

## From Workhouse to Children's Home

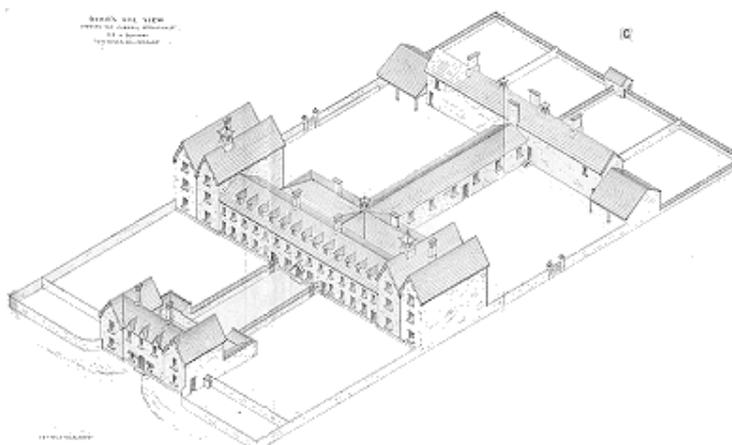
### John Cunningham and Sarah-Anne Buckley

The Tuam Workhouse, in which the Mother and Baby Home was located from 1925, was one of 160 such institutions built on foot of the Irish poor law legislation of 1838. On a six acre site and intended to accommodate up to 800 'paupers', it followed the general plan for such facilities.

In the era before social welfare, workhouses were intended to cater for the very poorest in the community and, so as to deter the 'undeserving' poor, conditions were made deliberately harsh: food was scarce and monotonous; parents were separated from their children and from one another; the buildings themselves, according to their architect, were 'intended to be of the cheapest description compatible with durability'.

Each workhouse served a district known as a Poor Law Union, with the Tuam Union serving an area of 214 square miles, stretching from

Headford to Monivea. Like the other workhouses it was supported by an unpopular tax on local property holders (the poor rate), and it was managed by a Board of Guardians, a majority of whom were elected by the same property holders. There was exceptional resistance to the collection of the poor rate in the Tuam Union, however, with the result that the workhouse there did not open until 1846, among the last of the pre-Famine workhouses to do so.



*Built according to George Wilkinson's 'general plan' for such institutions, the 800-bed Tuam Workhouse opened in 1846. In 1925, the building was designated a Children's Home in the charge of the Bon Secours sisters.*

### The Workhouse and the Famine

Initially, very few of the poor were prepared to submit to such harsh conditions in order to get food and shelter. However, the spread of Famine in the late 1840s forced hundreds of thousands to seek admission. The general pattern is illustrated by the increase in the number of inmates in the Tuam Workhouse: 254 in November 1846; 604 in early November 1847; 1907 in November 1848. By that point, many others were crying out to be admitted, and to cope with the overcrowding other buildings were temporarily fitted out as 'auxiliary workhouses'. Disease spread very easily in these buildings, and there many deaths from typhus, dysentery, smallpox, before the devastation of a cholera outbreak in 1849.

### **After the Famine**

The workhouses were anathemised in popular memory in the aftermath of the Famine, but the Poor Law itself was increasingly given responsibility for public health and welfare services. At the same time, there was an encroachment by Catholic religious into the system, effected by clerical lobbying of elected Catholic members of the Poor Law Guardians. Reflecting this tendency, the Sisters of Mercy were invited to take over nursing duties at the Tuam workhouse in 1890.

An improving social welfare infrastructure, culminating in the Old Age Pension legislation of 1908, greatly reduced the numbers depending on the workhouses, though almost all of them remained in operation. By the early twentieth century, there was widespread criticism of the system. Particularly critical were members of the new Sinn Féin party, who considered the workhouses to be both inhumane and inefficient as far as relieving poverty was concerned, and politically-compromised by decades of exploitation for patronage purposes by the Irish Party. Reflecting this perspective, the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil in 1919 undertook to abolish 'the present odious, degrading and foreign Poor Law system, substituting therefor a sympathetic native scheme.' However, due to circumstances rising from the political situation, to a reluctance to levy taxation to fund welfare facilities, and to an over-dependence on religious orders (already employed under the 'foreign Poor Law'), the 'native' scheme would be no more sympathetic than the one it replaced.

### **From Glenamaddy to Tuam**

Local authorities supportive of Dáil Éireann quickly set about giving effect to the commitment in the Democratic Programme, and in September 1921 during the period of Truce, Galway County Council announced the closure of the ten workhouses in the county, and the repurposing of some of them. Galway city's workhouse was to become a Central Hospital, Loughrea's a county home for the 'indigent' and 'infirm', while another was to be set aside for orphaned/abandoned/neglected children and unmarried mothers. Several of the workhouses in the county were occupied by the British military, while others had been burnt out by the IRA to prevent them being used in this way. One of the latter was in Glenamaddy, and it was in a remnant of the complex there that a Children's Home for County Galway was established in December 1921, under the supervision of the Bon Secours sisters who had previously been employed there as nurses. The atrocious conditions in Glenamaddy attracted attention, leading to the closure of the institution there and the removal to Tuam in June 1925 of 87 children, 26 mothers and the Bon Secours sisters.

Only recently vacated by Free State soldiers, Tuam's workhouse was not much more suitable than Glenamaddy's. With only minor adaptations, however, the grim building would fulfil the function of 'Mother and Baby Home' for counties Galway and Mayo for the next 36 years.