

# Carrick on Shannon Workhouse & THE GREAT FAMINE

*This article was prepared by members of Carrick on Shannon Historical Society*



*They carved the date above the gate  
'Eighteen Forty-Nine,'  
When they built the workhouse on the hill  
of limestone tall and fine.  
The people came to drink the soup  
Ladled from greasy bowls,  
They died in whitewashed wards that held  
A thousand Irish souls*

So wrote M.J. McManus of the workhouse in Carrick on Shannon where he was born. It was in fact built in 1841 at a cost of over £11,000 and it was unfortunately to play a big part in the life and death of the town in the following years during the Great Famine. It was one of three workhouses built in Co. Leitrim as a result of the passing of the Poor Law Act of 1838. The other two were at Manorhamilton and Mohill. Both these buildings have since been demolished.

The workhouse was built to accommodate 800 inmates. The Poor Law Union of Carrick administered the following areas. In Co. Leitrim, the parishes of Kiltoghert and Kiltubrid, parts of Annaduff, Drumreilly and Mohill. In Co. Roscommon, the parishes of Aughrim, Kilmore and portions of Ardcarne, Clooncraff, Creeve, Killukin, Killumod and Tumna. The administration was under the control of the Board of Guardians. Half the members of this Board were made up of Justices of the Peace resident in the Union area. The other members were elected by the Union's rate-payers and property owners. The day to day running was left in the hands of the

LEITRIM GUARDIAN

Master, who received a salary of £50 per annum. He was assisted by the Matron who received £25 per annum. There was also a porter, a medical officer, two school teachers, a Roman Catholic chaplain, a Church of Ireland chaplain and the Clerk of the Union, who recorded and maintained the records.

Only the destitute were meant to avail of the Poor Law system. Conditions were to be as miserable as possible. Families were not allowed to live as a single unit, husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters were all assigned different quarters. Parents were admitted to see their children on Sundays only. Despite some problems, conditions at Carrick's workhouse in the early years were reasonable, but workhouses and the Poor Law were hopelessly inadequate to deal with the tragedy of the Famine that was just a few years away.

A succession of "small famines" in the early part of the 19th century had led to crop failures and eventually to what became known as the Great Famine. In 1845 blight caused partial failure to the potato crop in Co. Leitrim. There were shortages of food in the workhouse and towards the end of the year the number of deaths

rose significantly. The reaction of the government to the food shortages was to repeal the Corn Laws which led to a fall in the price of home grown crops. Indian corn was imported into the country from the United States. Local Committees were set up to identify the worst hit areas and to allocate relief accordingly. Public work schemes were introduced to give employment. Many of the fine cut-stone public buildings and bridges date from these mid 1840 schemes.

In 1846 the blight re-appeared and there was a complete failure of the potato crop. A change in government saw the end of the relief measures introduced by the previous administration under Robert Peel. This was done so as not to interfere with what the new cabinet felt was the right of the suppliers to a "fair profit." The task of coping with the now worsening situation in the country was in the hands of the Poor Law Unions, local voluntary relief committees and the Society of Friends also known as the Quakers. In November 1846, William Forster of Norwich and James Tuke of York, both Quakers, arrived in Carrick on Shannon. The scenes of poverty and suffering witnessed by them had a profound effect. There were 110 applicants for the workhouse, all destitute for which there were only 30 vacancies. Starvation and disease were everywhere. Forster purchased all the bread available in the town and distributed it. Conditions in the workhouse were deplorable. There was no sanitation and clothing was scarce. Inmates were idle. Suppliers were profiteering. Built to accommodate 800 the workhouse was trying to cope with over one thousand. 170 were in the hospital suffering with typhus and dysentery. Inmates were dying at a rate of 12 per week. There was no bedding and nothing to lie on but straw.

