



Cathedral News

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 five in our series of his findings.

■ By Fr Robert Cross

Despite the discovery of two brick lined graves beneath the transept floor of St Mary's Cathedral, the fact that there was sand in one and a veneer of concrete slurry on top of the other raised the question as to whether the bodies were beneath or had been moved as suggested by Archbishop Prendiville's letter.

An inspection of the surface of the soil in one of the graves revealed shoe prints. If the coffins lay beneath, not too much respect had been shown to the occupants!

Excavating the coffins was not as easy as getting in the hole and digging! If the coffins lay beneath the soil, how deep were they? To put any form of compression on the soil may collapse the coffins and affect their integrity and contents.

A rig was set up whereby a person could lie prostrate on a narrow plank above the graves. The soil was excavated in 5cm layers.

The soil was sieved to find artefacts or evidence of any funeral ceremonial. Most of the artefacts found in the grave-fill were associated with the 1926 - 30 Cavanagh extensions. After excavating down about half a metre contact was made with the foot end of a coffin. The coffin was covered in black woollen material, a feature of some coffins in the late 18th and early 19th century. About half way up the top of the coffin we encountered a substantial metal name plate approximately a quarter metre in width and half metre



Unearthed: Bishop Gibney's coffin in the grave.

PHOTO: FR ROBERT CROSS

in length. The name plate had an image of Christ crucified on the top portion and an inscription in Latin and English that read:

*It is Finished
Martinus Griver
Epis Perthensis
Obiit die 1 moat 1886
Anno aiatitis Luae 73
R.I.P.*

The Latin essentially translates to:

*Martin Griver
Bishop of Perth
Died 1st November 1886
73 years of age*

We had found the coffin of

Bishop Martin Griver, second Bishop of Perth. We completed the excavation of the coffin and left it in situ in order to excavate the grave of Bishop Gibney, whose grave had a thin lens of cement on top of the soil that covered the coffin. After removing this, the same excavation procedure was followed as with Bishop Griver's grave. However, this time previous substantial white ant activity was discovered.

Once again, the foot end of the coffin was first discovered and excavation moved from the foot end to the head of the cof-

fin. The white ants had severely damaged the integrity of the coffin. As we moved towards the head of the coffin, we encountered two chrome plates. The bottom plate was inscribed with the Latin words "Requiescat in Pace" (Rest in Peace) and the plate located near the top of the coffin was inscribed in English:

*Right Reverend
Bishop Gibney DD
Died 22nd June 1925
Aged 89 Years*

At the very head of the coffin was a chrome crucifix.

Given the delicate condition of Bishop Gibney's coffin, we decided to remove the top of the coffin while it was still in the grave.

Upon removal, we discovered an inner zinc coffin with a viewing window. Even parts of the inner zinc coffin had been eaten by the white ants. Cleaning the viewing window, the skull of Bishop Matthew Gibney was clearly visible. On top of his skull was a faded red zucchetto or skull cap. Around his neck was a roman collar and just visible were his vestments.

A decision was made to remove the top of Bishop Griver's coffin. Again we encountered an inner zinc coffin, but this time there was no viewing window or evidence that white ants had attacked the zinc lined coffin.

The issue now was how to remove the coffins without damaging them or their contents. Next week we will explain how the coffins were removed from the graves and what we found when they were opened.