

Limerick Quakers and Famine Relief

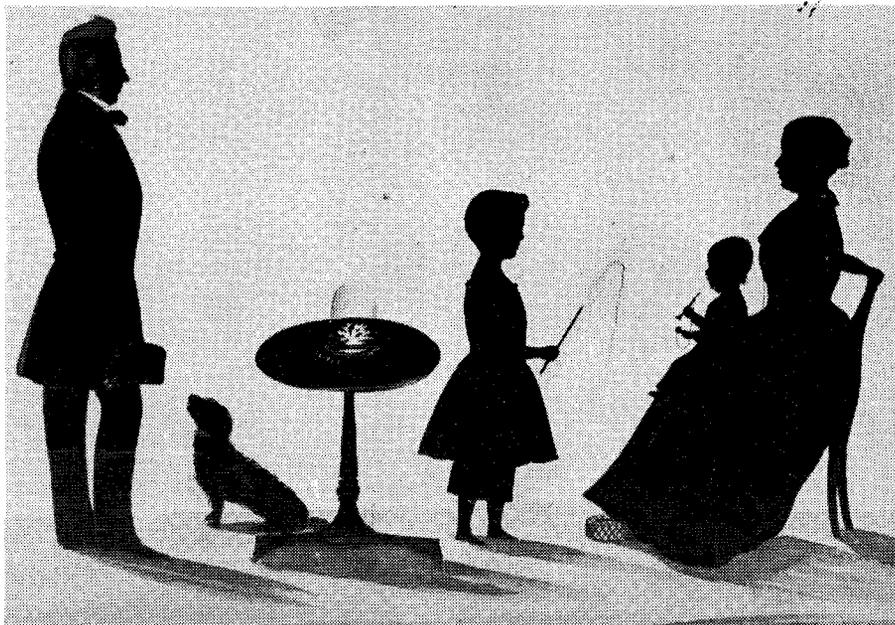
by Rob Goodbody

There have been Quakers in Limerick since almost the first appearance of this Christian denomination in Ireland. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) originated in the north of England in the turmoil of the mid-17th century, and the earliest Quaker meeting in Ireland was established in 1654. In many parts of the country, particularly in urban areas, the Quaker beliefs found adherents, though they were subjected to various persecutions in the early days. Some of this was brought upon themselves, as the first Quakers tended to alienate the authorities in their enthusiasm to make their views heard. In 1655, for instance, four Quakers were expelled through the gates of the city of Limerick as they had repeatedly attempted to speak in the 'public place of worship' - presumably St. Mary's Cathedral.⁽¹⁾

Not long after, this a permanent Quaker community was established in the city and by the mid-19th century there was a significant number of members of the Society of Friends in Limerick. Moreover, they had become upstanding members of the community and no longer attempted to force their message on others - a point which was to become obvious to the people of Ireland during the course of the famine.

It is possible that during the first season after the appearance of the potato blight in the autumn of 1845 some Quakers may have undertaken relief measures. There is little evidence for this, however, as any such efforts would have been on an individual basis and few records would survive. This first season was not a severe one in comparative terms, being no worse than some of the food shortages which had occurred on previous occasions, and, by and large, the relief operations undertaken by the government were sufficient to prevent a major catastrophe.

When the potato failed again in the autumn of 1846, Ireland faced a greater crisis than in the previous year as this time the crops were virtually wiped out and the people had few resources left to fall back on. Very soon after the potato failure occurred, a number of people in Ireland, Britain and elsewhere began to consider means of alleviating the expected distress and amongst these were members of the Society of Friends.



Mid-19th century silhouette of the Fitt family, the Limerick Quaker firm of brewers.

Central Relief Committee

In the autumn of 1846, groups of Quakers gathered together in various parts of Ireland and in London to consider the problem and in all cases they set up committees to provide relief to the suffering. Of these, the principal ones were in Dublin and London, as these looked at relief measures for Ireland as a whole rather than for local areas. The two committees worked closely together and established a sophisticated relief organisation which operated throughout the rest of the famine. By and large, the Central Relief Committee (CRC) in Dublin was responsible for distributing relief, while the London committee raised funds and lobbied the Westminster government, though this division of their functions was often quite blurred.

In order to provide information from around the country to the Dublin-based Central Relief Committee this body was to have a second category of membership, to be known as corresponding members. These were Quakers from outside Dublin who collected information, made contacts locally and kept in contact with the CRC. Two of the corresponding members, John Abell and William Woods, were from Limerick.⁽²⁾

Local committee

In addition to the committees in Dublin and London, members of the Society of

Friends in various towns and cities set up relief committees to help in their own areas and this included a committee in Limerick. In the majority of cases, these local committees would have established soup kitchens as the most effective way of distributing food to the hungry and this form of relief was offered by Quakers from the end of 1846 into the middle of 1847. This was a critical period of the famine when not only were potatoes in short supply, but many other foods had suffered poor harvests throughout Europe, including grain crops, and on top of all of this the winter was one of the most severe of the 19th century.

