

The Leader Interview Patrick Hederman, Abbot of Glenstal

A defender of the faith goes in a new direction

More philosopher than theologian, Patrick Hederman's election as the Abbot of Glenstal was a surprise to many. But the prolific writer and thinker has vowed to continue the monastery's key role of connecting the public with God

Patricia Feehily



WHEN Patrick Hederman was elected fifth Abbot of Glenstal, nobody was more surprised than he was himself. But from the

moment his name was announced, the joy was unrestrained. "It's like a current of fresh air sweeping through the Abbey," one of his fellow monks told this reporter.

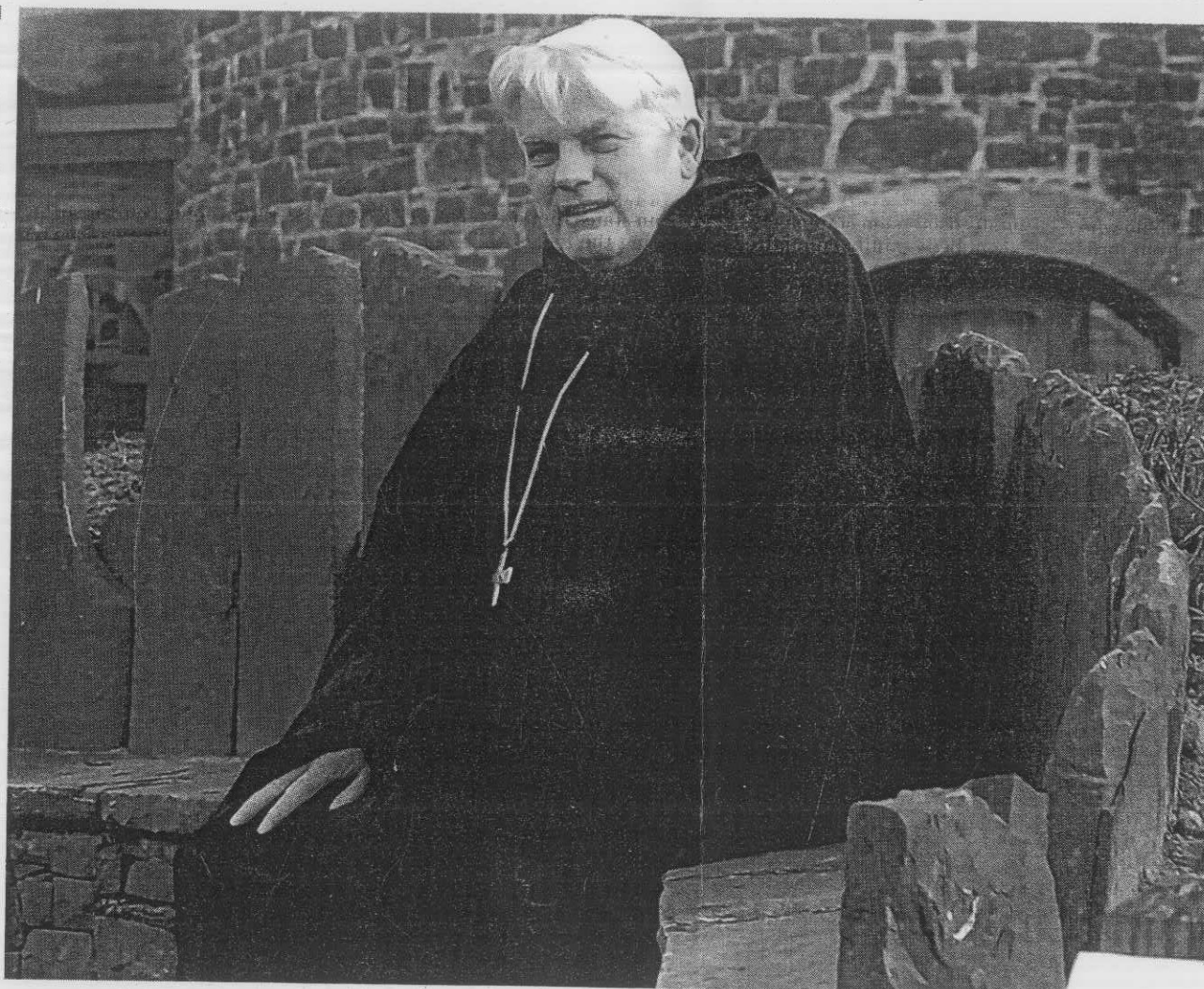
For us in the media, it was better than that. Here was an original thinker on our doorstep, with a great turn of phrase, direct, very approachable, and best of all, immensely quotable - a journalist's dream. He's still all that, even when, with typical self effacing charm, he overturns our perceptions and exposes our headline-hungry prejudices.

