

The Restoration of Glasnevin Cemetery and Crematorium

A massive project commenced two years ago to restore the Cemetery to its former glory. The recent opening of the beautifully restored Daniel O'Connell crypt by President Mary McAleese highlighted the scale of the work undertaken so far. Shane MacThomais, Historian, Education and Development Manager of the Cemetery, outlines the restoration programme.

On the 22nd of February 1832, the small coffin of a young boy from Francis Street in Dublin was placed into a small patch of ground on the northside of Dublin. From such humble beginnings arose a national cemetery, which would become the final resting place of over one million people.

Prior to the establishment of Prospect, later Glasnevin Cemetery, Irish Catholics had no cemeteries of their own in which to bury their dead as the repressive Penal Laws of the eighteenth century placed heavy restrictions on the public performance of Catholic services. This situation continued until an incident at a funeral held in Dublin provoked public outcry when a Protestant sexton reprimanded a Catholic priest for proceeding to perform a limited version of a funeral mass.

The outcry prompted Daniel O'Connell, champion of Catholic rights, to launch a campaign and prepare a legal opinion proving that there was actually no law passed forbidding praying for a dead Catholic in a graveyard. O'Connell pushed for the opening of a burial ground in which both Irish Catholics and Protestants could give their dead dignified burial.

With the passing of the 'Act of Easement of Burial Bill' in 1824, a committee was formed to administer the proposed cemetery.

A small plot of land had been acquired for this purpose at Goldenbridge, Dublin but soon proved insufficient. After some investigation a second site, amounting to nine acres, was bought at Glasnevin - to be named Prospect Cemetery.

The land was consecrated by Monsignor Yore in September 1831 and, five months later, young Michael Carey was the first person to be buried there.

The original entrance to the cemetery was located at Prospect Square, but was moved to the Finglas Road in 1879. A wall was erected around the cemetery with a total of eight watchtowers

to deter 'bodysnatchers' from their grisly deeds. Inside the towers were floored and stepladders were used to access each level. As well as providing security, the wall enabled a system of indexing to be used for the identification of graves. The system involved laying out the cemetery into squares of sections, which are indicated by letters and numbers on the boundary walls. Rows of graves running from east to west are denoted by letters and those running north to south are numbered.

The dominant monument in the cemetery is without doubt the recently restored round tower – the final resting place of Daniel O'Connell. Completed in 1869, it is the tallest in Ireland, standing 168 feet (51 metres). The tower was originally intended to be one of a group of buildings representative of early Irish Christian architecture. That plan, by the noted antiquarian George Petrie, was abandoned, as construction of the tower at such a height had distorted the scale. However, the later chapel is modelled on the plan of Cormac's Chapel on the Rock of Cashel.

Throughout the cemetery the use of Celtic motifs, particularly that of the Celtic Cross as memorial, is notable. Many of the crosses are extremely fine structures. The older parts of the cemetery show a very fine range of monuments of every shape and style, from classical to gothic, dating from the Victorian and Edwardian eras.

Alas due to the ravages of time, weather and neglect, many of these fine monuments and statues fell into dangerous disrepair. By June 2006, the Cemeteries Committee was faced with a stark decision: either close the cemetery due to health and safety concerns or undertake a restoration project. In their wisdom they opted for the latter and began the mammoth process of returning the cemetery to its former glory. On completion this work will turn the cemetery into a prime tourist attraction as well as providing a suitable venue for the centenary celebrations of the 1916 Rising.



A tomb in a bad state of disrepair and restored below.



The Cemeteries Committee petitioned the then government to assist with the funding and the cemetery was subsequently included in the National Development Plan as an Office of Public Works project.

In the two short years since restoration work began, some startling improvements have already been made, providing a sneak preview of what the cemetery will look like when completed.

The eastern end, which was something of an untamed wilderness, is shaping up to be a must see attraction. The tall limestone monuments, including the Monaghan Chapel, have been revealed as the venerable memorials they were designed to

be, when erected by the affluent citizens of Dublin over a century and a half ago.

The restoration work has brought new life to the main entrance area, not only by dramatically relocating the beautiful Sigerson memorial honouring the dead of 1916, but also by paving, landscaping and lighting the concourse. The fully restored O'Connell Crypt, recently opened by President Mary McAleese, takes centre stage. The renovated crypt below the tower now shows visitors, for the first time in many years, its striking Celtic-Romantic interior.

Equally impressive is the way in which many of the monuments close to the O'Connell Tower have been cleaned to reveal their



Statue of Sir John Gray showing the ravages of time, weather and neglect and then having been restored.

fine-quality craftsmanship, such as that of the Meade monument crowned by the archangel Michael; the Sir Thomas Farrell statue of the actor Barry Sullivan in the role of Hamlet; and the beautiful Boland chapel, which had suffered so unhappily from vandalism.

With six years to go the restoration is very much a work in progress. Some of the headstones that had been sinking, sloping and even falling, have been placed upright and provided with new foundations to prevent a reoccurrence. The grassing begun at the eastern end is continuing westwards. The intensive resurfacing of the eight kilometres of paths, in order for them to withstand further centuries of use, is still in its infancy.

Commuters on the Finglas Road will no doubt have noticed the ongoing construction site at the entrance. This building will house an exciting new state of the art museum, funded in whole

by the Cemeteries Committee, to be opened in spring 2010. The museum will be a centre of excellence informing and enthralling historians, genealogists and visitors alike.

Today, over one million people have joined Michael Carey in Glasnevin cemetery. From its humble nine acre beginning to its present 124 acres, it holds the remains of many of the men and women who helped shape Ireland's past and present, making Glasnevin Cemetery truly Ireland's necropolis.

The Dublin Cemeteries Committee, now known as the Glasnevin Trust, is a non-profit, charitable organisation, which runs Glasnevin Cemetery and Crematorium and the cemeteries at Dardistown, Goldenbridge, Newlands Cross and Palmerstown. Shane MacThomais is the historian for Glasnevin Cemetery. Tours take place at 2:30pm daily. For more information visit glasnevintrust.ie.