

THE OLD ACTON GRAVEYARD

BY BARBARA BEST

This short article is an addition to 'Acton Parish Church' in Volume VIII 'Before I forget...' October 2000.

Acton Parish is a sister church to St. Mary's Drumbanagher and this article arose from a visit to the old graveyard by Society members in summer 2021



To the south of Acton Village, Co. Armagh, on Glasdrumman Road, lies the old graveyard of Acton Parish. Francis X. McCorry maintains that the roughly circular shape of the graveyard denotes an early Christian holy place or burial ground, as at Relicarn and Ballinabeck.

That may be why Sir Toby Poyntz chose the site to build a church in 1684. All around was woodland until the trees were sold for timber in the nineteenth century. An advertisement in the local press in March 1860:-

TIMBER SALE

By Auction at Acton 12.00

Full-grown Beech Trees. 60 years old.

Felled. 5 – 8 Feet in circumference.

Also Ash.

Admirably suited for Rollers and Beetling Beams.

Canal Near.

NEWRY TELEGRAPH NOVEMBER 1868

To Be Sold by Public Auction at Acton Woods near the old graveyard –

Large Quantity of Timber – Full-Grown
Larch, Scots Spruce, Oak, Ash
Sycamore.

Auctioneer B. Wright & Sons.

Acton Woods are c.1 mile from
Poyntzpass Railway Station
and Newry Canal.

Within the graveyard, yew trees remain. For thousands of years, yew trees have been associated with death, eternity, and the soul's journey from this life to the next. They are also poisonous to cattle and their presence acts as a defence against cattle being allowed to stray into a graveyard.

In their season there are also snowdrops, primroses, daffodils and bluebells in this tranquil place.



One of the Yew trees

In 1609, Sir Charles Poyntz had been granted 500 acres of what had been O'Hanlon land in Brannock. As a grantee, he built his own house and twenty four cottages for the English settlers he brought from Gloucestershire.

Charles's son Toby built the original church on this site around 1684. In his will he wrote "...my body I

desire may be buried in the church built by me at Acton in the Vault of my dear wife Rose Poyntz" (Rose nee Buckworth).

Sir Toby died in 1685.

Sir Toby and his wife Rose had three children:-

Charles, who married his cousin Lucy Lucas of Monaghan. They had a son Lucas who died without issue.

Sarah, who married Archibald Stewart of Ballintoy, and

Christine (or Christian) who married Roger Hall of Narrow Water.

Sarah and Christine became beneficiaries of the Acton Estate, and in time, Sarah's son the Reverend Archibald Stewart bought his Aunt Christine's portion for £2,000.

Reverend Archibald was succeeded by his younger brother ALEXANDER STEWART who died in 1742. Alexander's son, ALEXANDER THOMAS STEWART inherited the estates of Acton and Ballintoy.

In Ballintoy, A.T. Stewart tried to develop a colliery and quay but the project may have bankrupted him. He sold the estate at Ballintoy and came to live at Acton, to be succeeded in turn by his son, ALEXANDER THOMAS STEWART Junior.

Meanwhile, within just over a hundred years, Sir Toby's church was in a state of serious disrepair.

The Ordnance Survey Memoirs of 1835 -38 state: "*Acton Old Church (in ruins)*

.....Nothing now remains of the building but a part of the north wall, 19 feet long and 11 feet high, built of whinstones, partially squared and laid in courses.

Within the surrounding burying ground and used as a headstone to one of the graves stands the half of a stone formerly part of the building itself with the inscription:

This Church was built
At the sole expense of Sr.Toby Poyntz
Knt.,
The son of Sir Charles Poyntz Knt. Of
Acton
Anno 1684
And dedicated to the blessed and
undivided Trinity".

Alexander Thomas Stewart Junior wanted to rebuild the church. Acton was in the Parish of Ballymore, Tandragee, and in the Diocese of Armagh where the Archbishop of the day was Archbishop Richard Robinson.

