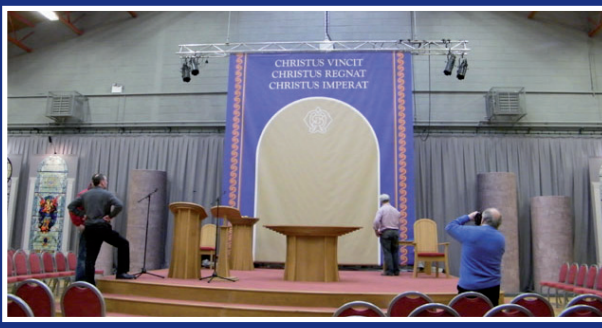


Sean and Eddie work on the window murals.



Our new tapestry is hung.



Pictured here are Eddie Kiernan, Jimmy Clabby and Edwin Kiernan who worked in the transition of St. Mel's Gym to St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.

“Compelled to help ... three generations of us had worked there”

EDDIE KIERNAN
speaks to Audrey Healy

“It was a nightmare,” says Longford man Eddie Kiernan, echoing the sentiments of many, when recalling that fateful day almost twelve months ago now when the town’s proudest monument, St. Mel’s Cathedral, went up in flames, in the early hours of Christmas morning, 2009. “I was about to start breakfast when Mary, my wife, rang me. She had gone to early mass at eight o’clock,” he recalls. “I was going to go to a later Mass. She said the Guards had stopped her and that there was a fire in the Cathedral. Because the roads were so bad at that time of year I thought when the phone rang, that maybe she had had a little ‘tip’. Anyway she said she’d come and collect me and we went down and round by the Ballinalee Road and into town that way - and that’s when I first saw it - the flames and the smoke - and I thought that’s it,” he says with a weary air of resignation.

Eddie says he simply felt compelled to help in some small way towards supporting the clergy in their time of loss. “I volunteered to help in the project here because my grandfather worked in the Cathedral

as a painter, my father worked in it and I worked in it, there was a deep rooted family history in it, three generations of us worked in it and I wanted to do something.... anything I could to help - I just felt that I had to do something and I said it to Fr. Tom that morning. Everybody was all over the place and in shock and I just heard at Mass one day what the plan was so I called up the next day and I then met up with the committee that was formed.”

Despite the desolation and tragedy of the fire, there’s a determination and unmistakable air of hope in Eddie’s voice. We’re conducting our interview in St. Mel’s College Gym which has, in the past few months, been spectacularly transformed into what has become a temporary church for the clergy and community of Longford and beyond, who have found themselves in a state of mourning for their place of worship since the events of the festive season last year.

Here, all around me there is colour and vibrancy - a beautifully crafted altar, intricately created locally by Irish Contract Seating in Dromod, Co. Leitrim; precise replicas of Harry Clarke stained glass windows which once hung so proudly in

the Cathedral and of course the majestic tapestry which was the centrepiece in the building and was created by Noel Strange. It is operated by remote control and was impressively replicated, thanks to Turners Print in Longford town. The imitation pillars were crafted from photographs of the original structures which once took pride of place in St. Mel’s Cathedral and were manufactured by Eddie’s son, Edwin.

To look at the interior around me and when Mass is celebrated in it to a full congregation, it’s hard to believe that throughout the week this room is a fully functioning gym to secondary school students in St. Mel’s College and has to be meticulously transformed each and every Friday. “We originally had a team of volunteers meeting every Friday and Sunday to put out the chairs and the hall now holds six hundred people and we’re delighted with how it looks,” says Eddie. “As a committee, we thought about different ideas and the college then came forward with the gym. It has to be transformed every week which is just amazing. We worked out a system, and stayed for six to eight weeks, getting into a routine, to get the feel of it. We feel the colours



The scene is set for the First Mass.

are rich and warm and it looks intimate and inviting.”

Eddie believes the loss of the Cathedral was felt by many people, from both far and wide. “It was felt by the entire community,” he says with immense feeling. “It was such a loss to the town, to real Longford people.

People were baptised, confirmed and married in the Cathedral and even those who aren’t church goers will still feel that loss - but thankfully the main structure is still there.

Only recently we were talking about putting a star up for Christmas and we were taking measurements and talking about the beautiful stonework and looking at it and the detail is unbelievable - it would have been terrible if we had lost the whole structure.”

Another notable feature of the décor at the college is a black cross, which was made from the charred remains of the Christmas Day fire. “It came from a rafter on the roof and that was also carefully done by

Irish Contract Seating in Dromod,” explains Eddie. “They cut it down to size and it’s a lovely sign of something hopeful. I’m very proud of how the place looks now and it was a pleasure to be involved. The team of volunteers who were involved are wonderful people and I think it’s great to see this place full every Sunday. There is a lovely atmosphere, the sanctuary is lovely and it is nice to have the altar in the centre, people feel that they are a part of the celebration.”



Noel Strange keeps a watchful eye on the design and set up of St. Mel's Cathedral Centre

“I have never worked on a job where there was so much goodwill”

NOEL STRANGE
speaks to Audrey Healy

Graphic Designer and Longford native Noel Strange played a pivotal role in the transformation of St. Mel’s College as you see it now, when you attend the celebration of Mass every weekend and he is immensely proud of his participation and that of the people of the town.

He recalls the events of Christmas Day 2009 as though it were yesterday. “I was at home when the news broke and somebody rang me,” he tells us. “I live in the town and was absolutely shocked, as everybody was. I went straight down there and was had a chance to witness it. It was kind of like a surreal movie.”

His first hand experience of that ‘surreal movie’ spurred him on to volunteer to help design the interior of the temporary place of worship in whatever way he could.

“I actually got involved through Mona Considine because I’d done some work with the Backstage Theatre through my theatre and stage work and she was aware of the kind of work that I would do, which

is basically big display work,” explains Noel. “It was from my experience of stage setting that she asked me to get involved so the whole brief was to transform the gym into a Cathedral like setting. She knew the sort of graphic design I had branched out into - big backgrounds and stage work.”

Noel’s CV is impressive and he was responsible for the replicated tapestry which now takes pride of place over the beautiful altar in the temporary church and took weeks to craft.

“We were very pleased with the finished product. We reproduced it working from a range of photographs and knew it would be possible,” he says, “even though the photographs were at times, a little grainy. We had to work quite closely with the printers on the tapestry as well as with the stained glass windows which we also replicated, from original photographs.”

A challenging task? “Well we got there in the end,” he says, “if you take the religious aspect out of it it’s really just a big stage in effect and it was just a matter of designing the gym as a stage setting. I made a model and a layout of what it would like and it grew from there.”

The most heartening aspect of the project for Noel, was undoubtedly the positive attitude of the local community who were determined to help in any way they could.

“I have never worked on a job where there was so much goodwill”, he insists without hesitation. “If you asked an electrician if they could move a wire he’d say ‘of course!’ he laughs! “Anything that could be done was done! I’ve never worked on a job like that before and I never will again,” he states simply.

Noel believes the immense grief of the local community spurred them on to help them recreate their place of worship.

“The huge loss felt by the people ... that was the motivation ... and the fact that people were so devastated to lose all the imagery of the Cathedral - I really wanted to get as much of it back for them or at least the reproduction of it back for them.

“That’s why we recreated the pillars and the tapestry and the stained glass windows as best we could for all those generations who feel such loss. We wanted to recreate some familiarity for them.”