

History of Merrick House

Merrick House, which provides sheltered housing for older people in Terenure, had its origins in a social-service initiative by students and academics at Trinity College Dublin at the end of the 19th century. The company they set up provided well-managed housing at affordable rents in Dublin's inner city. Later, it partnered with the Irish Red Cross, and with [Dr Margaret Merrick](#), a GP in Rathmines, who turned its Board's attention to the housing needs of older people.

Merrick House DAC continues the mission of the original company and its partnership, but no longer has any formal connection with TCD or the Red Cross. Incorporated on 21 December 1900, it is both a registered charity and one of the oldest companies in Ireland. What follows is a brief history of its work.

Background: Poverty and Social Work in 19th-Century Dublin

When the Act of Union of 1800 moved Ireland's parliamentary business to London—along with the fashionable social life that attended it—the upper classes gradually abandoned their elegant Georgian town houses in Dublin. Entrepreneurs who bought them rented them as tenements, housing more and more people as the buildings deteriorated and rents fell. The result, by the end of the century, was an overcrowded population of the very poor, living in dangerously insanitary conditions in the inner city.

Sanitation, housing and public health had become major public concerns across Europe, as epidemics of typhoid, cholera and influenza, spread by expanding steam travel, ravaged crowded cities. The 1875 Public Health Act for England and Wales was followed by the Public Health (Ireland) Act of 1878, laying down rules for the provision of clean water, maintenance of sewers, paving of streets, and prevention of overcrowding. By the 1890s, however, members of Dublin Corporation included a number of tenement owners, and the body was notoriously slow to implement standards for housing. Meanwhile, the nationalist idealism that inspired so many young people to work towards a 'New Ireland' in sporting and cultural associations showed little interest in cities, or their poor.¹

1895: An Inspiring Lecture by our First Chairman, Charles Eason Jr

At the end of the century, the prosperous townships of Pembroke (now most of Dublin 4), and Rathmines (now most of Dublin 6), lay outside the boundary of a decaying city, said to have the worst slums in Europe. At the weekly meeting of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI), on 13 December 1895, Charles Eason Jr (1853-1941) read a [paper](#) titled 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin: Their Condition and Regulation'.

¹ Valiulis sets out this background, and the work of the Alexandra Guild. See also Mary E. Daly, *Dublin: The Deposed Capital* (Cork, 1984).

SSISI was set up in 1847 during the Great Famine to conduct and publish empirical research on social questions (Daly). Eason's father arrived in Dublin from England nine years later, with his wife and young children, to manage the Dublin branch of W.H. Smith on Eden Quay (DIB). A philanthropist, and a fair, non-sectarian employer, he greatly expanded the wholesale and retail newsagent's Irish business as literacy levels rose and railway bookstalls profited from increasing travel. In the 1880s he took it over from the parent company, renaming it Eason and Son.

The business continued its success, with a new building at 40 Lower Sackville Street (now O'Connell St). Charles Jr had been involved since 1875.² Like his father's, his family home was in Rathgar, then in Co. Dublin. And he too was concerned about the squalid housing of people living near the landmark bookshop in the heart of Dublin. His 1895 lecture was one of many contributions he made to SSISI. In it he presented an incisive survey of reports and bye-laws, drawing comparisons with London, Aberdeen and Glasgow. He concluded:

The extension of the city boundary to include the adjacent townships would give increased power and additional facilities for the improvement of the condition of the city. The well-to-do people who live in these townships escape at present their due share of responsibility. The question is not one to be settled simply by a reference to the effect upon the rates.

The present boundary is purely artificial. The people on both sides of it are, in fact, one community, and all should be willing to co-operate in the task of grappling with the social problems of the city. There is nothing new in this paper; the evils pointed out, their causes and the possible remedies, have been brought before the public time after time. There is no royal road to their removal. An improvement can only come from personal effort and self-denial on the part of the citizens of Greater Dublin.

The city's boundaries were not extended until 1930, but Charles Eason Jr would become our first chairman in 1900.

Social Work in Dublin

Opposition to state welfare was widespread at the end of the 19th century, especially among the better off, who might be expected to finance it through taxation; the Great Famine had left many landlords bankrupt. Within a few years, however, a number of groups had taken up Eason's challenge. Past pupils of the all-female Alexandra College founded the Alexandra Guild, which raised capital in shares of £5 each, and on 4 July 1898 set up the Alexandra Guild Tenements Company, Ltd (Valiulis). The Association for the Housing of the Very Poor, Ltd, headed by L.H. Ormsby, President of the Royal College of Surgeons, was set up in December of the same year ([Lawson, 237-42](#)).

