

## **The 'Decade of Centenaries' All-Island History Competition 2016**

**Title of project:** Four-Mile-House Ambush,  
12<sup>th</sup> October 1920

**Category:** Local/Regional

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# **Four-Mile-House Ambush**

## **12<sup>th</sup> October 1920**

### **- Some Unrecorded Facts and my Neighbours' personal involvement**

**By Gillian Greene, 3<sup>rd</sup> Class, Roxboro NS**

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## Introduction

I picked the Four-Mile-House ambush of 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1920 for my project because I often heard my grandparents who live in the Four-Mile-House parish talking about it. I wanted to find out more about what exactly happened and what impact it had. Also my uncle is a Commandant in the Irish Defence Forces and is involved in organising the 1916 Commemorations. He showed me the brass buttons on his uniform bearing the letters IV representing Irish Volunteers, the founders of the Irish Defence Forces, and which was very involved in the ambush.

## Background to the Ambush

At the time of the ambush, the Irish were fighting for freedom from British Rule. They were inspired by the 1916 leaders who died for Irish freedom. The Irish Volunteers was recruiting nationalists (people who wanted Irish independence) and they got lots of support from the GAA, the Gaelic League, Cumann Na mBan, Conradh na Gaeilge and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a secret society. They organised many attacks on the Crown Forces in Ireland.

## Why was Four-Mile-House picked as a location for the ambush?

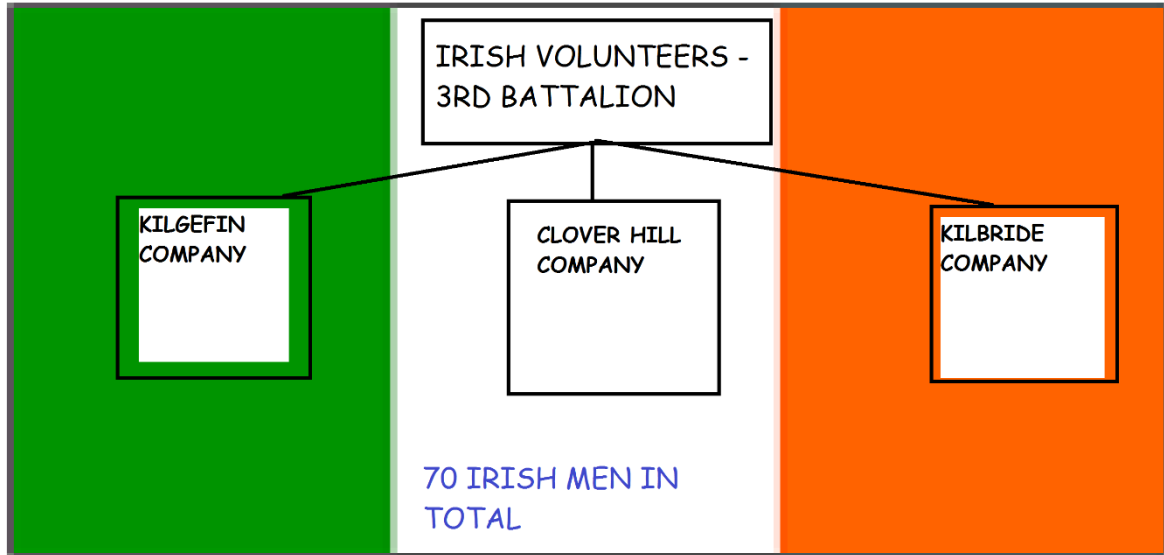
At that time, the Crown Forces were stationed in Roscommon, Boyle and Strokestown. The Roscommon Volunteers noticed that convoys of British lorries passed through Four-Mile-House usually around 8am daily on their way to these locations. The Volunteers decided to carry out an ambush on these lorries at Four-Mile-House. The Volunteers were also familiar with the area and could disperse quickly after the attack.

