

Public Record Office of N. Ireland

THE POOR LAW
and
THE WORKHOUSE
in
BELFAST 1838-1948

by
MICHAEL FARRELL

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FOREWORD

This study was prepared while the author was spending the autumn term of 1975 in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland under the scholarship scheme provided for teachers by the Department of Education. It is based on the sources described in the appendix and provides a model for anyone who wishes to study the history of other workhouses in Ulster.

The photographs used as illustrations were taken in 1964 before the workhouse was demolished to make way for modern hospital buildings. The style of the building erected in 1840 had been 'intended to be of the cheapest description compatible with durability'. Some of these rooms had been disused for more than twenty years: although they were dirty when the photographs were taken they would have been kept clean and tidy under the supervision of the workhouse staff. The photographs provide a valuable record and help to recapture the institutional atmosphere of the Victorian period.

The prints from which the photographs were taken are held in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland under the collection reference HOS 4. The large scale Ordnance Survey maps are held under OS 8/30.

M.F.

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INTRODUCTION: THE POOR LAW IN IRELAND

Poverty was on the increase in both Britain and Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century. A haphazard system of local charity and cruel punitive measures such as flogging and transportation for beggars did little to solve the problem. In 1832 the British government set up a royal commission to investigate the best way of dealing with the poor and destitute in England and Wales. Strongly influenced by the notion that most of the destitute were lazy or idle and could provide for themselves if they tried hard enough, the commissioners recommended a countrywide system of workhouses. The intention was that the destitute would be given food and shelter - but only if they went into a workhouse where they would live under grim conditions and do harsh and unpleasant work. The workhouse was conceived to deter all but the most desperate poor from seeking support. An act of 1834 established the workhouse system: it was to be known as the Poor Law.

In 1835 a commission had been set up to study the position of the poor in Ireland as well. It reported in 1836, painting a startling picture of destitution, much worse than that in England and Wales. A Dublin clergyman, Rev Thomas Shore, told the commissioners that in Dublin alone there were between 40,000 and 50,000 people with no means of support out of a total population of 212,000. About the situation in Ireland the commissioners wrote: 'We cannot estimate the number of persons in Ireland out of work and in distress during thirty weeks of the year at less than 585,000, nor the number of persons dependent upon them at less than 1,800,000, making in the whole 2,385,000.'

That amounted to 30.7% of the total population of Ireland which was estimated at 7,767,401 in the 1831 census.

Such chronic destitution required urgent remedies but the Irish poor commissioners opposed the introduction of the workhouse system into Ireland: 'We cannot therefore recommend the present workhouse system of England as at all suited to Ireland.' The British system was designed to force the destitute to seek jobs which the authors of the system believed to exist. The Irish commissioners believed that: 'The difficulty in Ireland is not to make the able-bodied look for employment, but to find it profitably for the many who seek it ... We see that the labouring class are eager for work, that work there is not for them, and that they are therefore, and not from any fault of their own, in permanent want.'² The commissioners also stated their belief that: 'the able-bodied in general and their families would endure any misery rather than make a workhouse their domicile.' Instead of the workhouse system the commission recommended a series of measures to develop the Irish economy and so provide employment and in the short term they suggested measures to assist emigration.

The government in London were fully committed to the workhouse system by now and they did not accept the report of the Irish commissioners. In September 1836 they sent George Nicholls, one of the three British Poor Law commissioners, to Ireland to review the feasibility of the royal commissioner's recommendations. Nicholl's letter of appointment made clear that he was expected to recommend a workhouse system for Ireland as well and he was told

'Your attention need not be very specially given to the plans for the general improvement of Ireland contained in the report of the commissioners' of inquiry.'³

Nicholls reported as expected and another official George Cornwall Lewis, one of the Assistants to the Irish Royal Commission and later a British Chancellor of the Exchequer, also submitted a memorandum to the government urging the establishment of a workhouse system. For Lewis the chief merit of the system was that, by forcing the impoverished peasantry to quit their holdings and enter the workhouse if they wanted relief, it would 'consolidate the present minute holdings and create a class of capitalist cultivators ...' He summed it up succinctly: 'Now the main purpose of a Poor Law for Ireland is, by offering the poor man a sure prospect of maintenance in case of absolute need, to loose his hold upon the land and thus to relieve the landlord from the incubus which now presses upon him ... In the present condition of Ireland I can conceive no other means except a strongly guarded Poor Law of restoring to the landlords the power of doing what they will with their own.'⁴ Nicholls concurred with this view.

In February 1837 the government introduced a 'Bill for the more effectual relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland' at Westminster. Most of the Irish MPs were strongly critical of it. Daniel O'Connell said: 'We have seen upon evidence that the work imposed under the Poor Law upon the idle population was only a kind of slave labour in order to drive them to seek employment'⁵ and he stressed that the problem in Ireland was not

laziness but unemployment. Criticisms hardened into outright opposition temporarily uniting even strong supporters of the Union like Lord Castlereagh with O'Connell. The Bill was passed on 30 April 1838 but a majority of those Irish MPs who voted, opposed it.

The Bill became law on 1 July 1838. It provided for the division of the country into a series of Poor Law Unions to be based on the market towns. Each Union would have a workhouse into which everyone seeking assistance from public funds would have to go - the old, the sick, the disabled and even the able-bodied poor. To obtain relief they would have to abandon their homes and their farms. No assistance would be given outside the workhouse and anyone found begging could be jailed as a vagrant. The money for the workhouses would come from rates levied on the property-owners of the Union and the system would be administered by Boards of Poor Law Guardians elected by the rate-payers of each Union. The whole system was to be supervised by the full time Board of Poor Law Commissioners in London who already supervised the British system. They appointed a number of full-time assistant commissioners, each responsible for a number of Unions in adjoining counties.

The commissioners wasted no time. George Nicholls was sent to Dublin in September 1838 as resident commissioner and immediately got down to work. Within five years the system was almost complete. By May 1843 the country had been divided into 130 Unions, the Boards of Guardians had all been elected, the rates were being collected and 112 workhouses had been completed (98 of these were in use) and the other 18 were under construction.

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The 130 workhouses were intended to accommodate 94,010 paupers (as the inmates were called) and the total cost was estimated at £1,097,650.

The workhouses were almost all built to standard and very detailed plans drawn up by the commissioners' architect for Ireland George Wilkinson, who had worked on the building of the Welsh workhouses as well. The buildings were grim and functional and surrounded by a high perimeter wall. The cost of each was only two-thirds of the cost of similar ~~cheap~~ English workhouses and the Poor Law Commissioners described them in their Annual Report for 1838-9: 'The style of building is intended to be of the cheapest description compatible with durability; and effect is arrived at by harmony of proportion and simplicity of arrangement, all mere decoration being studiously excluded.' Nonetheless the effect of the erection within five years of 130 of these massive buildings throughout Ireland, often in small villages, must have been dramatic. Forty-three of them were built in the province of Ulster.

The workhouse system in Ireland was meant to be harsh. From the very beginning the Poor Law commissioners laid down severe guidelines. In October 1838 they sent out instructions. Their character can be summarised in one of the orders: 'Employment for the able-bodied should be provided within the workhouse, to which they should be strictly confined, so long as they remain dependent on the Union for support. For every class of inmate indeed employment should be provided but for the able-bodied it should be of such a nature as to be irksome and to awaken or increase a dislike to remain in the workhouse ...' ⁶ The workhouse diet they ordered: 'must

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on no account be superior or even equal to the ordinary mode of subsistence of the labouring classes of the neighbourhood.'

There was no-one more likely to enforce this harsh regime than the resident commissioner in Ireland George Nicholls who had written in 1822: 'I wish to see the poorhouse looked to with dread by our labouring classes and the reproach for being an inmate of it extend downwards from father to son ... Let the poor see and feel that their parish, although it will not allow them to perish through absolute want, is yet the hardest task-master, the closest pay-master and the most harsh and unkind friend they can apply to.'

The Poor Law system was barely established in Ireland when it was confronted with a major crisis: the great famine. Here was destitution on an unprecedented scale. Pressed by the commissioners all the Boards of Guardians desperately expanded their workhouses by putting up wooden huts or renting unoccupied warehouses until, by 1849, they had accommodation of a sort for 250,000 people. But even that had little effect when millions were starving. Even the most ardent Poor Law supporter couldn't argue that the famine-stricken peasantry were destitute through their own fault and so the government had to temporarily abandon the basic Poor Law principle that no assistance or relief could be given outside the workhouse. In 1846 public relief works, to be paid for out of the rates, were begun but they were little more than a labour test to satisfy the authorities that only the 'deserving' poor were getting relief. In 1847 even the relief works were abandoned and relief committees in every parish gave out free food, mostly soup, to

the starving people. In the month of July 1847 3,020,712 people received rations from the Relief Committees.

These were clearly emergency measures going outside and beyond the Poor Law system but another measure was more significant because it authorised relief outside the workhouse (Outdoor Relief) within the Poor Law system. The Poor Relief (Extension) Act of June 1847 authorised Boards of Guardians to give outdoor relief to people temporarily or permanently disabled or unfit to work, to widows with two or more legitimate children, and even to the able-bodied poor if the workhouse were already full. Relief to the able-bodied could only last for two months and had to be given in kind (ie food or vouchers for food, clothes, etc.) and not in money. The new power was widely used so that in July 1849 there were 221,583 people in the Irish workhouses and 784,367 were getting outdoor relief. As conditions improved the numbers on outdoor relief tapered off but an important breach had been made in the workhouse principle.

This period also saw important administrative changes. In 1847 a separate Irish Poor Law Commission was established in Dublin and thereafter the Irish Poor Law system was administered separately from the British one. In 1851 the Medical Charities Act provided for a countrywide system of dispensaries where the poor could receive medical treatment free. The dispensaries were to be run by the Boards of Guardians under the supervision of the Poor Law commissioners. The Guardians were already responsible for fever hospitals attached to the workhouses. Moreover, each workhouse had an infirmary, originally

intended only for the treatment of sick inmates, but, since the workhouse infirmaries were often the only hospitals in the district they had begun to care for all the sick of the area. The Guardians and the commissioners were becoming the main public health authorities for most of the country. The famine period had seen also the establishment of another thirty-three Unions and workhouses in Ireland bringing the total to 163 with permanent accommodation for 150,000 people.

The Poor Law system survived the famine and the numbers in the workhouses gradually dropped back to assume a more stable pattern. By 1857 the average daily number of inmates was 50,688 and for the twenty years from 1861 to 1880 the daily average was 48,782. In 1872 the Irish Poor Law Commission was replaced by the Local Government Board which assumed all the commission's powers. In the years 1879-1881 there was a sharp agricultural depression and the government had to sanction outdoor relief to the able-bodied on a large scale again. They were unhappy about it however and in December 1882 they tried to re-assert the principle of no relief outside the workhouse. The Under Secretary for Ireland wrote to the Local Government Board: 'Her Majesty's Government are fully aware of the great objection entertained by many poor persons to go into the workhouse; but it cannot be contended that persons who are unable to procure for themselves the necessaries of life should be allowed to determine the manner in which public relief is afforded.'^g Nevertheless the principle of indoor relief on which the workhouse system had been established was undermined and the idea of outdoor relief, at least

in times of temporary depression, had been accepted. It probably kept many homes together and prevented many families from becoming permanent workhouse inmates for those who gave up their homes to enter the workhouse found it difficult to obtain work and secure accommodation when they left the workhouse.

In 1898 the Local Government (Ireland) Act was passed which established the system of Urban and Rural District Councils throughout Ireland. Under this Act the Boards of Guardians ceased to be responsible for collecting rates and for public sanitation, but they remained responsible for the Poor Law and for the Infirmaries and Dispensaries. Section 13 of the Act at last accepted the principle of outdoor relief even for the able-bodied - though still as an exceptional measure. If Guardians could satisfy the County Council and the Local Government Board that exceptional distress existed in their area, the Board would authorise them to start relief work schemes or to give outdoor relief to the able-bodied for a period of two months. The authorisation could be renewed at the end of each two month period. It was a cumbersome procedure but it represented a grudging admission that not all distress could best be dealt with in the workhouse.

In 1903 the British Government appointed a Vice-regal commission to examine the Poor Law system in Ireland. It accumulated a mass of statistics which showed that the role of the workhouse was changing. When the system had been established it was expected that able-bodied paupers would make up a substantial proportion of the workhouse inmates and indeed in the ten years from 1851 to 1860 the percentage of able-bodied men and women in the Irish workhouses averaged

26.8. On 11 March 1905 there were 45,193 inmates in the 159 workhouses (4 had been closed). Of them 14,469 were classified as sick, 14,360 as aged or infirm, 3,649 as lunatics or epileptics, 5,900 were children under 15 and only 6,815 were able-bodied women and men, including a number of pregnant women. The able-bodied made up at most 15% of the total. The workhouse had become an institution for the old, the sick, the mentally handicapped and children. It was a trend that would accelerate sharply over the next twenty or thirty years.

The vice-regal commission reported in 1906. It was strongly critical of the workhouse system, especially of the harsh and punitive discipline to which the old sick, the infirm and children all had to submit in order to obtain shelter and relief. The commission recommended that the whole system be scrapped and replaced by a series of district hospitals for the sick (using the workhouse infirmaries), with old people's and children's homes. It suggested that Outdoor Relief be used to deal with most unemployment although its attitude was still severe towards 'casual and vagrants', the tramps and others who spent only a few nights in any workhouse and often drifted from Union to Union. They recommended that this group be sent for long periods to 'labour-houses' run by the prison authorities.

A special problem was caused by unmarried mothers and their children. Many girls, disowned because they were pregnant, entered the workhouse to have their babies and then, left with no means of support, drifted into prostitution until they arrived back in the house. As the commissioners put it, in an unconscious comment on the social morality of the time:

We have frequently found in the workhouse an illegitimate baby, its mother and its grandmother; and in one case we were shown in the one workhouse a baby, its mother, its grandmother and its great grandmother or four illegitimate generations in the female line.

"The lapsing into confirmed immorality seems to be a tendency in Irish workhouses, because when a girl falls from virtue she is rarely able in Ireland to return to her home owing to the sentiment of aversion from immorality which is too strong in most parts of the country to permit her to face that feeling and return with her baby to her relatives even if they would receive her. We believe that in an enormous majority of cases a workhouse life debases such girls who get used to their companions and surroundings; and they leave and return to the workhouse as necessity compels or as their own blunted feelings incline them".¹⁰

The commissioners, humane on most issues, were stern about this problem. They recommended strict segregation of women who had 'lapsed' more than once and said: 'In our opinion no child which has to be supported out of the rates ought to be allowed to remain with a woman who is the mother of two or more illegitimate children ... We recommend the earliest possible compulsory separation of infants from the mothers of two or more illegitimate children'.¹¹

Before the Irish Commission reported a royal commission on the Poor Law had been established in Britain as well. It contained opponents of the Poor Law system such as George Lansbury of the Independent Labour Party and Beatrice Webb. No action was taken in Ireland pending

its conclusions which appeared in 1909 in the shape of a majority and a minority report both of which recommended abolishing the workhouse system. The Government took no action though some of its other measures such as the introduction of Old Age Pensions in 1908 and Unemployment and Sickness Insurance in 1911 further helped to undermine the whole concept of the Poor Law and accelerated the tendency for the workhouse to become merely a dumping place for the feeble, the sick and orphans. Condemned by three reports, catering less and less for those for whom they were originally intended, the workhouses lingered on imposing their antiquated discipline and rules on the unfortunate social casualties who sought refuge there

But in the South of Ireland they were nearing their end. The Poor Law system had always been resented in Ireland and when the Sinn Fein MPs elected in 1918 established the first Dail in January 1919 and adopted their democratic programme they pledged themselves to get rid of the workhouses: 'The Irish Republic fully realises the necessity of abolishing the present odious degrading and foreign Poor Law system, substituting therefore a sympathetic native scheme for the care of the Nation's aged and infirm who shall not be regarded as a burden but rather entitled to the Nation's gratitude and consideration.'¹² In 1923 a Local Government Act finally abolished the workhouses in the new Irish Free State, replacing them with public assistance in their own homes for the able-bodied poor and county homes and district hospitals for the old and the sick.

In England and Wales the Poor Law system survived until March 1930 when the Boards of Guardians were finally dissolved and their powers handed over to County Councils and Public Assistance Committees.

The old mixed workhouses were abolished, the able-bodied poor given relief in their own homes and the various groups of inmates separated and sent to the appropriate hospitals and homes.

In Northern Ireland the end was not to come for almost 20 years. In 1924 the new Belfast government set up a commission on Local Government administration. It reported in 1927 recommending once more an end to the Poor Law system. Money was scarce, however, and nothing was done. The 1920s and 1930s were years of depression and unemployment. Despite the Unemployment Insurance scheme there were still many who were not insured or who had exhausted their unemployment benefit. They could turn only to the Poor Law for help. Its inadequacy produced suffering and unrest. The mid-1920s and early 1930s saw bitter struggles in Belfast first to secure the granting of outdoor relief and then to increase the relief rates up to subsistence level. The passing of the Unemployment Act (Northern Ireland) in 1934 shifted the burden a little from the Boards of Guardians by providing the unemployment assistance for those not covered by the insurance scheme.

By the late 1930s a number of the Northern workhouses had been closed by the Guardians themselves and the number of inmates for the three years 1936-8 for the whole of Northern Ireland was 5,309, made up of 3,497 sick, 1,006 aged and infirm, 240 children under 15, 165 lunatics, idiots and epileptics, 63 mothers with young children and only 138 of all other classes - able-bodied, casuals, vagrants, etc. Eventually in 1948 the Poor Law system, unwanted when it was introduced, unloved throughout its history and its abolition recommended 42 years before, was swept away in the

great re-organisation of Health and Social Services in Britain and Northern Ireland after the Second World War. Only then was the stigma of pauperism finally lifted from those whom circumstances had forced to turn to public assistance for support. In March 1948 there were still 4,190 people in workhouse institutions in Northern Ireland. Already before 1948 many of the workhouse infirmaries had become district hospitals and now almost all the remaining buildings were handed over to the Hospitals Authority. The grim characteristic buildings can still be discerned in the structure of many local hospitals but they are fast being replaced. Soon the only trace left of the workhouses will be in their copious records and in folk-memory.



