

Farewell to the Terrace

Tuesday, May 15th, 2007 Editor – Madeleine Lyons Telephone: 01-6758283 email: specialreports@irish-times.ie

A SPECIAL REPORT

A move that completes a historic legacy



Benjamin Lee Guinness of No 80 St Stephen's Green, now Iveagh House, acquired the Coburg Gardens at the back of his house in 1862.

He had this property, then in a neglected state, landscaped in the style that we recognise today as Iveagh Gardens. On this site was held the Great Dublin International Exhibition of 1865.

To house that event an impressive Winter Garden of glass and iron as well as an Exhibition Palace in brick and stone facing on to Earlsfort Terrace were erected.

After the 1865 Event, the Guinness family retained the structures for concerts and exhibitions. The Winter Garden was sold in 1882 and removed to England.

The Exhibition Palace along Earlsfort Terrace was sold the following year to the Commissioners of Public Works, and occupied by the then recently established Royal University of Ireland.

Converted for university purposes, it was there between 1883 and 1909 that candidates from all over Ireland sat their Royal University examinations and did

their science examinations.

And it was here, in the early years of the twentieth century, in what had been the Concert Hall of the old Exhibition Palace and now renamed the Great Hall, that the students of the Jesuit-managed University College on St Stephen's Green protested against the playing of *God Save the King* during the conferring ceremonies.

Under the Irish Universities Act (1908) University College Dublin became a constituent college of the National University of Ireland, and a grant was made available for the necessary buildings. Several possible sites were examined before the College authorities concluded that the Earlsfort Terrace site offered the best solution.

On five-and-a-half acres, it fell far short of the acreage provided for recently established colleges in Britain. RM Butler was appointed architect, and the building contract was awarded to G and T Crampton.

Butler's plan proposed a quadrangle. The front, facing east along Earlsfort Terrace, would contain Arts, Commerce and administration. The north wing,



As UCD prepares to leave Earlsfort Terrace in Dublin city centre, Prof Donal McCartney recalls many of the historic events that shaped it

Right: a statue in the Iveagh Gardens – the Earlsfort Terrace backyard

facing St Stephen's Green, would house the science faculty. The south wing, along Hatch Street, would be for medicine. The west wing, backing on to Iveagh Gardens, would accommodate the faculties of Engineering and Architecture. And a central bloc would enclose the library and *Aula Maxima*.

The construction began in 1912 but encountered several difficulties.

The most serious problem was the effect of the 1914-18 war which greatly inflated prices while the parliamentary grant for building remained as it was fixed in 1908.

When the erection of the proposed quadrangle had to be suspended (permanently as it turned out), only the front and north wing had been completed – or less than half the original scheme.



It was the last major building project of the British administration in Dublin; and like the country itself, it was left truncated as the British withdrew.

And it is not without its own peculiar symbolism that the tragically divisive Treaty debates, resulting ultimately in the Civil War, should have taken place in the Council Chamber of the unfinished Earlsfort Terrace building.

Meanwhile, the number of students attending UCD was expanding beyond every expectation. If the quadrangle at Earlsfort Terrace had been completed it was intended to accommodate 1,000 comfortably.

The overcrowding was relieved to some extent in 1926 by the transfer of the College of Science in Merrion Street to UCD. The relief, however, was temporary, for numbers continued to grow; and a few years later the Medical School had to be moved out of its old premises in Cecilia Street to add to the numbers in Earlsfort Terrace.

In 1939 Lord Iveagh offered his house and gardens as a gift to the nation. The government decided to keep Iveagh House for the Department of External Affairs but was prepared to lease to UCD the use of the gardens and the riding-school grounds alongside the northern end of Earlsfort Terrace, and to grant a new Engineering and Science building at the Hatch Street end in lieu of the College of Science in Merrion Street.

The Hatch Street scheme proved too cramped without the acquisition of Crawford's garage at one end or the laundry at the

other. Hopes of acquiring Lord Iveagh's tennis-courts were dashed when this site was reserved for a civil servants' restaurant.

Plans for the erection of a School of Architecture in the gardens behind the Catholic University houses, numbers 82-86 St Stephen's Green, had to be abandoned because the Office of Public Works objected on the grounds that the building would interfere with the privacy and the amount of sunlight falling on the garden of the Department of External Affairs.

Efforts to purchase Mespil House and property in Peter's Place also failed. And when the government made it clear that compulsory purchase powers would not be forthcoming, the UCD authorities decided on a suburban campus at Belfield.

When this became public, formidable and bitter opposition to the proposed move from the city gathered momentum.

A Commission on Accommodation Needs, under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Cearrbhail Ó Dalaigh, reported in 1959 in favour of the transfer of UCD to Belfield, and the Dáil approved it in 1960.

Meanwhile, drastic overcrowding necessitated several makeshift adjustments. In the decade 1959-1969 student numbers more than doubled from more than 4,700 to more than 10,200. The overcrowding created favourable conditions for the student revolt and occupations of the late 1960s.

UCD's evacuation from the Terrace, which began with the opening of the science building in Belfield in 1964, has taken a long time to complete.

Its Great Hall was handed over in 1977 for a resplendent future as the National Concert Hall. The Concert Hall shared Earlsfort Terrace with UCD's Departments of Medicine and Engineering.

After a century, UCD bids farewell to the Terrace. Those of us who have been its privileged, if temporary, occupants may, at times, have suffered in its overcrowding. More often, we will have enjoyed the camaraderie which it engendered, and will ever be grateful for the memories awakened there.

□ Prof Donal McCartney attended UCD as an undergraduate in 1948 and was professor of Modern Irish History there from 1978 to 1994