Housing and Social Conditions: 1830–1940

by Jim Kemmy

"Let the truth be imagined and it will not be beyond the truth. In at least three-fourths of the hovels which I entered there was no furniture of any description save an iron pot – no table, no chair, no bench, no bedstead; two, three or four little bundles of straw, with perhaps one or two scanty and ragged mats rolled up in the corners unless where these beds were found occupied."

As he penetrated deeper into the labyrinth of lanes, the poverty and wretchedness became worse:

"The inmates were some of them old crooked and diseased; some young but emaciated, and surrounded by starving children; some were sitting on the damp ground, some standing, and many of them were unable to rise from their little straw heaps. In scarcely one hovel could I find even a potato. In one which I entered I noticed a small opening leading into an inner room. I lighted a bit of paper at the embers of a turf which lay in the chimney and looked in. It was a cella about twelve feet square; two bundles of straw lay in two corners; on one sat a bed-ridden woman; on another lay two naked children – literally naked with a torn rag of some kind thrown over them both. But I saw worse even than this. In a cella which I entered, and which was almost quite dark and slippery with damp I found a man sitting on a little sawdust. He was naked; he had not even a shirt. A filthy and ragged mat was round him; this man was a living skeleton; the bones all but protruded through the skin; he was literally starving."

Although the exodus from these stygian confines was tailing off by 1829, Matthew Barrington rejected the idea of building his hospital on a virgin site in Newtown Pery. Instead, he choose a site almost on the boundary between the Irish and English town, overlooking the Abbey River. The middle classes had already vacated George's Quay, and more had gone from Merchant's Quay by the time the hospital was completed in 1831, though some of those in the fine Georgian terrace on Charlotte's Quay were still there in the early 1850s, for we find them complaining of the sight of too many coffins being brought from the hospital's mortuary on George's Quay right in front of their eyes.

The hospital was located where the Barringtons wanted it to be, in the heart of the old city, in the midst of the people it was intended to serve. It was constructed of limestone on a triangular piece of ground which was formerly the main guardhouse, the administrative military headquarters on King's Island. It was bounded on the left by Miltown, a long, narrow thoroughfare that joined the quay with Mary Street, between the present hospital building and St. Mary's bandroom; on the south by the Abbey River and on the west by Mary Street.

Up to the 1830s, the distinctive Dutch...
George (now O'Connell) Street, in the mid-19th century.

Gables of Mary Street were tenanted by the upper classes, but afterwards came into the possession of the ordinary people, the houses being divided by the estate agents into small units, usually comprising of only one apartment in which a whole family would be accommodated: some of the houses provided shelter for up to six and seven families, and often had a tradesman such as a shoemaker or nailor living on the ground floor with his family.

The insanitary lanes, with their open sewers and rows of overcrowded cabins, were the causes of much ill-health, and the Limerick Corporation and local health authority met with little success in tackling the problem of the slums, and were content to allow charitable bodies and the hospitals to deal with the results of the squalor rather than redress the source of the problem. The wretched living conditions of the poor were taken for granted, and few houses were built by the public authorities to alleviate these conditions until well into the present century.

In 1842, eight years after the visit of Henry D. Inglis, another travel-writer arrived in Limerick. William Makepeace Thackeray brought all his descriptive powers into play in his portrait of the place and its people, as powerfully contrasts the quality of the housing in the new and old parts of the city:

"They say there are three towns to make one Limerick; the Irish Town ... the English Town with its old castle ... and finally the district called Newtown-Pery. In walking through this latter tract, you are at first led to believe that you are arrived in a second Liverpool, so tall are the warehouses and broad the quays; so neat and trim a street of near a mile which stretches before you. But even this mile-long street does not, in a few minutes, appear to be so wealthy and prosperous as it shows at first glance; for the population that throng the streets, two-fifths are barefooted women, and two-fifths more ragged men ... After you get out of the Main Street the handsome part of the town is at an end, and you suddenly find yourself in such a labyrinth of busy swarming poverty and squalid commerce as never was seen - no, not in Saint Giles’s where Jew and Irishmen side by side exhibit their genius for dirt. Here every house almost was a half ruin, and swarming with people: in the cellars you looked down and saw a barrel of herrings, which a merchant was dispensing; or a sack of meal, which a poor dirty woman sold to people poorer and dirtier than herself: above was a tinman, or a shoemaker, or other craftsmen, his battered ensign at the door and his small wares peering through the cracked panes of his shop'.

