

Kilmainham Gaol

Opened in 1796 as the County Gaol for Dublin, Kilmainham Gaol has, at crucial moments, held within its walls most of the key personalities involved in the struggle for Irish independence.

Background: Engraving of Kilmainham Gaol c.1796

From the 1790s onwards, freedom from British rule, as a republic, became the form of political independence favoured by radical Irish nationalists. More moderate nationalists aspired to 'Home Rule', or constitutional independence for Ireland within the British Empire. A remarkable number of the leading figures of Irish nationalism were imprisoned at Kilmainham Gaol, and some were executed here.

But there is much more to Kilmainham's story: the gaol functioned for most of its life as an ordinary prison, and the fate of ordinary men, women and children as convicts is a compelling story in its own right.

The 18th Century

When Kilmainham Gaol opened in 1796, it was one of the most modern prisons in Ireland. The rectangular west wing of the Gaol dates from this period.



Above: Execution of Robert Emmet in Thomas St., 20th September 1803

In the early years, debtors comprised over half the prison population. Others were detained for begging, stealing, assault, prostitution and drunkenness. Conditions were harsh. For the first fifty years the building had no glass in the windows and no lighting. Prisoners were allowed one small candle every two weeks. Bread, milk, oatmeal and soup were among the food listed on diet sheets.

The United Irishmen (1798)

The first political prisoner of note, Henry Joy McCracken, a founder of the United Irishmen, was detained on 11th October 1796. He was later hanged for his part in the rebellion of 1798. The United Irishmen were inspired by the French Revolution and Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Their goal was to make Ireland into a republic.

The 19th Century

In 1803, another United Irishman, Robert Emmet, led a brief rising in Dublin. Awaiting trial for treason, he was imprisoned in Kilmainham along with his housekeeper, Anne Devlin. Emmet was found guilty of treason and was publicly executed in Thomas Street in September 1803. Anne remained in the Gaol until 1805.



'The Young Irelanders', c. 1848. William Smith O'Brien, seated, Thomas Francis Meagher standing to the right.

The Common Prisoner

In the early 19th century persons convicted of murder and robbery with violence were hanged in public from gallows erected in front of Kilmainham Gaol. The last public execution took place in 1865. Bridget Butterly (19) and Bridget Ennis (21) were the last women to be hanged at the Gaol in 1821. Women made up a significant portion of the Gaol's population until 1881, when it became an all-male prison.

During the first half of the 19th century, the Gaol housed prisoners awaiting transportation to convict colonies in Australia. A sentence of transportation could be handed down for crimes ranging from murder to petty theft. Over 4,000 prisoners were transported to Australia via Kilmainham Gaol.

Famine (1845-50)

The final years of the Irish Famine saw a massive increase in the number of prisoners entering Kilmainham Gaol. Prison inspectors reported serious overcrowding, with as many as five people in cells designed for one. Most prisoners, among whom were a large number of women and children, were charged with begging and stealing food.

The Young Irelanders (1848)

Enthused by the spirit of revolution in Europe, the 'Young Irelanders' organised



The East Wing of Kilmainham Gaol (1860's)

a rebellion in 1848. Its leaders, William Smith O'Brien and Thomas Francis Meagher, were brought to Kilmainham following the rebellion's collapse. Both were transported to Tasmania, but Meagher escaped to the USA and eventually led the Irish Brigade on the Union side in the American Civil War.

The East Wing (1861)

The spectacular east wing, providing an extra 96 cells, opened in 1862. It is typical of the Victorian belief that prison architecture was crucial to the reform of inmates.

During this period the gaol was run on the principles of silence and separation. Communication between prisoners was forbidden and they spent much of the time alone in their cells. The prison authorities hoped that they would use this time to read the Bible, contemplate and repent their crimes.

The Fenians (1867)

The Fenians were a secret oath-bound group sworn to overthrow British rule in Ireland. Following the failure of the Fenian uprising in 1867, many were imprisoned in Kilmainham. The Gaol was cleared of common prisoners and security was strengthened.

