

The following text is a testimony from a former resident of Ireland's industrial system.

The full text has been anonymised and edited to produce a script, that will be read during an event, as part of a *Liverpool Irish Festival 2023* [event, for which details can be found here](#). It is offered to readers, after agreement with the survivor that they are comfortable with the amendments, to reflect on the experiences. For a list of support services, and more information on the McAleese Report, [we additionally have this article](#).

## Castlepollard

An ambulance picked me up outside the Church later and took me to Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home. I was taken straight to the hospital on the top floor. There I met one of Sisters who was a nurse. She asked a few questions and decided my baby was due about the 15th of December.

She then gave me a house name which was 'Norbert'. Of course, I hated it, but I had no choice. She said everyone was given house name so no one would know who you were or where you came from.

She then gave me a floral maternity smock, which was three times too big for me. After that, she took me to a mother waiting room where there was at least 16 mothers-to-be all sitting around large tables, where they were either sewing or knitting. I was introduced as 'the new patient' and told to join them.

Initially, when I got to Castlepollard, I had a sense of relief as everyone was in the same boat and the pressure on me was eased. We were in bedrooms shared by four people. All the pregnant women stayed together. The only time we saw the others was when we went to the big dining room, on the ground floor, and at daily Mass (which was compulsory). I settled in and got friendly with a girl, who was the same age as me, expecting her baby around the same time. One of the girls, who's child was in one of the nurseries, was in charge of looking after the expectant mothers. It was her job to allocate work, either sewing or knitting. I opted for knitting. She gave me a pattern for a man's sweater, which wasn't easy and the wool was a dismal colour.

We weren't allowed to talk to each other except at meal times. Instead, we had to recite the rosary all the time. It was so monotonous and boring.

The doctor came once a week. I had to see him the day after I got there. I was really scared as some of the girls said he was awful and quite rough. He was a huge man called Dr Cullen. He told me I "must have my dates wrong", as I was at least a month further on. He wouldn't believe it when I said my dates were right. That really upset me. Every time he came in, he wanted to see me and Kathleen. He was so rough with huge hands. He kept asking if it was my first pregnancy. He said to Sister Aidan that he was expecting to have problems with Kathleen and me.

The days were so long and boring I longed to go outside for a walk and get some fresh air, but we weren't allowed. The only exercise we got was going to the chapel to Mass and going up and down the three flights of stairs to the dining room.

I started labour pains so I moved into the waiting labour ward. I wasn't allowed anything to eat in case I was sick. Sister Aiden looked in on me a few times, otherwise I was all alone. I was so frightened and scared, as I had no idea what to expect or what was happening. I was there all day and night then the next day and night. I was in so much pain, with no relief; not even an aspirin, just a glass of water to drink, in case I was sick.

The following morning they called Dr Cullen in. I moved into the proper labour ward. I could see by his face he wasn't pleased to be there. It was seven o'clock am.

They put me to sleep by putting cotton wool on my face with ether. I had to have a high forceps delivery. He woke me up and stitched me, in cold blood, without even a local aesthetic. I have never forgotten the pain.

To make matters worse, he cut right through my back passage. After that, I had trouble going to the toilet for seven years, until I had my next child (who was a ten-pound baby). While stitching me up, the surgeon told me she had 'mended the botched job' done to me after my first baby.

Sister Aidan said I was in shock and sent for some hot water bottles. She put one on my tummy and burnt me. They never mentioned the baby and I had to ask what it was. She said it was a girl and-because she was a forceps delivery- she couldn't be moved for four days.

She was in a cot. All I could see were her little purple heels. There was an oxygen cylinder beside the cot. No wonder I had trouble having her; she was eight-pounds and eleven-ounces and I was less than seven stone when they weighed me a few days later!

I was then put in a four-bed room, but wasn't allowed to get out of bed. I've never been so hungry in all my life; I hadn't eaten for three days. Still, they would only give me water in case I was sick!

The next day the nurse and sister Aidan tried to make me walk along the corridor, but they'd damaged a tendon in my groin and I could only drag my leg behind me. I just couldn't walk.

The girls who worked in the nursery kept coming and telling me how beautiful my baby was. I named her Deirdre, which is a lovely Irish name. They had to feed her and change her in the cot as she couldn't be moved.

In the meantime, I was busy expressing my milk for her. I really wanted to breast feed her, but none of the mothers were allowed to breast feed. Instead, you had to express and feed your baby from a spoon from the day they were born.

Although Deirdre was given my milk she never suckled, or was breast fed, which is the most natural thing in the world. You were never given a reason why, but some of the mothers said it was to prevent you getting too attached to the baby. They wanted to prevent bonding with the baby before adoption.