During his visit, Thackeray stayed at 'one of the best inns in Ireland - the large, neat and prosperous one kept by Mr. Cruise'. He singled out the apple-women for special mention, 'clustering upon the bridges, squatting down in doorways and vacant sheds for temporary markets, marching and crying their sour goods in all the crowded lanes of the city'. And the ubiquitous children were to be found on all sides:

"... and a pretty tender sight it is in the midst of this filth and wretchedness, to see the women and children together. It makes a sunshine in a dark place, and somehow half reconciles one to it. Children are everywhere. Look out of the nasty streets into the still more nasty, back lanes: there they are sprawling at every door and court, paddling in every puddle; and in about a fair proportion to every six children an old woman - a very old, blear-eyed ragged woman - who makes believe to sell something out of a basket, and is perpetually calling upon the name of the Lord. For every three ragged old women you will see two ragged men, praying and moaning like the females. And there is no lack of young men, either, though I could never make out what they were about; they loll about the street, chiefly conversing in knots; and in
every street you will be pretty sure to see a recruiting sergeant, with gay ribbons in his cap, loitering about with an eye upon the other loiterers there.'

The general economic decline, the intensive trade competition, the growing unemployment, the rapidly increasing population and the Famine of 1845 brought an economic recession. Commenting on this decline in 1866, the historian Maurice Lenihan observed: 'In 1800 there were 20 tanneries and 1 pawnbroker, but in 1865 there were 20 pawnbrokers and 1 tannery.'

Kevin Hannan has written about the effect of the economic decline on the housing market in the second half of the 19th century:

"After the gentry had gone, many of the fine town houses were turned into tenements. This transformation resulted in their run-down appearance, which was only relieved, here and there, by the various colours of the household washing which festooned the improvised clothes-lines stretched from the upstairs windows -- front and back -- with the assistance of sweeping-brushes set horizontally from the window sills -- Some of the lanes branches from the main streets were approached through small archways... or openings, a little larger than ordinary doorways, which could only be distinguished from the latter by the absence of the actual doors. This system allowed for the continuation of the street line, with an unbroken terrace of houses concealing the less prepossessing labyrinth of lanes and alleys that criss-crossed the back street areas. Even in those far off days, the planners turned the best side out -- an exercise still favoured today'.

An old school register of the 1850s of the Brother Welsh Memorial School in John Street, contains the following place-names from Irishtown area: Scabby Lane, Mass Lane, Scott's Lane, Goat's Lane, Bushy Lane, William's Lane, Monaghan Lane, Ball Alley Lane, Sheehy Lane, Jones's Lane, Garvey's Lane, Moloney Lane, Curry Lane, Hatter's Lane, Barrack Lane, Joss's Lane, Moore's Lane, White Wine Lane, Forker's Lane, Repeal Alley, Pencil's Lane, Purcell's Lane, Magdalen Lane, Town Wall and Black Bull Lane.

In the same register, the trades and occupations of the fathers of the pupils are set out in a copperplate hand. They are worth recalling; rag-gatherers, wheelwrights, thatchers, chandlers, coffin-makers, basket-makers, labourers, fishermen, brass-founders, grave-diggers, fishermen, whip-makers, stage-keepers, dairy-men, cooperers, dyers, tailors, auctioneers, glaziers, weigh-masters, blacksmiths, tinmen, varnishers, stonemasons, nailors, bootmakers, last-makers, millwrights, snuff-grinders, slaters, fiddlers, candle-makers, cagemakers, pavers, lime-burners, pipers, woolcard-makers, bellows-makers, pipe-makers, soldiers, coachmen, car-makers and weavers.

