

# BUILDING THE WORKHOUSES

by P. J. Meghen

The old Poor Law system of this country has now passed into history. It has had many critics and there was no doubt that in its earlier years it was a harsh system that left bitter memories in the minds of the Irish people. Nevertheless, I have always been fascinated with the energy and administrative ability of those who established the system here in a few short years after the passing of the Irish Poor Relief Act in 1838. Let me ask the reader to forget for a moment the rights and wrongs of the system and to consider the size of the problem which confronted the Poor Law Commissioners when they set to work in Ireland. The only relief sanctioned by the Act was relief in the workhouse and so the first task was the provision of approximately one hundred large buildings as workhouses. The Poor Law Commissioners found that a legal point prevented them from availing of the services of the Board of Works and its technical officers.

They therefore had to set up their own technical and administrative offices in Dublin. It is interesting to note the energetic way in which this was tackled. The Act had finally passed through the British Parliament in August 1838. The Poor Law Commissioners decided to place one of their members, George Nicholls, in charge of Irish operations. He was given the assistance of four Assistant Commissioners, who had worked on the British scheme, and four Assistant Commissioners were recruited in Dublin. Mr. Nicholls reached Dublin on the 4th September, 1838, and by the 11th September had set up an office in that city. He then dispatched the English Assistant Commissioners to make a quick survey of the four provinces and to see what buildings were likely to be available. On the 9th October, 1838, they were back in Dublin and conferred with the Commissioner and their Irish colleagues, who had taken up duty. From their reports it was obvious that not many existing buildings would become available for workhouses and the decision was taken to employ an architect to prepare plans for new buildings. The Commissioners had experience of a number of architects in England and it was decided to employ one of these, George Wilkinson, at that time practising in Oxford. Wilkinson reached Ireland on the 11th January, 1839, and agreed to take on the work at a salary of £500 per annum. He asked for the appointment of an assistant, "an experienced person of active habits familiar with drawing and possessing a good practical knowledge of building", whom he thought could be obtained for £150 per annum. He also looked for an office clerk or draftsman at a salary of £100 per annum. Thus the technical staff were to cost £750 per annum and when the building of workhouses started, a clerk of works would be needed for each building at a salary of 2 guineas per week. His proposals were agreed to and he started work on 1st February, 1839.

By the time the Commissioners made their first report (1) on their activities in Ireland, that is on the 1st May, 1839, plans had been prepared and approved for several types of workhouses, specifications prepared and advertisements issued for contracts. In all this work, Wilkinson had the benefit of his experience in England but it is obvious that he must have worked really hard to have so much accomplished in four months.

In addition to the preparation of plans and general office work, he had to inspect the sites offered for workhouses. As soon as a union had been formed, an advertisement was inserted in the local papers indicating the amount of land needed. The several offers of sites were reported on by the Assistant Commissioners but the architect was also expected to inspect the sites. Before the 25th March, 1839, the boundaries of 22 unions had been declared. Limerick County had four unions declared and practically the whole county had been dealt with by that date.

In the following year, 25th March, 1840, Wilkinson was able to report (2) that 64 workhouses were under construction and

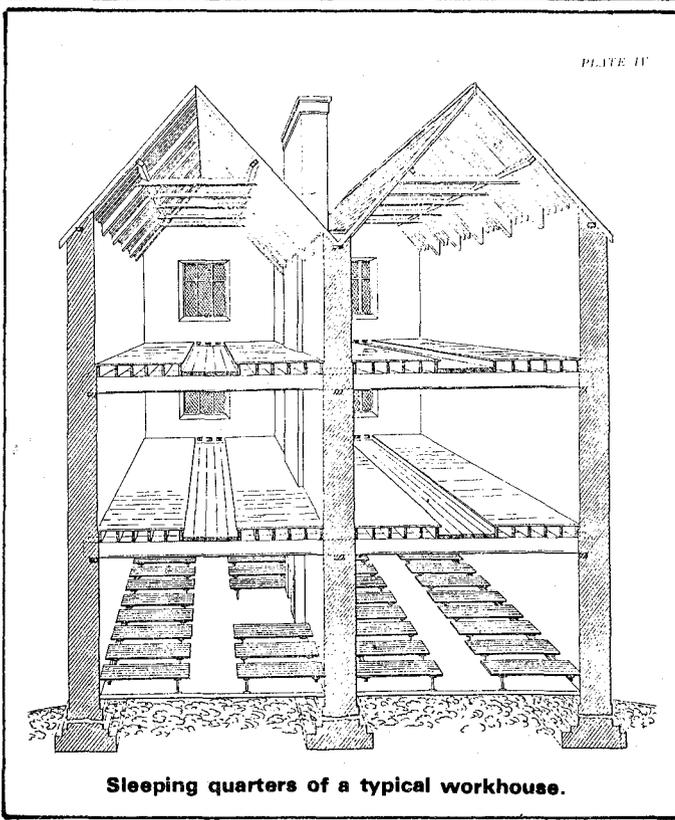


The Limerick Workhouse, circa 1930.

