

Ennis County Jail

TIM KELLY

O'Connell Street is one of the principal streets in Ennis today, but it is not generally known that it was formerly known as Jail Street, having got that name from a jail in the area. The first jail in the town was built about 1591 in Arthur's Row, a lane-way off O'Connell Street. In 1778 Clare Grand Jury decided to erect a new jail in the town.¹ Construction commenced in 1779, and the building was in use by 1781. It had separate cells for men and women, a day room for each sex, and was on the site of the future Town Hall — part of the Old Ground Hotel today.² The exercise grounds of this jail were across the street and the archway under which prisoners walked to these grounds is still standing, practically opposite the doorway of the later Town Hall.³

In 1810 a Prison's Bill for Ireland was passed because jails were generally overcrowded and badly laid out, debtors being confined with criminals. Grand Juries were empowered to build county prisons. The plans had to be first approved by the Lord Lieutenant who might then advance money on loan for construction. The Grand Jury appointed a board of superintendence consisting of eight to twelve members, half of them being justices of the peace. The high sherriff of the county, a government appointed official, appointed the prison officials who were paid by the Grand Jury from presentments levied on the whole county. Periodic inspections took place to see that prison rules were carried out.⁴

By 1813 it had been decided to erect this new county jail on the site of present-day Braid's factory, Jail Road, Ennis. It was outside the old borough boundary of 1762, but inside the new borough boundary of 1807.⁵ There was much controversy about the suitability of the site — was it too low lying and unhealthy? — but it was handed over to Mr. Behan, contractor, in 1815.⁶ The building was modern, radiating and semicircular. It contained "ten day rooms and airing yards, 73 sleeping cells, twelve other bedrooms", a treadmill, an infirmary and a chapel. The total expenditure for the establishment in 1835 was £2,522.7.10.⁷

A general code of regulations for these new county jails in Ireland was issued. The governor was to reside at the jail and no woman was to be keeper of any jail. No spirits were to be sold to the prisoners. Bread should be delivered at least four days each week and should not be more than 24 hours baked. Every room should be swept daily, washed once a week from 10 April to 10 October, and once a month thereafter. The inside walls should be whitewashed three times a year. Sick prisoners

¹ *Clare Journal*, 13 Aug., 1778.

² Diocesan Archives, Westbourne, Ennis (not catalogued).

³ Jack Donnelly, File on "Old Ground Hotel, Ennis," compiled whilst under his management.

⁴ R. B. McDowell, *The Irish Administration*, Vol. II (1801-1914), London and Toronto 1964, pp. 145-152.

⁵ *Report on Municipal Corporations (Ireland)*, 1835, p. 312.

⁶ *Saturday Record*, 18 Dec., 1915.

⁷ Pigot, J.: *City of Dublin and Hibernian Provincial Directory*, London and Manchester 1824, p. 266.

were to be segregated from healthy ones and attended by a physician. There was to be strict segregation of male and female prisoners, of debtors and criminals. At some time during the day prisoners were to be allowed out into the yard to exercise and have free access to the bath. No pigs or cattle were to be kept in the prison yard. No prisoners, even those sentenced to death, should be placed in an underground dungeon unless guilty of "outrageous conduct".⁸

From the outset it seems that Ennis county jail was efficiently managed. Rev. Forster Arches, Inspector General of Jails in Ireland, stated that Ennis jail had been built in accordance with official regulations. Chaplains, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, had been appointed at salaries of £30 to £50 p.a.⁹ A school was opened at the jail in 1824, and on 12 October 1824 there were twenty-three males and five females on the rolls.¹⁰ A well-known humanitarian, Mrs. Foy, inspected the institution in 1827. She was pleased with its administration, cleanliness and services.¹¹ At this time a wave of lawlessness was sweeping the country, one of the reasons being lack of employment due to the change from tillage to pasture land. Crimes increased from 1821 to 1829 in Ireland, assault from 3392 to 5256, riotous assembly from 253 to 928, larceny from 248 to 780.¹² It was argued that if such a trend continued the new county jail would be quickly overcrowded and extensions would have to be built on. By the Gaol Act, 7 Geo. IV.C.74, S. 96, local prisons in corporate towns were abolished, except those permitted by the Lord Lieutenant to remain open.¹³ Ennis town jail in Jail Street was closed, renovated, and later reopened as a constabulary barracks.¹⁴