Kevin Hannan has examined the brutal way in which many of the old trades and tradesmen were cast aside in the economic scramble: 'Many of these trades and callings, like those that followed them, are now extinct, and the monies derived from the long and tedious practice of them allowed little or no indulgence in the luxuries of the day. It was a time when the dreadful conditions under which the working classes lived were taken for granted. There were no trade unions as we know them to-day, no dole, no social welfare or unemployment benefits: there was nothing but the poorhouse. The pride of many of the destitute
would not suffer them to accept the
"hospitality" of the "big house across
the bridge": they preferred the slow
death from starvation in their own
hovels'.

The Limerick Public Health Committee
meeting of 22 October 1885 stated that from the 1860s onwards a full
range of recommendations to have
houses all over the Englishtown
and Irishtown 'whitewashed inside
and out'; this treatment, apparently, was the only
known antidote to the spread of
typhus. The buildings on Charlotte's
Quay screened the network of lanes
and bow-ways, which were connected
part of the Irishtown, with its huddled
families surviving in such places as
Palmerstown and Taylor's Row (52);
Osborne Lane and Hall's Bow (52);
James' Street (12); Barrack Lane (13);
lane off Cornwalls Street (13); Bushy
Lane (5); Mulcahy's Alley (8); Guinea
Lane (2); Sheehan's Lane (2); Scott's
Lane (3); West Watergate (6); Flag
Lane (5); Sullivan's Lane (5);
Bellevue Lane (3); Kerwick's Lane
(6); lane off William's Lane (5);
Thomas Court (9);
William's Lane (14); John Street (47);
White Wine Lane (15); Roseberry
Lane (10); Milk Market Place (7); Alley's
Lane (6); Sam Dickson's Lane (17);
Old Francis Street (24) and Reapall
Alley (12): in all 378 families living
without water on tap or a flush
toilet. The same
condition of the streets and lanes of the Limerick is much greater than that which
prevailed in Belfast and Dublin at that time.

James Punch's yard in Cornwallis
Street. The sewers ... are not properly
ventilated. It will be impossible to keep the streets and
laneways clean until each house is
provided with running water, sanitary
conveniences, and the means of
disposing of house slops, etc.'

Thus the high unemployment
and widespread poverty were manifested in
many ways but particularly in housing. In
the last decades of the 19th century and the
first three decades of the present
century, Limerick had one of the worst
housing records in the country. In the years 1887 and 88, the Corporation
built some small clusters of houses in the
Sandmall, Athlunkard Street, Mary
Street, Peter Street and St. Francis
Place, but these schemes had little
impact on the overall housing situation.
Between 1891 and 1911, the number
of houses in the city increased from 5826 to
6,305; of these only 5807 (92%) were
in rooms containing three or more
persons. 16 In 1915, the medical
officer's public health report stated that 1,669,
houses in the city were unfit for human
habitation. A breakdown of this figure
showed that 692 houses were in a
dilapidated state; 977 were 'in want of
ordinary basic sanitary facilities' and 91
'should be absolutely closed'. In
August, 1916, a local priest, Fr. Devane,
told a meeting of the Limerick Trades and
Labour Council that
38% of the local
population lived in
one or two rooms,
as compared to 4% in
Belfast and 8% in
Derry. 17

The 1917 annual
health report stated that 1,812 houses in
the city were 'unfit for human habitation', 852 warrant-
ed no other action
than 'immediate
closure', 635 were
without a water
closet and 245 had
no yard in which to
site such a closet.

The seriousness
of Limerick's housing problem was stressed in
1918 when the Irish Opinion
commented that "... the problem in
Limerick is much greater than that which
Dublin must solve ...", and that at least
£800,000 was needed to begin the
solution. 18 Indeed, in 1917 the Town
Tenants' Association, trade and labour
societies and the Local Authorities
recognised the gravity of the situation and combined, with the backing of the
Trades' Council, to form the Limerick
Housing Committee, 'to agitate for better
housing conditions for the working classes'.

