

# The Famine in Limerick

**L**imerick was still reeling from the effects of the dreadful cholera visitation of the 1830s when the Great Famine struck. Although the citizens generally were not affected by a lack of food during that awful time, except, of course, those who could not afford to purchase it, there were many families living far below the poverty line. In those days there was no organised relief for the destitute. The establishment of the Limerick Union Workhouse in 1841 started a new era in relations with the poor. Those who struggled in from the rural hinterland in their thousands lost their identities as they underwent the new process of subjugation by the Poor Law bureaucratic juggernaut and ended up as numbers on a ledger. It was a harsh remedy for extreme poverty, and, at best, it was simply a buffer between a spartan existence and starvation to death. Many people, particularly those free of responsibility to children or others, died of hunger rather than suffer the humiliation of the workhouse, and it was their responsibility to their starving children that induced many to partake of the charity of that odious place. Entering the workhouse also meant the breaking up of the family, with the males in one part of the institution and the females in the other.

The famine was a blessing in disguise for the many local destitutes, who could avail of the hand-outs organised by the authorities and by charitable organis-

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by Kevin Hannan

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ations, especially the Quakers, and thus they were in a far better position, food wise, than before the terrible tragedy. And, most important of all, the shadow of the workhouse was a little farther away. Just the same, they went through severe tribulations and witnessed many heart-rending scenes.

Partial failure of the potato crop in 1844 and 1845 and the total failure in 1846 led to starvation and epidemic disease in the rural areas. In order to alleviate the distress, the English government under Sir Robert Peel introduced a public works programme which enabled the poor to earn money to purchase some food in the cities and towns; the wage under this scheme was ten pence per day. This may seem a very small wage, but it was twice as much as the navigators were paid who worked on the cutting of the canals during the latter half of the eighteenth century. A new government abolished this programme and set up soup kitchens instead.

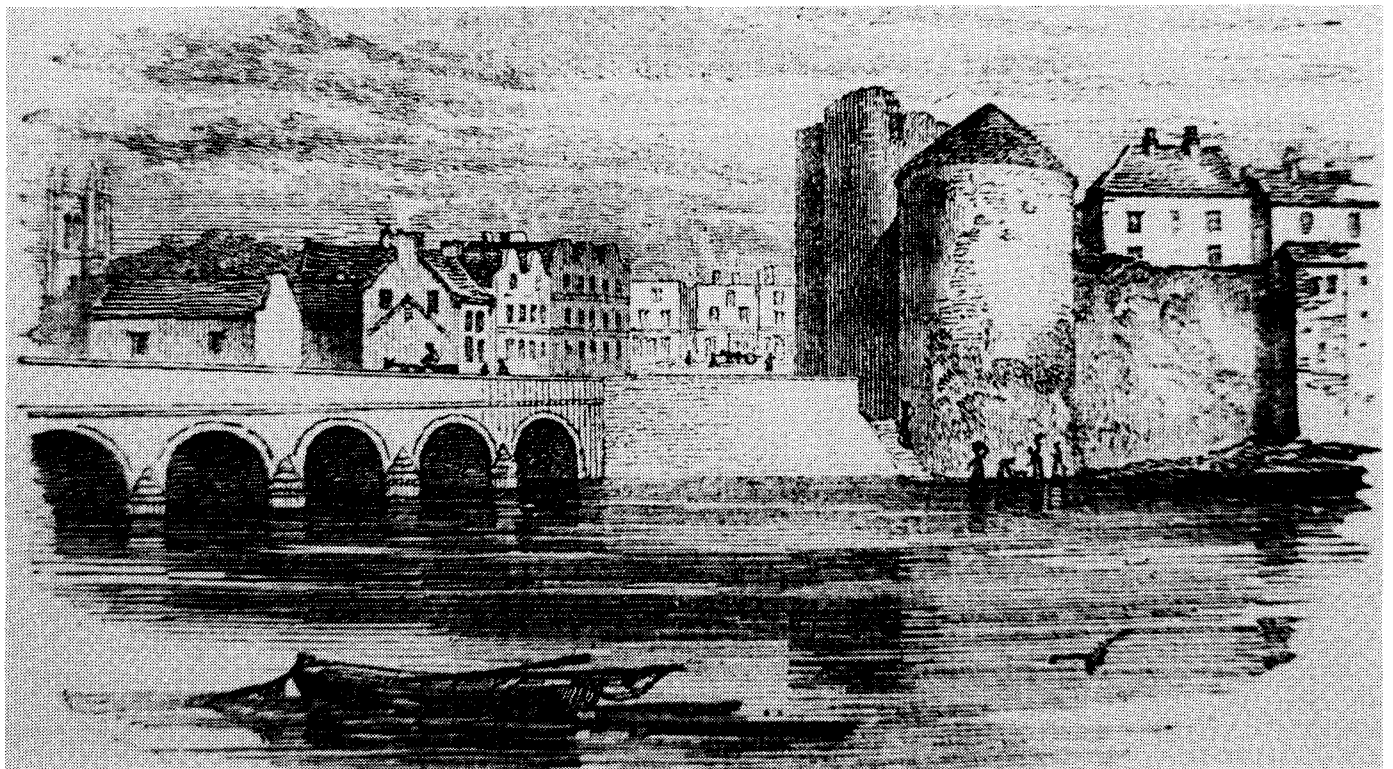
Limerick City was especially fortunate in having a number of bacon factories, and the large amounts of offals available daily were a great source of sustenance and even luxury for the working class people. People in the rural areas seldom tasted meat. These offals, which were donated gratis by the factory proprietors to the soup kitchen organisers, went a long way in saving many lives.

