



Where were the bishops buried?

St Mary's Cathedral priest Fr Robert Cross, also an archaeologist, has been excavating the site of the cathedral as large parts of it are dismantled in preparation for its completion. This is part four in our series of his findings.

■ By Fr Robert Cross

Before excavation work began on the graves of Bishop Griver and Bishop Gibney at St Mary's Cathedral, there was uncertainty about the location of their bodies.

Nobody knew where the Bishops were buried and two documents in the Archdiocesan archives conflicted with historical and physical evidence.

One document, signed by Archbishop Redmond Prendiville and dated July 10, 1943, stated: "The remains of the late Bishop Griver and the late Bishop Gibney now rest immediately in front of the central gates of the altar rails in the centre aisle (St Mary's Cathedral)." But what altar rails was Archbishop Prendiville talking about? Presumably the altar rails that existed at the time he wrote the note and not the 1865 Cathedral sanctuary's altar rails that were demolished in 1926, and were located approximately 10 metres west of the current sanctuary. There also existed a second document written on April 29, 1976 by the Cathedral Dean indicating that the location given by Archbishop Prendiville was investigated and confirmed by digging and probing. Whilst this letter indicated that no coffins or vault were actually found, it stated: "Archbishop Prendiville's letter is accurate and that the remains were buried in a concrete vault six feet below ground."

Before the initial archaeological investigation, the existence of two crosses carved into the floorboards of the Cathedral was known (top right). Archaeological examination found a further two crosses which together with the other crosses marked out a rectangular area similar in area to two graves (centre).



Excavations: The vault interior after the metal lid was removed and before excavation commenced (above); one of the crosses carved into the Cathedral floorboards (top right); the vault interior after the metal lid was removed and before excavation commenced (right); Vault lid revealed before being cleaned of debris.

These crosses coincided with a description by an eyewitness to the burial of Bishop Gibney, Fr John O'Mahoney, who said that Bishop Gibney was buried next to Bishop Griver in the front area of the 1865 sanctuary. Armed with this information, the archaeological team decided that the first investigation should be beneath the floor marked out by the crosses (top right). If nothing was found, then an excavation would be made in front of the current sanctuary. The

floor boards were lifted and a large sheet of "Lysaght" tin was found cemented to a brick wall. The metal sheet was removed, revealing two rectangular compartments, the dimensions of each being what a coffin might occupy. The compartments were half full of sand and rubble (main photo). Until this was excavated, uncertainty existed as to whether this was truly the location of the coffins, or had they been previously exhumed and moved elsewhere?

