

## Chapter 3:

### History of the Magdalen Laundries and institutions within the scope of the Report

**Summary:**

*This Chapter identifies the ten institutions referred to as Magdalen Laundries which fall within the scope of this Report.*

*This Chapter also notes the submissions made to it by persons wishing to extend the scope of the Committee's work to other institutions. However the mandate of the Committee extended only to these ten institutions, operated by four Religious Congregations, as identified by the Government.*

*Some factual information relating to each of these Laundries is included. All ten were established prior to the foundation of the State. A number were established by lay people and, at their request, were subsequently taken over by Religious Congregations.*

*A brief review of the existing historical analysis of the Magdalen Laundries prior to establishment of the State is also included. Although the Report addresses the period after the establishment of the State in 1922, this brief review of the period prior to 1922 is provided as background and context to the Committee's work.*

*Institutions known as Magdalen Laundries were not confined to Ireland, nor were they exclusively Catholic-established or operated. Their furthest history in Europe may date back to medieval times, but the first of what could be termed a 'Magdalen Home' was established in England in 1758. The first in Ireland was a Protestant asylum established in 1765.*

*Historians estimate that by the late 1800s there were more than 300 Magdalen Institutions in England alone and at least 41 in Ireland. These early institutions – variously entitled Asylums, Refuges and Penitentiaries - included institutions of all denominations and none.*

*The focus and purpose of these early institutions was closely tied to women in prostitution or women regarded as in danger of falling into prostitution, including unmarried mothers. This purpose, however, appears to have changed over time and based on the records it identified, the Committee found that the Magdalen Laundries in Ireland, after 1922, was not associated in the same strong way with prostitution or unmarried mothers.*

*Analysis by historians of the records of Magdalen Laundries until 1900 has also suggested that, until that point, it was common for women to enter or exit those institutions at their own request. Part II of this Report addresses the entries and exits of women to the Magdalen Laundries after 1922.*

## **Introduction**

“Considerable media attention has been focused on Magdalen Asylums in Ireland since the mid-1990s. Since 1993 there have been television documentaries, a film, television dramas, plays, songs and poetry, and a number of historical studies created around the subject of Magdalen Asylums. While public interest in Magdalen asylums in Ireland is a very recent phenomenon, few realise that their history in Ireland dates back to 1765”.<sup>1</sup>

1. Although the term ‘Magdalen Laundries’ is now in regular use in Ireland, neither the institutions to which that label has become attached, nor their history and context are widely understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922, Paper submitted to the Inter-Departmental Committee, based on her prior published materials

2. Such institutions were not confined to Ireland, nor were they limited to the period since the State's foundation, nor indeed were they exclusively Catholic-established or operated.
3. In fact the institutions now referred to as Magdalen Laundries operated over a number of centuries, throughout the United Kingdom, Europe, North America and Australia. They included not only Catholic-operated institutions, but also Protestant institutions as well as institutions run by lay Committees.
4. Moreover, no new Magdalen Laundries were established after the foundation of the State - rather, they were part of what O'Sullivan and O'Donnell describe as "inherited networks of social control" (referring in that regard to Industrial and Reformatory Schools, Workhouses, Magdalen Laundries and psychiatric hospitals).<sup>2</sup>
5. A full historical survey of Magdalen Laundries in Ireland and abroad is beyond the scope of this Report. However, some understanding of their history is necessary to identify and attempt to understand their place in Irish society from the foundation of the State onwards.
6. This Chapter first identifies the ten Magdalen Laundries which were operated in the State following 1922 and which come within the scope of this Report. It then provides a brief review of existing historical analysis of the Magdalen Laundries prior to 1922.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Sullivan and O'Donnell, *Coercive Confinement in Post-Independence Ireland* at 7

**A. Institutions within the scope of the Report**

7. Ten Magdalen Laundries operated in the State by four Religious Orders were identified by Government and included in the mandate conferred on the Committee. The institutions within the remit of the Committee's work were as follows:

*Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge:*

St Mary's Refuge, High Park, Grace Park Road, Drumcondra, Dublin;  
Monastery of Our Lady of Charity Sean McDermott Street (formerly Gloucester Street), Dublin 1;

*Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy:*

Magdalen Asylum / Magdalen Home, No. 47 Forster Street, Galway;  
St Patrick's Refuge, Crofton Road, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin;

*Religious Sisters of Charity:*

St Mary Magdalen's, Floraville Road, Donnybrook, Dublin;  
St Vincent's, St Mary's Road, Peacock Lane, Cork;

*Sisters of the Good Shepherd:*

St Mary's, Cork Road, Waterford;  
St Mary's, New Ross, Wexford;  
St Mary's, Pennywell Road, Limerick;  
St Mary's, Sunday's Well, Cork.

8. The Committee received a number of submissions requesting an extension of its mandate to include the following residential institutions with laundries attached:

- St Mary's, Stanhope Street;
- Summerhill, Wexford;
- Bethany Home; and
- Newtownforbes Industrial School.

9. The representative group “Magdalene Survivors Together” made a number of representations to the Committee, arguing that Stanhope Street was a Magdalen Laundry and should have been included in the mandate of the Committee. In that regard, Magdalene Survivors Together argued:
  - that education or training were not provided to the girls who worked there;
  - that the appearance of the Laundry and uniforms were similar to Magdalen Laundries; and
  - that the experience of girls at Stanhope Street was equivalent to that of the women in Magdalen Laundries.
10. Magdalene Survivors Together also suggested that Summerhill, Wexford, should also be included in the scope of the Committee’s work, for the same reasons.
11. The Religious Sisters of Charity, which operated Stanhope Street, have said that it was a training centre, which provided domestic training (including in laundry work) to young girls. They further said that it never operated as a “refuge” or “home” along the lines of the Magdalen Laundries which the Congregation operated at Donnybrook and Peacock Lane, Cork and that it was operated on a fee-paying basis for the girls admitted to it.
12. The Sisters of Mercy who operated Summerhill indicated that it was one of approximately 16 “Mercy Homes”, consisting of a vocational training school for girls.
13. A private person also made a number of submissions directly to the Committee, stating that Newtownforbes Industrial School, Longford, should be included in the scope of its work. She argued this on the basis that it had an attached laundry in which she had worked as a child.
14. Finally, the Committee also received submissions from the representative group “Bethany Survivors Group” and others, requesting inclusion of

Bethany Home which accommodated persons including pregnant women, unmarried mothers and their children within the scope of its work.

15. The Committee fully understood the desire of the individuals and groups concerned to draw the Committee's attention to other residential institutions which operated laundries and heard all such submissions.
16. However, the Committee did not have discretion to extend the mandate of the Committee to institutions other than 10 Magdalen Laundries listed above. In particular, the Committee did not have a mandate to examine other institutions such as schools, homes, asylums, orphanages or other institutions on grounds that they had laundry facilities attached to them.
17. Any possible extension of the mandate of the Committee would have been a matter for the Government. In every case where submissions were made to it regarding extension of its mandate, the Committee explained this point to the person or groups concerned, and passed the submission to the Minister for Justice and Equality, for consideration.
18. No additions were subsequently made by the Government to the original list of ten institutions within the scope of the Committee's work and these accordingly remained the focus of the Committee's work. Additional information on these ten follows.