He was 64 when elected Abbot, the oldest person appointed since the monastery became an Abbey in the 1950s. Everyone was delighted, but what did he think himself?

"What did I think? I thought of The Beatles. 'Will you still need me ... When I'm sixty-four?' When that song came out in 1967, I was 24 and in Paris enjoying the beginnings of the student revolution which took off in 1968. At the time, the song seemed like a joke. Forty years later, at 64 myself, it seemed more like a threat! Here I was at 64, arranging my retirement with pension and free travel. I had planned an easygoing schedule of lecturing and writing - the scenic route to old age. After the election my life became hectic and unusually clerical," he said.

In accordance with Benedictine rules, he had to be ordained by Archbishop Dermot Clifford, first as deacon and then on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, as a priest. He said his first Mass next day and that evening visited Glenstal priest, Fr Dominic Johnson in the Regional Hospital and anointed him, taking part in his funeral Mass a few days later.

"I heard confessions for the first time



Abbot Patrick Hederman fears that the hysteria generated by the Ryan report could lead to further injustices to be perpetrated

PERSONAL FILE

Motto: Never do today what you can get someone else to do for you tomorrow

Favourite book: Joseph and His Brothers by Thomas Mann

Favourite hero or heroine: Iris Murdoch

Favourite food: Paella

deeply aware of, God, but most of my conversations had been conducted on Knockfierna. I realised that it was impossible to be a mystic on a mountainside. I had to find a place. In the end I chose Glenstal and I was very fortunate. Not only is it a very beautiful place, but the community gave me every opportunity to educate myself and develop my talents."

Despite holding a PhD in Philosophy from UCD, he doesn't consider himself a deep thinker.

deal of study and understanding to grasp its depth and extent. However, a few things are important to keep in mind. We should take our cue from one of our greatest artists, John McGahern, and learn to tell it as it is. Throwing up our hands in horror and dissociating ourselves completely from what we were as a society in the 1940s is not going to help. This is the way we were, and this was the weather of the time. It is an understandable reality and not incomprehensible barbarity."

"which condemned those excluded from its criteria of acceptability, to a hell on earth." The government used the 'Orders' as an unpaid task-force to provide education and health services at minimum cost.

"It is clear that these same orders also became the agency whereby all who were excluded from the definition of our perfect Christian society were 'looked after'. Once a community is persuaded that certain people are not worthy of 'care', are beyond consideration as fellow human beings, then our natural sympathy and compassion can be switched off and the step towards regarding such people as a nuisance and then as expendable and finally as 'vermin' is within reach. This has been true in terms of certain tribes in all countries, of women in certain countries, of children in some cultures, of Jews in the Nazi philosophy, of itinerant communities in many countries, and in terms of homosexuals almost universally at this time."

"But," he warned, "a second kind of injustice can now take place because we want to find certain people whom we can hold responsible for a situation which was the effective 'doing' of a whole society at a certain time."

Now he also feels a responsibility to "defend God in all of this".

"I know that my own case is one of huge and incomprehensible privilege. I lived in Ireland from 1944 and was not subjected to any of the horror, misery and aberration that so many had to endure. But, I believe now that I have a very big responsibility to defend God in all of this. All these institutions, all these aberrations were the work of human hands. There is God and there always has been God, and there is always the possibility of being in touch with God wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. And God had nothing to do with the horror stories which abound in the Ryan Report. I have no brief whatever for the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 20th century."

"I abhor and detest the inhuman institutions which were created to deal with the 'unwanted' children of our so-called 'pure' and 'unadulterated' vision of ourselves as a society. My heart goes out to each and every one of the unfortunate children who were condemned to such inhuman institutions."

