

Parishoners protect pauper prisoners

by Gerard MacAtasney

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there existed no state provision for the poor, the sick and the old in Ireland. The main source of relief for these classes emanated from funds applied by Anglican church vestries. Between 1720 and 1820 the population of the country more than doubled from three million to six and a half million and as a consequence the number of poor increased substantially. Hence, by the end of the eighteenth century new sources of relief had been established in urban areas throughout the country. Within County Armagh this period saw the emergence of the enhanced efforts in Armagh City and Lurgan with the establishment of the Armagh Association for Occasional Relief of Sick Poor (1808) and the Lurgan Publick (sic) Kitchen in the same year.¹ In addition, medical provision was improved in the aftermath of the fever epidemic of 1816-17 so that by 1820 there were nine dispensaries in various parts of the country.² In the mid-1830s the population of Armagh had increased to more than 220,000 and the needs of the poor were manifested by the establishment of both a mendicity association and fever hospital in Newry in February 1834. While the latter catered for the medical requirements of the poor, the Workhouse and Mendicity supplied food, employment and lodgings for the poor and needy of the district. These endeavours were funded by means of voluntary subscriptions and various charity events and succeeded in raising hundreds of pounds.³ However, by the end of the 1830s donor fatigue had become evident and efforts to aid the poor throughout the country suffered as a consequence. The reasons for such were twofold. Firstly, huge population increases had been accompanied by a simultaneous rise in the number of people seeking relief, thereby placing an intoler-

able strain on those church vestries which had been in the forefront of poor relief for decades. For example, the numbers receiving aid in the parish of Derrynoose increased from 12 in 1817 to 45 in 1820 while the annual cost of the local Church of Ireland congregation in Clonfeacle of maintaining foundlings was almost £30 in 1825.⁴ The levels of costs associated with such relief operations eventually met with opposition from parishoners as acknowledged by Reverend Edward Chichester of Kilmore, who commented in 1834 that there had been “*much resistance in providing for foundlings by vestry grants.*”⁵ Similarly, a local clergyman in Derrynoose reported that it would be impossible to collect cess for foundlings “*so bad is the system and so violently opposed to it are the parishoners.*”⁶ Secondly, the introduction of a national poor law in 1838 meant that all areas faced a compulsory tax to support the poor of their district. Consequently, those who previously made voluntary contributions were unwilling to continue, with the result that care for the poor passed to a board of guardians elected by the rate payers of each electoral division in the country with the power to raise a compulsory rate.⁷ On 25 January 1838, the treasurer of Armagh City Hospital was directed to write to several local landlords asking them to subscribe to the institution, “*many of their tenantry being constantly in the habit of receiving relief from the establishment*”⁸. The request encapsulated the difficulty inherent in providing for the poor at this time - there was no compulsion on individuals to contribute to the welfare of the poorer classes. Unlike England, Scotland and Wales, no poor law had been enacted for Ireland apart from, as Denis O'Connor, MP, commented: “*The poor law of sympathy which makes the poor Irish peasant share to the last potato with those scarcely poorer than himself, not knowing what*

moment he might be thrown himself upon the world.”⁹ In an attempt to bring some legal redress to the situation and finally engage “*the difficult but pressing question of establishing some legal provision for the poor*”,¹⁰ the British government introduced a bill on 17 February 1837 by which it signalled its intention of enacting a poor law for Ireland. In announcing the bill on behalf of the government, Lord John Russell intimated that the measure would be predicated on the amended English poor law of 1834. The legislation itself was largely derived from the Elizabethan poor laws the ethos of which were, as Russell explained: “to place the pauper labourer, the pauper who cannot find work, and the infirm who apply for support, in a situation more irksome than that of its independent, industrious and successful labourer.”¹¹ Hence, the law sought to distinguish between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. The means considered best to meet this need were the establishment of workhouses which, while offering food, clothing and residence, placed all such persons “under a certain degree of confinement”, to the extent that “*while they have the necessary clothing, the means of subsistence and often a warmer residence in the winter than the independent labourer possesses, yet the restraint is so irksome to them, that they are not willing to subject themselves to it except when really in a state of destitution. The workhouse (thus) becomes a place that the poor would gladly avoid the necessity of having recourse to.*”¹² Consequently, the experience of the urban poverty in England was to be combined with the principles of the English poor law to provide a mechanism by which the poor could be relieved in rural Ireland. As in England, the centrepiece of the new Irish system was to be the workhouse, centred in a large town and usually serving a population within a radius of 10 miles. This establishment would be

overseen by an elected board of guardians responsible for the employment of paid staff. The entire system was to be financed by payment of a poor rate, remitted by occupiers of land or property owners with a rateable value of £5 and over.¹³ Unlike its English counterpart, the Irish poor law would not facilitate a system of outdoor relief, with Russell arguing that “*mixing mendicancy and charity with labour*” would lead to a “most pernicious system”.¹⁴ Similarly, there was to be no law of settlement, whereby an applicant for relief would have to prove a period of residence in the area concerned. Indeed, Russell contended that such legislation would result put “immense litigation” as a consequence of individuals attempting to prove or disprove a particular claim of residence.¹⁵ News of the government initiative was met with hostility from all the major public organs throughout County Armagh and other parts of the country, particularly Belfast. Whilst it was generally accepted that some form of legal provision for the poor was necessary, it was argued that the bill before parliament contained many flaws. Hence, the opposition which subsequently manifested itself was concerned with a number of areas of contention. For example, Armagh County Grand Jury believed that the introduction of a poor law involving the building and maintenance of a workhouse, payment of officers and so on, would prove an “expensive experiment”.¹⁶ This opinion was concurred with by the church vestries of Portadown and Kilmore, with the latter accurately predicting that op-

