

The Armagh Workhouse

Alias

Tower Hill hospital The Southern Health & Social Services Board Headquarters

by D.R.M. Weatherup

"Today as we struggle to secure sufficient resources to maintain and enhance our Health and Social Services it is appropriate that we reflect on a period when there were virtually no health or social services. Waiting lists were not relevant - because there were no lists at all. Ambulance response times were not important - because there were no ambulances. Accident and Emergency Departments were not over crowded - because there were no Accident and Emergency services. Life was cheap. Death was cheap"

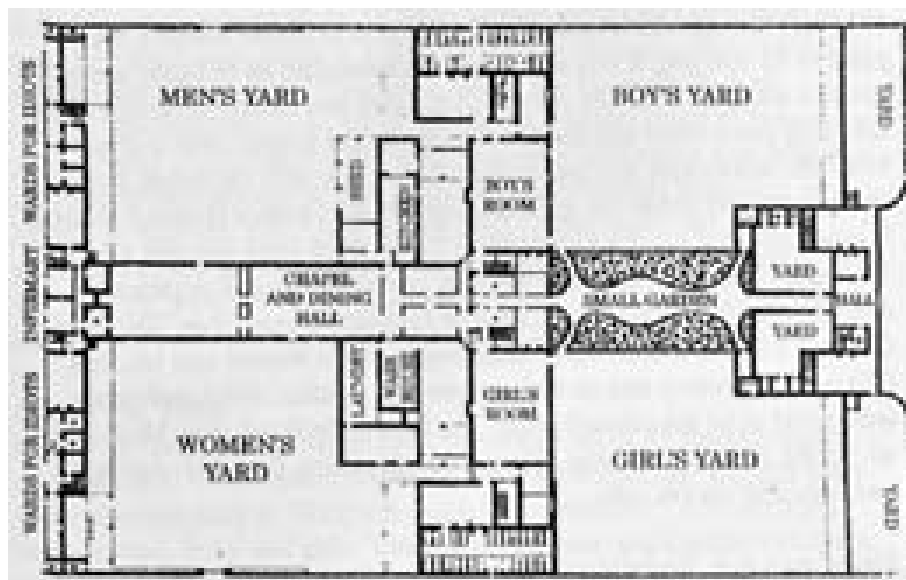
W.F. Gillespie, Chairman, Southern Health and Social Services Board 1996-2001.

Poverty and indeed destitution have long existed in human society and were recorded as widespread in European countries by the sixteenth century. In Ireland there was no general provision to alleviate the suffering of those in such degrading circumstances until the Poor Law Act of 1838. There had been local schemes especially in the towns with founding hospitals for abandoned children and alms houses for the old mostly supported by endowment or bequest. Local vestries distributed money, collected from voluntary and often unwilling subscribers, as did other religious communities and individuals of a charitable disposition. In 1542 an act was passed (The Vagabonds Act) to licence beggars to solicit alms in their own parish. From 1699 metal beggars badges, which were less friable than the licences, were issued in many areas including Armagh. These were given to local beg-

gars but such relief was inadequate in a country with a large and increasing population and the badges were as much to exclude vagrants as to help indigenous supplicants. By 1726 Dean Jonathan Swift was writing of the prodigious number of beggars throughout the country. In 1737 he published "A Proposal for giving Badges to Beggars in all the Parishes of Dublin". In 1838 the building of Houses of Correction for "the punishment of

and was financed by subscription, the subscribers being able to recommend the admission of poor persons with at least five years continuous residence in the town. By 1830 there was in Armagh an Association for the Suppression of Mendicity and a Society for the Relief of the Sick Poor both providing outdoor relief and radiating disapproval. Down through the ages the impoverished, living in appalling conditions, have turned to each other for support and shared an already inadequate sustenance. During the 1837 debate on poverty in the House of Commons the Irish M.P. Denis O'Connor referred to "the law of sympathy which makes the poor Irish peasant share his

last potato with those scarcely poorer than himself". Throughout the country there was this tradition of mutual support amongst the indigent down through the centuries. It was recorded by the French traveller De Latocnaye in 1796 when he had to shelter in a "miserable cabin" in Curraghmore, Co. Waterford



