

*ALEXANDER PARKES AND  
MEDICAL CARE IN IRISH  
WORKHOUSES  
BY PETER GIBSON*

Alexander Parkes -- a postal pensioner who was not destitute -- died in a workhouse in Dublin in October 1918. His case demonstrates how the role of workhouses had changed since they were first built in the 1830s and 1840s.

### **Working for the Post Office**

Alexander Parkes worked as a Postman in Dublin from 1884 to 1901 when he retired on grounds of ill health. He was only thirty-seven years old.

His salary had been £84 12s per year so he probably found it difficult to keep his large family on his pension, which, at £21 8s 7d per year, was about a quarter of his salary. His tenth, and last, child was born in 1904. By then, some of his older children would have been in work, including his two eldest sons who were telegraphic messengers in the Post Office.

### **Life after retiring from the Post Office**

Alexander seems to have had a number of jobs after he retired from the Post Office. He is recorded as being an insurance supervisor in 1904 and, at other times, including on his death record in 1918, he was a labourer.

Alexander's wife, Eveleen, died in Harold's Cross Hospice on 20th April 1914, aged forty-nine. The cause of her death was "Carcinoma of the stomach, 9 months".

On 3rd October 1914, just after the start of the First World War, Alexander, a widowed clerk, enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was fifty years old and was initially assessed as being fit for "Home Service only". He was sent to Limerick for training where he was examined by a medical officer. His report stated: "Varix [varicose veins] in both legs. He is very debilitated and totally unfit to undergo the rigours of active service."

He was discharged "for not being likely to become an efficient soldier" on 20th November 1914 after serving for only forty-nine days.

## **South Dublin Union Workhouse**

The workhouse of the South Dublin Poor Law Union was the largest workhouse in Ireland, capable of housing 3,200 inmates. It was built in 1840, close to Guinness' brewery, on a fifty acre site which had previously accommodated a House of Industry and a Foundling Hospital.

Workhouses were built to provide very basic accommodation for the destitute poor who were expected to undertake work in return for being fed and sheltered by the local Poor Law Guardians. The original workhouse buildings included an infirmary for the treatment of pauper inmates who were unwell.

During the famine (1845-1849) workhouses all over Ireland were overwhelmed by the need to admit thousands of starving and ill people. From that time many workhouses -- including the one in the South Dublin Union-- began to provide medical care for people in their area who, although not destitute, could not afford to pay for medical care.

We know from an article in the British Medical Journal in 1895 that criticised the standards of treatment provided by the South Dublin Union that it had three hospitals and was providing in-patient medical services for the people of limited means. Its Protestant Hospital was staffed by deaconesses who were trained nurses. Both the Catholic and the Children's' Hospitals were staffed by nuns (Sisters of Mercy) who were not trained nurses. Pauper inmates of the workhouse assisted on the wards. There were up to 1000 patients supervised by a resident medical officer and three visiting doctors – one for each hospital.

Some fourteen months before Alexander Parkes was first admitted to the workhouse it was occupied during the 1916 Easter Rising by the 4th Dublin Battalion of the Irish Volunteers. The sixty-five men could control only a few of the many buildings on the site. A counter attack was led by the Royal Irish Rifles, who were stationed nearby. After several days of fighting and many deaths on both sides -- among the inmates and also of one nurse -- the rebels surrendered when they were informed of the surrender of the volunteers in the GPO. None of the buildings on the site were damaged and the work of the Workhouse and its hospital was able to continue.

The sites of workhouses in Ireland often became used for hospitals. Today, St. James' Hospital, the largest teaching hospital in Dublin, is on the site of the South Dublin Union Workhouse. Currently (in 2021) a new Children's Hospital is being built beside St James'. There has been a tradition of caring for children on this site since the opening of Foundling Hospital in 1704.

## **Admission to the workhouse**

Records show that Alexander Parkes was admitted to the South Dublin Union Workhouse hospital on three occasions in 1917 and 1918.

He was admitted on 25th August 1917. He was suffering from lumbago and he was discharged on 21st September 1917.

Alexander was admitted again on 18th December 1917. On this occasion he was suffering from hepatitis and he was discharged on 18th January 1918.

Alexander was admitted to the Workhouse for a third time on 24th October 1918, following a cerebral haemorrhage (a stroke). He died on 30th October 1918, aged fifty-four. The cause of his death was "Hemiplegia", or paralysis of one side of the body.

