

Dr. Arthur Mussen - the coroner

The office of Coroner dates back to at least the twelfth century. In earlier times, to qualify for the position one would have had to have been a knight or at least have had a sum of money arising out of land amounting to £20. In later times they were appointed from members of the medical or legal profession. An interesting article appeared in the Lisburn Standard, dated Saturday 24th September 1887. The paper made comment on inquests held in the area. Dr. Mussen was the coroner at this time. The paper referred to a recent inquest in the deceased husband's residence. "Under ordinary circumstances the settled practice is to conduct the Coroner's investigation in the public-house which happens to be nearest to where the body of the deceased was found. It certainly is not at all surprising that respectable publican's should object to have their establishments from time to time converted into a morgue." The paper suggests that there should be some appointed proper place under the authority of the constabulary for inquests. "The present system is, on the face of it, a remnant of the past which could be advantageously dispensed with."

Dr. Mussen was appointed to the office of Coroner for South Antrim in 1880.

The following extracts are taken from the obituaries after the death of Dr. Mussen.

"The area within the jurisdiction of the coronership was very extensive, with a large and busy population, both industrial and agricultural. As a consequence there was a considerable demand upon the time and services of the holder of the office: and of Dr. Mussen it can truly be said that during the many years he occupied the responsible position he discharged the duties with zeal, conscientiousness, and an old-world courtesy that gained him the admiration and esteem of all with whom he was officially brought into contact. In recent years he had the valued co-operation of Dr. Robert Reid as deputy coroner whose services he held in the highest appreciation." (Belfast Telegraph, Friday 3rd July 1931)

"The late Dr. Mussen, in his capacity of coroner, had presided over the investigations of many singular and sensational cases of death, some characterised by mystery, others by grim tragedy, scores with a tensely pathetic human interest. Where there was a mystery to be probed, possibly crime, Dr. Mussen always proved judicial, painstaking, thorough, considering no detail too unimportant or trivial to be considered where a possible motive or useful clue might be brought to light. And where sad cases of distress had to be disclosed, as they so often are in a coroner's court - the loss of the only breadwinner of a family owing to some tragic happening - the doctor had ever proved himself a generous friend, and instigated jurors and others of the public to afford helpful assistance. Kindliness to the poor and the distressed had, indeed, been at all times characteristic of Dr. Mussen, whose beneficent deeds while rendered without the slightest ostentation were widely and sincerely appreciated." (Belfast Telegraph, Friday 3rd July 1931)

The following are some extracts from local newspapers covering several of the cases that Dr. Mussen dealt with in his role as Coroner. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

1886. On Friday, 5th inst. Dr. Mussen held an inquest in Stannus Arms Hotel, Chapel Hill on the body of William Greenaway, who met his death on the GNR line near Lisburn Station on 4th inst. (Lisburn Standard, February 1886)

1889. Dr Mussen, coroner for the southern district of Antrim held an inquest on Tuesday at six o'clock at the offices connected with the waterworks on the body of James Molloy a navvy at Stoneyford. (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 3rd August 1889)

1889. Dr. Mussen held an inquest after the close of the preceding inquest at the dispensary in Castle Street, Lisburn on the body of Thomas Knox who had died in the Infirmary on Sunday afternoon. (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 3rd August 1889)

1892. On Monday afternoon,(25th July) Dr. Mussen, J.P. Coroner, held an inquest at Ballynalargy near Lisburn, on the body of Charles Morgan, a servant man in the employment of Mr. Matthew Watson. (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 30th July 1892)

1892. An inquest was held by Dr. Mussen today at 2 o'clock, in the board room of the County Infirmary in Seymour Street, Lisburn on the body of Alice Greiffield, (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 25th June 1892)

1892. An inquest was held by Dr. Mussen on Monday at the residence of the deceased George Croll, at Aughnahough, near Lisburn. (Lisburn Standard 25th June 1892)

1899. Dr. Mussen was the coroner at an inquest held on Tuesday afternoon 23rd May 1899 at the Courthouse, Railway Street, Lisburn. The inquest was into the deaths of two children - Daniel and Martha Rice, who had drowned in the pond at Wallace Park, Lisburn. (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 27th May 1899)

1900. On Friday afternoon last Dr Mussen held an inquest in the waiting rooms at Lisburn Railway Station on the body of Edward McBennett who was found dead on the line, between four and five o'clock that morning a short distance beyond the station. (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 1st September 1900)

1901. On Friday afternoon last a farmer named John Cushenan, aged 52, of Lurganteneil, Stoneyford, received injuries through the bursting of his gun and died. Dr. Mussen had been sent for but he died on Saturday afternoon. (Lisburn Standard, Saturday 6th July 1901)

1923. Dr. Mussen held an inquest in the boardroom, Lisburn Union, on Monday afternoon on a man whose mutilated body was found near Ballinderry on Sunday morning on the railway. The deceased was Whiteside. (Lisburn Herald, Saturday 10th November 1923)

1923. Dr. Mussen held an inquest at 3 o'clock on the body of Richard Moore, found dead at Crew Park, Glenavy. (Lisburn Herald, Saturday 21st July 1923)

Another duty of a coroner was to hold an enquiry in respect of the finding of treasure trove.

