

Stranorlar workhouse

SLIDE 1 WILKINSON IMAGE

SLIDE 2 image of the minute books

Donegal is very fortunate to possess one of the best collections of workhouse records nationwide - telling the 19th and early 20th century histories of the lives of people in workhouses and hospitals as well as the development of public sanitation, public assistance, and health and social housing. In Donegal Co Archives we hold over 1,000 separate items including admission registers which are scarce nationally. Most of the minutes of meetings of the Stranorlar Board of Guardians have survived and some documentation but unfortunately no admission or relief registers.

A brief history of the workhouse

SLIDE 3 POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS

SLIDE 4 –SLIDE 5 photos of workhouses- Ballyshannon, Letterkenny

Under the Poor Relief Act of 1838 Ireland was divided into 137 poor law unions. The unions were controlled centrally by the Poor Law commissioners. Each union was run by an elected Board of Guardians whose duty was to oversee the running of each workhouse. Only property owners were eligible for election to the Boards.

The first major task of the Guardians was to ensure the building of a workhouse in their union.

The Guardians were granted the power to *'relieve and set to work....the destitute poor as by reason of old age, infirmity or defect may be unable to support themselves, and destitute children....[and others] who cannot 'support themselves by their own industry, or by other lawful means'.*

People were not given a right to relief, and what was given was often the bare minimum. It's clear the workhouses were designed to ensure that life behind the walls was at least as harsh as what was to be generally expected on the outside, in order to discourage dependence on them.

SLIDE 6 MINUTES MARCH 1845

The first surviving minutes of Stranorlar Board of Guardians date to 24 March 1845 though the workhouse opened in 1844. Some of those on the board at that meeting were Robert George Montgomery of Convoy House, Hon. James Hewitt (Viscount Lifford) of Meenglass Castle) and Samuel Hayes of Drumboe- well known landlords and upper class men of the area.

The early meetings of each Board of Guardians tended to focus on issues such as ...securing a suitable workhouse site and on appointing contractors, building the workhouse, collecting rates, vaccination against smallpox.

SLIDE 7 SMALLPOX VACCINATION

SLIDE 8 REGISTERS IMAGE

Each workhouse was designed to include a reception block, dormitories, laundry house, master's quarters, male and female yards, school room, day rooms, quarters for the old, kitchen, dead house, infirmary etc. Stranorlar workhouse was built to accommodate 400 people, a mid size workhouse.

SLIDE 9 INDOOR REGISTERS IMAGE

Admissions to the workhouse

Initially the Boards of Guardians were just responsible for what was known as 'indoor relief' - admission to the workhouse for a period of time. People of all ages and whole families were admitted for reasons of extreme poverty, homelessness, infirmity and illness.

The surviving 19th century registers from Co Donegal are from Glenties, Inishowen, Milford and Letterkenny, there's one from Dunfanaghy, these record the names of those born in or admitted to the workhouse during each week; giving information on age, state of health; whether able-bodied or disabled. Included are the dates of admission and discharge or death in the workhouse.

The minutes of the meetings of the Board of Guardians record that children were separated from their parents and men and women were also placed in separate accommodation blocks, husbands and wives included. Parents were allowed to see their children only a short time each day. The minutes record the diet of frugal meals they would have eaten, and the relentless boring tasks forced on people, stone breaking, washing laundry, knitting, spinning, darning, cleaning etc.

The children had school teachers in the workhouse but little is known of the extent of the education that was given. Doubtless it was limited in the extreme. After school every day the children were put to work cleaning the school room and other areas of the workhouse, they also appear to have done a lot of sewing, gardening and working outside on the grounds. Life must have been particularly dull and monotonous for young people.

SLIDE 10 FAMINE SKETCH

The Famine years

Donegal's eight newly established Boards of Guardians struggled desperately to cope during the Famine years. Outdoor relief was basic (in the forms of food, clothes and money) and workhouses were frequently extremely overcrowded.

SLIDE 11 DIET IMAGES

In Stranorlar issues over dietary scales were reflected in many of the minutes from March 1845. The medical officer wanted to increase the dietary scale to including 8oz oatmeal, 4 lb potatoes; 4 oz buttermilk for able bodied men, (breakfast, dinner, supper) and less than that for women and children. The Poor Law Commissioners refused the recommendation, stating that the diet in Stranorlar as it stands 'is as good as in any workhouse in Ireland'. They claimed that '*the ratepayers who contribute towards the support of those in the workhouse do not regularly obtain so liberal an allowance of food as that proposed to be given...*' (5 April 1845 minute). A special meeting of a subcommittee on 11th April fixed another smaller scale, e.g. men now at 7 oz, 3 and a half, and 5 oz. and women at 6, 3, 4.

