

Daylight Savings to Uniform Time in 1916

by Jennifer Levey

The Easter Rebellion in 1916 set a train of events in motion that resulted in Ireland demanding an eventual separation from the United Kingdom. Most people do not realise that in the same year that Ireland began its first steps to becoming an independent nation, in another way the country became more permanently and inextricably linked with Great Britain. This unifying factor was time.

The Summer Time Act gained Royal assent on 17 May 1916 and was implemented four days later. Daylight Savings Time, as it became known, was introduced initially to make better use of the longer hours of light during summer months, essentially saving energy costs and increasing production hours during the First World War.¹

This Bill had been championed as early as 1907 by William Willett MP who sadly died the year before the Act came to be implemented. Robert Pearce MP had also endeavoured to push the Bill through parliament in 1908 and T W Dobson MP tried again in 1909, but both were met with vehement opposition by farmers' groups; despite

a committee being set up investigate the advantages of the scheme.

The main concerns of the farmers groups centred on the perceived interference with early morning milking. Concerns were also raised in relation to the delivery and transport of goods, and rather unbelievably, a worry that the picking of crops would be affected due to the remains of morning dew which could cause harvesting to be more laborious and increase spoilage.

It seems that those with agricultural interests managed to stave off the Bill being passed for a number of years due to their large representation in parliament, despite making up only 8% of the population at that time. However, train companies, post office employees, and stock and cotton brokers as well as newspapers, theatres and music halls were also opposed to the Bill.²

Ultimately the first country to adopt Daylight Savings Time in Europe was Germany on 30 April 1916 at 23:00. This move may have influenced the UK parliament finally accepting the scheme as a viable means of saving energy

during the War, and realising their rivals would have been at an advantage if it was not implemented. Even though Prime Minister Asquith opposed the Bill, he did eventually concede along with the vast majority of the parliament. Sir Henry Norman, who had raised the debate in the House of Commons on the 8 May, later commented "unhappily our enemies have been quicker than ourselves to realise the greater economy afforded". The Act was estimated to save Great Britain, 'eleven thousand, five hundred tons in illuminating oil... thus avoiding two journeys of four months duration by an oil tanker'.³

Of course it is important to highlight that at this time in 1916 Ireland had still not adopted Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). In fact the Definition of Time Act 1880 defined Dublin Mean Time (DMT) as 25 minutes, 21 seconds behind GMT. Local mean time was set by the Dunsink astronomical observatory in Finglas, County Dublin. In fact DMT was often referred to as 'Dunsink Time' and receives an honourable mention in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, when Leopold Bloom deduces that it is 'after one, because the timeball



Clock on Limerick Docks (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)



Cannock's Clock which reminded Limerick, people of the time in the past.



Tait Memorial Clock
(Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

on the Ballast Office, overlooking O'Connell Bridge, has fallen'. Timeballs were an aid to mariners, dropping (in the part of the world) at 1 p.m. Greenwich Time to allow ships check their chronometers.⁴

Ireland had adopted this time difference in 1880 for good reason, as the sun rises and sets in Dublin just over 25 minutes later than it does in London. However the rest of country adhered to local time, which was a custom prevalent in most cities in Europe. Cities would set their town clock by measuring the position of the sun, providing Apparent Solar Time, or true local time. The time known as Mean Solar Time, or local mean time was measured in terms of any longitudinal meridian or in relation to the closest city.⁵

However, once the First World War commenced the various practical advantages of being of the same time zone as mainland Britain, from a trading and communications perspective could no longer be overlooked. These issues came to light during debates in Ireland in the period prior to DST being implemented, when it became apparent that not only would it be advantageous to have an extra hour of daylight, but to also be in sync with our neighbours on a more permanent basis.

An interesting article published in the *Limerick Chronicle* just days before the DST Act was passed highlights the difficulties a significant time difference between mainland Britain and Ireland would create, should the Act not apply here. Mr J F Miller, Limerick District Superintendent of the Great Southern and Western Railway explained Irish train services would have to be adjusted to meet the running of mail trains and boats to and from England. He also emphasised that the present time of departure of the principal morning mail trains is already very early and if altered an hour earlier would force passengers to rise as early as 5 a.m. and arrive in provincial towns far too early for business purposes. Irish people would also have to post their letters an hour earlier, not just their English correspondence, but Irish also. Mail trains serving all parts of the sector, including passengers, would have to be greatly and inconveniently altered.⁶

In the same article the subject of Ireland joining GMT was first mentioned by Mr Herbert Samuel, the Home Secretary, where he hinted of "the separate question of setting Irish clocks to Greenwich Meantime in October". It became clear that the then British Isles were to become united in time from autumn of 1916 after the termination of the daylight savings period. The Chamber of Commerce and other public bodies viewed the move favourably from a trade perspective. It would also be extremely useful from a telegraphic standpoint with Ireland finally joining Western European Time along with France, Portugal and the rest of Great Britain.

