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Gift for WWI pilot lands in Limerick

Memorial staircase for Limerick-born pilot finds a new home in St Munchin's Church, writes Lynne Kelleher

A grand staircase erected in an English hospital in memory of a heroic Irish fighter pilot who died in World War 1 has been dismantled and returned to his hometown of Limerick.

Major Edgar James Bannatyne was a decorated pilot with the Royal Flying Corps who died following a training exercise in England in 1917 after returning home from fighting in the Egyptian desert a few months earlier.

The Limerick-born pilot climbed out on to the fuselage and jumped from the burning wreckage of his plane just before it crashed into the side of a house in the Cotswolds in England.

He was rushed to Cirencester Hospital, north of London, with badly burned hands and legs but died from his injuries days later.

His Irish parents paid for a grand staircase and lift to be erected in memory of their only son after hearing how his badly burnt legs had been banged against the original narrow stairwell while being carried to the ward on a stretcher in 1917.

The story behind the installation in recent weeks of the staircase in the



Limerick-born Major Edgar James Bannatyne, was a member of the Royal Flying Corps during World War I and died at after an accident at Rendcomb airfield in the Cotswolds in 1917

deconsecrated St Munchin's Church in the city, which is to be turned into a military museum, began with the discovery of letters written by Major Bannatyne home to Croom during his service.

Local historian, Declan Hehir, began looking into the war hero after discovering four 101-year-old letters to the

previous owners, the Brouder family, in a leather pouch in a drawer when he moved into a period house in County Limerick.

He said: "I found the letters he wrote to the Brouders, who worked for his family."

"They were quite personal so he must have been very



One of Major Edgar's letters home to Croom

close to that family.

"His death was tragic. He died of injuries in 1917 when he crashed into a house on a training mission. He was an only son.

"It's fitting that the staircase is back in the year that is in it and that Major Edgar is known as a hero in his native Limerick.

"They installed the staircase after they heard his badly burned legs and arms were banged against the sides stairwell when he was being carried up to the ward on a stretcher."

In one of the letters, the decorated fighter pilot, who flew on missions in Africa during World War One, compared flying to riding a horse and thanked his

'Fashion in Limerick is gorgeous':



Hilary Thompson in 1981, wearing a Vonnie Reynolds design

JESS CASEY

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MODELLING for Hilary Thompson is something she has always known and loved.

"I love fashion and I love meeting people, having met some very special people down through the years," she tells the Leader.

The prominent modelling agent started her career when she was just 13 years old.

"My mother made me go to classes to straighten my back," she says with a smile.

She caught her first break at the age of 16, when she was cast in a television advert for Schweppes.

"I did some modelling in Dublin with Nan Morgan. I

was too small for the ramps so it was mostly photographic, television ads and magazine work, for things like Knorr Soup, Butcher Boy Sausages and Harp Lager."

Photographed here on the left in 1981, modelling the designs of one of Ireland's great fashion designers Vonnie Reynolds, it was around this time Hilary decided to go it alone and set up her own agency.

"It was Gretta Coughlan, who has since passed away, of Gretta Gibbs who gave me my very first show 35 years ago. Only for her and Jerry Relihan, they offered me my first show and that kick started it all.

"It's hard work but I really enjoy it. I'm learning all the time. I have a very good team

family's employees for taking "good care of his rifle".

"I have just got a new machine with an 80-horse power engine which goes 80 miles per hour and rises 1000 feet in a minute and it is like a riding a horse with a very good mouth as it is very light on the controls," wrote the 26-year-old pilot a year before his death.

Documents reveal that the Limerick pilot was posted to Egypt in 1916 where he took part in the Darfur Expedition as a flight commander earning a Distinguished Service Order.

When Declan discovered that Cirencester Hospital was set to be demolished this year, he wrote to them asking for the memorial stairs to be returned to his hometown of Limerick.

"I emailed the council in the Cotswolds and said we were very concerned about the stairs and he should be returned to Limerick," he explained.

"I went into David O'Brien in the Limerick Civic Trust and I left it in his capable hands and in fairness they got it back.

"The whole stairs was dismantled and brought back."

It is now fittingly installed in St Munchin's Church in Limerick city, a deconsecrated church, which is currently being converted a military museum.

David O'Brien, from Limerick's Civic Trust, said they had started making representations about the return of stairs to the English council in 2002 but the quest was revived when Declan Hehir approached them with Major Bannatyne's letters.

He said: "They were



Declan Hehir examines a letter written by Edgar Bannatyne on the memorial staircase



Mayor Bannatyne's 1917 Wellington College Yearbook

fantastic to do it. Weird things happen.

"My predecessor, Denis Leonard, had been chasing this and I took up the cudgel and then out of nowhere Declan arrived in here with these letters saying 'wouldn't it be great to get these stairs?'

"Declan was instrumental in getting it for us and those letters that were written back here reinforced the fact that Major Bannatyne was from

here. It showed the connection.

"We had to write a number of reports justifying why Limerick rather than somewhere else in the UK would be the natural place for not only an artefact but what is registered as a war memorial.

"Eventually they dismantled it and the church it has been put into is where the family Bannatyne crypt is," added Mr O'Brien.

He said the stairs was bought for the hospital by the Bannatyne family in the aftermath of the pilot's death.

"It was reckoned he suffered very badly when he was knocked about on a stretcher going up a narrow stairwell in the hospital

"So, the family decided to build them a decent one and the also built a huge lift. The idea was to move patients more freely and smoothly through the hospital.

"That was their gift."

Model agency boss Hilary

behind me and a very good team of models.

"I love fashion and I love clothes but I try to support local. That's very important because these people are the people who are keeping me in business. I think the fashion in Limerick is gorgeous. There is great variety," she adds.

"I'm in a different mindset now. I think I look at things a lot more objectively. At the beginning of the agency, it was tough. There was a lot of competition and I had to fight to keep what I had."

Hilary is pictured on the right wearing a purple dress from Gretta Gibbs, cream dress from In-Vogue, shoes by Serendipity and jewellery from Keane's. Hair and make-up by Henshin.



Dress by Gretta Gibbs



Dress by In-Vogue

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