## Fact Sheet: Alexander Parkes

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner name:</i> Alexander Parkes
<i>Person ID:</i> IR1040
<i>Your name:</i> Peter Gibson
<i>U3A group:</i> Northern Ireland
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
Alexander Parkes was born in the Coombe Hospital, Dublin on 27 November 1864. His parents lived at 8 Wood Street.
2: Who were your pensioners' parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write)
Alexander's parents were <b>Samuel Parkes</b> and <b>Jane Heney</b> .  Samuel and Jane married on 10 September 1853 in St Anne's Parish Church (Church of Ireland), Dublin. They were both living at 40 King Street. Samuel was a shoemaker as was his father, Leonard. Jane's father was Michael, a coachmaker.  In 1901 Samuel and Jane lived at Cathedral Lane west, Wood Quay (close to where their son, Alexander was living). Samuel was a general messenger.  Samuel died on 14 May 1902 at 1 Cathedral Lane. He was shoemaker, aged 68. The cause of his death was "Cerebral Effusion, 36 hours. Cerebral disease. Certified".  Jane was admitted to the South Dublin Union Workhouse on 21 February 1907. She died in the Workhouse on 05 April 1907. She was aged 61 and her home address was Cathedral Lane. The cause of her death was "Endocarditis. Certified".  Samuel and Jane Parkes were members of the Church of Ireland. In 1901 and 1911 Censuses, Alexander and his family were Roman Catholic. Alexander's marriage to Eveleen Shields took place in the Registrar's office. This may have been because they were a "mixed marriage". In the 1911 Census, Eveleen's father, Peter, was a Roman Catholic.
3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation)
Only the record of Alexander's birth has been found. It is possible that he had siblings born before the introduction of civil registration of births in 1864. Norecords of baptisms have been found.

## Part Two: Marriage and children

1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse's name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation)

Alexander Parkes married **Eveleen Shields** on 26 May 1884 in the Dublin Registrar's office. Alexander was a letter carrier of 72 Bride Street. His father was Samuel, a shoemaker. Eveleen lived at 3 Lower Mercer Street and her father was Peter, a tailor.

It is known, from Army records, (see Part Four) that Alexander was a widower by October 1914. There is a death record for an Eveline Parkes which is probably relevant, but has elements that suggest that it may not be.

On 20 April 1914, Eveline Parkes, aged 49, died in Harold's Cross Hospice. The cause of her death was "Carcinoma of stomach 9 months. Asthenia." Eveline's address was recorded as 163 Thomas Street and she was the wife of a "wardsman" (ie a guard or a keeper).

Her address and her husband's occupation do not appear to be consistent with other information about Alexander Parkes. However, no other possible death record has been found.

2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)

Alexander and Jane Parkes had 10 children

1 **Alexander Parkes jnr** was born on 13 March 1885 at 7 Peter Street

In November 1899, Alexander was employed as a boy messenger in the Post Office. In 1901 he was recorded as a telegraphic messenger.

On 09 October 1904, Alexander married Elizabeth Hughes in Limerick..

Alexander was a soldier, based at New Barracks, Limerick. His father, Alexander was recorded as being an insurance superintendent.

In 1911, Alexander and his family lived in Iveagh Trust Buildings in New Bride Street. His three children had all been born in Limerick. Alexander's occupation was "Vanman Reservist". The 1912 electoral Roll that Alexander lived in an apartment in no. 204, Block J, in the Iveagh Trust buildings.

2 **Frederick Parkes** was born on 26 September 1886 at 8 Mercer Street

In 1901, Frederick was a telegraphic messenger. In 1907 he was appointed to the post of trainee Postman.

On 17 January 1909, Frederick married Mary O'Connor. He was a Postman and

his father, Alexander was a Postal Pensioner.

In 1911, Frederick, Mary and their son, Frederick, lived in the “Guinness Trust” [technically, the Iveagh Trust – see Part Four] Buildings in Patrick Street, close to Kevin Street. Frederick was a Town Postman.

3 **Richard Parkes** was born on 02 June 1888 at 5 Greenvale Parade.

In 1911, Richard lived with his parents. He was a “Druggist Messenger”.

On 30 July 1915, Richard married Mary Meredith in Rathmines, Dublin. Richard was a Van driver. His father, Alexander was a Postman. Mary’s father, Samson Meredith, was also a Postman.

4 **Mary Jane Parkes** was born on 17 July 1890 at Digges Street.

In 1911 Mary Jane lived with her parents and was a packer in Jacobs’ biscuit factory.

