

The House of Industry: A Register 1774-1793

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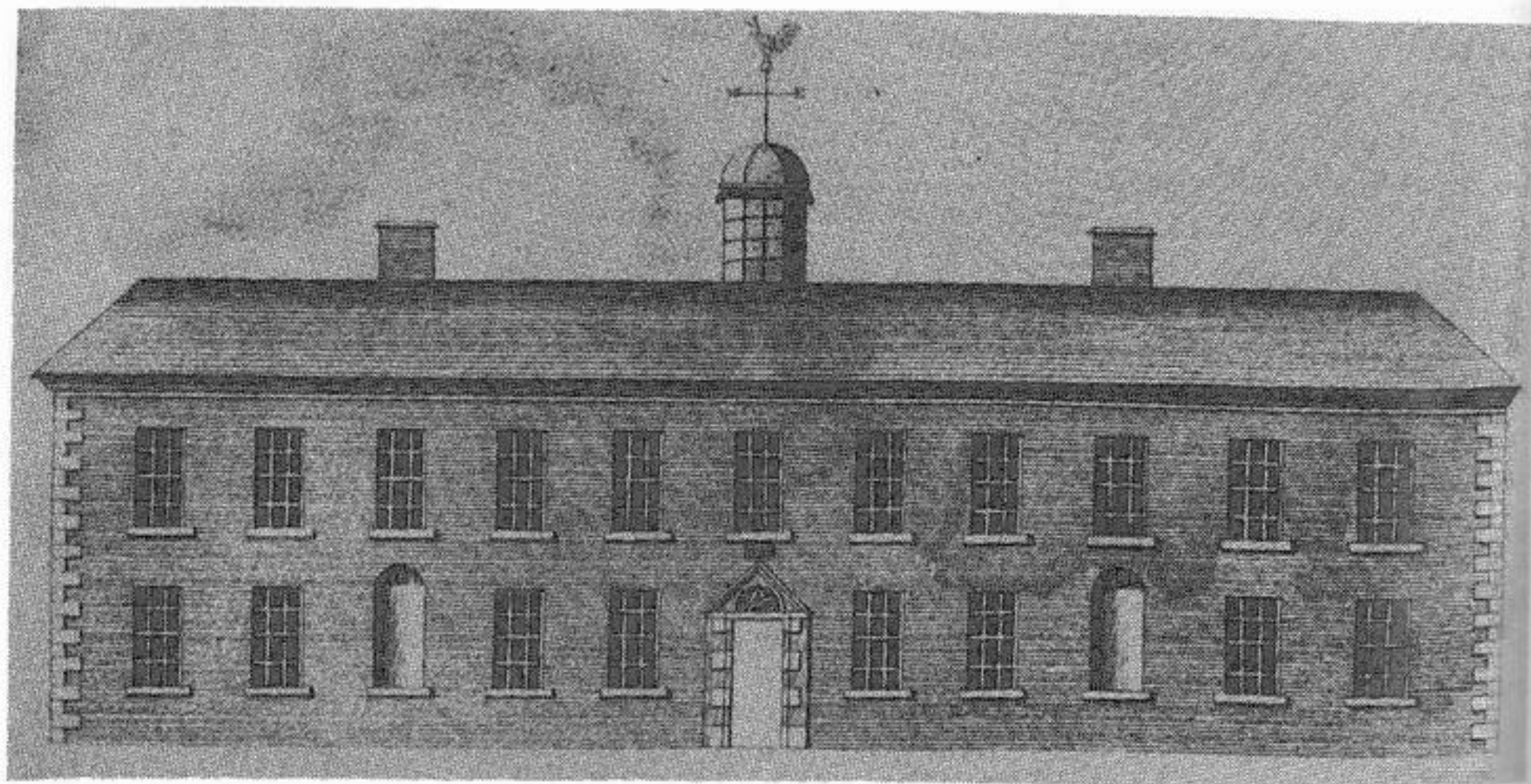
A Register of the House of Industry, Limerick, dating from the late 18th century is examined and found to reveal many surprising yet interesting details reflecting life in the city at the time.

