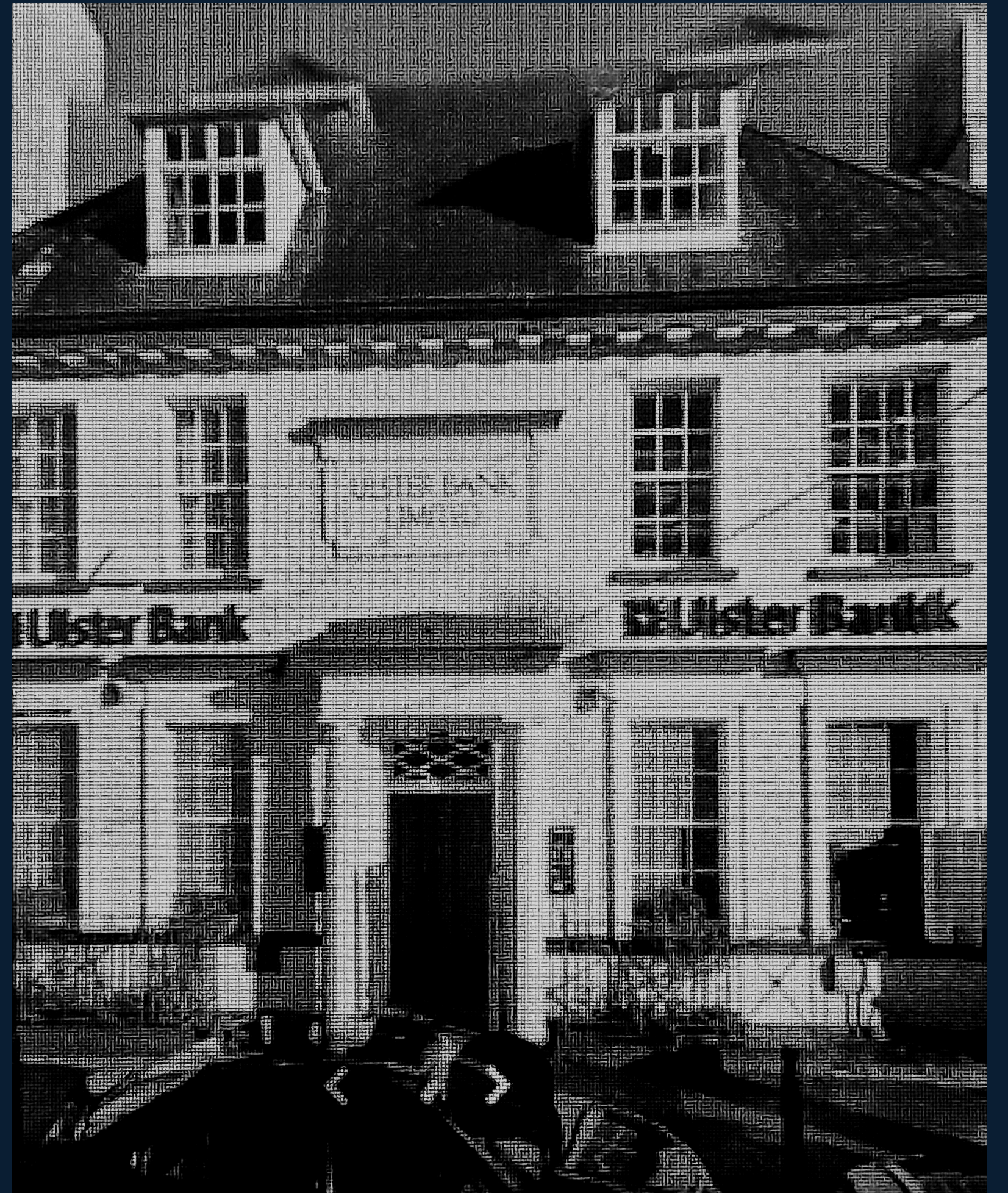


# Behind the Counter: Witnessing the Edgeworthstown Bank Robbery

NIAMH AHERN



# Introduction

My name is Niamh Ahern and I'm a TY student in Ballinamore Community school.

I've decided to do this as a project as I've often heard stories from when my Grandad worked in the Ulster Bank, which inspired me to investigate the 1971 robbery and the impact it had on the local community and country.