position to a proposed poor rate assessment would be so universal that collection would prove difficult and, in some places, impossible.¹⁷ As an alternative, which was published in a local paper, the churches suggested an act by which parish vestries would be empowered to impose and levy a rate for the support of the aged, infirm and impotent poor. In a natural extension of such proposals, concern was voiced at the “great extent” of the proposed poor law unions. This was particularly evident in Kilmore on the outskirts of Armagh City where it

spending a proposed £700,000 on the new system was advocated by William Blacker, agent and agriculturalist to Lord Gosford. Claiming that some thirty million acres lay unproductive throughout the country, Blacker suggested that the British government make grants of land to the poor, as it was presently doing in America. By such means, he opined, the subsequent greater extent of cultivation would allow the pauper population to eventually emerge as independent consumers and increase the home market, thereby restricting poor relief to the helpless destitute.¹⁹

Blacker was supported in his opinions by various vestries which, while arguing for the development of fisheries, instigation of public works and disbursement of charitable loans to develop agriculture, asserted that the new workhouse system would prove “*inefficient as a means of increasing the produce of the soil*”.²⁰ Another source of opposition was proffered by local man David Leslie of Armagh City who attacked the proposed measure from a moral viewpoint. He argued that any such initiative “*exempts the idle and improvident from the punishment intended by nature to warn them and others from the*



The entrance to Armagh workhouse

was feared that inhabitants of such agricultural districts would become liable for the urban poor of towns with which they were unconnected. Hence, they also argued for a law of settlement to limit claims for relief.¹⁸ An alternative to

pains of destitution”. In his opinion “Divine Law’ had ordained that want should be attended with pain in order to overcome indolence. Thus, by enacting the present proposal “*legislators are removing the punish-*

ment and pains attendant one idleness".²¹ A similar moral objection, though on more concerned with the plight of the poor, was raised by the Kilmore vestry which argued that the bill "*punishes pauperism as a crime, inflicting on the poor, imprisonment, scanty subsistence, vigorous discipline and hard labour*".²² The vestry further castigated the "principle of confinement" inherent in the proposal of being: "*totally incompatible with the disposition and habits of the Irish people whose domestic attachments would render such a system inoperative and induce them to consider the endurance of destitution at home preferable to relief on the conditions proposed*".²³ For its part, the local Armagh press, together with lambasting the main proposals of the bill, indulged in a personal attack on its main architect, English Poor Law Commissioner, George Nicholls. The Newry Telegraph styled the measure an "*absurd and ridiculous report*" drawn up by an "ignorant theorist" and claimed the government knew "*little or nothing of the people for whom they propose to legislate*".²⁴ Such sentiments found favour with Daniel O'Connell who, albeit in less vociferous terms, announced in parliament that the legislature "*should not rely upon the testi-*

mony of Mr Nicholls".²⁵ Russell, however, defended the latter as a man "*well known for his worth, abilities and intelligence*".²⁶ Opposition to the proposal also manifested itself in various parts of the country by means of meetings and petitions. For example, a gathering in Kilkee, County Clare, stated: "*That is the deliberate conviction of this meeting that the newly introduced system of Poor Laws... unaccompanied by employment will, before long, become the fruitful source of increased misery and suffering*".²⁷ It further maintained that proprietors would eventually become "*the victims of a grinding and almost profitless taxation*"²⁸ with similar sentiments being voiced at rallies in Belfast and Holywood, County Down. Irrespective of such opposition throughout Armagh and elsewhere, the poor law bill passed through parliament unaltered and received royal assent on 31 July, 1838.

1. Macatasney, 'Mendicity and Charity in Pre-Famine County Armagh', in Seanchas Ard Mhacha, volume 17, No 2, 1998, p88.

2. Ibid., p90.

3. Ibid., 992-3.

4. Ibid., p95.

5. Ibid., p96.

6. Ibid., p97.

7. Ibid.

8. Armagh County Museum, Armagh Hospital Minute Book, Accession No. 46-v1937, 26 January 1838, p156.

9. Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 3rd Series, Volume xxxvi, 31 January to 6 March 1837, Column 484.

10. Ibid., Lord John Russell, Column 453.

11. Ibid., Columns 4567-8.

12. Ibid., Column 458.

13. Ibid., Column 471.

14. Ibid., Column 469.

15. Ibid.

16. Newry Telegraph, 22 March 1838.

17. Ibid., 26 April 1838.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 24 March 1838.

20. Ibid., 26 March 1838

21. Ibid., 19 April 1838

22. Ibid., 26 April 1838

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 10 February 1838

25. Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 3rd Series, Volume xxxvi, 31 January to 6 March 1837, Column 487.

26. Ibid., Column 461.

27. I. Murphy, Before the Famine Struck, Life in West Clare 1834-1845, Irish Academic Press, 1996, p60.

28. Ibid. 29. Kinealy and MacAtasney, The Hidden Famine, Poverty, Hunger and Sectarianism in Belfast, 1840-50, Pluto Press, 2000, pp.25-28 30. G. Nicholls, A History of the Irish Poor Law, John Murray, 1856, p.222.

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