In 1918, the Limerick working class
broadsheet, The Bottom Dog, repeatedly
criticised the poor housing in the city. In
its edition of 11 May, 1918, a writer,
signing himself 'WJL', did not mince his
words, as he invoked stirring Christian
principles to make his case:

'Is there outside Hell anything
approaching the conditions under
which the poor are forced to live in 17
James's Row? What is the
same. Pump Lane, Dixon's Lane,
Heff's Lane, Walshe's Lane, Punch's
Lane, Upper Carey's Road and
Roxboro Road all bereft of sanitary
convenience. Boys, girls, men and
women eat, drink, sleep and wash
in these dens. Rents are squeezed
from the poor of these houses by
owners ... It is against the laws of
God and man to leave these helpless
Limerick Corporation houses for the working classes, at the Sandmall, 1887-'88.'

beings any longer in chains. Put your backs against the walls and shout, shout shout - "Pay no rent! Pay no rent!" Raise the standard of Christ high! Make Limerick ring with your shouting and topple over the edifices of your wrath ... What of the Public Health Act? Has it become inoperative? If an owner fails to put a house in sanitary condition the Corporation must do it. Why, then, is it not done? ... we suggest that the people themselves take the law into their own hands — Pay no rent for houses unfit for human habitation, and keep on paying no rent until approved accommodation is forthcoming. The guts, excreta, dogs and children rolled up in parcels in lanes and alleyways, half of which were 'a stink in the nostrils' because of the lack of sewerage.

The introduction of the Housing Miscellaneous Provisions Act in 1932 provided local authorities for the first time with a state subsidy for the provision of houses for 'the working classes.' After the passing of this Act, a campaign was launched to clear away the insanitary hovels in Limerick, and other cities. During the next eight years, up to 1940, the Limerick Corporation built a total of 942 dwellings. 6, 16

The year 1936, the mid-term of this period, marked an important development in the social and economic history of Limerick. The festerling slums, that had for so long pockmarked the city, were finally tackled, and already the greater part of the Island Field housing estate had been completed. The new scheme, renamed St. Mary's Park, was occupied by people who had previously lived in the ghettos of the Irishtown, Boherbue and the Abbey.

In September of the same year, the local building contractor, Pat Molloy, who had earlier completed 480 houses in the Island Field, at a cost of £450 per house, successfully tendered the sum of £29,823 for 74 extra houses there. The same contractor had just completed the concreting of all the principal streets of the city, with the exception of O'Connell Street, which had already been surfaced by another local contractor, 'Paver' Dillon, six years before. The year 1936 also saw the start of the O'Dwyer's Villas (Thomondgate) and Janesboro housing estates and the large scale housing development at Prospect.

People who lived through this period could not help making the comparison between the fearful conditions of the slums and the sparkling, new dwellings in their airy, spacious locations. But there were many tenants in the Island Field houses for whom the grand vista of the broad sweep of the River Shannon, with its picturesque backdrop of the Clare Hills, held few charms. They dearly longed for their battered but beloved hovels, with all the attendant privations and squallor, where they and their families had lived out their lives. Other new residents complained that they had been moved too far out from the centre of the city, and inveighed against their isolation from their old, familiar haunts.

With the new houses came the freedom from the nocturnal drudgery of emptying even smellier toilet pails and the convenience of the flush toilet. An exciting pleasure, not to mention the novelty of switching on the electric light was an exciting pleasure, not to mention the convenience of the flush toilet. During the next twenty years, the Corporation continued its housing programme, until finally all the slums were demolished. In looking back over the past 160 years, it can, at least, be said that Barrington's Hospital just about managed to outlast the slums that brought it into being.

References
2. Ibid.
3. A Journey Through Ireland, During the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 1834 by Henry D. Inglis, London, 1834.
5. The History of Limerick by Maurice O'Connell Lenihan, Dublin, 1866, p. 529.
6. Unpublished manuscript by Kevin Hannan.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
15. The Bottom Dog, 11 May, 1918.
16. Limerick Chronicle, 7 February, 1918.
18. Ibid.