

# THE POOR LAW COMES TO LIMERICK

*by Chris O'Mahony*

After the passing of the Act "for the more effectual relief of the destitute poor in Ireland" in 1838, Britain's Poor Law Commissioners lost no time in dividing Ireland up into administrative units called Poor Law Unions, providing administrators (called Boards of Guardians), and building workhouses in which to administer relief. Initially, residential relief was the only kind available under the Act; hence the urgency with which the workhouses were built - over 100 in four years. Limerick Union was the first to be declared (December 1838), and it had a new workhouse in operation by the middle of 1841.

The speed with which a handful of civil servants moved over the land and put the new system into operation might tempt one to conclude that their work was slipshod. But such an impression would be quite wrong. A closer look at the setting up of the Limerick Union, the thinking behind the decisions, and the awareness of the attendant problems, will show that Mr. Hawley, Assistant Commissioner for the Limerick area, was a very thorough and zealous man indeed.

## THE NEW WORKHOUSE

The provision of a workhouse was a matter of urgency. It was built quickly, but it was not rushed. Bearing in mind that the catchment area stretched from Patrickswell to Doon, and southwards to Fedamore and Caherconlish, as well as taking in five districts in South Clare, and, of course, a large city population, it was decided that a building capable of accommodating 1,600 people would be needed. It was at first proposed to extend the House of Industry (the present Strand Barracks) for this purpose. It had accommodation for 300. The extension was costed, but difficulties in purchasing necessary land on either side were such that a new building became a more attractive proposition. Sir Thomas Deane & Co. were given the contract in September 1839 and in May 1841 the Limerick Workhouse first opened its doors to the poor. The role of that building has changed over the years; it is now St. Camillus' Hospital.

## THE DIET

A matter which received early and close attention was the diet of the inmates. There was no quick calculation of what ought to be enough for people of varying age, sex and state of health. Mr. Hawley carefully studied what poor people actually did eat in the city and surrounding countryside, in institutions and out of them. The principle governing his efforts to frame a suitable diet was "that the food of a pauper, maintained at the public cost, should not be more abundant or better than that of the poor man maintaining himself in independence by his industry".

The reasoning behind this principle was that people should be encouraged to preserve their independence, and the workhouse should prove an attraction only for the truly destitute. "Once pauperism becomes ... more eligible than independence, evils which cannot be contemplated without dread are sure to follow". When the Commissioners had studied the eating habits of the Irish poor they found their reasoning was in many cases superfluous; you couldn't offer the working poor less to eat without starving them.

What did the poor eat? To answer this question, the Commissioners studied the dietary of gaols, of houses of industry, and of poor people in their own homes. They compared results from the four provinces, and found that two meals a day was the common pattern. Milk was the only animal product found, of which people drank about two pints each a day. Average food intake was about 7 ozs. of oatmeal and 4 lbs of potatoes per person per day.

For the Limerick area, we have Mr. Hawley's more nuanced account. He found that in rural areas potatoes were eaten at all meals from September to April. After that the supply ran out, and oatmeal, eggs, butter, lard and herrings were substituted in varying degrees. In winter, when milk was scarce, potatoes were dipped in a broth of boiled water, with some salt and lard in it. The hired labourer was often lucky enough to get some eggs or even meat from the farmer. Tea, coffee and bread, he found, were items that poor people were just beginning to buy. He ascribed this fact to the strenuous efforts that were being made at the time to reduce the consumption of whiskey. He also found that, apart from November-January, three meals were fairly common.

With his usual thoroughness, Mr. Hawley tabulated the average diet of the poor in every electoral division of the Union, and in every institution in the city. On the basis of this study, he recommended that adult males be given 8 oz. of stirabout and  $\frac{1}{4}$  pint of new milk for breakfast and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  lbs of potatoes and 1 pint of skimmed milk for dinner. Children, the aged and infirm he left to the medical officer's discretion.

The actual diet approved by the Guardians was slightly more generous and nuanced than this:

Classes.	Breakfast	Dinner	Lunch.
Adult males	8 ozs. oatmeal $\frac{1}{2}$ pint new milk	4 lbs. potatoes $\frac{3}{4}$ pint new milk	None
Women and Children over 9 years of age	7 ozs. oatmeal $\frac{1}{2}$ pint new milk	$3\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. potatoes $\frac{3}{4}$ pint new milk	None
Children from 5 to 9	4 ozs. oatmeal $\frac{1}{2}$ pint new milk	2 lbs. potatoes $\frac{3}{4}$ pint new milk	4 ozs bread
Children from 2 to 5	5 ozs. bread $\frac{1}{2}$ pint new milk	1 lb. potatoes $\frac{3}{4}$ pint new milk	5 ozs bread
Infants under 2	Daily, 8 ozs. bread and 1 pint of new milk.		

It is worth noting that the 8oz. of oatmeal mentioned as breakfast made about 3lbs of porridge. The cost of these meals was 2d each in 1841. So it cost 1/9 a week to feed a man, about 9p in our money!

