

# *North Tipperary famine orphans “exported” to Yorkshire*

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By Helen Kennally

It was six o'clock on Sunday, February 10, 1853. In the grimy, industrial town of Bradford in West Yorkshire the evening was cold and dark. As the train from Liverpool ground to a halt in the station, a woman gathered together the group of children under her care. Wearily they climbed down from the train, thankful that they had reached the end of their journey safely.

Not quite the end of their journey however, as there was no one to meet them. Somehow they must find the man who was going to care for them, who would give them employment and a place to live in. In Bradford they were strangers and unknown to anyone; but they set out into the night to find the home of Mr Leach, their benefactor. The town must have seemed crowded and bewildering, full of noise, smoke and unfamiliar voices, a whole world away from the place they had left just a few days ago.

After searching for some time without success, the woman noticed a police station and went in to ask for help. She produced a letter she was carrying addressed to Mr Leach, Bradford. One of the police constables knew a millowner of that name who lived in Thornton Road, a short distance from the centre of town, and he offered to take them to the house. When they arrived and spoke to Mr Leach, he denied all knowledge of the woman and her children and said he was unable to help them.

However, when he was shown the letter, he realised what was wrong; on the envelope it was directed to Mr Leach, Bradford, but addressed on the inside to Mr Thomas Leach of Wilsden, a village over five miles away. As it was then almost nine o'clock and they were without any means of obtaining either food or shelter, the police constable took them to the vagrancy ward at the workhouse. The porter admitted them and provided them all with food and a bed.

Who were these unfortunate people who now found themselves in the Bradford Workhouse, and where had they come from?

The woman was Bridget Wild. The letter she carried was from William Waller, gentleman, of Prior Park, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, to Thomas Leach, millowner, of Wilsden, West Yorkshire. The children, supposedly all about twelve years old, were to be employed in Leach's mill.

As they prepared to spend the night in the comparative safety of the vagrant ward, they must surely have felt worried about what would happen next. They had left Nenagh with hopes of a better life, but the journey so far had been long and difficult. Boat and third-class rail fares had been paid for them, but they had all set out without money, food or a change of clothing. The first part of the journey was probably from Nenagh to Templemore to catch the train to Dublin, followed by a wait at the dockside until the boat was ready to sail.

Conditions for emigrants on board these small steam boats crossing the Irish Sea was unpleasant enough at the best of times, but during the winter it was positively hazardous. According to the Passenger Acts two children under 14 counted as one adult, so on a boat licensed to carry 800 adults, there were often well over 1,000 people on board.

Emigrants stayed on deck all through the voyage. There was no shelter, but sometimes if the weather was stormy, a large tarpaulin was used to cover as many passengers as possible.



*Birkshead Mill, farm and cottages as they look today. The mill is one of the few in Wilsden still producing textiles. – Photo copyright Helen Kennally.*

Families crowded round the funnel searching for warmth and protection and, as they were not used to the sea, many people were seasick. As the boat heaved about, the sea washed over the deck and the passengers were soon soaked and freezing cold.<sup>1</sup> Most of them, like Bridget and her party of children, were without adequate clothing or food and so were in a very vulnerable position.

In the twelve months before June 1 1854 more than 100,000 passengers were carried to England by the Dublin and Liverpool Steam Packet Company. One of their ships, the *Princess*, was licensed to carry 350 deck passengers. About 150 of these could get under cover, and the directors of the company ordered that as far as possible the women and children should be sheltered and the men left outside.

It was admitted however, that the covered places on deck were intended for cattle. If cattle were not being carried, the shelters could be used by passengers. However, if there were cattle on board, they would be given priority and the deck passengers would not be sheltered.<sup>2</sup> Not until 1861 was it made illegal for women and children to travel on deck in winter.<sup>3</sup>

After disembarking at Liverpool, Bridget made her way to the station for the last stage of the journey. Everyone was now cold, wet and hungry, but thankful at least to be on dry land and in the comparative comfort of the train. Later, as they sat in the workhouse, eating a supper of bread and thin soup, we can only imagine the thoughts which passed through their minds. The journey at times had been frightening and dangerous and the future was unknown, but at least they still had each other and for the moment were safe.