In Limerick, the relief committee established by the Society of Friends appointed twenty-four members of the Society to investigate the extent of the problem in the city by visiting families which were thought to need assistance. This was organised by dividing the city into four districts and allocating each district to a sub-group of the visiting committee. At the same time they began the process of setting up a soup kitchen, and this opened its doors at the end of December, 1846.⁽³⁾ The visiting committee was allocated some six hundred tickets per day for distribution among the families they visited and found to be in need of food.⁽⁴⁾

Within a little more than a month the visiting committee had made contact with 163 families, consisting of 774 individuals, though they were aware that this was but a small proportion of the total number of

Limerick soup kitchen

Information obtained by the Relief Committee of the Society of Friends, Limerick, relative to Curing Fish, so successfully practised in the County Waterford.

METHOD OF CURING HADDOCK

At Ring, Helvick, near Dungarvan.

DUBLIN Y.M.
HISTORICAL
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Box 1 (42) 75

Open and clean the fish carefully, cut off the head, immerse them in *fish* of water, and wash away all impurities. Then take and split the fish from side to end, leaving merely the skin, and wash in a clean water; put them in pickle for 30 minutes, then put them on racks in the smoking house; if the house be full of fish, 24 hours will suffice; if not full, a longer time will be required. Larger Haddock require to be left a longer time in the pickle.

Fish thus cured will keep 14 days. Should it be necessary to hold it a longer time, let it remain one hour in the pickle.

Hardwood, as Oak, Beech, Elm, Birch, is used for smoking;—turf is added, should the fire become too great, but turf causes too much dust for general use. Pine wood imparts a bitter taste to the fish and is not approved of.

TO SMOKE HERRINGS.

Pack them carefully in barrels, placing salt between every layer, till full; then fill with pickle to the top; let them remain thus three days; then take them out, and wash in fresh water, and hang them up by the gills in the smoking house.

Note.—The Herrings may remain 12 months in the barrels, before smoking, without injury; but it will be necessary to steep them in *fresh water*, to remove some of the salt, should they be any length of time in pickle. The longer they have remained in the barrels the more steeping they will require.

Great care must be taken that the *fire* is not too hot, while the process of smoking goes on, as much injury may be caused in a very few minutes.—This is easily perceived by examining the Herrings from time to time, and if they become soft near the tails, or the fish rises from the racks, or they drop from the racks on which they are suspended, the fire should be *immediately* reduced.

TO CURE COD, LING, HAKE, &c.

Open and clean the fish, cut off the head, and remove the backbone, to the lower extremity of the belly, then wash away all blood, &c., very carefully, continue the cut down to the tail, close by the remaining part of the backbone, in doing this you expose to view a blood-vessel, which should be carefully opened; then wash, and remove all the black lining of the stomach, and other impurities. Soak for a week, and dry in the sun.

In Scotland large quantities of Haddock are cured, by cleaning and splitting as before described, and laying them on the rocks, near the water's edge sprinkling with salt water, from time to time, till perfectly cured, and then dried—this is done without using any salt, except what is in the salt water.

The Smoking House at Helvick is 32 feet long, by 14, and about 20 feet in height, with beams across, at intervals of four feet, on which the rods are supported; the perpendicular distance between these beams is not more than 4 inches, that being more than the length of the largest Haddock. The first tier of beams commence about seven feet above the floor on which the fires are.

JOHN ADAMS.
ISAAC W. LINTINE.

Limerick, 21 March 21st, 1848.

Fishermen are recommended to have this information preserved, by pasting it in their houses.

Handbill issued by the Limerick Auxiliary Committee containing advice to fishermen on the curing of fish, 21 March, 1848.

The soup which was served in Limerick by the Society of Friends contained about four times the proportion of meat than was recommended in the famous recipe devised for the government by the eminent chef, Alexis Soyer. One brew, on 20 January, 1847, consisted of 110 lbs. of beef, two cows' heads and four stone of meal, together with salt, black pepper, cayenne, allspice and celery seed. This produced 745 quarts of soup which was served with ninety-five loaves of bread. At that time, the committee had just one boiler at work, but soon there were two and the quantities were increased.⁽⁶⁾ Later on, it was found that if rice was used in the soup there would be a lesser incidence of diarrhoea.

At the end of February and beginning of March, the soup kitchen distributed an average of 1,260 quarts a day, plus 160 loaves of bread. Almost 500 portions were distributed gratuitously and the balance at less than cost price, leaving the committee with a loss of more than £28 a week.⁽⁷⁾ It is worth noting that on 26 February it was porridge that was distributed rather than soup, and it comes as no surprise to find that this was a Friday. Quakers were respectful of other people's beliefs and would never have served food which contained meat to a Roman Catholic population on a Friday. In keeping with Quaker practices, no soup was distributed on a Sunday.

