

Blennerville looking resplendent in this picture from the turn of the last century, with the old wooden draw bridge visible on the right and the original windmill, without its sails, in the background.



Was Robert Emmet's body put on the 'Kerry Car' in Dublin in 1803 and eventually buried in Blennerville?

THE legend that Robert Emmet was buried in Blennerville after his execution in 1803 has been passed on by word of mouth for generations, and a number of local people believe it as a fact that the patriot lies buried in their village graveyard. Blennerville is the only place, outside Dublin, which lays serious claim to being the place of burial of Robert Emmet.

Mystery shrouds what happened to Emmet's remains after he was executed — the penalty he had to pay for his leadership of the unsuccessful 1803 rising.

Twenty years ago an enquiry from an Australian priest about the murder of one of his ancestors in the Tralee mountains led to a closer investigation into the belief that Emmet's body was brought down to Kerry to be buried in Blennerville. The facts show that Emmet was executed, and his body brought back to Kilmainham Jail, from whence it disappeared. So, what evidence is there to support the legend that Emmet's body was brought down to Kerry? What links had Robert Emmet with the West of Ireland and Blennerville specifically?

In 1965 a Robert Emmet Society was formed to investigate the truth of the legend. When the findings were pieced together the following story emerged: Emmet's most obvious link with Kerry was that his mother, Elizabeth, was born in Ballydowney House, Killarney, the daughter of James and Catherine Mason, née Power.

Emmet's parents, Elizabeth and Dr Robert Emmet, lived first in Cork and later in Dublin where Dr Emmet practised as a physician, but they frequently visited their relatives in Kerry.

During Emmet's planning of the rising, he formed a close relationship with his relative, John Mason, who became very interested in Robert's ideas and ideals. John Mason

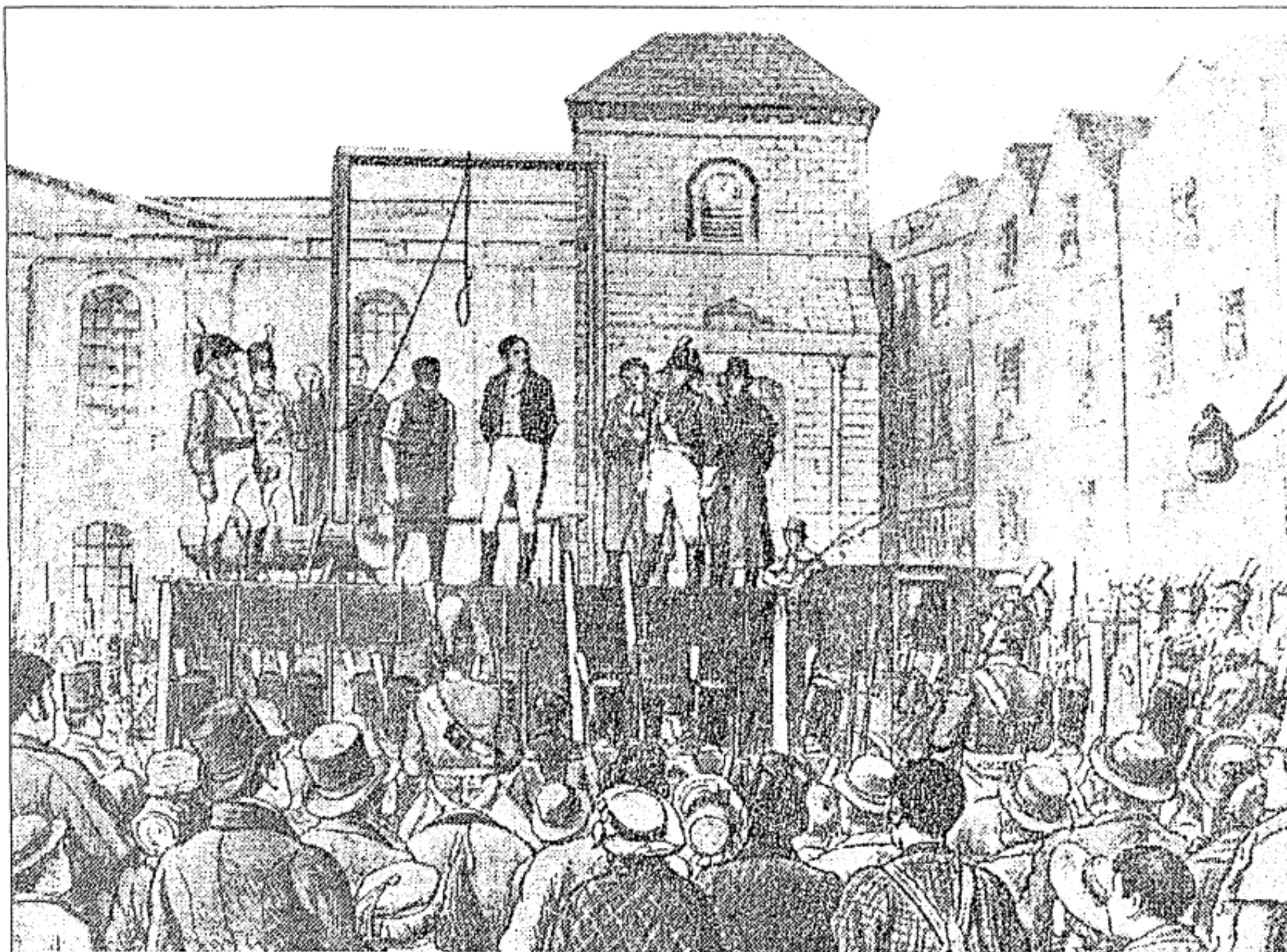
promised his assistance in providing manpower and weapons for the rising in Dublin from the ports of Tarbert and Dingle. Relatives of Dr Robert Emmet, who had settled near Dingle, also co-operated and supervised the shipments.