From 1847 there was massive migration to the towns. The citizens of Limerick reeled before the avalanche of frightened and famished people that rolled in from the rural hinterland seeking sympathy and assistance for themselves and for their helpless children. The Great Hunger had forced them to leave their habitations and seek refuge in the city. But here, as in other cities and towns throughout the country, the standard of sanitation, pure water supply and medical services were extremely low, leading to cholera and dysentery and other ancillary diseases. For a proud people the throwing of themselves on the mercy and charity of others was the last straw. But, compelled by the sight of their starving children, and the urgency of the awful hunger that numbed their pride, they flocked into the city seeking refuge in the hated workhouse. They came in the winter of 1845/46, but it was in the following two winters that the numbers reached the climax. The average daily number to receive relief in Limerick under what was known as the Soup Kitchen Act, for the three years from 1847 - 1849, was:

1847	2,204
1848	2,830
1849	4,550

Private charities, especially the Quakers, and some wealthy families, supplemented this relief with their own contributions.

It was not long before the dreaded famine fever appeared among the crowded



Thomond Bridge and King John's Castle.



Emigrants on their way to Cork. Engraving, *Historic Times*, 2 March, 1849.

unfortunates to send the death toll soaring. In the week ended 20 March, 1847, there were 72 deaths and the weekly total was rapidly increasing all the time. By April, it had reached the fearful peak of 108 deaths, an average of 15 a day. In all 4,000 people died in the Limerick Workhouse between 1847 and 1849.

Of all the pathetic scenes witnessed in and around the city during the famine years, that which occurred on St. Patrick's Day, 1847, in Rutland Street, was especially poignant. On 8 March, the *Limerick Reporter* carried the following news item:

*Opposite the new town hall was stretched a dead child, a little girl of about ten or eleven years of age, upon a little straw, thus being waked in the open street, while on the body lay a plate for the purpose of collecting pence to purchase a coffin, and the unfortunate father stood by, with famine depicted all over his face in characters that told the spectators he should soon follow the child. At the desire of Mr. E. Costello, the body was removed to a shed at the rear of the town hall. A coffin was afterwards supplied by the mayor.*

Towards the end of that year two auxiliary workhouses were opened, one in Boherbuoy and the other in Curry Lane, a long, narrow lane that ran parallel with Broad Street/John Street on the eastern side. The Curry Lane building, now in ruin, can still be seen. A dreadful tragedy occurred there in 1849. The building was a very old stone structure and was overcrowded with female paupers (the strict rule of complete segregation of the sexes in the workhouses was adhered to even in the great emergency). One night

one of the women shouted a fire warning and, in the ensuing stampede for the only exit, 40 women were trampled to death. But it was a needless tragedy; there was no fire.

