



Cathedral

By Thomas Lyons

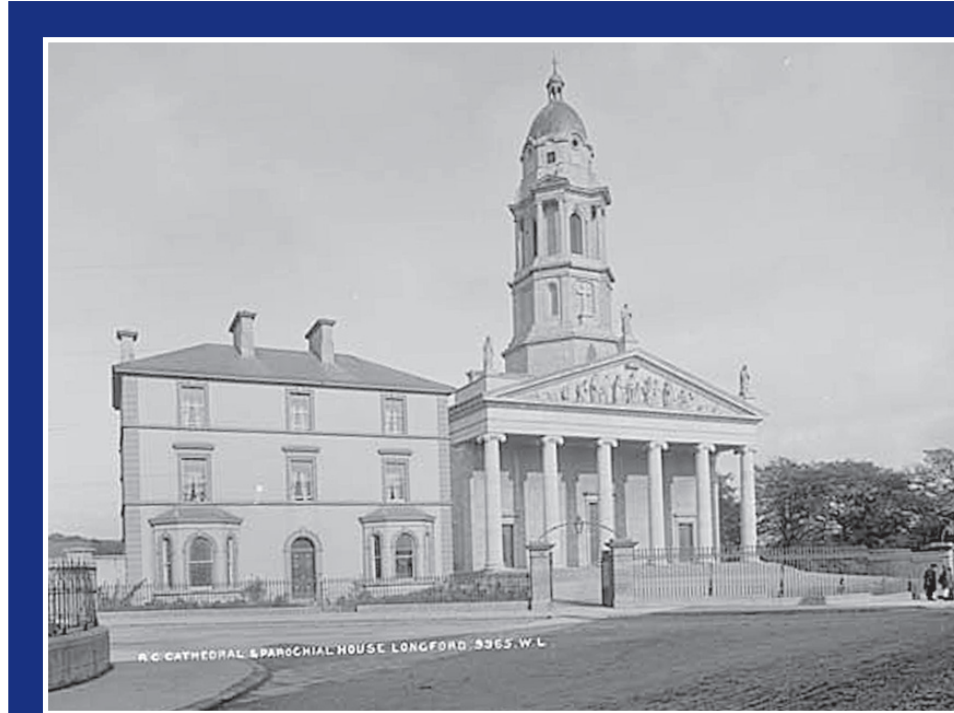
The Cathedral Church of St. Mel was intended to be a remarkable building from the outset. Looking not just to Ireland for inspiration, but to Europe as a whole, Bishop O'Higgins in 1839 set out to create a Cathedral that "[when] finished it will be the chastest, most extensive and most elegant church of modern times in any part of the United Kingdom". The exterior and interior layout and design drew from churches in Paris and Rome, including the Madeleine in Paris and both St. John Lateran and the Pantheon in Rome. The choice of Classical architecture rather than the Gothic Revival, being made popular by AWN Pugin in other cathedrals and churches at that time, harked back to the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome and the foundation of the Catholic church.

Organ Gallery

The interior has a typical basilica layout, with a large central nave flanked by side-aisles, terminating in a broad sanctuary with a curved, or apsidal, wall. Within this wall are deep niches designed to house statues to important religious figures, including St. Mel and the Blessed Virgin Mary. The interior had a beautiful plaster vaulted ceiling, with details picked out in gold leaf. The painting and gilding of the ceiling was originally undertaken by James Hodkinson, of Limerick. Over the doorway was the organ gallery, and the decorated pipes of the romantic organ was an uplifting sight to all those leaving the Cathedral after Mass. Brass lamps were placed in between each column to illuminate the interior in the evening and during the winter months. The central aisle and entrance porches were floored by an intricate mosaic with floral and religious designs.

The Architects and Builders

The original architect to bring Dr. O'Higgins vision to life was renowned Irish architect, Joseph Benjamin Keane (d.1859) along with the principal contractor, John Mullins.



As it was in the beginning.



Original interior of St. Mel's Cathedral.

The 200 foot-high campanile, or bell-tower, was designed by John Bourke, who completed the works in 1863 to his own design, rather than that originally designed by J.B. Keane.

The architect who completed the exterior, from 1889 to 1893, was George Coppinger Ashlin, son-in-law of the great Victorian architect AWN Pugin. It was Ashlin who

designed the great portico with its six magnificent Ionic columns and pediment housing the scene of the 'Consecration of St. Mel as a bishop'. Above the pediment are three sculptures; the Sacred Heart (funded by donations from the children of the Diocese), flanked on either side by St. Mel and St. Ciarán, who founded the great monastery at

Clonmacnois. Interestingly, Ashlin had hoped to erect the portico using cast-iron to a new design, but eventually it was agreed to return to the original vision, as set out by Dr. O'Higgins. The builder of the portico was Meade & Co., with the carvings on the pediment sculpted by George Smyth of Dublin. The original communion rail was by

Edmund Sharpe and brass communion gates were by John McGloughlin. Kelly & Sons, Earl St., also carried out work on the Cathedral during this time.

