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The 1841 Theft from the Iron Safe

William Thornhill Kidd (1803–65) was appointed as the first Chaplain and Registrar to the new Cemetery in May 1836 and later given the role of Secretary to the Cemetery Company. That summer he moved into the Minister's House at the top of the hill (now Montague House) and started work. His financial duties were spelt out over the coming months by the Directors: he must take money for all interments, keep accounts of all annual receipts and expenditure and he must pay all monies into the bank at least once a month.

At their meeting earlier that month the Directors had instructed: 'That an Iron Safe be fixed in the committee room at the lodge where all the Books shall be kept & the business transacted'. The Registrar's Office in these early days was in the one of the Lodges at the Gatehouse on what is now Cemetery Avenue, leading to the Ecclesall Road. It was to this office that enquirers came, and sales of grave plots took place. Installing a safe seems like a sensible move. If all went well and business thrived the Registrar could be handling substantial sums of money as early rules and regulations stipulated that all money due for graves and headstones should be paid for up front when they were ordered. While a single interment in 1836 could be had for 8 shillings (about £60 in 2025), prices went up from there: charges for a private grave started at £2 12s 6d, a private vault or crypt cost £5 5s and a catacomb (in an unfinished state) would set you back £52 10s (2025: £4,750).

As for the iron safe, this was in the early days of safe development (the term 'safe' itself only coming into use in the early years of the century) and most at this time consisted of shelves set into a wall with an iron door mounted on the front. From later references, we know the safe was secured with a key. There is also reference to a tin box in which important documents were kept (secured with two key locks) and in June 1840 this was put in the safe, which itself therefore would have been of a reasonable size. These documents were later removed for fears they might: '...receive injury from the dampness of the Safe...'

Throughout the early years of the Cemetery there had been all sorts of trouble and vandalism, and the minutes of the Director's meetings show that various attempts were made to stop this: notices were put up prohibiting dogs and all forms of antisocial behaviour, the gates were to be closed at certain times and access to the Cemetery restricted. So it may not have come as much of a surprise when a robbery was attempted at the Minister's House as reported in a news article in the *Sheffield Independent* of 5 October 1839:

...[the thieves] appear to have remained in the low rooms for some time, and made a diligent search for valuables. They carried away a writing desk and a workbox, neither of which contained property of any value to any but the owners.

Was this just another in a recent spate of robberies; two others on the same night were reported in the same article? Or were the thieves hoping to find cash taken for sales of plots and gravestones?

A more serious attempt was made early in 1841, this time at the Registrar's Office where the safe was located, for at their meeting of 19 February the Directors resolved:

That, in order to the greater security of the property of the Company deposited in the Safe, the Sexton be requested for the future to sleep in the Registrar's Office; and that a suitable bedstead be provided...

There may not have been time to implement this measure for at a Special Meeting of the Directors on 26 February, the theft from the safe was reported:

It was stated by Mr Kidd the Registrar, that on Wednesday night, the 24th instant a second attempt to rob the office was made, when the Robbers succeeded in obtaining the sum of £26.2.11 (around £2,350 in 2025) from the Iron Safe.

The Directors concluded that since £12.5.6 (2025: £1,100) of that money should already have been paid out by Mr Kidd for invoices due, he should be held responsible for its loss and refund it. Mr Kidd was to be allowed to leave money overnight with William Chadwick the Sexton for safekeeping and repairs to doors and shutters were ordered.

A report of the robbery was given in the *Sheffield Independent* on 6 March:

On Wednesday week the office of the Cemetery Company was broken into, and about £16 stolen from the safe. We understood that the safe had been put up in such a manner, that the thieves were able to take off the front with ease.

It seems that though the installation of a safe was a good idea, it was poorly executed.

Over the next few months, the attitude of the Directors to Mr Kidd softened; he wasn't required to pay the money back, he was given three months' notice and by the AGM in August he was being thanked for his good service to the Cemetery following his 'resignation'. A clue to this change of heart might lie in his whereabouts at the time of the 1841 Census in June. At that time, though his wife was still in the Minister's House, Kidd was in Dr Belcombe's Private Asylum in York, a private psychiatric institution run on modern 'humanistic' lines. We can only speculate on the sequence of events that brought Kidd there: did he have some kind of mental health issue that led to his problems at the Cemetery? Or did the whole experience of the theft result in some sort of breakdown? Long term he seems to have recovered, was re-appointed as Chaplain to the Cemetery in 1853 and served in that role for many years.

This must have been an unpleasant wake-up call for the Directors in terms of loss of money and the need look at the security of the Company's assets in the future. They tried to make the best of the situation by deciding to rent out the Minister's House, rather than give it to the Chaplain rent-free, and to employ both a Chaplain and a Secretary at much lower salaries. Unfortunately, in the not too distant future, events would show both of these measures to have been false economies.