
The House of Industry

by Paddy Lysaght



The foundation stone of the House of Industry, laid in 1774.

The building now known as the Strand Barracks, used since the mid-thirties by the Limerick Corporation as its main depot and stores, has a long and interesting history. A study of this history tells us much about social conditions in Limerick since the date of its foundation as far back as 1774 as the House of Industry, to its closure some time after 1842 when the first Union Workhouse for Limerick was opened for the reception of the poor.

Facing page 223 of Ferrar's *History of Limerick*, 1787, is a line engraving of the House of Industry. Its frontage is impressive and well proportioned, with two blind windows or niches and a neat doorway in the lower story. The second storey contains eleven windows. The outward facade of the building is still extant but it has been vandalised by the breaking down of the original doorway so as to enlarge it for the passage of large vehicles, and the building work above this enlarged doorway can only be described as an eye-sore — a plastered, white painted wall which has completely destroyed the appearance and line of the cut stone building.

The House of Industry owes its inception to an act passed in the Irish House of Commons in 1772, establishing Poor Houses and Work Houses in every county. As a result of this act, in 1773 the County and City grand juries of Limerick presented £500.00 for the erection of such an establishment in the city, and the Protestant

Bishop Gore granted the land for the building on the North Strand.

On March 10, 1774 the Mayor Joseph Johns, attended by the Corporation, led a procession to the site and laid the first stone. The building was completed in the following year, and, according to Ferrar's contemporary description,

It is light and handsome, forming a large square built in courses, ornamented in front with cut stone; contains 16 large rooms, with an Infirmary at the foot of the garden in the rear of the house, and a number of cells for lunatics, to the latter of which purpose £200.00 were given by the late Dr. E. Smythe of the city of Dublin.

Ferrar then proceeds to eulogise on the benefits the new institution will confer of the city: "What could be better conceived", he writes, "than to support the aged and the feeble poor, to save helpless infants from perishing, to take care of lunatics ... and to make the sturdy vagrant useful to society by his labour?". The building was also used to house "young females who for want of employment might become the victims of profligancy and vice".

It seemed all very meritorious to house the aged poor, deserted children and the rest, but there is an ominous ring about the phrase "making the sturdy vagrant useful to society by his labours". There is even evidence to

suggest that people were often forced into the institution, simply because they were unable to find work outside. The temptation must have been there to recruit sturdy people who could work rather than the aged poor and deserted children. It would appear that young females out of work were also sent to the institution for the strange and illogical reason that they might otherwise fall by the wayside.

For ten or fifteen years after the House of Industry opened it would appear that life was tolerable enough for the inmates. The funds for its support from the grand juries' presentments, plus several donations and subscriptions, were more or less adequate. Ferrar gives the following details of the inmates for the year 1787; aged and infirm 41; poor, able to work, 35; lunatics 12: in all, 88.

The pre-Famine increase in the population of the city inevitably meant an increase in the population of the House of Industry as well. In 1827 we find it contained 450 inmates, who, despite some additions to the original building, were now "crowded to excess, and the yards for exercise encroached on to such a degree, as to contract them beyond what they should be in point of space". And because the adjacent lands were Church property or in private hands, there was no possibility of purchasing further ground for enlarging the institution.

As early as 1801 we find that Rev. Foster Archer, in his capacity as His Majesty's Inspector of Prisons, visited the house and reported:

... The House of Industry, where an inhuman practice prevails of putting chains and heavy logs on vagrants, sick and well, industrious and idle, orderly or riotous. I had those chains removed from the diseased and the industrious and well behaved. This practice of chaining human creatures is very reprehensible. It covers an oppressive system of making the wretched beings pay the Beadle for taking them off.

Shades of Dickens, but it would appear that the beadle he portrayed in his writings never stooped as low as their

counterpart in the House of Industry.

