

CENTENARY COMMEMORATION

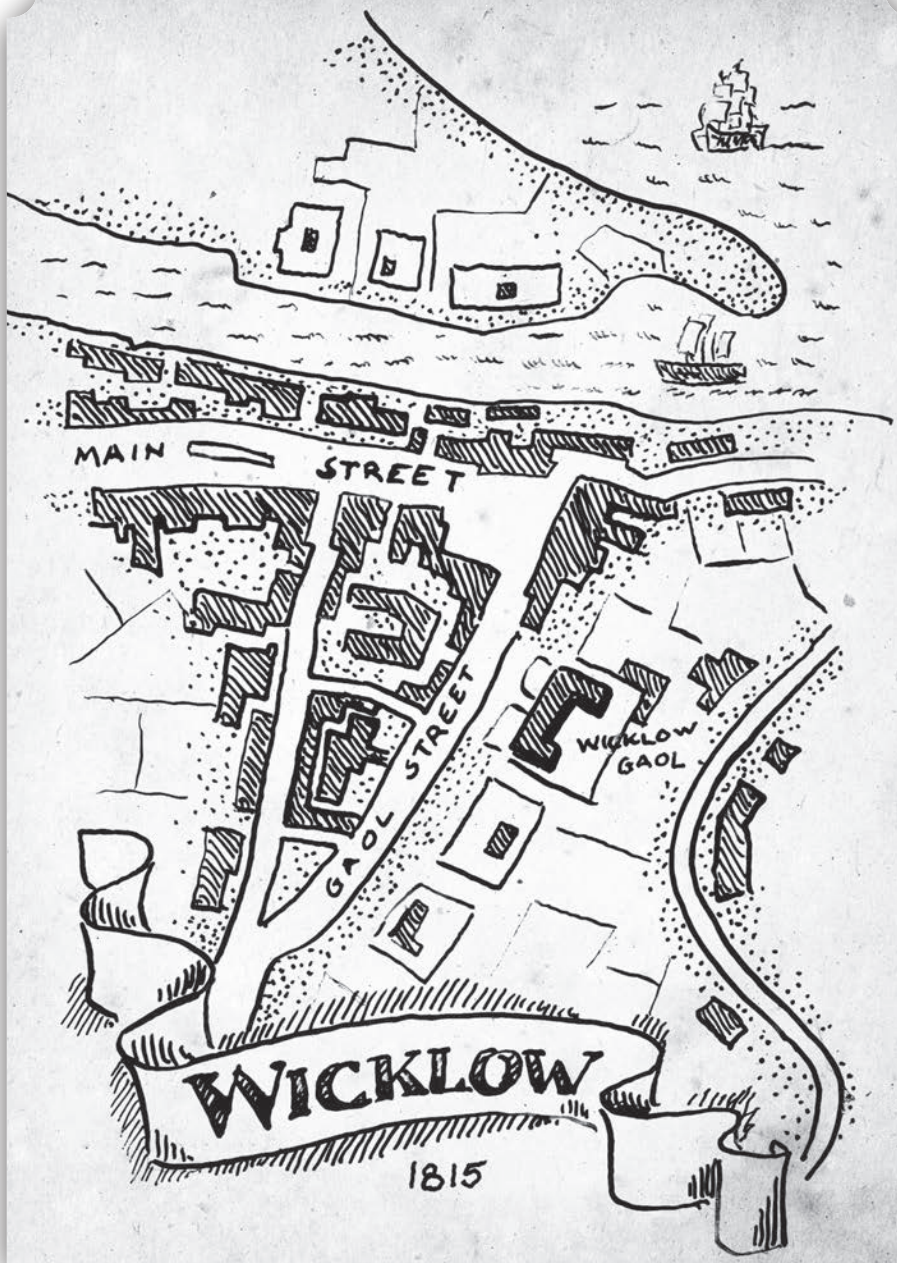
# WICKLOW GAOL

*Three Centuries of Incredible Irish History*



**Carmel Uí Cheallaigh**  
ILLUSTRATED BY *Jimmy Burns*





MAIN STREET

GAOL STREET

WICKLOW GAOL

WICKLOW

1815



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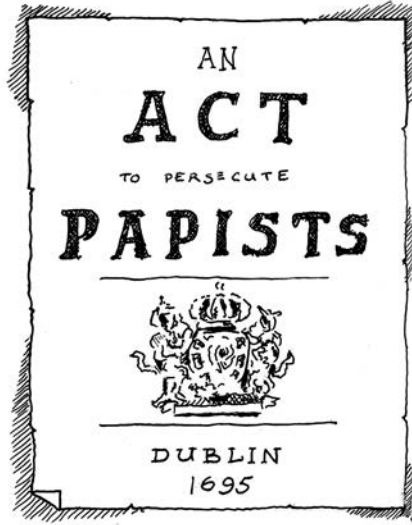


*To Alexandra.  
Welcome to the world, little one.*



# 1

## Bleak Beginnings



The harsh Penal Laws of the 17th and early 18th centuries discriminated against the mainly Catholic population of Ireland. To allow the laws to be strictly enforced, it was planned that each county would have its own prison.

Construction of a gaol in Wicklow began in 1702. It was first mentioned in the town council minutes of 1709, which recorded that 2s 6d was spent on candles and straw for a group of French prisoners, probably shipwrecked seamen, held there.



The gaol as we now know it was built on the site of this earlier gaol and then expanded significantly between 1820 and 1843.

In 1716, Fr. Owen McFee, a seventy-two-year-old Catholic priest was the first recorded prisoner in the gaol, awaiting transportation to a British colony in America. His only crime was saying mass.



In the early years, men, women and children, tried and untried, sane and insane were all held together in a small cell. They had no proper toilet or washing facilities, no fresh air or chance to exercise. Unsurprisingly, 'gaol fever', a highly contagious disease, spread rapidly inside and outside the gaol. Symptoms included





a high temperature, headache, and a red body rash. It was spread by lice moving from person to person in the overcrowded conditions. The gaolers were so afraid of catching it that they abandoned all sick inmates. Sometimes, they blasted gunpowder into the cells in a vain attempt to eradicate the disease.

