

# THE BURNING OF FINGAL COAST GUARD STATIONS

18 JUNE 1921

*"The Coast Guard stations were conspicuous all round the Irish Coast. A great deal of time was spent keeping them spic and span, much use being made of whitewash"*

Edmond P. Symes

## The History of the Irish Coast Guard

During the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), smugglers were extremely active in the waters around the southern and eastern coasts of Ireland. In an effort to deal with this problem, the British Government established the Preventative Water Guard in 1809. The Guard operated small boats along the shore to intercept smugglers who had escaped the larger Revenue cutters out at sea. Despite also having Customs Officers on land, this response proved to be inadequate and smuggling continued to thrive.

By 1819 the Commissioners of Customs in Dublin were forced to look for help from the Comptroller General of the Water Guard who sent his deputy, General James Dombain, to Ireland. Dombain initially went to south-west Cork where he set about re-organising the Water Guard there, establishing more stations and increasing the manpower with retired navy officers. This experiment was successful and Dombain sought to replicate it along the entire coastline of Ireland. It was decided that Coast Guard stations in Ireland would be placed closer together and with larger crews than in England. In Dublin, the stations were to be closer still due to the smuggling taking place there.

In 1822, the Preventative Water Guard, Revenue cutters and Customs Officers were all amalgamated into the Coast Guard under the Board of Customs who set about building a line of stations around the coast of Ireland.

The initial role of the Coast Guard was that of revenue protection, but as smuggling declined, and after it was transferred to the Admiralty in 1856, the Coast Guard took on the role of defending the coastline and acting as a Naval Reserve. The Board of Works (now the OPW), who up until then were responsible for the maintenance of existing stations, set about building more substantial two-story buildings. These are instantly recognisable as a terrace of stone or brick houses with a watch tower at the end. By 1860, there were 200 Coast Guard stations around Ireland.

Fingal had 11 Coast Guard stations along its coastline at Balbriggan, Skerries, Loughshinny, Rush, Rogerstown, Lambay Island, Portrane, Malahide/Robswall, Baldoyle, Sutton and Howth. They were manned by retired naval personnel who over the years were accepted by the local community.

During the War of Independence (1919-1921), many of the Coast Guard stations were destroyed. They were looked upon as being part of the British administration and therefore legitimate targets. The Guards and their families were evacuated to Britain. After the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in late 1921, the Coast Guard and its 109 stations were handed over to the Irish Free State becoming known as the Coast Life Saving Service. Many of the stations which had been badly damaged were not re-built while others were converted to private residences. Over the intervening decades, there were several name changes - The Coast and Cliff Rescue Service and The Irish Marine Emergency Service - eventually becoming known in 2000 as the Irish Coast Guard.



Skerries Rocket Cart  
Courtesy of the Irish Coast Guard Service, Skerries  
The Rocket Cart is a lifesaving apparatus. A rocket was used to shoot a light rope onto a ship in distress. This rope was then used to pull heavier ropes and equipment onto the ship. The Rocket Cart contained a supply of lifesaving equipment and was usually horse-drawn. The Skerries Rocket Cart is currently on loan to Fingal County Council.



Coast Guards, Balbriggan 1890s  
Courtesy of Balbriggan & District Historical Society



Coast Guards, Howth 1910s  
Courtesy of Mr. Kevin Rickard

## Functions of the Coast Guard in Ireland

### Control of Smuggling

By the 1830s, smuggling which had been extensive around the south and east coast of Ireland had been greatly reduced.

### Naval Reserve

From the mid-1850s, the primary role of the Coast Guard was the defence of the coasts and Navy back-up in the event of war or an emergency.

### Saving of Life at Sea

During the 19th century, aid was provided to numerous ships in distress and many lives were saved by the Coast Guard.

### Receivers of Wrecks

The Coast Guard had to try to protect shipwrecks from pillage.

### Famine Relief

In all periods of famine from 1831 to the end of the 19th century, the Coast Guard Service was involved in the distribution of famine relief, particularly along the western coast.

