



## The Procession of Crosses and Sacred Parish Stones

The now retired photographer Michael Sheahan brought back memories when he retrieved from his photo archives pictures of the entrance procession to the ordination of Bishop Colm O'Reilly. It began when Fr Pat Earley Adm visited St Oliver's Technical school in Longford as it was about to close for the Easter holidays of 1983. Fr Earley came to the woodwork room with a special request. He had with him a sketch by Fr Sean Casey of a cross 50 inches (127 cm) high with a shield back and front. The crosses made of wood were to be carried together with a sacred stone from each parish in the diocese in the entrance procession for the Episcopal ordination Mass of Rev Fr Colm O'Reilly as Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois in St. Mel's Cathedral on April 10, 1983.

Fr Earley explained that if we in the Tech could make the crosses that painter John Kiernan, had volunteered to paint on the name of each parish on the shields. As there are forty one parishes in the diocese it was quite a piece of work to be ready some eight days later. Over the next week as the crosses were being made the blank shields, two for each cross of mahogany face plywood, were ferried

almost every day to and from the Tech to John Kiernan's house where he painted on the parish name on each. Then the finished shields were returned to the woodwork room to be pinned and glued on to the crosses and a coat of varnish applied.

On each visit to John, now an old retired man delighted to be part of the coming event, he would regale us with tales of his experiences of former liturgical events. From when as a young man with a firm in Dublin that prepared the setting of the platform and back drop in the Phoenix Park for the Eucharistic Congress in 1932 and later on the painting of the cathedral ceiling by the Kiernan brothers during the reign of Bishop McNamee in 1962.

Meanwhile as the crosses were being made each parish was at work painting and decorating the specially selected parish stone, that was light enough to be carried and large enough to be beautified with some special symbol of historic interest from the ruins of Abbeylara to the mystic symbols of Clonmacnoise. Killoe's holy well at Cartron to the ancient See of Ardagh.

On that beautiful spring Sunday of ordination two representatives from each parish one carrying a

cross and the other a sacred stone, led the entrance procession from the presbytery into the cathedral, up the centre aisle and fanned out around the altar. And ever since that historic day for the past twenty seven years at diocesan masses and ceremonies, especially Holy Week and Easter time, the crosses were taken from the Cathedral Museum where they were on display with the parish stones and placed on the cathedral pillars to reflect and represent the diocesan parishes.

The parish stones would have survived the fire but they would have had their special parish identity symbols obliterated and are now somewhere among the debris that was removed from the cathedral after the fire while the forty one crosses with their parish name shields, so carefully prepared by John Kiernan and the technical school woodworkers for that historic ceremony in St Mel's cathedral, all perished in the fire.

Our thanks to Michael Sheahan who was photographer on the day on retrieving from his photo archives the photo negatives of the event and to Carl Sullivan for getting the negatives developed into super quality photographs.

### The Bells of St. Mel's

Written By: Grace Elise Iris Farrell, Lisduff, Longford

*On the birth of our Saviour,  
A snowy wonderland we captured.  
A time of reflection, a time of rapture.  
Peace and Solitude were indulgently  
interrupted,  
As the red hot flames quickly erupted.*

*A historic day, so duly unwelcome,  
Of unlucky merits its harsh footprints came  
from.  
Our graceful Cathedral so tall and power-  
ful,  
Now mimicked a resemblance to Beelze-  
bub's castle.*

*Through its thunderous roars its sizzling  
cracks,  
Our lonely tears and heartfelt pangs.  
Longford hearts cried out in anguish,  
For their sacred ground they could no  
longer lavish.*

*Of centuries old back to the years of the  
blight,  
A trying time of hunger and strife.  
The pillars secured and the vision so bright,  
Its majestic reverence was brought to life.*

*Longford people are proud and grateful,  
For the joyous memories already given;  
By that loyal building we can call our own,  
A home for many who are alone.*

*So let's lift our spirits on this fine spring  
day,  
And listen to the birds sing away.  
For with pride in our hearts and a helping  
hand to the fore,  
The Bells of St. Mel's will ring once more.*