In the 1700s, corrupt gaolers were commonplace. Oftentimes, new prisoners were robbed of their clothes. As there was no uniform to keep prisoners warm, things could get very chilly and embarrassing! Although gaolers were paid between £20 and £30 a year to supply prisoners with food, lighting and bedding, many demanded additional money from the prisoners for these basic items. They often further supplemented their income by allowing gambling in the cells, selling alcohol to the prisoners and extracting a fee from every prisoner before release. As many inmates were in prison for non-payment of debts, and sometimes even detained with their families, this was especially cruel and added to the overcrowding problem. In 1763, the Irish House of Commons passed a bill prohibiting this practice.



## 2

# Dreadful Punishments

Anyone convicted of a crime, political or otherwise, was sentenced to time in prison. Sentences were supposed to reflect the gravity of the crime and execution by hanging was the ultimate punishment. It is more than a little ironic that you could be hanged on wooden gallows for chopping down a tree! In the early days, the bodies of the executed were thrown into the sea and their heads fed to the prison hawk. As you can imagine, the local fishermen were none too happy about the floating bodies and refused to fish! One prison hawk met his end when a prisoner managed to kill and eat him. Ugh, that was only one step away from cannibalism!

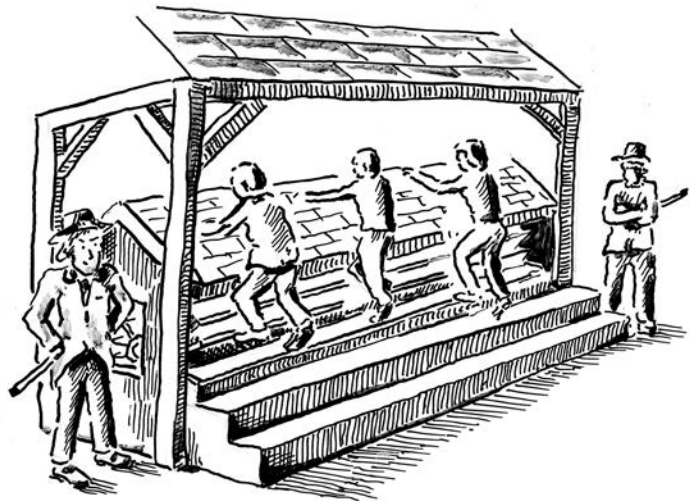
Depriving someone of their freedom was often not considered enough, so physical punishment was meted out regularly. Whipping was the usual punishment, even for children! Often, it was part of the original sentence, but it could be added on for misbehaviour. Usually, it was carried out by the other prisoners, making it extra humiliating as well as painful.



