

# 'The Distress of the Lower Class'

Some Further Government Correspondence from Limerick, 1847

Commander Hill to Sir R. Routh.

Limerick, January 15, 1847.

I have taken the opportunity of meeting the City of Limerick Relief Committee to-day. Thomas Wallnutt, Esq., mayor, in the chair, Mr. E. Costello, secretary and treasurer.

The Committee have continued their meetings without intermission from last season.

Since the 15th of August, local subscriptions were made, amounting to .....500l  
 Donation from Government .....250l  
 Additional local subscriptions.....1,250l  
 .....2,000l  
 Paid for meal .....6,559l

At present there is no cash in hand, but 104 tons of meal at 14l per ton.

Loss from selling under cost price, and the expenses attending sale and carriage .....700l

I inquired about the meal valued at 14l per ton, and find that the Committee were fortunate in making a purchase of corn from Vigo about the commencement of December at 12l 2s 5d. per ton, amounting with extra expenses and grinding to 14l per ton.

I pointed out to the Committee that the price at which the meal is sold should, as nearly as possible, be the same as the market prices.

The chairman and Committee replied that they consider it absolutely necessary to sell below the market price for the safety of the people. The mayor added, that he could not answer for the security of the city one day if they did not sell below the market price, Your letter of the 1st instant signed by Mr. Stanley, addressed to the late mayor, respecting a Government donation of 250l on condition that food is sold at cost price, was placed before me; the difference between cost price and the prevailing current price in the market, created some difficulty.

The Committee having purchased their meal at 14l per ton, are now retailing it at 1s. 9d. per stone.

A good regulation has been adopted by limiting the sale of meal to indigent families by cards ruled for every day of the week, and adapted for eight weeks. The daily quantity, which is regulated according to the size of the family, is mentioned at the head of the card, and on each day's issue a small hole is cut out of the card representing the day.

Six hundred and five people are now on the Public Works from this Committee, and they are most desirous of obtaining labour for a large number more, who are represented as being destitute.

The distress of the lower class in the city of Limerick does not occur so directly from the failure of the potato crop as in the case of the conacre tenant of the rural districts. I took the liberty (with reference to the Public Works not being a permanent measure for the relief of the distressed, and not supposing that funds would always be collected to supply food below the current price) to inquire of the Chairman if any system was likely to be adopted having in view the employment of the labouring class that were now depending on the Public Works, so that they might not become permanent paupers, to be supported by the local rates. The mayor replied that the subject had not been considered, but that it was of importance, and should be brought before a full Committee on a future occasion. The people who are on the Public Works from the city of Limerick are labourers, whose precarious and scanty wages will not afford them food at the present crisis, and a description of tradesmen (weavers in particular) who are at present also suffering both from the depressed state of their trade and the change of food, from the cheap potato to the dearer corn.

This Committee are of opinion that labourers do less on the Public Works than in other employment, and hence arises the preference to the Relief Works; but I have not been able to discover that any other



People gathering shell-fish.



Scene at Skibbereen. Engraving, *Illustrated London News*, 20 February, 1847.

labour has been offered; at the same time, the cause of neglect in cultivation is attributed to the Public Works.

The formation of a dock is likely to be commenced in the spring, and the corporation intend filling in a portion of the river to build a market, provided they can raise funds; these are the only works that I have heard of, unless an embankment round Queen's Island, which has been commenced by the Woods and Forests, but suspended for the last three months, should be again resumed.

The Committee are now busily engaged in establishing soup kitchens in each of the five parishes of the borough; their local subscriptions for this purpose already amount to 570l, and they have promised me it is their intention to adhere to the Government instructions in the sale of the soup, and will apply for a donation equal to their subscriptions.

This market, in point of quantity, is well supplied with bread stuffs, great supplies daily arriving; but Limerick is said to be the highest importing market in Ireland, which the chairman begged particularly to notice.

**Commissary-General Hewetson to Mr. Trevelyan.**

Limerick, February 2, 1847.