What they had yet to realise was that if they had left Ireland just a few days later they would have been caught up in the very heavy snow-storm which swept the whole of Britain. It continued for a week with great severity and several people lost their lives. In some places the snow drifted to a depth of 20 feet and gangs of men were employed to clear blocked roads and



railway lines.<sup>4</sup> A group of young children, already weak and undernourished, without food and dry clothing for the journey, may well not have survived the seventy-mile journey from Liverpool to Bradford.

What then had brought them to Bradford? Who were the two men who were beginning to have such an impact on their lives?

The letter informs us that Bridget Wild and the children had come from Nenagh. By 1853 the "Great Famine" was officially over, but an inspection of the Guardians' Minute Books for this period reveals all too clearly that the devastation and misery it caused was far from over.

The Workhouse in Nenagh, which admitted its first inmates in April 1842, was always full and by 1847 extra accommodation was desperately needed for the hundreds of starving people in the area. Several buildings in the town were pressed into use as auxiliary workhouses, but as these were not purpose built, they were for the most part totally inadequate, especially as some of them were used for housing children.<sup>5</sup> In 1850 Borrisokane was made into a separate Union in order to relieve the pressure on Nenagh.

The harshness of the workhouse system is familiar to everyone. On entering, people were supplied with regulation clothing and families were split up, the men, women and children being housed in separate areas. Overcrowding was often severe and consequently the death rate amongst the inmates was high.

The finances of Poor Law Unions throughout the country were always under a great strain, and Nenagh and Borrisokane were no exception. Money had to be raised through the poor rates, but as people were often unable to pay their rent, landlords were very reluctant to pay rates on money they had not actually received. Consequently the administrators of the Poor Law were frequently in financial difficulties, as this item shows:

"Upon reading the Poor Law Commissioners' letter, respecting the striking of a Rate, the following resolution was proposed by J.R. Minnitt Esq and seconded by Geo. Atkinson Esq and unanimously agreed.

Resolved that fully knowing the destitute state of the Rate payers of the Union, that the produce of the land being altogether consumed, we feel it a suicidal act to strike a higher rate than the one already fixed by the Board and one that we feel cannot now be collected."<sup>6</sup>

The collection of rates had always been a contentious issue. In 1849 the *Tipperary Vindicator* had commented that "Mr Waller of Woodpark had not paid since he was extremely busy and under extreme pressure."<sup>7</sup>

Unpaid rents lead to evictions as landlords sought to clear their land of unwanted tenants. Between Nenagh and CloghJordan nearly all the houses had been tumbled down and, in a district known as the "Forty Acres" between CloghJordan and Borrisokane, Rev. Trench had ejected a total of 40 families – 250 people in all. The property was then fenced, using the stones of the tumbled houses.<sup>8</sup>

The most vulnerable of those who were made homeless were the women and children, who consequently had little choice but to seek shelter in the workhouse. Many of the children were orphans and others had been abandoned by their parents. Sometimes the parents had emigrated and left the children in the workhouse until they could afford to send for them.

### Red Tape Affects Children

As saving money was a priority for the Guardians, they hesitated to admit anyone they



*Prior Park House near Puckane – William Waller's home. –Photo copyright Helen Kennally.*

thought could be accommodated elsewhere, as in the case of the Brien children. On July 10 1852 the three Brien children applied for admission to Borrisokane Workhouse. They were alone as their father was on his way to America. Originally they had applied to Nenagh, but were refused because they had lived in the Nenagh Union for only three months.

Previous to that they had lived in Cloghprior Parish and so were sent to Borrisokane. The Borrisokane Guardians were not very pleased about this and considered that the Nenagh Guardians had acted unreasonably as the children were "quite destitute having spent all the money left them by their father when going to America."<sup>9</sup> However, they could not refuse to care for them.

