

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](#).

Shirley

My mother, Bridie, was born in 1914 in Ballymahon, Co. Longford, where she remained for the first part of her life. She fell pregnant with me when she was 25-years old. She was devastated when she found out she was, but she didn't tell anyone except the father. She said he wanted them to go away and get married, but she refused saying if she "wasn't good enough to marry in Ballymahon, [she] wasn't going to marry him anywhere else". So, she finished with him and still didn't tell anyone.

She continued working in her job at Colonel King-Harmon's Estate, riding her bike everyday. When her pregnancy started showing, she wore tight corsets and baggy clothes. Then, when it got near her time, she left the job and went to her sister Manie's house in Mullingar, County Westmeath.

On the night that I was born Manie had to walk several miles in the snow to get the midwife. I'd arrived least two hours before they arrived back.

My mother said Jimmy-Manie's husband- came into the bedroom earlier and put a coat over us, as it was so cold. She was really worried. She thought I might die and she would be blamed for killing me, but obviously I was a survivor and I was okay. They were embarrassed my father wasn't there, so they told the midwife he was a soldier in the army. She registered my name as: Mary Treasa Kelly; father: Laurence Kelly; and mother: Bridget Kelly. She never told anyone, consequently my legitimate birth certificate wasn't found until I was 23-years of age.

When I was a month old, my mother came back home to Ballymahon to tell the family about me and ask if she could bring me home. When she got home, my Aunt Margaret wouldn't allow her in. She said she had brought disgrace on the family by having an illegitimate child.

My mother was sat down at the side of the road when a lady who lived nearby heard me crying. When she found out why, she went to the house and really told them off. After that, they let us stay. As far as I'm aware, my mother went back to work and my grandmother and the younger sisters looked after me.

Everything changed when my mother got pregnant again.

This time, she had to go into the County Home-in Longford- and take me with her. On June 19, 1942 my sister Margaret Mary (Peggie as she's now known) was born. I only have very vague

memories of being there. I can recall a fight between my mother and another girl. I remember being very frightened and keeping my arms around Peggie in case she got hurt. They were hitting each other and pulling each other's hair. I don't know how long the fight went on, but it had a lasting affect on me.

The room where they fought was very big, with a massive fireplace and a row of seats on either side, with older women sitting there. I think the children and elderly residents were kept together in the room, which now surprises me.

When we went into the home, my mother told me I was really cute, with blond curls, and the nurses used to have me singing the songs made popular by Shirley Temple (the child actress of that time). They started calling me 'Shirley' and that's what I've been known as ever since.

When I was about four I was boarded out to a farming family, in a place called Ballinamuck in County Longford. My mother, my mum, used to work in the hospital part of the home and got paid, so she bought nice clothes for us. She said I looked lovely, with a pretty dress and ribbons in my hair, when the boarded out foster parents came for me.

I have little memory of my time with them, except being frightened by a big turkey cock in the farmyard and also being scared of the pigs. The kitchen had a big open fireplace, which I remember looked really black and had a crook across, with cooking pots and a kettle hanging from it.

My mother was allowed to visit me and-when I was there for some time- she got the chance of a lift with an ambulance man who had to go to Ballinamuck with a patient. She told me-years later when I met her for the first time- what a shock it was when she got to the farmhouse. She said there was no one around. The door was open, so she went inside the big kitchen. The only one there was a small child, standing rocking a baby in a cradle. She asked the child where Shirley was and I said "I'm Shirley".

She didn't recognise me. She said I was standing in my bare feet, in filthy clothes, and had no hair on my head. She was so upset and couldn't believe what they had done to me. They had shaved all my hair off and I was filthy. She wanted to take me back to the home there and then, but the ambulance man wouldn't let her. She cried all the way back and was inconsolable when she reported how she'd found me, to the Matron, in the County Home. The Matron went herself to the boarded-out parents and brought me back the next day.

For a long time after I wore a pixie hood so that no one could see I didn't have any hair.

The second time I was boarded out it was to an elderly couple from Edgeworthstown, County Longford. She was a widow, who never had any children, and he had not been married before. They were married in January 1940, the same month and year I was born.

