

— A Special Publication recording the Christmas Day Fire 2009 —

St. Mel's Cathedral

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YEAR ENDING 2010



Christmas Day 2009 will forever be remembered by the people of Longford town and the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois as the day that fire took hold of our beloved Cathedral. St. Mel's played a very central role in the lives of generations of our parish and diocesan community - our loss is immense. We are fully committed to restoring St. Mel's Cathedral into the beautiful and gracious building that it was. We are aware that it will take a lot of work over some years but we look forward to having a wonderful re-opening one day and having a worthy place for our worship for generations to come. This publication aims to give you a comprehensive overview of the fire, the events that took place immediately afterwards and the progress that has been made in beginning the restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral.





Cathedral fire shattered

By Ciaran Mullooly

Christmas Eve meant only one thing in our house when I was growing up in the 1970s. The ten mile trip to Longford town on December 24th had a dual role with two absolutely crucial tasks which always had to be completed when we got there – whether we were driving in hail, wind or snow at that stage. The family's green Volkswagen Beetle would be parked on the back of the Market Square when we arrived in the town. My father and myself would then be bundled off to St. Mel's Cathedral for pre-Christmas confessions and my mother would head instead to Vaughan's shop on Ballymahon Street where her cousin Josie McKenna would have hidden away at least one additional half ton of toys for my increased enjoyment that night or during the following day's festivities.

Going into Josie's kitchen on Christmas Eve was always far more exciting than actually going into the shop. For starters there were far more toys in the kitchen and under the stairs and in the hall and upstairs and around the back. Piles and piles of boxes were to be found here on Christmas Eve and, to a young child of barely nine or ten years of age with a highly creative mind filled with adventure and elf-driven excitement, this was better than any cave that Santa could ever have put up for annual yuletide distribution purposes. This was massive - a major forerunner to anything that Toys-R-US could ever have dreamed of putting together with dozens of fascinating and challenging toys and games just waiting there to be explored – and a friendly face too with a cup of tea for my mother (another Gilleran) to go and meet with. Simply put - this was heaven and we all loved it.

The trip to St. Mel's was a different proposition. For starters it was never really known to us as St. Mel's. It was always described by both my father and my mother in what I would describe as fairly clinical terms as 'the Cathedral' – nothing more, nothing less, just THE CATHEDRAL. To a young and fairly harmless child from the country THE CATHEDRAL was a daunting place to visit – a vast open and vacant auditorium with gigantic intimidating columns rising out of sight into the sky on either side and cold, marble and stone everywhere else. Warm, it most certainly, was not.

The atmosphere in the place was also less than memorable at this stage on Christmas Eve. Long before the midnight mass events would kick off (and the crowds would flock here) this was a time when the lights in this great iconic building would be dimmed, practically turned off altogether, and small groups of those seeking redemption would huddle into the seats along the wall on either side of the mega-pillars of stone waiting for their turn to confess – the long periods of silence in the place only punctuated about every eight minutes or so by the abrupt and crushing noise of the sliding grill in the confessional – moving across and back in one short sharp movement as another happy customer came face to face with the cleric he hoped could redeem a lost soul in good time for the big events of the following day.

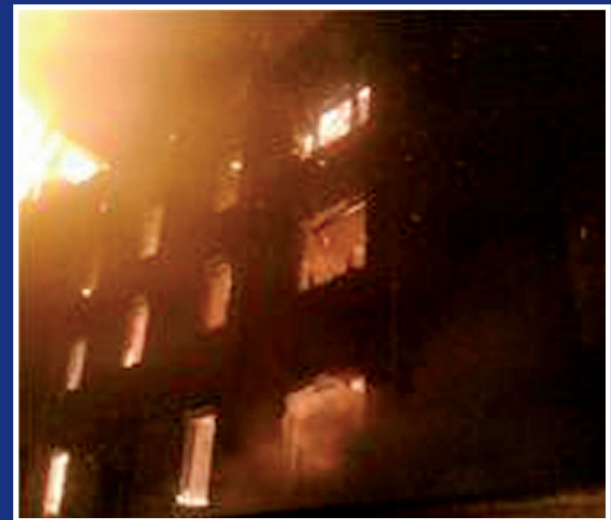
The truth is that for the best part of fifteen years this was the way I always spent Christmas Eve – the visit to the Cathedral and Josie McKenna's shop religiously observed anytime after 3 o'clock on the day itself and the job done long before eight o'clock that night when MIM 616 was turned for home on the square and faced back for Harbour Row, the metropolis of Killashee and onwards into the sophisticated homeland of George Lane's Borough in Rathcline. The country crowd would be home at that stage – the townies left to celebrate the Lord's birth in their own exclusive Cathedral. St. Mary's Church may not have been quite so grand but it was OUR chapel and it was home and we were glad to be there.

As we are now in full confessional mode - the second piece of truth that must be stated here is that I never actually stood in or outside St. Mel's Cathedral at any point on Christmas Day for any of the forty five years of this writer's life – until that historic and tragic day on December 25th in 2009 when I drove in to meet a camera man outside the building and watched the place burn alongside hundreds of other deeply shocked and emotional people from the town and surrounds. The truth is - I woke up on Christmas morning in the bosom of my own family out in our new home by the river Shannon in Ballyleague with a four year old boy in a most excited state of affairs – eyes fixed on a chimney stack and ready to go. With my early morning responsibilities surrounding the man in a red coat with the white beard, I missed at least five phone calls from the Cathedral Administrator Tom Healy and a handful of friends around the town and it was only after the last of Bryan Mullooly's small shareholdings in modern Irish toy companies was disclosed that I turned my attention to the fire and the destruction that went with it.

My first reaction to the news of the blaze and the devastation it brought was one of complete and utter disbelief. On the phone I cross examined a friend from the fire service time and time again about the scale of the destruction and, even though, he kept repeating that I simply had to come in and see it (even on Christmas



Ciaran Mullooly interviews Bishop Colm O'Reilly on the morning of the fire.



An early picture of the fire at the rear of the building.



Smoke arises from the burning building.

day) I don't think it really hit home how really really bad it was until I was parked in the car park across the road an hour later and stood back in complete horror to watch the bellows of smoke heading up into the pale Longford skyline.

On the phone Bishop Colm O'Reilly was clearly shaken but polite. He would soon be leaving St. Michael's on the Ballinalee road to say mass at the Temperance Hall but, of course, he would come in early and meet me and, of course, he would try and talk about what had happened to RTE News – even if his broken voice revealed just how sad and serious it had now become. At the Cathedral itself there were handfuls of people simply standing around when I arrived – standing in silence and murmuring among friends about the scale of it all – the damage done so quickly to a building that had taken such a long time to the built in the first place. Then the memories began . . .

My cameraman at the scene was John McMorrow – a Leitrim man who had driven from Sligo to capture the historic moment when St. Mel's literally went up in smoke and he scoured the area for a better vantage point to show the perilous position on the roof in better clarity and, the more he circled the building the

worse the images became, – strikingly scorched cherubs appearing in his viewfinder through the fractured panes of glass as the damage became abundantly clear.

The Bishop was quiet-spoken but fiercely emotional and surprisingly determined when our cameras rolled. Yes – the building was woefully wounded after a night when talk of catastrophes during the Midnight mass ceremonies formed such an ironic backdrop but YES, YES, YES, the Cathedral would be refurbished and re-built and it would once again be gloriously restored – of that he seemed to have little doubt. With that – he was gone, walking calmly away from the cameras at the gates of St. Mel's College towards the Cathedral smoke and the Temperance Hall with his briefcase in his hand and only stopping occasionally as parishioners wandered over to his side, arms outstretched as if to sympathise with the chief mourner at a terrible funeral.

In the next half hour or so we recorded interviews with some of those who had gathered in complete shock. It sounds slightly melodramatic (and probably a bit over the top now) but most of them were crying. I remember interviewing three or four people in a row who were simply choking back the tears as they tried



old-style Christmas habits



Crowds of people watch in horror at the early morning fire.



Weather hampers the work copy.



The fire continues to blaze.

After the fire: THE DAMAGE

Courtesy of St. Mel's Cathedral Exhibition, Longford County Library

On a bitterly cold Christmas morning in 2009 the unthinkable happened – St. Mel's Cathedral was devastated by fire. The blaze caused immense damage to the Cathedral interior and the roof to collapse. It also resulted in the loss of the majority of the artefacts in the Diocesan Museum located at the rear of the building.

The fire began at the rear of the Cathedral, sometime in the early hours of the morning.

By the time the fire was detected at 5.11am on Christmas morning, the blaze had entered the main body of the Cathedral. This huge space with its vast supply of fresh oxygen gave fuel to the fire and soon it became a raging inferno. Flames could be seen shooting 60 metres into the air and all the people of the town could do was watch the fire engulf their beautiful Cathedral.

Many Fire Brigade crews from Longford and the surrounding counties valiantly fought to control the blaze, but the sheer scale of the fire and difficulties in maintaining a constant water supply, as a result of the uncharacteristic cold snap which Longford was suffering from at the time, meant that by 7am it was clear that the interior of the proud building was now lost. As a testament to the skill and quality of craftsmanship that went into building St. Mel's, the exterior appeared to be largely unscathed, with the exception of smoke damage to the rear walls and campanile (bell-tower).

After much investigation by Garda and Insurance forensic experts, the cause of the fire was deemed to have been accidental and turned out to have a simple explanation; given the exceptionally cold weather the heating system was running for a longer period and at a higher temperature than usual. This led to the old brick flue becoming super-heated and igniting old flammable material in the flue once the heating had been turned off. Embers escaped the flue into the sacristy, where the fire originally took hold. It was a very unfortunate accident as the boiler and burner were found to be in excellent condition and properly maintained and serviced. Indeed, the fire never affected the boiler room at all!

The fire caused extensive damage to the walls, plasterwork, columns and marble decoration and statues in the Cathedral, as well as to those stored in the crypt below. Much of the timber objects, such as the seats and confessionals as well as the organ were destroyed. However, the damage was not absolute and some surprising things did survive the fire including some brass items which have now been thankfully restored.

Unfortunately the damage to the Museum was very severe. Precious objects that were lost included historic vestments, photographs, items brought back by missionaries from far-flung lands and the remarkable collection of Penal crosses. Thankfully, 200 items from the collection of 490 artefacts housed there survived the fire to some extent. These items tended to be metal objects, such as the silver altarware, the Limoges Crozier and book shrine of St. Caillinn, which are undergoing conservation by the National Museum.

to say something meaningful on the day that was in it and others just waved us away. Marian Barrins was just one of those distressed by what she had seen – talking of the many happy memories in her own family of St. Mel's in its glory – now reduced to smoke and ashes. Marian was my English teacher at Lanesborough Vocational School in the 1980's – coaching us in the use of English for the exams at the time and devoting many's the additional hour on a Saturday to the task at hand. Her tuition was always inspired and her dedication to the teaching of the subject very impressive but today she was in tears and speechless after a while. I had never seen her like that before and I was even more shaken as I watched it again in the editing process that afternoon for the RTE evening news on Christmas Day.

Those emotional interviews brought home the message to me for the first time that the scenes of devastation and the feelings of distress and sadness that we witnessed that morning twelve months ago were as much to do with the challenge brought by this inferno to the faith of the people as they were reactive to the loss of a landmark in the heart of the town – perhaps even more so.

In the intervening period since the fire I have watched like everybody else outside Longford with a great deal of admira-

tion as the plan to rebuild the Cathedral was floated and then stabilised. Through our 'Nationwide' programme on RTE1 I have seen the real spirit of the Longford people I know as the community rallied to turn the sports gym at St. Mel's College into a weekend place of prayer and there have been more encouraging developments surrounding the restoration work that has made it abundantly clear that St. Mel's will indeed rise from the ashes in due course.