In 1840 the board of superintendence of Ennis county jail, headed by William McNanara, M.P., and Cornelius O'Brien, M.P., had plans drawn up to extend the building.¹⁵ The County Surveyor, James Boyd, reported to the Grand Jury in 1841 that "additions to your County Jail are nearly complete; they will afford ample space for classification and discipline".¹⁶ In 1843 the cost per annum of maintaining a prisoner there was £19.13.8. The Governor, Mr. Darcy, continued to receive praise for his efficiency.¹⁷ Matthew O'Brien was physician, Rev. R. N. Plunkett Protestant chaplain and Rev. Terence O'Shaughnessy Roman Catholic chaplain.¹⁸ During the course of the Great Famine this jail was overcrowded, due to the wave of violence which swept the area, and the perpetration of crimes by people in order that they might be committed to prison where the food was of a higher standard than that obtainable in the workhouse. George Sampson, Clerk of the Crown for Co. Clare in 1847, and William Kean, Clerk of the Peace, submitted their reports of the numbers committed to jail from the county for 1847:—

Sampson: committed, 260; convicted, 103; acquitted by jury, 51; discharged, no bill being found, 42; not prosecuted and discharged, 62; bailed but not tried, 2; sentences, death, 0; transportation for life, 19; for over 14 years, 17; imprisonment for over one year, 32; for 12 to 6 months, 11; for under 6 months, 20.

⁸ *Report on Jails (Ireland)*: 1819, Vol. VII, p. 199.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 181 and 196.

¹⁰ *Report on Education in Ireland*: 1826, Vol. 12, p. 159.

¹¹ *Dublin Evening Post*, 7 April, 1827.

¹² *Report on the State of the Poor in Ireland*: 1830, Vol. 7, pp. 4-21.

¹³ *Report on Municipal Corporations (Ireland)*, 1835, p. 312.

¹⁴ Samuel, Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Vol. I, London 1837, p. 600.

¹⁵ Jail Report: Clare Grand Jury Presentments, Spring, 1840, in Clare Co. Library, Ennis.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Spring, 1841.

¹⁷ I. Slater, *National Commercial Directory of Ireland*, London and Manchester 1864, p. 236.

¹⁸ *Limerick Chronicle*, 15 May, 1843.

Kean: committed, 658; convicted, 178; acquitted by jury, 257; discharged, no bill being found, 193; discharged, not prosecuted, 30; sentences, transportation for 7 to 14 years, 34; imprisonment for over one year, 2; for 12 to 6 months, 13; for under 6 months, 19; other punishments, 10.

Incorporating both lists, 285 people from the county were convicted and 635 acquitted or discharged. Crimes included abduction, arson, assault, bigamy, burglary, cattle stealing, compelling to quit abode, conspiracy to murder, larceny, maiming of cattle, manslaughter, rape, riotous assembly and uttering counterfeit coins.¹⁹ The diet allowed to an able bodied man in the county jail at Ennis, 1847-48, was eight ounces of Indian meal and one pint of new milk for breakfast, and one pound of bread and one pint of skimmed milk for dinner. The daily diet at the corresponding time in Ennis Union Workhouse was eight ounces of Indian meal for breakfast, and four ounces of oatmeal and four ounces of rice made into stirabout for dinner, five naggins of new milk per person per day.²⁰ The old town jail in O'Connell St. had to be taken over for prisoners, and long term convicts were sent to Spike Island penitentiary.²¹ On 5 February 1849, 580 prisoners were incarcerated in the county jail which had a normal capacity of 115.²² By 1850 industrial training was being provided there.²³ On 30 March, 1851, there were 351 male and 134 female prisoners in Ennis county jail — included were twelve male and four female debtors, and two female "lunatics and idiots"; forty-one male and six female prisoners were ill. Crime was so widespread that one in every 646 persons in Co. Clare was in prison.²⁴ The significantly low number of ill prisoners is further testimony of the good management of the jail.

