

Limerick and the 1918-19 Spanish Influenza Epidemic

The Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918 and 1919 was probably one of the most devastating health scourges to impact the world in modern times. In total at least twenty million people are believed to have died between October 1918 and the end of March 1919. In the United States 500,000 people are believed to have perished. Although it was known as the Spanish Flu there is some doubt as to its link to Spain. It first broke out in Europe towards the end of World War I and very soon it had spread to all the European countries and beyond.

The first recorded case of a person dying from the epidemic, in Limerick, was Hilda Anita Carson a railway inspector's daughter, who was 21 years of age and lived in Henry Street, Limerick. She died on 29 September 1918, but there is a question as to whether she was in fact a victim of the Spanish Flu epidemic. The first victim definitely associated with the Spanish Flu was 25 years old Constable Thomas Ashe, stationed at William Street RIC Barracks who succumbed on 15 October 1918. His death was followed by a number of deaths among the British Military units in the city. It is generally believed that soldiers returning from the front brought the epidemic to Limerick and the extremely high number of deaths recorded in the military hospital attached to the New Barracks (now Sarsfield Barracks) seems to bear out this contention. Because of the passage of time and lack of records it is not possible to establish how many people were ill from the epidemic but survived. It is only possible to track the occurrence of deaths and even this method is flawed by virtue of the fact that some doctors did not report causes of death as accurately as they should have. Following the death of Constable Ashe the next four flu deaths recorded in Limerick occurred among the military garrison. All these soldiers were members of the 2nd Scottish Horse, a cavalry regiment, which was stationed in the city.

Of the twenty four deaths recorded in the city in October 1918, five related to members of the Scottish Horse Regiment and all occurred at the Military Hospital. Eight members of that unit died from the disease between October 1918 and February 1919. The epidemic among the military seemed to spread from unit to unit. By early November it was the turn of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Fourteen mem-

by Tom Toomey

bers of that regiment died from the flu and ten of these deaths happened in the first fifteen days of November. Six of the military cooks attached to the New Barracks died in the outbreak. This seemed to indicate that the military mess facilitated the spread of the disease, but it may also reflect on the working conditions for the cooks. In the period from October 1918 to February 1919 thirty six soldiers, garrisoned at Lim-

erick, died in the epidemic. Surprisingly the only officer to succumb, Captain George Wearing, died in Barrington's Hospital, on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918. The fact that Wearing was being attended to in Barrington's Hospital, rather than in the Military Hospital, must pose serious questions about the level of care available in the Military Hospital, as Captain Wearing was a dentist on the staff of the hospital.

In November 1918 the epidemic was at its most virulent. In Limerick city and county a total of 293 deaths were officially recorded for the month. The largest figure

Fig. 1 – Distribution of deaths by month 1918-1919

No	Dispensary Area	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	M/Jn	Total
1	Limerick City District #1	4	24	2	0	9	5	0	0	44
2	Limerick City District #2	3	13	10	2	10	12	2	0	52
3	Limerick City District #3	6	85	20	7	8	14	1	0	141
4	Limerick County Borough	6	34	0	0	3	5	1	0	49
5	Military Hospital	5	-20	2	0	7	0	1	0	35
6	Abbeyfeale	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	5
7	Adare	0	2	4	0	0	1	0	1	8
8	Anacotty	1	9	2	3	1	5	0	2	23
9	Ardagh	0	5	4	2	1	3	0	0	15
10	Askeaton	0	2	1	2	1	2	0	0	8
11	Broadford	0	1	4	2	3	1	2	0	13
12	Bruff	4	12	6	1	0	0	0	1	24
13	Bruree	0	3	0	0	1	2	0	1	7
14	Caherconlish	0	6	4	0	4	9	1	0	24
15	Castletown	1	14	1	1	4	1	2	0	24
16	Clarina	0	4	0	0	2	1	0	0	7
17	Croom	0	4	6	1	4	6	2	0	23
18	Feenagh	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	4
19	Galbally	0	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	11
20	Glin	0	0	7	1	2	0	0	0	10
21	Hospital	1	3	1	2	2	0	0	0	9
22	Kilfinnane	2	4	4	17	1	2	4	0	34
23	Kilmallock	0	1	3	8	12	2	0	0	26
24	Murroe	0	8	1	0	4	8	1	2	24
25	Newcastlewest	2	9	1	3	1	0	0	0	16
26	Pallasgrea	1	7	4	4	10	5	2	0	33
27	Pallaskenry	0	0	0	1	5	4	2	1	13
28	Rathkeale	0	13	4	1	0	2	0	0	20
29	Shanagolden	0	1	3	3	0	0	0	0	7
	Total:	36	293	97	62	96	93	23	9	709



