

THE OPW

A HISTORY OF SERVICE



Since its establishment in 1831, the Office of Public Works has adapted and evolved to meet the needs of the country, writes GEORGE MOIR

Prior to the establishment of the Office of Public Works in 1831, there was no correlated system of public works in Ireland. Individual works were carried out by state grants, local contributions, community expenditure, and private investment.

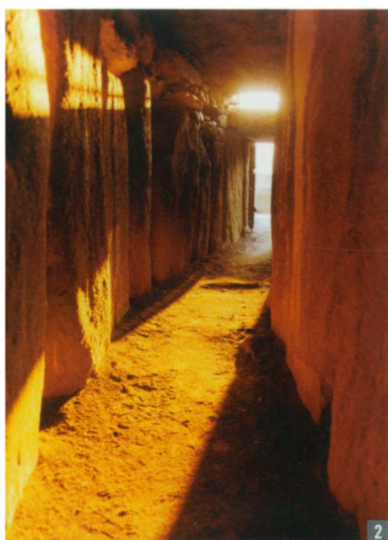
The scale of the OPW's remit can be gauged from some of the projects undertaken, including the Shannon Navigation system, the largest of its kind at the time in the then British Isles; Famine relief works 1845-52, one of the biggest relief operations in the world at the time; the reclamation of vast tracts of land for agricultural use under the great drainage schemes of the 19th century; and construction of most of the piers and harbours of the country.

In the early decades of its existence the OPW administered loans and grants for the construction of

extensions and repairs of piers and small harbours to encourage and promote sea fishing. It arranged for the construction of new 'road grants' throughout the country, including the famous 'Antrim Coast Road'. The OPW expanded its activities to cover the extensive relief works sanctioned in an attempt to relieve the distress caused by the potato failure in the middle of the century - at the peak of its operation the OPW provided work for almost one million people.

The Ancient Monuments Protection Act, 1862 granted the OPW powers to maintain, purchase and accept monuments, appoint inspectors and provide funding. This remit developed to include other objects of antiquity such as tumuli, cairns, stone circles, earth works and ancient and medieval buildings including the world famous heritage site at Newgrange, Tara and the 'Grianan of Aileach'. This was further expanded

1 The OPW
 Headquarters,
 St Stephen's Green,
 Dublin



when the Commissioners accepted the guardianship of a number of structures under the 1903 Land Act.

The OPW supervised the design and construction of major public buildings such as the Four Courts (1786), the Custom House (1781), Dublin Castle (c. 1680-1900), and the Royal Hospital Kilmainham (1680). The maintenance of these buildings became a permanent function that is still carried out today. A new 'convict depot' (now Mountjoy Prison) was built on the North Circular Road, along with prisons in Smithfield, Kilmainham and Richmond. Other notable buildings constructed and maintained include the Royal College of St Patrick in Maynooth, the Queens Colleges at Belfast, Cork and

Dromod, Co Leitrim, mainly during the summer months. Clearly the tourist potential and attractions of the River Shannon were appreciated long before tourism became a national industry. The OPW's responsibility for railways ceased in 1920 when they were transferred to the Ministry of Transport.

The responsibilities of the OPW diminished slightly in the early years of the 20th century, but in the years following 1921, the OPW renewed activity on a scale greater than ever before, as it dealt with matters directly rising out of the political situation of the time – providing accommodation for the Oireachtas and the new government departments, maintaining buildings for the Army, and setting up stations for the Garda Síochána (for which some 837 stations in all parts of the country were required).

Charged with finding a suitable fixed meeting place for the new Oireachtas, the OPW settled on the lecture theatre of the Royal Dublin Society in Leinster House, and proceedings opened there on 9 September 1922, though it wasn't until July 1924 that a recommendation was made to acquire the whole of Leinster House for the sum of £68,000. Providing accommodation for newly constituted government departments presented great difficulties. The three principal buildings occupied by staff – the Custom House, the GPO and the Four Courts – were all in a ruinous condition. The restoration of all three buildings was carried out over subsequent years.

In 1932 the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park at Killarney was presented to the state, and, together with St Stephen's Green and the Phoenix Park, are maintained by the OPW as public amenities. In 1929, almost half a million people attended the celebration of Pontifical High Mass, the principal event of the

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Galway, the National Gallery of Art, the National Library and Museums of Science and Art.

The role played by the OPW in the development of the railway system was mainly limited to the investigation of plans prepared by individual railway companies, although the Railways (Ireland) Act, 1896 granted powers to construct lines in congested districts when companies could not be found, resulting in the construction of light railways including Cavan–Leitrim–Roscommon and Skibbereen–Schull. Tramways included the Dublin–Blessington and the Giants Causeway–Portrush lines. The 1896 Act also allowed for the establishment and maintenance of steamboats and coaches, and in 1897 daily steamer and coach trips commenced on the River Shannon between Killaloe and

Catholic Emancipation Centenary Celebrations, on what is commonly known as the fifteen acres.

