



Pictured above are members of the Project committee: Back row, left to right: Carol Farrell, Fr. Tom Healy, Danny Donohoe, Tom Cleary, Derek Dockrell, Gerry O'Toole, Fr. Sean Casey and John Nugent. Front row, left to right: Joan O'Connor, Seamus Butler, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Niall Meagher.

Progress on Cathedral Restoration

The following is a brief overview of the past year of the Cathedral Restoration Project under the direction of St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee:



St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee Chairman Seamus Butler.

- Signing of contracts and Press Conference to announce Design Team
- Appointment of Art Advisor
- Appointment of Organ subcommittee
- Appointment of Curator to clean and stabilise 148 recovered Museum items
- Repaired Harry Clarke windows returned to Diocese
- Appointment of Conservation and Restoration Ltd to undertake repairs to statues at front of Cathedral with assistance from Heritage Council
- Time Capsule found in statues over portico. Sent to National Museum for analysis
- Trial plasterwork contract (see photograph below, on right).
- Appointment of Kelly Bros Ltd for investigative works/trial repairs to include trial cleaning, geo-thermal tests, steelwork, replacement of one column etc. The replacement of the column was very complex and results will greatly assist and inform the Design Team for the reconstruction project
- Successful application to Longford Community Resources Ltd for skills training scheme
- Open Day for public to view Cathedral
- Future plans and Model on display at Cathedral Centre and Library
- Cathedral publication circulated to Diocese December 2011
- Ongoing liaising with Diocesan and Parish Committees on future development of Cathedral

"The Biggest Restoration Project in Western Europe"

■ FRAN McNULTY

Longford is the location of the biggest restoration project in Western Europe. Unfortunately for locals that project happens to be the restoration of one of the most loved buildings in the town, St. Mel's Cathedral.

It is hoped the Cathedral will re-open in December of 2014. Many hope to be able to attend midnight mass there once again, no doubt recalling many happy memories of the last midnight mass in St. Mel's before the devastating fire took hold. Project Manager Niall Meagher says the 2014 timeframe "remains a target, every project has an end date set out and that is ours, it remains our ambition to meet that ambition". But Mr. Meagher warns, "The project is still at a very early stage". It would be easy to underestimate the scale of what lies ahead, Niall Meagher explains that the public procurement system, "simply would not be able to cope with the restoration of the Cathedral, it's just too complex". There may be a perception that the project is slow, but, if it was being handled as a public procurement project a Design Team may well not yet be in place. At present detailed designs have been presented to the public, we know what the new Cathedral could look like. The altar moved further down the body of the Cathedral, a large sanctuary will dominate and the tabernacle will be relocated to the back of the altar. The choir gallery will not be replaced and instead the christening font will be located inside the centre door at the bottom of St. Mel's.

But two significant hurdles must be cleared first, in the coming weeks a planning application will be lodged with the local authority to allow for a new concrete floor to be installed and for the new roof to be built. The new roof will be slate, in keeping with the original slate roof which was in place for well over 100 years before it was replaced with copper in the 1980's. Then sometime in spring a planning application to include the new internal layout and other changes will be lodged.

The Chairperson of the Cathedral Project Committee Seamus Butler says the best advice possible has been taken at every step of the work to date. An art advisor has been appointed, a special committee to choose the contractors to replace the organ is also in place. The restoration is hugely complex, even if the basic technical aspects of the project are left aside. Conservationists have a major role to play, whilst large and vastly experienced firms are being drafted in, local architecture firms are also playing a role.

Given the specialty of the work involved, most of the main contracts are likely to go to firms outside the County. But Seamus Butler says the tenders will be evaluated on the basis of the most economically advantageous tender, in other words contracts will not necessarily be awarded



Sanctuary area under investigation.

on the basis of the cheapest price. Project Manager Niall Meagher says a register of local contractors and suppliers has also been compiled, "firms awarded tenders will be given the register of local firms, it will ensure local crafts people, suppliers and contractors will play a part in the restoration".

If all goes to plan, Christmas 2014 will be celebrated in St. Mel's Cathedral, the New Year will be marked under the bells of St. Mel's as it has been for generations. Some find it difficult to imagine the new Cathedral, but Seamus Butler has a word of reassurance for them, "for those who stand into the new restored St. Mel's, they will instantly recognise the St. Mel's they know and love". Many of the best aspects of St. Mel's will be restored, the ceiling and its magnificent plasterwork, the rows of columns, the many statues. But it will be vastly different in many respects, the smell, the light, the feeling that your grandparents, great grandparents and many before stood here, kneeled here, married here, that will never return. But for those same ancestors that saved hard and worked hard to build one of the countries most magnificent buildings, Catholics in Longford owe it to them to restore the building to be the best extent possible. The Cathedral which will be re-opened will hopefully be there for hundreds of years to come.



Picture shows trial plasterwork undertaken in summer of 2011.