

Cross bears witness at last to forgotten dead in mass grave

Down Your Way



Kevin Cronin reports

A TOWERING wooden cross on the hilltop in St Brigid's graveyard, Kileely, was formally blessed this Wednesday morning in a poignant tribute to the thousands of souls buried there who perished during the Famine era.

City councillors, members of Limerick Civic Trust and pupils of St Munchin's school gathered for the official ceremony, which follows the successful renovation of a site once regarded as a haven for antisocial behaviour.

Mayor Kevin Kiely, now in the twilight of his reign as Limerick's first citizen, stood behind the Cross and gazed at the horizon as if contemplating the end.

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together, put on carts and dumped into a huge hole," he said.

Cllr Gilligan pointed out that the hill we stood on was not a natural one but was derived from a huge mound of bodies that grass grew on top of.

"I feel much better today as a Limerick person now that we've shown we haven't forgotten them. I'd like to pay particular tribute to Limerick Civic Trust for all the work they've done. Like so many things they've done before, they've helped make us proud Limerick people," he said.

The Mayor gave special thanks to Ger Imbusch, Ralph Slattery and Des O'Sullivan who constructed the cross as a replacement for the old one, which had decayed and was moved to the graveyard's entrance.

Ger Imbusch told the Limerick Leader: "The main piece of wood itself took 12 people to physically lift it up.



Kevin Kiely, now in his eighth year of his reign as Limerick's first citizen, stood on the Cross and gazed at the horizon as if contemplating the end.

"This is an historic occasion when we acknowledge the rich historic tapestry of our country. Irish people struggled for centuries and we must never forget the darker times during the Famine era when hundreds were laid to rest here," he said.

Former mayor Frank Prendergast outlined the history of what was once the "Pauper's Graveyard", serving as a mass grave for thousands of Limerick residents who died during the cholera epidemics and Famine of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

"This sacred place is awash with history. Sporadic attempts were made over the years to restore this graveyard, but none as successful as this. In the past, bodies were brought here on donkey carts and dumped vertically into the ground. The site fell into neglect. But with this new cross, we couldn't have a greater symbol of our reverence," he said.

Mr Prendergast said that elderly residents in Moyross remember seeing some of the old coffins sticking out above the ground.

Unseemly

"It was most unseemly. They weren't buried properly, no one took care of them and they were often brought down here without benefit of clergy," he added.

Canon Donagh O'Malley, who conducted the religious service, sprinkled the cross with holy water and blessed the many generations of Limerick residents laid to rest in the mass grave.

"I would like to take this opportunity to ask members of Limerick city council if they might consider bringing this graveyard back into daily use once again," he said.

Local poet Tom McCarthy read out a poem he had composed for the occasion, which spoke of "graveyards full with the old and the young" that made him "wonder if their souls were trapped in Purgatory with no name".

Cllr John Gilligan said that one of the most regrettable things about the graveyard was the lack of recognition given to it before now.

"We, in Ireland, always had a tradition of showing respect for the dead and yet we had thousands of people buried here who were simply abandoned.

"They died during two of Limerick's greatest catastrophes, the cholera epidemic and the potato Famine, and were simply bundled

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Ger Imbusch told the Limerick Leader: "The main piece of wood itself took 12 people to physically lift it up. We assembled it on site and placed it in a pre-constructed hole. The wood was sourced from Coillte in Dundrum in Tipperary. It's a beautiful piece of Douglas fir."

Brother Seán of the Franciscan Friars admitted he hadn't heard of the burial ground until recently.

Recognition

"I think a lot of people probably don't know about it at all. It's great that the dead have finally been given recognition. I'm sure there are many people in Moyross who have relatives buried here. We're giving them back the dignity that every human being deserves. They were buried in a mass grave and totally forgotten. It's a wonderful thing Limerick Civic Trust have done here to keep their memory alive," he said.

Debbie Jacobs, historian with Limerick Civic Trust, said that when she began researching the history of the graveyard, she was shocked at how little had been written about it.

She quoted English writer Spencer Hall, who wrote of the burial ground during his visit to Limerick in 1849:

"I was shown one vast grave in a field on the outside of the city, near the poor-house, into which two thousand bodies had been gathered in less than a month. A hole was first dug, large enough for six coffins, after which being placed together, without the slightest ceremony, were covered with the earth from another hole."

