

# ICONIC BUILDING SHOWCASES DUBLIN'S RICH HISTORY

The Custom House Visitor Centre, which opened its doors to the public in November 2021, is a key element of the Government's Decade of Centenaries programme. The refurbished centre features new and interactive exhibits which relate the rich history of Dublin's landmark building and showcase its exceptional architecture over the last two centuries.

**F**or more than 200 years, the Custom House has been one of Dublin's most iconic landmark buildings. James Gandon's architectural masterpiece on the River Liffey is one of the most photographed and best loved buildings in the capital. Built between 1781 and 1791, it was Gandon's first major commission in Dublin.

Replacing the old Custom House at the city's traditional commercial centre near Dublin Castle, it forever re-orientated the commercial centre of Dublin. The exterior is richly adorned in sculptures and coats-of-arms by Thomas Banks, Agnostino Carlini and Edward Smyth.

The magnificent south façade, with its spectacular dome topped by the statue of Commerce, addresses the River Liffey. Rather strikingly, Irish

symbolism abounds with the recurring Bucranium (ox-head) motifs referencing the importance of the beef trade to the 18-century Irish economy, while 14 sculpted keystones famously depict the river gods of Ireland.

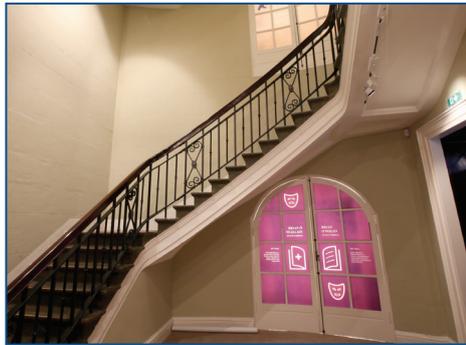
The building was gutted by fire in 1921 in one of the key events of the War of Independence. The external walls survived mostly intact, but the interiors were nearly completely lost. An extensive programme of repairs was subsequently undertaken over the 1920s under the direction of OPW Principal Architect, T.J. Byrne. The dome and drum were rebuilt in Irish Ardbraccan limestone rather than British Portland Stone.

However, the central block of the original scheme was never rebuilt, which meant the loss of the Long Room, the major internal

commercial space and the original beating heart of the building. The Custom House is still an active government administrative building to this day, primarily occupied by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage (DoHLGH).

The refurbished Custom House Visitor Centre is OPW Heritage

Services' flagship visitor experience in the Docklands area of the city, featuring new and interactive exhibits telling the rich history of the building and showcasing its exceptional architecture.



**The Custom House Visitor Centre opened in November 2021 on the week that marked the 230th anniversary of the original opening of the Custom House. (Pics: Naoise Culhane)**

## REFURBISHMENT WORKS

The overall package of works was funded by DoHLGH with additional investment by the OPW and Fáilte Ireland. It is seen as a key tenet of the overall Masterplan for the Custom House currently being developed by

the OPW and the DoHLGH, and as a crucial link to Fáilte Ireland's development plan for the Docklands.

Conservation and refurbishment works for the project were led by OPW Conservation Services. Externally, the works included cleaning and repointing of granite paving and steps to the surrounding landscape; painting of 315 linear meters of cast-iron railings, full refurbishment of all windows to the Liffey façade; painting of all 536 windows and external doors; and specialist cleaning and localised repairs of the stone façade and pediment.

Internally, the focus was on the refurbishment of the Custom House Visitor Centre in the south range of the building, one of the few areas to survive the fire partially intact. Here you can get a glimpse into Gandon's original vision, with its sequences of stone-



*James Gandon’s architectural masterpiece now houses a fully reimagined exhibition created by award-winning designers, with contributions from leading Irish historians and academics, featuring a narrative journey revealing a story with many layers, of people, heritage and history, spanning over 200 years.*

lined octagonal, circular and rectangular rooms offering views out over the quays and onto the River Liffey.

The refurbishment works, carried out by Main Contractor Sensori Facilities Management, included fire safety upgrade works, new lighting and electrical fittings, restoration of the early twentieth-century staircases, repairs to the stone walls, and new carpets and painting and decoration throughout.

OPW Building Maintenance Services provided their expertise and skills to restore all windows and doors using traditional joinery restoration methods and to upgrade all internal doors. This included the beautiful early twentieth-century Burmese teak doors with brass and glass vision panels, which required very careful restoration with assistance from Conservation Letterfrack.



*OPW Minister Patrick O'Donovan at the opening of the Custom House Visitor Centre. (Pic courtesy of OPW).*

**SEALING THE 'MASON MARKS'**  
Housing Minister Darragh O'Brien TD marked progress on the works by sealing a record of the names of all contributors to the project into the Visitor Centre fabric on 21 June 2021. This was in recognition of the ancient practice of stone masons etching their individual 'mason marks' into the fabric of a building, as happened at the Custom House during its construction over 200 years ago.

