

# Roscrea Workhouse

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by Joe Coughlan

In the mid 1840s there were 130 workhouses in Ireland and by 1852, three hundred thousand people died in them.



Roscrea workhouse was built to house 700 and was on the site in Scart where Crea House and St Cronan's Workshop are today. The workhouses were modelled on the English version, but Daniel O'Connell said that Ireland was too poor to support such a poor law system.

The workhouses were very elaborate buildings for the purpose for which they were built. They were built with cut stone having arched windows and spiral staircases all at a time when people were starving – a lavish extravagance considering that they were proposed to cater for the absolute destitute. The board of guardians was made up of local landlords, merchants and strong farmers who also funded it so it was in their best interest to run it on as low a budget as possible.

On entering the workhouse the men, women, boys and girls were separated into different dormitories. The parents only saw their children at meal times and then only from a distance. Their clothes were then taken and then they were washed and de-loused, many having their heads shaved due to their infestation of lice. They were then given a uniform which had Roscrea Union stamped on it. From then until they left their lives were governed by a strict regime. You could leave at any time but you had to give 3 days' notice and should you leave without permission you would be flogged for stealing the workhouse uniform.

The master of the Roscrea workhouse was George O'Malley and his wife was matron in charge of the women's dorms. They were said to be good and fair administrators. Also on the staff were a medical doctor, 4 nurses, porters and various tradesmen. Some of the biggest issues were heat and ventilation. It was very warm in summer with poor ventilation which led to disease causing many deaths. In winter there was an open fire at the end of the dorm and this led to many fights breaking out by people trying to get close to the fire. There was also a hierarchy among the poor like you find in prisons today. One woman survived because she got the job of cleaning out the big pot that was used for cooking.

The main hall was used for assembly, dining and church. When you arrived in the hall in the morning there was a roll-call and then prayers; after this the meal was served which had to be eaten in silence. Males and females entered the hall by separate doors and were kept separated during meals. Only children under the age of two or children who were seriously ill were allowed a visit by the parents.

In 1845 there were 330 people in Roscrea workhouse of which 26 died, many of these being elderly. By mid 1846 it was full to capacity and people were crowding around the gates screaming and pleading to be let in. The government passed a law which stated that a person had to give up all rights to the land before they would be allowed to enter. By the end of 46 there was so much pressure on Roscrea that they had to convert the stables and build platforms in the dormitories to accommodate the crowds, but it still was not enough. They then opened auxiliary workhouses in a school in Dunkerrin, the military barracks in Moneygall and in Egan's Brewery in Abbey St now Hasting's Mill. People were so tightly packed that fever and disease was rampant. People went in healthy and soon became ill. In Roscrea 80% of orphaned children died and 30% of children who had families, it was a death-trap for young children. Each week a pit was dug and the dead for that week were put in it. When they excavated at some workhouses they were able to record the amount of deaths by the amount of remains in each pit.

Smallpox spread like wildfire and sheds at the rear had to be used as fever sheds as the fever hospital was not built till 1850. Then in 1849 there was a large-scale outbreak of cholera in the country and a cholera hospital was opened on the Monastery road.

In 1846 104 people died in Roscrea workhouse; 1847 -719 died; 1848 - 867 died and of this number 258 died in May and June of that year. By the end of the famine 3,156 men, women and children died in Roscrea workhouse and were buried on the workhouse grounds in unmarked graves.

The building was eventually demolished in 1993.