I can remember clearly being taken away on a donkey and cart from the County Home. I cried for my mammy who I could see standing in the middle of the road waving goodbye. The woman was

sitting on a wooden seat, which was a plank of wood placed across the middle of the cart. She put me sitting with my legs hanging down, between the donkey's tail and the shaft of the cart. I remember my bottom hurting as I was sitting on the bare rough wood. When we were nearing the Pound Hill, in Edgworthstown she put a big hessian potato sack over my head to hide me in case someone saw me. It must have looked strange as my legs were visibly hanging down for all to see!

When we got to the house a man was making a cot-bed for me to sleep in. They gave me bread and butter with sugar on it and a cup of milk. Kathleen Dempsey (whose youngest sister Josephine later became my best friend) was there, she used to help by doing messages for them. She had to sit and stay with me or I wouldn't go to sleep.

I started *St Elizabeth's Convent Primary School*, which was run by nuns known as *The Sisters of Mercy* (not that any one of them seemed to know the meaning of the word mercy!). My foster mother had made me a school bag out of an old post tunic jacket of daddy's. She also made me some knickers, from the same jacket, which were really rough and black in colour.

On the first day at school, the nun gave me some bricks to play with. I put the bricks in my bag and took them home, but my mammy (as I now had to call her) accused me of stealing them and smacked me for bringing them home.

In the morning she would get up with daddy and light the open fire, which was the only way to cook and heat the house. After she made his breakfast, and he went to work, she went back to bed. It would then be about six o'clock in the morning. She left me a mug of tea and some bread on the table. The tea was stone cold when I got up and there was no way of heating it up as the fire would have died down by then.

She never woke me for school, which meant I was always late. I still had to walk miles to school, alone. If it was raining, I only had an old coat to put over my head to keep my hair dry. Sometimes, I would get drenched. There was no way of drying myself off when I got to school. I had to hang my wet coat up in the hall. The smell of the damp coats was overwhelming.

I had many more chores to do before and after school, such as bringing in baskets of turf for the fire. We had no running water, so I had to go to the well for two buckets of water in the morning and again when I got home from school. The well was down the Pound Hill, in the town.

Once a week, I had to clean the henhouse, which I hated because it stank. As part of this chore I had to put chicken droppings on a dung hill, which was saved for manuring the potatoes and vegetables in the garden.

We only had an outside toilet. It was a small concrete building with a wooden toilet seat and a dry bucket. It was my job to empty the bucket, into a hole my Daddy had dug, at the bottom of the garden. The bucket then had to be rinsed out with water, which was collected in an old tar barrel filled up with rainwater, from a down pipe attached the guttering. I then put doc leaves or

grass in the bottom of the bucket before putting it back in the toilet. Also, I had to make sure there was toilet paper by tearing newspaper into squares and hanging it with string, on a nail at the back of the door, a chore I really detested because of the smell.

The kids were very unkind even at an early age. I was made aware that I was different from all of them, being a boarded-out kid from the County Home. No one would play with me and I felt so unhappy and embarrassed because of who I was.

I never wore shoes in the summer except to go to Mass on Sunday, then it was white canvas slippers. Sometimes, when the men had resurfaced the roads, my feet would be covered in tar. Mammy used to wash them off with a scrubbing brush while I was standing in a bucket of cold water. If I cried, because she was hurting me, she'd wallop me on the legs with the wooden back of the brush. The school lunch she gave me was always the same: two thick slices of bread with a hard lump of *Stork* margarine in the middle. It was impossible to spread *Stork*-it was so hard- and there was no such thing as 'sliced bread' in those days. It was usually what was called the 'heel of the loaf', which would be days old; plus a sauce bottle with cold tea, in which you could smell and taste the sauce when opened. I never ate the bread, but I threw it across a wall every day. To this day I hate the smell of *Stork* margarine and still dislike cold tea.

I don't recall much of my early years with my foster parents. I now had to call them 'mammy' and 'daddy'. I was known by their surname, so I was now Shirley Heavey.

The kitchen was the main living area in the house and the only room with any heat from an open fire. The fire was used to cook, bake, boil water and heat the room. My daddy was a postman and started work very early, which meant we all went to bed early; but not before we knelt down on the cold concrete kitchen floor and said five decades of the rosary.

They were Catholic and very religious. At school there were prayers before and after each lesson, then at twelve o'clock we had to say the Angelus plus prayers before we went home.

