

AS I SEE IT

Anne Sheridan



Women still being let down by State

THERE ARE many reasons we can be ashamed about this Government, and the State's most recent forefathers.

We can be ashamed about the state of the country's finances, its failure to manage the health system, its inadequacy in tackling the rise in suicide, obesity, or making millions of euro in excise duty from people smoking and drinking themselves to death.

We can be ashamed that this is a country that celebrates the opening of roads and tunnels, further bankrupting the taxpayer, over protecting its heritage and environment.

Like the moniker on the now infamous T-shirt, we could say: "Keep going, sure it's grand." But it's not really grand, no matter how much we try to turn the whiskey red-dened cheek.

For many people there is one issue the Government has failed to address in any shape or form that is more enraging than any other.

Abortion. A word that still makes us weep, look away, and has politicians running for cover.

Six successive Governments have failed to take action on the 1992 Supreme Court judgement, which allowed for abortions to be carried out in Ireland where the life of the mother was at risk.



Early advocate: Jim Kemmy called for abortion to be legal in certain circumstances in the 1980s

A lot of hurt and lives have been lost or irrevocably damaged between then and now, all because the Government at the time couldn't look the issue - or their electorate and power base - in the eye and do what they thought was right.

One decision. A decision that hundreds of Irish women make each and every day. It is gut-wrenching, it is heart-breaking and it is often the single biggest decision they will make in their lives.

It's a monumental choice, but it's often made by women afraid to turn to another for support. They are told the pros, but never told the cons. It's a choice they will struggle with for years to come, which gives some context to the Government's indecision over 20 years.

Can the State once and for all lift its head out of the sand, face this emotive minefield and help women make the right decision?

The Irish website 'Women Hurt by Abortion' reveals the devastating impact abortions have had on their lives. Many suggest they might not have made the same choice if they knew that their lives would have been robbed in the process too. Unlike the young girl boarding a flight for London or Liverpool on her own, the Irish Government and its host of experts no doubt knows the arguments for and against.

It can help her. It can help the woman unable to go ahead with her pregnancy because her life is at risk. It can help women full stop.

The State can guide women, but it doesn't have to make the choice for them. It was never their decision to make. Instead, they just ignored her cries for help - and the unborn child's too.

Electrifying the Nicholas St almshouses in early 1963

Fifty years ago, the plight of 22 widows living in squalor in the Nicholas Street almshouses sparked an outpouring of charity from around the world, writes **Gerard Fitzgibbon**

IN 1691, the year when Williamite guns tore a hole in the Englishtown walls and Patrick Sarsfield surrendered Limerick at the end of its second great siege, people moved into a small row of innocuous limestone houses built in the castle's shadow.

With pepper pot chimneys facing out onto a small courtyard off Nicholas Street, the houses were part of the legacy that an English administrator, Jeremy Hall, bequeathed to the city. For three centuries after, these almshouses sheltered elderly widows under the keep of a charitable trust that carried Hall's name.

However 50 years ago, in the late spring of 1962, the decrepit state of the houses became front-page news. The damp, cold homes had barely been touched since they were built, and the people that they sheltered were at risk of being forgotten.

The story of the Nicholas Street almshouses sparked a wave of outrage and sympathy which reached far beyond the city, and caused an outpouring of charity that nudged the widows, ever so slightly, into the 20th century.

Jeremy Hall was an Englishman who came to Dublin in

1639 at the age of 19 to study. He later moved to Limerick after he received employment working with the Governor of Munster, the Earl of Orrery.

Hall was paid an income of £100, but he supplemented this with rents from a number of properties he acquired in the city. He later left the city after the Earl's death, and it is not exactly clear when he passed away. However in his will, dated March 1 1687, Hall specifically outlined what he wanted to happen to his estate, and in particular the site off Nicholas Street.

As well as the creation of a school, Hall wished that houses to the rear, near Barrack Street, would become homes for "four old aged, unmarried and four old aged women, widows, who are not able to labour to get their livelihood, nor have relations

that are able to maintain them".

The houses were administered by a charitable trust for generations, before they were gradually absorbed into State provision.

However by March 1962 the

“We got sick and tired of promises and decided to do it ourselves”

houses stood essentially as they were when they were first built, untouched and largely forgotten. A total of 22 widows lived there at this point, but their living conditions were terrible. They had no running water, and the houses were damp and

poorly insulated. An article in the Limerick Leader edition of March 28 carried a report from a city council meeting in which Labour TD and Alderman, Stephen Coughlan, attacked the rotten state of the almshouses. Mr Coughlan said that the widows' neighbours had to take it on themselves to ensure that they had fuel and other basic provisions.