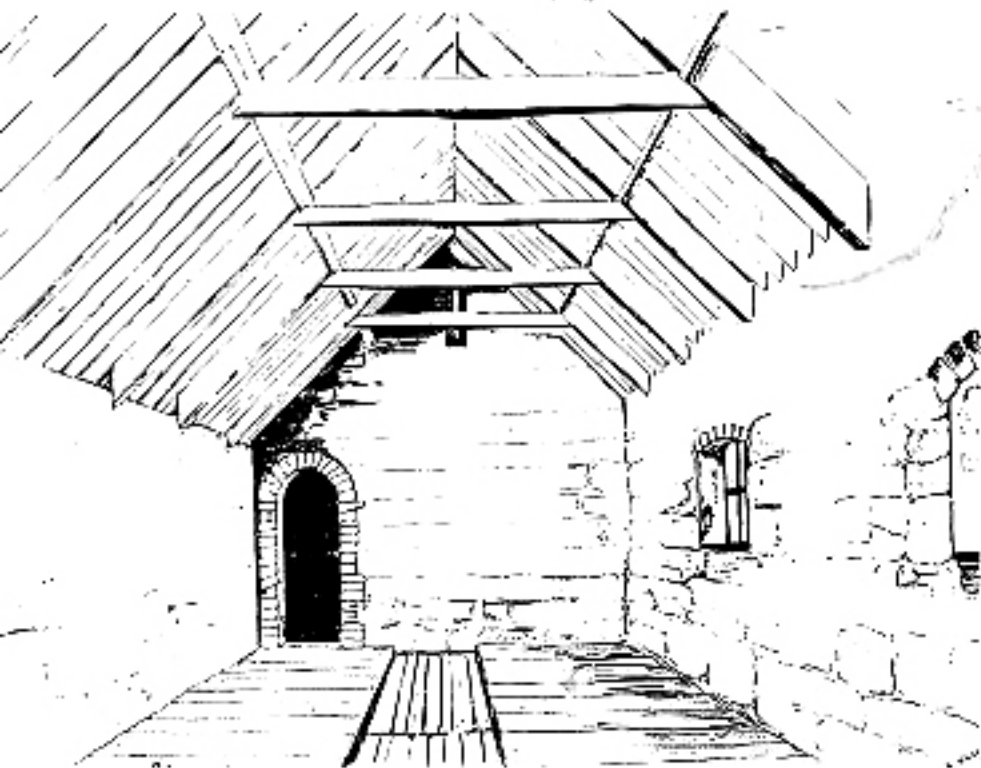
In January 1847 the government finally saw the folly of its earlier policies, and direct relief which included soup kitchens was introduced. This policy

ensured that millions of people were being fed at the state's expense. It reduced starvation but it did not prevent the spread of disease. People everywhere were demoralised, there was no planting and no harvest.

In 1847 James Tuke returned to Carrick to find that conditions in the workhouse had further deteriorated. It contained only 280 inmates and could not take in any more. It was besieged by people imploring admission. In November of that year the Poor Law Commission appointed a Temporary Inspector, Capt. Edmund Wynne to administer the workhouse more efficiently.

The Board of Guardians refused to co-operate with Wynne and they were disbanded and replaced by two Vice-Guardians, James O'Reilly and Robert Duncan. Initially this administration was a success but by September 1849 due to incompetence, bad practices in running the workhouse and a complaint made against him by a local landowner who was a former member of the Board, Wynne was replaced by Capt. Philip Haymes and in December of that year the Board of Guardians were re-instated. They immediately set about investigating the mismanagement of the workhouse in the previous years. Despite the determination of this new administration conditions in the Unions were getting worse rather than better. A special committee of the Board of Guardians was set up following a visit to the workhouse by the District Inspector, William Clarke. Their report was adopted by the Board and submitted to Clarke. All the officers of the workhouse except the clerk were dismissed. A petition was submitted to the House of Lords for an amendment to the Poor Law. Various charges were made against Captain Wynne and the Vice-Guardians. A select committee of the House of Lords was appointed to investigate the claims. Twenty seven witnesses travelled from Carrick to Westminster to give evidence. The committee found that the staff, inspectors, vice-guardians and the Board of Guardians were all equally to blame for the many abuses and irregularities in the workhouse and in the Union area. The only criticism levelled against Capt. Wynne was for placing a Catherine Foley, with whom he was having a relationship, on an emigrants' list i.e. financial assistance from the Union to enable her to emigrate.

The story of the Great Famine in Leitrim is one of poverty, suffering and disease, all resulting in widespread loss of life. Thousands died, many of them children. It was the single greatest tragedy ever to occur in Ireland. The country's workhouses struggled to cope with the crisis but more often they did not succeed. This is true of the workhouse in Carrick-on-Shannon more than almost any other in the country. Here, the indifference, incompetence and corruption led to the investigation by the House of Lords already mentioned. With the ending of the Famine life in the workhouse returned to some type of normality. It was still seen by the poor as a last refuge and many would wish to die and many often did rather than enter the grey walls of the poorhouse. It was viewed on as a place worse than gaol. The workhouse in Carrick continued in that role up until the early



*Artists Impression of proposed attic when restored*

decades of this century. It was closed in the 1930s and re-opened as a geriatric hospital. It is now one of the finest in the country, taking care of the elderly in a way that could not be imagined by the destitute who crowded outside its walls looking for food and shelter in the tragic years of the 1840s.