The band of the Royal Welch Fusiliers at the New (Sarsfield) Barracks

(Limerick Museum)

for a single day was on Thursday 14 November when eighteen deaths were recorded. Indeed the week beginning Monday 11 November saw a total of ninety deaths recorded in the city and county. In December 1918 there was a significant fall in the number of deaths recorded when the total for the month was listed at ninety seven. By January 1919 the figure had fallen even further when the number recorded was sixty two, but in February the figure rose to the same level as December when ninety six deaths were recorded. March 1919 featured an almost identical return of ninety three deaths. By April, however, the epidemic was clearly on the wane and a total figure of twenty three deaths was recorded in Limerick city and county.

One feature of the epidemic was that it seemed to peak in one area and then peak in another area immediately afterwards. In the Castletown Dispensary District, near Charleville, a total of 14 deaths was recorded in November 1918 out of an overall total for the district of twenty four. In the Kilfinane Dispensary District seventeen, of the district total of thirty four deaths, occurred in the month of January 1919. Of the sixty two deaths recorded in the city and county for the month of January 1919 the Kilfinane Dispensary District accounted for 27% of those deaths. In February the epidemic

seemed to peak in the neighbouring district of Kilmallock. Out of a total of twenty six deaths recorded for the entire period, twelve were incurred in that month. In the Newcastle West area the epidemic peaked early when the highest monthly total of nine, out of a total of sixteen, was recorded in November 1918. There were also two deaths recorded in the Newcastle West District in October. This gives some substance to the belief that the epidemic was brought into Limerick by soldiers returning from the front because Newcastle West had probably the highest level of recruitment to the British Army in County Limerick. The fact that one of the deaths recorded in the town in October was that of a Sergeant Major from the British Army gives strength to the belief.

In terms of the rural dispensary areas the death rate, if one accepts the Maigue River as the dividing line between east and west Limerick, was significantly more severe in the eastern part of the county. Out of 388 rural deaths 143 occurred west of the Maigue while there were 245 deaths on the eastern side. However, it should be stated that in certain areas, especially in the Abbeyfeale district, the newspaper accounts of deaths from influenza do not tally with the official record. It would seem that in these areas deaths that were caused

by the epidemic were reported as being from pneumonia or bronchitis, which while strictly correct in medical terms led to some confusion when totals were being compiled. However, in most dispensary districts, regardless of the ultimate cause, deaths relating to the epidemic were reported as being from influenza.

A tragic feature of the epidemic was the manner in which it impacted on individual families. On 17 November Ben Dineen, a trade union activist, who had been the editor of the radical *Bottom Dog* periodical, died at his home at Mount St Vincent's Cottages. On the following day, November 18, his three year old son John succumbed to the scourge and five days later his wife Mary also died. In the matter of six days a family of young children had been orphaned and one of their siblings taken from them. Their aunt, Agnes Dineen, reared the surviving children, two boys and a girl. One of the children, Kevin Dineen, went on to become a very prominent citizen in the life of Limerick city and he died as recently as 2005, in his 97th year.

In the Caherconlish Dispensary District the Boland family of Knockatana suffered a similar number of fatalities in the first week of December. On the first day of December Edward (Senior) who was then thirty seven years of age died from the epidemic. Six

days later his two sons Edward (Junior) who was ten years and John, who was two years old died. The remaining members of the family consisted of two sons, Michael and Patrick and four daughters. Fortunately for the young Bolands their mother, Margaret, was a doughty fighter. Once she had recovered from the tragedy she resolved to keep her family together and rear them on her own. To make ends meet she milked cows, knitted, baked and cleaned. She effectively worked every waking hour, successfully rearing a family against all the odds and lived to a ripe old age. Another family afflicted by the epidemic in the Caherconlish area was the Flood family. Catherine Flood, a sixteen year old girl, died at her home in Newtown on 25 November and five days later her father Jim Flood succumbed. Jim Flood had been a great hurler in his youth and had swept all before him in the colours of his beloved Caherline and when he lined out on the first Limerick team to win the All-Ireland Senior Hurling title in 1897.