The fully reimagined exhibition was created by award-winning designers Bright and realised on-site by Display Contracts International.

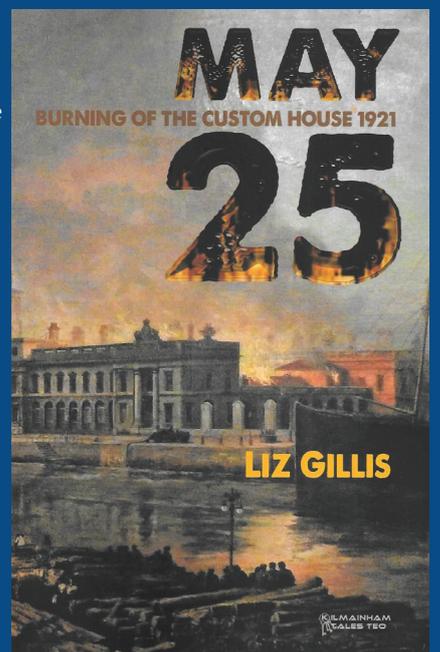
**MAY 25: BURNING OF THE CUSTOM HOUSE 1921**

On May 25, 1921, the IRA launched one of its largest and most audacious operations when it attacked Dublin's Custom House, the heart of the British administration in Ireland.

Many still view this as a military failure that destroyed the IRA's Second Battalion in Dublin.

However, over the last number of years, historians Liz Gillis and Mícheál Ó Doibhílin have challenged this view, based on their extensive research. They argue that the operation was, in fact, a success which probably helped bring about a truce and the subsequent Treaty negotiations.

In *'May 25: Burning of the Custom House 1921'* Liz Gillis, historian and author of six books on Ireland's early 20th century revolutionary period, tells this story in detail, including the planning and consequences, using much information that is new, as well as the recollections of those who were there.



# CUSTOM HOUSE



Paul Kelly, CEO of Fáilte Ireland, pictured with Minister for Housing Darragh O'Brien TD and OPW Minister Patrick O'Donovan TD, after they officially opened the Custom House Visitor Centre in November 2021. (Pic courtesy of OPW).

It features contributions from leading Irish historians and academics, with a narrative journey revealing a story with many layers, of people, heritage and history.

The exhibition flows and develops chronologically using each space to tell a chapter in the story, taking visitors from Dublin in the late 1700s through to the 21st century.

This gives them the unique and authentic experience of being inside the walls of one of the city's most iconic buildings. Visitors discover the magnificent architecture and story of the building and the city through first-hand accounts, personal stories, and artefacts.

The exhibition shows how the Custom House witnessed some of the most momentous events in Irish history, from the 1916 Easter Rising to the birth of the Irish Free State and eventually the Republic of Ireland.

The fulcrum of this story is the burning of the Custom House in May 1921, which is brought to life through captivating audio-visual interpretation and artefacts from the period.

For more information visit

<https://heritageireland.ie/visit/places-to-visit/custom-house-visitor-centre/>

## TEAMWORK BEHIND CUSTOM HOUSE VISITOR CENTRE

### Project Team

Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage  
OPW Heritage Services

### Design Team

**OPW Conservation Services Architects:** Terri Sweeney-Meade, John Cahill, Audrey Farrell, Alan Keenan  
**OPW Mechanical & Electrical Engineers:** Conor Byrne, Brendan Dillon  
**OPW Civil & Structural Engineers:** Joseph Gill  
**OPW Fire and Security:** Richard Calder  
**OPW Quantity Surveying:** Eamonn Heavey



Minister Darragh O'Brien with Sensori FM personnel, who placed records of refurbishment works into the fabric of the Custom House Visitor Centre on 21 June 2021.

### Custom House Visitor Centre Works

**Main Contractors:** Sensori Facilities Management

**Heritage Joinery:** OPW Building Maintenance Services, Conservation Letterfrack

**Interpretation Project Manager:** Sherwood & Associates

**Interpretation Design Lead:** Bright Narrative Research, Copywriting and Content Production: Laura Murtagh

**Interpretation Fit-Out Management:** Axo Architects

**Exhibition Production and Fit-out:** Display Contracts International Ltd.

**AV Content Production:** Thought Different Ltd

**AV Hardware:** Rockbrook Ltd & Tonwelt

**Bespoke objects:** Crowley Models & Fallover Art

**Irish Content Translation:** Dr. Cathal Billings, Prof. Liam MacMathúna

**Expert Advisory Panel:** Prof. Diarmaid Ferriter, Liz Gillis, Lar Joye, Dr Conor Lucey, Dr Ellen Rowley

### Custom House External Conservation and Cleaning Works

**Structural Engineer:** Punch Consulting Engineers

**Stonework Contractor:** Conservation & Restoration Ltd

**Stone Cleaning:** Stoneclean.ie

**Painting:** Des Byrne Painting Contractors