



OLD GROUND HOTEL

ENNIS

Old Ground History

Origins

The Old Ground Hotel was built in the early part of the 18th Century as a private dwelling, by Barry Upton & John Dwyer, who leased it to Charles Mahon for "Three Lives" When Mahon died in 1822 his son Charles Jnr took over the lease. On the 13th February 1863 Charles handed the property over to his nephew John Mahon, who then resided in London. John left London and travelled to Ireland. Riding on horseback from Limerick to Ennis to take up residence, he arrived at the mansion to be greeted by an old retainer with the words "You are welcome to the Old Ground".

It would appear that Mahon actually became owner of the property as on the 10th December 1875 he then sold it to a John Petty. Presumably Petty died sometime between 1875 & 1886, as in 1886 a William Hynes M.D. became a tenant in the house.

In 1895 approximately, Jane McNamara acquired it and thus turned it into a hotel. The McNamaras sold the premises (exact date unknown, though it is known to be after April 1915, the death of FW McNamara, owner of the Old Ground being noted in an obituary in the Limerick Chronicle and after June 1921 when much of the Hotel's contents were burned during martial law in Ennis at the time of the Irish War of Independence, at a time where Jane McNamara was 85 years old, blind and in very poor health, see below) and it has a chequered history thereafter. Eventually the bank acquired it and in 1927 it was bought from them by James O'Regan for approximately £2,000.

The Old Ground was as a central point to the Republic's tumultuous beginnings.

On June 7, 1917, Major Willie Redmond MP for East Clare was killed in action while leading the Royal Irish Brigade to victory at the Battle of Messines Ridge, at Ypres, Belgium during the First World War. A by-election was called to fill the vacant seat left by the death of Major Redmond. The election was hotly contested between Eamon De Valera, the Sinn Fein candidate and Patrick Lynch of the Irish Party. The Easter Rising of the previous year had passed off without much note in Clare and was even condemned as being misguided by church leaders. At a Sinn Fein meeting at the Clare Hotel, possible candidates were discussed. The majority of the party initially voted in favour of Peadar Clancy from Cranny, who had taken part in the Easter Rising and had his sentence of death commuted to ten years penal servitude. It was decided then to hold a convention at the Old Ground Hotel on Thursday, 14th July 1917. At the convention over 200 delegates focused on the emerging candidate Eamon de Valera, who had recently been released from prison. At the convention Peadar Clancy and three other candidates withdrew leaving the way clear for de Valera.

In 1920 during the War of Independence, the McNamara's still were in possession of the building. They were staunch nationalists, staunch Parnellites and later stout supporters of Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein used the Old Ground as their campaign headquarters from 1917 onwards and the building was used as a meeting place by the Irish Republican





Est. 1895

★ ★ ★ ★

OLD GROUND HOTEL

ENNIS

Army (IRA). With mounting frustration at kidnappings and ambushes of their members, the Black and Tans and Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) ransacked the building and burned most of the furniture on the lawn while food, drink and portable goods were distributed to loyalist onlookers who had gathered to watch. Harry Mills, a piano player, entertained the crowd with a rendition of God Save The Queen before the piano was put on the flames also. The Black and Tans addressed a letter to the Old Ground Hotel in 1920 warning Sinn Fein that: "Last Warning Take Notice. If the two constables who were kidnapped at R..NE (Ruan ?) on the morning of the 18th inst. are not returned by 12 midnight 21st to Ennis, those who have received such notices are prepared to meet their God' (signed) BLACK AND TAN ". The Black and Tans did so in the belief that the occupiers of the Old Ground (Sinn Fein and by extension the IRA) were the kidnapers. It is not known if the kidnapped were returned safely.

The April 18th 1921 edition of the newspaper 'Freemans' reported that on April 16th 1921 the local IRA decided to attack O'Shaughnessy's Pub in Ennis because it was serving drinks to British Soldiers in spite of IRA warnings. A group of about 9 IRA men went to the pub that night and found the door locked. They banged on the door, and when the door was opened, Paddy Con hurled a Mills grenade into the bar and the rest of the IRA group fired revolvers into the building killing a prominent Sergeant by the name of Rew. Four buildings were then destroyed or heavily damaged in the official reprisals for Sgt. Rew's death among them The Old Ground Hotel and Clare Hotel in Ennis.

Eoin O'Duffy, the leader of the Monaghan Brigade of the IRA, the first Garda Commissioner in Ireland's history, an Irish activist who along with Michael Collins accepted the Anglo Irish Treaty and fought as a general in the Irish Civil War on the pro-Treaty side, held disciplinary hearings in the Old Ground Hotel on 14th of June 1928 where he dismissed from his position, a Kilrush Superintendent who he accused of accepting a £100 bribe from the IRA in return for turning a blind eye to intimidation tactics that was being carried out in the area at that time.

Quick Bits

The National Council of the Blind Ireland sanctioned its Clare branch here on November 15th 1933.

In December 1936, famed pilot Charles Lindbergh, whilst scouting for locations to open a transatlantic gateway stayed at the Hotel while in Clare.

In 1946, with the advent of scheduled transatlantic flights into Shannon Airport, an extension was built onto the manor house. The Lounge beside the old reception area, known as the Blue Lounge was a communal room for Trans Atlantic Airlines. The cocktail bar was where reception is now and was used by Pan Am. Meals were served throughout the night.

Up until the late 1940's a white flag flown from the O'Connell Street side of the hotel indicated that there would be a funeral cortege on the street that evening on its way to the Cathedral.

In the late 1940's famed local historian Bill Bluett (1909 –1993) made a short film called "An Tostal" which included footage of the very first American Coach tour arriving to the Old Ground Hotel.