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The House of Industry on Clancy's Strand (formerly the North Strand) owes its inception to an Act passed in the Irish House of Commons in 1772, establishing Poor Houses and Work Houses in every county.¹ As a result of this Act, in 1773 the county and city of Limerick Grand Jurors presented £500.00 for such an establishment in the city, and the Protestant Bishop Gore granted the land for the building in the North Strand. On March 10th, 1774, Mayor Joseph Johns, attended by the corporation, led a procession to the site and laid the first stone.² The first inmate was admitted on the 19th of September, 1774. A year after the first Union Workhouse for Limerick was opened in 1841, the House of Industry was finally closed after 68 years in existence.

The building was, as Ferrar writes in his *History of Limerick*, and as is evident from the illustration (Illus. 1), "light and handsome, forming a large square built in courses,

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Illus. 1. The House of Industry, Limerick.

¹Rev. P. Fitzgerald & J. J. McGregor, *The History, Topography, and Antiquities of the County and City of Limerick*, 2 vols., Dublin 1827, p. 595.

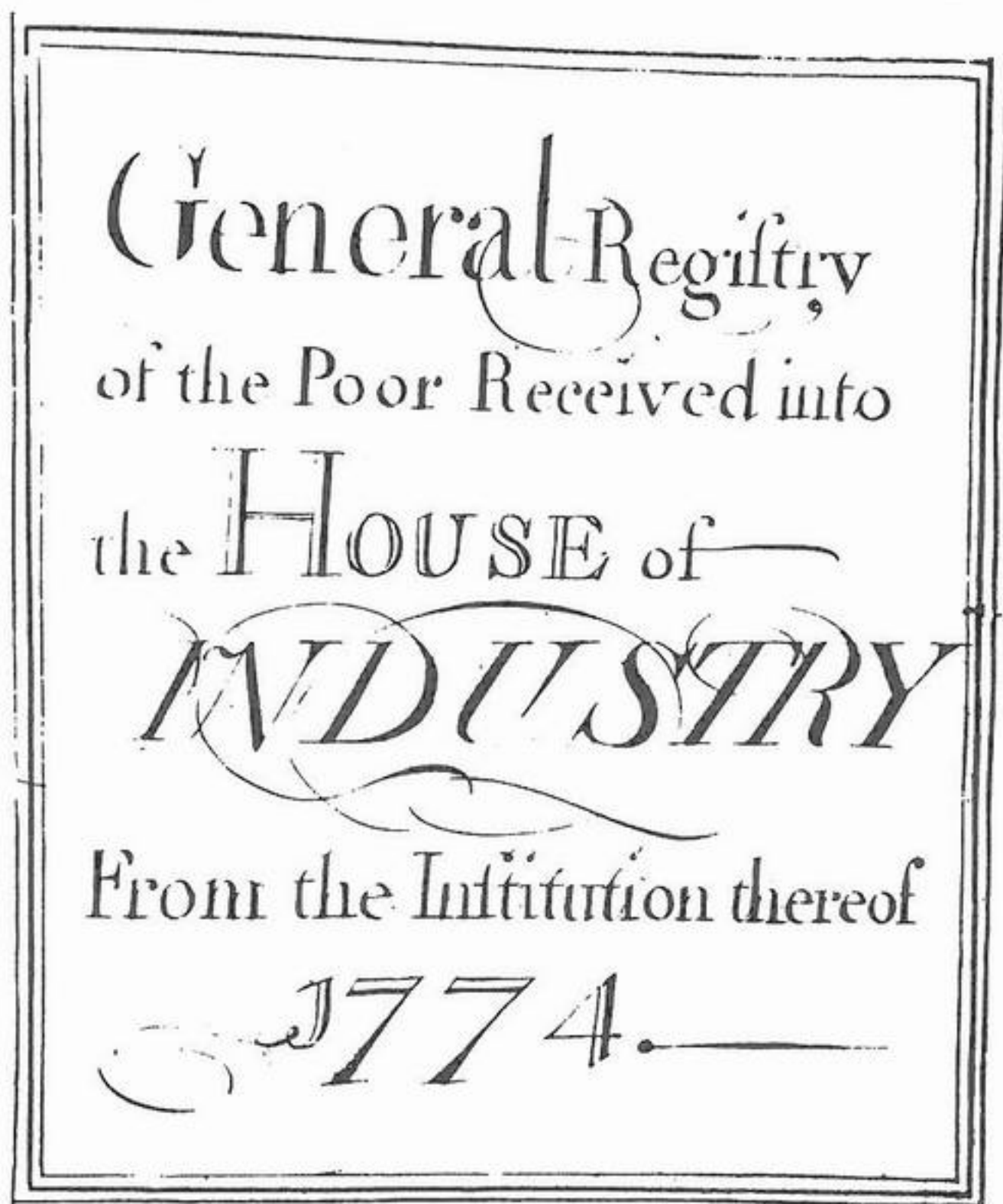
²*Ibid.*

ornamented in front with cut stone; contains sixteen large rooms, with an Infirmary at the foot of the garden in the rear of the house, and a number of cells for lunatics, to the latter of which purpose £200.00 were given by the late Dr. E. Smythe of the city of Dublin".³

The outward facade of the building was vandalised when the original doorway was enlarged and converted into an archway for the passage of large vehicles. The cumbersome white-painted protuberance now over the archway is an eye-sore which has completely destroyed the appearance and line of the entire frontage. Until recently the main depot and store of the Limerick City Corporation, it is presently being converted into a residential unit.

During his recent visit to the city, Lord Limerick graciously presented a Register of this House of Industry to the Mayor, Alderman G. O'Driscoll, who has deposited it in the city archives. It is a valuable addition to the city's history, a document which gives us an insight, and a not very flattering one, into pre-famine Limerick.