### Fisheries

Surveillance information collected by the Coast Guard was used to report on the state of Irish fisheries.

### Prevention of Gun-Running

The prevention of gun-running was added to the duties of the Coast Guard Service in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Coast Guard Station Howth 1905  
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## Balbriggan

The Balbriggan Coast Guard, which was set up in the 1820s operated from the Martello Tower with its staff lodging nearby. In 1864 a new station was built at The Banks close to the Martello Tower at a cost of £2,500. It was built with red brick and stone and included a watch tower and a boat house which could accommodate eight men and their families. On the night of the Sack of Balbriggan many frightened women and children took refuge in the Coast Guard Station. The station was not targeted on 18 June 1921 because of its proximity to Gormanston Camp and the fact that there was a large well-staffed RIC barracks in the town. It was eventually blown up in the early hours of 31 January 1923. The ruins remained there for several years providing a playground for the local children. They were eventually demolished and in recent years a public green space with a children's playground has been developed on the site.



## Skerries

The original Skerries Coast Guard Station was built at Red Island in 1822. It was manned with a crew of twelve. The station consisted of a rectangular two-storey watch tower with stores on either side. The living quarters were situated behind the tower. The ground floor was one large area with double doors that opened out towards the sea. It was used to store the boats and equipment. Above this area was the watch room with a large window facing the sea. During the 1850s a row of cottages was built behind the watch tower. The station was burned to the ground by the IRA on 18 June 1921 and the Guards and their families returned to Britain. Although the service continued to operate after 1923, fourteen local men providing the service, the current station was not built until the 1960s near the site of the original station. It was constructed from concrete blocks and pre-cast concrete sections. The structure today is largely unchanged although it has been modernised. The Pole Sea Memorial stands on the site of the destroyed station.



## Loughshinny

The Coast Guard Station was built at Loughshinny in 1863 by the Board of Works (OPW). It consisted of a two-storey building with a slated roof and was divided into four three-roomed units with entrances at the back. There was accommodation for four families. A boathouse and slip were built at the harbour. In 1921 the IRA decided that Loughshinny Harbour was the ideal location to land a substantial quantity of guns and ammunition. To ensure this was possible Loughshinny Coast Guard Station and five of the surrounding stations were attacked and burned to the ground on 18 June 1921. Loughshinny was never rebuilt.



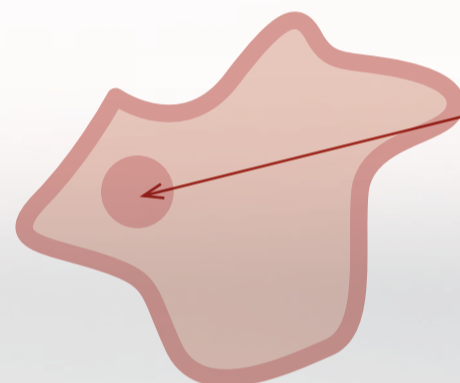
## Rush

Rush Coast Guard Station was originally built in 1821 close to the harbour. It was a large two-storey red-bricked building with a watch tower and a boat house. In 1864 the living quarters were expanded to provide accommodation for four families. Rush Coast Guard Station was attacked and destroyed by the IRA on 18 June 1921. It was never rebuilt, with the ruins being demolished in 1948. The land was laid out in a park by Brendan Dunne, a local gardener. Some of the surrounding walls and the steps down to the boat house were incorporated into the park design.



## Rogerstown

Rogerstown Coast Guard Station was built in 1864 and was a small sub-station which housed six guards and their families. It was attacked and burned by the IRA on 18 June 1921. It was bought in 1935 and renovated into accommodation for two families. Originally built with stone it was plastered and roofed in slate. One of the houses was sold in 2015 and extended.



## Lambay Island

The Coast Guard Station on Lambay Island was built in 1822 and consisted of a two-storey watch tower with accommodation for the Captain. There were also a number of cottages which housed the eight men who were assigned there. These buildings were all built from local stone. The station closed in 1907 and the men were assigned elsewhere. In the early 1910s Edwin Lutyens, architect, modified the cottages and other farm buildings. These provide accommodation for visitors to the island.