This old building is apparently, of medieval vintage, and there is little known about its early purpose, though it is not altogether without nameless associations. The Capucians set up house there in 1686, but they had to clear out and scatter into hiding after the Treaty of Limerick, and never returned. The bell intended for this church is now in the Church of Ireland parish church of Benburb, Co. Tyrone.

Despite the misery of it all, there were heroes and heroines who risked their lives every day in their efforts to alleviate the sufferings of those afflicted with fever and dysentery. Some gave their lives tending the cholera victims of the 1830s. Fr. Fitzgibbon, of St. John's, contracted the disease while caring for victims in St. John's Hospital. He was buried in the parish church, and when this was demolished in 1861 when the new cathedral was ready, the grave was disturbed and it was discovered that both the coffin and remains were in the same condition as when first placed in the grave 24 years before. On the orders of Bishop George Butler, the coffin and remains were taken up and re-interred in the north transept of the cathedral. The massive stone slab was also removed and placed over the new grave. A large pieta and candelabra were afterwards placed in this transept, covering the grave. Although I knew of the general whereabouts of this grave, I never dreamed that some church authority many years ago would have hidden it away. The pieta and candelabra were removed recently to a different part of the cathedral and the grave slab

revealed. It is the intention of the church authorities to re-open the grave, and were it not for the illness of the bishop, Dr. Jeremiah Newman, this task would have been completed during last year.

At the height of the cholera epidemic, Sister Elizabeth Moore, of St. Mary's Convent, called for volunteers among her community; the response could not be better and even the postulants volunteered.

Barrington's and St. John's hospitals were taken over completely for the treatment of the cholera victims, and the sisters nursed their patients, day and night, in both hospitals. On the first night of the sisters stay in St. John's, 17 people died. The sisters also made provision for visiting stricken families in their homes, for the citizens, though having sufficient food, did not escape the contagion of the dreaded typhus. In most cases, according to Sister Moore, father, mother and children were lying down and unable to hand a drink to each other.

I might mention here that it was not only the poorer classes that became victims of the cholera. The *Limerick Chronicle* of 1847/48/49 bears the names of a surprising number of the middle classes, merchants and professional people (who else could afford to make announcements in the press?). Apparently the cause of death bore no stigma, for in nearly all cases it appeared in the death notice - cholera.

We are told that the sisters administered their own special cure of hot port wine with good effect. A number of sisters fell down with the cholera, and one selfless worker, Sr. Philomena Potter, died. A number of nurse attendants in St. John's Hospital also died after contracting the fever while attending patients. Dr.

John Geary, writing of conditions in Limerick in 1847, stated:

*Accompanying this dreadful famine, a fever epidemic of exceptional virulence has affected the citizens, mainly through contagion after contact with the masses of infected sufferers. During 1846 the fever admissions to St. John's Hospital reached an all time high record: 5,228 cases, mostly cases of typhus. The following winter was even more terrible. Some people died in the streets and on the roads leading into the city. A physician to St. John's at that time wrote: 'I recollect many fever patients when admitted at this time into the hospital who declared they had not eaten a meal of any kind for several days, others said their chief support was procured from boiled nettles, dock leaves and other such wild herbs'.*

During the 1846 to 1849 period, there was an average of fifteen funerals a day from St. John's Hospital alone to Killalee cemetery. A lesser number was buried in St. Patrick's. The staff at the hospital worked under appalling difficulties. Corpses were piled on one another in the dead-house, and, according to one of the physicians, "the whole place savoured more of death and despair than life and hope". In the summer of 1849, the *Limerick Chronicle* published an account of two boys who were bringing ten corpses a day to Killalee churchyard, and, as they were unable to bury them, the dogs were devouring the bodies. Some of the animals were killed by their owners, while others were seen taking large pieces of human flesh across the country. But the poor starving dogs were not the only culprits. The same paper records "... Constable Nash arrested in the Irishtown a woman named Mary Touhy, in the act of selling human bones which she had removed from the burial ground of Killalee, outside Clare Street. The miscreant had also a quantity of shrouding and caps which she had stripped from the dead". We do not know the penalty paid by this wretched woman, but we do know that she was not the only human plunderer of that ancient burial-place. The Church of Ireland rector of St. Patrick's was quick to seize his opportunity of cashing in on the unprecedented demand for consecrated earth, for he increased the burial fees from one shilling to two shillings.

