

History of Grangeegorman

Richmond Asylum

During the 18th century, the area around Grangeegorman was synonymous with Houses of Industry – institutions established for the housing and employment of the poor. The governors of these institutions found that they were increasingly accommodating a large population of people with psychiatric issues and so, as a result, it was decided to establish a dedicated facility for the mentally ill. That facility was the Richmond Lunatic Asylum, that was built in Grangeegorman between 1810 and 1815. It was named after Charles Lennox, 4th Duke of Richmond who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at the time. His coat of arms survives on the building to this day.

The Asylum building was designed by Francis Johnson who also designed the G.P.O. and was modelled after the London Bethlehem Hospital (known colloquially as “Bedlam”). Over the years, the Asylum grew both in size and in number of patients, reaching its peak towards the end of the 19th century when it had 2,375 patients. Originally a single quadrangle structure, other buildings were added, including a Nurse’s Home, two infirmaries, a Church of Ireland, a Roman Catholic Church, a laundry, a mortuary, and separate male and female wards.



The Asylum represented the medical approach to mental illness of its time, utilising approaches that now seem alien to us, including solitary confinement, malaria treatment (where syphilitic patients were contaminated with malaria in order to induce a high fever and kill the infection), insulin coma treatment (where high doses of insulin were used to induce a series of comas believed to improve schizophrenia) and lobotomies.

Patient numbers declined during the 20th century and the Asylum was renamed St. Brendan’s Hospital in 1958. It continued to operate up until 2013 when the last of its patients were transferred to the newly built Phoenix Care Centre on the North Circular Road. The new building was built in the shape of the figure ‘8’ to symbolise that there were no more dead ends for its patients.

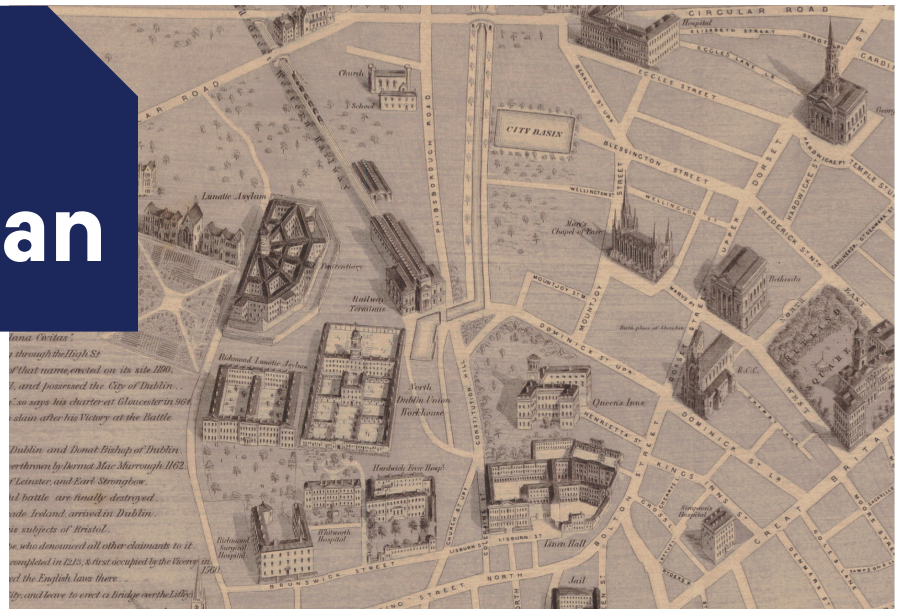


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General Penitentiary

At the start of the 19th century, a zeal for reforming prisoners rather than forsaking them to overseas colonies led to the establishment of the Penitentiary system in Great Britain and Ireland. This experiment in prisoner reform was manifested in Grangegorman through the construction of the Richmond General Penitentiary in 1816. Situated close to the Richmond Asylum, the Penitentiary building was initially used as a fever hospital for a Cholera outbreak before taking its first prisoners in 1820.

Initially, annual reports praised the penitentiary and the actions it took to rehabilitate its inmates. However, a proselytism scandal in 1826 led to far reaching consequences. Catholics prisoners were allegedly coerced into converting to Protestantism in return for better treatment. This led to inevitable friction between the Governor of the Penitentiary and the Catholic Chaplain. The strained relationship made the running of the building more and more difficult and the situation deteriorated so much that the experiment was deemed a failure and the Penitentiary closed in 1831.



In 1832, another, and far bigger, Cholera outbreak occurred in Dublin and the former Penitentiary building was pressed into use as a fever hospital once more. The impact of the epidemic on the city was demonstrated in 2015 by the discovery of approximately 1,600 bodies linked to the outbreak during the LUAS extension works near to the former Penitentiary Building.

The year 1836 saw the building change uses again – this time pressed into service as a Women's Prison, the only one of its kind in the British Isles. It even used female guards to maintain an exclusively female presence. The fate for many of its prisoners was transportation to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) where they generally became servants. In fact, the Grangegorman Women's Prison became a hub for female prisoners from all over Ireland who were first sent there to learn useful skills, such as needlework, before beginning the long journey to the southern hemisphere.

In all, over 3,000 female prisoners and more than 500 of their children made the journey from Grangegorman to Van Diemen's Land. Typically, the journey lasted more than 100 days and many perished on the way. In 2017, an event to commemorate these women took place in Grangegorman. Participants were issued with white bonnets of the type worn by servants in Van Diemen's Land, each one embroidered with the name of one of the women. To this day, people from Australia and Tasmania travel to Grangegorman to trace their ancestry to one of the women that set sail from Grangegorman nearly two centuries ago.

The Prison operated up until 1897 whereupon the last of its inmates were transferred to Mountjoy Prison and the building was taken over by the Richmond Asylum.

