

Borrisokane Workhouse

Rita Walsh

Borrisokane workhouse dates from the Act for the Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland, which was passed in 1838. (See ordnance survey map Fig. 1). The Bill was introduced by Lord John Russell and was passed in the House of Lords and the House of Commons despite the protestations of Daniel O'Connell and the Irish peers. The Irish peers and O'Connell denounced this Act as they were the property owners who would finance this relief. This Act was passed by a majority of 175 votes i.e. 234 votes for and fifty-nine against. It became known as the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act or the Irish Poor Law. 160 Unions with a workhouse in each union were established, financed by local rates. Boards of Guardians comprising mainly of property owners were formed to finance and administer the functions of the workhouse. The number of workhouses built in each province was respectively, Connaught – twenty-eight, Leinster – forty, Ulster – forty-six and the greatest number in Munster – forty-nine, i.e. 163 workhouses in all. 130 were pre-famine and thirty-three were post-famine.

The potato blight of 1846-7 compelled people to seek employment in the public works in order to eat and survive. Great distress followed the closing of the public works in 1847. The outdoor relief provided during the Famine was replaced by relief in the form of food by the local establishment of soup kitchens. Mortality rates rose prior to the opening of the soup kitchens: the workhouse was conceived in a pre-famine era which fulfilled its function before the overcrowding of the destitute famine population clamoured for relief. (See Fig. 1)

The workhouse was usually sited adjacent to a market town within new territorial areas called 'electoral divisions'. These divisions were an amalgam of townlands. In 1849 the Boundary Commissioners tried to ensure that no part of the country would be more than eight miles from a workhouse. The electoral divisions were reduced for economic reasons. They recommended that nineteen new unions would be established in Munster. The workhouse evolved further as the Famine ended: it diversified its role in extending relief to people through increased medical care.

Borrisokane Poor Law Union was formed in 1850 and the Borrisokane workhouse opened its doors in 1853. Borrisokane Poor Law union was constituted from Parsonstown and Nenagh unions. The extent of these unions stretched from Clonmacnoise in the midlands to Newport in County Tipperary catering for their own inmates as well as inmates from the Borrisokane area. These Borrisokane paupers contributed to the excess population in Nenagh and Parsonstown workhouses during the Famine. Nenagh workhouse was the largest workhouse

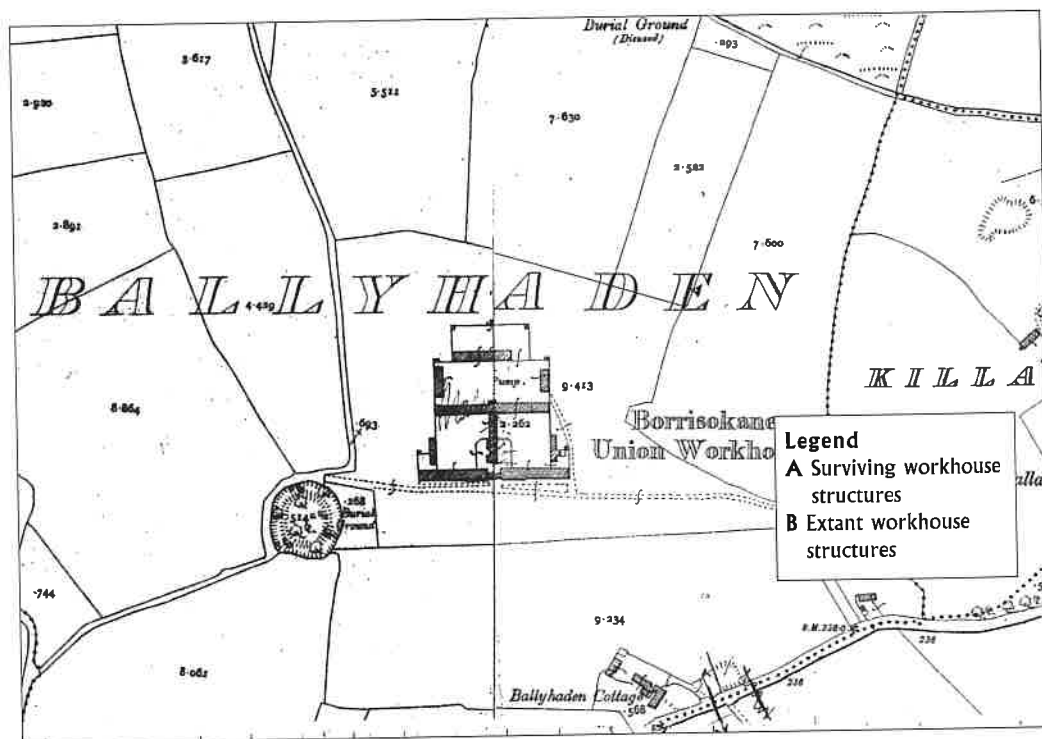


Figure 1 Borrisokane Poor Law Union workhouse
 Source: Adapted from First Edition six-inch series, Co Tipperary sheet no. X. Ordnance Survey Ireland Permit No. 8163c Ordnance Survey Ireland/Government of Ireland

