

The Soldiers Houses in Limerick

The Story of the Irish Sailors and Soldiers Land Trust

Relics of the British Army's presence in Limerick still remain in the form of Sarsfield Barracks, King John's Castle, the facade of Strand Barracks, and the officers Administration Building and outer walls of the Ordnance Barracks in Mulgrave Street. They also left a hospital, which was probably St Nessans in Croom. It is recorded that officers occupied houses in the Crescent and in the then fashionable area of Clare Street. Other ranks, principally NCOs, lived in private houses in Fair View Terrace, Garryowen Villas and St Joseph Street.

After the departure of the British Army in 1922, houses were built for the ex-servicemen of the First World War, officers and other ranks. The houses were built countrywide and Limerick City and County received their share. Those in the city were built at Rosbrien and on the Blackboy Road.

In Rosbrien twelve semi-detached cottages, as the houses were called, were built by the Board of Works in 1923 and can be seen opposite Old Crescent Rugby Grounds, with plenty of ground space and very large rear gardens.

The Blackboy Road Scheme of fifty houses in blocks of four and six are located near Mount St Lawrence Cemetery (later named Bengal Terrace)

by Anthony O'Brien

and were built in 1928. The authority responsible for building the Bengal Terrace houses and for assuming control of the Rosbrien houses was called the Irish Sailors and Soldiers Land Trust. The story of the Trust, as it became known, deserves to be recorded as part of our more recent history.

The Great War Volunteers

The Irish contribution to the Great War was considerable and according to official sources, 130,000 Irishmen volunteered to fight 'for the rights of small nations'. The fine War Memorial at Island Bridge in Dublin, recently renovated, honours 49,500 who died, and Irishmen won thirty Victoria Crosses in the Great War. Regular soldiers did not need promises of rewards for their services, but when additional recruits were needed to replace the huge numbers killed or injured in the bloody battles from 1916 onwards, inducements were considered necessary to counter the drift to Republican Nationalism being fostered by Sinn Fein.

Sir John French, the Viceroy, an Irishman who had commanded the British Expeditionary Force in France, toured the

country seeking replacements for the much depleted regiments. He was aided in this by John Redmond MP, who hoped to copperfasten the presence of Home Rule when hostilities ended. Despite the upsurge in support for Sinn Fein, further Irishmen did enlist and Lord French promised that land would be available for ex-servicemen when the war ended.

Origins of the Land Trust

The promise to provide land quickly turned into one to provide houses and every ex-serviceman expected a house. The Housing Act of 1919 was to give effect to these measures and the building or purchasing of houses commenced in the early 1920s under the Ministry of Finance and Home Affairs in Northern Ireland and by the Colonial Office in Dublin, and by 1924 a total of 1,640 houses had been built or purchased.

In 1923 the Treasury introduced regulations to set up the Irish Sailors and Soldiers Land Trust, which held its inaugural meetings in quick succession in London. It consisted of a Chairman and four Trustees. Representing the South were General Sir Bryan Mahon² and Major Lefroy, and representing the North were the Marquis of Dufferin & Ava³ and Brigadier-General R.J. Ross. The Chairman was George Duckworth. Captain



New (Sarsfield) Barracks, c.1914.

Limerick Museum.

Alexander was Trust Secretary and at an early stage he sought the transfer of the head office to Dublin. He was supported in this, quite independently, by Tim Healy, Governor General in Dublin, who also considered that the chairman had too much power. The move was opposed by George Duckworth and the headquarters remained in London. Cyril Browne looked after the Dublin office and Major Harris was in charge in Belfast.

Allocation and Cost of Cottages

The Trust sanctioned a total of 3,672 houses, or cottages as they were officially called, on a shareout of 2,626 for the South and 1,046 for the North. The Treasury provided £1.5 million and cottages were built in every county in Ireland, and while urban areas were the main locations, many rural areas received their quota, even to the extent of single cottages in places.

The size of the schemes varied greatly. Dublin and its environs received about one sixth of the total allocation and Cork City did well with 200 cottages. From the 247 house scheme in Killester in Dublin to the two cottage scheme in Kilkee, from Stranorlar in Donegal to Kinsale in Cork and from Whiteabbey in Antrim to Caherciveen in Kerry, the spread of cottages indicated that volunteers had come from all parts and all traditions.

Style and Layout

One can readily appreciate the excitement generated by the construction of those large urban housing schemes in the early 1920s when the move to the suburbs was pioneered by the Trust. When one compares the inner city public housing schemes of the early 1900s, having few rooms and no gardens, with this new development one can appreciate the attraction of the prospect of room and space and gardens, not to mention fresh air.