This project will be partially based on an interview with my Grandad as a key primary source as he was working in the bank when it got robbed. As well as that I will use newspaper articles and the 1971 Commissioner's report.



# The Role of the IRA During the Troubles

In 1971, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were one of the most powerful and controversial groups in Ireland. Their main aim was to end British rule in Northern Ireland and to create a united Ireland. The IRA had grown in strength after 1969, when the organisation split into the Official and Provisional factions, with the Provisional IRA focusing on defending Catholic areas and using armed struggle. They carried out shootings, bombings, and bank robberies frequently to fund their activities. They were controversial because they caused fear, violence and risk to ordinary members of the public.

## Troubles



*Soldiers in Londonderry in September 1969 picture from the Belfast News Letter*

# The Troubles: Chaos, Conflict and Confusion

The Troubles is a time in history that lasted from the late 1960s until 1998. It involved a few different groups such as the IRA, British Forces and loyalist paramilitaries who all disagreed about the future of Northern Ireland. This disagreement led to years of shooting, bombing and tension in Northern Ireland but was felt across all of Ireland and had a huge impact on ordinary people.



*Confrontation between British soldiers and the IRA in Belfast in 1971 picture from The Guardian*

# Why were banks a target?

Banks were a target during the troubles because both republican and loyalist paramilitaries found it a quick and effective way of getting money to fund their operations such as vehicles, weapons and planning attacks. The IRA used a strategy of economic disruption because they wanted to make Northern Ireland so expensive that the British government would leave them.

*A paramilitary mural in the Mount Vernon area of north Belfast picture from BBC*



# The 20th of August 1971: Chaos Behind the Counter

## Morning

The morning started off as usual by opening up the big heavy bank doors and providing their service to the local community. With no signs of anything unusual happening.

## Afternoon

At 2pm 3 men got out of a blue Volkswagen and 1 remained in the car. They threatened and assaulted a local postman and staff. They stole £300 from the cashier desk and took another £2,700 from the safe. My Grandad said in the newspaper that they were “cursing and shouting during the robbery”.

## Evening

The young men fled the scene and fled off towards Granard in their Dublin reg car. The car was later found burned out on a lane off the Granard Castlepollard road.

# From Bank to Community Space: Edgeworthstown's Historic Building

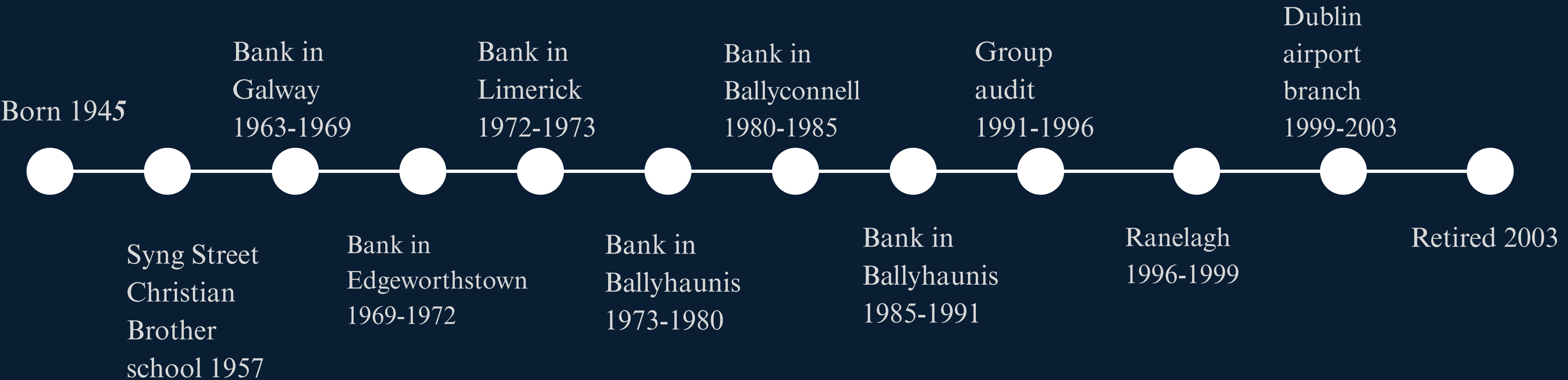


*Then VS now picture from ecological building system*

The old solid stone wall bank in Edgeworthstown was built in 1915. The building is a Queen Anne Revival style which can be seen in its overall structure. Originally its purpose was to serve as a bank but it was closed in 2017 and was recently renovated to serve as a co-working space for the community.