Financing

The financing of the relief efforts in Limerick was initially by means of local fund-raising. Much of this came from members of the Society of Friends, but some also came from other local sources and in the first couple of months the subscription income amounted to about £100 a month, equivalent to about £5,500 at today's prices.⁽⁸⁾ Another source of funding came from the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends in Dublin, which supplied two grants of £100 in January and February 1847, to bring the total income to £426 by the beginning of March.⁽⁹⁾

It was evident that the committee could not hope to maintain a constant income from donations, let alone increase their subscription income. At the same time, the visiting committee was reporting increases in the numbers of destitute cases, so that the cost of running the soup kitchen was bound to rise. In view of the difficulties of keeping their operations going, the committee took the unusual step of applying to Dublin Castle for a grant towards the running costs of the soup kitchen.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Castle was responsible for administering the operation of relief committees throughout the country, but turned down the application from the Society of Friends in Limerick on the basis that their operation was not one which was constituted under the statutory provisions for the administration of relief funds.⁽¹¹⁾

people in the city who needed help. Very few of those they had visited had any form of employment whatsoever, many having previously been in domestic service or had worked in the lace factories. The effect of the famine had by this time spread beyond those dependent on the potato and was affecting the wider economy of the country, putting vulnerable people out of work. Many more of those visited were

widows with young children. In most cases the families had no food, no beds, no fire, little furniture and hunger was so far advanced that many nursing mothers had ceased to lactate. Shortage of clothing was also seen as a problem, as the heads of the families were unable to seek work when they did not have adequate clothing. Lack of fuel was identified as another major problem.⁽⁵⁾

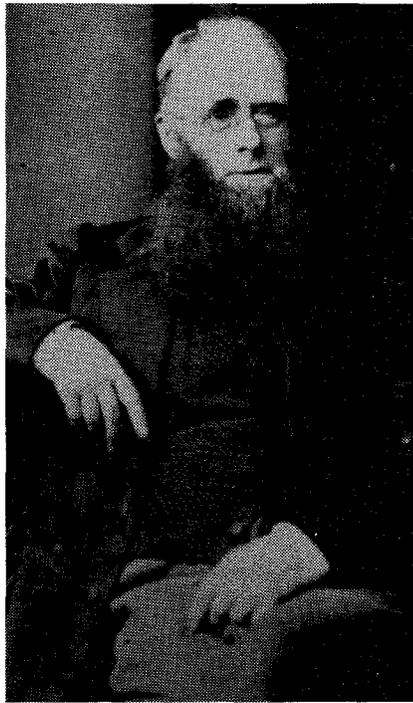
Auxiliary committees

Not long after the establishment of the soup kitchen in Limerick, Quaker involvement in famine relief in the city took a new direction. Early in December, the Central Relief Committee in Dublin had asked Quakers in Cork to investigate reports of particular distress in Skibbereen. To address the destitution which they found there Cork Quakers set up a committee which was to be run under the auspices of the committee in Dublin and to act as its local agent. This concept was an immediate success in that it delegated responsibility to a more locally-based body which could be more closely in touch with its local area and it also relieved the CRC of some of its workload. The degree of destitution nation-wide was becoming so severe that the single committee in Dublin was finding it difficult to manage on its own and the Cork arrangement suggested a means of lightening its load.

The Society of Friends is organised on a hierarchical system which operates from the local level upwards. Under this system local Quaker meeting-houses are grouped into districts known as *Monthly Meetings*, which, in turn make up *Quarterly Meetings* and these report to an annual assembly known as *Yearly Meeting*. On 18 January, 1847, Joseph Bewley of the CRC attended the Munster Quarterly Meeting, during which a conference was called to discuss the issue of famine relief. The outcome was a decision that local committees should be set up on the lines of that established in Cork and that these should act as local agents for the CRC. These would be based on each of the four Monthly Meetings in Munster - i.e. in Waterford, Tipperary (based in Clonmel) and Limerick, plus the one already existing in Cork.⁽¹²⁾

Members of Limerick Monthly Meeting met on 24 January and appointed six of their number to the Limerick Auxiliary Committee, giving them power to co-opt further members if they so required. The initial members were John Abell, James Alexander, Samuel Alexander, Thomas Fitt, Isaac W. Unthank and William Woods and this group appointed James Alexander and Isaac W. Unthank to be its secretaries. Curiously, this committee met three days later and again two days after that and each time it adjourned on account of having no business to transact! Matters changed radically after that and at the fourth meeting, on 31 January, two new members were co-opted, Thomas Grubb and Joseph Robinson.⁽¹³⁾