At home I never had any books or toys to play with. The only thing I remember, was when I was very young, the lady next door gave me a ragdoll with a painted face. Daddy made a doll's pram from a wooden cheese box and he put polish tin lids on for wheels and a string to pull it along. I really cherished that doll and pram for a long time. I also got a tin whistle and an apple from Santa one Christmas, but that was all I ever had.

As I'm recalling this, it still makes me feel so sad for how I was treated and what I had to do as small, sensitive child. I feel real pain and regret for my lost childhood.

Ireland, in those days, was completely ruled and controlled by the Catholic Church more so than the government, that came and went, but the Catholic Church had to be adhered to at all times. You were taught there was only one true faith and that was The Holy Catholic Faith. Although the church taught that Jesus was all merciful, and that our Heavenly Father loved us, there was no love or respect shown by the priests or nuns. Instead, it was all fear of hell fire and damnation.

You were expected to live a pious modest chaste life, even though you might not know what any of those virtues were or understand what they were talking about. Even as little kids, girls had to keep their knees together or pull their dress down to cover their knees when they were sitting down, otherwise they were committing the sin of immodesty.

I'm not sure how old I was, but I think I must have been five or six-as I now know my little sister Peggie was still in the County Home- when my mother absconded from there and couldn't be found.

My daddy sat me down and took me by the hand then told me that my mother had run away and, although they had searched, she couldn't be found. The Garda (Irish Police) had searched everywhere for days. So, he said that I was now an orphan, but not to worry as they would look after me.

Mammy spoke up and said she's not orphan she's a bastard. He gave her such a look; I could tell he was annoyed. I hadn't heard that word before, but I could never forget it as from then on that's how she always referred to me; as Biddy Killane's bastard. I also now know why the Garda couldn't find my mother; she went across the border into Northern Ireland.

Mammy originally came from Longford, which was the county town. She liked going shopping there and she would take me on the bus. On the way we had to pass the County Home, which was a big foreboding looking grey building. Every time we went, she would threaten to put me back in and leave me there. I used to feel sick in my stomach with worry. I had a crick in my neck from looking in the opposite direction each time we passed. Seeing that place was mental torture.

In order to wash my face before going to school, she had cut an end piece off a bar of red carbolic soap. She left it with a rag on the windowsill, beside the water barrel. The rag was what she left to dry myself with, but never a towel. In the winter, she would leave the hammer on the sill so I could break the ice on the water. Needless to say, only the minimum of face washing was done as it was freezing.

My bedroom used to be so cold in the winter that the inside of the window had thick ice on it. Sometimes at night, daddy used to heat the cast iron pot lid on the coals of the fire and wrap it in newspaper to put in my bed to warm it. The bed sheet-which she made by sewing four cotton flour bags together- used to have big scorch marks from the hot iron lid and I could smell the smoke from the scorched paper.

In those days, the flour came in 100-weight cotton sacks, and the grocer had to weigh it-in pounds or stones- depending how much the customer wanted. There was no prepackaged food so most items had to be weighed out. Poor people used these cotton bags for sheets.

She used to also put DDT on the blankets to kill the fleas. I often had flea bites on my body when I woke in the morning. They were red and itched like mad. I still remember the smell of the DDT.

My foster parents used to lock me in my room on a Saturday night, when they went to confession and did some shopping. Daddy would have a few pints of beer. Although there was electric light in my room, Mammy took the bulb out to save electricity so I was in bed in the dark.

Mammy used to keep lodgers. We had three men staying who were building the new housing estate, 'Marian Avenue'. We only had three bedrooms, so two of them slept in the same room and the other in the small bedroom, which was mine. My parents had the big room and I had to sleep on the concrete kitchen floor in a sack filled with straw. It was most uncomfortable as the straw was rough and prickly. As it was winter, it was really cold. I hardly slept. I think that's when my insomnia started, which I've had ever since.

One day, around this time, I came in from home school and Mammy gave me a dish of Indian meal porridge with a lump of margarine in the middle. It was supposed to be my dinner. The meal was a yellow maize we fed to the chickens! It was absolutely disgusting and no way could I eat it.