I consider the enclosed letter a document of so interesting a character that I do not wish to delay a post to copy it. If you will kindly cause a copy to be made and returned to me, I shall be obliged.

**Enclosure.**

**Doctor Gelston to Commissary-General Hewetson.**

65, George's Street, Limerick,  
February, 2, 1847.

In reference to our conversation yesterday with respect to the diminution of disease in this locality, I have hurriedly placed in a tangible shape the few following facts, and which are uncontradictable:-

In our County Infirmary, a very large hospital containing 120 beds, and also affording vast relief to an immense number of external applicants for medical aid, we find that during former years we were constantly obliged to defer the admission of patients for three and four

months beyond the date of their application at the hospital, by which many cases, at the time easily cured (had they been admitted), were rendered of a chronic, and in some instances, most unmanageable character, and even in a few, death terminated their sufferings before the arrival of the day on which a bed could be rendered vacant for them in this institution. The past six months presents a happy contrast to the above. Every patient whose case can be benefited is now admitted on the day of application, instead of, as formerly, being deferred for months. Indeed we have on an average 20 beds vacant for the last three months; a fact unparalleled for the last seven years. The character of disease has also altered in no small degree, for in former times, when the poor peasant's only food was the watery potatoe, diseases of the digestive functions were of most frequent occurrence, characterised chiefly by irritation of the mucous membrane of the alimentary canal; at present these diseases are, comparatively speaking, rare, and when the people become better accustomed to the use of grain, we shall, I hope and expect, have a further diminution of disease. These facts may tend to show one cause of the great fatality of typhus fever in this county, for no more serious complication can occur in this disease than irritation of the alimentary canal; and we should hope, from a like reasoning, that the mortality of fever will become much lessened; and at present our District Fever Hospital is considerably under its average number of patients at this season of the year. I give you a return of the number of cases admitted into the latter institution for the years 1845 and 1846.

Year, 1845, number of patients, 5391; year, 1846, number of patients, 2204.

In the month of February of 1846, there were admitted 165 cases, but in the past month of the present year, the average number admitted did not exceed 64. In the entire of the past year, each month shows a gradual decrease in the number of applications for admission. The number received in January 1846, being 172; and in the December following, only 72.

In our City Dispensary, there is also a very considerable diminution in the number seeking for medical relief. These facts are still further borne out in the hospitals attached to our county and city gaols; I can also confidently state that, within my recollection, there has not been so little of the ordinary classes of disease amongst the poor as at the present period.

In the City of Limerick Infirmary, an equal diminution of disease presents itself, alone attributable to the change in the diet of the poor consequent on the abolition of the potato.

I do not mean to deny the existence of suffering and great debility in those districts where food is not easily procured, but I strongly assert that if the lower classes be employed, and thus enabled to procure grain in lieu of their former, we shall have a much better and more healthy population.

**Captain Hill to Mr. Trevelyan.**

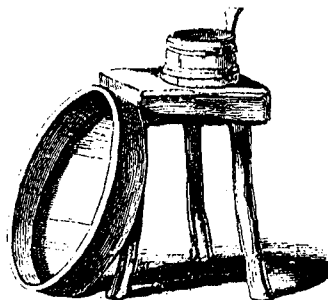
Limerick, February 14, 1847.

In my last, I mentioned that I had suggested to the proprietors of the Kiltreeley district in the barony of Coonagh the benefit the poor would derive by their contributing to the funds of the Committee, namely, my Lords Sandwich, Ashbrooke, Aldborough, and Kenmare, the Rev. Mr. Lloyd Apjohn, Messrs. Moore, J.P., and Manning.

Lord Sandwich has replied that he has given directions to his agent to subscribe towards the relief funds of the parishes in which he has property. Mr. Manning has declined to contribute, stating "there are no poor on his property, still it is heavily mortgaged under the Labour Relief Act for the support of strangers on unproductive works totally unconnected with it". I think if Mr. Manning came to Kiltreeley he would find he had several poor on his property, and that many of them are on the Public Works, at least this is the information given to

me yesterday by the Catholic curate of the parish. The other gentlemen have not acknowledged the receipt of my letters.

