

## Chapter 30: Thomastown County Home

### Introduction

- 30.1 The Thomastown union workhouse was built in 1854 on an eight acre site north east of Thomastown, Co Kilkenny. The design followed the standard workhouse plan as designed by architect George Wilkinson. The entrance block was a long single storey building with a central arch. The main accommodation block had the master's quarters at the centre, with male and female wards to each side. A utility block containing a bakehouse and washhouse were located at the rear with 'privies' in each yard. A central spine contained the chapel and dining hall that linked to an infirmary at the west of the site.<sup>1</sup> In the 1870s, the Congregation of the Sisters of St John of God took over the running of a number of workhouses in south east Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The Thomastown Board of Guardian records show that the congregation took over nursing duties at the Thomastown workhouse in 1888.
- 30.2 In 1923, the *County Scheme Order, Kilkenny No. 1, 1923* made provision for the Thomastown workhouse to be the Kilkenny county home. The scheme provided that Thomastown county home would admit and maintain the following people who were eligible for indoor relief - 'aged and infirm persons, chronic invalids, children, expectant unmarried mothers, harmless lunatics and idiots'.<sup>3</sup>

### Sources

#### Institutional records

- 30.3 The former Thomastown county home is now St Columba's Hospital and is a public nursing home. It houses a range of material from the period when it was a county home which catered for unmarried mothers. This material includes:
- Combined Indoor Relief Registers 1919-72 (26 volumes). This collection is largely intact apart from two missing volumes covering the periods October 1930-April 1932 and March 1938-December 1939.
  - Record of Maternity Hospital 1959-65 (1 volume).
  - Record of Births 1919-65 (1 volume).
  - Record of Deaths 1919-62 (1 volume).

<sup>1</sup> Thomastown Workhouse, Kilkenny. <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Thomastown/>

<sup>2</sup> Congregation of the Sisters of St John of God: [www.ssjg.org](http://www.ssjg.org)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1923/sro/923/made/en/print>.

- Return of Unmarried Mothers admitted to the County Home 1939-61 (1 volume).
- Half yearly Return of Children in the County Home 1938-61 (1 volume).

### **Kilkenny local authority records**

- 30.4 The Kilkenny Board of Health Minutes November 1921-July 1925 and July 1925-June 1927 (two volumes) are held in St Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny.
- 30.5 The following are held in Kilkenny county library:
- Letter Books for the years 1922-38. The first three collections have survived on carbon paper and have faded to an extent that they are largely illegible. These files contain correspondence about boarded out children between the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) and the Kilkenny board of health. The Commission checked the names of all children mentioned against the Thomastown records, the majority of whom were recorded there.
  - Manager's Orders, public assistance section, 2 April 1942-25 March 1970 (27 volumes).
  - Minute Book, Social Service Committee (later Ladies Social Service Committee) 19 April 1926-21 February 1941.
  - Kilkenny local authority statistical return in tabulated form of people receiving assistance 4 April 1953-1 March 1958.

### **Department of Health**

- 30.6 File INACT/INA/0/430483 contains the reports by the departmental inspectors.

### **The Women**

- 30.7 In the period 1920-1972, the registers record almost 60,000 admissions. The Commission identified the admissions of 75 married maternity cases, 970 single expectant women and unmarried mothers and 1,241 'illegitimate' children. In 1926, the Kilkenny board of health deemed the practice of admitting pregnant married women to Thomastown county home as 'contrary to the working of the Scheme' and married pregnant women remain largely absent from the records thereafter. The board resolved that maternity services at Kilkenny central hospital 'should be at the disposal of every poor married woman in the county'. It is clear that the Kilkenny board actively segregated pregnant married and single women

and limited access to maternity services on the basis of marital status. Married women had exclusive access to maternity services in Kilkenny central hospital; unmarried women from all parts of Kilkenny, and from parts of Waterford that came under Kilkenny boards of assistance, had to travel to Thomastown county home for maternity and institutional care.

- 30.8 Admissions of single pregnant women to Thomastown county home were highest in the years 1920 to 1923 and fell by around 50% thereafter. This decline is most probably associated with the opening of Bessborough in 1922. Kilkenny was one of the first local authorities to engage with the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary to provide institutional care in Bessborough for single pregnant women from the county. A further fall in admissions to Thomastown county home can be identified after 1930 and this is almost certainly related to the opening of Sean Ross in 1931. Over 750 single pregnant women from Kilkenny sought admission to either Bessborough or Sean Ross during the period under review. Admissions to Thomastown spiked during the war years and were particularly high between 1944 and 1946. This increase corresponded directly with the temporary closure of Bessborough to public patients and the temporary suspension of admissions to Sean Ross due to severe overcrowding. Admissions of single pregnant women to Thomastown declined steadily between 1946 and 1960.