A feature of the epidemic was the manner in which multiple deaths occurred in families. At least twenty eight families in the city and county had multiple deaths accounting for a total of sixty five. The Adare Dispensary District, with a total of seven deaths, suffered less than most areas. However, one family named Mc Donald in the townland of Ballycasey lost three of its members and accounted for 42% of deaths in the area. The worst case of multiple deaths recorded was a Killeen family that lived in the Rathkeale District. Four members of the family, three sons and a daughter died between 11 November and 20 November 1918. The three sons died on the 11th and the 12th.

While the Spanish Flu struck the poor and less well off very severely, it was not confined to the poorer sections of society. It also struck at the rich and the better off. Hugh McMahon, 'Doonea', O'Connell Avenue, Limerick, a member of the timber merchant family, who were among the city's largest employers, succumbed on 11 February 1919. Edna Halliday, whose family were among the main shareholders in Boyd's Department Store died at her home at 'Rose Ville' in Corbally on 4 November 1918. On 21 February 1919 Richard Norris-Russell, a scion of the milling and shipping family died at his residence at Ballinacurra Terrace. Unlike the vast majority of people who perished in the epidemic Norris-Russell was unusual in that he had reached the age of seventy three years at the time of his death.

One of the most peculiar features of the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-19 was the age profile of its victims. Over the centuries virtually all plagues and epidemics wipe out the very old and the very young in numbers far disproportionate to their actual numbers in society. The Spanish Flu, however, seemed to work in reverse and it wiped out far greater numbers of the active age groups in society. The most active working age groups between 16 and 45 years of age account for 57% of the deaths in the Limerick area, while pensioners and



**Mascot of the Royal Welch Fusiliers taken in the grounds of St. Mary's Cathedral
(Limerick Museum)**

small children account for only 20% of the fatalities (See Fig 2). For those most exposed to the epidemic such as nurses and doctors the finding is surprising. Three nurses are listed among the fatalities, but while many doctors may have contracted the flu none of them were reported as having died from it.

The epidemic seemed to reach into every corner of society. Two nuns, Sr. Edith Vaughan a member of the Faithful Companions of Jesus at Laurel Hill died on 9 November and exactly two weeks later, Sister Agnes Herbert, a member of the Presentation order died at the convent in Sexton Street. On Sunday 16 February 1919, Father Michael McCarthy, P.P. of Don-

oughmore, insisted on celebrating Mass at Donoughmore even though he was not feeling too well. After Mass he became quite ill and influenza was diagnosed. The following Saturday 22 February Father McCarthy died. To the parish of Donoughmore his loss was immense. Since his arrival in the parish in 1900 he had been responsible for setting up Drombanna Creamery, the construction of two schools at Roxborough and Donoughmore, the complete refurbishment of two churches at Knockea and Donoughmore and the building of the parochial house at Donoughmore. At his funeral Father McCarthy's nephew, Father Dick McCarthy C.C. of Ballyhahill, celebrated Requiem High



Barrington's Hospital from Matthew Bridge

(Limerick Museum)

Mass.¹ Fr McCarthy was then buried in Donoughmore Churchyard. Some weeks later, in March 1919, sixty eight year old Father William Ryan, Parish Priest in the neighbouring parish of Ballybricken also died from the effects of the flu. While there is no record of a Protestant minister, in the Limerick area, dying from the epidemic the first person to succumb to the epidemic in the Shanagolden Dispensary District was Mrs Susan Hughes-Connolly a clergyman's wife from the Foynes area.

From the beginning of October 1918 to the end of April 1919 there were few, if any, communities in Limerick city and county that were not affected by the Spanish Flu Epidemic. In terms of overall tragedy and trauma, however, it would be difficult to equal the bitter experience of the little fishing village of Coonagh on the outskirts of Limerick city. In the fifteen days from 10 to 25 November the village buried eight of its inhabitants. What made it all the more poignant and tragic was the fact that seven of the victims were under the age of eleven years of age. In a perverse sense the experience of Coonagh was in contrast to that of the overall trend where the majority of deaths were those of older and more mature age groups.²

While the official record for Limerick city and county attributes a total of 709 deaths to the Spanish Flu, the deaths effectively occurred in the six months from 1 October 1918 to 30 April 1919. When comparison is made with the average total deaths for the same periods of 1917/18 and 1919/20 the 1918/19 figure is over 1,000 greater (See Fig 4). This raises the possibility that the actual deaths from the epidemic may have been under reported or wrongly categorised and that the actual number of deaths from the Spanish Flu in Limerick actually exceeded 1,000.

