

— A Special Publication recording the Restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral —

St. Mel's



Cathedral

www.longfordparish.com

YEAR ENDING **2011**



Some of the new trial plasterwork undertaken at the archways above the pillars.

‘Faithful to the Past – Building for the Future’

Throughout the year 2011 a great deal of thought and planning was invested by many people on the Cathedral Restoration Project. Diocesan Committees in consultation with the Design Team have advanced the plans for the internal design and improvement of facilities for the future.

Comprehensive investigation/trial works were undertaken throughout the summer months which will greatly inform the future restoration.

The refurbishment of statues and the entablature high up on the front façade was undertaken with the assistance of the Heritage Council. This piece of art depicts the granting of authority over the diocese to St. Mel by St. Patrick.

An Open Day was held in September last when over 3,000 people took the opportunity to visit the Cathedral and see for themselves the extent of the fire damage. Also on that day plans for the future

were on display at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.

It is still hoped that the target of re-opening the Cathedral for Christmas of 2014 can be achieved. Through this special publication we wish to give you an overview of the many aspects of this complex, challenging and exciting restoration project.

“Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart, and wait for the LORD” (Psalm 27:14)



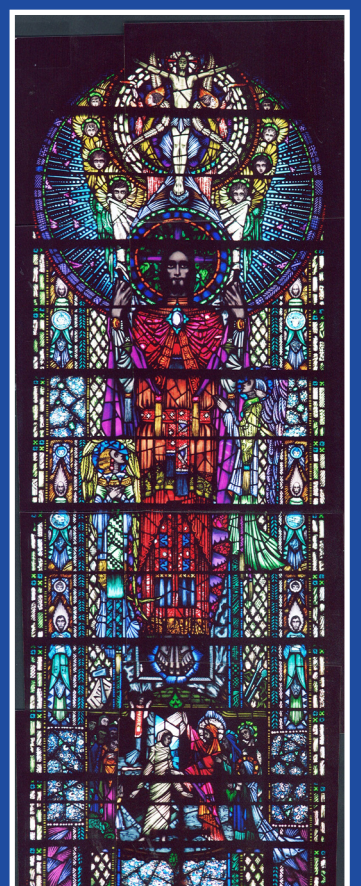
Picture shows statue before and after repair works undertaken during the summer months.

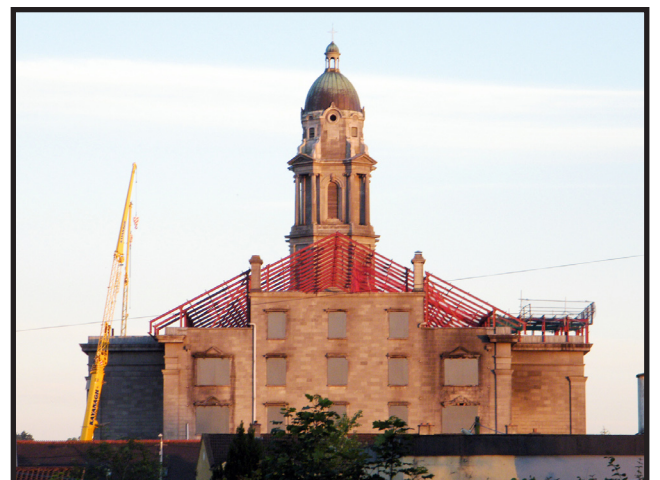
Stained glass windows restored

The two well known stained glass windows designed by the famous Harry Clarke studio in Dublin which were destroyed in the fire have now been fully restored. The windows which were in place in the transepts almost fully disintegrated in the fire, but much of the glass survived and has been restored.

Abbey Stained Glass, at Kilmainham in Dublin have repaired the windows and they are now ready for installation once the building work is complete. The company had refurbished the windows in 1997 and had a detailed knowledge of the window's design. A number of other fan windows have also been repaired by the studio.

The work was completed at “significant” cost according to project committee chairperson Seamus Butler. The windows are now in storage and will remain there until the building work has progressed significantly. See page 13 for more on this story.





The Temporary Roof of the Cathedral

■ JACKIE HUGHES

In the aftermath of the Cathedral fire, among the early emergency works to be undertaken was the installation of the temporary roof. This work was carried out by Frank and Dolores Kiernan, of Kiernan Steel Fabrications. They placed other work on hold to commence fitting the temporary roof on the hull of the burnt-out Cathedral.

We watched each day as their youthful agile work team scaled the very high scorched walls a few weeks after the burning of the building to fit Lego-like pieces of steel. Steel manufactured in their factory on the outskirts of Longford town at Carriglass now spans the immense interior space to support the corrugated roof cladding.

The cladding has been well tested by the record snow-falls and freeze-up of 2010/11 and some continuous spells of wet weather during the summer into the autumn and winter months of this past year. This cladding will have some years to serve before the building is restored to its former glory and the new Cathedral roof is fitted.

It was only when the Cathedral was opened to us, the public, one Sunday in September that it was fully appreciated the great value of the temporary roof and how snugly the building looked, though highly scarred like a 'war zone' by the great fire. This temporary roof will be a great comfort to the workforce under its great shelter as they display their various special skills required for the restoration, during the coming years.

Frank Kiernan supplied the following technical information.

In early February 2010 KSSL Ltd completed a survey of the existing walls and spire for dimensions to detail steel support fabrication drawing by our Draughtsman Francis Scriven.

Fabrication commenced on all the roof steel in the KSSL factory in Carriglass, Longford and was transported from our factory to Longford on to the Cathedral site.

Two large mobile cranes were utilised to erect this steel. One crane was used to lift our steel erectors in safety cradles while the other crane was used to lift the steel sections and roof purlins into place. Our erectors then bolted the steel within the 2mm tolerance that is allowed for structural steel.

Internally the horizontal steel was required to brace the external walls to the internal walls which were fixed to the old brickwork by chemical mortar fixings. Steel was required in all arches between the large limestone columns - as they were badly damaged in the fire; with large internal cracks showing up in the X-ray surveys.

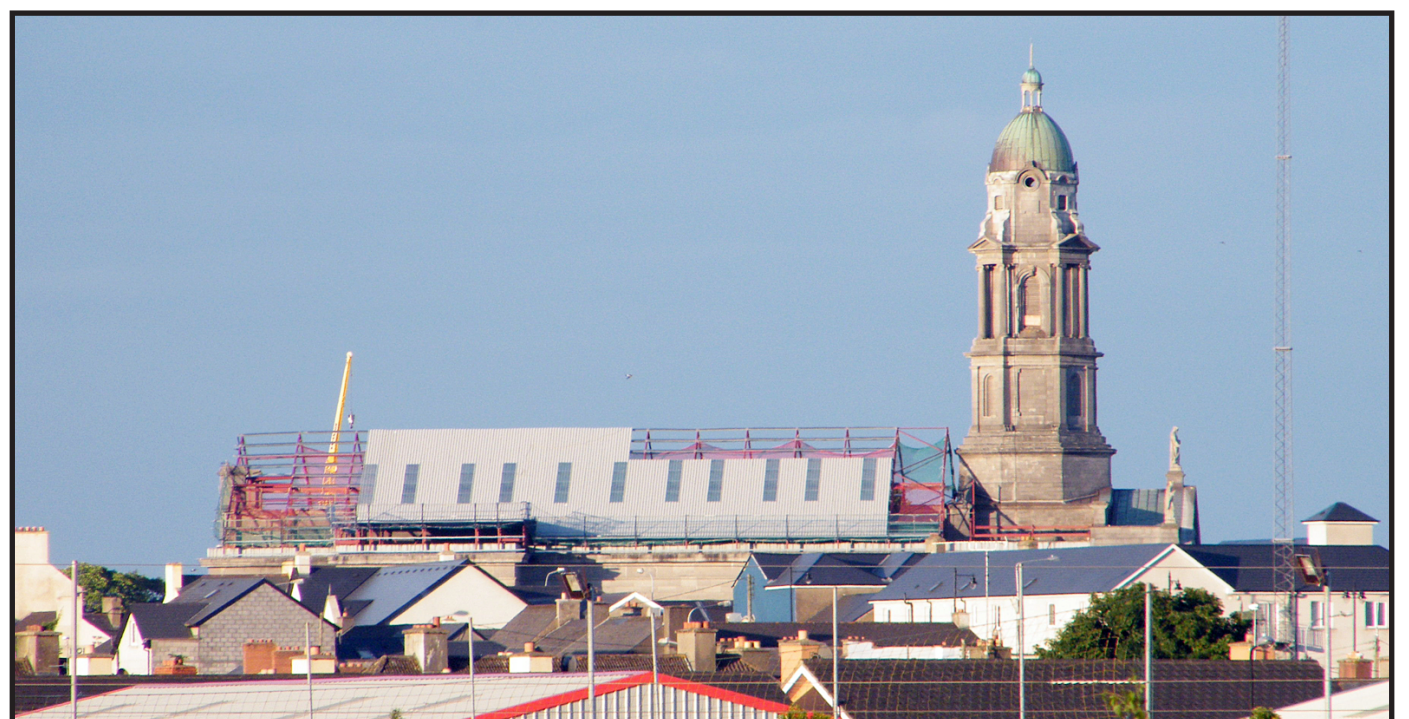
The next phase of KSSL work was the fitting of the cladding on the thirty degree roof. Safety netting was fixed on the underside of the steel to provide safety for the cladders. A 1.5m high edge - protection was erected around the perimeter of the roof and using crawler boards on the roof purlins, we fixed our cladding, produced by C.P.F.Ltd in Longford.

