

Bedford Row Lying-in Hospital 1812-1975

Bedford Row Lying-In Hospital (hereafter Bedford Row) operated as a voluntary maternity hospital in Limerick from 1812 to 1975.¹

It was the only maternity hospital serving the childbirth needs of the women of Limerick city until 1954, when a temporary maternity unit was opened by the government in the City Home, Shelbourne Road. Samuel Lewis, in 1837, indicated that its initial location was not in Bedford Row and that the bulk of the funding for the hospital came from the generous bequest of a woman:

“The Lying-in Hospital, opened in Nelson Street (now Parnell Street) in 1812, under the control of a board of Trustees, is supported by subscriptions and the interest of a bequest of £1000 from Mrs. White: upwards of 400 patients have been admitted annually since its establishment.”²

By 1866, it had moved to the corner of Bedford Row and Henry Street from where it took its name and where it was to remain until its closure in 1975.³

by Terry Forristal

The hospital issued annual reports that included a review of the year's activities in terms of numbers of births, maternal deaths, listing of medical staff and committee members, statement of accounts and names of subscribers. Several annual reports from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are held in the Bedford Row file of Limerick City and County Archives⁴ (hereafter Archives), the earliest dating back to 1868. This file also contains minute books of two separate hospital committees. The visiting physicians minute book documented the infrequent and sporadic meetings called amongst the professional medical staff, who also operated general practices outside of the hospital. This minute book dates from April 1884 to August 1948. The Ladies Management Committee minute books, from March 1927 to December 1936, reflect a more structured and organised approach, with regular monthly meetings that were well attended. In 1961, this management committee was restruct-

ured and consisted mainly of doctors. The minute book from this changed committee is also available in the Archives up to 1974, but only the Annual General Meetings were documented in it for the later years.

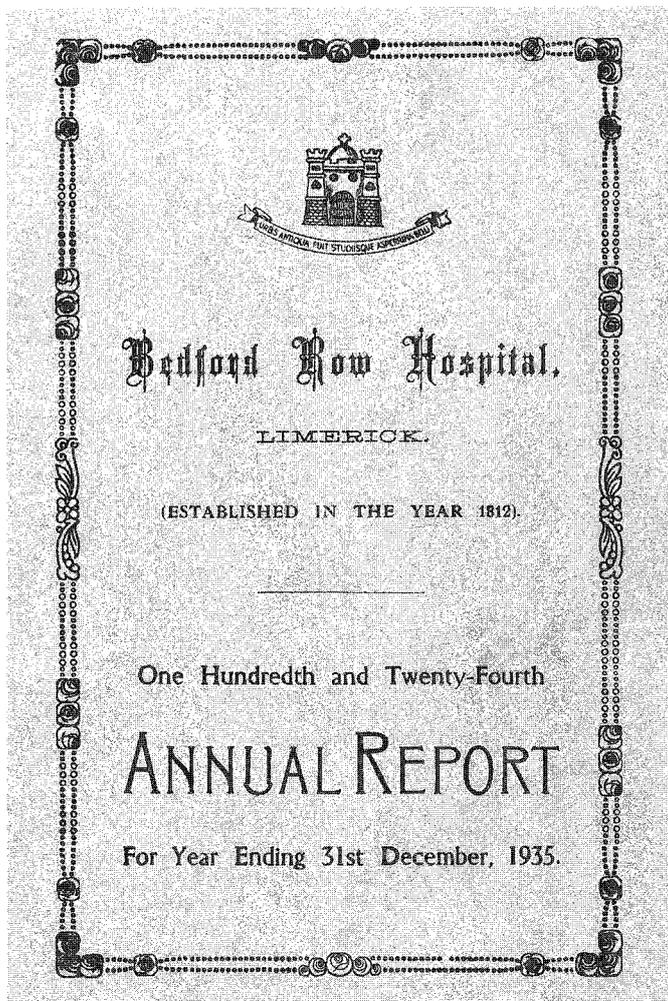
The early annual reports included the following statement, which clearly shows that it was a charitable institution set up primarily for the provision of maternity services for the poor:

“Those who have witnessed the sufferings of the wives and mothers of the poor who meet their hour of trial in a crowded hovel, or dreary cellar, can alone appreciate the benefits of this institution which secures to them safety, comfort and quiet, and in many cases provides clothing for both women and children.”⁵

Services were expanded by 1898, when an extern dispensary was set up in the hospital for the treatment of ‘diseases peculiar to women’; the Child Welfare Committee also operated a clinic for children from the basement of the hospital and a training centre for midwives was set up at the end of the nineteenth century.