# My Granddad's Career timeline







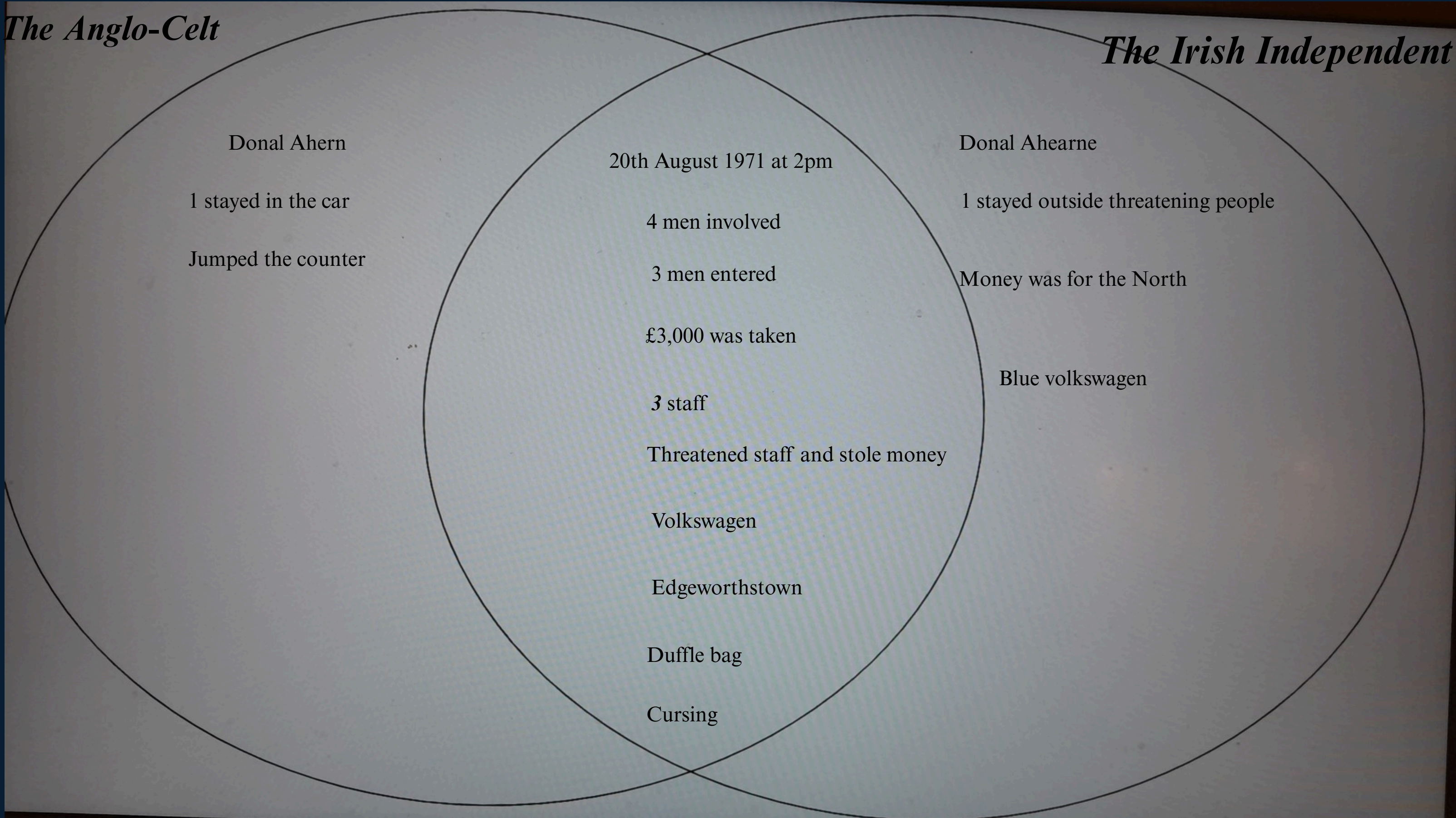
# Summary of the Anglo-Celt

On Thursday 20th of August 1971, the Edgeworthstown branch of the Ulster Bank was robbed by a gang of four armed men at 2 p.m. Three burglars entered the bank while a fourth stayed in the getaway car. They pushed a local man Mr. Seamus Masterson to the ground and threatened the staff which consisted of manager Mr. Gerard F. Hyde, the cashier Mr. Donal Ahern(my Grandad) and Ms Breta O'Malley. The raiders took approximately £3,000 from the cashier's desk and safe. The young men were shouting nervously and were wearing gloves. The getaway car was a Volkswagen with Dublin reg plates and it was later found burned out four miles away in a lane.