I started lactating as soon as she was born. Of course, I had no idea how to express. I had little or no nipples and my breasts were as hard as footballs! They became engorged and I had lumps under my arms and up into my neck and shoulders. I was still kept in bed and hadn't yet set eyes on my baby.

When I was allowed up, I couldn't believe how thin I was. My legs were like knitting needles and I felt so weak. I was taken into the baby feeding room and they brought Deirdre in and put her in my arms. I just sat gazing at her. I will never forget that wonderful feeling. I can only describe the pure delight and love that swept through me. She was beautiful and she was mine. I was so happy. I held her close and, in that moment, we bonded and that bond could never be broken.

It was the first time in my life I'd felt real love and I never wanted it to change. She was mine and nobody could take her away.

I would go through it all again just to be here holding and loving her.

I was shown how to feed her (from a spoon of course) and bathe and change her. It was so hard to hand her back to be taken to the nursery, but I lived for feeding time from then on. I had always said I wanted a boy because I'd worked out it was a man's world and I never wanted a daughter of mine to go through what I had to go through.

When Deirdre was six weeks old, Kathleen and I were sent to work in the laundry. We also now had to move to the convent, where we slept in large dormitories. There were two smaller rooms with four beds, and two single rooms, where two of the nuns slept. There was only one toilet on each floor. There was no heating and it was freezing in winter. If you had a hot water bottle you could use it. Again, we had to say the rosary before lights out.

I was always first up at six in the morning, because I never slept well, and I couldn't wait to see Deirdre. She had been moved from the hospital-on the top floor- to the baby nursery on the second floor.

I got her up and changed her and got her dressed. I fed Deirdre then put her in her cot. By then it was time to go to Mass. We were up three-and-a-half hours before we broke our fast. Breakfast was always porridge, then toast and tea, before walking down to the laundry.

When we went in the smell hit you as soon as you opened the door. It was horrendous. Hundreds of soiled nappies, which all had to be rinsed before being put in huge washing machines. When they were washed, you had to peg them outside on clothe lines if it was fine or-if it was raining- they were hung on heated pulleys. There were four on either side of a

coal fired burner. This had to be done really fast, as they soon cooled down, so had to be pushed back in to dry.

Everyone's laundry had to be done, including the nuns. Their clothes were washed in a separate machine.

Each nursery's laundry was washed separately. All the bedding was staggered over the week as you got clean sheets every other week. There were big heated rollers, called 'callenders', used to iron the larger items. It was really hard work and you never stopped as there was so much washing to do.

We only had half an hour for lunch at noon. We could then go to the nursery to feed and change our babies, but all the time we were feeding them we had to recite the rosary out loud. They were obsessed with praying.

When Deirdre was four months old the time between feeding was extended to every four-hours. This meant I only had three nursery visits a day, rather than four; early morning, lunch time and evening feed.

I really resented not been able to feed her each feed, but I had no option. There were no exceptions; everyone had to obey the rules.

She was doing well and was always happy to see me. She had beautiful blue eyes and when she smiled her whole face lit up. Sunday was the best day of the week as we could spend a bit more time to play, with our babies, in the afternoon. If it was fine, we could take them outside, which was lovely. Otherwise, the babies never got any fresh air. I was in the choir, so had to attend Benediction about four o'clock. I really resented having to leave her.

There was a community room where we had free time between eight and nine. There was a TV, but it was only switched on to **BBC** for the evening news.

Sister Isobel was in charge of looking after the mothers. She had spent time in Scotland so loved to play Scottish music records on the gramophone. She also opened the tuck shop once a week. As I didn't have a penny to my name, I couldn't buy anything, not even sanitary towels. We were given some towels and had to make our own. I embroidered my house name on mine, but you never got you own back from the laundry. They were most uncomfortable to wear. Everyone called them rabbits.

You were allowed only one bath a week, on a rota basis. A list was on the wall, near the dining room, so you could see when your twenty minutes bath time was. If you over-stayed the next person would bang on the door!

At nine o'clock Sister Isobel marched us all over to the convent to bed. Once it was icy and I hurt my ankle when I slipped in a drain from a downpipe. I could hardly walk the next morning. As I was limping down the four flights of concrete stairs, an old nun-Sister Bridget-

was clapping her hands for me to get a move on and to stop dawdling. I was in agony and didn't even get an aspirin. You never got any kind of painkiller even if you had a bad headache. You were made to suffer for the terrible sin you committed by getting pregnant.