Charles Stewart Parnell (1881-82)

Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of the Irish

Parliamentary Party at Westminster, and many of his fellow MPs were detained in Kilmainham after their open rejection of the Land Act introduced by the British government in 1881. Parnell was imprisoned in Kilmainham from October 1881 to May 1882.

The Invincibles (1882)

Four days after Parnell's release, two senior officials of the British government in Ireland were assassinated in the Phoenix Park by members of a group called 'The Invincibles', an offshoot of the Fenians. Five of this group were hanged in the Gaol in 1883 for their role in the assassinations.

The 20th Century.

On 28th February 1910, the prison was closed but was later used to house political prisoners during the period from 1916 to 1924.

1916 Rising

On Easter Monday 1916, groups of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army seized the General Post Office and other strategic buildings in Dublin, and declared an Irish Republic. They held out for almost a week before surrendering. Kilmainham Gaol was reopened to house hundreds of men and women arrested for their part in the Rising. Between 3rd and 12th May 1916, fourteen men were executed by firing squad in what had been the stone-breakers' yard. The first executed was Patrick Pearse, Commander-in-Chief of the Volunteers. Another of

Above Right: 1916 Proclamation, Background: Eamon de Valera between his British escort while awaiting trial, May 1916



the leaders, Joseph Plunkett, was given permission to marry his fiancée, Grace Gifford, in the chapel of the Gaol just hours before his execution. The final execution was that of James Connolly.

The War of Independence (1919-21)

The last 1916 prisoners were released under a general amnesty in June 1917. In the period since the Easter Rising, a dramatic change had occurred in the attitude of Irish people towards those who fought in the rebellion. On their return from internment in Britain, the released prisoners were given a hero's welcome. Sinn Fein, a radical republican party, won a landslide victory in the general election in 1918. Instead of taking their seats in the British Parliament, Sinn Fein set up its own parliament, the Dáil, which first sat on 21st January 1919. On the same day the first shots of the War of Independence were fired. Dramatically different

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The Stone - Breakers Yard in Kilmainham Gaol



from previous rebellions, the War of Independence saw the introduction of guerrilla warfare between the Dáil's military wing, the Irish Republican Army, and British forces. Kilmainham was now used to hold captured Irish Republican Army members. The War of Independence effectively ended with the declaration of a Truce in July 1921.

The Civil War (1922-24)

