



A Short History of Mullingar Town Council, from Foundation to Dissolution 1856 - 2014



by
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Members of Mullingar Town Commissioners with the President of Ireland, Dr Patrick Hillery during his visit in 1985



President Mary Robinson with members of Mullingar Town Commission in 1992

Mullingar Town Council 1856-2014

In 1854, the Towns Improvement (Europe) Act was passed allowing towns to claim a measurement of self-government. On April 23rd 1856, a meeting took place in the Courthouse of the ratepayers of Mullingar, to discuss whether or not to adopt the Act. Those who attended agreed that the Act could help to alleviate the problems of poor housing, overcrowding, and destitution prevalent in Mullingar at the time. Their decision to adopt the Act was ratified by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Carlisle, on April 28th.

On May 12th 1856, the male ratepayers of Mullingar met in the courthouse to select fifteen Town Commissioners. The Towns Improvement Act gave men whose property was rated at £4 annual value the vote. The following men were elected to serve as Mullingar's first town commissioners: Dillon Kelly, William Middleton, Bernard Kerrigan, Denis Keegan, Laurence Keena, Terence Byrne, Michael Dooner, Andrew Hughes, Thomas Dowdall, James Daly, Patrick Egan, Patrick Nesbitt, Thomas Nugent, Thomas Allen and Patrick Farrell.

The first meeting of the Commission took place on May 19th. Bernard Kerrigan was elected as the first Chairman. He promised 'to do all in his power to promote the welfare of the town and keep down taxation'. The first Town Clerk was Thomas Duffy, who was appointed on a salary of £15 a year.

On June 20th, the commissioners elected John Mongan at a salary of £15 a year to the wonderfully named post of 'Inspector of Nuisances and Lodging Houses'. 'Nuisances' referred to the manure and other refuse which littered the streets and gave Mullingar the reputation of being one of the dirtiest towns in

Ireland. It also referred to the prostitutes and vagrants who were a major feature of Mullingar life in the mid-19th Century. The lodging houses were described as Mullingar's 'monster grievance'. The proliferation of lodging houses, many of them housing up to ten people, was a consequence of a lack of housing to deal with a growing population.

To tackle these problems the Inspector of Nuisances was directed to employ two men at 1 shilling a day to clean the town and to visit the lodging houses with a view to preparing a registry of them. The Inspector was also ordered to put the householders of the town on notice to sweep the footpath outside their door every morning. These who did not could be fined.

Over the next year or so, a total of 126 lodging houses were registered and obliged to be cleaned up daily and properly ventilated. Sickness among lodgers had to be reported to the authorities and the Inspector of Nuisances kept a careful watch out for 'improper characters' in the houses.

Dealing with prostitution and vagrancy proved to be more difficult for the Commissioners and the Inspector, despite the pledge of the Commissioners to 'prevent these nightly scenes of immorality from being enacted in the public streets'. The Inspector was often threatened as he went about his job and proposals to remove sex workers from the town were unenforceable.

In the area of street lighting and paving, the Commissioners went to work with determination. A rate of 1 shilling in the pound on rateable property within the town was struck in 1856, and this property tax was used to fund street lamps, new paving and, in 1859, gas lighting. The formation of a gas company for Mullingar was agreed by the Commissioners in January, 1858, and, on

November 20th 1859, the town lamps were lit with gas for the first time. Peat from the bogs outside the town was used to provide the gas. The lamps in Mullingar were the first public street lamps in Ireland. By the end of 1860, the Commissioners had provided Mullingar with 47 gas lamps as well as 711 yards of footpaths and new grates and gullies.

In the 1860s, the Commissioners turned their attention to the commercial life stock company for the purpose of erecting a flax mill. A mill was built but was destroyed by fire soon afterwards and never rebuilt. The Commissioners did, however, succeed in getting the new Town Landlord, Lord Greville, to give the town three new fairs.

During the 1870s, the Commissioners began to campaign for the expansion of the military barracks and for the retention of the county jail. Although the Commissioners were, for the most part, staunch Nationalists, they welcomed the British Garrison as a reliable source of income and employment in the town. The military authorities welcomed delegations from the commission to the barracks, but would not accede to the Commissioners' request that Mullingar be made a regimental depot. The Commissioners were also unsuccessful in their efforts to have the jail in Mullingar, which they described as being 'the healthiest in Ireland', made the prison centre for the midlands in 1875. That role went to Tullamore and Mullingar jail eventually closed in 1900.

By the end of the 1870s, the Commissioners were becoming more Nationalist in their opinions and actions. They supported the Land League and Parnell's campaign for Home Rule. In 1880, the Commission's Chairman, William Farrell, was imprisoned under the Coercion Acts. Another Commissioner,

James Tuite, who was also the MP for North Westmeath, was also imprisoned in 1881.