On the following day, 1 February, the auxiliary committee received its instructions from the CRC in Dublin. This stressed the importance of getting to know the district for which it was to be responsible, including ascertaining the condition of the people and making contacts with trustworthy individuals in various localities. The CRC was to supply funding, beginning with £300 immediately,



Samuel Alexander, a member of the Limerick Auxiliary Committee.

and the Limerick auxiliary committee was to have a fair degree of autonomy. Accounts would need to be forwarded weekly to the CRC and the auxiliary committee's affairs were to be kept entirely separate from the original relief committee. In effect, Limerick Quakers were now running two mutually exclusive relief operations, the original one which was looking after distress in the city of Limerick and the auxiliary committee which was in charge of a vastly larger area.⁽¹⁴⁾

The district allocated to the Limerick auxiliary committee was certainly a large one. It included the entire counties of Limerick and Clare, together with the two baronies of Iraghticonnor and Clanmaurice in Kerry, the three baronies of Upper Ormond, Lower Ormond and Owney and Arra in Tipperary and the four baronies of Kiltartan, Loughrea, Leitrim and Longford in Galway.⁽¹⁵⁾ In all, this amounted to a population of 1,450,000.⁽¹⁶⁾

From this time, all applications to the Society of Friends for relief which related to these districts were handled by the auxiliary committee in Limerick. In general, applications came from those who had the ability to run relief efforts locally - including local resident gentry, clergy of various denominations, officials and professional people. From the outset the committee tried to encourage local areas to provide as much relief from within their own communities as possible. To this end applicants were told that if they set up their own local soup kitchens the committee would provide them with support. In line with the policy adopted by the CRC contributions to relief funds were around £10 to £15, and if such a contribution were used properly and fully accounted for a further grant could be made.⁽¹⁷⁾ It was a strict condition of all relief offered that it was to be distributed

without any regard to religious persuasion. At the end of the famine, the CRC felt it had managed to ensure that this rule had been adhered to.

Fact-finding tours

In order to ensure that they were as well informed as possible, members of the auxiliary committee undertook tours of the more remote parts of their territory. James Harvey and Thomas Grubb went to south-west Clare in February, 1847. They found that most of the districts were in turmoil, with horrendous scenes of starvation, while for the most part the officially recognised relief committees had not carried out their jobs properly. Many of them had not collected subscriptions locally, nor had they applied to the government for assistance. Some parishes, like Kilmihil, were under-represented on the local relief committee and were not getting assistance. That parish had no resident gentry and the only person capable of helping was the parish priest. He was subsequently given assistance by the Limerick auxiliary committee.⁽¹⁸⁾

Another two members of the committee, Joseph Robinson and Thomas Fitt, visited the parish of Trough and the surrounding area. They reported that near to the city of Limerick many of the farmers still had some corn and hay, but as distance increased from the city supplies became more scarce. In those more destitute areas, particularly those which were the property of Lord Limerick, the inhabitants were entirely dependent on the government relief schemes and none of the land was being cultivated. They found only one resident gentleman and he and his wife were keen to help the starving. They were promised a soup boiler and funds to help them establish a soup kitchen.⁽¹⁹⁾

In April and May of 1847, Edward Fitt of Limerick toured in Clare and Kerry with an English Quaker, Edmund Richards, on a gruelling fact-finding tour. Like the previous tours, this was of immense importance in identifying the places in most need of assistance and making contacts with local people.⁽²⁰⁾

Foreign aid

During the spring of 1847, food supplies began to come in from other countries to the Society of Friends relief committees. This began with two shiploads of provisions from Liverpool and by April there were frequent ships arriving from America. The CRC and its counterpart in London made an arrangement with the government commissariat whereby all food coming in for the Society of Friends would be handed over to the government food depots in exchange for credit notes. These could then be used to draw down supplies from any depot throughout the country and this saved the Society of Friends the considerable problem of transport and storage of supplies.

The Limerick auxiliary committee was

able to avail of this facility and it allocated food supplies throughout its area by means of notes drawn on the commissariat depots at Limerick, Tarbert, Kilrush, Banagher, Clare Castle and Galway. Through this system grants were given, such as one to George Spaight of Thomondgate in the city of Limerick for one bag of rice to give to the poor in the form of prepared food. Other grants were monetary, such as one to Benjamin Jacob, a cleric in the city of Limerick, who received £10 for handing to the Ladies' Employment Society.⁽²¹⁾

