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Special service marks restoration of family grave of penalty kick inventor

A special service of celebration and thanksgiving was held recently in St Mark's parish church, Armagh, to commemorate William McCrum, from the nearby village of Milford, who invented football's penalty kick, and to mark the completion of the restoration of the McCrum family grave in the church's graveyard.

The service was led by the rector of St Mark's, the Revd Malcolm Kingston, assisted by the Very Revd Robert Townley and the Very Revd Gregory Dunstan.

Many members of Northern Ireland's football fraternity were present and a representative of the Irish Football Association (IFA), along with members of the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs (AONISC), read the lessons and led the intercessions.

The guest speaker was Johnny Jameson, the former Irish League footballer, a member of the 1982 Northern Ireland World Cup squad in Spain who refused to play on a Sunday because of his deeply-held religious views.

Following the service, guests and parishioners walked to the graveyard, led by a lone piper, where Mr Kingston dedicated the newly-restored McCrum family grave.

'MASTER WILLIE'

William McCrum was a member of the wealthy McCrum linen manufacturing family who built the red-brick, Victorian-

era model village of Milford, just outside the city of Armagh, as the centre of its lucrative linen business.

Unlike his millionaire father, Robert Garmany McCrum, a leading member of 1st Armagh Presbyterian church, who was authoritarian, austere and thrifty, William - known in the village as 'Master Willie' - preferred a lifestyle of fun, travelling, drinking and gambling.

Educated at The Royal School, Armagh, and a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, William was frozen out of the family business, in which he had no interest, was ignored by his

father and deserted after 12 years of marriage by a faithless wife who moved to France with their son, Cecil.

In 1931, the mills and William's possessions were sold to pay for his debts accrued at the gambling tables of Monte Carlo and the following year, shortly before Christmas, he died, an alcoholic, penniless and alone, in an Armagh boarding house.

THE 'ULTIMATE SANCTION'

When not travelling the world, 'Master Willie' was immersed in the sporting life of Milford village, in particular Milford football team, for which he played for

many years as goalkeeper.

From that position, he was able to witness at first hand the reckless and, at times, violent excesses which occurred during matches, as a result of which, in 1890, he submitted to the IFA his idea of introducing a penalty kick as the ultimate sanction to stop defenders fouling attacking players to prevent a goal.

Although the proposal was initially ridiculed, after much debate, the penalty kick was unanimously adopted by the International Football Association Board - the rule-making arm of FIFA, football's world governing body - in

June 1891, becoming, with refinements over the years, the integral, if not uncontroversial, part of the game it is today.

MCCRUM GRAVE RESTORED

Although small in numbers, members of the Milford Northern Ireland Supporters' Club, founded in 2012, proud of William McCrum's contribution to world football and anxious to rescue him from obscurity, began a campaign to promote Milford as the home of the penalty kick and to raise funds to restore the McCrum family grave which, over the years, had fallen into serious disrepair.

Having enlisted the help of AONISC and the IFA, their campaign proved successful when, last February, FIFA agreed to fund the full restoration costs of the grave.

'SUCCESSFUL VENTURE'

Speaking to the *Gazette*, Mr Kingston said that "the legacy of the McCrum family maintains a very special place in the hearts of the people of Milford".

He continued: "The restoration of the family grave has been something for which many locals have earnestly longed for some time and it is a great joy to see this enduring aspiration realised.

"When asked about this service, I could only but feel that it was most appropriate to come together as a community to thank God for the contribution and continuing influence of the McCrum family."



The Very Revd Gregory Dunstan (left), the Revd Malcolm Kingston (centre) and the Very Revd Robert Townley are pictured at the restored McCrum family grave in St Mark's, Armagh, with some of the guests who attended the special service of celebration and thanksgiving. (Photo: Ian Maginess)