



HISTORY OF THE  
Port Centre  
Building





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*“He turned his eyes to the grey gleaming river, winding along towards Dublin.”*

James Joyce, *Dubliners*

## Introduction

H.A. Gilligan’s “History of the Port of Dublin” is a well researched and most informative book on the history and development of Dublin Port. In view of the rich history that attaches to the Port, it is worthwhile and interesting to review this history which places the current Port Centre building in context with more than 1,000 past years.

It is generally accepted that Dublin was little more than a monastic settlement until the Norse invasion in the 8th and 9th centuries when they selected the Liffey Estuary as their point of entry to the country as it provided relatively easy access to the central plains of Ireland.

Trading with England and Europe followed which required port facilities so the development of Dublin Port is inextricably linked to the development of Dublin City.

**Top Left:**

**View of the Corn Exchange, Burgh Quay and Custom House, Dublin** by Artist Samuel Frederick Brocas and Engraver Henry Brocas. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

**Bottom Left:**

**The Ha’Penny Bridge, Dublin, 1818** by Artist Samuel Frederick Brocas. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

# Dublin Port Buildings

## 1300 – 2013

The first boats using the port had shallow drafts and pulled up to the bank. As the drafts got deeper timber jetties extended out into the river to provide deeper berthage.

Around 1300, the first stone quay walls were erected on Wood Quay and Merchant Quay in more or less the same line as the present quay walls. This is where the first offices to serve the port were probably located.

Up until 1706 the city fathers conducted the port affairs as a constituent department in the corporation and in that year they established the Dublin Corporation (Ballast committee) as a separate entity to manage the port and would have occupied offices initially around Wood Quay.

*“She asked that it be named for her. The river took its name from the land. The land took its name from the woman.”*

Eavan Boland, Anna Liffey

**Top Right:**

**A Prospect of the Custom House, and Essex Bridge, Dublin, 1753** Print by Joseph Tudor. Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

**Bottom Right:**

**The Custom House, 1867** Photo by Frederick H Mares. Courtesy of The British Library.



To the right you can see the crests of the various Port Authorities that were the predecessors of the current Dublin Port Company and listed below are the office locations:

1. Early offices are not recorded but presumed to have been near Wood Quay
2. **1620** The Old Customs House at Essex Bridge
3. **1791** Gandon's 'Custom House'
4. **1794** 4-6 Lower Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street)
5. **1801** Ballast Office 3-21 Westmoreland Street; **1866** Ballast Office acquires 19-21 Westmoreland Street
6. **1976** 'Gandon House Amiens Street'
7. **1981 to present** Port Centre, Alexandra Road, Dublin 1

The 'Old Customs House' on Essex Quay, sadly demolished, and Gandon's 'Customs House' on Customs House Quay which is rated one of the best of our 18th century heritage are both buildings of great architectural merit.



1707-1786 Dublin Corporation  
(Ballast Committee)



1786-1867 Corporation for Preserving and  
Improving the Port of Dublin



1867-1946 Dublin Port and Docks Board also  
Pilotage Authority also Bridge Authority



1946 Reconstruction of Board under Harbours  
Act 1946 also Pilotage Authority also Bridge  
Authority



1996 Reconstruction of Board under Harbours  
Act 1996 Dublin Port Company



PORT CENTRE 7

CUSTOM'S HOUSE 3

GANDON HOUSE 6

4-6 LOWER SACKVILLE ST 4

5 BALLAST OFFICE

2 OLD CUSTOM'S HOUSE

1 WOOD QUAY

Aerial view down the Liffey towards the port, 2005



## The Ballast Office, 1870

The first bespoke office that the Port built was the famous Ballast Office on 19-21 Westmoreland Street. Though the building itself was not distinctive in design, it formed part of an elegant streetscape framing a view to Trinity College and the Irish Parliament Building (now Bank of Ireland).

What made the building famous and distinctive was the 'Ballast Office Clock' mounted over the front door. In 1870 the clock was connected by telegraph wire to Dunsink Observatory making this the most accurate public clock in Dublin at the time. It became established as a popular rendezvous point for people - "Meet you under the Ballast Office Clock" was a well known refrain in Dublin.

