

# bulletin



Finance & Photography

2021

*eabh* (The European Association for  
Banking and Financial History e.V.)

# bulletin

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# Central Bank of Ireland's photographic collection

## The value of visuals

Sinéad McDonnell

Established in 1927 as the Currency Commission, the Central Bank of Ireland is responsible for the management and regulation of the Irish banking system, as well as being Ireland's representative within the European System of Central Banks (ESCB) and for international monetary affairs. At present, the Bank Archive's holdings comprise more than 12,000 paper files, 2,000 Bank publications, over 600 architectural plans, 250 ledgers, various artefacts and some 6,000 photographic items, with the archive continuously growing.

Our photographic collection begins in 1932 with a large framed portrait of all the attendees from the British Empire Economic Conference/Ottawa Conference, which included three Irish delegates—Seán T. O'Kelly (Ireland's 2nd President); Sean Lemass (former Taoiseach of Ireland); and Joseph Brennan (Chairman of the Currency Commission and first Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland). Joseph Brennan makes his next official appearance in the Bank's photographic collection in a portrait of the first Board meeting of the Central Bank of Ireland's Bank Commission, where he is seated front and centre. The photo-

graphic collection at present covers the years 1932–2019 encompassing an array of themes including various buildings owned by the bank; banknote and coin designs; the change over to the euro; senior staff portraits; staff sports

and social events; landscape photographs; bank conferences and social events; and also the dreaded 'miscellaneous' album (Photograph 1).

The Bank's photographic collection was realised as a genuine asset to the Bank upon the launch of the Archive's reading room, the online archive catalogue, the Bank's exhibition celebrating their 75th anniversary, and the Bank's exhibition titled 'Pounds, Shillings and Independence', all in 2017. Prior to this, there was little knowledge of the value of the bank's photographic collection in relation to garnering public interest, using it as a historical tool, or using it for social media, solely due to the wider lack of knowledge surrounding the archives themselves within the organization.

During these launches, the photographic collection was used a great deal as part of the Bank's marketing campaign and was featured in news articles, social media posts and informative booklets. The 'Pounds, Shillings and Independence' exhibition, the 75th anniversary exhibition and video (which detailed the evolution of the bank since 1943) and an additional informative booklet, made great use of the bank's photographic collection,

displaying the unique evidential value a photograph can serve to provide an historical narrative. The collection is now in constant use due to various exhibitions held at the Bank, whether it be for Culture Night, VIP visits, or school/

**Not only are financial institutions' photographic collections an asset for displaying their historical timelines through subjects such as corporate events; architecture; and currency, they are also an asset for revealing the character of these institutions.**



1. First meeting of the Board of the Central Bank of Ireland, 1st February 1943. Joseph Brennan, first Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland seated third from the right



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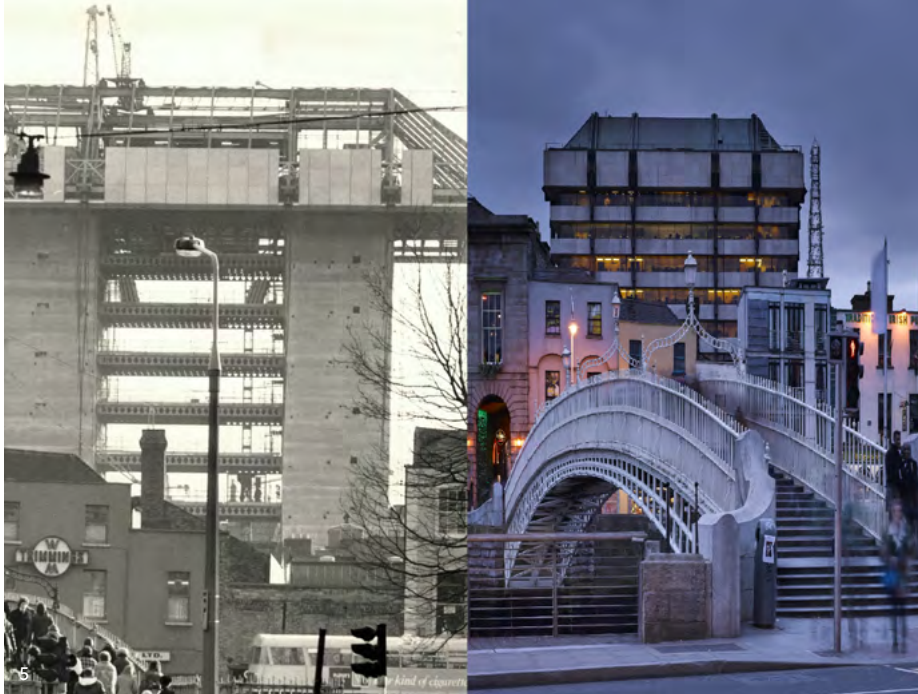
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2. Story boards featured in the Central Bank of Ireland's visitor centre, detailing the history of the Central Bank of Ireland and featuring images from the Bank's archive  
 3. Lady Clerks sitting outside Foster Place, former headquarters of the Currency Commission/Central Bank of Ireland, c. 1940's





4. Central Bank of Ireland colleagues enjoying a work social event, 1955



5. Left - Dame Street Tower, designed by Irish architect Same Stephenson during construction c. 1976; Right – Dame Street Tower c. 2016, prior to the Bank's move to the new building on North Wall Quay. Both photographs feature the famous Ha'penny Bridge  
6. Central Bank of Ireland's new headquarters situated on North Wall Quay, Dublin City





7. Draft design of the £100 B Series banknote, featuring Gráinne Mhaol. This banknote was never circulated due to lack of demand
8. £50 Consolidated banknote, also known as the Ploughman Banknotes. These notes were in circulation between 1929-1953. The Ploughman series was a series of Irish banknotes issued by the Currency Commission of Ireland as a transitional measure for eight Irish banks with the arrangement that the banks withdrew their previous individual banknote issues
9. Series B £5 banknotes being checked over during printing in the Currency Centre c.1980



group visits; the photographs are usually the part of the exhibition individuals linger around longest (Photograph 2).