We had to wear a thick cotton dress and an old-fashioned crossover overall that you put your arms through with strings that tied at the back. Every- one was dressed the same. It was like being in prison, except inmates in prison had much more freedom. We couldn't go out, not even to the post office! If you sent a letter you had to leave it open and all mail was undone before you received it.

You never got paid for any work you did. They said you were "paying for yours and your child's keep". I know for a fact that County Longford was paying for us both so what we were doing was slave labour!

Deirdre had her first cold when she was about five months and they put her in isolation. I could only see her through a glass partition. I remember looking at her and it's the first time I noticed her eyes were just like my mother's. They were a beautiful shade of blue with dark lashes. Real Irish eyes!

When she was born, she really resembled her father, her hair was dark and her skin was milky white. With being eight-pounds eleven-ounces she was easy to handle. She was so solid and never floppy like new-borns.

Luckily, she soon got over her cold but she was now old enough to advance to the next nursery, on the first floor. She lost her baby hair and it was now growing blond. She was also trying to stand and getting strong.

My nursery visits were again cut to twice a day, instead of three. I made the most of every minute I had with her, but I hated leaving her.

When she was eleven months, I got a letter from my foster mother. She asked me to come home to look after her and said I could keep the baby. I was elated and jumped at the idea. I could keep Deirdre and not have her adopted. That was all I ever wanted. I never gave it a second thought and replied immediately, thanking her and saying I would be only too delighted to come home as I never wanted to give the baby away.

The nuns didn't like the idea of me taking her home, but I'd made up my mind and-the first week in December- my foster mother came, in a taxi, to take us home. She had with her a baby jacket, vest and dress. The [nuns] didn't give me any clothes, for Deirdre, except the nappy she had on. I didn't have a penny to my name, but mammy stopped the taxi to buy another nappy.

Mammy was, by this time well into her eighties, and sat in the chair most of the time.

I managed to get social security cash of twenty-nine shillings a week (£1.45 in today's money) and a free pint of milk, which I had to collect from the doctor's surgery. It was a long walk to get the milk. I had to carry Deirdre with me as mammy couldn't look after her.

Not one person in Edgeworthstown spoke to me because I had illegitimate baby. It hurt, but I didn't care. I was so proud of her and loved her.

Out of the cash each week, I bought food and a ball of wool to knit Deirdre a cardigan and some socks. It was December and quite cold. My biggest problem was the fact she was still in nappies. Washing them and getting them dry... especially if it was raining... then I could only dry them by the fire.

I bought a potty, and did my best to potty train her, but there was a lot of hit and miss. I didn't have much clothing for her and I couldn't afford to buy any.

Mammy wasn't much help as she only had her widow's pension. The house was paid for so there wasn't any rent to pay. She insisted I buy my own turf for the fire, which was the biggest expense from my allowance. We had no electric appliances in the house apart from the light, so the open turf fire was all we had.

Deirdre had her first birthday soon after we came home. I tried to make it special, but we had so little money it wasn't easy.

It was hard doing everything, but I managed to get into a routine of cooking, feeding and looking after mammy, who was very demanding. Deirdre was difficult to feed. Breakfast was her best time as she liked her porridge, but she refused her dinner; she would clamp her mouth shut. I used to get so upset and worried, but I had no one to help me or who I could get advice from.

I never saw a health visitor and I was a very young inexperienced twenty-two-year-old. Josephine, my childhood friend, never came near me and no one even spoke to me although I knew everyone. All my old anxieties returned and I felt real isolation. On top of that, mammy started being really difficult. She loved Deirdre, but the novelty of the baby wore off some, and she was back to her nasty self.

I really tried to keep the peace and made every effort to be kind to her. For the first time in my life I was beginning to realise she had a mental illness; otherwise, why would she behave like she did? I really was so thankful for her letting me keep Deirdre, who was my whole life, and I loved her so much. I promised myself I'd have to take whatever she put me through.

Deirdre was starting to talk and I taught her to bless herself. She was a happy child and very rarely cried, but still wouldn't walk. I'd put her standing at the gate and I'd put my hands out for [her].

When she was about eighteen-months, one morning, I was walking back with her in the pushchair when-from the opposite side of the street- two large Garda (Irish police) called me over and asked me to come into the barracks. I was shocked and didn't know what they wanted with me.

I stood there as one of them said they had a complaint from mammy that I'd assaulted her. I was shocked and said "what do you mean assaulted?". I didn't know what the word meant. He replied that I had hit her. I said: "Do I look like someone who would strike an eighty-year-old woman?". No way did I ever hit her or anyone else in my life.

"Well", he said "we have to caution you but you can go now". I couldn't believe it. I was so angry and upset. I couldn't believe she could have said that. On the way home I decided I wouldn't say a word about it, and carry on as though nothing had happened; I never said a word.

