

POYNTZPASS & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



The Bell Thorn (aka The Burial Thorn)

Aughantaraghan townland, Poyntzpass, Co Armagh

A site of some significance in the townland of Aughantaraghan is known locally as ‘The Bell-thorn’. On Ordnance survey maps and in the Memoirs’ of the 1830’s it is referred to as ‘The Burial Thorn’.

The gnarled thorn from which the site derives its name is still growing in a field boundary-hedge and is very obviously of great antiquity

The 1835 Ordnance Survey map marks the site and shows it as a semi-circular enclosure. The accompanying Memoirs described it as ‘an ancient thorn’ and the enclosure as a place where casualties of some ancient battle were buried.

The site is about a mile south of Poyntzpass village, 200 yards east of the Old Road - which was up to the early 19th century the main road from Newry to Acton and Tandragee.

Local people regarded this site with some reverence. According to the tradition it was here that the local Catholic people gathered to pray on Sundays in Penal times but it was believed that this was a place of spiritual significance long before that. Indeed, it is possible that an ancient church may have stood here in early Christian times.

At one time there was a large pile of stones at the Bell Thorn. An oral tradition has it that every member of the congregation when coming here in times of persecution brought with them a stone which, it was hoped, would one day be used to build a church on the site. Over a period of time a large pile of stones was amassed. It is possible, however, that most or all of the stones had been here from much earlier times.

One tale, probably apocryphal, is that on a Sunday morning in winter in 1790 or thereabouts, the local landlord Alexander Thomas Stewart of Acton, when passing by saw the people gathered at prayer here and, moved with compassion, gave the Catholic people the field in Brannock townland, on which St Joseph’s Church was built in 1794.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the stones were carted away from here and used to pave a yard in Poyntzpass village (where the Independent Church stands today). Now only few large stones remain in the ditch below the old tree. The Bell Thorn is obviously a very old tree indeed having been described as ‘ancient’ nearly two-hundred years ago.

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

Thorn trees have long been associated mystical things and with places of spiritual significance. The Glastonbury thorn in England is probably the most famous example of this. In Ireland there will often be a thorn tree growing beside a holy well, on which visitors hang offerings such as rosary beads or handkerchiefs.

A generation ago, locals were very much more conscious of their surroundings and a site such as the Bell Thorn was pointed out to visitors and the traditional stories retold. Today, few know of the existence of this old tree and there is always the concern that though ignorance, rather than malice, some enthusiastic hedge-culler could destroy an irreplaceable part of our heritage.

Frank Watters