***a. Sisters of Our Lady of Charity***

19. The Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity was founded in Caen, France in 1641 by St John Eudes with the stated goal of caring for girls and women. The first community of the Congregation in Ireland was formed in 1853, following a request for assistance by Fr John Smith, with the approval of Cardinal Cullen, for the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity to

operate a refuge for girls and women “who did not have the protection of family and friends”.<sup>3</sup>

20. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity was initially an enclosed Order. Until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, the Sisters of the Congregation were prohibited from leaving the Convent enclosure other than with advance written permission. Permission even simply for movement of a Sister from one convent to another required the permission of the Archbishop.<sup>4</sup>

21. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity operated two Magdalen Laundries, both in Dublin.

#### *St Mary's Refuge, High Park, Drumcondra*

22. A refuge termed “Mary Magdalen Asylum” was operational in Drumcondra from 1831. At the request of Fr Smith, noted above, a number of Sisters from the Congregation, then based in France, were invited to Dublin and became responsible for the operation of the institution in 1853 at Sacred Heart Home, Drumcondra Road.<sup>5</sup> In 1856, the Order purchased High Park at Grace Park Road, Drumcondra and built St Mary's Refuge.<sup>6</sup>

23. A number of other buildings were also located on the High Park site in addition to the Laundry and living quarters for the women who worked there. These consisted of a Convent, an industrial school, a farm and for a number of years, a lodging house for paying guests known as St Michael's.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Submission of the Congregation to the Inter-Departmental Committee

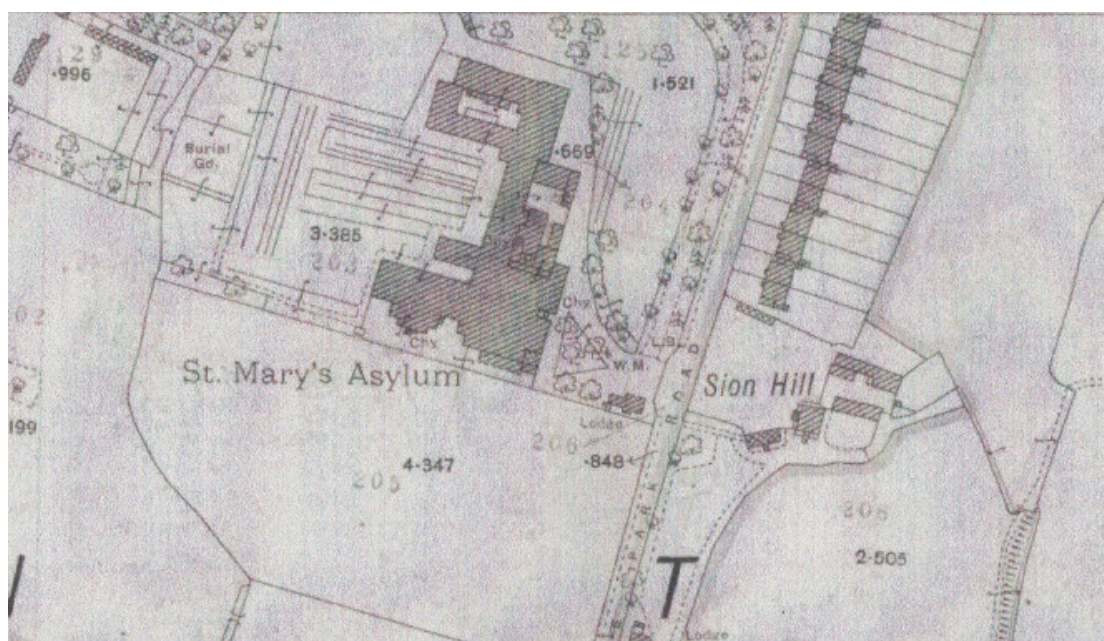
<sup>4</sup> Numerous written applications for permission for members of the Congregation to leave the enclosure to travel to another convent or, in exceptional circumstances, to other locations are on record in the Dublin Diocesan Archive

<sup>5</sup> Centenary booklet, Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, High Park

<sup>6</sup> Id

<sup>7</sup> Information Note from the Order of our Lady of Charity

24. The capacity of the Magdalen Laundry at High Park varied over time, but did not exceed 250. For instance, the occupancy was 218 in 1922; 210 in 1932, 215 in 1942 and 200 in 1952.<sup>8</sup> The Laundry ceased operations in 1991.
25. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1936, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>9</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.



*Monastery of Our Lady of Charity, Lower Sean McDermott Street*

26. In 1821, a refuge was established at Mecklenburg Street (later re-named Railway Street, at the rear of Gloucester Street) by a layperson (Mrs Brigid Burke) for 'troubled and homeless' women. Over time, a four-member lay Committee became responsible for the institution and a Matron was employed to operate it. In or about 1860, the Committee purchased additional land to include a site on Gloucester Street (later re-named Sean McDermott Street).

<sup>8</sup> Catholic Directory 1922, 1932, 1942, 1952

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27. In 1873, Cardinal Cullen requested the Sisters of Mercy to take over the operation of the institution, then known as the Magdalen Retreat, which they did until late 1886. At that point, and with the approval of Archbishop Walsh, the Sisters of Mercy requested the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity to take over operation of the institution. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity did so and became responsible for the institution in February 1887.
28. There were no other institutions on site, other than the laundry, living quarters for the women who worked there, and the Convent.
29. The capacity of the Magdalen Laundry at Sean McDermott Street was 150. Occupancy varied over time- it was 120 in 1922, 130 in 1932, 135 in 1942 and 140 in 1952. The Laundry ceased operations in 1996.
30. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1936, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>10</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.



<sup>10</sup> © Ordnance Survey Ireland / Government of Ireland. Copyright Permit No. MP 000413

**b. Sisters of Mercy**

31. The Sisters of Mercy were founded in 1831 by Catherine McAuley, with a mission to particularly focus on the poor, sick and disadvantaged. This work was carried out through the establishment of many distinct and independent Houses throughout the country. Each independent House had its own Reverend Mother and some had Branch or Daughter Houses. There was no relationship between the different Houses.<sup>11</sup> In 1994, the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy was founded, which united all Mercy Houses in Ireland and South Africa.
32. The Sisters of Mercy operated two Magdalen Laundries in Ireland, one in Galway and one in Dun Laoghaire, as follows.

*Magdalen Home / Asylum, 47 Forster Street, Galway*

33. The Magdalen Laundry in Galway was founded in 1824 by a private person (Ms. Lynch) and was managed by a lay society known as the Association of Ladies of the Saint Magdalen Society. At the request of the founder, the Sisters of Mercy became responsible for the operation of the institution following her death in 1845.
34. The Laundry and living quarters at Forster Street were separate from the Convent (motherhouse) in Galway. The living quarters included dormitories (at one point 3 dormitories), a kitchen, dining room, infirmary and recreation room. The site also included a Chapel and a farm (across the road).<sup>12</sup>
35. The capacity of the Magdalen Laundry in Galway was approximately 110 and the occupancy varied from 110 in 1951<sup>13</sup>, 73 in 1954<sup>14</sup> and 18 in 1984.<sup>15</sup> The Laundry closed in October 1984.