When the Parnell split occurred at the end of 1890 the Mullingar Town Commissioners initially supported Parnell strongly. James Tuite, who had withdrawn his support for Parnell, was denounced as the man who had ‘thrown Parnell to the English wolves’. But as the Roman Catholic Bishop of Meath, Dr. Nulty, denounced Parnell the majority of the Commissioners changed their mood. By 1892, with Parnell dead, James Tuite was being lauded and the Parnellite editor of the ‘Westmeath Examiner’, JP Hayden, condemned. Hayden, who had himself served on the Commission, was even banned from attending Commission meetings. He was accused of using insulting language about the Commissioners and ‘attacking our Bishop and priests’.

New legislation such as ‘The Housing of the Working Class Act’ enabled Mullingar Town Commission to begin a programme of house building. One of the first Commission housing schemes was Parnell Terrace, which was completed in February 1890 at a cost of £1,040.13s, 6d. Rent was 2 shillings a week.

Over the next two decades, the Commissioners built more houses in Patrick Street and Barrack Street. Most of these houses had gardens and even piggeries. The houses were designated as being for ‘artisans’ (tradesmen), and many of the tenants in Patrick Street, for example, were railway employees. As the 1890s drew to a close the Commissioners erected new gas lamps in areas such as Blackhall and Millmount Road. Lighting was kept on after 11 p.m., and the Commissioners also began to examine the possibility of getting electric lighting for Mullingar, with Commissioner Francis Stafford noting that, ‘this electric business is going at a great pace’. The work of keeping the town

clean was also continuing. The office of Inspector of Nuisances had been transformed into that of ‘Town Sergeant and Lamplighter’. The first Sergeant was George Booth, who was appointed in 1884 at a salary of £24 per annum with a uniform supplied by T.L. Hutchinson, draper. The Town Sergeant could summon people for littering or anti-social behaviour. The Sergeant could even summon people to appear before the Commissioners. This happened, for example, in the 1890s, when the Sergeant was sent by the Commissioners to fetch a Mr. Hickey who had offered to sell land to the Commissioners.

In 1898, a new Local Government Act was passed, setting up County Councils and Urban and Rural District Councils. Mullingar’s population was too small to qualify it for UDC status, so it became a Rural District. The Mullingar Town Commission was subordinate to the RDC, but the Commissioners still had powers in many areas of Mullingar life.

As early as 1858, the Commissioners had begun naming, or re-naming, the streets. Linen Street had become Dominick Street, ‘Austin Friars’ replaced ‘Bridge’ Street and ‘the back of the town’ was grandly rechristened ‘Bishopsgate Street’ and ‘College Street’. In 1901, the Commissioners decided to do their bit for the language revival by erecting street signs in English and Irish.

In the 1899 Town Commission elections, Labour representatives topped the poll. But the majority of Commissioners were staunchly Catholic and strongly Nationalist. The new leader of the Irish Party, John Redmond, received enthusiastic support from most Commissioners and the Commission passed frequent resolutions in support of Home Rule and the establishment of a Catholic university. Great deference was shown to the local Catholic clergy

and Bishop. The Commission meetings were now being held in the church owned St. Mary's Hall in Bishopsgate Street and priests frequently attended meetings. In 1903, the Commissioners even set themselves the task of examining and amending the script of the controversial play 'The Wild Irish Boy', which was being performed in Mullingar.

In May 1914, the Town Commissioners took part in a triumphant parade through Mullingar to celebrate the passage of the Home Rule Bill. A few weeks later the First World War began. Throughout the war, the Commissioners remained largely loyal to Redmond and supportive of Irishmen serving in the war. Resolutions were passed in praise of local men who won bravery awards. In 1916, for example, when Private Richard Cully won the Distinguished Conduct Medal, the Commissioners honoured him with this tribute; 'actions such as his bring credit to his native town, Mullingar, and still more lustre to the splendid records of the Irish soldiers generally'.

Town Commissioners attended recruitment meetings and continued to enjoy good relations with the British regiments stationed in the towns. One Commissioner lost a son in the conflict, while the Town Clerk had a nephew killed.

The Easter Rising took the town, as everywhere else, by surprise. During Easter week, the Commissioners held an emergency meeting at which they decided to organise citizens into a sort of Home Guard called the Volunteer Defence Corps to help keep the peace, but there was little for them to do. After the Rising, the Commissioners condemned the rebellion but also denounced the executions and called on the British to show mercy.