It was built, as we know in the face of adversity – during times when the faith of the Irish people was certainly challenged and their very survival put under threat. Now in 2011 the people of Ireland face the same scale of challenge one more time and the people of Longford face an iconic struggle to restore something that everyone had loved in the heart of the town. Watching them face up to the challenge has already been an uplifting experience. Reporting on the next stage of the re-building work will be an even greater pleasure. Hurry back St. Mel – your country needs you!!!

FOOTNOTE: Sadly Josie (Gillera) McKenna has passed away since the St. Mel's Cathedral fire. We remember her generosity of spirit too alongside the first anniversary of the Christmas Day fire at St. Mel's. May She Rest In Peace.



A tough year, but

By John Greene

The Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, Colm O'Reilly, has reiterated his belief that Mass will be said again in St Mel's Cathedral by 2015. "We've been talking five years more or less from day one and I don't see any reason to move away from that to tell you the truth," said Bishop O'Reilly. "I don't think it's going to be 10 years, I would hate to think so. I think people would be rightly impatient at something that would last that long."

He understands there have been frustrations in Longford over a perceived lack of progress but he is certain that not one day has been wasted since the tragic events of December 25 last. "We're working hard, flat out, at this," he says. He is reminded of something Seamus Butler, chairman of the project committee, said earlier in the year about the initial stages of restoration work in the Cathedral: It's like an iceberg, 90 per cent of it will be unseen, but it's there.

It is a cold and wet November morning when we sit down in his office. Bishop O'Reilly reflects on a year which he sums up simply: "It has been tough." He continues: "People say to me that the burning of the Cathedral must have been the worst thing in your time as a bishop. It's not. The worst thing is the scandals that have been there – that's the most painful thing. The other doesn't compare."

"It has been a tough year from that point of view and if I could see two things while I'm still alive, one would be the Cathedral underway and that we [the Church] get back on a more even keel."

"I don't expect the effect of the scandals to be gone quickly at all but I'd like to think the road map for a better time is a little clearer

for us. And that's my hope.: It is his first major interview in some time and Bishop O'Reilly is keen to set the record straight on a lot of things. He knows there is unrest among people who have a lot of fears about the restoration of their beloved Cathedral: that progress on the restoration work is slow; over what plans are drawn up; over how the project will be financed; and over what his own involvement in the restoration will be.

As sheets of rain pound the office windows, he makes it clear that no subject is off limits. He is anxious that people trust that everything that can be done is being done.

"Stage one is over, the interior is safe – all that is done," he says. "Stage two is going to be largely something that won't be visible. It'll be the work of the design team and they will spend hours on drawings. It's my hope that we'll be able to ensure that we'll keep the public in the frame and that there will be an opportunity for people not just to be told what's happening but to say what they think. I would see that the architects would explain things, explain their vision, and that there will then be a period of consultation."

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS...

ON THE FIRE

I have always compared it to watching a close friend on their deathbed. That's the sort of feeling I had about it, which was actually even stronger when the people started arriving for the normal 8 o'clock Mass and all these tear-stained faces appeared. It added to my sorrow in a way because I saw how grieved they were.



The grandeur of St. Mel's Cathedral is seen here in the beauty of the Sanctuary area which was the site of many celebrations since its remodelling in 1977. Incredibly this image of the Holy Family seen here on the left survived the fire. Our Lady's Altar on the right was made of Carrara marble, part of the original architecture and was erected between 1867 and 1870.

"I don't know how long it takes to do all the drawings and stuff but if you combine that with the consultation process you can talk about nine months without any doubt. There will be huge interest in it and I'd like to think myself that it would be wider than Longford town – it'll be a lot wider than that. And I would like to keep everybody well informed."

It has been a long year, no doubt about that, but as he reflects on what has been accomplished to date, he is happy that all is going as well as he could have hoped. He thinks back to Christmas morning as he stood outside the Cathedral and watched it burn and the torrent of emotions that were running through his head.

He thought it unlikely that any living person knew that building as well as he, or loved it as much as he. He had spent over 40 years around it, as a young curate, as ADM and then as bishop for over a quarter of a century. "It would be hard to be around there so long

and be involved in different phases of its existence, and big days and so on, without having a great affection for the building itself."

He remembers a sense of helplessness and despair washing over him at one point, and then being asked to do an interview for RTE. He agreed to it, reluctantly, and when he looks back now he sees that decision as a turning point for him.

"I'm glad I did that, because the question was posed to me, what did I think the future would hold for St Mel's Cathedral and I said 'It will be restored.'"

That was the first time the thought crystallised for him in that way, and it was from then that his energy began to shift.

"I think it was important that I said that. A close friend of mine wrote to me shortly after Christmas. He has a good turn of phrase and one line in his letter stayed with me: 'I was glad,' he said, 'that you spoke about restoration before the fire had finished its work.' The smoke



Bishop Colm O'Reilly is interviewed by Ciaran Mullooly for RTE News just hours after the fire at St. Mel's Cathedral on Christmas morning.



Monsignor Pat Earley looks on in disbelief.





much accomplished

Bishop O'Reilly speaks to John Greene



able for us. It is impossible to put a final figure on what it will be; all I know is that I am quite confident that our insurers will see us through this."

There will be fundraising to finish the Cathedral but he says that any money received will "be very carefully allocated and used only within limits so people can be certain it will be well used". Money has already started to come in from "charitable and kind people" who were touched by the horror of it all, and he will soon be asking the parishes to start making a contribution, once a year probably.

And on the subject of his own future, well it's just a matter of time before his successor is named. He won't be Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois when this work is finished – it is, "not in my hands". "When you cross the 75 mark you have to send in a letter of resignation, and my letter has gone in".

"I certainly would like to be around to see it finished – I hope that's not arrogant of me to think that way but I'd like to be around to see it finished and I'd feel very fulfilled if I was. I think I'm happy in a way that I've been able to press forward and be around for some of the significant steps that have been taken so far and that will be taken in the next while and when those are settled and all the consultation is underway I think it will be easier for someone else to come along and slot in and take up the running."

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS...

2010 – HIS YEAR

It has been tough. People say to me that the burning of the Cathedral must have been the worst thing in your time as a bishop. It's not. The worst thing is the scandals that have been there – that's the most painful thing. The other doesn't compare. For me personally the impact of it is far deeper. I say that advisedly. It's not off the top of my head I'm saying it that's how it is.

was still rising from the building behind my back as the journalist was talking to me. It was a sort of spontaneous statement and it came not from reasoning, but from the fact that I couldn't think otherwise. I think it probably was heartening for people, at least for local people here, to hear that at that time."

From those four simple yet powerful words - It Will Be Restored – began the process. The only delay, if you could call it that, was the initial wait as the Gardai investigated the scene. Once it was cleared, this was a matter of some relief to Bishop O'Reilly on two levels: firstly, work could now begin making the structure safe; and secondly, for much more personal reasons, as he had been greatly troubled by the possibility that the fire had been set deliberately.

"I remember announcing that it was not deliberate. We were still having Mass in the Temperance Hall at that stage and I mentioned this to the people and I said this had given me immense relief at which stage they all burst into applause which told me that those worries were high in the minds of people in Longford too."

From that point, he is emphatic that

there have been no delays. There have been countless meetings – an average of one every two weeks he reckons – and every step has been planned carefully. He is determined that he and the project committee will ensure there are no costly mistakes. They are, he says, devoting great attention to detail. "At an early stage, as soon as this committee was put together, we took back the decision making from just being merely ad hoc to a proper structured approach. That's important in the long run. I'd like to think it will stand up when it's analysed."

The policy is simple: he sees the restoration as needing the co-operation of a lot of organisations and he keeps all of them in the loop. So there's the Church, naturally, Longford County Council's planning and heritage sections, the Department of the Environment's heritage section and, of course, the congregation. "There are two huge issues which have to be balanced," he explains. "There's Liturgy and there's Conservation."

This, in essence, is the conflict between the Cathedral as a place of worship and its importance as a national treasure. Bishop O'Reilly says it "was

in a class apart in this country" as a building of importance but for liturgists, its function cannot be ignored. "Primarily it's a place of worship," he says, "it's not primarily a museum. So what you want to do is tread a fine line between the two. That's where the tricky bit is if you like at times."

He continues: "I want to have a Cathedral which is usable in the way that it was as a very suitable place for celebrating big liturgical occasions and restoration for me in the first instance is that. I think people would need to know that – that it's not just for nostalgic reasons that we want to put something back as it was, it's for better reasons, it's for artistic and liturgical reasons really." Over time too has come the realisation that in rebuilding St Mel's Cathedral there are improvements which can be made. "I keep telling people that when the Cathedral was started in 1840, things that we assume now are necessary weren't even thought about. There were no toilets in the Cathedral – there was an outdoor toilet for a long time when I came to Longford first."

He doesn't know to what degree things will be changed – modernised if you like – but he imagines there will

be differences. He points to the choir gallery as an example. When the new gallery was built, it was lowered considerably from its original position when moving it to a different part of the interior may have been a better option, albeit one that was not open to them

Amidst all the certainty, however, there is still plenty of uncertainty – chief among these is what the final cost of the restoration will be and who the bishop overseeing the remainder of it will be.

The Cathedral was insured with Allianz and Bishop O'Reilly says the company has not been found wanting since the morning of the fire. "Our insurers have been saying at all times that it's not appropriate to name sums of money because we don't know what the sums of money will be like. It's very hard to estimate the cost. The insurance company has been paying for stuff but there won't be a final settlement until the end of the process. There's probably about €1.5 million paid over – that's in terms of securing the site and we're also getting insurance for the temporary arrangements we have in place which is very valu-





Cathedral FIRE ... PERSONAL STORIES

as told to Tiernan Dolan



PETER KEENAN (ALTAR SERVER)

I was really looking forward to serving Mass on Christmas Eve 2009 because it's such a major event in the church calendar. I was the only boy serving that night and thankfully everything went smoothly during the Mass. On Christmas morning I was faced with the terrible news. I was overcome

by sadness because of all the cherished memories I had of the Cathedral and that it had been part of Longford town for over a century. As I will have stopped serving before the end of 2010, and my last Mass will be in St Mels Centre, I can only hope that Longford's beloved Cathedral will be returned to its former glory.

PAURIC CULLEN (STATION OFFICER, LONGFORD FIRE STATION)

When I received the call there was disbelief on learning that the Cathedral was on fire. Then on arrival seeing the extent of the fire spread, along with the extreme weather conditions, was very traumatic, and then it being Christmas day. Battling against the elements and trying to save this historic building and county landmark was a call to duty never anticipated.



GERRY REILLY (SACRISTAN)

The phone goes at 5.30 am with the news that the Cathedral is on fire. No words can describe the feeling. Walking up St Mels Road all I could feel was the silence of the morning and the roar of the fire. To watch the fire for the next five hours was like watching a very close relative

or friend pass away. Since July 1999 I have lived my life to the spiritual beat of this precious building. To work in the Cathedral as Sacristan is just an honour and a privilege. The Cathedral at the moment stands silent but I know in the not too distant future, the Cathedral's spiritual heart will beat louder than ever before.

LARRY NOLAN (JNR.), CHAPEL STREET - WHO WAS FIRST TO SEE THE FIRE AND DIAL 999 (only one call was made)

I was getting back into bed in the early morning when I noticed what I thought were yellow flashing lights flickering outside. I pulled back the curtains and saw the flames pouring out of the right hand window, on the second storey of the Cathedral. Immediately I rang the Fire Brigade. But within seconds, every window on every storey was a mass of yellow flames. It was absolutely scary and I've spent 12 and a half years in the Brigade myself.



CORRINE Mc CORMACK BUSHELL (CHOIR MEMBER FOR OVER 20 YEARS)

My brother, Brendan, rang me before 8am and I was completely and utterly shocked. I was heartbroken-utterly devastated. What immediately came to mind was the magnificent sound

of the final piece of music played on the pipe organ by Fintan Farrelly, Tocatta by Windor. The sound of the organ lingers still. Later on that fateful morning, painfully aware that all our original music had been lost, I went searching for some copies at home. The first piece I picked up was "Our Own St Mel" written by the late Fr Tommie Devine and Sean Cahill and given to me by the late Philo Kelly. At 11.30 am Mass in the Temperance Hall, we sang this piece, as the smoke billowed. It was extremely emotional.

