

# The Newcastle West Workhouse

by Sean Kelly

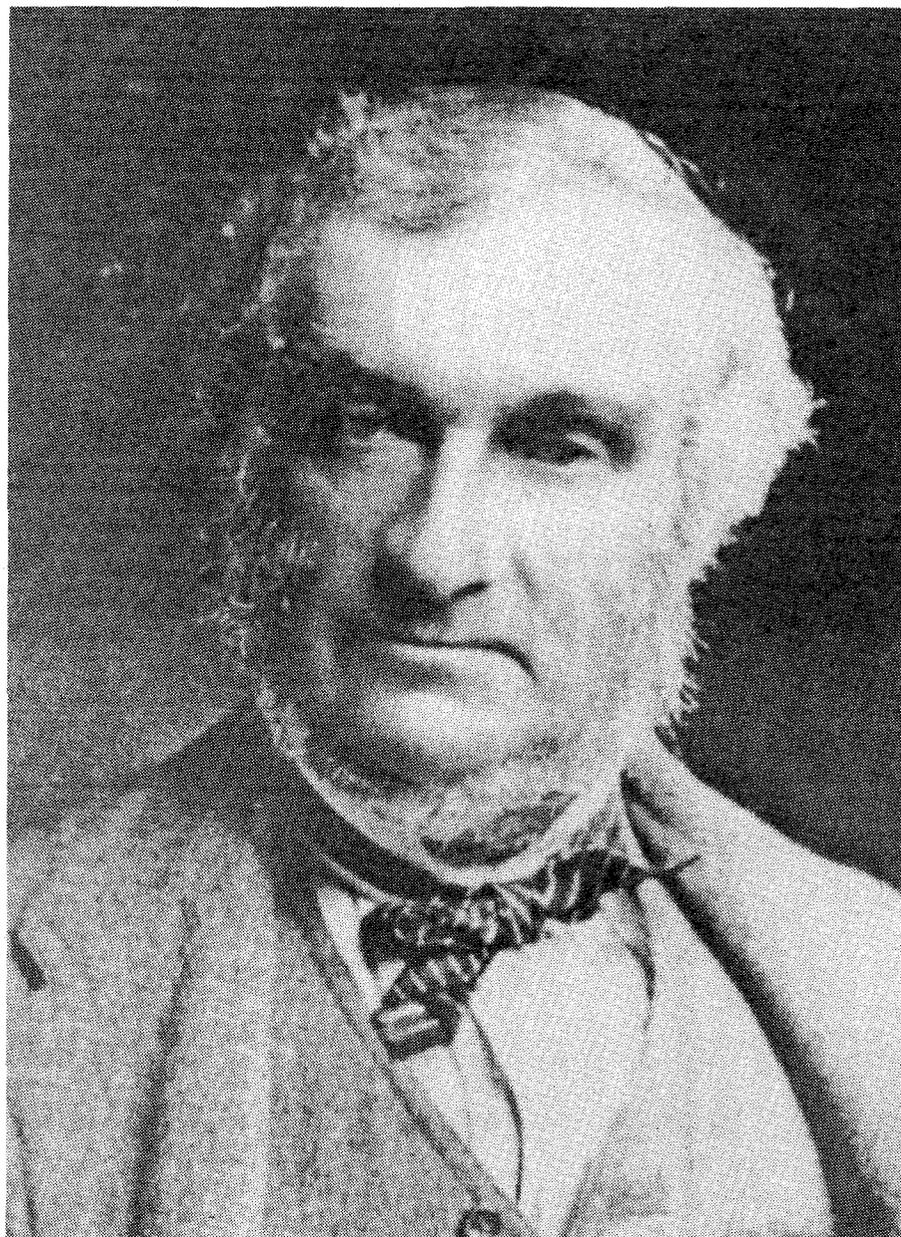
**I**reland in the 1830s presented a very different picture to the Ireland of today. The population was roughly eight million and had a greater density than in China. It has been estimated that the population increased 172% between 1779 and 1841. The poverty and misery were unbelievable - the Census Commissioners of 1841 stated that more than half of the population live in windowless mud cabins of one room. Furniture was a luxury. In a part of Donegal 9,000 people had between them 10 beds, 93 chairs and 243 stools. In 1835, the Poor Enquiry stated that three-quarters of the labourers in Ireland existed without any employment.

The question could be asked - how did they live? The key to survival lay in land. A man could grow enough potatoes on half-acre of land to feed his family. A consequence of this was that land was divided and sub-divided. By 1841 it was estimated that 45% of all holdings were under five acres at a time when holdings under an acre were not enumerated. Rent for an acre of good land varied from £10 to £14 and poor land was let at around £6.

This dire poverty encouraged early marriage; a cabin could be built for next to nothing, no savings were required and it was felt that children would provide for parents in old age. Girls usually married at 16 years, boys at 17 or 18, and the birth-rate was very high.

