

100 YEARS OF SERVICE

ONE hundred years ago St. John's Hospital began the second phase of its existence when it was taken over by a new board of governors, under the chairmanship of Bishop Edward O'Dwyer, and the arrival of the Little Company of Mary who took over the nursing administration. The hospital has already been in existence since 1780.

The hospital came into being when Lady Harstonage (see p. 7) a very charitable and benevolent woman, responded to the needs of the sick and destitute in Limerick city in 1780. Poverty, poor living conditions and lack of hygiene caused an epidemic of fever in the city (cholera, typhus and typhoid were common).

She was instrumental in procuring the old Guard House (associated with the famous Sarsfield) and with subscriptions from city merchants and other notable families, the building was renovated and opened for patients on February 23, 1781. This was the first 'fever hospital' in Great Britain; the London hospital opened in 1803.

Lady Harstonage, we are told, visited the 'innates', underwritten by the deeded disease and continued her personal interest until her death in 1793.

By 1786 a new building (cost £500) was erected 'on the foundation of the old city wall, in an elevated healthy position, on a three-acre site, architect James Williams'. Sir Henry Harstonage (husband of Lady H.), being a member of Parliament, was responsible for obtaining a grant from Parliament for the hospital. The staff consisted of two visiting physicians, Dr. Hassett and Dr. Crump. (The latter contracted typhus fever from a patient and died in 1798). There was also a visiting apothecary, a matron-housekeeper, and some 150 women known as nurse tenders. A section of the building was kept for the victims of venereal disease.

From 1800-1802 the progress of fever assumed alarming proportions and the next big epidemic came again in the years 1817-1819. Dr. Geary, who had now joined the staff, published a booklet in 1820 entitled 'A medical report on the nature and progress of fever in this district', the 'district' referred to being the 'fever ward' at Englishtown and Lishowna. It is grim reading and he refers to the social injustice and inequalities of that time. This helped to stir the consciences of the more fortunate citizens. An appeal was launched for funds for the hospital. A wooden building in the grounds was erected capable of holding 30 patients. The main building has 78 beds but the number of patients fluctuated with demand. During 1817-1818 the records show the number averaged 180 and went as high as 191. The dead were carried away in carts for burial. Whole families were found huddled together in their hovels.

In 1832 the virulent cholera epidemic which 'swept across Europe' reached Limerick. It lasted two years. The Mayor at the time, Mr. Vereker, formed a health committee, consisting of twenty citizens. Health officers were appointed in each parish and temporary 'hospitals' were opened for cholera victims. Barrington's Hospital also made provision for the admission of fever patients during this period. The health officers appear to have been meticulous in keeping records. We quote: "Every attention that could be paid to human beings was given by the physicians, apothecaries, staff and clergymen, each vying with each other in performing the corporal works of mercy," and noted "the hospital was plentifully supplied with good prime beef, bread, tea, milk, whey, white and brandy."

During the famine years of the 1840's thousands died of sickness and starvation. In 1845/46 the number of patients admitted to St. John's was 5,228. During the thirty years which followed the number of fever patients coming to the hospital steadily declined. This was mainly due to improved sanitation, more employment, better housing.

In October 1877 Bishop Edward O'Dwyer received a letter from the Board of Management of St. John's Hospital asking him to become a member of the Board of Governors "with a view to resuscitating the hospital and making it more useful." The Bishop and others donated some finance which was spent on badly needed repairs. Within the hospital there

remained the remnants of furniture and bedding from former days which no doubt harboured infection from the thousands of suffering humanity who passed through it's doors.

Bishop O'Dwyer was searching for some nursing Sisters for the hospital, Divine Providence arranged this way, Count Arthur Moore, M.P., of Moorefort, Tipperary, was in Rome with his wife and daughter when she became very ill with enteric fever. She was nursed back to health by two Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, Sisters Catherine and Michaela Count Moore, great-niece to God and His Blessed Mother and the devoted care of the Sisters, made a resolution to do everything in his power to bring these Sisters to Ireland. His first request met with refusal. His first request met with refusal. His first request met with refusal.