Fig. 2 – Distribution of deaths by age group

No	Dispensary Area	0-5 Yrs	6-15 Yrs	16-30 Yrs	31-45 Yrs	46-65 Yrs	65 + Yrs	Total
1	Limerick City District #1	17	2	10	6	6	3	44
2	Limerick City District #2	1	6	24	11	7	3	52
3	Limerick City District #3	16	15	46	23	32	9	141
4	Limerick County Borough	1	6	17	16	6	3	49
5	Military Hospital	0	0	24	11	0	0	35
6	Abbeyfeale	0	1	3	1	0	0	5
7	Adare	1	1	1	5	0	0	8
8	Annacotty	1	3	8	2	7	2	23
9	Ardagh	1	2	7	1	3	1	15
10	Askeaton	1	2	4	1	0	0	8
11	Broadford	3	0	3	2	4	1	13
12	Bruff	6	2	4	10	2	0	24
13	Bruree	1	1	2	2	1	0	7
14	Caherconlish	6	2	6	4	3	3	24
15	Castletown	2	2	8	6	3	3	24
16	Clarina	0	2	2	2	1	0	7
17	Croom	4	0	7	2	6	4	23
18	Feenagh	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
19	Galbally	0	0	5	5	1	0	11
20	Glin	5	0	1	2	0	2	10
21	Hospital	3	1	0	2	3	0	9
22	Kilfinnane	5	1	13	4	2	9	34
23	Kilmallock	2	7	9	5	2	1	26
24	Murroe	4	0	11	8	1	0	24
25	Newcastlewest	0	1	8	4	1	2	16
26	Pallasgrean	9	2	12	4	5	1	33
27	Pallaskenry	1	0	4	4	1	3	13
28	Rathkeale	2	0	14	2	2	0	20
29	Shanagolden	0	1	2	3	0	1	7
	Total:	92	60	257	150	99	51	709



Laurel Hill Convent circa 1900

(Limerick Museum)

Fig. 3 – List of 36 soldiers who died in the Spanish Flu epidemic

Name	Address	Age	Status	Occupation	Death
Thomas Marlin	9 Parks Tce Bligh Northumberland	30	Married	Corporal 2/1 Scottish Horse	19-Oct-18
George Hamilton	Bray Head Colbourn	22	Single	Corporal 2/1 Scottish Horse	21-Oct-18
John McKerracher	16 Hillside Crescent Edinburgh	34	Married	Sergeant 2/1 Scottish Horse	22-Oct-18
Geo Crichton Angus	79 Queen St Aberdeen	19	Single	Private 2/1 Scottish Horse	22-Oct-18
Charles Edgar	Dumfries	22	Single	Lance Corp 2/1 Scottish Horse	29-Oct-18
Edward Jones	Liverpool	18	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	05-Nov-18
Sam Hillyard	Wrexham	24	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	04-Nov-18
Geo Cooke	London	23	Single	Sgt 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	04-Nov-18
Thos Snelson	Northwick	28	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	01-Nov-18
Thos Riley	Pontypridd	28	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	06-Nov-18
Clement Smith	Birkenhead	19	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	06-Nov-18
Alex McKenzie	Grantworth on Spey	41	Married	Pte RASC	10-Nov-18
Alan Price	Bridgend	27	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	10-Nov-18
John Dunlop	Ayr	20	Single	Privatet 2/2 Scottish Horse	11-Nov-18
Geo Stevenson	Edinburgh	24	Single	Pte RASC	11-Nov-18
Pat McCourtney	Glasgow	32	Married	Pte RASC	12-Nov-18
Arthur Mason	Nottingham	24	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	13-Nov-18
Stanley Colwell	Usk	24	Single	L/Corp 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	15-Nov-18
Albert Cooney	Walton on Hull	34	Married	Pte RASC	16-Nov-18
Edward Lampard	Leytonstone	33	Single	Pte RASC	19-Nov-18
John Sydall	Bolton	20	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	22-Nov-18
Jas Prentice	Kettering	24	Single	Pte Tank Corps	25-Nov-18
Thomas Fisher	Midlothian	20	Single	Pte Tank Corps	25-Nov-18
John Hanley	St Helens	31	Married	Pte Tank Corps	05-Dec-18
Harry McBeath	Edinburgh	38	Married	Corporal 2/1 Scottish Horse	15-Dec-18
Wm Henry Jones	Seaforth Liverpool	30	Married	L/Corp Military Field Police	02-Feb-19
Reginald Foot	Shaftesbury Dorset	31	Single	L/Corp 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	07-Feb-19
Sidney Ernie Browne	Polasmare Swansea	29	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	11-Feb-19
John Gilmore Cartloge	Anfield Liverpool	25	Single	Lance Corp 2/1 Scottish Horse	13-Feb-19
Ernest Warrington	Altrincham Kent	34	Married	L/Corp 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	17-Feb-19
Wm Davies	London	29	Married	Pte 10th Royal Warwicks	18-Feb-19
Samuel Hooper	Bradford	21	Single	Driver RASC	24-Feb-19
Henry Coulton	Tarleton Moss Preston	27	Single	Pte 3rd Batt RW Fusiliers	04-Mar-19
Isaac Thompson	Nottingham	44	Married	Pte RASC	03-Apr-19
Geo Preece	Hightown Wrexham	53	Married	Pte RASC	18-Apr-19
Geo Douglas Wearing	Barrington's Hospital	35	Married	Capt RAMC	11-Nov-18