George Wilkinson's general plan for a workhouse, the ground floor

rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars and other lewd and idle persons" was authorized and this illustrates the attitude prevailing at that time. The first institution called a workhouse in Ireland was apparently that authorized by Parliament for Dublin in 1705 and by 1810 a House of Industry in Belfast had been founded

where the old lady offered him potatoes from her meagre store and later in Pogue's Entry in Antrim town as portrayed by Alexander Irvine in his tribute to his mother in "My Lady of the Chimney Corner". In 1819 a House of Commons committee began inquiring into the state of the poor in Ireland and it was

followed in 1823 by another one which recommended road making and harbour construction, etc. to provide useful work. In 1833 when a Royal Commission considered "the position of the poorer classes in Ireland" it concluded that the English system of workhouses would not answer

ing, the main building, the infirmary and the fever hospital - in a rectangular compound enclosed by high stone walls. The entrance door gave direct access into the front building with the board room, clerk's office and accommodation for the porter on the upper floor. On the ground

lighted by dormer windows, raised sleeping platforms took the place of beds. A central extension from the back of the block which separated the yards for men and women contained the dining room around which were the kitchens and the laundry, etc. Against the far end wall was the infirmary but there was no direct access from one to the other. It was a two

storey building with doctor's and nurses' rooms and a male and a female ward. In 1844 a detached fever hospital was built to the rear of the infirmary and it too had male and female wards as well as accommodation for the surgeon and nurses. The wards for idiots shown on the standard plan were not built at Armagh. In spite of the common plan the use of local stone or brick, the topography of area and the size of the workhouse gave each a distinctive ambience. At Armagh the site selected was on Tower Hill an elevated area to the East of the town contiguous to the graveyard of the Church of Ireland chapel of ease, built in 1811 and dedicated to St. Mark. Here between the church grounds and the Ballinahone

River with access from the Belfast Road (now Victoria Street) and from the road to the Deanery (College Hill) six acres were purchased from Mr. John Magee for seven pounds ten shillings an acre. The contractor was a local man, Sinclair Carroll, who also built the Newry workhouse. In Armagh the Board of Guardians was composed of 37 elected representatives from the 25 electoral divisions of the district and 12 ex-officio members all local gentry. They held their first meeting in June 1839 and appointed John Frazer as Clerk of the Union at a salary of £50 a year. In 1841 the selection of Mr. & Mrs. Harrington as Master and Matron (£40 & £20 respectively), Mr. Leslie as Medical Officer at £50, Mr. & Mrs. Maxwell as School Master and Mistress (£20 & £15) and P. Cunningham as Porter at £12 per year and with the same rations as the inmates completed the staff compliment. The house opened in 1842 with accommodation for 1,000 destitute poor. As with the other workhouses the effect of the solid building within its high stone walls entered by iron



Armagh Workhouse, The sleeping platforms under the slates on the third floor.

because in England suitable outside work was available for the inmates but in Ireland due to the depressed state of trade there were no such opportunities. None the less in 1836 George Nicholls, an English Poor Law Commissioner, came to Ireland and found in favour of the this scheme. He introduced into the House of Commons a "Bill for the More Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor In Ireland" which became law in 1838. By this act Ireland was divided into 130 Unions each centred on a market town, supported by a levy (the poor rate), each managed by a local Board of Guardians and overseen by the Poor Law Commissioners, the governing authority based in Dublin. In each selected town a workhouse was established, the majority built to a standard, although flexible, design drawn up by the architect George Wilkinson of Oxford who had experience in this work in England. After his engagement with the Commissioners was finished he set up in practice in Dublin. In this general plan there were four separate buildings - the front build-

ing, the main building, the infirmary and the fever hospital - in a rectangular compound enclosed by high stone walls. The entrance door gave direct access into the front building with the board room, clerk's office and accommodation for the porter on the upper floor. On the ground floor were the separate male and female receiving rooms for applicants where they were inspected and medically examined. Those accepted were entered in the registers, required to wash, issued with workhouse dress and sent to appropriate part of the institution according to age and sex for there were separate categories of inmates:- aged men, able bodied men, boys and infants and the same classification of females. There was complete segregation of each class and no communication was permitted causing families on entering the premises to be split asunder. From the front building a central passage bounded by high stone walls which separated the boys' and the girls' exercise yards led to the main building or body of the house which bisected the site. It was from two to four stories high according to the size of the institution usually, as at Armagh, with a wing at each end. On the ground floor was accommodation for the Master and the Matron and "the wards" or day rooms. The dormitories were on the upper floors and in the top level, beneath the rafters and