The Cathedral roof extends 0.600m out by the existing external walls to allow for air circulation to keep the building dry and damp free. The steel and cladding around the spire was complicated and took experience and patience to make it water tight.

The above project is indeed a high profile and complex one, but all personnel in Kiernan Structural Steel Ltd are very proud of being involved in this historic and prestigious Cathedral.

We look forward to the official opening of St. Mel's Cathedral circa Christmas 2014 D.V.

We cannot list all KSSL workers involved in this project as there would be over 75 names but the majority hail from Longford town and county.





Bishop O'Reilly Announces Design Team for the Restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral

■ BISHOP COLM O'REILLY

If Christmas 2009 was one of the most painful days of my life as bishop, this is truly a hope-filled and joyful one

On February 6th, the Feast Day of St. Mel, the patron saint of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois and the Cathedral in Longford, the media launch of the announcement of the Design Team for the restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral took place in Bishop's House, Longford.

Please see below the address by Bishop Colm O'Reilly and key points of the address made by Dr Richard Hurley.

Psalm 29 contains the following beautiful line: "Tears come with the night but joy comes with the dawn". The psalm does not mean literally that all sadness comes upon us at night time and all happiness with the coming of a new day. In biblical language darkness is disaster, light is deliverance. For the people of Longford at Christmas 2009 it was quite the opposite. In St. Mel's Cathedral we celebrated a joyful Midnight Mass; dawn revealed a Cathedral ruined by fire. The contrast between the happiness of the Mass at Night with the heart-break of Christmas Mass could not have been greater.

Today I believe we are taking an important step towards a new day when we will be able to reverse the disaster of Christmas 2009. The signing of contracts by Design Team and client for the restoration of our Cathedral marks a new dawn for us. If Christmas 2009 was one of the most painful days of my life as Bishop, this is truly a hope-filled and joyful one.

We have engaged two prestigious architectural firms which have formed an Alliance to plan and guide the restoration of our historic Cathedral. I am extremely pleased to have present at this Press Conference Dr Richard Hurley, our lead Design Architect and Mr Colm Redmond, architect from Fitzgerald, Kavanagh & Partners. We are convinced that these two men and their respective firms which have formed an Alliance can deliver a restored Cathedral which will not just be faithful to its original architectural splendour but also a place of worship which will be inspirational for a new time in the life of the Church in Ireland.

Up to this point the plans for restoration of the Cathedral have been handled by Mr Niall Meagher of Interactive Project Managers. This firm was chosen after a very careful search among those with the needed expertise for this key role. They in turn have led the process of identification of the entire Design Team. I welcome the Director of Interactive Project Managers, Ms Joan O'Connor, who, like Mr Meagher, is an architect.

Our Design Team can be assured of the full support of the hard working St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee chaired by Mr Seamus Butler. This committee which has been meeting



Left to right, Aidan Kavanagh, Colm Redmond, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Richard Hurley.

every second week for many months is attended by a representative of our insurers, Allianz, Mr Gerry O'Toole, Managing Director of OSG, the Loss Assessors, Mr Danny Donohoe and Tom Cleary, OSG.

In the current year, 2011, there is an immense task to be undertaken by the Design Team. I am convinced that few people in the general population fully appreciate what is involved in planning work. It is easy to see the product of a day's labour by, for instance, a bricklayer. It is not so in the case of days spent reaching a decision about how best to create a design for a church sanctuary. However, everything about how well the work of restoration is done will depend on how the Design Team completes the first phase of the work.

It is necessary at the present juncture in our journey towards restoration to invite a high de-

gree of interest in the design work to be undertaken, by all parishioners of Longford and all in the Diocese as well. It will shortly emerge, I can promise, that the Design Team will engage with the public about the big questions that we need to explore. At an early stage ideas about restoration will be put forward for discussion. It is my hope that this immense challenge that we face will offer us an important opportunity for renewal, not only renewal of a destroyed Cathedral but renewal of a sense of community and creation of an understanding of the purpose that a Cathedral fulfils.

At this significant moment it is impossible not to think of the Founder of St. Mel's Cathedral, Bishop William O'Higgins. He laid the foundation stone, taken from the ruins of the old medieval Cathedral at Ardagh, in 1840. That day, the 19th of May, was a great occasion in Longford

Design Team

The Design Team comprises a number of professionals who are required to plan the very complex restoration of the Cathedral. They have been working all year within their various disciplines to survey, analyse and plan a restoration that will respect the heritage of the building, adapt it for our future worship and make it fit for purpose for generations to come.

Project Managers:

Interactive Project Managers

Architects:

Richard Hurley and Associates in association with Fitzgerald Kavanagh and Partners

Structural Engineers:

Punch Consulting Engineers

Mechanical and Electrical Engineering:

ARUP

Building Fabric Consultants:

CARRIG

Quantity Surveyors:

Brendan Merry and Partners

Health & Safety:

Bruce Shaw Safety Management

with an estimated attendance of 20,000 people present. No one was to know on that joy-filled day that in seven years time all work would have ceased. In a country decimated by the Great Famine it had begun to look like a ruin, abandoned and overgrown by weeds. However, six years later it would be opened for worship and so it would remain until 2009.

I remember today that Bishop O'Higgins set out with confidence and, while he did not live to see his dream come true, another man was there to complete the work. Many times in history those who lay foundations never see the last phases of the work completed. We cannot predict with anything like certainty when the work we are undertaking will be completed. It is in faith that all of us must set out on the journey towards restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral knowing that we will not walk alone, for God is with us.

Key Points

Dr Richard Hurley

- St. Mel's will rise again and live again as the centre of Catholic life in the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois.
- Sacred buildings are a faithful record of the mindset of the times in which they are built. Hence the changes from age to age reflecting man's relationship with God and the universe. Church buildings shape and influence our religious beliefs.
- While restoring the building is of the utmost importance, every step is being taken to reinstate the heritage of the building, it is ultimately an effective and forward looking liturgical environment which must be the primary consideration. If this can be achieved the Cathedral will live again.
- Part of our task in re-building St. Mel's is to make it a religious space of powerful resonance, respecting the past, living in the present and pointing towards the future. Our committed aim is to restore the Cathedral to its former architectural beauty, with a complementary contemporary liturgical intervention reflecting pastoral aspirations, supported by the arts which will make St. Mel's a worthy flagship of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois and beyond.



Fr. Tom Healy, Administrator; explains some of the fire damage to national media at the press conference in February.



The Morning on Fire

■ BELINDA MCKEON

I learned to tie my shoelaces in St. Mel's Cathedral. I wasn't meant to be learning how to tie my shoelaces, of course. I was meant to be staying quiet in the pew beside my parents. I was meant to be paying attention. It must have been a one o'clock mass; that luxury afforded to Longford Catholics; a lie-in of a Sunday, followed by a good gawk, in opulent surroundings, at practically everyone from the area. If you were a child, it was an hour of what should have been utter boredom, but never actually was. There was so much to see. So much neck-craning to do. The stained-glass windows, their colours so vivid in their dark lacework of lead. The saints, high in their alcoves, seemingly eyeless but staring down at us all the same. The stone angels, peeking out of the spaces between the huge grey columns which soared towards the sky.

My favourite thing to do as a child in St. Mel's was to throw my head back and try to count the sections of the elaborate central nave, or the ceilings in the side aisles, with their coffers like slices of cake. I never managed it; there were too many, and they went too far back. Which I suppose must be why, one day, I learned to tie my laces instead. And then proceeded to show off about this achievement to the boy in the next pew, with his pathetic slip-on shoes.