Physical punishment was meted out regularly. Whipping was the usual punishment, even for children!



Another common form of punishment was the treadmill. It had been invented in 1818 by English civil engineer William Cubitt for prisoners to pump water, mill flour or grind corn in a bid to combat idleness. It was introduced to Wicklow Gaol in 1820. This 'everlasting staircase' consisted of a wide, hollow cylinder with wooden steps. As it moved, it forced the prisoners to move with it. With up to forty prisoners using it at any one time, accidents causing severe injuries were common.





A momentary lapse in concentration could result in missing teeth as the prisoner's face collided with the step while struggling to keep up. Inmates spent three hours working the wheel in winter and four in summer. It was eventually abolished in the 1898 Prisons Act.

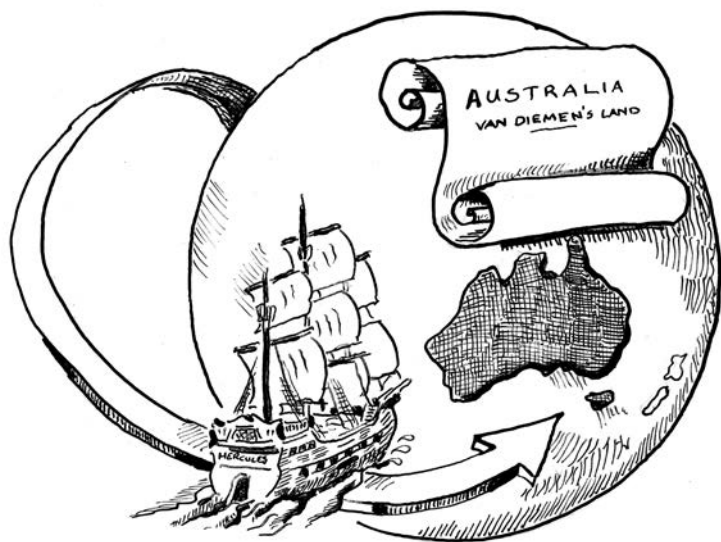
The shot drill was a heavy steel ball, like a cannon ball or a bowling ball, weighing 11 kg. Anyone sentenced to hard labour had to lift it to chest height and hold it for a few seconds, without bending their legs, on the orders of the gaoler. As the ball became slippery with the sweat of the prisoners, it made it even harder to hold. For those already weak with hunger, this was a particularly harsh punishment to endure.



Solitary confinement in the basement was another way to discipline unruly prisoners.

# 3

## Treacherous and Terrifying Transportation



Transportation was the fate of many prisoners at Wicklow Gaol. The Transportation Act of 1717 allowed Britain to send prisoners to her faraway colonies to serve seven- or fourteen-year sentences of hard labour. Effectively, these convicts were banished to live in exile, never to see their families or Ireland again.



Political prisoners and petty criminals were all sent away. Stealing a loaf of bread or being homeless was enough to be sentenced to transportation.

Up until the 1770s, 15,000 Irish had been sent to plantations in Virginia and other parts of North America. The convicts provided cheap labour for the British settlers there. Australia later became the preferred destination. In the years from 1791 to 1868, around 50,000 Irish people were sent to New South Wales, Perth and Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). They worked for the government building roads, bridges and new towns, or were assigned to free settlers.

Transportation ships sailed out from the ports of Queenstown (Cobh) and Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire). Prisoners from Wicklow Gaol were among the 140 men and 25 women on board the convict ship the *Hercules*, which departed from Queenstown in November 1801. The *Hercules* sailed to Port Jackson in Australia via Rio de Janeiro and the Cape of Good Hope. By the time it arrived in June 1802, 40 male convicts had died from disease, starvation and murder. The ship's captain Luckyn Betts was accused of manslaughter, but he received a pardon.