#### **Mothers working in the home**

- 30.9 In July 1923, the matron of the Thomastown county home asked the board of health what action she could take against unmarried mothers who left the institution without permission. The board informed her that she was to 'threaten women with confinement' if they did not comply with the rules of the home. There is no evidence to suggest that the matron took such action against any woman. The matron also complained that some unmarried mothers refused to undertake work in the institution. The board discussed the matter with their solicitor and enquired if legal proceedings could be taken against such women. It is not clear how this matter was resolved but there is no evidence that legal proceedings were taken against any woman for refusing to undertake work in the county home.
- 30.10 In March 1925, the Kilkenny board of health was involved in discussions with the Wexford, Waterford and Carlow boards about opening an inter-county mother and baby home in Wexford. It was proposed to open an institution 'along the lines of Bessborough' in a disused workhouse in New Ross. The plan was that all women

admitted to the institution would be employed in industries such as mattress covering and shirt making to supply other institutions in the participating counties. The Kilkenny board agreed that unmarried mothers were ‘a neglected class of the community’ and that a central home specially designed for them would be a better alternative to Thomastown county home.<sup>4</sup> This plan did not come to fruition and the Kilkenny board subsequently made its own arrangements with the authorities in Bessborough.

### **Maternal mortality**

- 30.11 The institutional records examined by the Commission show that there were three deaths among single pregnant women and unmarried mothers admitted to the home; this represents 0.31% of all such admissions. All three deaths occurred in the institution during 1922. The women were aged 15, 25 and 40 years respectively at the time of death. These deaths do not appear to be childbirth related; the causes of death were given as influenza, heart disease and tuberculosis.

### **The Children**

- 30.12 A total of 1,241 children covered by the Commission’s Terms of Reference entered Thomastown county home. The institutional registers record 764 births there; all related to ‘illegitimate’ children. 77.8% of children were either born in the home or admitted there with their mother soon after birth; 11.7% were older siblings accompanied by their mother and 10.6% were admitted unaccompanied. Many unaccompanied children were transferred from Bessborough and Sean Ross for boarding out.

### **Children’s exit pathways**

- 30.13 The Unmarried Mothers Register records exit pathways for 176 children born in the county home in the years 1931-61 as follows: 101 (57%) went home to live with their mother and/or grandparent; 55 (31%) were boarded out; 14 (8%) were sent to industrial schools; five (3%) were sent to Sean Ross (with mother) and one child was informally adopted.

- 30.14 The Unmarried Mothers Register also record details relating to 141 single women with two or more children. These entries show that 54% of unmarried mothers

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<sup>4</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 4 April 1925.

admitted to Thomastown experienced the death of at least one child; 28% of infant and child deaths recorded occurred outside the institution. It should be noted that Kilkenny County Council did not employ dedicated infant protection visitors (see Chapter 1) and the superintendent assistance officer for Kilkenny regularly remonstrated with the board of assistance that assistance officers were not qualified to medically assess children in foster homes. Assistance officers were responsible only for boarded out children in the care of Kilkenny County Council. Infant and child fatalities recorded in the Unmarried Mothers Register appear to have occurred, in the main, among unregistered children placed at nurse, or in the family home. In 1935, the Kilkenny Board appointed an NSPCC inspector to follow up on single women and their infants when discharged from Thomastown and to establish the intended destination of mother and child.