Panoramic view of Belfast Workhouse

THE EVE OF THE POOR LAW IN BELFAST

The Royal Commission for inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland which was set up in 1835 carried out a detailed survey of conditions throughout the country. They sent out questionnaires to clergymen in every parish and the replies of the Rev Thomas Hincks, a Church of Ireland Minister in Belfast, give a remarkable picture of life in the town in 1834:

1. Number and description of Houses?

In 1757, there were 1,779 houses in Belfast, averaging rather more than seven persons to a house, according to the population. In 1782, 2,026 houses, about six and a half, according to the population. In 1791, 3,107 houses, and not quite six persons to each house. In 1822, there were 5,494 houses, giving, according to the population, seven to each house; and in 1831, 8,710 houses; and calculating the same increase as during the preceding nine years, the present number would be 9,424...

2. Has the Population of your Town or Parish increased of late?

In 1757, the population was 8,549; in 1782, 13,105; in 1791, 18,320; in 1813, it was 27,832; in 1821 (or rather 1822, for the census of 1821 was corrected in 1822) it was 37,277; and in 1831 it was calculated at 53,737.

3. ...

4. ...

5. ...

6. Have you any, and what, Manufacture established in your Town or Parish? How long established, and in what condition? And what Trades are most prosperous?

Yes; cotton and linen yarn manufactures, the latter rapidly increasing; much done in muslin weaving; various other manufactures. Trades generally prospering: perhaps the tradesmen best off are tailors, hatters, shoemakers, and coopers.

7. What are the chief occupations of the Labouring Classes?

Working in the provision stores, and on the quays as porters, attending masons, sweeping the streets, and attending on shops.

8. Do Women find any Employment; and of what description?

Yes; in the cotton and flax spinning factories: there are four of the former and four of the latter in work in the town, and several others not far off, within the bounds of the parish.

9. Do Children find Employment; of what description, and from what age?

Children are employed in factories as above; seldom so young as nine years, but from 11 or 12 upwards.

10. What may be the average Earnings of an average Family, say a Man, his Wife, and Four Children, all of an age to work, (the eldest not more than Sixteen Years of Age,) obtaining an average amount of employment?

If all are so fortunate as to get employment, perhaps it might produce from 12s to 17s per week. Seldom more than three children can be employed, as one is required to assist the mother at home when the children are young.

11. Are the Wages of Working Tradesmen or Labourers in your Parish always paid in Money? or, if not, in what other modes?

I have not heard recently of any cases in which wages are paid otherwise than in money. A few years ago we had to expose the practice in Belfast; and since that time, if it be done, care is taken to conceal it from the public.

12. On what kind of Food do the Labourers and Working Tradesmen of your Parish usually subsist?

Potatoes and meal are the general food, and occasionally herrings for a relish. In winter, cuttings of hams and pigs' feet from the

provision stores are much used. At all times, however, there are many, and some of these mechanics, who use a substance called starch sowins, sold at the works at 1d per gallon, which is very unwholesome: it is the lowest possible kind of diet, fit only for pigs; and yet, from the waste of money on ardent spirits, it forms a considerable part of the diet of the lower classes.

13. Has any alteration taken place in their Food, Clothing, and Habitations? if any, from what period do you date that alteration; and has it been for the better or the worse?

I am not aware of any alteration in these respects within the last few years; but the variation may take place from the state of the markets, &c. I say, from observation and inquiry, that there is a great effect produced on the food, clothing and state of the habitations of the lower classes of the people, by drinking of ardent spirits, which prevails to an alarming degree, not only among males, but even women and children.

14. Have any new sources of Employment been opened to the Labouring Classes; or has any change, beneficial or otherwise to them, taken place?

The flax spinning-mills, four of which are now at work in Belfast, (two additional within the last six months,) give employment to a number of children from nine to 16 years of age. Weaving

has also improved considerably, so that no man who has a loom need be idle; but the prices being low, an industrious man cannot earn more by constant work than from 5s to 6s per week. If the work be of a particular kind, he may win 10s or 12s; but I have given the average as nearly as I can calculate.

15. ...

16. Are the Working Tradesmen generally Industrious and Sober in your Parish?

Quite the contrary; almost all addicted to the use of ardent spirits. Shoemakers often do not work more than four days in the week. Coopers the same. Tailors very bad. I am informed that out of 300 in this trade there are not above 20 strictly sober. The custom of paying at public houses still prevails in some trades, and this leads to all the evils detailed so fully in the evidence before the Committee of the House of Commons on the Profanation of the Sabbath.

17. What Hospitals, Dispensaries, or other Charitable Institutions, are there in your Parish; how long established, and how supported?

Belfast Fever Hospital, of which the Commissioner have probably received the last printed Annual Report. This has a dispensary connected with it; and there is another dispensary in a different part of the town. There is a lying-in-hospital, and female penitentiary. The poor, however, have not, in my opinion, been efficiently attended at their own houses for the last six years at least;

and they have been much worse off in this respect since the cessation of cholera in town, as there is a difficulty in getting medical gentlemen to fill the office of district attendants to the Fever Hospital without payment.

18. ...

19. ...

20. ...

21. Where two or more Families reside in the same House, state the number of Families so resident, and the number of individuals in each Family.

Many of the houses in small streets, courts, &c are of two stories. When a family takes a house, it is usual to let the upper part to one or two families. In one such street, the proportion at last census was 62 families to 29 houses. In another, many of the houses having a third story, 605 families to 63 houses; but in the whole district, which includes these two streets, the total was 2,043 families to 1,420 houses. The number of individuals in the 62 families, as above, was 275, averaging about nine to each house; and in the whole, 2,043 families, 9,826 individuals - not quite seven per house. Perhaps this may give some general idea to the Commissioners. (See answer to Query 2: the average throughout the town seems to have kept pretty steady; the greater press of population being in the smaller streets.)

22. How are those Lodging-houses, which are chiefly frequented by Persons of the lower classes, usually provided as to Beds and Bedding? In what condition are they as to Ventilation and general repair?

The lodging-houses, such as the query refers to, are badly provided with beds and bedding; in many of them the lodgers sleep on straw, in covered with a blanket. I have frequently found only one such bed for a whole family of four or five persons. In respect to ventilation, many of the smaller houses in Belfast were very deficient previous to the breaking out of cholera but the exertions of the Board of Health were directed to this, and great improvement was effected.

23. What is the state of your Parish with respect to Sewers, and Cleanliness generally?

The sewerage of the town has been considerably improved by the Police Committee. Perhaps it may not be deemed irrelevant to state here, that many of the smaller houses in different parts of the town have no back conveniences, and the nuisances are consequently left on the streets till the police carts remove them; there is also a great want of public necessaries in the town; this subject has been brought forward more than once by medical gentlemen.

24. What is the number of Public Houses or Houses where Spirituous Liquors are retailed in your Parish?

From the accounts I have received, I may state 550; 221 of these are also grocers' shops. Since the Act, giving permission to grocers to sell spirits, (perhaps the most ruinous to the morals of the country that ever passed the Legislature,) the number of spirit-sellers has increased in this parish, above 390. At the last census the number returned was only 371; the above shows an increase of 179. I have reason to know, however, that at the census it was underrated.

25. What number of Pawnbrokers' Shops are there in your Parish?

The number in Belfast this year is 41.

26. What are the classes of Persons with whom their dealings are principally carried on?

With all classes, but especially mechanics and labourers; the shops abound with all articles of wearing apparel and bedding; and there are many copies of the word of God; in short, the deposits show the reduced state of the owners; but much of this I attribute to the use of ardent spirits to which I have already alluded more than once. I have known a parent strip his own child to pawn the clothing for drink, and a husband take the blanket off his wife on her death-bed for the same purpose.

27. ...

28. . . .

29. . . . 13

Belfast, however, was more prosperous than most towns in Ireland because of its growing cotton and linen industries and its thriving port. A number of charitable institutions catered for the poor especially the Belfast Charitable Society and the House of Industry. Yet there was so much poverty that these bodies were kept working at full stretch. The Belfast Charitable Society had been founded in 1770 and provided a house for the elderly destitute and for children (the original building is still standing and still in use at the corner of Clifton Street and North Queen Street.) In November 1833 it provided accommodation for 428 inmates: 253 old people and 195 children. There was also a House of Industry financed by voluntary subscriptions, which distributed spinning wheels and flax to poor women to help them earn a living and gave out rations to destitute families provided they had lived in the town for five years and were recommended by two subscribers. In the year 1833/4 the House of Industry supplied 794 women with spinning wheels and flax and gave rations to 626 families. In addition an average of 62 adults and 54 children who did not qualify for relief were given bread each day. Yet despite all these provisions a total of 264 people had been arrested for begging in the previous year.

The problem would have been much worse had it not been for emigration. The Commissioners estimated that 5,457 people emigrated from Belfast to the United States in the first half of 1834. No figures were available for emigration to England or

Scotland.

The Assistant Commissioners, the Commission's full-time officials, toured much of the country in the course of their researches. They visited some of the slums and recorded their comments. About a visit to one of the worst areas they reported:

Another house visited may serve as a specimen of the poorest in Belfast. It is situated near the quay, and called the Hookery; it is in so dilapidated a state that the House of Industry refuse relief to any persons living in it, being apprehensive of its falling.

The guide of the Assistant Commissioners into this place was an able-bodied labourer, who was carrying in some fresh straw for his bed. He lived in a small and most miserable outshed, which presented every appearance of being damp; he was unwilling to show them the inside of it. He told them that his wife had died of cholera last year, and that there were four who died of the disease in that house. He was employed as a porter on the quay, and would not wish to work as a labourer, since he would only get by labour 6s a-week.

In another small and damp outshed lived a second miserable family, but they had a bedstead and bedclothes, however dirty, and had also a fire.

Up stairs, in one of the rooms, lived a widow, whose husband had been taken away by cholera. She now supported herself by her own industry as a basketwoman; her rent, she said,

was in arrears, and, only that her landlord was kind to her, she would not be able to support herself.

Still in this room, and in the room next to it, there was some appearance of cleanliness. They were sweeping the floor, and said that, if they did not take precautions for cleanliness, the place would be dangerous to inhabit.

The circumstance calculated to add materially to the filth and unwholesomeness of the town is the total want of privies attached to the smaller houses. Whole rows of new houses are built without any accommodation of this kind; the consequence is that many of the streets and lanes are filthy in the extreme.¹⁴

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORKHOUSE

In 1838 a Poor Law Union was established based on the town of Belfast but including the village of Ballymacarrett on the east side of the River Lagan and the neighbouring districts of Ballygomartin, Ballyhackamore, Ballymurphy, Ballysillan, Carrmoney, Castlereagh, Dundonald, Greencastle, Holywood and Whitehouse. The total population in the Union was 80,512.

The Board of Guardians was composed of 22 elected and 7 ex-officio representatives. Only those who paid the county cess, a local tax based on property, were allowed to stand for election or vote. So the franchise was confined to the wealthier sections of the population, while individuals were allowed extra votes for other property they owned in

the Union. The ex-officio guardians were the seven justices of the Peace in the area who owned the most property. The Poor Law was firmly based on the belief that those who paid the rates should determine how the system should be run and certainly not those who were supposed to benefit from it. The franchise was widened in later years and the ex-officio JP's were abolished but right up to the end voting for the Poor Law Guardians was based on a property qualification which excluded the poorest sections of the population. The Union was divided into districts to elect representatives.

The first election in Belfast was held on 24 January 1839 and there were no contests for any of the seats. The new Board of Guardians represented a selection of the most prosperous merchants, businessmen and gentry of Belfast, not the most sympathetic group to deal with the problems of the poor and the destitute. These were the 22 elected Guardians with their addresses and occupations:

BELFAST (10 MEMBERS)

James McNamara, JP, 89 Donegall Street, Gentleman¹⁵
Samuel Graeme Fenton, 9 College Square North, linen partner in the firm of Sadler, Fenton and Co, linen merchants and bleachers
James Blair, 12 Wellington Place, gentleman
Valentine Whittle, 4 Donegall Square South, exporter and shipping merchant

William Webb, 11 Commercial Court, muslin and shawl
manufacturer

John Clarke, 12 College Square East, gentleman

James McTier, Hazelbank, merchant and agent for the
Belfast and Glasgow Steam Shipping Company

Charles Thomson, 36 Upper Arthur Street, merchant of
Thomson and Finlay's, High Street

Daniel Davis, Davis's Buildings, Donegall Street,
glass, oil, colour, drysaltery, iron, steel and coal
merchant

John Getty, 16 York Street, gentleman

BALLYMACARRETT (2 MEMBERS)

John Young, Shamrock Lodge, partner in Coates and
Young, brass and iron founders, Lagan Foundry

Robert McKibbin, Henryville, proprietor of the
Connswater Flax-Spinning Mill, Ballymacarrett

GREENCASTLE (1 MEMBER)

John F Ferguson, 20 Donegall Place, member of the
firm of John S Ferguson and Company, linen merchants,
White Linenhall

BALLYGOMARTIN (1 MEMBER)

Samuel Nelson, Monkshill farm, West India merchant
with offices at 16 White Linenhall

BALLYMURPHY (1 MEMBER)

Lewis Reford, Beechmount, general merchant, trading
at 3 Waring Street

WHITEHOUSE (1 MEMBER)

Thomas Hughes, [not known]

CARRMONEY (1 MEMBER)

Alexander Henry Halliday, Clifden, Holywood,
barrister and gentleman, later High Sheriff for
Co Antrim.

BALLYSTILLAN (1 MEMBER)

Joseph Bigger, 1 Gt Georges Street, provision
merchant trading at Long Lane, North St

CASTLEREAGH (1 MEMBER)

Robert McConnell, Castlereagh, gentleman

DUNDONALD (1 MEMBER)

Hugh McCutcheon, Ballybeen, gentleman

HOLYWOOD (1 MEMBER)

Robert Blackwell, Prairie, Holywood, gentleman

BALLHACKMORE (1 MEMBER)

William Harlin, Strandtown, gentleman

The new Guardians set to work quickly. A site for a workhouse was found on the Lisburn Road and bought for £2,130. The workhouse was to be one of the largest in Ireland, designed to hold one thousand people. The contract to build it was allocated to the building firm of Williams (who also built the workhouses in Lisburn and Lurgan) and signed on 7 June 1839. The final cost of building and furnishing the workhouse came to £10,122 and it was opened to receive the first inmates on 11 May 1841.

The Belfast workhouse was built to a standard plan drawn up by George Wilkinson, architect to the Poor Law Commission in Ireland. Wilkinson drew up two basic plans: one for a workhouse to accommodate 400 people, the other to accommodate 800.¹⁶ Both were capable of expansion to include an extra 200 inmates. The Belfast Guardians adopted the second plan as expanded. In later years the Belfast workhouse was more than trebled in size but some of the characteristic Wilkinson-style buildings can still be seen to-day in some of the City Hospital buildings which have survived from the workhouse.

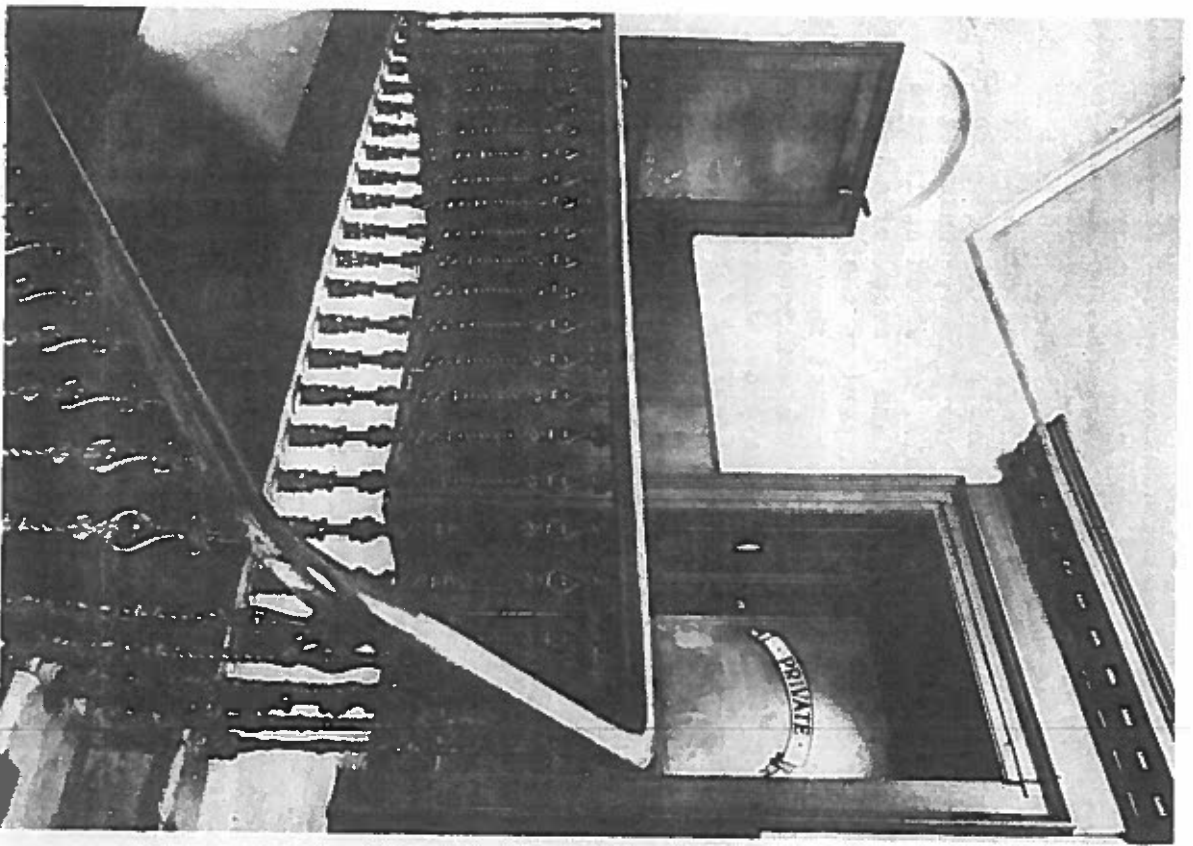
Wilkinson's buildings were extremely plain and functional. Inside the rough stone walls were not even plastered, just white washed, while there were no ceilings, just the bare rafters. Wilkinson also managed to make the Irish workhouses cheaper than the British equivalents by two innovations of his own. The floors were made of mortar rather than boards or flagstones and instead of bedsteads he introduced sleeping platforms which were simply continuous raised wooden floors on either side of the dormitories or wards where the inmates slept on straw mattresses.