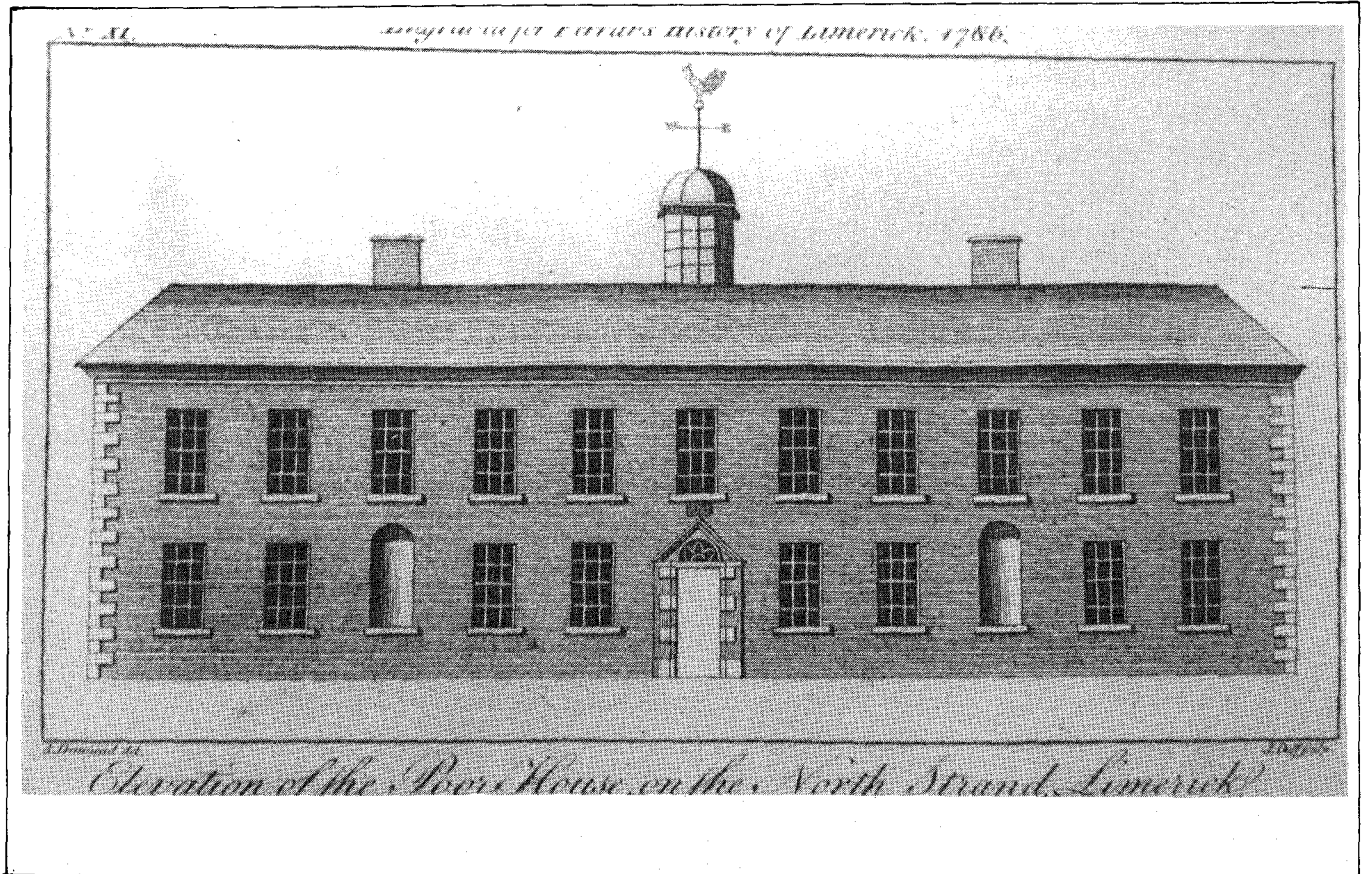
In 1805 Sir John Carr in his *Tour of Ireland* described his visit to Limerick, and he found the House of Industry, "A gloomy abode of mingled want, disease, vice and malady, where lunatics were loaded with heavy chains and fallen women bound and logged".

