

In and Around

THE PIGEON HOUSE

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TIME was and that within living memory when Pigeon House was a synonym for electricity to the inhabitants of Dublin. Although for several years now the reconstructed plant there has been both solid and liquid (oil) fuelled, it was originally a coal fired station as were the smaller — also municipally owned — urban powerhouses at Rathmines and Pembroke. A still smaller works was operated by the D.U.T. Company on South Lotts Road. In those days practically all electricity supply for domestic, industrial and electrical tram traction purposes in the City and its boroughs was met by these four plants, the Pigeon House Station having succeeded the first Dublin powerhouse which was situated at Fleet Street at the back of the site of the present E.S.B. district office and showrooms. The earlier powerhouse belonged to the days when the street supply to neighbouring thoroughfares only was H.T. with a transformer in each premises.

How things have changed since those far off days when in the first decade of the present century the only two three-phase A.C. supply systems operating in Europe were at Pigeon House in Dublin Bay and at the Dead Sea end of Constantinople. At any rate Pigeon House has lived on to become the doyen of the industry in this country. Now that its ultimate retirement (I'm only guessing here) may not be far off, perhaps a brief outline of its storied existence and some of the historical associations of the site on which it stands may not be considered inopportune to-day.

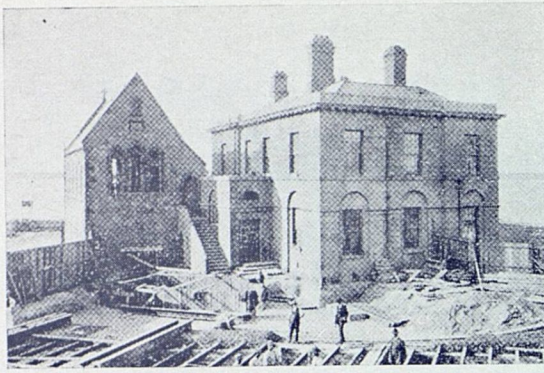
To begin at the beginning we must look back to the days of the earlier Viking invasions of this country. It was on and around the then tidal sandbanks on which the Station now stands that the Danes first waded ashore in strength in the ninth century. And it was on this same coastline

that in 1014 the battered remnants of their army defeated at Clontarf took their departure forever from Ireland leaving behind as a permanent memorial of their visits the distinctive Scandinavian accent of the Dublin backstreets.

In later times, while the City was still almost wholly Irish speaking, the village of Liam Mhuirbhlean was developed in the neighbourhood, in fact at the last land point, at that time, on the south side of the Liffey. Later this seaside hamlet became the official port of Dublin. As such, Ringsend had an important status up to the early years of the seventeenth century.

In 1715 the Ballast Board, under pressure of the City merchants, started the extension seawards of the jetty of piles at the landing stage to the place which then became known as Piles End, the first name of the site now known as the Pigeon House Station.

The next development embraced an extensive reclamation scheme for the eastern end of the present South Bull Wall, the stated objective, it is said, was to improve navigation facilities on the river and contain the waterway which had often flooded the city as far back as Trinity College. On maps of the period up to 1670 this expansion is identified and described as the end of the coastal continuance of the spur of land which gave Ringsend its name. On the 14th August, 1649, using the landing stage and jetties for disembarkation of his troops, Cromwell landed hereabouts an army of 8,000 foot, 4,000 horse and a formidable train of cannon and munitions of war. Earlier still Ormonde, at the head of the Royalist Army, attempted to capture the landing stage and, three years before the arrival of the Cromwellians, the Parliamentary forces landed there. When construction of the breakwater on which stands to-day the South Bull Wall was finally completed, it extended



The Military Hospital and Chapel.

into the Bay a distance of $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles. In this way the reclamation of the area of land from Ringsend to Piles End and the Halfmoon was gradually achieved and eventually linked up with Poolbeg Lightship a further $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles eastwards. The present Lighthouse took seven years to build and was completed in 1768.

So much for the reshaping of the coastline and the coming into being of the original tract of land. In 1770, the Ballast Board appointed a Commissioner of Works and erected the first building ever on the site at Piles End for the storage and disposal of the sea wrack — up to now thought fair prize for all — from about 100 wrecks annually on the bay. This action, it is said, resulted in the native pirates, smugglers, pimps, and robbers, becoming land based in the main and making the shanty-like town a highly dangerous one for people not so engaged. Although there were many genuine sea disasters in the area at this time and for many years later, one at least was of the other kind. A happy ending after many vicissitudes is recorded of the stout and richly laden Ouzel Galley made famous by visiting pirates. When captured by Algerian Corsairs they decided to make it the flagship of their fleet, operating in the far-away — for those days — Mediterranean. After years of absence from its home port the Irish captive crew turned the tables on the pirates and sailed home the Ouzel Galley in triumph to Piles End and there unloaded its cargo which far exceeded in value that aboard when seized. There were, however, some tragic disasters on the treacherous sandbanks in which the coastline abounds further off shore even to this day. The cross-channel Packet Boat, Prince of Wales, and the troopship Roch-