With the lessening of famine the spate of crime abated. There were 25 male and 16 female prisoners in Ennis county jail on 14 June, 1856. "All the males sleep in single cells, where they take their meals, and, during the hours of industrial labour, they work in the stalls, stone breaking being carried on apart by placing those engaged in it back to front at wide intervals so as to prevent intercourse. The females are divided into three classes, the convicts and lunatics constituting two, while the third is almost subject to complete separation. All the prisoners of this sex occupy single cells, except those of the lunatics who require unremitting attendance and supervision".²⁵ At this stage the jail had 103 single cells for men and 12 for women. Each cell was not less than nine feet long, six feet wide and eight feet high. It had eight male and two female wards, yards, nine day rooms, four hospital rooms, nine sleeping rooms, one chapel, three workshops, one kitchen, one bakery, one laundry, two lavatories, two baths, two fumigating rooms, two reception rooms, eleven pumps and wells, four worksheds and one treadwheel.²⁶ The inadequate water and sewerage schemes in the town were primarily responsible for the paucity of lavatories and baths and the multiplicity of pumps and wells. A watchman was on patrol each night.

¹⁹ Abstract of returns of numbers of persons committed to the different jails in Ireland, 1847-8, pp. 7-8; in *Parliamentary Accounts and Papers*, 1847-8, Vol. 53.

²⁰ *Report on Gaols and Workhouses (Ireland)*, 1847-48, Vol. LIII, p. 394.

²¹ *Clare Journal*, 11 Oct., 1847.

²² *Limerick Chronicle*, 10 Feb., 1849.

²³ *Clare Journal*, 1 Aug., 1850.

²⁴ Prisoners in Jail in Co. Clare: *Parliamentary Accounts and Papers*, 1854, Vol. 58, p. 103.

²⁵ Jail Report: Clare Jury Presentments, Spring, 1857.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

During the day male prisoners worked at the treadwheel, in the workshops and worksheds, whilst the female prisoners washed and dressed flax, or were engaged in knitting, sewing, spinning and carding. School hours for males were from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Prisoners received two meals daily, similar to those given in 1847. In 1853 the cost of running the institution was £2,010.11.10. The Governor received £300 p.a. together with maintenance, the Protestant and Roman Catholic chaplains £46.3.0. p.a. each, the schoolmaster, the store keeper and the clerk £32.8.0. each p.a., the physician £54, the nursetender £24, the watchman £22.8.0, and the first female assistant £17.8.0. p.a.²⁷ These salaries were, generally, far higher than those obtained in other institutions in the town for similar work. The total area of the building and yards was three acres, two roods and 37 perches, the valuation being £120 p.a.²⁸ From an employment point of view, the county jail was a decided advantage to Ennis but an economic burden on the rate-payers of Co. Clare, with so much money (for those days) being spent to incarcerate about forty prisoners.

1866 was a very bad year for the staff of the county jail. It had very few prisoners, generally only between one and ten in number.²⁹ In the ensuing decade salaries of staff and general costings tended to increase but numbers of prisoners did not increase. In 1879 many of the staff were retired on pension,³⁰ and the institution was officially closed as penitentiary for Co. Clare on 31 March, 1880.³¹ Long-term prisoners were to be sent to Limerick, Spike Island or elsewhere. Prisoners awaiting trial were still detained at Ennis jail and during periods of acute unrest in the county, such as Land League times, it was reopened, temporarily, as a penitentiary.³² "Lunatics" who used be detained here had been, for the most part, transferred to the new Asylum in the town.³³

In 1899 the jail was renovated and reopened as the Ennis Inebriate Reformatory. The inmates were to be allowed visitors occasionally. After nine months detention they might be allowed to walk, under escort, outside the prison walls. It was envisaged that, eventually, they might be released on parole.³⁴ In 1901 there were two male and three female prisoners in the reformatory. The Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1908 practically ended the imprisonment of children under 16 years of age,³⁵ and Ennis County Jail was closed. For a time it was used as a military barracks, but was later demolished. In the 1940s a new factory, Braid's, was built on the site and continues in production there at present.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ A. Griffith, *General Valuation of Ireland, Co. of Clare*, 1848, p. 58, National Library, Dublin.

²⁹ *Clare Journal*, 14 June, 1866; cf. William Bassett, *Directory of Limerick and the Principle Towns of Tipperary and Clare*, 1866, Limerick 1866, p. 102.

³⁰ Clare Grand Jury Presentments, Summer, 1879; Presentment No. 100.

³¹ *Clare Journal*, 22 Jan., 1880.

³² *Ibid.*, 23 Jan., 1882.

³³ Jail Report: Clare Grand Jury Presentments, Spring, 1866.

³⁴ *Saturday Record*, 3 June, 1899.

³⁵ R. B. McDowell, *op. cit.*, p. 162.