in County Tipperary. It was built to cater for 1,000 inmates comprising 600 adults and 400 children under fifteen. The rate for Nenagh workhouse was three shillings in the pound.¹ Overcrowding occurred in Nenagh workhouse in 1846 which necessitated the taking of auxiliary workhouses including a house rented at Ballygraigue as a cholera hospital. Nenagh workhouse was only half-full in the years before the Famine but its full capacity was increased by one-third during the Famine due in part to the spread of Famine diseases. Nenagh was therefore an overpopulated union and it needed Borrisokane to take care of its own inmates locally. These paupers were accommodated in auxiliary buildings being taken over in the town of Borrisokane for example, to the rear of Seymour's public house on the main street. The accompanying cholera outbreak of 1849 accelerated the pre-Famine demand on the fever hospital in the townland of Killeen adjacent to the townland of Ballyhaden. The hospital was opened again in 1849 with the rise in fever victims.

The District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) in Nenagh poor law union were Terryglass, Borrisokane, Cloughjordan, Kilbarron, Ardcroney, Cloughprior, Knigh, Kilruane, Ballymackey, Nenagh, Lisboney, Castletown, Youghal, Templekelly, Burgessbeg, Kilmore, Dolla, Annameadle, Kilcomenty, Kilmastulla, Killoscully, Templederry, Newport, Kilnarath. Parsonstown workhouse suffered the ravages of the 1849 cholera epidemic and responded by taking auxiliary workhouses to cope with the increased number of inmates. Parsonstown workhouse opened in 1842 to accommodate 800 inmates. Its DEDs were Parsonstown, Kilcolman, Seir Kieran, Kinnity, Litter, Drumcullen, Eglis, Frankford, Ferbane,



Figure 3 Front block east of Borrisokane workhouse
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy

of Irish workhouses but does not include a case study of Borrisokane workhouse. The fever hospitals (which were essential during the 1849 cholera epidemic) were also designed by Wilkinson. Cogan's study includes the typical plan of the fever hospitals. A similar design was followed in all the workhouses with some local variation in slates and stone to save costs.

Borrisokane workhouse was an austere grey complex of buildings in a highly populated rural landscape. It occupied a site of eight acres, three roods and one perch and was built to accommodate 600 inmates. The front blocks were used for administration, for the master's quarters and for children. (Fig. 3). The centre block was divided by the spinal building and was used as separate male and female three storey dormitories. The rear block was the infirmary or fever wing. The spinal block contained a chapel, which is still extant. The bakehouse, a feature of post-Famine workhouse buildings was constructed to the rear of the centre block facing one of the yards which divided the different structures. There was no deadhouse as it was a post-Famine workhouse. A ten foot boundary wall enclosed all the workhouse buildings.