View of hospital building before demolition, 2006



From the annual report, 1935

In 1935, the hospital took over the domiciliary maternity services of the city, resulting in the appointment of a midwife to attend to women in their homes during childbirth. Dispensary midwives employed by Limerick Corporation had previously provided this service. Up to the early decades of the twentieth century, home births were the norm in Ireland; lying-in or maternity hospitals were only considered for the use of the poor or if medical intervention was required. The visiting physicians gave their services for the treatment of the poor gratuitously to the hospital, but minutes from the September 1884 visiting physician's meeting show that a ward for the treatment of the doctors' private patients had just been opened within the hospital, so that the doctors' association with the hospital was mutually beneficial, and provided a hospital environment for their paying patients requiring medical assistance to give birth. These private patients were required at that time to pay £1 a week to the hospital for nursing and maintenance. The annual reports also indicate that there was at least one 'Consulting Accoucheur' or obstetrician on the medical staff at all times to treat specialist cases.

From its foundation the hospital was financially dependant on subscriptions, donations and bequests for its survival. Several of the local titled gentry were early supporters of the hospital with names

such as Lady Barrington, Lady Clarina, Lord Dunraven, Lady Inchquin and Lady Massy appearing among the list of subscribers in the 1868 Annual Report. The Ladies Management Committee (hereafter Committee) almost entirely consisted of the philanthropic wives of Limerick business and professional men, with a marked increase in the participation of the wives of the visiting physicians participating on the Committee during the twentieth century. While association with the Hospital might have enhanced one's position socially, there is no doubt that the unpaid membership of the Committee brought with it a lot of hard work and responsibility. The Hospital Commission, in a letter to the Department of Local Government and Public Health in 1936, describes the function of the Committee as similar to that of a Board of Hospital Directors.⁶ While the visiting physicians provided professional medical care and the Matron was in charge of the nursing care and the day-to-day running of the hospital, the minute books show that the Committee ultimately controlled the hospital. It had the power of appointment to all positions on the medical and nursing staff and the Matron and doctors were responsible to it for the functioning of their respective departments. The Committee was responsible for the purchase of equipment, maintenance of the building, sourcing of supplies,



BEDFORD ROW HOSPITAL,

LIMERICK.

*With the Hon. Secretary's
Compliments.*

LIMERICK:

George McKern & Sons, Ltd., Printers and Publishers.
1936.

(Limerick Museum)

management and investment of resources (such as they were). Probably the most demanding and time consuming of all the Committee's duties was its responsibility for ensuring there were enough funds to keep the hospital functioning.

Religious nursing orders were not involved in the running of Bedford Row. This may be due to the fact that, prior to the last decades of the nineteenth century, nuns were not permitted to nurse maternity cases in case their modesty would be wounded.⁷ According to the annual reports, both Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy were regular annual subscribers to the hospital during its early years. The 1935 Annual Report was the first such available report to list Limerick's Catholic bishop, Most Reverend David Keane at that time, as patron and trustee, and from then on the Catholic Church did have a vested interest in the hospital and a Catholic ethos must have prevailed. In a letter to the Minister for Local Government and Public Health in August 1936, the Honorary Secretary of the Committee, Mrs. A. Treacy, pointed out that one of the conditions of a bequest, which was a major source of income, was that the Committee of the hospital be composed entirely of Catholics.⁸ However, nowhere in the minute books of the Committee is there a reference to the involvement of the bishop or any clergy in the day-to-day running of the hospital, nor is there mention of

Bedford Row Hospital.

THE MEDICAL STAFF,

1935.

Consulting Accoucheur:

HUBERT ROCHE-KELLY, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O., D.P.H.

Visiting Physicians:

JAMES ROBERTS, L.R.C.S.I., L.R.C.P.I., L.M.
JOHN G. HOLMES, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O.
TIGHE FOLEY, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O.
WILLIAM P. DUNDON, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O.
DENIS J. CORBOY, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O., D.P.H.
MARY ROCHE-KELLY, L.R.C.S.I., L.R.C.P.I., L.M.

Matron:

MISS C. LAFFAN.

Number of Patients for year ending 31st December, 1935 588

Number of Deaths, 1—Cardiac Kidney.

Bedford Row Hospital.

(Established 1812).

Patron:

HIS LORDSHIP, THE MOST REV. DAVID KEANE.

President:

MRS. L. O'BRIEN-KELLY.