## Portrane

Portrane Coast Guard Station was originally built in 1822 but was a small sub-station with a staff of five men. By the turn of the century it required repair. The Board of Works (OPW) decided to build a new station at a different location overlooking the bay. The new terrace of four stone-built houses were designed by John Howard Pentland who went on to remodel the GPO completing the work just two weeks before the Easter Rising of 1916. It was built beside the Martello Tower in 1912 but was destroyed by the IRA on 18 June 1921. The station was not repaired but was sold as private residences. The Captain's House was bought in 2009 and was totally renovated.



## Malahide/Portmarnock

The first Coast Guard Station in Malahide was established at The Green in 1821. The men lived in a terrace of two-storey houses facing onto The Green. There was a flagpole on The Green and a ball alley and boat house at the right-hand side. For reasons that were unclear it was decided to build a new station and in 1886 a substantial station, running at right angles to the cliff, was built at Robswall. The building included a watch tower, office, Chief Officer's house and accommodation for six staff and their families. This became the main station with The Green closing in 1907. The terrace of houses there were demolished in the late 1990s. Robswall was attacked and destroyed by the IRA on 18 June 1921. It was never rebuilt and was subsequently demolished with just some boundary wall remaining on both sides of the road which runs through the site.



## Baldoyle

In 1761 a barge used for the interception of smugglers' boats was transferred from Portrane to Baldoyle after the crew could not find somewhere to live in Portrane. This barge continued to operate from Baldoyle, with the men living in an outhouse on Dublin Street, until James Dombain remodelled the Coast Guard Service. The first station, built around 1831, was quite small. It consisted of a watch-house which was a two-storey, rectangular block and was built on the edge of the shore. It was divided into a large front room on the ground floor with double doors opening out which housed the boats and equipment. Above was the watch room overlooking the sea and behind these were the offices and living quarters. In 1862 the Board of Works (OPW) extended the original station with two blocks of houses on either side. There were eight boatman's houses, each of five rooms, as well as the officer's house of six rooms. The station finally closed on 8 April 1909 and was offered for auction in 1910. A buyer was not found and shortly afterwards the nine houses were rented to tenants of Dublin Corporation. Over the next 100 years the central boathouse operated as a shop, but since 2007 it has been completely residential.



## Howth

The Martello Tower, Tower Hill was given to the Preventative Water Guard in 1825 to use as its base. It provided an excellent location to allow monitoring of boats on the sea. The Coast Guard continued to make use of its advantageous location right up until 1897. In 1818 Howth became the mail station for Dublin with the mailboat sailing between Howth and Hollyhead. Unfortunately, the harbour was prone to silting up so in 1837 the mailboat service was moved to the new harbour at Dún Laoghaire. The Coast Guard Station was built on the West Pier in the 1840s. It consisted of a two-storey watch tower at the far end of a terrace of six houses. There were large windows on three sides of the watch tower so that movement on the seas could be monitored. Howth was a large station with over 12 guards and their families living there. On 21 June 1921 the Howth company of the IRA were ordered to attack the Coast Guard Station on the West Pier. The raiding party consisted of ten men. Everyone was removed to safety and the station was set alight. The station was never rebuilt and was finally demolished in 1928. The present day Howth Coast Guard Station is still on the West Pier.



## Sutton

Sutton Coast Guard Station and Cottages were built in the middle of the 19th century by the Board of Works (OPW). The buildings were not constructed as one unit but in different stages between 1856 and 1862. In 1856 four houses with a watch tower were built for the men stationed there. All porch doors were placed on the north side of the houses facing away from the sea. A common green space was at the seaward side and contained the flagstaff. The two-storey rendered tower block housed a store room at ground floor level and the watch room on the first floor, which was accessed by external steps to the rear. A fifth house was built in 1861 with the final three houses in 1862. The station, which was a sub-station of Baldoyle ceased operation in 1908. Mr. Smith was the last commissioned boatman in charge. In 1909 Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Viceroy of Ireland, campaigned for the Coast Guard Station to be converted into a sanatorium for TB patients. This never materialised due to considerable local opposition. Sutton Coast Guard Station was not targeted or damaged during the War of Independence and eventually became private residences. Over the years this terrace of brick houses has been renovated and modernised. Martello Terrace, as the station and cottages are now known, is an excellent example of the OPW designed station and is now a much sought-after location in Sutton.



