

An Irishman's Diary

It's the charity with the very odd name, the Sick & Indigent Roomkeepers' Society, but in fact it's the oldest charity in Dublin, still helping the sick and the destitute in the inner city. It was founded in 1790 by a group of eleven concerned citizens, all of whom came from what might be politely called the middle class of society.

One was a wholesale linen draper, another a pawnbroker and a third a schoolmaster. All were deeply troubled by the appalling deprivation so widespread in the city then. Often, people in the poorest areas of the city lived 16 or more, several families in fact, in a single room. In those days, Dublin had a vast array of charities, but somehow, the Sick & Indigent Roomkeepers' Society has managed to outlast them all.

In its early years, its work was confined to a very limited area around Ormond Quay and the relief it gave was itself small, confined to potatoes, fuel and a few other essentials of life. Three years after its establishment, the society had expanded so much that four divisions were set up to cover the city, including one for the St Stephen's Green area.

Income built up, from such sources as subscriptions, investments and charity sermons, which were a compelling feature of Dublin social life in those days. They created enormous interest and raised considerable sums of money. Charity balls also became big fundraising events.

By the middle of the 19th century, despite the fact that the nobility, who often donated to charities like this one, had largely moved from Dublin, either to London or down the country, the society had become one of the leading organisations of its kind in Dublin.

In 1855, it moved into new premises at Palace Street, just off Dame Street and right beside Dublin Castle. The tall house, with the letters of the society's name prominent on the facade, became a Dublin landmark. Over 30 years ago, the then City Council wanted to compulsorily purchase the building, but the society eventually saw that threat fade away. Then, when it discovered that equipping the building to comply with new legislation on access for disabled people would cost a small fortune, it could no longer afford Palace Street.

About 10 years ago, it moved out, to its present location, a one-room office in Lower Leeson Street. After the society left Palace Street, Peter Pearson, the architectural historian, made it his family home for a number of years.

Inevitably, the society had its scandals. After the secretary of the time, Mark Casey, died in 1861, it was discovered that just over £2,000, an enormous sum

Hugh Oram

for the times, had disappeared from the accounts. The matter was hushed up, for fear that it could dissuade donors.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Dublin was overwhelmed by regular outbreaks of disease, including typhoid fever. The need for the society was greater than ever and in November, 1896, *The*



A tour group at the former home of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society

Weekly Irish Times praised it for its work in "seeking out the honest poor to offer them charity in their own homes".

In the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising and the following years, more suffering by the poor people of the city had to be looked after. In 1921, the British military commandeered the Palace Street building, occupying it for a year. Around 1930, a further challenge came when the city's boundaries were extended to take in such townships as Pembroke and Rathmines. The society decided not to follow suit, but to continue helping people within the "old city", the space between the two canals.

A new form of fundraising began in 1935, when the then Lord Mayor of Dublin, the renowned Alfie Byrne, gave the first appeal for the society on Radio Eireann, now RTÉ. These radio appeals continued for over 30 years. The Earl of Wicklow gave the talk in 1954, while in 1966, it was the turn of Richie Ryan, later to become a Minister for Finance. In the 1940s, one of the big benefactors of the Society was Joe McGrath, of Hospitals Sweepstakes and Waterford Glass fame.

These days, the fundraising is just as assiduous as ever. The society circularises many commercial firms in the city for contributions. People are generous with their donations, from €5 upwards, sometimes very much more. Bequests are another source of income and church collections are still done. Last year, the society gave out assistance to the tune of €235,000 and it says that its

work is as much needed as ever. It's not just the urban poor who need its help; sometimes, middle class families can fall on hard times, through illness or other misfortunes.

The society has been through its own revolution: these days, for the first time in its existence, women play a much more prominent role.

Back in 1988, Dr Geraldine O'Brien of Aer Lingus was first appointed a trustee, the first

woman appointed by a society that she noted had been seen until then as "rather quaint and male dominated".

The first woman secretary, Ina Ryan, had been appointed four years previously. She served for 20 years and today, Thelma Tutty continues in that role. 1990 saw the society mark its bicentenary with its history written by Deirdre Lindsay.

In 1995, Tona O'Brien became the first woman chairperson in the society's history

and that year also, Bernadette Madden, the artist, became a trustee, a position she held until recently. This past summer, Tona O'Brien was succeeded in the chair by her daughter, Aphria, who runs her own concierge company. This gives her the flexibility to devote time to the society as and when it's needed.

Many of the problems remain resolutely the same, although in modern times, drug addiction has had a devastating effect on many families. Some families, Aphria points out, will never have employment. Then families spend vast amounts of money they can't afford on first communions and funerals.

They pile up huge debts at Christmas.

People are helped on a case by case basis. Sick children can be helped in hospital with presents, such as a Walkman. Some families that haven't been away on holidays for years are helped, modestly. In one recent case, such a family was helped to go on holiday in Tramore. Applications for help usually come through social workers.

Not all requests are granted. One woman whose husband had died went to great expense to get him embalmed. She didn't like the end result so decided on cremation and asked the society for the necessary funding, which it had to turn down. Council rent arrears, or ESB or gas bills that can't be paid, are all considered to be much more deserving of help. The basic needs of the less well off sections of society really haven't changed all that much in the past 214 years.