In the 20th century, further changes took place in the Cathedral, with Ralph Henry Byrne undertaking designs for the mortuary chapel in the 1930s. From 1975 to 1977 the Sanctuary was reorganised in

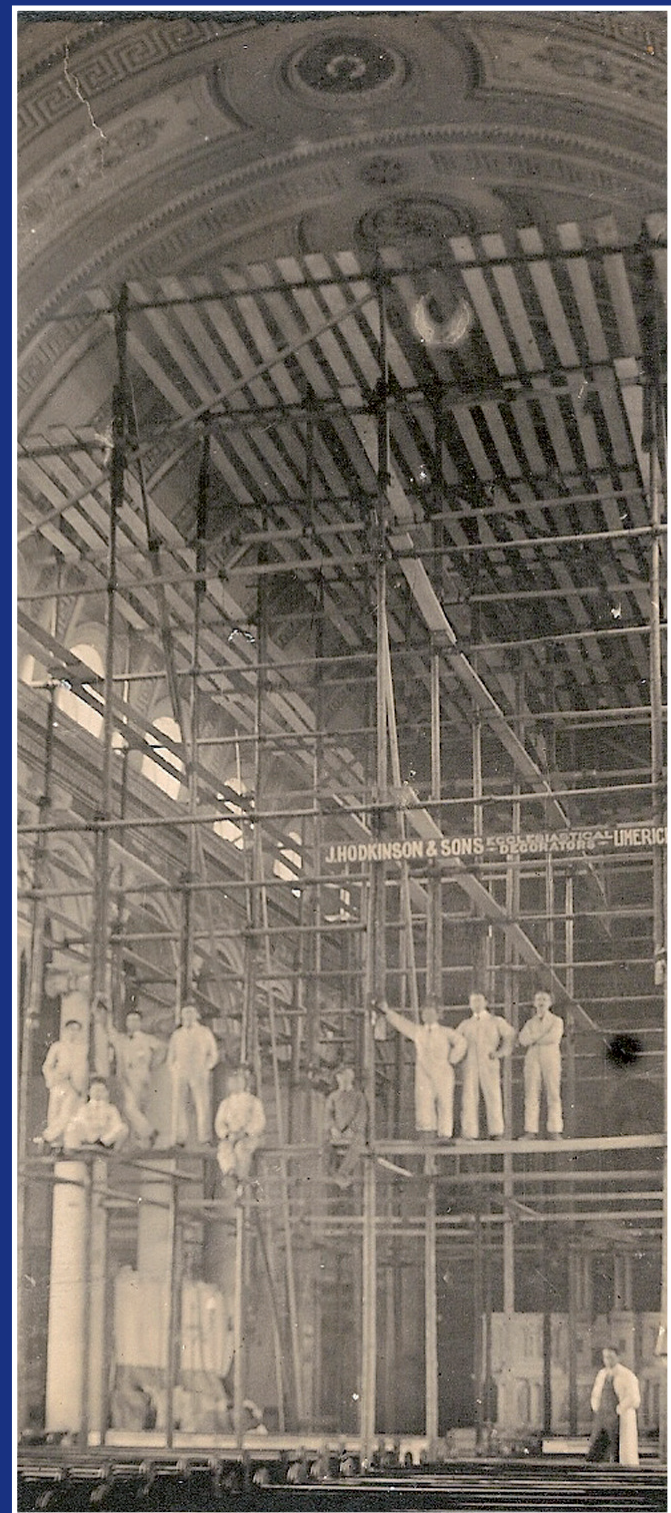
line with post-Vatican II liturgy. The architects for this were Wilfred Cantwell and Richard Hurley. Ray Carroll designed the magnificent tapestry showing the Coming of Christ in Glory; the tapestry was woven by 'Killybegs Carpets'.

Ray Carroll also designed the backdrop of the 'Supper at Emmaus' which stood over the

Blessed Sacrament altar. Imogen Stuart carved the new lectern and altar for the redesigned sanctuary.

The main contractor for this work was P.J. McLoughlin with Frank Rennick, Hugh Brady and Noel McGeeney as sub-contractors.

The new pipe organ and choir gallery was erected by Kenneth Jones of Bray in 1983.



Cathedral Painters 1924.