The Register is a large quarto, 94-page ledger, bound in rowan with decorations in blind around its edges. Though now scuffed and with cracks on the back joint, it is still in



Illus. 2. Title page of the Register.

³J. Ferrar, *The History of Limerick*, Limerick 1787, p. 597.

reasonably good condition. The front cover is neatly hand-printed with black ink, now faded: WORK HOUSE, / LIMERICK: / GENERAL REGISTRY / 1774. As illustrated (Illus. 2), the title page is finely executed and framed with a border of red and black lines. Lined by hand both horizontally and vertically, it lists all the inmates admitted between the 19th of September, 1774, and the 9th of May, 1793—approximately 19 years. The verso of each folio is divided into the following heads: No./Name/Age/Religion [R.C., Prot.]/Occupation/Late Residence/Admitted /Vol.-Comp.); the recto is headed: No. of bed/Condition when received [healthy/sickly]/Disease when received/ How Disposed of [Discharged, Died, Eloped]/Condition when discharged [Healthy, Sickly]/Observations.

There are 2,908 entries in the Register. As one would expect, the majority are listed as Roman Catholics. Surprisingly, approximately 450 Protestants are listed, and one Quaker, a James Nicholson from "The North" who was admitted on the 28th of July, 1786, and died on the 21st of November of the same year.

From the first entry on the 19th of September, 1774, to the end of that year, sixty-six people, forty-six males and twenty females, were admitted, mostly by compulsion. Of these, fifty-six were Roman Catholics, the remainder Protestants. When admitted, forty are listed as healthy while the others suffered from a multiplicity of diseases. During this period of time, twenty-one inmates died, over thirty were discharged, and four eloped. The practice of "jumping over the wall", "over the garden gate" or simply "through the front door" became much more prevalent as the years passed, indicating dissatisfaction with the harsh life in the Institution, and probably the human desire for freedom however depraved or ill one may be.