I also suggested to the large proprietors of the Bruff district the necessity of their subscribing to the relief funds of the Bruff Committee. Lord Monteagle, as trustee to the late Lord Limerick's property, immediately replied that 100l. for the relief funds and 20l. for the





Interior of a labourer's cabin.

soup-kitchen, should be forwarded, to be applied according to the directions issued by the Government. Archdeacon Maunsell has also promised to contribute to the funds according to my suggestion.

Count de Salis, whose property is said to be 7,000l. per annum in the district, has acknowledged my letter by referring me to his agents. Mr. Creed, another proprietor, has not yet replied.

I fear some of the Committees in this county will not prove very good agents for distributing food under the new measures; although the distress of the poor is beyond belief, it does not bring forth the honest, active energies of half the residents, and in some districts, I think, they can hardly be entrusted with the duties.

I know not whether the laws of England respecting the adulteration and sale of bread by weight extend to Ireland or not, but throughout the whole of this county, the city of Limerick included, bread is sold without any regard to weight (and, as I have heard, much adulterated); in one instance, I found a small loaf of 11 ounces sold at 3d.; this was in a small village near Newcastle. If the laws do extend to this country, it would be of great service if they were carried into effect, and a notice posted at every police station, for there is no check to imposition at present, and the poor people are often imposed on without being aware of any means of redress.

Fever and dysentery are on the increase; the weather lately has been very bad for the poor people, but I hope we may now expect it will clear up.

**Hon. S. Spring Rice to Mr. Trevelyan.  
British Association for the Relief of the  
Extreme Distress in Ireland and Scotland.**

**Committee Room, February 26, 1847.**

I am directed to inform you that the Committee have this day had under their most serious consideration the various difficulties which stand in the way of effecting as rapid a supply of food to the distressed districts of Ireland as is undoubtedly desirable, and as the amount of the funds at their disposal would justify.

The Sub-Committee charged with the purchase of provisions have been instructed to extend their operations to the utmost, limited only by the necessity of avoiding to create any serious action on the food markets. But this limitation is a serious one; and added to the difficulties of shipments, the delays of transit, and the further delays of distribution, very many pressing cases remain unrelieved, even to that

partial extent which a private subscription fund can be expected to afford.

Under these circumstances I am directed to press most earnestly on the consideration of Her Majesty's Government the expediency of making the Commissariat and naval stores in England and Ireland available for immediate relief, by permitting issues from them, either on immediate payment from the funds of the Association, or on engagement to replace them with the utmost practicable despatch.

The Committee do not venture to suggest under what limitations this step should be taken, which must mainly depend on the quantity of provisions which are in store. But they feel they should be wanting in their duty to their subscribers, if they failed to suggest every means for making the funds subscribed available at the earliest possible moment for the purpose of relief.

**Treasury Minute on the above.**

**February 26, 1847.**

Write to Mr. Spring Rice that their Lordships have already directed that requisitions of the Committee upon the Limerick depot shall be complied with to the extent of 100 tons a month, and they will now instruct Sir R. Routh to report whether similar accommodation might with safety be given at any other of the Government depots, and to what extent.

Their Lordships are of opinion that all the issues which may be made from Government depots on account of the Association should be paid for in money, instead of being replaced in food; it being believed that this course will be the simplest and the most conducive to the regular replenishment of the depots.

Their Lordships are of opinion that it would not be advisable to transfer to the Committee any of the stores of provisions at their disposal in their country, the meal and biscuits constantly in course of preparation being no more than are required to secure the prompt replacement of the stores in the depots; and as regards the food procurable in the market, the intervention of this Board is not necessary to enable the Association to obtain what they require.

Transmit copy of this letter and Minute to Sir R. Routh, and desire that he will give his early and careful attention to the subject of it, and report his opinion to this Board.

(British Parliamentary Papers, *Famine* [Ireland], Vol. 7, 1847, pp. 35-37, 66, 126-127 and 177.)