

# IN PICTURES: New book offers insights to Limerick's St Joseph's Hospital









STANDING proudly in its own grounds at Mulgrave Street, St Joseph's Hospital is a landmark building on the edge of the city.

Now architect and historian Patrick Quinlivan has uncovered a fascinating history of the facility which includes tales of its earliest patients escaping and "nocturnal sorties by

unmarried colleagues".

One of the first institutional facilities in the country, St Joseph's - once known by the less flattering, and now offensive name of the Limerick District Lunatic Asylum - was built by a prominent advocate for asylum reform, Thomas Spring Rice.

Costing £29,856 in 1827, Spring Rice - who went on to become a member of the parliament in London - was stinging in his criticism of the previous arrangement whereby cells were built at the old Limerick House of Industry.

At the time, he wrote that provisions provided for accommodation which would "not be appropriate for our dog kennels."

"It consists of an open arcade, behind which cells have been constructed with stone floors, without any mode of heating or of ventilating and exposed during the whole of the winter to the extremities of the weather, frequently resulting in mortification of the extremities."

This basically meant the amputation of limbs, and it was under his watch that changes were made.

Mr Quinlan has put together this, and a variety of other fascinating tales from institutions across Ireland in his new book, the Walls of Containment which has been published by UCD Press.

"I am from an architectural background with a particular interest in how spacing worked in modern healthcare. The inspiration for this book came from doing a site walk-up in a modern project in Co Dublin.

"I saw the old building, and was fascinated by it. I started to realise there were nearly 30 of these old buildings around the country, and they are all being emptied out of patients, and there's not a plan for their future," he explained.

As part of putting the book together - over the best part of a decade - Mr Quinlan was able to tour St Joseph's, and get some behind the scenes access to the sprawling campus. Some fabulous pictures have been taken by David Killeen.

When it opened, he believes it was quite "experimental", saying: "The State in this case was coming up with a plan, rolling it out and learning from its mistakes. In the case of Limerick, all seemed great at the start. But looking at the correspondence, you learn of the normal teething problems. Perhaps the fixtures and fittings weren't up to scratch.

"Some of the people committed there had their own views [on the service] and were

making their escape over the walls. The walls there were originally lower than they are today, as the architect wanted people to enjoy the views."

Back at the time of the construction of Irish institutions, the boards were populated by the "great and the good" of local society, Mr Quinlan said.

"They brought their own savvy to what they were doing. As gentlemen, they might not have known much about running a hospital, but they knew a fair bit about how to run an estate, a landscape, how to get productive gardens going, how to have a parkland, and how to negotiate land deals," he said.

This was in evidence when they did a deal with the Waterford and Limerick railway for a 'slither' of land at the rear. The sale was £2,870, a healthy return given the fact the whole site had cost just £3,840.

The patient numbers of St Joseph's Hospital have steadily declined, with the facility now only home to limited administration and some rehabilitation services.

Calls for a complete closure of the site have not been acted on, with the HSE recently taking action to fix the roof.

However, the huge land bank, the majority of which is not in use, has led to huge questions being asked over its future uses.

But architect Mr Quinlan says while changing the use of some of the surrounding buildings might be possible, altering its overall use might not be as simple as it sounds.

"In the central buildings, the layout internally are all these small little cells. It's like living in your bath at home. Also, the walls would have the solidity of a prison structure. As a result, it may be very difficult to convert," he said.

Published by UCD Press, Walls of Containment is available from all branches of Easons, plus O'Mahony's in Limerick. It's also available to order from [www.ucdpress.ie](http://www.ucdpress.ie), priced €36.

For more see [limerickleader.ie](http://limerickleader.ie)