gates was as forbidding and intimidating as it intended to be for in Ireland with outdoor relief illegal the workhouse was to be a place of last resort. Indeed Mr. Nicholls made this clear when he wrote "I wish to see the poor house looked to with dread by our labouring classes and the reproach for being an inmate of it extend downwards from father to son". This attitude was again emphasized by the Commissioners' direction that "the diet, clothing, bedding, and other merely physical comforts, may in the workhouse be better than in the neighbouring cottages, yet none but the really destitute poor will seek admission into the workhouse, provided that order and discipline be strictly maintained therein it is the preservation of decency and decorum, and exclusion of all irregular habits and tempting excitements of life, on which reliance must mainly be placed for deterring individuals, not actually and unavoidably destitute, from seeking refuge in the workhouse:....". To this end the rules were harsh and repressive and the food plain and meagre. For example in September 1845 James McKinney for neglecting his work was ordered 24 lashes and no supper for a week while in December of that year Bridget McNamee for disturbing the nursery was sent to break stones for a similar period. In February 1846 Mary Cosgrove was to be locked up for six hours each day for a week for insulting the Master and in March Michael Murray was to get 12 stripes for climbing over the infirmary wall. In 1847 for using obscene language Mary Ewing was placed in "the black hole", a windowless cell in the basement of the infirmary. In March, 1846 the Chairman of the Board having stated that the inmates were much better fed than many a hard working man outside the walls the number of meals was reduced from three to two each day except for children under nine but this was rescinded a month later. The

average cost of feeding a pauper was estimated at one shilling and five pence per week in that year and soup, potatoes, when available, were along with oat or yellow meal and bread the staple diet. On Christmas Day, 1844 each inmate got ¾ lbs of meat in addition to the usual fare when the Archbishop (Lord J.G. Beresford) paid for this luxury. Clothing was also supplied when necessary as when boys were sent out as labourers or girls into service. In September, 1845 when Abbey Leckey was allowed to go and work for a Mr. Hamilton in Kilmore in place of Mary Jane Gray, who did not like living in the country, Abbey was to get Mary Jane's shoes and stockings. New clothes were also furnished to 26 orphan girls who had been selected for emigration to Australia and they were escorted to Belfast and put on board the "Athlone" by the Master in May, 1848. Although the Armagh workhouse was one of the

Cathedral Road) and houses on Barrack Hill had to be brought into use as there were so many destitute and in the institution's care. The occurrence of fever was almost inevitable and in that year it appeared "in every part of the house". Many died from the contagion over 500 from October 1846 to March 1847 including both the, Medical Officer and the Master. So widespread and complete was the poverty that outdoor relief and public works had to be introduced again. The famine declined after 1848 and consequently so did the numbers seeking refuge in the workhouse and by 1851 Armagh had only 710 on the rolls. There are two graveyards at the workhouse, the first one, still known locally as the "Paupers' graves", was across the road from the entrance and later a second plot was laid out for this purpose close to the infirmary and the fever hospital. The Southern Health and Social Services



Armagh Workhouse, The front building seen from the third floor dormer window of the main building.

largest in Ulster within a few years of its opening it was too small to accommodate all those seeking succour when in 1845 the potato crop failed and famine spread throughout the land. In the following years there was further and more severe damage to this staple item of diet. By 1847 the workhouse was overcrowded and in addition to large sheds erected in the yards the old Cholera Road (now

Board has recently taken cognizance of these sites. In 2002 a simple wooden cross bearing a metal plaque inscribed "Armagh/Workhouse/Graveyard/1841-1948" was erected at the earlier one, now a grove of mature trees between the road and St. Mark's ground. At the gate into the second site in 2001 there was placed a memorial stone recording the purpose of this grass enclosure with

its central yew tree walk for there are no headstones or memorials at either site for all were interred anonymously. When in 1899 the reform of local administration in Ireland set up county, urban and rural district councils the infirmary and fever hospital became rate supported as a District Hospital open to all. The workhouses in Northern Ireland continued in use until 1948 when they were closed following the creation of the modern health and welfare services. Until 1989 Tower Hill was used as a special care hospital for the mentally handicapped under Dr. J. Mulligan and also housed a specialist unit for children under the supervision of Dr. H.H.G. Dorman. Longstone Hospital was then opened to accommodate the handicapped and the children were moved to the Manor House at Milford. Tower Hill continued in use as administrative offices and the station for the local ambulance service

while in 1970 a modern maternity unit was built in the grounds and operated there until 1988. After the closure of the City Hospital in Abbey Street in 1991 this building became the Armagh Community Hospital. In 1996 the workhouse was refurbished and adapted for a new role as the headquarters of the Social Services Board. From its modernised buildings the Board continues for the present the alleviation of suffering, hopefully in a more generous spirit than that of the Poor Law Commissioners and the Guardians of the Workhouse of old.

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