

History comes to life as bishops exhumed in cathedral

■ By Peter Rosengren

The bodies of two of Perth's bishops were exhumed from a crypt beneath the floor of St Mary's Cathedral this week.

Perth priest and archaeologist Fr Robert Cross discovered coffins containing the mortal remains of Bishop Martin Griver, who died in 1886 and Bishop Matthew Gibney, who died in 1925.

The discovery came during an archaeological survey of the floor of the cathedral.

The two-part crypt was located beneath the intersection of the central aisle of the cathedral and the side aisles that lead to the northern and southern side entrances.

Four floorboards, each inscribed with a cross, indicated the existence of a crypt, the precise location of which has been speculated on for many years.

Beneath these were found a tin lid and, once this was removed, excavators only had to remove approximately two feet of earth before they found the crypt containing the coffins.

Bishop Gibney's coffin had been almost completely white-anted, including the zinc inner casket, Fr Cross told *The Record*.

However Bishop Griver's coffin, made from solid jarrah, was better preserved despite being much older, he said.

This coffin has a lid made from a



The light of day: The coffins of Bishop Martin Griver, left, and Matthew Gibney lie on the floor of the cathedral on Wednesday this week on either side of the crypt.

PHOTO: PETER ROSENGREN

single piece of solid jarrah as well.

One possible explanation for this is that it appeared to have been wrapped in wool, which is high in lanolin and protein content, and therefore possibly less attractive to white ants, he told *The Record*.

Bishop Gibney's coffin contains a viewing window and it was possible to see the body of the Bishop dressed in what appear to be green vestments, he said.

This may have been because the Bishop was Irish, he added.

Although there are different historical descriptions of where the crypt is located in St Mary's, Fr Cross said he thought this was the original crypt of the cathedral.

"The centre wall is brick and mortar rendered but the other walls seem to be plain mortar; but we need to look into this more thoroughly," he said, adding that

at some stage in the future he and those investigating the archaeology of the cathedral will sink a pit to investigate further.

The two coffins will be relocated to a new crypt when the cathedral is completed; until then they will be managed by Perth funeral company Bovera and O'Dea.

The old crypt lies under what will be the new sanctuary of the cathedral.

Consultant archaeologist Dr Shane Bourke and a team of student volunteers from the University of Western Australia's Centre for Archaeology are assisting Fr Cross. "Everything has been recorded, and the whole cathedral is being surveyed archaeologically," he said.

Among interesting facts to emerge is what has been discovered during the floor survey.

The most common object found so far, he said, are ladies' hairpins and these have been located mainly on the right hand side of the cathedral towards the front where the ladies' sodalities usually sat in years gone by.

The original paint scheme has also been uncovered in places, revealing faux marbling on the walls of the 1865 cathedral, which he suspected had been done in about 1880.

"Prior to that it was probably whitewashed walls," he noted.

Names written in pencil have also been uncovered, including that of a DH Regan; cathedral archives record an EM Regan who collected money in the 1870s for repairs to the cathedral and Bishop Griver's records mention a Regan who was a stone mason but there was nothing conclusive, he said.

Fr Cross said the historical record often communicates conflicting information.

"The archaeology deciphers the historical record and tells us of past ways - it's telling you how people lived and what they used," he said.