

Construction/Destruction

The Public Record Office of Ireland (1867–1922)

*Peter Crooks and Ciarán Wallace*¹

'There shall be nothing inflammable within the building except the records themselves; and these, I may observe, would be extremely difficult of combustion'

—*Sir Samuel Ferguson*

Construction

The Public Record Office of Ireland (PROI) was established in 1867 under the Public Records (Ireland) Act 1867, to bring together into a single modern repository the records of English government in Ireland. Prior to the foundation of the PROI, Ireland's public records were held in several distinct locations including the Record Tower of Dublin Castle, the Four Courts and the Custom House.

The new record office was a state-of-the-art premises located at the Church Street side of the Four Courts complex, designed to provide ample, secure storage for the records together with a modern public reading room. Its architects were Enoch Trevor Owen (d.1881) and Robert John Stirling (d. 1915) draughtsman of the Irish Board of Works.² The construction took place between 1864 and 1867, pursuant to the Four Courts (Dublin) Extension Act of 1858.

The building was nearing completion in 1866, the year *before* the passage of the Public Records (Ireland) Act 1867. The repository was originally conceived of as a new archive for the courts. This explains why the *Dublin Builder* in July 1866 refers to the new building as the 'General Law Record Repository'. The article described the

¹ **Image:** Architectural drawing (1864) of entrance-way to proposed new Record House (National Archives of Ireland, Office of Public Works (OPW), 5HC/1/41).

² *Dictionary of Irish Architects, 1729–1940*, <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/4246/OWEN-ENOCHTREVOR>, <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/5171/stirling-robertjohn>; Christine Casey, *The Buildings of Ireland: Dublin* (2005), pp 98–9.

building as 'by far the most important in point of size and cost, of a public nature, that has been erected in Dublin for some years'.³ The cost of construction was estimated as £40,000

The Public Records (Ireland) Act 1867 designated this new repository on Church Street as the Public Record Office of Ireland. Possession of the building was formally transferred to Samuel Ferguson, the first Deputy Keeper of the Records in Ireland, on 19 November 1867, acting on behalf of the Master of the Rolls in Ireland. The memorandum recording the transfer of the building from the architect to its new custodian describes it as 'the building erected in the neighbourhood of the Four Courts in Dublin, for the purpose of serving as a Public Record Office'.⁴

The PROI consisted of two separate blocks, faced in cut granite. The first of these was the Record House, a three-storey building over basement approximately 28 meters by 17 meters. This held the office of the chief archivist — whose title was Deputy Keeper of the Public Records of Ireland — together with the Registry Office and public Search Room, where readers could consult the public records. A caretaker lived on site in an apartment in the basement. The double-height Search Room was covered by a coved and glazed ceiling providing natural light to the readers below.

Adjacent to the public Search Room was the Strong Room, whose windows were protected by iron bars. Here records could be stored safely overnight for readers who intended to return to consult them on the following day.

The Search Room was also connected via double doors and a fire-break isolation zone to the six-storey repository known as the Record Treasury, a large block with a vaulted basement and a main hall at ground-floor level with five galleries above. The interior of the Record Treasury was a large atrium (approximately 45m by 28m and 18 m high), with light entering from an arcade of ten tall arched windows running

³ 'The New Record Buildings, Inns'-Quay', *Dublin Builder*, 1 July 1866.

⁴ *1st DKPRI*, p. 27.

along on each side, complemented by two windows at the north end of the repository throwing light into the central hall.

The ornamental iron-work roof was constructed in three pitched sections, the outer sections being slated. The central section was glazed and ran the length of the building. Five levels of galleries, constructed in ornamental iron-work and linked by a central staircase, overlooked the atrium. These gave access to the bays which held the records. At ground level, the floor was paved in black and white stone, and desks were available for the use of the record-keepers. Beneath this main hall was a vaulted basement storage area, which survived the fire and is still in use by the National Archives of Ireland.

