



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

'On Saturday evening, Auxiliaries arrived'



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In the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, various sections of the British Crown forces began to depart from Ireland.

One of these groups was the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary, more commonly referred to as the Auxiliaries. They, along with the Black and Tans, had gained a reputation for violence against civilians and businesses. In this article, we discuss some examples of their activities in the Athlone area.

During spring 1920, new recruits to the RIC began to arrive in Ireland as part of the British government's plan to bolster the police. Due to a shortage of the regular RIC uniforms, the new recruits were provided with a mixture of police and military clothing, earning the nickname, 'Black and Tans'.

From July 1920 the RIC received an additional supplement in the form of an Auxiliary Division, a heavily-armed and elite corps of ex-British army officers. It was autumn 1920, however, before the Auxiliaries became a visible presence in Westmeath.

'military bearing'

During the first half of October 1920 the Crown forces carried out many raids around Athlone, both in Westmeath and Roscommon. In Cornafulla, at least some of these raids were carried out by a group of men whom locals described in contemporary newspapers as being 'of military bearing', with 'some dressed in fawn trench coats and grey caps, while others wore black coats'.

According to a series of interviews carried out by the paper, this group smashed in the doors and windows of a small building that served as the local Sinn Féin hall before raiding the houses of the Macken, Naughten, Keena, Tyrrell, Hynes and Lennon families. In the Naughten household, the occupants were forced to kneel on the kitchen floor, while one of the

raiders threatened to shoot them. One of the Macken household, with a gun pointed at his forehead, was forced to call out 'God Save the King'.

The raiders were not looking for information but were giving a warning to the local Irish Republican Army. Most of the above families were republican, with members who were active in Sinn Féin or the IRA.

For example, Patrick Lennon, from Summerhill, was a volunteer in the IRA, although he was away when the raid on his family home occurred. In each instance, the raiders warned the families that they would return and inflict revenge in response to any IRA attacks against the Crown forces in the locality.

'an outbreak of terrorism'

One section of those Auxiliaries arrived in Athlone on Saturday 16 October 1920, causing mayhem in the town. During the previous week, the town's Victoria Barracks had received regular convoys of lorries carrying troops and supplies of various kinds. Newspaper reports suggest that many people were unnerved by this activity but there was no sense that the Crown forces were going to direct these resources against the Athlone.

For much of that day, 16 October, the town was quite bit, as contemporary newspapers reported: 'On Saturday evening, "Auxiliaries" arrived'. These new additions to Athlone were, according to the *Westmeath Independent*, 'not under rigid discipline' and there was a growing restiveness among townspeople, a sense 'that normal conditions had been somehow disturbed'.

Later that night Athlone suffered what the *Westmeath Examiner* called 'an outbreak of terrorism' when, before midnight, groups of uniformed men began firing weapons in the centre of the town. A few houses, such as the home of a well-known republican, Seán Hurley, were raided. While these raids were in progress there was a series of 'loud explosions on the Leinster side of the town'.

This was the sound of incendiary bombs being thrown into the premises of the *Westmeath Independent* and the Athlone Print Works, which employed over 100 people and which printed a range of local newspapers. When this attack started the building was occupied by only two people:



A group of Auxiliaries and Black and Tans in Dublin, April 1921 (National Library of Ireland). On 16 October 1920, the Auxiliaries launched the first of two attacks against the Athlone Print Works

Eleanor Chapman, the wife of the paper's owner, and Mary Blaney, a maid. Chapman and Blaney fled the building, outside of which they saw, according to Chapman's subsequent affidavit, 'eight or ten' armed men.

Chapman headed towards Church Street and the houses of some of the paper's employees but her progress was stopped by a military party. She implored them to aid in quenching the fire but the soldiers did nothing. Chapman returned to the print works, where she could see that 'a quantity of printed matter that supplied the original flames had burnt itself out', although other sections of the ground floor remained ablaze.

Chapman and Blaney displayed remarkable determination by re-entering the printing works to fight the flames. Their task was aided by the fact that the attackers had not tampered with the building's water supply and they were able to avail of 'a plentiful supply' to quench the fire, although not before a substantial portion of the ground floor was damaged and two printing machines were destroyed. According to the

Freeman's Journal newspaper, 'petrol cans and portions of hand grenades were found about the works'.

'swept away'

Many newspapers gave detailed report on those events, describing the sense of shock that pervaded the town in the days after. The *Westmeath Independent* described the general reaction among locals to the night's events: 'they were in a state of wrath that they had been victims for no reason whatsoever'.

Prior to this, the paper stated, 'relations between the people and the forces of the Crown of all grades were not unfriendly'. The town's citizens had 'made it a subject of congratulation that Athlone was immune from the tragic happenings taking place elsewhere...' The paper warned that all this 'good standing of long duration had been swept away'.

In its editorial the *Westmeath Independent* had made the point that, during the time of the attack on its premises, the town was legally under the control and protection of the British army since it occurred during

the curfew hours of 10.30pm to 5.30am: 'At the time the attack was made the streets were patrolled by the regular military, an armoured car was not far away and the men who sought to set fire to and destroy these works had the protection and support of mighty England...'

It was the beginning of a chaotic time for region. On the day after the Crown forces attacked Athlone, the local IRA decided to retaliate by launching an attack on a British army patrol travelling by boat on Lough Ree. During the subsequent week, many families left Athlone, seeking temporary shelter in the countryside, in Moate or in Roscommon Town.

Local fears were described by the *Westmeath Independent* when it wrote: 'After what had happened, anything might happen. There was neither law, order, discipline, nor the shadow of protection against the unexpected, the dangerous, and perhaps ill-tempered, aggression ending in tragedy.' Weeks later, those fears were realised and Athlone would again suffer at the hands of the Crown forces.