Christmas Day 2009

'They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed'

By Kitty Hughes

The merry rhythm of Christmas melodies jingled on the radio. The kettle was singing in tune and the toast popped. What was that on the radio...? 'Over to Mary Clare Greally at the scene of the fire in St Mel's Cathedral! The Cathedral on fire? Since early morning! People gathered in shock. We can see the flames from the studio window here!' Alarmed, I rushed to tell the awful, unbelievable news. 'We'll go to town and see what's wrong'. Quickly we wrapped up for it was freezing outside and the snow was hard packed. The countryside around Carriglass was like a Christmas card; skeletal trees wrapped in snow, lights twinkling in windows, a big snowman with balloons waved from a garden. As we rounded the bend at the Bishop's there, above the snowy rooftops and frosted trees, the dome of the Cathedral stood with a great pall of smoke like a hideous black fog alongside.

People were hurrying on foot towards the Cathedral. We joined them on the icy footpath. The smoke had an ominous red glow, the windows shattered, roof gone, flames licking and leaping menacingly inside, the smell of burning, people crying, hugging in disbelief.

An arm came around my shoulder, Fr Brendan. He was trembling from head to foot. They had to evacuate the Presbytery. People gathered round shaking hands, tears and looks of disbelief. The firemen continued to pour water through the broken windows. Flames leaped from where we knew the choir gallery was and the organ. On the

traffic island Fr Healy was surrounded by sympathisers; he seemed dazed yet he talked and greeted each of us by name in his gentle voice - 'early morning - at the rear of the Cathedral-couldn't control it'. All around, cameras were focussed on the flames and the smoke. Word went around that there would be Mass at 11.30 in the Temperance Hall. We walked back to the car ever staring back at the smoke still soaring skywards. Two children came pedalling unsteadily on new bikes up the footpath. Santa had come and their first cycle was to the Cathedral.

Home again still in disbelief. Some of the family went to Mass in Shroid. The rest of us decided to go back to Mass in the Temperance Hall. Now the crowd was greater, the cars less. It was like a scene in the 1940s, families hand in hand walking towards the crossing heavily coated and it seemed almost all were wearing black.

We walked on the road for it was closed to traffic by the Gardaí. The hoist of the fire engine hovered; we blessed ourselves as we passed the Cathedral, an RTE cameraman focussed on someone at the pedestrian crossing and the reporter held the mike for a comment. In the doorway of the hall ushers welcomed us and advised we go up to the front as there were plenty of seats. Strange the further up we went the more full it seemed, one seat at the front, thanks! grand!

Could this be real? I was facing the altar; a trestle table draped in two white cloths, an ornate chalice and lidded ciborium, blue tinted bowls and saucers filled with hosts, two glass jugs with wine and water and a single large candle. Over it a microphone craned awkwardly.

Looking up, members of the choir shivering with cold and shock were assembling on the stark black stage, distributing hymn sheets and whispering messages to each new arrival. Someone reached up a stool to Fintan and he sat at the keyboard.

Fr Tom came with Mass booklets and arranged them on the altar; Fr Padraig took the chairs for the priests and rearranged them for those who were standing. One blue chair remained near the altar. And still the people came, standing along the walls and up on the balcony they crowded. Then from a little alcove the priests entered with Bishop Colm. His face was a portrait of heartbreak, his voice trembling with emotion as he welcomed us to Mass and led us in prayer. 'This is like a death of a dear friend in our community, a great loss ... don't look down... hold up your heads God is with us... we must have faith and trust in God...'. We prayed together, the choir sang 'Glory to God, Glory... I closed my eyes remembering the glorious scenes of Christmas in St Mel's Cathedral; vestments and vessels shimmering in the warm lights, the tapestry with the angels almost alive trumpeting Glory to God, Christmas decorations intertwined with flowers, the Christmas tree with the words *rejoice, hope, and joy*, the crib cosy beside the candle shrines, people dressed in their best, relaxed and at home in God's house.

How sudden the change. How stark. Two young students read the readings and Bishop Colm, a little more composed now, talked of Midnight Mass and the homily he had prepared - a story of the Nuns who had to flee their burning convent centuries ago and of the relic of that event that



The view from Ballinallee Road on Christmas morning 2009.



CATHEDRAL FIRE ... PERSONAL STORIES

as told to Tiernan Dolan

INGRID NEVIN (16 YRS)

I was still in bed when I was told. I just couldn't believe it. I had been at midnight Mass and the Cathedral had looked lovely on the night. The Bishop's sermon now sounded so ironic, as he spoke about a fire in a convent. I was shocked and sad. During our Transition Year in the convent, we had a guided tour of the Cathedral and we all had admired the Harry Clarke windows. It was really weird that the whole place was gone. It's still hard to believe.



ANON (80 YRS)

When I turned on the radio from bed, I thought it said it was St Mel's College and I thought the children will have an extra long Christmas holiday. Then when I heard the next News at 8 and realised it was the Cathedral and not the college, I turned over and cried my eyes out....



ANGELA GREER

Anita Hanley told me about it first when I was passing the Anvil. I had seen all the Guards but never thought in my life it could have been the Cathedral. Then when I saw it from Hughie Doyles, I cried my eyes out. Oh, I got such a shock. Sr Dorothy brought me up to the convent and I got 10

Mass there. Then I brought down baskets from the convent for the collection in the Temperance for Masses at 10.30 and 1 o'clock."Good thinking" said Fr Healy.

ROSE DOLAN, (AGED 7) from LONDON AND LONGFORD

I was sad when Daddy told me the news. I remember the side chapel was very fancy and that's where I used to light candles for Granny and Grandad when they were alive, that's when I was very young.



FR. TOM HEALY, ADM

As I look back to the early hours of last Christmas Day, my initial reaction was one of huge shock and sorrow that the beautiful building we've been used to all our lives was going up in smoke before our eyes.

At the beginning we hoped that the fire would stay contained at the rear but as the hours unfolded we watched helplessly as it spread and overcame the Cathedral. A lasting memory for me will be the people gathering united in a shared grief and even in the turmoil of that time speaking with determination of the will to see St. Mel's restored again. I recall too our impromptu celebration of Mass in the Temperance Hall which was a great focal point for us to gather as a community, to comfort each other, and to turn to the Lord in prayer for some kind of reassurance on such a special day for all Christian people. In the days and weeks after the fire we were overwhelmed by the messages of goodwill and support from all over the country and internationally. As will be outlined elsewhere in this publication, the task of setting up the alternative facilities was a project that took on great momentum in the succeeding weeks. We will be always grateful for the enormous expressions of goodwill that were so evident at that time and indeed since then.



Crowd looks on at blaze.

remains still in Nuns Island in Galway. It was the Offertory and Emer Barry sang 'O Holy Night' like an angel calling us from the desolation outside. At the altar Bishop Colm sat on the blue chair hands to his face, deep in thought. Spontaneous applause for Emer and the choir and we prayed together for all who had helped that morning; the Firemen and Gardaí, the neighbours and friends.

Now the priests were all gathered around the altar with the Bishop. Fr Brendan held the great Mass book and gently Bishop Colm guided each tearful priest through the Great Eucharistic Prayer.

The sign of peace was real and genuine, warm and tearful. Then ushers hastily worked an orderly queue for Holy Communion and all the while the choir sang the familiar hymns and carols including a lovely solo by Maurice Murphy.

Fr Padraig read a message of thanks from the priests for the heroic work done to try to save the Cathedral.

Then Bishop Colm bade us 'Go in Peace to celebrate Christmas with family and friends and a promise that we will together rebuild our beloved St Mel's Cathedral'. The Hall echoed with warm applause for him and the priests and our choir and then the congregation surged to shake their hands and assure them of our help and support.

Outside again strong hands helped less able avoid slipping on the icy footpath. The smell of burning lingered in the sharp frosty air. As we crossed the road the sound of something falling came from inside the Cathedral. A small flame flickered near the top of the front door mocking the fireman's hose. "It's all gone - it will take years to re build - the altar, the museum - it was so beautiful!"

Home via the cemetery for our traditional visit to the family graves. Snow swirled around us as we placed the holly wreath with its shiny leaves and red berries on the white snow. "God, if they were here now what would they say 'the Cathedral on fire, burned to the ground.'" Memories of my father and mother cycling from Esker to Midnight Mass and telling us of the wonder of it all next morning over breakfast.

Nine o'clock that night, all is calm under a starry sky. We drive again to Longford,

only three cars in the car park now. The fire brigade has left and a Garda car stands sentinel near the presbytery gate. A few people peeping through the railings. The smell of timber burning, a sudden thud from inside sends a shiver through me. No lights and strange, from the front in the moonlight the Cathedral didn't look any different at all!

But at the side, stained glass windows

were now gaping holes periscoped on the devastation we imagined was inside.

But there was no roof to shelter it from the icy chill though the dome stood tall. Let it be strong we prayed.

Silently we drove home. On the car radio a newsreader brought 'the bitter news' from Longford to late night listeners at home and away.



Interior view of St. Mel's Cathedral prior to the fire.



The Gym to a Cathedral - and back again every week

By Neil Halligan

It's six o'clock on a Friday evening; the weather is beginning to turn cold and the students and teachers at St. Mel's College are long gone home for the weekend. However, in one section of the educational campus, it's a hive of activity for six men who are busy at work.

Twelve months ago, none of the team of people led by David Shannon expected to be inside the school's sports hall, transforming it into St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.

But after the events of December 25 unfolded, the lives of all Longfordians changed forever. Among those at the centre of the hectic days and months that followed was parish administrator, Fr Tom Healy.

"By 8 o'clock, our initial thought was that Christmas was cancelled and people were going to have to go to Newtownforbes or Edgeworthstown or Killoe to go to Mass," said Fr Healy.

"You must remember we lost everything, so we didn't have a chalice or a book, or vestments, or altar wine, or anything. Everything that we had was gone.

"However, by half nine it struck me that there was a real need for people to somehow gather, that this was a shared grief - the community had lost something very dear and that there was a great need to assemble and to be together," he added, and the first Mass after the fire took place in the shadow of the Cathedral, in the Temperance Hall.

"I remember the choir's music that morning just lifting our hearts. I have no idea to this day where the vestments or chalices came out of".

"That half eleven Mass and the one o'clock Mass were highly memorable for the emotion of the loss and the common bond," he recalled.

Sundays, however, were far too busy to consider the Temperance Hall as a long term replacement, and just days after the fire, plans were already being drawn up for a new location to celebrate weekend Mass.

"There's something sacred about a venue where people can gather. It did occur to me on those days that some hundreds of people would have come every day to the Cathedral, whether it was for two minutes or for an hour. It was a place that was very welcoming and that an awful lot of people dropped into," said Fr. Healy.

Other venues like the army barracks or an industrial unit might have been briefly considered, but in St. Mel's College, the parish had facilities that would provide the perfect fit for its needs.

The school's principal, Damian Cunningham, contacted the bishop, and among the first places to be visited on that Monday - three days after the fire - was the college's chapel.

For years it was the venue where boarders attended Mass, but since boarding has been discontinued, it had been largely unused.

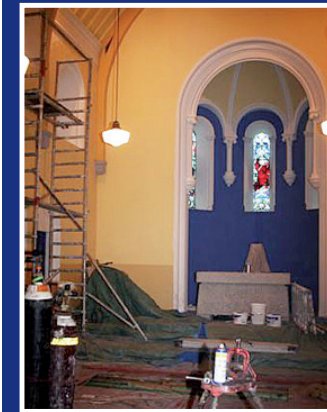
Minor repairs and upgrades were carried out (roof fixed, paint job, new heating system, seats restored, new sound and lighting system, baptismal font, notice board and signage erected) and within three weeks, it was open to the public and is used for daily Mass.