After the failure of the rising, Emmet and John Mason were imprisoned. When it became clear that Emmet would be executed, Mason got in touch with his people in Kerry in order to make arrangements for a proper burial. Mason was still in jail when Emmet was executed.

Patrick MacMahon from Tralee (who married a Mrs Blennerhassett, née Mason, second cousin of Robert Emmet), and who knew both John Mason and Robert Emmet, was paid for smuggling the body out of Kilmainham Jail and transporting it down to Kerry. He was at that time one of the major haulage contractors in the county, and was also employed by the authorities to clear garbage from Kilmainham Jail. After the execution, Emmet's body was left in the main hall of the jail.

Emmet's head, severed from his body, had been taken by an artist, named Petrie, who wanted to make a death mask from it. When Petrie returned with the head, the rest of Emmet's body had disappeared. MacMahon had taken it to the outskirts of Dublin in a load of garbage, where it was transferred into a wooden box and put on the 'Kerry Car' for its journey to Tralee.

Everything went well until the convoy passed Headley's Bridge, where Kearney, the leader of the local Whiteboys, intervened and took the box containing the body. According to some accounts, when he discovered what he had taken, he handed the box over to the Mason family in Oakpark, Tralee, where it remained for an indefinite period. Meanwhile MacMahon had learnt about



Picture of the execution of Robert Emmet courtesy of the O'Connell Museum, Dublin.

the disappearance of the box, and went to see Kearney at his headquarters in the mountains to find out what had happened to it. It is said that he was followed by two Redcoats and, in order to prevent Kearney from talking, MacMahon shot him. Kearney was the murdered ancestor of the Australian priest.

Originally Emmet's body was meant to be taken to Old Kiltallagh, near Castlemaine, where his grandmother had been laid to rest.

Unfortunately, this plan failed because of the close watch kept by the authorities on the area. Eventually arrangements were made to have the body buried by the back porch of the church, in Blennerville. The burial was taken care of by a Mr Fuller, church architect, who through marriage, with a Miss Blennerhassett, was connected with the Emmets. Because of the fear of detection, the burial took place at night and everything possible was done to conceal

the nature of the event.