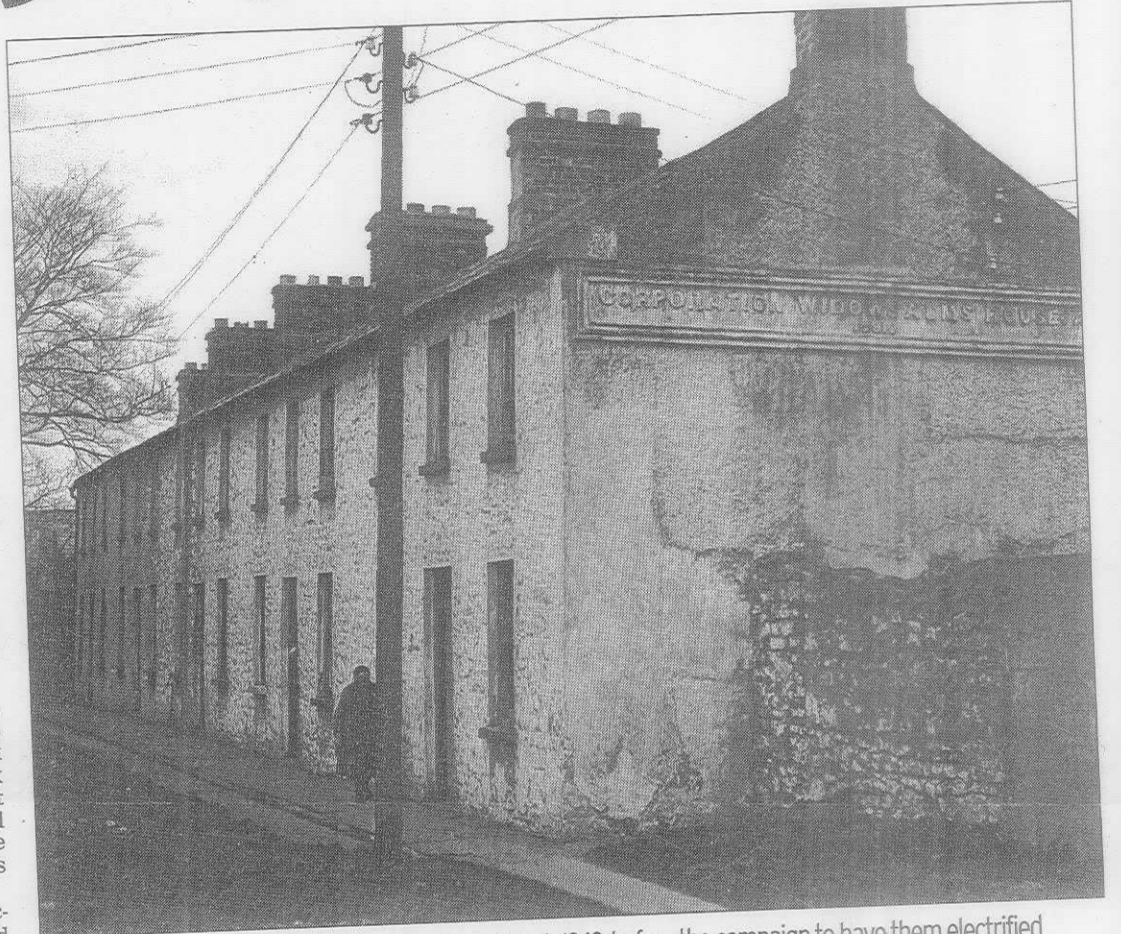
Cllr G B Dillon went further, describing as a "miracle" the fact the widows were able to survive that previous winter. The majority of the widows, the councillor added, were over 75-years-of-age, "had reared decent families" and deserved to be treated better.

However, despite stinging protests, the Corporation manager T F McDermott was frank. While they were investigating installing running water, the Corporation "had no responsibility" for providing light or heat. He admitted that the houses were "not in good condition", but they had nowhere else to put the widows. Even the City Home was full.

But the widows were not simply abandoned to their lot. On April 7, the Leader carried a triumphant front page report that a small charitable campaign started on the widows' behalf by a local publican, Michael Crowe, had exploded to life since their plight was made public. In just two weeks, donations came from as far afield as America, and the Widows' Light Fund Committee now sat on a pot of £150, enough to bring electricity into each home for the first time.

Mr Crowe told the Leader that they did not intend to stop there: "When we have the lighting installed we are going to provide them with new bedding. We are

Bringing a light to



Run down: The Nicholas Street almshouses in March 1962, before the campaign to have them electrified



Widows: Almshouses residents (left to right) Ms Ryan, Ms Kate Riordan, Ms Bridget O'Riordan and Mrs K Kelly

widows' lives



Action centre: Josephine Walsh, Mark Liddy and Catherine Hannon with the redeveloped houses in 2009

going to make this place look like a hotel."

The paper reported that in a week's time the widows, the oldest of whom was 93-year-old Bridget O'Riordan, were to be taken on a day trip to Shannon Airport. When they returned that evening, "they will witness... the switching on of electric light in their homes, that have only known the candle and the oil lamp".

The Leader's reporter spoke to many of the widows themselves, whose quiet dignity pierced the squalor in which they lived. Many of them had lived there for 27 years, receiving a pension of between just 30/- and £2 per week, the paper said. They were used to it.

"One of them said she eats very little meat. Another, who only came out of hospital the day before said: 'I'll have a cup of tea, and a bit of bread and butter for my tea. I'm thankful for that'".

Mr Crowe said that there was no clamour for praise or kudos on the committee's part. They were simply providing for the widows where others had failed. "We got sick and tired of promises and decided to do it ourselves. Promises had been made by politicians, but they were only promises."

The houses were renovated by the Corporation in 1970, and again in 1993, and served as sheltered housing until their residents were moved out and the buildings boarded up. However, acting out of fears that the listed buildings would be damaged or destroyed by vandals, in 2009 they were refurbished as the headquarters of the St Mary's area integrated development group.

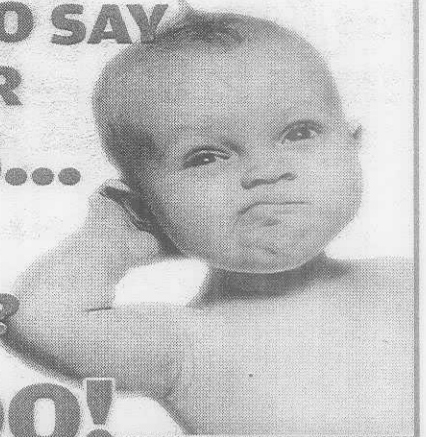


Tough conditions: The oldest resident, 93-year-old Bridget O'Riordan, lights an oil lamp, her only source of light before electricity was installed

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