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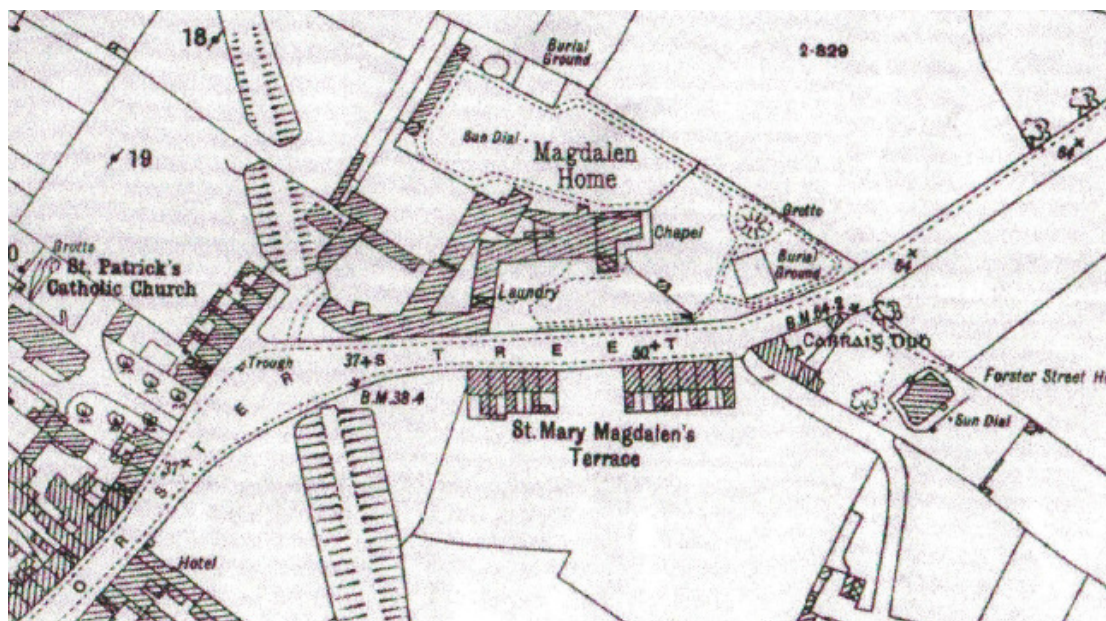
<sup>11</sup> History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy,

<sup>12</sup> Submission of the Sisters of Mercy to the Inter Departmental Committee

<sup>13</sup> Galway Diocesan records

<sup>14</sup> Halliday Sutherland, "Irish Journey"

36. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1944, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>16</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.



*St Patrick's Refuge, Crofton Road, Dun Laoghaire*

37. The Magdalen Laundry referred to throughout this Report as St Patrick's Refuge, Dun Laoghaire, was founded in Bow Street, Dublin in 1790. It was moved to Crofton Road, Dun Laoghaire in 1880. The Laundry and living quarters for the women who worked there were located adjacent to and on the grounds of St Michael's Hospital, Dun Laoghaire and St Michael's Convent.

38. St Patrick's Refuge itself comprised a three storey building, including four large rooms for laundry, sleeping quarters on a higher floor, infirmary, refectory and kitchen. The Laundry and institution closed in January 1963.

39. No Registers survive for the institution, but it is estimated that the occupancy at St Patrick's Refuge was typically 50 women at any one time.

<sup>15</sup> Records of the Sisters of Mercy

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There were approximately 20 women there at the time of its closure in 1963.

40. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1937, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>17</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.



**c. Religious Sisters of Charity**

41. The Religious Sisters of Charity were officially established in 1816 by rescript from Pope Pius VII, following the previous work of foundress Mary Aikenhead, as an Order of religious women dedicated to the service of the poor. In light of its particular charism, the Order was never enclosed, even at time of establishment, when no other convent in Ireland permitted Sisters to leave their enclosures.<sup>18</sup>
42. The Religious Sisters of Charity operated two Magdalen Laundries in the State, one in Donnybrook and one in Cork, as follows.

<sup>17</sup> © Ordnance Survey Ireland / Government of Ireland. Copyright Permit No. MP 000413

<sup>18</sup> Submission of the Religious Sisters of Charity

*St Mary Magdalen's (later named St Margaret's), 1 Floraville Road, Donnybrook, Dublin 4*

43. The Magdalen Laundry referred to throughout this Report as the Donnybrook Laundry was founded in 1796 by two lay persons (Mr Quarterman and Mrs Brigid Burke) as St Mary Magdalen's Care Centre at Townsend Street, Dublin. Another lay person (Mrs Ryan) took over management of the institution from 1798 until her death in 1833. During that period and under the stewardship of Mrs Ryan, the Laundry was established.<sup>19</sup>
44. Archbishop Murray, at the time of Mrs Ryan's death in 1833, requested the Religious Sisters of Charity to take over the operation of the institution, which they did. The institution re-located to Donnybrook Castle in 1837, purchased with a legacy from Mrs Ryan's will. The institution was renamed St Mary Magdalen's Asylum at this time.<sup>20</sup>
45. The capacity of the Magdalen Laundry in Donnybrook varied from 100 to 120 over much of the period of its operation. Occupancy also varied over time – 100 in 1922 and 1932, and 115 in 1942, 1951 and 1952.<sup>21</sup> Capacity was only approximately 40 in the 1970s, but increased again to 100 after renovations.<sup>22</sup>
46. In 1992 the Laundry was sold to a private company which operated a commercial Laundry on the site until 2006. Two of the women who continued to live in the institution were employed by this company. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1938, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>23</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included at in the Appendices.