# Summary of the Irish Independent

On Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> August 1971 four masked and armed men robbed Edgeworthstown Ulster Bank around 2 p.m. Three of them went inside while the fourth stayed outside and was holding a number of men at gun point. One suspect pushed a local post office driver Mr. Seamus Masterson, into the bank. The the 2 other masked men forced the manager, Mr. Gerard Hyde, the cashier Donal Ahearne (my Grandad) and Miss Breta O'Malley to open the strongroom. They used "horrible language" repeatedly and told the staff to put their hands over their head as they had rifles and pistols. They grabbed about £3,000 shoved it into a duffle bag and drove off in a blue Volkswagen which was later found burned out six miles away. The robbers were shouting the whole time and claimed the money was "for the North."

# Similarities and differences of the newspaper articles



# Cash, Cops, and Chaos

## CO. LONGFORD

22. On 19th August, 1971, three armed and masked men entered the Ulster Bank at Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford and at gunpoint subdued the bank staff and stole the sum of £3,014. The raiders made their getaway in a stolen car parked outside the bank premises with a fourth masked man seated behind the steering wheel. No person has yet been made amenable for this robbery.

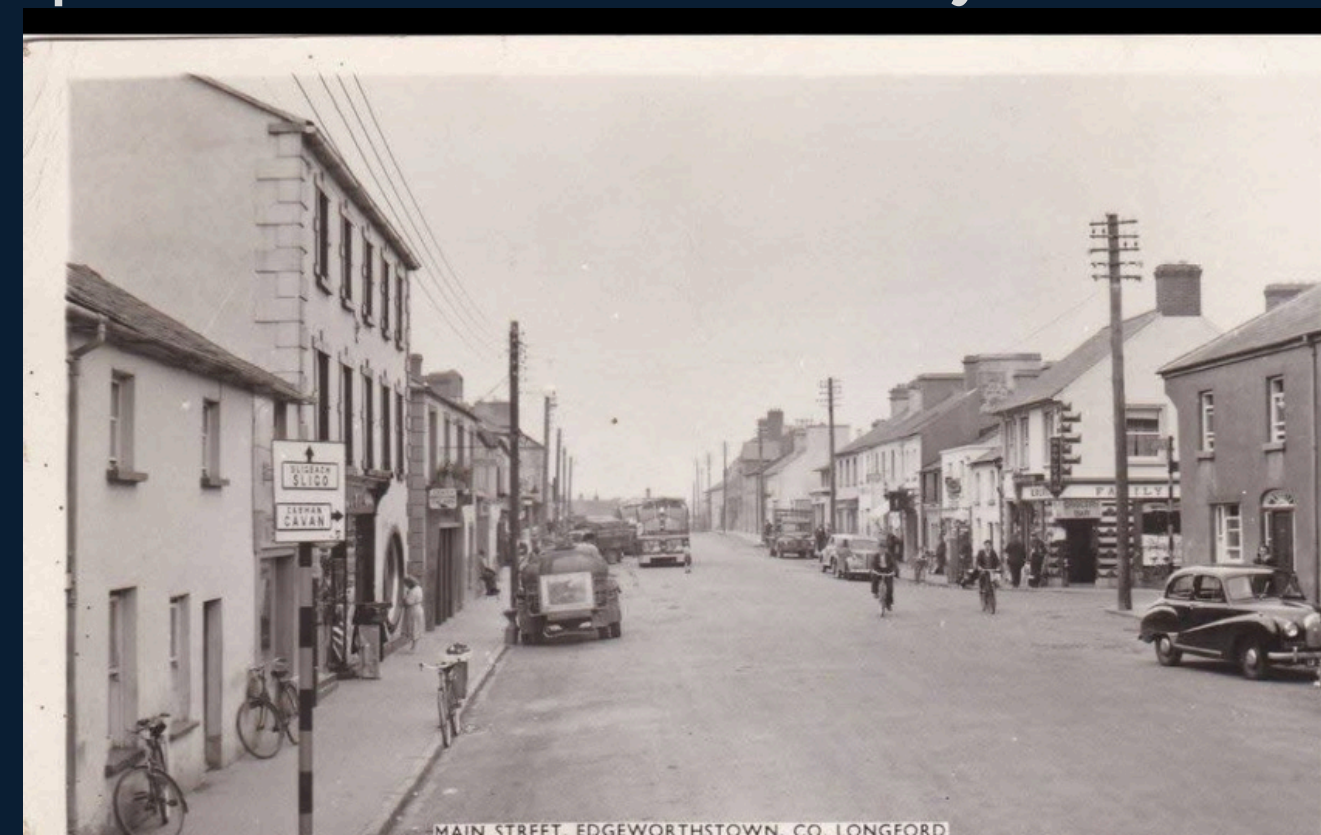
## CO. KILDARE

Above is the report from the 1971 Garda Commission's report. It states that there was nobody charged yet when the report went out. But according to my Grandad people were eventually found guilty and jailed. Due to this being a sensitive topic my grandparents have decided that they wouldn't give further details so I respected their wishes and left it out.

