

FASCINATING STORY OF THE KENNY FAMILY AND 'THE DONCASTER CURSE'

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Two of An Taoiseach's ancestors died tragically in same city 37 years apart

By Phil Penfold

YOU'D completely forgive Taoiseach Enda Kenny's family for avoiding a visit to South Yorkshire.

After all, two of their menfolk met untimely and tragic ends in the area. Both died in accidents in Doncaster, their deaths separated by decades. A wide berth could well be advised.

But now three of the current Kenny clan have made the journey. And, with the help of local historians, have tracked down the hitherto unmarked grave of one of their ancestors, Denis, who was killed in a gruesome pit accident at the Yorkshire Main Colliery in the late April of 1910.

Fine Gael Councillor Henry Kenny, his brother John, and son Henry Jr. were invited to join in the recent commemoration of no less than 133 men who died while working at Yorkshire Main in Edlington, which finally closed in 1985.

Richard Bell, the chairman of the Friends of Hyde Park Cemetery, the final resting place of the unfortunate Dennis, told *The Connaught Telegraph*: "John and Henry got in touch with us some time ago, telling us all about Denis - or as much as they knew.

"They said that they were going to attend the Yorkshire Main ceremonies, but that they had no clue as to where their great uncle might lie.

"Fortunately, our records are pretty comprehensive and, after a little research, we were able to identify the precise place - there hasn't ever been an official marker. So, when they came to Yorkshire, I was able to guide them to the spot."

Councillor Kenny said it was 'a deeply moving experience' and that he and his family are

extremely grateful to Richard and his team for their help in locating Dennis's grave.

The trio have been in touch with the Taoiseach to tell him the good news and now plan to have a permanent gravestone and kerb edgings put in place.

It is unclear why a memorial was not erected on the grave in 1910 and records show the plot was purchased by a man named Tom Naylor or Taylor (the handwriting on the bill of sale is smudged and indistinct) of Edlington on May 2.

Who was Mr. Naylor - a friend of the dead man, or someone from the colliery company?

Denis was buried on May 4 after dying of terrible injuries in Doncaster's Royal Infirmary. He arrived at 2 p.m. and died only minutes later.

According to Dr. Battersby, he had 'extensive laceration of the scalp, fracture of the right forearm, fractured ribs, a deep cut into the right knee joint, and a great deal of bruising'.

Death was due to 'shock and possible severe internal injuries'. He was only 27. His mother was the only member of the family to attend his funeral, and over the years, she would sternly warn all her family that they should 'never, ever, go to Doncaster'.

"It's a very sad tale," said Richard Bell. "Denis was a pit sinker - meaning that he helped to dig the new mine shafts. He was single, and his lodging was in a hut near to the mine.

"He and another 19 men were working on a narrow scaffold in the shaft when it suddenly tilted to one side and Dennis and two other men were pitched nearly 40 feet down. Denis was the most seriously injured and was brought out alive, but uncon-



John Kenny, Councillor Henry Kenny and Henry Kenny junior, brothers and nephew of Taoiseach Enda Kenny, pictured during their visit to the grave of Denis Kenny (killed in 1910 at Yorkshire Main Colliery) at Hyde Park Cemetery, Doncaster, on March 9 last.

PHOTO: RICHARD BELL

scious, and taken to the DRI, where he died on April 30."

The Staveley Coal and Iron Company, who ran the colliery on land leased from wealthy local family the Battie-Wrightsons, of Cusworth Hall, appear to have paid no compensation at all to the Kenny family and their representative, Mr. W. Bunting, merely commenting to a coroner's hearing that the accident was 'greatly regretted'.

The deputy coroner, Mr. J. G. Nicholson, sitting at the old Guild Hall of Doncaster to examine evidence on the accident, said that it was 'miraculous' that only one man was killed.

The company added that 'instructions had been put up

which, if carried out, would make it impossible for a like accident to happen in the future'. A verdict of accidental death was recorded.

The fascinating twist to the story is that another Dennis Kenny also perished in an accident in Doncaster.

This time the year is 1947, and this Dennis was the uncle to John, Henry and Taoiseach Enda Kenny, and nephew to the first Dennis, the man killed in the colliery mishap.

He was named after his unfortunate uncle and worked in the UK for the Cementation building firm, travelling up and down the country.

He'd been a loyal employee for 13 years and was very well respected. The winter of 1947

was one of the coldest of the last century and snow and ice covered Britain from the Boxing Day of 1946 all the way through until late March.

Denis - remembering his grandmother's warning about Doncaster - tried to avoid staying in the town, but the weather on the night of February 25 was so atrocious that he had no choice.

Further travelling north, the 'tall, blue-eyed and blonde' Irishman found that he could go no further and put up for the night at the old Reindeer Hotel, long since demolished, which stood at the corner of Hall Gate and Cleveland Street.

What could possibly go wrong?

The Reindeer Hotel had been on the site for centuries and clearly maintenance wasn't that high on the list of the management's priorities. In the early hours of the morning, Dennis, aged on 37, was found unconscious by a member of the staff.

He had collapsed as he tried to open the window of his room which was filled with fumes from a faulty gas stove.

"A priest and a doctor were summoned," reported *The Connaught Telegraph* a few weeks afterwards, "and he was rushed to the town's hospital, but he expired that evening."

The coroner of 1947 delivered the same verdict as his predecessor of 1910 - accidental death.

Two men called Denis Kenny, uncle and nephew, both killed in freak accidents, and both dying in the same hospital, far away from home, 37 years apart.

After the death in 1947, however, Denis' body was taken back to Castlebar, and laid to rest there.

"It truly is a bizarre set of coincidences," said Richard Bell, "made even more out of the ordinary by the fact that all the succeeding Kennys were all warned never to go to Doncaster for fear that bad luck would befall them.

"Apparently their grandmother mourned her son killed in the colliery to the day that she died and told them not to come near the town.

“Over the years she would sternly warn all her family that they should never, ever, go to Doncaster.”

"You cannot but wonder if when Denis the Cementation employee checked in to the Reindeer Hotel, he knew that his uncle was buried in Hyde Park Cemetery, which is only about a mile away? He certainly would have wanted to get out of the town as quickly as he could."

Again, the family got an apology - but not a penny of compensation.

"No health and safety regulations back then," said Richard, "and families didn't sue the authorities in those days either."

Another bitterly ironic turn of the tragic tale is that when the Reindeer Hotel was finally demolished, the new building on the site housed the offices of... the local gas board!

Mr. Bell added: "Henry, John and Henry Jr. told me that they had no trepidation at all themselves about visiting Doncaster and they laid some flowers on their ancestor's grave plot. I didn't see them crossing their fingers once!"

"This is just another of the extraordinary stories that we've uncovered as we dig deeper into the history of the people who lie at rest in Hyde Park Cemetery.

"But this one is one of the strangest and most poignant of the lot and it is wonderful to think that the Kenny family are determined that their relations will not be forgotten."