

# Two centuries of care at St John's Hospital

THIS, the city's first hospital, was founded in 1780 by Lady Lucy Hartstonge, wife of Sir Henry Hartstonge, MP, for County Limerick. This remarkable woman, who was a member of the Pery family, was a noble and virtuous lady.

She had much to look forward to in life, enjoying the most select company and the luxuries that her wealth commanded, but her noble nature was stirred by a desire to assist the fever-stricken inhabitants of the festering lanes of the city.

At that time the word 'hospital' meant nothing to most people. Physical injuries and disease were treated, after some fashion or other, in the homes of the sufferers. Surgery was primitive, and few survived the horrors of operations without anaesthetics and antiseptics. But essentially

ferred a most grievous loss. It must indeed be a source of cheering consolation to her pure departed soul that she left the work of her beneficence in such a progressive state of advancement."

As the years rolled by the hospital, which was recognised from the beginning as a treasure beyond price, was being constantly improved and the accommodation extended. These extensions progressed eastwards, from the Guard House, along the old city wall, almost to the site of the famous Black Battery. The most extensive additions date from 1830. The hospital authorities can be proud of their preservation of the Guard House, the inner citidal gate and part of the walls.

From the date of its establishment the sick poor received medicine and advice there, and were visited by various medical officers until January, 1797, when a dispensary was established. The first permanent medical officer was

Academy, for an essay entitled "The Best Means of Providing Employment for the People". This was later published, all 360 pages of it. He later became a member of the Academy.

Dr Grogan succeeded Dr Crump and was regarded a worthy successor. He established convalescent wards in the hospital.

In 1796, the husband of the foundress, and treasurer of the hospital, Sir Henry Hartstonge, died. He was succeeded by another charitable man, Rev Averhill Hill, through whose charity the hospital never wanted, as his purse was never open.

By 1817 fever conditions in the city worsened considerably, and the hospital authorities were hard pushed to meet with the demands for accommodation. The situation was eased somewhat when a Mr Michael Fitzgerald, an architect, made up a temporary building at his own expense.

Two other outstanding doctors associated with the

26 years before. The people and clergy were deeply affected by this discovery, so much so that they had the remains interred in the north transept of the new Cathedral.

In the 1830's and up to the late 1840's, and again in the fifties of that century, when cholera was rampant, there was an average of fifteen funerals a day from the hospital to Killalee Churchyard, a few hundred yards away, and as many more to St Michael's outside Watergate. There was an ambulance service from the hospital even in those trying times, though there were no flashing blue lights or blaring sirens only the clippety-clop of the two attendants who carried the 'cholera cot' - the ambulance - which was a simple box, about six and a half feet long, two feet wide and two feet deep. It had handles on both ends, and was probably heavy and cumbersome.

Compared with conditions to-day the staff worked under appalling dif-

nothing.

Alas! Many of those whose remains rest in Killalee evoke no more respect to-day than when left as prey for starving dogs. The once quiet churchyard, rich in fine memorials and ringed by mature poplars, stood on a gentle eminence overlooking the plain of Singland. It is not a dump, without grave markers or poplar trees; completely enveloped in a housing complex since the 1930's with nothing to identify with the last resting place of past generations - devilish desecration carried out thoroughly by Limerick "Christians".

A short time after the founding of the hospital, and when an effective routine was established, provision was made for the reception of women suffering from venereal disease, a highly prevalent and dreadful malady for which there was no cure. The institution then became known as the "Fever and Lock Hospital". A Lock Hospital was one in which the patients were

household words throughout the diocese (at a time when such thoughts meant eternal damnation), he wrote to the foundress ordering her to remove the matron, Mother Veronica (Dowling), from the hospital. The matron, who had a flawless and blameless record, had to leave, amid tears and lamentations, for the Order's establishment in the United States. Six years later the bishop ordered the sisters out of his diocese. He wrote the following letter to the Mother Foundress in Rome "I regret to inform you that the time has come when we must contemplate the withdrawal of your sisters from Limerick. St John's Hospital, while under their care, has not been a success. It is not already drifting into debt at such a rate that the Governors may find themselves compelled to close it. I think it would be wiser if you take the first step in the matter rather than await the action of the Governors (of which he was the Chairman!).

The Mother foundress was so shocked at this inexplicable order from the Bishop that she sent a senior sister form Nottingham to plead with him. During a confrontation with this sister, who grovelled at his feet, the Bishop offered no reason for his attitude. The sister pointed out that the sisters, who were paid a miserable ten shillings for an eighty hour week, had nothing to do with the finances of the hospital, and only a few years before the Governors had refused to pay for conf-



## My Limerick



A weekly series by KEVIN HANNAN

the hospital dealt with fever cases, mainly cholera and typhus, dread scourges of which there was little knowledge and even less means of successful treatment. In 1781 an act of Parliament was passed in sustinment of the institution.

Lady Hartstonge was a brave woman; to say that she was charitable would be a gross understatement. At her own expense she fitted out the old guard house of the citidal with a few beds and with whatever essentials were available at the time. In due course her example excited the sympathy of her wealthy and influential friends who subscribed so handsomely to the establishment that considerable improvements and extensions were made.

Lady Hartstonge laboured at the hospital until her death in 1793. The following tribute was paid to her by the medical staff of the hospital at the time.

"Lady Hartstonge was one whose life was a continuous stream of benevolence, who days were spent visiting the wretched habitations of the afflicted poor and administering solace to them. She was resolved on bringing fever under one roof so as to lay the groundwork of an institution which, by confining contagion within its precincts, has preserved thousands from disease and death. The benevolent example of this good woman, this angel of charity, has had a most salutary influence. In her death the hospital has suf-

Dr Hassett.

