

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

STRABANE HISTORY SOCIETY



THE URNEY BELL

“There are strange things done by the

” so continues the words of Robert Service in a well-known poem. These words could apply to the story of the Urney Bell, once a hidden gem, now hanging in the grounds of St. Mary’s Church, Melmount, Strabane.

On one occasion the bell had been ‘stolen’ by the parish priest, and on another occasion buried in a graveyard for so many years that the parishioners forgot where it had been hidden!

The bell, measuring eight feet in circumference, cost Most Reverend James Connolly P.P., Urney, £72-10-0 in 1869 to mark the opening of the church of St. Columba at Doneyloop, between Clady and Castlefinn. The bell and the church were officially dedicated by the Most Reverend Francis Kelly D.D. At this time Urney was part of the parish of Castleberg, Sion Mills, Melmount and Clady with the parochial house at Doneyloop.

A church on the northern edge of the parish had been built near Strabane at Melmount in 1846 by Fr. Paul Bradley who had succeeded Fr. Denis McDevitt as Parish Priest of Urney.

In 1904 the Rev. Father John McElhatton, a formidable gentleman who immersed himself in local politics, especially in the Home Rule movement, was appointed P.P. of Urney. In 1906 the land on which the present Church of St. Mary’s, Melmount now stands became available. He purchased the land and proceeded to build the parochial house there.

Fr. McElhatton then took the decision to transfer the bell to Melmount. There it was erected at the entrance to the Church. It remained there for 34 years. The parishioners of Urney were not happy that the bell ‘Dedicated to St. Colmcille, Doneyloop’ now stood outside St. Mary’s of Melmount. But who was brave enough to incur clerical wrath?

In 1939 the Second World War broke out. Due to the shortage of armament stocks it became necessary for the Government to requisition iron and metal objects for recycling to provide

munitions. In the Strabane area soldiers were commissioned to gather in metals that would help the war effort.

Local parishioners at Melmount, fearful of losing 'their' precious bell, removed it and buried it in a secret location at the rear of the cemetery.

There it remained, buried, secure and forgotten – for so long in fact that no one could quite remember where it had been hidden. When parishioners began again to question the empty plinth the then new curate in Melmount, Rev. Fr. John Convery began a search. Eventually it was discovered in the rear of the graveyard. The grave had a single name to mark the spot – A. Bell. So the bell was resurrected!

In 1970 a new church of St. Mary's was built on the other side of the road. In 1978 Rev. Fr. Anthony Mulvey was appointed P.P. Melmount and several years later he had a plinth constructed outside the church and had the bell erected.

The people of Urney still believe that the bell was should not have been removed and should rightly stand outside the Church of St. Columba's at Doneyloop.

By Michael G. Kennedy