10 were ready for tenders. These were all new buildings except North and South Dublin, Clonmel and Fermoy. In the South Dublin Union use was made of the existing Foundling Hospital in James Street and the House of Industry became the North Dublin Union Workhouse. Wilkinson had to supervise the reconstruction in both of these buildings. He also had to reconstruct a premises at Cork Street to which to remove the remaining inmates of the Foundling Hospital. He also had to do considerable repairs to an old premises at Island Bridge Artillery Barracks, to house the 370 idiots and incurables removed from the House of Industry. In Clonmel, the old barracks was taken over. Elsewhere the buildings were entirely new and on open sites. But before he could get going on these new buildings, a great many old buildings had to be inspected and rejected. This must have absorbed a considerable amount of time.

His report states that Sir Thomas Deane & Co of Cork were contractors for the Limerick, Rathkeale and Newcastle West workhouses and Alexander Deane contracted for Killmallock. Generally 2 years seems to have been allowed for the building of the larger workhouse. In a return given in the 1840 report, the contract for Limerick Workhouse to house 1,600 inmates was for £10,000. The contract was signed in September, 1839, and it was to be finished by June, 1841. The contract for Rathkeale was for £6,686 and as it was a smaller workhouse for 660 inmates, it was to be completed by December, 1840. The terms for Newcastle were much the same while Killmallock contract was for £7,000 to be finished by September, 1840.

The contractors do not seem to have had much difficulty in complying with the terms of the contracts. The Limerick Workhouse was opened on the 18th May, 1841, before the contract time expired; Newcastle West was opened on the 15th May, 1841, and Rathkeale on the 26th March, 1841. These were a little over their time but weather conditions probably accounted for that. It would be interesting to give extracts from the detailed reports that Wilkinson gave to the Commissioners on the difficulties met with during the construction work but only a few points can be mentioned here. The Poor Law Commissioners in their report dated 2nd May, 1842. (3) stated that



Sleeping quarters of a typical workhouse.

"81 of the Workhouses had been declared fit for the reception of the destitute poor. By the end of the approaching summer we expect that at least 100 of the Workhouses will be completed and opened". They draw attention to the difficulties as follows:-

\* The weather in Ireland has been extremely unfavourable for building operations during the past three years, there having been an unusual quantity of rain; and this prevalence of wet weather has necessarily impeded the progress of the buildings and greatly increased the difficulty of superintendence. Even with favourable seasons, it is by no means a light task to superintend and direct extensive buildings, proceeding simultaneously in every part of the country; but with such weather as that of the last three years and with not less than a hundred of these buildings in progress at one time, and all requiring frequent inspection and constant superintendence, the difficulty has been proportionately increased. (4)

The Commissioners also pointed out that the sites which they were compelled to take, "although generally good, have not always been the most favourable for building; and the difficulties attending the transport of materials, and of finding suitable workpeople in some localities, have likewise in several instances served to impede the operations of the contractors." (5) In two instances the Commissioners had to take over from defaulting contractors and their architect had to complete the works under his own supervision, but as the Commissioners point out, "this has necessarily imposed much additional labour upon him". (6)

Wilkinson's work did not finish with the completion of the building because he was called upon to arrange for the supply of fixtures such as boilers, grates, stoves, dressers, water-works, etc., and fittings such as bedsteads, tables and forms. Then he had to deal with the contractors' final accounts and it says much for his energy that he can record in his report (7) dated 30th April, 1842, that of the 81 Unions declared fit for occupation, 56 final accounts had been received and 32 of these were closed satisfactorily and the remaining 24 were in course of examination.

He also gives some details of the drawing department of his office which had at that date completed the contract and work-

ing drawings for all the 130 workhouses. He points out that no less than 5,200 sheets of large drawings had been prepared. On another occasion he deals with the efforts he made to get full information on costs and materials and states:

I have paid particular attention to the collection in a systematic manner of the particulars of the price of local building materials, labour, carriage, customary prices, etc., in all parts of Ireland, from the commencement of the building operations to the present time, together with the particulars of the mode and cost of working the various quarries. I have also made a collection of all the different building stones used in Ireland, in order, in various ways, to test the actual cost of different kinds of works, and the proportionate quantities of the different kinds of materials required for their execution.

The good progress in the erection of the workhouses continued and in April, 1843, Wilkinson could report (8) that out of the 130 workhouses which had been decided on, 112 were completed and 17 others in a forward state. He was kept busy for many years with suggestions for increased accommodation in many of the Unions and of course the Famine years of 1846 and 1847 brought many additional tasks. Temporary buildings had to be provided for fever cases and Wilkinson's plans for these buildings are shown in annual reports. He must have had a tough time supervising the erection of these buildings in the terrible conditions of the time. In April, 1847, he supplied a general report (9) to the Commissioners on the building of the workhouses. By that time all 130 buildings were completed and he indicates that 125 were entirely new buildings and 5 were old buildings reconstructed and enlarged.

