his present unhappy situation, humbly to recommend him to His Majesty's merciful consideration". The verdict was ordered to be read at the head of every regiment.⁵

William Butts was born at Glemsford in Suffolk in 1784. His military career is recorded in the volumes of the London Gazette, in 1801 he was promoted from Gentleman Cadet to 2nd Lieutenant, in

1803 he became 1st Lieutenant, in 1808 2nd Captain, then in 1824 1st Captain. His brevet rank of Major was awarded in 1814 when, as his local paper reported, he was appointed Major of Brigade on the Isle of Antigua in the West Indies.⁶ He remained in Antigua until at least 1823. Six of his children, by his wife Victoire Elizabeth whom he married in 1808, were baptised on the island between 1814 and c1823.⁷ In 1819 William's brother Charles died in Antigua⁸ and it would appear from the context of the letter that this was the brother to whom William had lent money.

William seems to have stayed in Antigua until c.1824 when the family returned to England. From 1824 to 1829 his movements are recorded in the Battery Records of the Royal Artillery.⁹ In 1824 as newly promoted 1st Captain he replaced S. Maxwell of 4th battalion 1st Company on its return to Woolwich from Canada and was then based in London until 1826 when he transferred to the 4th battalion 4th Company on its removal to Islandbridge in Dublin. His company moved to Limerick in mid-1827 and William remained there until his court-martial in May 1829, though his company had already left Limerick in March of that year. While in England two children were baptised in Glemsford.¹⁰ One of these was named Octavia. If she was an eighth child, as her name possibly suggests, then there must have been another child born in the period 1821-24. A further two children were baptised in St John's Limerick,¹¹ the latter Mary Agnes after William's court martial.

What William did in the aftermath of his dismissal is not entirely clear. Intriguingly the baptismal record of another child, Elizabeth, in 1833 at Greenwich, records his occupation as Lt. Colonel in the Portuguese Army. This is confirmed by the list of officers in the army of Dom Pedro, which also records his son, William Leith Butts as lieutenant.¹² In the 1841 Census he appears with his wife and 2 children in N. Street Leighton Buzzard, where his occupation is given a Clerk to the Railways. When the Military General Service Medal was instituted in 1848,



Map showing Limerick Gaol in the 1840s

William applied for it with the bars for service in the capture of Martinique (1809) and Guadaloupe (1810).¹³ The London Gazette of 9th April 1850 records William's appearance before the court for the relief of insolvent debtors seeking protection against bankruptcy where his occupation is given as commission agent. His address is 18 Harker Street, Chelsea, late of 13 Cadogan Terrace, Sloane Square, Chelsea and before that 22 Grove Place, Brompton, Kensington. In the 1851 Census he is to be found living in Paulton Square London, giving his occupation as commission agent. In the 1861 census he was at 13 Sloane Terrace in Chelsea, with his wife and two unmarried daughters Emily and Celia, where he describes himself as a retired army officer. In 1862 Butts was declared bankrupt.¹⁴ He died in 1866.

Little is known about the early background of James Wilson, to whom Butts addressed his letter. He was a proprietor of an estate on St. Vincent in the West Indies and aspired to the title of Colonel though it is by no means clear if he in fact merited it. In 1820 he bought Sneaton Manor near Whitby in Yorkshire and proceeded to rebuild the mansion as Sneaton Castle. He was elected M.P. For York in 1826 and died

in 1830.¹⁵ From Butts' letter it is clear that the two met in the West Indies, probably in St Vincent where William's first child was born.¹⁶

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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REFERENCES

- 1 LM2012.0876
- 2 Brother of William.
- 3 *United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine*, part 2, (London 1829) pp 641-2.
- 4 *Freeman's Journal* May 26th 1829.
- 5 *United Service Journal* p. 642.
- 6 *Bury and Norwich Post*, December 28th 1814.
- 7 Victoire appears as Victoria in some documents. The baptisms of Emily b.1812, (according to 1851 Census born in St. Vincent), Amy Jane b.1814, William Leith b.1816 and Edward Boehmler b.1818 are recorded in 'Extracts from the Register of St. Paul's Falmouth, Island of Antigua' in *Miscellanea Genealogica et Heraldica*, Vol. IV 2nd series, London 1892, pp 197 & 319. The 1861 Census records Celia

Montgomery, aged 40, unmarried, and born in Antigua as living with her parents at 13 Sloane Terrace, London. Anne Emily Victoria b.1823 calculated from 1861 and 1871 Census returns; she married John Robarts winner of one of the first Victoria Crosses for action in the Crimean War.

- 8 *Bury and Norwich Post*, March 8th 1820.
- 9 M.E.S. Laws, *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery 1716-1859*, (Woolwich, 1952) pp 180-195.
- 10 Octavia Drury in 1825 and Thomas Henry Spelling in 1826.
- 11 John Worsley Robertson 1827 and Mary Agnes 1829.
- 12 Americo Fernandes Henriquex, *Os Oficiais do Exercito de Dom Pedro (1829-1835)*, (Lisbon, 2008) pp 152 & 160-1.
- 13 *Peninsula Medal Roll 1793-1814*, on www.findmypast.co.uk
- 14 *London Gazette*, May 6th 1862.
- 15 Information on Wilson extracted from his entry, compiled by Martin Casey, in D.D. Fisher (ed.) *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820-32*, (Cambridge, 2009).
- 16 Though christened in Antigua.