

Celia Edwards Irish Famine Survivor

Ernest Baxter's grandmother, Celia Edwards (born 1833), was a survivor of the Irish famine.

She spent time in the Gorey Workhouse in County Wexford, Ireland, before being shipped to Australia in 1849 at the age of 16.

She was selected from amongst orphan girls at the Gorey Workhouse in Ireland for export to Australia because she was in good health, disease-free, could read and write and was trained as a nursemaid.

Compiled by Gail White

Photos taken in Ireland 2012

Celia Edwards In Australia

The ship New Liverpool brought Celia Edwards, along with many other Irish orphans girls, to Melbourne in 1849.

From there she was shipped to Portland, Victoria, on the Raven, where work was found for her at Port Fairy (then called Belfast) with W. Thompson, earning six pounds over the year.

According to one branch of her descendants, the Jelli family of 'Tahook', near Warrnambool, Victoria, employed her and she had a child, James by one of the sons, Robert Jelli.

Celia married John Baxter (Ernest's grandfather) on 7 June 1845. John was a widower living in Warrnambool.

John and Celia's son John was Ernest's father.

Celia died on 8 May 1898 and is buried at Warrnambool.

*Much of the information on this page was sourced from the Irish Famine Memorial in Sydney
www.irishfaminememorial.org*

The Gorey Workhouse

The Gorey Workhouse has become a trendy private residence — very private.

It was originally built in 1840-41, designed by the Poor Law Commissioners' architect, George Wilkinson, to accommodate 500 'inmates'.



The Portumna Workhouse

Workhouses throughout Ireland were built to the standard designs Wilkinson developed.

The Portumna Workhouse in County Galway, currently being restored, provides an example of the conditions in these places.



Note: Irish – Port Omna means ‘the landing place of the oak’



The Irish Workhouse Centre

The workhouse system was designed
to cater for 80,000 people.

No outdoor relief was allowed.
People entered the workhouse to
avoid death by starvation.

Approximately one million people
died during the Famine years.



The Irish Workhouse Centre

Portumna Workhouse opened in 1852.

It consists of 7 main buildings on
a large 8.2 acre site.

It was built to cater for 600 inmates
and cost £7,875.

The high stone wall surrounding the
site was to keep people out, not in.





The Irish Workhouse Centre

Entire families had to enter the
workhouse together.

This was one way for the landlord
to get tenants off the land.

Family members were split up into
separate quarters.

Sometimes they never saw each other
again. Only children, 2 years or
younger, could stay with their mothers.



The Irish Workhouse Centre

This room was the nursery.

Paupers were classified into five categories.

1. Males above the age of 15 years.
2. Boys above the age of 2 years, and under that of 15 years.
3. Females above the age of 15 years.
4. Girls over the age of 2 years, and under that of 15 years.
5. Children under 2 years of age.

Article 11 of the Irish Workhouse Rules stipulated that "each class, or subdivision of a class, shall respectively remain in the apartment assigned to them; without communication with any other class."

There were some exceptions to this enforced segregation. Class 5 paupers, children under 2, could remain with their mothers. Also, "the master of the workhouse shall allow the father or mother of any child in the workhouse..to have an interview with such child at some time in each day."





The Irish Workhouse Centre

These are the original platforms on which people slept. It must have been cold in here, with the ventilation openings and only one fire place. The smaller dormitory opposite was probably intended for mothers with infants.

Dormitories were often overcrowded. The inmates slept on straw mattresses, covered in rough rags or maybe blankets. The only real beds were in the hospital. Disease was inevitable.

In the morning, the bell rang. The inmates dressed in their rough workhouse uniform and half an hour later, the roll was called. The inmates could not return to their sleeping quarters, except at the time appointed for going to bed.

As John O'Connor points out in his book, *The Workhouses of Ireland*, "the inmates were, in many instances, half starved and half clothed . . . and it was not uncommon to find the living and the dying stretched side by side on filthy straw, under the same miserable coverings . . ."





The Irish Workhouse Centre

What did the workhouse diet consist of? The Poor Law Commissioners debated for years as to what the diet should be. So as not to encourage people to stay, workhouse conditions were never meant to be better than those of an independent labourer outside. This was difficult to apply given that the diet of most people was barely above subsistence level. Two surveys were carried out to see what the diet should consist of. One reviewed the diets at other institutions, the second surveyed poor labourers' diets. Generally, adults received two meals a day and children three.

A typical adult diet would consist of eight ounces of stirabout and half a pint of milk for breakfast, with dinner consisting of three and a half pounds of potatoes and one pint of skimmed milk.

Children got three ounces of oatmeal and half a pint of new milk for breakfast, potatoes and half a pint of new milk for dinner and six ounces of bread for supper.

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'Stirabout' is a porridge of Irish origin consisting of oatmeal or cornmeal boiled in water or milk and stirred.



The Irish Workhouse Centre

This room was the women's work room.

It was a rule of the workhouse that everybody had to work. The women did domestic jobs such as cleaning or helping in the kitchen or laundry and looking after the sick. Older inmates were put to work mending clothes and spinning wool. Girls were trained for domestic service.

The men broke stones, ground corn, limewashed the interior of the buildings, worked on the workhouse lands and did other manual work. It was work without reward.

Even the children had to work. Children also received an education of sorts. Article 22 of the rules stated that "boys and girls . . . shall, for three hours every day, be instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic and the principles of the Christian religion."



The Irish Workhouse Centre

This was the laundry building. Can you figure out where the large pots for boiling water were located? Where did the water go out? How did the steam get out? Where and how were the clothes dried?

Do you see the large section of wall that was not white washed? There is a story behind this. One day, a number of years ago, a neighbour was looking out his window and saw a digger about to take a large bite out of the laundry building. He quickly made his way across the road and told the digger driver that this was an important building. The digger driver was happy to leave.

Unfortunately, in the past many historic buildings were knocked and the stone used for other purposes.





The Irish Workhouse Centre

Notice the fine timber beams in the ceiling. These are made of pitch pine that may have come from Canada. War and industrialisation had depleted Ireland, Britain and Europe of timber.

Britain turned to Canada for supplies. Ship owners had empty boats on the outward journey. Soon they began sending agents around the country offering cheap fares to potential emigrants.

The Government financially assisted this emigration. The cost of emigration to landlords was less than that of keeping paupers in the workhouse. An Emigration Commission was set up. Its representatives visited every workhouse in Ireland. Those who wanted to emigrate were offered free passage, clothing and a little money. Because of the number of deaths during the voyages, the emigrant ships became known as coffin ships.

Between 1845 and 1854, an average of 200,000 people a year emigrated from Ireland to the United States, Canada, Australia and Britain, a total of two million people.





The Irish Workhouse Centre

Life in the workhouse was strict. There were many rules. Inmates could be deemed disorderly or refractory (disobedient) if they broke the rules, for instance, if they made any noise when silence was ordered, if they played any game of cards or chance or if they failed to wash properly. Inmates who broke the rules could be confined in the dark refractory wards for up to 24 hours. Do you see the "R"s marked on the ground here beside the dry toilets? These sections were two refractory wards. Do you want to stand in this space?



The refractory wards





The Irish Workhouse Centre

The Poor Law Act of 1838 divided
the country into 130 Unions,
33 more were added later.

Each union had to have a workhouse.

This was to be paid for by a tax
on landowners.