

The Great Influenza Epidemic, 1918-1919



In the last few months of the First World War a virus, more deadly than the bullets of the battlefields, swept the globe, leaving millions of deaths in its path. The virus, which killed an estimated 27,000,000 people, was known as the Spanish Flu.

Opinions vary as to where the virus originated; there had been an outbreak of influenza in Spain in February, 1918, hence the term the Spanish Flu; another theory was that it had been brought from China by labourers working near the front lines; others maintained that it may have been brought to Europe by American soldiers, who arrived there around May, 1918. However, one of the main possible breeding-grounds must have been the wet, damp, lice-and-raft-infested trenches of the Western Front, where so much blood had been spilled.

The influenza epidemic lasted roughly from the Spring of 1918 to the Spring of 1919, the high point being the Autumn of 1918. It came in two waves, one being of a mild type of illness and the second being more severe. The symptoms of the first, or milder flu, were lack of energy, aching pains, rising temperature, unstable pulse, sore throat, headaches, loss of appetite, gastro-intestinal pains, forcing a person suffering from the illness to lie down.

The symptoms of the second type were similar to the first but a patient quickly developed pulmonary complications, that is, the lungs became infected and bronchial pneumonia, or blood poisoning, set in. At times the patient turned purple.

The first cases of influenza in Limerick seem to have appeared towards the end of June, 1918, and were of the mild type. By the end of October a large number of people were beginning to feel the effects of the second wave. Doctors were run off their feet in trying to cope with increasing numbers of calls for medical treatment. The Christian Brothers and a number of the schools closed their doors. Several deaths, due to pneumonia and other complications, were also reported.

Doctors at the City Dispensary, in Lower Gerald Griffin Street were overworked and began to request extra help. Some of them had approached Paddy Bourke, Chairman of the Limerick Board of Guardians, pointing out that the number of staff at the dispensary was totally inadequate to the ever-increasing demands of patients suffering from influenza. Bourke said that he knew of one family of seven who were stricken down and had no one to help them.

At a meeting of the Board of Guardians,

by Des Ryan

on Wednesday, 20 October, it was agreed that a special committee with plenary powers be elected to sit in constant session while the epidemic lasted. It was also hoped that the committee would approach the City Home Hospital to make more beds available, even though at that time the hospital was already full. Another member of the Board recommended that the medical staff should outline whatever precautions should be taken by families to prevent the disease from entering their homes. On Thursday, 31 October, the following notice appeared in the columns of the city's newspapers:

Influenza Epidemic

Poor Law Relief

The Limerick Board of Guardians have appointed the following members of the Board to sit as a Committee with plenary powers to extend immediate relief arising out of the epidemic of influenza:- Messrs P. Bourke (Chairman of the Committee), James Bourke, J. Reidy, J. Doyle, James Ledden, Thomas Donnellan, Joseph Keane, (Chairman of the Board).

The Committee is empowered to grant Poor Law Medical Relief and other essential assistance to deserving cases during the continuance of the epidemic. Applicants for relief should apply at once to any member of the committee above-mentioned.

The committee invite services of young women with some experience of nursing who will be liberally paid. The committee will meet in the Mayor's Office, Town Hall, each evening at 7 o'clock, when applications will be considered.

By Order of the Committee,

T. Ryan, Clerk of Union

As the flu epidemic began to grip the city, and other parts of the country, the only recourse for medical attention, for those who were unable to pay a doctor, was through the Poor Law Relief system.

The Poor Law Relief Act was designed to assist those living in poverty in Ireland and came into operation in 1838. The country was divided into 130 areas, or unions, as they were called at the time. In each area a new building was erected: this was known as the union workhouse. The Limerick Union Workhouse, on Shelbourne Road, was completed in 1841;

although it is still often referred to as the City Home, its official name is St Camillus Hospital.