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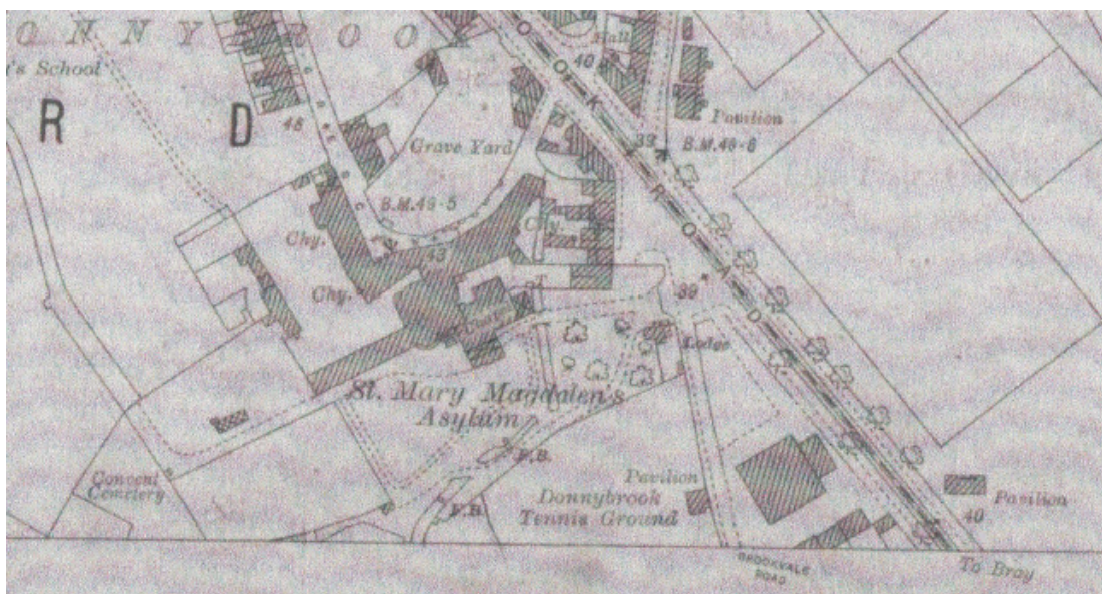
<sup>19</sup> The History of St Margaret's, archive of the Religious Sisters of Charity

<sup>20</sup> Id

<sup>21</sup> Catholic Directory, 1922, 1932, 1942, 1952

<sup>22</sup> Annals of the Religious Sisters of Charity, Donnybrook

<sup>23</sup> © Ordnance Survey Ireland / Government of Ireland. Copyright Permit No. MP 000413



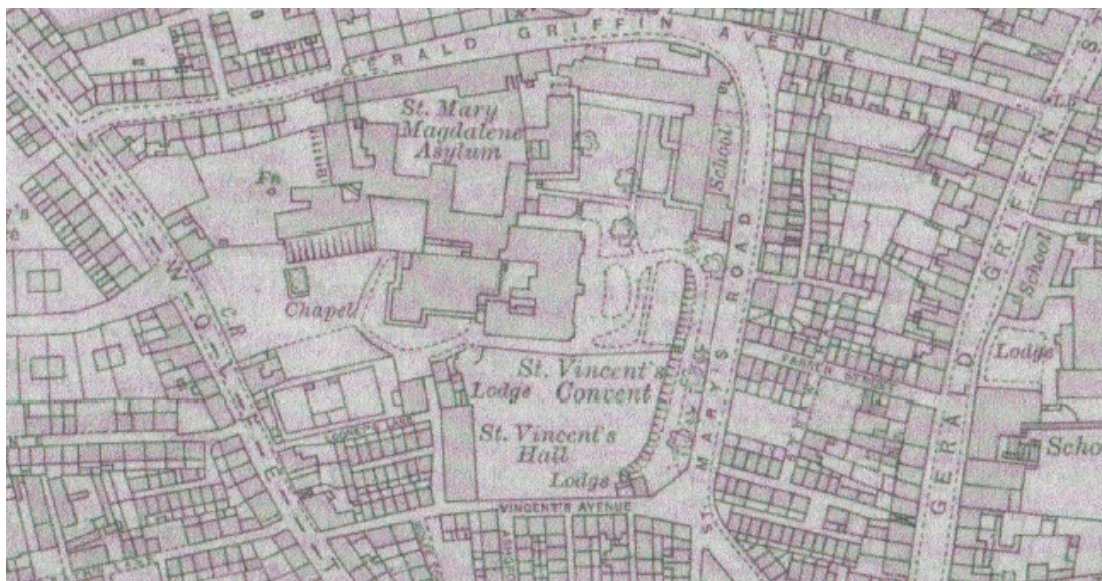
*St Mary Magdalen's, Peacock Lane, Cork*

47. The Magdalen Laundry referred to throughout this Report as “Peacock Lane” was established by a lay person (Mr Nicholas Therry) in 1809. The Religious Sisters of Charity were invited to Cork and became responsible for its operation in 1845.
48. The campus at Peacock Lane included a primary (national) school as well as the Laundry, living quarters for the women who lived there and the Convent. The capacity of the Magdalen Laundry at Peacock Lane was approximately 110 and the occupancy varied from 104 in the years 1922 and 1932<sup>24</sup> to approximately 80 in the 1970s. The capacity fell to 60 following refurbishments to the institution in 1986.<sup>25</sup>
49. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1927-1928, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>26</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.

<sup>24</sup> Catholic Directory 1922 and 1932

<sup>25</sup> Annals of the Religious Sisters of Charity

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#### ***d. Sisters of the Good Shepherd***

50. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd were established in France in 1835 by Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pellentier. She had previously entered the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity and served as Superior at a community of that Congregation in Angers. From Angers, a number of new communities were founded. She ultimately requested permission of the Pope to establish a Generalate to link these communities, which was approved in 1835.<sup>27</sup>
51. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd was initially an enclosed Order. Until the Second Vatican Council 1963, the Sisters of the Congregation were prohibited from leaving the Convent enclosure other than with written permission in advance.
52. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd operated four Magdalen Laundries within the territory of the State, one each in Waterford, New Ross, Limerick and Cork, as set out in more detail below. Magdalen Laundries were also run by the Order in Derry and Newry in Northern Ireland, but these institutions do not fall within the scope of the Committee's work.

<sup>27</sup> Submission from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd to the Inter-Departmental Committee

*St Mary's, Good Shepherd Laundry, Clare Street / Pennywell Road, Limerick*

53. The institution referred to throughout this Report as the Limerick Magdalen Laundry was established in 1826 by a priest and a lay person (Fr Fitzgibbon and Miss Joanna Reddan). Twelve years later in 1848, the Bishop of Limerick requested the Good Shepherd Sisters (then in France) to send sisters to take over the institution, which they agreed to do.
54. The site at Clare Street / Pennywell Road included the Laundry, living quarters for the women who worked there, a Convent, an Industrial School and a Reformatory School for girls. The capacity of the Limerick Magdalen Laundry was approximately 120 and the occupancy varied from 100 to 120 until the 1960s, at which point it reduced to an average of about 60 women. By the 1980s the occupancy had further reduced to an average of about 40 women.
55. The Laundry was operated on-site by the Congregation until 1982, at which point it was sold as a going concern to a private company. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1938, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>28</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.