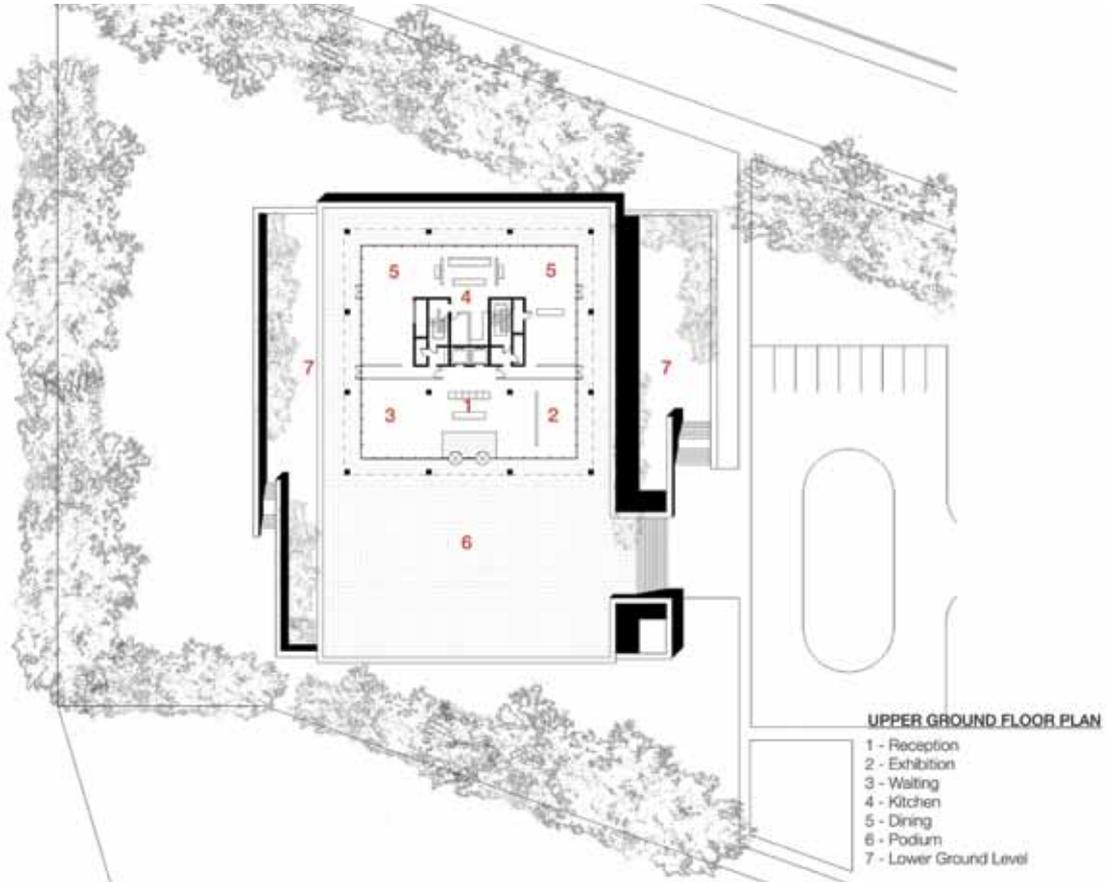
The functional qualities of the Ballast Office were somewhat lacking though and with the development of the Port eastwards down the river Liffey a new building was proposed to be closer to the heart of the Port.



**Left:**

**Westmoreland Street and D'Olier Street.**

**View from Carlisle Bridge, Dublin** by Artist Samuel Frederick Brocas and Engraver Henry Brocas. Original Ballast Office seen to the right of the image. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

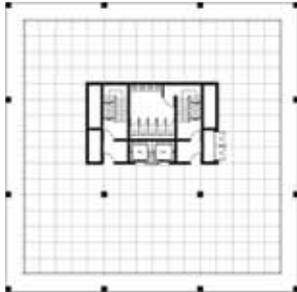


## The Port Centre Building

An architectural competition took place in 1954 for the new building, however, it wasn't until 1976 that Scott Tallon Walker were appointed as architects for the proposed new Offices of Dublin Port and Docks Board.

The brief was to provide a large office space for approximately 120 staff and additional space to be let to other port users. A most important element of the brief was that the new Port Centre should have a strong presence to compete with the scale and visual dominance of the large cranes that inhabited the port area.