However, there were major ructions in the House of Commons when the Time Ireland Bill was introduced in August 1916. The Redmondites were staunchly against Ireland's union with GMT on mostly nationalist grounds. In August 1916, a letter appeared in the *Irish Independent* supporting this view noting that 'the question is whether we should give up this mark of our national identity to suit the convenience of shipping companies and a few travellers'.

The Time Bill became a hot potato, so to speak, in Ireland, an Ireland altered forever by the events of the Easter Rising just months before. The *Irish Times* of 12 August reported how Edward Carson failed to understand the



Clock over the Dainty Dairy Co. on Bedford Row (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

controversy of it all. He spelled out in no uncertain terms; "that if certain hon. members stopped this Bill he would see that the Dublin Reconstruction Bill, or other Bills, would also be treated as controversial and not allowed to proceed".⁷

Simultaneously it was reported in the *Limerick Chronicle*, courtesy of a parliamentary correspondent of the *Daily Mail* that; 'a serious obstacle to the conclusion of business in the House of Commons is being removed by the withdrawal of the Redmondite objection to the government Bill for making time in Ireland unified with Great Britain. This opposition had provoked the blocking of the Dublin Reconstruction Bill by half a dozen Unionists'.⁸

With all opposition quashed mercilessly by means of holding the reconstruction of Dublin hostage, the Uniform Time (Ireland) Act was passed into law on 23 August by Royal Assent. The full title was; 'An act to assimilate the Time for use in Ireland to that adopted use in Great Britain'. The Act was set to take effect at 2 a.m. Dublin Mean Time on Sunday 1 October 1916 or 2.25.21 Greenwich Mean Time.

Due to the adjustment that had already been made due to Daylight Savings Time, Irish people only needed to put back their watches by thirty-five minutes, as instructed in the *Limerick Chronicle* of 21 September. The paper advised to make the alteration at 3 a.m. Summer Time, and the correction to the nearest second is thirty-four minutes and thirty nine seconds, by order of the Lord Lieutenant, of Dublin Castle. From this date the phrase "new time" was used to describe GMT in Ireland. Mr. Knight, a well known nautical optician suggested the best way to make the alteration was; "all pendulums should be stopped gently and remain so for 35 minutes. Striking clocks may be set right by moving the hands forward and striking hour by hour the full eleven hours, and stopping short 25 minutes of the full hours".⁹

All Irish communities did not necessarily abide by the directions issued by the government and the media. A story recorded in the *Limerick Chronicle* in the 1920's reported on a political meeting, set to be held in a certain Limerick village at 1 p.m. The party leaders were curious when the village folk did not start arriving until 2 p.m. and still more converged at a little before 2 30 p.m.. When the villagers were questioned as to why they were so late, a local replied "some of us go by Old time in these parts, but nearly everybody else goes by old Irish time which is 25 minutes behind Old time".¹⁰