Sometime later I was kneeling down trying to get the fire going. The turf was hard and I banged it against the hob, at the side of the fire, when from nowhere she hit me with full fisted force at the side of my temple and sent me flying against the wall. She was shouting that I was breaking her hob, in her house, with the turf. She was as strong as an ox and really hurt me.

Things were now getting very bad. I had very little to eat as I couldn't afford food. Whatever money I had I spent it on food for Deirdre. She was not eating so well and I worried she wasn't getting enough nourishment.

The local nuns sent for me to come to see them. I was getting pretty desperate. I thought maybe they might be able to help me, so I picked up courage and walked out to the convent. Sister Pascal and Sister Cathrine met me. It was a lovely sunny day so they said we would sit outside. I definitely wasn't prepared for what was to come.

First, they said they knew I was having a hard time at home. I had no idea how they knew, but I broke down and sobbed my heart out. Sister Catherine had Deirdre sitting on her knee. I was upset that she saw me crying.

Instead of being helpful to me they accused me of being selfish by wanting to try keep the child. Didn't I know I had nothing to offer her? And it would be far better to have her adopted to a good Catholic family in America with parents who would love and do everything for her that I couldn't. The more they went on about it, the more I knew they were right.

I couldn't work as no one would employ me and, even if I did get a job, I had no one to look after her. The worst was yet to come. They said they'd already been in touch with Castlepollard and they'd agreed to have us back.

I was shaking and couldn't stop crying. They had no sympathy whatsoever, but kept saying how selfish I was that I was not thinking of Deirdre's welfare. How could I deny her the chance



of being happy, with two parents who really wanted a child to love? I should be thinking of her and giving her the chance for a better life than I ever had.

I don't know where I got the strength and courage to agree with them, but, reluctantly, I had to agree that what they were saying was right. I loved my beautiful little girl so much it would be criminal of me not to give her the chance of a better life in America.

Unbelievably, the nuns in Edgeworthstown had already arranged with the nuns in Castlepollard for an ambulance to pick us up by the Church gates the next morning. I had no time to think about it or change my mind. The decision was made and that was it. DONE.

I don't remember going home.

After that, time went by in a flash. I can remember telling my foster mother and she said I was only doing it to spite her as she loved the child! I packed our few clothes, in a bag, and put Deirdre in the push chair for the last time. It was only eight-thirty in the morning when the ambulance stopped to take us back. I left the push chair by the church!

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I was a wreck on the journey to Castlepollard, but Deirdre was happy. It was only the second time she'd been in a motor vehicle and she liked it. When we got there, we were put in isolation-in a building they called the annex- for two weeks. I saw no one except the person who brought us our food. One of the nursery nuns came each day and took Deirdre over to the hospital; she said she had to be built up for adoption as she was underweight.

Sister Rufina, who I worked with at the laundry, came to see us. She was amazed to hear Deirdre talking as none of the children ever talked, the only word they said was 'daddy' and then, only if they saw a man, which was very rarely.

While Deirdre was at the hospital, I walked to the laundry to do some hand washing. I didn't know that the Reverent Mother had seen me. The next day she sent me a message to say she was giving me the job of working in the front hall of the convent as she said I looked smart. The job was answering the door to all visitors also cleaning all the offices and the two sitting rooms.

Our time in isolation was up. Deirdre was taken to the nursery for older children. This meant I was only allowed to see her once a day; first-thing in the morning for half-an-hour. I was so worried about her. There were about twenty children there and she was frightened of them. Some of them were big, including three-year-old twin boys who were identical and had ginger hair.



One of the girls, Rita (who I'd know from before) worked in this nursery. Her little girl Noleen and Deirdre were the same age. Rita promised to look after her for me as she knew she was scared and the children were really noisy.

I started my new job in the convent but I didn't know it was a prestigious appointment. There was a lot of resentment from some of the women that I'd got it as I'd only just come back in. Really, it had nothing to do with me. I was only doing what I was asked to do. The work was definitely easier than the laundry.

Mass was at eight. Whichever of us was on duty had to collect the priest's breakfast, from the hospital kitchen, each morning. It was a full Irish breakfast, which he had in the convent private dining room. It was on a big wooden tray. His cooked breakfast was on a plate, which had a reservoir, filled with boiling water to keep the food hot. I-being small and skin and bone- struggled to carry it.

The days were long and there was always plenty to do. I kept worrying and wondering how Deirdre was doing. The half hour I was allowed to see her seemed to go in a flash. Six in the morning was so early, but all the children had to be up by then. There was just time to get her dressed and give her breakfast, then we had to leave. It was the same for everyone with a child over one-and-a-half.

