

Kelly's Hot & Cold Baths, Bray, Co. Wicklow

A photograph from an advertisement for the baths in 1935, when the baths were still a popular attraction.

The baths were built in 1861 on a section of the foreshore leased from Lord Meath by John Kelly to the designs of Edmund O'Kelly, a local builder and architect. Edmund O'Kelly had designed and built the courthouse in Bray in the 1840's along with several other major buildings, including two churches in Wicklow and the adjoining houses on Martello Terrace, Bray. He was a major contractor in the building of the 200-plus bedroom International Hotel and the Turkish Baths. He went on to own extensive property, including many buildings on the west side of Main Street, his house Edmundville off the Killarney Road, and a 120 acres farm, before going bust. John Kelly was the owner of the Dublin City Saw Mills, a huge builder's suppliers' yard with an impressive arched entrance at Thomas St (now Chadwicks), and he owned and developed Martello Terrace and had a small builder's yard behind it.

Designed in a Neo-classical style, the building was described in 1861 as internally divided into fourteen separate baths, with hot, cold and tepid water, showers and a reclining bath; the men's being separated from the women's by an oak screen. The interior was lit by a large Gothic stained-glass window. Before the present harbour was built in the 1890's, outdoor bathing was possible on the east side, with a strong platform and several diving boards installed for that purpose. In general, bathing was strictly regulated at Bray as the hotel owners and Town Commissioners wanted to maintain decorum and project the town as an upmarket resort. At one time it proposed to rail off the entire promenade (or esplanade as it was officially known) and to restrict access to the right sort by charging a small fee for entrance. In the Township Bye-Laws of May 1870, the area south of the Quinsboro Road to the Martello Tower (the one opposite Esplanade hotel, demolished many years ago), was designated as the female bathing place. A Lady's Baths was built on the section of the esplanade some years later at a site which became Sealife and a pub and restaurant). The men's area was rather more restrictive , Bye-law No 8. Stating: That the male bathing places shall extend from the estuary of the Bray River to the south corner of Mr Joseph Kelly's Baths and no further and that every male bathing within boundary of the Township shall wear drawers".

Sources: contemporary newspapers