Vice-President:

MRS. FITZJAMES KELLY.

Trustees:

HIS LORDSHIP, THE MOST REV. DAVID KEANE.
LADY NASH. MRS. ROBERTS.
MRS. O'BRIEN-KELLY. MRS. SPILLANE.
MRS. TREACY.

Honorary Treasurer:

LADY NASH, Shannon View House.

Honorary Secretary:

MRS. TREACY, Ard Caoin.

Committee:

| | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| MRS. DUNDON. | MRS. SPILLANE. | MRS. WOODHOUSE. |
| MRS. O'DWYER. | MRS. ROBERTS. | MRS. A. McNEICE. |
| MRS. J. HARTIGAN. | MRS. O'TOOLE. | MRS. R. HERRIOTT. |
| MRS. O'MALLEY. | MRS. J. G. HOLMES. | MRS. CORBOY. |
| MRS. J. S. GAFFNEY. | MRS. SHEEHY. | MRS. T. CORBOY. |
| MRS. McGRATH. | MRS. IRWIN. | MRS. RIORDAN. |
| MRS. DOWLING (Hon. Member). | | |

Law Adviser: JOHN O'BRIEN-KELLY, Esq., Solr., Cecil Street.

Auditors: Messrs. PURTILL & CO., Dublin and Limerick.

Bankers: PROVINCIAL BANK OF IRELAND, LTD.

From the annual report, 1935

(Limerick Museum)

religious ceremonies within the hospital or a deferment to the church or interference from the church on any point of principle or ethics.

As the number of patients grew towards the end of the nineteenth century, from 129 in 1868 to 373 in 1898, there were demands on the hospital in terms of space and facilities. The visiting physician's minute book of 19 June 1895 records the concern of the doctors:

"The medical staff are of the opinion that the present hospital premises are not at all adequate for the requirements and would impress on the Committee the necessity of enlarging the building by purchasing the adjoining house and enlarging the hospital. There is at present no bathroom or any official sanitary arrangements. All the water has to be carried from the basement to the wards by hand. The washing has to be done in the kitchen owing to the want of a laundry. There is no labour ward or operating room. Consequently operation cases have to be treated in the ward in the midst of other patients. These wants need to be remedied or the number of patients reduced."⁹

Although the hospital was in receipt of a regular grant from Limerick Corporation, funding for an expansion of premises with

the resources at the Committee's disposal was just not available.¹⁰

The Committee's minute books from the late 1920s show that the members were doing everything possible to fundraise just to keep the hospital open. They held flag days, whist drives, concerts, dances, garden fetes etc. They received proceeds from locally held events such as pony races, plays, and even the NMBI Rugby Union donated £20 in November 1928. Not surprisingly, this work and fundraising activity began to take its toll on the number of ladies attending the monthly meetings, much to the annoyance of the regular attendees, who on the 1 February 1928 decided 'that ladies not attending meetings should not have a vote and that new members should be added to the committee.'

The financial position of Bedford Row was not unique, as voluntary hospitals in Dublin in the late 1920s were experiencing financial difficulty with 'the National Maternity Hospital unable to raise money to carry out essential repairs and threatening to close its doors.'¹¹ This led to increasing dependence on receipts from private patients to keep such voluntary hospitals solvent. The Bedford Row Annual Report of 1923 shows that receipts from patients totalled £78.6.0 for the year, or 8% of total receipts. This figure had increased to £325.11.0 by 1926, or 23% of total receipts for the year. The Public

Charitable Hospitals Act 1930 established the Hospital Sweepstakes and the Bedford Row Committee was very quick to realise the potential benefits of participating and made a decision in September 1930 to join the Sweepstakes Committee. The hospital fulfilled the requirement that 'not less than twenty five per cent of its total accommodation for indoor patients ... did not pay for treatment in such hospital or ... at a rate not exceeding ten shillings per week.'¹²

The first cheque received from the Sweepstakes in April 1931 came to the hitherto unimaginable sum of £10,996. 6s.3d. This was quickly followed by another cheque for £13,967.6s.5d in July 1931. In fact the amount granted to the hospital from the proceeds of the first six sweepstakes totalled £33,326.14s.4d. However, this large funding came at a price: the minutes of Committee show the members continually having to provide information to the Sweepstakes Committee on the hospital operation, provision of free beds etc. There was a negative consequence of Sweepstake membership for voluntary hospitals: 'Once the hospital accepted the Hospitals Commission shilling, true independence was gone.'¹³ While time and effort spent fundraising effectively disappeared, there was an increase in the number of meetings and paperwork. The hospital also had to appoint the services of a solicitor to deal

Bedford Row Hospital.