Security and fire-safety were key features. The Board of Works drawings specify shelving in deal, and sycamore was also used because it was believed to be less combustible. Sir Samuel Ferguson, the Deputy Keeper, hoped that wooden shelving could be replaced altogether 'so as to place this repository on a par in point of security from fire with the great National Record Office of London'. In his eleventh annual report (1879), he set out his achievements with evident pride when describing the bays that held the records:

These newly fitted bays, as all others at the north end of the Record Treasury, which have been fitted up since the building was placed at the disposal of this Office, are *perfectly fire proof* ... I hope hereafter, from time to time, to eliminate the existing wooden shelving from the central and southern sections, as well as the wooden flooring from the galleries of communication, so that *there shall be nothing inflammable within the building* (which is brick-arched underneath, roofed with slate on iron, and has, during the past year, been counter-sealed with zinc), except the records themselves; and these, I may observe, would be extremely difficult of combustion.⁵

⁵ *11th rep. DKPRI*, p. 10 [emphasis added].

Nor did the safeguards end with fire-resistant fittings in the Record Treasury. At the urging of the Record Office staff, the Board of Works put in place a system for extinguishing fire. 'A supply of water to be laid on to the basement of the ground floor of the building, and two Fire Extinguishers and six buckets to be supplied, which the Board think will, under proper management, be found sufficient provision to guard against fire.'⁶

The most important fire prevention feature as the isolation space between the Record Treasury and Record House. The two structures were designed as two distinct structures surrounded by a sunken area and separated by an 'isolation' space, 3m wide and spanned by a covered bridge with iron doors at each end.⁷ This was intended as a fire-break. In 1922 it proved effective, but 'rather in the opposite way from what was intended, as the design was to prevent a fire starting in the Record House and spreading to the Treasury'.⁸ As a result the four-storey Record House survives, including the top-lit Search Room, which now serves as an active court-house (Court of Appeal), and its distinctive pedimented entrance and main stairhall, clad in Portland stone.

Collections

At the time of its destruction in 1922, the PROI collections ranged in date from the thirteenth century to the late nineteenth century. The first records were transferred to the new repository in 1868. By 1912 the Deputy Keeper had to plead for further space. Requests for additional storage were made in 1912 and again in 1915, but were unsuccessful. The scale of the collections by this time is conveyed by Herbert Wood's *Guide* of 1919, which lists over 5,500 series organized hierarchically by Departments of State. These included the records of chancery, exchequer and the courts, as well as land ownership records, copies of wills, census records back to

⁶ Office of Public Works Letter Books, OPW/1/1/2/48 (1874)

⁷ Plans for the PROI, dating from 1863–4, are extant in NAI, Office of Public Works 5HCC/1/106. The 'isolation space' is visible in fig. 1.

⁸ *55th rep. DKPRI*, p. 18.

1841, records of the Irish parliament before 1800, and records of the Chief Secretary's Office — the most senior official in the Irish administration. Additionally, the 'Ecclesiastical and Testamentary Collection' comprised the diocesan and parish records of the Church of Ireland. The oldest records were the Christ Church Deeds dating back to the thirteenth century. Municipal and local records were also transferred to the archive, as were papers of several private individuals.

Destruction

In 1916 the Record Office was occupied for a few days by rebel forces during the seizure of the Four Courts but sustained no damage, other than the loss of one document.⁹ In April 1922, anti-Treaty forces occupied the Four Courts complex. After some weeks of tense stand-off, the National Army began a bombardment on 28 June. On the afternoon of 30 June 1922, a large explosion took place in the Four Courts complex in the building opposite the Record Treasury. The ensuing fire spread to the Record Treasury and consumed the building. As the records burned, Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Commonwealth, was answering questions in the House of Commons. A telegram arrived while he stood at the dispatch box informing him that the Record Treasury in Dublin was on fire. His comment to the House was: 'a State without archives is better than archives without a State'.¹⁰

A huge mushroom cloud rose from the Four Courts, and sometime later, newsreel footage, taken from the south side of the Liffey, shows smoke billowing from the arcade of windows in the Record Treasury. The explosion and heat carried fragments of charred records across the city. Ernie O'Malley, who was garrisoned inside the Four Courts, later gave a romanticised account of the fire in his memoir, *The Singing Flame*:

As we stood near the gate there was a loud shattering explosion ... The munitions block and a portion of Headquarters block went up in flames and

⁹ *49th rep. DKPRI* (1917), pp 3–4.