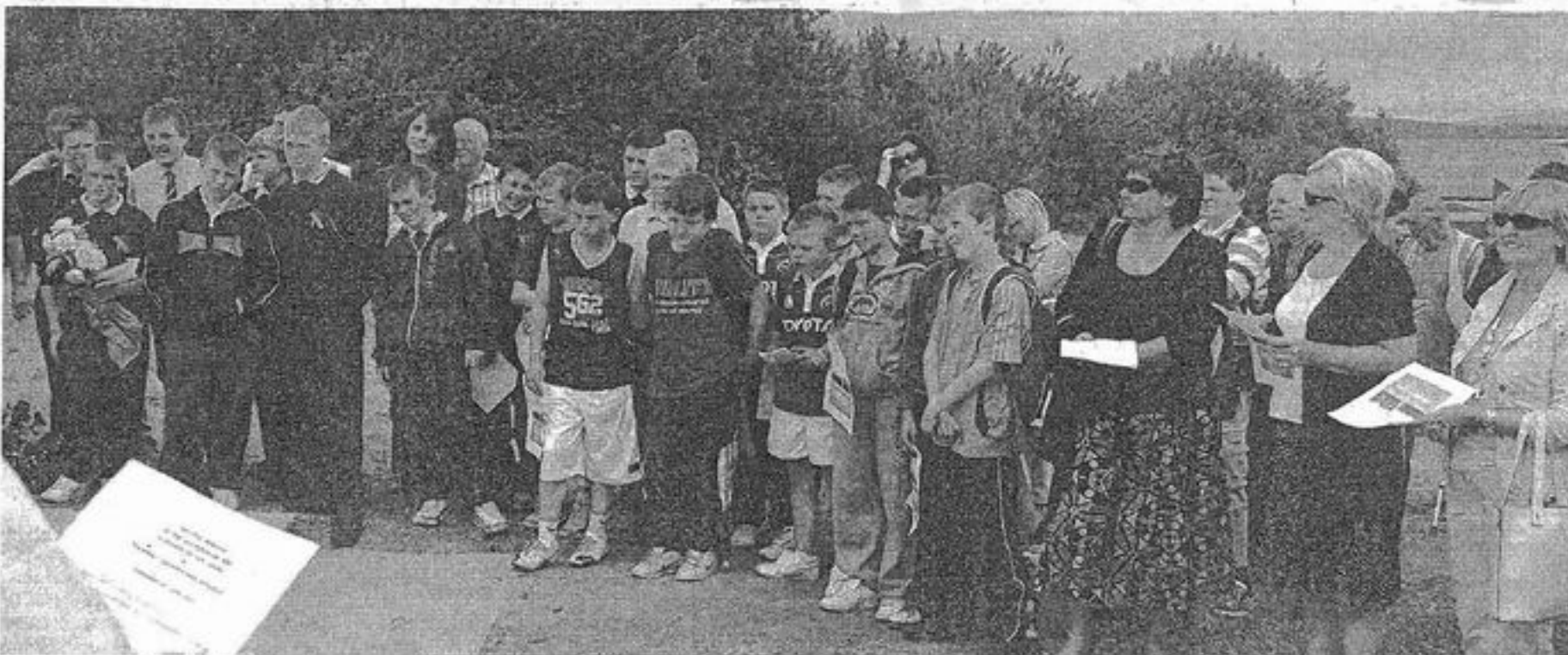
The Bard of Thomond, Michael Hogan, also described the scene in his 1847 poem, "The Living Skeleton":

*All my heart, with horror shrinking,
On a thousand dread things thinking,
I advanced- each footstep sinking,
In the corpse-befatted ground;
Where uncoffined and unshrouded,
lay the blackened bodies crowded,
With a pall of blue flies clouded,
In the festering graves around;
While meagre birds of darkness, and
lank-sided beasts of prey,
From the putrefying members tore
the stinking flesh away.*



Mayor Kevin Kiely speaking at the St Brigid's graveyard in Kileely where a cross was erected to commemorate those buried there

PICTURES: OWEN SOUTH



The congregation gathers in prayer around the cross at what was known as the paupers' graveyard in Kileely during the commemorative ceremony this week



Des Murray, Ann Brown, Archie Brown and Mavis Murray at the ceremony in Kileely



Former Mayor of Limerick, Frank Prendergast, speaking at the ceremony in Kileely



Cian Nolan, Dylan Considine, Michael Kelly and Danny Wyse

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