In 1899 the Alexandra Guild Company sent Miss Mary (or Marie) Bagley to

² He took over as Managing Director of Eason & Son on his father's death in 1899.

London to train with [Octavia Hill](#) who had been operating social housing schemes in Marylebone since 1865. Using Hill's model, the Guild bought and refurbished property, and by 1909 owned and operated five tenement houses on Summerhill and Grenville Street, both off Mountjoy Square. Mary Bagley has been described as 'the first modern social worker employed in Ireland'. She collected rents weekly, as laid down by Hill, and became a friend and mentor to many tenants (Kearney and Skehill, 14, 52).

R.M. Gwynn, TCD, a Student Society, a New Company

About 1899, a small group of male students set up the Dublin University Social Service Society (Trinity first admitted women in 1904). Their leader was 22-year-old [Robert Malcolm \('Robin'\) Gwynn](#), a recent graduate, from a distinguished family long associated with the university. His father, the Reverend John Gwynn, had been Regius Professor of Divinity there since 1888; his older brother Edward was a Fellow; William Smith O'Brien of Co. Limerick, whose statue stands in O'Connell Street, Dublin was his maternal grandfather.

Trinity's Social Service Society held meetings and heard papers delivered, but interest waned for lack of contact with real social problems, until a speaker (perhaps Mary Bagley) set out Octavia Hill's approach in detail:

...The owner of the house must do his share; the tenants must equally do theirs. Rents must be charged which would cover the necessary repairs and rates and allow for a moderate profit. Rent collectors, trained by Miss Hill herself, must insist on regular payments, never allowing arrears to mount up, and on the other hand provide for the prompt execution of all repairs necessary to keep the house healthy and clean.... Miss Hill was firm in expecting the tenants to understand that self-respect demanded that they should pay their way....

It was suggested that ...students, without imposing controversial questions of religion on charitable benevolence, might come into close touch with the lives of their fellow citizens, and listen at first hand to the difficulties with which they had to cope. Without in any way pauperising the tenants it should be possible by help in time of illness and providing wholesome recreation to make real friends among them and their children. (1953 Typescript, 2-3)

Robin Gwynn, who may be the author of the typescript quoted here, was ordained a priest in the Church of Ireland in 1908 and later became Trinity's Professor of Biblical Greek. He died in 1962.

At a seminar held in his memory in Rathfarnham, Dublin, in 2013, the Rev. Patrick Comerford underlined the complexity of Gwynn's social commitment, noting that while he shared a platform with James Connolly and Jim Larkin during the 1913 Dublin Lockout, 'he was also a leading member of Trinity's

Officer Training Corps], and served briefly during World War I as an army chaplain'. [Comerford](#) noted that:

[f]rom his rooms he could see the ugly face of the slums of Dublin, with their appalling housing and their high rates of infant mortality. He not only visited the slums, but went and lived in the slums for weeks and months on end, so that he not only preached but practised social service long before the welfare state was conceived.

Following some significant donations and offers of help, the Society took steps to form a limited-liability company to own and operate 'good' tenement houses, and on 21 December 1900, R.M. Gwynn's brother Edward was one of eight men who signed Articles of Association to set up the Social Services (Tenements) Company Ltd.

The company's main object was to be 'the relief and care of persons suffering from poverty or destitution or being otherwise in need'. It would own and manage houses on the model set up by Octavia Hill in London, and later in Dublin by the Alexandra Guild Company. Like them, as an index of sustainability, it would pay its investors (mostly Trinity graduates), a modest dividend, not to exceed 4%. In fact it never paid more than 2.5%, and after 1907 no dividends were available.

The new Company bought two houses on Grenville Street, near those owned by the Alexandra Guild Company. By 1909 it owned and operated seven houses (numbers 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 24 and 25), housing 256 people. It later acquired two more. A paid resident superintendent lived with his wife in one of the houses, but volunteer members of the student society, whose committee reported annually in writing to the Board, carried out all administration, including rent collection. R.M. Gwynn continued to be the driving force (Lawson, 239-40; Comerford; 1953 Typescript).

