

The Irish Workhouse Past and Present Conference

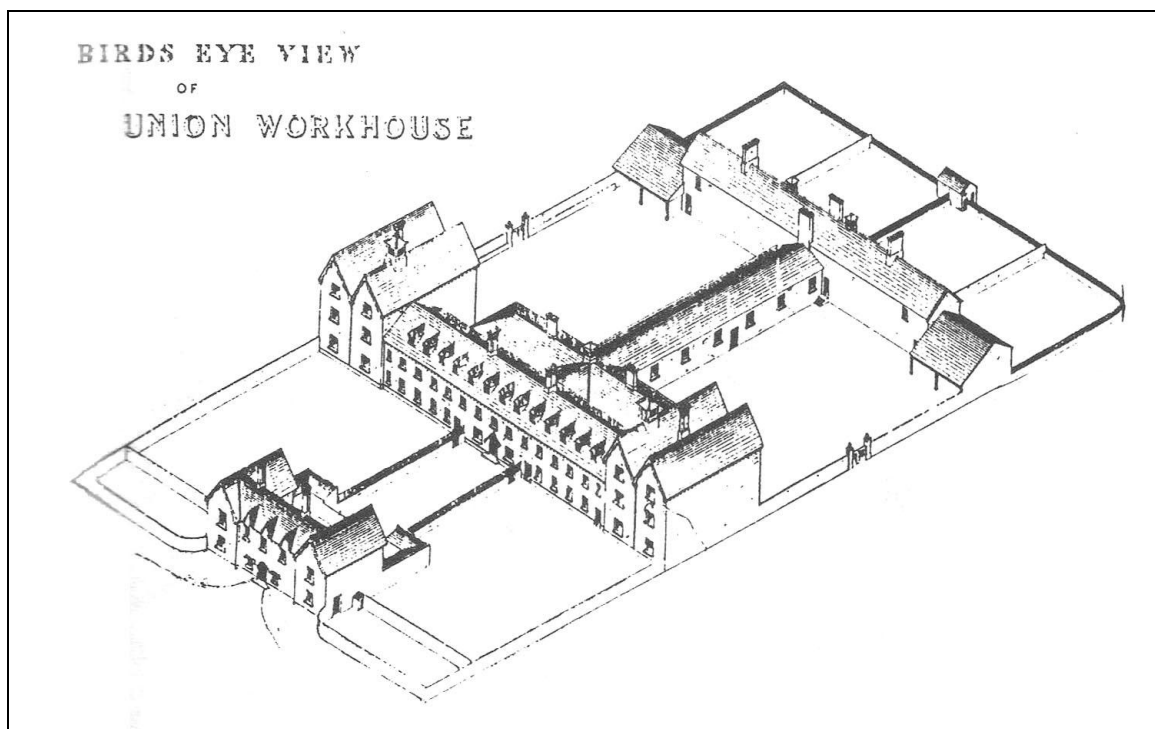
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Osteoarchaeological Evidence from Irish Workhouses

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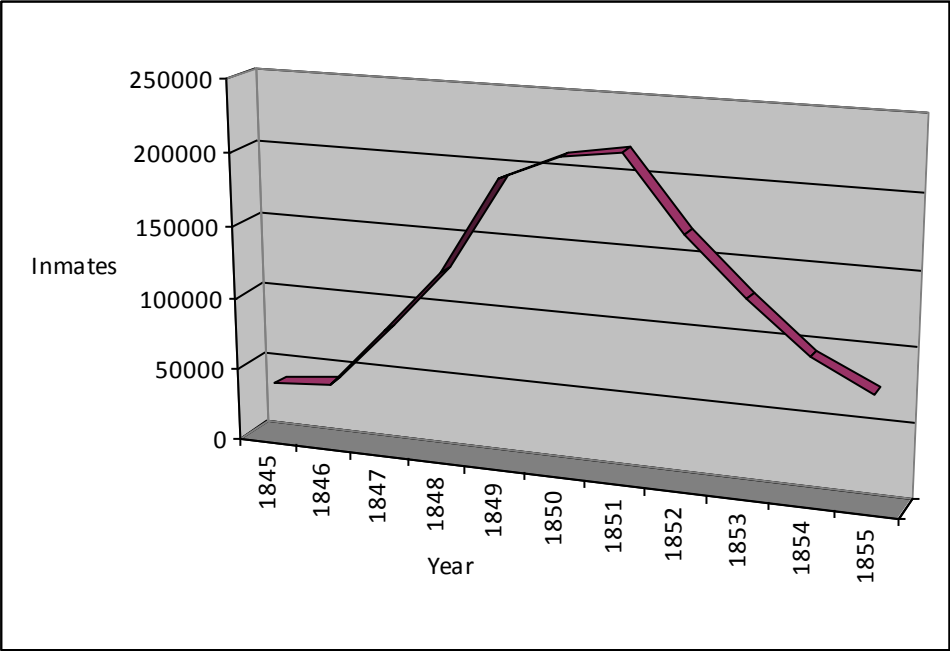
Consultant Human Osteoarchaeologist