Due to the renovation and extension of the old Blennerville church in 1826 it proved difficult to locate where exactly Emmet's remains lay, or were said to have, been buried.

In order to trace the remains, three diviners were called on for assistance. They were Dr Pierce from Listowel, Michael Shanahan, Tarbert and Frank MacCarthy, Ballyjamesduff — persons with high recommendations. All three used slightly different divining methods, but with astonishingly similar results.

Mr Shanahan divined Emmet's body in the porch of the church in Blennerville and the head was divined in Ringsend, Dublin. Dr Pierce, working with a photograph, the death-mask and a penknife, got a pull in Dublin. Upon investigation, the Dublin pull was discovered to be the grave of Petrie. Mr MacCarthy, in Ballyjamesduff, working with a photograph only, got a pull on the map of the body in Blennerville and the head in Ringsend.

MacCarthy's and Shanahan's Blennerville church porch pulls were considered ample evidence for digging. Samples of earth taken from the place indicated were sent to the Agricultural Institute for analysis.

According to the report, the high phosphorus content in the soil could indicate a grave site. The remains of a grave was found under the site of the church porch, covered by a stone similar to the shape of a human being. Does this mean that Emmet's body had been buried in Blennerville

while his head remained in Dublin, at Ringsend?

Whether Blennerville is the resting place of Robert Emmet or not, we are unsure, but it is definitely the burial place of members of the Mason family (Emmet's mother was a Mason), the Springs, the Hudsons and the Hargraves, to whom Emmet was related. Also buried here is the leader of the Whiteboys, Kearney, who was shot by MacMahon. It is thought that Kearney was buried by

Memories of Blennerville

There is a spot so dear to me
Just a mile outside Tralee
Enclosed by mountain, sea and dell
Called the village of Blennerville.

A seven arch bridge with one blind eye
Reflect its windows, one by one
An aged Quay, grown mossy green
Where now a ship is never seen.

The four-spire church which could be seen
With naked eye from Curraheen
Alas 'tis now a silent mound
Its walls have crumbled to the ground.

How oft I watched the setting sun
Reflect its windows, one by one
And tired birds at the twilight hour
Seek refuge on the heltry tower.

The white-washed school across the way
Hold memories of a former day
Though not majestic, by way of size
One entered dull and came out wise.

My lonely heart with grief is sore
For scenes like these I'll see no more
And childhood friends with whom I played
To many distant lands have strayed

But hearts in exile seldom rest
From thoughts of home and friends loved best
If they return, perchance they will
We will meet again, in Blennerville.

By the late *Monty Sweeney*
of *Blennerville*.

MacMahon and the slab over the grave bears the name Rd MacMahon. However, others believe that it was the remains of Robert Emmet that MacMahon was burying in the churchyard.

In 1981, after two years of negotiations between the Residents' Association and the Church of Ireland, the site of the church and cemetery was handed over to the Urban Council, on condition that the cemetery would be maintained in a manner in keeping

with its former use as a burial ground and the tombs and tombstones were to be retained and restored. Work on developing what was to become the Robert Emmet Park began in September 1982 and was completed by the summer of 1983.

Source: *Blennerville: Gateway to Tralee Past*, published by The Blennerville Windmill Company Limited in 1989.



Diviners attempting to locate the grave of Robert Emmet in the old Protestant cemetery in Blennerville in 1969. Included are: John Kelliher, Michael Dwyer, Frances O'Dwyer, Eily McEvoy, Billy Foley, Maurice Lynch, Thomas Baily, Bill Charles, Johnny Savage, Michael Kelliher and Brendan Green.



Billy Foley and John Knightly digging for the remains of Robert Emmet in the graveyard in Blennerville in 1969, watched by Stephen Healy, Donal Brosnan, Stephen Shannon, Gretta King, Biddy O'Shea, Tadgh O'Shea, Mary Green, Denny Kelliher and Michael O'Dwyer.