

A brief history of
Castlebar
Gaol

Image: Castlebar Gaol with
the hanging window in the
centre (nli.ie)



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CASTLEBAR GAOL



Castlebar has had three main prisons, the first was near Egan's jewellers at the junction of Castle Street, the second built in 1785 was on the Mall where the Motor Tax Office is - this had a tunnel running to the courthouse across the road. And the most recent of the prisons was on the Westport Road, where Mayo University Hospital is today.

Throughout the 1820's the prison on the Mall was overcrowded, it was in a state of disrepair letting in rain and described by prison inspectors as the worst prison in Ireland. A tendering process for the construction of a new gaol was put in place and won by the firm, Clarkes, that had recently built the Military Barracks in Castlebar. They had tendered a bid of £18,000 to construct the gaol, the final figure was £24,723.

The building of the gaol began in 1830 and it took five years to complete. The entrance, opposite the Travellers Friend Hotel, was a limestone building with four towers and heavy double gates. It also included a large window to the room where hangings took place. Lord Lucan, who had sold the land for the prison hung a sign outside it which read 'Outside Beware, Within Amend'.

The gaol had an unusual design with the three storey Governor's house in the middle of a circle of prison units.



The gaol replaced an older prison at this site now the motor tax office (irelandxo.com)

Plaque on the last remaining section of Castlebar gaol (visitcastlebar.ie)

Six separate buildings radiated out from the house, four of these were male prisoner buildings, and two service units. Separate from this was a women's and children's area which had three prison buildings, and the female warden's house. Surrounding all of this were twenty-foot walls. The capacity of the gaol was 180, with 98 male single cells, 20 female, and several double cells.

Also contained inside were two units of three solitary cells, along with a treadmill for raising water from a well, usually used as a punishment tool, and a stone breaking yard. Each prison cell measured 4 foot 6 inches wide and 14 foot long. All were well ventilated. There was a peer-hole in each door. Each cell contained a bed of bare planks - with no pillow, a small wooden table, a form shaped stool, a wooden salt cellar and a horn spoon.

The staff of the gaol included the governor, the deputy governor, matron, assistant matron, visiting surgeon, nurse, gate porter, guards and three chaplains. The first governor of the gaol was Governor Rodgers, who along with his staff had transferred the prisoners from the Mall. The historian, Michael O'Connor, tells of staff refusing to wear uniforms and bringing their families to live in the gaol. Prison inspectors eventually tired of the situation and decided to replace the staff. When they arrived at the gaol, staff wouldn't let them in, and the police were called to attack the gaol and free it from the staff.

After 1913 there was a call to close the gaol in Castlebar, and prisoners were transferred to Sligo. In 1919, at the start of the War of Independence, the RIC took over the building. By 1921 the Black and Tans occupied the gaol. In 1922 anti-Treaty forces took control of the gaol and started to imprison pro-Treaty and Free State Army men. In July that year the National Army moved against the prison and the anti-Treaty forces abandoned it and set it alight. The army put out the fire and used it as a prison for IRA members.

By 1924 the gaol was in extreme decline and being used by Mayo County Council as a machinery store. In 1929 the building was handed over to the council. It was converted into a site for the county hospital. Demolition began on the gaol in 1932 and in 1933 the first stone of the new hospital was laid.

Sources:

- Con-telegraph.ie
- Dr. Michael O'Connor, The Prisons of Castlebar Walk, May 2024
- Castlebar.ie

Left: Another view of the gaol (con-telegraph.ie)