However bad a tenant's lot was, an evicted person was in an even more pitiable state; it was tantamount to a death sentence. Evicted people roamed the country and lived in ditches, bogholes or burrowed into banks, and lived on the charity of their slightly better-off neighbours.

It was against this background that an Irish Poor Law Act "for the more effectual relief of the poor in Ireland" was passed in 1838. One of the objects of this Act was to make property in Ireland liable for the upkeep of the poor in Ireland as was the case in England. This would also lessen the number of indigent Irish going to England to seek employment. The Act became law on 31 July, 1838. Under the Act, the Poor Law Commissioners in London divided Ireland into one hundred and thirty administrative divisions, called Poor Law Unions, and each was to be provided with a workhouse. The law was to be administered locally by a board of guardians, consisting partly of justices of



George Wilkinson, the master builder of workhouses.

the peace and partly of members elected by the ratepayers of the union. These boards were to be responsible for the striking of the poor rate and its collection, this was then to be used for the relief of the poor.

George Nicholls, one of the English Poor Law Commissioners, was placed in charge of executing the Act in Ireland and to help him he had four assistant-commissioners who had worked in England. He had set up office in Dublin by September, 1838, and recruited four more assistant commissioners. It was decided to engage an Oxford architect, George Wilkinson, at an annual salary of £500 to

prepare plans of new buildings, as very few of the existing buildings in the country were suitable as workhouses. Plans and specifications of several types of workhouse were drawn up, and it was decided that a clerk of works for each building would be appointed at a weekly rate of two guineas.

The extent of Newcastle Union was delineated in December, 1838, and it covered an area of just over 207 square miles. It comprised the electoral divisions of Abbeyfeale, Ardagh, Ballingarry, Castletown, Clouncagh, Dromcollogher, Killaghohane, Killeady, Kilmeedy, Mahoonagh, Monagay, Newcastle and

Rathronan. On 10 January, 1839, the following magistrates were elected ex-officio guardians:

Alfred Furlong	Newcastle
Eyre Massey	Glenduff Castle
Thomas Locke	Castleview
William Cox	Ballyine
John W. Shelton	Rossmore
William Smith O'Brien	Cahermoyle
Bryan Sheehy	Mayne

On 2 February, 1839, the following persons were declared as duly elected by the returning officer:

Nicholas Meade	Dromin
John Dowling	Newcastle
Patrick Kennedy	Ballypierce
Cor. John Curtin	Killaculleen
Henry O'Brien	Lissureland
Ml. Sheahan	Ballinakill
John Corbett	Danganbeg
John Curtin	Glanduff
James Leahy	Ballycommane
Patrick Hayes	Abbeyfeale
John Harnett	Newcastle
Maurice Roche	Athea
Daniel Donovan	Liscordan
Philip Barry	Lisinisky
Roger K. Sheehy	Liskinnett
John Cox, Jun.	Ballyneale
James Lynch	Granagh
Edward Lloyd	Heathfield
David Kelly	Farrihy

Mr. W. Hawley, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, then acquainted the guardians with the duties and obligations of their office. This being done, the following positions were filled:

*Chairman:* Alfred Furlong. *Vice-Chairman:* Bryan Sheehy. *Deputy Vice-Chairman:* Nicholas Meade. *Treasurer* (without salary): Alfred Furlong. *Secretary and Clerk:* Kerry Moore, at a salary of £40 per annum.

The next meeting of the board was held in the old courthouse on 12 February and was again attended by Assistant Poor Law Commissioner Hawley. Several plans of workhouses were looked at and one to accommodate 550 persons, at a cost of £5,000, was approved. It was estimated that a sum of £7,850 would be required to purchase the site, build the workhouse and to fit and furnish the same. It was resolved on 3 September, 1839, that this amount be borrowed from the Commissioners.

The contractor was to be Sir Thomas Deane & Co. of Cork. He was also the contractor for Limerick and Rathkeale workhouses. Several sites were visited and one called Hayes's Field in Gortboy was selected. The building was to be durable but yet as cheap as possible, without decoration of any sort. The walls were to be of limestone rubble masonry, the inside to be unplastered but white-washed. The ground floors were to be of mortar and clay, being less cold than stone, and the upper floors of timber with raised sleeping platforms on either side of a central well. The time generally allowed for construction was two years but, due to the

extremely wet weather conditions of these years, it took slightly longer.