The Irish Red Cross (Rathmines) Old People's Committee & Dr Merrick

Dr Margaret Merrick first brought voluntary workers together as 'Homes for the Aged' in Rathmines, after World War II (known in Ireland as 'The Emergency'). When the Irish Red Cross Society turned its attention soon after to the needs of older people, it invited her and her associates to become founder members of its Old People's Committee. More local groups were formed, among which theirs came to be known as 'the Rathmines Group'.

Beginning in 1951, the Rathmines Group met every month in the Children's Reading Room, upstairs in the public library. According to its records, members were 'of every age, occupation and creed', their common aim 'to help those who, because of their age, [were] no longer able to help themselves.' Most, maybe all, of its members were women. Among them we find a number of surnames of well known men—a reminder that married women were excluded from most paid employment, and that many were active in voluntary work. The first president was 'Mrs Felix Hackett', then in her early sixties, vice-chairman of the Irish Red

Cross, and described as having ‘a lifetime of experience of social work in Dublin’. Herself childless, Mary E. Hackett (née Murnaghan) had been a member of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the tragic fire at St Joseph’s Orphanage in Cavan on 23 February 1943, which caused the deaths of 35 girls and an elderly woman, trapped in the dormitories. Her husband, also active in voluntary service, was Professor Felix Hackett (1882–1970), who retired in 1952 from the UCD chair of physics and electrical engineering. Both from Omagh, Co. Tyrone, they lived last at 20 Zion Road, Rathgar. Mary E. Hackett died in 1968 (DIB).

Dr Merrick chaired the Rathmines Group, whose first concern was to provide skilled nursing care for older people in their homes. They raised funds to employ a specialized geriatric nurse, paying her £6 a week, plus a petrol allowance. From 1954—long before Local Authorities did anything of the kind—they hired Home Helps to light fires and do cooking and cleaning for those no longer able to take care of themselves. Members visited older people in their homes, and would ‘strive to help them with their problems and difficulties’. In winter the Group distributed bags of coal; it also paid for large quantities of laundry.

The 1950s Partnership: Auburn House

When the Rathmines Group began regularly assisting vulnerable older people in its area, Trinity’s Social Service Company was 50 years old, and Ireland had recently become a 26-county republic. Unemployment and poverty were rampant. Social questions had come into public focus again with the ending of the War, and in 1946, the then Irish Free State had passed the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act, creating dedicated cabinet positions for a Minister for Health and a Minister for Social Welfare. Since 1934 Trinity had been offering a Diploma in Social Studies (Kearney and Skehill, 22). Its students—women—gained valuable first-hand experience working as volunteers for the Social Service Company, but their skills had come too late to bring the Company’s practices fully up to date (1953 Typescript).

All the original directors (see Appendix, below) had died by 1951, and the students who had set up the Social Services Society were in their seventies. Repair costs for the Company’s 200-year-old buildings continued to rise, while rents often went unpaid. The board found itself financially unable to bring its buildings into line with new health regulations. It requested Dublin Corporation to take over the houses, and considered how best to continue to fulfill its own mission with the modest cash reserve that remained.

The Company planned at first to build cottages, to house a number of older people still living in tenement rooms, but despite much effort, failed to secure a suitable site. It was on the point of winding up its affairs when Dr Merrick approached some of its officers. T.W. Moody’s [words](#) following her death in 1970 have the authority of personal acquaintance:

She was shrewd, good humoured, amusing and an excellent judge of character. She was a bonny fighter for causes she served, but also a

master of the art of cutting through red tape. She was nothing if not strong-minded, and once she had decided that you were called upon to undertake some good work you usually found yourself doing it.

Moody had moved to Trinity from Queen's University, Belfast, in 1939, to become Erasmus Smith's Professor of Modern History, a position he held until his retirement in 1977. He was treasurer of the Social Service Company from 1942, and became its chairman in 1953.

Living with his family in Healthfield Road, Terenure, well within Dr Merrick's area of operation, 'Theo' Moody became her staunch ally. With her colleagues in the Rathmines Group, she had identified Auburn House, at 266 Harold's Cross Road, directly across the street from the church of Our Lady of the Rosary, as a building close to all services, which could be made suitable to house a number of older people at modest rents, and provide them with a hot meal daily. She herself would offer GP care; a resident nurse would provide continuity, oversight and any nursing care required, and her Red Cross group would manage the building, visiting and befriending residents and undertaking to raise funds to make up the necessary shortfall in running costs.