"It has a lovely prayerfulness about it. Lots of people go down there every day," remarked Fr Healy.

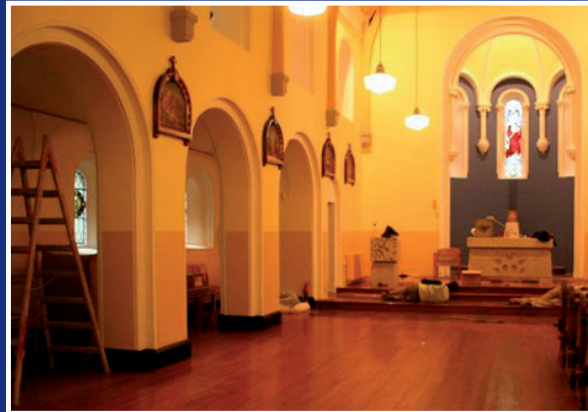
The second venue on their visit was the gym. This, says Fr Healy, required more effort.



All roads lead to our temporary new home.



Work on St. Mel's College Chapel begins.



Everything is taking shape in the College Chapel.

"We knew that we needed help. I remember on that Monday saying that we needed people around us," said Fr Tom, and the next day over 20 people from the Parish, Temperance Hall and Finance committees formed sub committees to chart the road ahead.

In order to create a new venue from what effectively was a blank canvas, people with experience in theatre were drafted in.

Mona Considine, member of the Temperance Hall committee, and manager of Backstage Theatre, brought in Noel Strange and Eddie Kiernan to

help transform the school's sports hall.

"They conceived this whole idea that it could be more than just a boring building. It's a gym Monday to Friday and at the weekend it's transformed into a lovely religious theatre. I think it was a tour de force really," said Fr Healy.

Noel, using his graphic design experience, recreated the famous 'The Second Coming' tapestry that hung behind the altar in St. Mel's Cathedral, as well as the Harry Clarke Studio stained glass windows that adorned the transepts.

Images of the statues that

stood behind the altar and replica pillars were also created by the design team to help seal a connection with the Cathedral.

The design team aside, there was a huge community effort around bringing together what the parish has today. Committees met throughout the months of January and February, with many people - too many to mention one-by-one - putting in long hours.

Eventually, on February 19th this year, St. Mel's Cathedral Centre was formally opened to the public with Mass by Bishop Colm.

"I think the tapestries are

extremely clever," Fr Healy remarked. "The first evening I think people thought they were arriving to an empty building and I remember them being just blown away by the artistic merit of it, the warmth of it and the whole sense of creating a connection with the Cathedral."

In those early weeks, teams of 20 or so gathered each Friday and Sunday to transform the hall into a place fit for worship.

Nowadays, David Shannon and his team of five come together at six o'clock on Friday to undertake a precision-like two and a half hour operation, which includes setting out 720 chairs and assembling a 29-piece stage that becomes the altar, and again on Sunday afternoon/evening to return it to its original use.

"It took us a lot longer when we started off, but we have a complete system and everybody knows what to do," said David. "There's no talking, no telling, and you have to stay ahead of the next guy so there's no hold-up in the process. We have some very, very good lads here."

It's not a year-round job, however, as the crew get a break when the school breaks for holidays, which includes this Christmas, a time that's undoubtedly going to be poignant for parishioners in Longford.

None more so than this year's Midnight Mass, which was the last ceremony to be held in St. Mel's Cathedral.

"We realise the space is a bit tighter, but there's an assembly hall where we will use sound and video link," said Fr Healy.

Meanwhile the Cathedral itself won't be draped in darkness, new floodlighting will be installed, and a star to symbolize hope for the future. And, most noticeably - particularly for those around town - the bells will chime once more.



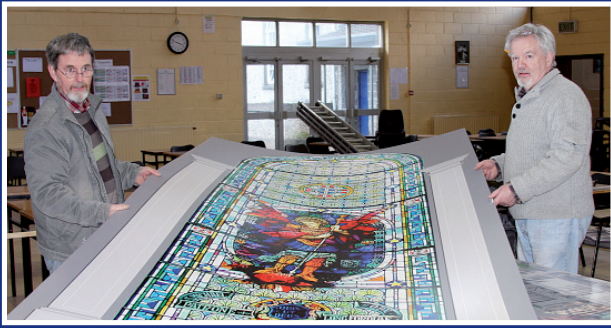
Many hands make light work! Left to right: Mona Considine, Sean Gallogly, Ursula Bowler, Ronan Nugent, Edwin Kiernan, Ruth McGarry, David Farrell, Brian Lyons, Sive McGuinness, Frank McKiernan (Jnr), Thomas Farrell, Eleanor McKiernan, Frank McKiernan, Noel Strange



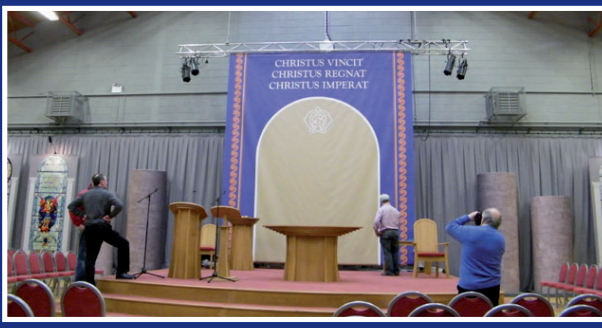
Work on the new pathway begins.



Sanctuary area is assembled.



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.”



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.



Elaine Sheahan and Darren Duignan celebrate their wedding day.

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

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 Ballinallee' after the county Longford village from which he came.



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



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. How are things going with the Cathedral?

This is undoubtedly the most frequently asked question of all. It is very understandable and also positive and welcome that so many are keen to know how progress is in relation to restoration of the Cathedral. Thankfully we are progressing well but it is important that people have an understanding of how complex and intricate a project this is. Hopefully the answers below will help inform you more fully.

2. What started the fire?

Christmas Eve 24th December 2009 was particularly cold with sub-zero temperatures experienced across the entire country. In order to adequately heat the Cathedral in advance of celebrating Midnight Mass, the central heating system ran continually at a higher than normal temperature for 17 hours. The flue serving this boiler connected into an old brick lined chimney which formed part of the original Cathedral construction.

Old combustible material which had accumulated in this old brick lined chimney, unchanged since coal burning days, had dried out and were likely super-heated and glowing.

When the burner was turned off an oxygen supply was restored and now assisted by a natural and maintained draught these old deposits ignited leading to a serious flue fire. Burning embers escaped through old worn inspection hatch doors into the priests sacristy igniting combustible materials therein.

Both the central heating boiler and burner were found in good condition and had been correctly maintained and serviced.

3. What has been happening since the fire?

In the early days after the fire we had to liaise with Garda, Fire Services, National Museum, Insurance Company, various media outlets etc. Emergency and 'making safe' works were undertaken at the Cathedral alongside the provision of alternative facilities for the parish community at St. Mel's College.

We established a Project Committee and undertook a selection process to appoint Project Managers. The successful firm are Interactive Project Managers who are headed up by Joan O'Connor and Niall Meagher.

4. What emergency works have been carried out?

Emergency works carried out since the fire included: fencing of site, hoarding of building, propping of windows and doorways, clearing out of building under direction of conservation architect, numbering and storage of materials (remains of mouldings, frescoes, etc.) wind bracing of wall with steel, installation of temporary roof, making pillars safe, surveying of building etc. These works were completed by mid-July.

5. What alternative facilities were put in place?

St. Mel's College Chapel was given a complete renovation to make it suitable for daily Masses for Longford Parish. A very innovative re-ordering of the College Gym was designed and implemented which allows it to be transformed to a temporary place of worship each weekend. Works undertaken included sound & light systems, seating, storage facilities, stage, altar



furniture, sacristy, painting, emergency lighting, new toilets, re-creation of tapestry / statues / stained glass windows from Cathedral etc. A new Footpath was also put in place, as were teams for Car park stewarding and setup and set down of the temporary facilities.

6. Why was a temporary roof installed?

In fact that question was asked by the engineers and considered. However after the devastation of the fire the priority was to safeguard what was left of the building and to ensure that it would not deteriorate any further. It was very important to protect the building from the weather.

In so far as it will take some time before reconstruction works begin it was therefore decided to install a temporary roof. Some people have asked why not install a permanent roof. However major decisions will need to be made as to what kind of roof will be put in place – it may have to facilitate solar panels for instance and many different constructions and materials

will have to be considered. Also the stonework at high level is very badly damaged and will have to be repaired prior to any permanent roof being put in place.

7. When will restoration work start?

From the start we spoke of a 5 year timeline. This is still what we are working towards. A realistic start-up date would probably be early 2012.

8. What will the costs be?

A Cathedral has never burnt in living memory before so this is a one off unique intricate building project and as yet the costs are unknown. We now have an opportunity to plan the building for generations to come. The needs in the 21st century differ from the 19th and therefore we need to add to what was put in place in the 1840's. We need to enhance what we have inherited for now and future generations. The costs will become more apparent when the Design Team have developed the scope of the works.

9. Aren't insurers paying - why fundraise?

As explained above it is most likely that we will have to carry some costs ourselves to pay for 'enhancement' / 'betterment' to the building and its surrounds. We have not yet launched any formal fundraising drive until we have more clarity as to our possible financial needs. However, we have received many donations for which we are very grateful. All donations are acknowledged and receipted and overseen by the Parish Finance Committee.

10. Will it be same on inside?

The intention would be that the Cathedral will be largely the same as it was familiarly known to us with some liturgical intervention. Most of the main features of the Cathedral will be fully restored to include plaster work, stone work and columns which are an integral part of the architecture of the building.

11. Will the local community have an input?

Dialogue with the local community

will form part of the discernment around the future layout out of the Cathedral.

The Diocesan Art and Architecture Committee, and Liturgy Committee will also be consulted.

12. Will the Pillars remain in place?

The pillars have splintered severely and are extremely badly damaged. Conservation experts will have to decide whether they can be repaired or replaced. The intention is that they will remain as a central feature of the classical design of the Cathedral.

13. What's happening now?

Over the past number of weeks the Project Committee and Project Manager have been engaged in an intensive selection process to form a Design Team. It is hoped that the successful Design Team will be announced in the very near future.

14. Who is on the Design Team?

To plan and implement the future restoration of the Cathedral we will need to bring together a number of professional people as follows – Architects (with Conservation and Liturgical expertise), Structural Engineers, Mechanical / Electrical Engineers, Quantity Surveyors.

Selection of the Design Team is possibly the most crucial element of the project. It is being done with a view to assembling the most qualified and experienced of professional people. We are confident that the Team which will be announced at an early date will be highly competent to fill these key roles for the restoration project.

15. What happens next?

When appointed, the Design Team will have to plan the reconstruction in a manner that will recreate its beauty and create a worthy space for worship for generations to come. Because the Cathedral is a listed building we will have to dialogue at all times with the Dept. of Heritage.

16. When will it be reopened?

It is envisaged that the Cathedral Restoration Project will be completed by the end of 2014.

17. It doesn't look too bad on the outside - why not start work soon?

Thankfully the familiar outside facade of the Cathedral is intact. It would have been extremely distressing if this had been damaged.

However the outside appearance betrays the shocking damage that the fire did to the inside of the Cathedral and disguises the complexity of the restoration works. Photographs on the parish website www.longfordparish.com give a truer impression of the extent of the interior damage.

18. What about the Stained Glass Windows?

The two most prestigious stained glass windows survived best. They were supplied by the Harry Clarke Studios 1932. Because of their importance and beauty the Project Committee instructed that they be restored without delay. This restoration has been completed.

19. Where can I find further information?

Longford Parish website www.longfordparish.com is frequently updated on developments on the restoration project.