Peter Dunne was appointed clerk of works to superintend the building, at a salary of £1. 1s. 3d. per week. While the building was in progress, various other positions were advertised and filled by the board of guardians. The tender of William Wilson of Springfield to value the rateable property in the union was accepted, the fee being £2. 10s. 0d. per 1,000 Irish acres. It was an unfortunate choice and led to much contention about the accuracy of his valuation books. On 1 July, 1840, the positions of master and matron were advertised, and sixteen applicants applied. Patrick Meade of Ballingarry was selected as master at a salary of £40 per annum and Olivia C. Burne of Glenwilliam as matron at a salary of £10. On 12 September, 1840, Dr. John Pierce was elected as doctor of the workhouse at a salary of £50 and Myles O'Brien as apothecary at a salary of £25. Daniel Power and Michael Bourke, county collectors of cess, were appointed collectors of poor rates, at a rate of sixpence in the pound. On 21 December, 1840, Denis Moylan was appointed rate collector for Newcastle, at the rate of fourpence in the pound. James Reidy of Mahoonagh was appointed collector for Dromcollogher and Daniel Maurice Leahy for Abbeyfeale.

At a meeting on 6 March, 1841, it was resolved "that the workhouse be opened for the reception of paupers on the 15th inst." The following was to be the diet of the inmates:

<i>Breakfast</i>	
Able-bodied man 14-60	Able-bodied female 14-60
8-oz. Stirabout	6-oz. stirabout
½ pint new milk	½ pint new milk
<i>Dinner</i>	
3½lbs. best cup of minion potatoes	ditto.
1 pint skim milk	

Infirm, sick and bedridden people were to be dieted at the direction of the medical officer. Children under nine years were to be dieted at discretion and between nine and fourteen the same as women.

On 13 March, it was ordered that Thomas Danielson, aged 72, of Killagolehan be admitted on the following Monday and also Catherine Quinlivan, aged nine, and Mary Quinlivan, aged eight, from Newcastle. It was also decided that meetings be held daily for the admission of paupers. The first poor were admitted on Monday, 15 March, 1841, and by Saturday, 20th, fifty-four had been admitted. It was ordered that children up to thirteen years be given a bread and milk supper and that they be sent to the Courtenay School, paying one penny a week each. On 27 March, Margaret Hinchy of Newcastle was provisionally appointed school-mistress, at a salary of £10.

On 3 April, it was decided to build a stone wall with iron railings and gates in front and a ditch of clay and stones at the rear.

On 8 April, Rev. Thomas Plummer was appointed Protestant chaplain at a salary of £25, but there being no Protestant inmates, his salary was held over. Rev. William Coll acted as Catholic chaplain but, at the direction of his bishop, he was ordered to discontinue his attendance at the workhouse on Sundays to celebrate mass until the question of salary had been settled. John Heffernan was appointed schoolmaster at a salary of £15 per annum.

The dubious honour of being the first to die there belongs to Mary Lynch, who died on 17 April. It was ordered that her clothes be given to her niece.

The early records give an interesting insight into prevailing prices at the time. The following tenders were accepted:

<i>Myles Bros.</i> of Limerick: for the supply of coal at 25s. per ton.
<i>Pat Carroll:</i> for the supply of oatmeal at £13. 10s. 0d. per ton.
<i>Con Curtin</i> of Evegallahoo: for milk at 2½d. per quart and skimmed or sour milk at 1d. per quart.
<i>William Enright:</i> for clothes baskets at 2s. 6d. each.
<i>Patrick Hayes,</i> Cooper: for buckets at 3s. 0d. each.
<i>John Barry,</i> Lisiniska: for potatoes at £2. 19s. 0d. per ton.
<i>John Collins:</i> for bread at 1½. per lb.
<i>Timothy Larkin:</i> for straw at £2 per ton.
<i>Michael Dowling:</i> for salt at 4s. 0d. per cwt.
<i>John Conway:</i> for two days horse hire, 6s. 0d.
<i>David McCoy:</i> for meat at 4¼ per lb.
A regulating clock cost 3s. 6d.
Six pickaxes cost £1. 0s. 10d.
Twenty-five pairs mens shoes and twenty-five pairs women's shoes cost £12. 0s. 5d.
<i>Thomas Raleigh's</i> tender for glazing at 1s. 4d. per foot was accepted with the proviso that no pieces or bull's eyes be used.
<i>Daniel Curtin</i> supplied a ladder at a cost of £2. 0s. 0d.
<i>Michael O'Regan</i> supplied 22 coffins at a cost of £6. 4s. 0d.
3 pairs of blankets cost £2. 19s. 0d.
<i>Myles O'Brien</i> supplied leeches for 7s. 0d.

To Irish eyes the workhouse was a grim, forbidding place - this it certainly was - but it was no worse than any similar institution in England. *Oliver Twist* gives a very good insight into workhouse conditions at this time. Only the barest necessities of life were to be given to the indigent poor and then in a cold, detached manner.

The establishment of workhouses had a positive side, giving a legal basis to the relief of the poor in Ireland. From July, 1838, onwards the property owners of Ireland had to accept responsibility for the relief of their less well off neighbours.

Many of the original buildings are still extant, surely a lasting tribute to their design and construction.

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