

No immoral persons buried here!

Source:

Stevenson, John, *Two Centuries of Life in Down, 1600-1800*, McCaw, Stevenson & Orr Ltd., Belfast, 1920. Reprinted by the White Row Press Ltd., Belfast, 1990

Also available at

http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7154363M/Two_centuries_of_life_in_Down_1600-1800.

An account of procedure, surely unique in burial practice, is furnished by the records of Ballylesson. A deceased person, brought there for interment, had “to be attended by some person of credit to answer for the good behaviour of deceased when alive.” The declaration of the Churchwardens at the first funeral in Ballylesson graveyard on 21st December, 1788, reads:—

“Mr Hull & Mr. Beers, the Churchwardens attended before the corpse was put in the ground, Mr Hull said that the Churchwardens came there to the first funeral to make it publicly known that the churchyard of Ballylesson was given by the original owner of the land, conditionally, that the present churchwardens had promised in the name of themselves & their successors for ever, that the remains of no immoral person Should at anytime be admitted to lie in that Churchyard – that in future every deceased person brought there for interment must be attended by some person of credit to answer for the good behaviour of [the] deceased when alive, or a certificate from the minister by whom such deceased person had been instructed to that effect, Mr Beers said he was sure that what had been said by his worthy colleague would be generally approved of, that it was in every man’s power to have his bones laid to rest in that very desirable place by being honest. As to John Johnstone whose remains lay before them, he said he could with truth vouch for his having been an honest upright man, not a bigot, but rather negligent as to formal show in respect of religious matters. It was by being a good neighbour, a friend to the distressed & on every occasion within his reach proving himself a worthy member of society that he chose to show himself a Christian. Mr Beers recommended in the strongest terms he was capable of, more attention to the burying of the dead. He said the dissenters could not deny but that it would be decent to have at least a psalm suitable to the occasion sung at the edge of the grave, by such means he thought the idle attention of the bystanders might be collected, at least for a short time, & directed to that Almighty Power from whom we every moment receive fresh mark of his beneficent attention, & from whose mercy & goodness we hoped for everlasting life.”

Messrs. Hull and Beers surely took upon themselves a great responsibility when they promised, in the name of themselves and their successors for ever, that the remains of no immoral person should at any time be permitted to lie in that churchyard.