

Enniskillen Poor Law Union



Enniskillen Workhouse. Photograph courtesy of the Western Health & Social Services.

The Admissions Registers and Minute Books of the Enniskillen workhouse have survived.

Studying these we get a vivid picture of life in the workhouse in Enniskillen.

Formally declared on 14th September 1840, it covered 9 electoral divisions.

The total population falling within the Poor Law Union was 64,694 in 1831.

The Guardians first met at the Enniskillen courthouse on 21st September 1840.

Staff employed by the union consisted of a master, a matron, a schoolmaster, a schoolmistress, a Protestant and Catholic chaplains and a medical officer.

The workhouse was erected on a 9.5- acre site. The Poor Law architect, George Wilkinson, designed the workhouse based on one of his standard plans to accommodate 1000 inmates. It was built at a cost of £8,750 plus a total of £1,451 for fixtures and fittings.

The main accommodation block had the Master's quarters at the centre, with male and female wings to each side. At the rear, a range of single-storey utility rooms such as bakehouse and washhouse connected through to the infirmary and idiot wards via a central spine containing the chapel and dining-hall.

Declared fit for the reception of inmates on 15th March 1844. The first inmates were admitted on 1st December 1845.

The first diet was adopted from the Lowtherstown workhouse and before the famine consisted of potatoes and milk three times a day. Potatoes disappeared from the diet on 25th August 1846 and replaced with buttermilk and 'stirabout' (maize with water and milk). Later, rice and soup were added.

In August 1846 a majority of Guardians passed a resolution to eliminate dinner from the workhouse, saving 3d a day per inmate.

Inmates had their last meal, dinner at 3pm, with nothing to eat until breakfast at 6am the following morning.


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In 1846 the numbers seeking to enter the workhouse were small as the potato blight of 1845 had little impact on Fermanagh.

Later that year there was a sudden increase in admission, to about 20-30 people per week. The numbers spiralled from October 1846 and for several weeks at the height of the crisis entry was severely restricted due to a lack of clothing and funds.

In May 1847, at the height of the crisis, 156 inmates died; to save money, part of the workhouse grounds were set aside as a burial ground.

During this period the Poor Law Union hired houses and sheds to accommodate 120 patients and a fever hospital was added.

Between December 1845 and the spring of 1851 a total of 2040 people died in the Enniskillen workhouse.

In June 1847 so many paupers were dying in the fever hospital and workhouse that 3 carpenters had to be employed to make coffins.

On one day 351 people queued to get into the workhouse in Enniskillen.

Assisted Emigration

The Enniskillen workhouse was involved in the Earl Grey Emigration Scheme. Some of those who emigrated from Fermanagh to Australia were: Jane Donnelly, Anne Duffy, Mary McCann, Mary McCrae, Ellen & Mary Ann McElroy, Ann Muldoon, Catherine O'Riely, Margaret Ross & Catherine Riley.



The Board of Governors of the Union was abolished in 1948, to be replaced by the new NHS. The final meeting was held on the 3rd September 1948; the 30 remaining inmates, (children, old people and unmarried mothers) were transferred to the workhouse in Armagh.

The workhouse subsequently became a general hospital but was largely demolished in 1964 to make way for the Erne Hospital. Only the original workhouse entrance block remains.

Numbers admitted to Enniskillen Workhouse increased dramatically in the famine years.

Date	Number of Paupers
January 1846	176
April 1846	274
Nov 1846	519
March 1847	1129
May 1847	1433
Dec 1847	1099
April 1848	1070