

St. Patrick's Church, Ardragh Parish, Shanco, Corvalley, Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan

INTRODUCTION

In 1865 Mr E.P. Shirley of Lough Fea, Magheraclone, near Carrickmacross decided to build a church near the far north west end of his estates at Corvalley Cross.

There are various stories about his intentions at the time. One suggestion is that he intended a new town to grow up around that cross roads and the church was part of that plan. Another suggestion is that the church was intended to serve the needs of the Roman Catholic people of the area covering what are now the parishes of Rafferaugh and Corduff but that the people of those parishes did not want the church and stayed in their own buildings. A third story is that the church was built to handle the overflow of people attending St. Finbarr's Church in Carrickmacross and who came from the northern end of Magheross Parish.

Dr David Lawrence in his research into the windows came up with the drawings of a far larger building of which the present church represents just the chancel and choir. This would fit in with the idea that the building was originally intended to serve a large congregation, which would be unlikely to have come from the Church of Ireland. In the event the Church of Ireland families in the area began to use the church and have done so ever since. The fact that there is a large family vault for the Shirley Family under the sanctuary (which has never been used) does not seem to fit with the idea that it might have been originally intended as a Roman Catholic parish church though the size of the church does.

In Church of Ireland terms the Corvalley area was part of Magheross or Carrickmacross Parish and the area designated to St. Patrick's was effectively carved out of Carrickmacross making the church originally a daughter church of Carrickmacross. However it was many decades before there was any relationship between Carrickmacross and Ardragh parishes. It first existed as a parish on its own, it then became united with Magheraclone and finally, with Magheraclone, it was grouped with Carrickmacross. Although the church is

in Shanco townland in the Corvalley area it was designated as serving “Ardragh” Parish, effectively a newly created entity, the name associated with the circular hill on which it was built rather than any larger area. The name Ard Rath means in Irish a “High Fort” or elevated fortified dwelling from ancient times.

In 1865 Dr Romney Robinson was the absentee rector of Carrickmacross being the full time Director of the Observatory in Armagh, to which all his income, tithes and otherwise, from the parish was applied. He was interested in all the many technological inventions that were appearing at the time, being a noted inventor himself. He had contacts with all the prominent people of the time and used the well known architects, Richard Herbert Carpenter, (1841-1893) and William Slater (c.1818-1872) of London to draw up plans to extend St. Finbarr's church in Carrickmacross after St. Patrick's Ardragh was completed. It is possible that he recommended these architects to E.P. Shirley when he began to talk about building St. Patrick's. The church was built in what is described as 'the early French style” a simple Gothic style featuring a curved chancel.

The foundation stone of St. Patrick's was laid on Thursday, 23rd November 1865 by Sewallis, Evelyn Shirley's only son (Dublin Builder, 7, 1 December 1865, p. 286.) and the current building was completed in 1866. The following is extracted from a contemporary account of the Ardragh church, found amongst the Shirley Papers in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland:

The parochial district of St. Patrick's Ardragh...was constituted under a deed dated the 4th of February in the present year [1868] whereby 33 townlands forming heretofore the northern part of the parish of Magheross...were formed...into a district parish. The site of the new church was conveyed by deed dated 22nd February 1868, and the same was endowed on the following day by a rent charge of £100 per annum...

So, Ardragh Parish was formed as a Perpetual Curacy out of Carrickmacross on the 4th of February 1868 and the church was consecrated as a Church of Ireland church two years after its completion on the 13th October 1868. Obviously during this time discussions seem to have been taking place as to exactly what it should be used as and who should be responsible for it. The building was completed to a very high standard with high class materials and a number of experimental innovations. Obviously the intention of the architect and builder, the Parks Company of Carrickmacross, was to provide a show piece building. It has been described as a “Simple oblong building with apsidal sanctuary with alabaster-lined walls”. In fact a great deal of alabaster