<sup>28</sup> © Ordnance Survey Ireland / Government of Ireland. Copyright Permit No. MP 000413



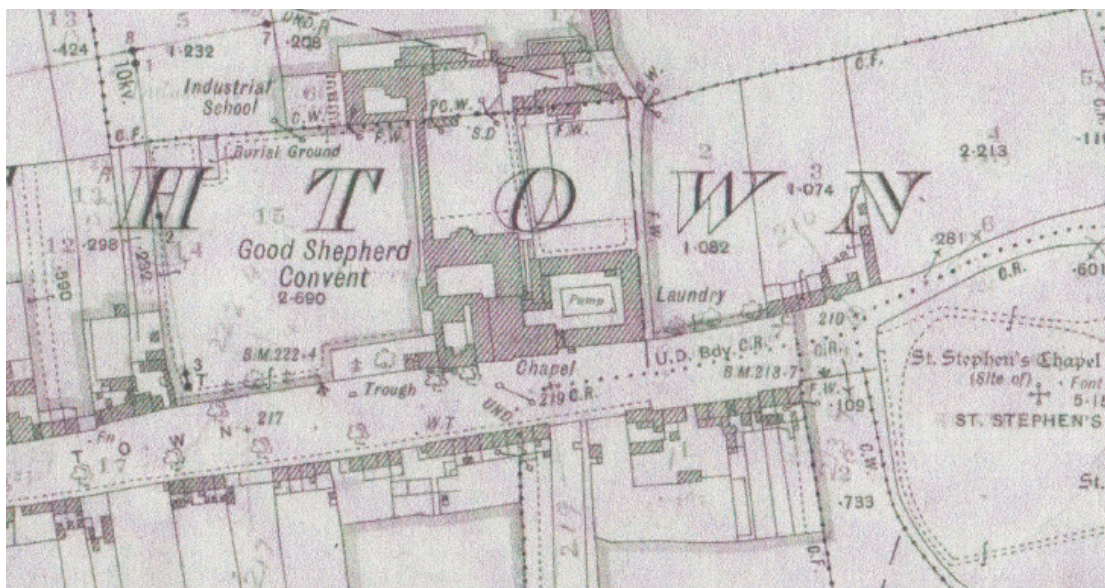
### *St Mary's, Good Shepherd Laundry, Cork Road, Waterford*

56. An institution for homeless girls and women was established in Waterford by a priest (Rev. Timothy Dowley) in 1842 and later, run by Rev. John Crotty with the assistance of two lay Matrons.
  
57. With the approval of Bishop O'Brien, a different priest (Rev. Crotty) requested the Good Shepherd Sisters to provide Sisters for the purpose of operating the institution. Initially, five Sisters travelled from France in 1858 to do so. Work on the building of a new Convent and associated buildings began in 1892 and was completed and occupied by 1894.
  
58. The site included the Laundry, living quarters for the women who worked there, a Convent and an Industrial School. The capacity of the Laundry was approximately 120 and the occupancy varied from about 100 to 120 until the early 1960s, at which point it reduced to an average of about 60 women. By the 1980s the occupancy had further reduced to an average of about 40 women. The Laundry closed in 1982.
  
59. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1924, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>29</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included in the Appendices.

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<sup>29</sup> © Ordnance Survey Ireland / Government of Ireland. Copyright Permit No. MP 000413

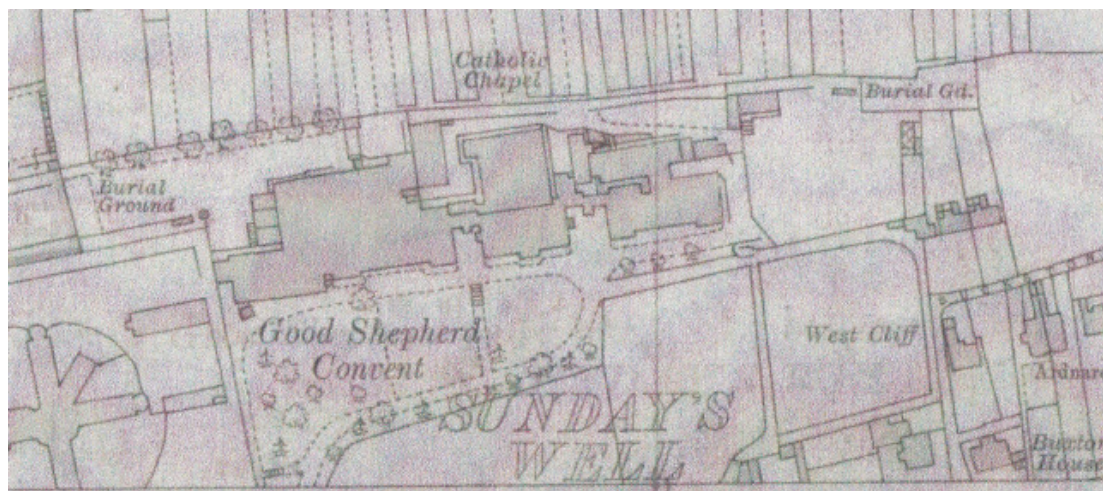




*St Mary's, Good Shepherd Laundry, Convent Avenue, Sunday's Well, Cork*

63. The Magdalen Laundry at Convent Avenue, Cork, was established in 1870 by a Good Shepherd Sister from the New Ross Convent. She and three other Sisters established a temporary convent at a cottage supplied by Mr James Hegarty. A Convent and Magdalen Asylum were built that year. Two years later in 1872 the laundry was opened as a source of income for the asylum.
64. The campus consisted of the Laundry, living quarters for the women who worked there, a Convent and an Industrial School. The capacity of the Laundry was approximately 120 and the occupancy varied from about 100 to 120 until the 1960s at which point it reduced to an average of about 60 women. At the time of its closure in 1977 the occupancy had further reduced to an average of about 40 women.
65. An extract from the Ordnance Survey map for 1927-1928, below, demonstrates the layout of the site.<sup>31</sup> Additional maps of the site and its development are included at in the Appendices.

<sup>31</sup> © Ordnance Survey Ireland / Government of Ireland. Copyright Permit No. MP 000413



## B. Brief review of the existing historical analysis of the Magdalen Laundries prior to 1922

### Origins and early institutions

66. Magdalen Laundries are generally understood as being named after Mary Magdalene. Luddy points out that it was the association with prostitution – which arose only after her identification as a prostitute by Pope Gregory in 591 – which led to Mary Magdalene becoming:

“the patroness of rescue homes or Magdalen Asylums ... which were originally established to ‘rescue’ women and girls in danger of becoming prostitutes, and to rehabilitate those who had already ‘fallen’ into prostitution”.<sup>32</sup>

67. Although a matter for further research, it is possible that threads may link the institutions now known as Magdalen Laundries to medieval times. For instance, the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX (a canon law collection promulgated in 1234) included a section in relation to monasteries as a site for “lay penance” with a recommendation that women who had:

<sup>32</sup> Maria Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922, Paper submitted to the Inter-Departmental Committee, based on her prior published materials

“committed adultery, whose husbands refused to take them back, should be confined to convents to perform lifelong penance under the supervision of that house’s religious women”.<sup>33</sup>

68. Earlier materials on which this canon was based had been associated with convents which “reformed prostitutes” might enter and which ultimately led to the establishment of a Religious Order “specifically for these former prostitutes: the Penitential Order of St Mary Magdelene”.<sup>34</sup>

69. Regardless of a possible link to early history, it is generally accepted that the first of what are now called Magdalen Laundries was opened in the eighteenth century.

70. In general, these institutions were established as refuges, to which a variety of activities, including laundry, needlework, lace-making, habit-making, shroud-making, farms and so on, were added to support them and, in some cases, to provide training for the women.

