

## CIBSE Heritage Group Dublin Visit May 2015

### Kilmainham Gaol

The advance party (Frank, Mike, Geoff & Neil) had the opportunity to visit Kilmainham Gaol on the morning of Tuesday 12th May.

This turned out to be an extended lesson in Irish Political History since it is obligatory for all visitors to join a Guided Tour. However, Kilmainham has featured in all episodes of the struggle for Irish Independence very strongly throughout its life and it was entirely appropriate that our Guide should constantly refer to this.

The gaol consists of two main wings built about 65 years apart. The West Wing was built in 1796 and would have been part of the major rebuilding of prisons which took place throughout the British Isles in the 30 years or so following John Howard's report of 1777 about *'The State of Prisons'*. The East Wing which was built in 1862 appears to have been built in the style of Pentonville Model Prison, however, the central 'corridor' space or atrium, is far wider than any encountered in previously visited gaols and there was no sanitation provided in the cells.

### Reformed Prisons

We were informed that Kilmainham in 1796 was described as a 'Reformed Prison', this is not a term I am familiar with. The Penitentiary Act of 1792 (although aimed specifically at London) required that men and women should be housed in separate prisons and this seemed to be what our Guide was hinting at in terms of 'reform'.

Since we had not been charged for admission, it seemed inappropriate to argue with our Guide but his knowledge of the reasons for various aspects of prison design and the chronology involved could hardly be described as accurate! He appeared to want to give far more credit to Elizabeth Fry than to anybody else and John Howard was never mentioned! He also wanted us to believe that the impetus for prison reform at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century had been brought back over the Atlantic by Quakers. Elizabeth Fry was indeed a Quaker but she never visited America although she is said to have been heavily influenced by the preaching of an American Quaker who was visiting England, however, the most important fact is that Elizabeth Fry was born three years AFTER John Howard produced his Report! She did not become involved in Prison Reform until about 20 years after the West Wing of Kilmainham Gaol was opened.

### Political History

Kilmainham seems to have been notorious as the place where Irish 'Rebels' were executed, principally when the rebellion was against English Rule, however, we were surprised to learn that during the Irish Civil War in 1922, when two different factions were in dispute about

how much autonomy they wanted, a number of Republicans (77 in all) were executed by the Irish Free State Government and the first four of these executions took place at Kilmainham.

Kilmainham is probably best known as the place where 14 men were executed following the Easter Uprising of 1916. The gaol had actually been closed in 1910 but was reopened in 1916 to house political prisoners. The last political prisoner to be released from Kilmainham (in 1924) was Eamon de Valera who went on to become President.



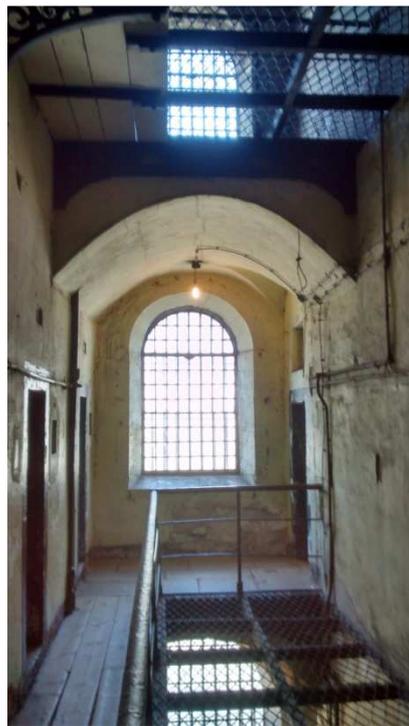
**Plaque commemorating most of those executed in 1916**

### The Building

After lying empty for many years the building was partially restored by groups of volunteers and eventually became a museum open to the public. The political prisoners were all held in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century West Wing which appears to be very much as it was in the 1920s, however, it was possible to see into the cells through holes in the doors and it was apparent that WCs had been installed in some of them and there appeared to be heating pipes and electricity.



**View through spyhole into cell used for 1916 prisoners**



**This landing held the 1916 rebels**

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century East Wing is currently undergoing refurbishment and was not accessible to the public but after we had completed our Tour we were invited to meet the Director of the Museum and he took us into the East Wing where the scaffolding was being dismantled. It was apparent that he had little knowledge of how the original heating and ventilation system had been designed to operate and so we were able to enlighten him!



### **The East Wing compete with scaffolding**

At our request we were taken into the basement of this block but little remained of original pipework/ductwork so it was not entirely clear how the system had operated. Unusually for this type of prison there were a number (believed to be 12 in all) of large circular grilles in the floor ( about 2ft in diameter) of the atrium and so it was clear how fresh air was admitted to this space, however, whether there was the facility to warm this air supply was a matter of conjecture.



**This image displayed in the Museum shows the ventilation grilles in the floor**

The individual cells appeared to have their own separate supply and extract systems but it was not possible to locate miniature supply ducts in the basement. It is likely that the supply to each cell came from the atrium space but there had been alterations carried out by the British Army when the building was used as a temporary barracks so this could not be clarified.

Fresh air entered the basement under a staircase and the passage then split into three corridors. There were chambers between the two outer corridors and the central one and it appeared that these chambers had probably housed some sort of heating apparatus. There was evidence in the way of 4" cast iron heating pipes, however, no warm air risers (which would have taken air to each individual cell) could be found.



**Central air passage in basement showing air inlets to atrium  
(The Director of the Museum, Niall Bergin is on the right)**



**The basement housed prison staff offices**



**The extract hood on the right is thought to have been associated with a forge.**

We were not able to gain access to the top gallery level but there were two wide chimney stacks visible at roof level, which almost certainly provided the necessary ‘pull’ on the cell extract ducts in the external wall, as is typical in any prison based on Pentonville. There was evidence of a metal lattice extract grille around the bottom of the roof-light above the atrium.