A PARISH UNDERTAKING

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*Cleaning an ancient, over-crowded cemetery is a problem
of the most delicate kind. The enumeration of the difficul-
ties is a familiar recital. But within the past few years
the problem has been solved successfully in many places
throughout the country. Father Houlihan tells how the
parish of Ardpatrick tackled the job.*

*Few exercises are more calculated to impress on a parish
the lesson of Christian respect for the dead and the need
for thinking of them in our prayers.*

Editor.

THE cemetery on the hill of Ardpatrick, Co. Limerick, was,
until quite recently, in a very bad condition. One would
scarcely believe that Christian people could tolerate
such disorder where their nearest and dearest were laid to rest.
Loose stones were scattered all over the ancient church; and,
worst of all, human bones strewn about, especially within the
old church. Today, the cemetery, though by no means a model
one, is quite respectable. The old section has been cleaned,
levelled and a concrete path runs right around it. There is a
new extension to the graveyard, which is, of course, excellently
laid out.

My task in this brief article is to explain how the local
Parish Council and Limerick County Council co-operated to bring
about the transformation. At the outset, I must mention that
in the case of Ardpatrick cemetery there were certain circum-
stances which made the undertaking very difficult. The cemetery
is situated on the top of a very steep hill and consequently the
carting of materials presented a big problem. Secondly, there
was no road to the old cemetery. Finally, the parish is very
small and so the amount of voluntary help available was very
limited.

However, it was decided at a Parish Council meeting, on
March 25, 1946, that the County Council should be asked to
inspect the place and report to the local council. In due course
the report arrived. It was the opinion of the engineer that
because of the elevated position of the cemetery and its over-

crowded and very disorderly condition, it would be wiser to close it down and open a new cemetery somewhere else. The Parish Council was asked to find out what the grave-owners thought of the suggestion. The result of the inquiry was that the grave-owners rejected the proposal and made it quite clear that they would continue to use the old cemetery. When the wishes of the people were made known to the County Council, it was agreed to leave the old burial ground open, to add an extension and make a road to the hill top.

The County Council agreed to make the road without any assistance from the local Parish Council. It was some time before the work on the road commenced and the road was not completed until the end of 1948. The big work—the extension and the cleaning of the old burial ground—had yet to be tackled. The Muintir na Tire Parish Council (the Parish Council was disolved during 1948 and a Muintir na Tire Guild established) began to work on the project.

After a lengthy correspondence with the County Council an agreement was reached on the work that the County Council should carry out and what the local council was expected to do. The County Council agreed to purchase the half acre extension; to build a concrete surrounding wall; to supply and erect the gates; and to supply the grave markers. The local council on its side was responsible for the levelling of the extension; the cleaning and levelling of the old section; the laying of concrete paths around the old burial ground. The members of the local council undertook to interview the owner of the land, adjacent to the cemetery, and find out if he were willing to sell the required amount and at what price.

When agreement was reached on these points the Muintir na Tire Council got to work without delay. The landowner when interviewed showed that he was keenly interested in the whole project. Not only did he agree to sell the required amount of land but gave permission to use any sand or gravel that could be obtained on the hillside. As carting gravel, etc., on the steep new road would be very difficult, the owner pointed out that the easiest way to the hill top could be selected, even though that meant considerable traffic through his land. The County Council was informed of the result and an engineer was sent to inspect the ground and decide where the extension should be made. When the engineer selected the most suitable site, trial

holes were dug and as these were satisfactory the place was
passed as suitable for burials. The site was then purchased.

The Ardpatrick Muintir na Tire Council had to set about
organising voluntary help and think out ways and means of
collecting money to buy cement, gravel, etc. It was decided
at a Council meeting to advertise in the *Cork Examiner* and in
the *Limerick Leader* their intention to carry out extensive
improvements in the local cemetery. Those interested in the
project were invited to send their names and addresses to the
Hon. Sec. of the Guild. Furthermore, it was decided to com-
municate with some people in the neighbouring parishes who
were known to have an interest in the improvement of the
cemetery and ask them to forward the names of those in their
area who owned graves in Ardpatrick. It was also considered
advisable to have two hundred circulars printed. These were
sent to grave-owners outside the parish. Circulars were not
sent to parishioners as these were to be contacted by members
of the council. The circular contained a statement of the work
that was to be carried out; an appeal for help in cash or man-
power. As well it asked permission from the grave-owner to
clean the graves of his relatives.

The next matter the council had to attend to was the
securing of voluntary help and plan how the available help
could be used to the best advantage. Members of the council
visited each house in the parish and at a subsequent council
meeting a list of the families in the parish was drawn up and the
type of help each family was prepared to give noted.

When all these preparations had been made it only remained
to decide on the D-day of the enterprise when operations
would begin.

Work began on September 27, 1951. On that morning the
ten voluntary workers for that day went to fetch sand from
the sand pits. Their instructions were to keep the tractor,
which was also given voluntarily for the day, moving as quickly
as possible. The men were so arranged that there was only
the minimum of delay at the place of loading and the place of
unloading. Due to the steepness of the hill the tractor could
only carry one-third of its normal load. It was some days, then,
before sufficient gravel was delivered on the hill top. When the
drawing of gravel was completed the men were put to work on
the levelling of the new site. This work turned out to be much

more difficult than was anticipated and absorbed much of the available voluntary help. As the old cemetery was yet to be set in order, the members of the council had a few anxious days.