As you can tell, I was a spiritual six-year-old. But if I can claim to be at all spiritual now, twenty-five odd years later, it's thanks in large part to those hours spent paying attention to all the wrong things while mass was being said in St. Mel's. To the things that were new and beautiful; the things that went right to the senses. Smells: incense and candlewax, striking on a very different register to those scents brought into the aisles by worshippers: shoe polish and wet wool, Sunday morning shampoo and Saturday night smoke. Sounds: the beauty of the choir, or how the boom of the burnished pipe organ reached right into your blood. And textures: the bone-smooth marble of the baptismal font. The thick tufts of altar rugs. The intricate mosaic of the floor tiles, polished by over a century of footfall and genuflection. Or the crisp dust of burned-out wicks lining



Belinda McKeon

the trays of the brass candle banks. Nothing was like the real world. Nothing was like the rest of life in Longford, anyway. And the hush. Always, there was a hush.

It was the hush I couldn't get over on Christmas morning 2009, when I stood opposite the gates of St. Mel's, with forty or so other people, and watched the Cathedral burn. It was not yet 9am, and some of those watching had turned up for early mass. My husband and I had been passing through town on our way to my parents' house for Christmas day, and somewhere on the outskirts, we had seen them reaching high: the black plume, the russet flame. Within the town, streets were blocked off; we found parking, and walked towards the scene. I had brought my camera with me, and as we approached I took photographs of a scene that seemed impossible. The building stood tall on its hill over the town,

and it was a bowl of angry fire. The crane of a lone fire engine hovering close to the collapsed roof looked as hopeful of making a difference as might a long-necked bird with a drop of water in its beak. It was a snowy Christmas, and every other part of the county was quiet and beautiful, but here at the end of Dublin Street, it was just quiet and unreal. The freezing weather meant that the fire brigade could not get extra water from the Camlin. It was obvious to everyone who saw it: St. Mel's was lost. Its great ceilings, with all their mouldings and their cornices and their coffers, had collapsed. And there it was again: the hush. Nobody was speaking. Everyone was staring, unable to believe their eyes. Come on, my husband said, touching my arm. Let's go.

I cannot pretend that my feelings on seeing the Cathedral in flames were uncomplicated. They were not. This was less than a month af-

ter the publication of the Murphy Report, with its nightmarish revelations which had left the country reeling. That report was not, of course, about the diocese in which St. Mel's was, and is, located. But it was about the Catholic Church. And it was about the place, and the dominion, that the Catholic Church had for so long assumed at the centre of Irish society, and of what had come of that assumption. It was about the children who had suffered. And here we were, on the morning in the Catholic calendar that is above all else about a helpless child, and here it was, a Catholic Cathedral, a palace of that religion, set catastrophically ablaze from within. And I know that it may cause pain to make the suggestion even now, two years later, but it was hard not to think that something was happening. Something profound.

But running almost in exact parallel with that feeling was a reaction much more straightforward. This was a building for which I had never had anything but affection, and I felt immensely sorry for those who had been on their way to its welcome and who had found it gone. For me, the experience of being in St. Mel's had always brought real comfort, no matter how complicated my relationship to religion might have grown. No matter how complicated life might have become once I learned to tie my shoelaces. I went home that Christmas morning, and I did what anyone of my overly-plugged-in generation would do: I uploaded the photograph I had taken to my Facebook page. And I tried, as you always try when you upload a personal photograph to Facebook, to think of a caption that was somehow pithy, or clever, or striking. Something which would somehow encapsulate what I thought of as the complexity of my feelings as I'd looked on the scene. But all I could think of - and so I wrote it down - was a line that my six-year-old self might have come up with.

I think this is very sad.

BIOGRAPHY: Belinda McKeon is a Longford-born author and journalist. Her debut novel, *Solace*, was published by Picador in 2011 and won her the Best Newcomer award at the Irish Book Awards.

Time Capsule

As part of the repair works to the statues on the front of the Cathedral a very interesting discovery was made. A time capsule was found in the body of the Sacred Heart statue - the highest statue on the roof. The capsule is well corroded and contains paperwork

which is thought to contain the names of the children of the diocese who contributed their pennies towards the purchase of the Sacred Heart statue. This was a very exciting discovery and the capsule has been passed on to the National Museum for analysis.



Pictured here is the corroded Time Capsule which was found in the body of the Sacred Heart statue.



Project Manager Niall Meagher shows Time Capsule to Peter Cox, Carrig Consulting. Also in picture are Fr. Tom Healy and Seamus Butler.



Fr. Tom Healy pictured showing the Time Capsule to pupils from St. Emer's N.S.



Pictured above are members of the Project committee: Back row, left to right: Carol Farrell, Fr. Tom Healy, Danny Donohoe, Tom Cleary, Derek Dockrell, Gerry O'Toole, Fr. Sean Casey and John Nugent. Front row, left to right: Joan O'Connor, Seamus Butler, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Niall Meagher.

"The Biggest Restoration Project in Western Europe"

■ FRAN McNULTY

Longford is the location of the biggest restoration project in Western Europe. Unfortunately for locals that project happens to be the restoration of one of the most loved buildings in the town, St. Mel's Cathedral.

It is hoped the Cathedral will re-open in December of 2014. Many hope to be able to attend midnight mass there once again, no doubt recalling many happy memories of the last midnight mass in St. Mel's before the devastating fire took hold. Project Manager Niall Meagher says the 2014 timeframe "remains a target, every project has an end date set out and that is ours, it remains our ambition to meet that ambition". But Mr. Meagher warns, "The project is still at a very early stage". It would be easy to underestimate the scale of what lies ahead, Niall Meagher explains that the public procurement system, "simply would not be able to cope with the restoration of the Cathedral, it's just too complex". There may be a perception that the project is slow, but, if it was being handled as a public procurement project a Design Team may well not yet be in place. At present detailed designs have been presented to the public, we know what the new Cathedral could look like. The altar moved further down the body of the Cathedral, a large sanctuary will dominate and the tabernacle will be relocated to the back of the altar. The choir gallery will not be replaced and instead the christening font will be located inside the centre door at the bottom of St. Mel's.

But two significant hurdles must be cleared first, in the coming weeks a planning application will be lodged with the local authority to allow for a new concrete floor to be installed and for the new roof to be built. The new roof will be slate, in keeping with the original slate roof which was in place for well over 100 years before it was replaced with copper in the 1980's. Then sometime in spring a planning application to include the new internal layout and other changes will be lodged.

The Chairperson of the Cathedral Project Committee Seamus Butler says the best advice possible has been taken at every step of the work to date. An art advisor has been appointed, a special committee to choose the contractors to replace the organ is also in place. The restoration is hugely complex, even if the basic technical aspects of the project are left aside. Conservationists have a major role to play, whilst large and vastly experienced firms are being drafted in, local architecture firms are also playing a role.

Given the specialty of the work involved, most of the main contracts are likely to go to firms outside the County. But Seamus Butler says the tenders will be evaluated on the basis of the most economically advantageous tender, in other words contracts will not necessarily be awarded



Sanctuary area under investigation.

on the basis of the cheapest price. Project Manager Niall Meagher says a register of local contractors and suppliers has also been compiled, "firms awarded tenders will be given the register of local firms, it will ensure local crafts people, suppliers and contractors will play a part in the restoration".

If all goes to plan, Christmas 2014 will be celebrated in St. Mel's Cathedral, the New Year will be marked under the bells of St. Mel's as it has been for generations. Some find it difficult to imagine the new Cathedral, but Seamus Butler has a word of reassurance for them, "for those who stand into the new restored St. Mel's, they will instantly recognise the St. Mel's they know and love". Many of the best aspects of St. Mel's will be restored, the ceiling and its magnificent plasterwork, the rows of columns, the many statues. But it will be vastly different in many respects, the smell, the light, the feeling that your grandparents, great grandparents and many before stood here, kneeled here, married here, that will never return. But for those same ancestors that saved hard and worked hard to build one of the countries most magnificent buildings, Catholics in Longford owe it to them to restore the building to be the best extent possible. The Cathedral which will be re-opened will hopefully be there for hundreds of years to come.



Picture shows trial plasterwork undertaken in summer of 2011.

Progress on Cathedral Restoration

The following is a brief overview of the past year of the Cathedral Restoration Project under the direction of St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee:



St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee Chairman Seamus Butler.