The burial of those who died in the workhouse presented great problems for the Board of Guardians as the emergency became protracted. At first, some burials took place in Killeely, which was adjacent to the workhouse. The burials here must have been many and frequent. When the worst affects of the famine had receded, the following appeared in the *Limerick Chronicle*:

*We are reliably informed that the state of Killeely cemetery calls for immediate attention at the hands of those whose*



**A mother cries out for food to feed her hungry children.**

*interest or duty it is to look after the health of the community. The cemetery, which by the way, has been used for years past is already overcrowded, and the interments which are made there from time to time cannot, as a matter of course, take place but in a manner calculated to prove injurious to the health of the populous district close by. It is even alleged that dogs are seen prowling through the cemetery nightly - with what purpose can be readily imagined - and the smell emanating from it is something frightful. We could add to these sickening details were it not in our opinion that enough has been said to show the desirability of having immediate steps taken to remedy such a shocking state of affairs.*

Some burials also took place at Old Church and St. Dominic's at Rosbrien, but, as private graves were being encroached upon, the protests of the local people succeeded in having those places closed to the interment of paupers. St. Patrick's churchyard was then used in 1848. It soon became overcrowded and insanitary, so much so that the Rev. Mr. Moore made the following proposal to the Board of Guardians: "That the paupers be buried from this time forward in Kilquane free of charge, until we have power to take ground for burials under the Poor Law Acts now before Parliament". At a subsequent meeting of the Board, it was learned that the people of Parteen would not allow the burial of paupers in Kilquane. It was an impasse something like that which exists today regarding the travellers - everyone wants them someplace else. Everyone wanted the dead paupers laid to rest someplace else -

but there was no place else. The Board was finally forced to have part of the grounds of the Union Workhouse consecrated and used as a burial-ground. The problem was finally settled in 1849 when the Board leased a plot of ground in Ballynantybeg from one Daniel Cullen, who, in turn, had it leased from the Earl of Lansdowne. Whether it was intended to have this property, paupers and all, returned to the titled owner after the expiry of the lease is not known. But it is certain that no one ever tried to wrest ownership from the Board of Guardians or their successors. From the beginning this sacred spot was seldom given its proper title - St. Brigid's: to the local people it is still "The Paupers'," but the older name, seldom heard nowadays, was "The Yella Hole".

