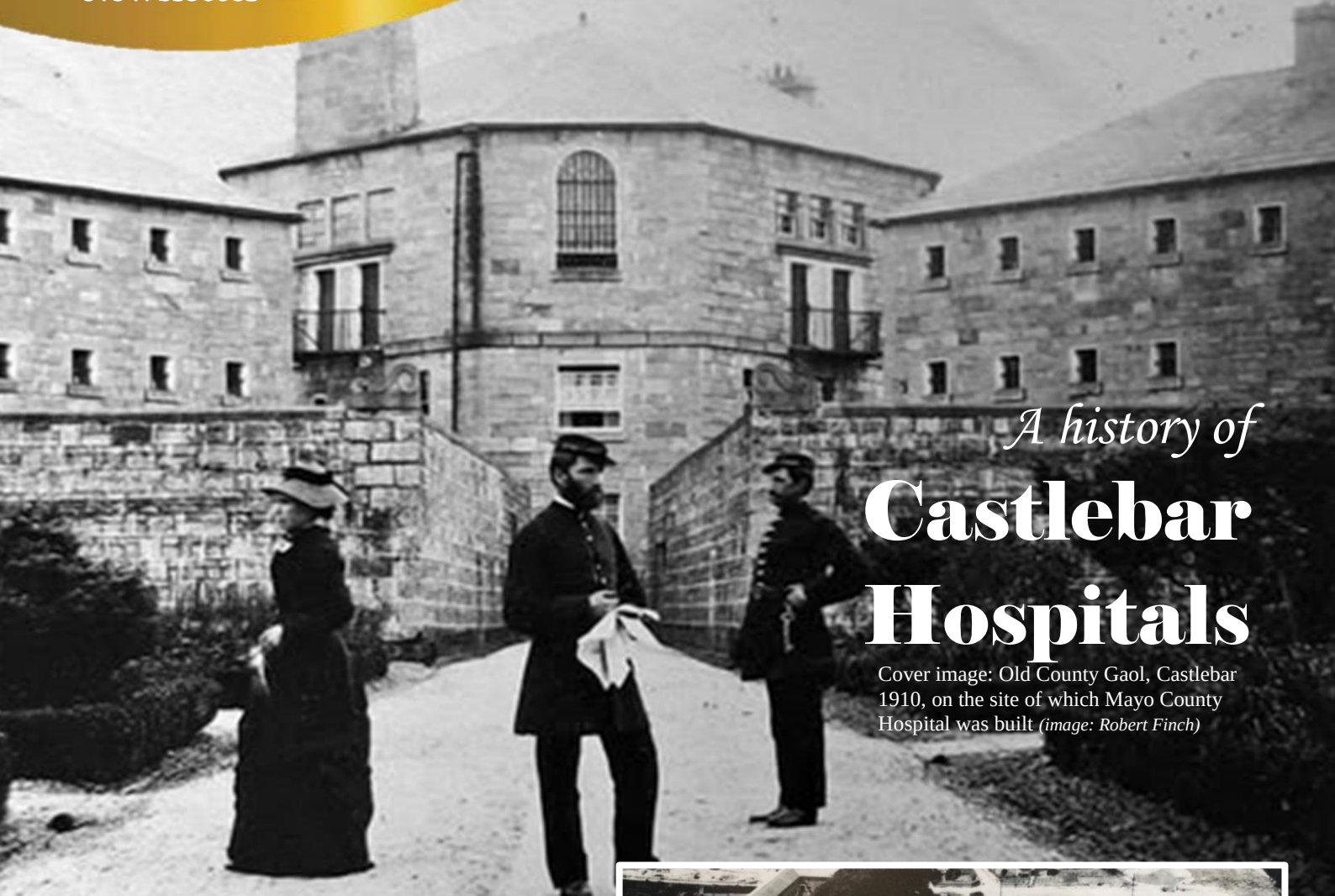




A history of **Castlebar Hospitals**

Cover image: Old County Gaol, Castlebar
1910, on the site of which Mayo County
Hospital was built (*image: Robert Finch*)

In the vibrant town of Castlebar, the healthcare services were anchored by two essential facilities. Together, these institutions played a vital role in promoting health and well-being for the people of Co. Mayo. We delve into the history of both

Right: Aerial view of Mayo County Hospital when it first opened (*Image: Connacht Telegraph*)



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THE GENERAL HOSPITAL

On October 24th 1938 Mayo's new county hospital, erected at a cost of £100,000, was formally opened and blessed before a distinguished gathering of public representatives, clergymen and other local and national officials. The hospital was located on the site of the old county gaol which was demolished in 1932 after being acquired by the Mayo County Board of Health. The hospital stands opposite the current TF Hotel.