71. Finnegan records that the first Refuge in England:

“for the reception of the penitent ‘fallen’ was the Magdalen Hospital, opened in Whitechapel in 1758 ... . This institution admitted females aged between fifteen and twenty, and could eventually house about 140 inmates desirous of reform”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> X 5.32.19, *Gaudemus in Domino*, as summarised in Edward Andrew Reno III, “The Authoritative Text: Raymond of Penyafort’s editing of the *Decretals of Gregory IX (1234)*”, [Columbia University 2011. At 5.8.2.2](#). Full text of the Canon as translated in that paper:

“But those women, who having abandoned the marriage bed have fallen away due to the sinfulness of the flesh – if their husbands, after having been exhorted by you, should still not wish to take them back once they have been turned toward the virtue of a more moral life – you should, for the sake of God, endeavor to place [them] in convents with religious women, so that there they may perform perpetual penance”.

<sup>34</sup> *Id*

<sup>35</sup> Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, at 8.

72. She indicates that a second institution – the London Lock Hospital - was established in 1787, “catering solely for venereal patients discharged from the Lock Hospital ... to which the new institution was now attached”.<sup>36</sup> Finnegan then details the “succession of Penitentiaries and Rescue organisations which followed the establishment of these eighteenth-century Homes”<sup>37</sup>, with the effect that:

“[b]y 1898 there were more than 300 Magdalen Institutions in England alone, collectively housing 6,000 inmates and employing at least 1,200 full-time staff.”<sup>38</sup>

73. Similar institutions were established in other States during the period – Smith details that “the first asylum for fallen women in the United States, the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, was founded in 1800” and that other North American cities including New York, Boston, Chicago and Toronto also subsequently did so.<sup>39</sup>

74. The first such institution in Ireland was the Dublin Magdalen Asylum on Lower Leeson Street. It was established in 1765 by a lay person, Lady Arbella Denny. The establishment was announced to the public by way of a pamphlet on “The Important Subject of Establishing a Magdalen Asylum in Dublin” and with the object “to rescue first fall Protestant cases only”.<sup>40</sup> From that point onwards, Luddy records that:

“at least forty-one asylums or refuges were established to rescue and reclaim ‘fallen women’ in Ireland. Of these at least nineteen operated in Dublin and Dun Laoghaire and five were in Belfast”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Id.

<sup>37</sup> Id.

<sup>38</sup> Id. at 7

<sup>39</sup> James Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment, at xv

<sup>40</sup> Finnegan, supra, at 8

<sup>41</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra

75. These early institutions – variously entitled Asylums, Refuges and Penitentiaries - included institutions of all denominations and none. Some were managed by members of Religious Orders and some by lay people. These included, for example:

- The Church of Ireland “Lock Penitentiary” in Dublin, founded in 1794 by a lay person “to employ and reform destitute women leaving the lock hospital”,<sup>42</sup>
- The Church of Ireland “Magdalen Asylum” in Cork, founded in 1810<sup>43</sup>
- a so-called “Female Penitentiary” established in 1813 on Eccles Street in Dublin “for fallen females of every religious persuasion”,<sup>44</sup>
- The Catholic “Female Penitent’s Retreat” on Marlborough Street in Dublin, founded in 1826;<sup>45</sup>
- The Episcopalian “Asylum for Penitent Females” on Baggot Street, Dublin, established in 1835;<sup>46</sup>
- The “Magdalen Asylum” established in Tralee, Co Kerry, in 1858 and operated there by the Sisters of Mercy until 1910;<sup>47</sup>
- And the Church of Ireland “Rescue Home” or “Home for Fallen Women” established in 1860 at Dun Laoghaire<sup>48</sup>.

76. An indicative list of 41 such institutions was compiled by historian Maria Luddy and is reproduced in the Appendices.

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<sup>42</sup> Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society 1800-1940*, Table 3.1 at 79-82

<sup>43</sup> *Id* and Finnegan, *supra*, at 158

<sup>44</sup> Finnegan, *supra*, at 9

<sup>45</sup> Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society 1800-1940*, Table 3.1 at 79-82

<sup>46</sup> *Id*

<sup>47</sup> *Id*

<sup>48</sup> *Id*

### Purpose and character of the early institutions

77. The purpose of these early institutions was closely tied to women in prostitution or women seen as in danger of falling into prostitution- including unmarried mothers, as “it was commonly believed that women who had given birth to an illegitimate child would fall into prostitution”.<sup>49</sup> Referring to the Leeson Street asylum, Smith identifies it as “closely associated with the moral reform and spiritual conversion of fallen women in the city” and that it, together with the other:

“asylums operating in Ireland by the end of the nineteenth century, provided shelter for women considered likely to end up on the streets”.<sup>50</sup>

78. It has been noted that these institutions were not imposed on society – but rather that:

“These refuges were established in response to social demands, the alarming number of prostitutes who operated openly in the city generally being given as the reason for their existence”.<sup>51</sup>

79. In that regard and referring to Dublin, Ferriter notes that:

“It has been estimated that in 1868 that there were 132 brothels in the city and at least 1,000 prostitutes: ‘Prostitution in Dublin was unregulated by police control, a situation at the time unique in Britain or Ireland as remarked on in the 1903 edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica’.”<sup>52</sup>

80. Accordingly the so-called “rescue movement”, (including the “Midnight” or “Lamplight” associations) or work in relation to unmarried mothers appears

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<sup>49</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra

<sup>50</sup> James Smith, Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment at 25

<sup>51</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1880-1930, supra, at 92

<sup>52</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland, at 30, [citing Brian Lalor (general ed.), The Encyclopaedia of Ireland at 736]



to have often provided the impetus for the establishment, including by lay people, of many of these early institutions. For example, the first asylum established in Ireland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (noted above) appears to have been established after the lay foundress became interested in so-called ‘rescue work’ while involved in the Foundling Hospital and encountered unmarried mothers who had been abandoned by their families.

81. It has also been argued that:

“from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it is evident that the asylums were beginning to be used by Catholic parents to hide the ‘shame’ visited on their families by wayward or pregnant daughters”.<sup>53</sup>

82. Rhattigan, in considering the much later time-period of 1900-1950, also analyses a “society that was, on the whole, deeply intolerant of pregnancy outside marriage”<sup>54</sup>, and where “social hostility” to unmarried mothers was “one of the main factors for the high levels of prenatal emigration among single expectant women in post-independence Ireland.”<sup>55</sup>

83. Reform and return to society, and in some cases after a period of practical training, were also common themes in the early asylums and institutions. For example, at the Leeson Street asylum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

“it was decided that the ‘penitents’, as the inmates were called, should spend between eighteen months and two years in the asylum and that they were to leave only if their future could be guaranteed in some way, either through acquiring a position or returning home”.<sup>56</sup>

84. Similarly at the Lombard Street Asylum in Galway, established in 1824:

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<sup>53</sup> Luddy, *Magdalen Asylums in Ireland, 1880-1930* at 304