By 1918, the Commissioners had begun to move towards a more radical stance. One Commissioner, Patrick Brett, joined Sinn Féin in 1917 and set up a Sinn Féin Club in town. The Commissioners joined protest rallies against conscription and demanded the release of political prisoners. Following the setting up of the Dáil government in 1919, the Town Commission came under the control of the Department of Local Government under William T. Cosgrave. Like other local authority bodies, the Town Commission ceased to recognise or co-operate with the British authorities in Ireland. By 1921, Commissioners were serving on Dáil courts and Patrick Brett was in prison.

The Commissioners also flexed their Nationalist muscles by embarking on a new round of street-renaming in honour of the patriot dead and other suitable persons. The transformation of Greville Street into Oliver Plunkett Street was generally popular, at least among Roman Catholics. Military Road became Ashe Road, in honour of Thomas Ashe, and the murder of Cork's Sinn Féin Lord Mayor, Thomas McCurtain, brought about the renaming of Barrack Street in his honour. However, it would be fifty years before Pearse Street was finally accepted in place of Earl Street, while some names, such as 'Republican Glen' (Springfield) and O'Donovan Rossa (Harbour) Street were never accepted.

The Commissioners welcomed the truce in 1921 and supported ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Independence saw the British Army depart the Barracks and the Commissioners sought to obtain a portion of the unused buildings in the Barracks to be used for the purpose of relieving the housing shortage in Mullingar. The Minister for Defence refused the request on the grounds that the Irish Army was now in occupation of buildings. However, when the barracks closed at the end of the 1920s, the married quarters were handed over



Dillon Kellsy:

Longest Serving
Chairman

Mr. Carey proposed & Mr. Coyne seconded
the following Vote of sympathy which
was unanimously carried
To the relatives & friends of Lieut. Dease
V.C. Private Gerry Fagan
& Taite. We the Mullingar Town Commissioners
Send our very fullest sympathy.
They with others of our brave fellow
Countrymen have had their blood
shed for our Safety, and we desire
to publicly place on record our
Estimate to them

Expressions of sympathy made by Mullingar Town Commission to the Family
of Lt Dease on his death in WWI.
Dease was the first recipient of the Victoria Cross

and became known as St. Finian's Terrace. The Commissioners also sought the right to purchase from Lord Greville the tolls for the fairs and markets on the Fair Green.

Throughout the interwar period the Commissioners continued to carry out improvements in the town. As well as St. Finian's Terrace, the Commissioners also developed housing such as Grand Parade, McEoin's Terrace, Cathedral View, St Lawrence's Terrace and St. Loman's Terrace. In the 1930s, the Commissioners helped to bring electric light to the streets of Mullingar.

From 1935 to 1941, the Commissioners were actually the only elected local politicians in Mullingar, as the County Council had been dissolved for failure to strike a rate. Originally elections to the Commission had taken place annually. This had been changed to triennial elections in 1899. From 1899, women had the right to vote and from 1935, universal suffrage for all over 21 was introduced. Commission elections generally ran smoothly and with little controversy. An embarrassing exception was in 1942 when the elections were deemed to be invalid because the town had been illegally divided into two electoral areas and new elections had to take place. From 1920s, all political parties were represented on the Commission and there were also a number of Independents.

From the 1940s onwards, the Commissioners began to lose power to the County Council. Lighting, road building and maintenance and provision of social housing ceased to be functions of the commission. However, the Commissioners were still able to represent the concerns of their constituents and to assist people to access their entitlements. They could, for example, when central government funding was available, help ensure that roads and

paths in the Town Commission electoral area were repaired and maintained.

The Commissioners were also able to represent Mullingar on bodies such as the A.M.A.I. (Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland). Between 1977 and 1990, no less than three members of Mullingar Town Commission, Vincent Brophy, Frank McIntyre and Camillus Glynn, served as president of the A.M.A.I.

The Commissioners continued to play an important role in civic life of Mullingar. They were on hand for the homecoming celebrations for sporting heroes such as boxer Maxie McCullough in 1949 and Grand National winning horse, Quare Times in 1955. In 1966, the Commissioners erected a plaque on the Market House to mark the Golden Jubilee of the Easter Rising and, in 1991, another plaque was put up to celebrate the fact that James Joyce had once lived in the town. From 1981 to 1998, the Commissioners gave space in the Market House for a town museum.

Women had been eligible to vote in Town Commission elections since 1898 and to stand for election. But, amazingly, the Commission remained an all male body until the 1990s. It was only in December of 1993 that Betty Doran became the first female Commissioner when she was co-opted to the Commission. In the elections in June 1994, Detty Cornally became the first woman to be elected to Mullingar Town Commission, and Betty Doran again made history a year later when, in June 1995, she became the first female Cathaoirleach.