By 1828 the conditions of the inmates would appear to have improved, if we take the words of Elizabeth Fry, the great prison reformer at their face value. In that year she and her brother visited the house, and in the words of her brother, "Visited this useful institution in company with my sister, Elizabeth Fry, and we are much pleased with it. It appears extremely desirable that the worthy Alderman's Watson's efforts should be yet more extensively supported..." Andrew Watson was, apparently, a consistent worker on behalf of the house.

An 1825 report on the independent schools in Limerick showed that there were two schools, sponsored by the Protestant Kildare Place Society, in the house. Seventy-two girls and seventy-one boys were being educated there.

From a statement of the income and expenditure of the house in 1840 we learn that there were 567 people in the institution. At this date it was over £700.00 in debt and the governors made an appeal to the grand juries to grant "a sum adequate to the support of this excellent charity". But such an amount was not forthcoming. In the previous year, presentments from the city and county, plus donations only came to over £1,200.00 — a pitiful sum when one remembers that there were more than 500 inmates to be cared for. An examination of the income and expenditure of the house for 1839-'40 is so interesting that it is worth giving in full. (See appendix).

Some of the rules of the house bring home the harshness and poverty of the times. At night fall a bell was rung, when all the inmates had to retire to their respective wards, where they were locked up until morning. After a breakfast of porridge and new milk, all the able-bodied went to their respective occupations — weaving, spinning, opening up hair for upholsterers and oakum for ship chandlers. A third of the profit from these

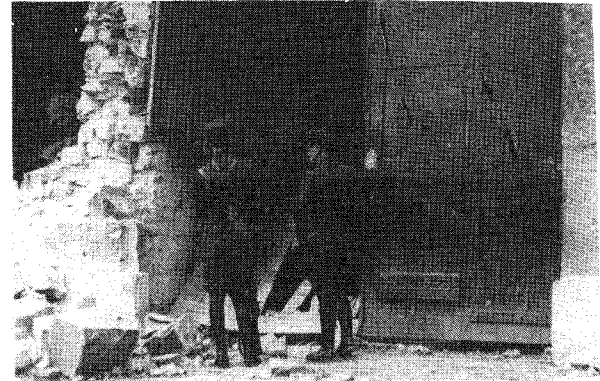


labours was given to the workers, a quarter to the house steward and the remainder to the funds of the institution. Dinner consisted of potatoes and sour milk, meat being seldom available as funds were not sufficient to buy it.

Misconduct was punished by confinement and deprivation of food. It is also worth noting that there was no provision for a resident doctor or clergyman and these functions were performed voluntarily by some charitably disposed doctors and clergymen of both the Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic denominations.

In the same period visits to the house were made by the Sisters of Mercy from St. Mary's Convent. With the transfer of inmates to the Limerick Union, the nuns continued their visitations at that institution.

It can be said that the House of Industry, because of inadequate funds and the increase of population in pre-Famine times never lived up to the high hopes of its founders. For the first few years of its existence donations, coupled with presentments, kept its head above water. Besides, the number of inmates was not great. But, as usually happens, donations gradually declined. Whereas early on it was the thing to do to give donations, interest in the house quickly waned. The gentry returned to their panelled drawing rooms and their hunts and balls, where the poor and their plight were out of sight and very much out of mind.



Civil War damage to the front of the House of Industry in 1922.

The institution was, no doubt, a blessing to some of the poor wretches that found shelter under its roof. They had little choice: either the hell of their filthy and overcrowded garrets, or the lesser evil, the comparative opulence of the House of Industry, where, if they were lucky, they may have escaped chaining and logging, and if the beadle of the time was not too corrupt, the few paltry coppers they earned may not have been given with one hand and taken away with the other.