A curious incident occurred in the summer of 1847 in relation to American food supplies. A ship arrived in Haulbowline from the Boston Relief Committee containing rice, peas, beans, and more than 3,000 barrels of Indian corn meal. Of this, 50 barrels were to go to a nun in Tuam, another 50 barrels to Maria Edgeworth, who was one of the CRC's local agents, in Roscommon, and the balance was for the Limerick auxiliary committee. On 17 July, the committee wrote to Miss Edgeworth to ask where she would like her barrels sent. She wrote back saying that she did not want them and asking the committee to sell them on her behalf. She got a curt reply stating that 'it would be out of the province of our committee, no member or officer of which receives any remuneration whatever and all of whom have their private business to attend to during the day, devoting the evenings to the distribution of the provisions entrusted to their charge. And when undertaking the onerous duties they have now to perform, they did not contemplate, nor would they undertake *selling* the provisions assigned to them'. In the end, more than two months later, the eminent novelist agreed that the meal should be sent to an agent in Dublin.⁽²²⁾ One wonders how the citizens of Boston would have reacted if they had known how their gift was received!

Workload

The committee was not exaggerating its workload. From the start, it met every two to three days, which would be a reasonably heavy workload for any voluntary group whose members held full-time jobs during the day. From the spring of 1847, however, the government changed its policy in relation to relief to the distressed. Instead of the relief works on roads and so forth, for which people were paid a wage, the government would now establish a system of soup kitchens for distributing food directly to the destitute, thereby simplifying the operation. The Society of Friends recognised a major drawback in this changeover as soon as it was announced. They could see that the relief works would come to a halt fairly rapidly, while it would take the poor law unions some time to commence their soup kitchens.

As a result, instead of the Quaker relief operations becoming superseded by the government system, they found that they

Auxiliary Relief Committee, Society of Friends,

Limerick, 4th Mo., 1848.

This Committee believing that much good would result by the encouragement of the culture and manufacture of Flax amongst the destitute poor, for their own use as well as for sale, thus affording employment to many women and children, and encouraging habits of industry and cleanliness amongst them, have concluded to make grants of Flax-seed, on Loan, to approved applicants for the use of the poor in their respective neighbourhoods, such applicant to be accountable to this committee for three-fourths the amount of the grant, and to be refunded either in cash or well prepared flax, the remaining one-fourth to be allowed as a bonus to the grower for punctual payment when the crop is ready for market, and at least one-half of the produce must be spun and made up for the use of each family.

Decision promoting 'the encouragement of the culture and manufacture of flax amongst the destitute poor', 4 April, 1848.

had to massively increase their assistance to the destitute to bridge the gap in the official system. In practical terms, the Limerick auxiliary committee found that it had to meet every day (barring Sundays, of course) in order to keep up on the increase in applications for assistance. Each day they dealt with about ten to fifteen applications for help, usually agreeing to send something - for instance, an order for 2 tons of meal from the commissariat store in Limerick was sent to Philip Reade of Mountshannon in April and 1 ton of meal to Charles Donnelly of Kilquane, Co. Clare, together with £10 to Mary Donnelly for 'employing females industriously'.⁽²³⁾

Gradually, as the poor law unions opened their soup kitchens, the burden was eased. The government soup kitchen in Limerick city opened on 3 April, 1847, but the changeover to this form of relief

was not a smooth one, and there were disturbances in both city and county of Limerick.⁽²⁴⁾ Eventually, the government system came into full operation and Quaker food distribution was limited only to those who were not included in the government system, such as those who were destitute not because of crop failure, but because of age, convalescence or infirmity.

Reduction in food grants

By the summer of 1847, the distribution of food became greatly reduced and throughout Ireland private soup kitchens were closed, including those run by the Society of Friends. The local Quaker committee in Limerick approached the CRC with a proposition to give grants of food to the children of poor families in the city whose wages were inadequate to

support large families. The CRC agreed to this and asked the Limerick auxiliary committee to provide its sister committee in Limerick with provisions for this task.⁽²⁵⁾

With the coming into operation of the government soup kitchens, the entire Quaker relief system took stock of its resources and capabilities. The funds which had been so liberally donated had by now been severely depleted, as had the food stocks. Moreover, the stalwart band of workers were suffering from fatigue. Faced with the meagre resources remaining and the gargantuan task of attempting to hold back the tide of hunger, the harrowing decision was made to reduce the amount of food to be given out. The reality was that the Society of Friends did not have the capability of providing as much food as would even amount to a drop in the ocean compared to what would be required.⁽²⁶⁾

Distribution of food continued on a lesser scale through the winter of 1847-48, and following the closure of the commissariat food stores in the autumn of 1847, the Limerick committee had to rent a store of its own, at a cost of £160 a year, even though by now the level of grants of food aid was considerably reduced.⁽²⁷⁾