On 07 July 1912, Mary Jane married John Sweeney, a van driver. Her father, Alexander, was a Postman.

5 **William Joseph Parkes** was born on 15 September 1892 at 15 Digges Street.

On 10 January 1910, he joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Reservers (8156). Later that year, on 26 July 1910, he joined the Royal Irish Rifles (1/9474). He served in France in World War 1 from 1914 to 1916 and was promoted to Corporal. He did not return from leave in Dublin and, on 23 January 1917 and was declared a deserter.

On 08 September 1917, William Joseph married Elizabeth Sweeney, a laundress. His occupation was “Army” and his father, Alexander, was a pensioner.

6 **Eveleen Parkes jnr.** was born on 31 August 1894 at 25 Watkin Cottages.

In 1911, Eveleen was living with her parents. She was a servant.

On 11 March 1915, Eveleen married Edward Doyle, a water inspector. Her father, Alexander, was a Post Pensioner.

7 **Francis Charles Parkes** was born on 24 September 1896 at 13a Guinness Buildings, New Bride Street.

In 1911, Francis was living with his parents. He was a drapers messenger.

Francis joined the Royal Irish Rifles (7892) and fought in France in WWI. He was killed on 11 April 1916 and is buried in Becourt Military Cemetery, near Albert.

8 **Samuel Peter Parkes** was born on 21 August 1898 at 13A Guinness Buildings.

In 1911, Samuel was living with his parents.

On 18 April 1919, Samuel joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers (31860). He subsequently joined the Royal Munster Fusiliers twice (15328 and 32272). He also joined the Royal Army Medical Corps (7211638) and served in WWII.

9 **Mary Margaret Parkes** was born on 27 December 1900 at 13 New Bride Street.

In 1911, Margaret was living with her parents.

On 13 December 1922, Margaret Mary Parkes married John Robert Hawkins, a Private in the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers in The Dublin Registrar's office. Margaret Mary's father was Alexander, a deceased postman.

10 **Elizabeth Anne Parkes** was born on 30 March 1904 at 13 New Bride Street

In 1911, Elizabeth was living with her parents. Apart from being mentioned on her father's application to join the Army in 1914 (see Part Four), no other records have been found.

### Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

In February 1884 Alexander Parkes was employed as a Postman in Dublin.

On Alexander's birth record in 1885, he is described as a letter carrier and on Frederick's birth record in 1886 he was a sorter. In later birth records he was a Postman.

Alexander was retired from the Post Office on health grounds in 1901, aged 36, after 16 years service. He was awarded a pension of £21 8s 7d per annum.

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

In 1901, Alexander was living with his wife and 9 children (Elizabeth Anne was born in 1904) at 13 New Bride Street. Only two of his children were in employment. Both Alexander and Frederick were "telegraphic messengers".

In 1911, Alexander was living with his wife, seven of his children and his father-in-law, Peter Shields, a tailor, at house 16.5 Bishop Street. Four of his children were in employment. Richard was a "druggist messenger", Mary Jane was a packer in Jacob's biscuit factory, Eveleen jnr. was a servant and Francis was a draper's messenger.

## Part Four: Anything Else

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner

### Life after retirement from the Post Office

A number of records give an impression of Alexander's life after he retired from the Post Office in 1901 at the relatively young age of 36.

After the 1901 Census the family moved from the Kevin Street / New Bride Street apartments. The record of his mother's admission to the Workhouse in 1907 states that his address was 16 New Bride Street

At the time of the 1911 Census the family lived in room in a house in Bishop Street.

By the time of Alexander's admissions to the Workhouse in 1917 and 1918, his address was 10 High Street.

### Work

When his son, Alexander, was married in 1904, he was recorded as being an insurance superintendent.

At the time of the 1911 Census his occupation was "Civil Pensioner. GPO."

When he briefly served in the Army in 1914 (see below) he was recorded as being a clerk.

On both occasions on which he was admitted to the Workhouse, in 1917 and 1918, he was recorded as being a labourer, which is also his occupation on the record of his death.

### Army Service 1914

Shortly after the outbreak of war, on 03 October 1914, Alexander Parkes enlisted as a Special Reservist in the Royal Army Service Corp (39288). His occupation was "clerk". He had previously been in the RAMC and that service had terminated on 06 May 1908. He was initially assessed as being "'Fit' for Home Service only".