- 30.15 There were numerous institutional and local authority health records available for the period 1942-52. Analysis of the county home Indoor Registers, Unmarried Mother's Register, Death Register and Kilkenny county managers' orders for this period show that 380 children were either born in or admitted to Thomastown county home. Associated exit pathways were noted in 214 cases. It was possible to determine that 32% of children were boarded out; 24% remained in the county home; 23% died; 12% went home with their mother or grandmother; 2% were sent to industrial schools and 2% transferred to Sean Ross with their mother in this period. Although the managers' orders recorded that 61 women were admitted to Sean Ross from Kilkenny during this period, just three had transferred from Thomastown county home. The managers' orders also show that about 4% of children were placed at nurse directly from the institution during this period.
- 30.16 No discharge pathways were recorded for roughly 44% of children discharged from Thomastown in the period 1942-52. These children did not subsequently appear in public assistance authority records and it must be reasonable to assert that they also left the institution with their mothers and were either living at home or placed at nurse in the community under a private arrangement. This figure is broadly in line with the figure of 45% of children recorded as being 'at home' in the Unmarried Mothers Register.
- 30.17 The Kilkenny board of health expressed concern at the 'extraordinarily low number of registered children at nurse' in the county. Three women were found to have unregistered nurse children in their care during the period under review. The

women were issued with a warning and instructed to register the children in their care with the board. However, the board did not prosecute the women under the *Children Acts* 1908-34. It is likely that perennial overcrowding in the county home nursery, and the acute shortage of 'suitable' foster homes in Kilkenny, deterred local assistance officers from pursuing these cases with any vigour.

### **Infant Mortality**

- 30.18 A Register of Deaths for Thomastown county home covers the years 1919-62 - all entries correlated with deaths independently identified by the Commission in the institution's Indoor Registers. Of the 764 live births attributed to single women, 140 infants subsequently died. In most cases, the stated cause of death was 'inanition'.<sup>5</sup> Other recorded causes of death include congenital asthenia, congenital debility, congenital heart disease, convulsion, gastric ulcer, gastro enteritis, meningitis, pneumonia, premature birth, septicaemia, tuberculosis, umbilical haemorrhage, umbilical sepsis, marasmus, and one case of a fractured skull. It is interesting to note that just two infant deaths due to measles were recorded in the institution in the years 1919-62, a period when this particular disease took a heavy toll on child life. Other rampant and frequently fatal childhood diseases such as pertussis (whooping cough) and diphtheria are almost completely absent from the county home death records. Of the 477 children admitted to the home after birth, 37 subsequently died. The institutional records suggest that 177 children born in or admitted to Thomastown subsequently died. The Commission has located GRO death records for 169 children.
- 30.19 The institutional medical officer reported that in the six months April to September 1922, 28 infants were born at Thomastown county home and 19 subsequently died - resulting in an infant mortality rate of 68%. This does not fully accord with the institutional records analysed by the Commission. The institutional records show that 22 infants were born in this six month period and nine subsequently died (an equally unacceptable mortality rate of 41%). Notwithstanding this, it is the case that 1922 was the worst year for infant mortality in Thomastown - 20 children born/admitted that year subsequently died. The high infant mortality was, according to the institutional medical officer, due to 'careless and indifferent mothering' and because 'mothers are not sufficiently careful in giving the infants nourishment'.

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<sup>5</sup> This is defined as 'severe weakness and wasting as occurs from lack of food, defect in assimilation, or neoplastic disease': [www.irishhealth.com](http://www.irishhealth.com).

30.20 However, an inspection undertaken by a local government inspector found that the nursery section of the institution was overcrowded (35 women and 35 infants), understaffed, and was ‘the worst part of the Institution’. The inspector noted that lavatory accommodation was insufficient and insanitary and that one midwife cared for all women and children as well as attending to maternity cases. The inspector reported that infants were removed from the nursery at night and placed in an unheated dormitory ‘passing through an open yard on each occasion’. Bed clothes for unmarried mother were described as ‘wretched and scanty’. Regarding infant mortality in the institution the inspector advised the board of health:

That careless and indifferent mothering by some of the younger women militates against the healthy development of the offspring.

That the passage of the children to and from their dormitories through the open yard in inclement weather subjects them to serious chills.

That as these children were not having sugar in their bottles in the period covered by my report they were possibly being deprived of an important food element (Decided that sugar be given).

That the covering of the beds occupied by unmarried mothers is too wretchedly scanty to afford the necessary winter warmth (Decided that when blankets are light or worn on any of the beds, that some extra single blanket be given in winter time).

That little woollen shirts for the babies instead of the calico ones would be beneficial. (Decided that these be given)

Where it appears to the medical officer and the midwife, after a reasonable period of observation after birth that a child who is not developing on breast feeding, bottle feeding might be resorted to.

A baby scale to weigh up to two years should be provided for the nursery.

The question of heating the sleeping quarters to be considered

The change from ‘Hospital;’ to ‘Hall’ diet at the end of confinement should be gradual rather than sudden.