City Dispensary, Gerald Griffin Street, c.1971

(Limerick Museum)

SOURCES

Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages St Camillus Hospital.

Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages St Ita's Hospital, Newcastle West.

National Registry of Deaths, Births & Marriages.

Limerick Leader files.

Limerick Chronicle files.

Weekly Observer files.

National Archives Ireland.

Anecdotal evidence of Ned Boland, Knockatanna, Caherconlish.

Anecdotal evidence of Len Dineen, Gouldavoher.

Anecdotal evidence of Harry Greensmyth, Herbertstown.

Anecdotal evidence of Chris Halliday, Ellen Street, Limerick.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Father Dick McCarthy was a very strong supporter of the IRA in the War of Independence and as a result of this support he had come to the notice of British military authorities and he was forced to go to America for a period in 1921.
- 2 The tragedy of Coonagh in November 1918 only compounded the tragedy it suffered in the Great War when it lost a total of eleven young men. Eight young men from Coonagh were drowned at Gallipoli in 1915 when HMS Goliath, a British warship, was sunk. It is probable that no Irish community suffered as badly when taking into consideration that the community only consisted of between two and three hundred people.

Fig. 4 – 3 year comparison of deaths for the period October to April

No	Dispensary District	1917/18	1918/19	1919/20	Av. Diff.	Recorded
1	Limerick City District #1	90	190	94	98	44
2	Limerick City District #2	95	142	74	57	52
3	Limerick City District #3	95	197	91	104	141
4	Limerick County Borough	182	286	171	109	49
5	Military Hospital	0	35	0	35	35
6	Abbeyfeale	48	99	46	52	5
7	Adare	23	25	21	3	8
8	Annacotty	21	51	12	34	23
9	Ardagh	14	25	11	12	15
10	Askeaton	11	23	10	12	8
11	Broadford	33	45	29	14	13
12	Bruff	19	44	16	26	24
13	Bruree	17	20	18	2	7
14	Caherconlish	28	58	27	30	24
15	Castletown	30	63	22	37	24
16	Clarina	13	30	29	9	7
17	Croom	40	79	47	35	23
18	Feenagh	24	31	18	10	4
19	Galbally	17	42	21	23	11
20	Glin	23	51	31	24	10
21	Hospital	21	49	20	28	9
22	Kilfinnane	49	85	36	42	34
23	Kilmallock	75	108	62	39	26
24	Murroe	21	56	33	29	24
25	Newcastlewest	40	95	46	52	16
26	Pallasgrea	52	96	39	50	33
27	Pallaskenry	14	28	19	11	13
28	Rathkeale	50	71	41	25	20
29	Shanagolden	26	40	20	17	7
	Total:	1,171	2,164	1,104	1,019	709