BEDFORD ROW, LIMERICK.

The Hospital was established in 1812, and now comprises:

Maternity Wards to which Patients in Labour are admitted at all hours, beds being available for their reception.

Gynaecological Department for treatment of women suffering from diseases peculiar to their sex.

Ante-natal Department for treatment of expectant mothers.

Child Welfare Department for treatment of children up to 5 years.

Extern Maternity Nursing Service with a qualified Maternity Nurse.

The Hospital is intended primarily for the relief of the destitute poor and secondarily for those who, although not destitute, are not in a financial position to pay for treatment either in their own homes or in a Nursing Home.

No charge is made to the destitute poor, but those patients who are insured and whose husbands are employed, contribute half their maternity benefit, that is, one pound,

The Hospital is situated in Bedford Row, Limerick, in the heart of the City, and is readily accessible to those patients who avail of its services.

There is a resident Matron and a staff of qualified Nurses and Probationers.

with the complex legal matters arising out of Sweepstakes membership. The Public Hospitals Act 1933 brought the distribution of the Sweepstakes fund under the entire control of the Minister for Local Government and Public Health through the newly established Hospital Commission. This meant that any plans which the hospital had for spending the Sweepstakes money had to be in line with government policy, which greatly diminished the control of the Bedford Row Committee.

On receipt of the first grants from the Hospital Sweepstakes, the Committee immediately started planning for the hospital's expansion into the adjoining building. However, they were advised by the Hospital Commission in 1933 that a fresh site should be bought for the building of a new hospital. A site was bought at Belfield at the north side of the Shannon River for £2,000 and during 1935, the hospital's architect worked with the Hospital Commission on the design. As this site was considered too small on its own, the adjoining site, which contained the old Belfield House, was purchased for £3,000 in 1936. In 1936 the Department of Local Government and Public Health put forward the proposal that a large maternity hospital be built in the city that would cater for the poor as well as those who could afford to pay.¹⁴ This statement reflected the extent to which the hospital was perceived as being 'private,' despite

the hospitals continued assertion in the annual reports that it was intended primarily for the relief of the destitute poor. The proposed hospital at the Belfield site, with a total of eighty-six beds, would be managed by a committee made up of seven representatives of Limerick Corporation and seven representatives of the Bedford Row Committee, with an independent chairman to be nominated by the Minister.¹⁵ After several meetings with the Corporation and the Department, the Committee agreed with this proposal. Indeed the delay in getting approval at government level for the final hospital building plan was a source of annoyance for Bedford Row. The 1936 Annual Report reflects the feeling of helplessness as they struggled to cope with the limited resources in the Bedford Row premises:

"But the months have passed into another year and nothing definite has been accomplished. The hospital is still carrying on in Bedford Row under many difficulties. The Medical Staff from time to time draw attention to the serious question of overcrowding. Belfield remains an unbuild-on site."¹⁶

The City Manager must have come under pressure from the Committee to move the plans forward, as in an unofficial letter to the Department in 1936 he stated: 'The Committee (comprised exclusively of Ladies) are expecting a letter and they are inclined to be a bit impatient.'¹⁷

Report for 1935.

THE PROPOSED NEW HOSPITAL.

In the 1934 Report reference was made to the fact that a suitable site had been acquired on the Ennis Road for the erection of the new hospital building. The construction, however, has not yet begun, and the work of the Hospital has been continued and will be continued for some time in the old premises at Bedford Row. The accommodation there is far too small for the efficient treatment of the number of cases with which the Hospital has to deal, and it is to be hoped that all the necessary arrangements will be completed in time to permit the foundation stone of the new Hospital to be laid before the end of the year 1936. The original plans, approved by the Hospitals' Committee of Reference, were prepared in respect of the old site; it being at that time decided to erect the new premises there and on an adjoining plot which had been acquired. It was later decided, however, that a site in a new and less congested area would be more suitable, and accordingly a complete new set of plans had to be prepared. At the moment of writing these are being finally approved by the Hospitals' Commission.

OVERCROWDING.

On several occasions during the course of the year under review the Committee has had before it the serious question of overcrowding. The present building is far too small for its purpose and the work of the Hospital is accordingly interfered with and impeded. The Medical and Nursing Staffs find it very difficult indeed to carry on their duties with the small accommodation available, and they, as well as the numbers of patients who are treated in the Hospital, are looking forward eagerly to the time when they will be housed in a larger and better equipped modern Hospital building.