- Signing of contracts and Press Conference to announce Design Team
- Appointment of Art Advisor
- Appointment of Organ subcommittee
- Appointment of Curator to clean and stabilise 148 recovered Museum items
- Repaired Harry Clarke windows returned to Diocese
- Appointment of Conservation and Restoration Ltd to undertake repairs to statues at front of Cathedral with assistance from Heritage Council
- Time Capsule found in statues over portico. Sent to National Museum for analysis
- Trial plasterwork contract (see photograph below, on right).
- Appointment of Kelly Bros Ltd for investigative works/trial repairs to include trial cleaning, geo-thermal tests, steelwork, replacement of one column etc. The replacement of the column was very complex and results will greatly assist and inform the Design Team for the reconstruction project
- Successful application to Longford Community Resources Ltd for skills training scheme
- Open Day for public to view Cathedral
- Future plans and Model on display at Cathedral Centre and Library
- Cathedral publication circulated to Diocese December 2011
- Ongoing liaising with Diocesan and Parish Committees on future development of Cathedral



The Design Team members and Bishop Colm discuss model of Cathedral. Left to right Bishop Colm, Richard Hurley, Margaret Glupker, Ann Cuffe Fitzgerald, Peter Cox, Colm Redmond.



Pictured at St. Mel's Cathedral Open Day on September 18, 2011 are Corrine McCormack, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Peter Cox.



Taking a closer look on Open Day, September 18, 2011.

St. Mel's Cathedral Open Day



Some of the keen visitors view the fire damage at St. Mel's Cathedral.

■ TIERNAN DOLAN

Christmas morning 2009 is etched forever on the memories of Longford people. Following a beautiful and moving midnight Mass, when everything was Christmas card perfect, we woke from dreamland to a living, lasting nightmare. In temperatures of minus fifteen, dazed and bewildered parishioners watched in horror as yellow and orange flames shot skywards from the blazing inferno that was once their pride and joy. As stunned neighbours huddled together in shocked silence, tears of genuine sorrow flowed freely. One man summed it up for the rest of us "it's like watching the public passing of a dear friend".

On Sunday September 18th, we got a chance to view our dear friend and thousands of us availed of that opportunity. For 20 long months we passed the sad, boarded up shell and wondered what it must look like inside. Images were available on the parish website but still we yearned to see the real thing.

The fact that so many stood patiently in line was testament to how deeply the people felt about their Cathedral. Some friends chose not to visit, saying the experience would be too painful; they'd wait to see the finished product, a fully restored St. Mel's Cathedral.

Listening to comments as we lined up outside the side entrance, it was clear that many were nervous and anxious at the sight that lay ahead of them. Yet, they were determined to see. It really was like going to visit a dear friend in intensive care, following an horrific accident.

On signing a visitors' book, we were in. It took a few silent mesmerizing minutes to adjust my senses. It was the same but changed so utterly, totally. The scale even seemed different. We were led to the "top" of the Cathedral, where a now shattered altar stood.

What stuck me forcibly was the silence, punctuated by barely audible whispers. We were all in shock. The most common utterance seemed to be "Oh, my God". One middle aged lady wept openly as she pointed out to her friend where, for years, she used to sit during Mass. The spot was now a huge, gaping hole. Camera phones clicked and captured the images that would soon be sent to family and friends worldwide.

Eyes were strained as we tried to imagine what it did look like. The once beautiful, ornate, curved ceiling had been replaced by a cold, functional industrial roof. Amazingly, the centre aisle still stood, though on either side massive, deep holes stood open mouthed, having swallowed dozens of pews and large ancient oak beams.

A member of the choir stood beside me. She gazed open eyed as she surveyed the spot where the choir balcony once stood. Now two pillars stand awkwardly, nothing else remains. She turned and moved on, her head shaking slightly. Catching my eye, she whispered "it's just so awful, worse than I imagined" memories of celestial music ringing in her ears.

Many, especially the numerous children present marvelled at how some statues remained almost perfectly intact behind the altar.

Standing there, eyes strained, thoughts and memories whirling, the whole scene was surreal. It was our Cathedral but changed for ever. The



A young boy admires the model of Cathedral at the Open Day in September 2011.

scale and time frame of the reconstruction now appeared to be overwhelming.

Then, as if out of nowhere, a little girl broke the eerie silence. "Look Mammy, that bit wasn't even touched". All of us, stared in the direction of the young girl's finger. High above all of us, up over the pillars, a sample of the reconstruction plastering work stood out bright and bold, brilliantly and breathtakingly white against the black and darkened fire damaged brick work. Some work had been carried out on a small semi-circle window as well as some more delicate plaster work. The mother seemed to sigh a sigh of relief and hope which in turn trickled through all of us gathered there.

Suddenly, the patient in intensive care we came to visit, despite its tubes and machines, showed a definite sign of life if not a faint sign of recovery. Injured and sore, bruised and disfigured but not down and out. Seeing that restoration work did lighten the heavy, brooding atmosphere. It was like watching the dawn break after a long, difficult dark night.

As I exited the Cathedral into the Sunday afternoon light, I too felt a lightness in my step. The silence, horror and disbelief had been replaced by friendly chatter. As we headed home people were now in animated conversation, most of which went something like "At first, it was worse than I thought, it was really hard to look at but when you looked up and saw that a start had been made, it didn't feel as bad as when I first went in. It was definitely worth having an Open Day, definitely worth a look. And now we know, the Cathedral will be back again one day and it'll give us something big to look forward to."

Indeed!



Replacement Pillar arrives and workmen begin to bring it into the Cathedral via the Crypt.



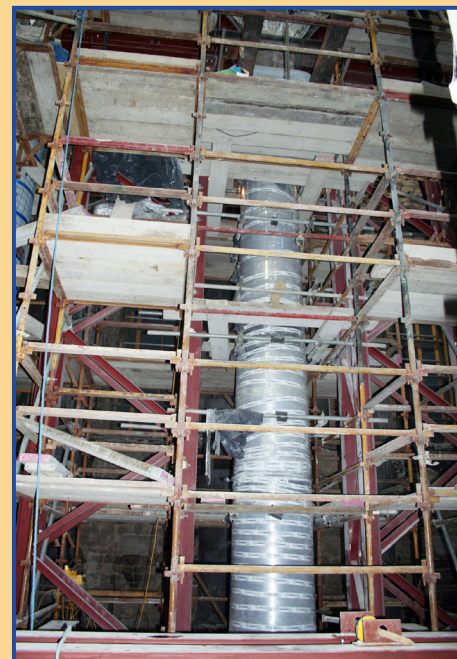
The replacement pillar is wheeled into the Crypt of the Cathedral manually.



One final push sees the Pillar in!



Pillar foundation stone being measured as workmen begin the process of setting it in place.



According to workmen the method used in the 1840-92s was not much different to how they worked in 2011.

Trial Pillar Replacement

■ FRAN McNULTY

"Nobody has done this before" says Christy Hynes of Kelly Brothers Builders. The investigative works contract which he has been involved in has yielded a "fountain of knowledge". One of the familiar limestone columns has been removed, a replacement column has been installed. A quarry near Ballinasloe was selected as the location for the stone to be used, it was carved by stone masons in County Clare. The investigative work is critical and provides important information on how to proceed with restoring the Cathedral.

The new column is an exact replica. The investigative work revealed the true scale of the damage done to the pillars; the intense heat of the Christmas morning fire has badly damaged the stone and it is crumbling. All of the pillars will have to be replaced, that process alone will take over a year. Project Manager Niall Meagher says the work undertaken by Kelly Bros in the lead up to Christmas has been vital, "it has taught us the condition of the stone, how to remove the columns and more importantly how to install the new ones". Mr. Meagher says "we've learned a huge amount from the investigative works, they also provide a timeframe for the project, we now know that it will take up to fourteen months to replace the columns". Christy Hynes has been on site at the Cathedral throughout the investigative works, "the method used in the 1840's are not much different to what we've been doing for the past few weeks". The replacement column was wheeled into the crypt of the Cathedral manually and hoisted up using



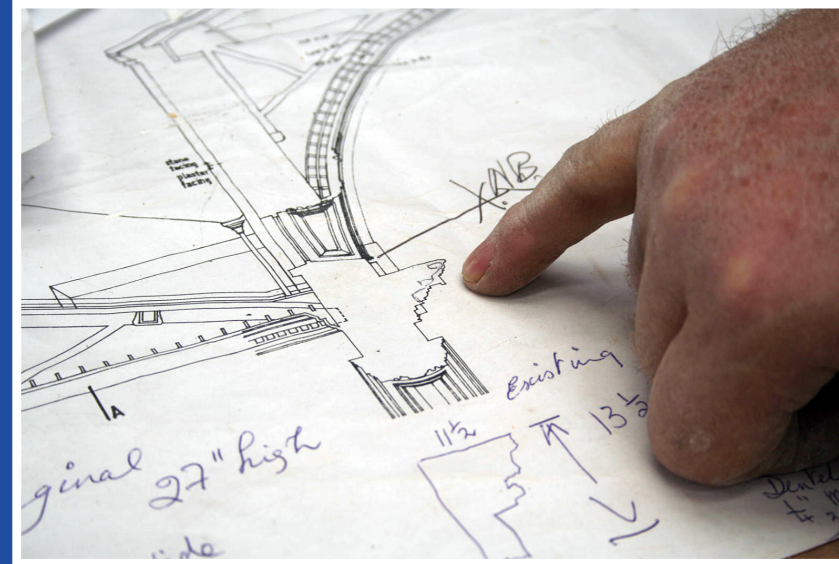
The final piece is put in place as the Ionic Capital stone is lowered and secured.

a manual pulley system. It takes around thirteen weeks, for each pillar, from the time the stone is quarried to the point at which it is installed. The scale of that part of the project alone is breathtaking.

