

It's a 'highway robbery' as antique post-box vanishes

IT WAS a 'highway robbery' with a difference.

A post-box believed to be more than 140 years old was ripped from a road-side wall in Co Clare and may have been stolen to be sold abroad.

The box had a VR (Victoria Regina) insignia to show that it dated back to the reign of Queen Victoria and was torn from its wall mounting last Friday night or early Saturday morning.

And the theft of the local landmark has angered locals in Ralahine South near Newmarket on Fergus, who regarded the post-box as a valuable piece of local history.

It's thought it would have taken several people some time to remove the box.

Earlier this year, another box

By **Pat Flynn**

was stolen from the junction of the R471 and R463 roads near Clonlara in east Clare, while last year two others were ripped their pole mountings at Ballyline near Ennis and Ballycalla close to Shannon Airport.

A spokesman for An Post said: 'It was cleared as normal on Friday afternoon and reported missing on Saturday.'

'This was a wall-mounted post-box which had served the people of the area around Ralahine Cross over many years.'

'It was one of the oldest of its kind in Clare.'

'Gardaí are investigating the crime and have appealed for any information that may help their enquiries. An Post would ask that

anyone who is offered such a post box who knows of the whereabouts of an old postbox to notify the gardaí,' the spokesman added.

An Post also confirmed that the company does not 'sell or otherwise dispose of old post-boxes'.

It's believed the boxes are being moved out of the country because they would be very difficult to sell here.

It's also thought they are sought after because of their heritage value and not as scrap metal.

'This is normally a low-volume post-box and we believe it was probably empty when removed.'

'Customers who believe there may have been mail in the box are asked to contact An Post Customer Services at 01-7057600,' the An Post spokesman added.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

How Lego can teach us to love art and culture

AS I observed them in the Lego pit, their little faces shining bright with joy, I saw again the power of play. We were staying at the Legoland Hotel in Windsor for the mid-term break. It was not our first visit, but it was still special.

To see children imaginatively engage with the world is such a rare thing today. For the 'plugged-in' generation, playing with toys is so much hard work. It is not until you realise that play is essential for health and harmony that you understand the perils of 'Cyberia'.

We all need periods of recreation. 'Recreation' means, quite literally, to remake or to renew. We take time out from our responsibilities to recharge and to refresh ourselves. To play is to recreate the self. We do nothing in particular, and yet we do everything that makes life worthwhile. All work and no play makes us all dull.

In playing, we find joy in simple things. Sitting in the airport the other morning, I noticed an elderly couple having coffee. He was reading the newspaper and she was busy working through a book of crosswords.

Each time she cracked a clue she smiled with delight. This old woman was at play and enjoying the world. She was busy doing nothing important, yet this simple pastime was a source of self-renewal.

Work is an essential element of real play. Upon entering the hotel, my children immediately began to build. In a collection of Lego bricks, they each saw something that simply had to be created. They worked and, slowly but surely, the object of their dreams became a reality. From nothing, they brought forth something real and concrete. They took the world and made something of it.

We spent four days in that hotel, and not once did I see a video game, console or digital device of any kind.

All the children were there to discover what childhood is really about. It is about playing with the world in such a way that you learn how to belong to it.

The more a child creates and makes, the more they can identify with reality. If, however, the youngster never engages with things by shaping them in their own image, how can they ever feel at home here? Without play, the child will not become attached to anything or anyone.

There is nothing passive about playing with Lego. You either build or you will very quickly become bored. In challenging the imagination, it draws children out of themselves.

One morning, our eight-year-old discovered that the hotel had dismantled some of his creations. Seeing his distress, another little boy said: 'Don't worry! That's the great thing about Lego: you can always rebuild it!' And that is exactly what he did.

We play, we let go of our burdens

and we see life anew. However, when we become too serious for play, we lose our vitality. We lose our zest for life, our capacity to smile with wonder and to laugh simply for its own sake.

As we wandered around Windsor Castle, having just witnessed the Changing of the Guard, I noticed that my boys seemed far less enthralled than their father. For me, a royal palace offers a direct line to history, memory and tradition. For them, it was a wondrous spectacle but one that lacked meaning.

Our eldest was fascinated by the splendour of the State Apartments, the sumptuous artefacts and priceless paintings. For the first time, he saw why the royal family inspires such devotion. In identifying with them, the people of England have a living link to their past and the promise of a future.

Back in Legoland, our two youngest were once again at ease with life. How could they possibly prefer a plastic palace to the real thing? Looking at them dive back into the Lego pit, I realised it was because Windsor Castle was a place without play.

However regal and magnificent, it contained nothing with which they could identify. We all need an apprenticeship in the playground before we can appreciate the higher things. We all need to make and mould, to build and shape, before we can respect the great creations of culture.

THE German poet Friedrich Schiller said that a person 'is only serious with the agreeable... but with beauty he plays'. As each new figure emerged from the Lego pit, I saw just how true this is. Without first experiencing the imaginative wonder of a place like Legoland, a child will never truly appreciate the sheer beauty of a place like Windsor.

In play we give birth to culture. We see the world as something that can be remade, something that can be imbued with beauty.

To play is to give the world a face and to make it smile.

'How will I keep all my creations together on the plane?' our son inquired. His life-sized models were too good to leave behind, yet we all knew they could not survive the journey.

By the time we reached our front door, his little bag contained nothing but a pile of Lego bricks. Inwardly, I lamented the fact that all his hard work had been for nothing.

The house was cold and dark, but suddenly it came alive to the sound of Lego smashing to the floor.

My own da Vinci went to work and, within 20 minutes, the figures were once again standing tall.

The day before, I gazed silently at a portrait by Vermeer. Now, I looked upon a cute creature made from imagination and true love. Both had brought me to the point of tears, but only one tipped me over the edge.

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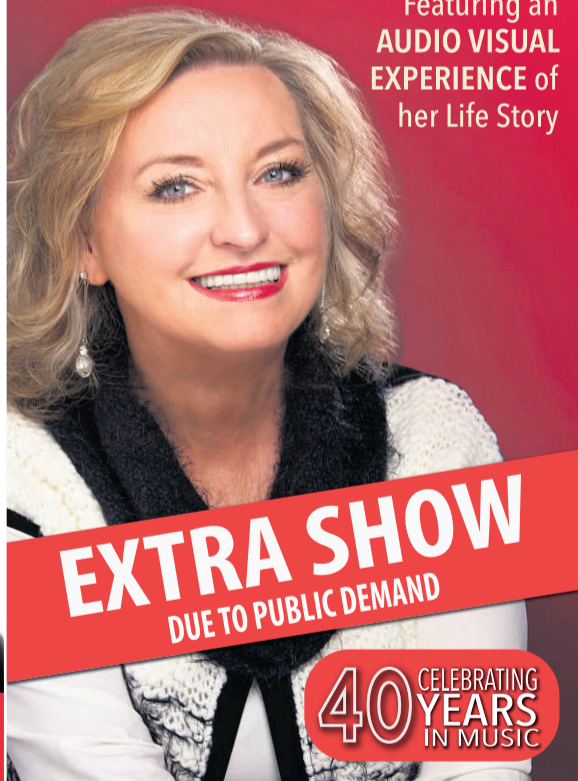
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