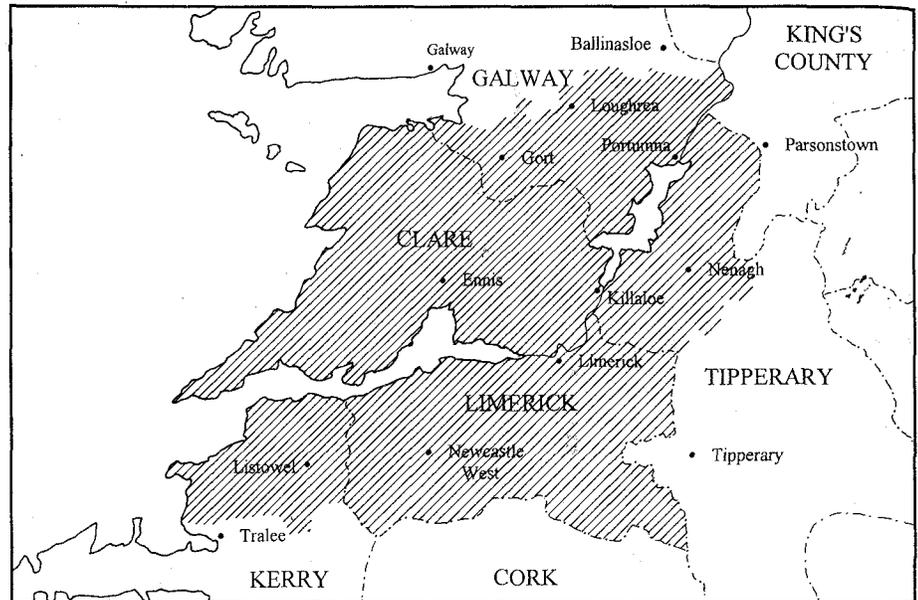
On 6 May, 1848, members of all of the Quaker relief committees in Munster met with the CRC in Limerick to decide on their future strategy. This meeting concluded that issues of money, food or clothing for gratuitous relief should be kept within such narrow bounds as would be practicable and that future operations should as far as possible have a bearing on the promotion and encouragement of industry.⁽²⁸⁾

Clothing

During a famine, clothing is as important as food, and this was particularly the case in Ireland in the harsh winter of 1846-47. To tackle this problem, each of the Quaker committees set up a sub-committee to receive donations of clothing and distribute it to wherever it was needed. In Limerick a clothing sub-committee was constituted under the secretaryship of Edward Fitt. This committee received clothing from the CRC and found suitable recipients.

As the second winter since the establishment of the Limerick committee approached, Edward Fitt wrote to the CRC to voice his opinion that rather than clothing being sent he would rather be given fabrics. This would allow him to give employment to local people making up the exact types of garments which were required rather than having to make do with whatever arrived through donations.⁽²⁹⁾ This was a policy which was adopted throughout the Quaker relief system, being particularly attractive as it encouraged local employment.

The clothing subcommittee in Limerick kept going through the winter of 1847-48 with assistance from the CRC. They found that pilferage was a problem when supplies went by road and suggested that a better way would be to



Map showing the area for which the Limerick Auxiliary Committee was responsible.

send clothing from the depot in Galway by road to Ballinasloe or Portumna and from there to Limerick by canal.⁽³⁰⁾

While the CRC's clothing committee in Dublin was wound down in the spring of 1848, its Limerick counterpart changed its role away from the supply of clothing into the provision of employment through the making up of clothing and so managed to play a useful role for somewhat longer.⁽³¹⁾

Longer-term measures

From the outset, curiously enough, the Society of Friends had considered that short-term measures such as providing food to the starving would provide little ultimate benefit to the country. From a humanitarian point of view it was necessary to become involved to try to prevent deaths from starvation, but what the country really needed was fundamental changes to its economy and its system of land holding. The CRC and its London counterpart were busy lobbying for changes in land law, but this was a long-term objective. In the medium-term, there were other changes which could readily be facilitated.

Some of the grants made in the early months of the relief operations were through monetary aid to assist in the provision of employment, often through cottage industry. This method of offering relief was continued, as it was seen to have longer-term potential. Early in the relief operations, the women of the Society of Friends in Limerick established the Women Friends' Association for Promoting Industry among the Female Poor and they carried out their work with the aid of funds raised by subscription together with grants from the other Quaker relief operations.⁽³²⁾

In May, 1848, the Society of Friends' clothing committee in Limerick applied to the CRC for a grant of £50 to enable them to employ some of the destitute roomkeepers of the city who, they said, were "numerous here and in much want".

