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Appeal for calm after memorial vandalised

By Margaret Canning

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A MEMORIAL to two men killed by the IRA during the first serious incident of the Troubles in east Belfast has been vandalised.

Police called for the communities of Short Strand and Lower Newtownards Road to stay calm after the memorial at Pitt Park on Lower Newtownards Road was attacked early on Saturday.

White paint was thrown over the granite stone and garden and sectarian slogans painted on the plaque in memory of two men from the area killed on June 27 1970.

Police said they saw youths in the area at around 3am. Some of the youths were chased down Bryson Street by police, who were able to secure some objects for examination.

The memorial in the grounds of St Matthew's Church was put up in memory of father-of-four James McCurrie (34) and 38-year-old single man Robert Neill, shot dead during a gun battle between loyalists and IRA members.

Mr McCurrie was shot dead on Beechfield Street in the Short Strand.

Mr Neill was fatally wounded after he was shot between Central Street, where he lived, and Newtownards Road.

There were claims that the church and neighbouring Short Strand area came under sustained attack but loyalists have since disputed this.

The gun battle marked the first fatal incident of the Troubles in east Belfast.

Catholic man Henry McElhone, a 32-year-old father-of-five, died in hospital a few days after he was found seriously injured in the grounds of St Matthew's on June 27.

Speaking following Saturday's

attack, acting police inspector Robert Ellison called for the community's help.

"We do our utmost to work with the local community to tackle this type of crime and help provide local initiated solutions," he said.

"The vast majority of people do not want this type of activity in their own community.

"It is only a small minority who are intent on causing trouble.

"I would ask all residents in the Lower Newtownards Road and Short Strand areas to assist us in apprehending those responsible."

James McCurrie's widow Kathleen said it was the third time the memorial had been attacked.

"They can never wipe out the truth, no matter what they do," she said.

Niall O Donnghaile, Sinn Fein's east Belfast representative, said the attack was "completely reprehensible".

“It is essential that the work which is ongoing to try and resolve the interface issues in this area continues and that we all work to try and ensure that such attacks are not repeated,” he said.

Mr O Donnghaile visited the site with party colleagues and spoke to relatives of those remembered in the garden.

“People were quite emotional because of the fact that the memorial was targeted,” he said.

“The atmosphere was heated. There were people there, families of those people who were killed so understandably it was emotional.”

Ulster Unionist leader Sir Reg Empey said he was “disgusted” at the attack, and claimed “republican elements from the Short Strand” were responsible.

“It is deliberately provocative and totally unjustified behaviour designed to damage community relations,” he said.

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