



## Training Scheme – A Legacy of the Fire

The reconstruction of St. Mel's Cathedral could its hoped leave a significant legacy says Project Committee Chairperson Seamus Butler. Mr. Butler says he hopes the project could result in the establishment of a conservation training college in the town.

Already the EDI Centre has accredited two courses to help train skilled crafts people to work on the conservation and restoration of the Cathedral. One 40 week basic skills course, will train unskilled people to become involved in some of the conservation work.

A second course, which will be part-time, will up skill already skilled trades people to specialise in conservation work such as lime plastering, stone work and slate work. The courses have been accredited from Scotland as no similar training programmes are in existence here.

Seamus Butler says, "I would like to think that the restoration of the Cathedral could leave a significant legacy, when the skills of local people are perfected on the Cathedral a new training facility at Connolly Barracks could become the permanent home of a conservation training college".

Mr. Butler says the numerous listed buildings on the Barracks site, will need restoration and could be a working conservation project for up to ten years. The new courses are being supported by LCRL.



One of the professional plastering team at work at trial plasterwork in July.

## The late Richard Hurley – A Man with a Simple Vision

■ FRAN McNULTY

The lead architect for the project to restore St. Mel's Cathedral had a simple vision, "The new St. Mel's will say something about Longford to the nation", the late Richard Hurley outlined his views in a lengthy interview last Christmas. The man behind Richard Hurley & Associates Architects was no stranger to the Cathedral during the 1970's as he had worked with then Bishop Cahal B. Daly to develop a new sanctuary and altar.

But at the beginning of this month, the man with vision for "the new St. Mel's" as he called it, sadly died, suddenly. He passed away hours after falling ill at a meeting which was discussing important aspects of how the newly renovated building would look.

He insisted that "St. Mel's should be returned totally to what it was before the fire with the exception of the interior furnishings and liturgical layout". As an architect of renowned liturgical and ecclesiastical experience he had a right to hold that view; it was his work that resulted in the main altar and other aspects of the Cathedral as most people remember them until the fire struck, for it was principally his design. A nationally recognised expert on church and Cathedral restoration, it will be reassuring for many that the vision the late Richard Hurley set out will be central to the new building. He said last year that he feels he knows the Cathedral as he put it himself "like the back of my hand".

Mr. Hurley wanted the new layout to "change the relationship between the church and its congregation" and he said he felt that "must be reflected in the new design". During a conversation which was meant to principally about his design of the new building, his knowledge of the Catholic Church, its traditions and its somewhat changing role in Irish society was very apparent. Mr. Hurley said that liturgically he wanted to bring the Cathedral and its new sanctuary up to date and forward looking for the rest of the century. The new layout needing what he called a new "liturgical intervention". Effectively what he meant was that the altar and sanctuary as it was known is unlikely to resemble any-



Bishop Colm O'Reilly pictured with the late Richard Hurley at St. Mel's Open Day in September.

thing the new Cathedral will feature.

That is now the case and the new altar will be located further down the body of the Cathedral. Even last December as he was drafting and considering how the new Cathedral would look he said the sanctuary should be "moved further down the nave of the Cathedral and closer to the people". He had the view that, "liturgically the sanctuary is the centre point, the placing of the altar is the beginning and after than everything else will fall into place." He spoke of relocating the Bishop's Chair to what he calls a "less judicial position, most likely on the side of the sanctuary", reflecting the modern change in how the church and its hierarchy interact with its people.

We now have a much clearer image of what the new Cathedral will look like. Richard Hurley was from the outset insistent that most of the main features of the old Cathedral would be fully restored including, "the colouring of the old building, plaster work, statues, shrine chapels and all aspects of the stone work, including the columns which are an integral and important part of the architecture of the building". One year on, the first of the replacement columns is already in place, an exact

replica of what went before. Skilled plasterers have put in place a small section of plasterwork re-creating what many thought would never be restored.

Richard Hurley had this vision and was insistent that the views of the congregation and local people would play a key role in his design. "The new St. Mel's will say something about Longford to the nation, so as well as consulting the various stakeholders dialogue and discussion with the local community will be essential". Asked if the views people express would influence the final plan Mr. Hurley said, "of course, this will be a reinvention of a very important historical building and the change in the relationship between the church and its congregation must be reflected in its new design". Even before the project has begun its first significant development, that consultation and vision he had is clear to be seen, from the sketches of the new Cathedral.

Richard Hurley may not be alive to see the new building when it is finally finished, he may not perfect the finer touches as any architect would. But, his stamp, his vision will undoubtedly be an integral part of what we see when the doors of the restored St. Mel's are eventually opened.