



# 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 (Gilleran) 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.