

History of the Gresham Hotel

(extracted and abbreviated from Mac Con Iomaire: [*The Emergence, Development and Influence of French Haute Cuisine on Public Dining in Dublin Restaurants 1900-2000: An Oral History*](#): Doctoral thesis, 2009)

Thomas Gresham founded Gresham's Hotel, as it was called, in 1817. After the opening of Carlisle Bridge in 1794, Sackville Street, Rutland Square (Parnell Square) and Britain Street Great (Parnell Street) became the hub of fashionable Dublin replacing Capel Street in prominence both in business and socially. Gresham wanted to build an establishment which would act as an acceptable alternative to the town house, with spacious drawing rooms, elegant staircases and large fires burning in all rooms, day and night. Gresham's 'commercial town house' became a fashionable place for families visiting Dublin. In style it was not unlike the town houses, which these families formerly owned in the city (pre Act of Union) and now acquired in London. Gresham remained in control of Gresham's Hotel for 48 years until 1865, when he sold it to a new company who changed the name to 'The Gresham Hotel'.

The new owners were a group of Cork businessmen and they invested in further refurbishment and a massive rebuilding programme that saw the frontages of the three Georgian houses unified under a single elegant façade. Although a number of books were published on the Gresham detailing information of staffing and menus during the nineteenth century were destroyed along with the hotel archives when the building was burned to the ground during the 1922 Civil War.

The Gresham was re-built and re-opened in 1927 following its destruction in 1922. Little is known about the Gresham during this early period. An advertisement for the hotel in 1932 boasts of '*central heating, hot and cold water and telephone in every bedroom, private suites, spacious rooms for private dinner and wedding parties*'. It also noted that the Gresham's Ballroom could accommodate 600 for dancing and a Banqueting Hall to seat 800, moderate terms, every modern convenience and that there was an '*orchestra during tea hour every afternoon in the Winter Garden from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.*'. Another advertisement noted that some bedrooms had private bathrooms '*in accordance with the latest American ideals*'. Miss Kate Mullen was the manageress and Carl Opperman was the head chef from 1927 until 1940. In 1938, Arthur and May Healy were married and had thirty four people to the wedding breakfast in the Gresham Hotel. The fare included Grapefruit, Fillets of Sole, Roast Spring Chicken and Limerick Ham, Chips – Stuffed Tomatoes, Sherry Trifles –Fruit Jelly, *Charlotte Russe*, Dessert, Tea, Coffee.

For a brief period in early 1940, Bernard Tennant became manager of The Gresham before moving on to the Four Courts Hotel, where coincidentally his successor, Toddy O' Sullivan was manager for a short time, as '*he waited to achieve his main objective "manager of The Gresham"*'. Timothy 'Toddy' O' Sullivan, who had worked in various hotel positions in England and had been manager of the Rock Hotel in Gibraltar until the outbreak of the war, was appointed as the new manager of The Gresham on the 1st July 1940. O'Sullivan employed Karl Uhlemann as head chef, who brought his *sous chef* from the Regal Rooms, Michael McManus, with him. O' Sullivan soon became an expert on the 'black market' as he travelled the country purchasing bottles of spirits, butter, and chests of tea from publicans and shopkeepers. When the *Daily Express* in Britain published one of the Gresham's extensive *à la carte* menus on their front page to illustrate how neutral Ireland was not suffering from the effects of war, it unintentionally increased the numbers of off-duty servicemen who dined at the Gresham. At this stage, the Gresham was so famous that that Eleanor Roosevelt turned up unexpectedly with an entourage of ten airmen. It is interesting to note that Gresham menus were written in English with some menu French, which may have been deliberate policy by O'Sullivan targeted towards American customers. O'Sullivan embarked on the building of several extensions soon after the war. His period in charge of the Gresham, has been seen as a 'golden age'.

The Irish Hotelier (July 1949) carried a special report on the Gresham Hotel noting that although it was re-built in 1926, '*the go-ahead directorate of Dublin's seven-story Gresham Hotel has followed a policy of continuous improvement*'. The manager for over eight years is listed as Timothy O'Sullivan who had previously managed The Rock Hotel, Gibraltar, and the assistant manager was Philip G. Bennett, formerly of the Piccadilly, Hyde Park, and the Savoy Hotels, London.

The article noted that the hotel had been refurbished, with a grill room (seating one hundred and fifty) in the basement. It also noted that the Gresham ran a special four to five year course in hotel management where trainees spent three months in each department of the kitchen before spending six months as kitchen clerk. O'Sullivan was appointed as a director of the Gresham Hotel Ltd on 31 August 1945, and embarked on a programme of modernisation and expansion. Anticipating a post-war tourist boom, he consciously targeted American tourists.

Karl Uhlemann became head chef of the Gresham Hotel in 1940. Born in Alsace-Lorraine, Uhlemann spent fifty six years working in kitchens on the Continent, in Britain and in Ireland. He had been captured during the First World War and imprisoned in Oldcastle, County Meath. He married a girl from Oldcastle and never returned to Germany. He was governor of the order of merit of the International Academy of *Chefs de Cuisine* in London.

In the preface of *Uhlemann's Chef's Companion*, published in 1953, Conil pays homage to Uhlemann: 'He who works with his hands is a labourer; he who works with his hand and his head is a craftsman; he who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist. Karl Uhlemann is an artist in the true sense: he has devoted all his life to impart knowledge to youngsters, he has produced Irish chefs of outstanding abilities, who now will soon take over in the same tradition as he has done' (Uhlemann 1953). Uhlemann must have been in his late 50s when he joined the Gresham and many of his apprentices recall him directing operations from a high stool near the hotplate in the kitchen. The Gresham Hotel kitchen brigade, apart from Uhlemann, were Irish.

The Gresham was consistently listed by Egon Ronay as one of the most luxurious hotels in Dublin but was only awarded a one star rating for its food once, in the 1963 guide. By the late 1960s it was losing its position as a leading gastronomic hotel. It is interesting to note that the menu for the Gresham in 1956, although French in structure, is written mostly in English or in what was considered at the time 'Franglais' – a mixture of French and English. A feature common to menus during this time was the popularity of Rump, Point and Porterhouse Steaks. The invitation to 'inspect our all stainless steel, air conditioned kitchens where you can observe the preparation of meals under ideal conditions' may also have been directed at American guests who were noted to be more concerned about health and hygiene than European diners.

The Gresham became part of the Ryan Hotel Group in the early 1970s. Improvements in the quality of food served in the Gresham post 1977 were not noted by either the *Egon Ronay* or *Michelin* guides. Oral evidence from the time suggests that management found it difficult to implement changes and increase productivity in the highly unionised environment of the Gresham Hotel. The Gresham continues to operate as a four star hotel in the centre of Dublin City up to the present day.