From the annual report, 1935

(Limerick Museum)

The need for accommodation in the hospital had become so acute that the Matron complained in a memorandum to the Committee in June 1935 that three resident student midwives had to vacate their small room at short notice to provide beds for women and their new born babies. While this was unsatisfactory in terms of hygiene for the patients, the young nurses were probably quite pleased to find themselves accommodated in the nearby Bedford Hotel instead.¹⁸ During the early months of 1935, staff and patients had to endure the discomfort of the construction of the cinema in the plot adjoining the hospital.¹⁹ There had been objections raised by the Committee and the Limerick Medical Officer over the operation of a cinema so close to a maternity hospital. They considered the building and operating of such a facility to be a nuisance. In May 1935, Matron complained that the noise of 'pile driving' at a late hour caused considerable shock to the patients and there was an undertaking that this activity would not take place outside the hours of 8am to 6pm. The vibrations of the building works did cause a portion of the ceiling in the Violet Ray room to collapse.²⁰ These events served to strengthen the Committee's resolve to re-locate to Belfield as soon as possible.

The delay in building the new maternity hospital at Belfield dragged on and, as

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The period prior to the change over to the new Hospital is naturally a trying one for the Committee and Staffs, but despite this the work of the Hospital has gone on in an efficient and thorough manner during 1935. It will be seen from the paragraph headed "The Work of the Year" that the number of patients admitted during the year was considerably more than that for 1934. There has been a steady increase in patients for several years, and as the Hospital premises has not been increased, it is easy to understand how difficult it is to carry on the work, but it is gratifying to know that notwithstanding such difficulties every possible care and attention is afforded and the results are eminently successful.

THE URBAN DISTRICT NURSING SCHEME.

The Urban District Nursing Scheme which was inaugurated in 1933 was continued in 1935. It is organised on a solid and satisfactory basis, and the Scheme has been a great benefit to the citizens generally. The final agreement between the Hospital Authorities and the Board of Health was executed early in the year. The Scheme was in operation for some months before the agreement was signed, and it has now been established for over twelve months. Notwithstanding the fact that it has meant additional work for the Hospital the Committee feel that the Scheme is an excellent one, and it is understood that the Board of Health are also satisfied with it. As indicated in the 1934 Report, the Scheme means that the Hospital has taken over the treatment of all maternity cases in Limerick's Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Dispensary Districts which used to be treated by the Board of Health through its own nurses.

During the year under review 106 of these maternity cases were treated and the number of visits made by the Nurse and Probationers who operate the Scheme was 1,484. This shows an increase on 1934 of 46 cases treated and of 684 visits made.

THE HOSPITALS' COMMISSION.

In the course of the year the Committee have had several negotiations and some interviews with the Hospitals' Commission. As in previous years the members of the Committee have found the Commission most helpful, obliging,

From the annual report, 1935

the Hospital Commission was closed for the duration of the Second World War, there was no prospect of alleviation from the overcrowded and unsatisfactory conditions in Bedford Row. While the hospital was able to benefit from the interest accrued from the sound investment of the Hospital Sweepstake money received in the 1930s to meet its day to day expenses, it had to face rising costs due to the war and was not able to spend any of the grant money without the Commission's approval. The 1944 Annual Report once again reflects the struggle of providing the maternity service to 565 patients:

"... often during the year the accommodation was overtaxed and that several times extra beds and stretchers had to be provided at short notice shows clearly how necessary it is to provide extra Maternity Hospital accommodation for the poor of Limerick as early as possible."

It was unfortunate that it was under these conditions that Dr. James Deeny, the newly appointed Chief Medical Advisor (CMA) for the country, paid a visit to Bedford Row in September 1945 during his countrywide hospital assessment tour. He found the maternal and child welfare clinic in the basement to be dirty and seldom used, giving him a bad impression of the hospital in general.²¹

"Limerick generally was very bad. They had some kind of maternity and child welfare set up in a place called Bedford Row. It was dirty and seemed to be used very seldom. I found the dried slime of snail-tracks on the examination couches."²²

Following Dr. Deeny's unfavourable reaction to what he saw in the hospital, the Hospital Commission followed up with two official inspections and, although they reported shortcomings in the hospital structure and layout, they commented that they found that "the Board has always shown willingness to co-operate in achieving any suggested improvements" and praised the advances made in the furnishings and equipment of the labour ward carried out prior to the war.²³ Despite this vindication of the hospital, Deeny's first impression remained and he was adamant that Bedford Row be excluded in the management of any future maternity hospital built in Limerick with government or Hospital Commission funding and, indeed, thought that Bedford Row should be closed down. In an inter-departmental hand-written memo dated 29 October 1946, he made the following statement about the hospital and the hospital authorities:

"The proper solution of this problem is to build a Maternity block at the new

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and courteous in all its dealings with them despite the fact that the selection of the new site, and the consequent change of plans has naturally given the Commission considerable more work as far as this Hospital is concerned. The work of the Commission is arduous and complicated, the requirements of each Hospital participating in the Hospitals Sweeps having to be carefully investigated and dealt with. It is therefore gratifying to the Managing Committee of this Hospital to record their appreciation of the kindly co-operation and assistance which they have always been afforded by the Commission.

WORK OF THE YEAR.

In 1935 the number of patients admitted to the Hospital was 588. This shows an increase of 66 from 1934. One death only was recorded, and in that case the patient was one who had been removed from the City Home in a chronic condition. The Gynaecological Department treated 132 cases, and the attendance amounted to 528.

The Child Welfare Department, which continues under the control of Dr. Roche-Kelly, had a successful year's work. 628 children were treated, and the total attendance was 6,293. In the Ante-natal Ward 150 cases were treated with a total attendance of 1,200.

In the Ultra Violet Ray Department 31 cases were treated. The attendances in this Department totalled 135.

Seven Nurses who presented themselves for the C.M.B. examination in Cork in October were successful, two obtaining honours.

The Committee desires to offer its sincere thanks to all its Subscribers and Donors whose names appear in the appended lists, and to the Medical and Nursing Staffs who have always so cheerfully and kindly carried out their many onerous duties to the patients under their care.

A. TREACY,

Hon. Secretary.

(Limerick Museum)

Regional Hosp. This difficulty is however that these people have £33,000, which they hold. Is there anyway to recover it? Supposing this place is closed down under the Registration of Maternity Homes? What happens to the money? If alternative accommodation is made available at the City Home and Hospital this place to be closed down."²⁴

As documented in his autobiography, it was Deeny's agenda to accomplish the building of a record number of state controlled regional hospitals during his tenure as CMA.²⁵ It is possible that he used his brief one-off visit to Bedford Row as an excuse to bring the provision of maternity services in Limerick under full government control once and for all.

A letter was sent by the Department of Health to the Limerick City Manager, Mr. M. Macken, on 6 July 1948 proposing that a Regional Maternity Hospital, servicing Limerick city and county and parts of Tipperary and Clare, be built on the Belfield site currently owned by the authority of Bedford Row and that this new hospital should be operated exclusively by Limerick Corporation. The building of this hospital was to be financed entirely from Hospital Sweepstake Funds. At a meeting of Limerick City Council on the 9 August, Mr. Macken expressed his delight that the cost of building of the

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| Dr. INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT | | | |
|---|-----|-----|--------|
| EXPENDITURE. | | £ | s d |
| Provisions:— | | | |
| Meat, Fish, Poultry, etc. | 72 | 5 | 7 |
| Eggs, Milk, Bread etc. | 198 | 14 | 5 |
| Fruit and Vegetables | 30 | 19 | 8 |
| Other Items | 298 | 1 | 10 |
| | | 560 | 1 6 |
| Surgery and Dispensary:— | | | |
| Drugs, Chemicals, etc. | 49 | 6 | 10 |
| Dressings and Bandages, etc. | 38 | 15 | 6 |
| Instruments and Appliances | 10 | 14 | 3 |
| | | 98 | 16 7 |
| Domestic:— | | | |
| Repairs and Renewals | 26 | 9 | 3 |
| Bedding, etc. | 31 | 1 | 0 |
| Light, Heat, Power, etc. | 150 | 3 | 5 |
| | | 207 | 13 8 |
| Salaries and Wages (Maintenance):— | | | |
| Lecture Fees | 31 | 10 | 0 |
| Nursing | 484 | 1 | 4 |
| Other Employees | 117 | 6 | 0 |
| | | 632 | 17 4 |
| Administration:— | | | |
| Printing, Stationery, Postage, etc. | 11 | 2 | 1 |
| Auditor's Fees | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| Sundries | 127 | 3 | 6 |
| | | 154 | 0 7 |
| Miscellaneous:— | | | |
| Insurance, Building, Furniture, etc. | 27 | 7 | 4 |
| Bank Interest | 12 | 16 | 9 |
| Rent, Rates, etc. | 38 | 8 | 10 |
| | | 78 | 12 11- |
| Balance being excess of Total Income over | | | |
| Total Expenditure | | 144 | 5 7 |

