

Coastguard Station, Bray c.1900

“Detached multiple-bay two-storey coastguard station, built in 1877, now in use as six private dwellings. The building is constructed in semi-coursed rubble granite with brick dressings and a slightly battered base course. Five of the houses are entered from a rear private yard to which there was no public access; the sixth has a small porch projection with a sheeted side door and sits on the south side. Windows are segmental arch-headed with six over six top-hung replacement uPVC windows. The pitched roof is slated and rainwater goods are cast-iron; the stone eaves course is bracketed. Chimneystacks are rendered with corbelled caps and clay pots. The building sits on a slight rise behind promenade; a narrow laneway extends across the east side. The station was converted to an army barracks in 1922 and then to private dwellings in 1925” (Buildings of Ireland /NBHS)

A section of a photograph in the Lawrence Collection at the National Library of Ireland shows the station complete with the original watchtower, featuring a flagstaff, pyramidal slated roof, and timber oriel windows on stone brackets at the top floor. The windows served as lookouts for observing movements on both land and at sea, which occasionally meant that the coastguard were among the first to spot outbreaks of fire in the town. The main functions of the coastguard, however, were to prevent smuggling and to save lives at sea. The shed beside the main building housed the rocket-cart, which carried a life-saving apparatus enabling lines to be fired out to vessels in distress. Local men, such as Batt Naylor, fisherman and boat-builder, were employed to assist the coast guard, and the officers were generally drawn from the ranks of former officers in the Royal Navy. In 1901, Alfred E. Wills was the Chief Coastguard Officer, and other members of the coastguard complement living with their families at the station were Henry Smith, the Station Officer, John Taylor, and Harry Gain, who were mostly English.

The coastguard station was built on land which had been part of the Putland Estate and replaced an earlier station on the Strand Road, which after its demolition became the site of Cloonada Terrace, and later the Esplanade Hotel. The station was designed by the architect Enoch Trevor Owen of the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the drawings were produced by W.D. Williams in 1875/1876. Owen produced the designs for between 30 to 40 coastguard stations in total, and there are similarities with the design he produced at Bray with those at Dun Laoghaire, Ringsend, and elsewhere. Among his other work, was St Finian’s Church on Adelaide Road, Dublin, the Boyd monument, East Pier, Dun Laoghaire, and numerous police stations and schools in Ireland. He also did the first systematic survey of the important historical sites at Glendalough and the Rock of Cashel.

In the background of the photo, one can see the spire of Christ Church, completed in 1870, and the buildings of the Loretto Convent and schools, formerly the home of the Putland family and known as San Souci. Mother Teresa Ball bought the estate

comprising of 72 acres on behalf of the nuns in 1850 and established the convent. A major expansion begun in 1860 included the erection of a chapel and two large ranges at the rear of the house designed by John Sterling Butler, and a boarding and day school taking in both junior and senior level pupils. Some of the buildings for the national school are seen directly above the coastguard station in the photograph. On the right-hand side of the photo, one can see one of a small terrace of mews houses at Marie Villas, Convent Avenue, dating from the 1860's; and above that one of a number of cottages which were formerly scattered around the estate. The trees on the right surrounded the nun's graveyard which contains a Spanish style mausoleum, not visible in the photo. The national school was relocated to the former Drummond/ Meath Industrial School building on the Vevay Road in 1945. Much of the land was sold off for building by the nuns late in the 1970's, and the Loretto Grange and Seacrest estates were subsequently built there.

(Sources: Buildings of Ireland/ NIAH; Census of Ireland 1901; Dictionary of Irish Architects. This post first appeared in the Victorian Bray Facebook page December 2025).