Even so, transportation was seen as more humane than other punishments of the day. Transportation solved many problems for the authorities, as it got rid of the undesirables, eased overcrowding and decreased the population. How strange this vast new land 'down under' must have seemed to the weary, homesick convicts, with its arid soil, huge farms and constant sunshine.



By 1816, the authorities introduced separate ships for men and women, thanks to campaigners like Elizabeth Fry in England who worked tirelessly for the rights of female prisoners.

**Many prisoners died from disease, starvation, or even murder, aboard the transportation ships.**



# 4

## Who Feared to Speak of 1798

In 1791, the Society of United Irishmen was founded to unite all Irish people, establish a republic and end divisive British rule in Ireland. The United Irishmen were buoyed up by the success of the recent French Revolution, which put an end to the reign of King Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette who, in 1793, ended up losing their heads, literally.

The United Irishmen Rebellion broke out in May 1798. County Wicklow had 14,000 United Irishmen, making it the county with the most members. Many suspected of being United Irishmen were thrown into gaol. Billy Byrne, from







Ballymanus, Co. Wicklow, was a rebel leader who fought at Arklow, Vinegar Hill and Hacketstown. He was convicted on the paid witness testimony of 'Croppy Biddy'. In Wicklow Gaol, he enjoyed preferential treatment by the gaolers. He had his own cell and could roam freely around the gaol while others were shackled to the floor. He was also fed every day while other prisoners were lucky to eat every few days. Nevertheless, Billy was taken by horse and cart to Gallows Lane (now Rocky Road) and publicly hanged on 26 September 1799. People travelled from far and near, some with packed lunches, to enjoy this free entertainment. Many rebel prisoners were hanged from the gallows above the main entrance to the gaol. The public spectacle of hanging was intended to further demean the prisoner and act as a warning to other potential wrong doers.



The rebellion lasted for five years in Co. Wicklow, far longer than in other areas of the country, culminating in the arrest and transportation of Michael Dwyer (known as the Wicklow Chieftain) in December 1803.



Wicklow's most famous exiles to Australia during this period also included General Joseph Holt and James 'Napper' Tandy.

**Many rebel prisoners were hanged from the gallows above the main entrance to the gaol.**

Glencree, Laragh, Glenmalure and Aghavannagh barracks and the old military road all date from this time, as the British government tried to take control of the Wicklow Mountains from the rebels.

The influx of rebel prisoners during this time put considerable pressure on Wicklow Gaol and the authorities were afraid that the badly built walls would collapse.

In the prison's long history, Hugh Vesty Byrne, another rebel leader who fought alongside Billy Byrne, was renowned as the only escapee never to be recaptured. He was also the cousin of two other famous Wicklow rebels, Michael Dwyer and Anne Devlin.





# 5

## Slow but Sure Reform



With the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, all aspects of society were scrutinised by philosophers and intellectuals of the day. It is no surprise then that they found prison life to be inhumane and sought reform.





Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick visited Wicklow Gaol in 1785 and reported to the House of Commons that despite twenty-year-old legislation abolishing fee payments to gaolers, he discovered one wretched man still in prison 'detained for his fees'. He became the first Inspector General of Prisons a year later. Legislation in 1786 also stipulated regular prison inspections and reports and laid down thirteen regulations, the first of which was 'That it shall not be Lawful for any Woman to be Keeper of any Gaol'. Thankfully, no such 'reform' is acceptable today. Another reformer, John Howard, visited Wicklow Gaol in 1788 and again highlighted the unsanitary conditions endured by inmates. He recommended that cells be whitewashed and dirty straw burned regularly.

The expansion of the prison in the years 1820 to 1843 also focused on improving the physical building and its ventilation, adding exercise yards, and segregating prisoners based on their gender, status and severity of crime committed. By 1826, Wicklow Gaol was paying salaries to gaolers, two chaplains, a surgeon, a matron, a schoolmaster, and a local inspector. In 1843, the number of cells had increased to seventy-seven, allowing single cell occupancy for a short period of time.



Menial tasks like breaking stones with a hammer and untwisting thick, rough ropes for reuse did little more than give the prisoners blistered hands and bleeding fingers. Education consisted of classes in reading, writing and arithmetic and female prisoners also learned knitting, sewing, spinning and weaving. Ex-military man Edward Storey was appointed the prison Governor in 1866. His job was to show compassion and to make the prison a safe and healthy environment where prisoners could be educated. He was forbidden to take bribes or torture prisoners.





