

## Hidden Gems and Forgotten People

### NORTH OF IRELAND FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY LISBURN BRANCH



#### **SIR WILLIAM McILROY, PAPAL KNIGHT**

William McIlroy of Hilden Cottage, outside Lisburn, had a very successful career with the Barbour organisation. William, like his father before him, was engaged in the flax trade all his life. The family was originally from the Falls Road, Belfast, but settled for a time in Courtrai, the Belgian flax growing district, where William's father James died on 8 August 1875 and the family returned home. Educated at St Malachy's College, Belfast, McIlroy served his apprenticeship in the flax department of Barbour's Mill at Hilden and in his spare time he was active with Hilden Athletic Club and played football for local team Hertford. He was appointed a flax buyer and later promoted to flax manager. With the formation of the Linen Thread Co. he was responsible for all flax purchases made by the combine from 1904 until his retirement in 1933. He was an acknowledged authority on flax and there were few superior judges of it in the British Isles. In the course of his duties he travelled to many parts of the world and spoke several languages fluently. He was a J.P. and a member of the management committee of the County Antrim Infirmary.

A devout catholic, he supported the church and institutions with numerous benefactions such as the building of the church of St. Mary of the Angels, Clanvaraghan, Drumaroad, Co. Down; St. Anthony and St. Anne statues, a Lourdes grotto and a Calvary grotto at St. Patrick's, Lisburn; financing new x-ray equipment at the Mater Hospital, annual excursions for Lisburn Boys' School, and the McIlroy bursary valued at £3,000 at St. Malachy's College. In recognition of his good work he was created a Knight of St. Gregory by Pope Pius XI. The Order of St. Gregory the Great is bestowed on persons who distinguish themselves for conspicuous virtue and notable accomplishment on behalf of the church and society, regardless of their religious belief. During his funeral service in St. Patrick's in May 1945 his Knight's bicornered hat with plume and court sword reposed on the coffin. He was buried in the family grave at Holy Trinity Cemetery, Lisburn.