Towards the end of the 1930s the OPW undertook the drainage of the lands, construction of roads, runways and buildings at the state's first two civil airports at Shannon and Dublin. Work commenced in Shannon in 1936 and in Dublin the following year – at its peak 830 men were employed in Dublin and 630 in Shannon.

During the Emergency 1939–45, the OPW came under pressure to meet demands for accommodation to cater for the increased army. In 1941, the Government set up a fuel control and transportation system in response to the deterioration of fuel imports. The Chief Engineer of the OPW was assigned the task of co-ordinating turf production. All forms of native fuel were transported to Dublin and a spectacular fuel depot was created in the Phoenix Park with turf clamps on both sides of the main road as far as the eye could see.

In 1939 Iveagh House was donated to the state and adapted for use by the Department of External Affairs (now the Dept of Foreign Affairs) and the Headquarters of the Dept of Industry and Commerce at Kildare Street was completed in 1942.

After the War there was, as to be expected, a great step forward in building and engineering activities. Plans became reality and major advances were made in the building of national schools, Garda stations, post offices and telephone exchanges. The OPW was also active overseas, buildings were purchased and adapted for use as Irish embassies – the embassy in London was completed in 1952, Paris in 1956. A permanent residence for the Irish representative to the UN in New York was also purchased. A memorial to Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins and Kevin O'Higgins was erected in 1950 at Leinster Lawn, in the form of an obelisk of Dublin granite, rising to sixty-five feet high, surmounted by a gilt bronze flame (Fig 5). In 1956 the Custom House memorial, designed by Monsieur Yann Renard Goulet, depicting Eire consoling a wounded and fettered warrior, was unveiled

In 1951 the OPW Central Engineering Workshops were established in extensive premises in Inchicore, Dublin, to provide a comprehensive machine repair and replacement service together with stores of essential supplies and spares of works equipment. This facility added greatly to the completion of major drainage catchment schemes in Offaly, Louth, Kerry, Galway, Tipperary, and Wexford. Land reclamation provided thousands of acres of land improvement, and marine and coastal protection works were carried out at many piers and harbours.

In the 1960s the move from small parish schools to larger, central schools began. Modern teaching

methods required modern standards with central heating, cloakrooms, toilets and kitchen facilities. A new central sorting office in Sheriff Street in Dublin and telephone exchanges, ranging from small rural automatic exchanges to large multi-storey trunk exchanges were provided. The National Gallery was extended, decayed stonework at the National Library was replaced, and the famous cross block at Dublin Castle was restored.

The 50th anniversary of the 1916 rising was marked by a memorial at Arbour Hill and the adapted Rotunda gardens at Parnell Square became the Garden of Remembrance. A memorial to Thomas Davis was unveiled on Easter Monday 1966 at College Green by the then President Eamonn De Valera.

In 1970/1980s work continued on architectural restoration works at the Royal Hospital Kilmalsham, the Custom House and the Curvilinear range in the National Botanic Gardens. In the 1990s controversy centred around proposals for visitor 'interpretive' centres, especially for The Burren in Co Clare and Luggala in Co Wicklow, and the heritage services were transferred from the OPW to a new Dept of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

The new Millennium brought with it the completion of many projects such as new state-of-the-art laboratories at Backweston, the National Gallery extension in Clare Street, and the Leinster House 2000 project.

Event and facilities management has become part of the OPW's remit – from the Papal Mass in the Phoenix Park in 1979, to the 1 May 2004 Accession Day in Aras an Uachtarain and Farmleigh when ten new member states joined the EU. In 2004 the OPW again assumed responsibility for the care and maintenance of the state's built heritage and national monuments.

Looking ahead, the OPW is involved with the proposed National Conference Centre, the relocation of the Abbey Theatre, and the National Concert Hall extension. The Government's decision to decentralise eight government departments and agencies to 53 locations around the country is another enormous task.

Since its foundation, the ethos of the OPW staff has been to deliver high standards of care and public duty, exemplified by commissioners such as TJ Byrne, John Fox Burgoyne, William le Fanu, Sir Richard John Griffith, Harold Leask, Robert Manning, Raymond McGrath, William Mulvany and Jacob Owen. Percy French, the well-known songwriter and performer, was an engineer with the OPW, and his work in Co Cavan inspired many of his songs. No doubt the OPW has inspired many others over the past 175 years. ■

■ George Moir, Press Officer, OPW



2 Newgrange, Tara Co Meath

3 Phoenix Park, Dublin

4 YANN RENARD GOULET *Custom House Memorial* 1956 bronze and granite

5 Memorial to Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins and Kevin O'Higgins, Leinster Lawn, Dublin, 1950