£1,876 8 2

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31st DECEMBER, 1935. Cr.

| INCOME. | | £ | s d | £ | s d |
|---|-----|----|-----|-------|-----|
| Voluntary Gifts:— | | | | | |
| Subscriptions and Donations | | | | 10 | 1 0 |
| Receipts for Services Rendered:— | | | | | |
| Private Patients | 392 | 7 | 0 | | |
| Fees—Nurses and Probationers | 195 | 0 | 0 | | |
| | | | | 587 | 7 0 |
| Grants:—Public Bodies | | | | 50 | 0 0 |
| Invested Property:— | | | | | |
| Interest, Dividends, etc. (other than from Sweep Funds) | 238 | 12 | 4 | | |
| Interest from Sweep Funds | 934 | 15 | 0 | | |
| Rents | 55 | 12 | 10 | | |
| | | | | 1,229 | 0 2 |

£1,976 8 2

From the annual report, 1935

(Limerick Museum)

hospital would not have to be met locally. However, at least one city councillor, Ald. J. Reidy T.D., did consider the impact on Bedford Row and said that the Council:

".. must have consideration for the very useful work being carried out, under most difficult circumstances during the past number of years, by the staff and board of the Bedford Row hospital...any action of the Council on the Departments letter should be carried out after consultation with the authorities of the Bedford Row institution."²⁶

Mr. Macken replied: "if the Council did not express a desire to immediately go ahead with the erection of the hospital, the Minister might put the work in the hands of the County Council."²⁷

As the minute books for the Bedford Row Committee are unavailable between 1937 and 1961, there is no record of what their reaction was to this offer. One can only imagine the dismay and disappointment felt after nearly fifteen years of working towards and planning a new hospital while simultaneously running a busy and overcrowded facility, only to have not only the plans, but the very land purchased for the hospital, to be taken over in a 'hostile' manner. However, they must not have been taken totally by surprise as the *Limerick Leader* reported on the 13 September 1948 that Bedford Row had agreed to transfer their interest in the site to the Corporation. Such a

quick decision indicates that the Committee realised they would never be able to build a hospital on the site without government funding and they might also have come under pressure from the City Council, who were in fear of losing the proposed Regional Maternity Hospital to another local authority.

Building of the Regional Maternity Hospital at Belfield commenced in 1955 and it received its first patients in October 1960. The Bedford Row Annual Reports of 1950 and 1952 show the administration trying to cope with the usual problems of increased business and overcrowding. In the 1950 Annual Report, the Honorary Secretary, Mrs. Treacy states:

"Were it not for the interest received from the investments which were made from the Hospitals' Trust Funds, the income of this hospital would be in a sorry state and the Hospitals' Commission has been very generous and understanding in making good the annual deficits on the running of the Hospital."²⁸

Mrs. Treacy was taking the opportunity to impress upon the Commission the necessity of allowing the hospital to retain the £28,000 approx. that remained from the grants made in the 1930s. In the 1952 Annual Report, Dr. J.G. Holmes adopted a tone that was critical of the government:

".... it appears that during 30 years of our own Government the Department of Health has not made one extra bed available for Maternity Service in Limerick City. During those 30 years this Maternity Hospital with its voluntary Medical Staff has devoted itself primarily to the welfare and relief of the destitute poor women who are admitted in labour at all hours."²⁹

A breakdown of the birth locations within the city for 1952 (see Table 1) shows that Bedford Row (including its extern home delivery service) was responsible for nearly 50% of the 1,285 total births:

Table 1: 1952 Birth Locations in Limerick city.

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Bedford Row | 572 |
| St Gerard's MH* | 182 |
| St. Anthony's MH* | 181 |
| Alexandra MH* | 148 |
| Mrs. O'Malley's MH* | 11 |
| Bedford Row Extern | 65 |
| Other Locations ³⁰ | 126 |

Source: Department of Health Files,³¹ and 1952 Bedford Row Annual Report.

*MH: Maternity Home.

These figures also show the high usage of private maternity homes, which had become increasingly popular during the twentieth century and indeed which were necessary to meet the maternity needs of the city. Two additional maternity homes, the Marian in Davis Street (which moved to O'Connell Ave. in 1970) and Tranquilla in Fort Mary Park, opened in 1956.