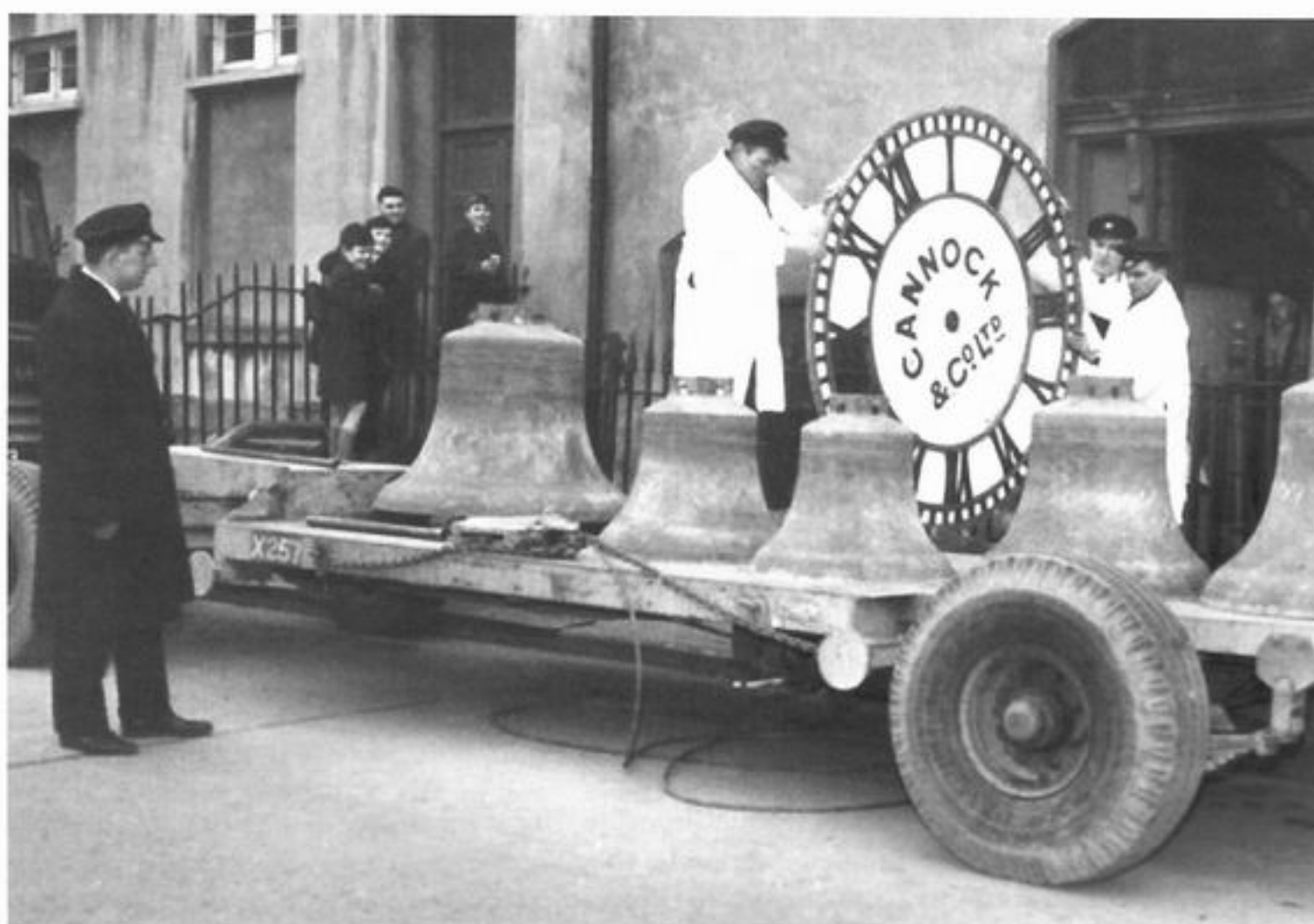
So the meeting appointed for 1 p.m. was held at 2 25 p.m. However this story was not an isolated incident. Ernie O'Malley, an IRA organiser during the War of Independence, responsible for training rural units, also highlighted how timekeeping was a major issue amongst recruits. He wrote; "There was a difficulty of three different times for councils and classes. Summer time was kept by cities, some towns and the railway; new time was an increase of 25 minutes on old Irish time to synchronise with English time; as yet punctual time had not come".¹¹ These tales bring meaning to the phrase "going by Irish time".

It is debatable whether the new time was not immediately adopted due to the fact that the Time Act was passed, with little or no consultation with the people, or whether resentment lingered amongst the farming communities due to their concerns being dismissed before the passing of the Daylight Savings Act months before. It could simply be due to the popular attitude voiced by Mr. John Dillon, MP for East Mayo, expressing how Ireland had run perfectly well for "six or seven hundred years" without needing to defer to England's opinion on the subject.¹² Indeed, in the political environment that existed directly after the Rising, this viewpoint may have been more prevalent than the government was willing to acknowledge.

In a country that wished to separate itself from Great Britain, a unifying Time Act between the two islands could not possibly have been a welcome amendment despite any amount of advantages to trade, transport or communications. Although the Irish people were forced to adhere to the new train timetables and post collection times, they demonstrated that their everyday lives outside of this, especially in rural communities, need not follow an Act passed in a London parliament far removed from them. Perhaps the failure to implement the changes decreed in a prompt fashion was a deliberate omission on behalf of the rural populace to demonstrate their disdain for British Rule and an attempt to cling to an important aspect of their national identity; Irish time.

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Replacing Cannock's Clock in the 1960s (Courtesy of the *Limerick Leader*)