## Why was an ambush chosen as a method of attack?

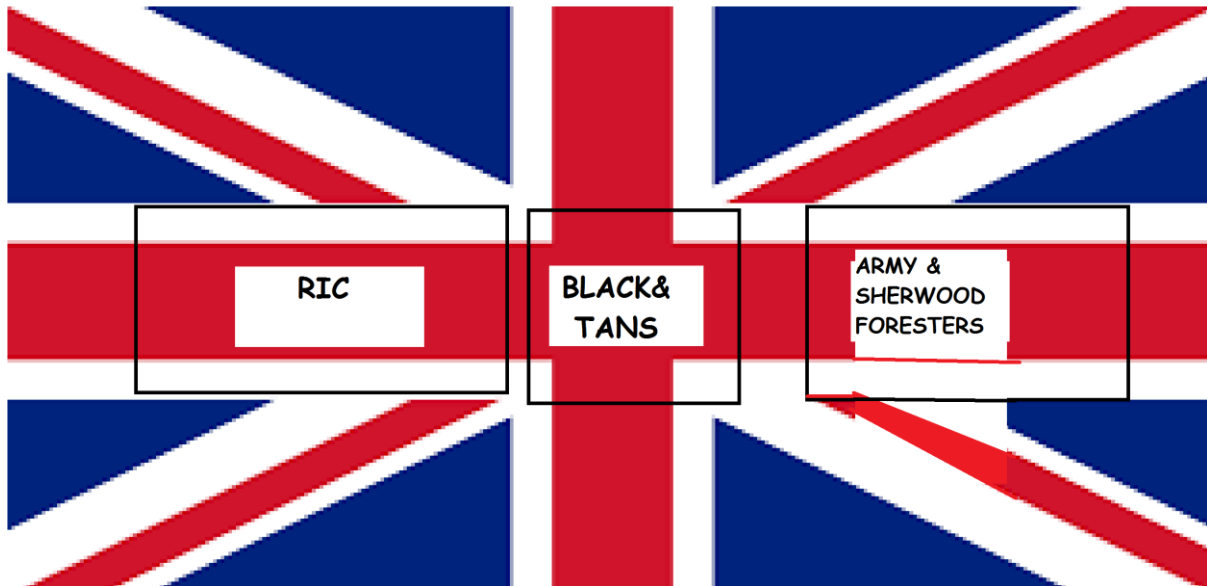
- To catch the enemy by surprise. The area chosen in Four-Mile-House has two high earth embankments. The Volunteers could attack passing vehicles while out of sight behind the embankments.
- To gather more arms and ammunition which were in short supply.
- To show that the Volunteers were desperate for Irish independence. The ambush took place during the War of Independence which followed the 1916 Rising.

## Who was involved in the ambush?

On the Irish side:



English side:



## Preparations for the Ambush



PAT MADDEN

The night before the ambush, about 40 men gathered in Ballagh. Pat Madden, Commanding Officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> IRA battalion South Roscommon, was in charge. They stayed in a cottage until about 2am. Armed with whatever weapons they could gather, they marched for Four-Mile-House, passing through New Line, Aghamuck Crossroads and Cloonboney. At Ballinderry school, they met 30 men of the Kilbride Company. (See **GREEN** route on map)

The Kilbride Company was divided into 3 groups. One group was sent to the Roscommon side of Four-Mile-House (see **BLUE** route on map), the 2<sup>nd</sup> group was sent to the Boyle road (see **ORANGE** route on map) and the last group to the Strokestown Road (see **PINK** route on map). In this way they made sure all the main roads into Four-Mile-House were covered. Would their plan work? The remaining men in the Kilbride Company went with the main group to the ambush site.

My local historian, Jim Ganly, told me that 2 Flanagan brothers (they live next door to the church at the bottom of the hill) on their way to Cloonboney bog early that morning met a large group of men making their way to the Strokestown road. They knew something was up. Later that day, when they returned with their first load of turf, they found great scenes of commotion around the church. There were RIC men everywhere and the brothers were quizzed at length. They never got to return for their 2<sup>nd</sup> load of turf that day!



First the Roscommon Volunteers had to borrow a cart and pole from Curran's next door to Four-Mile-House Church (see picture). They tied the pole onto the cart and the plan was to push it out on the road when they would hear the English lorries approaching. The driver

of the first lorry would be forced to stop or slow down and this would give a chance for the Volunteers who were concealed behind the wall on top of the high embankments to fire at the occupants. They thought they were very clever - or were they?