The Department of Health remedied the lack of state provision of maternity beds by opening up a seventeen-bed maternity unit in the City Home in Shelbourne Road in 1954, pending the construction of the Regional Maternity Hospital. The opening of this facility did have a small and probably welcome impact on the numbers attending Bedford Row, with number of patients reducing from 771 in 1953 to 604 in 1955.

The experiences of some women who gave birth in Bedford Row in the 1950s supports the picture portrayed by the Committee and the doctors in the annual reports: it was a hospital sadly lacking in funding and suitable accommodation. One woman related how, after a long and difficult delivery, she was unable to climb the stairs from the delivery room to the ward. She had to be carried up in a chair by a heavily pregnant nurse and a member of the kitchen staff. The nurse stumbled during the climb, resulting in all three nearly falling back into the stairwell. Other women remarked on the bad food and the provision of only one toilet for the patients in the public ward. There was also only one bath available for the use of all the women in the hospital. However, on the positive side, the women praised the standard of nursing care and the large number of cleaning staff who worked to keep the spread of infection to a minimum. Many women also liked the fact that their G.P. could deliver their babies in the hospital, in either a private or public capacity, if he was a member of the visiting physician panel. This practice was not permitted in the maternity unit of the City Home or in the Regional Maternity when it opened in 1960. Babies could only be delivered by the state-appointed midwives, doctors or consultants attached to these institutions.

Bedford Row continued to function as a lying-in/maternity hospital for fifteen years after the Regional Maternity started operations in 1960. It was regarded, understandably but inaccurately, by many at this time as a private maternity home which was owned by the doctors. The new Management Committee formed in 1961 was composed mainly of doctors, with only a few lady members remaining from the old Committee. Otherwise the structure remained the same. It was still a voluntary hospital which was officially owned by trustees, and no one received an income or profit from managing the hospital. After the building of the Regional Maternity Hospital commenced, Bedford Row was excluded from receipt of any further aid from the Hospital Commission. The Corporation withdrew its annual grant in 1956. Income continued to come from

interest on investments, bequests and private patients receipts and the 1953 Health Act resulted in the local health authority subsidising the accommodation costs of patients in voluntary hospitals to a maximum of 6/- a day. Monthly Committee meetings show receipts from Limerick, Clare, Tipperary and Kerry County Councils to cover the patients treated from these counties. This source of finance proved to be significant: in October 1965, for example, the local authority contribution made up 60% of total receipts for the month.³² Despite competition from the modern Regional Maternity Hospital, Bedford Row remained popular, annual reports indicating that the number of births there increased from 267 in 1960 to 796 in 1971. However, due to inflation, rising wages and the cost of new equipment, debts increased and pressure from the financial institutions meant that Bedford Row had no option but to close down in 1975. This was despite extensive lobbying at national and local level for state assistance.³³

For over one hundred and forty years Bedford Row had been the only maternity hospital in operation in Limerick. It was founded thanks to the generous bequest of a wealthy woman who wanted to help impoverished Limerick women giving birth. It continued to be managed almost exclusively by women, for no monetary return, until 1960. As Bedford Row is an important part of the social history of the city and in light of the recent demolition of the building, it is fitting that a plaque be erected to commemorate the important work and sacrifices made by Limerick women in the running the hospital. Such a commemoration would realise the wishes of Mrs. Treacy, the long-serving secretary of the Committee, who reflected in the joint Annual Report of 1955/1956:

"But even when the new Regional Maternity Hospital is in operation, Limerick will still remember 'Bedford Row' with justifiable pride and will ever be grateful to all those who, on Medical Staffs, Nursing Staffs, on Governing Committees of Bedford Row so faithfully and successfully catered for the women of Limerick for almost a century and a half."³⁴

This commemoration should also pay tribute to the generations of Limerick women who laboured and gave birth there, not always in the most ideal of circumstances, over the 163 years of its existence.

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25. James Deeny, *To Cure and to Care* (Dun Laoghaire, 1989), p. 142.
26. *Limerick Leader*, 11 Aug, 1948.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Bedford Row Annual Report 1950, p. 6.
29. Bedford Row Annual Report 1952, p. 9.
30. 126 is the difference between the 1,285 total births and the sum of the maternity home and Bedford Row births for that year. This figure would have almost consisted entirely of private home births.
31. Unofficial unsigned hand-written document between memo dated 18 September 1953 and 12 October 1953, (N.A.I. H18/7/1 Vol. II).
32. Bedford Row Committee Minute Book, Nov.1965.
33. Bedford Row Committee Minute Book, 1973, 1974 A.G.M.
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