

HISTORY OF MULLINGAR

By Ruth Illingworth

The town of Mullingar has a history stretching back centuries. People have lived in this part of Ireland for at least 5,000 years. Artefacts dating back to the Stone and Bronze Age have been found near where the town now stands and there were important monastic settlements here during the early Christian centuries. The name Mullingar first appears in a twelfth century



life of a local saint, Colman of Lynn. The Vikings traded and settled here over a millenium ago and the High Kings of Ireland had one of their palaces close to Mullingar on the shores of Lough Ennel a thousand years ago.

Mullingar as an urban settlement began around 1186 when a Norman Baron called William Petit was granted land between Lough Owel and Lough Ennel by the Norman ruler of Meath, Hugh de Lacy. Petit built a stone castle overlooking the River Brosna where the County Buildings now stand. His brother, Father Ralph Petit built a church close by on the site of the present day All Saints Church. Father Petit went on to become Bishop of Meath and, in 1227, he founded a monastery for the Augustinian Order. This religious house stood at the eastern end of the town close to what is now Supervalu, the Austin Friars Hotel and the Town Park. The Statue of the two monks at Austin Friars Street commemorates the fact that in the 13th century, some of the Augustinians went on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The Augustinian Monastery stood until 1540 when it was closed during the Reformation. A second religious house, belonging to the Dominican order was founded on the western side of the town in 1237. It closed in 1540 but the friars remained in the town until 1799, and had another friary close to what is now Cusack Park in the 17th century. A third religious foundation, belonging to the Capuchin Friars briefly existed in Mullingar from 1636 to 1652.

Mullingar is a town founded by immigrants. The first language spoken here was French and the early citizens of Mullingar came from France, Flanders, Wales, England, Brittany and other lands. Along what is now the main street houses and businesses were established by the burgesses who governed the town. The Parish of Mullingar was founded in 1205 and the earliest grant of a market dates to 1207. Over time Mullingar was granted the right to hold four fairs a week as well as a weekly market. The town survived wars, famines, plague and climate change to become the county town when Westmeath was created in 1542. In the 17th century, Mullingar also became an assize town and an important military base. A county jail opened in 1566 and would remain in existence until 1900.

In 1747 a fire devastated the town. In its aftermath, Mullingar was rebuilt in stone and slate. A fine new Roman Catholic Parish church was built in 1730 on the site of the present Parish community centre and extended in 1755. The first county hospital opened in 1770 on the Dublin Road and what would become the Greville Arms Hotel was first opened sometime between 1750 and 1800. The 18th century town was a prosperous settlement which hosted one of the largest horse fairs in Ireland. A wealthy Roman Catholic merchant community funded the building of the parish church and, in 1825, helped set up the Presentation Convent school which still exists today.

A new Church of Ireland church was built in 1814 on the site of the original parish church of Mullingar. In 1825, a Presbyterian church opened in the town and, following visits to the town by John Wesley, a Methodist meeting house also opened in 1806. Georgian Mullingar also contained a post office, several inns and a number of breweries and malt houses, as well as two military barracks.

Mullingar developed as an important transport hub in the early 19th century. The main roads between Dublin and Galway and Sligo came through the town and there were a number of coach houses along the main streets. The Royal Canal reached Mullingar in 1806 and thousands of people travelled through the town by boat over the next 40 years. The coming of the canal boosted local trade and a number of warehouses were established at the fine canal harbour which opened in 1810. Some of the original canal bridges can still be seen in Mullingar. Passenger traffic ceased with the coming of the railway in 1848 but freight traffic continued between Mullingar and Dublin until 1951. Since the reopening of the canal through the town in 1999, it has become one of the town's most significant amenities and tourist attractions.

The railway reached Mullingar for the first time in October 1848 and by the 1860s, Mullingar was one of the most important rail junctions in Ireland. The station remains one of the finest surviving examples of Victorian railway architecture in the country. The railway, like the canal, boosted local trade and commerce and became one of Mullingar's most significant employers. The 19th century also saw the establishment of a number of important institutional buildings in the town. A cathedral opened in 1836 and the Christian Brothers came to town in 1856 to run a new school for boys—now St Mary's College. Loreto Convent opened in 1881 and St Finian's College in 1908. The Asylum—now St Loman's Hospital, opened in 1855 and a new and extensive military barracks was built between 1811 and 1817. Throughout the 19th century, regiments from all over Britain and Ireland were stationed in Mullingar and local men served with the Army all over the world. The first police station in the town was opened around 1837 and the present day courthouse dates back to 1824. The County Town of Westmeath began to acquire local democracy in 1854 when the Town Commission was established. In 1899 Westmeath County Council and Mullingar Rural District Council came into being. Mullingar was also a Poor Law Union from the 1830s and the fine Workhouse building which was first opened in 1841 still stands. The Famine Memorial designed by local artist Gerald Leslie, and unveiled in 1997, is a sombre reminder of the tragic years of the 1840s when thousands of Westmeath people died from hunger. Towards the end of the 19th century conditions improved and the Town Commission began building Local Authority houses. Many of these houses are still inhabited today.

In 1858 the town acquired a new landlord when the Earls of Granard—landlords since 1661 sold Mullingar to the Greville family. Ten years later Lord Greville granted the lease of a right of way beside the Army Barracks to the British War Office for an incredible ten million years! It is the longest lease in history. Lord Greville also rebuilt buildings such as the Market House and the Greville Arms Hotel. The Greville Arms would be put on the literary map by James Joyce. Joyce lived in Mullingar for a few weeks in 1900 and 1901 and he never forgot the town. Mullingar is mentioned in three of his novels.

In the early decades of the 20th century Mullingar continued to grow and to change. A new Cathedral was built between 1932 and 1936 and became the landmark building in the town. The 1930s also saw the building of a new County Hospital, the Greyhound Stadium and the Cusack Park GAA Grounds, where Micheal O Hehir began his legendary broadcasting career on AUGUST 14TH 1938. The Army Barracks had closed in 1928 following independence and the end of the Civil War, but it was reopened in 1939 after the Second World War began. From 1943 until 2012, Mullingar was the home of the 4th Field Artillery Regiment and soldiers from the town served all over the world on UN Peacekeeping missions from 1960 onwards.

In the last decades of the 20th century, Mullingar experienced a dramatic rise in its population. Markets and fairs gave way to factories and business parks. Supermarkets made their first appearance but Mullingar still retains a number of family businesses-some dating back as far as the 1870. Two of the pubs in the town centre have been around since the 1820s. Ring roads now encircle the town and a place which was founded by immigrants is now home to people from more than sixty different countries.

Mullingar is a place with a rich and diverse history and heritage of which we can all be very proud.

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