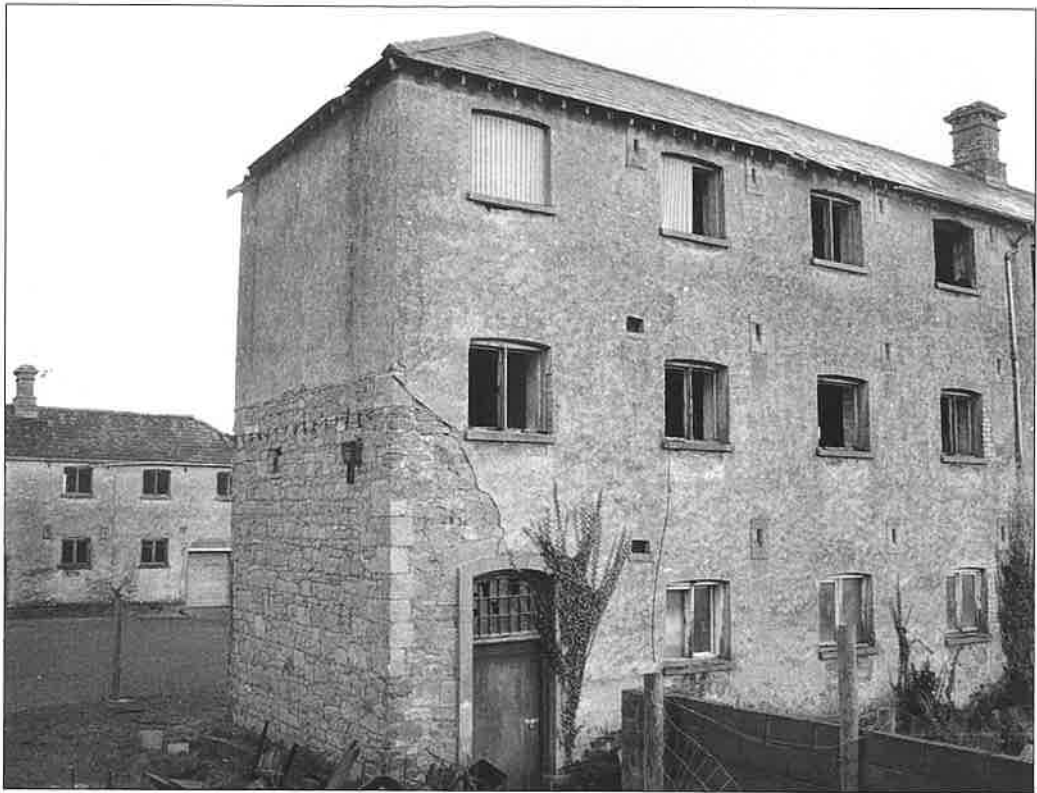
Two graveyards lie adjacent to the workhouse site and people who died in the adjacent fever hospital were buried in them. (The fever hospital, in the townland of Killeen, beside Ballyhayden, no longer exists.) The field to the rear of the workhouse is known locally as 'the famine field'. One graveyard is located to the rear of this field encircled by trees and



Figure 4 Borrisokane graveyard adjacent to front block east. Shows single headstone dated 1895
Source: Photographed by Rita Walsh

bounded by a tributary of the Ballyfinboy river. The other graveyard (Fig.4) is situated across the road from the school in the townland of Ballyhayden. This graveyard is marked by one headstone with unique small crosses per three graves underneath the grasses.⁴

Famine victims were buried in either of the two workhouse burial grounds. One disused and unidentified graveyard was situated some distance to the rear of the workhouse, the other across a dirt track facing the workhouse.



Figs.5, 6. Borrisokane two-storey rear block and three-storey dormitory
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy

Flank block A is a single-storey building with slate roof and hipped ends. It lacks a chimney, which may not have been necessary for the function of the building. In contrast Famine workhouses would have needed a chimney to cook the daily soup as diet for the inmates. The Rear Block (Fig.5) is a two storey building lying parallel to the front block with a rendered exterior, hipped slated roof and original stepped chimneys, and original pot on one chimney.



Figure 7 Borrisokane workhouse bakery (Bakehouse)
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy

Most of the external openings are original with cut limestone architraves and there are many original timber casements on the rear façade.⁵ The interior of the rear block has served different uses.⁶ The middle block (as seen in Fig.6) is an imposing three-storey building with a slated roof and hipped ends with original style chimneys and evidence of previous attachment to a central

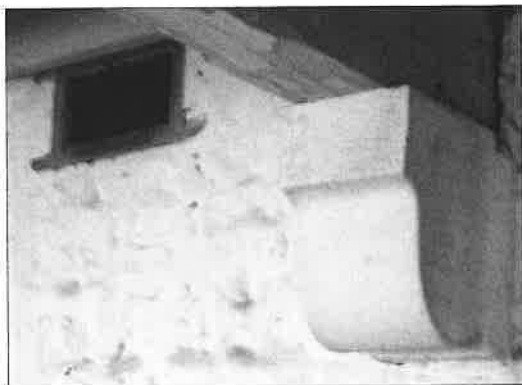


Figure 8 Typical Wilkinson ventilation box under Borrisokane workhouse ceiling rafters
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy

spine block. The ends of rafters can be seen on the wall at the original roofline.⁷

The main elevation of the bakehouse (Fig.7) faces the yard and is remarkable for its dressed door surround. Inside, it consisted of two rooms and an oven. On 20 September 1851, at a meeting of the Board of Guardians chaired by Mr. Saunders, Mr. Lynch, Poor Law inspector raised the idea of having a bakery in the workhouse.⁸ It was proposed by John Stephen Dwyer, Esq. and seconded by Mr. Patrick Kelly. 'Those steps are taken to enable the Board to bake brown bread, that an oven be erected forthwith and that the selection of a proper

place to establish the bake house be referred to the Visiting Committee Amendment.' The clerk advertised for the building of an oven and a master baker and also for Egyptian and Irish wholemeal.⁹ The pauper boys would be profitably engaged in baking the brown bread to save expenses for the Union. The bakery (bakehouse) is a single storey building with five bays.¹⁰

The typical Wilkinson architectural features are evidenced in Borrisokane workhouse – three-chimneystacks, hipped roof, lime wash, ventilation slots. (Fig.8).