RELIVING THE NEWS

with Sean Curtin

Publicans divided over increase
From the Limerick Leader
Wednesday, January 3, 1962

Price war erupts as houses vie for punters' custom

AT A largely attended meeting of the Limerick Licensed traders, held at Cruise's Hotel yesterday, it was unanimously decided to increase the price of the pint of stout by 2d. to 1/6d. The increase will come into operation on Friday morning.

In a statement issued after the meeting to reporters, Mr. T. Long, secretary of the Limerick branch of the licensed vintners, said that the following prices had been agreed on unanimously, old prices in brackets: Pint, 1/6d. (1/4d.); half-pint, 9d. (81.2d); bottle (small) 11d. (10d); pint bottle 1/8d. (1/6d).

The meeting was presided over by Mr. Patrick Quilty, chairman.

The statement added that the meeting was the biggest held since 1953 when the price of the pint was last increased. Both members and non-members attended.

The meeting was the result of the additional 16/- per bulk barrel, imposed by Messrs. A. Guinness, last week. This in effect means 1/2d on the pint.

One trader pointed out that he employed three barmen and they recently received a substantial increase in addition to shorter hours.

Other traders recalled it was 1953 since the last increase was made by traders, notwithstanding the fact that almost everything else had gone up considerably.

The article finished with the news that the new metal barrels will replace the old wooden ones on the 10th of January.

Unlike modern times, the drinking man didn't take too kindly to the 2d. rise in the pint. On Monday, Jan. 8, the Limerick Leader said that the price of the pint varied from pub to pub. "Customers refused in many instances to patronise their local where the full increase was implemented. They were welcomed with open arms in other establishments. In an effort to justify their increase some publicans installed TVs in their pubs in order to provide entertainment. Lounge bars were charging 1/7d.

Several publicans remained at the old price of 1/4d until present supplies were

LX LIMERICK LEADER
20TH JUNE 2009
PAGE 25

WHEN Patrick Hederman was elected fifth Abbot of Glenstal, nobody was more surprised than he was himself. But from the moment his name was announced, the joy was unrestrained. "It's like a current of fresh air sweeping through the Abbey," one of his fellow monks told this reporter.

For us in the media, it was better than that. Here was an original thinker on our doorstep, with a great turn of phrase, direct, very approachable, and best of all, immensely quotable – a journalist's dream. He's still all that, even when, with typical self effacing charm, he overturns our perceptions and exposes our headline-hungry prejudices.

He was 64 when elected Abbot, the oldest person appointed since the monastery became an Abbey in the 1950s. Everyone was delighted, but what did he think himself?

"What did I think? I thought of The Beatles. 'Will you still need me ... When I'm sixty-four?' When that song came out in 1967, I was 24 and in Paris enjoying the beginnings of the student revolution which took off in 1968. At the time, the song seemed like a joke. Forty years later, at 64 myself, it seemed more like a threat! Here I was at 64, arranging my retirement with pension and free travel. I had planned an easygoing schedule of lecturing and writing – the scenic route to old age. After the election my life became hectic and unusually clerical," he said.

In accordance with Benedictine rules, he had to be ordained by Archbishop Dermot Clifford, first as deacon and then on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, as a priest. He said his first Mass next day and that evening visited Glenstal priest, Fr Dominic Johnson in the Regional Hospital and anointed him, taking part in his funeral Mass a few days later.