She went out to the yard and got a long thick 'sally rod' and beat hell out of me with it. She was screaming at me, while hitting me, saying she took [me] out of the County Home and all manner of reasons that I should be grateful to her.

One of the young lodgers was there the whole time that this tirade went on. He had been laid off work because it was raining. I just sat there crying. When she went out of the kitchen, he told me he'd grown up in an industrial school where he learned his trade as a carpenter. He said he was treated better there and not nearly as badly as I was. His mother had died when he was young, and he and his siblings were split up, which was the reason they went to the industrial school.

Occasionally, a lady from the County Home came to our house, presumably to check to see if I was okay and being cared for. I dreaded her coming as mammy always threatened to send me back with her.

I didn't take much notice of the lady, or listen to their conversation, but mammy had to go into the other room for something she had to sign. When she was out of the kitchen, where we were, the lady would grab me and pull up my clothes to check my underwear. At the same time, she'd put her fingers to her lips, motioning me not to make a sound. It was scary as a small child and I didn't understand what she was doing. I don't think she liked mammy, but then not many people did.

My mother used to shout at me: "I took you out of the County Home when nobody wanted you" (obviously referring to my bald head). Then, she would make a point of how badly the bastards, meaning the children, were treated there... but it couldn't be any worse than how she treating me!

I was so skinny, pale and puny looking. This wasn't surprising, as I was hungry most of the time. She was in her sixties and never had a child, so had no idea how a child should be treated. She

used to take me grocery shopping and some people she would talk to would often remark to her about how pale I looked.

I remember one man said I looked as though I might have worms and that turpentine was a good cure. When we got home, she filled a tablespoon full of turpentine and made me swallow it, followed by a spoonful of sugar. It's a wonder I'm still here at all. I now know it's a paint stripper which is toxic.

It was about this time she became really nasty and said really horrible things to me. Like "look at you with your crooked mouth" and then "you will end like your old mother, she was like a bitch in heat in the field with all the dogs around her waiting for their turn". Of course, I had no idea what she was talking about, but I became really scared of dogs.

Even as I was beginning to do better at school, the discrimination didn't stop. I was the only boarded out County Home child in the school. I was never allowed to forget it; not only by the children but also by the nuns.

The kids wouldn't play with me at playtime and Sister Catherine, who taught the fifth-year classes, referred to me as the 'black sheep'. Making it worse, she had to fill out a monthly attendance form-along with additional information about me- for submission to the County Home. Frustrated by this extra work she said I was "more trouble than any other child in the school". And, she had no trouble relating this, not only to me, but also to the whole class.

Because I was left out of my classmates' games, I started to engage with the younger kids. For example, I would get several little ones to hold hands, while I held my arm up against the wall; they went through singing "The big ship sailed from the ally-ally-oh"-repeating it 3 times- until they formed a ring, then singing "now we are all in a merry, merry ring-again, 3 times- on the last day of September". The little ones loved it and would clap their hands when we finished and wanted to do it again.

Unfortunately, the nun on playground duty stopped me without giving a reason. I, in turn, kept wondering what was wrong with me. I never hurt anyone, or was nasty to them, so why was I being ostracised? I just couldn't understand why I was left feeling miserable.

I was fourteen-and-ten-months when I had my first period. I had no idea what it was and thought I must have cut myself so I put a handful of salt on to clean the wound. I really regretted doing that. I was so sore I could hardly walk and had only the cold water in the barrel to wash myself. Mammy must have noticed the blood as she then gave me a lecture about it. What she said was unbelievable.

The first thing she said was it was called 'a monthly' because I would get it every month, but did not explaining what 'IT' was. Then next thing she told me was I must "never ever mention it to a man". What she said then was the most incredible thing. She said that men used to have it, but it was too difficult to hide it from women. So, when Our Blessed Lady (Mary) came, she decided

that women should have it as they did the washing and it was easier to hide it from the men. That was it, my entire sex education. You just couldn't make it up! Talk about innocence, I grew up in total and complete ignorance.

I know I'm painting a very bad picture of what my life was like, but there were very few happy times for a boarded-out child. There was no love or affection and I never remember feeling happy.

The partners would like to thank the survivor that provided this testimony. Thanks are made for the original interview provided, the follow up questions about edits and usage and the generosity shown in allowing us to showcase her experience. We see you and we thank you.