Speaking of costs, the inmates were also fully clothed by the establishment. A man could be fully fitted out for just under £1, a woman for half that sum, and children (who it would appear wore no shoes) for even less. The average weekly cost of maintaining one poor person in the workhouse was about 2/- a week.

### WORK

The food was not attractive in quantity or quality - not was it meant to be - but it was found that the security of receiving it regularly was attractive to people who normally worked hard for very little more. To avoid the temptation to a life of sheltered subsistence, great emphasis was placed therefore on work and discipline. "It is in truth the regularity, order, strict enforcement of cleanliness, constant occupation, the preservation of decency and decorum, and the exclusion of all the irregular habits and tempting excitements of life, on which reliance must mainly be placed for deterring individuals, not actually and unavoidable destitute, from seeking refuge within the workhouse".

In the years before the Famine able-bodied men were rarely to be found in a workhouse; they worked or they begged. The bulk of the workhouse population was made up of the aged, the infirm, orphans, mothers with children. The aged and infirm were "generally employed in oakum picking; in the picking, carding and spinning of wool; in knitting; and some few making and mending the clothes belonging to the establishment". Partially disabled men did the rougher work about the house and yard, or broke stones. The women did the household work. Children were generally taught for about three hours a day and were encouraged to develop skills, trades or muscles for the remainder.

It was found difficult, however, to continue to provide enough work to make life in the workhouse less attractive than life outside. Men were "kept at it" by piece work, connected with threats of no dinner until the given task was completed.

When such obvious jobs as levelling the grounds, building boundary walls, etc were done, the Guardians found themselves faced with the problem that if the inmates did productive work they would be competing with their counterparts on the outside; this would ruin the latter and defeat the purpose of the workhouse. All they could do was to make work as irksome as possible for the able-bodied as an inducement to leave.

### PROBLEMS

The introduction of any new system is not without its attendant problems. In this the Poor Law was no exception. Let us look at one problem that beset Limerick Union in particular, and also at two rather more widespread problems.

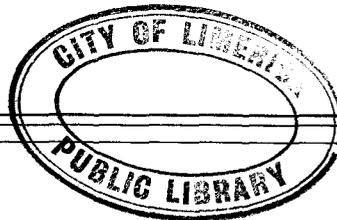
Limerick's chief problem arose from an imbalance in the composition of its Board of Guardians. Of its 53 members, 40 were elected and 13 were ex-officio members. But of the 40 elected, 20 represented the city electoral district, while the other 20 represented 16 rural electoral districts. On a population basis this may have been quite fair, but in practice it worked otherwise because all the meetings were held at the workhouse and rural members attended in smaller numbers. As a result, the city members exercised a disproportionate influence on the affairs of the Union.

Not surprisingly, the main grievance of the rural Guardians concerned money. The system by which the workhouse and its inmates were maintained was that each electoral district paid for the poor which it sent to the workhouse. The Union at large paid establishment costs and the maintenance of poor people who could not claim residence in any district - those "of no fixed abode", as we might say. The system was fair enough, but were the City Guardians?

What happened was that the City Guardians brought a little gloss of their own to the accepted distinction between the poor of known address and the vagrant or mendicant population. They extended the latter rather arbitrarily by holding that to have asked for alms at any time was enough to consign a pauper to the Union at large, though he might have lived in a certain area for years and still inhabit a fixed abode. They even contended that "to have received assistance in money, food, or clothes from relatives or friends, or to have lodged gratuitously



The front of the Limerick Workhouse.



in their houses. was an act of mendicancy;'. With their voting strength they had no difficulty in charging to the Union at large an unacceptably high proportion of applicants for relief. The number of people registered in the "Union at large" category amounted to 40% of the total intake in the first quarter of the workhouse's existence. Rural paupers constituted only 14% - a combination of independence and local charity keeping them from the workhouse.

When we realise that the Limerick City division contributed 46% of the inmates, it is perhaps understandable that they should be anxious to charge as many as possible to the Union at large. They argued, too, that the preponderance of city poor was due in large measure to the flight from the land. The rural members showed little sympathy with this line of reasoning, and lodged a formal complaint. The Commissioners ordered an inquiry. In spite of objections that "it was highly derogatory to the character of the Board", Mr. Hawley carried out an investigation, which revealed that the complaints were more than justified. The Guardians were informed that their interpretation of residency was wrong. But the decision of the Commissioners would appear to have had little or no effect. Returns for the end of September 1842 show that some 42% of the inmates were still charged to the Union at large.