In nineteenth century Ireland, the growth in population of the poorer classes (including small farmers, cottiers, and labourers), their increasing reliance on the potato for sustenance, and the lack of waged work, ensured that poverty was a problem for a large part of the population. In an attempt to deal with the escalating levels of poverty, the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838 divided the country into 130 Unions, each of which were obliged to construct a workhouse for the relief of the poor in that Union. In an attempt to discourage entry, the conditions of the workhouses were designed to be worse than those endured by most of the poor outside the workhouse, and an individual had to be destitute to be admitted. Each workhouse was built to one of three standard plans, all designed by the architect George Wilkinson. Small workhouses were to cater for between 200-300 people, medium-sized workhouses were designed to hold 400-600 people, while the largest of the workhouses could hold 1000 people or more (O'Connor, 1995, 80).



Standard workhouse plan

The workhouses, while undoubtedly assisting those in the most dire of circumstances, were utterly tested, and ultimately failed, during the Great Famine of 1845-52. As disease and hunger ravaged the country the workhouses were eventually overrun with desperate people trying to escape the horrors outside. As each Union was responsible for the running of its workhouse, so it developed that those under the most strain had the highest running costs (Kinealy, 1995, 107). Those workhouses were also invariably in some of the poorest areas. Many workhouses became vastly overcrowded, and the mortality rates within the walls were considerable. The workhouses became synonymous in the Irish psyche with suffering, ignominy, and death. After the Great Famine the workhouses increasingly took on the role of caring for the sick and infirm. Many of the building survive today as hospitals.



Numbers of inmates in Irish Union Workhouses 1845-55 (amended from O'Connor, 1995, 177)



At the gates of the workhouse

From the year 2000 onwards, a number of archaeological excavations have been undertaken at the locations of some workhouses. The excavations occurred as a result of redevelopment of the sites. Portions of cemeteries associated with the workhouses have been excavated, and these represent both known and unknown burial grounds. The analysis referred to here is based on the osteoarchaeological analysis of the human skeletal remains from Tuam workhouse in Co. Galway, Cashel workhouse in Co. Tipperary, and Manorhamilton workhouse in Co. Leitrim. Most of the burials are believed to date to either the Great Famine and/or the early decades of use of the workhouses. An osteoarchaeologist is an archaeologist who is trained in the analysis of human skeletal remains. The resulting report is therefore not just a report on the anatomy and pathology of the bones, but an assessment of the skeletal assemblage within the context of recovery. In the sites named above, the fact that the workhouses were for destitute paupers framed the interpretation of the evidence. The analysis was initiated by research undertaken for a recently completed PhD in the Department of Archaeology in University College Cork (www.ucc.ie/en/archaeology), under the supervision of Dr Barra Ó Donnabháin, entitled 'An Assessment of Health in Post-Medieval Ireland. 'One Vast Lazar House Filled with Famine, Disease, and Death''. Please contact lindalynch1@eircom.net for further details. A number of publications are currently under preparation.

The analysis of the skeletons of the paupers in the workhouses bore clear testament to compromised diets in childhood through stunted final statures, combined with repeated exposures to infectious

