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 photographic 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 banks 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/
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.
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.

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 majority 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 approximately 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...
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.

Author’s profile
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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.

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