Sunday was the only day we could spend more time with them. I knew that was the sacrifice I had to make. It was so painful. I had so many sleepless nights.

When I was back about two months Sister Ann Teresa attacked me. She'd been making bread when I got there. She said I had bad mouthed her to another resident. She started hitting me, full-fisted, in the face. I just put my hands up to save myself from the blows that were coming from her hands and she was pushing me around the kitchen. She was shouting horrible things at me. She said I was "good for nothing except laying under men". That I was "a tramp and a whore". I couldn't believe it. I was covered in flour. I ran out the door and went back to the convent.

I was sitting on the back stone stairs crying when the secretary sister came out and saw me. She said "my goodness what's happened to you?". I told her Sister Ann Teresa had attacked me. I didn't tell her the names she had called me. She pleaded with me not to tell the Reverend Mother. I didn't tell her, or anyone, as I was too ashamed and upset. I still had to go to the kitchen for the priest's tray, but I never spoke to sister Ann Teresa again. I really didn't get involved with anyone.

The dreaded day for Deirdre leaving was getting nearer each day. I tried not to think about it and enjoy the short time I was with her. Rita said she had settled and was better with the other children now, but she still clung to her. I thanked her for being so good to her.

Every other week the nurse and one of the sisters took two or three children to the passport office in Dublin; they were usually away for two days. They took Deirdre and another child before Christmas. I think it was near her birthday. It was quite late when they got back. Everyone had gone to bed in the convent, but I refused to go till she got back. I put her on her potty and she nearly filled it. I wondered if she had been for a wee all the time she was away. I was so pleased to see her. I undressed her and put her to bed. I had to get someone to unlock the convent door so I could get in and go to bed myself.

I started memorising the return addresses on the adoption papers, as I was taking them to sister in the chapel, to have them signed. On one occasion, she didn't return them to me so I decided that must be where Deirdre might be going. The name on it was 'Trainer of Union', New Jersey, USA. I convinced myself that she had become Deirdre Trainer for years.

I was asked to sign a paper, but I wasn't shown what was on it. They told me only that I would be breaking the law if I ever tried to find my child after she was adopted. It was so final and I felt strange. I don't remember signing it, but obviously I must have.

They were so matter of fact as though it was just a formality and no big thing. To them, I expect that's all it was. It had become so common for them as they were used to doing it almost on a daily basis, but for me it was like signing my own death warrant. I honestly couldn't have felt worse.

I really regret not having the courage to ask if I could at least read what I had signed but, I wasn't given the time to see it. It was sign here and go. I knew then, that was it, no return or going back. It was just a matter of time.

A couple of weeks later, the Reverend Mother came out of her office and told me to go to the hospital. She asked [me] to get Noleen ready as they had come for her. I felt sheer relief that it was Noleen.

When I was half down the corridor, she shouted after me saying, "I'm so sorry, but it's Deirdre not Noleen". My heart stopped. I'd just answered the door and let a lady come in who was now waiting in the sitting room to take my own child away. Worse, I had to go to the hospital and tell them to get her ready.

I don't know how I did it. I stayed for as long as they allowed me. Deirdre was excited about the new clothes. They wouldn't let me stay and sent me back to the convent. I didn't even get the chance to hug her and say goodbye.

There were two big sitting rooms. The lady who came for her was in one and I stood behind the curtain in the other one. The taxi was waiting outside. It wasn't long until they brought Deirdre over. The lady sat in the front seat, and they put Deirdre on her knee, facing out to the left. She was smiling and appeared quite happy.

They were gone in a flash.

It was unbelievable. I was in a trance. It was like being in limbo. She was gone and I couldn't believe that I would never see her again. I didn't care what happened to me anymore. I had given up the love of my life, how would she ever forgive me? How would she ever believe that I did it because I loved her so much? I had to give her the chance of a better life than I could ever give her.

I went into the chapel and sobbed my heart out. I prayed to God and Our Lady to keep her safe and give her loving parents to love her, make her happy and treasure her as I had done for the two-years and two-months I'd the privilege to know and love her.

I have cried all my life for her. My grief was worse than death as there is no love greater than between a mother and child. I was overcome with my Catholic guilt. God had given her to me when I had nothing or no one to love and I had thrown that love back in his face. Guilt plagued me and I wondered if I had done the right thing for her. To me the most important thing for her was that she was loved. Material things were never on my list, but she needed love and to be safe and happy. That was mostly what I prayed and wished for her. After Deirdre left, I lost all interest in life. I had no idea what I could do.

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