

The Famine Mass Burials at the Kilkenny Union Workhouse

The discovery of a mass burial ground dating to the Great Famine at the site of the former union workhouse in Kilkenny ten years ago was completely unanticipated as there was no local knowledge or awareness of its existence. At the time, the site was subject to a commercial redevelopment, and a decision was made at an early stage to move these burials and eventually re-inter them in a purposely designed crypt and memorial garden. The archaeological excavation took place in 2006 and revealed the skeletal remains of nearly 1,000 individuals in 63 burial pits. All of these people were inmates at the workhouse who perished during the height of the Famine between August 1847 and March 1851.

The historical, archaeological and bioarchaeological research of the mass burial ground has been a stark reminder of the true horrors of the Famine. This is not only reflected in the physical agony of poverty, starvation and disease (as evidenced by the palaeopathological analysis of the bones and teeth of these victims) but also from indirect evidence that suggests that a certain level of communal trauma affected those who survived. In addition to the suffering induced by the Famine, the workhouses of Ireland were associated with much social stigma, and those who lived may not have wanted to talk about what they had both witnessed and experienced during these years. This would explain why this burial ground was eventually forgotten.

Children were particularly vulnerable to the Famine, which was very evident from the mass burial ground; more than half of all interred individuals were aged less than 18 years old. Several were orphans or foundlings, and it seems likely that many of those who died in the workhouse had no surviving families left outside the institution. The same was probably true for the elderly who also comprised a significant proportion of the deaths that took place in the institution.

The research of the Kilkenny Famine burials has enabled an unprecedented insight into the true impact the Great Hunger had on the poor and destitute of Ireland. The research has also highlighted how the Famine affected the population of a city which at the time was considered to be relatively prosperous. Poverty and destitution, which during the nineteenth century was always most extreme and widespread in the west of Ireland, was very much present in Kilkenny City as well.

The archaeology indicates that these people were interred with respect and care; they had all been buried in coffins that were carefully placed in the burial pits and then covered over. But these people never got a consecrated burial, something that undoubtedly would have caused much grief. This may have been why this burial ground was never marked on any maps – it was never a cemetery in a formal sense – and it may also have been another reason that contributed to why this burial ground was lost in local memory.

From this research, it has been possible to reconstruct a narrative of the Famine in Kilkenny, and enable the story of the people who died in the workhouse to be told. They are no longer an anonymous mortality statistic recorded in the surviving minute books of the Kilkenny Poor Law Union, which only states how many people had died each week. They are no longer forgotten, and their lives and their fate can be fully acknowledged and recognised.

Jonny Geber, 1 July 2016

Note:

The mass burials were discovered in 2005, during an archaeological evaluation of the site by Cónán Ó Drisceoil of Kilkenny Archaeology. The excavation was undertaken in 2006 under the direction of Brenda O'Meara of Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd. The client for

the project was MacDonagh Junction Development Ltd, who has shown continuous support throughout this project. After a detailed osteological and palaeopathological analysis, the skeletons were interred in the Kilkenny Famine memorial garden on Hebron Road in May 2010, which involved a public and well-attended multidenominational ceremony. Funding for the research of the mass burial ground has gratefully been received by MacDonagh Junction Development Ltd, Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd, the Wellcome Trust, Johan and Jakob Söderberg's Foundation (Johan och Jakob Söderbergs Stiftelse), Kilkenny County Council, Queen's University Belfast (Emily Sarah Montgomery Travel Scholarship) and the Royal Irish Academy.