Alexander was sent to Limerick for training. In Limerick, on 08 October, a medical officer reported:

*"Varix in both legs. He is very debilitated and totally unfit to undergo the rigours of active service. Unfit for service"*

Alexander was discharged "for not being likely to become an efficient soldier" on 20 November 1914 after serving for only 49 days.



### **Alexander's admissions to the workhouse and death**

On, 25 August 1917 Alexander was admitted to South Dublin Union Workhouse. He was suffering from lumbago and was discharged on 21 September 1917. He was admitted again on 18 December 1917. He was suffering from hepatitis and was discharged on 18 January 1918.

Following a further admission, Alexander died on 20 October 1918 in the Workhouse, aged 54. The cause of his death was "Hemiplegia. Certified."

### **The South Dublin Union Workhouse**

Both Alexander Parkes, in 1918, and his mother, Jane, in 1904, died in this Workhouse and Alexander had been admitted to it on at least two other occasions.

Neither of them were paupers, without other means of support. Rather, as they were in need of treatment in the Workhouse's hospital, they had to be admitted to the Workhouse as being in need of "Indoor Relief".

The Workhouse of the South Dublin Poor Law Union was the largest workhouse in Ireland, capable of housing 3,200 inmates.

The Workhouse was built in 1840, close to Guinness' brewery, on a 50 acre site which had previously accommodated a House of Industry and a Foundling Hospital.

In 1895 the Workhouse was the subject of a critical article in the British Medical Journal – an article that confirms its involvement in medical care. In 1895, the workhouse had 3 hospitals. The Protestant Hospital was staffed by deaconesses who were trained nurses. Both the Catholic and the Children's' Hospitals were staffed by nuns (Sisters of Mercy) who were not trained nurses. Inmates of the workhouse assisted on the wards. There were up to 1000 patients supervised by a resident medical officer and three visiting doctors – one for each hospital.

As part of the Easter Rising in 1916, the Workhouse was occupied by the 4<sup>th</sup> Dublin Battalion of the Irish Volunteers. The 65 men could control only a few of the many buildings on the site. A counter attack was led by the Royal Irish Rifles, who were stationed nearby, and there followed several days of "brutal, hand to hand fighting" (Dorney). After many deaths on both sides, among the inmates and also of one nurse, the rebels surrendered when they were informed of the surrender of the volunteers in the GPO.

The sites of workhouses often became used for hospitals. Today, St. James' Hospital is on the site of the South Dublin Union Workhouse.

## The Iveagh Trust

In 1890, Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh, founded the Guinness Trust to help homeless people in Dublin and London. He endowed the London Fund with £200,000 and the Dublin Fund with £50,000.

The Kevin Street / New Bride Street development of three blocks (containing 336 apartments) was the first project undertaken by the Trust in Dublin, in 1894.

In the 1890s, Alexander Parkes lived in “Guinness Buildings” and, in 1911, his son, Alexander and his family, also lived one of the apartments.

In 1903 an Act of Parliament created The Iveagh Trust by the amalgamating the Guinness Trust (Dublin Fund) with other housing in Dublin which had been built following a further endowment by the Earl of Iveagh. The Guinness Trust continued to operate in London. Both organisations are still in operation today, providing social housing.

The founding mission of the Iveagh Trust was: “The amelioration of the conditions of the working population of Dublin and their modes and manner of living, by the provision of improved dwellings”.

The following is an extract from the Earl of Iveagh’s introduction to the Trust’s first Annual Report:

*On the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1903 there were 1380 persons living in the Trust Buildings. During the year there were 69 births and 20 deaths in the Buildings.*

*The average weekly earnings of the head of each family in residence at the close of the year was 19s 7 1/2 d. Every possible enquiry is made from the Trust Office to verify the statements of applications, as to give effect, as far as possible, to the Founder’s intention that the poorer applications should receive first consideration.*

*The average weekly rent of each room was 1s 11 1/2 d, covering chimney sweeping and the use of Venetian blinds. The rent is also inclusive of all rates.*

*The Trustees have made arrangements for supplying coal, in small quantities, to the tenants, for cash, at a rate which is lower than they would otherwise have to pay*

Today, the Iveagh Trust is one of the largest Registered Housing Bodies (housing associations) in Dublin. It has over 1600 homes (including 42 built in 2020) and a homeless hostel – Iveagh Hostel, which has 195 rooms. Following renovation and expansion, Kevin Street / New Bride Street now has 474 homes. Four members of the Guinness family, including the 4th Earl of Iveagh, currently serve as Trustees.

Please use this space to record the sources you have used