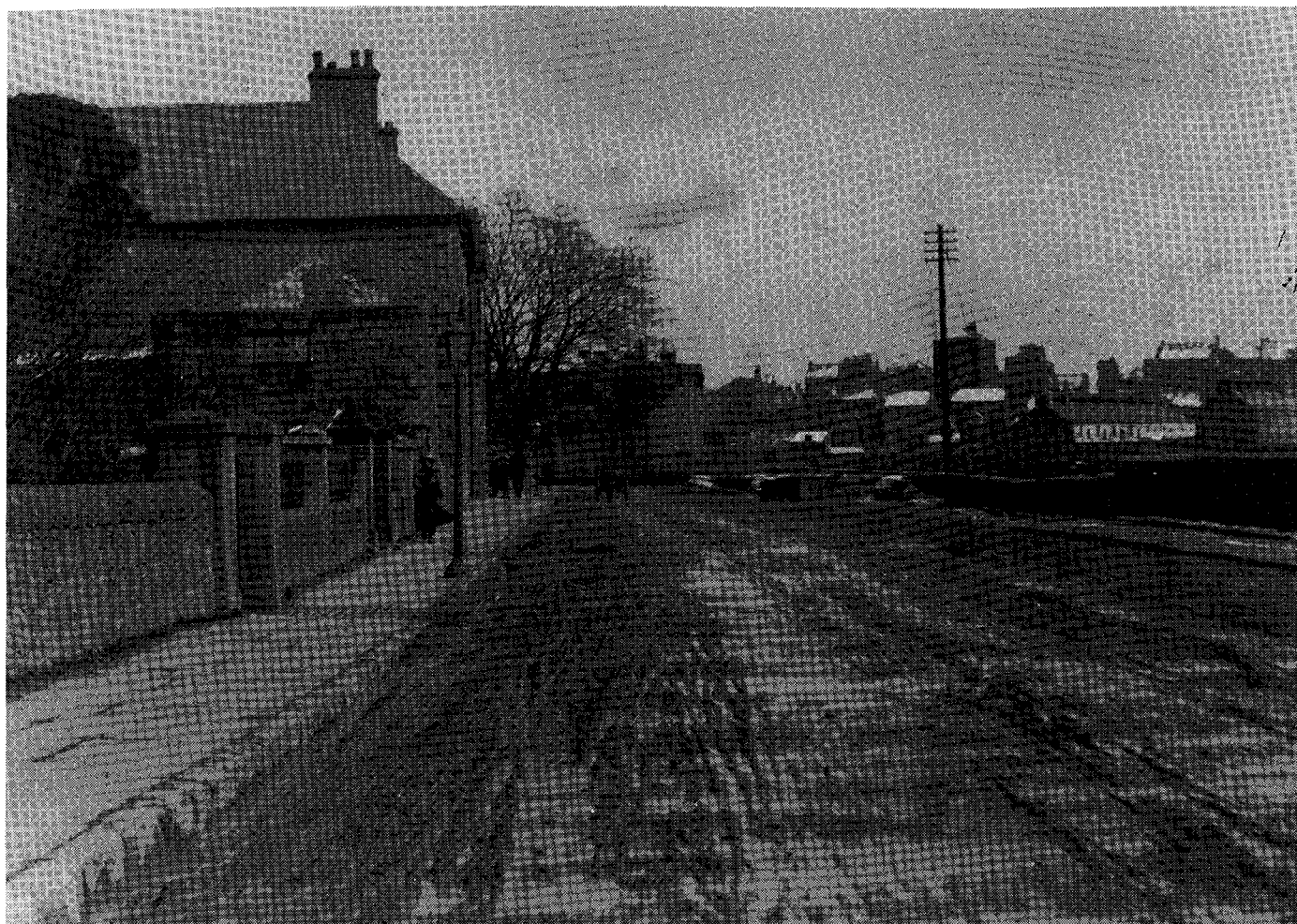
The Poor Law Relief was funded by a tax (rate) on those people who owned property or had a business. The system was administered locally by a Board of Guardians, who were answerable to a government body known as the Poor Law Commissioners. In 1872, the Poor Law Commissioners became the Local Government Board; in today's terms they would come under the Department of the Environment.

Another building that came under the Poor Law Relief was the old City Dispensary at Lower Gerald Griffin Street. Records show that in the 1840s a dispensary and vaccination office was located in Francis Street. In 1851, under the Medical Charities Act, each union was further divided into dispensary districts. In 1872, the dispensary for the city was located at Barrington's Hospital. Finally, in May, 1888, the Board of Guardians acquired the lease for a new dispensary at Lower Gerald Griffin Street. This building served the people of Limerick up to the 1960s.