The 28 columns in St. Mel's Cathedral form a vital part of the building, not only in architectural terms, but also practically. They support the vast roof and also give the Cathedral its beautiful, renowned classical colonade.

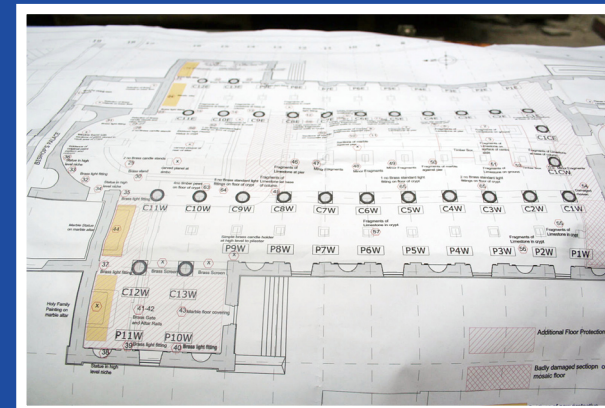


Picture shows the replica pillar in place alongside fire damaged pillar.



Cathedral Trial Plasterwork Progresses

St. Mel's Cathedral was known far and wide for the intricate plasterwork on its ceilings and walls. All of this beautiful work was destroyed in the fire. Over the past few months a team of master craftsmen were on site to carry out trial repairs to the detailed plasterwork. The craftsmen have been guided by drawings used during the original building of the



Cathedral. One small area of plasterwork has been replaced on a trial basis. If one person alone was to take on the job to replace the plasterwork, it could arguably take decades to finish the job. In fact Seamus Butler of the Project Committee says "there are forty man years alone in the lime plastering contract." When the contract for the lime plastering is awarded, it is expected to take close to a year for the work to be completed. It is necessary to use old traditional methods and even when the plasterwork is completed a slow drying period to allow the plaster to set could take months before any painting takes place.

The trial plasterwork was undertaken by George O'Malley Plastering. These pictures show various stages of the trial work carried out on site by the skilled plaster craftsman. The results of these trials will inform the Design Team on how the original plasterwork was executed on site and how therefore to plan for the replacement works and their details.





Family Fun Day at Flancare Park

Sunday August 7th was Family Day at Flancare Park organised by Pascal Flaherty, Padraig Farrell and a host of willing volunteers in aid of the Cathedral Restoration Reserve Fund. Cathedral sacristan Gerry Reilly and his helpers prepared a lovely altar that had been erected by Frank McKiernan for our Sunday Mass on the hallowed pitch of Longford Town Football Club.

Following Mass celebrated by Bishop Colm O'Reilly the day swung into action under the baton of MC Benny O'Brien, with a wonderful line up of talent from the region. Children enjoyed bouncy castles, had their faces painted, munched on tasty food and then with their families danced, clapped and sang to the music. And what a line up we had! Chart topper Larry Cunningham wowed the crowds with his familiar country songs and the Wee Amigos stole the hearts of all with their 'Galway Girl' and 'Say you Love me'. Seamus Moore the JCB Man did his JCB song and had everyone rolling in the stand with 'My Little Honda Fifty'. Tiernan Dolan's



photos capture some of the atmosphere of enjoyment. Many other artistes regaled the crowds and the success of the day was due in no small measure to the hard behind the scenes work of many people. Our heartfelt thanks to members of Longford Town F.C., Brendan Gilmore, Security, all the entertainers and all who attended. It was a wonderful Family Day and over €1500 was raised for the Reserve Fund on the day.



Faithful to the past - building for the future

Restoration Reserve Fund

As the Cathedral Restoration Project continues to develop it is evident that we will have to carry some costs which will fall outside our insurance claim.

While the fire was a great disaster, it is also an opportunity to develop the building for the future. Such improvements are known as enhancement or betterment. Examples include - improved toilet facilities, improved landscaping, provision of lifts, etc.

We have continued to receive generous donations from the public throughout 2011. These funds are held in the name of 'Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral' and are overseen by the Parish Finance Committee. Donations have now reached €542,000.

If you wish to donate, you can do so:

**By Post to Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral,
The Presbytery, St. Mel's Cathedral, Longford.**

**By Bank Transfer to
Bank of Ireland, Longford Sort Code: 90-17-73 Account No: 41420562**

Please let us know you have made a donation as we would like to acknowledge your contribution. You can contact us at stmelcathedral@eircom.net

Longford Parish Finance Committee: Pat Chapman, Mary Donlon, Francis Hanley, Fr. Thomas Healy, Tom Mulligan, Evelyn Quinn

"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart, and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14)

St Anne's Parish Community
In association with Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral, Longford
Dance and Social
on
Saturday 26th February 2011
at
St Anne's Parish Centre, Alcester St, B12 0PB
Dancing to **LITTLE JIMMY**,
and friends
Tickets £4 Doors open at 8pm
Tombola and Raffle during the evening

Birmingham Dance

Monsignor Pat Browne originally from Ferbane, Co. Offaly is a priest in St. Anne's Parish, Alcester Street, Birmingham. In the Springtime, his parish hosted a fundraising dance in their local Parish Centre in aid of St. Mel's Cathedral Restoration Reserve Fund. It was fantastic to see so many warm hearted people getting together to help raise money for the Restoration Reserve Fund.

Fr. Tom Healy attended the function on behalf of the Parish and proceeds amounted to €2,442 - sincere thanks to all.



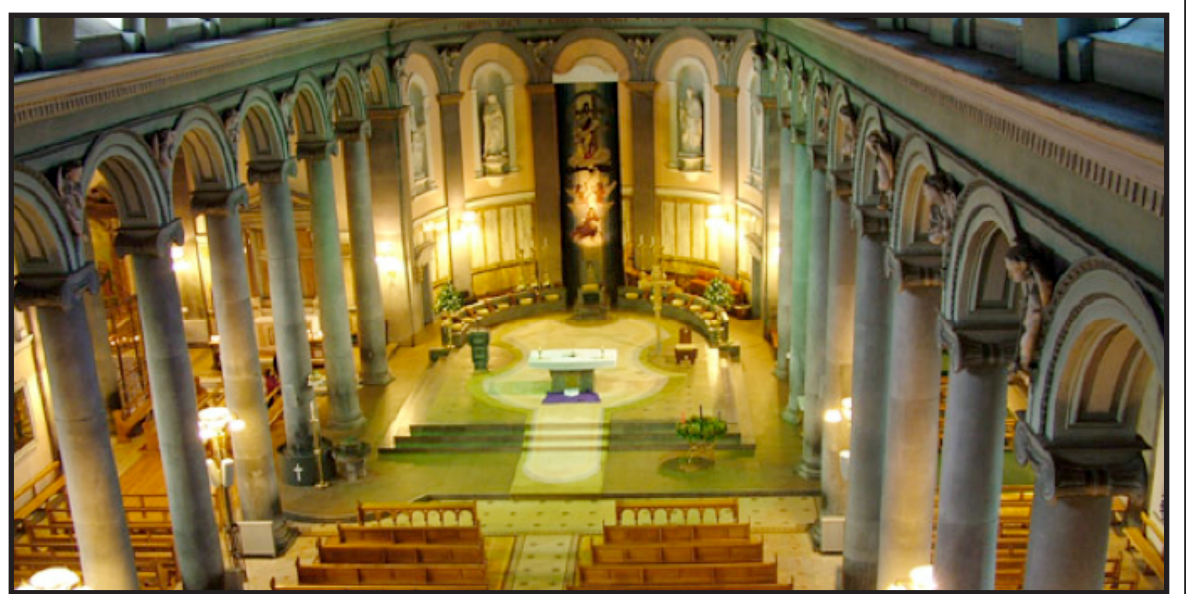
Hidden Names in Cathedral Walls

The names of the men who toiled long and hard to build St. Mel's Cathedral in the 1840's are etched into the lead gaskets which separate the limestone block in the buildings famous columns. One lead sheet which was removed during exploratory works shows the name 'Neary'. Workman records show that two people with the Neary surname worked on the building.