The committee also asked the CRC to let them have any material for clothes, shoes, etc. so that they could employ "distressed workwomen, tailors and shoemakers" to make them up.⁽³³⁾

The auxiliary committee also became involved in an attempt to foster the linen industry locally. This was a project which was helped in various parts of the country by the Belfast Flax Society, which supplied instructors to teach farmers how to cultivate the flax. The Limerick auxiliary committee purchased 30 hogsheads of flax seed in May, 1848, and distributed the seed in rural areas.⁽³⁴⁾ In August, the committee gave its backing to a proposal which was put forward by James Molony, a landowner from Kiltannon, County Clare, to establish a flax scutching mill in Limerick. The committee felt that the potential for growing flax was reduced, as there was no scutching mill and that the various stages in the growing and processing of flax held great potential for giving employment, particularly to women and children.⁽³⁵⁾

Fisheries

Any means of providing employment through the production of food was an obvious choice for famine relief and the Society of Friends was able to provide a considerable amount of help to fishing communities throughout Ireland. In the case of the Limerick auxiliary committee this was carried out in partnership with the London committee of the Society of Friends and their assistance was given to fishermen in the Claddagh in Galway.

A common problem among fishermen was that they had been hit by the disappearance of the herring from the Irish shore, leading to hardship which had, in turn, led to nets and tackle being pawned. The pawnbrokers of Galway confirmed to Quaker visitors that they had at least £1,000 worth of fishing tackle in pledge and saw little chance of it being redeemed.⁽³⁶⁾

Despite advice that the Claddagh fishermen were "a very selfish set of people - not even allowing strangers to fish on what they call their grounds",⁽³⁷⁾ the London and Limerick committees embarked on a scheme to assist them. Beginning by providing loans for redeeming tackle from pawn, they worked with a Dominican foundation in the Claddagh to assist the fishermen to re-establish themselves and they attempted to teach new, modern, methods of fishing. For this purpose they employed a Cornish fisherman, Captain Arthur Chard, as an instructor and advisor and he arrived in August, 1848.⁽³⁸⁾ The work at the Claddagh continued for two years, and succeeded in getting the fishing operations back under way. The committees were less successful in teaching new methods, though, as the Claddagh fishermen spoke no English and were resistant to new methods, while Captain Chard's experiences in Cornwall did not translate well to the conditions off the Galway coast.

Aid to small farmers

Before Ireland could recover from the famine, new crops had to be sown and harvested. However, during the time it would take for crops to grow farmers would have nothing to live on. Recognising this problem, the Society of Friends developed a system for giving assistance to farmers who were caught in this vicious circle. This involved paying farmers to carry out work on their own land, either with monetary payment or food grants. Because of the scarce resources available, the relief committees were strict in ensuring that work was carried out, but as it was on the farmers' own land the farmers usually recognised that this was in their own interest.

The Limerick auxiliary committee introduced this type of system before most other relief committees and was already offering aid to small farmers by the autumn of 1847. The type of work would ideally be that which would improve the land, such as new field fences or subsoil drainage, but work on homes was also supported. Examples included lime washing or thatching the houses of the poor, for which materials were often gleaned from local gentry.⁽³⁹⁾

For the most part this form of relief was administered by responsible local people, just as the food had been in the winter of 1846-47. Amongst these was the Dean of Kilfenora, who reported that the grants of relief had "not only given much relief but has really changed the appearance of the district from a dirty and gloomy character to cleanliness and cheerfulness". The teacher at the Belvoir Agricultural School inspected work done and found that recipients had prepared for the planting of cabbages and similar work and he felt that the grants had been "productive of more good than perhaps you or the benevolent donors had anticipated, or than tenfold the amount injudiciously applied would have effected".⁽⁴⁰⁾

Scariff 10th Feb 1848

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 137
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My dear Friend
 I have to acknowledge
 with thanks the receipt from
 your Bank of an order on
 the Bank in Limerick for £25
 to be disposed of in clothing
 for such of the poor children
 of this Union as are in most
 want of it. I who cannot be
 provided with clothes out of
 the Union funds. I shall
 render you a faithful account
 of its disposal & hope to be able
 to show it is usefully spent
 I shall allow to your wishes
 as communicated to me by
 John Abell that the materials
 shall be strong & substantial

Letter from J.G. Fisher regarding a donation to provide clothing at Scariff.