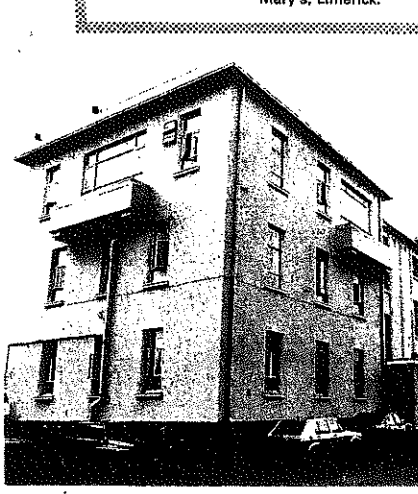
It was in July 1888 that the local people noticed great activity around the hospital. Word had got around that Nuns were coming but they were unaccustomed to seeing Sisters in white gowns and blue veils. A story is told of a woman coming out from Mass in the Cathedral who spread the news that she had seen a vision of Our Lady at one of the hospital windows! She was not aware that the Sisters were busy inside cleaning up after the workmen and getting rid of the debris. The Bishop had hoped to have at least the living accommodation ready for the Sisters when they arrived about the first week in July, but the progress was slow and he arranged for the first two Sisters to stay at St. Mary's Convent, where they received a warm welcome. These were Sisters Edward Hitchcock and Mother Veronica Dowling who became the first matron. Sisters de Montfort Fox and Clare Mullins arrived next day in time for the opening ceremony on the 18th. The first Mass in the hospital chapel was celebrated by the Adm. of St. John's Cathedral, Rev. Fr. Higgins. What a daunting task lay ahead for these young Sisters in their strange environment. Despite all the renovations, the records tell us that the building was damp, sanitary arrangements were unsatisfactory, the water was contaminated, gas light poor. Fires had to be kept going to heat the place. There was a long uphill struggle sustained only by their faith and dedication. They set about establishing a standard of cleanliness and disinfectants were used to help control and prevent infection. The 'art and science' of nursing was introduced and the methods promoted by Florence Nightingale were taught.

One wing of the hospital was allocated for fever patients and the remaining beds allocated for surgical and medical patients. The records tell us that the following medical staff were in attendance: Dr. P. F. Graham, M.D., Dr. McGrath, F.R.C.S.I., and Dr. John Holmes. In 1889 the first patient on the register was Fr. C.C., of Bruff, admitted under Dr. Holmes with a fractured leg.

In 1905 Dr. J. F. Devane joined the staff and with his expertise major surgery of all kinds was performed. There were many 'emergencies' and travelling conditions were difficult. He records in his book trips to Co. Kerry taking a theatre Sister with him to perform operations on patients with 'acute abdomen' on an improvised operating table in the kitchen, and they survived too. He was instrumental in having all the fever patients treated at the City Fever Hospital. Even though patients and nurses were confined to the fever wards the stigma remained and some patients expressed their fears of contracting the fever when being admitted for other ailments. During this period Mother Ambrose O'Donnell was matron and initiated many changes. She later became Mother General of the Congregation.

One of the 'ingredients' the dedicated doctors and Sisters needed to improve the facilities and cater for the increasing volume of patients was finance! In the 1890's the financial situation was so bad that an item from the records 'best illustrates' it: "an application from the nuns for a coffin for a patient who had died was refused." In 1893 the Sisters were increased to six. The demands were increasing, so were the debts. By 1897 Bishop O'Dwyer suggested that the Sisters should withdraw and wrote accordingly to the foundation in Nottingham. She quickly replied that the Sisters should not be blamed for the financial difficulties. She sent over another Sister — Mother Catherine, who became matron.

Source material for this article: 'A History of St. John's Hospital' by the late Dr. J. F. Devane, 'A Vision of Hope' by Sr. Geraldine Fitzgerald, L.C.M. Document compiled by late Dr. John G. Holmes. Archives of Sisters of Mercy, St. Mary's, Limerick.



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The centenary celebrations are a national event, and plans will be coming from Mount Carmel in Dublin, from Fermoy and from Milford House.

They will be honouring the original founders of the Order in Ireland who took over the care of the sick and dying in the old St. John's fever hospital in 1888.

And after the closure of Barrington's hospital, they will also be opening a new chapter in the history of the hospital, which is now gearing itself to meet greater demands than ever.

A new chapter about to commence

NO ONE was prepared for the severe financial cutbacks which ensued and the subsequent closure of Barrington's Hospital, whose doors were always open to the sick people of Limerick and surrounding areas for 130 years.

St. John's Hospital today continues to provide a comprehensive medical and nursing service, catering for the needs of people from Limerick and the surrounding areas. The hospital has 60% of which are for public patients. This includes a 10-bed day care unit, the opening of which has been delayed awaiting funding for equipment from the Department of Health.

In April of this year a new Out-Patients' Department was opened, funded by the Department of Health at a cost of £150,000. The unit includes a full accident and emergency department and consultant staffed out-patients clinics. Over 100 people are treated in the accident and emergency department daily and up to another 100 are seen at clinics.