Local Killaloe slates were probably used and imported timber. The exterior was rendered in lime. Windows are evident in the exterior of the surviving workhouse buildings. Other



Figure 9 Borrisokane workhouse interior showing gangway in surviving dormitory flanked by sleeping platforms
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy



Figure 10 Borrisokane workhouse stone stairs. Designed by Wilkinson, showing architectural sweep of stairs.
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy



Figure 11 Borrisokane workhouse stone stairs with detailed patterned edges
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy

typical architectural features are to be seen in the interior of these buildings: stairs, sleeping platforms and gangways. (Fig.9). Wilkinson favoured ground level floors of clay for their warmth and to avoid dampness.

The building has survived the test of time. Some of the original windows remain and provide a template for replacement. The stone stairs and cast-iron balustrade are an interesting feature in the construction and the worn steps remind us of all the inmates who traversed them. (Fig.10). The patterned edges of the steps are evidence of Wilkinson's detailed specifications. (Fig.11).

Its exterior and interior architectural features contributed to the pervading sense of gloom. It consisted of two, two-storey structures fronting the rough road linked by an overhead arch and massive uninviting gates forbidding exit. The eastern front block of fifteen bays was solidly built in stone rendered with lime. Its hipped, slated roof overlooked a single-storey building with distinctive oval windows. The corresponding western building maintained the same style with segmented windows and doors and three-stack chimneys. The central spine with flanking buildings rose three-storeys high.

The interior of the workhouse buildings was spacious but draughty with unplastered walls and high ceilings.(Fig.12). The male and female dormitories were similar in design in accordance with typical Wilkinson drawings. Timber rafters sloped upwards to an apex. Timber sleeping platforms were separated by timber channels or gangways which were tongued and grooved. The raised platforms provided space for straw mattresses as beds. The sleeping platforms are an important part of the workhouse heritage."

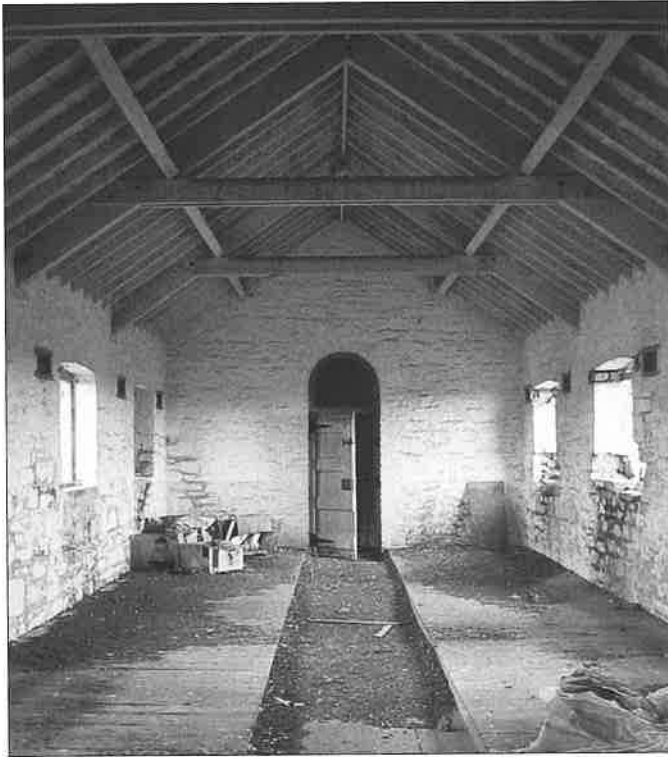


Figure 12 Borrisokane workhouse interior of surviving male dormitory conveying conditions as experienced in the workhouse
Source: Courtesy Brendan Treacy



Figure 13 Borrisokane surviving workhouse infirmary or fever wing (rear view)
Source: Photographed by Rita Walsh