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*"Collins told us that the military situation was very critical, that our supply of arms was run out and that, unless something very drastic was done soon, we could no longer carry on the fight"*

Michael Lynch, O/C Fingal Brigade, IRA

## Arms Smuggling

In 1916, Brigadier General John T. Thompson, head of the U.S. Army's Ordnance Department, teamed up with inventor and retired Navy Commander John Bell Blish and together they founded the Auto-Ordnance Company which developed the Thompson submachine gun. The main financial backer of the company was Thomas Fortune Ryan, an Irish-American multi-millionaire and an influential member of Clan na Gael.

Éamon de Valera and Harry Boland travelled to America in 1919 to seek official recognition of the new Irish Free State and encourage further donations for the fight for freedom. While there, Boland heard about the Thompson submachine guns and contacted Michael Collins back in Ireland. At the time there was a severe shortage of weapons among the active service units of the IRA. They were fighting a professional, well-equipped army and if they were to gain any advantage over the British what was needed was firepower. The Thompson submachine gun was ideal.

Harry Boland contacted Thomas Fortune Ryan and a plan to purchase and ship Thompson submachine guns to Ireland was put in motion. Over the course of the next few months, Clan na Gael built up a substantial cache of Thompson submachine guns. At the same time, small numbers of the submachine guns were smuggled onboard the passenger and cargo ships S.S. Celtic and S.S. Baltic which travelled from New York to Liverpool. From there, they were transported to Ireland by the IRA's Liverpool Brigade.

By May 1921, small quantities of the gun had reached Ireland, along with two former U.S. Army officers who trained the IRA in their use. They were tested for the first time in the tunnel under the Casino at Marino before a select audience of IRA men including Michael Collins and Richard Mulcahy. Their first use in combat in Ireland was on 16 June 1921, when a train carrying British troops was ambushed at Drumcondra railway station. Three soldiers were injured and newspapers reported that the train carriages were "riddled with bullet holes".



Casino at Marino  
Courtesy of the OPW



Tunnel at Casino, Marino  
Courtesy of the OPW



Harry Boland, Michael Collins and Éamon De Valera  
Fingal Local Studies and Archives



IRA practice with Thompson Machine Guns 1921  
Courtesy of Irish Volunteers.org

## Choosing Loughshinny

In late April 1921, at Vaughan's Hotel, Parnell Square, Michael Collins met with Seamus Finn, Vice Officer in Command and Director of Training of the 1st Eastern Division of the IRA and told him that 1,000 Thompson guns had been purchased in America. The bulk of the weapons were to be smuggled to Ireland aboard the East Side, a freighter chartered by the Irish White Cross, an important relief agency, which was transporting coal from New York to Dublin. The East Side was due to arrive in Dublin on 27 June 1921.

Collins told Finn that the freighter would be met at sea by a yacht. Finn's job was to visit Fingal and survey the coastline between Balbriggan and Dublin to find a suitable landing place for the yacht to come close to the shore and transfer the arms and ammunition. Collins had indicated to Michael Lynch, Officer in Command of the Fingal Branch of the IRA, that once landed, the guns were to be transferred to horse-drawn carts and brought under the cover of darkness along the backroads of Fingal to Trim. From there, they were to be distributed amongst the Dublin and Fingal Brigades. Cars were not to be used to transport the arms as their headlights might alert the authorities to what was happening.