# 6

## Famine

By 1841, the Irish population of approximately 8 million was largely dependent on the potato crop.

The blight first appeared in County Wicklow in October 1845 in the Shillelagh area and the sickening stench of decay soon filled the countryside. Relief committees were formed to work with the government to coordinate relief measures. Relief works were set up to give employment, but these were short-lived and closed after a change of government a year later. To make matters worse, the herring fishing industry in Arklow failed at the same time.

Due to rising prices and the shortage of food, the workhouses throughout the county were soon full. Inevitably, crime increased and burglary and theft of sheep and cattle became widespread.

The courts were very busy, and in 1848, the seventy-seven cells in Wicklow Gaol held 780 people, the highest number ever recorded. In gaol, you were guaranteed two meals a day, so many people, desperate with hunger, committed crimes just to get inside.



By 1849, potatoes were replaced with meal, bread and milk on the prison menu. Gaol lore has it that the gaol cats were



also starving at this time due to a distinct lack of rats and mice around the place, because even these scrawny specimens were gobbled up by hungry people inside and outside the prison.

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, migrant workers flocked to County Wicklow. They were employed in the Avoca mines, the building of the railway, the development of Arklow and Wicklow harbours and the formation of the Vartry Reservoir. Earning good money, several workers were incarcerated for drunken and disorderly behaviour.

**In 1848, the 77 cells in Wicklow Gaol held 780 people, the highest number ever recorded.**

# 7

## Suffer Little Children

In the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of children were detained alongside adults in Irish prisons. Some were born there while others ended up there, punished for their petty crimes. Fighting and theft were the most common offences committed by children and we can only imagine their fear and anxiety when they realised they were going to prison.



In 1847, Laurence Murphy aged 14 received a sentence of one month for disorderly conduct in Baltinglass Workhouse. At that time, food was more available inside prison than out, so that might have motivated his bad behaviour.





In 1848, eight-year-old Thomas Pitt from Carnew was sentenced to one week in prison, with a whipping, for stealing 2s from a woman's purse in Bray. He was recorded as being illiterate and working as a labourer. It is likely that he was an orphan.

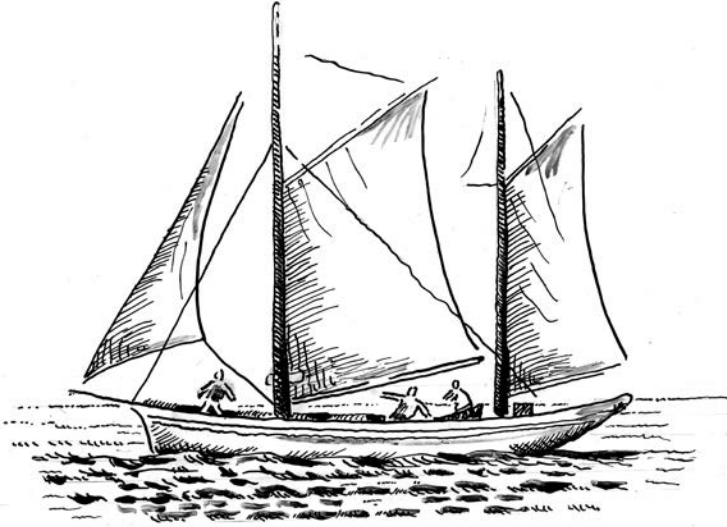
In the same year, John Weadock was given a one-month sentence, plus hard labour, for stealing gooseberries, and sisters Margaret and Mary Anne Spenser aged eight and nine were sentenced to a fortnight in Wicklow Gaol for 'causing malicious injury to timber'. Attitudes to imprisoning children with adults were changing, however, and Ireland's first reformatory school opened in 1858. By 1912, there were only five children in Irish prisons.

**In 1848, eight-year-old Thomas Pitt from Carnew was sentenced to one week in prison, with a whipping, for stealing 2s from a woman's purse in Bray.**



# 8

## Erskine Childers



Robert Erskine Childers was born in London on 25 June 1870. He spent much of his childhood at Glendalough House, Annamoe, County Wicklow, which was his mother's family home.