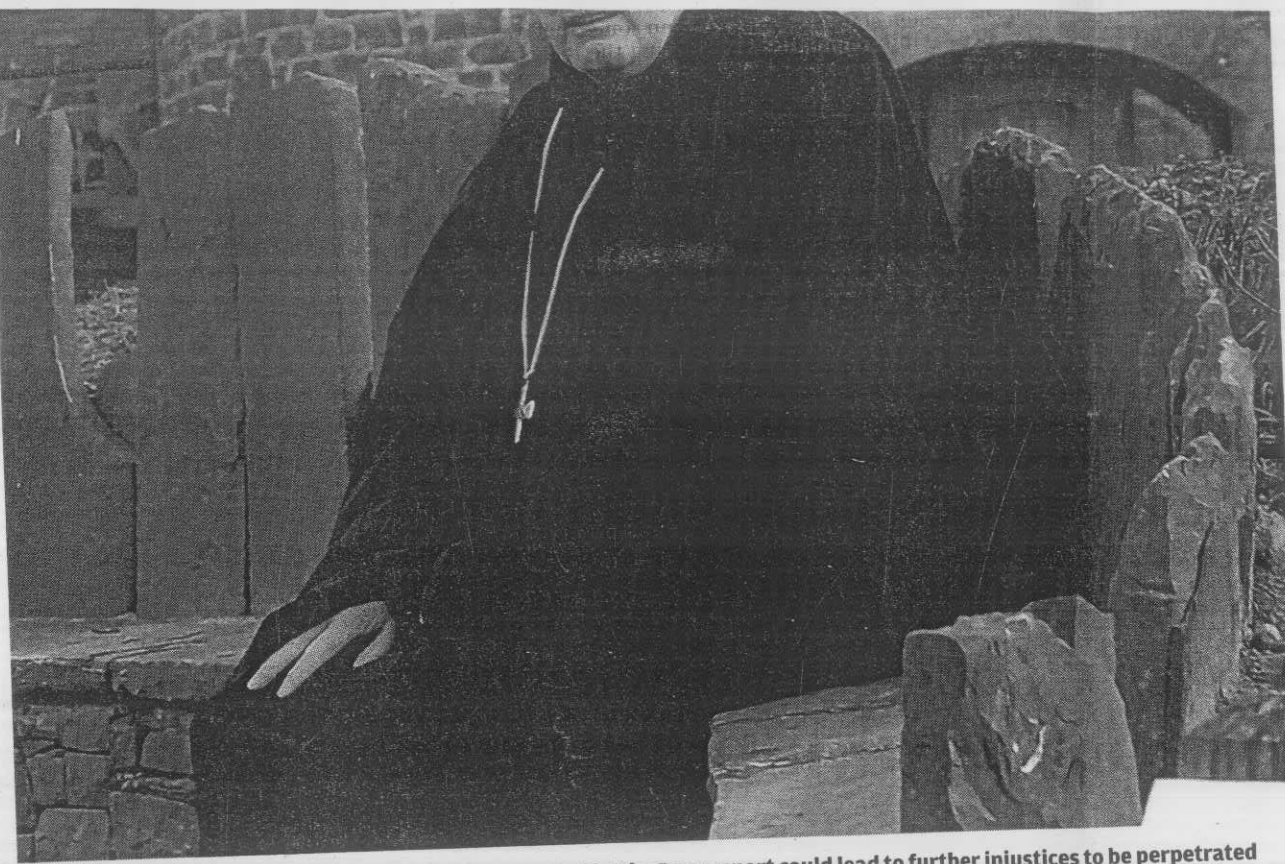
"I heard confessions for the first time in January; confirmed a boy in our school in May; did a Baptism in June; and will have been celebrant at three marriages before the summer is out. So, it's a case of seven sacraments in six months," he said.

He comes from Ballingarry, the second son in a family of four. His brother John, who died in 2007, had worked as a sound engineer in RTE and married Mary Ryan, a novelist and lawyer; his sister Louise, who became a nurse, is married to Risteárd Mulcahy, and his younger brother, Ted, lives in Kildare, and has three children and two grandchildren.

His late father John inherited 350 acres at Ballyneale and his late mother Josephine Mullaney was born in Boston, and brought to Dublin by her mother, following her father's untimely death in the 1930's.

A Trinity Arts graduate, she was on a visit to Ballingarry with her future sister-in-law when she met her husband. "My father was walking out the front avenue and saw Josephine in the car. It was love at first sight. A few days later he proposed. 'I know nothing about you,' she said, somewhat dismissively. 'You know as much about me now as you'll ever know,' came the jaunty reply, 'so, you'd better make up your mind.' Both of them agreed some 40 years later that he was right!"

The Hedermans enjoyed an unusual childhood. "I didn't go to school until I



Abbot Patrick Hederman fears that the hysteria generated by the Ryan report could lead to further injustices to be perpetrated

PERSONAL FILE

Motto: Never do today what you can get someone else to do for you tomorrow

Favourite book: Joseph and His Brothers by Thomas Mann

Favourite hero or heroine: Iris Murdoch

Favourite food: Paella

Favourite place: Skellig Michael

was nine. My American mother believed that children should not go to school until they wanted to go themselves. So the first nine years of my life were spent roaming the hillsides of West Limerick with my sister, Louise, mostly on ponies." Knockfierna, Cnoc Fírinne (Hill of Truth) was one of their haunts. He's going back there again this summer.

