

Did you notice?

A column for the curious stroller

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20. Sir Howard Grubb

In a previous article I referred to the gifted astronomer Margaret Huggins (née Murray) who lived at 23 Longford Terrace in Monkstown. She was not the only distinguished astronomer to live on Longford Terrace: in fact she may have been introduced to her husband William Huggins by Howard Grubb who was a maker of astronomical instruments and a Monkstown resident at the time of his death in 1931.

Howard Grubb was the son of Thomas Grubb, who had established Grubb's Optical and Mechanical Works in Rathmines in 1830. Ireland had a thriving scientific instrument trade since the eighteenth century centred around Capel Street, Essex and Arran Quays. Thomas was an amateur astronomer who developed a considerable competence in the construction of optical instruments. He assisted the Earl of Rosse in the construction of the great telescope at Birr Castle.



The Grubb company developed an international reputation for the quality of manufacture of precision devices. In 1866, the factory won the contract for a 48 inch reflector for Melbourne Observatory. Howard, who was a student of engineering in Trinity College, was taken out of college and put in charge of the project. When completed two years later, it was hailed as an engineering triumph. In 1870, Thomas retired and Howard took over the business. Under his management it grew into an important international export business, producing precision instruments for emerging fields such as astrophysics and astronomical photography.

The firm secured contracts for refracting equipment for the observatories at Dunsink, Armagh, Greenwich, Johannesburg and Glasgow. They made astronomical telescopes which were used all over the world. In 1878 he made the 27inch refractor for Vienna observatory, regarded at the time as a world leader in the field. He was involved in the development of periscopes for submarines and his Rathmines factory produced gunsights and rangefinders for the military. He patented an entirely new form of gunsight in 1900.

It was the importance of his military work that caused the British government to move the Grubb works to St. Albans in 1918. In 1925 he joined forces with Sir Charles Parsons and the firm they founded, Grubb, Parsons and Co. lasted until 1984.

Sir Howard Grubb lived in Monkstown from 1926 until his death in 1931. Some of his telescopes are still in use, and the street name Observatory Lane in Rathmines marks the location of the original works.

Look out for his commemorative plaque on Longford Terrace, not far from that of Margaret Huggins.