From accounts of those who visited it, as well as from the various brief but graphic words or phrases in the "Observations" column, it is evident that life in the House was harsh and often cruel. As early as 1801, we find that Rev. Foster Archer, a Corkman, in his capacity as His Majesty's Inspector of Prisons has this to report: "The House of Industry, Where an Inhuman Practice Prevails of Putting Chains and heavy Logs on Vagrants Sick and Well Industrious or Idle, Orderly or Riotous. I had those chains removed from Diseased the Industrious and Well Behaved".⁴ In 1805, John Carr, in his *Tour of Ireland*, described his visit to Limerick where he found the House of Industry "a gloomy abode of mingled want, disease, vice and malady" (see Appendix).

While the number of inmates increased each year the additions that were made to this building, mainly because of lack of space, were not great. Thus, overcrowding was inevitable. For instance, in 1787, eighty-six people were admitted, four hundred and fifty in 1827, and five hundred and sixty-seven in 1840.

A certain carelessness in the entries indicates that, as the years passed, the situation in the house got more chaotic. The bed number for each inmate is seldom given; those compulsorily admitted far exceeded those who entered freely; the observations column is often left blank, and the former residence of the inmates rarely given. Even the handwriting of whoever entered the details, though readable, seems to be more hurriedly written. The number of female inmates in the thirty to forty age group is high. Though we are not told whether these were married or unmarried, one suspects that they were largely deserted wives, since we find that they are often admitted with one or two children. The poignancy of some of these entries is indeed heartbreaking: the insane, the blind, the crippled, those

⁴P. B. Lysaght, "The Reverend Foster Archer's Visit to Limerick and Clare, 1801", *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 18(1976), 52.

⁵J. Carr, *The Stranger in Ireland; or a Tour in the Southern and Western Parts of that Country, in the Year 1805*, London 1806, p. 324.

"dead drunk", those "stark mad", those "full of whiskey", those "wh", "foul", and "loose women", and those "big with child", are all here. It excuse those in authority, or understand their insensibility, when we find, that a "woman who came in drunk", was "turned out being in labour". One, I think, a woman, who came in drunk with two sons aged four and two and a four months old daughter, eloped after two months by being "stole over the wall by the Mother". One would hope that this sad story might possibly have had a happy ending. Perhaps they lived happily ever after with the loving mother who rescued them?

The inmates were, as one would expect, mainly from Limerick and its surroundings. A surprising number of tradesmen and even one farmer found sanctuary in the house. But it was the poor, the beggars, the strollers, servants, labourers, lunatics, harlots and the rest that are in the majority. As one leafs through the Register one comes across some surprising inmates. Listed are two Frenchmen, and also two Americans, one a beggar from New York. There are several Englishmen, a few Scotsmen, and most unexpected of all perhaps, a Signor Lahore, aged 40, a Dancing Master from Italy, and, strangely enough, a Protestant. Having been detained for about six months, he "eloped while out for a walk". There is a curious modern ring to the number of residents entered as "from the North".

For one reason or another, usually by being redeemed by a friend of relative, or on payment of a fine, many inmates were discharged after a short stay. The number who died was not as numerous as one would expect. Eloping was quite common, but how many of these were subsequently "compulsorily readmitted" is impossible to ascertain. Very few seem to have been detained for more than a year. Quite a number of infants found abandoned were taken in. Again, many were discharged by the Mayor or the Committee; others gained their freedom by promising to quit the city or return to wherever they came from. Quite a few women, who one suspects were formerly in the service of influential people, were subsequently claimed and released by these. Overall, one gets the impression of a constant come and go, the activity of a hive rather than the passivity of a home.

During its existence the House of Industry helped in an infinitesimal way to ameliorate the wretched conditions of the few who were fortunate enough to be admitted, or even compelled, to seek refuge within its walls. The city at the time was exceedingly cramped and insanitary, and its inhabitants poor. Dr. Pococke, who visited Limerick in 1725, states that "the town consists of narrow lanes, and is a very dirty disagreeable place".⁶ A like account is given by John Barrow, who in his *Tour of Ireland* in 1835 wrote: "Nothing that I had yet seen equalled the streets and houses of this Old Town [The English Town] as I understand it to be called for their dirty, dingy, dilapidated condition, the people at the doors, the windows, and in the street, ragged, half-naked and squalid in their appearance".⁷ One can assume that in the eighty-three years interval between these two accounts nothing much changed. From these and many other accounts we are left in no doubt as to the miserable state of the city at the time. The overcrowding, the unsanitary conditions, the dampness and the dark in which untold numbers of the poor languished, must give us pause.