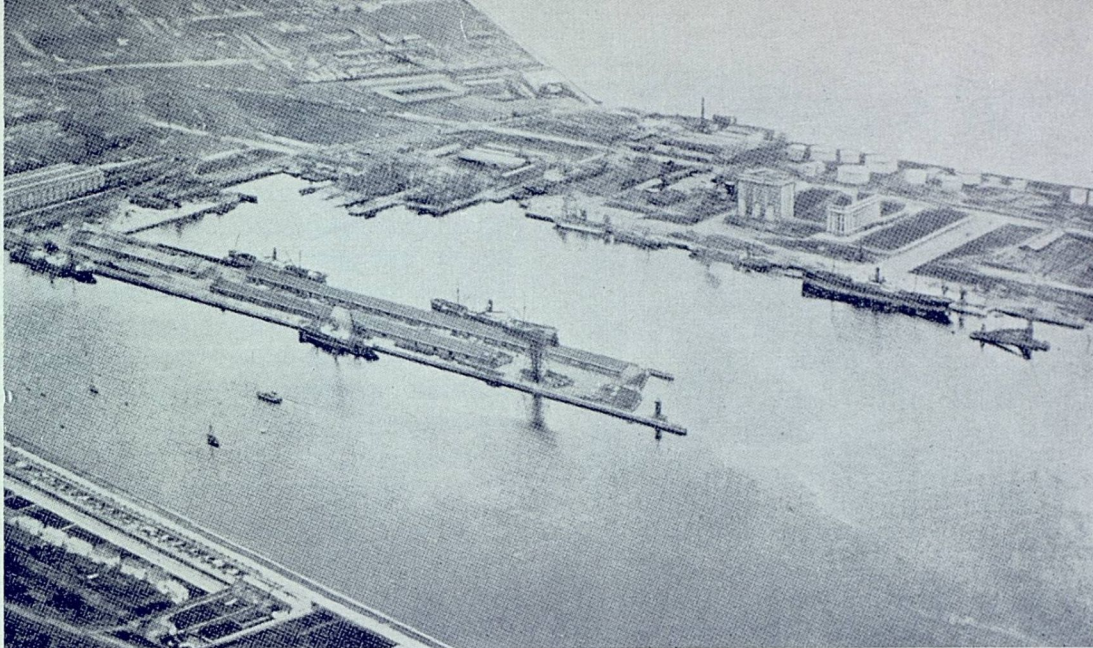
dale, sailing to Parkgate in Cheshire were both lost within sight of Piles End, the latter with 400 lives, the entire regiment of the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry which has as its motto 'Aucto Splendore Resurgum' to commemorate its revival after the disaster.

And now for a brief reference to the circumstances in which the change of name of the site from Piles End to its present name took place. About 1786 the first employee of the Commissioners, John Pidgeon, after several years of successful office during which regular cross channel packet services had been running from the little harbour built there by the Ballast Board, purchased the Wreck House. At this time the Pidgeon House was the official port of Dublin having replaced Ringsend. It is on record that the famous actress Peg Woffington used the port on her travels to and from England. At the landing stage there the mails were unloaded and conveyed to the City by coach up to the year 1818, shortly before which time the Packet Station was transferred to Howth. Meanwhile Pidgeon had built up a flourishing business by developing the Wreck House as an hotel, restaurant and ale-house, for the use of travellers and visitors alike and in that way gave his name to the place.

At any rate about 1813 the British Government purchased the site and buildings thereon for £100,183 and developed it as a fort under the British National Defence Act known as Pitts' Folly and hence the name Pidgeon House Fort. The Martello Towers are another survival of the English defence measures against Napoleonic invasion. The official records refer to its construction as a Fort Royal and City Fortification to be filled up around the existing Redoubt of



Entrance to Pigeon House.



Dublin Harbour thirty years ago.

5 battering cannon, 24 pounders planted as the radii to the segment of a circle commanding the entrance from the sea. It is also on record that the Battery had its uses too, as a military depot for the control of the 'natives', but neither Wolfe Tone's men nor Emmet's followers ever came to grips with its garrison, although all had planned attacks on the fortress. The 1916 Insurrectionists who had plans for its capture and the control of the City electricity supply also failed to occupy it. In 1848 the fort was made a closed garrison and much of the War Office construction works were demolished between then and 1895 when the remaining military installations were finally dismantled. The next change of ownership took place in 1897 when the Dublin Corporation bought back the place for £65,000 from the British Government.

It is hard to realise today that is all of thirty years since the Station was acquired by the E.S.B. under a vesting order made on the 28th March, 1927. The foundation stone of the first power house (two extensions came later) was laid by Lord Mayor Harrington in faraway 1902. Up to that time the arched, now demolished, entrance to the site denoted it was a fort by the words cut in stone 'The Pidgeon House Fort.' To this day can be seen the remains of the drawbridge sentry post, the guard room and part of the parapet for sentry patrol, the house of the guard commander, gun turrets, port holes and the ramparts

around the site. In the armoury still extant are some of the hooks and racks used for the storage of military equipment identified by markings still barely visible in black lettering on a white background, i.e. bayonets, swords, rifles and scabbards. Other reminders and relics of its days as a military fort can still be seen in the form of gun carriage sheds, slipways for the emergency landing of boats and craft used in the pursuit of unwelcome and prying visitors. On the actual site of the Wreck House the replacement stone building which was the administrative centre of the Fort also survives and to this day is known as the Hotel. The harbour and wharfs are still intact and used by the E.S.B. to take delivery of imported fuel.

No longer the maritime gate of Dublin, the electricity station and the drainage disposal systems shall keep the place important in the official eye. Gone too are the days of its existence successively as a pirates' rendezvous, the packet station and port of Dublin, an hotel, ale-house and military fort, but enough has been said for now to indicate that the origin of its name has never had any connection with those graceful birds which many still believe gave the place its name. It is still well worth a visit for its historic associations alone, quite apart from the fact that its existence has been much more effective for the uses of peace than it ever had been for the purposes of war.