

Ballina Workhouse

The Poor Relief Act of 1838 brought the recently established Workhouse System to Ireland from England. A site of 8 acres, 15 square perches was acquired at a cost of £716.9 shillings and 9 pence and work was begun on a new workhouse to accommodate 1,200 people. It was opened in 1839 before the famine. It was the fifth largest in the country, an indication of how the authorities saw the poverty of the area. Originally, it catered for all North Mayo and West Sligo. Two more workhouses were built, one in Dromore West in Co Sligo and the other in Belmullet in West Mayo. Conditions in these workhouses were dreadful, both basic and disagreeable. But poverty and disease were endemic in the population and so there were always clients clamouring for admittance. During the famine years it was so overcrowded that an extra workhouse had to be opened in Ardnaree. At the start, victims of fever were housed in the same building, a practice which spread infection. So in 1870, a separate fever hospital was built in the grounds of the workhouse where cholera victims were treated. The Staff in the hospital consisted of just one paid nurse who was assisted by inmates who had no other employment. Since the salary offered to the nurse was very low and because of the prevailing conditions in the workhouse, few nurses were interested in getting employment there. Remuneration in terms of salary or plain money was not a determining factor in the Sisters accepting invitations to serve in whatever capacity they could. It was sufficient for them that there was opportunity to be MERCY. In 1902 the nurse on the staff resigned and the Guardians of the Workhouse asked for two Sisters of Mercy to take charge. Sr. Michael McNama and Sr. Brendan McHale went for training to Loughrea and to Waterford where there were established hospitals. In 1905 they, with Sr. M. Baptist O'Brien, took up duty in Ballina Fever Hospital. Later Sr. Columba Neville was assigned to the kitchen. By 1908 the Visiting Committee's Report on the hospital was very different from preceding ones. It stated "The Sisters working under desperate difficulties have raised it to the status of a first class Hospital". Between 1906 and 1909 major reviews of the Poor Laws were undertaken by the Government and so the abolition of the Workhouse System was recommended, and their replacement by County Homes, County Hospitals and District Hospitals. In 1921, all the inmates in the Workhouse were transferred to the County Home in Castlebar. The Workhouse became a military barracks and the infirmary became a district hospital. Both were demolished in the early 1930's and St. Joseph's Hospital was built on its site in 1936, to which the Sisters transferred, with Sr. M. Michael McNama as Matron. In 1943, Sr. Mary of the Sacred Heart Gallagher was appointed Matron of the Fever Hospital.