The new millennium saw further reform of local government. The 2001 Local Government Act changed the title of the Town Commission to the Town

Council. To reflect the change, a new chain of office was purchased in 2008. Councillors were paid an allowance for the first time and members of the Oireachtas were barred from serving on local councils. T.D.s and Senators who had served as Mullingar Commissioners included Gerry L'Estrange, Camillus Glynn and Paul McGrath.

In April 2006, President Mary McAleese unveiled a plaque in the Market House to mark the 150th anniversary of the Commission/Council. By then, Mullingar had expanded way beyond the electoral boundaries of the Town Council. The newly titled Councillors were still able to make representations to the powerful and be a voice for their constituents, but they had gained no new responsibilities and had almost no powers.

Nevertheless, the 2009 local elections attracted a record 22 candidates to contest the 9 Town Council seats – including, in a reflection of the diversity of 21st Century Mullingar, immigrants from Pakistan, Poland, and Nigeria who had made their home in Mullingar. Following the elections, Mullingar Town Council made history when Ruth Illingworth became the first openly gay leader of a council on the island of Ireland.

The 2009 elections turned out to be the last ever held for a Mullingar Town Council. In 2013 a new Local Government Reform Act abolished all Town Councils. The final business meeting of Mullingar Town Council took place on May 13th 2014 and the Council ceased to exist on June 1st 2014, after 158 years.

The last Cathaoirleach/Chairperson of the Council was Pat Collins. The other members of the last Mullingar Town Council were: Ken Glynn, Michael

Dollard, Peter Burke, Detty Cornally, Aidan Davitt, Bill Collentine, Ruth Illingworth and Gerry Sheridan. The last Town Clerk was Caroline Byrne.

Ruth Illingworth

May 2014

Images:

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**Chairmen & Chairwomen of
Mullingar Town Commission & Council**



1856	Bernard Kerrigan	1920-1924	J. McKeown
1857	Bernard Kerrigan/ Denis Keegan	1925-1926	R. Corcoran
1858-1867	Dillon Kelly	1927	J.J. Barry
1868	Patrick Farrell	1928-1929	Patrick Brett
1868-1879	Dillon Kelly	1930-1933	P. Dooner
1879-1881	William Farrell	1934-1941	Owen Comiskey
1882	James Tuite / Fred Gilroy	1942-1944	Harry Gilbert
1883-1885	James Tuite	1945-1950	P.J. Shaw
1886-1887	Laurence Kerrigan	1951	Ger Jennings
1888-1899	Peter Daly	1952-1954	Denis Keelan
1900	James Doyne	1955-1956	P. Kiernan
1901	T.J. Shaw	1957	J. Beglan
1902	George Hickey / T.J. Shaw	1958	Vincent Brophy
1903	T.J. Shaw	1959	J. Beglan
1904	T.J. Shaw / P.J. English	1960	Jack Coleman
1905	James Gaynor	1961	J. Harte
1906	P.J. English / James Gaynor	1962	J .Beglan
1907	T..J. Shaw	1963	Joe Feely
1908-1910	P.J. Weymes	1964-65	J. Beglan
1910-1919	P.J. Shaw	1966	Jimmy Bennett

1967	Jack Coleman	1991	Denis Burke
1968	Gerry L'Estrange	1992	Michael Dollard
1969	J. Beglan	1993	Frank McIntyre
1970	Vincent Brophy	1994	Michael Dollard
1971	Jimmy Bennett	1995	Betty Doran
1972	J. Beglan	1996	Frank McIntyre
1973	Vincent Brophy	1997	Pat Collins
1974	Jimmy Bennett	1998	Detty Cornally
1975	Eddie Bruton	1999	Michael Dollard
1976	Joe Feely	2000	Frank McIntyre
1977	Jack Coleman	2001	Detty Cornally
1978	Vincent Brophy	2002	Betty Doran
1979	Jack Coleman	2003	Pat Collins
1980	Gerry L'Estrange	2004	Detty Cornally
1981	Joe Feely	2005	Frank McIntyre
1982	Jack Coleman	2006	Pat Whelan
1983	Oliver Buckley	2007	Pat Collins
1984	Joe Feely	2008	Michael Dollard
1985	Frank McIntyre	2009	Ruth Illingowrth
1986	Joe Feely	2010	Detty Cornally
1987	Denis Burke	2011	Peter Burke
1988	Michael Dollard	2012	Gerry Sheridan
1989	Martin Hynes	2013	Pat Collins
1990	Camillus Glynn		





Mullingar Town Commissioners 1980



Mullingar Courthouse
Home of the earliest meetings of Mullingar Town Commissioners



Mullingar Town Council 2014