## The Ambush.

It was 7 am on the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1920 and the first convoy was expected to pass in an hour. They were just getting ready when they heard a lorry approaching. A local man, Michael Cunningham, recalls at that time, the Parish Priest, Fr. O'Hara, had



two jersey cows similar to the one in the picture. Another local man was driving the cows 200 yards down the road to get their milk. The Volunteers told the man to hurry up as the lorry was coming. He did not know what they were talking about but they were just going in the gate when the lorry came and they couldn't push out the cart in time to block the lorry! **OOOps!**

They saw a Crossley Tender approaching at high speed. It had 8 occupants including the driver. The Volunteers fired at the vehicle. The driver appeared to be the only man unharmed. One of the Volunteers jumped out on the road in front of the lorry and fired point blank at him with a revolver. The driver dodged it. The lorry sped on. They continued firing until the lorry was out of sight. When the sections that were covering the roads heard the shots, they started to build a barricade of stones across the roads as instructed. The barricade on the Boyle road, however, was only partially built and the Tender sped through. Oh no!

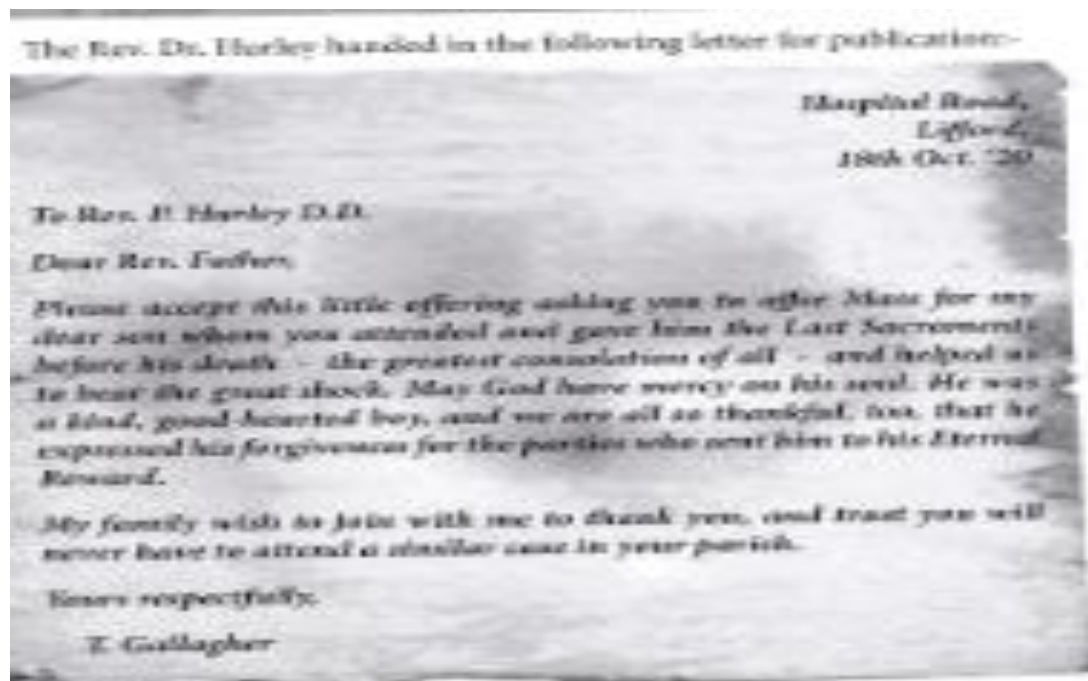


PHOTO OF A CROSSLEY TENDER SIMILAR TO THE ONE DRIVEN BY THE BRITISH FORCES THE MORNING OF THE AMBUSH.

The driver of the Tender, Constable Joyce, was anxious to get out of the 'death-trap' and sped to Clashaganny where he slowed down and stopped. He saw that 2 of his passengers were dead, Constable John Crawford and Michael Kenny, both RIC men.

Realising that 2 others were seriously wounded, he called on Ciss Hunt's (99 years) aunt who lived at Clashaganny Crossroads. She recalls her aunt telling her that she directed the driver across the road to Flanagan's Public House. Mr. Flanagan wouldn't come out to see the dead bodies but he gave the driver some whiskey for the wounded men! He also gave the driver directions to Strokestown.

There was great hullabaloo in Strokestown when the Crossley Tender pulled up outside the police barracks there with the load of dead and wounded men. Two local doctors, Dr Dudley Forde and Dr John Mullin tended to the 2 wounded men, Sergeant O'Connor and Constable Gallagher in vain. The priests were then sent for and administered the last rites. A report from the Roscommon Herald, dated 16<sup>th</sup> October, states that Gallagher died praying that there would be no reprisals on women or children. There is a letter dated 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1920 from Constable Gallagher's family in England, thanking Rev. P. Hurley, for giving their son the Last Sacraments and expressing thanks that he asked forgiveness for those 'who sent him to his Eternal Reward'.



