

THE OLD GAOL / COUNTY BUILDINGS

The first Gaol for County Westmeath was located in Blackhall Street on the site of the former Dominican Priory in 1566.

The Gaol was replaced in 1682 by one built in Pearse Street on a site now occupied by the Greville Arms and adjoining buildings. In 1787 construction commenced on the County Gaol in Connaught Lane, on the site of the present County Buildings complex. The work was finally completed in 1828.

The Gaol had a range of facilities: Treadmill Yard, Infirmary, Bakery, Chapel, Offices, Governors House. It could cater for both male and female prisoners with 98 criminal cells, 10 sleeping- rooms for debtors and 19 day and work rooms .

The Westmeath Independent in 1827 recorded the fact that at the Westmeath Assizes held at the Courthouse in March of that year no less than 15 men were sentenced to be publicly hanged outside the Gaol. Three of these prisoners subsequently had their sentence commuted to transportation for life and the remainder were hanged .In the year 1843 the average number of prisoners in the gaol was 110 and the total operational expense of the gaol amounted to £2,055.17s.2d It is reported that the last man to be hanged at Mullingar Gaol was Brian Seery in 1846, his alleged crime was assault on Sir Francis Hopkins then owner of Tudenham House.

The Gaol although closed in 1900 remained intact for a number of years thereafter. In 1901 a Government grant was obtained for the opening of a temporary Technical School in the old Gaol buildings and a Mr. P.J. Lyons was appointed Principal of the School.

The Governor's House was occasionally used for small social functions. Part of the complex was also used as a shirt factory for a short period.

The Gaol was demolished in 1910 to make way for the building of the County Hall and Council administrative offices. Building work was completed in 1913. The decision to build the County Hall and Council Offices led to much acrimonious debate at Council Meetings over a long period as an overwhelming majority of the Council who represented the farming and agricultural interests saw the project as a waste of ratepayer's money. The main supporters of the project were, Mr. Robert Downes, Mr. J.P. Dowdall and Mr. John P. Hayden MP. When the County Council finally gave the go ahead for the provision of a grant for the building of the County Hall with Council Offices attached it was subject to the proviso that Messrs Dowdall, Downes, Hayden and others who supported them were prepared to recoup the Council for any losses sustained on the running of the hall during the first ten years of its existence! If necessary it was agreed that the traders of Mullingar would be accepted as joint guarantors of the scheme. Much to the relief of the proponents of the project their guarantees were never called in. Beckett & Medcalf Quantity Surveyors, 6 Clare Street, Dublin drew up the bill of Quantities for the project in July 1910 and the estimated cost was £9,676.10s. (The original document is held in the Archives Section of the County Library)

The modern building constructed of Ashlar limestone with its pleasant Corinthian Portico and pedimented windows complimented the Courthouse building located opposite and was in stark contrast to the grim gaol building it replaced.

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