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Sorry its been a few months but believe it of not it has been a pretty quiet summer here. However I thought I might take this edition to tell you about the day trip our extended family and friends took to the Crumlin Road Jail or knows as “The Crum” in Belfast.

We decided to take the tour in July as there have been very limited opportunities to view the gaol as it was in need of restoration. With grants and money being secured but the Assembly the gates to the Crum were opened this summer for members of the public to view several wings of the gaol including the infamous execution chamber.



It was quite surreal walking through the gates knowing that members of the group had been imprisoned in the gaol for a period of times throughout the troubles. It was quite eerie at times knowing what had happened in the gaol with executions like Tom Williams and young Patrick Magee hanging himself in the prison. Also the Crum is known as one of the most haunted buildings in Ireland with the press writing on strange encounters on a regular basis.



During the history of the prison between 1846 and March 31, 1996, when it was closed, an estimated 25,000 prisoners were held here. It is the only prison from the Victorian era remaining in Northern Ireland and has been derelict since 1996. It was designed by Sir Charles Lanyon, built between 1843 and 1845 and cost about £60,000. The prison was originally built to hold between 500 and 550 prisoners in cells that measured 12 x 7 feet. A tunnel linking the courthouse to the gaol under the Crumlin Road was constructed in 1852, 1.5 meters in depth.

As our tour guide Maris informed us, it was the first prison in Ireland to be built according to "The Separate System", intended to separate prisoners from each other with no communication between them. Later, especially in the early 1970s, as many as three prisoners were placed in each cell.

When the prison opened the first 106 inmates housed in the Crum were forced to walk from Carrickfergus Prison in chains. These inmates, who were men, women and children, completed the changeover of the two prisons. The children were from impoverished working-class families imprisoned at the gaol in the early years for offences such as stealing food or clothing. This had been in the case of ten-year-old Patrick Magee, who had been sentenced to the Crum hanged himself in his cell in 1858.

Sentences for children ranged from one week to one month and could include a whipping. The sentence could increase to up to 3 months if this was not a first offence, as in the case of Patrick Magee, who found himself before the judge for a second time in April 1858 for stealing clothes from a washer woman.

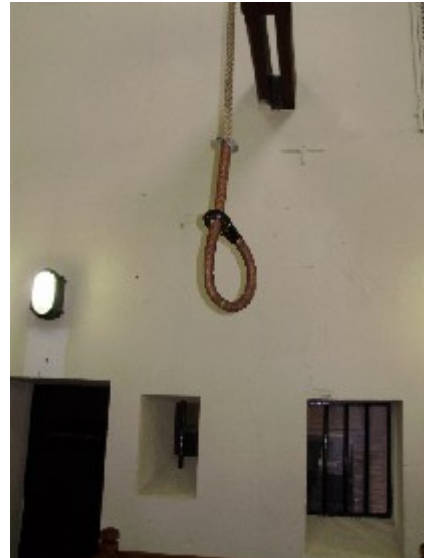
Patrick Magee was 'sent down' for 3 months, a sentence that resulted in the boy hanging himself in his cell, on April 27, 1858. That same year a law was introduced forbidding children under the age of 14 to be sent to an adult prison.

The same leniency could not be guaranteed for the adult male prisoners whom if sentenced for execution.

When originally designed by Lanyon, the prison did not contain a gallows and the executions were carried out in public view until 1901, when an execution chamber was constructed and used until the last of the hangings in 1961.

Upon entering the holding cell for the execution or known as the condemned cell it was hard not to feel overwhelmed in the room that seventeen men spent the last moments of their life. The cell was just 15 feet from the gallows through a secret door hidden along side the bathroom – a fact that was concealed from the prisoner until moments before his hanging. The last prisoner to be executed was Robert McGladdery who was [hanged](#) in 1961 for the murder of Pearl Gamble. The bodies of the executed were buried inside the prison in unconsecrated ground and the graves were marked only with their initials and year of execution on the prison wall.

The execution of [Tom Williams](#) took place on September 2, 1942 and is the most emotive of all that were carried out in the gaol. Williams, nineteen years old, was hanged for the murder of an RUC officer. The hangman in charge was [Thomas Pierrepont](#), the gaol's most regular hangman, who carried out six executions in the gaol between 1928 and 1942. Williams was one of the two prisoners of the seventeen executed whose remains were reinterred and buried elsewhere. His remains were only released in January 2000 after the closure of the prison in 1996 and a lengthy campaign by the Belfast National Graves Association. (I believe I have previously mentioned Tom Williams in the photographs section.)



Only 15 graves remain on the Crum site that has yet to be reclaimed since the 1994 law that allowed families to reclaim the deceased. The graves lay virtually unmarked into the yard which is quiet poignant as if you were not aware of the fact you would most likely assume that it was just an external wall to the gaol.

No jail is without its escapes and the Crum is no exception. Despite the prison's heavy security, overseen by the British Army in the adjoining Girdwood camp, several daring escapes were carried out by IRA prisoners during November and December 1971. Thirty years earlier, on January 15, 1943, the IRA's Chief of Staff and three other republican prisoners (including leading Belfast republican Jimmy Steele), escaped from the gaol, launching Belfast into the biggest security operation since 1922. A reward of £3,000 was put on the men's heads, but was not taken up.



In another piece of history, two republican prisoners held in the gaol for their role in an arms raid, were elected to Westminster in 1954. They never took their seats - they were elected on an abstentionist policy of non-recognition of the British parliament.

The day ended on a higher note when one of the party described his wedding taken place in the Gaol as he stood yards away from his cell. Throughout the history of the troubles, the prisons have remained a contentious issue with some believing that they should be knocked down and forgotten in history whilst others want to remember the past to tell future generations. I think that all the prisons as with most aspects of our bitter past have to recognize as this is the best means in seeking out truth and reconciliation.

The gaol is undergoing extensive restoration work over the next few with plans ranging from making more of the out buildings accessible as well as adding in a permanent museum on site.

I hope this article gives you a more personal account of the Irish history. Thanks very much.

Orla Adams