30.21 The inspector also recommended that the board of health employ an additional nurse with midwifery qualifications. The board refused to do so and instructed the matron to ask ‘the nuns’ to supervise the nursery and to utilise the services of unmarried mothers living in the home to assist them. The DLGPH advised the board that infant mortality in the home was ‘alarmingly high’ and that it was considered ‘absolutely essential’ to provide an additional nurse with maternity qualifications as recommended by their inspector. The matron informed the board



that every nun in the home was 'fully and arduously engaged the whole working day' and none had capacity to supervise the nursery. The DLGPH asked the institutional medical officer to report on the matter and instructed the matron to 'report any mother neglecting her child'.

- 30.22 In March 1922, the Kilkenny board of health discussed staffing arrangements in Thomastown county home. The board stated that four nursing sisters were working in the home, none of whom were trained in midwifery, and 'had more work than they were able to do' looking after infectious and chronic cases. The board heard that the midwife in the institution was not a permanent official and was paid 15s for every maternity case she attended. They decided to employ a permanent qualified midwife who would also act as assistant matron in the home.<sup>6</sup> An advertisement for the position asked that candidates should have 'full midwifery qualifications and possess a knowledge of child welfare'. Salary was £45 per year, with rations and an apartment in the county home.<sup>7</sup>

### Living conditions

- 30.23 In October 1925, a local government inspection of Thomastown county home found that 58 children, aged from new-born to over three years old, were sleeping in 32 cots. Having failed to secure suitable foster homes for the children, DLGPH Inspector Miss Fitzgerald-Kenny advised the Kilkenny board of health to consider the transfer of 'suitable women' from Thomastown county home to Bessborough. Miss Fitzgerald-Kenny told the board that the case of unmarried mothers was 'very pathetic' and that it was up to them to see that they could make a fresh start in life. She told the board that there was a woman in Thomastown county home with four illegitimate children and that the woman's oldest daughter had been admitted to the home 'with a second illegitimate child'. She stated

It was desirable that first offenders should be removed from such an environment as the county home provided, and placed in a home where their characters would be formed on the right lines and where they would be fitted for the battle of life. Those girls as a rule were mentally defective and required religious upbringing. What advantage was it to anybody to keep those girls and their children in such a place as the county home?...Taking everything into consideration I do not think that the board could do anything

<sup>6</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 18 March 1922.

<sup>7</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 1 April 1922.



better for these girls - the first offenders - than to send them to the home in Cork.<sup>8</sup>

- 30.24 The Kilkenny board initially sent four 'first time offenders' and their infants to Bessborough. The Mother Superior advised the board that the women were 'doing fine' in Bessborough and that she had space for 20 more. In January 1926, the DLGPH approved Bessborough as an extern institution under the *Kilkenny County Scheme Order 1923*. Following an inspection by Miss Fitzgerald-Kenny, in April 1926 a further ten women and their infants were transferred to Bessborough. They travelled to Waterford and on to Cork by train accompanied by a nurse.
- 30.25 The mother of one woman contacted Bessborough and indicated that she wished to take her daughter and her child home. The board agreed to pay the cost of transport. In another instance the father of a woman transferred to Bessborough requested to have his daughter returned home. The superintendent assistance officer for Kilkenny reported unfavourably on the man and his home and advised the board that it would be inadvisable to allow the woman to return to her family home. In August 1926, the Mother Superior in Bessborough asked the Kilkenny board what she should do with a woman maintained by the Kilkenny board if her child died in Bessborough. The superior suggested that she would keep such women at Bessborough for two years where they would be trained to secure employment. The Kilkenny board approved of this suggestion once they were not expected to continue to pay for a woman's maintenance after her baby had died.
- 30.26 In August 1926, the DLGPH instructed the Kilkenny board that all mothers of 'illegitimate' children were required to contribute to the cost of their children's maintenance when boarded out from Thomastown county home. The board advised the DLGPH that they had located some women whose children had been boarded out and assessed their capacity to contribute to their child's maintenance based on their income. The board stated that, although most women were willing to contribute to the cost of their child's maintenance, few were earning enough to do so.
- 30.27 In 1927, the *Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor* stated that, when they inspected Thomastown, there were 38 unmarried mothers living there; eight were 'first offenders'. The report said that the water supply to the

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<sup>8</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 31 October 1925.

institution was 'bad' and that bathing and sanitary accommodation there was 'very bad'. Furthermore, the standard of comfort in the home was 'poor' and that little effort was made 'to brighten the lives of the aged and infirm' or to 'reform those who through moral weakness', were obliged to seek shelter there. The report noted that a maternity department attached to the home had insufficient accommodation to cater for the number of women seeking admission.