Borrisokane workhouse can be compared with other workhouses designed by Wilkinson. The *Workhouse Collection* in the Irish Architectural Archive consists of 2,500 drawings by the Architect George Wilkinson for the building of workhouses in Ireland.¹² Unfortunately, no drawings survive for the Borrisokane workhouse. However, it can be compared with the plans for Parsonstown (1842)¹³ or Portumna (1852) or Strokestown (1852). Both Borrisokane and Donoghmore, (County Laois), workhouses opened in 1853.¹⁴

It is appropriate to compare Borrisokane with Parsonstown workhouse, as Borrisokane was originally part of Parsonstown and Nenagh unions. (Nenagh hospital now occupies the Nenagh workhouse site.) A visit to Parsonstown shows the different imposing entrance and chapel and deadhouse, which are non-existent in Borrisokane. The workhouse cemetery is to the rear of the deadhouse.¹⁵ The infirmary or fever wing in Borrisokane stood three storeys tall occupying an isolated position to keep fever and infectious diseases from spreading to the rest of the inmates. (Fig. 13) The male and female three-storey blocks did not easily facilitate family life. Four walled yards compart-



Figure 14 Borrisokane workhouse, close-up of dormitory window.
Source: Brendan Treacy

mentalised the lives of men, women, boys and girls. The front block although altered still maintains the tradition of education. This block contained the girls' schoolroom, female probationary ward, waiting room and board room.

In conclusion, Borrisokane workhouse, created by the poor law in response to the Famine, witnessed many changes from the post-Famine period to its dissolution in 1923. Its architectural solidity although bare, adhering to strict regulations which governed adaptation of Wilkinson's earlier workhouse plan, contained its inmates securely in an industrious manner sewing and mending to equip them for departure to employment and survival without poor rate subscriptions. The significance of Borrisokane as a post-Famine workhouse lies in the locality's indebtedness to Parsonstown and Nenagh Unions during the Famine and its uniqueness after the Famine. Its architectural heritage in belonging to Wilkinson's later phase of thirty-three workhouses is a legacy where many original features remain intact using local materials e.g. slates and stone pointing to its durability over time and its ability to accommodate inmates in facilities not exceeding conditions outside the workhouse. Post-Famine demographic decline allied with emigration schemes relieved the pressure on the workhouse as a system to combat poverty and destitution.

References

- ¹BG 129/A/February 1850.
- ²Thomas George Stoney owned an estate in Kyle Park and Agricultural school. He had extensive relief works at Borrisokane during the Famine. *Guardians*, Thomas George Stoney of Kylepark and Thomas Sadlier of Ballinderry, were the Borrisokane grand jurors for the first two assizes in both North and South Ridings in Tipperary.
- ³John O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), p. 259. Acreage is given in statute acres. Borrisokane workhouse was built to accommodate 600 inmates.
- ⁴Information from Dr. Siobhan Geraghty, Heritage Officer for North Tipperary.
- ⁵Kelly and Cogan Architects, *Advisory Report on Workhouse Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary* (Dublin, 2003).
- ⁶Heritage Commemorative booklet in Borrisokane library.
- ⁷Kelly and Cogan Architects, *Advisory Report on Workhouse Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary* (Dublin, 2003).
- ⁸BG/46/ September 1851.
- ⁹BG46/September 1851. (Joseph Bewley was Secretary and Treasurer of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends which distributed food and clothing during the famine.)
- ¹⁰Architectural Conservation Company, Conservation Report in respect of former Workhouse Bakery, Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary, commissioned by the Heritage Council. 28-September 2000.
- ¹¹Kelly and Cogan Architects, *Advisory Report on Workhouse Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary* (Dublin, 2003).
- ¹²David J. Griffin and Simon Lincoln, *Drawings from the Irish Architectural Archive*, (The Irish Architectural Archive, 1993), p. 21.
- ¹³Parsonstown (Birr) 1st. Admissions 2nd. April 1842 for 800 inmates. Nenagh 1st admissions 28th. April 1842. John O'Connor, *The workhouses of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), pp 262, 263. Nenagh workhouse was burned in 1923 and was replaced by the county hospital.
- ¹⁴Sean Rothery, *A field guide to the buildings of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), p.156.
- ¹⁵Portumna workhouse was built in 1852. Towards the end of 1884 the Sisters of Mercy in Portumna began to visit the workhouse on a daily basis to perform hospital duties. In March 1886, they moved into St. Vincent's Hospital in the workhouse. Parsonstown workhouse remains, having experienced various functions over time.