EXPLANATION OF PLAN:

The entrance front building, forming a distinct structure, is placed about 150 feet in advance of the main building, and consists of one floor (above the ground), on which the Board-room and clerk's office are placed; underneath these are the waiting hall, in which applicants for relief are received, and a room for a porter, who has charge of the paupers on their admission, for the purpose of seeing that they are washed, cleaned, and clothed in the probationary wards, therefore placed near the probationary wards. Distinct wards are also provided for vagrants receiving temporary relief; this arrangement of the probationary and vagrant wards secures the vicinity of the body of the house from the risk of infection from persons previous to their being examined, and declared free from disease. The letters to the several rooms connected with this building explain their appropriation as follows:--

- g. Stairs to Board-room.
- h. Porter's room.
- w. Washing-room.
- f. Fumigatory closets for purifying the clothes of the paupers, which are cleaned and afterwards deposited in a room in the roof over the Board-room, to be ready for such paupers as may quit the house.
- r. Refractory ward.
- p. Privies.

The main building is separated from the entrance front by a courtyard and garden, which divides the two front yards for the boys and girls;



Stairway to Board Room

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the centre of the main building contains the master's house, which is placed immediately among all classes, and from which ready access is had to any of the rooms; the kitchen offices are close under the master and matron's inspection, as well as the several stores.

The wash-house and kitchen offices are placed in a situation distinct from the paupers in the yards, and none but those immediately employed in them have access thereto; on each side the master's house are placed the rooms for children, who have separate staircases, used also by the master and matron; the extreme wings contain on the ground floor rooms for the old and infirm people, and some accommodation also for the able-bodied, which class, however, being employed (the women in the wash-house, &c., and the men at a mill, in breaking stones, or other useful occupation), the same extent of day room is not requisite; the chapel and dining hall answers three purposes, inasmuch as it also serves, by means of a double partition, for day rooms for able-bodied men and women, should occasion require it. The situation of this building as a dining hall is, from its central position, best suited for all classes, and is most convenient as regards the serving the food from the kitchen; the two rooms for boys and girls will also serve the purpose of a chapel, if required.

- e. Partition in the dining hall.
- s. Stores.
- o. Stone bench seats in the yards.
- i. Scullery.
- m. Drying closet.
- p. Privies.
- l. Stairs.

35



Main body of the house

36

The infirmary is placed at the back of the building, occupying a position distinct from the wards of the house, and sufficiently convenient for the supply of food from the kitchen offices without entailing the necessity of a separate establishment:

- a. The surgery.
- b. For a nurse.
- d. Dead house.

Wards are placed on each end of the infirmary building for idiots, epileptics, and lunatics, in which cells are provided for those for whom occasional restraint is unavoidable, or whose habits render distinct accommodation necessary.

- k. Inspector or keeper's room.
- c. Cells or small rooms.¹⁷

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LIFE IN THE WORKHOUSE

What was life like in the workhouse? The workhouse was meant to be a deterrent to keep out all but the really desperate by making conditions unpleasant. Yet most people were so poor that it proved difficult to make food or accommodation worse for them. The Commissioners commented in their Report for 1839-1840:

'It must be obvious to anyone conversant with the habits and mode of living of the Irish people that to establish a dietary in the workhouses inferior to the ordinary diet of the poorer classes would be difficult if not, in many cases, impossible and hence it has been contended that the workhouse system of relief is inapplicable to Ireland. ...

"On the contrary we are satisfied that the diet, clothing, bedding and other merely physical comforts may in the workhouse be better than in the neighbouring cottages and yet that none but the really destitute poor will seek for admission into the workhouse, provided that order and discipline be strictly maintained therein ..." 18

The Commissioners therefore laid down a strict and very detailed set of regulations to be followed in every workhouse. They were enforced by the Master, the official responsible under the Guardians for the day to day running of the House. Inside the workhouse walls the Master had virtually supreme authority.

When they entered the workhouse the paupers were immediately segregated by sex, age, and physical condition and sent to different wards each with their own yard for work - except the infirmary, of course. This was probably the most hated regulation. It meant that families were broken up, wives separated from husbands, parents from children, sisters from brothers. They were allowed to meet again only at times appointed by the Guardians; usually a short period once a week. All paupers had to wear distinctive workhouse clothes and obey prison-like rules and restrictions. Boys could be flogged and adults put in the lock-up if they disobeyed. They all had to work, the women doing most of the chores around the House, the men breaking stones or picking oakum, i.e., unravelling the fibres in old hunks of rope. Oakum-picking was a dull, unpleasant task much used in prisons.

The food was monotonous and poor. In March 1842 the Poor Law Commissioners approved the following diet for able-bodied men and women in the Belfast workhouse:

	<u>Breakfast</u>	<u>Dinner</u>	<u>Supper</u>
2 days in the week	6 ozs oatmeal and $\frac{2}{3}$ pint of buttermilk	2 lbs potatoes $1\frac{1}{2}$ pints of soup	4 oz oatmeal and $\frac{3}{4}$ pint buttermilk
5 days in the week	6 ozs oatmeal $\frac{2}{3}$ pint of buttermilk	3 lbs potatoes $\frac{3}{4}$ pint of buttermilk	4 oz oatmeal, $\frac{3}{4}$ pint of buttermilk 19

The meal was mixed with water to make gruel and the soup which was a sort of broth, contained the only meat the inmates got in the week. There was a slightly better diet for the sick and young children.

The workhouse clothes were adequate enough but they marked out the inmate as a pauper and later, when the workhouse children began to be taken out for regular walks, the clothes immediately identified them to the passers-by. This is a description of the workhouse clothes in 1842:

The clothing of the adult males consists of a coat and trowsers (sic) of barragon,²⁰ cap, shirt, shoes and stockings. The female adults are supplied with a striped jerkin, a petticoat of linsey-wolsey,²¹ and another of stout cotton, a cap, shift, shoes, and stockings. The male children have each a jacket and trowsers of fustian,²² a shirt and a woollen cap. The female children have each a cotton frock and petticoat, a cap, and a linsey-wolsey petticoat. Each bed is supplied with a straw mattress, with blankets, bolsters etc.²³

In 1843, when almost all the workhouses had been opened, the Commissioners drew up their detailed code of regulations to be applied in every House. With a few modifications they remained in force for the rest of the century and quite a few were still in operation until the system was finally abolished. These are some of the regulations:

[Note. On entering the workhouse the paupers were first placed in a probationary ward until they were examined by the workhouse doctor.]

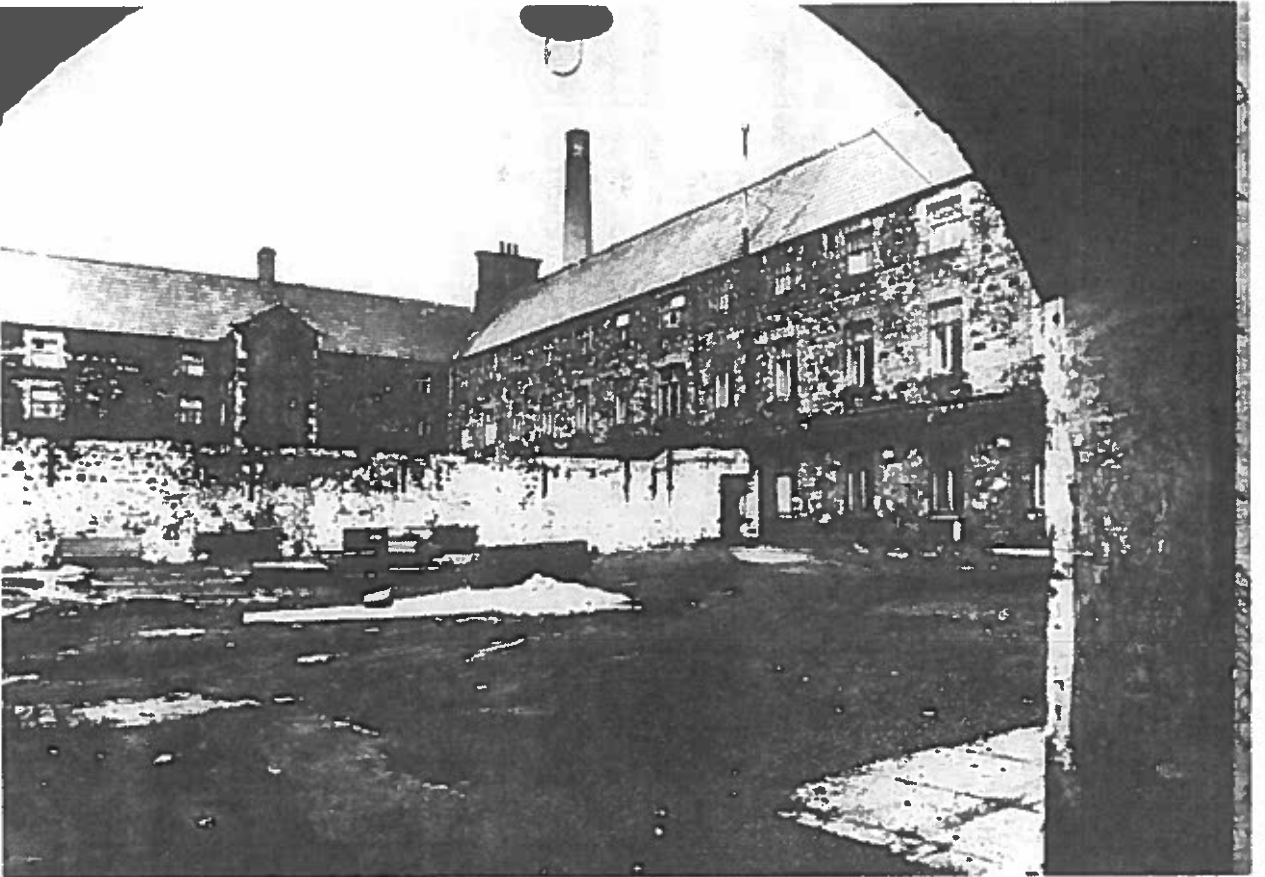
Article 7. Before being removed from the probationary ward, the pauper shall be thoroughly cleansed, and shall be clothed in a workhouse dress, and the clothes which he wore at the time of his admission shall be purified. Such clothes shall be restored to the pauper when he leaves the workhouse.

Article 8. Every pauper shall, upon his admission into the workhouse, or on his return after a temporary leave of absence, in pursuance of Article 25, be searched by or under the inspection of the proper officer, and all articles prohibited by any Act of Parliament, or by this Order, which may be found upon his person, shall be taken from him, and, if possible, restored to him at his departure from the workhouse.

Classification of the Paupers

Article 9. The paupers, so far as the workhouse admits thereof, shall be classed as follows:-

1. Males above the age of 15 years.
2. Boys above the age of 2 years, and under that of 15 years.
3. Females above the age of 15 years.
4. Girls above the age of 2 years, and under that of 15 years.
5. Children under 2 years of age.



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The women's yard with the cripples' wards on the left, separation block on the right

Article 10. To each of the classes specified in Article 9 shall be assigned, by the Board of Guardians, the apartments and yard best fitted for the reception of such class; and where the number of inmates and the accommodation of the workhouse admit thereof, the said classes may be further subdivided, with the approval of the Poor Law Commissioners.

Article 11. Each class, or subdivision of a class, shall respectively remain in the apartment assigned to them, without communication with any other class or subdivision of a class; subject, nevertheless to such arrangements as exist with reference to the probationary wards and infirmary, and also to the following five exceptions:

Exception 1. Any paupers of the third class, and any paupers of a proper age in fourth class, may be employed, constantly or occasionally, as assistants to the nurses in any of the sick wards, or in the care of infants, or as assistants in the household work; provided that the said paupers, when employed in the household work be so employed without communication with the paupers of the first and second classes.

...
...
...

43

Exception 4. All paupers of class 5, whose mothers are inmates of the workhouse, shall be allowed to remain with their mothers, if the mothers so desire; and all paupers of classes 2 and 4, who are between the ages of two and seven years, shall, when not attending school, be placed in some apartment specially provided for them; and the mothers of such last-named children shall be permitted to have access to them at all reasonable times.

Exception 5. The master of the workhouse (subject to any regulations to be made by the Board of Guardians, and approved of by the Poor Law Commissioners) shall allow the father or mother of any child in the workhouse, who may be desirous of seeing such child, to have an interview with such child at some time in each day, in some room in the workhouse to be appointed for that purpose.

Discipline and Diet of the Paupers

Article 13. All the paupers in the workhouse, except those disabled by sickness or infirmity, persons of unsound mind, and children, shall rise, be set to work, leave off work, and go to bed at such times, and shall be allowed such intervals for their meals as the Board of Guardians shall, by any regulation approved by the Poor Law Commissioners, direct; and these several times shall be notified by the ringing of a bell. [Everyone had to be in bed, all lights out and the house locked up by 9.00 pm

each night.]

Article 14. Half an hour after the bell shall have been rung for rising, the names of the paupers shall be called over by the master, schoolmaster, matron, and schoolmistress respectively in the several wards, when every pauper belonging to each ward must be present to answer to his name, and to be inspected.

...

Article 19. No pauper shall have or consume any tobacco, or any spirituous or fermented liquor, or food or provision other than is allowed in the said dietary table, unless by the direction in writing of the medical officer, as provided for in Article 17.

...

Article 21. The paupers of the several classes shall be kept employed according to their capacity and ability; but no pauper shall work on his own account, or on account of any party other than the Board of Guardians; and no pauper shall receive any compensation for his labour.

Article 22. The boys and girls who are inmates of the workhouse shall, for three of the working hours at least every day, be instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the principles of the Christian religion; and such other instruction shall be imparted to them as shall fit them for service, and train them to habits of usefulness, industry, and virtue.

Article 23. Any pauper may quit the workhouse upon giving the master three hours' previous notice of his wish to do so; but no such pauper shall carry with him any clothes or other articles belonging to the Board of Guardians without the express permission of the master, or matron.

Article 24. No pauper having a family dependent on him shall so quit the workhouse without taking the whole of such family with him; nor shall any pauper, after so quitting the workhouse, be again received therein, except in one of the modes prescribed in Article 1 for the admission of paupers.

...

Article 27. No person shall visit any pauper in the workhouse, except by permission of the master, or (in his absence) of the matron, and subject to such conditions and restrictions as the Board of Guardians may prescribe; such interview shall take place, except where a sick pauper is visited, in a room separate from the other inmates of the workhouse, in the presence of the master, matron, or porter.

...

Article 29. No pauper shall play at cards, or at any game of chance in the workhouse; and it shall be lawful for the master to take from any pauper, and to keep until his departure from the workhouse, any cards, dice, or other articles relating to games of chance, which may be in his possession.

Article 30. No pauper shall smoke within the precincts of the workhouse, or shall have any matches or other articles of a highly combustible nature in his possession....

[Punishments for Misbehaviour of Paupers]

Article 36. Any pauper who shall neglect to observe such of the regulations herein contained as are applicable to and binding on him;

Or who shall make any noise when silence is ordered to be kept;

Or who shall use obscene or profane language;

Or shall by word or deed insult or revile any person;

Or shall threaten to strike or to assault any person;

Or shall not duly cleanse his person;

Or shall refuse or neglect to work, after having been required to do so;

Or shall pretend sickness;

Or shall play at cards or other game of chance;

Or shall enter, or attempt to enter, without permission, the ward or yard appropriated to any class of paupers other than that to which he belongs;

Or shall misbehave at public worship or at prayers;

Or shall return after the appointed time of absence when allowed to quit the workhouse temporarily;

Or shall wilfully disobey any lawful order of any officer of the workhouse;

shall be deemed Disorderly.

Article 37. Any pauper who shall, within seven days, repeat any one or commit more than one of the offences specified in Article 36, or who shall by word or deed insult or revile the master or matron, or any other officer of the workhouse, or any of the Guardians;

Or shall wilfully disobey any lawful order of the master or matron after such order shall have been repeated;

Or shall attempt to introduce any fermented or spirituous liquors or tobacco without lawful authority;

Or shall unlawfully strike or otherwise unlawfully assault any person;

Or shall wilfully or mischievously damage or soil any property whatsoever belonging to the Guardians;

Or shall wilfully waste or spoil any provisions, stock, tools, or materials for work, belonging to the Guardians;

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall commit any act of indecency;

Or shall wilfully disturb the other inmates during prayers or Divine worship;

Or shall climb over any wall or fence, or attempt to quit the workhouse premises in any irregular mode;

Or shall attempt to convey out of the workhouse any clothes or other articles belonging to the Board of Guardians;

shall be deemed Refractory.

Article 38. It shall be lawful for the master of the workhouse, with or without the directions of the Board of Guardians, to punish any

disorderly pauper, by requiring such pauper, for a time not exceeding two days, to perform one hour's extra work in each day, and by withholding all milk or buttermilk which such pauper would otherwise receive with his meals.

