



## Conservation Works to Statues and Tympanum

In recent weeks the statues at the front of the Cathedral have come in for much positive comment. While the Cathedral was being surveyed, the Design Team discovered an amount of erosion to the statues and the tympanum (or entablature) on the front façade. The statues were put in place in the early 1890's and so have suffered approx 120 years of wind, rain, snow and frost. Typically some of the figures had parts missing, while holes and cracks were evident on others. Also some steel props were in a state of decay.

In the Spring of 2011 an application was made to the Heritage Council and

a grant of €100,000 was secured. Since public funding was associated with these works the tender process had to follow the rules of public procurement. The contract was awarded to Conservation and Restoration Ltd who commenced the works in August and completed them in November last. The repairs included cleaning, sealing, repair of cracks, metal brackets, flashing, pointing, and repairs to lintels over doors. These features of the Cathedral's architecture seem to stand out more than in many years and are hopeful symbols for the future Restoration Project.

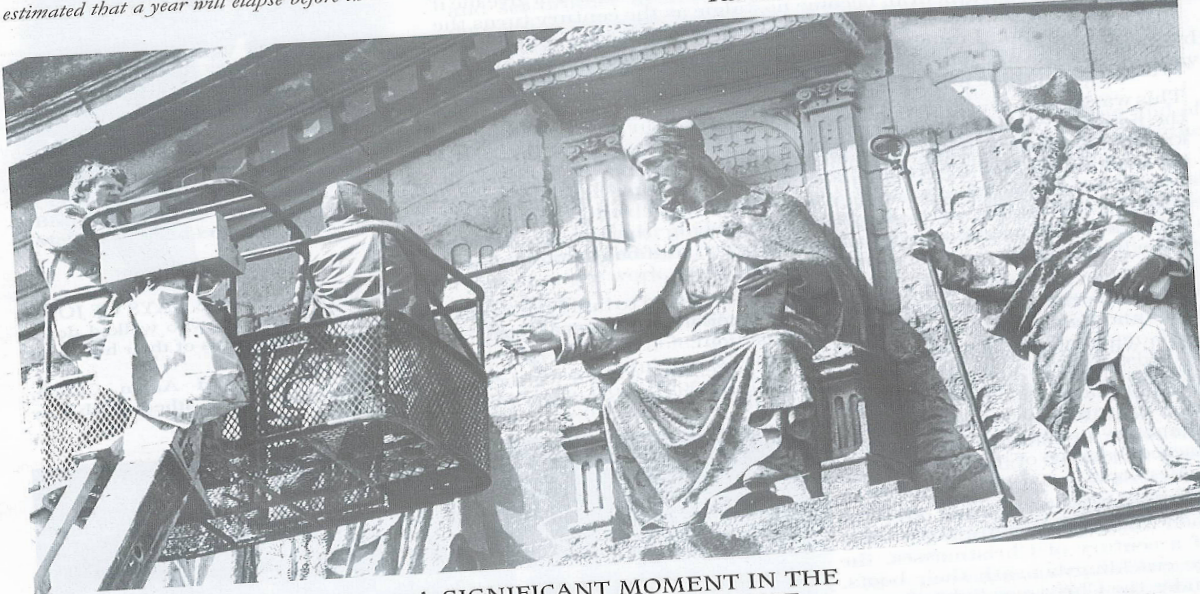


A MILLENNIUM MEMOIR 7

### PORTICO OF ST. MEL'S CATHEDRAL

Preparations are being pushed for the erection of the portico to St. Mel's Cathedral. The Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alderman Meade, is the contractor. The stones, which weigh eight and ten tons each, arrive by train from Knockcroghery, where they are dressed. The excavation of the foundation has been made and an enormous steam crane erected for hoisting the stones off the lorries. It is estimated that a year will elapse before the work will be completed.

The Irish World, (New York) March 14th 1891.



### A SIGNIFICANT MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE DIOCESE

Since the Portico of St. Mel's Cathedral has been cleaned we have begun to see it again as it looked on the day when the Cathedral was consecrated, the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1893. While comparisons with St. Peter's in Rome, also cleaned for the Great Jubilee, may seem to exaggerate the importance of what has been done in Longford, the thinking may be the same. The Church is determined to be renewed and young and a sign of hope.

In 1889 the building of the portico was begun. Great cylinders of stone, weighing many tons, began to arrive from the quarries near Pinea to construct six pillars, "exceeding anything ever seen in these islands", as Canon M.J. Masterson, who saw the building being done, proudly stated. Above the pillars he saw the triangular frame enclosing a group of sculptured figures being constructed. He waxes more eloquently still when he describes this part of the work: "There is nothing in Greece or Italy, from classical or Christian times to equal this group". This entablature, to use the architectural terminology, illustrates a significant moment in the history of the Diocese, the grant of authority over the Diocese of Ardagh

to St. Mel by St. Patrick. Patrick is seen handing the crozier to St. Mel. Behind St. Patrick is St. Benignus and on the other side two other bishops, traditionally described as brothers of St. Mel. Then there is another brother who is an abbot, abbot of Inisbofin. St. Brigid is also there because of her close connection with Ardagh. Then there is a chief and a bard and other symbols of religious and cultural life in Ireland that speak for themselves.

It is hard for us to envisage how the cathedral looked before 1893 because the portico is so striking. Fortunately, we have some old photographs which give us an idea of how the facade was dramatically changed. Of course, change, (then and now) does not meet with universal approval. The tower was more impressive before the portico was built, it is said. An article appeared in a magazine called "The Irish Builder" shortly after the completion of the work in 1893. The writer deplored what he considered to be a work in bad taste. Whether he had a valid point or not, we have come to love the grandeur of the portico which is surely the most enduring symbol of Longford.

St. Mel's Cathedral - All the beautiful statues have been placed on the facade of the portico of the Cathedral. When the scaffolding, which now obstructs the view, shall have been removed, the magnificent proportions of the edifice and the adornments will be very striking indeed.

The Longford Independent October 15th 1892

Extract taken from 'Guardians of the Flame' - Jubilee Year 2000.