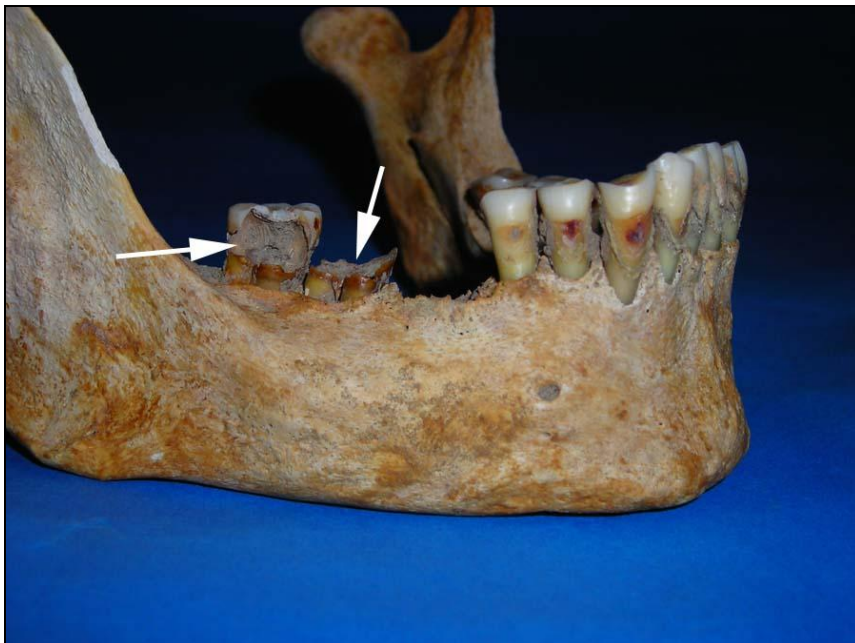
diseases. The dentition of the paupers was also significantly impacted on by an unbalanced diet. The poor in Ireland were in a significantly poorer physical state than their counterparts in Britain.

There are a number of factors that stood out in terms of the osteoarchaeological analysis of individuals buried in the Irish nineteenth century workhouses. There were high numbers of juveniles buried in workhouses, with nearly 42% of individuals recovered from the three sites being aged 17 years or less at the time of death. The majority of those juveniles (50%) were aged between 1-6 years at the time of death. The highest mortality rates in children are traditionally in infancy. Those rates decrease between 1-4 years and are at the lowest between 5-9 years (Rousham and Humphrey, 2002, 124). Traditionally in infants and early childhood, problems associated with birth and infections were some of the main causes of death, while malnutrition increasingly played a part in early childhood death (Higgins, 1989, 185). Weaning was a particularly vulnerable time for children. Not only could nutrition be significantly compromised but there could be serious problems with hygiene, and consequently infections (Scott, 1999, 32). The lack of infants (just 13.6% aged 1 year or less at the time of death) in the samples may initially appear unusual, given that this age-group would traditionally have had a very high mortality rate. However, in reality in the early days of the workhouses the very young were sent out to wet-nurses, particularly if mothers were unable to provide milk due to compromised health. Nonetheless, there were both pre-term and full-term infants in the burial assemblages from the workhouses, a testament to the dire circumstances of some poor pregnant women.

In terms of the ages-at-death of adults, most (66%) were aged between 25 and 45 years at the time of death. There were very few young adults (17-25 years) and they comprised just 5.7% of adults, while individuals older than 45 years at the time of death accounted for just over a quarter of adults (28.3%). It may typically be assumed again that the older age group would comprise the largest group of adults. The nature of workhouses – outside of the stresses of the Great Famine in particular – ensured that the most vulnerable of adults sought refuge there. It may be assumed that old adults, with perhaps no family, or at least no family willing to care for them, would have sought admittance to the workhouse. And certainly, these may have been the cohort expected to die within the workhouse. However, in reality, the workhouse populations were traditionally drawn from the poorest classes of society, those with the most compromised health and those most exposed to disease stresses. Indeed it is possible that many of those individuals did not have a long life expectancy.

Regarding the sex of the adults, the results were startlingly similar: 50% were female and 50% were male. Traditionally, poor women were particularly vulnerable, and used the state relief systems, such as the workhouse, more than men. In 1881 72% of those in hospitals, asylums, and almshouses were women (Luddy, 1995, 16). This may suggest that one should expect more females than males in workhouse cemeteries. Indeed, particularly due to a lack of modern medicine, women were exposed to significantly more life-threatening circumstances in the form of pregnancy and childbirth. Up until the 1930s in Ireland, women had higher mortality rates than men (Daly, 1986, 100). However, sometimes this situation was reversed, particularly during times of stress. For example, during the Great Famine men suffered higher mortality particularly relating to increased pressure on the male bodies undertaking heavy relief works, and the higher calorific demands of the male body which came under considerable strain (ibid.). Therefore, it is not unexpected to see similar numbers of females and males in the burial samples.