Article 39. It shall be lawful for the Board of Guardians, by a special direction to be entered on their minutes, to order any refractory pauper to be punished by confinement in a separate room, with or without an increase in the time of work and an alteration of diet, similar in kind and duration to that prescribed in Article 38 for disorderly paupers; but no pauper shall be confined for a longer period than 24 hours; or, if it be deemed right that such pauper shall be carried before a justice of the peace, and if such period of 24 hours should be insufficient for that purpose, then for such further time as may be necessary for such purpose.

Article 40. It shall be lawful for the Board of Guardians, by any special or general order, to direct that a dress different from that of the other inmates shall be worn by disorderly or refractory paupers, during a period of not more than 48 hours, jointly with, or in lieu of, the alteration of diet to which any such pauper might be subjected by the regulations herein contained; but it shall not be lawful for the Board of Guardians to cause any penal dress, or distinguishing mark of disgrace, to be worn by adult pauper, or class of adult paupers, unless such pauper or paupers shall be disorderly or refractory within the meaning of Article 36 or Article 37 of this order.

Article 41. If any offence, whereby a pauper becomes refractory under Articles 36 or 37, be accompanied by any of the following circumstances of aggravation: that is to say, if such pauper

Persist in using violence against any person
Or persist in creating a noise or disturbance so as to annoy a considerable number of the other inmates;
Or endeavour to excite other paupers to acts of insubordination;
Or persist in acting indecently or obscenely in the presence of any other inmate;
Or persist in mischievously breaking or damaging any goods or property of the Guardians;

it shall be lawful for the master, without any direction of the Board of Guardians, immediately to place such refractory pauper in confinement for any time not exceeding 12 hours; which confinement shall, however, be reckoned as part of any punishment afterwards imposed by the Board of Guardians for the same offence. But it shall not be lawful for the master to confine any adult pauper without the direction of the Board of Guardians in that behalf, except in one of the cases specified in this Article.

To avoid abuses of these powers, however, the Regulations strictly limited the punishments that could be enforced. Some of the provisions were quite humane for the period.

Article 44. No pauper shall be confined between 8 o'clock in the evening and 6 o'clock in the morning, without being furnished with bed and bedding suitable to the season, and with other proper conveniences.

Article 45. No child under 12 years of age shall be confined in a dark room, nor during the night.

Article 46. No corporal punishment shall be inflicted on any male child, except by the schoolmaster or master of the workhouse.

Article 47. No corporal punishment shall be inflicted on any female child.

Article 48. No corporal punishment shall be inflicted on any male child, except with a rod or other instrument, such as shall be seen and approved of by the Board of Guardians or the Visiting Committee.

...

Article 51. No male child shall be punished by corporal correction whose age may be reasonably supposed to exceed 15 years.²⁴

Despite the detailed regulations the day-to-day running of the workhouse was very much in the hands of the Master and Matron and conditions in the House depended a lot on their character and temper. In the early days Masters were largely untrained and often quite brutal characters. The Belfast Guardians had some trouble with their first Masters

Arthur Connor, and his wife who was the Matron. Connor resigned early in 1842 when the Guardians tried to dismiss him after he had attacked the workhouse schoolmistress, Mrs Evans. Before Connor had left however his wife hit Mrs Evans in the workhouse dining-room and the result was a court case which gives some insight into life in the workhouse. Connor tried to prevent some of the paupers from giving evidence and they had to be brought to court by the police. This and the prosecution's appeal at the end of the case for protection for the paupers who had given evidence against the Connors shows the power of the Master and Matron and the fear in which they were held by the inmates.

GOVERNMENT AND MORALITY OF THE BELFAST UNION WORKHOUSE (report from the ULSTER TIMES)

... Mrs Connor, matron of the Belfast Union Workhouse, was charged with assaulting Catherine Evans, the schoolmistress of that establishment, in the dining-hall, on the 26th inst.

Mr J Smyth appeared for the prosecution, and Mr Geo Black for the defendant.

Catherine Evans, sworn - My husband and I are connected with the Belfast Union Workhouse, as schoolmaster and schoolmistress. We came here from the Norwood Institution, near London, recommended by one of the English Commissioners. Mr and Mrs Connor are master and matron of the workhouse, and have the control and management of it. My husband and I have held our situations for about four months. Our duties are, to instruct the children,

six hours in each day during the week; and I have also to assist in the dining-hall, in seeing the children seated and served. On the evening of the 26th instant, at supper hour, I entered the hall, for this purpose, with the children. Mrs Connor was standing at the top of the hall, over against the men's hall; she came down to where I was, and said I should not seat the children. I replied, that, so long as I had authority to do so, I would exercise it. She then told me to be off about my business, and, raising her hand, struck me twice upon the arm. I believe she was intoxicated at the time. Her husband was not present. Directly I was struck, I called for Mr Evans, who came to the hall, and Mr Connor also entered. I told them what had occurred, but Mrs Connor denied that she had struck me. Mr Connor said she had struck me, and desired her to go to her own room. My arm was much hurt with the blows. I had not spoken to Mrs Connor, for a month before. I confess there had not been good blood between her and me. I have witnesses to prove that she struck me, but they are not present. I swear that I did not return the blow. The names of my witnesses, who were summoned, are Cherry, Hughes, and Carey; there is, also, another, not summoned - a Mrs Archer. These are all paupers in the workhouse, and under Mr and Mrs Connor's control.

Mr Molony [the magistrate] - We will send a Policeman for them. Mrs Connor - One of them left the house last night and another this morning. Another said she would not come forward. My husband reminded them that they were summoned.

Mr Malony - Let the Policeman, who goes for the witnesses, cause Mr Connor also to attend. Mr Lindsay will proceed to the house, and take charge of it until he returns.

Mr Lindsay and two Policemen proceeded to the workhouse, accordingly; but, to the surprise and displeasure of the Bench, neither Connor nor the witnesses made their appearance for upwards of an hour.

Before the expiration of that time, ...

Anne Hughes, examined - I am a pauper, and was in the workhouse when this occurrence happened. I saw Mrs Connor strike Mrs Evans, at supper-time, in the dining-hall. She struck her twice. I did not hear Mrs Evans say any thing to her previously, nor did I hear any scolding between them. Mrs Evans was walking down the hall, with the children, to put them into their seats - a thing which she was in the habit of doing. Mrs Connor was in a passion at the time ... I had my eyes fixed on Mrs Evans at the time; for one is in the habit of looking at a person she likes. Mr Connor would not permit me to come out of the workhouse, today, to give evidence, in the Union clothes, and my own were not fit to appear in.

Mr Molony - I think it would be much more creditable to the master and matron to give facility for bringing forward the witnesses, than to delay them in the manner they are doing.

Mr Cairns - It is really too bad that the Bench should have their time wasted in waiting on Mr Connor and the witnesses.

Mr Malony (to Head-Constable Campbell) - You had better see what it is that occasions the delay.

Mr Campbell - I am afraid, Sir, that some obstacle has been thrown in the men's way.

Campbell went to execute the orders of the Bench; and, after the lapse of a considerable time, Connor and the witnesses arrived.

Elizabeth Carey and Mary Archer were then examined for the prosecution, and strictly corroborated the foregoing testimony - both deposing that Mr Connor called Mrs Evans a liar ... that she was in a passion ... and that she was the assailant.

Mr Black was endeavouring to shake their testimony, on the cross-examination, when

Mr Smyth said - The Bench see very well what sort of witnesses we are compelled to produce - poor creatures under the control of your clients, this master and matron...

Jane Cunningham and Sarah Madden also gave corroboratory evidence.

The following witnesses were then called to prove a cross-case :-

Mrs Connor, examined - A little after six o'clock, on the evening of the 26th, I was in the dining-hall I had my females seated; but the children under Mrs Evans's charge were late. She walked to the top of the dining-hall, while I stood in the centre. I observed a number of the little children in a cluster, and lifted a form, that they might pass up one side, and down another. On this, Mrs Evans lifted her elbow, and struck me, saying it was none of my business. She afterwards said that I had struck her, and called me a false-swearing woman. (Cross-examined by Mr Smyth)... The women who were sworn were present. What they have sworn is untrue.

(Cries of "Oh, oh!" from the paupers, mingled with that expressive sound produced by the action of the tip of the tongue upon the palate, but which no combination of letters can embody.) I was an officer in Coldbath fields Prison, in London, before I came here... Mr Smyth - It is a common prison, however. How long were you there? For two years. How often have you been married? Twice. What was your first husband's name? Ryder. ... He was superintendent and jailer for four years. Did you push Mrs Evans I did; but she neglected her duty, or she would have put the form aside, to allow the children to pass. Are you a very mild woman? If I do my duty, my mildness is nothing to nobody. Mrs Evans is only an assistant in the dining-hall, and must obey my orders there. She has other duties to attend to, also - those of teaching.

Ellen Webb was produced in corroboration, and swore that Mrs Evans struck first, which called forth loud cries of "Oh, oh!" from the other paupers; she appeared to be a sort of subordinate officer in the workhouse, but denied that she was a favourite of the master and matron; she had never heard that Mrs Connor got drunk; she could not tell whether the blow was hard or easy, nor what place it took effect upon; did not hear Mrs C complain of being hurt; Mrs C did not strike in return ...

Mr Malony desired those witnesses for the prosecution to be recalled who had last come into Court.

Eliza Carey was then asked why she had not attended the summons, and replied - I was willing to attend; but Mr Connor would not let me out, except in my old clothes, and they were too bad to appear in. Except I had sided with him, he would not give me

the Union clothes. (Sensation.)

Mr Connor - I beg to say, that this woman said she would not come, and that I told her she might, if she pleased.

This person then put some questions, through his attorney, to which Carey replied, that she had asked Mrs Evans if the law was going on, and she answered that she really could not say; that Mrs Connor scolded her and others on the stairs, and pointed her out to her husband as one of those who were going out (to give evidence), that day.

Mrs Evans was then examined as to an assault with which she charged Mr Connor. The evidence was to the effect, that she had gone to get two nets of potatoes, to supply two children, for whom no shares had been left, and that Mr Connor caught her by the wrist, twisted it round, and took them from her. He had previously assaulted her in the dining-hall, in a manner that obliged her to cease assisting in it. He said she was a thief, and had stolen the things of the house, to give to the inmates. Mr Connor had been dismissed lately, in consequence of his conduct to her. She and her husband had resigned, but were still connected with the work-house. They would not have resigned but for a false and malicious letter which Mr Connor laid before the Guardians.

Mr Connor - I was not dismissed, but resigned. Mr and Mrs Evans were dismissed in consequence of their disgraceful conduct in their former situation, in pointing out portions of Scripture to the children, and turning them to bad purposes. I question much whether they ever were married. Their letter of dismissal has arrived from the Commissioners.

The Bench requested, that these personalities should not be further indulged in.

Mr Molony - What between keeping back the witnesses and this recrimination, the day has been wasted.

...

The Magistrates then retired; but, after a brief interval, again entered the Court.

Mr Molony - The Magistrates, through me, wish, in the first place, to express their astonishment, the persons in the situation in which both parties are should have set such an example as they are proved to have done, and shewed such a loss of temper, and such violence, before people whom it was their duty to control and preserve in order. The assaults which have been committed are trifling; but there something behind which has not come out in the evidence. The Magistrates consider that Catherine and Arthur Connor are guilty of the assaults with which they were charged; and that Catherine Evans is not guilty of the offence laid against her. The sentence Catherine Connor to pay a fine of 10s, or in default, to 14 days' imprisonment; and Arthur Connor, also, to 10s fine, or 14 days' imprisonment. There is another feature in the case - the means taken to keep back the witnesses - which the Magistrates cannot but consider highly discreditable. The fines were immediately paid; and the result of the trial appeared to give much satisfaction to a crowded Court.

Mr Black drew their Worships' attention to the case of the paupers who had given evidence for his client, and who expected harsh treatment in

consequence - especially one poor creature who climbed over the workhouse wall.

Mr Molony - If I find that the slightest violence or ill-treatment is shown to any witness, in consequence of this trial, I shall certainly feel it my duty to send the offending party for trial to the Assizes.

Mr Connor assured his Worship, that nothing of the kind should occur. He did not wish to punish the female who went over the wall. A number of the paupers who had sworn today were marked by the Guardians for dismissal.

The parties then left the Court. 25

THE PAUPERS

What sort of people entered the workhouse? The Poor Law Commissioners insisted that every Union should keep extremely detailed records and analysed them periodically in their Reports. Here are some of the figures for the Belfast workhouse for 3 months in 1844, 3 years after it was opened.

A total of 1,468 people, 802 adults and 666 children, had been admitted to the workhouse during the 3 months - Some of them had left again of course. Of the adults 526 were women and 276 men. A high proportion of the women were widows (214), or had been deserted by their husbands (51), while 196 of the children were orphans or had been deserted by both parents.

The previous occupations of the adults were as follows:

Previous occupation of persons relieved in the Belfast workhouse from 10 January to 9 April 1844.

	Men	Women
Peasant and Common Labourer:	72	2
Servant:	16	149
Mendicant (beggar):	3	12
Retail Tradesmen, Shopkeepers etc:	10	23
Artisans, Mechanics and Handicraftsmen:	64	1
Porters, Carriers, Drivers, Messengers etc:	10	1
Seamstresses, Dressmakers etc:	-	48
Laundresses, Washerwomen, Charwomen etc:	-	35
Manufacturing Labourers:	33	47
Hawkers, Pedlars etc:	1	-
Farmers	-	-
In Army, Navy, Police or Excise Service:	8	-
Schoolmasters, Teachers, Writing Clerks etc:	2	-
Miscellaneous	1	-
No previous occupation stated:	56	208
Total	276	526

Among the records kept by each Union was the Admission and Discharge Register, a massive ledger in which were entered the name, workhouse number, age, occupation, religion, family status and physical condition of everyone admitted to the

Form 6.—REGISTRY of I

1. Number.	2. Names and Surnames of Paupers.	3. Sex.	4. Age.	5. If Adult, whether Single, Married, Widower, or Widow; if Child, whether Orphan, Described, or Bastard.	6. Employment or Calling.
1	Chambers Sittia	M	46	Married	Miner
2	" Samuel	M	15 ^{mo}	Not called	"
3	Chambers Ellen	F	62	Widow	Bag packer
4	Mitchell John	M	60	Widower	Sailor
5	Dunn Francis	M	27	Single	Dealer
6	McKee James	M	70	Widower	Silversmith
7	Craker Betsy	F	27	Married	Dealer
8	Harris John	M	64	"	Silversmith
9	Begun John	M	28	Single	"
10	Wynndman Agnes	F	30	"	Servant
11	Wynndman William	M	66	Widower	Dealer

workhouse and when they were discharged or died.

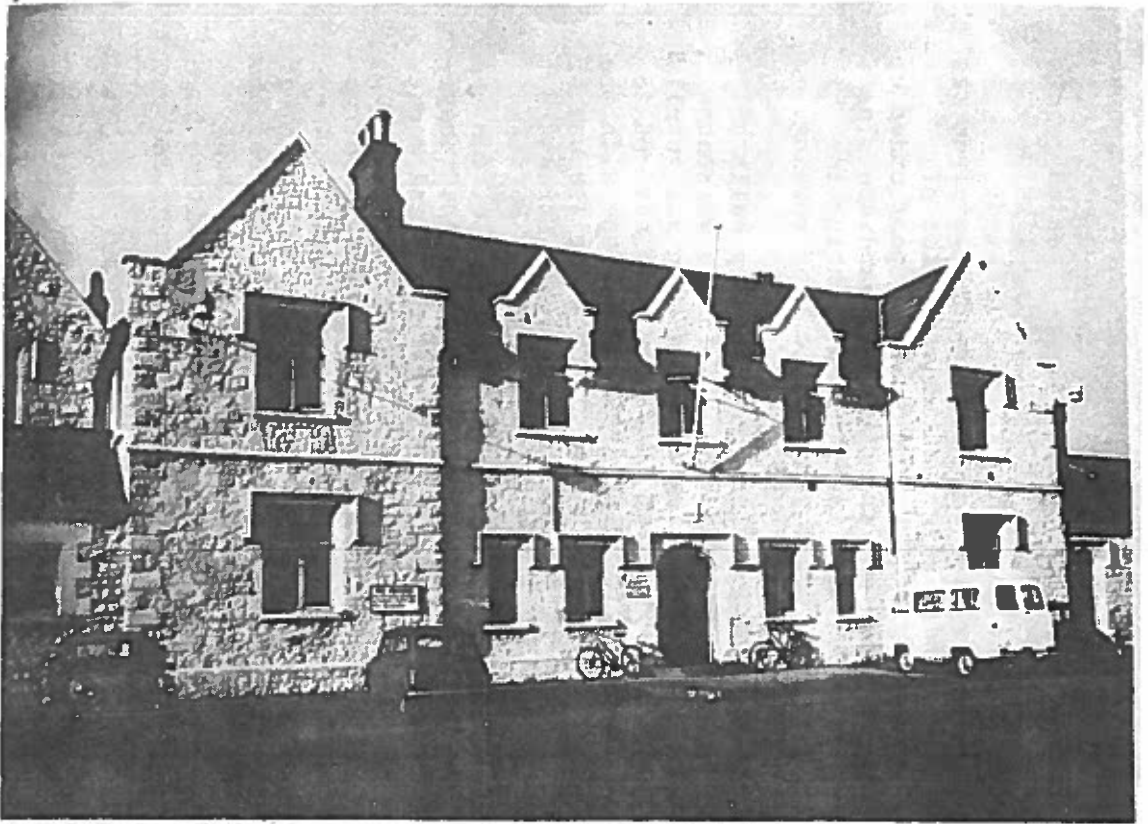
This is a typical page of the Register giving details of some of the people who entered the House some 30 years after the previous group. The harsh moral attitudes of the time are shown by the description of illegitimate children as 'bastards'.

THE FAMINE AND AFTER

Like every other Union Belfast was affected by the Great Famine of 1845-7 though nothing like as severely as the South and West of Ireland.

