

Why is Groomsport Church not dedicated to a saint?

Groomsport Church was built in 1841 as part of a church extension programme of Bishop Richard Mant (1766-1848), the Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore. It was built as a “Chapel of Ease” to facilitate attendance at services for those parishioners of Bangor Parish who lived some distance from Bangor Abbey.

The church was built on land donated by the local landowner, John Waring Maxwell (1788-1869) of Finnebrogue, Downpatrick. (While his surname was the unhyphenated “Waring Maxwell”, he was often referred to as “John W Maxwell” or, simply, “Mr Maxwell”).

When Waring Maxwell gifted the site he specified that burials were to be prohibited in either the Church or Churchyard and that the church should be called “Groomsport Church”, indicating that it should not be dedicated to a saint.

I suggest that there are potentially two reasons why John Waring Maxwell imposed the latter condition.

The first possible reason was that, for most of his life (from the age of 3 until he died in 1869 at the age of 80) John Waring Maxwell’s church was Inch Parish Church which was about half a mile from Finnebrogue House. Inch Parish Church is not dedicated to a saint and this may have influenced his view about such a dedication.

A second, and possibly stronger, reason was that, in terms of Anglican “churchmanship”, Waring Maxwell was a “low churchman”. The dedication of churches to saints had fallen out of favour during the Reformation in the 16th century and many of the previous dedications of churches were lost to memory. Moreover, the Book of Common Prayer did not have a text for a dedication service. Waring Maxwell may have thought the dedication of churches to saints was not in keeping with his beliefs.

Waring Maxwell’s churchmanship became widely known in the early part of 1845. On 01 April 1845, the Newry Telegraph reported:

“Inch Church.- John Waring Maxwell, Esq. has been obliged to quit his Church at Inch...Fortunately for Mr Maxwell, he has a Church on his property at Groomsport, endowed by himself, and in that Church he, and some other members of his family, attended Divine service on Sunday last.”

In 1845 Groomsport House was still in the course of construction and it is not known if the Waring Maxwells had another residence in the village. So why did John Waring Maxwell feel that he had to travel some 26 miles to attend church in Groomsport rather than travel half a mile from Finnebrogue House to Inch Parish Church?

To begin to answer this question we have to note the development, from the 1830s, of the “Oxford Movement” of high church members of The Church of England. They believed that some of the older (pre-Reformation) traditions of liturgy and theology should be reintroduced to the Church. Many of the leading proponents were associated with the University of Oxford, especially Oriel College.

Supporters of this point of view were often referred to as “Tractarians” (after a series of publications “Tracts for the Times”), as “Puseyites” - Edward Pusey was Professor of Greek at Oxford – or as “Newmanites”. John Henry Newman was an Anglican priest and academic at Oxford who, in 1845, joined the Catholic Church. Newman became the Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland (now University College, Dublin) in 1854 and was made a Cardinal in 1879.

In 1842, Bishop Mant had appointed his son, Frederick, to be the Rector of Inch and Prebendary of St Andrews. It seems that Rev Frederick Mant caused controversy in the congregation by making innovations that reflected some of the views of the Tractarians.

On 04 March 1845, one month before Waring Maxwell’s reported departure from Inch Parish Church, the Belfast News Letter reported on a meeting which was held at Inch. It reported that Waring Maxwell had enumerated those innovations which Rev Mant had made that, in his view, meant that the Church was “traveling Romeward”. These included wearing the surplice and turning to the east when saying the Creed. Two other innovations, which although Waring Maxwell acknowledged were in accordance with the rubrics of the church, were novel in Inch Church, had been introduced without consulting the congregation. These were the reading of the offertory sentences and the use of the Prayer for the Church Militant in the service of Holy Communion.

In its report, the Newry Telegraph stated that John Waring Maxwell had made a “remarkable statement” at the meeting in Inch:

“He said that there was an old baptismal font in Inch Church, which was greatly prized on account of its antiquity – that the Reverend Frederick Mant having ‘had a hole perforated’ in his font he had taken the occasion to ask for what purpose the aperture had been made; and that Mr Mant had told him, in reply the hole had been drilled ‘to let off the holy water, lest the people might sprinkle themselves with it’”. (Newry Telegraph 04 March 1845)

The Reverend Mant replied in a letter published in the Statesman and Recorder on 18 March 1845. He wrote:

“I am sure that Mr Maxwell only stated what he believed to be true, and can only regret that his imperfect hearing has been the cause of his misunderstanding my words so much to my prejudice.

"I have never stated that I made the hole in the font for the purpose of "drawing off the holy water". All notions of holy water is repugnant to my feelings as it is, I believe, contrary to the doctrine of the Church."

It is interesting to note that Rev Mant was among a number of clergymen who wrote to the Bishop (his father) on 14 May 1845 requesting him:

"to take such steps as may seem to you the most suitable and effectual for giving expression to the sentiments of us and others of your lordship's clergy, against the proposed endowment of the Romish College of Maynooth"
(Belfast Commercial Chronicle, 24 May 1845)

Notwithstanding Rev Mant's views on Maynooth College, with which John Waring Maxwell would have agreed, their relationship appears to have been either strained or non-existent. Bishop Mant resolved this problem, in November that year, by appointing his son to be Rector of Ballintoy in county Antrim and replacing him at Inch with Rev Daniel Bell.

It is likely that Rev Bell's churchmanship was more to Waring Maxwell's liking and that he was able to return to worship at his local church.

Rev Daniel Bell and John Waring Maxwell also shared an interest in the Orange Order. The Downpatrick Recorder of 18 November 1848 reported on a meeting in Inch Orange Hall at which Rev Daniel Bell proposed a motion condemning the *"great endeavours [that] are being made to support and strengthen Popery and destroy the Protestant Church"*.

At the conclusion of the meeting Rev Bell proposed a vote of thanks *"to J W Maxwell Esq., for his kindness in taking the chair, his proper conduct therein, and for his staunch and unflinching advocacy of Protestantism on every occasion."*

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Sources:

Newspapers were accessed on the Newspaper Archive of www.findmypast.co.uk