<sup>54</sup> Rhattigan, *What else could I do? Single Mothers and Infanticide in Ireland 1900-1950*, at 29

<sup>55</sup> *Id* at 16

<sup>56</sup> Luddy, *supra* at 77

“women stayed for a number of years and were instructed in ‘useful and practical industry’ and, when it was felt that they had acquired ‘regular and pious habits’, they were placed in situations, usually as servants”.<sup>57</sup>

85. When the Eccles Street asylum acquired new premises, two distinct wards were established:

“so that penitents of ‘birth and delicate education’ should be separated from those of the lowest orders. Most of the women, however, were soon found to be unskilled and illiterate; confirming the Committee’s view that training and the procuring of ‘eligible situations’ were vital objectives if the reformed were to be permanently restored to society”.<sup>58</sup>

86. Luddy points out that in addition to a function in training for the future, work within the early institutions served another purpose, namely the avoidance of “an idle life” which it was considered might prejudice the “reform” of the women in question. Accordingly, it appears there was typically a dual purpose for work within these early institutions: “The aim of the work was not only to keep the inmates busy but also to train them for new occupations once they had left the asylum”.<sup>59</sup>

87. The nature of the work undertaken varied from institution to institution, but it has been reported that all “engaged in needle and laundry work”, which also provided a “vital source of financial support” for these early institutions when the charitable funding typically available in the first years of their existence waned.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Luddy, *supra*, quoting *Connaught Telegraph* 31 May 1827.

<sup>58</sup> Finnegan, *supra*, at 9, citing the 1814 Report of the Committee of the Dublin Female Penitentiary to the General Meeting

<sup>59</sup> Luddy, *Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra*

<sup>60</sup> Luddy, *Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra*

88. The institutions had differing rules on the types of women considered suitable for each institution as well as the conditions which applied within them. Some had a preference for younger women, such as the Ulster Magdalen Asylum Belfast (which accepted women under the age of 20 only); while others accepted only women of a particular religion, such as the Magdalen Asylum in Leeson Street (which accepted Protestant women only).<sup>61</sup>
89. Lay-run Magdalen asylums “generally excluded the admission of hardened prostitutes” and many of the women admitted:
- “were described as ‘seduced’ women who on abandonment by their seducers and families turned to the asylums for protection”.<sup>62</sup>
90. The Protestant Asylum in Leeson Street accepted pregnant women<sup>63</sup>, but this was not the case with the vast majority of institutions – including all 10 of the institutions covered by the present Report, none of which accepted pregnant women.
91. The conditions within these early institutions varied. It appears that the women who lived in the Protestant Asylum in Leeson Street were given a number by which they would be known during their period in the institution; “known as Mrs. One, Mrs. Two” and so on.<sup>64</sup> In some of the religious-operated institutions, the women were given the name of a saint as their “House name”, while in others, women retained their own names throughout their time in the institution. Some of the Laundries within the scope of this Report had this practice of giving women a “House” or “Class” name, while others did not.

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<sup>61</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra

<sup>62</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra

<sup>63</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra

<sup>64</sup> Luddy, Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922 supra

92. Whether new names were adopted in this way or not, a common thread through the early institutions appears to have been a break with her former life for the women who entered, including in many cases a break in contact with family, friends and associates.<sup>65</sup>
93. During the early period “lay women played an important role in running these establishments”, including the administration and operation of the institution, the “instruction of the inmates in religion, reading and needlework” and fundraising.<sup>66</sup> Over time, many of these early institutions closed or were taken over by religious congregations. Luddy explains that:
- “Nuns generally took over institutions which were already in existence but which through both managerial and financial considerations had run into difficulties. It was a very practical move to bring the nuns in because they had the personnel, commitment, organisation and financial support which many of the Catholic lay asylums lacked”.<sup>67</sup>
94. These institutions, then operated as religious-run institutions located near or attached to convents, were generally larger than surviving lay institutions and were typically located in the hinterland of urban areas.

### **Routes of entry and exit during the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

95. A number of historians have studied the populations of these institutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, based on the Registers of the asylums, have compiled some data on the routes by which women entered and left these institutions up to 1900.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Luddy, *Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922* supra

<sup>66</sup> Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society*, supra, at 91-92

<sup>67</sup> Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society*, supra, at 93

<sup>68</sup> Study of the primary sources – the Registers of institutions up to the year 1900 - have been conducted and analysis thereof published both by Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, supra, and Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society*, supra

96. Luddy, on the basis of analysis of 7 institutions up to the year 1900, concludes that the “majority of women who entered these refuges did so voluntarily ... just over 66 per cent” and that “entering a refuge was, for the majority of women, a matter of choice” which was favoured over the workhouse by “many”.<sup>69</sup>
97. The second largest source of referral identified by Luddy for the period is that of religious referrals (priests and nuns), followed by family referrals or other non-religious sources such as employers.<sup>70</sup>
98. She identified a similar pattern in the exit routes from the institutions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “The majority of women who left the asylums did so of their own wish ... approximately 52% of the women did this”.<sup>71</sup> She notes, however, that:
- “some form of permission to leave had to be granted by the nuns and a small number of women, about 1 per cent, ran away or escaped from the homes”.<sup>72</sup>
- Nonetheless, she states that “right up to the end of 1899, the majority were also able to leave if they wished to do so”.<sup>73</sup>
99. In light of these statistics and the repeat entries by a significant number of women, Luddy concludes that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century:
- “It seems likely that many of the women used these homes as a temporary refuge and had no intention of reforming... . The decision to stay was made by the women themselves and although the nuns

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<sup>69</sup> Luddy, *Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922* supra

<sup>70</sup> Id.

<sup>71</sup> Id.

<sup>72</sup> Id.

<sup>73</sup> Id.

certainly did not encourage women to leave, they had little choice in the matter if the woman was determined to go”.<sup>74</sup>

100. Analysis by Finnegan of the entries and exits of women to the Magdalen Laundries operated by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Limerick, New Ross, Cork and Waterford up until the year 1900 also confirm a high proportion of both voluntary entries and exits. Finnegan’s analysis on this issue can be summarised in the form of the following table:

<b>Institution &amp; years examined</b>	<b>Voluntary entries (‘entered of own accord’)</b>	<b>Voluntary departures (‘left at own request’)</b>
Cork (1872-1890) <sup>75</sup>	47%	48%
New Ross (1860-1900) <sup>76</sup>	22%	39%
Waterford (1842-1900) <sup>77</sup>	49.5%	63%
Limerick (1848-1877) <sup>78</sup>	43%	34%

101. It should be noted that cases where women left to re-join family or friends; or who left to take up employment are not included by Finnegan in the figures for voluntary departure represented in the above table.

102. Finnegan’s detailed research therefore tends to support Luddy’s position that until at least 1900, it was a common occurrence for women to enter or exit the laundries at their own request.