The records show that in one week in September 1843, John and Thomas Neary were paid 18 shillings each for cleaning and preparing work on the building. The men worked a six day week and were paid three shillings per day.

The records which were traced by Fr. Tom Murray give an interesting insight into the kind of work done, money paid and duration of the various parts of the project. Many names which are still familiar in the town and County are recorded in the Workmen's Records, names such as Burke, Cox and Devlin.

WORKMEN'S ACCOUNTS, from 1 st 13 th September 1845									
WORKMEN'S NAMES.	Monday.	Tuesday.	Wednesday.	Thursday.	Friday.	Saturday.	Days Worked this Week.	Wages by the Day	Total Value of Week's Work.
<i>Shimcutters in</i>									
Edward Cox	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
John Neary	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
Thomas Neary	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
Edward McDermott	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
Thomas McDermott	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
Charles Coffey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
Michael O'Donnell	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
James Bellamy	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	3 0	18 0
Thomas Cox Bay	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 6	9 0
<i>Masons</i>									<i>£7 13 0</i>
Donald O'Donovan	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	2 6	15 0
John White	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	2 6	15 0
John Caulfield	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	2 6	15 0
<i>Suburors</i>									<i>£2 5 0</i>
Pete Devlin	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 6	9 0
Michael Gannon	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 2	7 0
Thomas Kelly	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Michael Croton	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Pete Creamer	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Bernard Downey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Michael Gaffney	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
John Mahon	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Mike Reynolds	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Pete Rowland	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Pete Dennyson	2	2	1	1	1	1	8	1 0	8 0
William Wilson	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Thomas Carey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Pete Burke	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Pete Mulvey	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
John Keane	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
Michael McFale	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1 0	6 0
<i>Others</i>									<i>£5 2 0</i>



'Ardagh & Clonmacnois – Footprints of Mel and Ciaran'

The dining room of St. Mel's College, lined with portraits of Bishops since 1829 is no bad vantage point to survey the first fruits of Catholic Emancipation. From its parlour window, the great ashlar stone Cathedral of St. Mel soars majestically before you.

It is the Lord's own house and it is hard to imagine Longford town today without it. The space it occupies is partly within these iron railings, partly within the hearts of all who love it. It seems to have a twofold mission in life: to be mother church to far-flung Ardagh and Clonmacnois and to mother all its Templemichael children. Why, even as we enter, its tuneful chimes are ringing out in dulcet tones majestic.

It was the dream of William O'Higgins, the Bishop from humble origins 'in the well field' in Barraghbeg, Drumlish, who won his way to Paris and Rome and returned to a professor's chair in Maynooth. The Madeleine in Paris, the Pantheon and the great basilicas of Rome were to inspire him when called to the chair of Mel in 1829.

Fifty-three years it took to bring his dream of this Cathedral to completion. The notes of the landed gentry, the penies of the poor, money raised in America. Elphin, Tuam, and Meath too chipped in. Fifty-three years, three Bishops and three architects. O'Higgins, Kilduff and Woodlock; John B. Keane, John Bourke, George C. Ashlin. B is for Benjamin by the way, so Listowel is not in question! The Kellys were to be its master builders. Philo, their descendant, true to the Greek roots of her name, was friend and lover of the Cathedral they built, and more than once took weapons from the wall to defend its heritage.

But the Famine halted the great work and it was left to his zealous successor Bishop John Kilduff from Bushfield, Athlone, to resume the work and start to build St. Mel's College. By 1956 the Cathedral was opened, and by the autumn of 1865 the first students of St. Mel's entered the then treeless avenue, many to a life of priesthood in the diocese and elsewhere.

The hat went round many a time to defray the huge costs and in the end it all proved too much for Bishop Kilduff who succumbed to typhoid fever in 1867 in his forty seventh year. Both lie buried beneath in the Cathedral crypt, Kilduff in a marked, O'Higgins so far, at least, in an unmarked grave. Cardinal Cullen who came for the obsequies was not at all impressed. The Cathedral is much too large for the town,' he wrote to Kirby in Rome, 'and is not at all handsome.'

Making it handsome, for handsome it became, had to wait a while. Their time in Ardagh was short for the next two Bishops. Both died abroad; Bishop McCabe in France on his return from the first Vatican Council, Bishop Conroy while on a diplomatic mission to Newfoundland. McCabe had time only to erect the high altar in the Cathedral to the memory of Dr Kilduff. It is the work of Joseph Farrell, brother of the better-known Sir Thomas Farrell, whose family before them were stonemasons in Crieve, Killoe.

The portico exterior with its six pillars supporting the triangular pediment and tympanum belongs to the time of Bishop Bartholomew Woodlock. The design of George Ashlin presents to public view a remarkable assembly of saints gathered for the enthronement of St. Mel. In a dramatic moment St. Mel, his eye gazing towards the Presbytery or Temperance Hall, is seen to gesture or reach out for the proffered crozier from the hand of Patrick.

The work has not stood still. Bishop Hoare gave the organ that has been such a part of the celebrations and later for

the centenary the beautiful windows from the Harry Clarke Studios, the Resurrection and St. Anne glow with purest light and colour on Holy Souls and Holy family chapels.

Modern commentators have interesting things to say about St. Mel's Cathedral. Christine Casey and Alistair Rowan, for instance, feel it can best be read as an act of faith. It is a classical building in a rural setting. Keane was a Dublin architect with experience of the Pro Cathedral and St. Francis Xavier Jesuit Church in Gardiner Street. By right St. Mel's would have been more at home as the focal point of an urban square or market place to show its exterior off to best effect. In the light of this those with a flair for computer CAD might like to let their imagination take wing and create from the existing nearby Longford buildings a great piazza or Market Square with St. Mel's as centre piece presiding. The portico a 'finely executed piece in itself' makes the Cathedral seem out of place. The belfry 'is a good design, in three stages with an excellent silhouette.'

But when the present critics step inside St. Mel's Cathedral their comments are truly uplifting and uniformly reassuring. Keane's interior 'is one of the most beautifully conceived classical spaces of Irish architecture.' What follows is unfeigned admiration without qualification for the pattern, symmetry and 'the simple coherence and logic of the design'. Their conclusion: 'What is beyond doubt is the success of his solution, matched with craftsmanship of great quality.' It is a verdict that would please Bishop MacNamee who presided over its Centenary Celebrations in 1940 and Cardinal Cahal Daly who invested much thought and energy in its restyling and restructuring after Vatican II, and Bishop O'Reilly who saw its sesquicentennial and rejoiced.

But it is at the spiritual level of faith, the drawing in of people to a sense of God's presence and loving care for his people that the great treasure house of St. Mel's is best revealed. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer' is true for all ages. The four side altars have been used to enhance this sense. Presently Bishop Conroy's Sacred Heart altar of 'onyx, malachite, porphyry' is bearing fruit by many in hours spent here in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Aided by the 'Disciples at Emmaus' painting, where Jesus is recognised in the breaking of bread so realistic that someone could say 'that bread is straight out of the oven not out of the Gospel.'

The chiselling hand of sculptor George Smyth is in evidence inside and out in the Pietà in the mortuary chapel, the names of children all over the diocese are still up there under the huge statue of the Sacred Heart high above the portico outside. Reader it could be your own ancestor. The Nuptial chapel over on the left beyond the Christmas crib was beloved of generations of men and women who were married there and return in memory to that happy day.

But the great tapestry that is the centrepiece of the sanctuary might be our final reflection. It is at times seen as Christ ascending to the Father being serenaded by the angels. Where he has gone we hope to follow. It bears resemblance to Simon Marmion's *Choir of Angels* in the National Gallery, London. But more likely it is the Final Coming of Christ in Glory, the reminder of the promise that Christ will Come Again that is Ray Carroll's best legacy to St. Mel's Cathedral.

Extract taken from "Ardagh & Clonmacnois- footprints of Mel and Ciaran" by Rev Owen Devaney, 2005.



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.