The cottages were built in blocks of four or six in the urban areas and in the countryside semi-detached or detached cottages were the order. They were invariably two storey types with four rooms and scullery, and gardens front and rear. The allocation of land in rural areas was generous, with up to a quarter of an acre of land being provided, and in suburban schemes a large allotment was often provided in addition to sizeable rear gardens, and for anyone willing to use a spade, ample vegetables could be grown for the many large families reared in these cottages. Bathrooms were not provided in the earlier schemes except for officers, and these were in the main confined to the large urban schemes.

While there were problems with cottages built before 1924 (pre-Trust), the standard in Trust cottages was very high and many new features, such as cavity walls, were incorporated in the cottages. The situation in Dromod, Mohill, Co. Leitrim, went against the general trend when in 1928, in a scheme of five houses,



Bengal Terrace, red-brick end of terrace houses, 1998.

Photo: Tom Keogh.

three were sold because of their isolated situation and the poor prospects for work. The position throughout the country, however, was one of feverish activity, with eighty schemes proceeding simultaneously, and the Dublin office contained a staff of forty to service this great enterprise.

Pressure to build Cottages

Many people sought to bring pressure on the Trust to build or complete the building of cottages. W.T. Cosgrave, President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State, wrote to his nominated trustee, General Sir Bryan Mahon, urging the completion of the Trust building programme. However, when the Free State Government was called upon to allocate grants for new houses, it refused, even though the 1924 Housing Act granted £100 for each newly built house. Under the 1925 Act, the Trust was again excluded, this time by name. In 1930, however, the government relented and paid £45 per house, but only currently, to the Trust. It may have appeared late in the day for such assistance, but houses were built as late as 1934 and the Dominions Office expressed its appreciation for the gesture. By now the target of 3,672 housed had been exceeded and the final tally was nearer 4,000.

Bengal Terrace

When the Blackboy Road Scheme was mooted in 1927, Malcolm Shaw of the famous Bacon Company and James Bannatyne of the Flour Mill Firm (later Ranks) urged the completion of the houses as they had work for men convenient to the Scheme. Shaws was certainly convenient, but Bannatyne's in

the Docks area was nearly two miles away.

The fifty houses built there were in nine blocks with the first and last blocks in red brick and having bathrooms. The latter were intended for officers, but only one officer ever lived there. He was Captain John Murphy MC DCM+Bar, renowned for his bravery in the war. He was from Kilballyowen and was killed in a premature explosion in the new cement factory in Mungret in 1936. Capt. Murphy had risen from the ranks and had served latterly with the Leinster Regiment. His daughter Mary still lives in the 'Terrace', as it is affectionately known.

The red brick houses were allocated initially to NCOs and carried a higher rent. The other seven blocks were in sets of six houses which had four rooms and a scullery. There were front and rear gardens and, in addition, a large allotment of two acres was located in what is now Woodlawn Estate. The allotment was sold during the second world war years, as it was considered unsuitable for future houses. The tenants had the option of combining to buy, but there was insufficient interest to raise the few hundred pounds necessary to buy it.

Before emigration became the trend after World War Two, there were very large families in the 'Terrace' and it boasted over 300 residents at its peak. It produced three priests and many fine soccer players, as well as the colourful Sean Bourke, who sprang the spy, George Blake, from jail. It was a great place to live, with plenty of fields around, straddling, as it did, town and country, and with its own farm and shop, owned by the Hanly family, right on the doorstep.

The Trust sought to expand its building programme and considered the present Fairgreen, but the County Council set too high a price and built its own

houses there later. The Trust also set its sights on the Limerick Lawn Tennis Grounds on the Ennis Road. It did not, however, proceed with the plan and opted instead to build several smaller lots in the county.

Rents, Inspections and Evictions

Rents varied throughout the country from a low of 4/= in rural areas to 9/= in urban areas. Ex-servicemen were, in the main, employed as rent collectors and inspectors, and collectors were even expected to act in a supervisory manner to see that tenancy rules were kept. A firm of estate agents in Limerick, who were responsible for tenants in rural areas, had their contract withdrawn for requiring tenants to post in their rents, thus adding to the householders costs, and failing to supervise.

Major inspections were usually carried out from the Dublin office on an annual basis by Col. Hunt, the chief inspector, and there was much activity in advance of same. The cry of 'the Trust are coming' was enough to see greater attention to houses and gardens.

Compliance with the rules was strict and rigidly enforced. When both parents died, the children had to vacate the house within months. This was always sad in the community, but it must be said that evictions, as such, were always carried out in a peaceful and humane manner. Evictions for reasons other than the death of parents in the Southern Region make interesting reading in the Trust files and show the ingenuity and indeed foolishness of the tenants. Here are a few:-

1. An ex-Irish Guardsman was evicted for building a timber lean-to at the rear of the house without permission and then not allowing inspection.
2. An ex-Worcestershire Private installed his mother in his house while he transferred to her flat. He met a similar fate and both he and the Irish Guardsman appealed their evictions to the King, but the evictions stood for these Limerick cases.
3. In Galway, a tenant sold his house to another ex-serviceman for £25 and both lost the tenancy.
4. In Cork, when both parents died, a brother of the father, one of five ex-servicemen, was nominated as a tenant in order to keep the family together. They chose the wrong brother, because the one nominated had been a deserter.
5. Also in Cork, a Ford employee was transferred to the Dagenham plant and returned home twice a year to his family occupying a Trust house. He was evicted for prolonged absences.
6. To add variety to the above cases, a tenant and wife and their eleven children in Thurles had to leave because they broke the rules by keeping five lodgers.