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OLD GROUND HOTEL

ENNIS

A short pencilled autograph signed note written in the Old Ground Hotel by Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Fein to 'Cathal' (Murphy, Treasurer of Sinn Fein), dated 9th July 1917 by the recipient, asking for £5 to be sent to the Hotel saying "Have just got here from Nenagh and Limerick. All things looking well." sold for £1,000 at Adams Auction House in Dublin. The date and address indicate that Griffith was taking part in the final canvas in the historic East Clare by-election, where De Valera defeated an Irish Party candidate to take the late Major Willie Redmond's former seat.

In a June 6th 1999 article written in the Irish Independent about former Clare hurling manager Tom Ryan, the author relayed a story that Ryan, a Tipperary native, had used an incentive to get the Clare hurlers more interested in their graft. He wrote, "Perhaps it was difficult for Tipp to treat a county seriously when for generations Clare themselves had found it hard to do so". To address the apathy evident in 1967 Tom Ryan suggested to county chairman John Hanly that the players needed an incentive to train. He proposed steak meals in the Old Ground Hotel after each session; some 1,800 were devoured in the first year and players began to respond. There was definite progress. In '67 they reached the league semi-finals and trounced both Limerick and Galway in the championship to reach the Munster final against Tipp.

Joseph Rooney's 2011 book 'The Flying Hound' uses The Old Ground as a setting in his fictional novel.

The O'Regan's

Brendan O' Regan recounted in Micheál Ó Muircheartaigh's book 'From Borroloola to Mangerton Mountain: Travels and Stories from Ireland's Most Beloved Broadcaster' the tale of how his father James came to be in possession of the Hotel. He said "We were on holidays in Italy when my father met some people who suggested that he should become a Fiat agent on his return; they also mentioned that the 'capital' would be a better location than where he was then operating." The Fiat deal was made on his return to Ireland and he began looking for a place in the county capital Ennis to open this garage in 1927. "My father found a garage alright, but there was a problem because it was part of a hotel that was then closed down; the only way to get possession of the garage was to buy the Hotel as well – it was called The Old Ground Hotel." O'Regan finished.

The site of the Hotel's long history

Next door to the Old Ground was the Town Hall, which incorporated a jail. The back stair case was reported to be haunted in an article from the Chicago Sun Times dated 1991 by a reporter who stayed here. In 1963 the O' Regan family who owned a large residence in Bindon Street, swapped it for the Town Hall with the town commissioners. The upper floor of the Town Hall is now the Banquet Suite. In former times there was a bridge leading from an upper window of the Town Hall across the street to an exercise ground for the prisoners. The jail was used more as a depot where prisoners were kept while awaiting deportation to Australia and Tasmania.

It is not known exactly when the jail ceased being used for this purpose. Later, the Grand Jury, who held the jail on



OLD GROUND HOTEL
ENNIS

the payment of a shilling, gave it to another government department. It had been intended to open as a library, but it was, in fact, acquired by the Grand Jury once more where it was used as a Court House and later closed to become a library. It was then sold to the Town Commissioners who in turn sold the entire premises to the O' Regan's.

In an article that was first published in *The Other Clare*, vol. 16 (1992), pp. 5-15 by Risteárd Ua Cróinín & Martin Breen, they detail excavations carried out in 1965 following the purchase of the Town Hall by the then owners. "During this work a cellar was discovered underneath the floor and among items scattered on the flag floor were chains, iron window bars, parts of an old flintlock gun with a Dublin Castle and crown stamp on it, and a coin dated 1743 or 8. Also found were oyster shells and the bones of kid goats, while a water channel could be clearly heard flowing underneath."

The fireplace in the Lemenagh Hall (formerly the jail) was originally in Lemenagh Castle (built by Conor O' Brien in 1553 and was given to the Old Ground by Gerard McDonagh of Dromoland Castle in 1902, on the understanding that if Lemenagh Castle is ever restored the fireplace is to be returned and is commonly acknowledged as the finest fireplace from the Castle. The Lemenagh Hall is contained in what appears to be an authentic medieval Tower House. Most of the original stone from the Tower is now blocked by modern construction but some remaining large limestone blocks are still visible and form the wall on the main stairs to the function room.

Ennis was the first town to adopt the 1855 Public Library (Ireland) Act. This decision was unanimously taken at a public meeting held on 16th October, 1855. A circular was distributed in January 1856 appealing for funds and outlining the advantages of a Free Public Library. The Grand Jury provided the site of the old Convict Depot, Jail St. and designs furnished by J. Petty were approved, at a cost of £860. The gentlemen of the County, no doubt in response to the circular, subscribed £500 while the penny rate would produce the sum of £24-14-0.5. However, the library project was later abandoned and the building became the Town Hall and later part of the Old Ground Hotel.

A map written in 1703 called the Moland Map shows a large building straddling what is now the top of O'Connell Street. It is thought that the building was the original Gaol built after the construction of the Court House in 1617 though Larry Brennan's book on the history of O'Connell Street dates the jail to 1595. There was heavy refurbishment of the site to update the prison to a more satisfactory level between 1779 and 1781 following a decision made by the Clare Grand Jury in 1778. The refurbishment included separate cells and day rooms for male and female occupants.

The new section of bedrooms which is known as a New Wing was built in 1966. The O' Regans sold the hotel to Kingston Windsor Hotels in 1967 and it was subsequently acquired by Strand Hotels in 1970. It again changed ownership in 1977 when it was incorporated into The Forte Group and in 1995 was purchased by Allen Flynn and is now part of the Flynn Hotel Group.