

Escape of prisoners from Louth County Gaol – 27th July 1922

Ninety years ago this year, with the ratification of the Anglo/Irish Treaty in January 1922, Crown Forces began to evacuate twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of Ireland. On the 13th of April the UK's armed forces stationed in Dundalk Military Barracks moved out and at mid-day members of the 4th Northern Division of the IRA with their leader, Frank Aiken, took up occupation of the barracks. In June a Civil War commenced between pro-Treatyites and anti-Treatyites. The forces occupying Dundalk barracks became anti-Treatyites. In the early hours of the 16th July 1922 pro-Treaty forces descended on the Barracks and without any casualties, made all therein prisoners. They were marched just over a mile, with a heavy escort, to the County Gaol at The Crescent in Dundalk where they were detained.

Eleven days later, at approximately 7am on the 27th an explosive device was placed against the gaol wall along the Ardee Road. At that time the prisoners were in the exercise yard, and Frank Aiken and a number of his senior staff were aware that an attempt at breaking out was going to occur that morning. On a signal from within the Gaol an explosion occurred and the wall was breached by a sizeable hole appearing. All prisoners therein were free to make a run for it they wished. A total of 106 did so and succeeded in escaping.

Dundalk Jail Register

It appears that the processing of the prisoners took place on the days following their admission and not on their entry to the gaol on the 16th July. In compiling the list of escapees on the 27th July, which was recorded from the Gaol Register of Admissions and Discharges, a number of errors were detected, e.g. Frank Aiken's age is given as 38 when in fact he was 24. Other items were not very clear, i.e. physical features and addresses of the prisoners. Eye colour for instance might appear as 'Gr.' which could be 'grey' or 'green'. How accurate the gaol warder(s) were in compiling each individual's details is another matter, as there appeared to be much abbreviating and 'shortcutting'. It can also be stated that many of the prisoners would have been un-co-operative during processing, for instance, refusing to allow themselves to be weighed or declare scars/marks etc. Given the turmoil that the new State was at that time enduring, it would have been the object of the Authorities where prisoners were concerned; to ensure that each one remained in custody and admission procedures took a second place.

On the days and weeks following the escape many of the escapees were re-captured and re-interred in the County Gaol in Dundalk.

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