By the end of 1852 the workhouse at Borrisokane contained 635 inmates; of these, 405 were children under 15.<sup>10</sup> Occasionally work was found for young people. However, those who had been in the workhouse for several years had no clothes of their own and others had only the ragged garments they had been wearing when admitted. In order to take up employment, they needed to be decently dressed:

"Ordered that the Master be directed to purchase a suit of clothes each for Mary Mooney and Bridget Gleeson, two young girls who have been inmates of the Workhouse for eight or nine years and who are now promised employment. The cost of the suits not to exceed ten shillings."<sup>11</sup>

As many Poor Law Unions found it difficult to raise money, they searched for ways of alleviating the situation. Emigration was one way of reducing the numbers in the workhouse without creating any further burden on the rates. Hundreds of young women and orphan children were sent abroad on various emigration schemes during the famine years. Many people from Tipperary workhouses went to Australia.



Some landlords who were unwilling to pay rates and wanted to clear their estates of poor families also saw emigration as a solution to their problem. Many tenants were "persuaded" to give up their land in exchange for an assisted passage out of the country. Several landlords in the Nenagh and Borrisokane Unions took advantage of both opportunities. As Guardians they helped the workhouses, and as landowners they tried to remove their unwanted tenants.

The first name which comes to notice is William Waller. His family home was at Prior Park, Nenagh. The house, built by James Otway around 1778, was designed by William Leeson and took seven years to build. Otway laid out extensive gardens but because of his lavish lifestyle soon ran out of money and had to sell the house. Prior Park was first let, and then in 1803 was bought by George Waller of Newport, whose descendents lived there for several generations.

Waller and his wife Elizabeth had three sons. William, the youngest, was born in 1811 and took over the responsibility of the estate on the death of his father. He married Eliza Guinness, a granddaughter of Arthur Guinness, and they had four sons who all became successful in business and held important positions in the neighbourhood.<sup>12</sup>

Prior Park is in the Parish of Cloghprior. In 1841 there were 1306 inhabitants. Out of 212 inhabited houses, 110 were described as fourth class.<sup>13</sup> The families in this group were especially vulnerable during the famine years. In 1853 William Waller of Prior Park was a magistrate and a member of the Borrisokane Board of Guardians. Previously he had served on the Board of the Nenagh Union.

The letter carried by Bridget Wild was addressed to Thomas Leach of Wilsden. In 1853 Wilsden was described as "a well built village, in a picturesque valley surrounded by high moorlands, five and a half miles W.N.W. of Bradford."<sup>14</sup> The whole township occupied an area of 2,450 acres and so was slightly smaller than Cloghprior Parish. There were 3,454 inhabitants.

The hilly land here was difficult to cultivate and farmers could not compete successfully in agriculture with the more fertile farms in the valley. A lack of capital often caused severe hardship to these small farmers, but the development of cotton and worsted trades in the eighteenth century, at first as cottage industries, gave them an additional income. By 1767 70 per cent of the villagers were working in the textile trade. The first spinning mill was in operation by 1792, but weaving continued to be done at home on hand-loom for several more years.

During the first part of the 19th century Wilsden grew rapidly as more mills were built and machinery was steam-powered. During this time ten mills were operating in the village and the surrounding area. Birkshead Mill, which dates from 1820, was situated just outside Wilsden village. Built originally as a warehouse for supplying hand workers with materials for weaving, it was later occupied by a linen manufacturer and a worsted spinner.

Initially it had the advantage of being only a quarter-mile away from a good supply of coal, and as the seams were close to the surface they were relatively easy and cheap to operate. The numerous moorland streams ensured a plentiful supply of water both for the mill and the workers' cottages. With the rapid growth of the village, housing the workers became a serious problem. Cottages on the hillsides were built to include cellar dwellings, and barns often housed several families.

After 1850 Wilsden's prosperity began to decline. Titus Salt, a philanthropic industrialist, built a large mill and a village for his workers in Shipley a few miles away. The village, known as Saltaire, became an important textile centre and had many advantages over Wilsden. It was built close to the Aire and Calder Canal, and the main roads and railways also took the easier route through the valley. In contrast, the roads around Wilsden were steep and not always well maintained. By the middle of the century the local coal seams had become so depleted that it



was necessary to carry supplies by cart from much further away. The railway did not reach Wilsden until 1886.<sup>15</sup>

As the records show, Leach was a common family name in the Wilsden area. Thomas was born in 1797 and like many other members of the family became a farmer and textile worker. By 1837 he had established his own business and rented part of Birkshead Mill at £50 a year for worsted spinning.<sup>16</sup> In 1851 he lived at Birkshead with his wife Martha and their two young sons. He employed 28 men and 20 women in his worsted spinning mill, and he also farmed 11 acres.<sup>17</sup>