STATEMENT

OF THE INCOME AND EXPENDITURE OF The House of Industry,

LIMERICK,

FROM 11TH JUNE, 1839, TO 11TH JANUARY, 1840.

INCOME.

	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
City Presentment, granted	492	6	1			
Spring Assizes, 1839,						
Advance on City Presentment granted Summer Assizes, 1839, paid by order of the Chief Remembrancer,	100	0	0			
County Presentment, granted Spring Assizes, 1839	500	0	0			
Re-presentment made by Co. Grand Jury, Spring Assizes, 1839.	100	0	0			
				1192	6	0
DONATIONS.						
From Lord Lieutenant, ..	5	0	0			
D. A. Leahy, Esq. ..	20	0	0			
B. F. Fethard, ..	3	0	0			
Mr. Dawson, ..	1	1	0			
Wm. Dunbar, Esq. ..	1	0	0			
Samuel Wilson, Esq. ..	1	0	0			
Thos. McNamara, Esq. ..	10	0	0			
Miss Maunsell, ..	1	0	0			
Rev. Dr. Townley, ..	1	10	0			
Rev. Thos. McDonnell, Restitution Money, per Captain Kane	4	6	0			
				38	1	1
Received Instalment of Mrs. Banks' Charity ..	17	10	0			
Received Instalment of Mrs. Tuthill's do. ..	2	17	3			
Collected by Alderman Watson, to provide Christmas cheer for Inmates, ..	26	0	6			
Balance due to Alderman Watson, Treasurer, 11th January, 1840, ..	744	7	8			
				£2021	3	6

EXPENDITURE.

	£	s.	d.
Balance due to Treasurer, 11th June, 1839,	288	14	1
Potatoes, ..	£283	4	9
Milk, ..	343	12	4
Oatmeal, ..	442	5	5
Bread, ..	42	19	0
Meat, ..	21	13	0
			1133 14 6
Fuel, from January 1839, ..	236	10	0
Clothing, ..	20	12	9
Straw, ..	15	12	7
Soap, Candles and Salt, ..	65	11	4
Stationary, ..	10	11	9
Plumbing and Glazing for two years, ..	38	17	2
Slating, ..	12	0	0
Painting, ..	6	10	0
Coffins, ..	6	18	8
Printing, Advertising, &c. for two years, ..	16	14	10
Tin Work, ..	7	3	2
Nails, ..	3	19	8
Cooperage, ..	1	15	0
Brooms, Baskets and Brushes, ..	3	7	9
House Steward's Salary, ..	£45	0	0
Surgeon, ditto, ..	25	0	0
Lunatic Keeper, ditto, ..	32	10	0
Housekeeper, ditto, ..	13	17	0
Apothecary, ditto, ..	13	6	8
School-Master, ..	10	0	0
School-Mistress, ..	10	0	0
			149 13 8
Paid Servants on account, ..	2	13	8
			£2021 2 6

Number of persons in the house, 567.

JOHN BASSETT, House Steward.

We have examined the foregoing Account, and compared the different Vouchers, and have found them perfectly fair and correct in every particular, and leaving a balance due of SEVEN HUNDRED and FORTY FOUR POUNDS, SEVEN SHILLINGS, and EIGHT PENCE, to Alderman HENRY WATSON.

Limerick, January 13th, 1840.

POOLE GABBETT,
MICHAEL J. KEATING,
MICHAEL GAVIN.

We, the Governors of the House of Industry, (in consequence of the Institution being so much indebted to Alderman Watson) hope that the Grand Juries will grant a sum adequate to the support of that excellent Charity, as otherwise it will be impossible for it to dispense such benefits, previous to the Poor Law Relief Act coming into operation.

EDMUND LIMERICK,
GEORGE E. MASSY,
WILLIAM HARTIGAN,
WM. WRAY MAUNSELL.