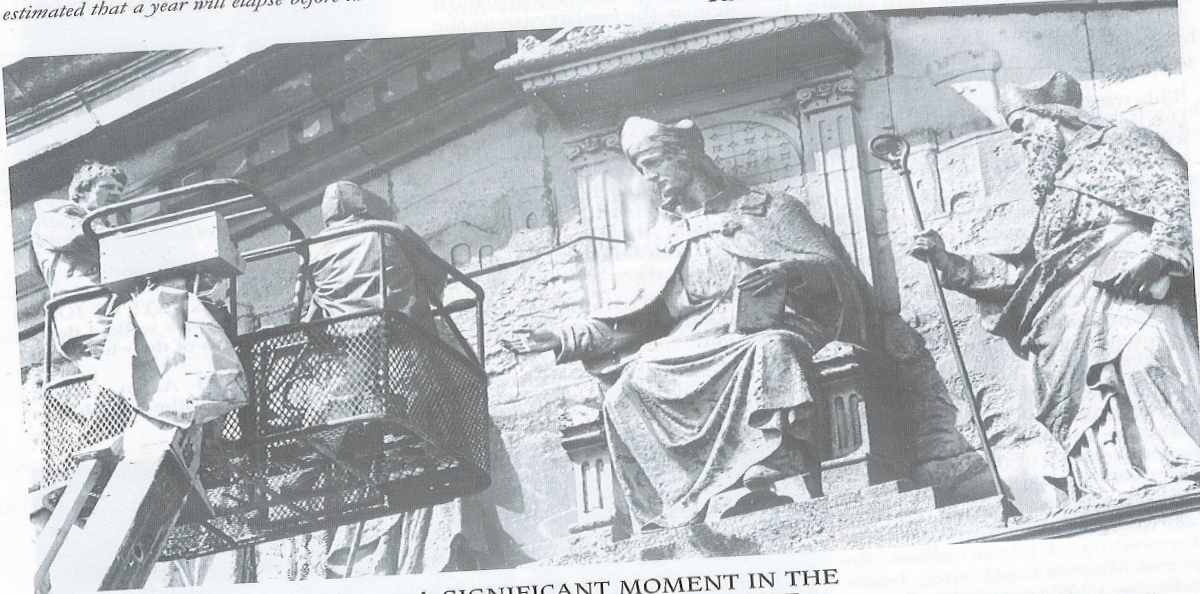


A MILLENNIUM MEMOIR 7

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 done 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 19th 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 waxed 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 the 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.





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.

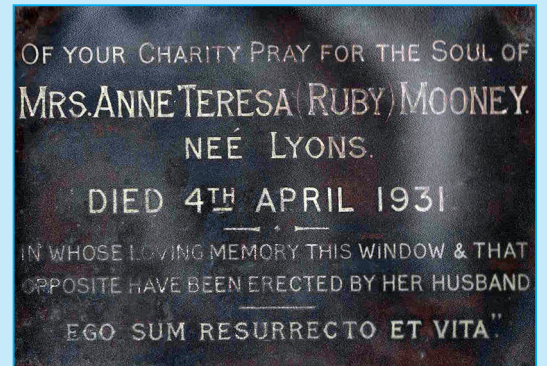
It took a full year of painstaking work by our Artist Brendan Mullins and our Craftsmen under the direction of Directors Willie Malone and Garrett O'Grady to complete this mammoth task. The completed sections of the windows were inspected by the supervising Architects and Members of St. Mel's Cathedral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





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

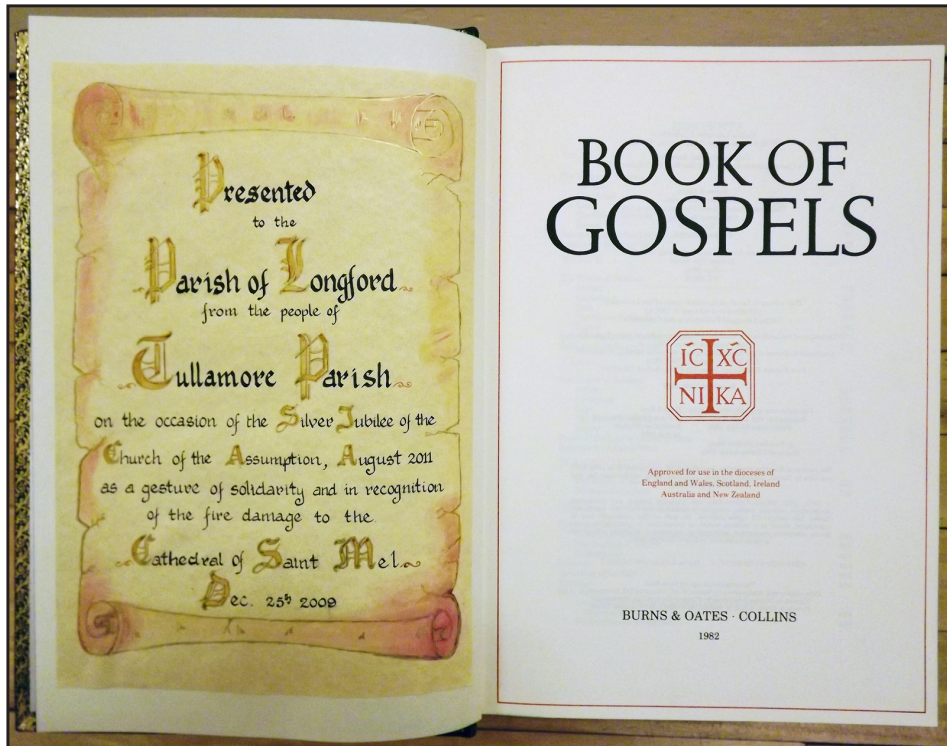
replica of what went before. Skilled plasterers have put in place a small section of plasterwork re-creating what many thought would never be restored.

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.



Gift of Gospel Unites Two Parishes



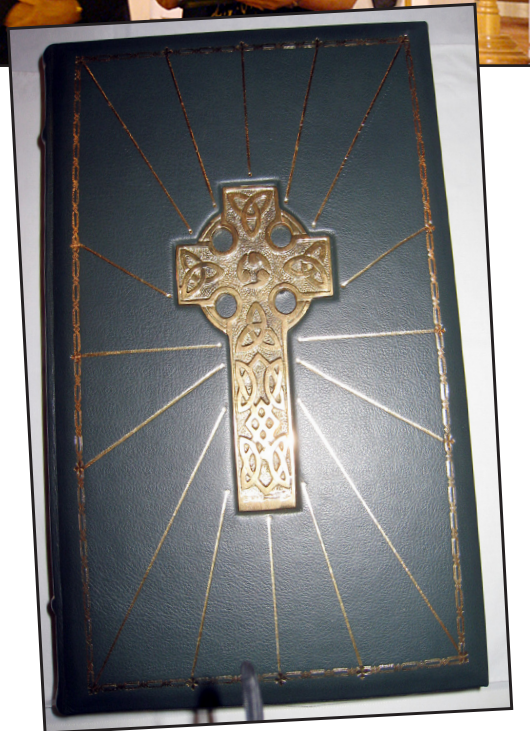
Teresa Neville, Pastoral Council, receives a beautifully embossed Book of Gospels from a Tullamore parishioner.



This year marks the 25th anniversary of the rededication of the Church of the Assumption, Tullamore following its reconstruction after fire had led to its destruction a few years earlier.

On the 25th of August 2011 a Day of Celebration was held in Tullamore parish. Bishop Michael Smith of the Diocese of Meath celebrated Mass along with past and present priests of the parish of Tullamore. Our own Bishop Colm O'Reilly had preached at the rededication of Tullamore church in 1986 and it was surely fitting that he was invited back to give the homily at this year's special celebration. The celebratory Mass was followed by a street party for the people of Tullamore.

Christmas 2009 saw our own beautiful Cathedral meet a similar fate as Tullamore Church had in the 1980s. As a gesture of solidarity with the people of our parish, the parish of Tullamore presented a beautifully bound Book of the Gospels to our parish. The presentation was made during the Celebratory Mass and was accepted on behalf of our parish by Pastoral Council members Teresa Neville and Bernie Mulligan.



SIGNIFICANT DATES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ST. MEL'S CATHEDRAL

- 1840 - Foundation Stone Laid
- 1846 - Side walls and pillars in place
- 1856 - Main building opened and dedicated for public worship
- 1858 - The Stations of the Cross were put in place.
- 1863 - Entrance Lobby and Campanile Tower were completed
- 1889 – 1893 - Entrance Portico with its great columns and entablature was completed.
- 1893 - St. Mel's Cathedral was solemnly consecrated on 19th May, exactly 53 years after the foundation stone was laid.
- 1910 - Dr Hoare helped to provide the chimes that ring out the time every quarter hour.
- 1914 - Giant Organ installed.
- 1932 – 1933 - Stained glass windows put in place
- 1977 - Rededication of the Cathedral after the Sanctuary was redesigned. The new Altar, Bishops Chair and the Canon Stalls are all of limestone. Behind the Bishops Chair is a large Tapestry designed by Ray Carroll and made by Killybegs Carpets Ltd. A painting by Ray Carroll hangs above the Blessed Sacrament Altar.
- 1983 - Dr Colm O'Reilly, as Bishop, saw the completion of the new Choir Gallery and the installation of the new Pipe Organ by Mr Kenneth Jones.
- 1985 - A new roof was put in place.
- 1986 - The ceilings in the side-aisles were replaced.
- 1997 - All windows were releaded.