So did he read comics then or indulge in any of the typical rural boyhood pursuits? "Not only did we read comics but we acted them out. I was Kit Carson and Louise was Buckskin Annie in this ring fort, doing all the scenes we read about in comics. We were often joined by my brothers and by Annie Scanlon and Pat and Seán Lane. It was a great disappointment to me when, later in my life, I visited Taos in New Mexico where Kit Carson lived and they told me that he was a genocidal monster from Northern Ireland originally, who had walked the Navajo Indians to their deaths."

His relationship with God hasn't changed significantly since he was nine – "which is when I became fully aware of it". He went to Glenstal at 12 and remained, apart from some short absences, for the next 50 years.

"I had always been interested in, and

deeply aware of, God, but most of my conversations had been conducted on Knockfierna. I realised that it was impossible to be a mystic on a mountainside. I had to find a place. In the end I chose Glenstal and I was very fortunate. Not only is it a very beautiful place, but the community gave me every opportunity to educate myself and develop my talents."

Despite holding a PhD in Philosophy from UCD, he doesn't consider himself a deep thinker.

"I always tried to work out why I was thrown into this world without my permission 65 years ago, and I vowed to solve this problem before I was 40. I wanted to know what it meant to live fully in this world, whether I was Chinese or Muslim, man or woman, rich or poor; there had to be some strategy which would cater for every eventuality, every person on the planet. When I began to study philosophy, I realised that these so-called 'philosophers' were simply people who had the same urge, and had left behind them written accounts of what they discovered. Some people said I was a nerd to be into that sort of thing."

Humility is the last thing he would associate with himself.

"I think people have attributed this notion to me because they imagine that I didn't become a priest for some feelings of unworthiness. Nothing could be further from the truth. I was a monk because I believed this was what God was asking me to be. When I was elected abbot, I believed God was asking me to do that."

The Ryan report did not surprise him, he said, but it did increase the huge anguish he shares with all Irish people at this time.

"I suppose we should all get down on our knees and pray forgiveness and guidance. However, I fear that the hysteria generated by this report will cause further injustice to be perpetrated. The situation is very complex and needs a great

deal of study and understanding to grasp its depth and extent. However, a few things are important to keep in mind. We should take our cue from one of our greatest artists, John McGahern, and learn to tell it as it is. Throwing up our hands in horror and dissociating ourselves completely from what we were as a society in the 1940s is not going to help. This is the way we were, and this was the weather of the time. It is an understandable reality and not incomprehensible barbarity."

His own book 'Kissing the Dark' was an attempt to explain to himself some of the reasons for this horrific situation, but he finds it difficult to summarise it in a newspaper interview.

"The newly created Ireland was obsessed by an ideology of 'purity' which became the foundation stone of our socio-cultural architecture. In the Irish context, this was linked to a thraldom and fear of both sexuality and femininity. The fairly recent discovery that humanity is capable of genocide, as a not too distant component of our make-up, is the opening up of another possibility that we are also 'gynocidal' as a society with a murderous antipathy towards the 'feminine' in ourselves and in others – witness the brutal and ubiquitous beating to death of 'women taken in adultery' of 'pansies' 'poofs' and 'queers' who remind us of unacceptable aspects of ourselves."

The 20th century in most European countries, he says, was a blundering between ideologies. "The first half was a battle for the 'soul' of Ireland. The Roman Catholic Church became the highest and the loudest bidder. It thought of Ireland as a light to the nations, zealous missionaries of the angelic nature of humanity. There were others, mostly artists, who demurred, but they were brushed aside."

The Irish Free State, which he described as "an alignment of nationalistic politics and the Roman Catholic Church", set up a socio-political system

Once a community is persuaded that certain people are not worthy of 'care', are beyond consideration as fellow human beings, then our natural sympathy and compassion can be switched off and the step towards regarding such people as a nuisance and then as expendable and finally as 'vermin' is within reach. This has been true in terms of certain tribes in all countries, of women in certain countries, of children in some cultures, of Jews in the Nazi philosophy, of itinerant communities in many countries, and in terms of homosexuals almost universally at this time."

"But," he warned, "a second kind of injustice can now take place because we want to find certain people whom we can hold responsible for a situation which was the effective 'doing' of a whole society at a certain time."

Now he also feels a responsibility to "defend God in all of this".

