The Four Courts Repository post-1922

The Public Record Office of Ireland (centre, back) during reconstruction c.1923.
National Library of Ireland, McConneran Album ALB 161

Hazel Menton, Senior Archivist
National Archives, Ireland

‘..the rain is again coming through the roof of the Treasury Vaults in a different spot from that mentioned in my letter of 18th ultimo. I shall be obliged if you would have measures taken to render the roof stanch as rain and snow-water from time to time penetrate in different parts to the great risk of the Records.’
- James F Morrissey

Without a building you cannot have an archive. The National Archives, the successor to the Public Record Office of Ireland, has had an archive repository in the Four Courts complex since 1867. The original building was almost completely destroyed by explosion and fire in the Civil War in June 1922. However, the basement survived and a new, smaller repository was built by the Free State government to house the archives of the State.

The Public Record Office of Ireland (PROI) building in the Four Courts was a six-storey building. The building was divided into two sections, the Record House with staff offices and a public search room, and the Record Treasury which contained the archives. There was a fire-break between the two buildings to prevent fire spreading between premises. When the explosions occurred on 30th June 1922 the basement of the Record Treasury and the Record House were all that remained.

During the occupation of the Four Courts complex and in the months following the destruction of the Record Treasury, PROI staff were based in the Record Tower of Dublin Castle. In 1923 the Office of Public Works (OPW) repaired the basement of the old Record Treasury and this allowed PROI staff to occupy the building once more. Conditions were not ideal and the Deputy Keeper wrote to the OPW in November 1923 lamenting that ‘..the rain is again coming through the roof of the Treasury Vaults in a different spot from that
mentioned in my letter of 18th ultimo. I shall be obliged if you would have measures taken to render the roof stanch as rain and snow-water from time to time penetrate in different parts to the great risk of the Records.’

Government-owned buildings are managed by the Office of Public Works and in the 1920s the PROI and OPW worked together on the rebuilding plan. In a minute sheet dated 14th November 1927 the OPW estimated that a completed structure of six floors would cost £68,000. Rather than commence building the entire structure at that time, it was proposed to build two storeys above the basement at an estimated cost of £25,800. In a letter to the Department of Finance in 1927 the OPW proposed ‘with the Minister’s sanction, to proceed with the erection of two floors at once leaving over the remainder till further needs arise.’

One of the main considerations with the reconstruction was fire prevention. Following the experiences of PROI staff this is understandable. The basement is comprised of twenty-barrel vaults, divided into four sections separated by thick stone walls and fire proof doors.

Plan of basement of PROI with fire doors shown dividing each of the four sections.

1 Letter from James F Morrissey, Deputy Keeper to the Commissioner of Public Works, 3 November 1928, ‘Public Record Office, Leaking of roofs of Basement and Vaults’, NAI/OPW/5/22256/28
2 Minute Sheet, Reference 3676, Dated 14/11/27, ‘Public Record Office, reconstruction of Record Treasury’, NAI/OPW/5/7618/30
3 Ibid.
4 Letter from the Commissioners of Public Works, T. Cassedy to The Secretary, Department of Finance from the Secretary, 21/12/1927 re Public Record Treasury, Dublin. NAI/OPW/5/7618/30
5 NAI/OPW/5/14610/27 ‘Public Record Office, shelving contracts’
The two new floors were also laid out in four sections with fire breaks between each section. Reinforced concrete was used for the walls and columns to enhance fireproofing. The windows were fitted to prevent any draughts and steel shutters were also installed at the windows on floors 1 and 2. Fire proof doors were fitted at the entrance to each floor, and between each section.

In addition to the reinforced concrete construction, the shelving was a mix of reinforced concrete, and galvanised steel. On the first floor, shelving of reinforced concrete was installed in every section except on the left hand side of the farthest room. On the second floor, shelving to left hand side was of galvanised steel plates carried on steel frames and bracing fitted between concrete pillars. On the right hand side it was of concrete.