Perhaps, those unfortunates in the House of Industry were the lucky ones? Was it not far, far better to be inside with stirabout and new milk for breakfast, potatoes and sour milk for dinner and a bed of straw,⁸ than to be one of those outside, cooped up in some

⁶G. T. Stokes (ed.), *Pococke's Tour in Ireland in 1725*, Dublin 1891, p. 113.

⁷J. Barrow, *A Tour Round Ireland, through the Sea-Coast Counties, in the Autumn of 1835*, London 1836, p. 279.

⁸Fitzgerald and McGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 597.

overcrowded tenement, both hungry and cold? Perhaps it was, but those existing in poverty outside had at least their freedom, something more precious and preferable to the rigid discipline within its walls.

These glimpses of Limerick which the Register gives us may bruise our local pride but it is folly to ignore them. Individually, this long and dreary list of crushed humanity, with all their diseases, all their human failings and all their sad escapades, are nothing more than ghostly cyphers whose past or future will forever remain unknown. But bulk them together, shuffle them about, and they reveal a sad and unpleasant page of Limerick's story.

APPENDIX

John Carr's Description of the House of Industry, 1801

...if the traveller will take the trouble of walking over Thomond's bridge and enter the house of *Industry*, as it is called. He will quit a noble city, gay with novel opulence and luxury, for a scene which will strike his mind with horror. Under the roof of this house, I saw madmen *stark naked* girded only with their irons, standing in the rain, in an open court, attended by *women*, their cells upon the ground-floor, scantily supplied with straw, damp, and ill-secured. In the wards of labour, abandoned prostitutes, in rags and vermin, each loaded with a long chain and heavy log, working only when the eye of the superintending officer was upon them, are associated throughout the day with respectable old female housekeepers, who, having no children to support them, to prevent famishing, seek this wretched asylum. At *night*, they sleep together in the same room; the sick (unless in very extreme cases) and the healthy, the good and the bad, all crowded together. In the venereal ward, the wretched female sufferers were imploring for a little more covering, whilst several idiots squatted in corners, half naked, half famished, pale and hollow-eyed, with a ghastly grin, bent a vacant stare upon the loathsome scene, and consummated its horror. Fronting this ward, across a yard, in a large room, nearly thirty feet long, a raving maniac, instead of being strapped to his bed, was handcuffed to a stone of 300 lbs. weight, which, with the most horrible yells, by a convulsive effort of strength, he dragged from one end of the room to the other, constantly exposed to the exasperating view and conversation of those who were in the yard. I have been well informed that large sums of money have been raised in every county for the erection of mad-houses: how has this money been applied?

The building of this lazar-gaol is so insecure, that the prostitutes confined in it, although ironed and logged, frequently make their escape. No clothing is allowed to these poor wretches but what they bring into the prison, or can earn, or beg. Upon enquiry I found, what I need scarcely relate to my reader, that the funds are very inadequate, that it is supported by presentments and charity, and very seldom visited by those whom official duty, if not common humanity, ought to have conducted there. The number of miserable wretches in this house amounted to one hundred and thirty-eight. The Governor appeared to be a humane man, and seemed deeply to regret what he could not conceal.

One of the naked subjects which I mentioned, lost his senses by an excess of mathematical research, the other by a disappointment of the heart, and the third, who was in the same yard, by drunkenness: a more affecting and expressive groupe for the pencil, could never be presented. In one cell, covered to his chin in straw, lay a hoary-headed man, who would never speak, nor take any thing unless conjured to do so by the name of "the Most High".