# The community's response

The armed robbery in Edgeworthstown had a serious impact on the local community, as it caused fear among both staff and customers who were present during the robbery. The weapons made the situation more frightening, as people felt their lives were in danger. After the robbery, a sense of shock and anxiety spread throughout Edgeworthstown, as the bank was an important service that many people depended on in their daily lives. This event showed how violence during The Troubles could disrupt an entire community.

*Picture of The Main street in Edgeworthstown in 1964 picture from Facebook from the Longford Historical Society page*



# From robbery to reform: Security changes after Edgeworthstown

The Edgeworthstown bank robbery was the first bank robbery in the country during the Troubles so when it became clear that banks were being targeted they began to take security more seriously. They introduced stronger safes, alarm security and stricter procedures when dealing with the cash. The staff underwent training on how to respond to a robbery. When cash was being delivered to the institutes there used to be escorted cash deliveries.

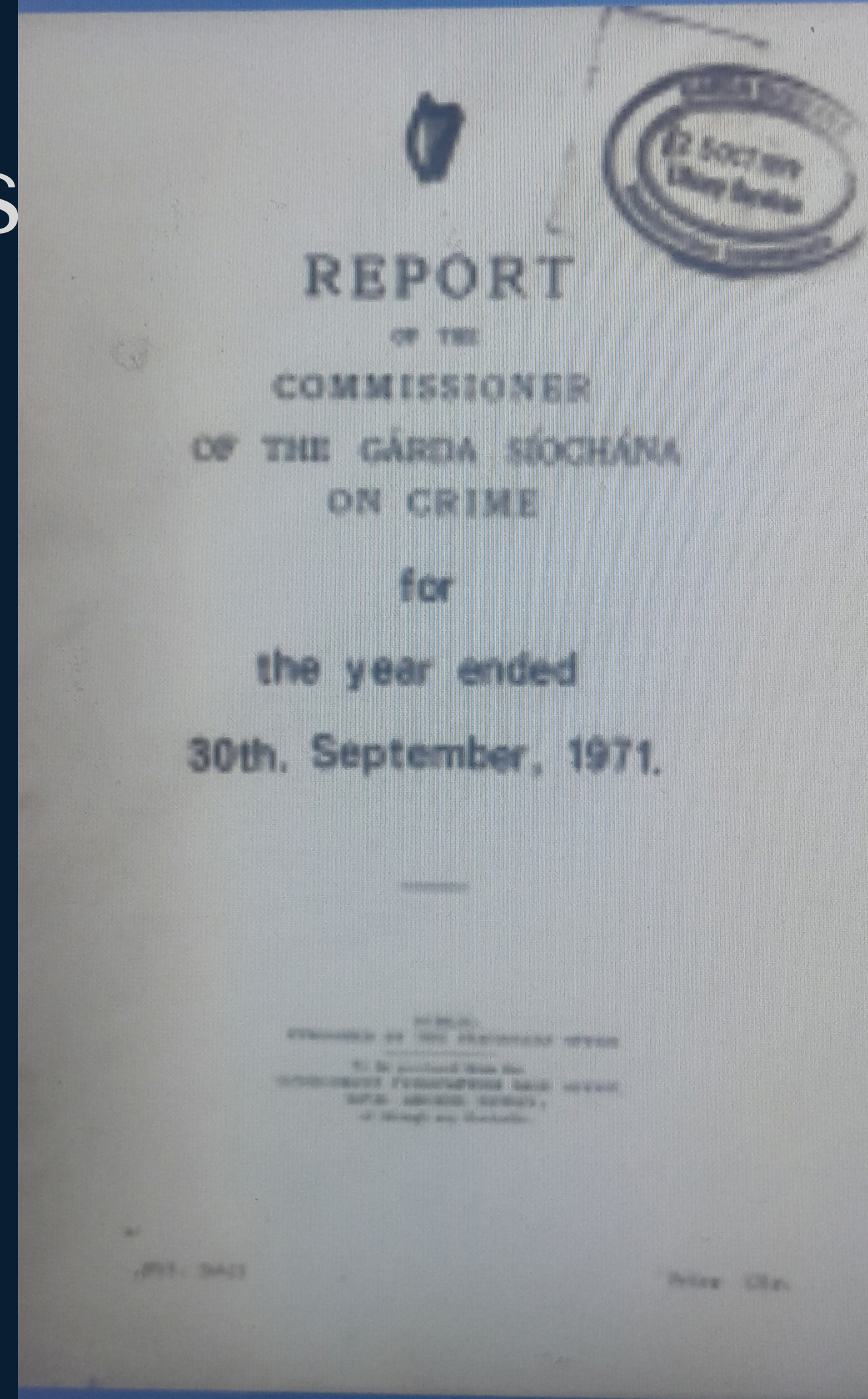
*Picture of the burnt out still-smouldering car in which the bank-raiders made their escape from Edgeworthstown. They abandoned the car about four miles from the town, set it on fire, and disappeared. Picture from the Irish Independent.*



