



# Dioceesan Museum

## Coutesty of St. Mel's Cathedral Library Exhibition

The dome of St Mel's Cathedral is the dominant image that remains in the memory of all who visit the town of Longford. Beneath that dome is the imposing bas relief showing St Patrick passing a crozier to St Mel. This symbolic representation conveys the handing over of power to oversee the diocese from our country's patron saint to our diocesan patron saint. Little did the authorities who commissioned the work know that within two decades St Mel's Crozier would be found or that a century and a half later it would become a symbol of loss in the wake of a devastating fire.

The 9th century crozier of St Mel was the main item on display at the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Museum. It was discovered next to the ruins of the original Cathedral in Ardagh in 1862, six years after the Cathedral was completed in Longford town. It was handed over to Bishop John Kilduff in 1863 and underwent a major restoration operation in the British Museum in London in 1971.

The historic artefact received a national audience when the late Pope John Paul II held it in his possession during the papal visit in 1979.

The crozier was just one of the casualties of the fire that ravaged the Diocesan Museum as it engulfed the Cathedral. The museum collection was assembled in the 1930's and 40's by the late Fr Michael Kearney, President of St Mel's College and was housed in the Cathedral since 1974.

Although the damage to the artefacts was extensive an archaeological salvage team, under the direction of the National Museum, recovered a number of items that were miraculously protected from the fire enough to allow for restoration.

Few would have had the knowledge of the collection as Father Tom Murray: "I hold a dual role as the diocesan archivist and also as a member of the Longford Historical Society. I would have been very familiar with the collection. Many of those artefacts survived through the Viking era, through the destruction of the monasteries and turbulent times in our history. The fact that some have survived the fire is inspiring." Father Tom conveyed the shock of realisation that sunk in on the morning of Christmas 2009: "The loss of the artefacts was coupled with the loss of the Cathedral. I was conscious of what the fire would have visited upon the vestments and many of the other items in the collection. I think anyone with a sense of history would have been struck by the loss. It was a demise of not only ecclesiastical value but of a number of items that occupy a significant position in our county history."

The compilation contained items from almost every parish in the county. When the fire struck its flames licked beyond the confines of the Cathedral: "Initially I thought that everything would have been lost. I thought that nothing could have survived the fire. There have been a number of items recovered. But there is great sadness that many items have now been lost forever."

Aside from St Mel's Crozier there were a variety of artefacts in the museum including the renowned St Cailin's Bookshrine and St Cailin's Bell. Both were part of the Fenagh Monastery in Leitrim and were presented to the Diocesan Museum at St Mel's Cathedral a number of years ago.

The book shrine was hand-crafted by the monks and is believed to have originated around 1536. It was used to hold the Book of Fenagh which was considered to be a very important manuscript and is now housed at the Royal Irish Academy.

The book shrine is one of the items that will be worked on by the restoration team. However the items lost have great value: "One of the things I greatly lament is the loss of the collection of penal crosses. There were 10 crosses in total. Beautiful in their simplicity, it is a tragedy to think of them as lost. One of them survived, as it was out of the collection at the time of the fire," said Fr Murray.

Another item to survive was

### BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS ABOUT...

#### THE MUSEUM

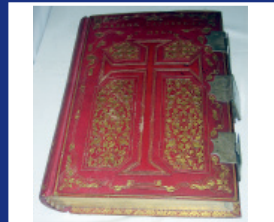
We were of course very upset by the loss of the museum. There are things you can restore – the interior decoration might seem to be very difficult to restore, there are angels up in the niches and so on, I don't know what to promise people in that regard but I imagine myself a lot of that is restorable. But there are things that are lost – those enormously valuable things (valuable because of their history) – the crozier of St Mel of course was the single biggest loss we had, a thousand years old of an artefact, a symbol of the diocese. When you can say something is a thousand years old... the national museum said it's in the same category as the cross of Cong for instance.



Old Chalice and Paten.



Shell from the battle of Ballinamuck.



Original Register of donors to Construction of St. Mel's Cathedral in 1840.



Bell of Fenagh.



Book Shrine of St. Cailian, (Fenagh).



Mallet and Trowel used in laying of original foundation stone in 1840.



Uniform from the Battle of Ballinamuck.



St. Mel's Crozier, 9th Century.

the bishop's chair. It was also out of the collection at the time. However vestments, parchments, documents, illuminated calligraphic presentations all perished in the blaze. Although there were records of the original subscriptions to fund the Cathedral in the museum most of the documentation relating to the building of the Cathedral was not held on site.

Fr Tom said that the one of the most helpful tools that the recovery team had was an account of the items compiled a number of years ago: "The former County Heritage Officer, Shirley Markley, undertook an inventory of all the items in the collection. She catalogued all of the objects and photographed many of them. This was an invaluable resource to the team that went through the remains to determine what was what."

The recovery team worked on site painstakingly sifting and analysing the debris to ascertain what could be saved. The artefacts that were recovered have been assessed by a team commissioned by

the National Museum on behalf of the diocese.

The role of the National Museum of Ireland in the recovery of artefacts from the Cathedral is integral. The Museum has made a number of services available to the diocese to allow for the recovery of the artefacts.

As Head of Collections Ragnall Ó Floinn has overall responsibility for the care and development of the National Museum's collections and for research. He explained the process that the retrieved items will now go through: "The items are at the recovery phase. There has been an inventory made of the fragments. A lot did not survive but there are several hundreds items on a list to be assessed."

The team engaged by the diocese, under the supervision of the National Museum, has finish the preliminary examination and retrieval stage: "They are now in discussions with regards to the conservation arrangements to be made. There are a number of factors to be taken into consideration when deciding what will be worked on. Not least of these is the cost of restoration against the historic value of the piece," Mr O'Floinn said.

Eamonn Kelly is the Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum. Mr Kelly was involved in putting in place a team to sift through the ashes: "This was very skilled work. They made an assessment of the items recovered and put them forward for consideration for restoration."

Mr Kelly said that the damage of the blaze was extensive: "Unfortunately the nature of the inferno was such that only the metal objects survived. There are a number of axes and daggers that are retrievable, but there was quite a lot lost. The greatest loss is St Mel's Crozier. A combination of the mate-

rial it was comprised of and the intense heat meant that the crozier suffered extensive damage. Though much of it was made of cast bronze the temperature of the fire caused extensive damage to it."

A fortuitous occurrence meant that another of the prize items of the collection was protected from the fire: "The miracle of the fire was what happened to St Cailin's Bookshrine. It appears that when the base it was on burned the book shrine fell on a burst water pipe, this protected it from being irreparably damaged. I don't think that that means we should dedicate our prayers to St Cailin rather than St Mel."

When the diocese assesses the artefacts that have been recovered and the cost of conservation they will determine what work will be undertaken. High on the list will be items such as St Cailin's Bell and St Cailin's Bookshrine.

St Cailin's Bell was also known as the Bell of Fenagh and was closely guarded by the O'Roddy Family of Fenagh.

The Wheery Bell, which originated in Ferbane, Co. Offaly and was discovered in the River Brosna during a drainage operation in 1848, will also be considered. The story of the Wheery Bell suggests that monks threw the bell into the river in an effort to protect it from harm by raiders at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries.

Other artefacts, some of which dated as far back as the Stone Age, that were part of the collection of precious materials discovered throughout the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois are now up for assessment. Their future in the restored Cathedral will be determined by the resources available to the diocese.