



St Mel's Cathedral Longford – Fire 25th December 2009

Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Presentation to the Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois

Saturday 10th April 2010

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Historic & Architectural Importance of St Mel's

- 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 historic building in the Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois.
- The incorporated museum & gallery contained many historic artefacts of local and national importance.
- The chapels to the two transepts contained stained glass windows by the Harry Clarke studios which are of particular significance.







**Discovery -
Fire Christmas Day
25th December 2009**

Discovery - Fire Christmas Day

25th December 2009

- Following the celebration of midnight mass on Christmas Eve 24th December 2009, the Cathedral was secured and vacated at approximately 11.45pm when all appeared in order.
- A fire was first detected at 5.11am on Christmas morning 25th December 2009, by the occupant of a neighbouring property to the rear. The emergency services were immediately alerted and arrived promptly on the scene. Extensive resources were deployed towards containing and extinguishing the fire which took many hours.
- Sadly despite the best efforts of all involved, both the building and all its contents have suffered very extensive damage as a result of this fire.





Cause of Fire

Cause of Fire - Initial Considerations

All potential causes of the fire were considered, including the following

- Malicious involvement
- Burning candles / incense
- Carelessly discarded smoking materials
- Mains electrical malfunction
- Malfunction within appliances
- Other accidental human agency
- Fire associated with flue serving heating system

A comprehensive investigation has been undertaken by Garda and Insurance Forensic Experts into the cause of the fire. This concluded the fire was entirely accidental in origin and could not have been foreseen.

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 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 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 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



Museum Window

Sacristy Window





Boiler room and boiler.

Note absence of
burning in this room.
Brick flue in which seat
of fire was located is
indicated in red



Boiler flue above
inspection hatch
(note old deposits
burnt away)



Brick flue inside of
inspection hatch (note
ashes from burnt
deposits)



Interior of flue in
crypt (Note remains
of heavy deposits
still in place after
flue fire)



Clear evidence of corrosion in top quarter of inner inspection door located in priests sacristy

Overview of original outer hatch position and location found post-fire



Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

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External Walls & Campanile Tower

- The external walls and main campanile tower whilst damaged, have largely survived the fire.
- External hairline cracking is apparent in many areas though this is relatively minor and localised.
- The inner face of external walls has suffered more significant impact through direct fire attack though is expected to respond well to repair.
- There are varying levels of damage to window and door surrounds / sills most particularly on the rear north elevation.











Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Roof

- The main roof to the central nave & dome which was formed in timber overlaid with copper has been completely destroyed.
- Flat roofing to the side aisles and transepts, which were constructed using a butyl membrane overlaid on timber decking, has also been totally consumed.











Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Internal Walls & Limestone Columns

- Internal large circular limestone columns with arched brickwork walls above have suffered very severe levels of damage.
- The stonework columns, capitals, bases and arches reveal severe cracking and spalling throughout.
- Other internal partition walling has also suffered severe damage through direct fire attack / thermal movement.









Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Floors, Floor Finishes & Basement

- Substantial areas of timber flooring have been lost within the body of the Cathedral, most particularly within the campanile tower, four storey accommodation to the rear and between the central nave and crypt beneath.
- Areas of flooring within entrance porches and transepts have survived the fire to some extent, though are largely destroyed.
- The majority of floor finishes to include timber strip, mosaic and marble are severely affected.





Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Doors & Windows

- Widespread damage has been suffered to all doors and windows serving both external elevations and internal partitions.
- Stained glass windows to include Harry Clarke windows within east and west transepts are extensively damaged though have been removed for assessment and restoration where feasible by appropriate specialists.











Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Ceiling & Wall Finishes

- Internal ceiling and wall plaster to include feature plasterwork and bulkheads, decorative finishes, panels and plaques have been effectively destroyed throughout.
- Minor elements within both transept chapels may be capable of restoration though the majority of finishes will unfortunately need to be renewed within their entirety.
- Redecoration will be necessary throughout all affected areas.





Summary of Nature & Extent of Damage

Contents

- Extensive damage has been caused to statues, altars and water fonts to varying degrees. One of the surviving statues was that of St Mel.
- Other items to include the organ gallery, pitch pine pews, confessionals, altars, stations of the cross, Ambo, Presidential Chair, rostrum and other contents have been destroyed.
- Extensive destruction was suffered to contents within the Cathedral museum. Many artefacts have however been recovered, details of which will be outlined further in this presentation.









