

began on a new Garda station on the site of the old barracks soon afterwards and the Gardai were able to move out of the courthouse in April 1925.

Following Independence in 1922 the courthouse continued to function much as before. The Royal Coat of Arms was removed and the tricolour replaced the union flag but the common law system of justice continued to be administered in Mullingar and elsewhere as it had been since the coming of the Normans. In 1924 the Petty Sessions were transformed into District Courts. The County (formerly Assize) Courts and Quarter Sessions became Circuit Courts. The District Judge replaced the Resident Magistrate (RM) and the letters SC replaced KC after Senior Counsels' names.



The role of the Grand Jury in the story of Mullingar Courthouse is especially important since it was actually the Grand Jury which decided to build the new courthouse and levy the taxes to pay for it. The Grand Jury comprising local

property owners was responsible for raising money for road building and repairs and also had responsibility for hospitals, prisons and other public buildings. The Grand Jury also had the function on the ruling of the holding of indictments at the twice yearly assizes held in the Courthouse. Their role in criminal proceedings continued until 1948.

This note was prepared by Ruth Illingworth, Millmount Mullingar local historian, and is reprinted here by the Court Service with her kind permission

All Courts Service publications are available on our website www.courts.ie

The Heritage Series aims to increase awareness of matters of historical, architectural and cultural interest associated with the courts system in Ireland. Included in the series are features on court buildings, members of the judiciary and court staff, famous trials and other events and occasions.



COURTS SERVICE
An tSeirbhís Chúirteanna

the heritage series

Produced by the Courts Service.

Mullingar Courthouse

5

The present Mullingar courthouse was built between 1824 and 1828 and opened in the spring of 1829. It replaced an older courthouse which stood in Pearse Street.

The site now occupied by the courthouse was once monastic land belonging to the Augustinian Order. A street of 26 houses and shops were demolished to make way for the courthouse. The building cost £6,700 to erect. The Westmeath Grand Jury (forerunner of the County Council) built the courthouse in response to an Act of

Parliament in 1813. The Act required "The building and repairing of courthouses and session houses in Ireland". The architect for the project was John Hargrave.

The court building was linked to Mullingar Jail by an underground passageway so that prisoners could be transferred securely. This tunnel is still there but is now blocked up. The jail stood where the county buildings, arts centre, and pound field are now. Executions took place outside the jail (opposite the courthouse) until 1868.



Photography courtesy of the Buildings of Ireland / Alistair Rowan

Famous trials

The most famous trial held in Mullingar courthouse was that of Brian Seery in 1846. A former tenant farmer from near Dysart, a townland approximately 8 miles from Mullingar, Seery was accused of the attempted murder in 1845 of his former landlord Sir Francis Hopkins at Tudenham which is 4 miles outside Mullingar. Seery was convicted on dubious evidence and was hanged in February 1846. The Irish version of Mount Street is Sraid Seery and his widow owned a shop near the courthouse at the top of Mount Street.

In the early years of the courthouse, Westmeath was extremely violent and this is reflected in surviving court record books from the time. The summer assizes in 1836, for example, dealt with seven cases of murder, 15 of burglary and housebreaking, five of highway robbery and two of rape. On one occasion 10 men were executed in Mullingar in one week and on another occasion there were five murders in Westmeath in a fortnight.

As well as the death penalty (which in the 1820's could be imposed for almost 200 offences) the

courts could sentence people to be "transported in the Hulk" to Australia. The Hulk was the prison ship which sailed from Dublin. Flogging was another punishment available to the courts in the nineteenth century.

In January 1839 the courthouse was badly damaged by the hurricane known in Irish folklore and history as 'the night of the Big Wind'.

As well as trials the courthouse was used by the Westmeath Grand Jury until 1899. It was also used by the County Council and Mullingar Rural District Council until the opening of the county buildings in 1913. The first meeting of the County Council in 1899 led to a riot as police tried to prevent a nationalist crowd from raising

the green flag of Ireland on the courthouse in place of the union flag of Britain. The crowd succeeded in their aim by attaching a flag to a chimney. During the riot the County Council Chairman Lord Greville was hit by a police constable who mistook him for a rioter.

Mullingar Town Commissioners also met in the courthouse in the nineteenth century. Their very first meeting was held there in May 1856 when the

first commissioners were elected by the town ratepayers.



Famous visitor

A famous visitor to the courthouse in 1900 was the novelist James Joyce. His father came to Mullingar to sort out the electoral rolls as they were largely out of date and an election was due to be held within a year. James Joyce came along to help him. He was just eighteen at the time. Much of their work was done at the courthouse and they may have visited a public house called Connellans beside the courthouse where Caffreys bar is now.

Other uses

The courthouse was also used as a venue for theatrical and musical events. In 1852, for example, orchestral concerts were held there nightly for a fortnight. In 1843 Westmeath Farming Society held a cattle show in the courthouse yard.

The building was also used as a polling station at election time and election rallies sometimes took place outside the building. In 1883 the Land League leader Tim Harrington was declared elected unopposed in a bye-election for North Westmeath. It was at the courthouse too that Larry Ginnell was declared to be North Westmeath's new MP after his historic victory in the 1905 General Election. Mr Ginnell was noted for his fiery rhetoric and was a campaigner for land reform. He represented North Westmeath from 1906 to 1918.

Mullingar's first police barracks was located just opposite the courthouse from

1837 until 1861. The army were sometimes used to prevent rioting outside the courthouse and jail.

Mullingar people did not always respect their courthouse. In 1830 the courtyard in front of the building was reported to be in a filthy state with a large dunghill in one corner and a stable or cowhouse erected against the front of the wing wall. A pig house was also erected and a turfhouse converted into a washhouse.

In 1871 the County of Westmeath was placed under martial law (by an Act known locally as the Westmeath Act) due to a number of murders, in particular that of the station master who was shot outside his house.

In the early years of the Irish Free State the courthouse served as Mullingar's first Garda station. During the civil war the anti-treaty forces occupied the courthouse and county buildings for several days. They were eventually persuaded to evacuate the building peacefully but the Royal Irish Constabulary barracks was blown up. As a result when the first contingent of Gardaí arrived in Mullingar in September 1922 they were housed in the court building. They remained there for two and a half years. In May 1924, Westmeath TD Mr. P.W. Shaw requested the Minister for Justice to authorise the rebuilding of the old RIC Barracks in College St. Mr. Shaw reported that the courthouse was "uncomfortable, unsuitable and did not contain sufficient accommodation". Work