Approximately 90% of patients who attend at these clinics are medical card holders and therefore free of charge. Patients who do not have a medical card are liable for a single £10 Government charge which covers them for the complete range of hospital out-patient services in relation to a particular ailment.

Further developments due to take place at the hospital include expansion of the Gastro-Enterology Unit and Cardiac Assessment Unit, both to be available for intern and extern patients.

Now the Barrington's staff with the expertise and experience, particularly in accident and emergency, continue to give their services to patients in their new environment. St. John's staff welcome them.

The long talked about merger of the two hospitals has come about in an unexpected way. A new chapter in the history of St. John's is about to commence.

Frank Patterson concert

Frank Patterson, the tenor, will host a gala concert, with his guests, at the Limerick Inn on Friday, August 26th, at 8 p.m., in aid of Follo Fellowship/Rehab. Details were announced at a press reception, yesterday evening, at the hotel.



ERA OF SPECIALISATION COMES TO ST. JOHN'S

BY 1950 a new extension was added to the hospital increasing the bed complement to 100. This included new operating theatres, pathological and bio-chemical laboratory and administrative area. The Limerick Blood Transfusion Service now moved to the old block near the gate and had its own medical director and staff. The era of specialisation had begun. The hospital had a full range of specialists and it must be recorded that they gave their services to patients at Out-Patients' Clinics long before the Department of Health recognised them. Many newborn babies were saved by exchange blood transfusions. A central sterile supply unit was set up.

From 1925 to 1938 St. John's was affiliated to the Mercy Hospital in Cork and students spent some time there. By 1939 St. John's was in a position to satisfy the Irish Nursing Board of that time. Mother Berchmans was matron during this period. In 1947 Sister Mildred O'Sullivan received the Sister Tutors Diploma at

London University. She took over the training school and was principal tutor until her retirement over a year ago. Some Sisters specialised in other areas: theatre, physiotherapy, radiography, laboratory, administration, etc.

The rapidly expanding health services in Ireland put a severe strain on Local and Central Government Finances. Where formerly the Voluntary Hospitals' finances were supplemented by the Hospital Sweepstake Funds, gradually the Department of Health took control and allocated funds to meet the hospital deficit from central funds. The hospital needed funds badly for new diagnostic equipment. A group of people, including some staff, set up a fund raising committee which included the existing volunteers, and became known as The Friends of St. John's. Their sustained efforts over the years generated finance for new equipment for existing departments and enabled new units to get started.

In the early 1980's the long sought permission and finance was allocated by the D. of H. to modernise the kitchen and catering area. To comply with D. of H. regulations and Fire Prevention Regulations, the Management Committee set about the task of having a feasibility study carried out exploring the possibilities and alternatives necessary to modernise the whole building. After long negotiations with frequent changing of health ministers, the D. of H. finally approved the plans. The work was to be completed in three stages. The third one, a new building to accommodate out-patients, extension to X-Ray department and clinics was postponed. The Department of Health at that time sanctioned the remainder and allocated the finance.

Part of the old convent was converted into a new 20 bed ward unit with ancillary services but the D. of H. refused finance for equipment and staffing. It now accommodates the gastro-enterology unit and cardiac assessment unit.



Limerick-born Dublin-based press photographer Eamonn Gilligan pictured with his friend of 24 years, world famous tenor Luciano Favaretto at dinner in the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin.

A school for the training of nurses begins

In 1897 the Board of Governors decided to accept probationer nurses, the first three were: Mabel Wray from England, Dora Frost from Limerick and Lily Green from Co. Clare. Their photographs are in the hospital records. Lay nurses continued to be trained at St. John's until 1934. From that time onwards a large number of Little Company of Mary Sisters were trained and many of these went to South Africa and Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) to new foundations there. The training school was again re-opened to lay students in 1968.

A Building Fund was set up in 1896 when a bazaar called 'Thomond' was organised. Again in 1903 a second one called 'The Colleen Bawn' was very successful. A copy of the programme still exists. A hand painted poster now hangs in the admission area of the hospital. Bishop O'Dwyer laid the foundation stone for a convent for the Sisters in 1904. This building faces the Cathedral. Extensions were added for the School of Nursing. In the 1960's when the Department of Health finances were slow to be sanctioned the Sisters advanced some of their own finances in order to provide a further extension which included a large lecture hall.

Pilgrimage to Knock

Special ceremonies for the closing of Marian Year will take place on Monday, August 15, at Knock. Buses depart from Knock Shrine Bureau, Bedford Row, Limerick, at 8 a.m. Further details from Bureau.

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