



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## 'We had to extinguish the flames by ourselves'



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October and November 1920 were particularly tumultuous months in Athlone's history, the Athlone Print Works, which printed newspapers such as the Westmeath Independent and many other publications, was burned down and destroyed by the British Crown forces.

The Athlone Brigade of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) carried out a series of ambushes on sections of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) at Parkwood and at Auburn and it attacked a British army patrol on Lough Ree. The Crown forces carried out reprisals against Moate and Athlone, where they shot and killed a civilian named Michael Burke. At the time, Athlone was rarely out of the newspaper headlines and it was the subject of repeated discussions in the British House of Commons, during which the government of David Lloyd George sought to hide the truth of what was happening in the town.

### 'loud explosions'

Although those events have been well covered in various publications, including this newspaper, there are gaps in our knowledge of what occurred. However, some of those gaps have been filled by a series of contemporary documents, including remarkable eyewitness accounts, that have recently been made available to the public. Those documents were provided to the author by Luke Baxter and subsequently deposited with Westmeath Library Services. Many of these documents have never been published or catalogued before and they provide much detail on the destruction of the Athlone Print Works in 1920. Among those documents are thirteen affidavits that were compiled by the Athlone solicitor Denis J. Hannon during November 1920. Each affidavit was recorded in the presence of Justices of the Peace James J. Coen and John Burgess. Of particular interest are the testimonies of Eleanor Chapman and Mary Blaney, who worked together to save the print works during the first of two attacks on the premises by the Crown forces.

During the War of Independence, attacks by the Crown forces on newspaper offices and printing works were a common occurrence, although those on the Athlone Print Works were particularly destructive. The first attack occurred on Saturday 16 October 1920, hours after a contingent of so-called Auxiliaries – members of the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary – arrived in the town. That night, Athlone suffered what the Westmeath Examiner called 'an outbreak of

terrorism' when, before midnight, sections of the Crown forces began firing weapons in the centre of the town. While numerous house raids were in progress there was a series of 'loud explosions on the Leinster side of the town'.

### 'further shots were fired'

This was the sound of bombs being thrown into the premises of the Athlone Print Works. Eleanor Chapman, whose husband Thomas owned the business, recalled being woken by 'several explosions'. She looked out the window and saw that the works were on fire: 'I ran out in my dressing gown and saw a number of men in long dark coats...' One of the men ordered her to raise her hands and, although she asked them to help with the fire, they 'moved on without answering me'. She continued: 'Coming back I saw an armoured car without lights moving slowly towards the station. There were two men in front and I could see one of them in uniform. The flames were at that time very alarming. When I saw the armoured car it was about 40 yards from the wicket gate of my dwelling house. I then came in and dressed and started with my maid to seek further help.'

Once dressed, Chapman and her maid, Mary Blaney, went to the nearby house of James Martin, manager of the print works. Martin, as he recalled in his affidavit, attempted to reach the burning building: 'I proceeded at a quick pace until I reached Messrs. Burgess establishment in Church Street at which shop the first shot rang out. In quick succession three further shots were fired and I had to retreat...' Martin returned to his home, from where he heard more 'explosions and shots'. As Martin was unable to reach the print works, Chapman and Blaney were left without hope of assistance.

According to Eleanor Chapman's affidavit: 'When returning from Mr. Martin's house we were again halted near the same place. I again asked for help but got no answer. The military passed down the street away from the burning building. My maid and I got back to the fire but found no one there and we had to extinguish the flames by ourselves.' 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, according to Mary Blaney's affidavit: 'We worked for a long time throwing buckets of water on the fire and eventually we got it out.'

### 'A fresh outburst'

The heroism of Ellen Chapman and Mary Blaney had saved the Athlone Print Works, although a substantial portion of the ground floor was damaged and two printing machines were destroyed. Yet, sadly, they had earned only a temporary respite and two weeks later the Crown



Contemporary documents, recently made public, provide eyewitness accounts from Athlone during the War of Independence. Among the many accounts are those by Eleanor Chapman (seated in the centre of the photo)

forces returned and carried out an overwhelming attack that resulted in the complete destruction of the print works. That attack is recounted in great detail throughout the affidavits.

At the time of the second attack during the early hours of 3 November 1920, Arthur Groves Morgan, an English mechanic and foreman in the print works, was on duty when he heard shouting and 'the smashing of the boarded-up windows'. He 'immediately recognised the English accents of the men speaking' and soon after heard 'a dull explosion in the main building'. Along with others, Morgan began working the fire hoses, as recalled by James Martin: 'Mr Ivan Chapman [director and secretary of the print works company] remained at the hydrant – I took the centre, and Mr. Morgan dragged the hose close up to the Bindery [where the printed pages of magazines, pamphlets, books and other publications were bound together]. At this time we thought the attackers had gone, but there was

a fresh outburst, a loud explosion...' Despite the danger posed by the Crown forces, they continued fighting the flames, which Morgan described as being of 'a black and suffocating nature'. Their hopes were extinguished before the flames could be quenched and they were unable to save the print works. It would not reopen until February 1922, putting over 100 people out of work.

Apart from Eleanor Chapman, Mary Blaney, James Martin and Arthur Groves Morgan, the affidavits contain testimony from members of the Chapman family. Their accounts are supplemented by affidavits from George O'Neill, Gilbert McMullen, James McKell, John Joseph Mylius, Patrick McTernan and Thomas Brady, all 'members of the Marist Community'. The collection also contains contemporary letters that, taken together with the affidavits, give us a better understanding of the terror inflicted upon Athlone and the manner in which a vital local business was targeted, attacked and destroyed.