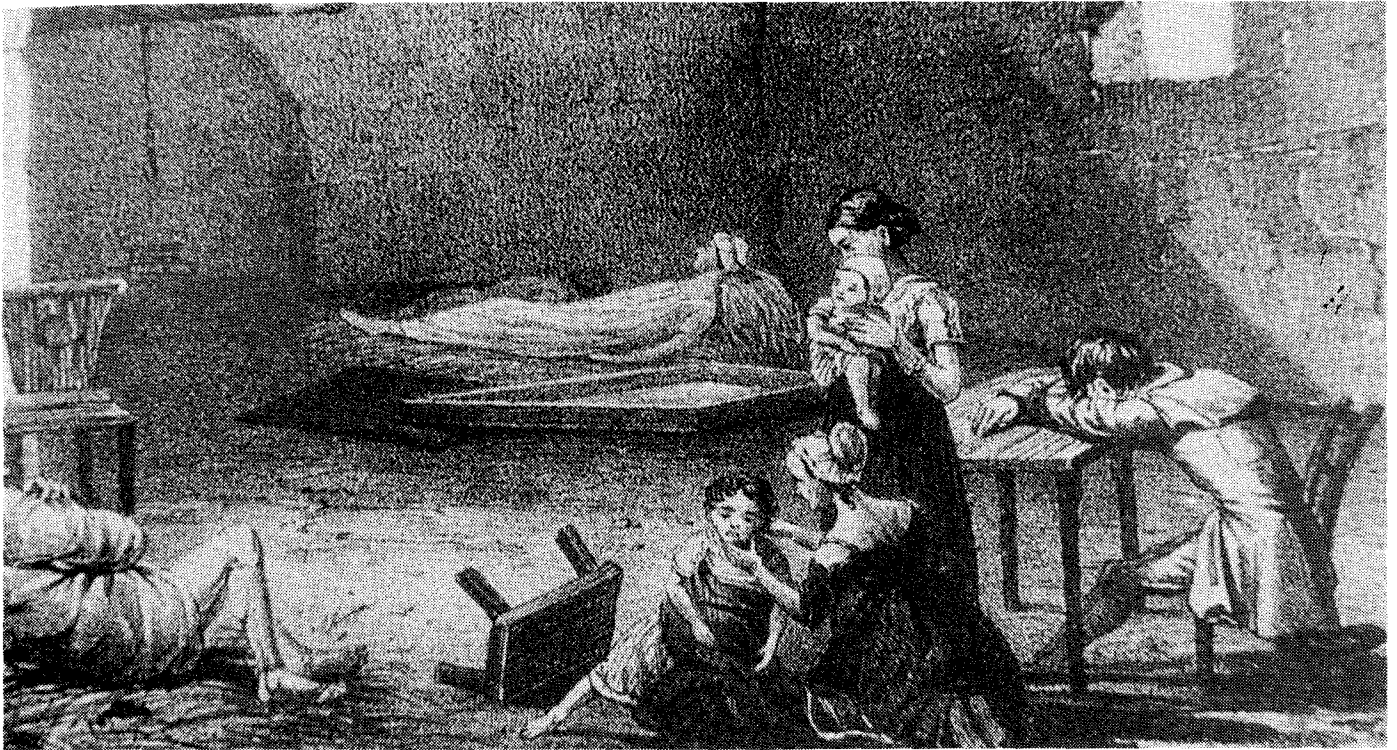
It is a quiet place now, but contemporary accounts tell us of a crowded workhouse, long after the famine, and daily funerals. But these were no ordinary funerals. The hearse was a common dray cart and the coffin a plain deal box, without mountings or embellishments of any kind. It was a complete do-it-yourself affair without any of the frills of a respectable funeral - not even a priest, though it is likely that the burial service was read before the corpse left the workhouse.

St. Brigid's would have been completely desecrated years ago, like many of those cemeteries not under the care of the Church of Ireland, were it not for the daunting presence of the large wooden cross which is still casting its shadow over its charges. For a hundred years until the 1950s, all the very poor, many of whom would dearly have wished to be buried with their ancestors in their native parish churchyards, were laid to rest in this totally neglected spot.

Unfortunately I do not have the records of the number of cholera victims who died in Barrington's owing to the difficulty of tracing the hospital documents after the disruption following the closing of the hospital.

An extraordinary event took place at St. John's in August, 1849, when my great-grandmother, at that time a woman of 39 years, dragged her son from a pile of corpses in the dead-house and brought him on her back to her home in nearby Chapel Street, where, miraculously, she revived him and nursed him back to health. At that time he was eighteen years of age. He regained full health and emigrated to the United States in 1853 and settled in Brighton, Boston. He married a Limerick girl and all his descendants have done well. I have visited them many times during the past twenty years.

