

# From undertakers to funeral directors

by Marjorie Halligan

In *Other Days Around Me*, Florence Mary McDowell was impressed by a funeral she had seen as a child. There was a magnificent hearse drawn by matched black horses, which for this particular funeral wore nodding black plumes rather like circus ponies in mourning. Local opinion was convinced that “no one would have been ashamed to be seen dead in it” (56). A well turned out funeral was perceived as an indication of status. The Victorian age (1837-1901) was renowned for its mourning rituals. The example was set by Queen Victoria’s prolonged mourning for her consort, Albert, who died in 1861. Such intense mourning could not be maintained or afforded by the rest of society; however,

number. The relative economic prosperity in Ireland between 1896 and 1914 may have contributed to this growth (Kennedy, 1997). More people could afford to employ an undertaker. More people needed an undertaker because the death rate in Northern Ireland was high. By 1922, at fifteen per thousand of the population, it was higher than the rest of the British Isles (Bardon).

This study is based on personal interviews with representatives of families engaged in undertaking in Armagh from 1880 onwards.

## R.R. Loudan

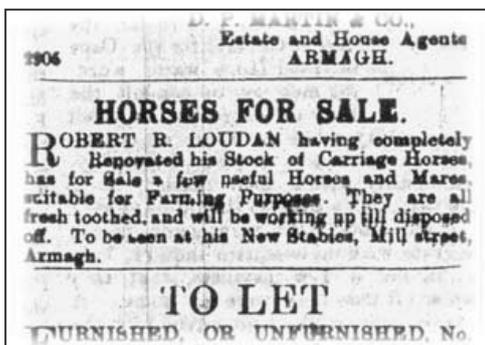
Patricia Tapson is the director of Loudan’s Funeral Directors which was begun by her grandfather, Robert R. Loudan in 1880. He already owned the Imperial Hotel, at Seven Houses, Armagh; and had a thriving carriage business. Once focused on his new venture, family records show that he brought innovations to the service he offered. He built the first motorised hearse in Ireland and was among the first nine embalmers in Europe; the first embalmer in Ireland.

He was succeeded by his son, Robert, in 1926. Robert’s experience of death went beyond the family business when he served in the First World War. None of this, however, prepared him for his experiences of death in the improvised mortuary at St. George’s Market, Belfast, after the Blitz of April, 1941. Together with three men from his firm, he worked there, free of charge, until the end of April. He confided to his wife that conditions were appalling.

On his death in 1971, his daughter continued the business which she manages with her son, Robert.