Immediate Emergency Actions

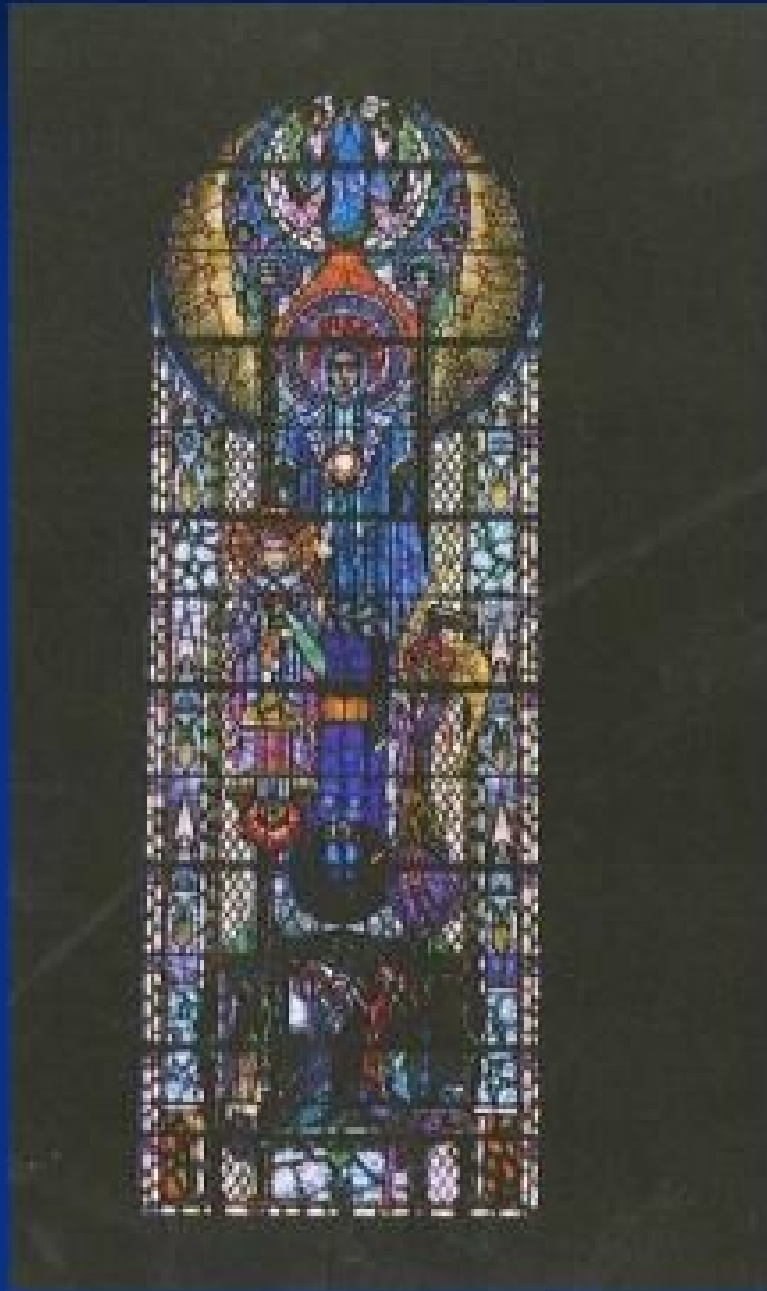
Phase 1A: Emergency Actions (Immediate)

- Securing the site / prevention of unauthorised access.
- Immediate making safe actions were completed in those portions of the Cathedral buildings necessary to allow Garda and forensic specialist access. This included removal of loose material, propping and shoring.
- Removal and storage of stained glass windows to avoid any further damage was completed by specialist Abbey Stained Glass Studios. The Harry Clarke windows are of particular importance
- 24 hour security was put in place.
- The Heritage Officer & Senior Planner of Longford County Council were consulted from the outset and have worked collaboratively with specialists involved. They were entirely satisfied with & reassured by the professional representation in place and supported all emergency actions undertaken.
- Safe access was provided for archaeologists from The National Museum of Ireland to the museum area. Salvage & retrieval efforts are now complete.

All has not been lost!

