

Hidden Gems and Forgotten People

BY BRIAN McCABE



VIRGINIA CHURCH OF IRELAND

In the centre of the town of Virginia, almost hidden at the end of a long avenue flanked by trees, stands the historic Church of Ireland church.

A biography of the great 18th century English Shakespearean actress, Peg Woffington, records that in January 1753, while visiting the nearby home of the great dramatist Richard Sheridan, she attended church at ‘the parish church of Lurgan, near Virginy’.

The present church in the town was built in 1821, on a site overlooking the old Fair Green and dominating the roads that meet in the centre of the town. It was described in *Lewis’ Topographical Directory* as “a new and handsome structure in the Gothic style, with a fine spire surmounted by a gilt cross”. It was built with a loan from the Board of First Fruits but, shortly after completion, a storm blew down the steeple which, falling on the roof, completely destroyed it. It was soon rebuilt, but its run of bad luck continued when, on Christmas night 1832, the rebuilt church ‘was entirely consumed by fire, which was accidental’.

The church was rebuilt yet again and continued in use throughout the 19th century.

The *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette* of 1881 records that the church was re-opened after many months of closure, for repair and improvement, almost entirely at the expense of the Marquis of Headfort. The old-fashioned pews were replaced, the choir was raised and choir stalls were built. A new pulpit, the gift of a number of parishioners, was installed to match the choir stalls and reading desk. A new Holy Table fall was made by ‘young ladies of the congregation’ and a brass lectern was also purchased. A new underground heating system was installed and a stained glass window in memory of Madeline Crichton, daughter of the Marquis, replaced what was referred to as ‘a hideous window of stained glass, of the worst possible taste and execution’!

Today this extremely tasteful church building, with its beautiful Yew Tree avenue and surrounding graveyard, overlooks the busy (and pretty) little town of Virginia – itself a hidden gem, which has won the national Tidy Towns competition not just once, but twice, during the 1960s.