Can you imagine a hospital to-day without nurses? In the early 1800's trained nurses were unknown, though young women slaved for long hours as ward attendants, risking their lives among fever-stricken patients. Many of them died attending to their duties. Of course this was a time when women had no rights - when they did not matter!

The great Dr Sylvester O'Halloran was a visiting surgeon to the hospital until 1806, the year before his death. Also visiting the hospital at that time was Dr Patrick Unthank, who was regarded to be eccentric but very good at his job. Perhaps the first real tragedy in which the hospital figured was the death, in 1796, of Dr Samuel Crump, at the early age of 29. This most promising young doctor contracted typhus while attending a patient at the hospital. The following death notice appeared in the Limerick Chronicle at the time "The public have to lament a man whose information, whose judgement, whose accuracy of information, whose penetrating and inquisitive mind and whose rising extend of practice promised considerable improvements in the important branch of science; and whose writings would probably have produced solid advantage to the world, even beyond the sphere of his profession".

Dr Crump was a prolific writer, and won a prize, in 1793, from the Royal Irish

hospital in the early years were Dr John Geary, and his son, Dr William John Geary. The father John Geary, was senior physician to St John's for the greater part of his life. In 1819 he wrote a historical report on "The Nature and Progress of Fever in the District". This book was dedicated to Rt Revd Charles Graves (1866-96), Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick (his son wrote "Father O'Flynn"). In the dedication he quoted the old story of the Indian philosopher being asked "from what source he derived his knowledge; and his reply "From the blind, who never place their feet until they have tried the firmness of the soil". He continues "I observed before I reasoned, and I reasoned before I wrote."

This book was published by William McKern, at the "Sun Office", Rutland Street in 1820. Fortunately there is a copy in our museum.

William John Geary, also laboured in the hospital throughout his life and, like his father, was a fine scholar.

Another outstanding here associated with the hospital was Fr Fitzgibbon, of St John's, "who died a martyr of charity while attending to his duties among his parishioners stricken by the dreadful cholera visitation of 1837". When demolishing the old parish church of St John's in the 1860's his coffin and remains were found to be in the same condition as when interred

facilities. The accommodation was limited and the numbers suing for assistance were beyond counting. Corpses were piled up each day in the "Dead House", and the whole place savoured more of death and despair than life and hope. In the Summer of 1849 the "Limerick Chronicle" published an account of two boys who were "bringing ten corpses a day to Killalee graveyard and as they were unable to bury them the dogs were devouring the bodies. Some of the animals were killed by their owners, while others were seen taking large piece of human flesh across the country. "But the poor starving dogs were not the only culprits. The same paper records: "Constable Nash arrested, in the Irishtown, a woman named Mary Touhy in the act of selling 1 cwt of human bones which she had removed from the burial ground of Killalee, outside Clare Street. The miscreant had also a quantity of shrouding and caps worn by the dead". We do not know the penalty paid by this wretched woman, but we do know that she was not the only human exploiter of the ancient burial place. The Church of Ireland Rector of St Patrick's was quick to seize on his chance of cashing in on the unprecedented demand for the consecrated earth of Killalee, for he increased the burial fees from one shilling to two shillings at a time when the people were in a state of terror and distress, and had

locked in, and usually applied to places where venereal and other such diseases were treated.

The nursing sisters of the Little Company of Mary were introduced in 1888, and their exacting standards measured up well to those established during the past century, though the efficiency of their special training made great improvements in the running of the hospital. The introduction of this renowned nursing order came about as a result of the benevolence of Count Arthur Moore, of Mooresfort, Co Tipperary. This gentleman was holidaying on the continent in the mid eighteen eighties, when his wife took seriously ill. She was nursed back to health by two sisters of the Little Company of Mary. Elated at his wife's recovery, and in thanksgiving, the Count resolved to establish the "Blue Nuns" in his native Tipperary, but a place could not be found for them there, however, Moore highly recommended them to the Bishop of Limerick, who graciously allowed them to work themselves almost to death in the hospital, which was in disarray for some years before they took it over in 1888.

Despite the great record of the sisters in St Johns they failed to conciliate the regard of the Bishop Dr E T O'Dwyer, who from the beginning, seems to have harboured as animosity towards them. In 1891, when his arrogance and pomposity were already

fin for a dead sister. The Bishop grudgingly and uncharacteristically, relented, and in the following year, as if to re-assert himself, expelled the Christian Brothers from Bruff without giving a reason, pretending at first that he knew nothing about the matter!

To-day the hospital is flourishing, and providing an excellent service, the value of which can hardly be measured. Thank God, the Blue Nuns are still there, with no fear of eviction from the present Chairman of the Board of Governors!

Local historians and antiquarians will be forever grateful to the former Matron, Sister Mary Hassett, for her practical interest in the preservation of the old city fortifications. A few years ago she drew the attention of the writer to the dangerous condition of the inner citidal gate. Steps were immediately taken by the Civic Trust to carry out the necessary repairs. At that time Mr Paddy Hoare who has done so much to rehabilitate the whole John's Gate area, employed a skilled mason who also repointed the guardhouse and shored up the badly eroded section of city wall abutting it.

### APPLICATION TO PLANNING AUTHORITY

I, John Foley, 65 Rosturra Crescent, Woodview Park, Limerick, wish to apply to Limerick Corporation for planning permission to retain garage and kitchen extension at above address. (115/1062)