In the city itself the citizens, terrified of the invisible menace of the fever, carried on their own fight against it in the only way they knew. Great bonfires were kept burning here and there in the Englishtown and Irishtown in the hope, rather than belief, that this would help to purify the atmosphere and thus stall the virulence of the plague. Efforts were made to clean up



Famine fever. Engraving by A.S.G. Stopford.

the excrescence in the city by having the channels in the streets and lanes lavishly sprinkled with lime. Perhaps these efforts were helpful, but in the light of after knowledge, it was the unpotable water taken from the wells all over the city that was one of the main causes of transmission and spread of the disease. In those days, the city streets and lanes were veritable cesspools. Some of the lanes and smaller streets were cobbled, but the majority had earthen surfaces. Almost all these thoroughfares had channels, or, to be more precise, open sewers running down their centres. In wintry conditions these earthen surfaces were churned into a gooey mess of pig-manure and household slops (everything was thrown outside the doors). This fearful substance was usually dehydrated in the heat of the summer and disseminated through an atmosphere already polluted by the unsavoury odours resulting from a complete lack of hygiene in the cramped living conditions. These conditions prevailed well into the present century. Some entries from the Limerick Health Committee minute books of the 1880s will give some idea of the squalor in the city: "A house in Black Bull lane where Ann O'Brien kept two pigs, a flock of poultry and a donkey in a back yard where the donkey had no room to turn around". "A house in Hall's Bow where Elizabeth Sheehan housed a pig in a hole off the kitchen" and "A house in a lane off Gerald Griffin Street where James Ryan keeps two pigs under the stairs". There were hundreds of cases of such conditions all over the older parts of the city, and it is clearly evident that those living under such conditions had little resistance to the plague carried into the city by the famished rustics.

For the authorities the death of a

pauper meant one mouth less to feed, but one more body to be buried. Three of the four parish churchyards in the city were under the control of the Church of Ireland authorities, who only allowed interments of those having burial rights there. There was no room for strangers. In the years up to Catholic Emancipation, Roman Catholic parishioners had gradually fallen away from the practice of burying their dead with their ancestors in the parish churchyards. This reluctance was based mainly on the law which forbade the reading of prayers for the dead by a priest at the graveside. Thus the parish churchyards passed out of the hands of the Catholic parishioners, with only a few maintaining their burial rights there. Dr. Begley, in his history of the Limerick diocese, describes the scene in St. John's churchyard at the burial of a Catholic, Captain Darrack, whose body was brought from Tarbert to St. John's Protestant church grounds for interment, accompanied by Fr. McCarthy, P.P. of that place. The coffin having been placed beside the grave, the priest commenced to read the burial service when he was interrupted by the sexton, who was maltreated for his untimely interference on so solemn an occasion. The sexton went with haste to the vicar, Rev. John Fitzgibbon, who lived beside the church. That gentleman rushed to the scene and what happened was best described by the sexton:

*The vicar went to the churchyard and found Mr. McCarthy, of Tarbert ... going through the service of his Church. The vicar remonstrated, but to no purpose, as the priest proceeded, cheered on by cries of 'go on; we will die to a man 'til you finish'. The vicar was jostled and called opprobrious names. He called the military, but as soon as they came he*

*ordered them away and withdrew himself, considering his duty was done when he forbade a violation of the law.*

This incident occurred some time before the famine in 1824, but it illustrates the hostility to the interment of Catholics in their parish churchyards where they were legally entitled to be buried. The application of this penal law by some zealots, forbidding the burial service at the graveside, was odious to all Catholics, but there was a blind eye turned to it in most places, and it was entirely abolished after Catholic Emancipation.

Now that we have reached the 150th. Anniversary of the famine, it would be well for us to look at the totally neglected burial-places of thousands of innocent victims of the worst disaster ever to hit the city, St. Bridget's at Watch House Cross, Ballynantybeg and Killalee in St. John's parish. It is heartrending to ponder the public indifference in turning a blind eye to the desecration of these places. It was well known that a member of the travelling community used part of St. Bridget's as a scrapyard for many years.

Likewise, Killalee was at one time a pleasant rural churchyard, rich in fine memorials, planted with yews and hawthorns, and having an all-round boundary of tall poplars. Today there are no trees, no memorials; it is merely a repository for household rubbish, with nothing to be seen that would identify with a burial-ground.

In Pery Square there are two memorials, about 50 yards apart, commemorating those Limerickmen who died fighting in various wars, but there is nothing to commemorate the thousands of victims of the Great Famine in 'the Yella Hole' and Killalee. It is time to remedy this neglect.