

# Dr. Robert Frith



**O**f the many doctors who practiced in Limerick through the centuries, there is one Robert Frith, whose name and life's work deserve to be remembered,

especially by the people of the Irishtown and Garryowen. This nineteenth century doctor, who had a medical hall in Charlotte Quay, made a most significant contribution to the education of the poor children of those areas. It was he who saw the need for their education and who paid for the building of St. John's School. He also built houses for homeless widows and his bequests to convents, charitable institutions and orphanages were numerous.

Although he spent over thirty years of his life in Limerick, Dr. Frith was not born there. He came from a Protestant family of English extraction, which had settled in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, in the eighteenth century. He was descended from William and Jane Frith, who were related to James Frith, the postmaster in Nenagh in 1788. He was the brother of George Frith MD MRCSE., the surgeon to the Nenagh County Gaol up to 1873. He had a number of brothers, sisters and cousins, most of whom lived in the Nenagh area. (See family tree).

Robert Frith commenced his medical education at about the age of sixteen. This was the age at which most young men started their anatomical studies in the 1800s. He studied anatomy at a time when cadavers for dissection were commonly supplied by resurrectionists. He attended the Apothecaries' Hall, Merrion Square, Dublin, to which a medical school was attached in the nineteenth century, and took the LAH (Licentiate of the Apothecaries Hall) in 1825. Soon after completing his basic training, he worked in the Rotunda, Dublin, where he received the Licentiate in Midwifery (LM). Following this, he practised surgery, and was conferred with the MRCS (Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons) in England, on July 30, 1830. His brother George pursued a similar career, but unlike George, who returned to Nenagh, Robert came to Limerick about 1835.

Soon after his arrival in the city, he leased No 3 Charlotte Quay from William Howley, and set up as a surgeon and druggist in the medical hall he established there. This area was quite fashionable at that time, and was in close proximity to both Barrington's

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and St. John's hospitals. It also banded on a number of impoverished parts of the old city. Dr. Frith referred many of his patients to Barrington's but he was not attached to the hospital or to the Poor Law Unions, which were set up about that time.

While residing in Charlotte Quay, with his wife Catherine and daughter Margaret, Dr. Frith made the acquaintance of many local people. His best friend was Mortimer O'Brien, who had a drapery business at 14, 15 16 Charlotte Quay. He was frequently visited by Rev. Fitzgerald, the administrator of St. John's Cathedral. Dr. Frith made friends with the nuns of St. Mary's Convent, which was founded in 1830, and also with the nuns in the Good Shepherd, Mt. St. Vincent, and the Presentation Convents. His manservant was Patrick Brereton, who many years later, in 1878, became an oil merchant, at 19 Charlotte Quay. A number of other people also stayed with the Friths: John Frith lived at Charlotte Quay until his death following apoplexy in 1866; the Maher sisters, Bridget and Maria, performed many of the household chores for the Friths.

While living in Limerick, Dr. Frith had a private income from family properties in Nenagh. He was the owner of thirty-seven houses in north Nenagh, near Summerhill, the Old Turnpike Road and the Old Birr Road. These were small houses, mainly occupied by tradesmen such as coopers, and the majority of the tenants were of Protestant stock - Chadwicks, Libertys, Grays, Callows, Jacksons, Urrell, Hingerty etc. (One of the fields which he owned was adjacent to the Nenagh river and this, which was held by his sister Mary Ann Harrington after his death, was the scene of a skating carnival in the severe winter of 1898).

In 1850, Robert Frith was the lessor of No 51 the Old Turnpike Road. At that time, according to Griffith's Valuation, the property consisted of a house in ruins and an orchard. This may have been the site of James Frith's post office and family home, after he had moved from Pound St., Nenagh where he was postmaster in 1788. The area where the Friths had property was in close proximity to the military barracks, and one of the Frith sisters, Catherine, married Capt. Thomas Smith of the Dragoon Guards, who was stationed

there. The area was just north of Summerhill, where up to 1922 one of the houses (which was also the home of Aquilla Smith, the celebrated Irish numismatist) had a window with the name Elizabeth Frith scratched on it.

Because of his private income, Dr. Frith was free and unhindered in his humanitarian work for the poor and uneducated. Accounts have been handed down of a man who toiled all day in his medical hall helping the destitute of the Irishtown. He was often seen giving away the day's "takings" to the poor who approached him on the street. He was not without insight into the causes of illness - one woman came from another doctor with a prescription for her ailing husband. Frith, realising that the only medication her husband needed was nourishment, put his hand in the till, took a shilling, gave it to the woman and told her to buy a sheep's head to make soup for her spouse.

The standard of housing accommodation for most people was very poor at that time. This was particularly so for women whose husbands had died and left them unprovided for. To assist these widows, Dr. Frith had five small houses, similar to those which he owned in Nenagh, built in Garryowen, in the shadow of St. John's Cathedral. These houses were known as the Penny Alms Houses, and were inhabited up to the 1940s. They were demolished in the 1950s to make way for the boundary wall at the front of St. John's School.