Construction of the general hospital began in 1933, and initial cost estimates of £90,000 were far exceeded due to contractual issues. Despite delays the hospital was completed and equipped by late 1938, with an anticipated total cost of £150,000 once all buildings were completely finished. In addition to the main facility, a separate nurses' home, costing £8,000, was built nearby.



The hospital was a two-storey building, with 20 wards accommodating up to 124 patients, including a six-bed maternity unit. Ward sizes varied from single-bed rooms to 12-bed wards.

The ground floor housed the Matron's Office and Surgeon's offices, reception, and medical departments, while the second floor contained surgical rooms and the operating theatre. The facility featured a modern kitchen, along with an X-ray room, pathology lab and an accident department. A modern internal telephone system connected all departments.

Many other redevelopments occurred in the following years such as the new laboratory opened on 7th April 1975 by Henry Kenny, TD on his last official engagement.

Following the redevelopment further expansion of services continued such as a new Renal Dialysis Unit in December 2013.

A major re-development of the hospital was sanctioned during Barry Desmond's tenure as Minister for Health (1982-1987) and the new modern wing was subsequently opened in 1999/2000. The expanding facility developed into what became known as Mayo General Hospital. In November 2015, the hospital's name was changed from Mayo General Hospital to Mayo University Hospital and managed by the Saolta Group. The hospital is constantly evolving and adding to the range of services offered to the public.

THE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL

Situated on the grounds of Mayo University Hospital was St. Mary's Psychiatric Hospital, which now houses part of ATU Mayo. This had been the site of the Castlebar Union Workhouse. The very distinctive building, designed by George Wilkinson, opened as the Castlebar Asylum in 1866, when the first admissions (125 males and 125 females) were transferred from Ballinasloe by horse and sidecar. The District Lunatic Asylum, as it was then known, was more akin to a gaol than a hospital with its dark appearance, high walls, locked gates and windows reinforced with iron bars. Extensions were added in 1878 and 1882 to cater for the ever-growing population of patients.

In May 1900, a tender was accepted from Mr. John Mulligan, Swinford, for the construction of a hospital chapel. The cost of the chapel was £3,636 (€4,620) and completed in June 1902. In the 1920s the hospital had become known as Castlebar Mental Hospital and the foundation stone for the last extension, or 'new wing' as it became known, was laid in 1934.

In the 1950s the building became St. Mary's Psychiatric Hospital. Patient numbers peaked during the years 1959 to 1963, when they eventually reached 1,300. The hospital was completely self-sufficient in the provision of meat, vegetables and other commodities and was often referred to as "a town within a town". The whole complex spanned over 200 acres. A herd of over 60 pedigree Friesian cows provided milk to the hospital. With a cobbler, tailor, baker, gardener, farmers and butcher - all the needs of this community were catered for within its sprawling 200 acres. From the mid-1950s, attitudes in Ireland were slowly changing towards mental illness. In 1957, St. Mary's became one of the first psychiatric hospitals in Ireland to remove locked gates.



This was followed later by the demolition of the higher perimeter walls, which allowed for greater interaction between patients, staff and the local community.

The first major move from St. Mary's started in 1972 when St. Teresa's New Psychiatric Unit was opened (on the grounds) for the admission of patients with mental illness. It had a bed complement of 44: it was a ground floor building with large light-filled wards with a modern appearance and landscaped gardens. Furthermore, a new industrial Therapy Unit was opened by Pádraig Flynn, Minister of State at the Department of Transport in May 1981 to coincide with the introduction of deinstitutionalisation.

Subsequently, St. Mary's hospital went into a period of decline in the late 1980s and eventually closed altogether in 2005. The development of the community psychiatric services including home visits "helped to remove some of the stigma which was such a feature of psychiatric illness in the past" recalled Jim Brett, Community Psychiatric Nurse and Mayo Man of the Year 1981.

The building now serves as part of Mayo ATU ... with many tales that can be told of life within those walls.

References:

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