In the first week of November it was thought that the epidemic was coming to an end, even though a large number of people still had the flu. While the Board of Guardians had issued notices stating that medical relief would be available for the poorer classes, there was still a shortage of doctors, some of whom had even caught the flu themselves. It was hoped that the cold weather of November would help to dispel or kill off the virus.

At a further meeting of the Board of Guardians, a letter from the Local Government Board, dated the 5 November, was read. It stated that the LGB agreed with the measures being implemented by the Guardians for the relief of the influenza epidemic amongst the poor. The LGB also agreed to pay the salaries of the temporary medical officers recruited to help out during the epidemic. Quite soon afterwards it appears that the LGB had second thoughts about paying the expenses of the temporary medical staff, and felt that the relief committee, set up to deal with the epidemic, should pay them. The LGB was not satisfied about the way the relief committee was set up; it was felt that they did not act in a strictly legal manner. One assumes by this that they did not apply for government sanction.

By this time the relief committee had enlisted the services of a Doctor Mulcahy. His job was to attend to the patients whom the other doctors were unable to see due



The North Strand in 1916.

to their work-load. Doctor Mulcahy was paid a guinea per day; Mr Coffey, who was to take him to the homes of those who were ill, was paid 7 shillings per day.

At a meeting of the Board of Guardians on the 6 November, there was some acrimony about members turning up late for meetings and also about the refusal of the Corporation to let the relief committee use the Mayor's office at the Town Hall. It was also felt that the Mayor was not taking enough interest in the work of the relief committee.

The Corporation itself had its own Public Health Committee. At a meeting of this committee a resolution was passed calling upon the people of the city to guard against overcrowding in the streets and in public buildings. It also called upon the cinema-owners in the city to close their premises until the epidemic had subsided. After the last showing on Friday night, 8 November, the owners complied with the Corporation's request. The misunderstanding with the Corporation about the use of the Mayor's office must have been resolved, because the notice advising people to come there for help was still being printed in the local newspapers.

By early December, the flu epidemic had more or less died out; schools reopened and also the cinemas.

Some of the remedial cures recommended in those months included: snuff, a pack of towels soaked in vinegar, soda and sugar in a glass of hot milk, a strong dose

of whiskey and ginger. A carpet and window cleaning company, at 4 Lower Cecil Street, advised the use of its "Americus Disinfectant" to combat the effects of the epidemic.

The opening weeks of 1919 were a watershed in Irish history. The shooting of two policemen in Soloheadbeg, County Tipperary, was the starting point of the War of Independence. The political situation in Ireland, and the aftermath of the war in Europe, dominated the news media. Suddenly, in the second half of February, the symptoms of the flu began to re-emerge.

In the city and county it appeared in the mild form, even though there were a number of deaths in the city. In Dublin, the authorities felt that the new outbreak and the septic pneumonia associated with it should come under the Infectious Disease (Notification) Act of 1889. It was hoped that other areas of the country, including Limerick, would take similar action. In one institution for boys in the city a large number, including some of the principals, were on the sick list.

On Wednesday, 27 February, the Mayor presided at a meeting of the Public Health Committee. Dr McGrath, the medical officer from the dispensary, recommended that they should apply to the LGB for compulsory powers to enforce, if necessary, the provisions of the Infectious Disease (Notification) Act, owing to the re-appearance of the

influenza in the district. Dr McGrath also said that there was no need yet to close places of entertainment, but that this action could be done later on if requested. A week later, on 6 March, at a specially convened meeting of the Public Health Committee at the Town Hall, it was agreed, after some discussion, to close the cinemas and schools in the city as a tentative measure from 7 to 17 March.

At another special meeting of the Mayor and the City Councillors a few days later, the Law Adviser to the Corporation, Mr Dundon, pointed out that, after giving 14 days clear notice, the Council would be empowered to make influenza-pneumonia a notifiable disease. It was decided then and there to make it notifiable for a period of six months. Another motion adopted was that all soldiers returning to the country would have to have their clothing disinfected before they landed; it was hoped that would also help to isolate the infection.

By this time the epidemic was beginning to wane, and the virus disappeared as mysteriously as it had arrived. It was not until 1933 that researchers were able to identify the virus and provide a vaccine to combat its effects.

It is not known how many people died, in the city or county, during the flu epidemic. The records of those who died still lie unresearched in the offices of the Mid-Western Health Board at St. Camillus Hospital.