He fought in the British armed forces in the Boer War (1899–1902) in South Africa, but he became disillusioned with the idea of the British Empire and took up the fight for Irish independence. He joined the Irish Volunteers and smuggled German guns on his yacht the *Asgard* in 1914 in what became known as the 'Howth Gun Running'.

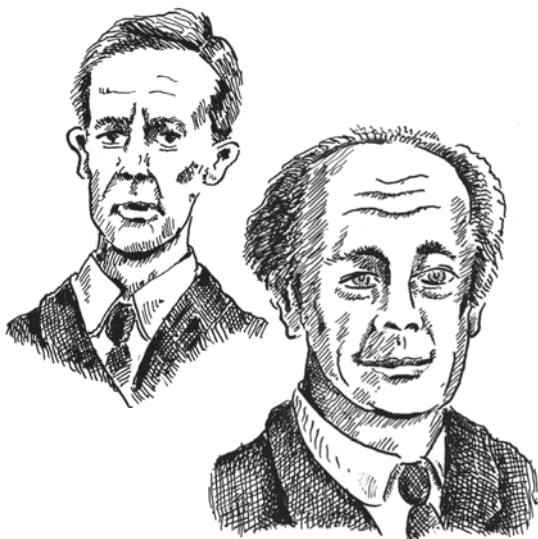


Childers wrote 'The Riddle of the Sands', one of the first ever spy novels. It was hugely popular in the years after its publication in 1903. It was also made into a movie in 1979.

A member of the Irish delegation at the Anglo–Irish treaty negotiations, he opposed the final draft, specifically the need for Irish leaders to take the Oath of Allegiance to King George V.

On 10 November 1922, during the Irish Civil War, he was arrested in Annamoe for the possession of an unlicensed handgun, a gift from Michael Collins. He was held at Wicklow Gaol for three days before he was removed to Dublin, where he was executed by firing squad by the Irish National Army at Beggar's Bush Barracks. Little did he know that his then sixteen-year-old son, Erskine Junior, would become the fourth President of Ireland in 1973.

He died heroically. His final words were 'Take a step or two forward lads, it will be easier that way.'





# 9

## Final Days/ New Beginnings

After the opening of Mountjoy Prison in Dublin in 1850, Wicklow Gaol was eventually downgraded to a bridewell, a place to hold prisoners serving short sentences. In 1901, just one prisoner was recorded there on census night.

Wicklow Gaol closed in the early 1900s, but it was reopened when the Cheshire Regiment of the British Army was stationed there during the War of Independence.



*Cheshire Regiment graffiti  
at Wicklow Gaol –  
© Wicklow County Council*



Between 1922 and 1924 the Gaol was occupied by the National Army of the Irish transition government and many republican prisoners were held there.

The Gaol closed permanently in 1924 and was taken over by Wicklow County Council in December of that year. Eventually, in 1985, a Gaol Advisory Committee recommended using the Gaol as a heritage centre. Major building work was carried out with funding secured from the EU.

Wicklow's Historic Gaol was officially opened by President Mary McAleese on 30 May 1998.





## Suggested Further Reading

Kavanagh, Joan, 'Wicklow County Gaol',  
*Roundwood & District History & Folklore Journal*, No. 4 (1991).

O'Reilly, Stan J., in conjunction with Abbey Community College,  
'Aspects of Wicklow Gaol' (2007).

Wicklow Gaol Education Pack (1998).

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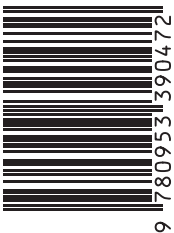
## CENTENARY COMMEMORATION



Thousands of men, women and children passed through the gates of **Wicklow Gaol**. Common criminals and Irish rebels alike endured painful punishment, corrupt gaolers and horrendous conditions. During major events in Irish history, including the 1798 rebellion, the Great Famine and the Civil War many local and national heroes were imprisoned within its walls.

Some prisoners were executed there; others were transported to faraway lands.

One hundred years after its closure, Wicklow Gaol has a history to tell that is not for the squeamish, so step inside if you dare ...



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