## George Cheevers

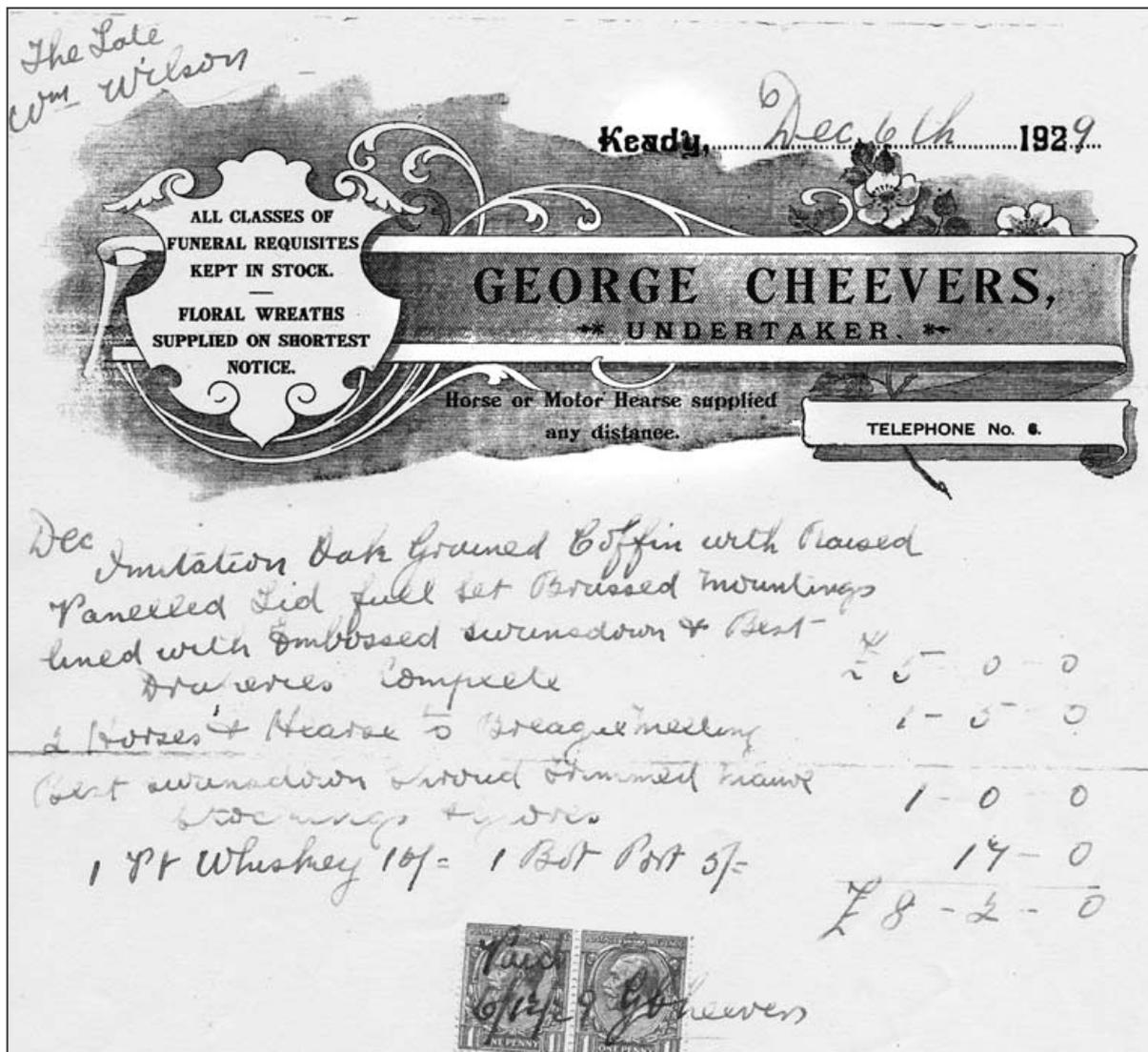
Kenneth Cheevers and his son, Andrew, carry on business from their Dobbin Street premises. His grandfather, George, began their firm, at Main Street, Keady. He was already in business as a druggist, grocer and publican. Diversification into undertaking was prompted by two facts. In 1899, the local undertaking firm of Nicholson’s ceased trading, so creating an opening. The second impetus came from the practice of the local coroner in ordering that remains subject to his jurisdiction should be waked in a designated public house, very often theirs. Such wakes were infrequent, but family wakes were frequent. As a grocer and publican, he supplied the food and drink for them, yet another factor nudging him in the direction of undertaking. He began by supplying the coffin and the hearse. A local carpenter supplied him with the coffins. In the home, however, the body was still in the care of a local woman skilled in the last offices. The firm began supplying appropriate clothes for this, items such as shrouds, stockings and gloves appeared in the early receipts. Gloves were supplied for a female funeral. Other funeral receipts included black crepe for the scarves and armbands of mourners. The family had the grave dug. On the day of the funeral, the undertaker confined the body. It was then carried from the home feet first, if a layman, and removed to the place of worship. Pallbearers were usually members of the family. The mourners followed the hearse according to their



its example raised the profile of funeral rituals, and contributed to the growth in the undertaking business. As McDowell pointed out a funeral established status

## Alexander Frizell

The first listing of an undertaker, in an Armagh business directory, was in *Slater’s Directory* (1846), when Alexander Frizell was listed as a cabinet maker, upholsterer and undertaker. Towards the end of the century there was an increase in their



A bill from George Cheevers for the funeral expenses of William Wilson in 1929, note included on the bill, the cost of Whiskey and Port

relationship to the deceased. Women did not attend.

George was succeeded by his son Herbert, in 1949. He immediately joined the National Association of Funeral Directors, which had been founded in England in 1905 to establish professional standards to provide a comprehensive service from death to the grave.

The firm moved to Dobbin Street in 1977. Changes are charted in their bills. Shrouds and liquor vanished off the bills from the 1950's onwards. Insertions of death notices in the press for all classes became the norm. Charges for embalming appeared as a standard item. Lead lined coffins were replaced with zinc for those wishing this service. Cremation became a more acceptable last rite for many. Wreathes were often replaced by donations to charities. The

growth of nursing homes for the elderly increased the use of their Rest Home. Finally, their records show the change in economic values. In 1910, a funeral cost two pounds and seven shillings. Now a modest funeral can cost one thousand four hundred pounds, though towards this state help may be sought.

### J.J. McArdle

J.J. McArdle's business was established at its present premises in Thomas Street, in 1907. Gerald McArdle and his daughter Ursula O'Hare were interviewed.

Gerald's grandfather, John James, began the business in Upper Irish Street. As a carpenter, he had many requests to make coffins. From the economic advantages of these orders, it was logical to make the

next step to supplying a hearse, so being drawn into undertaking.

