

## Times Past

# Cootehill's abandoned Quaker heritage



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Cootehill's Quaker graveyard is not too far from where I live. It is in a dreadful condition. It has been for many years. Attempts to enter it, or find graves, are virtually impossible because of the inaccessibility of the site. People are unable to walk around what is effectively an over-grown jungle. Recently, members of Cootehill Heritage (Dúchas na Mhuinchille) tried their best to get help. In the early 2000s, a building contractor agreed to undertake a general tidy-up of the graveyard when the Lodge-view Estate was being built. At the time, members of the Quaker community, also known as the Religious Society of Friends, came to see it. However, the graveyard's ownership appears to be disputed, leaving it a no-man's land, unwanted and forgotten. That's not acceptable. There are at least 200 people, buried in that graveyard. In Cootehill, I feel that the Quaker cemetery has become an abandoned heritage that nobody wants to know about.

## Earliest Quakers

A detailed account by Patrick Cassidy, on 'The Quakers of Cootehill' can be read in *Breifne 2002*. The paper speaks of the early history, of the first Quakers in Cavan who leased a farm from Colonel Nicholas Kempson at Killashandra in 1656. They consisted of William Edmundson, a shop-keeper from Antrim, his brother John and a group of 'Friends' (Quakers are also known as Friends). Edmundson was a keen evangelist and spread the Quaker message as espoused by the teaching

of George Fox, the religion's founder. In those days, Quakers sometimes fell foul of the law because of their beliefs. For example, they didn't believe in having clergy, nor did they approve of paying tithes to the 'established church'. They also believed in equality; that a woman and a man were equal. It is recorded that William Edmundson got into bother and was landed in Cavan Gaol. An account of his imprisonment, as noted in *Breifne*, states that he was held: 'in an arched dungeon with thieves and robbers with a grating open in the day-time only, while at night the other prisoners would make a turf fire, the thick smoke of which overcame him so that he almost died of suffocation.'

In 1692, the first Quakers settled in Cootehill. In the book, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Ireland* by David M. Butler, it is noted that they first obtained permission to bury the dead at the Quaker Fort in 1704. They originally had a Meeting House (church) on Market street. Then in 1805, they built a new Meeting House in the graveyard at Drumnaveil.

## Relations

As mentioned, some of our own relatives are buried in the Quaker Fort. The neglected nature of the site makes it impossible to find headstones; many of the stones lie flat to the ground (often a Quaker practice). Among our relations interred in the graveyard, there is Mary Pepper (nee Smyth) and her husband Tommy Pepper who was born at Shibliss, Cootehill. After the Peppers got married, they lived in a house at the cross, Lisnasaran, where Jim Argue's petrol station now stands. Their home was known as 'Pepper's Cross', and in later years when the train-driver Joe Scully bought it, it became 'Scully's Cross'. In the 1880s, Mary and Thomas spent time in New York, where their



Mary Pepper (nee Smyth) pictured at her home in Lisnasaran, Cootehill.

son Richard, known as Dickie, was born. They also had another son named John. In the 1900s, both sons emigrated to Sterlington, in Upper State New York where they met-up with their uncle John James Smyth. Many of John and Dickie's postcards from New York are still in the family's possession. John Pepper became a great horse-man and worked as a stable manager for Mrs Morgan, widow of J.P. Morgan Snr, the famous American banker. John's

descendants, the Pepper-Davies family, are still living in New York.

The 1911 census shows that a man named Henry McCarney came to live with and help Tommy and Mary on the farm at Lisnasaran. In 1912, Henry joined the Great Northern Railway at Cootehill, where Mary's brother later became Stationmaster. Another grand uncle, Samuel Smyth (brother of Mary Pepper) is also buried in the Quaker Fort. He was married to a

Quaker lady named Annie Louisa Whitfield from Knockataine, Cootehill. They lived and farmed at 'the Hollow', Drumgreen, where Samuel was considered to have been a progressive farmer. In 1913, his methods got high acclaim in an English farming magazine. Samuel died at the age of 63, in March 1919, while out foddering his cattle.

Over the years, I had searched the Quaker Fort for his grave but could not find it. Then last month, my brother Nicholas struck gold when he discovered the grave beneath clay and bushes. He had located the plot exactly 100 years to the month that Samuel had passed away.

When the Quaker community ceased in Cootehill, Samuel's brother-in-law, John Whitfield purchased the Meeting House in the centre of the graveyard. In 1924, the old house was demolished, presumably because it was in a state of disrepair. Thankfully, pictures of the Meeting House still exist.

## Families

The following, is a list of surnames for some of the families who are buried there: Tully, Mitten, Smith, Brown, Hall, Beaven, Dale, Whitfield, Jebb, Wright, Wallace, Bevan, Welch, Cooke, Simpson, Smyth, Johnson, Walopole, Bouchier, Burn, Creeth, Hodson, McFadden, Pearson, Abell, Hewitt, Thacker, Chapman, Duff, Pepper and Evans.

In the 1950s, Mr David Evans became the last person to be interred in the Quaker graveyard.

It would be nice if a committee could be formed to help restore the graveyard as a mark of respect to those buried there.



**WE WANT YOUR PICTURES**

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**LEFT:**  
We found this gem in the archives from the Fleadh Cheoil in Clones in April 1969.

Were you there?  
Recognise anyone?  
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