- 30.28 In June 1928, the Kilkenny board of health advertised for people living in Kilkenny to consider taking children from Thomastown county home under the local authority boarding out scheme. The rates of pay were stated as 6s per week and £3 annual clothing allowance for each child up to 10 years of age and 3s per week and £3 annual clothing allowance for children aged 10-15 years. Applications were to be sent to the Superintendent Assistance Officer.<sup>9</sup>
- 30.29 The Kilkenny board of health reported that on 31 March 1929, 35 unmarried mothers and their children were living in Thomastown county home. Twenty four of the children were aged under five years and 11 were five years or older. The board reported that 52 children were on the county boarded out register on that date and noted that the 'class of life' from which they generally came was 'Domestic servants'. In the twelve months to 31 March 1929, 15 children were removed from the boarded out register: five were returned to Thomastown county home by foster parents; three were 'adopted' by their foster parents; two were claimed by their mothers; two were placed in the Good Shepherd Convent, Waterford (an industrial school) and nine were admitted to hospital.
- 30.30 In 1932, a member of the Kilkenny Social Services Committee<sup>10</sup> reported that a 15 year old boarded-out girl had given birth to a premature child. A man lodging in the foster parents' home was named as the putative father of the child. A Garda Superintendent reportedly took the case in hand with a view to prosecution but informed the board of health that there was no point in bringing the case to court as there was 'no corroborative evidence'. The girl was subsequently admitted to Thomastown county home. Her age on admission to the county home was recorded as 13 years and not 15 years as reported by the Social Services

<sup>9</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 9 June 1928.

<sup>10</sup> In 1926, DLGPH Inspector, Miss Fitzgerald-Kenny set up a women's Social Service Committee, with the Duchess of Desart as President, to visit boarded out children in their districts and to inspect the homes of prospective foster parents.

Committee. She was subsequently transferred to Sean Ross where she stayed for one year.

- 30.31 In 1932 The DLGPH inspector Miss Fitzgerald-Kenny took statements from single pregnant women who sought indoor relief in Thomastown county home.

***Statement of Miss S:***

Miss S went to service in 1931. She has been keeping company and walking out with Mr H and she did not keep company with other men. She states that Mr H is responsible for her present condition. When made aware of the state of affairs her father interviewed Mr H who admitted responsibility and agreed to marry the girl. Both parents and the girl state that Mr H called to their home and arranged to marry the girl in Dec 1931. Her father subsequently received a letter from Mr H from England saying he cannot make up his mind to marry his daughter.

***Statement of Miss L:***

I reside in Kilkenny with my mother. I am about 30 years of age. I am expecting to become a mother about May next. A man named Mr D is responsible for my present condition. He used to meet me on the road in the evenings when I was coming from the shop. Mr D used to be watching for me to pass. He induced me to cross over a ditch on the roadside more than once. Some people around knew that Mr D was watching me to pass the road at different times, but I cannot prove it, only what I heard. Mr D worked at the time in the shop, but I do not know where he is at present. I believe Mr D is a widower. He told me his wife had died and he had four children. (Miss L was subsequently admitted to Sean Ross)

***Statement of Miss F, aged 22:***

In the County Home, Thomastown for 5 weeks. Baby expected end of November. Putative father is Mr M. She worked in Knocktopher for about 9 months. Mr M works for the County Council on roads. The girl met him and kept company with him about one month after entering service at Knocktopher. No promise of marriage, no correspondence. Her employers knew of them keeping company. She never kept company with anybody else. She wrote to Mr M asking him to meet her in Kilkenny in August and he did so. She is not willing to go to Court but will do so if compelled.

**Statement of Miss M, aged 24:**

Worked in Kilkenny for 3 years. In the County Home about one month. Baby expected about February 1931. Name of putative father Mr R, a baker; wages unknown. Kept company since December 1929. Never kept company with anyone else. Never corresponded with Mr R. Her employer knew of herself and Mr R keeping company. Nobody else ever saw her in company. No promise of marriage. Will give evidence but is not anxious to go to Court.