The response to the circulars sent to people outside the parish was excellent. Subscriptions began to pour in. Some of those who subscribed offered to send workmen as well. This interest and enthusiasm of many non-parishioners was a source of great encouragement to the members of the *Muintir na Tire* council. Needless to mention, our parishioners responded magnificently to the appeal for voluntary help. Many who could not come along themselves paid men to work for them.

As time proved, the most difficult part of the work lay ahead—the cleaning, etc., of the old graveyard. It was quite evident that serious trouble could arise when work commenced there. People are very touchy when there is question of any interference with the graves of their dead. Many have the odd belief that to interfere with a grave—even to clean it—is to ask for trouble. A number of graves lay across the pathway where it was intended to put down a concrete pathway. Before starting work in the old cemetery it was considered advisable to write to the County Council (the cemetery is County Council property) for permission from the County Council to carry out the necessary improvements. The permission was, of course, readily granted. When people, and these were very few, objected to any interference with their graves, the parish council referred them to the County Council and has not heard anything since from the objectors. The graves across the pathway appeared at first to present a very difficult problem, but actually it was solved very easily. The grave owners in question were interviewed and asked if they would agree to have large flat stones flush with the concrete path, placed over their graves. The owners agreed. When the concrete was being put down the flag stones were put over the graves in such a way that they can be very easily removed when occasion demands.

The cleaning of the old graveyard was indeed a formidable task. It involved very hard, difficult and in some instances dangerous work—taking down unsafe parts of the old church walls. At this stage one was very much inclined to favour the County Council's original proposal to close down the cemetery altogether. Where did all these stones belong? How were they to be disposed of? Down the centuries the walls of the old

monastery church and round tower had crumbled. Local tradition believes that before the old cemetery was walled in it was customary to bring stones along and pile them on the newly made grave. The purpose this covering with stones served was, it has been said, to prevent cattle interfering with the graves.

The first work to be undertaken in the old cemetery was the cutting down of the ivy from the old church walls. Bushes and trees were also removed. Then one day at lunch hour the school boys were asked to go to the graveyard, gather the ivy, branches of trees, bushes and coffin boards into one corner and set fire to them. (We thought it proper to engage as many as possible of the sections of the parish in our enterprise.) Need I say the children were delighted to be asked? Unfortunately, the boys had to return to school before the fire really got going. But such is life. The trunks of the trees were thrown over the wall to be removed at a future date.

The stones were disposed of as follows. Part of the old walls of the church were rebuilt to a height of five or six feet. As the walls were very thick quite a lot of stones was disposed of in this way. More of the stones were used as foundation for the concrete pathways. The remainder were thrown over the cemetery wall. As a horse and car could not be used to remove the stones the men had to do the work with hand barrows. This method was necessarily very slow.

As the work progressed it was only too evident that voluntary help would soon be at an end. There was yet quite a lot of work to be done. Employing men to finish the work was hardly feasible as the money that had been subscribed was earmarked for the concrete pathways and the cleaning of headstones. Someone suggested that the County Council should be approached and asked to send a gang of men for a few days.

The County Council agreed and a gang of eight men was sent for five days. These men were from the locality and were naturally very interested in the improvement of the graveyard. They certainly gave of their best while on the job. Some of the stones they succeeded in getting over the wall will, I think, remain where they are for a long time. At the end of the five days the real heavy work was completed. The Ardpatrick *Muintir na Tire* council are very much indebted to Mr. Meghen, County Manager and Mr. Hayes, Assistant Surveyor, for the

assistance they gave at this critical juncture. Perhaps I should mention that the gang of eight men were payed by the County Council for the five days they worked in the cemetery.

The laying of the concrete path was carried out mostly by voluntary labour. There are in the parish a number of men engaged in the building trade. These men were asked to work on the pathway. They marked out the boundaries of the path; fixed the levels; saw that the soling stones were properly arranged; and assisted at the laying on of the concrete.

By the time all this work was completed, Christmas was near at hand and it was decided to suspend work until the following Spring. Since the work was resumed a turning table was made on the hillside. This enables the hearse to come within a few hundred yards of the graveyard. (In the past the coffin had to be shouldered from the main road to the cemetery, a distance of half a mile.) The cleaning of the headstones is still in progress. As many of these date back to the eighteenth century, it takes a good deal of caustic soda and hard scrubbing to remove the lichen.

You may wonder if I have forgotten about the extension. The extension was a contract undertaking, paid for by the County Council. The local council had no part in the work, except for the levelling of the site. The extension, of course, looks very fine with its beautiful pathways, well-arranged markers and so on. I have dealt only with the work accomplished by the Ardpatrick Guild of *Muintir na Tire* in the past few years and the work of the Parish Council before *Muintir na Tire* was established in the parish, during 1948.

During the course of the work, some noted archaeologists visited the cemetery and were very interested in some of the objects found there. They are particularly interested in a baptismal font which, it is thought, dates back to the 12th century.

It is hoped that those interested in preservation of ancient monuments will take a greater interest in the ancient ruins on the historic hill of Ardpatrick and see to it that they are preserved.

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Kilmallock,
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