Finn travelled from Dunboyne to Oldtown in North County Dublin where he met with members of the Fingal Brigade including Michael Lynch, Officer in Command and Michael Rock, Vice Officer in Command. Over the next few days, Rock and Finn carried out their survey and reported back to Collins that, although Loughshinny Harbour was an ideal location, the North Dublin coast was so well protected that "there was no hope of landing a goat from Lambay Island, much less a consignment of arms". The reason for this was a line of Coast Guard stations strategically situated along the coastline completely guarding all approaches. The stations were connected by telephone, the occupants armed with rifles and supplied with Verey (flare) lights for signalling. Each station could be seen by two others. Finn told Collins that there was no way the guns could be brought ashore while the Coast Guard stations were there. Collins' response was "Well, wipe them out". Plans were formed for a simultaneous attack and local volunteers monitored the activities of the Coast Guard stations so that when the time came to act all necessary information was available.



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## Dublin Coastline Ablaze

Evening Herald 18 June 1921  
Courtesy of the Irish Newspaper Archives

Over 30 men from the Fingal Brigade were involved in the meticulously planned operation to destroy all the Coast Guard stations along the stretch of coastline from Skerries to Malahide.

They were divided into groups, one for each station, and were armed with rifles and revolvers. Re-enforcements came from local volunteers based in Balbriggan, Skerries, Naul, Rush, Corduff, Portrane, Swords, Malahide, Kinsealy and Santry, who also acted as scouts and guides.

At the stroke of midnight on 18 June 1921, the six Coast Guard stations at Skerries, Loughshinny, Rush, Rogerstown, Portrane and Malahide were silently approached by groups of IRA men ready to undertake a simultaneous attack. The raiding parties lay in wait, having cut the telephone wires to ensure no one could raise the alarm. When the command was given they rushed into stations up and down the coast, taking the Coast Guards by surprise. The Guards and their families, who lived onsite, were told to leave immediately and the stations were set alight. As dawn broke the following morning, flames were still licking what was left of the stations.

In their Bureau of Military History witness statements, James Crenegan and John Gaynor described the burning of the Coast Guard station at Rogerstown. Having travelled from Mooretown near Swords, 16 men arrived at Rogerstown and met up with local volunteers who had procured paraffin with which to set the station on fire. The telephone wires were cut and some men were left as look-outs. Rogerstown was a small sub-station with married quarters and some stores. The raiding party entered the station without any trouble, the Guards making no attempt at resistance. The IRA men helped the Coast Guards and their families to remove their furniture and personal items, even helping one man save his piano as he said he would not be compensated for it by the British Admiralty. The men took it out and put it in a safe place for him. The station was then doused with paraffin and set alight. Once the fire was burning strongly, they dispersed back to Mooretown, satisfied with their night's work. John Gaynor of the Balbriggan Company of the IRA, reported that the Coast Guards in Rogerstown had told him they had been expecting them for some time previously.

Thomas Peppard and Seamus Finn recount a similar story at Loughshinny. Their group of 20 men were armed mostly with shotguns. At the allotted time they burst in through the doors and windows "like possessed devils" and while one or two of the Guards "made a show" they were soon subdued. The Guards and their families were removed from the station which was made up of a few dwelling houses and stores. Again, some of the men helped to remove the Guard's furniture but in haste as they were close to Gormanston and Collinstown Military Camps. The premises was sprinkled with paraffin and set alight. Finn noted how the now homeless Guards "took it philosophically enough". Rather than undertake the long walk 16 miles back to Mooretown, the men commandeered a car, using their shotguns as persuasion.

Originally Skerries Coast Guard station was thought to be too dangerous to attack as the station was on the peninsula at Red Island. This could make escape dangerous as it would be easy to get hemmed in. Michael Rock volunteered to destroy the station with men from his own battalion. He felt that his riflemen would be able to give them adequate cover to escape. With the help of volunteers from Skerries and the Naul, they entered the station, drenched it with buckets of paraffin, set it alight and smashed in the doors and windows so that the fire would take hold. There was no resistance from the Guards who were entirely unarmed. A Guard told a newspaper reporter that the raiders had told the Guards that they had nothing personal against them. The raiding party took blankets and a few good telescopes to bring back to the camp at Mooretown. The entire operation only took about 20 minutes.