Those in the workhouses reveal significantly high prevalence rates of caries (dental decay) and ante-mortem tooth loss. The development of caries is closely associated with sugar in the diet, particularly today. However, it is evident that the poor in nineteenth century Ireland, particularly in the first half of the century had little exposure to sugar. Instead, the cause of the carious lesions in the teeth of the poor may actually be linked to the consumption of maize as an emergency food and the high quantity of potatoes in the diet.



Caries lesions (cavities) in adult teeth. Left arrow, large lesions. Right arrow, tooth completely destroyed

A common finding in all workhouse cemeteries was individuals whose health may have been either physically or mentally compromised. A number of adults have evidence of healed skull fractures which

may have resulted in at least some brain damage, although the extent of the damage and the impact on their lives can only be speculated. Physical disabilities were also present in a number of individuals. For example, one female from Manorhamilton has suffered – and survived – essentially a broken neck, sustained as a result of severe whiplash. Leg fractures also resulted in significantly reduced mobility in some individuals. One male adult from Cashel workhouse suffered from severe curvature of the spine, which would have had a considerable impact their physical health. This is an indication of the natural role of the workhouses in attracting individuals who may have been difficult to care for in the normal homes of the poor. In 1851 14% of those in workhouses were registered in the hospitals. This had risen to 34% in 1872 (Luddy, 1999, 103). From the 1860s nuns increasingly became prominent in the workhouses.



Healed fracture to right rear of skull. View from top of head.



Misaligned healed fracture to lower leg (left tibia and fibula). Knee joint to left, ankle joint to right.



Life outside the workhouse. Evidence of clay-pipe smoking, as shown by the concave wear in the teeth. Smoking was banned in the early decades of the workhouses, and the evidence of it in a number of individuals is testament to another denial afforded to the poor.

Entering the workhouse was akin to a 'social death' (Hubert, 2000). The workhouse system essentially criminalised the poor. They were locked away until they were no longer a burden on society (Spencer-Wood, 2009). As the pauper suffered a social death on entering the workhouses, they also died alone, and were denied the trappings traditionally associated with death and burial in nineteenth century Ireland. They were also, in most instances, buried apart from the normal community. The fact that, at least in the early years of the workhouse, the pauper dead were confined to the same enclosing walls as the living was related to how those individuals were viewed in life. The separation of the living and the dead is a universal feature across many societies and time periods (Parker Pearson, 1999, 25). However, in the case of paupers it was important that the workhouse dead were kept separate from both the living and the dead in normal society. It did not matter that the dead pauper was intimately associated with the living pauper by virtue of the enclosing walls. It did not matter because the pauper did not matter. The pauper burial was not marked and would not be visited, and so their burial places could be legitimately erased from memory. If the poor in workhouses were considered the 'invisible people' by their contemporaries (Grauer et al., 1998, 150), they are now, somewhat ironically, *more* visible due to their distinct burial locations.



Tuam Workhouse Cemetery, courtesy of Eachtra Archaeological Projects. An example of the classic grave pits, containing multiple bodies, often associated with periods of stress such as the Great Famine.

The archaeological investigation of these sites, and the osteoarchaeological analysis of any skeletons recovered from workhouses is of the utmost importance. Post-medieval archaeology (post sixteenth century) has only relatively recently been accepted as a legitimate period of study. The traditional interpretation was that the period was too recent in time, with an abundance of documents. What could archaeology possibly add to the existing data? One of the basic counterarguments is that, historical records are rarely written by neutral observers. There may often have been ulterior motives to the compilations of reports, be they on health, social, moral, or political issues, or simply on observances of events. Archaeological evidence can provide real answers to some outstanding queries of the past.

For further information please contact lindalynch1@eircom.net. I wish to particularly extend my gratitude towards the osteoarchaeological consultancies involved: Eachtra Archaeological Projects (www.eachtra.ie), Mary Henry Archaeological Services (www.maryhenryarchaeology.ie), Moore Group (www.mooregroup.ie), and Aegis Archaeology (www.aegisarchaeology.com).

See also:

www.irishworkhousecentre.ie

www.workhouses.org.uk

For more information on Manorhamilton workhouse excavations go to www.mooregroup.ie/tag/workhouse.

The report on Tuam workhouse will shortly be available in the *Eachtra* journal at www.eachtra.ie.

A publication is currently being prepared by Mary Henry and the writer on Cashel workhouse.

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