The Dublin University Social Service (Tenements) Company bought Auburn House for £1,300, and paid for the necessary extension and refurbishment. When it opened in 1954, twelve tenants moved in: men, women and married couples. The Red Cross nurse lived in one of the rooms, and the Rathmines Group remained closely involved in the running of the house.

Dr Merrick and the Social Service Company did not rest on the success of Auburn House. Many older people remained in inadequate housing, and for years Dr Merrick urged the need for a second building. With T.W. Moody still in the chair, and his wife, Margaret, as Secretary, the Company launched an appeal for funds. In 1969, on land granted by the then Dublin Health Authority, it commenced building on the 'Dispensary Field' on Eaton Road. Already in poor health, Dr Merrick consented to the new house, with twelve rooms for residents, being named after her.

The 1970s: Fundraising, Expansion and a Change of Company Name

In 1972, two years after Dr Merrick's death, another successful appeal for funds was launched. This financed the purchase of 25A Eaton Square, near the new building, and 'six ladies [were] comfortably settled' there by Christmas 1975. Further fundraising was carried out in 1976, and several contributors set up standing orders.

The Rathmines Group continued its involvement with the houses for many years. In documents dated October 1977, its official name appears as 'The Margaret Merrick Old People's Committee'.

On 23 March 1979, the The Social Service (Tenements) Company Ltd changed its name to The Social Service Company (Trinity College) Ltd, as it no longer owned

tenement houses, but retained a strong connection through its directors with TCD.

1990s-present

As Auburn House was unsuitable for further upgrading, it was sold, and Merrick House was extended in the mid-1990s. Twelve residents' rooms became 18, along with a staff bedroom and a room for occasional guests. The house on Eaton Square was sold in July 1996, its six occupants moving into Merrick House.

Ten years later, the whole house was insulated and upgraded, to give each resident a private bathroom. The original build had had no government support, but this time the Department of the Environment awarded the company a Capital Assistance Grant.

In 2011, when the board of directors no longer included any representatives of Trinity College, the company changed its name to Merrick House Ltd. Five years later, in accordance with the Companies Act, 2014, Merrick House Ltd became Merrick House DAC (Designated Activity Company) on 28 June 2016.

In 2019, Merrick House celebrated [50 years in Terenure](#).

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Appendix

The First Board of the Social Services (Tenements) Company:

A Piece of Dublin's History

When the new company was set up in 1900, two of its unpaid directors were TCD graduates with special knowledge of living conditions among Dublin's poor:

- Charles Eason Jr, described as a 'book-seller', had moved to a house called Ardnachree, in Dalkey. His 1895 paper, 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin' had motivated the TCD students' initiative. He agreed to become chairman and gave 'inestimable guidance in the purchase and management of the houses' (1953 Typescript, 4);
- Richard Dancer Purefoy (1847–1919), obstetrician and gynaecologist, was Master of the Rotunda Hospital, at the heart of some of Dublin's poorest areas. A leading member of the Church of Ireland, he lived at 62 Merrion Square, and died unmarried (DIB). He may be the 'well known Dublin doctor who approved the idea of bringing students into first-hand contact with the conditions under which the Dublin poor were forced to pass their lives in a lot so different from our own', and thus inspired the students to set up a limited-liability company (1953 Typescript, 4);

The other six directors were fellows and/or professors of Trinity:

- Edward John Gwynn (1868–1941), R.M. Gwynn's older brother, was a

noted Celtic scholar and expert on the medieval Monastery of Tallaght; he was Provost of Trinity, 1927-37;