Death of Dr Richard Hurley, Design Architect for Restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral

Many people were deeply shocked by the sudden death on Tuesday, 6th of December of Dr. Richard Hurley. Among those very deeply and immediately affected are ourselves, especially those in very regular contact with him in planning for the restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral on which he has been engaged since he was employed here in 2010. His death has deprived us of the services which he was still to give us. Our loss is great. Of course, the feeling of loss and sadness that we are experiencing are of a different kind from those of his wife, Bernardine, and their sons whose distress must be intense. We deeply sympathise with them. Richard Hurley was involved with us here many years ago when the sanctuary of St. Mel's was reordered to accommodate the new style of celebration of the liturgy. While he was no longer involved when that work on the Cathedral was completed, his original plan was clearly reflected in the end product. It had stood the test of time very well until it was destroyed by the fire of Christmas Day 2009. Richard entered the scene again last year when he was an enthusiastic applicant for the role of architect for the current restoration. When awarded the key role of Design Architect, he expressed his delight in being back again. At that time he promised me with the utmost confidence that he would achieve the best possible outcome. As soon as agreement was reached with the other partner architectural firm involved, Fitzgerald Kavanagh and Partners, he threw all his energies into the Association's mammoth task of agreeing a programme for the restoration. Since then he has continued untiringly to press on and meet targets. He was a man in a hurry and the speed with which he delivered his plans would have done credit to a man of half his age. He delivered his last presentation to the Diocesan Art and Architecture Committees on the 16th of November. When he said it was his last, he meant that this would be the one which would be the



The late Dr. Richard Hurley, Design Architect for restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral.

final part of his outline of his vision for the restoration. He had no idea that it would also be his last in a more final sense still. As so often happens in life when we see someone for the last time, as he concluded the presentation he just checked the time that he would need to get to the train and said 'good-bye', neither he nor we having any idea that we would not meet again on earth. We have now lost our Design Architect but not the plans he had so carefully prepared for us. He had, I would like to think, a sense of great satisfaction in reaching the end of the planning phase. I would like to think that achieving this stage in this particular project has somehow rounded off the long and fruitful career of Ireland's best and known and greatly respected Church architect. I would

like to think that this last of the 150 or so major projects of his life meant more to him than most. He had given to his full concentration and brought to it the experience of a lifetime as architect and the insight of many liturgists, of whom the late Father Sean Swayne, Director of the Centre for Pastoral Liturgy in Carlow, was the foremost. I am very touched by the fact the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois has just benefited in the double from the mature and experienced Richard Hurley, doyen of Church architects in Ireland. He was Design Architect for the splendidly restored St Mary's Church in Carrick-on-Shannon which was completed last year and has left us with the plans for St. Mel's Cathedral.

Many people in Longford met him when we had our Open Day on the 18th of September last. He was at the Cathedral Centre in the morning and afternoon and spoke with anyone who sought to speak to him about the model and the draft plans for the Cathedral on display. He was easily recognisable with his imposing presence, tall in stature and impressive in appearance. His gracious manner and willingness to listen to everyone must still be remembered, I believe. He stayed for a long time greeting and talking to people, a tiring exercise in itself but something to which he attached great importance.

I have known Richard Hurley for a very long time. In recent times it was good to have reason to meet with him very often. He was a truly an inspirational man, a man of deep faith and integrity. He was a man who has left a great legacy of fine work in the design of churches and other buildings of note. Among his writings is the beautifully illustrated Irish Church Architecture. We have good reason to be grateful that part of his legacy will enrich us. It is my confident hope that when St. Mel's Cathedral has been restored his contribution will be seen as his final gift not just to us but to the nation as well.

+Colm O'Reilly.



Open Day and Presentation of Plans for St. Mel's Cathedral

■ BISHOP COLM O'REILLY

The response to our invitation to come and see the interior of St. Mel's Cathedral greatly exceeded our expectations. We knew, of course, that there is great interest in this great treasure of the Diocese and of the country which we lost in an accidental burning on Christmas Day 2009. However, we needed to see that the concern of people in Longford and well beyond Longford has not diminished. The priests of Templemichael Parish and I are deeply grateful to all who made the effort to come and see the shell of our burned-out Cathedral for themselves. We have every reason to believe from the reaction that we got that all were appreciative of the effort made to accommodate this experience.

I personally did not hear anyone express surprise that this opportunity was not offered sooner. However, I was at pains to say to a lot of people that we could not have done so safely until now. We also feel that the time was right because of some signs of real progress. In particular we wanted people to see the restored plasterwork. This is indeed a sign of hope for the future.

We were pleased too that a model of how the interior of the Cathedral is likely to look was available for viewing. Many comments were made on this. All those who made comments did so with sincerity and with a wish to seek clarification on aspects of the proposed design on which they were unclear or about which they had reservations. In order to be helpful I would like to mention some of these comments, just some which stand out in my own mind.

The proposed location of the altar

I heard several people ask why it is proposed to bring the altar farther down the Cathedral than the altar which was installed in the 1970's.

The altar's location in a central place is intended to be a sign that during the celebration of Mass all the people truly participate. None are mere onlookers. The location of the altar will be a constant reminder to us of this fact.

Seating

Some concern was voiced about the loss of seating resulting from the new location of the altar. It is regrettable that we have to admit that we do not have the need for as much seating as we had in times past; so the loss of some seating will be less problematic, for that reason.

Whenever major celebrations call for additional seating there will be generous open space to take added temporary seating or afford standing room. I believe there will be no major problem encountered in this regard.

Location of Cathedral Organ and Choir

After much consultation with expert advisers, as well as the Cathedral Choir and Organist, it was agreed that the location proposed is the best possible. The advice we received was provided by Professor Gerard Gillen and Dr. John O'Keeffe who



An early image of how Sanctuary Area might look after restoration.

served as organist in St. Mel's Cathedral for two years and currently holds the position of Director of Music at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

Some concern was expressed about how well the sound of an organ in this location would be able to reach the entire Cathedral. Since this is a highly technical matter which requires specific advice from experts in sound transmission further investigation will be carried out to ensure that the opinions we have received stand up.

Benches or Chairs

Some drawings which were on display showed the Cathedral with suitably designed chairs rather than benches for seating. These drawings do not indicate that any decision on this matter has been taken.

The Cathedral Project Committee has no position on this and, while the Design Team expressed a preference for the use of chairs, the Committee will want to take into account what the views of the people are in this matter.

Tabernacle

Locating the tabernacle in a central position in the apse of the Cathedral seems to have been met with no objection. In fact it seems to have been warmly welcomed.

Some wondered why it should be necessary to use screens which are now redundant in the North transept and are to be relocated in that area.

The use of the screens in this place indicates that the Place of Reservation is not just part of the sanctuary but a sacred space with its own special dignity and atmosphere.

Baptismal Font

When a new Baptismal Font is introduced at the entrance to the Cathedral, some asked, would the old font which is located in the South porch still remain there? The answer is most certainly in the affirmative. This font is a part of the Cathedral's heritage and of special significance because it was used for many hundreds of christenings over the years.

Sanctuary Lamp

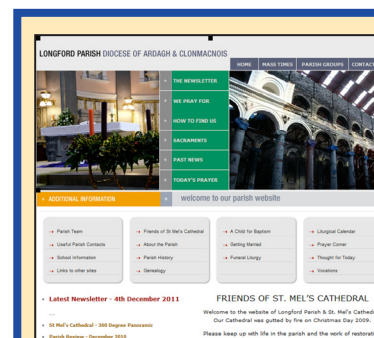
Will the Sanctuary Lamp which was used in the Cathedral for years be re-installed? At the time of writing I do not know if a lamp which was recovered after the fire is capable of being reused or not. One way or another, there certainly will be a red light calling attention to the tabernacle and the place of reservation.

Communicating The Message

St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee express their thanks to Fr. Padraig Kelliher and Tiernan Dolan for all their work in updating the public on the Restoration Project through the Parish website www.longfordparish.com. The website is regularly updated with news on the various stages of the Restoration Project. Log on to see a wonderful trove of photographs of the various developments throughout the past year.

We also say a sincere thanks to the Parish Review Committee for their commitment in publishing this supplement of the Parish Review for the Diocese. They are also maintaining great archives of all the material associated with the Restoration Project for the years ahead.

"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart, and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14)



For further information on the Cathedral restoration and updates on progress go to www.longfordparish.com