Defiance built the Cathedral and defiance can restore it

The symbol of the indestructible Irish spirit that was St Mel's will be again, writes John Greene (Sunday Independent, December 27th, 2009)

AS PEOPLE stepped out into the freezing temperatures late on Thursday the talk was of one of the most memorable nights in the long history of St Mel's Cathedral.

The traditional Midnight Mass had just been celebrated and many in the packed congregation commented afterwards that they couldn't remember a more poignant ceremony, adorned by the Cathedral Choir and the organ-playing of Fintan Farrelly.

Bishop Colm O'Reilly, too, had struck a chord with them. He is unquestionably one of the country's most understated and low-key bishops, who has overseen the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois with quiet efficiency for 26 years, far from the glare of

local and national media.

But on Christmas Eve he held the congregation spellbound with a moving homily on the darkness facing the Church. Few present could recall a time when his oratory had been so captivating.

At the heart of his sermon was a story about an attack on a convent nearby, at what's now known as Bethlehem Bay on the banks of the Shannon, on Christmas morning 1642. The convent was burned to the ground.

Only hours later, Bishop O'Reilly stood outside the walls of St Mel's Cathedral watching in tears as flames raged inside it.

Word began to spread around Longford town from 7am on Christmas morning of a fire at the Cathedral and people began to flock to the scene.

As morning light arrived it was immediately clear to those who had gathered that the scale of this disaster was beyond their worst fears.

St Mel's Cathedral, and every single thing inside it, would be destroyed.

As one onlooker said, the historical life of

Longford would be lost, in a town where so little has been preserved. Yesterday morning, when 8am Mass would normally have been celebrated there, priests and parishioners stood and wept openly.

To the outside world this is the sad destruction of one of the country's best known places of worship. (Last year, St Mel's was one of the most-visited 'free' tourist attractions in Ireland.)

To the people of Longford it is so much more than that.

It is about more than religion too. Built either side of the Famine in the 1840s, anyone who grew up in Longford became aware of its history from an early age, about how thousands of people in the diocese's 41 parishes had literally contributed their last ha'penny to its construction and about how its opening in 1856 was a symbol of hope to an impoverished nation.

Its influence on life in Longford goes beyond being simply the seat of the diocese. My mother grew up in its shadow, and pretty much every milestone in her life -- from oc-

casions of great joy to times of grief -- was enacted in or around it. On Christmas morning she was one of those who stood and watched in shock and distress, her emotion barely contained, as the horror unfolded.

I was baptised there, made my Communion and Confirmation there, I was an altar boy there, and I was married there.

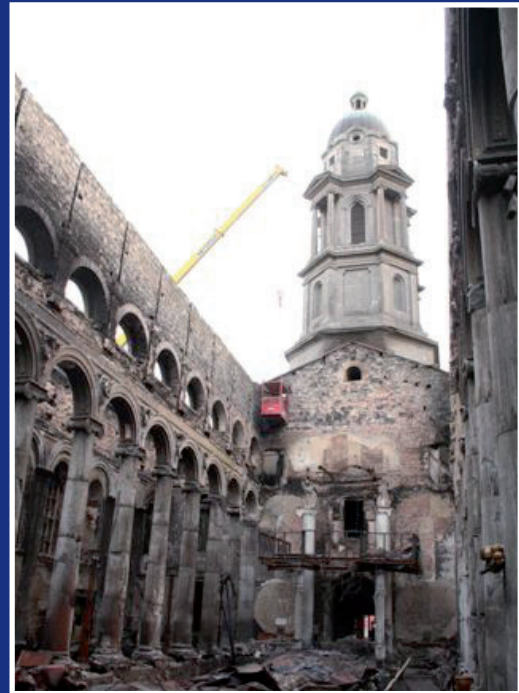
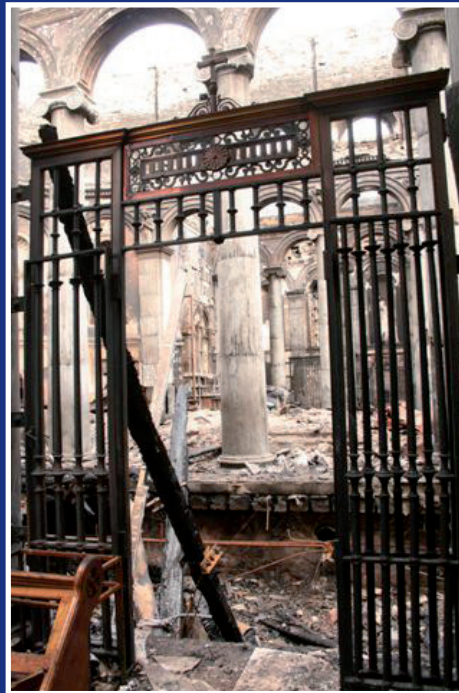
For 13 years I walked past it going to school, its car park was the pick-up point when we went to football games and its gates were a meeting point for me and my friends.

Modelled on a church in Paris, and containing priceless artefacts and historical documents that can never be replaced, St Mel's Cathedral was a monument to the Irish spirit, and to the people of a small county.

After 153 years, this building is not done yet. It's construction was an act of defiance in times of enormous hardship and Bishop O'Reilly has pledged to restore it.

My uncle phoned me last night having just visited the scene again. "It struck me as I stood there," he said, "that there was a noble defiance about it; its story is not done yet."







A parish united in



William Farrell Photography

Ready for the First Mass at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.



The Sanctuary at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.



Mass at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre during first weekend of use.

Eugene McGee chats to Fr. Tom Healy

In the list of titles in the Catholic clerical system not many people know exactly what an Adm is. The title stands for Administrator. In the diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois there are only two Adms, who oversee the two largest parishes, Longford and Athlone. So when Fr. Tom Healy became Adm in Templemichael parish five and a half years ago most people saw him as a pastoral priest rather than an 'Administrator'. Then suddenly and without warning on December 25, 2009 he became a real administrator because he was the man who was faced with the direct responsibility of coping with the disastrous consequences of the gutting by fire of St. Mel's Cathedral. Fr. Healy therefore moved more to being a real administrator than just a pastoral priest in the public eye even though he continued carrying out his previous church duties.

'Well, this change of workload was literally thrust upon me when the fire occurred' said Fr. Tom. 'Suddenly I was dealing with the Fire Brigade, the Gardai, and the Insurance Company and most importantly, along with my colleagues, trying to provide a facility for Mass-goers because the fire had been a terrible traumatic time for them and indeed for myself and all the priests and staff of the Parish. We considered renting an empty commercial building, we thought about using the vacant Connolly Barracks but a few days after the fire we discovered the little chapel in St. Mel's College which was previously used by the boarders and then we were offered the use of the fine gymnasium in the college by the college Principal, Damian Cunningham.

The close proximity of the College to the Cathedral encouraged us to choose both buildings and extensive alterations and refurbishment saw us ending up with two excellent facilities. We called on the members of the Pastoral Council, the Temperance Hall Committee and the Finance Committee and after a lot of hard work carried out mainly by a small army of volunteers, the gym was transformed into a wonderful spacious temporary church for weekend ceremonies and the old college chapel was restored to its grandeur of 100 years ago for daily use'.

With the needs of the parish met by these developments it was time for Fr. Healy and Bishop Colm O'Reilly to face the daunting task of dealing with a completely destroyed magnificent Cathedral dating back to 1840. The insurance company, Allianz Insurance, was a huge help in signposting the way forward. A working Project Committee comprising the Bishop, Fr. Healy, Fr. Sean Casey, John Nugent and Seamus Butler was established and some order and method began to emerge helped by the appointment of the Project Managers.

Allianz took charge of all the emergency work in the short-term. The general idea at that time was to safeguard anything that could be saved; from the large pillars on both sides of the church



William Farrell

Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Fr. Tom Healy.

to artefacts in the museum that had been damaged but could be restored. All that 'clearing out' and 'making safe' work went on for over six months and was largely completed by last July when the temporary roof was installed to protect the building from the elements.

Said Fr. Healy: 'The amount of clearing and making safe work that had to be done by the Hearty firm was extensive. The pillars for instance, had to be encased in steel to safeguard them. We are drawing close to the initial stage of plan-

ning our refurbished building with the appointment of the Architect's, Quantity Surveyors, Structural, and Mechanical & Electrical Engineers being imminent.

'It is important to explain to the people the sheer complexity of this operation. Passersby only see the outer shell of the Cathedral and on the surface it looks like not too much damage was done. Believe me that is not the case. The entire building inside was gutted from top to bottom with the appearance of the sound outer walls betraying the destruction inside and underneath and even visualizing what will have to be done is an enormous task.

'But on the other hand the rebuilding will open many exciting possibilities for its future use. Simple things like installing lifts, eliminating steps, etc. can be considered and of course more fundamental ideas will also be brought forward for consideration. Will the sanctuary remain as it was? Where will the organ and choir be located? Can the congregation be brought closer to the altar? I have no doubt there will be many exciting ideas and of course we in the Presbytery will welcome suggestions. And practical things like using solar power from the new roof to provide energy for heating, maybe landscaping the surrounding areas outside and such like will have to be considered. While retaining the traditions of the original building there are many other innovative ideas to think about,' he added.

Fr. Healy was at pains to point out that there will be consultation with the public at all times with Open Days and other forms of communication as the project starts developing. The Cathedral is of course a listed building so the Department of Heritage will also have a major part to play in what can or cannot be changed. Parts of the project may also



The Welcoming entrance at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.



goodwill and support

require planning permission. By the way there is a very good website - longford-parish.com, showing excellent coverage of the gutted interior which readers can consult. So with the decks of debris cleared where does the operation go from here and how long will it take?

'We have prepared a 20-page 'vision statement' outlining broadly what we want for the refurbished building and this has been handed over to the architects who have worked on about 170 churches in the past. But all that planning work is time-consuming especially for a very complicated and extensive project as this one. I will be pleasantly surprised if the builders are on site in 18 months time and the broad plan is to have 2015 as the year of completing the job but there are many caveats attached to that projection. Of course it may be possible to carry out some of the preparatory work in the short term and it would be a great bonus if local contractors were successful in tendering for any of the works'.

Inevitably the question of money attracts a lot of attention with regard to such a huge project as this. Fr. Healy explains that it is hoped that the Insurance cover will be adequate to restore the building. However he explained that there is now an opportunity to adapt the Cathedral for the future. Already a number of ideas have emerged such as a museum, a hospitality room, library or bookshop, as well as good toilet facilities etc. Such new works are considered to be enhancement and will be a cost that will have to be borne by the parish community.

So far and without any recourse to fund-raising, over €300,000 has been given to the fund for such work and the church authorities are extremely grateful for this generosity so early in the project. The only official fundraiser announced to date is an envelope collection throughout the diocese each year on the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Mel. It is hoped that following the architect's work a reasonable esti-

mate of overall costs, insurance money, etc. will be available within the next 12 months. Fr. Healy is anxious to emphasise the totality of the diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois. 'Of course the Cathedral is synonymous with the town of Longford and county Longford in particular but it is also the Head Church of the entire diocese even though some of the parishes are up to 60 miles away from St. Mel's. I would hope that the re-dedication of the refurbished Cathedral will be an opportunity for us to strengthen the ties with the diocesan Cathedral and all the parishes and of course we have had many diocesan-wide events over the years with great success,' he said.

In the meantime the steady extra workload involved in the ongoing development adds greatly to the limited resources at Longford Presbytery and Fr. Healy greatly appreciates the commitment of his fellow priests and the dedication of the lay staff there who have consistently gone beyond the call of duty to keep everything running smoothly despite the additional pressures attached to the ongoing Cathedral project on their doorstep.

Fr. Tom is very grateful for all of the goodwill and support that has been evident in the parish community since last Christmas's traumatic events. He is looking forward to being involved in the challenge of restoring St. Mel's Cathedral and is confident of a great reopening in the not too distant future.



Fr. Tom Healy and Gavin Duignan, Irish Contract Seating pictured at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre surveying plans of the new Sanctuary area.