# Primary and Secondary Sources

- My Grandparents
- My Dad
- Irish Independent
- Anglo-Celt
- The Garda Commisions report 1971
- Ecologicalbuildingsystems.com
- Wikipedia

*The front cover of the Garda Commisionar's report*



# Strengths and weakness of my sources

## 1. My Grandparents

Strength- First hand memories that isn't published

Weakness- Memories could be forgotten, biased or inaccurate

Gap- Don't have precise dates

## 2. My Dad

Strength- Filled me in on information that my grandparents didn't tell me

Weakness- Influenced by family stories

Gap- Missing out on other perspectives

## 3. Irish Independent

Strength- Reliable newspaper with dates and facts

Weakness- Information could be biased or inaccurate

Gap- Didn't give details about court

# Strengths and weakness of my sources

## 4. Anglo-Celt

Strength- Local newspaper

Weakness- Biased or inaccurate information

Gap- Limited in the Garda investigation

## 5. The Garda's Commissions report 1971

Strength- Official source

Weakness- Hard to understand since its technical

Gap- Doesn't have any personal stories

## 6. Ecologicalbuildings.com

Strength- Historical context about the building

Weakness- Inaccurate information

Gap- Didn't have a photo of inside the bank in 197

## 7. Wikipedia

Strength- Good for background information

Weakness- Inaccurate

Gap- Didn't have any original information about the robbery

# Reflection

## 1. New information found

During this project I've learned a lot about the Edgeworthstown bank robbery in 1971 and the Troubles in general. I discovered that there was 30 robberies with firearms and other serious robberies in 1971 to fund paramilitary groups such as the IRA.

## 2. Difficulties I encountered

A major difficulty I had when I was trying to research my project was trying to read the newspaper articles from "The Irish Independent" and the "Anglo-Celt". I found the text small and a bit blurry due to the newspapers being from the 1970s. It was also hard to complete this project with my personal life because I have extra curricular activities most evening.

## 3. How I overcame my challenges

I had to get my friends and my teacher to help me read the articles. I also tried downloading the articles to see if they would be easier to read. In order to get my project done in time I had to leave a few evenings free the week before my project was due.

# Reflection

## 4. Areas I would like to pursue in the future

In the future I would like to learn more about the Irish history especially the different perspectives on the Troubles such as the different paramilitary groups. As well as that I would like to research and see if the media influenced anyone's prospective of the Troubles.

## 5. New skills/ skills I improved from this project

By doing this project I've improved my research skills by learning how to use different primary and secondary sources. As well as that I've developed my research and writing skills further and this will be very useful for when I have to do my Leaving Cert projects.