None of the Wilsden manufacturers were as wealthy as their counterparts in Bradford. When work had been plentiful many people had come in from Bradford and neighbouring towns; occasionally these had been Irish workers. Several Mayo and Tipperary families were listed in the Census in 1851. However, in periods of recession the Wilsden millowners often found it difficult to attract workers as the village was in such an isolated position. Both Bradford and Saltaire were much more accessible. A solution had to be found by looking further afield. An opportunity arose which Thomas Leach could not resist.

Bridget Wild's arrival at the workhouse with ten destitute children caused some concern to Mr Balmforth, the porter who admitted them. Although it was late on a Sunday evening, he considered the matter was serious enough to be reported immediately to the chairman of the Board of Guardians. Alderman Brown instructed the porter to take a copy of the letter which Bridget Wild had brought with her.

The following day, at a full Board meeting, the chairman reported what had happened and William Waller's letter was read.

"Prior Park, Nenagh.

Dear Sir,

I started this day ten children about the age of twelve years and I hope you will be satisfied with them. I sent a woman to take care of them (Mrs Wield). She is the mother of three of them. I trust there will be no mistakes and that they will arrive all right. I have written to persons in both Dublin and Liverpool to look after them and forward them to you.

If you wish me to send any more I can do so, as many as you please. On this occasion I was confined to select them from the Electoral Divisions not being able to get other Guardians to join, these being sent out by private subscriptions.

If you wish me to get any more and give me a little time I shall bring the matter before the entire Board and make no Doubt but I will be authorised to select out of some hundred children and that they will be sent over at the expense of the Union.

I am,  
Your very obt st.  
Wm Waller."<sup>18</sup>

Immediately there was an outcry from the assembled members.

"We ought to charge Mr Leach with the lodging and keep of these persons," stated Mr Green, angrily. "It is exceedingly wrong that the ratepayers of Bradford should be put to any expense by such a transaction."<sup>19</sup>

Mr Smith agreed.

"We ought to send an account and demand payment, because if there has been business transacted of this kind between Mr Leach and a Guardian in Ireland, they ought to have provided for this woman and children without a third party being taxed. If Mr Leach sent to Ireland for these children to come and work in his factory, he was morally, if not legally, bound

to make a comfortable provision for their arrival in Wilsden, their maintenance whilst there and also to send them back when no longer required.<sup>120</sup>

Mr Rhodes, another Guardian, commented:

"It is to me a matter of great sorrow and grief, that in Christian England, a number of orphaned children should like a parcel of dry goods be transported from one part of the kingdom to the other, without either food or a change of clothing or a penny in their pockets. This is a system of slavery which ought to be put an end to. I cannot think the Poor Law Board would sanction such traffic in human beings. This system was invented in order that manufactured goods might be brought at a cheaper rate to the Bradford market. The object of it is in fact to enable one man to compete with and beat down those who give a fair price for reasonable labour."<sup>21</sup>

The meeting then agreed that a copy of William Waller's letter be forwarded to the Poor Law Board in London, and that the chairman and the clerk go to Wilsden to speak to Mr Leach.

The minutes of the meetings of the Board of Guardians were often very brief, but the *Bradford Observer* gave very detailed accounts. It severely condemned the system of importing juvenile labour from Ireland in order to supply Mr Leach's factory with cheap labour.

On February 24 the leading article stated:-

"It is needless to say that if transactions such as the foregoing are conducted in England, they are done only as other acts, disreputable or illegal are done – namely, in secrecy, in defiance of public opinion, or in contravention of the law. Such deeds may be done – until they are disclosed – then, there is an end to them. Under proper regulations, the exchange from Irish workhouse to a Wilsden factory will doubtless be a happy one .... instead of the apparently reckless manner in which these children have been brought over to suffer want by the way."<sup>22</sup>

On the same day they also carried a report of the Guardians' meeting with Thomas Leach.



Shay Gate. An example of the first type of terrace cottages, built in 1820 for the workers at Birkshead. Each one had a small garden at the front and an earth closet at the back. Several Irish families were living here in 1851. Workers's cottages built after this were very inferior and have long since been demolished.