Not only are financial institutions' photographic collections an asset for displaying their historical timelines through subjects such as corporate events; architecture; and currency, they are also an asset for revealing the character of these institutions. Staff photographs spanning from the 1940s through to the present-day feature staff enjoying days out, participating in sports events, celebrating birthdays, Christmas, promotions and retirement parties; and taking part in the annual theatrical production. We have come to find this particular theme of photographs truly captivates staff, past and present. In 2018, the Archives decided to introduce a project that needed the participation of all willing staff. As the photographic collection is so large, and the Archive is relatively new to the Bank, we found it quite difficult to be able to name all staff featured in these photos. An appeal was placed on the Bank's intranet to all staff, calling for anyone interested in helping the Archive name the unknown individuals in the collection. There was great interest in this and over fifty staff visited the Archive's reading room over the following weeks to look through the thousands of photographs and name anyone they recognized. The project not only helped to catalogue the Archives' holdings, it also allowed the staff to appreciate the size of the collection and gave them opportunity to travel down memory lane and enjoy a laugh between colleagues and friends. Following on from this project, the Archive was contacted by the Communications Department in the Bank to discuss various planned retiree events. Through these events, the Archive received the names of over fifty former staff members that were interested in assisting the Archive with this project. The retirees then contacted other past staff members and before long we had groups in the reading room every week for five weeks, which then coincided with the Archive receiving even more photographs to add to its collection. This is an ongoing project that the Archive makes an effort to arrange every year, and all contributions have been of great value to the Archive. While many of these photographs are not available to the public, they are available to staff members and family (Photographs 3 and 4).

With regard to external researchers, the most requested photographs from our collection come under

architecture and currency. Since the launch of the online catalogue, the Archive has received requests from architectural students to view the collection containing the images of the Bank's former headquarters located on Dame Street, Dublin. This building was built by architect Sam Stephenson. The building was completed in late 1978 and it was the Bank's headquarters until 2017, when all staff moved the new headquarters located down the river Liffey at North Wall Quay. The Dame Street building was constructed in a Brutalist style and is Ireland's only 'suspended building', with its eight floors hanging from central concrete cores. Each floor was built on the ground and then raised into place. This particular building courted controversy, as during its construction it exceeded the original planning permission height by thirty feet and building was put on halt for a year until a new approval was granted. Due to this controversy, and style of the building, it proves to be a popular topic amongst students. Photographs of the Dame Street 'Tower' are also regularly used in exhibitions aimed at the general public as major-

ity of the population who lived in Ireland during the 1970s will have memories of this dispute, and more often than not are hugely interested in seeing the construction photographs, as it's not very often you see a building's floors being hoisted from the ground up (Photographs 5 and 6).

Currency has also proved to be a favourite amongst external researchers, with annual statistics showing this topic making up approx-

imately 30% of material viewed in the Archive's reading room. Numismatists are particularly interested in the design of old Irish banknotes—namely Series A and B, and the Consolidated banknotes. Images from the Central Bank of Ireland archives have been used in numerous publications, printed and online, and on numismatic websites (following relevant copyright approval). The Bank has hosted talks and exhibitions solely based on these banknotes, with great reviews. One note in particular that is of interest to the public is the Irish £100 B Series banknote, featuring Grace O'Malley (an historical figure in 16th century Irish history, in Irish folklore she is commonly known as Gráinne Mhaol, anglicized as Granuaile). This note was never released to the general public due to lack of demand and its design was largely unknown, along with its draft designs. This design is now featured in many publications

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and online informative sources. The bank does not hold this physical banknote, only photographic evidence of the proposed designs, and therefore it is extremely valuable to the history of Irish banknotes (Photographs 7 and 8).

In order to preserve the history of the Central Bank of Ireland, the Archive team visited the Currency Centre to document all banknote-printing processes prior to the cessation of banknote printing in Ireland. The team photographed printing machines, printing plates, dyes, and even staff workwear. There are some photographs from when the Currency Centre opened in 1974, and due to security reasons, some photographs cannot be released to the public. However, the printing staff in the Currency Centre are highly appreciative that their lifelong work has been documented and preserved in the form of a photographic print. A number of these photographs can be released for general consumption, and will hopefully be used in an upcoming exhibition to observe the end of banknote printing in Ireland and to celebrate the work of the printing staff (Photograph 9).

The photographic collection of the Central Bank of Ireland provides a captivating historical record of the Bank, its staff, its buildings, and the nation's currency through the years. It is a hugely important section of the archives and for the history of the Bank, as they are unique to the Bank itself. Digitizing the photographic collection is the next step for the Archive of the Central Bank of Ireland, and through this, we hope to reach a wider audience and share with them the visual history of the bank.

All photographs: © Central Bank of Ireland

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#### Author's profile

Sinéad McDonnell joined the Central Bank of Ireland as Archivist in 2016, and became Archives Manager in 2019. She previously worked as project archivist in the National Library of Ireland in 2014 and 2015. She has her master's degree in Archives and Records Management from the University College Dublin and her undergraduate degree in Archaeology also from the University College Dublin.

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