103. Smith reaches a similar conclusion on the “voluntary nature of the Magdalen asylum in nineteenth-century Ireland”<sup>79</sup>, stating that:

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<sup>74</sup> Id

<sup>75</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, supra, at 236-237, extract from Tables 23 and 24

<sup>76</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, supra, at 153-154, extract from Tables 16 and 17

<sup>77</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, supra, at 107-108, extract from Tables 10 and 11

<sup>78</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, supra, at 73-74, extract from Tables 1 and 2

<sup>79</sup> James Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* at 37

“In the nineteenth century, regardless of how they entered these institutions, it was the women themselves who made the decision to stay. Although the nuns certainly did not encourage women to leave, they had little choice in the matter if the women were determined to rejoin society”.<sup>80</sup>

104. To date, it has been commonly assumed that these patterns of entry and exit changed somewhere between the turn of the century and the foundation of the State; and that from that time onwards, voluntary entry to or exit from the Magdalen Laundries greatly diminished or ceased altogether. The statistics set out at Part II of this Report suggest that this is not the case.

#### **Wider context of institutions and institutional networks**

105. During this period, alternatives to such institutions for a woman either without family or rejected by her family were perhaps few. Smith notes that:

“With little or no social welfare system to fall back on, her choices were limited to entering the county home, begging on the streets, or possibly resorting to prostitution”.<sup>81</sup>

106. The Irish Poor Laws, from enactment of the first relevant legislation in 1838 until the foundation of the State, made basic provision by way of maintenance of workhouses for the destitute<sup>82</sup>, but those workhouses were explicitly “designed to be grim and foreboding places in order to deter all but the most desperate from seeking refuge there”.<sup>83</sup> Other than workhouses, for many periods the provision of non-institutional assistance (or so-called “outdoor relief”) was heavily constrained.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Smith, *supra*, at 31, citing Luddy *supra*

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *supra*, at 1

<sup>82</sup> Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838-1948*

<sup>83</sup> O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, *Coercive Confinement in Post-Independence Ireland*, at 15

<sup>84</sup> See e.g. Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838-1948*

107. After the foundation of the State too, and in the face of significant and widespread levels of poverty and poor housing, home assistance payments, which were “at that time the only source of relief for poor families outside of the county home (formerly workhouse) system”, were inadequate.<sup>85</sup>
108. A reliance instead on institutional relief continued well into the period of the Irish State. O’Sullivan and O’Donnell describe as an “elaborate network” the variety of institutions which existed in Ireland, spanning Magdalen institutions, County Homes (the successors to the Workhouses), Mother and Baby Homes, Industrial and Reformatory schools, psychiatric hospitals (previously, “lunatic” or district and auxiliary mental institutions) and prisons.
109. They put forward a view that these institutions “ensured that an institutional solution was readily available for social problems and obviated the need to develop alternatives”<sup>86</sup>, and that this wide range of institutions was “utilised to reform, quarantine, or reject those who did not confirm to societal norms”.<sup>87</sup>
110. Maguire, by contrast, suggests that poverty could also have been a contributing factor to practices of institutionalisation, when she states that “over-crowding, substandard housing, homelessness and evictions contributed to industrial school committals”.<sup>88</sup> Following consideration of the “substandard” diet and nutrition of poor or working class families up until at least the 1950s<sup>89</sup>, she states that although “there is no direct evidence linking malnutrition and poor diets to industrial school committals”:

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<sup>85</sup> Maguire, *Precarious Childhood in Post-Independence Ireland* at 19, citing in support the Report of the Commission for the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor 1925

<sup>86</sup> O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, *Coercive confinement in post-Independence Ireland* at 258

<sup>87</sup> *Id* at 2

<sup>88</sup> Maguire, *Precarious Childhood in Post-Independence Ireland*, *supra* at 25

<sup>89</sup> Maguire, *supra*, at 27-29



“malnutrition was probably but one of a number of symptoms of poverty and poor living conditions that characterised the lives of poor children generally and that contributed to the committal to industrial schools of children whose only ‘crime’ was that their parents were poor”.<sup>90</sup>

111. Of these institutions identified above, psychiatric institutions were considered “one of the few areas of Irish social intervention that remained predominantly secular in administration”<sup>91</sup>, and yet analysis demonstrates high levels of “institutional residency” there too, with “an overall trajectory” that increased rapidly from at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until well into the period of the modern Irish State.<sup>92</sup>

112. Some sources suggest a strong bias during early periods for unmarried mothers to enter “a religious institution of reform” rather than the workhouses<sup>93</sup> or the County and City Homes which replaced them; and indeed the Department of Local Government and Public Health suggested in its 1931 Annual Report that “the Magdalen Asylum offers the only special provision at present” for unmarried mothers of more than one child.<sup>94</sup>

113. However, despite this perception, as well as the strong historical associations between the Magdalen Laundries and prostitution or unmarried mothers, these categories of women were by no means found only in Magdalen Laundries: unmarried mothers and their children were in

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<sup>90</sup> Maguire, *supra*, at 29

<sup>91</sup> Brennan, *A Theoretical Exploration of Institution-based Mental Health Care in Ireland* in Prior ed., *Asylums, Mental Health Care and the Irish 1800-2010* at 307

<sup>92</sup> Prior, *Asylums, Mental Health Care and the Irish 1800-2010* at 16, detailing an increase in psychiatric institutionalisation from a low level in the early nineteenth century, “increasing rapidly between 1830 and 1890, continued to increase at a steady pace until 1956, and then began a steady decline that has continued until the present time”.

<sup>93</sup> *Witnesses to the Vice Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland, Minutes of Evidence*, PP 1906, lii. Cd 3204.

<sup>94</sup> Department of Local Government and Public Health, *Annual Report 1931-32* at 129

some cases retained in County Homes for up to 2 years<sup>95</sup>, while psychiatric institutions also housed significant numbers of women who had given birth to children out of wedlock: “Frequently, admissions came from homes for unmarried mothers or similar locations of persons who did not conform to the mores of these institutions”.<sup>96</sup>

114. In summary, O’Sullivan and O’Donnell suggest, in relation to psychiatric institutions, Industrial and Reformatory Schools, Mother and Baby Homes, prisons and Magdalen Laundries the “communities offered cold comfort to those who had the nerve, and wherewithal, to flee”.<sup>97</sup>
115. Luddy notes that “[t]he perception of Magdalen asylums in twentieth-century Ireland is extremely negative” and that without access to the records for the period, only oral histories provided a standard by which to consider them.<sup>98</sup> The Committee had the benefit of full access to all surviving records of the Religious Congregations which operated the Magdalen Laundries, as well as the ability to search for and access all surviving official records. This Report represents an attempt to clarify and establish an objective picture of the operation of the Magdalen Laundries in twentieth-century Ireland and, in particular, of the facts of State involvement with these institutions.

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<sup>95</sup> See O’Sullivan and O’Donnell at 17, citing the Inter-Departmental Committee appointed to examine the question of the Reconstruction and Replacement of County Homes, Unpublished Report 1951

<sup>96</sup> Walsh and Daly, *Mental Illness in Ireland, 1750-2002* at 33

<sup>97</sup> O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, *supra*, at 5

<sup>98</sup> Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society 1800-1940*, *supra*, at 122.