–Photo copyright Helen Kennally.



"He conversed with them in a very kind and gentlemanly manner and very candidly answered all their questions. He admitted he had received a woman and ten children from Nenagh. They were not the first he had received. They had been sent by private subscription, and had been sought because he could not get hands. He repudiated the idea that he was under any obligation to send them back, or provide for them supposing he was unable to employ them. He spoke of the people being well behaved and very valuable to him as workpeople. He had received about fifty and he intended to send for more. He gave them 2s a week at the first; then 2s-6d in two or three weeks afterwards; and then 3s till at last they received 5s a week."<sup>23</sup>

The *Observer* noted that these wages were considerably lower than those paid in Bradford, but Thomas Leach insisted that the Irish workers were paid the same wages as his English workers. One of the *Guardians*, Mr Barber, had spoken to some of the Wilsden residents, who were under the impression that the young people had come from Bradford to find work. They were unaware that they had been brought directly from Ireland. He had been informed that the children were very inadequately accommodated. No fewer than 19 of them had been put in one room, and in December of the previous year (1852), one of them, a girl of about 14 or 16 years, had died and was buried at the expense of the North Bierley Union.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of February Thomas Leach was becoming very exasperated with the adverse publicity he was receiving at the hands of the *Bradford Observer* and wrote the following letter to the editor.

March 3rd, 1853.

"IMMIGRATION OF IRISH TO WILSDEN.

To the Editor of the Bradford Observer.

Sir,- I feel surprised to see in your paper of the 24th inst. uncalled for remarks with regard to the emigration system - as you are pleased to call it; and also the remarks which were made at the Board of Guardians the other week, and I feel bound to myself and family to make a reply to you. As you are aware the board ordered a deputation to wait on me. I think I answered them fairly and candidly; I told them the correspondence betwixt Mr Waller and myself, and I was willing to give them all the information I was in possession of. Now for the slavery question. The first slave I received from Tipperary was Jane Abberton and one of her sons; and she sought employment. I asked her at what employment she had been at in Ireland? Her answer was, "Farming." I asked her how it was that so many were coming to England? Her answer was, "We are nearly all broken down. She gave me a short history of her life, and said there were only two ways for her: one was to come to England, and the other was to go to the workhouse; and the latter she could not bear. She gave me a statement of her sister's and six of her little children, which went into the workhouse, and had only been there eleven weeks when the whole six were dead and buried. I then took on the boy into the mill, and gave the mother a house and furnished it; she was not long before saving as much money as send for her husband and her two children. She sent such favourable reports to Ireland, with regard to her situation, that she was never so comfortable in all her life; and she told them that she had met with the best master in the world. The news spread all about the neighbourhood where she lived. The next family was a woman and four children. I furnished them a house also. This family was recommended by one Mr Robinson, of Burrosakane, they soon managed to send for their father and daughter. The next lot was recommended by Mrs Egan, of Bell Vue. The next lot was recommended by Miss Cambrie, of Castletown. I give you a true copy of the first letter which I received from Mr Waller.

Prior Park, Nenagh, Ireland, Nov. 30, 1852.

'Dear Sir,- I took the liberty of addressing a letter to you the other day, in consequence of conversation I had with Miss Cambrie, who told me of your benevolent and Christian character. I



fear my letter must have miscarried as I did not direct it right; my object in writing was to recommend to you a family who were about leaving this neighbourhood for England in quest of employment. I have known them for the last thirty years; the man was a very respectable, firm, and always a remarkably well conducted man, and his wife a most decent and respectable, as well as an industrious woman. The property on which they lived is adjoining mine, and was purchased a few years ago by an Englishman. His object has been to get this land all into his own hands, and consequently gave no encouragement to the family, who consequently have been obliged to give up. The landlord has consented to allow this family as much as will pay their expenses to some manufacturing town in England; and they were preparing to go when I heard of you. Feeling a great interest in them, I advised them to wait till I received an answer to my letter. I have given them a little means, in order that they may not run out of their little means. The family have lately become converts from the Church of Rome, and I have no doubt of their sincerity, as they have received no benefits to hallow (sic) for the change. The family is large; nearly all of them are fit for factory labour; and all they want is an office to support themselves by their labour. As I am a stranger to you, I beg to say I am a magistrate of this county, and have neither interest nor object in recommending the family, but simply knowing them to be what I have stated, the man in whom I place every trust,

'I am, your obedient servant, 'Wm. Waller.'