One of the early Masses at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.



William Farrell Phot

Pictured at the First Mass at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre are Fr. Tom Healy, Adm.; Noel Strange, Bishop Colm O'Reilly, Damian Cunningham and Frank McKiernan.

Acknowledgments

The Parish Review Committee are very grateful to all who have assisted in the publication of this year's issue. In particular we express our gratitude to all the local journalists and photographers who generously responded to our invitation to assist with this special supplement on the Cathedral fire and restoration project: Fintan Duffy, John Greene, Neil Halligan, Audrey Healy, Thomas Lyons, Eugene McGee, Fran McNulty, Ciaran Mulooley, Tiernan Dolan, Willie Farrell, Aaron Gannon, Fr. Padraig Kelliher, Michael Keenan, Richard Moloney and Noel Strange. We also thank Longford County Library, Archive and Heritage Service for permission to use material from their July exhibition on St. Mel's Cathedral.



Pillars being secured as part of the emergency works.



Extensive steelwork is put in place to safeguard the building as part of the emergency works.

Generous amount of donations greatly appreciated

By Fintan Duffy

As the enormity of the impact of the Christmas Day fire at St Mel's Cathedral was beginning to dawn on all of us, many minds turned to fundraising. The natural reaction for so many people was to make a donation to a restoration fund which hadn't even been set up yet. Fr Tom Healy tells the story of a knock on the door of the Presbytery on the evening of St Stephen's Day. A group of young people had spent the day on the traditional 'Wren' collection and they offered the proceeds of their efforts to help restore a still smouldering Cathedral. That kind of generosity was replicated many times over from people throughout the midlands region and much further afield.

There was the couple in England who asked their guests at the celebration of their 25th wedding anniversary to donate money to St Mel's Cathedral instead of bringing a gift; money arrived from groups and individuals in the United States, Australia and across the UK, and that was before any appeal for funds had been made.

The Cathedral Restoration Reserve Fund was established to deal with such donations. Fr Tom Healy said, as of now, there is no official fundraising campaign underway, but these monies will be vital when it comes to completing the restoration of the Cathedral.

"The funds that have been collected will be used to cover any of the costs that are not included under the insurance policy," he said.

"We will need to resort to our own resources to cover any updating of the facilities in the Cathedral and when we know what our needs are we will then make those known."

Overwhelmed by the outpouring of goodwill and support in the aftermath of



One of the damaged pillars.

the grounds of Longford Town Football Club was a huge success, raising over €12,500. In total just over €315,000 has been donated since the fire. These donations are all receipted and acknowledged and are managed by the 'Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral' (Parish Finance Committee):

Pat Chapman, Mary Donlon, Francis Hanley, Fr. Tom Healy, Tom Mulligan, Evelyn Quinn

Many more events have already been held and many more donations, large and small, have arrived in the post.

"After the devastation of the events of Christmas Day is was heartening to experience the goodwill and enthusiasm that people showed towards ourselves here in the parish and we hope that over the next five years or so, as the restoration of our Cathedral is undertaken, that we can harness that support to help us meet the costs of making St Mel's a place of prayer of which we can once again be proud" Fr Tom said.

the fire, Fr Healy said many fundraising proposals were put forward from both at home and abroad.

"We are very conscious that these are difficult times to be asking people for financial help, so in the interests of everyone, including those raising money for other good causes in Longford, we would ask people to be patient with us and when we can definitively say what we need over a specific timeframe, we will be happy to work with all offers that come forward as part of an official fundraising campaign."

To date the largest single fundraising event was the Flancare Family Day which was the brainchild of Paschal Flaherty and Pdraig Farrell. The country music day in

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS...

HERITAGE

The Cathedral is not just a church, in terms of the heritage of the country it's also a treasure and we want to keep it that way. So there's a legitimate interest in it from that view point. St Mel's Cathedral was in a class apart in the country – it was one of those buildings that Heritage has a perfect right to have a special interest in it. We were always flattered by the fact that they're so keen on it. The Liturgists look at a building and they say well how we can make it user friendly for Sunday Mass and rightly so.



The extent of the damage to the right side aisle.



Busy year for Project Committee

By Fintan Duffy

One of the first steps along the road to restoration of St Mel's Cathedral was the appointment of a Project Committee. The committee, under the chairmanship of Seamus Butler, oversaw all the emergency works at the Cathedral itself and then the appointment of Project Managers to co-ordinate all the groups that will be involved in the restoration of the building over the next few years.

The group chosen was Dublin-based firm, Interactive Project Managers led by the internationally acclaimed architect Joan O'Connor. They have previously worked as Project Managers on public building projects such as the Millennium Wing of the National Gallery of Ireland and the Assay Office in the heart of Dublin Castle. Following the appointment of IPM the next major step was to appoint a design team that will start to put on paper a vision of what the new Cathedral will look like. As we go to print the appointment is at an advanced stage and following that appointment the selection of key people such as quantity surveyors and structural engineers will begin.

Along with the exhaustive process of selecting the very best professionals to lead the restoration works, the Project Committee were also busy with the initial tasks of securing the Cathedral building and getting the temporary roof in place. "Getting the Cathedral secured and covered was a very important issue for us at the beginning," according to committee chairman Seamus Butler.

"We also wanted to make sure that anything that could be salvaged was removed carefully during the clean-up operation and thankfully we do have a number of artefacts being looked after at the National Museum. We also have two Clarke studio windows



St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee sign contract with Interactive Project Managers on 12th May 2010. Back Row: Carol Farrell, Fr. Tom Healy, Danny Donohoe, Tom Cleary, Derek Dockrell, Gerry O'Toole, Fr. Sean Casey, John Nugent. Front Row: Joan O'Connor, Seamus Butler, Bishop Colm O'Reilly, Niall Meagher.

being restored by Abbey Stained Glass in Kilmainham in Dublin," he said. As St Mel's Cathedral is a listed building, inside and out, great care will have to be taken to restore it to its former glory, but it will have to be updated to meet the demands that are now placed on public buildings of this size. As Seamus Butler explains wherever

possible there will be local input into restoration works: "So far we have used local firms during the initial phase of securing the building, such as the steel works and site security, and it is our intention to maximise the involvement of local companies at each stage of the restoration project."

Importance of St. Mel's

The following are extracts from the OSG (Chartered Loss Adjusters) Presentation to the Diocese:-

- St. Mel's Cathedral is one of the finest classical style Cathedrals in Ireland. It is of national significance.
- Commissioned in 1840 the Cathedral's design involved three eminent architects of the 19th century. Namely J.B. Keane, John Bourke and George C. Ashlin.
- Work commenced in 1840 but had to be suspended in 1846 after the onset of the Great Famine. Construction recommenced in 1853 and the Cathedral was eventually completed and consecrated in 1893.
- St. Mel's is listed as a Protected Structure under the Planning & Development Act 2000. It is the most important religious and historical building in the Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois.
- The incorporated museum and gallery contained many historic artefacts of local and national importance.

Cause of Fire Forensic Findings

- Christmas Eve 24th December 2009 was particularly cold with sub-zero temperatures experienced across the entire country.
- In order to adequately heat the Cathedral in advance of celebrating Midnight Mass, the central heating system ran continually at a higher than normal temperature for 17 hours.
- The flue serving the boiler connected into an old brick lined chimney which formed part of the original Cathedral construction.
- Old combustible material which had accumulated in this old brick lined chimney over many years became dried out and were likely super-heated and glowing.
- When the burner was turned off an oxygen supply was restored and now assisted by a natural and maintained draught these old deposits ignited leading to a serious flue fire.
- Burning embers escaped through old worn inspection hatch doors into the priest's sacristy igniting combustible materials therein.
- Both the central heating boiler and burner were found in good condition and had been correctly maintained and serviced.



The blue skyline pictured through the windows of St. Mel's Cathedral.

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS ABOUT...

PRESIDENT McALEESE

There's a couple of things I'll always remember. One is on Christmas Day getting a telephone call from President McAleese offering her sympathy. She was down in her Roscommon home for Christmas and she came in person on the following day, St Stephen's Day, with a gift. That was important at that time. Then there were some of the young people around here who went out hunting the wren as they say and they brought us in the proceeds. Those were gestures and they were hugely important to me I must say at that stage.



All that remains of the Cathedral floor is the fragile centre aisle.



Cathedral

By Thomas Lyons

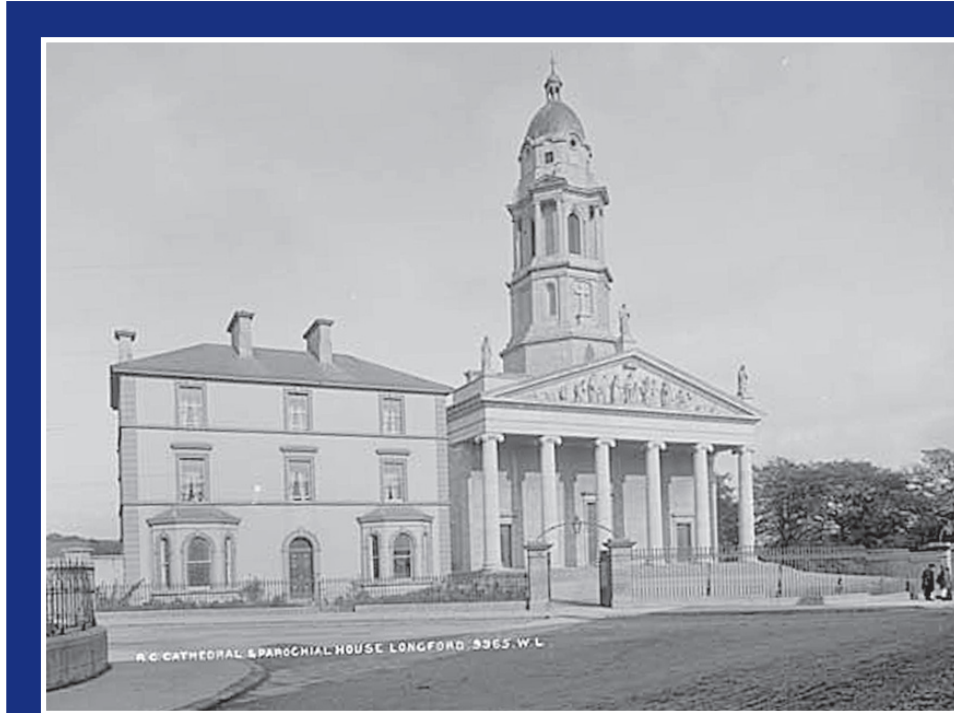
The Cathedral Church of St. Mel was intended to be a remarkable building from the outset. Looking not just to Ireland for inspiration, but to Europe as a whole, Bishop O'Higgins in 1839 set out to create a Cathedral that "[when] finished it will be the chastest, most extensive and most elegant church 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.

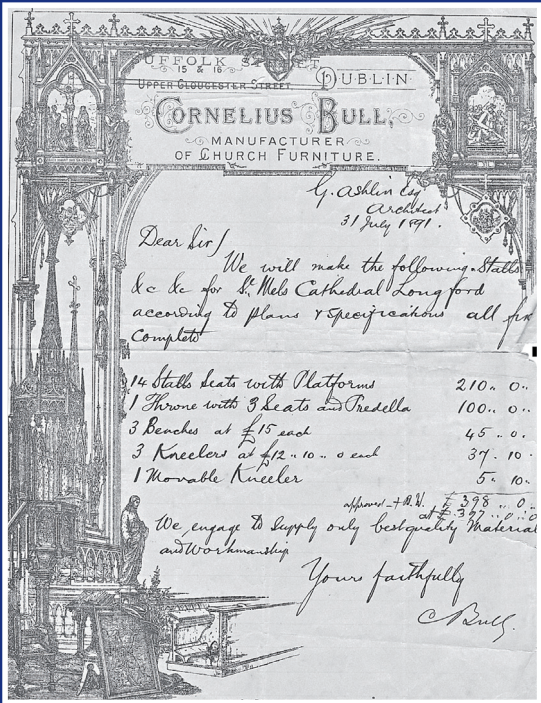
The new pipe organ and choir gallery was erected by Kenneth Jones of Bray in 1983.