At that time, Ballymore Church could not accommodate all its parishioners at a single service and so agreements and indentures were drawn up to re-build the Acton church as a Chapel of Ease to Ballymore.

Alexander Thomas Stewart Junior undertook to *“lay out a Glebe of 20 acres with a road from the Whinny Hill to the Churchyard in Brannock.....at the rent of one Peppercorn”* to Reverend Henry Leslie (incumbent of Ballymore) and his successors. Henry Leslie, for his part, was to find the money to build the church, and the house for the curate.

Henry Leslie managed to persuade the Trustees of the Board of First Fruits, established in 1711 to build and improve churches and glebe houses in Ireland, to pay £390 for the building of the church, and £150 for the curate's house. He also undertook to pay the curate £50 a year.

In 1790 however, a new agreement was drawn up between Alexander Thomas Stewart Junior and the Ballymore people who promised to pay Mr. Stewart 10 shillings a year for a plot of ground in Poyntzpass. Evidence has not come to light as to why the plan was changed but the church was built in Poyntzpass instead of Acton. It may have been that Acton was already on the wane since A.T. Stewart Junior had moved the Fair from Acton to Poyntzpass in

1784; the canal was also having an influence on the growth of Poyntzpass.

Whatever the reasons, the new church was built not in Acton, but in Poyntzpass where it was and is known as Acton Parish, to the confusion of many. The Glebe was built where it still stands on the Whinny Hill, but the road from the Glebe to the churchyard was not made.

Around this same time, towards the end of the eighteenth century, A.T. Stewart Junior built the present Acton House, on the main road from Newry to Tandragee. Not wanting the general populace walking past his front door, he then created the road now known as ‘Acton Road’, up the Chapel Hill to Acton.

So the former O’Hanlon lands in Brannock became Poyntz land for three generations and thence by marriage to Stewarts for three generations. Alexander Thomas Stewart junior built Acton House and was instrumental in the building of Acton Parish Church; he also granted a lease for the building of St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Poyntzpass. Sympathetic to the United Irishmen, he was arrested on a charge of high treason, released due to insufficient evidence and pressure from Parliament. Following his release from prison in England, he returned to Ireland where he died from typhus fever in the early 1800s. Having probably inherited family debt and having no children, his mortgaged estate was bought by the Close family soon after A.T. Stewart’s death and there it remained for the next hundred years.





The Poyntz Crypt

As to the people buried in the Old Graveyard, it is probable that at least some of Sir Charles Poyntz's settlers are there. One surname which appears in The Muster Roll of Sir Charles' men-in-arms and on a headstone is that of Wilkinson.

It is already over twenty years since the headstone inscriptions in the graveyard were

transcribed by members of the local History Society (Volume VIII of 'Before I forget..') and even in the year 2000, many headstones were illegible or toppled or grown over.

Also of interest are the people buried there during the twentieth century whose names are in the parish church's Burial Register but not on headstones. (Earlier Burial Registers no longer exist.)

Included in this number are the following:-

Daniel CLARKE	Tullylish	1934	Presbyterian
Margaret VINT	Tullynacross	1934	
Thomas VINT	Tullynacross	1940	
Sarah VINT	Tullynacross	1943	
Sarah Margaret MARTIN	Acton	1934	
Martha STRETTON	Demone	1936	Presbyterian
Elizabeth HAIRE	Acton	1937	
Harold HAIRE	Monclone	1950	
Sarah Ann CRAIG	Tullynacross	1937	
Margaret Jane INGRAM	Loughadian	1938	
John MORROW	Poyntzpass	1938	Presbyterian
Sarah MORROW	Poyntzpass	1943	Presbyterian
Robert MORROW	Poyntzpass	1950	Baptist
Agnes MINNIS	Loughadian	1938	
Thomas GALLOWAY	Brannock	1938	

The last interment was that of Floyd Ryan in June 2007.