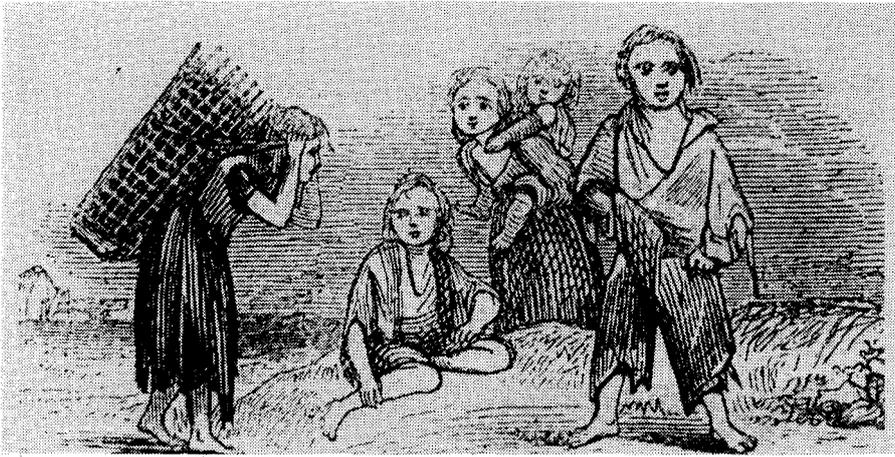
Winding down

The relief operations of the Society of Friends continued into the early 1850s, though at a very reduced scale in the later stages. The last relief operation was a model farm which was established in County Galway in 1849 and which continued until 1863, amongst the directors of which was Isaac W. Unthank of the Limerick committee. The final act of the Quaker relief system during the Great Famine was to publish a report of its operations and this appeared in 1852.

Before this, though, the CRC considered what would be the best way of using the funds which remained in its hands and it sought suggestions from its

associated committees. The Limerick auxiliary committee suggested that £500 or £600 should be allocated for the erection of baths and wash-houses for the poor of Limerick City. If the CRC did not consider that to be suitable, and alternative was a donation to an industrial school in the city, which had two Quakers on its committee and which was educating seventy girls in the sewing of muslin. A third option was the employment of a person to instruct the peasantry of the Limerick neighbourhood in the sowing and culture of flax.⁽⁴¹⁾

In the end, the CRC decided not to dispose of its funds for the time being. Ultimately, this choice was fortuitous, as another famine occurred in the winter of



Little children did not escape the trauma of the famine.

1862-63 and the CRC met again to restart its operations. On that occasion the system used was not so elaborate and the auxiliary committees were not reconstituted.

Conclusion

Throughout the period of the famine, the Quaker relief committees worked long hours to do what they could manage against the enormous odds. In many cases they suffered from illness or exhaustion and some lost their lives. One of these was James Harvey of the Limerick auxiliary committee who died in February, 1848, "after an illness of a few days" at the age of forty-five.⁽⁴²⁾ The cause of his death is not recorded, but it is likely that it resulted from his relief work.

Statistics give a very bland and incomplete picture of the achievements of these organisations, but help to put some perspective on the quantities involved. The Limerick auxiliary committee distributed some eleven soup boilers and 560 tons of food within County Limerick and six boilers and 632 tons in Clare in addition to further quantities in parts of Kerry, Tipperary and Galway. These two counties also received more than £2,000 in cash, equivalent to about £110,000 at today's prices.⁽⁴³⁾ Over and above this there is the unquantified amounts distributed by the Limerick soup committee, the Women's committee for employment and other branches of the organisation, plus countless hours of time given free of charge.

The final report of the CRC concluded that they had failed in their efforts, and in view of the enormous toll of death and emigration this statement is understandable. However, in terms of what they achieved in proportion to their tiny numbers and the manner in which they worked, bringing a sense of dignity and hope to those in distress, their work has earned them a place in Irish folk memory.

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2. *Transactions of the Central Relief*

Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland (1852), Appendix I, p. 129.

3. In the past it was not the Quaker practise to use the names of the months and days as these were taken from pagan gods - March from Mars, Thursday from Thor, etc. Instead, they were numbered, the soup kitchen opening in the 12th month, 1846. The first day was Sunday. Here, for simplicity's sake, the dates are given in their better-known forms.
4. *Statement from Limerick auxiliary committee to CRC*, 11 February, 1847, National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Statement of one week's working of Limerick soup kitchen* [20-25 January, 1847], National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
7. *Statement of the working of Limerick soup kitchen for the past week* [26 February - 4 March, 1847], National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
8. A conversion factor of 55 for reckoning the value of money during the famine in comparison with late 20th century prices was kindly supplied to me by Philip R. Jacob, who had obtained it via the Central Bank, Dublin.
9. Benjamin Fisher of the Society of Friends in Limerick to Dublin Castle, 3 March, 1847, National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Dublin Castle to Benjamin Fisher, 24 March, 1847, National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
12. Limerick auxiliary committee minutes, 24 January, 1847, Friends Historical Library, Swanbrook, Dublin, ref. MM IX P1.
13. *Ibid.*, 24, 27, 29 and 31 January, 1847.
14. *Ibid.*, 1 February, 1847.
15. *Transactions, op. cit.*, Appendix I, p. 130.
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 30. Edward Fitt to Central Relief Committee, 20 and 24 November, 1847, National Archives, ref. 2 506 6.
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 34. John Abell to Central Relief Committee, 15 and 26 May, 1848, National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
 35. Limerick auxiliary committee to Central Relief Committee, 11 August, 1848, and James Alexander to Joseph Bewley, 29 August, 1848, National Archives, ref. 2 506 43.
 36. Report of William E. Foster, *Transactions, op. cit.*, p. 158-9.
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