- Charles Francis Bastable (1855–1945), of 6 Trevelyan Terrace, Brighton Road, Rathgar, gave his occupation as ‘Barrister-at-Law’. He was also a distinguished economist, with professorial appointments at TCD and at Queen’s College, Galway. Son of a Church of Ireland rector from Charleville, Co. Cork, he was vice-president of SSISI, which regularly published articles on living conditions in Dublin, including Charles Eason’s, quoted above;
- John Joly (1857–1933), of 17 Northbrook Road, Ranelagh, was a rector’s son from Co. Offaly, then called King’s County. A brilliant scientist and committed educationist, he studied engineering, moved into physics and in 1897 became Professor of Geology at TCD, pioneering the study of radioactivity in relation to geology;
- M. W. J. Fry (1863-1943), born in Co. Clare, was a Fellow of TCD from 1889 and Tutor in Mathematics. Deeply committed to Trinity, he compiled the *University of Dublin War List 1922*, and left his library to the Dublin University Mathematical Society (Obituary);
- Louis Claude Purser (1854–1932), classicist and brother of the artist Sarah Purser, was from Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. Described in the DIB as ‘A genial and sociable character who was immensely popular’, he was Professor of Latin at TCD from 1898 to 1904, when he resigned his chair to devote himself to university administration;
- William Edward Thrift (1870–1942), of 80 Grosvenor Square, Rathmines, was born in Yorkshire, grew up in Dublin and attended the High School and TCD, where he became Fellow in Mathematics and Experimental science, and later Erasmus Smith’s Professor of Physics. More effective as a committeeman than as a scientist, he was Independent TD for Dublin University from 1922 until university representation was abolished in 1937, when he succeeded E.J. Gwynn as Provost of Trinity, a position he held until his death. A noted cyclist in his youth, he was grandfather of the Olympic athlete Maeve Kyle.

Sources, including abbreviations used in text:

1953 Typescript: Copy of an unsigned 7-page typescript, with corrections, handwritten title ('The Social Service Tenements Company') and date, '1953', possibly the work of R.M. Gwynn;

1969 Appeal: B/w brochure dated 1 September 1969, issued jointly by the Directors of the Social Services (Tenements) Company Ltd (T.W. Moody FTCD, chairman) and the Officers of the Irish Red Cross (Rathmines) Old People's Committee (M. Margaret Merrick, president). Building had commenced on Merrick House, based on donations, legacies and fundraising. Statutory grants of over £7000 were anticipated but a deficit remained of some £19000;

1972 Appeal: A single-page memo from the Dublin Old People's Committee of the Irish Red Cross Society/Cumann Croise Deirge na hÉireann, dated October 1972, appealing for volunteers and for funds to continue its work;

1976 Appeal: A single-page memo dated October 1976, similar in layout to the 1972 document, appealing for funds to make up a shortfall in the cost of refurbishing 25A Eaton Square, near Merrick House, 'where six ladies have been settled since Christmas 1975';

Census: National Archives of Ireland, Census of Ireland, 1901, 1911: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>, accessed repeatedly, 2012-20;

Comerford: Patrick Comerford, 'The Revd Professor RM Gwynn (1877-1962): Priest', address delivered at RM Gwynn Commemoration and Seminar, Whitechurch Parish, Rathfarnham, Dublin 16, 8 pm, 19 September 2013, blogged as <http://www.patrickcomerford.com/2013/09/the-revd-professor-rm-gwynn-1877-1962.html>, accessed July 2016;

Daly: Mary E. Daly, *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry: the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 1847-1997* (1997);

DIB: James McGuire and James Quinn, eds, *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), print and web;

Eason: Charles Eason, 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin: their Condition and Regulation', JSSISI, X (1898-99) Part 79, 383-398);

Index: Methodist History Society of Ireland, *Index of Preachers*, entry on William Bolton Merrick, (methodisthistoryireland.org). Thanks to archivist Robin Roddie, who kindly provided a copy of the entry;

Kearney and Skehill: Noreen Kearney and Caroline Skehill, eds, *Social Work in Ireland: Historical Perspectives* (Dublin: Insitute of Public Administration, 2005);

Lawson: William Lawson, 'Remedies for Overcrowding in the City of Dublin', JSSISI XII (1906-12), Part 89, 230-248 (http://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/handle/2262/3923/jssisiVolXII230_248.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y);

Moody: T[heodore] W[illiam] M[oody], 'Dr Margaret Merrick, 1896-1970: An Appreciation'. Printed single sheet (q.v.);

Obituary: 'Matthew Wyatt Joseph Fry', *Journal of the London Mathematical Society* (1945) s1-20 (1): 57-58);

SSISI: *The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*;

War Graves: Website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission: (<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx?cpage=1>, accessed 2016.0713);

Valiulis: Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, "'Toward the Moral and Material Improvement of the Working Classes": The Founding of the Alexandra Guild Tenement Company, Dublin, 1898', *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 23, no 3, March 1997: 295-315.