The Roscommon Herald 22nd October 1920





FRANK SIMONS

Back at the scene of the ambush, most of the men had scurried back in the direction of Ballinderry school where they had met earlier. Frank Simons, Pat Madden and some of the men in charge stayed behind to discuss the outcome. An ordinary Ford car came along. The two occupants were in civilian dress and the car was allowed to pass through. Imagine the shock when they realised it was the Country Inspector of Police Hetreed. They had let the greatest catch of all slip from right under their noses! The Inspector did not realise that the ambush had just happened.

At 8pm that evening, a convoy of Crossley Tenders brought the coffins back to Roscommon. On the side of the coffins were painted the words 'work of Irish savages'. The occupants of the vehicles fired on every house, cattle and other livestock on the route. There was going to be BIG trouble!

## The Aftermath

The local people were in fear of their lives that night. Many left their homes in the towns of Roscommon and Strokestown. A local man, Michael Cunningham, recalls that they left because they thought the whole place would be burned. The Volunteers themselves were on the alert. They had a Company on duty each night armed with shotguns and revolvers. Nothing happened. However, on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1920, disaster struck. A meeting of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion staff had been held the previous night in a house in Rathconnor, near Four-Mile-House. A policeman's notebook had been found containing the names of 26 Volunteers who were involved in the ambush. Knowing that they were marked men, the Volunteers agreed to form a Flying Column



JOHN CONROY

The following day, John Conroy, and his new wife, were at their home in Rathconnor. John had been warned by James Quigley, another Volunteer, that his life was in danger. Quigley had been given this information by a Miss Rafferty of Castleplunkett who had overheard the

Tans saying that they were going to shoot Quigley and Conroy next.

Quigley took the warning seriously and went on the run. On that fateful day, Conroy was discussing the events with 2 neighbours when a loud knock came on the door. Looking out the window, he saw a truck owned by a local merchant, George Kelly. When he opened the door however, instead of Mr Kelly, there stood 2 men armed with revolvers. The dreaded Black and Tans! They had played a nasty trick. They stormed in. Once they were satisfied they had their target, they ordered John to take off his coat and to march outside the door. More Black and Tans were outside waiting. They bundled John Conroy into the truck and drove off.

Hannah Mulligan from Rathconor remembers as a small girl seeing one of the neighbours going up the road. He found John Conroy dead on the side of the road. The neighbours took Conroy's remains back to his home and held a wake. The next day he was buried in Ballinderry Cemetery. The British had got their revenge!



PHOTO OF ME AT MEMORIAL IN RATHCONOR WHERE JOHN CONROY WAS KILLED



PHOTO OF ME WITH JIMMY GANLY THE LOCAL HISTORIAN AT JOHN CONROY'S  
HEADSTONE AT BALLINDERRY CEMETERY

## Why was the Ambush significant?

I found it very interesting to read Frank Simon's report that he and his comrades felt the ambush was a failure at the time. They had not seized any guns, their plans hadn't worked but he was not aware that 2 policemen had been killed and 2 seriously wounded. This view changed later when he realised the English had 4 casualties. This was the first major ambush carried out by the Roscommon Volunteers and it encouraged them to carry out further attacks on the Crown forces.

It had a ripple effect throughout Ireland and boosted the War of Independence effort. General Sean MacEoin, a high-ranking officer in the Volunteers, met British Prime Minister Lloyd George during the Truce discussions of 1921. He was asked if the Irish had planned to carry on with their guerrilla tactics (ambushes, raids and lootings), Truce or no Truce. MacEoin replied they were prepared to start fighting all over again!

The British forces suffered badly during the War of Independence and were eventually forced to retreat. When the Irish War of Independence ended and the Treaty was signed in October 1921, the mighty British Empire lost some of its power for the first time ever. We were on our way to independence at last!