The decision to have shelving of concrete and steel was likely as a measure to help prevent fire and possible damage to records in the event of fire. Former staff member S.C. Ratcliff wrote of the condition of the shelving in the basement after the fire, “The vaults on the basement level are more or less intact, though the brick vaulting has sagged in places. In the vaults were deed-boxes on iron racks. The racks were evidently softened by the great heat, and the weight of the boxes has bent them and drawn them forward; the lids of the boxes have fallen in, and the contents have been reduced in every case to a little white ash.”

Plan of reinforced concrete shelving installed in rebuild PROI building. Cross bracing was used to strengthen the shelving.8

Under the Public Records Act of 1867, court records were transferred to the PROI when they were 20 years old. Among the many court records lost in the destruction were nearly all original wills probated up to 1904. As a preservation method to try and prevent possible loss of wills in a future fire, from the 1920s the PROI began storing all wills in metal boxes.

Image of former Deputy Keeper Brendan Mac Goille Choille retrieving wills from metal boxes c.1940

8 NAI/OPW/5/5637/32
A small number of record series had survived the destruction of the building. Herbert Wood in his letter to the Commissioner of Public Works in November 1922 highlighted the need for proper storage for judgment books from the Common Law Courts and chancery bills and cause books dating from the 1660s. Wood also referred to the need to facilitate new accessions of records as he had been approached by a District Registrar and Clerk of the Crown and Peace regarding the possibility of receiving new transfers. Some of the surviving records were badly damaged. As the PROI had no conservation staff to repair these documents, they wrapped them in parcels and labelled them with any identifying information they could decipher. The parcels of salvaged records remained stored in these parcels in the Four Courts repository until 2010.

Example of loose bound volumes and parcels stored on concrete shelving. Due to lack of space the volumes are stored horizontally and vertically.

Letter from Herbert Wood, Deputy Keeper to Philip Hanson, Commissioner of Public Works, 7 November 1922, ‘Salvage File 1922’, NAI/PROI/1922
The PROI worked from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s collecting court records and private accessions to supplement records lost in 1922. By the early 1970s, the three floors of the repository were full and there was no space for expansion. In the 1960s, a new Land Registry building had been built above the PROI, preventing the construction of the proposed remaining floors as originally envisaged in the 1920s. The passing of the National Archives Act in 1986 amalgamated the PROI and the State Paper Office, which were now known as the National Archives. It also brought in a new 30 year rule for the transfer of departmental records to the National Archives. In the early 1990s, the National Archives moved to its current site at Bishop Street. The staff moved to Bishop Street and a new public reading room was opened. While the old Record House was vacated by National Archives personnel, storage was retained in the archive repository in the re-built Record Treasury.

For over a decade the building was effectively a static store and no refurbishment work had been carried out since the rebuild. In the early 2000s, the OPW rewired the building and, installed a modern fire detection system. The new lighting showed areas where storage conditions had deteriorated and as a consequence an intensive clean was carried out of the entire repository.

By 2009 the National Archives was under increasing pressure due to lack of storage space at its Bishop Street site. A project to update all the location data for the repository was carried out to get accurate information about the record series stored there. From this, a plan to move less frequently used records to the Four Courts site led to an assessment of available space to see if it could be utilized to increase storage capacity.

The concrete and metal shelving installed in the rebuild had proven very durable, however it was also very inflexible. The concrete shelves could not be altered and the galvanized steel sheets were welded into the concrete pillars, which meant they also could not be adjusted to create greater capacity. The National Archives approached the OPW with a proposal to have the metal shelving removed from two rooms on floor 2, to be replaced by modern static bays of shelves. The OPW agreed with the plan and work commenced in 2011.
The entire left hand side of the repository on floor 2 had metal shelves welded into pillars with concrete shelves on the right hand side. The initial plan was only for the metal shelves to be removed from the left hand side of rooms known as 2C and 2D. As part of these works the rooms would be cleaned, painted and the new static shelving installed. Before any work could begin the records in the affected area were packed on pallets and stored down the aisles of the concrete shelving on the right hand side of the two rooms. Hoarding was placed at the end of each bay to prevent any damage to the records.