**Statement of Miss D:**

I wish to report that there is a girl named Miss D an Unmarried Mother and her child at present in the County Home. She states Mr R is the father of her child. I have been making inquiries regarding her case and there are two witnesses willing to give information as to Mr R keeping company with the girl. The Board's solicitor states he believes there is a possibility of the Board being able to procure conviction against the putative father under the Affiliation Orders Act.

- 30.32 A fatal altercation between 'inmates' of Thomastown county home occurred in June 1932. A 60 year old man took umbrage with a fellow inmate who had taken his job looking after the institution's horse and cart and subsequently killed him during the course of a fight.<sup>11</sup> Later that year a boarded-out boy was charged with stealing a sum of money. The court applied the *Probation of Offenders Act 1907* and ordered his return to Thomastown county home.<sup>12</sup>
- 30.33 In April 1935, the DLGPH asked the Kilkenny board of health to provide a list of children suitable for boarding out from Thomastown county home. The board responded that they found it difficult to get suitable foster homes and that several foster homes 'obtained after great difficulty' had been rejected by the department. The DLGPH instructed the Kilkenny board to notify the local NSPCC inspector of all 'illegitimate' children who were discharged from Thomastown county home with their mothers so that he could gather information regarding the intended destination of both mother and child. The board of health advertised for foster parents to board out children from Thomastown in February 1936.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 18 June 1932.

<sup>12</sup> *Munster Express*, 11 November 1932.

<sup>13</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 8 February 1936.

30.34 An 18 month old girl fell to her death in April 1942. The child was sitting on a ledge in the home when she fell through an unfastened window. She fell 30 feet and fractured her skull. The institutional records show that the child had been born to a single woman in Thomastown in 1940. At the inquest, the woman told the jury that she was in the habit of sitting her child on the window ledge and did not realise that the window was unfastened.<sup>14</sup> The coroner asked one of the nursing sisters giving evidence if women were allowed to bring their children around Thomastown county home with them. The sister replied

Inmates were not allowed take children with them around the house. They might sleep with the children but they were supposed to leave them in the nursery in the morning. They might take them around the grounds but they were not supposed to take them around the dormitories. It was usual for mothers to take their children away with them. They had to ask permission to remove them from the nursery.

30.35 The sister explained that if the child had 'died in the ordinary course' the mother could leave the institution immediately - otherwise she would have to stay for three years. She said that arrangements were being made for the woman to leave the home 'her mother had decided to take her out'. The coroner told the jury that they should consider whether the child's death was accidental, or not. He stated

In an institution of that sort they all knew that there was a certain mental effect which must affect people in the place and for that reason there was a big responsibility on the people in charge to take precautions that such accidents would not happen.

30.36 The foreman of the jury said that there was not very much to consider - the jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

30.37 At a murder trial in June 1944, Dr Edith Lane told the court that she had confirmed a young woman's pregnancy and made arrangements for her admission to Thomastown county home. The woman did not want to be admitted to Thomastown as she had given birth to an 'illegitimate' child there previously. She asked to be admitted to Sean Ross. That home was closed to new admissions due to overcrowding and so agreed to go to Thomastown. Some weeks later the woman's sister told Dr Lane that the woman had given birth in Regina Coeli,

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<sup>14</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 4 April 1942.

Dublin, but the child had died soon after. However, a Garda subsequently found the remains of a baby boy wrapped in a bundle of clothes and he was identified as the woman's child. The woman and her sister were charged with the child's murder. They told the court that the woman had gone into labour on the way to Thomastown, that the child was stillborn and they buried the body. The woman subsequently confessed to strangling her baby so that her father and her neighbours would not find out about it.<sup>15</sup>

- 30.38 A visiting committee's report on Thomastown county home was discussed at a Kilkenny County Council meeting in February 1945. The report stated that 60 or 70 men were in the dining hall at the time of the visit and that the ration was 'meagre' and consisted of 'about three potatoes, a little green cabbage and home cured bacon'. The committee criticised the quality of the meat being served stating that 'it was large lumps of fat that in any home would be diverted to the offal for dogs and pigs'. In the female dining room, they encountered '12 or 14 unmarried mothers with their babies'. They stated:

The same state of affairs evidently existed there as there was not a pick of food visible, except potato skins and the relics of the pig. Conditions in this section did not at all appear to be ideal. The fire was at its lowest ebb with no apparent fresh supply of fuel...the floor was littered with straw.<sup>16</sup>

- 30.39 In November 1945, Kilkenny county council asked the county surveyor, Mr J C Coffey, to report on Thomastown county home. Mr Coffey reported that the institution had one vertical boiler which served the kitchen, eight baths, laundry and drying rooms. He noted that the boiler's capacity was inadequate to serve the institution and that when dinner was being cooked there was little heat available for other purposes. He noted that the baths in particular were seldom supplied with hot water. He reported that there was no central heating in the home and that dormitories and wards were heated by small open fires. He recommended that central heating should be installed and that cooking arrangements, which he described as 'also bad', should be overhauled.