These who have come I have taken to Bradford, and clothed from head to foot. I have taken as many as half-a-dozen at a time, in my own conveyance. I have fed the hungry and clothed the naked, and if this be slavery, please to let me know what is liberty? ... Now for the girl that died at Wilsden. She lived at Bradford till a very few weeks of her death. I had her mother's sister living at my place, and her mother came to ask me if the country air would do her any good? I gave consent for her to come to my place. She only lived a fortnight, so I think fairly how North Bierley Union relieved Bradford. I attended the girl in her affliction, and gave her the best things my house could afford -

Yours truly,  
THOMAS LEACH."<sup>25</sup>

One week later there was a long letter in support of Thomas Leach, written by "One who wishes to be a consistent Liberal and Free Trader." Here the virtues of Leach were extolled. He was one of the best masters in the country, had saved people from destitution and starvation; out of his own pocket he had paid the expenses of young men to come and work in Wilsden and furthermore had been unfairly accused of trying to reduce wages. The following extract gives some idea of the tone of this eulogy.

"The hands gave satisfaction, and being well satisfied themselves and knowing that hands were wanted, their attention naturally turned to their poor starved relatives in Ireland. They wrote to them stating what a good master they had found. The result was that Mr Leach received several communications from private families who were wishful to mend their situations, offering their services. He (Mr L) having ascertained their character, sent money over to assist a few in coming. On their arrival in Wilsden, Mr Leach having furnished a few cottages where they might be made comfortable, two or three of the young men gave him an invitation to accompany them on a pleasure excursion to their native country. The invitation was accepted, and I have no doubt but Mr Leach would feel surprised to find that his humane treatment of objects of distress had gone before him, for on his arrival in Tipperary he was introduced by his own workpeople to some of the first families in the county. I could give you a list of names, if necessary, of several benevolent ladies as well as the notorious Mr Waller, one of the most benevolent Protestant gentlemen in the country and a magistrate."<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say it was pressed upon Mr Leach that if he could find employment for some of the poor families in the area he would be saving them from the horrors of starvation.

The eulogy continued:

"On his return home, having several applications from other millowners in the village, they wishing him to write for a few more families who might feel anxious to come, he complied with their requests, the result being, as you already know, by Mr Waller's letter, that ten fine and healthy young people, whose ages varying from 12 to 16, were sent, not destitute, but at the expense of Mr W. and a few private persons."<sup>27</sup>

In its leading article the *Bradford Observer* replied to both these lengthy statements, pointing out that neither person had actually replied to the original criticisms – that of importing children without due concern for their welfare.

"Mr Leach vindicated his pure intentions. They were never questioned. He enumerated his acts of kindness to various poor Irish families. No one ever denied them. We have heard from various quarters that Mr Leach really is a gentleman of signal humanity and charity. We have not the slightest doubt of it. There **was** however, something laid to his charge, both in the discussion at the Board of Guardians, and in our own short article. To this he did not reply. He maintained his blamelessness where he was not blamed, and left unexplained the accusations chiefly preferred."<sup>28</sup>

To the accusation of neglect, Mr Leach had made no comment. The *Observer* continued:

"Nor are these imported children placed under the care of their parents; being for the most part, not children merely, but orphan children, forsaken children, children who will be in Mr Leach's power ... Mr Leach maintains that he is a very kindhearted and charitable man. No doubt it is so, though the case of these ten children does not reveal these high humanities. But are all masters kind? ... We have no such assurances. Therefore, whatever may be the individual happiness of Mr Leach's orphan immigrants, we shall not cease to denounce the principle and to oppose the practice of importing infant labour, where no parent's eye can watch, but where every neighbour is either an employer or a fellow worker. The system is wrong. It will beget abuses."<sup>29</sup>

### Events in North Tipperary

Meanwhile, as Thomas Leach in Wilsden was vigorously protesting that he had been misjudged, what was happening in Tipperary? As the relevant records both in Nenagh and Bradford are fragmentary, it is difficult to build up a complete picture. There are several pieces missing; but this seems to have been the sequence of events.