Nonetheless the poor flocked into Belfast from the country and there were serious epidemics of smallpox and dysentery. Most of the poor ended up in the workhouse and the Board of Guardians also became the main body involved in fighting the epidemics. The result was drastic overcrowding.

Fortunately the Guardians had recently built a 250-bed Fever Hospital attached to the workhouse but even so the existing accommodation was totally inadequate. In January 1847 they were advised to rent a large building in the town to cope with the overflow. They did intend to apply for the use of the old House of Correction [in Howard Street] but were informed that the Belfast Relief Committee was already using it to feed 3,500 people from food kitchens. (In June 1847 they reckoned that they were relieving up to 15,000 individuals and were rapidly running out of funds.) Sheds were put up in the workhouse yards and the stables, the straw-house and even a newly-built piggery were pressed into service. Even with this Nassau Senior one of the Assistant Poor Law Commissioners described the Belfast workhouse in December 1847 as the most overcrowded he had seen (although he admitted that it was well managed and free from disease) and the Commissioners recommended 1,850 as the maximum number that could be accommodated. After that number they suggested that the Guardians grant outdoor relief to the destitute. But the Belfast Guardians were determined not to initiate outdoor relief and by April 28th 1848 they had managed to



Administration Block: the date 1840 above the door

cram 2,825 people into a workhouse built to accommodate 1,000 just 7 years before. They preferred to provide additional accommodation rather than grant outdoor relief which they argued 'would encourage pauperism as from the fact that when the Soup Kitchen's Committee commenced their relief the numbers were about 300 or 400 and in the course of a few weeks the numbers increased to 14,000 or 15,000.' They knew that many poor would flock into Belfast from the surrounding countryside if they commenced poor relief. They took over the buildings of the Day Asylum at the end of 1847 and then the College Hospital (the old barrack in Barrack Street).

The Belfast Guardians had to cope with many Irish poor shipped back from Scotland and England. In Britain the law of settlement required poor to be shipped back to their place of origin. Ireland did not have such a law and so those parts where the poor were dumped, had to take responsibility for their maintenance. Early in 1848 a report on this situation was made to the Poor Law Commissioners:

Mr John Holden, muslim manufacturer, on his oath sayeth for [about]* the last 20 years I have acted gratuitously and given up much of my time, to the several local charities, Belfast, and I have acted as a member of the Relief and Soup Kitchen Committees of the town of Belfast since their formation in 1846 which was supported by voluntary contribution without the aid of Government. These committees at one time last year gave daily support to 15,000 people; in rough numbers 5,000 of these had been in the town less than 18 months, attracted by these charities and public works, but of the

* pencilled annotation

surplus of our funds we applied a portion to the removal of these strangers and others, immigrants from England and Scotland. In all we have removed from Belfast 6,045 persons since July 1847 at a cost of £700.

We gave food to the casual poor and money where necessary and paid their railway fare or sent them by cart towards their home. All these were volunteers, but we have laterally (sic) punished persons found begging in the streets, by confinement for short periods under a local act.

We are in the habit of sending persons employed by the Relief Committees, to meet the steamers from England and Scotland which bring paupers removed to Belfast, which parties deponent* has invariably examined, about 2,500 in all of which 2,300 are from Scotland. The English immigrants are usually well provided with food by the removal parochial authorities and furnished with a removal order. Those removed from Edinburgh, Paisley and Dundee have sufficient bread and cheese for the voyage, and for their support on the day of landing. Paupers removed from Glasgow, on the contrary, invariably declare that they are unfurnished with food or money, and several apparently just discharged from hospital, and who make that declaration, and who arrive in too weak a state to travel on, and we have had to keep a few families for a day or two, to enable them to gain strength. In one case a widow lost one of her children immediately on landing, and she said at the coroner's inquest, that she begged the authorities at Glasgow to allow her to remain for a short time from the dangerous state of her children's health which was refused. Several cases of persons

removed by the Glasgow parochial authorities relapsed to fever on their landing here, and were obliged to be taken into hospital [signed] John Holden.

Sworn before me at Belfast January 19 1848
[signed] Edward Senior. 28

Early in 1849 Belfast suffered an outbreak of cholera. It was not the last attack to hit the city but several letters of 1866 illustrate the increasing efficiency of the Board of Guardians in coping with such a crisis:

28 July 1866 'Dr Reid reports 63 fever of whom 22 are convalescent, 13 dysentery, 2 smallpox, 11 measles, 6 scarlatina, 5 whooping cough and 130 medical cases remaining under treatment in the hospital ward on the 28th day of July 1866. He fears there is little chance of our escaping visitation from Asiatic cholera. He has removed some medical cases from two of his wards so that they may be ready to receive male and female patients. He requests the Board will order two very large metal baths such as they used before and a dozen of copper warming pans similar to those in use in the hospitals. He also suggests that a conveyance be provided in which cholera patients can be removed from a distance in a horizontal position; that they be admitted by the back gate and that the road from Sandy Row to the gate be made smooth.

'Dr Johnston reports 12 syphilitic 91 medical 68 surgical 2 midwifery 3 disease of eyes 34 epilepsy 1 delirium tremens and 119 insane cases remaining under treatment in the infirmary

* i.e. Holden

wards on the 28th instant ...'

'Resolved that the above recommendations be adopted with the exception of that recommending that a conveyance be provided but that the conveyance used when cholera last visited Belfast be repaired and made suitable for the conveyance if necessary of cholera patients to hospital ..

'The Rev John Porter, Dr Murney JP and Mr Boag as a deputation from the Belfast General Hospital Committee waited upon this Board and stated that had been deputed to ascertain what arrangements the Guardians had already made and could make for the reception and treatment of cholera patients, should Belfast unfortunately be visited with a cholera epidemic. During the last visitation of cholera the General Hospital Committee were enabled to receive for treatment into their hospital of cholera patients, a certain number of the middle or better class whose treatment was paid for, but if cholera should at present visit Belfast they could not receive any patients labouring under that disease as the hospital was at present fully occupied with the usual or ordinary cases admitted or treated by them.'

'The deputation were informed of the arrangements at present made by Dr Reid for the reception of cholera patients, and they were further informed that if it should be found necessary the Guardians could in a very short time make arrangements whereby the entire fever hospital this workhouse which would accommodate 500 beds could be set apart for the reception of cholera

patients alone.

4 August 1866 Dr Reid reports ... that a cab could not be made suitable for the removal of cholera patients to hospital. They require a vehicle into and out of which they can be lifted in a horizontal position with places for lamps and it should not be painted black [the former conveyance to be used].

No. 2 He suggests that several such conveyances be placed in different parts of the town when cholera appears, so that patients coming to hospital can be removed immediately [deferred].

No. 3 As it will be necessary that a medical officer should be on duty at night as well as during the day when cholera patients are coming into hospital he requests permission to engage an assistant to the hospital resident surgeon and to employ nurses to replace those he may transfer to the cholera wards and also that the pay of the latter be increased. The request not to be acted on till cholera patients had been admitted [granted].

No. 4 He states in former epidemics of cholera lives were saved by having persons sitting up all night in the different wards of the workhouse so that any inmate was brought under treatment on the first occasion of diarrhoea or vomiting. He thinks this arrangement should be commenced at once in the probationary wards and directions given to those in charge during the day as well as at night to watch closely all persons who may have arrived recently from England. It was by one of those travellers that cholera was started

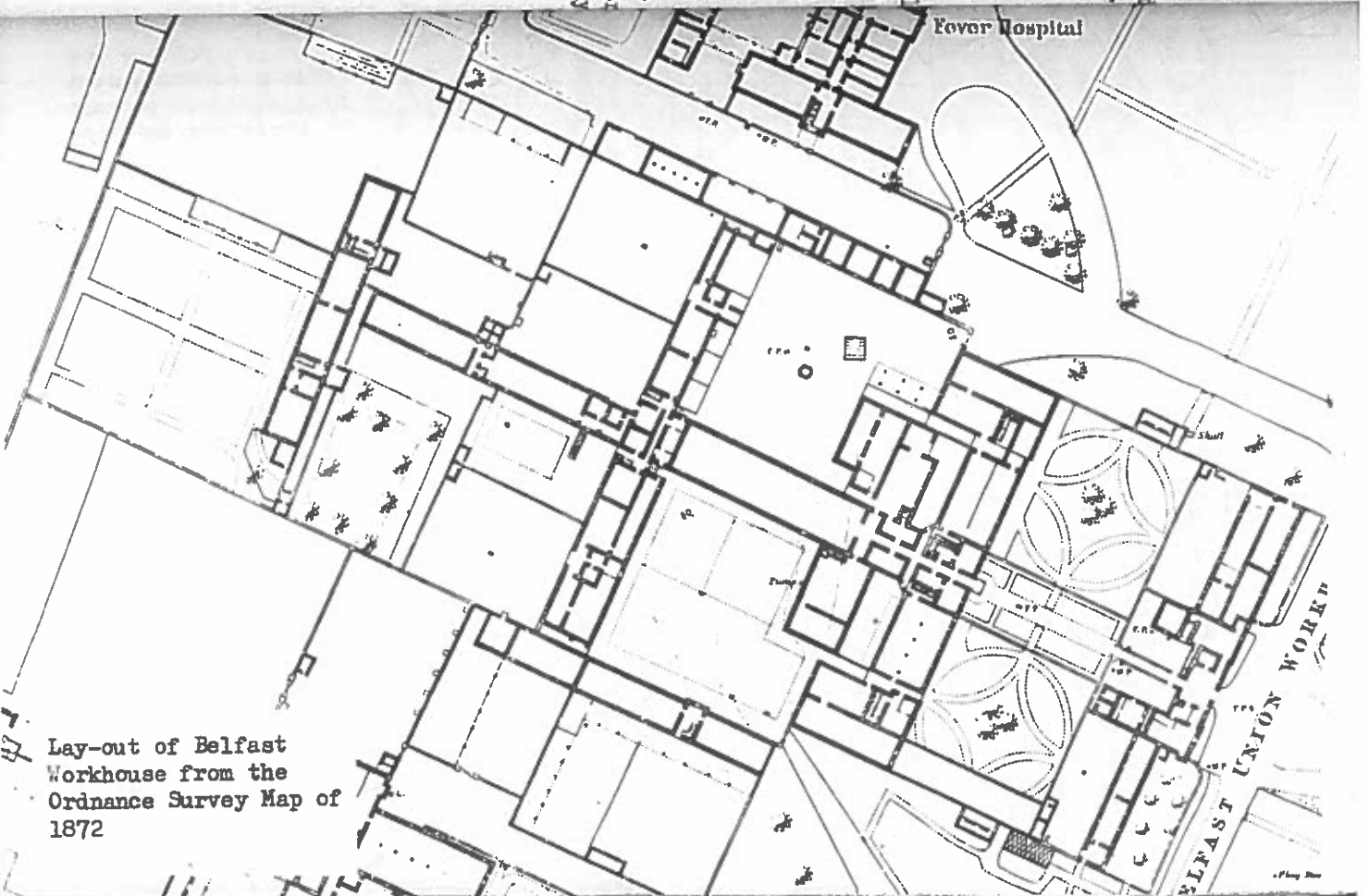
as an epidemic in the workhouse in 1848...

No. 5 As the sewer from the hospital passes very close to the wall of the new well he thinks it would be well to ascertain that no leakage can take place. The hot water cistern of the hospital is too small to contain a sufficient supply for the baths that will be required and the accommodation for washing and drying the hospital clothing is insufficient.²⁹

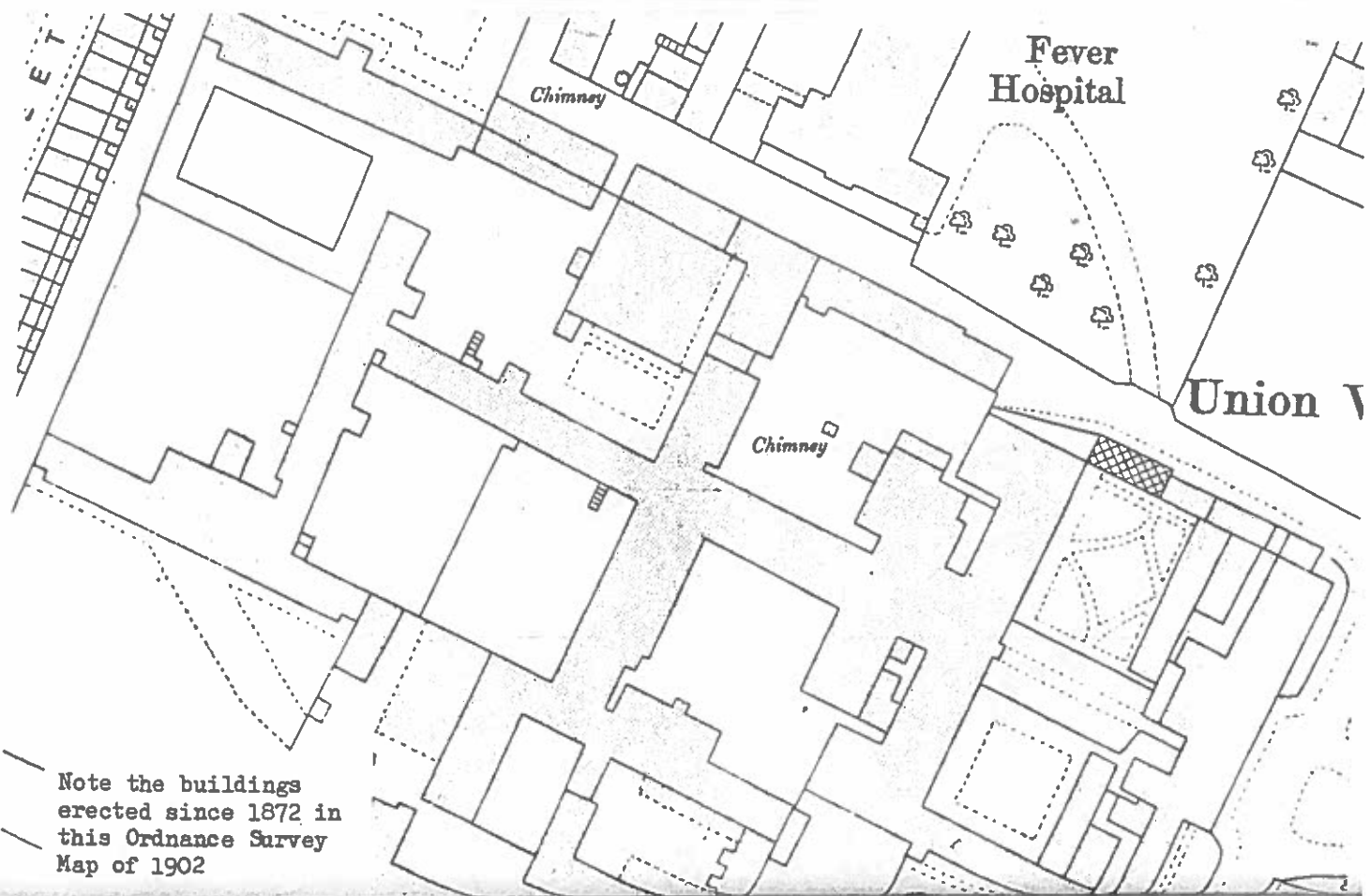
The expected cholera outbreak did come but its effect was much less severe than in previous years. The total number of cases was 73, of which 33 were fatal. After the Famine the numbers in the Irish workhouses dropped dramatically from a peak of 221,583 in July 1849 to an average of below 50,000 in the late 1850s and early 1870s. But in Belfast, the fastest growing city in Ireland, (population 1851 : 87,062; 1881 : 208,122; 1901 : 349,180 inside extended boundary) the drop was less dramatic. Though the number of inmates was down to just over 1,000 in 1853, by 1879 the average number per day had climbed again to 2,429, while in the country as a whole the figure for 4 January 1879 was still only 51,764. Once again the authorities, now Local Government Board, warned that the workhouse was overcrowded and recommended a ceiling of 2,200 on the number of inmates. The Guardians response was to extend the buildings until the Belfast workhouse became the biggest in the country.³⁰ It was also extended again in the new century until eventually it had accommodation for almost four times the number originally envisaged.

THE VICE-REGAL COMMISSION OF 1906

The detailed figures in the Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on the Poor Law in 1906 showed



Lay-out of Belfast Workhouse from the Ordnance Survey Map of 1872



Note the buildings erected since 1872 in this Ordnance Survey Map of 1902

that the Belfast workhouse had changed its function in the same way as all the others. It had become an institution for the old, the sick and children, not for able-bodied men and women. In October 1857 there had been 1,092 paupers in the Belfast workhouse of whom 268 were Aged or Infirm, 408 were children and 416 or 38.1% were able-bodied men and women. 340 of the inmates were sick but they were not classified separately from the Aged and the children. On March 11 1905 there were 3,819 people in the Belfast workhouse of whom 1,592 were sick, 1,476 were Aged or Infirm, 174 were Lunatics or Epileptics, 262 were children and 315, or 8.2%, were able-bodied. A further 156 children were under the care of the Board of Guardians but were boarded out with paid foster parents.

The Vice-Regal Commission travelled round the country taking oral evidence in almost every area and the Minutes of its sessions reveal something of the human tragedy behind the grim walls of the workhouses. Dr John McLeish, a doctor attached to the Belfast workhouse, gave evidence about the life of the insane and epileptic inmates:

"Then about the visiting of friends. Out of 66 male Lunatics there are 19 who are visited by friends, that is they are visited by friends from once a week to once a month, and those who don't come to see them oftener than once a month, as a rule don't come to see them at all.

Mr Murnaghan, M.P. (Commissioner): So that two-thirds of them are almost forgotten?