In July 1846 the potatoes still in use were declared to be unfit for use and stirabout (watery porridge) was to be given for dinner instead. The diet by then for everyone consisted of Indian meal, oatmeal, buttermilk, bread and sweetmilk. Debates on diet continued throughout the years of the workhouse.

SLIDE 12 MEDICAL OFFICER REPORT

Life during the Famine in the workhouses was fragile. The Medical Officer's report on Stranorlar workhouse on 1st Feb 1847 was damning. He stated that *'the health of the inmates has suffered much from overcrowding, The consequence has been, greatly increased mortality among the aged females and children up to three years. Of late however other diseases of an alarming character and infectious nature have appeared. Among the children whooping cough has become general and in the present reduced state likely to carry off many of the inmates. Among the same class are infectious and dangerous forms of stomach and bowel disease nearly analogous to gastric fever'*.

The Medical Officer also stated that the hospital accommodation was 'wholly inadequate' even for ordinary requirements. He urged the building of a fever hospital as soon as possible. By March 1847 the board was refusing admission to individuals who had fever. By April plans for the building of a fever hospital in the workhouse grounds were well underway.

Yet throughout these years of starvation, overcrowding and fever, Stranorlar workhouse continued its hard and non-empathetic regime, including it seems being fixated with punishing paupers of all ages for minor offences or infractions:

SLIDE 13 image of punishments dished out

Punishments in Stranorlar Workhouse

Under the Poor Law Act it was lawful for the Boards to punish 'refractory' paupers for offences laid down, such as absconding from a workhouse, *for drunkenness, insubordination to the officers of the union, for disobedience of the rules prescribed or sanctioned by the Commissioners, and for misbehaviour such as 'attempting to introduce spirituous or fermented liquors into any workhouse'*.

In 1845 Margaret Devenny was charged with several offences including for throwing stirabout at another inmate. She was punished by having her milk withdrawn for two meals.

Mary Allison was brought before the Board by the Master for striking Mary McCool. She was discharged forthwith from the workhouse.

A woman named Mary Anne Martin was sent to solitary confinement for four hours for assaulting Eliza Arnold in Sept 1845.

In Feb 1846 Susan Coultin was charged with giving a piece of Union cloth to another inmate (she thought it was a washing rag). She was severely admonished. It was '*highly improper for any pauper to make use of any property belonging to the Union workhouse other than dictated by the workhouse master or matron*' apparently.

Often people ended up in prison. The board had a woman sent to trial for taking children's clothes from the workhouse; she was sentenced to six months in prison by Letterkenny Sessions as a result. Another woman, no doubt in a desperate condition 'absconded' without her children, taking clothes with her. A warrant was issued for her arrest and she was apprehended while boarding a boat sailing from Derry to Scotland.

EMIGRANTS

SLIDE 14 EMIGRANTS

Emigration to the 'new worlds' of Australia and America was gradually being regarded by the state as one solution to the privations of the Great Famine. In February of 1848, the British Colonial Secretary initiated an emigration scheme to send orphaned young people from Irish workhouses to South Australia. It was decided that women and girls in particular were needed in the colonies to balance the mainly male population.

Rebecca Faulkner left Stranorlar workhouse in 1850 on the Eliza Caroline ship, she was 16. The Sydney Famine Memorial database records some information about Rebecca. She was a Presbyterian from Stranorlar and could

read & write. When she arrived in Melbourne she became a house servant, employed by an Eliza Webster in Geelong. In 1859 she married John Hulls of Melbourne; Rebecca died in 1905, never coming home again presumably. Alice Malarkey, also from Stranorlar was only 15 when she arrived on the same boat, she also became a house servant in Geelong and married some years later, having it is stated in the memorial 11 children; she died in 1922. These are the bare facts, on the database is included a line for 'story' but it is blank, it seems the deeper stories of many aren't as well known. Assisted emigration schemes to Australia, US and Canada mainly, often of whole families. continued from workhouses throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

SLIDES 15 – 16 REGISTRY IMAGES

Women and Children in the Workhouses after the Famine

While life did improve over the 19th century even in the workhouse, it remained harsh, a minute from Stranorlar in January 1872 reports the Commissioners demanding the board purchase shoes and stockings for the children as they had chilblains.

(As there are no surviving registers from Stranorlar, we can look instead at some of those who spent time in Letterkenny workhouse after the Famine.)

William Wallace is a very sad entrant in the register; he appears there several times in the 1860s; first aged 9, later aged 14. He appears to have been sporadically homeless and was always admitted on his own, he's described as an orphan and 'in want'.