### The Bells Of Old St. Mel's

By James Gorham and Mel Crowe ( Busy Fingers Band )

*In the year of 1856  
In the heart of Longford town  
They built St. Mel's Cathedral  
The jewel in her crown  
Forty thousand gathered round  
To worship and rejoice  
And hail the pride of Longford  
Ardagh and Clonmacnois*

*They built the campanile tower in 1893  
And hung mighty bells inside  
They called out loud and free  
People came from far and near  
Their beauty to behold  
A history to be written  
A story to be told*

*Here's to the bells of old St. Mel's  
You'll hear the people say  
They welcomed us to worship here  
Each and every day  
Though burning flames may break our hearts  
From ashes she will soar  
And we know the bells of old St Mel's  
Will ring for us of once more*

*A raging fire ripped through its heart  
As the snow lay on the ground  
The mighty bells fell silent  
Not an echo or a sound  
But as the dawn was breaking  
ON this the Saviours Day  
A thousand people gathered round  
And they began to pray*

*Now the fire is over  
The walls still proudly stand  
As people come together  
To lend a helping hand  
For although there's emptiness inside  
And the loss no one can tell  
Like the Phoenix we will rise again  
TO the Bells of old St. Mel's*

### Important events in the history of St Mel's Cathedral

**1838 (6 May):**

Bishop William O'Higgins made the first appeal for funds.

Carrara marble was planned and erected.

**1889-'93:**

The portico (pillars at the front) was erected.

**1840 (19 May):**

The foundation stone was laid at a ceremony attended by as many as 40,000 people.

**1893 (19 May):**

St Mel's was consecrated, after being fully completed.

**1846:**

The side-walls and pillars were completed, but work stopped because of the onset of the Great Famine.

**1913:**

A new organ was purchased.

**1853:**

Bishop John Kilduff began fund-raising again.

**1932-'33:**

Stained-glass windows were installed, including two from the Harry Clarke Studio, Dublin.

**1856 (24 September):**

The main part of St Mel's was consecrated.

**1940:**

Centenary celebrations.

**1857:**

The first organ was installed.

**1977:**

Re-dedication after the remodelling of the sanctuary.

**1860:**

Bishop Kilduff launched a further appeal for funds to build the bell-tower and entrance vestibules.

**1983:**

New gallery and pipe-organ installed.

**1863:**

The bell-tower and entrance vestibules were completed.

**1990:**

Celebrations to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone.

**1867-'70:**

The high altar made of

**2009 (25 December):**

Severely damaged by fire.

### ON CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING

(with apologies to John Betjeman)

**"Seven units of the fire brigade are fighting a fire in St. Mel's Cathedral, Longford. Traffic has been diverted". 8.00 am News RTE 1 Christmas Day 2009.**

*And is it true? And is it true  
This most distressing tale of all,  
The vaulted ceiling, mauve and blue,  
The baby in an ox's stall?  
The polished stone, the gracious chimes  
Engulfed in flames this Christmas time?*

*And is it true? For if it is  
No organ swell, no voices sing  
From pews and lofty galleries,  
Their sweet and joyful Christmas  
hymns,  
No fervent prayers, petitions sent,  
No sign of peace, so kindly meant.*

*The Prince of Peace, where will he  
dwell,  
Where lay his head in frosty air?  
No soaring tower, no peal of bells  
Can with this single Truth compare,  
The dwelling that he makes His own  
He builds from us – the living stones.*

**This piece by Fr. Seán Casey is based upon John Betjeman's poem "Christmas". John Betjeman (1906 -1984) Poet and Church Conservationist.**



Faithful to the past - building for the future

### Restoration Reserve Fund

Since the fire at St. Mel's Cathedral we have been very much strengthened by the outpouring of goodwill and support that we have received from so many people. In response to people's generosity a separate account had been established in the name of 'Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral.'

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 if you have made a donation as we would like to acknowledge your contribution. You can contact us at [stmelcathedral@eircom.net](mailto:stmelcathedral@eircom.net) **Longford Parish Finance Committee: Pat Chapman, Mary Donlon, Francis Hanley, Fr. Thomas Healy, Tom Mulligan and Evelyn Quinn.**

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