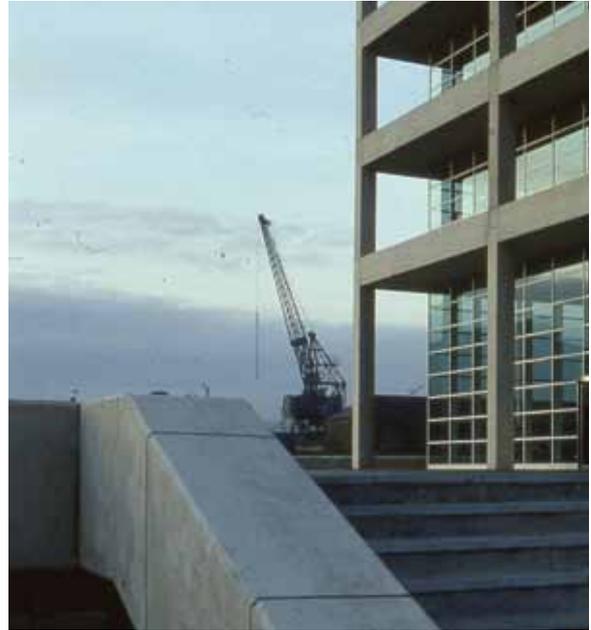
The proposed location of the building changed many times between those years and finally a disused part of the Liffey dockyard facility was chosen for the project.



**Above:**  
Port Centre, Typical Floor Plan; Lower  
Ground Floor Plan; and 5th Floor Plan  
Scott Tallon Walker Architects.

**Top Left:**  
Port Centre, Upper Ground Floor Plan  
Scott Tallon Walker Architects.

**Bottom Left:**  
Port Centre, Elevation Scott Tallon  
Walker Architects.





The site, located off Alexandra Road, was surrounded with a three metre high stone boundary wall on the north, south and west boundaries. A new east boundary wall to match the assisting stone walls was constructed to separate the site off from the remaining live Liffey dockyard facility.

On 1st June 1978 the Board approved the purchase of the Liffey Dockyard Site. On 29th May 1979 the contract to construct the new offices was signed with the Dublin based contractor PJ Walls.

In order to ensure that all the offices experienced views over the port a bucket was attached to a crane and the project architect Conor Dwyer was hoisted up to establish that the first floor would need to be 9.2m over the existing ground level to avail of these views.

The Port Centre building was completed on 1st September 1981 and the Board moved from Gandon House to the new port centre on 9th November 1981.

*“... from swerve  
of shore to bend  
of bay, brings us  
by a commodius  
vicus of re-  
circulation back  
to Howth Castle  
and Environs.”*

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

**Clockwise from top left:**

**Port Centre Exterior, 1981** John Donat / RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

**Port Centre Entrance, 1981** John Donat / RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

**Port Centre Reception, 2013**

**Port Centre, 1981** John Donat / RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

The six storey office building is mounted on a raised podium which is also the roof of the lettable offices underneath.

The building comprises of expressed concrete columns and the windows are recessed 1.5m resulting in an overhang providing shading from the sun.

Unlike the old Ballast Office, which had traditional compartmented offices, the new building offers a modern open plan office that was designed for flexibility and to embrace change.

The steps outside lead up to a gracious entrance hall and reception at the front of the building. Today this hall is housed with many artefacts, drawings and historical pieces relating to the Port providing an important link with the past.

The site itself was quite a harsh and hard environment but this has been enriched with trees and landscaping around the building over the years to create a more inviting atmosphere.

The greatest success of the Port Centre building can be seen when you exit the lift on any floor and experience the wonderful views over the Port, Dublin Mountains, Dublin Bay and the City.

The Port Centre is 32 years in use today and still has a strong visual presence at the heart of the port and the city of Dublin.

*“O tell me all  
about Anna  
Livia! I want to  
hear all about  
Anna Livia. Well,  
you know Anna  
Livia? Yes, of  
course we all  
know Anna Livia.  
Tell me all.”*

James Joyce, Finnegans Wake



**Clockwise from top:**

Aerial view of the Port Centre, 2013

Port Centre Reception, 2013

Original clock from the Ballast Office  
on Westmoreland St in the Port Centre  
Reception, 2013







**Dublin Port Company**

Port Centre  
Alexandra Road  
Dublin 1  
Ireland