



Harry Clarke Studios Stained Glass Windows Restored

BY KEN RYAN

We could not believe the news on RTE Television on Christmas Day 2009 that St. Mel's Cathedral had been engulfed by fire only hours earlier. We at the Abbey Stained Glass Studios had a long working relationship of fifty years with the Priests of the Cathedral going back to my late Father's time. In 1997 Mgr Bernard Noonan gave us instructions to restore all the major stained glass and leaded windows that had become buckled and damaged over time.

This then was one of our major prestigious projects as it included two magnificent Harry Clarke Studios windows which cost £500 in 1932. We were delighted to have been entrusted with this restoration work in 1997.

On St Stephens Day after the fire Garrett O'Grady and I left Dublin to travel to Longford to see the extent of the damage and on our arrival could not believe the sight that unfolded in front of us with smoke still rising and the Fire Brigade still on duty. However in spite of the carnage and with the aid of long distance camera lenses I could see from outside the Garda cordon that we could save the two East and West Transept Harry Clarke Windows if we could have access to them as soon as the Garda had completed their investigations.

Fr. Tom Healy appointed us and we started removing the fire damaged windows a few days later before any vibration from demolition work would shatter the remnants of these windows which had their bonding solder melted off by the extreme heat from the flames and this left the thousands of individual glasses in a very loose and fragile condition.

Our craftsmen gently removed the stained glass panels and some of them had already fallen to the floor. The sections of windows were catalogued and transported to the Studios in Dublin. Through sheer good luck we still had the crayon "Rubbings" that we had taken thirteen years earlier in our Studios that gave us the exact shape of every single piece of coloured glass in these Harry Clarke windows. We also had the detailed photographs from 1997 which gave us the artistic content of the glasses that were lost in the fire.

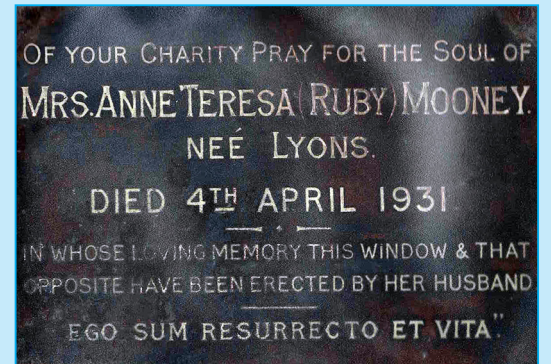
It took a full year of painstaking work by our Artist Brendan Mullins and our Craftsmen under the direction of Directors Willie Malone and Garrett O'Grady to complete this mammoth task. The completed sections of the windows were inspected by the supervising Architects and Members of St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee from time to time as the various stages concluded.

Eventually the Harry Clarke Studios stained glass windows were packed into purpose made crates and transported back to Longford and we hope it is not too long before these crates are opened to refit these beautiful artistic treasures in the fully restored St. Mel's Cathedral.

I, Ken Ryan and all my colleagues at Abbey Stained Glass Studios take great pride and satisfaction in the part that we have played in salvaging and restoring these magnificent stained glass Works of Art which now form part of Ireland's National Heritage.



Pictured above is one of the stained glass windows – 'Blessed Virgin And The Child Jesus' - that was restored since the fire on Christmas Day 2009.



Mystery Plaque

This little plaque – pictured above – was recovered from the rubble in the Cathedral by one of the workmen. It was obviously placed beneath one of the stain glass windows – but which one? We do not know. And who was Mrs Anne Teresa (Ruby) Mooney, nee Lyons? We hope some of our readers can fill us in on the story behind this loving memorial.



Sanctuary Statues

It was a funny sight for anyone who saw it. A statue of St. Mel, normally resident in an alcove above the sacristy door in St. Mel's lying down on a flat bed truck, been driven through Longford Town.

The three statues that survived the fire St. Mel, Our Lady and St. Therese, have now been removed; all of the angel figures which adorn the centre aisles have also been taken away and are in storage awaiting restoration. All of the artefacts are being stored off site at a secure location. People may have in their minds images of the badly scorched Pieta from one of the side chapels. Despite the ferocious fire, some of the familiar statues in front of which Longfordians have prayed for generations survived.

Most are very badly damaged, but can be repaired and will form part of the new Cathedral, an integral part of St. Mel's as it has been since it was built in the 1840's.

