

TWO SPANISH INFLUENZA VICTIMS IN SURBITON CEMETERY

David A Kennedy, PhD

22 May 2025

ABSTRACT

The pandemic of 1918-1920 of what was known as “*Spanish Influenza*” killed about 250,000 people in Britain. Mildred Feeney is buried in Surbiton Cemetery [Section 1, Class B, grave 2152]. She was a British Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse from Kilkenny, Ireland, who died of influenza on 8 November 1918, at the Royal Naval Hospital, Chatham. Nearby is buried [Section 1, Class B, grave 2150] Father Ralph McElroy, curate of St Raphael’s Church, Surbiton, who died of influenza on 29 November 1918 after visiting stricken parishioners.

INTRODUCTION

The neglected grave of Mildred Feeney, of Kilkenny, Ireland, [Figure 1], is in Surbiton Cemetery [Section 1, Class B, grave 2152]. The front of the headstone states that she was a “VAD” who died at the Royal Naval Hospital, Chatham, on 8 November, 1918. Also buried in the grave is her father, Peter John Carr Feeney, who died on 27 October 1925. Edith Eleanor Feeney, Mildred’s mother, who died on 27 February, 1949 [Figures 2 & 3] is commemorated on the headstone, but she is not buried there. Surbiton Cemetery records state that Peter John Carr Feeney died in Dún Laoghaire [formerly Kingstown], Co. Dublin, Ireland.¹ Questions arise: what was a “VAD”, and why were two Irish people, one who died in Ireland, buried in Surbiton Cemetery? Some research was carried out to address these questions. Some records were sourced via the *Ancestry* and *Find my Past* websites.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

What was a “VAD”? During the Great War, men and women could join one of the voluntary aid detachments [VADS] established by the British Red Cross charity. For example, a VAD, among other volunteers, had nurses, with basic training, who cared for sick or wounded soldiers, often in military hospital wards. These volunteers became known as “VADS”.²



**Figure 1. The Feeney grave in Surbiton Cemetery, front view.
Photograph taken by David A. Kennedy on 8 March 2025**

**IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MILDRED FEENEY, VAD
DEARLY LOVED DAUGHTER OF PETER J. C. FEENEY AND EDITH FEENEY OF
KILKENNY, IRELAND
WHO DIED AT THE ROYAL NAVAL HOSPITAL, CHATHAM, NOV. 8TH 1918
AGED 28 YEARS
ALSO IN LOVING MEMEMBRANCE OF
MY DEAR HUSBAND, PETER J. C. FEENEY
WHO DIED OCT. 27TH 1925, AGED 72 YEARS**

Figure 2. Inscription on front of Feeney grave, transcription

**ALSO OF EDITH ELEANOR FEENEY
BELOVED WIFE OF PETER JOHN CARR FEENEY
WHO DIED FEB. 27TH 1949
AGED 93 YEARS**

Figure 3. Inscription on side of Feeney grave, transcription



Figure 4. Photograph of Mildred Eleanor Feeney in VAD uniform

The 1901 Irish Census found Mildred Eleanor Feeney in Main Street, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, aged 11. She was in the household of her father, Peter John Carr Feeney, a bank manager, born in Galway City. The household included her mother, Ethel Eleanor Feeney, born in Birkenhead, Cheshire, Mildred's sisters, Ethel Mary and Kathleen, aged 14 and 7 respectively, and a female domestic servant. It was recorded that Ethel was born in Tullamore, Co. Offally, [formerly King's County] and that her siblings were born in Kilkenny Town. Mildred's mother's religion was recorded as Church of England, while all the other occupants were Roman Catholics.

The 1911 Irish Census found Mildred Eleanor Feeney living in the household of her father, a bank manager, in Patrick Street, Kilkenny. Also present were her mother and a female domestic servant. Mildred's two sisters were not recorded. Various references in the *Kilkenny Moderator* local newspaper showed that the Feeneys were very much part of the Kilkenny Town's social circle.

British Red Cross VAD records show that Mildred Eleanor Feeney was engaged as a nurse on 16 October 1918, aged 26, and died in service on 8 November 1918.³ **Figure 4** is a photograph of Mildred in her uniform.⁴ Her death certificate records that she died on 8 November 1918 at the Royal Naval Hospital, Gillingham, Kent, she was 26 years old, and her domicile was *Hibernian Bank House*, Kilkenny. The certificate states that after suffering influenza for ten days, she succumbed to broncho-

pneumonia and cardiac failure. No next of kin is stated, but the certificate names the informant of the death as "*F. Hollick Sick Berth Reserve*" who "*was in charge of and causing the body to be buried*".

Why was Mildred Eleanor Feeney from Ireland, who died in England, and why was her father, Peter John Carr Feeney, who died in Ireland, both buried in the same grave in Surbiton Cemetery? A clue lies in the 1921 English Census which found Ethel Mary Maile, née Feeney – Mildred's sister - living with her husband, William Charles Drayson Maile, a general medical practitioner, at number 95 Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey. Also present were their son, William Burgess Drayson Maile and two domestic servants. Moreover, recorded as visitors from Ireland at the time were the parents of Ethel Mary Maile, Peter John Carr Feeney and Ethel Eleanor Feeney. A marriage certificate recorded that Dr and Mrs Maile were married in Westminster Cathedral on 11 August 1914. Records of St Agatha's Church, Kingston upon Thames, showed that their son, William, was baptised there on 20 July 1915 and his proxy Godmother was Mildred Feeney. Surbiton Cemetery records showed that the burials of Mildred Feeney, on 13 November 1918, and of her father, Peter Feeney, on 28 October 1925 were conducted by "*A. Wright*".⁵ The website of St Agatha's Church showed that Fr. Alfred Wright was the Parish Priest there from 1917-1926.⁶