"I know that my own case is one of huge and incomprehensible privilege. I lived in Ireland from 1944 and was not subjected to any of the horror, misery and aberration that so many had to endure. But, I believe now that I have a very big responsibility to defend God in all of this. All these institutions, all these aberrations were the work of human hands. There is God and there always has been God, and there is always the possibility of being in touch with God wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. And God had nothing to do with the horror stories which abound in the Ryan Report. I have no brief whatever for the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 20th century."

"I abhor and detest the inhuman institutions which were created to deal with the 'unwanted' children of our so-called 'pure' and 'unadulterated' vision of ourselves as a society. My heart goes out to each and every one of the unfortunate children who were condemned to such inhuman institutions."

The Abbot is a prolific writer, having written eight books between 1999 to 2008. His worldwide 'walkabout' in search of the Holy Spirit has been well documented. "My job, as a monk, is to spot wherever I see the Holy Spirit working in the world and to try to identify and highlight this fact."

Galvanising and focusing the energies of Glenstal is an administrative, organisational and diplomatic task, after "the more important work of connecting with the Holy Spirit to receive direction from GHQ", he says.

"The most important function of the monastery is to establish direct connection with God through our public prayer in the monastery church four times a day."

What happened to him happened without human engineering, he insists. "I am grateful to have the path pointed out to me so clearly. But it does make for a very different kind of life. In fact, if the truth be told, there is something of a boring finality about my role. I no longer have to get up every morning and wonder where I should be today. I no longer have to worry about creating significance out of every toe-hold that presents itself. I have been slotted into the masthead of the good ship Glenstal and as far as vocation and effort are concerned, guiding that ship is all that is required. Nor is this too difficult a task, because there are several expert navigators on board."

increase the price of the pint of stout by 2d. to 1/6d. The increase will come into operation on Friday morning.

In a statement issued after the meeting to reporters, Mr. T. Long, secretary of the Limerick branch of the licensed vintners, said that the following prices had been agreed on unanimously, old prices in brackets: Pint, 1/6d. (1/4d.); half-pint, 9d. (81.2d); bottle (small) 11d. (10d); pint bottle 1/8d. (1/6d).

The meeting was presided over by Mr. Patrick Quilty, chairman.

The statement added that the meeting was the biggest held since 1953 when the price of the pint was last increased. Both members and non-members attended.

The meeting was the result of the additional 16/- per bulk barrel, imposed by Messrs. A. Guinness, last week. This in effect means 1/2d on the pint.

One trader pointed out that he employed three barmen and they recently received a substantial increase in addition to shorter hours.

Other traders recalled it was 1953 since the last increase was made by traders, notwithstanding the fact that almost everything else had gone up considerably.

The article finished with the news that the new metal barrels will replace the old wooden ones on the 10th of January.

Unlike modern times, the drinking man didn't take too kindly to the 2d. rise in the pint. On Monday, Jan. 8, the Limerick Leader said that the price of the pint varied from pub to pub. "Customers refused in many instances to patronise their local where the full increase was implemented. They were welcomed with open arms in other establishments. In an effort to justify their increase some publicans installed TVs in their pubs in order to provide entertainment. Lounge bars were charging 1/7d.

Several publicans remained at the old price of 1/4d until present supplies were exhausted and there were virtually besieged yesterday.

The controversy raged in the papers for several weeks and on Saturday, January 20, 1962 the headline ran across the entire front page with the news that some vintners were claiming that attempts have been made to intimidate them to force them increase the price of their drink.

"Considerable confusion still exists regarding the price of a pint of stout in Limerick. Prices vary in different areas from 1/4d. to 1/6d. and several vintners allege they have been intimidated by the association during the week because they have refused to comply with new prices."

Said one vintner: "I was approached by members of the association of which I am not a member. I had already raised the price to 1/6d. but I lost considerable business. I told them I would comply with their wishes if they guaranteed me my business back. When I reduced the price many of my customers returned but some did not."

Another trader said he had been approached, words had been exchanged. He refused to raise the price and said he would continue at the old price.

"I am satisfied with the profit I am making at 1/4d and no one is going to intimidate me," was the remark of a third trader. Pint drinkers still remain bitter over the increase and many have boycotted the 1/6d houses. One regular said that if he did visit a premises where the full increase operated he drank beer or whiskey.