Local archaeological finds appeared to be of personal interest to Dr. Mussen. He was a subscriber to the Ulster Journal of Archaeology in 1899.

Dr. Mussen also contributed an article titled "Burial Urns found at Glenavy" to this publication. It was published in the Ulster Journal of Archaeology Volume 5 Part 1 dated November 1898. The article refers to two urns. They were found in a field belonging to James Lorimer, in the town land of Glenavy about a quarter of a mile east of the village. One was discovered in 1854 and the other in June 1898. Charles Elcock, of the City Museum, Belfast provided Dr. Mussen with accompanying drawings for the article.

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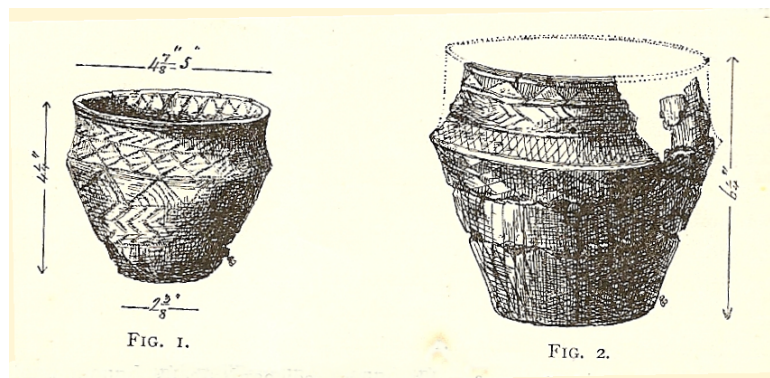
"Burial Urns found at Glenavy

By A. Mussen, M.D.,

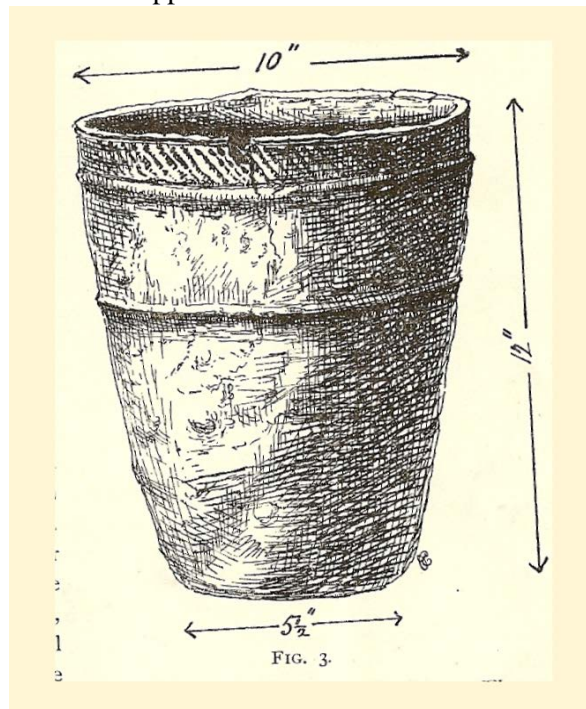
Her Majesty's Coroner for South Antrim.

These urns were found in a field belonging to James Lorimer, in the town land of Glenavy, Co. Antrim, about a quarter of a mile east of that village. The smaller one (fig.1), with covering urn (fig.2), was discovered in 1854, embedded in the gravel, at the summit of an abrupt natural mound, about three feet under the surface. This mound was being levelled at the time to facilitate farming operations. The soil all round was alluvial, and did not appear to have been disturbed by interments.

The urn proper was half-filled with calcined bones, and resting in the gravel; the covering urn (fig 2) was inverted over it. There was no cist or supporting stone, and no flint or bronze implements of any kind were near the place, which had no appearance of having been a general place of sepulchre. A number of trees, but nothing worthy of the name of timber, had until recently been growing round the mound, their planting being evidently due to the fact of the mound being unfavourable. At a distance of about five feet from the urn, and about three feet under the surface, part of a human skeleton was found. From the position in which the bones of the head and those of the feet were found, it seemed as if the body had been crushed into a hole too small for it. The body had been placed on its back and doubled up.



The larger urn (fig.3) was discovered in June 1898, in a field about 350 years west of the field in which was found the smaller urns. A gravel pit had been sunk, the sides of which were being levelled in when the spade struck the bottom of the urn, knocking a hole in it. This disclosed its nature, and James Lorimer had it carefully uncovered, when it was found to contain a large quantity of calcined bones, of what must have been a very large-sized human being. The urn was inverted over the calcined bones. The soil about is entirely alluvial, showing no signs of a general sepulchre, but merely a hole large enough to admit of the insertion of the urn and nothing more. There were no flints or bronzes about the urn, but a stone about six inches in diameter rested upon the bottom of it. The field is quite level at the place, and has no appearance of a former mound near it.



I am indebted to Charles Elcock, of the City Museum, Belfast, for the accompanying drawings.”