DISCUSSION

Ethel Mary Maile [née Feeney], who lived in Kingston upon Thames, probably was entered as the next of kin of her sister, Mildred Feeney, in the records available to "*F. Hollick*" who, according to the death certificate "*was in charge of and causing the body to be buried*". Probably, he would have been a member of Royal Naval Auxiliary Sick Berth Reserve who, as a member of the St. John Ambulance Brigade, had volunteered to serve on naval duty in an emergency.⁷ It is assumed that after Mildred died, he contacted Ethel Feeney, who was a parishioner of St Agatha's Church in Kingston, and she asked the parish priest, Fr. Alfred Wright, to conduct the funeral. It is unclear why Mildred was buried in Surbiton Cemetery rather than in Kingston Cemetery. After her father, Peter Feeney, died in Ireland in 1925, it is assumed that Ethel Feeney arranged for him to be buried in the grave of Mildred Feeney and Fr. Wright conducted the funeral service. Moreover, after her mother, Edith Eleanor Feeney, died in 1949, it is assumed that Ethel Feeney arranged for a memorial inscription to be put on the grave in Surbiton Cemetery [**Figure 1**].

The influenza pandemic - commonly known as “*Spanish flu*” - was the most significant health event ever recorded. It was caused by a most virulent strain of influenza virus and was spread mainly by the unavoidable inhalation of infected droplets produced when an affected person coughed, sneezed or talked. The 1918-1920 pandemic killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide. Roughly, 25% of the British population caught it and about 250,000 died of it. Fit, younger people, between ages 20 and 40, were worst affected. It was first reported in Spain which, because of its neutral status, was one of the few countries in Europe not controlled by wartime censorship. However, the first confirmed cases were in the United States in March 1918, but some people believe it started in China and was carried to the trenches in Europe by labourers who were working in French army camps.⁸ The mass movement of troops after the Armistice and crowded living conditions helped to spread the disease. With no effective infection control measures at the time, hospital staff were much at risk and Joyce Sapwell, a VAD nurse, wrote that her hospital in Aldershot was full of cases, with 108 deaths in eight weeks and about one third of the staff incapacitated.⁹



**Figure 5. Grave of Fr. Ralph McElroy.
Photograph taken by David A. Kennedy on 29 July 2018**

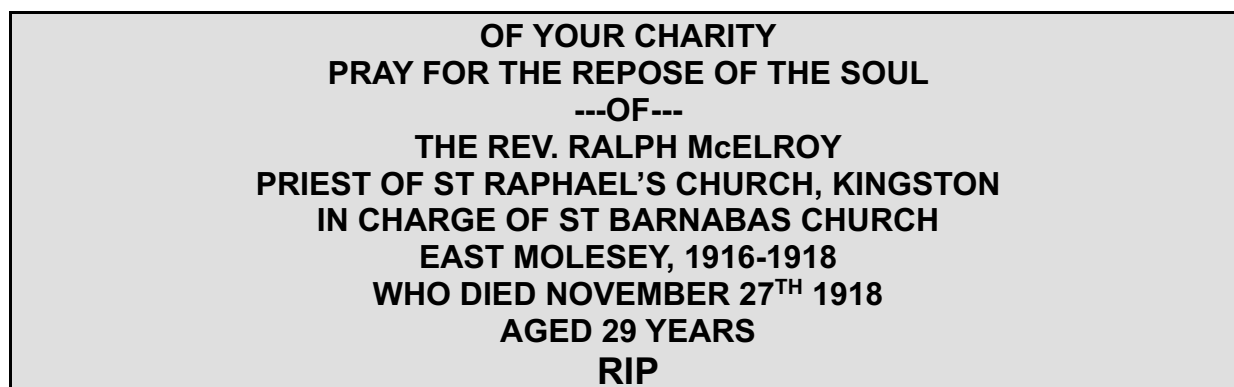


Figure 6. Inscription on Fr. McElroy's grave, transcription

Not only were nurses and doctors tending cases of Spanish Flu vulnerable to an infection that could be fatal. Fr. Ralph McElroy, aged 29, a curate of St Raphael's Church, Surbiton, is buried close to the Feeney grave [Section 1, Class B, grave 2150]. He died of influenza in Surbiton Hospital, on 29 November 1918, after visiting stricken families in the Parish of St Barnabas in Thames Ditton and Molesey.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Lying in adjacent graves in Surbiton Cemetery are the mortal remains of two young caring people, one a Red Cross nurse, the other a Catholic priest, who caught Spanish Influenza in the course of their duties and who both sadly died as a consequence in November 1918.

¹ <https://www.kingston.gov.uk/directory/21/burial-records>

² <https://vad.redcross.org.uk/volunteering-during-the-first-world-war/who-were-the-vad-volunteers>

³ <https://vad.redcross.org.uk/search>

⁴ <https://www.militaryimages.net/tags/Voluntary-aid-detachment-vad/>

⁵ <https://www.kingston.gov.uk/directory/21/burial-records>

⁶ <https://www.stagathaschurch.org.uk/our-priests>

⁷ <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/story/77008>

⁸ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/health-and-social-care/health/coronavirus-how-the-red-cross-helped-in-the-spanish-flu-pandemic>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwwhtrd/revision/5>

Catherine Arnold, 1918, Pandemic 1918. The Story of the Deadliest Influenza in History, London, Michael O'Mara Books

⁹ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/health-and-social-care/health/coronavirus-how-the-red-cross-helped-in-the-spanish-flu-pandemic>

¹⁰ Surrey Advertiser, 2 December 1918 & Tablet, 7 December 1918.