With the co-operation of the Matron of St. Patrick's Hospital, Ms Fullard and the North Western Health Board, Carrick-on-Shannon and District Historical Society hope to commemorate the tragic events of the famine years in the district. The attic in the hospital has remained unchanged since the famine, the walls are whitewashed and the floors have a central aisle

with raised sections on each side where the inmates lay on straw. It is the aim of the society to restore and enhance these features and recreate the scene as it was during the Famine, complete with utensils and fittings of the period.

At the rear of the hospital is a disused graveyard in which hundreds of the victims of the Famine were buried in unmarked graves. It is hoped to have this area turned into a Garden of Remembrance, suitably landscaped with walks, seating and a monument to the people who are buried there and to all who suffered and died during those terrible times 150 years ago. ●●●

Patrick McGovern was born in Gortnaguillon, in the parish of Kiltubrid about 3 miles from the village of Keshcarrigan, Co. Leitrim on the 24th October 1861. He was the son of Thomas McGovern and his wife who was formerly Taylor from Currycramp parish of Eslin Bridge.

He emigrated to U.S.A. on the 22nd May 1887. While in Ireland he contributed some poems to, I think, the Irish Emerald or some radical papers edited by Arthur Griffith. He was also a member of Kiltubrid Land League.

In America he went first to his sister in Chicago and worked there for some time. While there he married Kathleen McNamara a native of Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare. He eventually settled in St. Louis Missouri where he had a dry goods store. He had five children all now deceased. He was a member of Gaelic societies and contributed poems to Irish American papers. He never returned to Ireland.

Only a few broken walls of the home, he loved so much, are now standing. The old holly tree, of which he wrote one of his nicest poems is now gone. The poem 'Building the Land League Hut' relate to the Proughlish evictions which took place about 1881, and where huts were built in one day for the evicted tenants.

He has two nieces living in the U.S.A. and I received those particulars and the poems from his niece, Mary McCarthy, Lorain, Ohio, U.S.A. I am a nephew of the poet, and he has several cousins, McGoverns and Taylors still in Ireland.

## Patrick T. McGovern

EDWARD FLYNN.

### THE FAMINE VICTIM

*They found her dead by the hawthorn hedge,  
Her wasted form still fair;  
In silent sorrow her life went out,  
She died of hunger there.  
No roof to shelter her dear young head,  
No ear to list her sighs;  
No lip, to whisper a parting prayer,  
For death had closed her eyes.  
Alone, through the dreary, dismal night,  
In anguish, pain and fear,  
No hand to soothe her feverish brow;  
No solace, help or cheer.  
Where was her father, her mother, where,  
She was her parents' pride!  
Ah, why did she live to see them starve!  
They too of hunger died.  
But the God of justice saw her woe,  
And heard her plaintive cry,  
And took with paternal care her soul,  
With Him to rest on high.  
And his hand shall smite, His wrath shall fall  
His vengeance stern and sure,  
On the cruel wrong, oppression fell,  
That rob and slay the poor.  
They dug her grave near the willow tree,  
'Twas soft and peaty soil-  
Oh, blighting Famine's withering clutch,  
Was on the hand of Toil!  
No coffin had she, or "blessed clay,"  
Only a peasant's prayer.  
But that lonely spot is holy ground,  
A martyr sleepeth there.*

#### Reference Note To

#### "The Famine Victim."

The subject of this poem was found on the farm of my maternal grandfather (now in possession of my Uncle Edward Taylor) of Currycramp in the parish of Mohill, County Leitrim. The spot where her dead body was found is on the western slope of the hill near the black-thorn hedge. She is buried in the brink of the bog not far from where she was found. The parents of the poor girl had died a couple of weeks previously of starvation. Such deaths were of almost daily occurrence in those terrible times of 1846-7, and the people were so weakened by hunger and the ravages of the famine that there were not enough left to bear the dead to the graveyards, or to provide coffins. Hence numbers were buried in ditches and the most convenient place to cover the decomposing bodies while the government looked on and did nothing to relieve the situation or the condition which its own inhuman laws had created, and the sovereign Victoria, (of unhappy memory) extended her sympathy, but sympathy brought no bread, and so the "bold peasantry, their country's pride" the "finest in the world" were destroyed.