Dr McLeish: Yes, although they will have friends who generally turn up when they die to see their

burial; that is about all the interest they seem to take in them. Out of the 51 females 17 receive some visits - some of them once a week regularly, some once a fortnight, some once a month. And the epileptics - out of 29 males there are 10 who receive visits and of the 29 females there are 14 who receive visits."31

Robert Wilson, the master of the Belfast workhouse, spoke about the problem of unmarried mothers and their children and the lack of proper provision for them. His concern wasn't solely idealistic. He argued that a better provision for unmarried mothers would save money for the ratepayers in the long run

During the twelve months until March 1903, 153 illegitimate children were born in the Workhouse Maternity Hospital. Of this number as far as could be ascertained 140 were first cases and 13 not. Thirty-seven of the mothers, with their children, subsequently drifted into the nursery departments of the workhouse. On inquiry, I have found that there is, at any one time, an average of fifty women with their children being maintained there by the Guardians, or over 100 persons in all.

I have long felt that if the Local Government Board could see their way to order and authorise a Ladies' Committee, that such a committee could quietly and unostentatiously assist these women to obtain suitable employment, and in addition, if the Guardians were empowered to have their children looked after in properly equipped day nurseries, many of them would be saved from ruin, the children's lives in many cases saved, and the Poor Law expenditure

considerably reduced. I have, in my own experience, found such to be the case in those cases which the lady members of the Board have taken in hands at my request. I tried to trace what became of these first cases afterwards. One case, M.J., born 10th April, 1902, went out within fourteen days, was readmitted, with the mother 5th November, 1902, and child died 3rd December, 1902. Another case, born 19th of May, readmitted 28th June; child died shortly after that. I have had many consultations with the Deputy Coroner of the city, and we really don't know what to do with them. He has informed me that the number of infant children on whom he has to hold inquests is abnormal in the city of Belfast...

These girls very often come into the workhouse in the dead of night; apparently they don't want anyone to know where they are going. I have made it a rule to receive them; in fact, I have had one or two object lessons to teach me to do that. One respectable girl from whom I had an application told me, after I had decided to admit her, that it was just as well I had done so, for had she been turned away she would have thrown herself into the river. Belfast is peculiarly situated with regard to this matter, owing to the fact that there are a considerable number of young girls from the adjoining counties, employed as servants, factory and wareroom workers, &c., in the city, whose parents are in the country, and with whom almost invariably the girls refuse to communicate when they are obliged to seek shelter in the workhouse for confinement or after confinement. I can assure the Commission with the greatest respect, that I have often watched

those girls going out with their children on to the streets of the city when they were discharged at their own request, and having told me, in reply to my enquiries, that they did not know what they might do or where they were going, and I have been disgusted to think that the state of the Poor Law permitted such a thing without protection. 32

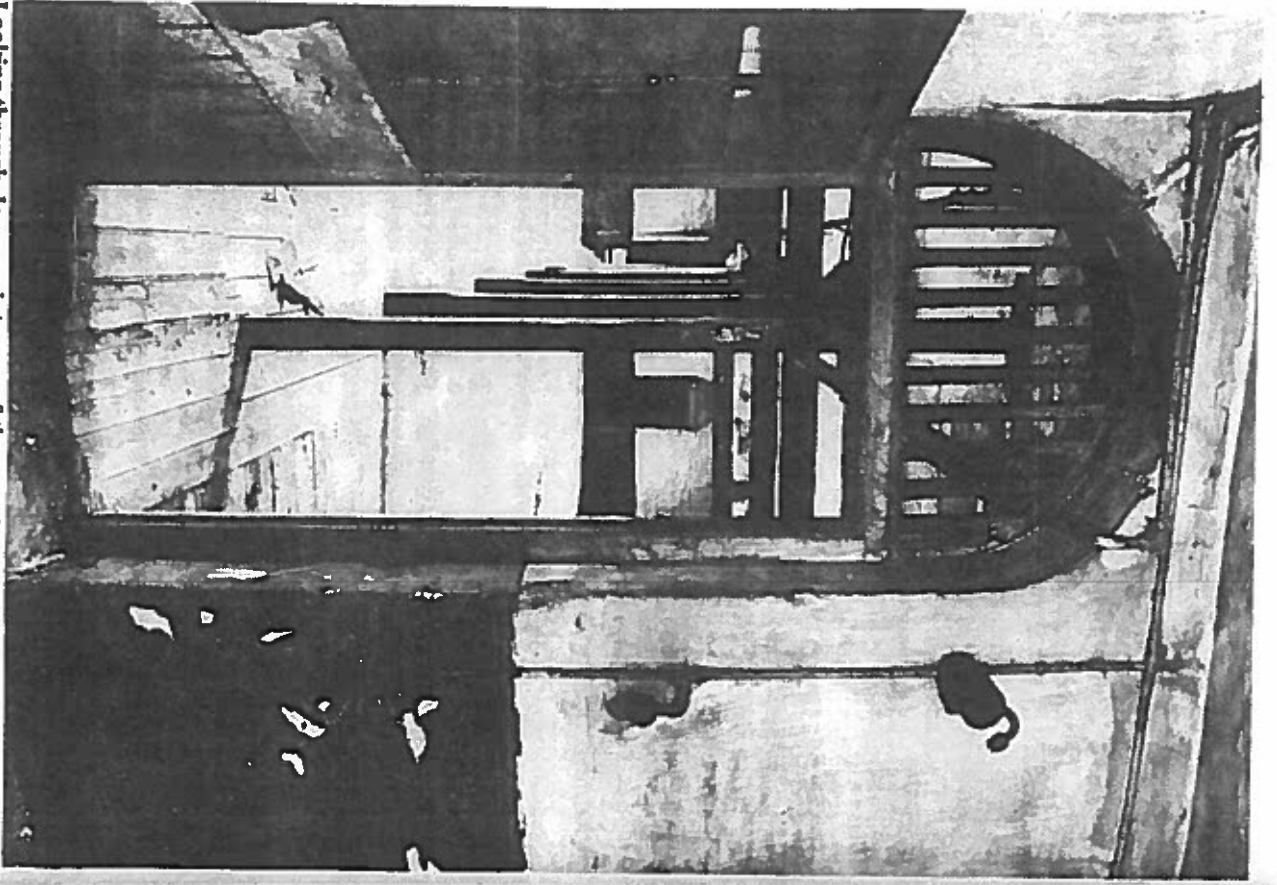
The Report of the Vice-Regal Commission and the evidence to it also highlighted an important difference between the administration of Poor Relief in Belfast and in most other Unions. In the country as a whole outdoor relief had now become widely accepted and in fact there were more people (55,670) in receipt of outdoor relief in the whole of Ireland in 1905 than in receipt of relief in the workhouses (45,193). Outdoor relief wasn't so readily given in Ulster but there were 8,732 people on outdoor relief compared with 11,066 in the workhouses. In Belfast, however, there were only 87 cases in receipt of outdoor relief compared with the 3,819 people in the workhouse. 33

The Belfast Board of Guardians had set their faces firmly against the extension of outdoor relief and were adhering strictly to the old Poor Law principle of no relief outside the workhouse. William Walker a prominent trade unionist and a Labour member of the Board of Guardians gave evidence to the Commission on the effects of this policy.

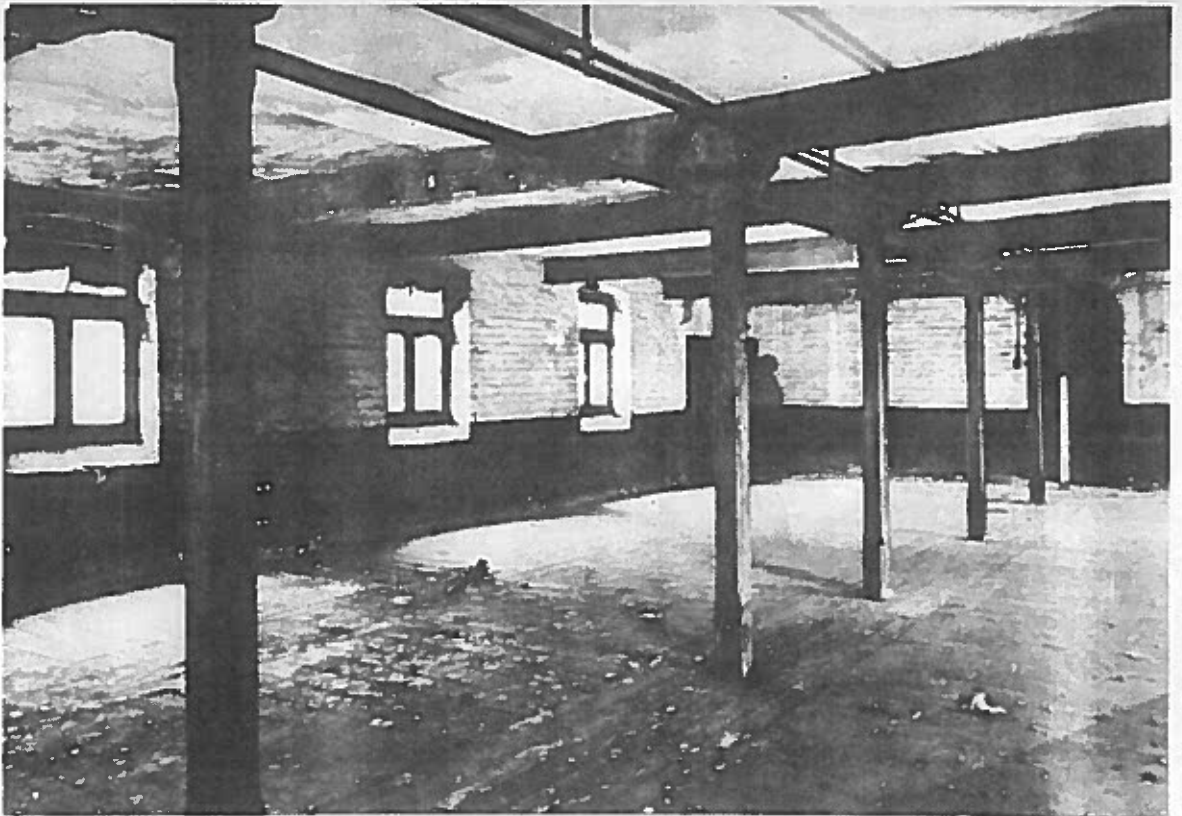
... On the question of relief, it appears that a very large number of deserving persons are not, under the Poor Law system in force at present in Belfast, relieved as the spirit of the Poor Law Acts intended they should be relieved.

Might I just read two paragraphs of the relieving officer's evidence. Mr Mercer was asked, "Are there ever any cases of destitution in your district that you never hear anything at all about unless from the clergyman, or to whom your attention was drawn by some friend or clergyman? - Yes; that has often occurred." "In many cases respectable poor people? - That has very often occurred." Mr Adams: "Then you have power to give a sum of money? - No." "Have you power to give them goods? - No." "What is your power on the outdoor relief question? - You cannot give them either goods or money; you can give them relief only in the workhouse." Mr Mercer is asked what he does with the people, when they apply to him, to whom he cannot give outdoor relief. He advises them to remain out as long as they can. The Committee felt that the evidence given by the relieving officer amounts to this, that when a person applies whom temporary relief would place on their feet again, the relieving officer has no power to give that temporary relief; he says "Go and remain as long as you can without relief." The person goes in semi-starvation, and comes into the workhouse, afterwards, broken in mind and body and a permanent charge on the rates, whereas, in the first instance, if a little relief were given they would have been enabled to remain out of the workhouse the remainder of their days. 34

Looking through doorway into one of the upstairs wards



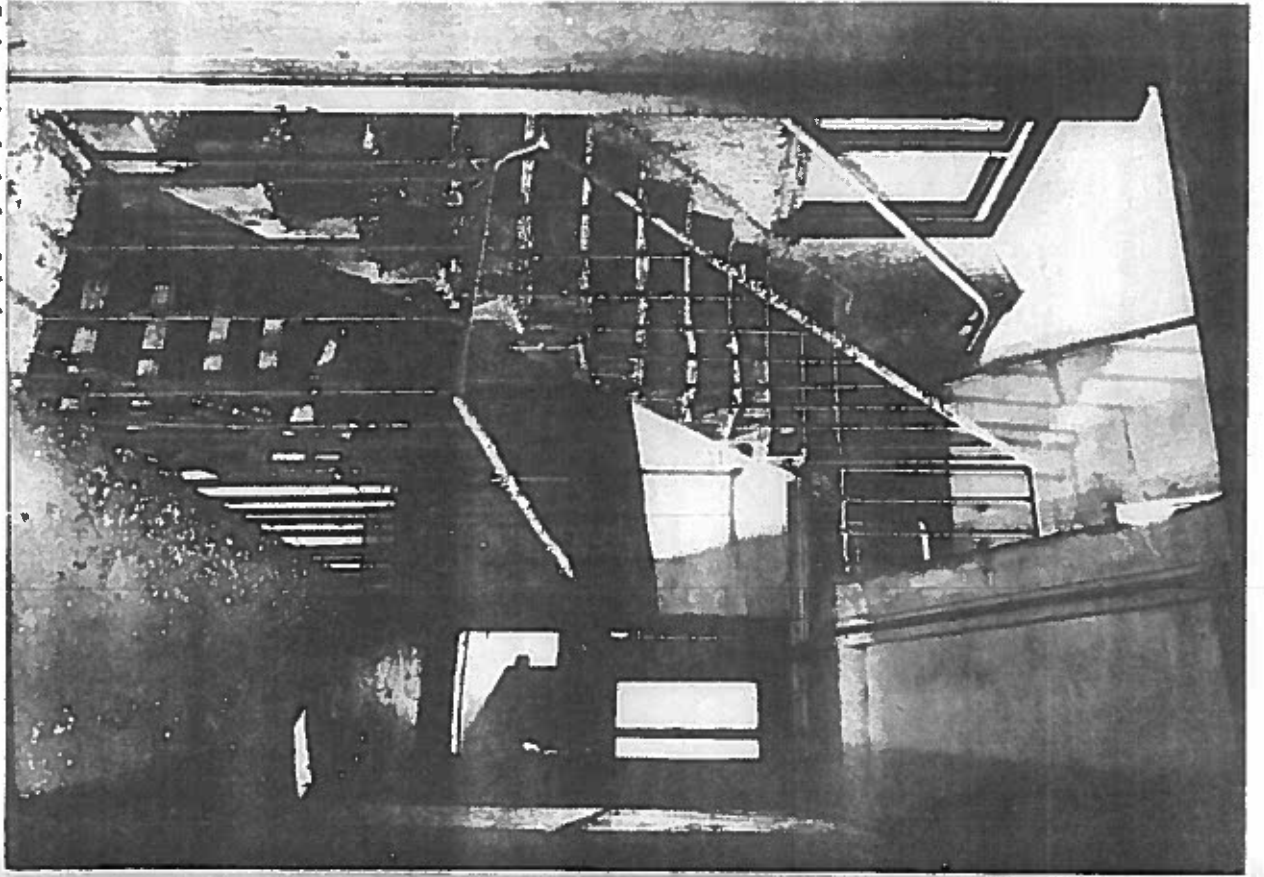
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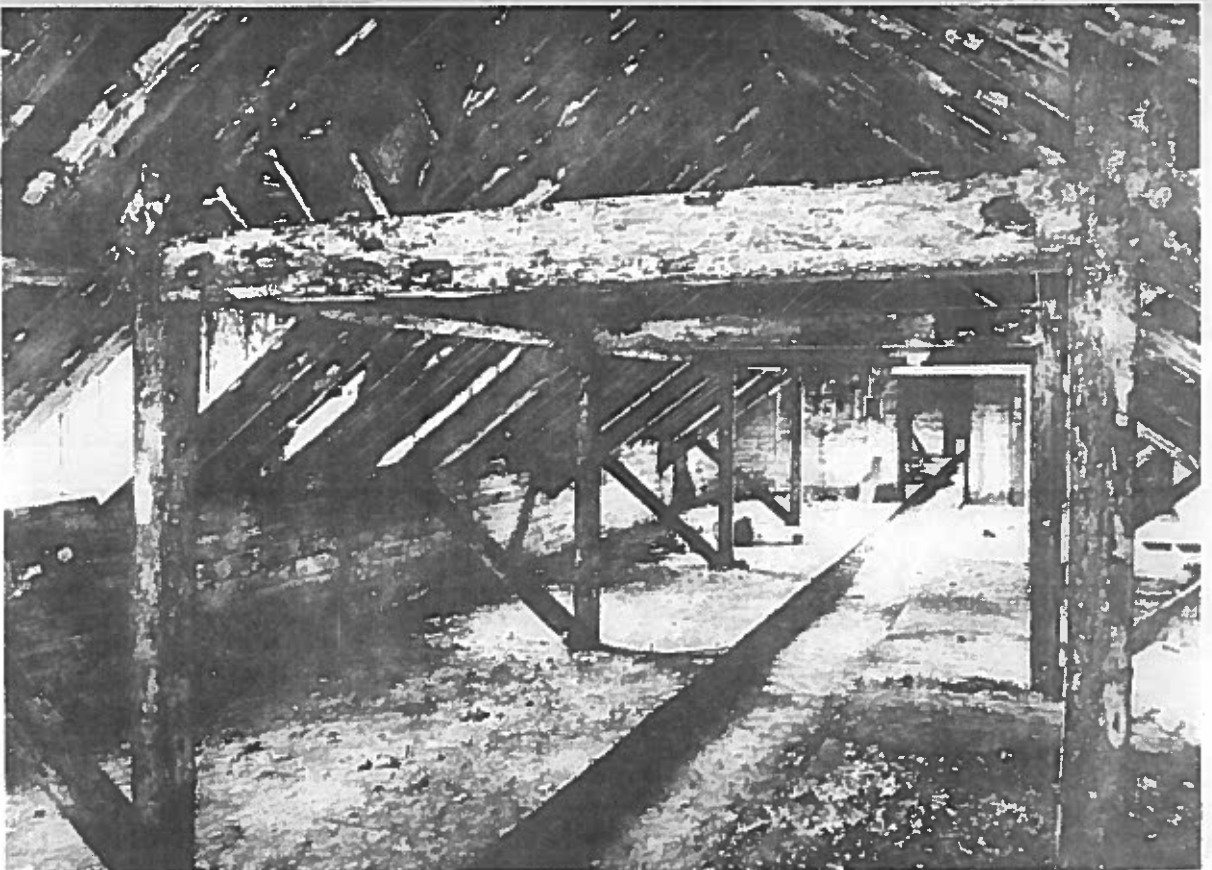
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An upstairs ward