The positive results of the refurbishment works were immediate. Painting the room white enhanced the lighting in the space making it a better working environment for staff. The environment also improved conditions for the storage of records as the paint and new shelves were easier to keep dust free. In addition, the new modern shelving was adjustable, which allowed for created greater capacity for storing records.
The refurbishment of these areas highlighted the need to improve the storage and conditions throughout the repository. The obvious benefits of the works was such that plans began to complete the refurbishment of the entirety of the two rooms, not just the areas with steel shelving. The concrete shelves on the right hand side were cleared of records and the area was painted white with a sealant painted on each shelf.

In 2011 Ireland was in a recession and the National Archives did not have the financial resources available to carry out a large scale project to refurbish the entire repository. It was decided therefore to refurbish the building in phases. Structurally the building was sound, the measures insisted upon by the OPW in the rebuild had ensured this. Aside from cleaning, painting and replacing shelving, all fittings including fire doors and shutters were retained.

One major complicating factor with the phased works were the archives. It was not possible to remove all the records from the building to facilitate the refurbishment. In order for works to be carried out in one particular room, the records were packed on pallets and moved to the far side of the room (as had happened with rooms 2C and 2D) or were moved to the room next door. This meant that it was not possible to simply move to the next sequential room once one was completed, as that room was filled with pallets of records waiting to be moved back. Based on available space and financial resources, different rooms on different floors were identified to allow for record moves between each phase. For instance when work was
completed in two rooms on floor 2, the next refurbishment was of three vaults in the basement; when the three vaults were completed the next phase was to two rooms on floor 2.

Records were stored on pallets and stored in the aisles of other rooms during the works.

Preservation is a vital part of archiving to ensure the long-term survival of records. The process of cleaning, painting and installing new shelving had improved the environmental conditions. The next element was to improve the way the records were kept and the enclosures in which they were stored.

As previously mentioned, many of the record series were from the courts. The main court series included the Courts of Crown and Peace and Petty Session, which were replaced with the Circuit and District Courts in the 1920s; High Courts of Justice, the High Court, Probate Offices and the Supreme Court. The PROI had also actively acquired solicitors papers as the records contained in these collections often held copies of original wills which had been lost in 1922. In the 1970s, the Business Record Survey was established to acquire records from Irish businesses, and a significant number of these records were held in the Four Courts repository.

Many of the court records date from the 19th century and the solicitors collections contained legal documents dating back to the 17th century. The format of the records was mainly loose papers, files and bound volumes. The bound volumes were stored loose on shelves and files and loose documents were wrapped in parcels. The parcels were made from an alkaline paper known as ‘sugar paper’, which was a very durable protective enclosure for the documents.

10 NAI/PRIV1154 Carton, O’Meara & Kieran Solicitors, papers dating from 1684-1929.
Crown and Peace records with loose files stored in parcels and volumes loose on shelves.

For preservation purposes, it is better to have archives wrapped or boxed. Acid free archive paper and boxes are used to protect the records contained within. Following an assessment of how the various series of records were stored, it was decided that all the parcels would be replaced with archive boxes, and that bound volumes would also be boxed. Staff measured each parcel and volume and bespoke archive boxes were ordered for the material. Before the records were re-housed into boxes, every volume and the contents of each parcel was carefully cleaned.

Images of the newly decorated basement showing barrel vaults
It was also decided to re-house wills from metal boxes into archive boxes. The metal boxes had begun to deteriorate and some had sharp edges which made them difficult to handle. The re-housing work was carried out simultaneously with the refurbishment works. As a result of this work all the location data for the approximately 90,000 boxes of material contained in the building changed, and had to updated.

The project to refurbish the Four Courts repository took almost 5 years. During that time the entire repository was cleaned and painted which resulted in vastly improved environmental conditions for the records. The basement which was originally constructed in 1867 required only paint and new shelving to upgrade it for the 21st century. Likewise the building constructed in 1931 has proven robust, and the fire prevention measures implemented by the OPW and PROI, continue to preserve and protect the nations archives.