

A Historical Note

The Irish Sailors' and Soldiers' Land Trust was constituted under the Irish Free State (Consequential Provisions) Act 1922 for the provision of cottages in Ireland, with or without plots or gardens, for ex-servicemen, under the powers given by the Irish Land (Provision for Sailors and Soldiers) Act 1919, including the power to carry out schemes made by the Local Government Board for Ireland prior to the passing of the 1922 act.

That act provided for a body of five members, and empowered the Treasury to make regulations as to the procedure of the trust, the application of the proceeds of sale, the audit of its accounts, and generally as to the manner in which the trust should carry out its powers and duties. It also stipulated that the trust should not come into operation until the Treasury had certified that legislation had been passed by the Parliaments of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland to enable the trust to acquire and hold land, to vest in the trust any land and other property to be transferred to it under the act, and otherwise to enable the trust to carry out the purposes of the act.

The Treasury gave the required certificate in its Regulations dated 31 December 1923, under which the trust was to function; and in official letters of the same date, the home and colonial secretaries announced the appointment of the five trustees. The trust, a body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal, first met on 22 January 1924 and during the 1920s and 1930s provided over 4000 houses.

Prior to the first meeting of the Board, agents for Trust property were the Ministries of Finance and of Home Affairs in Northern Ireland, and the Dublin branch of the Colonial Office in Southern Ireland, which paid rents from properties into a general account of its own. Subsequently two agencies were set up, in Belfast and Dublin, under the two acting Secretaries to the Trust, and these were responsible for the management of Trust tenancies and for the payment of receipts into the Trust's accounts established in 1924 at the Bank of Ireland. Local trustees were appointed in Dublin and Belfast and the agents had local counterparts dealing with the day to day payments of rent and tenancy affairs.

The headquarters of the Trust were in London. A salaried secretary was appointed in 1924 with a small permanent staff. The trustees, consisting of a chairman and four trustees, usually met in the London office. Meetings were attended by representatives of the Dublin and Belfast offices. The proposal, put forward in 1924, that alternate meetings should be held in Belfast, Dublin and London was not adopted although some meetings were held outside London.

In Eire, operations of the trust were complicated by a series of rent strikes culminating in a decision (the Leggett Judgement) by the Supreme Court of Eire in 1933 that the trust as constituted was not entitled to charge rents to ex-service tenants. The Northern Ireland courts reached the opposite conclusion and thereafter the trust received no rents from tenants in the South. As a result no further houses were built in the South after 1932 and maintenance was reduced to a minimum. In Northern Ireland building continued, the last house being completed in 1952.

In 1961 the trust affirmed that its scope was limited by law to provision of cottages for ex-servicemen of the First World War, but that applications from ex-servicemen of the Second World War to purchase Irish cottages would be considered.

In 1967, the Irish Sailors' and Soldiers' Land Trust Act enabled the trust to provide or assist in providing living accommodation other than cottages and extended its powers to sell cottages to widows of former tenants. By the 1980s most of the houses in the Republic had been sold and the 90 or so in Northern Ireland still rented were administered by the Milibern Trust.

The Dublin office was closed in 1974/1975 and the local management of individual properties then transferred to a firm of estate agents.

In 1987 under the terms of the Irish Sailors and Soldiers Land Trust Act the trust was wound up. Money provided by the sale of the houses was distributed to the original contributors. Three-fifths of the United Kingdom's share was paid into the UK and Northern Ireland Consolidated Funds and the remainder paid to the Royal British Legion. Use of the share returned to the Republic of Ireland was decided by the Dail.