Out of all the contractors, only two restored to legal proceedings but even in these Wilkinson's figures were accepted by the courts. He gives the total cost of the 130 workhouses, including purchase of sites, buildings and fixtures, clerks of works and legal expenses as £1,145,800. Accommodation was provided for 93,860 persons at about £12 per person. He felt entitled to claim that "no future works are ever likely to be executed at so low a rate of cost as the new workhouses have been. In offering these remarks, I have carefully examined the prices paid for work in new barracks by the Board of Ordnance, as well as other public buildings. I can also say that up to this time I am not aware of any failure in the works that deserves even mention, or from first to last, of even a settlement in the walls of any of the main buildings of the 130 workhouses that deserves such a name".

The workhouse buildings have been denounced as ugly and the grey stone walls have been compared to prison walls. But Wilkinson had always hoped that conditions would not be so bleak. During the 1847 period, when many able-bodied persons were sheltered in the workhouses, he reported:

It may not be an unimportant matter for me further to remark on the want of greater attention to the workhouse sites of most of the Unions and in the proper cultivation of land, and the arrangement of paths and roadways around the workhouses. In some Unions where individual Guardians have taken an interest in these matters, or where there has been an intelligent and active workhouse master, the ground is well cultivated, the roadways and paths are carefully formed and well covered with broken stones or gravel, the open drains are kept clear, the outer-yard walls are being covered with ivy or other creepers, and neat shrubs, evergreens, or trees contribute to give a cheerful and inviting appearance to the establishment occasioning it, with much advantage to the institutions, to be visited and inspected by the inhabitants of the Union, and a warm interest to be frequently taken by visitors in the welfare of the inmates and the good management of the institution, instead of its being rendered repulsive, as is sometimes the case, by the appearance or neglect of its external features.

However, the pressure of the Famine years caused a neglect

of these aspects and the architect had to concentrate again on providing increased accommodation. In his report in 1848, (10) he indicates how the work grew. Plans were made for enlarging the existing workhouses, for new fever hospitals, for the conversion and equipment of old buildings as auxiliary workhouses. In addition he was constantly called upon to inspect buildings, to advise Boards of Guardians and to report on works in progress. He claimed that "these duties have at times been fully as arduous as those during the almost simultaneous erection of the original poorhouses, attention being from time to time unexpectedly required at places widely distant from each other".

Although the auxiliary workhouses were closed down after the Famine years, a number of new permanent workhouses were constructed between 1849 and 1851. At one time after the Famine the accommodation provided touched nearly 290,000 but the auxiliary buildings were given up and finally 163 permanent workhouses remained giving accommodation for 176,700 people. The task accomplished by Wilkinson and his staff seems to me to be worthy of our admiration. It is well to remember that the work had to be done in the face of tremendous difficulties. When he undertook the task, there were no railways available in Ireland. Passenger travel was by coach or canal-boat. The buildings were all built in masonry and the discovery of suitable quarries and the transport of the stone presented many problems. Many of these buildings are still in use to-day and the solid walls and much of the timber work remain to show us the quality of the work done. The erection of 100 workhouses in less than three years was an achievement which would be difficult to surpass to-day with all the modern inventions and labour-saving appliances to help in the work.

The curtain falls on Wilkinson's official career in 1854 when as a result of an economy campaign, the Poor Law Commissioners closed down its Architect's Department. I believe, however, that his achievements in this country entitle him to an honourable mention in the history of Irish administration.

### THE WORKHOUSE BUILDINGS

The Poor Law Commissioners laid down the standard plans for

the workhouses, and these varied in detail only with the numbers to be accommodated in them. As well as standard plans there were standard forms for advertisements, specifications, contracts, and so on.

The layout of the Limerick building - one of the big ones - gives a good idea of the typical workhouse. In Carlow the guardians asked for a workhouse "to be erected in accordance with the character of the other public buildings in the town" so Wilkinson found time to prepare a plan for a fine building. In other places variations of the standard were also made to give some diversity of appearance. A standard form of layout for the buildings was prepared, and an idea of what the sleeping quarters were like can be gleaned from available plans.

The Commissioners in their 1839 Report said: "The style of building is intended to be of the cheapest description, compatible with durability; and effect is aimed at by harmony of proportion and simplicity of arrangement, all mere decoration being studiously excluded". The buildings were in limestone rubble masonry, and inside were unplastered, but heavily whitewashed. The ground floors were of mortar and clay, being as Wilkinson says in the Seventh Report "less cold than stone, and less liable to decay than wooden floors".

### REFERENCES

- (1). **Fifth Annual Report Poor Law Commissioners, 1839.**
- (2). **Sixth Annual Report Poor Law Commissioners, 1840.**
- (3). **Eighth Annual Report Poor Law Commissioners, Page 2.**
- (4). **Ibid, Page 2.**
- (5). **Ibid, Page 3.**
- (6). **Ibid, Page 7.**
- (7). **Ibid, Page 112.**
- (8). **Ninth Annual Report Poor Law Commissioners, Page 422.**
- (9). **Thirteenth Annual Report Poor Law Commissioners, Page 213.**
- (10). **First Annual Report Poor Law Commissioners, Page 166.**



A Victorian artist's drawing of the starving poor storming a workhouse gate.