The entire Maloney family from Gartan, father Denis a carpenter, his wife Margaret and four young children spent time in Letterkenny workhouse in 1864. Many families were forced to return again and again.

Frequently single mothers and their children or pregnant girls and women were forced to seek help in the workhouse. Rachel Killen aged 22, a dressmaker from the 'union at large', was admitted to Letterkenny on 19 Oct 1869 and gave birth over a month later on 26 November. Her baby was

named Charles. They left the workhouse the day after his birth, to where we can only speculate.

The elderly were perhaps the most likely strata of society to end their days in the workhouse. Peggy Spence aged 90 from Glenmacquin, entered Letterkenny workhouse in March 1865, her disability being 'old age'. She died there a year later.

Life gets a bit easier

In the last two decades of the 19th century, life in the workhouse did get a little easier. Visiting Committees were set up to oversee the running of the workhouses and to monitor treatment of inmates. Dispensaries were opened for people to be treated outside the workhouse. **SLIDE 17 DISPENSARY**

Older children were often boarded out (fostered) with mixed results. **SLIDES 18, 19- BOARDED OUT, NURSED ETC**

In the meantime changes were made in the running of the workhouse with the Sisters of Mercy taking over the nursing duties from 1899.

SLIDE 20 SUPPLIES

One gradual but vital change was that the diet improved and became more varied- by the early 20th century eggs, meat, tea, rice, vegetables, milk, even jam and sugar was added- with some of these being introduced gradually over the years. There were also by then special diets for the sick in the infirmary. By then the workhouse garden would have provided much needed vegetables.

Also as the 19th century progressed, overcrowding ceased as living standards rose very slowly. Children were allowed some leisure activities, work was not as hard, and people did not tend to stay as long in the workhouse as the years progressed. The lives of staff of the workhouse are often documented, such as the marriage of the matron and master of Stranorlar workhouse in 1873.

The indoor relief registers for early 20th century see more of a steady trickle of people being admitted, and often discharged and readmitted quite regularly, but for short periods of time. The majority of those resident in the workhouse by this time are the elderly and ill and many of these people, if not most, ended their days there.

We have also seen that life in the workhouse was designed by the government and those who oversaw and managed the workhouse to be harsh and grim, each long day filled with grinding, often pointless work, the institution frequently overcrowded and insanitary, with bad and inadequate food, petty punishments, cold, comfortless and often hostile. Yet it was often the only option – a last resort- for people. In times of sheer destitution and desperation it became for many a place of refuge, if not a welcoming one.

The Workhouse – a review

The new Irish Free State in 1922 officially abolished the workhouse system, and Stranorlar's workhouse became the County Home. The workhouse system was abolished because of the stigma attached to it, not because the new government had any radical alternatives lined up to assist the homeless, the abandoned and the poor. While by then outdoor relief/ home assistance and public housing schemes were increasing there were still many who had to be accommodated in emergency or situations of extreme poverty or need. The Free State continued – even extended- the Victorian social policies of institutionalizing those who were marginalized by society or who could not survive without state assistance - be it in the County Home, St Conal's mental hospital in Letterkenny or the various industrial schools and orphanages, mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries that proliferated in the 20th century.

SLIDE 21 – 22 CO HOME AND ST CONALS

The Mother & Baby Home Commission's Chapter 29 on Stranorlar makes for tough reading. It's clear that the situation for children and women admitted to and resident in the County Home after 1922 wasn't much improved from or radically different to those admitted to the same building and site when it was run by the Board of Guardians as a workhouse.

In the County Home up to 1966, about 22,000 people were admitted, 1,646 pregnant women and 1,777 so called 'illegitimate' children were born there during this time. The commission notes that 1 in 5 children admitted between 1921 and 1956 died there. 343 children, 87% under a year old. The report notes the overcrowding and poor conditions of mothers and children, the boarding out of some children, the refusal to transfer mothers to a less crowded home because they needed them to do most of the work there, the fact of 2 toilets for 269 residents in 1927, broken beds, falling ceilings, rot, no disinfection, cross infection, bad heating, inferior milk and bread supplies, already inadequate dietary scale reduced from four to three meals a day, inadequate water supply, typhoid in 1930- 23 of 37 infants born that year died.

SLIDE 23 EXTRACT FROM CO HOME COMMISSION

For women it meant a maternity ward in terrible condition; scrubbing floors during labour, children designated as 'illegitimate' and adopted or fostered without permission, mothers only given access to babies once a week while they toiled for the other six days... the list goes on. Eventually the maternity ward/living quarters for mothers and babies was phased out in the 1960s but as we know the legacy of institutionalism in Ireland remains with us today.