After hearing from his neighbours about a Yorkshire mill owner who was looking for workers, William Waller first contacted Thomas Leach on November 20 1852 with plans to send out a family from a nearby estate. Thomas Leach was only too pleased to have them and requested more. William Waller obviously saw this as a good opportunity to reduce the population of the Borrisokane workhouse, and also to clear some of the poorest people from the surrounding area. He made plans accordingly.

In its report of the weekly meeting of the Borrisokane Board of Guardians, the following item is recorded by the *Nenagh Guardian*.

"Ordered – that a list of paupers in each Electoral Division be prepared and printed and copies furnished to each Guardian, distinguishing particularly the children whose parents are not in the Workhouse, and also deserted families."<sup>30</sup>



This is unusual. The Poor Law Board often requested information about numbers and categories of Workhouse inmates, but this order did not come from them. It was specific information to be circulated internally amongst the Guardians. Why was this? William Waller served on both the Finance and Emigration Committees; was he preparing a list of likely candidates to be sent to Thomas Leach? Furthermore, the order does not appear in the Minute Book, but only in the newspaper report of the meeting.

A week later Bridget Wild arrived in Bradford with three of her own children and seven orphans. In his letter William Waller claims that he can send as many more as are needed and that he will have the support of his fellow Guardians.

As a result of the events in Bradford the Nenagh Union on 26 February received a letter from the Irish Poor Law Commissioners "making reference to a woman named Bridget Wild and ten children who applied for assistance to the factories of Bradford Union, England."<sup>31</sup> On March 2 a letter was sent in reply stating that "the paupers in question were removed from Borrisokane Union, not from Nenagh."<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps some of the disquiet being voiced in Bradford in regard to the utter destitution of the children who were sent from Tipperary reached the ears of William Waller, because on March 5 the following item appeared in the Minute Book in Borrisokane.

"The Master reports that Mr Waller had chosen some paupers to go to England whom he proposes to assist by paying their expenses and that they are unable to leave unless the Board orders some clothes for them, their own clothes being very bad.

Resolved that the Board will not take part in such a proceeding as that of aiding Parties in sending Paupers to England, and that the Master be directed not to entertain such applications in future."<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps this rebuke to William Waller came as the result of a directive from the Irish Poor Law Commissioners "on the subject of the illegality of assisting Paupers to go to England from the Union funds."<sup>34</sup>

There the public controversy seems to have ended. It is unlikely that either William Waller or Thomas Leach took any more risks with their reputations. As the *Bradford Observer* commented, "Such deeds may be done – until they are disclosed – then there is an end of them."<sup>34</sup>

The incident is interesting because it reveals so much about the motives of the people concerned. The anger voiced in the editorials of the *Bradford Observer* was straightforward enough. There the concern was for the welfare of the children – not only during their journey from Ireland, but also while they were living and working in Wilsden. The articles exposed a system of exploitation which was indefensible.

The indignant outrage of the Bradford Board of Guardians was something different. No doubt some were kind-hearted enough to worry about the children's well-being; but their main concern was financial. They were not Guardians of the poor, as much as Guardians of the Public Purse, and it was their job to keep spending on the poor under tight control.

They may have shouted loudly about the plight of destitute orphans being transported around the country "like a parcel of dry goods," but the Bradford Guardians themselves were notorious for doing exactly the same thing. They had no scruples whatsoever about sending destitute Irish families back to Ireland whenever they could, if they considered them to be a burden on the ratepayers of Bradford.

Thomas Leach had his own agenda too. He was a millowner who thought he could solve the problem of finding workers by bringing in Irish children who were orphans and so had no one to look out for them. In spite of his claim to have fed and clothed them, he admitted that he felt no responsibility for them. They were workers, useful to him when he needed them but



dispensable when work was scarce. The publicity he received probably did him no good at all, as two years later he gave up the tenancy of Birkshead Mill and went to live in a small house in Wilsden village.