It was felt that in the larger urban schemes, a tenant was paid a small annual

sum to report on breaches of tenancy rules.

Rent Arrears

The problems of rent arrears, and the withholding of rent in some cases, were present from the origins of the Trust and especially so in the South. George Duckworth, the chairman, had accused Major Lefroy, one of the Trustees, of encouraging tenants not to pay rent, of spending £400 on travelling expenses during which he encouraged tenants not to pay rent, and of failing to sanction evictions. He was removed as a Trustee and was replaced by Brig. Gen. the Earl of Meath. Lefroy, who represented the British Legion and lived in Killaloe, was a staunch defender of ex-servicemen and was very mindful of their financial plight. He was vindicated in his stance by a subsequent Court ruling.

In 1933, Leggett, a tenant in the large Killester scheme in Dublin, with others, challenged the Trust in the Irish Supreme Court, claiming that the original Act made no mention of rents. Leggett won his case and thereafter rents could not be demanded in the South.

A letter was sent to the Trust around this time from a tenant in the North, who feared that the Northern Courts would reach the same verdict as the Southern Courts on the same question. In a beautifully mixed metaphor he beseeched the Trust "If you do not grasp this nettle, forthwith, it will accumulate like a snowball rolling." Curiously the Northern Courts reached the opposite verdict and rents continued to be paid in the Northern jurisdiction. The snowball had stopped at the Border.

Sale of Cottages

Around 1952, cottages were offered for sale to the tenants at a starting price of £340, and rising by £200 after selected periods of time. Most of the tenants purchased their houses and were free to sell them later. World War II veterans sought to qualify for tenancy of houses still left in Trust control, and it was agreed that they could combine with relatives who had the necessary qualifications to purchase cottages.

Lord Killanin

During this time the distinguished Peer, Lord Killanin⁴, was one of the Southern Trustees, having been nominated in 1955. His father was killed in his first action in 1914 when commanding the Irish Guards. The son was a journalist and was in Downing Street when Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich waving his piece of paper of Hitler's promises, so he decided to join the Territorial Army. He later gained prominence when guiding the fortunes of the International Olympic Committee during the African walkout in Montreal and during the American boycott of the Moscow games. Lord

Killanin continued as a trustee up to the winding up of the Trust, a remarkable span for a remarkable man.

Mention must be made of some other long serving Trust officials.

Cyril Browne continued in the Dublin office until 1949.

Sir James Bannatyne became the second chairman in 1927 and served until 1946, embracing a testing time when the rents issue arose. He was replaced in turn by a remarkable man, Sir Edmund Crompton, who continued for 38 years, and his signature appears on most tenant purchase certificates. He became Britain's first Ombudsman.

Disposal of Trust Surplus Funds

It is not too often that one encounters a declining company or body with too much money, but that is what befell the Trust after the sale of its cottages. The Trust had aided other voluntary housing agencies besides, and had provided accommodation for older people who could not look after themselves.

There were now about 100 cottages unpurchased and a bill in the House of Lords introduced in 1987 sought to wind up the Trust. Similar legislation was placed before the Dáil and in both cases became law.

A sum of £4.5 million was to be distributed between the British and Irish Governments on a shareout of 68% and 32% respectively. The Irish Branch of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution received £1.1 million from the Irish allocation.

Thus concludes the last chapter of the Irish Sailors and Soldiers Trust, a body so well served by prominent people who acted so splendidly as Trustees and by staff who worked so diligently and caringly for the exciting new venture.

The author grew up and has many happy memories of the Bengal Terrace Scheme, and this short narrative is dedicated to his late father's regiment, the Royal Munster Fusiliers. It pays tribute also to the many fine old soldiers and sailors who occupied those equally fine cottages, and indeed to their children, many of whom are now scattered throughout the world.

FOOTNOTES

1. County housing schemes were built in Knocklong, Knockainey, Kilmallock, Kilfinane, Galbally, Newcastlewest, Askeaton, Ballylanders, Cappamore and at two locations near Castleconnell.
2. Sir Bryan McMahon was a Boer War hero and a member of the Free State Senate. He was a Galwayman.
3. The Marquis had the family name of Beresford.
4. Lord Killanin was a Galwayman with the family name of Morris.

Research carried out at the Public Record Office, Kew, Surrey.