

LISBURN HISTORICAL SOCIETY



MAGHERALLY CHURCH

It was in this church in the summer of 1776 that Hugh Brontë and Alice McClory were married. Although engaged to Joe Burns, a local farmer and fellow Catholic, Alice had secretly decided to take a different groom to the altar, and in a different church.

The McClory family did not approve of Alice's friendship with Hugh. Not only was he not local and little known about him, he had no visible prospects and most importantly he was not a Roman Catholic. On the other hand Joe Burns filled all the McClory's desires, though crucially not Alice's

Despite the disapproval, Hugh and Alice frequently met in secret and decided to elope on the day of the proposed nuptials with Mr Burns.

Having lost his position at Swift McNeill's Linn Kilns at Mount Pleasant near Dundalk, Hugh went to the Hiring Fair at Newry. There he hired himself out as a farm hand to Mr James Harshaw of Donoughmore, an area just four miles from Newry and about the same distance from Alice's home. Well treated by the family he frequently drove them to the local Presbyterian Meeting House, sharing the family pew. Having no contact with religion in younger days, this was probably his first experience of a church service.

James Harshaw, a kindly man, must have been aware of Hugh's romance and of the difficulties the couple would face in finding a minister willing to officiate at a mixed marriage. Through his friendship with Rev. William McCormick, Vicar of Magherally, - a new church he had recently built - it was agreed that the wedding would take place there. The registers for that parish prior to 1784 are said to have been destroyed in the fire at the Four Courts in Dublin in 1922 so no record of the event exists.

Today the church stands roofless but proudly on top of a County Down drumlin just a couple of miles from Banbridge, the town where in later times, Patrick would bring the linen he had woven. Built in 1770 to replace an older and smaller church, which was in serious disrepair, it in turn was replaced in 1886 by a new church on an adjoining drumlin. The well-kept churchyard surrounding the ruin is still in use to day and attracts visitors not only for the Brontë connection, but also to visit the grave of a well-known playwright and author, Helen Waddell. Although born in Tokyo she was brought up in the Banbridge area. And expressed a desire to be buried at Magherally.