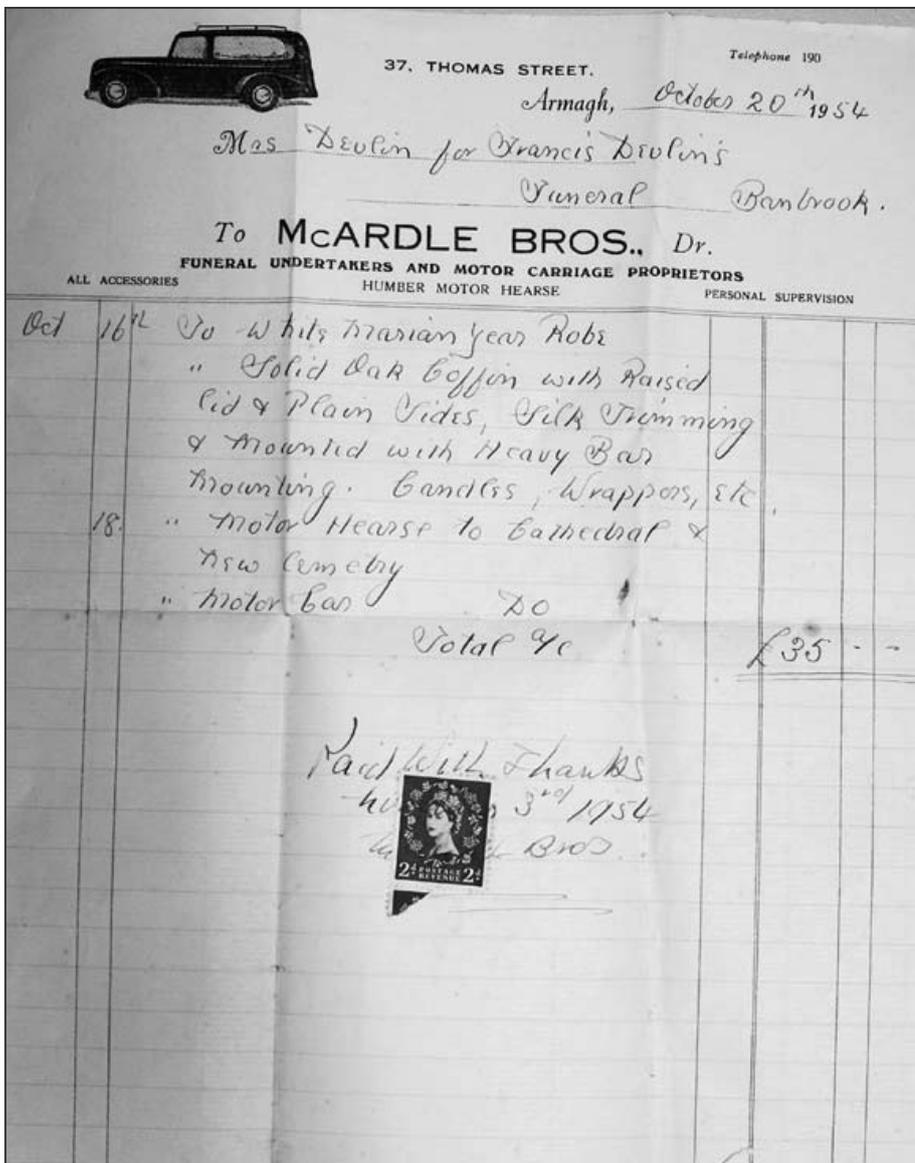
Early records were lost in a fire, but the display of training diplomas charts their modernisation. Gerald trained in Cork and Philadelphia. Ursula is a fully trained funeral director, but has not yet practised. It is her training in Business Studies which she finds useful as office manager.

Gerald has seen stability and change in the profession. The three-day wake in the home is still the preferred choice for most families, with the remains removed to the church on the last night. In the Republic of Ireland, wakes are more often held in funeral homes. In Armagh, these may be used for one day of the wake. Wakes are now sober copies of their nineteenth century forbearers. Shrouds of whatever colour have vanished. Embalming has

become standard practice. He finds that, on average, they have only two cremations annually. This may be due to tradition, or to the formalities associated with cremation, or to the continued availability of land in St. Patrick's cemetery.

## Jackson Stoops

Jackson Stoops can trace the origins of his firm to the beginning of the twentieth century when it was owned by R. Patterson. This firm operated from Dobbin Street, on the site of the present British Legion. Patterson's business was bought



A bill from McArdle Bros' for the funeral expenses of Francis Devlin in 1954

by the late Norman Leathem in 1968. In 1979, it was bought by Jackson Stoops and the late Herbie Burrows. Jackson now operates it with his son.

He has experienced the changes noted for the other firms. He feels that the introduction of a family's decision to support charities instead of accepting many wreaths is a more personal tribute to the deceased.

## Family Businesses

Undertakers may now be funeral directors who are highly trained and have to cope with increasing bureaucracy; but they do seem to have developed a tradition of drawing in their families at a young age to the family business

## Acknowledgments

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