Poor Law relief was financed by a Poor Rate, and it was the fond hope of its administrators that this contribution would replace almsgiving and put an end to mendicancy. Nine months after the workhouse opened, however, there was no sign of this happening, though the workhouse population was generally about 1,100. Mr. Hawley was disappointed to have to report that "the operation of the Act had done little towards clearing away these blots from the constitution of society". He painted a vivid picture of "these beggars; the implements of whose trade often are assumed disease, untiring importunity, imposture and abuse; and the roads display the usual number of vagrants returning daily with the spoils obtained from the labours of the industrious farmer. Were a fair computation made of the amount of the exactions levied by this traffic on the feelings and credulity of the humane, it would be found to exceed that of the

### LIMERICK UNION

**THE POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS** are desirous of purchasing a Site for the Workhouse intended to be built at or near the City of Limerick.

Land possessing the following advantages will be considered most suitable for the purpose, viz:- A dry and healthy situation, level surface, a good substratum for the foundation, convenient access, and proximity to Building Materials, a good soil for Garden purposes, an ample supply of Water, and sufficient means for Draining.

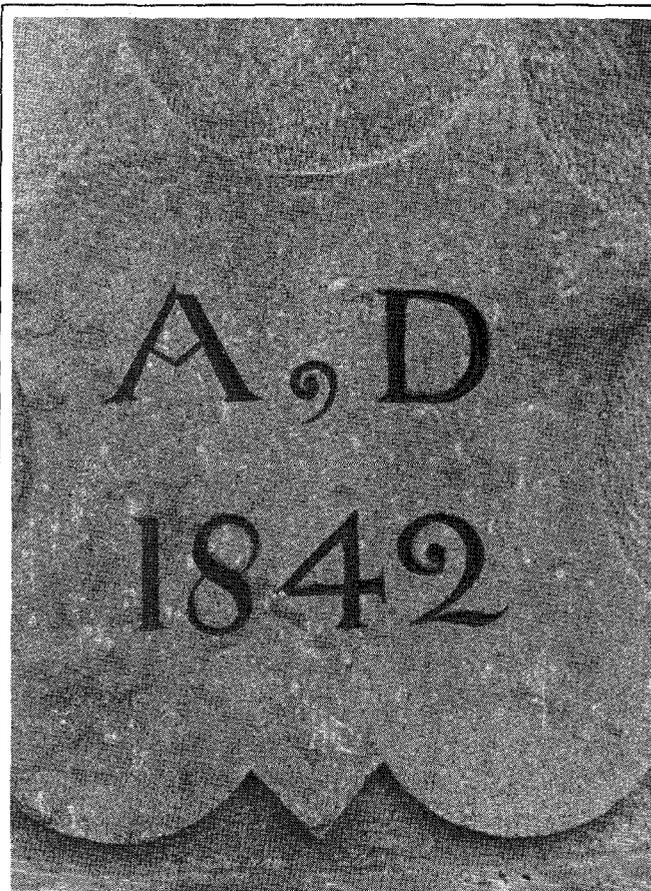
The quantity required is not less than seven nor more than nine statute acres, and in such a form as to afford a space of 500 feet square.

A Perpetuity will be required. Corporate bodies and persons who would otherwise be incapacitated to sell, are empowered by the provisions of the 1st and 2nd Victoria, chap. 56, to convey land to the Commissioners for the purposes of said Act.

All persons willing to contract with the Commissioners are requested to transmit Tenders in Writing with full particulars and terms, on or before the Eleventh day of March next, to the ASSISTANT POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS, No. 14, Thomas-street, Limerick.

February 23.

A copy of an advertisement taken from the "Limerick Chronicle", 2 March, 1839.



The foundation stone of the Limerick Workhouse.

poor rate". He went on to appeal for a law against mendicancy; otherwise the Poor Law would be an added burden rather than a benefit to the rate payer. Beggars must be forced to stop begging, but the Poor Law could not do that. The fact was that begging earned more than the relief available through official channels, and there was no way to force "sturdy beggars" to be content with the relief offered. Previous to the enactment of the Poor Law this latter category could be imprisoned and given hard labour; in the early 1840s many felt that a similar law was again necessary. Motions to that effect poured in from the Unions, one of them pointing out that it was only the poor people who were unaccustomed to beg that entered the workhouse. In the absence of such a law, both systems continued to co-exist - a situation which contributed in no small measure to another problem of the time; the desertion of wives.

When Mr. Hawley analysed the early returns for the Limerick Workhouse, he was disturbed by the large proportion of children, and women who alleged that they had been deserted. His experience led him to be very suspicious of these "desertions". Many men, he said, "threw wives and children in wholesale numbers into the workhouse, to be supported at the public expense, whilst they themselves were improvidently dissipating their earnings, or living on the charity obtained by mendicancy". A special committee was set up to investigate these claims of desertion, and many were discharged as a result.

From even so cursory a look at its workings, it will be seen that the new system was implemented with a great deal of zeal, that it provided relief for over 1,600 people in the first three months of its existence, and yet failed to make any appreciable difference to the class of people it was designed to eliminate. Like all systems, there were those on hand ready to turn it to their advantage in ways which the legislators never intended, and, equally, there were those who would rather die of starvation than have anything to do with it. As the first Poor Law Commissioner said, "the Irish people are peculiarly sensitive".