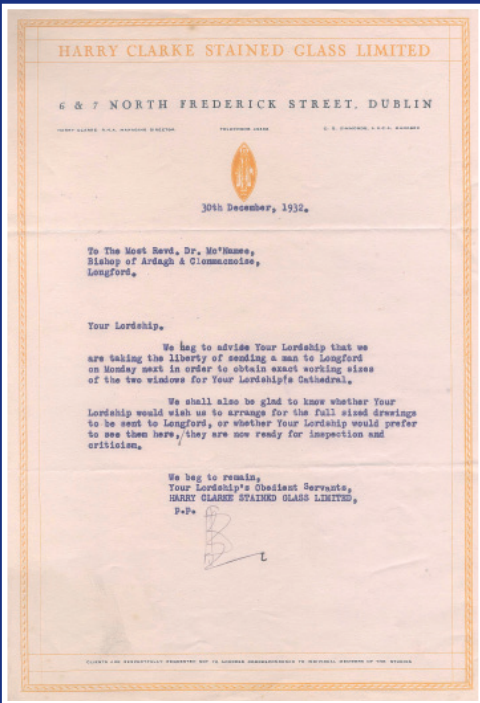
Cathedral Painters 1924.



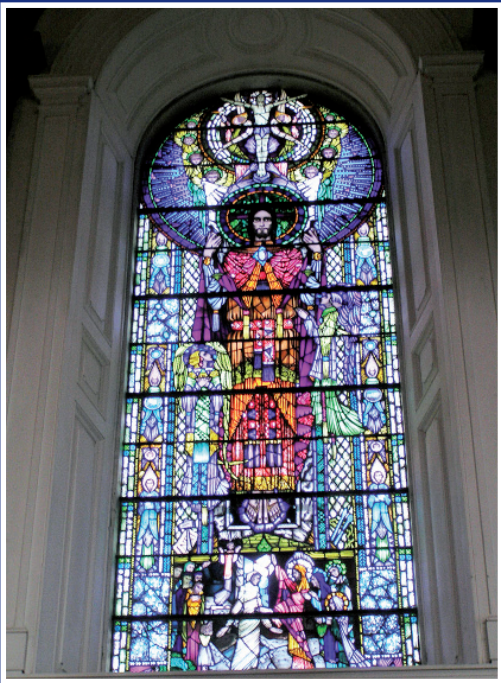
Treasures



Sanctuary receipt, 1891.



A letter from Harry Clarke Stained Glass Ltd.



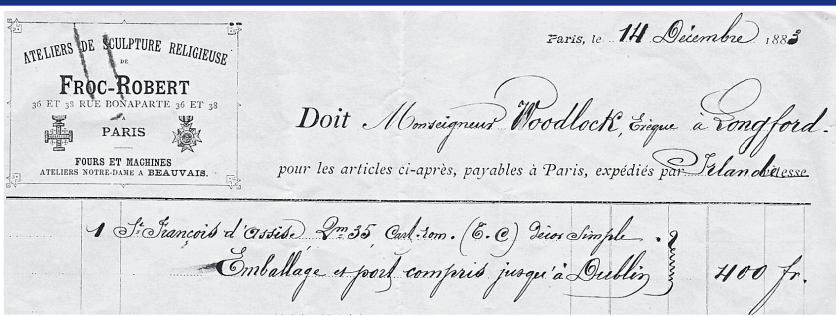
One of the Harry Clarke Studio stained-glass windows.



Our Lady's Altar.



Blessed Sacrament Altar.



St. Francis Statue receipt, 1883.

artefacts in the collection was St. Mel's Crozier, the Bell of Fenagh, the reliquary of St. Cailin of Fenagh as well as the later medieval Crozier from Limoges, France. These objects rooted in Ireland's Christian heritage are a powerful connection to our shared past.

One of the most eye-catching items in the museum was the collection of vestments and mitres, ceremonial robes and headaddresses worn by past bishops and priests. These vestments were richly decorated with coloured embroidery and gold thread which would glimmer in the candlelight during Mass. Other objects of interest to individual parishes throughout the diocese included the collection of ceremonial trowels. These richly-decorated trowels were used during the ceremonies held for laying the foundation stone of a new church, and indeed the trowel used during the ceremony for St. Mel's in 1840 was still in the museum. The museum was home to a remarkable collection of wooden Penal crosses. The Penal Laws, (17th century - 1829), caused the Catholic Church in Ireland to go underground. Penal crosses were used by priests in their ministry and their small size meant that they were easily carried around and hidden during times of extreme religious prosecution. Also in the collection were 5 altar stones which would have served as altars for outdoor Masses.

There were a number of other, more personal items in the collection. Everyday objects such as wooden milk noggins, even pats of "bog butter"; butter wrapped and buried in the acidic soil of the bog to preserve it. Some objects had a wider interest, including the uniform for Chevalier Joseph Higgins Sheeran, a Knight of the Golden Spur of St. Sylvester; a button from the uniform of Dr. Huggins from his service in the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and a delicate Easter 1862 book-marker, donated by the grand-niece of Oliver Goldsmith. These personal tokens sum up the personal affection for the Cathedral held by the people of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, regardless of religious background.

Stained Glass
The majority of the windows were of simple patterned-coloured glass. There were a number of important stained glass windows, including two by The Harry Clarke Stained Glass Studio located in the transepts, on either side of the sanctuary. These windows, constructed of stained glass in deep, rich colours, repre-

sented the Blessed Virgin and the Sacred Heart, surrounded by hosts of angels and smaller narrative panels. As the windows date to the 1930s, it would appear that they may not have been by Harry Clarke himself, who died in 1931, but his influence is strong in the design and the windows display the excellent craftsmanship which the Studio was famous for.

Despite being damaged in the fire, thankfully it is likely that these can be fully repaired and returned to the Cathedral in the future.

Altars and Statues
St. Mel's Cathedral had a fine collection of beautiful statuary. All of the individual plaster statues were made by renowned Parisian sculptors, Froc-Rob-

ert, in the 1880s. Remarkably, two statues survived; ironically these were the figures of St. Mel and the Blessed Virgin Mary. The marble altars were carved by other equally skilled craftsmen. The original high altar was by local sculptor Joseph Farrell, whose father, Terence, carved for the beautiful angels that adorn the walls of the Cathedral. Another

noteworthy altar is the magnificent Pieta altar, by George Smyth.

Museum
St. Mel's Cathedral was the home of the Diocesan Museum which housed the majority of the precious historical artefacts owned by the Diocese. The majority of these artefacts were religious objects, but there were

many other curiosities in the museum including objects from around the world, sent back by missionaries and others for the benefit of the diocese. Many of these items were destroyed by the fire, but others managed to survive and are currently being conserved and restored through the National Museum. The most important



Dioceesan Museum

Coutesty of St. Mel's Cathedral Library Exhibition

The dome of St Mel's Cathedral is the dominant image that remains in the memory of all who visit the town of Longford. Beneath that dome is the imposing bas relief showing St Patrick passing a crozier to St Mel. This symbolic representation conveys the handing over of power to oversee the diocese from our country's patron saint to our diocesan patron saint. Little did the authorities who commissioned the work know that within two decades St Mel's Crozier would be found or that a century and a half later it would become a symbol of loss in the wake of a devastating fire.

The 9th century crozier of St Mel was the main item on display at the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Museum. It was discovered next to the ruins of the original Cathedral in Ardagh in 1862, six years after the Cathedral was completed in Longford town. It was handed over to Bishop John Kilduff in 1863 and underwent a major restoration operation in the British Museum in London in 1971.

The historic artefact received a national audience when the late Pope John Paul II held it in his possession during the papal visit in 1979.

The crozier was just one of the casualties of the fire that ravaged the Diocesan Museum as it engulfed the Cathedral. The museum collection was assembled in the 1930's and 40's by the late Fr Michael Kearney, President of St Mel's College and was housed in the Cathedral since 1974.

Although the damage to the artefacts was extensive an archaeological salvage team, under the direction of the National Museum, recovered a number of items that were miraculously protected from the fire enough to allow for restoration.

Few would have had the knowledge of the collection as Father Tom Murray: "I hold a dual role as the diocesan archivist and also as a member of the Longford Historical Society. I would have been very familiar with the collection. Many of those artefacts survived through the Viking era, through the destruction of the monasteries and turbulent times in our history. The fact that some have survived the fire is inspiring." Father Tom conveyed the shock of realisation that sunk in on the morning of Christmas 2009: "The loss of the artefacts was coupled with the loss of the Cathedral. I was conscious of what the fire would have visited upon the vestments and many of the other items in the collection. I think anyone with a sense of history would have been struck by the loss. It was a demise of not only ecclesiastical value but of a number of items that occupy a significant position in our county history."

The compilation contained items from almost every parish in the county. When the fire struck its flames licked beyond the confines of the Cathedral: "Initially I thought that everything would have been lost. I thought that nothing could have survived the fire. There have been a number of items recovered. But there is great sadness that many items have now been lost forever."

Aside from St Mel's Crozier there were a variety of artefacts in the museum including the renowned St Cailin's Bookshrine and St Cailin's Bell. Both were part of the Fenagh Monastery in Leitrim and were presented to the Diocesan Museum at St Mel's Cathedral a number of years ago.

The book shrine was hand-crafted by the monks and is believed to have originated around 1536. It was used to hold the Book of Fenagh which was considered to be a very important manuscript and is now housed at the Royal Irish Academy.

The book shrine is one of the items that will be worked on by the restoration team. However the items lost have great value: "One of the things I greatly lament is the loss of the collection of penal crosses. There were 10 crosses in total. Beautiful in their simplicity, it is a tragedy to think of them as lost. One of them survived, as it was out of the collection at the time of the fire," said Fr Murray.

Another item to survive was

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS ABOUT...

THE MUSEUM

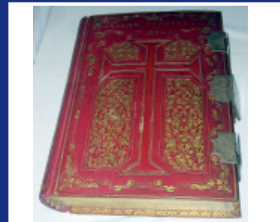
We were of course very upset by the loss of the museum. There are things you can restore – the interior decoration might seem to be very difficult to restore, there are angels up in the niches and so on, I don't know what to promise people in that regard but I imagine myself a lot of that is restorable. But there are things that are lost – those enormously valuable things (valuable because of their history) – the crozier of St Mel of course was the single biggest loss we had, a thousand years old of an artefact, a symbol of the diocese. When you can say something is a thousand years old... the national museum said it's in the same category as the cross of Cong for instance.



Old Chalice and Paten.



Shell from the battle of Ballinamuck.



Original Register of donors to Construction of St. Mel's Cathedral in 1840.



Bell of Fenagh.



Book Shrine of St. Cailian, (Fenagh).



Mallet and Trowel used in laying of original foundation stone in 1840.



Uniform from the Battle of Ballinamuck.



St. Mel's Crozier, 9th Century.

the bishop's chair. It was also out of the collection at the time. However vestments, parchments, documents, illuminated calligraphic presentations all perished in the blaze. Although there were records of the original subscriptions to fund the Cathedral in the museum most of the documentation relating to the building of the Cathedral was not held on site.

Fr Tom said that the one of the most helpful tools that the recovery team had was an account of the items compiled a number of years ago: "The former County Heritage Officer, Shirley Markley, undertook an inventory of all the items in the collection. She catalogued all of the objects and photographed many of them. This was an invaluable resource to the team that went through the remains to determine what was what."

The recovery team worked on site painstakingly sifting and analysing the debris to ascertain what could be saved. The artefacts that were recovered have been assessed by a team commissioned by

the National Museum on behalf of the diocese.