William Waller was a man of considerable wealth with a large estate. The Famine had obviously left him and many of his kind in financial difficulties; but he had the means to survive, while his estate workers did not. He abused his position both as a magistrate and a Poor Law Guardian, in order to alleviate his own problems.

Which brings us back to where we began, with the most important people in this affair – Bridget Wild and the children. They had little choice in deciding which direction their lives would take. They were at the mercy of more powerful forces. Apart from Bridget, they are nameless – a condition indicative of their lack of status in the society in which they lived. We know the names of all the other people involved in this incident, even the porter at the vagrancy office. We do not know the names of any of the children, not even the young girl who died in Wilsden in the winter of 1852.

Perhaps, by trying to piece together what happened to them, it is possible to rescue them from the anonymity of the statistics and to remember them as real people, struggling against great odds in an effort to survive. Finally, it is interesting to reflect that if Bridget Wild had not become lost in Bradford that Sunday evening, none of these events would have come to light at all, and this “system of slavery” operated by William Waller and Thomas Leach might well have continued for much longer.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *Passage To America*, Terry Coleman (Penguin Books, 1976), Ch. 4, pp. 65 – 67.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Amendment to law governing Removal of Irish Born Paupers, 1861, quoted in *The People and the Poor Law in 19th century Ireland*, Helen Burke (WEB, 1987) p. 195.
4. *Annals of Yorkshire*, John Mayhall (C.H. Johnson, Leeds, undated), Vol. 1, p. 626.
5. “Tipperary Workhouse Children”, by Anne Lanigan, in *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1995, pp. 56 – 62.
6. Minute Book 8 of Nenagh Guardians, 19 January, 1850.
7. *Tipperary Vindicator*, 22 May 1849.
8. *Tipperary Vindicator*, May 16, 1848.
9. Borrisokane Union, Minute Book 2, July 10, 1852.
10. Borrisokane Union, Minute Book 3, December 25, 1852.
11. Borrisokane Union Minute Book 1, 30 August, 1851.
12. “The Wallers of Prior Park”, by H. Waller, in *Cois Deirge*, Winter 1979.
13. Census of Ireland, Cloghprior Parish, 1841.
14. Leeds and Clothing District Directory. (Part 2) (White, 1853).
15. Information on the history of Wilsden compiled from *The Story of Wilsden*, R.H. Fawcett. pp. 148, 189, 194, 208, 209, in *The Bradford Antiquary* (Journal of the Bradford Historical and Antiquarian Society, Vol. XI, ed. Wilfrid Robertshaw. Bradford, 1976).
16. West Riding of Yorkshire Electoral Registers. Wilsden Township 1835 – 1860.
17. Census Returns 1851, Bradford and North Bierley Union, Wilsden Township 1851/2311, E.D.2c, Folio No. 527.
18. Letter from William Waller, recorded in the Minute Book of the Bradford Union, Ref. BU/1/5, 11 February, 1853.
19. *Bradford Observer*, Feb. 17, 1853, p. 6, Report of the meeting of the Bradford Board of Guardians.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*



22. *Bradford Observer*, Feb. 24, 1853. p. 4 (Leading article – 'Immigration Extraordinary').
23. *Bradford Observer*, report of Bradford Guardians' meeting with Thomas Leach, 'Immigration of Irish to Wilsden.' Feb. 24, 1853. p. 6.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Bradford Observer*, letter from Thomas Leach. March 3 1853, p. 7 col. 5.
26. *Bradford Observer*, 'Original Correspondence,' Letter from supporter of Thomas Leach, March 10, 1853, p. 7, cols. 4, 5.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Bradford Observer*, leading article, March 10, 1853, p. 4, col. 5.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Report of meeting of Borrisokane Union, *Nenagh Guardian*, Feb. 2, 1853.
31. Poor Law Commissioners' letter to Nenagh Guardians, ref. No. 3.369/53 (Nenagh Minute Book 3, 26 Feb. 1853).
32. P.L.C. letter, 2 March, ref. No. 3.906/53 (Nenagh Minute Book 3, p. 268. March 1853).
33. Borrisokane Minute Book 3, 5 March 1853, p. 772.
34. P.L.C. letter to Borrisokane Guardians, No.13906 (Minute Book 3, p. 773).
35. *Bradford Observer*, 17 Feb. 1853.