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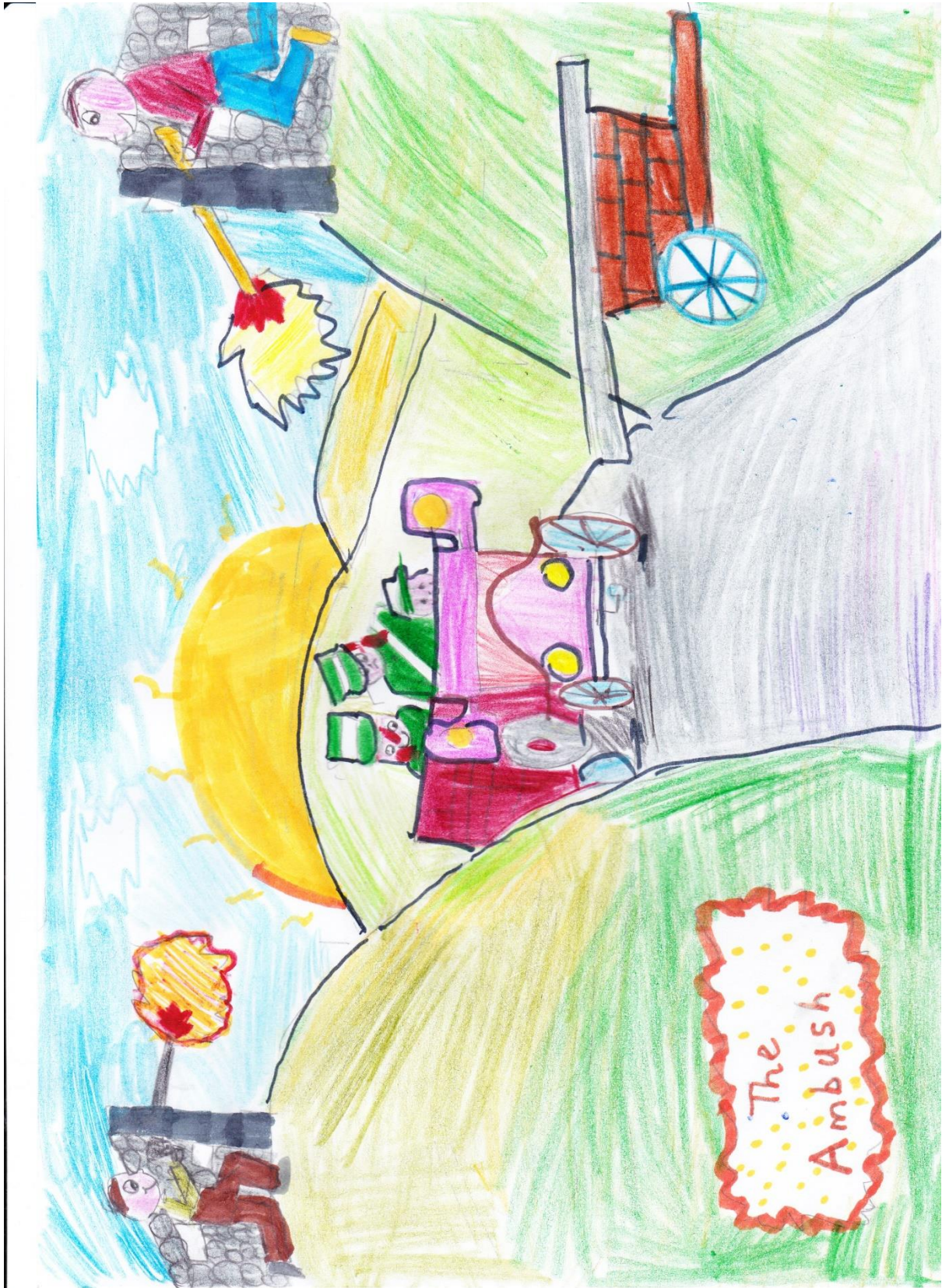
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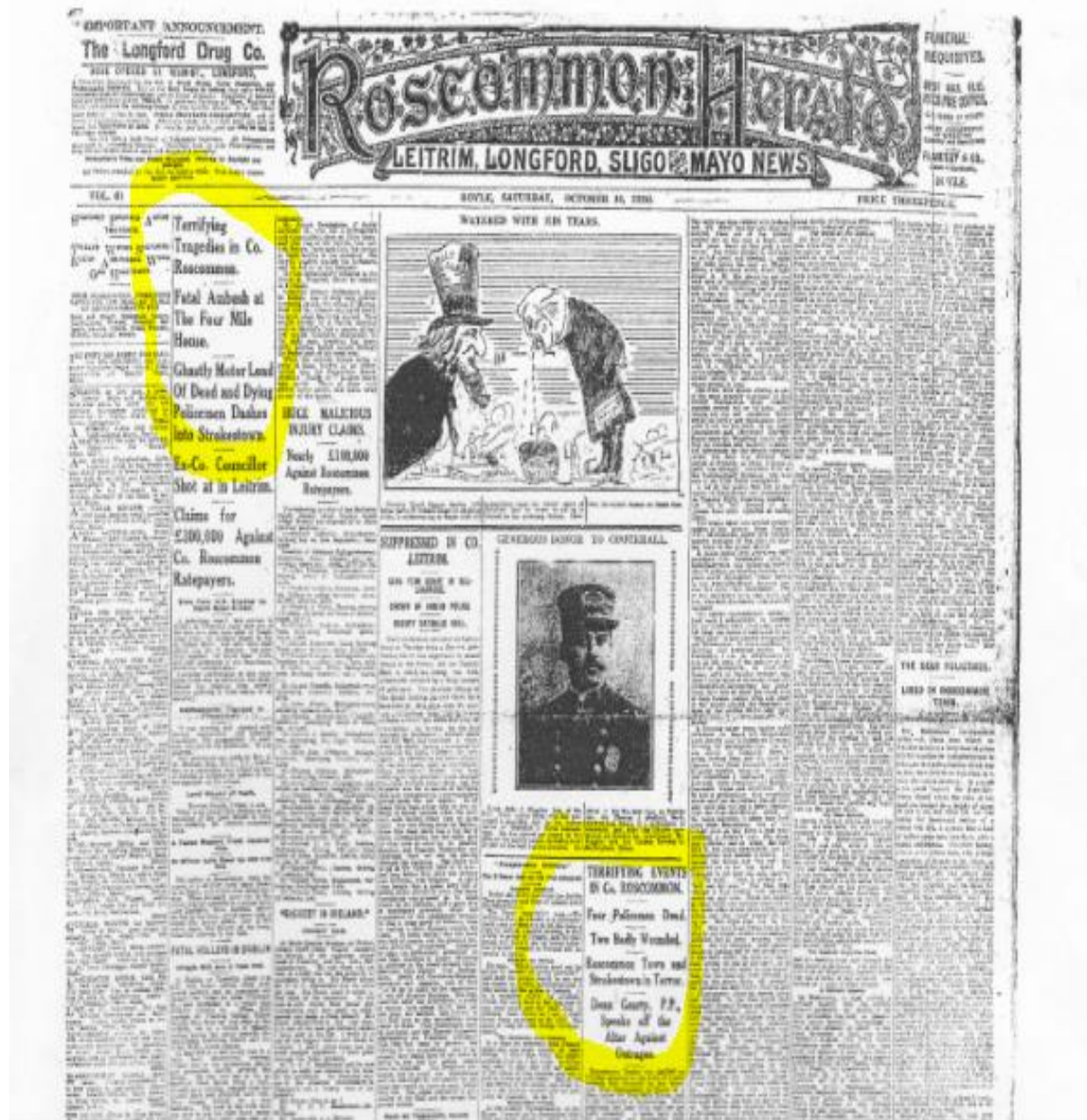
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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jim Ganly, my local historian, who gave of his time freely to tell me about the ambush, guided me to good primary and secondary sources of information to use and who brought it to life for me by organising visits to the various sites of interest.

Some Interesting Images





The Four-Mile-House Ambush made front page of Roscommon Herald on 16 October, 1920

Who was in the Crossley Tender?

Constable Joyce the driver	Constable Rahilly
Head Constable Conway,	Michael Kenny RIC
Sergeant Boulter	Sergeant Martin O' Connor
Constable John Crawford RIC	Constable Francis Gallagher, a Black and Tan



John Conroy's Name at the War of Independence Memorial, Shankhill Cross, Elphin. Co. Roscommon

War of Independence Memorial at Shankhill Cross, Elphin, Co. Roscommon









The site of the ambush as it looks today. You can see the high embankments. The wall on the left is the original wall. Stones were removed from it to make loopholes through which the Volunteers could aim their guns at the target vehicle.



The brass button on my uncle's Defence Forces Uniform showing the letters IV for Irish Volunteers

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