Staircase in the body of the house

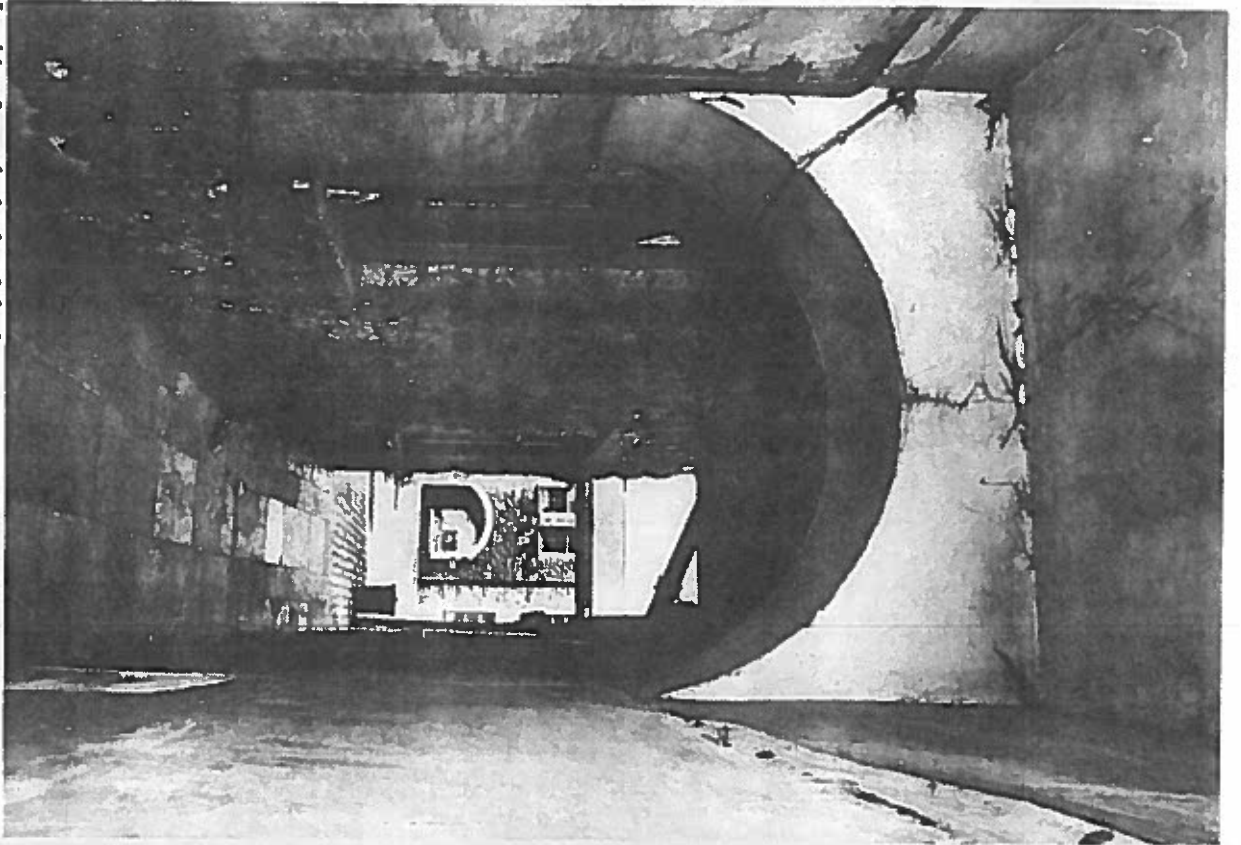


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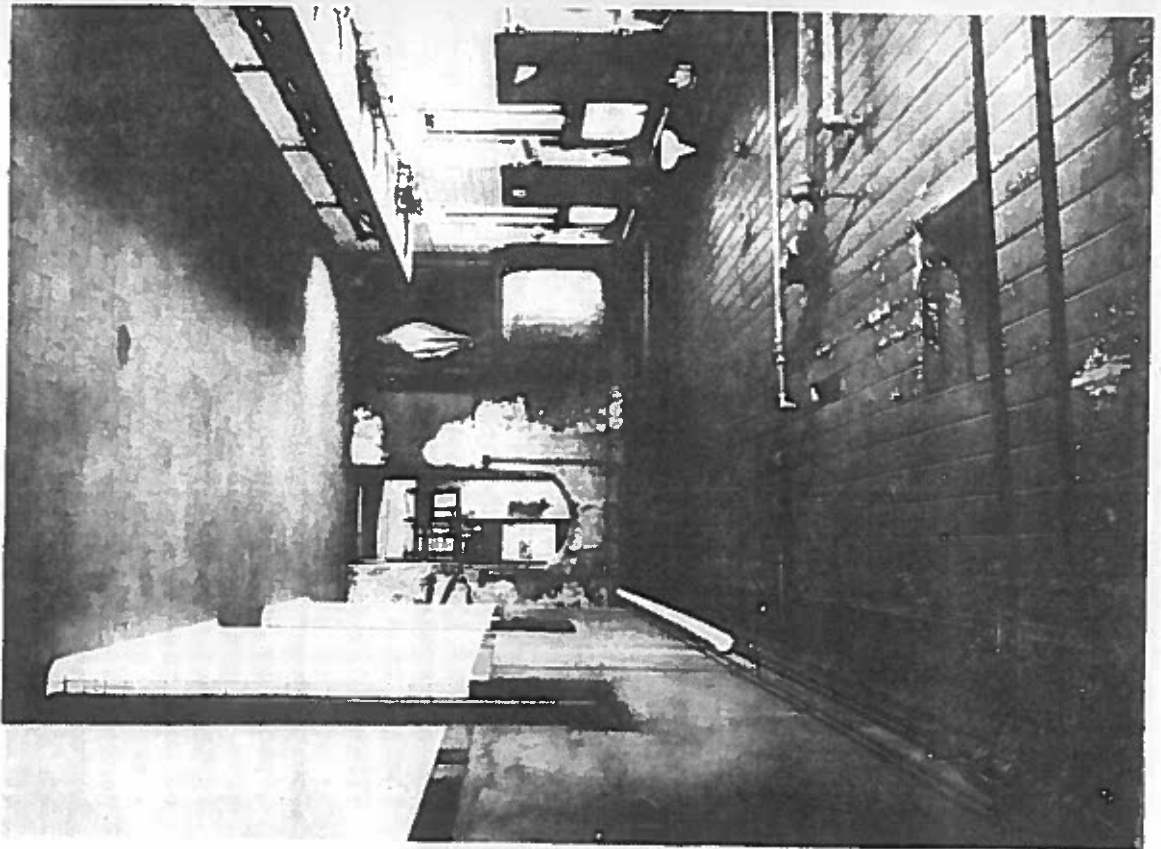
81

An attic dormitory



Looking from the body of the house towards the sewing room

82



Toilets in sewing room

83

THE 'TWENTIES

The establishment of the new Northern Ireland state made little difference to the Belfast Board of Guardians or the workhouse. The introduction of Health and Unemployment Insurance had confirmed the trend shown in 1906: the workhouse now catered mainly for the old, the sick, the insane and children. The Belfast workhouse infirmary became more like an ordinary general hospital with paying patients as well as paupers and acquired a good reputation as a hospital. The rest of the workhouse was still run on the old lines, however, with its stern regulations only slightly relaxed and with the inmates forced to wear the distinctive workhouse clothes. In 1942 Mr Henry Miller who was himself an officer of the Belfast Union, commented in his thesis on the administration of the poor law: 'There has been little change in the method of providing Indoor Relief (in the workhouse) in Northern Ireland; the system adopted by the Poor Relief Act (1838) remains very much the same to-day. The accommodation for inmates has been little changed in a hundred years. Dietary has undoubtedly improved to a great degree.' 35

Unemployment was a major problem in the new state, especially in Belfast and the situation worsened with a depression in the textile industry early in 1924. National insurance didn't solve the problem because unemployment benefit ceased when the workers' contributions were exhausted and some workers such as servants and farm labourers weren't insured at all. They could only turn for help to the Guardians and, since the Belfast Guardians were still refusing to give outdoor relief to the able-bodied, that meant entering the workhouse with all the humiliation and suffering that entailed.

In late 1923 and early 1924 there was a series of protests and demonstrations by trade unionists and the unemployed that finally forced the Belfast Guardians to apply for and the government to grant an order under Section 13 of the Local Government Act (1898) authorising special outdoor relief in the Belfast area because of the exceptional distress there. These orders were valid for only two months and for Belfast they had to be continuously renewed for the next four years.

Because the Guardians were still unhappy about granting outdoor relief, they kept trying to reduce it and this led to a clash with the government. In November 1927 the Guardians decided to stop outdoor relief to anyone who had been receiving it for more than twelve months. The alternative once again was to enter the workhouse or starve. Outdoor relief was stopped in 235 cases affecting 1,097 people. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which was responsible for Poor Law administration, was alarmed and wrote to the Belfast Board of Guardians on November 4th, that 'It was contrary to the modern conception of social service that any provision for the relief of distress due to depression in trade should involve the breaking up of homes of industrious workers in temporary financial straits owing to unemployment. ... the Guardians would be open to grave censure if it could be laid to their doors that, as a result of omnibus decisions, they had allowed individual deserving cases to be unprovided for.' 36 A major reason for the attitude of the Belfast Guardians however was that outdoor relief had to be paid for out of the rates for the Belfast area whereas if the government could be forced to shoulder the burden it would come out of general taxation.

THE OUTDOOR RELIEF STRIKE OF 1932

The Belfast Guardians had also requested the introduction of a Labour Test for those on outdoor relief, i.e. they would be required to do task work to prove they were not work-shy. The Ministry agreed and the task work scheme began in February 1928. Applicants for outdoor relief were required to do several days task work laying pavements for a new Belfast Corporation Housing Scheme at Whitewell. The task work was bitterly resented. Many of the unemployed were unfit for heavy outdoor work; they were given less than the normal labourer's rates and so the Corporation was getting cheap labour. The scheme was seen as a punitive measure against the poor.

The Belfast Guardians again tried to stop the outdoor relief schemes in August and September 1928. Eventually the government introduced the Poor Relief (Exceptional Distress) Bill which became law in December 1928 and enabled the Ministry of Home Affairs to order the payment of outdoor relief in any area regardless of the wishes of the local Board of Guardians. This measure ended the old principle of the 'workhouse test' for the bulk of the applicants for relief.

The Great Depression hit Belfast very hard in the early 1930s and provoked the most violent conflict in the history of the Poor Law in the city. Unemployment in Northern Ireland reached 76,048 in August 1932 and the bulk of it was concentrated in Belfast. The numbers on outdoor relief increased dramatically. On January 31st 1931 outdoor relief had been given to 272 cases, affecting 1,137 people. By January 2nd 1932 the figure was 884 cases affecting 4,008 people and on September 10th 1932 it had jumped to 2,612 cases affecting 11,983 people - this was over and above the thousands getting unemployment benefit. Discontent was rife because the conditions for getting outdoor relief were harsh. There was a stringent means test and applicants were sharply cross-examined by the Guardians when they applied. They had to exhaust all their savings before they could get any assistance. Men still had to do hard task work outdoors for which many were now unfit through malnutrition. Single men were not entitled to relief unless they could get work on the task schemes and there wasn't enough work to go round, even for the married men. Single women could get no assistance at all. The married men got relief in cash only if they had got work on the task schemes. Otherwise they got relief in kind, i.e. tickets to buy certain types of food and some fuel. This meant they couldn't pay their rent, buy clothes or small luxuries like cigarettes or a drink. And the relief rates were pitifully inadequate. A married couple with no children got 8s. per week, with one child 12s., and another 4s. for each subsequent child up to a maximum of 24s. Single men, if they got work on the task schemes, would get 3s. 6d.

As the discontent mounted and the poor began to take militant action the churches expressed their concern at the inadequacy of the relief rates. A meeting

of the Belfast Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church passed a resolution about the situation.

"That we, the members of the Presbytery of Belfast, are deeply concerned about the widespread distress in our city, due to unemployment and the exhaustion in many cases of unemployment benefit. We are of opinion that as a rule the grants that are being made to those who are entirely dependent on outdoor relief are inadequate to provide the barest necessities of life. In view of the fact that in similar cities in Great Britain, most of them more heavily rated than Belfast, the grants made by public authorities to applicants similarly situated are more than double in amount those made in Belfast, we respectfully call upon our local and Government authorities to take steps to deal with this serious and urgent situation, and that representatives be appointed to co-operate in this matter with representatives of the other Churches. "

COMPARISONS WITH ENGLAND

In moving the resolution, Professor Corkey said that there could be no doubt that a vast amount of distress and discontent existed in the city. They, as ministers, could not but be concerned. It had always been the aim of the Northern Government to maintain for the workpeople here social conditions equal to those enjoyed by their fellows in Great Britain. So far as the social services of the Government were concerned, he understood equality had been maintained. But when workers in Belfast, through unemployment, exhausted their insurance benefit and became wholly dependent on poor relief they found themselves in a very much worse position than

workers in similar circumstances were in similar cities in England.

For example, said Professor Corkey, a family of a man, wife, and one child that was "out of benefit" received in Manchester 21s, in Liverpool 25s, in Glasgow 25s 3d, in Bradford 26s, and in Northampton 27s. In some of these cities an additional allowance was made for rent. In Belfast the normal outdoor relief grant to such a family would be 12s. If work were available, the man would be given a day and a half's work in the week, and he would be paid cash. If no work were available the whole grant would be paid in kind, although the man would be expected to pay rent in cash.

LOW BELFAST RATES

The rates in most of the English cities were higher than in Belfast, and the valuation in Belfast was generally lower. Everyone regretted the precipitate action that had been taken by these men, but he hoped that that would not blind people to their need. 37

The unemployed in Belfast began to organise themselves in the summer of 1932 and after a series of requests to the Guardians met with no response the Outdoor Relief (ODR) Workers' Committee called a strike of all men working on the task schemes. It began on October 3rd with demands for relief for single men and women, much higher rates for married men and women with families and an end to the means test. The strike secured full support from the men and the ODR Committee followed it with a series of protest demonstrations which involved frequent

clashes with the police. On October 5th the Committee organised three hundred single men to enter the workhouse. There it cost 16s 1d per week to maintain them, more than they were demanding in outdoor relief. It was many years since the workhouse had seen such an influx of young able-bodied paupers and they soon came into conflict with its Victorian rules and discipline. The newspapers reported the results:

Inside the workhouse there were stormy scenes soon after the arrival of the three hundred persons who had been granted admission. Two young men were arrested for alleged insubordination to the ward masters and they were conveyed to the central police station ... The majority of the police on duty at the gates returned to their various depots about 9.00 p.m. but a considerable force remained inside the premises all night to cope with any trouble that might arise in the wards... 38

At a meeting in Belfast yesterday men applying for admission were urged by the leaders to conduct themselves and not to repeat the disturbances of Thursday morning which led to the ejection of those who had been taken in. The main disturbances occurred when the demonstrators demanded and were refused eggs for breakfast. They were all ejected by the police. 39

Court cases against three of the men who had entered the workhouse gave more details of the scenes inside.

DIDN'T TAKE MOTHER'S ADVICE

Samuel Thompson (19), Belgrave Street, and Wm. McMullan, Carnan Street, were charged separately with insubordination at the workhouse on Wednesday evening, and Mr Harper prosecuted on behalf of the Guardians.

Constable Somers said that Thompson had been pointed out to him in the dormitory of the healthy department. When arrested and cautioned he said, "Surely you will not hit me."

Wardmaster Andrew Patterson said that Thompson was sitting on the edge of the bed at nine o'clock and should have been retired an hour before. When asked to go to bed he did so, but kept his trousers on. He also started singing and shouting. There were 85 inmates in the dormitory at the time. When spoken to again, Thompson shouted, "Come on boys, put on your trousers."

Thompson said he was sorry for what had happened.

"When I get clear of them I will never take another hand in it," he declared, adding "if I had taken my mother's advice I would not have been here at all." He intended going home.

Thompson also told the magistrates that he did not want to be a leader of the men in the workhouse.

Prisoner was found guilty, but discharged on account of his youth.

WANTED TEA AND BREAD

When McMullan appeared in the dock, Robert J. Patterson, one of the officers at the workhouse, stated that the prisoner, when he arrived at the dormitory about 10.45 p.m., stated that if he and all the rest of the inmates got tea and bread he would see that there was no further trouble. He refused to go to bed or to undress. There were between 90 and 100 men in the dormitory.

McMullan told the Court that there were "a lot of men and a lot of shouting" in the dormitory. The matron came in and appealed for quietness as the noise could be heard by the sick patients. It was suggested that he should speak to the matron, which he did. She told him that they could not get bread and tea, and witness replied: "Then I can do no more." He went to bed, but did not undress because, as he alleged, he had not been told about the regulations. He lay down with his shoes off.

Mr Harper pointed out to the Court that disobedience in the workhouse was likely to lead to serious trouble.

In reply to Mr Toppin, McMullan said he was prepared to go home. If he returned to the workhouse he said he would be prepared to obey the orders and endeavour to see that others did the same.

The charge against McMullan was dismissed on account of his previous good character.

Mr Toppin said the Court was determined to give the officials of the workhouse every support in enforcing order and discipline.

BURNED WORKHOUSE CLOTHES

Peter Dooley, aged 21, said to have resided in Albert Street, was charged with causing malicious damage to two caps, four peaks of caps, and a waistcoat belonging to the Belfast Union.