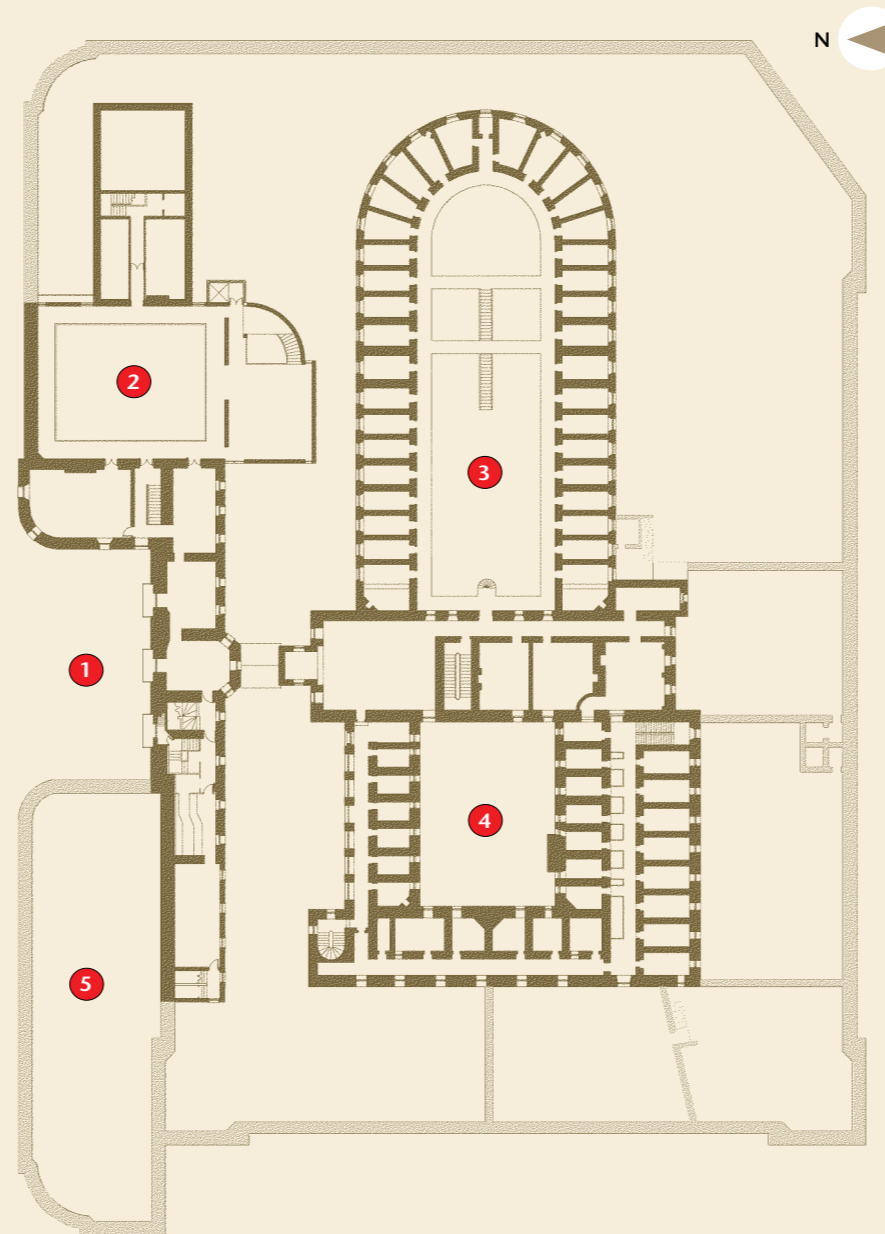
In June 1921 the six county state of Northern Ireland came into being. Following negotiations, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on 6th December 1921. This provided for the setting up of a twenty-six county Irish Free State. Bitter disagreement over whether to accept the Treaty split Sinn Fein. The main subject of disagreement was a condition in the Treaty obliging all members of the Free State Parliament swearing an oath of allegiance to the British monarch who would remain Head of State. This proved unacceptable to Eamon de Valera and those republicans who followed him. The pro-Treaty, or Free State, side took the more pragmatic view that although not perfect, the Treaty gave them "the freedom to achieve freedom". The anti-Treaty or

Republican side felt anything short of an Irish Republic was a betrayal of their cause and of those who had fought and died for Irish independence. The tensions eventually erupted in civil war in June 1922. Kilmainham Gaol was taken over by the Free State Army. Of seventy-seven Republicans to be executed by the Free State Government during the Civil war, the first four took place close to where the leaders of 1916 had been shot. From February to September 1923, Kilmainham housed over 300 women and girls aged between twelve and seventy. The Civil War eventually came to an end and its very last prisoner, Eamon de Valera, later Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and President of Ireland, was released from the Gaol in 1924.

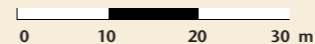
Abandonment and Restoration

After a period of neglect, the voluntary Kilmainham Gaol Restoration Committee was established in 1960 to preserve the Gaol as a monument of Irish nationalism. The voluntary work lasted for almost thirty years until the Gaol was handed over to the State in 1986. Today Kilmainham Gaol receives visitors from all over the world.

Floor Plan of Kilmainham Gaol



- 1. Entrance
- 2. Museum
- 3. East Wing
- 4. West Wing
- 5. Stone Breakers yard (Scene of 1916 executions)



Background: Entrance Door to Kilmainham Gaol

Kilmainham Gaol

VISITORS' GUIDE



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