



Busy year for Project Committee

By Fintan Duffy

One of the first steps along the road to restoration of St Mel's Cathedral was the appointment of a Project Committee. The committee, under the chairmanship of Seamus Butler, oversaw all the emergency works at the Cathedral itself and then the appointment of Project Managers to co-ordinate all the groups that will be involved in the restoration of the building over the next few years.

The group chosen was Dublin-based firm, Interactive Project Managers led by the internationally acclaimed architect Joan O'Connor. They have previously worked as Project Managers on public building projects such as the Millennium Wing of the National Gallery of Ireland and the Assay Office in the heart of Dublin Castle. Following the appointment of IPM the next major step was to appoint a design team that will start to put on paper a vision of what the new Cathedral will look like. As we go to print the appointment is at an advanced stage and following that appointment the selection of key people such as quantity surveyors and structural engineers will begin.

Along with the exhaustive process of selecting the very best professionals to lead the restoration works, the Project Committee were also busy with the initial tasks of securing the Cathedral building and getting the temporary roof in place. "Getting the Cathedral secured and covered was a very important issue for us at the beginning," according to committee chairman Seamus Butler.

"We also wanted to make sure that anything that could be salvaged was removed carefully during the clean-up operation and thankfully we do have a number of artefacts being looked after at the National Museum. We also have two Clarke studio windows



St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee sign contract with Interactive Project Managers on 12th May 2010. Back Row: Carol Farrell, Fr. Tom Healy, Danny Donohoe, Tom Cleary, Derek Dockrell, Gerry O'Toole, Fr. Sean Casey, John Nugent. Front Row: Joan O'Connor, Seamus Butler, Bishop Colm O'Reilly, Niall Meagher.

being restored by Abbey Stained Glass in Kilmainham in Dublin," he said. As St Mel's Cathedral is a listed building, inside and out, great care will have to be taken to restore it to its former glory, but it will have to be updated to meet the demands that are now placed on public buildings of this size. As Seamus Butler explains wherever

possible there will be local input into restoration works: "So far we have used local firms during the initial phase of securing the building, such as the steel works and site security, and it is our intention to maximise the involvement of local companies at each stage of the restoration project."

Importance of St. Mel's

The following are extracts from the OSG (Chartered Loss Adjusters) Presentation to the Diocese:-

- St. Mel's Cathedral is one of the finest classical style Cathedrals in Ireland. It is of national significance.
- Commissioned in 1840 the Cathedral's design involved three eminent architects of the 19th century. Namely J.B. Keane, John Bourke and George C. Ashlin.
- Work commenced in 1840 but had to be suspended in 1846 after the onset of the Great Famine. Construction recommenced in 1853 and the Cathedral was eventually completed and consecrated in 1893.
- St. Mel's is listed as a Protected Structure under the Planning & Development Act 2000. It is the most important religious and historical building in the Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois.
- The incorporated museum and gallery contained many historic artefacts of local and national importance.

Cause of Fire Forensic Findings

- Christmas Eve 24th December 2009 was particularly cold with sub-zero temperatures experienced across the entire country.
- In order to adequately heat the Cathedral in advance of celebrating Midnight Mass, the central heating system ran continually at a higher than normal temperature for 17 hours.
- The flue serving the boiler connected into an old brick lined chimney which formed part of the original Cathedral construction.
- Old combustible material which had accumulated in this old brick lined chimney over many years became dried out and were likely super-heated and glowing.
- When the burner was turned off an oxygen supply was restored and now assisted by a natural and maintained draught these old deposits ignited leading to a serious flue fire.
- Burning embers escaped through old worn inspection hatch doors into the priest's sacristy igniting combustible materials therein.
- Both the central heating boiler and burner were found in good condition and had been correctly maintained and serviced.



The blue skyline pictured through the windows of St. Mel's Cathedral.

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS ABOUT...

PRESIDENT McALEESE

There's a couple of things I'll always remember. One is on Christmas Day getting a telephone call from President McAleese offering her sympathy. She was down in her Roscommon home for Christmas and she came in person on the following day, St Stephen's Day, with a gift. That was important at that time. Then there were some of the young people around here who went out hunting the wren as they say and they brought us in the proceeds. Those were gestures and they were hugely important to me I must say at that stage.



All that remains of the Cathedral floor is the fragile centre aisle.