It was stated by a constable that when some of the men were being discharged yesterday morning the accused threw the articles into the fire. When arrested the accused said "You saw me burn one cap and some peaks. I was being put out and I had no place to go." The constable added that there was a lot of other property in the room that had been torn up and destroyed.

Accused, in reply to Mr Toppin, admitted burning one cap. His clothes were examined and found correct.

Dooley was ordered one month's hard labour. 40

There was an emergency conference between the Belfast Guardians and the Ministry of Home Affairs on October 6th and the Guardians agreed to increase relief rates by 50% but the strikers weren't satisfied and plans went ahead for a massive protest demonstration on October 11th. Marches of unemployed were to set out from four different points, Clonard Street on the Falls Road, Tennent Street on the Shankill Road, Templemore Avenue in East Belfast and Ganning Street off York Street, and converge on the city centre. From there they would

go to the workhouse on the Lisburn Road. On October 10th the marches were banned by the government under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act but the organisers decided to go ahead. On the morning of October 11th when the demonstrators gathered they were broken up by armed police. The result was widespread violence with rioting all over the city and one man shot dead in the Lower Falls area. Another died the next day as a result of the shooting and the government brought in a curfew in the Belfast area. The newspapers reported the clashes:

GRAVE OUTBREAK OF RIOTING IN BELFAST

Police Battle With Snipers in the Falls Area

MAN KILLED: OVER 30 INJURED

Attempts to Loot Shops: Many Cases of Incendiarism
GOVERNMENT'S CURFEW ORDER

One man was shot dead and over 30 other persons, including a woman, were wounded as the result of grave outbreaks of disorder which occurred in various parts of Belfast yesterday.

The rioting followed determined attempts by unemployed to defy the proclamation prohibiting the holding of meetings for the purpose of organising processions to the workhouse.

THE FALLS AREA

The most serious disturbance took place in the Falls Road area, where a fierce fight was waged between rioters and police during the day and into the night.

The windows of tramcars were smashed and it was found necessary to suspend the service on the Falls Road early in the afternoon.

The authorities decided to impose Curfew (from 11 p.m. until 5 a.m.), and this measure was effective in assisting to get the situation under control, although there was still sniping going on in the Falls area.

FIRE BRIGADE BUSY

A number of cases of incendiarism were reported. The Corporation store in Short Strand was set on fire, while a garage at Artillery Street was gutted, and a hay shed in New Lodge Road was burned out. The Fire Brigade answered 12 calls. Street lamps were extinguished by the rioters, and the police utilised searchlights to locate their assailants. Shops were attacked, and there was a considerable amount of looting.

TROOPS STAND BY

The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers were confined to barracks, at Holywood, last night ready to proceed to Belfast at a moment's notice.

Thirty-four men were arrested and were remanded at a special court which sat until 1 o'clock this morning.

WORST DAYS OF 1922 RECALLED

THE CASUALTY LIST

DEAD

Samuel Baxter (20), Regent Street, gunshot wound to chest.

WOUNDED

Patrick Mallon (45), Kane Street, gunshot wound to shoulder.

John Davey (16), Frere Street, gunshot wound to arm.

James Conlon (33), 46 Bow Street, gunshot wound to leg.

John Geegan (40), Smithfield, gunshot wound to abdomen.

Leo Donnelly (18), 17 Frere Street, gunshot wound to arm.

James Boyle (18), address not given, gunshot wound to leg.

James Girvan, 2 Plevna Street, gunshot wound to abdomen.

Daniel McNaughton, Raglan Street, gunshot wound to hand.

Edward Burns, 27 Lepper Street, gunshot wound to leg.

Joseph Magee, 73 Butler Street, gunshot wound to head and leg.

Edmond Sheridan, 12 Gracehill Street, wound to head.

Terence Burns (17), 17 Massareene Street, gunshot wound to back.

James Hill, Hanover Street, gunshot wound to back.

Mary Brady, Lincoln Street, gunshot wound to arm.

F. Smyth (19), 1 Meadow Street, incised wound to leg and cheek.

Stanley Battershill (30), Conway Street, wound to scalp.

D. English (21), 18 North Thomas Street, cut hands.

William Crocker, Eton Street, lacerated wound to scalp.

William Moore, Belgrave Street, injured hip, - O'Connor (28), Smithfield, gunshot wound to arm.

Mary Waddell (73), address not given, injuries to head.

Sergeant Barry, R.U.C., Court Street, injuries to leg.

Constable Harvey, Inrgan, wound to forehead.

Constable Thomas Foley (38), Andersonstown, wound to leg.

Sergeant H. Thompson (55), Shankill Road, wound to face.

David Gibson (33), Leopold Street, injuries to head and face.

John Mackie, Mountjoy Street.

Thomas Trainor, Fortingale Street, fractured skull.

Mary Rooney, Upper Library Street, injuries to hand.

Annie Kane (18), Wilton Street, lacerated wound to hand.

John Robinson, injuries to leg.

George Hazley, Medway Street, scalp wounds.

John Montgomery, Carlton Street, injuries to head.

James Moran, Josephine Street, scalp wounds.

OTHER CASUALTIES

It is understood that several persons were admitted to the Belfast Union Infirmary, but on inquiry at that institution no particulars could be obtained...

CURFEW IN OPERATION

Citizens' Frantic Rush Homeward

At 6 p.m. yesterday a copy of the official order imposing Curfew was posted at every police barracks in Belfast, and about 10.30 p.m. a great exodus commenced from the city centre.

As 11 o'clock approached there was a frantic dash homewards. Every tramcar was packed, and taxi-drivers did a roaring trade.

The scenes in the city carried one's thoughts back to the days of "the trouble" when Curfew caused a last-minute rush for the last tramcars.

Police patrols halted everyone out of doors after 11 p.m. and examined permits. Three persons were arrested for breaches of the Curfew order...

TRAMCAR SERVICE STOPPED

Sequel to the Attacks Made in the Falls Area

The tramcar service on the Falls Road was discontinued after lunch in consequence of the troubles, and while the tramway management would have liked to resume it later in the afternoon, for the convenience of the public, the police advised them that it would not be safe to do so.

The windows of three tramcars were smashed, and one vehicle was attacked by a mob at Ardoyne after an attempt had been made to derail it.

The crowd was so hostile in the Falls Road area that had the service been continued the passengers would have been carried at a grave risk.

Gangs of young men were congregating at the street corners, and whenever the backs of the police were turned there was a volley of stones. Not only were several windows smashed, but the police in many cases were struck.

The position in the afternoon became so serious that the police had to use their revolvers to disperse the crowds, and there were exchanges of shots, some of the rioters having equipped

themselves with firearms.

OMNIBUS DRIVEN AWAY

Three omnibuses belonging to the City Corporation were attacked and the windows smashed. One of them, which was held up by an infuriated mob in North Queen Street, was cleared of the passengers and driver of it, but was recovered later by a constable who delivered it at Springfield Road barrack.

The driver of the 'bus, David Gibson, Leopold Street, was cut on the head and face in attempting to resist the attack by the mob. He had to be taken to hospital for treatment.

Another of the Corporation 'buses had to be vacated in Albert Street, so serious was the rioting in that area, and a third in the Cavehill Road service, was badly damaged and had to be taken to Messrs. Gatherwood's garage.

The Cavehill Road and Waterworks 'bus services had to be diverted in the early afternoon via York Street and Limestone Road.

The last tramcars from the city centre last evening left for the various depots at 10 o'clock so that the tramwaymen might have time to reach their homes before curfew... 41

Three days later the Guardians announced a further increase in relief rates. A married couple would now get 20/= per week. Those with one or two children would get 24/=; with three or four children 28/=; and with more than four children 32/=.

All benefits would be paid in cash and single men and women living on their own would get benefit. It was less than the ODR Workers' Committee had demanded but it was a massive improvement on the old rates. On October 15th the Outdoor Relief Workers' Committee accepted the new rates and called off the strike.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE WORKHOUSE

Although unemployment remained very high throughout the 1930s the Unemployment Act (Northern Ireland) of 1934 provided for unemployment assistance for most of those not entitled to insurance benefit and transferred much of the responsibility away from the Guardians. The routine of the workhouse meanwhile settled back into its former pattern. On the last Saturday of March 1938 there were 2,114 people in the Belfast workhouse (just under half the total for Northern Ireland) but 1,460 of these were in the infirmary or hospital and only 654 in the workhouse proper. Of those in the House 451 were Aged or Infirm, 134 were Lunatics, Idiots or Epileptics (as the official statistics still termed them), 46 were children, 3 were mothers with infants and all other classes, i.e. the able-bodied, numbered only 20.

The workhouse system was nearing the end of its life but the Belfast workhouse was not destined to fade away quietly and peacefully. Its last few years witnessed the dismissal of two Masters and the jailing of one, and the dissolution of the Board of Guardians. In August 1934 Mr James Mahood, the Clerk of the Belfast Union and former Master of the Workhouse was suspended from his post and in February 1935 he was convicted by a court of falsifying workhouse accounts and jailed for six months.

He was also dismissed as Clerk. In November 1938 the government instituted a public enquiry into the auditing and stocktaking in the Belfast workhouse. The results of the enquiry were never disclosed but it had a dramatic sequel. On March 16th 1939 the Minister of Home Affairs dissolved the Belfast Board of Guardians and asked for the resignation of the workhouse master. The Guardians were replaced by two government appointed Commissioners.

THE BELFAST UNION
COMMISSIONERS IN CONTROL

"I Had No Option" - Sir Dawson Bates
POSITION OF MASTER
(By our Political Correspondent)

The announcement made in the "News-Letter" yesterday morning that the Minister of Home Affairs had dissolved the Belfast Board of Guardians was confirmed by an official statement issued later in the day.

Two Commissioners - Mr Henry Diamond, O.B.E., M.A., Principal Officer in the Ministry of Home Affairs, and Dr L. D. I. Graham, Senior Medical Inspector - immediately took over control of poor law affairs. I understand that they will hold their first meeting on Tuesday, and that it will be open to the public.

Temporary arrangements will be made to safeguard the welfare of the sick poor and the interests of applicants for outdoor relief during the transition period.

Each of the fifty-eight members of the Board received a copy of the Minister's sealed Order dissolving the Board by the first post. It was accompanied by a letter giving the Ministry's reasons (based on the report of the recent inquiry) for its action.

No Excuse

"No evidence was given and no facts were disclosed (at the inquiry)," the letter stated, "that would in any 'way' excuse the Board for its failure to discharge the duties laid upon it."

The Ministry also stated that unless the Workhouse Master (Mr Thomas Browne) resigned a sealed order would be issued removing him from office. 42

No further Board of Guardians was ever elected. Elections were suspended during the Second World War and by the end of the war it was clear that the old Poor Law system was going to be swept away in the new tide of post-war social legislation.

On July 5th 1948 the powers of the old Boards of Guardians were transferred to the new Health and Welfare authorities. At that stage there were 1,748 people in the Belfast workhouse, 1,245 of them in the infirmary. On September 30th 1948 the Guardians were finally abolished. The Belfast workhouse infirmary became the Belfast City Hospital run by the Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority. The rest of the Belfast workhouse continued to be used as a welfare hostel for the remaining inmates for a while but the old Poor Law regulations were ended. Eventually the remaining buildings were handed over to the City Hospital as well. Some of

them are still there but these are rapidly disappearing as the hospital is expanded and modernised.

REFERENCES

- 1 Third report of the commissioners for enquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland (1836) [43], 5
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Report of the Vice-regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland 1906, I [Cd. 3202], 6-7
- 4 Ibid., pp 8-9
- 5 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3rd series, Vol 36, Col. 488
- 6 Fifth annual report of the Poor Law commissioners (1838-9), p. 43
- 7 Quoted in Norman Longmate: The Workhouse. (Temple Smith, London, 1974), p. 47
- 8 Annual report of the Local Government Board of Ireland 1883, p. 120
- 9 Report of the Vice-regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland (1906), Appendix p. 15
- 10 Ibid., I, 42
- 11 Ibid., I, 44
- 12 Dail Eireann, Minutes of Proceedings 1919-21, 21 January 1919, p. 23

- 13 First report of commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland (1836) Appendix C, Part 1, [35] Supplement, pp 2, 4g
- 14 *Ibid.*, Appendix C, Part 1, p. 2
- 15 Gentleman meant someone of independent means, i.e. who lived off the income of property, shares, etc.
- 16 Reproduced on following pages from Fifth annual report of the Poor Law commissioners (1839), p. 144, diagrams C and D
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp 132-3
- 18 Sixth annual report of the Poor Law commissioners (1839-40), pp 67-8
- 19 P.R.O.N.I. Belfast Board of Guardians records, BGT/A/ Minute book, 4 March 1842
- 20 A kind of fustian cloth; see note 22 below
- 21 A cheap material made from poor quality wool
- 22 A coarse thick-textured cotton material, very tough and durable, sometimes called moleskin
- 23 Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland, I (1846), introduction, page cxxxvii
- 24 Tenth annual report of the Poor Law commissioners (1843-4), pp 328-32
- 25 Ulster Times, 31 March 1842
- 26 Tenth annual report of the Poor Law commissioners (1843-4), pp 580-1
- 27 Belfast Board of Guardian records, BGT/G/1 Indoor admission and discharge register 1864-5, p. 1
- 28 Belfast Board of Guardian records, BGT/A/6, Minute book p. 360
- 29 Belfast Board of Guardian records, BGT/A/29, Minute book 1866, pp 383, 395, 405
- 30 There were two workhouses in Dublin for the North and South Dublin Unions respectively
- 31 Minutes of evidence taken before the Vice-regal commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland (1906), III [Cd. 3204], 388
- 32 *Ibid.*, III, 388-9
- 33 *Ibid.*, II [Cd. 3203], Appendix, 15, 33
- 34 *Ibid.*, III, 366
- 35 Henry Miller, 'The administration of the Poor Laws in Ireland until 1921 and in Northern Ireland until the present date' (Thesis for M. Comm. Sc., Queen's University Belfast 1942. No page number.)
- 36 *Ibid.*, Section 3: 'The Poor Law in Northern Ireland'
- 37 Belfast News Letter, 5 October 1932
- 38 *Ibid.*, 6 October 1932

- 39 Ibid., 7 October 1932
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 12 October 1932
42 Ibid., 17 March 1939

APPENDIX : A NOTE ON SOURCES

This study has concentrated on the Belfast Union and the Belfast workhouse. Similar studies could be done of any of the 43 unions in Ulster or even of any of the 163 unions in Ireland. The meticulous book-keeping and statistics-gathering of the Poor Law authorities means there is a wealth of documentation available for most areas.

Norman Longmate, The Workhouse (Temple Smith, London 1974) provides a general picture of the operation of the workhouse system in Britain; journalistic in style. More detailed works available are Sidney and Beatrice Webb: English Poor Law History, 3 volumes (Frank Cass and Co. reprint London 1963) and English Poor Law Policy (Frank Cass and Co. 1963), and Michael Rose, The English Poor Law 1780-1930 (David and Charles, Newton Abbot 1971).

The working of the Poor Law in Ireland has been analysed in Henry Miller's thesis, The administration of the Poor Laws in Ireland till 30th November 1921; and in Northern Ireland from 1st December 1921 till present date (Q.U.B. M.Com.Sc. 1942). Government reports and the records of the Belfast Union itself are the other important sources. There are two major reports by government commissions. The first is the Report of the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland (1836) with its appendices. This gives a detailed picture of poverty and destitution in Ireland before the Poor Law was introduced and the appendices contain reports on many towns and parishes in Ireland. The second major report is that of the Vice-Regal Commission

on Poor Law Reform in Ireland (1906) with its Appendix and Minutes of Evidence. It gives statistics for all the Poor Law Unions and its minutes of evidence contain some information on each area. There is also the Report of the Departmental Commission on Local Government administration in Northern Ireland (1927) which gives a picture of the Poor Law system in the 1920s and of the living conditions of the poor and destitute especially in Belfast.

A major source of information is the Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commissioners (containing a section on Ireland) 1839-47, then the Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commission for Ireland 1847-72, the Annual Reports of the Local Government Board for Ireland 1872-1921 and the Annual Reports on the Administration of Local Government Services by the Northern Ireland Ministry of Home Affairs 1921-48. These Reports contain an account of administrative developments for each year with notes and correspondence on any unusual problems in particular areas and a statistical appendix with figures for each individual Union. There is also a Compendium of the Irish Poor Law (1871) compiled by B. Banks, a former Secretary to the Poor Law Commission. It was designed primarily as a handbook for Guardians and Union officials and contains a summary of the regulations for workhouses and the various laws affecting Poor Law administration. It also has an index to matters dealt with in the Commissioners' Annual Reports.

Finally there are the records of the unions themselves. Each union had to keep an extraordinary number of records. Probably the most useful are (a) the Minute Books of meetings of the Boards of Guardians which contain weekly

summaries of the numbers in the workhouse and usually contain an index of subjects discussed; (b) the Indoor Admission and Discharge Books which list the names and details of all inmates and the dates on which they entered and left the workhouse. These are sometimes indexed as well; (c) In and Out-Letter Books. These contain copies of all the most important letters sent and received by the Clerk of the Union including correspondence with the Commissioners and Local Government Board about administration; (d) Master's Journal, the book in which the Master recorded any important or unusual events in the workhouse. Besides these there are copious medical, financial, sanitary and other records which may be of more interest for specialist studies.

The records of the Poor Law Unions in Northern Ireland are held in the Northern Ireland Public Record Office where they are uniformly catalogued under each union. The records are not always complete but between the records available and the Annual Reports it is possible to build up a good picture of the workings of the Poor Law in any individual union.

Poor Law records could also be used for many other studies. The Admission records might be used to measure fluctuations in the level of distress in any area or to study the level of distress in any particular trade or occupation. The workhouse infirmary and fever hospital records would be useful for medical history, the effect of epidemics etc. And since the Board of Guardians was often the only local government authority in many areas until 1898 their minutes should be used to study the development of villages and small towns.