About 1858, attempts were made to improve the organisation of education. Religious orders had taken the initiative in many areas and were concentrating their attention on young boys. In some places the monitorial system of education, was in use, with the older children teaching the younger ones. Frith was directly exposed to the illiteracy and ignorance of his young patients and was particularly struck by the lack of facilities for female education. He therefore resolved to have a school built for young girls in the grounds of St. John's Cathedral. (He later left money for a boy's wing, which was added in 1893). This school was between the cathedral and the Widows' Alms houses and was administered by the Sisters of Mercy. It was known for years as Frith's School. It was the main educational establishment for the area for almost one hundred years, until it was replaced by a modern structure in the early 1970s.

Another group of underprivileged children in whom Frith had a great in-

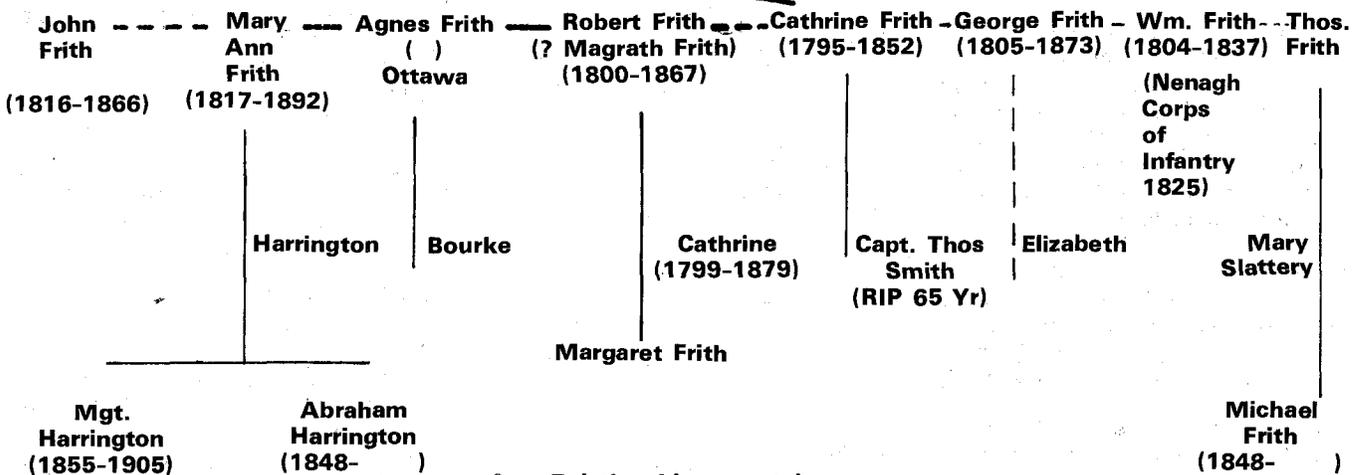
terest were the orphans of the city. A record of some of his work was given in the annals of St. Mary's Convent. "The first event recorded in 1870 is the death of an old and generous benefactor, Dr. Frith, Charlotte Quay. For years, this good man was in the habit of sending a quantity of material for clothing to the orphans and a good supply of bread for the poor attending our schools. All of which for a long time he endeavoured to keep concealed as to who was the giver, forwarding them anonymously. His relief to the poor and indigent was both great and secret. He constantly retrenched from the quality of his

own sustenance to have more to bestow on the poor of Christ. He would not buy salmon or expensive fish but only such as was cheap to spare money for them ..."  
 Robert Frith was involved with charitable work when he took ill with bronchitis on November 14, 1867. His condition gradually worsened over the next seven days. He was moved from his house (by this time the Friths had moved to 18 Charlotte Quay) to the Assembly Hall, Charlotte Quay and on Thursday night, after writing his will, his condition finally deteriorated and he died of pneumonia.  
 In his will, he provided for his family

and requested that the rest of his money and the proceeds from the sale of his estates in Nenagh be divided among a number of charities.  
 He was buried in a private ceremony, and his grave is situated close to the church in the graveyard of Mt. St. Laurence. On the headstone, subsequently erected to his memory, the following inscription can be read:  
 Erected to the memory of Robert Frith, surgeon, who departed this life on the 21st day of November 1867. He was a just man. He served God. His hands through life were open to the poor and in death he did not forget them.

**THE FRITHS OF NENAGH**  
**JAMES FRITH (Postmaster, 1778)**  
 (Freed)

Wm. Frith (1772 - 1820) & Jane (1775 - 1837)



\* ... Relationship uncertain

*Copy Will of Robert Frith Esq.*

**I ROBERT FRITH** of Charlottes Quay do hereby make  
 this as my last Will and Testament.  
 I Will and Bequeath to my Executors for the benefit of my Daughter

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