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When Limerick gloves were the height of style

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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE

Dispelling an urban myth

FROM THE ARCHIVES

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DESPITE the common belief that the Widow's Alms Houses off Nicholas Street were erected in 1691, they were in fact built much later. The myth probably arose from the following inscription that was on gable the buildings "Corporation Widows Alms Houses A.D. 1691".

The Corporation Alms Houses were built on the site of the former St Nicholas Church. This church was destroyed during the seventeenth century sieges but the remains of the building were not removed from the site until early in the following century.

During excavation work carried out in 1998 at the site, a number of human bones were uncovered. These were most likely from the graveyard of the church and were backfilled to prevent further disturbance to the remains.

The original Corporation Widows Alms Houses were erected on the site soon after the remains of St Nicholas Church were removed. These are not the same buildings on Nicholas Street today.

On August 5, 1848 in the Council Minutes, the following was resolved:-

"The Corporation having as one of their Charitable hereditary Trusts the lodging and maintenance of twenty widows and the Alms House in which they resided being in a ruinous state a contract was entered into for the building of a new one, capable of conveniently lodging the widows, the expense there of is by the same contract £396."

At this time, the new Alms Houses were already under construction by John Duggan. Duggan was a well-known builder in Limerick, his firm based in Pery Street in 1846. He was responsible for building Mathew Bridge, Bridge Street in 1844. He was also responsible for extensions to the Workhouse in 1841 and flagging the Milk Market in 1842.

Although Duggan was under contract by the Corporation to build the Alms Houses, they refused to pay him any of the costs up front. By June 1848, Duggan was in debt to

Francis Spaight for building materials. Spaight told him that he would hold the debt if the Corporation would pay even five percent of what was owed. The Town Clerk, gave Duggan a bond promising to pay him in a given time as they were awaiting a loan from the Treasury for £20,000.

The minutes of the Corporation for August 8, 1848 recommended that "the Mayor be authorised to have the rooms of the new Alms House furnished in an economical manner preparatory to their being occupied."

The Chronicle of September 6, 1848 wrote, "The Corporation met in the council chamber, Town Hall, on Monday, the Mayor in the chair... The report of the Finance committee stated that the sum ascertained to be due to Mr John Duggan, builder, was £472 14s 6 1/2d". They also recommended that new Widows' Alms Houses be furnished and that the end of Thomas McKnight's house, adjoin the premises be rebuilt.

The Chronicle went on to report:- "It appeared that the end of the house in question was in course of erection, the work having been commenced on the supposition of the committee's report being approved of. The council were opposed to this proceeding, and a discussion ensued, in the course of which it was elicited that no contract had been advertised for. The report was not passed owing to such irregularity having been sanctioned."

When John Duggan died on March 25, 1849 he was still in debt to Francis Spaight, who took a claim against Duggan's estate before the remaining effects were passed to John Duggan jnr., of 8 Grantham Street, Dublin.

The Chronicle of March 28, 1849 wrote of Duggan's death, "at his house, in Queen-street, Mr John Duggan, Architect - a gentleman of great professional ability and indefatigable industry, whose death is deeply deplored by his family and numerous friends." His wife Bridget passed away three years later in



One of the residents of the Corporation Widows' Alms Houses, in her home in November 1971

1852.

The Alms-houses are mentioned in a summary Corporation of expenditure for the public purposes from October 1842 to March 1850 published in the Limerick Reporter on May 24, 1850, "New Widows' Alms'-house £659"

On November 21, 1849, the Chronicle reported on a number of cases brought to the police court. One case was that of "Hanora Kennedy and Margaret Kett, arrested by Constable Hyland, of Kilmurry station, for stealing geese, near Plassey, were discharged, and the fowl ordered to be sent to the Corporation (Widows) Alms-house."

It took only a year before the Alms Houses were in a state of disrepair as the Chronicle of December 19, 1849 reported:-

"The committee appointed by the Corporation to inspect the Widows Alms-house met yesterday, an vis-

ited the institution, which they found not kept with due regularity, and in consequence resolved to recommend the Council to appoint a resident Porter to take charge of it. The number of widows located there is 19, who are to be supplied with a substantial dinner at Christmas, by the Mayor."

It would take until 1856 before a sewer was placed by the Alms Houses, this sewer fed directly into the river.

Although the buildings saw some repair works carried out over the following century, these were only to give the outside a fresh coat of paint, as in 1910, or fixing general issues such as leaking roofs in 1956.

It is not surprising then that even by 1962; the Alms Houses had no indoor plumbing or electricity. The twenty-two residents, the oldest of whom was ninety-three year old Bridget Riordan, had to use oil

lamps and collect water from an outside pump.

That year, 1962, brought outcry from the public as although the Corporation was investigating installing running water they were not responsible for providing heat or light. This inspired the local community to set up a fund to get electricity into the buildings. This included publican Michael Crowe who acted as the spokesman for the committee. Crowe played his part by putting an extra penny on each pint sold. Soon £150 was raised.

The morning that the electricity was installed, the widows were taken out to Shannon airport for dinner and dancing. When they returned home afterwards, they found the Alms Houses glowing with light. Bridget Riordan managed to use the electricity in her

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Alms Houses' long history

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home at 3 Widows' Alms House for a number of years before she passed away on February 25, 1969.

Although the houses were connected to the main water supply soon after they received electricity, it would take another five years before inside toilets were added to each of the Alms Houses.

The Corporation renovated the houses in the 1970s. In 1990, the Civic Trust landscaped the gardens and fixed the walls around the houses. As the 1990s progressed the widows either moved away or passed away and the buildings were boarded up. In 2009, they were refurbished as the headquarters of the St Mary's Aid.

It is also often stated that Dr

Jeremy Hall founded the Alms Houses on Nicholas Street. Hall's Alms House was located, according to John Ferrar in his 1787 History of Limerick "Opposite the Parade in Limerick" which was at the top of Nicholas Street. Hall's Alms House was home to both men and women. While the Corporation Alms House which operated at the same time were only ever the home to widows.



The date 1691 on the gable end of the Corporation Widows' Alms Houses added to the myth that these houses were erected just after the last Siege of Limerick