- 30.40 Mr Coffey conducted another survey of Thomastown county home in November 1946. He again drew attention to the primitive nature of the heating and cooking arrangements and highlighted the 'totally insufficient' sanitary arrangements in the

<sup>15</sup> *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 24 June 1944.

<sup>16</sup> *Kilkenny people*, 10 February 1945.

institution. At the time of this inspection, 250 men, women and children had eight baths, eight W.Cs and 16 wash-hand basins available to them. In addition, he noted that all washing in the institution was done by hand and that the laundry was not equipped with disinfecting or sterilising equipment. He reported that the labour ward in the institution had no electric sockets, no heating and no sanitary equipment.

- 30.41 In February 1949, the Department of Health sent an engineer to assess the necessity for improvements to the county home recommended by Mr Coffey and to consider the expenditure involved. The departmental inspector advised that the proposal to install a central heating system should be 'deferred, if not abandoned' on the basis that few county homes had central heating and that institutions such as sanatoria and regional hospitals should take priority over county homes. In May 1949, the Department of Health advised Kilkenny County Council that it did not object to the proposed refurbishments at Thomastown county home but stated that the department was not in a position to contribute financially to the proposed works. It is clear from a report on Thomastown county home undertaken by the DLGPH inspector Miss Alice Litster in 1952 that no refurbishments had been undertaken and that the institution remained without central heating and without adequate lavatory and bathing facilities.
- 30.42 Miss Litster inspected the nurseries at Thomastown county home in February 1952. She interviewed unmarried mothers and examined records relating to births, admissions and deaths of 'illegitimate' infants. At the time of inspection, 14 mothers and 45 children aged from new-born to 15 years were living in the home. Miss Litster reported that one of the nurseries was 'a good room with polished floors' with four cots and two beds for adults. The room was occupied only by one eleven-year-old girl. Miss Litster reported that a second nursery housed 20 'motherless children'. Two adults slept in the room to attend to them at night. She noted that infants who were accompanied by their mothers slept in the same bed with them at night. She described this nursery as a large room heated by an open fire. She observed that women sat in front of the open fire and that clothes were drying on a fire guard. She noted that the room was 'stuffy and squalid' and that the atmosphere was 'charged with odours associated with humanity cramped for space'. Miss Litster noted that there was no lavatory accommodation in the nurseries and that chamber pots were available for the children. She also noted that 17 of the children were 'illegitimate' and the remaining three were extramarital



children born to a woman who lived outside the institution caring for her other children.

30.43 Miss Litster reported that a third nursery was a dark room used at night to house 'motherless children'. She noted that a cupboard containing milk, bread, bottles and other articles was not in a clean condition. Older children were housed in an outside shelter heated by a turf burning stove. Most of the older children had been placed at nurse by their mothers and subsequently sent to the county home as their mothers had stopped paying maintenance for them. Miss Litster described other children as being either physically or mentally disabled.

30.44 The children's diet was recorded as follows:

Breakfast: Porridge with milk; eggs about three days a week. Smaller children are started with a little yoke and increased until a whole egg can be taken.

Bread and butter with milky tea.

Lunch: 'Goody' (bread, milk and sugar)

Dinner: 1 pm. Soup, (made of meat with addition of vegetables, onions, carrots etc., as in season, thickened with barley or lentils, sometimes with addition of Bovril) given either separately or poured over potatoes and vegetables. Mashed potatoes and vegetables, a little minced meat. Pudding is given every day, generally cornflour, sometimes rice. Rhubarb and apples are given when available. Otherwise, except for very occasional orange, no fruit. Amount of milk given is regulated by appetite. Bread and milk is given in the afternoon.

Tea: Eggs may be given at this meal. Bread and butter and milky tea.

