



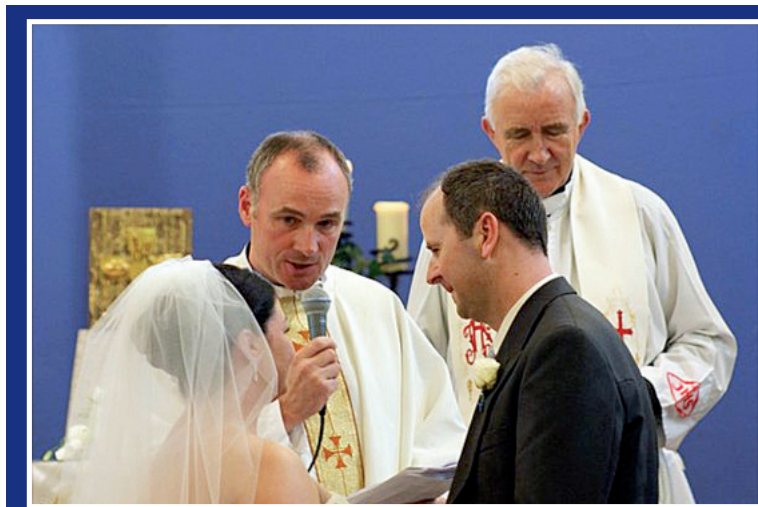
Two very different wedding days

By Fran McNulty

It is the worst fear of most brides, the church you intend getting married in is destroyed by fire. Worse again when it's one of the most iconic in the country and you've lived under its shadow your entire life. For most Longfordians, getting married in St. Mel's is a rite of passage, a dream, and for generations it has been a reality. But last Christmas morning that reality was shattered for hundreds of engaged couples who intended marrying there over the coming years. In any given year around forty couples marry in the Cathedral, but for some that dream will never become a reality. In Teffia Park, news of the fire reached the Rhatigan family, like many, via text message.

Melanie Rhatigan was due to marry her fiancé Gerard Rafferty in the Cathedral during the summer. She met Gerard at college in Galway sixteen years ago and was spending Christmas at home with her family in Teffia Park. "It was such a strange morning; the presents were left unopened and we stood in the back garden staring at the smoke billowing into the sky. We could see huge plumes of smoke coming from the body of the church; it was strange to have such a sombre mood in the house on Christmas morning."

But for Elaine Sheahan the news had a far more immediate impact. She was due to marry Darren Duignan in the Cathedral four days later. Darren, a long time resident of Longford town, had celebrated all the sacraments from Baptism to Confirmation there and marrying in the Cathedral, whose bells had chimed in the Duignan household for decades, was very important to both of them. Darren broke news of the fire to Elaine at around half six on



Melanie Rhatigan and Gerard Rafferty exchange their vows.

Christmas morning. He had been helping the priests of the parish in the hours following the discovery of the fire and his phone call to Elaine to tell her the Cathedral was destroyed shocked her. "It was the last thing you expected to happen four days before your wedding and the fact such an iconic and important building had gone up in smoke was really hard to deal with."

The couple were married as planned on December 29th in St. Mary's Church in Newtownforbes. "The day was still very special and it wouldn't have mattered if we got married in a field, but there is always a little piece of us very sorry that we couldn't get married in the Cathedral." However, Elaine added, "We both have had a strong connection with the Cathedral, Darren having lived so close and I had sung there at Masses for many years, but the world of Bishop Colm and the priests of the parish had

been turned upside down and that put things in perspective for us." Both couples have been quick to praise the way the parish team dealt with the fire. "Despite trying to find a new space for Masses, Fr Tom Healy, who married us, worked hard to make sure we could get married as close to the Cathedral as possible," said Melanie, who was named after the patron saint of the Diocese having been born on the feast day of St. Mel.

"We settled on the College Chapel which has a stained glass window of St. Mel overlooking the altar. We had no idea at the time that it would become a very special and significant space to us. Fr. Tom and Gerry, the Sacristan, looked into it before the wedding but we only found out on the day that it was the first wedding ever in the chapel. We thought that maybe some of the staff would have been married there



Elaine Sheahan and Darren Duignan celebrate their wedding day.

before so it was even more special to know that it was a little bit of history too."

Despite the initial shock and turmoil Elaine Sheahan and Darren Duignan have similar praise, "We lost the venue in which we had always wanted to get married, but the priests of the parish had lost a lot more than that. Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan was so strong and how he ever managed to get through things and still manage to organise a wedding four days later we'll never know."

"Fr. Ciaran McGovern in Newtownforbes was also very kind to us and to them and all the people who helped we will be eternally grateful." Both couples managed to deal with the upset of losing the Cathedral a short time before their weddings well, but still thoughts of the limestone shell that houses so many memories, special

occasions and traditions remain high on their mind.

Melanie Rhatigan vividly recalls the first time she saw the building smouldering.

"As I looked in I could see the brass cover of the christening font in the hallway where I was christened, it was hanging askew. It was only as I saw the daylight streaming through that it hit home that the entire roof was gone and the entire space was flooded with smoke and daylight."

Elaine and Darren both agree that they looked forward to seeing the Cathedral reopened once more.

"It will be difficult but it would be nice to see it restored as close to its original format as possible. It would be nice if it was not too modern; it's difficult to imagine St. Mel's much different to how it always was."

First Baptisms in St. Mel's College Chapel - 31st Jan 2010



Baptism of baby Aileen Grace Hannon. Parents: Graham and Cassandra Hannon



Sean MacEoin and Alice Cooney celebrated their wedding in St. Mel's Cathedral. This photo of their wedding, June 22 1922, was taken outside the Cathedral. The Guard of Honour is provided by the National Army. Sean MacEoin (also known as John Joseph McKeon) was the celebrated military leader of the Irish Free State and twice a candidate for the Presidency of Ireland for the Fine Gael party, (1945 and 1959). Those campaigns, although not successful, gave the Fine Gael party additional credibility because of MacEoin's strong showing at the polls. MacEoin was also the commander of the Longford Flying Column. He served in the Dail and subsequently held two portfolios in the Irish Government, Minister for Defense and Minister for Justice. He was known as the 'Blacksmith of Ballinalee' after the county Longford village from which he came.



Baptism of baby Viktoria Pompova. Parents: Anton and Kathrina Pompa