¹⁰ *Hansard*. HC Deb 30 June 1922 vol 155 Col 2558

smoke ... The yard was littered with chunks of masonry and smouldering records; pieces of white paper were gyrating in the upper air like seagulls. The explosion seemed to give an extra push to roaring orange flames which formed patterns across the sky. Fire was fascinating to watch; it had a spell like running water. Flame sang and conducted its own orchestra simultaneously. It can't be long now, I thought, until the real noise comes.¹¹

The sober description which appeared in the *Irish Times* on 3 July 1922 focussed on the destruction of Ireland's documentary heritage:

[T]hose precious records, which would have been so useful to the future historian, have been devoured by the flames or scattered in fragments by the four winds of heaven. [The record treasury], with its glass roof and its tall side windows, is now a sorry-looking wreck.¹²

Even before the ashes had cooled, a desperate effort was underway to mitigate the effects of the disaster. In July 1922 notices appeared in the press seeking the recovery of records that had been dispersed by wind across the city and scavenged as far away as Howth.¹³ Alas, the response was 'ridiculously small', according to Herbert Wood, the Deputy Keeper: 'it is more than likely that such records as were picked up have been kept as mementoes of a remarkable occasion'.¹⁴

Further Reading:

CLARKE, Howard B. 'Making up for lost time: the impact of the destruction in 1922 of the Irish Public Record Office', in Igor Filippov and Flocel Sabaté (eds), *Identity and loss of historical memory: the destruction of archives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017).

¹¹ E. O'Malley, *The Singing Flame* (Dublin, [posth.] 1978), pp 114–15.

¹² *Irish Times*, 3 July 1922.

¹³ See, e.g., *Irish Times*, 3 July 1922; *ibid.*, 10 July 1922.

¹⁴ Wood, 'Public records of Ireland before and after 1922', p. 36.

- CONNOLLY, Philomena. 'The destruction of the Public Record Office of Ireland in 1922: disaster and recovery', *Archivum*, 42 (1996).
- CROOKS, Peter. 'Reconstructing the Past: The Case of the Medieval Irish Chancery Rolls', in N.M. Dawson and Felix Larkin (eds.), *Lawyers, the Law and History: Irish Legal History Society Discourses and Other Papers, 2006-2011* (Dublin, 2013).
- DOYLE, G.J. 'The foundation and first twenty years of the Public Record Office of Ireland' (M.A. thesis, University College Dublin, 1975).
- EDWARDS, David, 'Salvaging Irish history: Hogan and the Irish Manuscripts Commission', in D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *James Hogan: revolutionary, historian and political scientist* (Dublin, 2001).
- KEANE, R. 'A mass of crumbling ruins: the destruction of the Four Courts in June 1922', in C. Costello (ed.), *The Four Courts: 200 years. Essays to commemorate the bicentenary of the Four Courts* (Dublin, 1996).
- WHITFIELD, Niamh. 'My grandfather, Dr. Séamus Ó Ceallaigh (1879–1954)', in S. Ó Ceallaigh, *Gleanings from Ulster History* (Ballinascreen Historical Society, 1994 [1951]).
- 'Memorandum on the destruction and reconstruction of the records', *55th rep. DKPRI*, appendix 1.
- WOOD, Herbert. *A guide the records deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland* (Dublin, 1919).
- WOOD, Herbert. 'The public records of Ireland before and after 1922', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, 13 (1930).