The role of the National Museum of Ireland in the recovery of artefacts from the Cathedral is integral. The Museum has made a number of services available to the diocese to allow for the recovery of the artefacts.

As Head of Collections Ragnall Ó Floinn has overall responsibility for the care and development of the National Museum's collections and for research. He explained the process that the retrieved items will now go through: "The items are at the recovery phase. There has been an inventory made of the fragments. A lot did not survive but there are several hundreds items on a list to be assessed."

The team engaged by the diocese, under the supervision of the National Museum, has finish the preliminary examination and retrieval stage: "They are now in discussions with regards to the conservation arrangements to be made. There are a number of factors to be taken into consideration when deciding what will be worked on. Not least of these is the cost of restoration against the historic value of the piece," Mr O'Floinn said.

Eamonn Kelly is the Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum. Mr Kelly was involved in putting in place a team to sift through the ashes: "This was very skilled work. They made an assessment of the items recovered and put them forward for consideration for restoration."

Mr Kelly said that the damage of the blaze was extensive: "Unfortunately the nature of the inferno was such that only the metal objects survived. There are a number of axes and daggers that are retrievable, but there was quite a lot lost. The greatest loss is St Mel's Crozier. A combination of the mate-

rial it was comprised of and the intense heat meant that the crozier suffered extensive damage. Though much of it was made of cast bronze the temperature of the fire caused extensive damage to it."

A fortuitous occurrence meant that another of the prize items of the collection was protected from the fire: "The miracle of the fire was what happened to St Cailin's Bookshrine. It appears that when the base it was on burned the book shrine fell on a burst water pipe, this protected it from being irreparably damaged. I don't think that that means we should dedicate our prayers to St Cailin rather than St Mel."

When the diocese assesses the artefacts that have been recovered and the cost of conservation they will determine what work will be undertaken. High on the list will be items such as St Cailin's Bell and St Cailin's Bookshrine.

St Cailin's Bell was also known as the Bell of Fenagh and was closely guarded by the O'Roddy Family of Fenagh.

The Wheery Bell, which originated in Ferbane, Co. Offaly and was discovered in the River Brosna during a drainage operation in 1848, will also be considered. The story of the Wheery Bell suggests that monks threw the bell into the river in an effort to protect it from harm by raiders at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries.

Other artefacts, some of which dated as far back as the Stone Age, that were part of the collection of precious materials discovered throughout the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois are now up for assessment. Their future in the restored Cathedral will be determined by the resources available to the diocese.



The Architects and Builders

The original architect to bring Dr. O'Higgins's vision to life was renowned Irish architect, Joseph Benjamin Keane (d.1859) along with the principal contractor, John Mullins. 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 A.W.N 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 Clonmacnoise. 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 past-Vatican II liturgy. The architects for this were Wilfred Cantwell and Richard Hurlley. 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 subcontractors. The new pipe organ and choir gallery was erected by Kenneth Jones of Bray in 1983.



Restored religious objects

Selection of items recovered after fire which were restored with great care by local craftsmen



St. Mel's Fire 25th Dec 2009

Large Cross

Ciborium

Ciborium

St. Mel's Fire 25th Dec 2009

February 2010



When the World went on Fire

This poem was written by Raymond Raleigh, Stonepark N.S. and published in Eurochild Poetry Book 2010

Early Christmas morning 2009
St. Mel's Cathedral burst into flames
Like the world was on fire

All its chairs and paintings
Were destroyed in the fire
Along side its lost beauty

But good news we read today
It can all be restored
From the Harry Clarke windows
To the angels on the ceiling

I Was Never Inside

This poem was written by Aiman Azam, Stonepark N.S. and published in Eurochild Poetry Book 2010

I was never inside
The big cathedral
I was never inside
Because of my faith

I'm a Muslim, you see
But I'm still a bit upset
For the building and the people
Who loved it so much

The big, huge building
With the roof all up in flames
And the wind blowing the ash
And the memories away

There's still no doubt
They'll restore
The stained glass windows
The cathedral
And more

It's More Than About Religion

This poem was written by Diarmaid O Nuallain, Stonepark N.S. and published in Eurochild Poetry Book 2010

It's more than about religion
It's who we are
It's a church we pray and sing in
This is our cathedral

The cathedral will be okay
It will be restored
The cathedral is God's home, mine and yours
God will always be happy within
Even when it's burnt

The Cathedral Tapestry – a chance encounter

Standing on the DART platform on the 24th September 2009 waiting for the last train home we got into conversation with a middle aged man who asked directions for the train to Malahide where he was going to visit his son. He told us that he was on route from working with a charity possibly Gorta in Africa and that in a few days time he would be travelling to India on more charity business.

He became very interested when he heard we were from Longford

just minutes before the train was due. 'I hope you taking good care of that Tapestry in Longford Cathedral' he smiled, explaining that his firm in Donegal, which had since closed, made the tapestry all those years ago.

We told him how well it looked especially at evening ceremonies when it was flood lit

He went on to explain that weaving it was very heavy work for the girls who worked the looms in the factory. Then he was gone - either

through politeness or surprised by his story I didn't ask his name, but I wondered many times since then where he was or in what part of the world had he heard the Christmas morning news of the demise of his factory's most prestigious creation and of the girls back then, who worked the weave and watched as a Donegal fish lorry drove away from the factory with their creative handiwork on route to St Mel's Cathedral.

– As told by local couple



Once Upon a Snowy Silent Night...

Midnight Mass in Mel's, much loved event, had ended
And through the magic Christmas snow, key turned in door,
The shepherds had gone home - now what might the Magi bring?
There was that other Bethlehem tale – premonition, pattern, paradigm?
Not at all! – tomorrow is Christmas day, so let's turn in.
Then - News Headlines upon the stroke of eight.
Am I dreaming? - do I sleep or wake?
'Two bishops gone, the pope pulled to the ground'
A report of fire at St Mel's had a far fetched, off hand sound
Still cold comfort, unsettling in this whitest Christmas dawn;
Black frost gripped window-sills of silent Longford town.
Ah well, shur with all this recent rain, barrel-fulls of it around,
Brave fire fighters roused from out their sleep will soon
Put paid to that. Let's just turn over, curl up, and fall fast asleep.

But all the while a flame was creeping, steadily stealing
Through sacristy, museum and glorious plaster ceiling.
A midnight Mass, a smoke filled dawn of flame, a day of grief
In every street and terrace a great sorrow is unleashed.
Doors open down St Mel's Road, shock, disbelief -
'Our cathedral is on fire! smoke pouring from the roof.
Was ever a Christmas day anywhere near like this?'
By midday blank rear windows gape, their clear glass gone
Helpless men and women murmur a prayer down town
And reel beneath an irretrievable sense of loss
'O Mel and Michael help our poor bishop and presbytery priests;
The cathedral only last night aglow with festive light
Will we ever live to attend Mass there again on Christmas night?
And watch the great candle light procession pass,
The thurible send its sweet scented incense prayer aloft?
For infant, ox and ass forlorn and mangerless are gone
All we have said farewell to whether knowingly or not
Consternation, confusion, fear and sorrow all around;
If only tears could put out flames, and love restore lost ground

And indeed little by little the extent unfolds of this great loss.
Outside all seems well, pillars strong, converging curve of arch
Soaring bell-tower with legend of the ill fated father's son
Planting on its dizzy heights that twelve foot cross, fell to his doom.
High over entrance triangular enthronement scene of Mel
Hardier outdoor saints well used to rain and frost stand so sedate,
While fragile indoor plaster ones, from Froc in France, asphyxiate,
And names inscribed in gold, from high niches fall from grace.
O winged guardian angels, scorched black at arch and pillar top,
Fly down and comfort red eyed, tearful men and women
Down Michael's Road, Bannon Terrace, Dublin and Water Street.



Save, save, at least, those mystic windows, gems of Harry Clarke:
Christ Risen, St Anne, spectacular in blue, gold, ruby red and green.
For much, we fear is lost – priceless museum pieces turned to ash
The thousand year old Staff of Mel, Book of Fenagh 's ornate shrine.
A thousand lovely things we knew so well, admired, all are gone:
Sweet scent of chrisem, confirming girl or boy; deacon raised to priest.
Eucharistic Emmaus scene, altar to the Breaking of the Bread
Rare woven tapestry - Cardinal Daly's gift - of Christ in glory come;
(Won't it go as hard on +Cahal as on +Colm when he hears the news?)
You seek and seek in vain the well loved Stations of the Cross,
Confessional door, whose every click signalled a sheep no longer lost.
Creations of vanished hands we loved to gaze and dwell upon
Daylight and starlit December sky both ceiling now and roof
Thank God the Holy Family painting though faded, made it through;
Fears for founder bishops Higgins and Kilduff last resting places grow,
As burned out carved seats, floor boards echoing tread of pilgrim feet
Crash into the desolate Valhalla regions of the crypt far down below .

This inner yen we all seem to share for place of permanence,
When some great edifice we set our eyes and hearts upon,
In wonder at the awesome grandeur of Pyramid or Pantheon
Are they destined to be eternal, or must they too succumb

To some unforeseen ill hour, accident, mishap or fall?
And didn't we somehow assume St Mel's to last forever
A reassuring, welcoming, symbolic eternal sacred space,
Not some passing earth bound pleasurable Camelot dome,
But earthly threshold to our many-roomed heavenly home.

Jesus, you who once wept over your own city's plight
From ruined organ loft, we pray, reach down to us tonight
Veronica's towel to heal and dry the sorrow of our town;
In God's good time, may all pull through, never know despair
And in the end achieve a worthwhile restoration and repair,
But not just yet; for one needs pause, allow things time to heal,
Come to grips, grasp straws, commiserate, and cope with loss;
And then grant bishop, man, woman, nun, child and priest
The entire length and breadth of Ardagh and Clonmacnois
Grace to put a brave face on yesterday's, tomorrow's cares,
With Michael's aid and Mel and Ciaran's prayers,
Somewhere within the inner soul's serene pure light
Relief from what befell us once upon a snowy Silent Night.

This poem was written by Fr. Owen Devaney on the Feast of the Epiphany 2010

Account from Freeman's Journal, 1868

'When the late Dr. Kilduff was appointed to the pastoral care of the diocese of Ardagh, fourteen years ago, the only Catholic chapel in Longford was a ruinous hovel, of which a miserable remnant still remains to show by the side of the present noble structure a material type of the progress

and the labours of those fourteen years. The cathedral, begun by Dr. O'Higgins – was an almost acknowledged failure. The famine of '47 had stopped the progress of the work, and the rains of heaven trickled down its unroofed walls. The wild nettle and luxuriant weed twined round the half

raised columns, or covered the prostrate pillars lying scattered all around. The weather-beaten walls, prostrate columns, and roofless waste all overrun with weeds, spoke rather of a ruin than of a work progressing to completion. It was, indeed, a task to discourage the stoutest heart and deter the

noblest zeal; yet a very few years sufficed to carry the work almost to completion, and it stands today a noble and glorious monument of his labours and his zeal."

June 29 1868 Freeman's Journal – account of Anniversary Mass of Bishop John Kilduff



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.

1840 (19 May):

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

1846:

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

1853:

Bishop John Kilduff began fund-raising again.

1856 (24 September):

The main part of St Mel's was consecrated.

1857:

The first organ was installed.

1860:

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

1863:

The bell-tower and entrance vestibules were completed.

1867-'70:

The high altar made of

Carrara marble was planned and erected.

1889-'93:

The portico (pillars at the front) was erected.

1893 (19 May):

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

1913:

A new organ was purchased.

1932-'33:

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

1940:

Centenary celebrations.

1977:

Re-dedication after the remodelling of the sanctuary.

1983:

New gallery and pipe-organ installed.

1990:

Celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone.

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 **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)



As the first anniversary of the 2009 Christmas day fire approaches a lighted star was placed on the front of St. Mel's Cathedral. This star acts a symbol of hope as our community looks forward to the restoration of our beautiful place of worship.

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

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