30.45 Miss Litster noted that children living in the home 'appeared to be well-nourished, robust and on the whole in good health'. She drew attention to the 'large number' of children aged two years and over who were living there and recommended that they should be boarded out as soon as possible. She also highlighted cases where 'illegitimate' children had been placed at nurse from the home by their mothers only to be readmitted to the institution unaccompanied 'suffering from the effects of neglect'. She noted that some of these children were admitted with broken limbs and others in a condition described as 'dying from neglect'.

30.46 The unmarried mothers were housed in a dormitory at the top of the building. Miss Litster described a long, narrow room with floorboards, clean, fresh and bright with

ten windows. She noted that each bed had a chair beside it and that the room had a large communal wardrobe. The room had an electric light, but no heating. There was no sanitary accommodation attached to the dormitory and women were supplied with 'night pails'. Washing facilities for the women were provided on the ground floor. Miss Litster noted that the dormitory could accommodate 24 women and was 'clean and comfortable'. At the time of her visit there were just two single expectant women in the home. One was 'a crippled girl with T.B.' who had been admitted from Sean Ross. She reported that in the period April 1951 to February 1952, 13 infants were born in the home and a further five were admitted after birth. Two infant deaths were recorded during this period. Causes of death were given as congenital debility and whooping cough.

- 30.47 Miss Litster reported that work incidental to the running of the home was undertaken by resident unmarried mothers. The Department of Health asked the Kilkenny board why unmarried mothers remained in Thomastown instead of being transferred to Sean Ross. The reply was that the women were required in the county home to carry out work there. In July 1953, the matron notified the Kilkenny public assistance authority that the number of unmarried mothers in the home had reduced to six and that she had no one to put to work in the institution. She advised the authority that she had employed eight women to take up duties formerly undertaken by unmarried mothers.
- 30.48 The Department of Health next inspected Thomastown in August 1958. The inspector, Miss Reidy, reported that four children aged between four and 16 years were living in the home. All four children were described as 'mental defectives'. Miss Reidy did not refer to unmarried mothers in her 1958 report.
- 30.49 Miss Reidy again inspected Thomastown in March 1960. At the time of inspection four unmarried mothers and 14 children were living in the home. She noted that eight of the children were 'illegitimate'. She noted that one 'mentally defective' 'illegitimate' boy, who she had examined on her previous visit, had deteriorated considerably and had become 'distressing to look at'. She noted that the boy was on a waiting list for admission to a special institution. Her report concluded by stating that children living in the home were 'adequately cared for'.
- 30.50 Miss Reidy next inspected Thomastown in February 1962. At the time of inspection seven expectant and unmarried mothers and ten children were living in

the home. Three women and their children had remained in the home since her inspection two years earlier. All other children were in the home unaccompanied. She noted that one child had been admitted from Sean Ross to allow his parents to make arrangements for marriage. However, both parents subsequently disappeared leaving the child abandoned. Miss Reidy reported that three children died in the institution in the period since her last inspection. She noted that the overall standard of care in the home was 'quite satisfactory'. In April 1963, Miss Reidy reported that two unmarried women and three children were living in the home. One woman and her infant had been admitted from Sean Ross. She again noted that the standard of care was 'satisfactory'. When Miss Reidy again inspected Thomastown, in February 1965, she reported that there were no unmarried mothers or children living there.

## **Burials**

- 30.51 A groundsman at St Columba's Hospital, Thomastown (formerly Thomastown county home) told the Commission that he has been employed at the institution since around 1986. He said that, in or around 1990, the matron of the institution, asked him and another employee to incinerate institutional records. He said that these records included burial registers relating to people who died in the institution and were buried onsite. He believed that the burial registers related to the period when the institution operated as Thomastown county home. Shortly after this, groundsmen were put to work renovating the institutional graveyard located in an adjacent field. The groundsman identified the location of the graveyard on a map. The Commission had previously identified this location lying to the east of St Columba's Hospital as a potential institutional graveyard. He said that the graveyard, known locally as the 'Shankyard graveyard' had been neglected for some years and was in a state of disrepair. He stated that 'several loads of topsoil' were put down on the graves and that the site was levelled and grassed. The Commission visited the graveyard in 2019 and found the site to be well-maintained. A single cross with the inscription 'Remembering those who died' marks the site as a former graveyard. The graveyard was in operation from 1854 to 1978. The Commission considers it likely that children who died in Thomastown county home were buried there.