

The case of the missing bones: Rector accused of moving graves

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A VERY strange article appeared in the Chronicle on July 30, 1851 when the Rector John Elmes of St John's Church, John Square was accused of exhuming human bones from the churchyard and moving them to the pig market.

In 1851, the ground in the churchyard was being levelled to make way for the construction of the new St John's Church. On June 23, 1851, a committee report on St. John's churchyard was released. Thaddeus MacDonnell, Mayor, chaired the committee and they had visited the churchyard three days earlier to ascertain whether the reports in circulation about the disinterment of the dead were fact.

The committee statement read: "Your committee found that the greater portion of the church yard had been levelled by the removal of the surface of various depths, irrespective as to whether that surface contained the remains of the dead interred recently or for a long period. That a large portion of this surface, containing the bones of the dead, had been removed to the old pig market in the vicinity of the artillery barracks. That this operation appeared to your committee to have been carried on for a long time, and was by no means confined to the immediate vicinity of the church, now rebuilding, as stated, and to have been general over the entire surface of the church yard, except where prevented by the tombs erected over vaults being now considerably over the level to which the cemetery has been lowered. That the graves of several citizens were uprooted, and the coffins removed, in some instances, to other parts of the church yard, where removal was practicable, but that some coffins too fragile to disinter, were burned in heaps - the charred remnants of which were manifest to your committee, covered with stone and rubbish, apparently for the purpose of concealment. That in some

ST JOHN'S CHURCH (LIMERICK).

SURVEY OF GRAVEYARD.

ANY person claiming a burial plot in above graveyard, will send particulars to E W ANGLE (Churchwarden), North Strand, Limerick, before 31st

There was a call out in the Chronicle on July 20, 1918 asking for family members of those buried in St John's Churchyard to come forward

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parts all traces of the burial place of certain families was obliterated by the removal of the tomb-stones. That tomb-stones and head-stones lie piled over each other, having been removed from their position; so that a church yard that, in the re-

collection of some of your committee, was crowded with those records of the dead, now present but a few large monuments over vaults. That several coffins are now level with the surface of the church-yard, the entire depth of the soil heretofore covering them being, as before-mentioned, removed.

That instances of tomb-stones having been disposed of, for the purpose of erasing that inscriptions, in order to have them used anew, have occurred. That these facts were patent to your committee from their own observations - from the evidence of the grave-digger employed in the church-yard, who made no concealment that he was the instrument of this profanation,

acting under the direction of the rector."

The following week this report was brought up in the Limerick town Council meeting were a Mr Cullen stated that "it was the duty of the vicar not only to protect the souls of the living, but to take care of the dead, and he would be sorry to hear that any clergyman would act in such a manner as it now appeared the Rev. Mr. Elmes did. He hoped government would take cognizance of the matter, and adopt such measures as would prevent a recurrence of such brutal conduct towards the ashes of the dead in this country - that would deter others from acting in the inhuman way in which Mr. Elmes did. He vis-

ited the burial ground, and conversed with the grave digger, who told him all had been done by the direction of the rector".

The work on the new church and churchyard ended the following year. The Rev John Elmes continued as rector of St John's Church.

He passed away in the rectory, John Square in 1869. He was buried in the churchyard that caused so much controversy eighteen years earlier. His epitaph reads "Sacred to the memory of Revd John Elmes. The beloved minister of this parish for 31 years. Under whom the present church was rebuilt.

He died January 5th 1869 aged 63 years."

Visionaries help build the city we know today

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annum. Original tenants included Vere Hunt, of Curraghchase, William Monsell of Tervoe and Pery's brother, the Rev. William Cecil Pery. Another of the early tenants was Dorothea Crump, widow of General Crump, who later married William Cecil Pery. William succeeded his father in the vicarage of St. John's Church, which occupied the fourth easterly side of the square. William Cecil Pery would later become the

Protestant Bishop of Limerick.

At the time, the church of St John's was a 15th century structure. The wall around the churchyard was built in 1693. This church was demolished and the present church was opened on June 24, 1852. A few weeks later on July 14, 1852, a report from the petty sessions appeared in the Chronicle. "Some persons engaged with the election posted on the pillar of St John's new church gate, an inflammatory placard. Rev John Elmes went to the place and desired a

man in his employment to take it down, which was done. In a few minutes after Mr. Elmes had retired a mob of some hundreds came rushing on, and beat severely the man who had removed the placard. Mr Elmes went amongst them and brought the man into his house, but the crowd continued to increase, and used violent and threatening language. Mr Elmes' two sons and the parish schoolmaster went to the magistrates for the police, and the answer they brought back was to summon all

the offending parties". The church was deconsecrated in the 1970s and is now used by Dance Limerick.

The last rector of St John's Parish who lived in John Square was Canon Frederick Langbridge (1849-1922). Langbridge was a novelist, poet and dramatist most well known for the line "Two men look out through the same bars: One sees the mud, and one the stars".

His funeral was recorded in the Chronicle on January 24, 1922. "The funeral of the late Canon Frederick Langbridge, M.A, D Litt,

took place yesterday from the Rectory, St John's, for St John's Church, of which the rev. gentleman had been Rector for close on forty years. The cortege was large, and was representative of all classes and creeds, testifying to the respect and esteem in which the rev. gentleman was held in the city, and the sympathy which is so widely felt with Mrs Landbridge and her daughter in their bereavement. The poles outside St John's Temperance Society were draped in black."