Men from the Finglas, Santry and Kinsealy companies joined Thomas Markey in attacking the Malahide/Portmarnock Coast Guard station at Robswall. Armed with a few rifles and shotguns they collected petrol from a garage at Malahide. They had no trouble getting into the station and met with no resistance. Robswall was a substantial station with married quarters, out-houses and stores. Again, the families were given time to remove their belongings and were brought to a safe place. The station was doused in petrol and set alight. The flag which had been flying on the flagstaff outside the station was hauled down and the tricolour hoisted in its place.

The following day, the newspapers carried headlines telling of "Coastguard Stations Destroyed", "Co. Dublin Sensation" and "Dublin Coast Afire". It was reported that those arriving into Amiens Street Station (now Connolly Station) the following morning had seen fires all down the North Dublin coast. But all reports pointed out that the raiders were courteous in dealing with the guards and their families. An Evening Herald reporter summed it up when he noted that the raiders were "courteous but firm".



Ruins of the Balbriggan Coast Guard Station 1923  
Courtesy of the Benton/Curtis Collection  
Fingal Local Studies and Archives

Howth Coast Guard Station was burned down four days later. Ned Reid led the attack party of about 10 men. Others acted as look-outs against intervention by the RIC at Howth Barracks, which was only a quarter of a mile away. The Coast Guard station was seized and the guards were overpowered before they could set off an alarm signal. The Guards and their families were removed to safety and the station was set on fire. After the IRA had left, the Coast Guards came back and managed to extinguish the fire before it did too much damage.

Balbriggan Coast Guard station escaped destruction as it was situated quite close to the large RIC Barracks in the town. This would have made escape difficult after the attack. Another reason was that Gormanston Camp, which housed Black and Tans and Auxiliaries, was only a few miles away. Balbriggan station was eventually bombed and set on fire in early 1923.

By September 1921, the Admiralty had lodged claims totalling £50,250 with Dublin County Council in respect of damages caused by the burning of the various Coast Guard stations - Skerries (9,900), Rogerstown (3,500), Portrane (7,600), Malahide (10,400), Rush (9,500) and Loughshinny (6,100). The claims were ignored.

*"there was no hope of landing even a goat from Lambay Island, much less a consignment of arms, while these coastguard posts were there, brought the obvious reply from Mick "Well, wipe them out"*

Seamus Finn, Vice O/C 1st Eastern Division, IRA

## All in vain

Despite the destruction of the Coast Guard Stations going smoothly, fate intervened when, due to a worker's strike, the East Side ended up stuck at Hoboken, New Jersey. Although the freighter was supplied with an Irish crew to get it underway, a non-Irish crew member became suspicious of heavy sacks that were being loaded onto the ship. Upon opening one of the sacks he saw a gun barrel and immediately contacted the police, who, along with the FBI, raided the freighter on 15 June 1921. Police records show 13 sacks containing 105 unpacked Thompson machine guns, 495 packed machine guns, 289 large boxes of magazines, one small case of cartridges and 175 small boxes thought to contain small arms were seized. News of the police raid did not reach Ireland until well after the attacks on the Coast Guard stations and the men in the Fingal and Eastern Brigades were greatly disappointed, with Seamus Finn noting that it "knocked the bottom" out of them. The guns were impounded by the New York Police Department pending trial. All of those taken to court either had the charges dropped against them or were found not guilty, as the relevant export documentation had lapsed. After much bureaucratic wrangling the guns were eventually returned to their owners and arrived in Ireland in 1925.



Detective Beauty of the Hoboken police with some of the seized guns 1921  
Montrose Daily Press 1 July 1921  
Courtesy of the Colorado Historic Newspaper Collection  
Colorado Library Service

Demolition of Howth Coast Guard Station, 1928  
Courtesy of Mr. Kevin Rickard



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