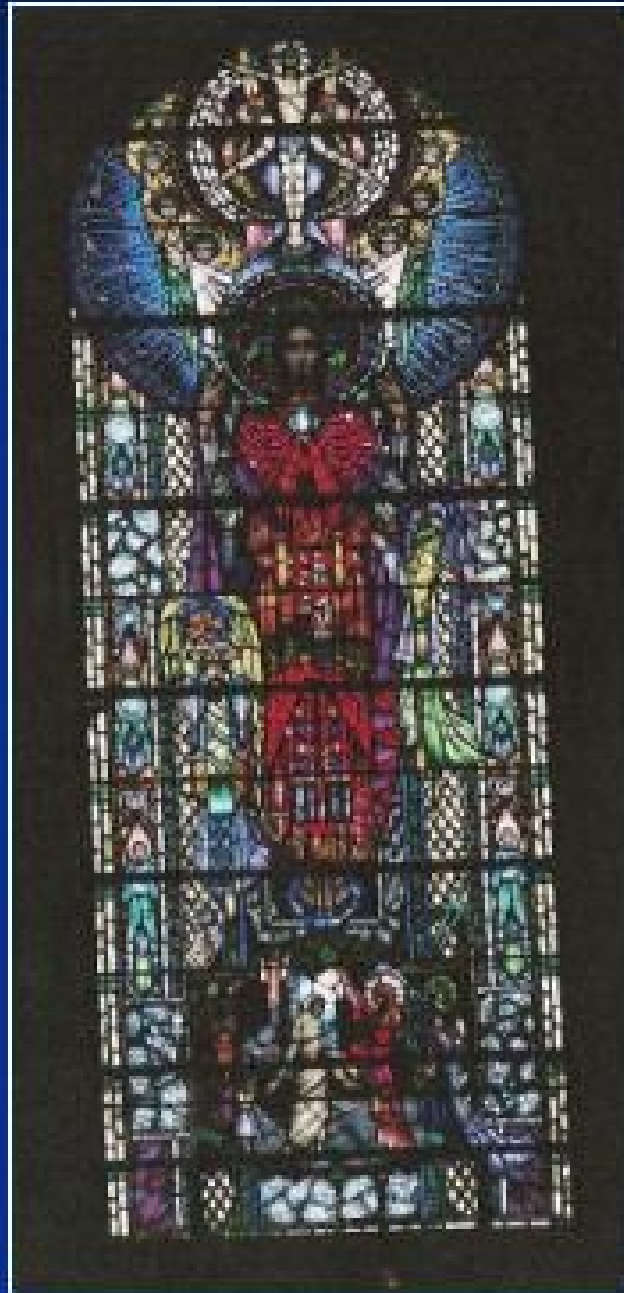
Examples of Items Recovered / Restored

Conservation of Stained Glass Windows



Harry Clarke Stained Glass Window

Conservation of Stained Glass Windows



Harry Clarke Stained Glass Window

Samples of Artefacts Recovery by National Museum



16th Century Book Shrine

Samples of Artefacts Recovery by National Museum



Ceremonial Trowel

Samples of Artefacts Recovery by National Museum



Limoges Crozier

Samples of Artefacts Recovery by National Museum



Spearhead

Samples of Artefacts Recovery by National Museum



Axehead

Samples of Artefacts Recovery by National Museum



Dagger

Examples of Silver & Brassware Restored By Quality Brass Supplies Ltd

Samples of Other Items Retrieved & Restored



Samples of Other Items Retrieved & Restored



Samples of Other Items Retrieved & Restored



Samples of Other Items Retrieved & Restored



Alternative Facilities

Phase 1B: Emergency Actions (Alternative Facilities)

- Following the fire, immediate use was made of Temperance Hall for daily and weekend masses (this was however of insufficient capacity and was not suitable for on-going usage in either short, medium or long term).
- Various alternative options were considered by the Diocese. Use of St Mel's College was ultimately identified as the most suitable & practical solution, due to the facilities already in place, its overall capacity, scope for adaptation and it's proximity to the Cathedral.
- Upgrade to the existing chapel in St Mel's College, as an alternative facility for daily masses is now complete. Limited car parking facilities are available to the front of the College, to support daily masses.

Phase 1B: Emergency Actions (Alternative Facilities) - continued

- Upgrade and modification to Sports Hall in St Mel's College to make same suitable for Sunday Masses and larger congregations is also now complete.
- Pedestrian pavement alongside existing entrance avenue to St Mel's College has now been installed.
- Proposal for additional new car parking facility at rear of St Mel's College has also now progressed significantly.

The success of the above facilities was built on a strong sense of community and the provision of an impressive voluntary input from all involved!









William Farrell Photography

Emergency Actions

Phase 2

Phase 2: Emergency Actions (Secondary)

- Further making safe and temporary support works in the remaining Cathedral and associated building structures continues.
- On-going examination and removal of fire debris, to identify and salvage all remaining artefacts, features and salvageable items from the Cathedral and Museum, under archaeological supervision, is near completion.
- Wind bracing to external walls in order to secure same is now complete.
- A temporary roof to weather proof the Cathedral has now been designed and will shortly be fitted.
- Protective site hoarding incorporating public viewing facilities will shortly be erected.

Phase 2: Emergency Actions (Secondary)

- Full surveys of the building including detailed photographic and dimensional surveys are on-going.
- All making safe works, temporary works and protective measures have been carried out to Conservation Architect & Local Authority requirements.
- A Project Committee with local representation has been appointed to oversee the restoration of the cathedral.
- A professional team selection process is now underway.

Phase 2 Emergency Actions and weather proofing of building is scheduled for completion by late April 2010

Photographs Illustrating Phase 2 Works in Progress

















Next Steps

Next Steps

- Complete selection process for professional team
- Determine appropriate specification required and obtain planning permission
- Prepare detailed design, fire certificate, drawings and specifications
- Obtain tenders and appoint contractors
- Carry out works
- Final account and defects period

Indicative program completion is estimated at 5 years

Conclusion

Conclusion

- The focus will shortly change towards the restoration phase of this project which will evolve over a period of time.
- The successes achieved to date are attributable to the energetic and collaborative approach adopted by all involved, a strong sense of community and a most impressive voluntary input.
- We are all confident that in time we will achieve a worthy restoration that will again see St Mel's Cathedral take its place as a beautiful centre for prayer for the people of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clanmacnois.

Thank you for your attention



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