was used in the decoration and fitting out of the church. As well as on the walls of the chancel there is alabaster work in the pulpit and font. Apparently Shirley has discovered the raw materials for this medium on his estates and was experimenting with developing an industry around this. The use of the material in the church was apparently part of this development which unfortunately came to nothing. Unfortunately the dampness of the church in more recent times led to major deterioration in the alabaster work which was stripped from the walls. The Stained glass work was undertaken by Clayton & Bell and is very highly commended by Dr. Lawrence. There is also some fine Marble work which was carved by Sibthorp's of Dublin. The floor of the stone-vaulted polygonal apse is decorated with interesting tiles and is approached by steps which leave it about three feet higher than the choir, a very "Catholic-Revival" feature.

In May 1866, Evelyn Shirley's carpenter, George Thomson, informed him 'that Mr. Parks has commenced Ardragh Church... and is getting on very well'. Two years later, in March, the builder Mr. Gordon wrote to Shirley informing him that the roof of the apse was finished, the chimney was almost built, most of the cut stone for the bell cote prepared and that setting the gable cross depended on the weather. St Patrick's was Consecrated on 13th October 1868 by Archbishop of Armagh, the Primate of All Ireland, Marcus Gervais Beresford, who also held the see of Clogher. The sermon at the Consecration, preached by Dr. Reeves, Rector of Tynan, afterwards Bishop of Down and Connor, was printed at the Chiswick Press in 1869. He preached on 2 Chronicles 6. 41, (Now ascend, O LORD God, to your resting place, you and the ark of your strength! May your priests, O LORD God, experience your deliverance! 75 May your loyal followers rejoice in the prosperity you give!).

The following is an article from a contemporaneous building journal.:

SAINT PATRICK'S CHURCH AT ARDRAGH is picturesquely sited on an eminence in a grove of beech trees at Corvalley in rural countryside between Carrickmacross and Shercock. Solid and well-built in a simple Gothic style, this perfect small church was conceived by Evelyn Philip Shirley of Lough Fea, ultimately for a new parish to be formed on 4th February 1868, but also in part as a mortuary chapel for the Shirley family. Designed in 1866 by the important, London-based architect, William Slater, the first stone was laid on Thursday, 23rd November 1865 by Sewallis, Evelyn Shirley's only son (Dublin Builder, 7, 1 December 1865, p. 286.)

ARCHITECTURE

To quote: “When completed in 1868, this rural hilltop site was endowed with an exquisitely crafted building displaying an exploitation of local materials that would have greatly cheered Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, the leading promoter of scholarly Gothic architecture in the Mid-nineteenth century and the most influential architect of his time. In the intense academic environment which surrounded church design of the period, Pugin had stridently called for the adoption of a correct revival of mediaeval Gothic architecture which he deemed most apt for Christian buildings; he believed that the design should clearly reflect the use of the building, that decoration should not be superfluous, limited instead only to enhance elements of structural necessity.”

THE ARCHITECT

William Slater was one of many ecclesiastical architects who espoused Pugin’s ideals to drive forward the Gothic Revival movement. Slater was born in 1818 and began his architectural career apprenticed to the church architect Richard Cromwell Carpenter (1812-1855) whose practice he inherited in 1855. In 1863 he took as his partner, Richard Herbert Carpenter, the son of his former master. Before his involvement with Ardragh, Slater had already been involved in a number of commissions in Ireland, including Christ Church in Bray which, he designed in 1860 and the restoration of St Mary’s Cathedral in Limerick between 1858-1863. However, Slater’s earliest work in Ireland, and the building with which he is still most associated, is Kilmore Cathedral for which he exhibited his designs at the Royal Academy in 1858.

Two weeks after the dedication of St. Patrick’s in October 1868, William Slater with his partner, Richard Herbert Carpenter, produced designs for the enlargement of St Finbar’s Parish Church in Carrickmacross. The scheme proposed the creation of a buttressed south aisle and polygonal apse, like Ardragh in a robust Gothic Revival style with geometric tracery contrasting with the more restrained Gothic of the late-eighteenth century church. The design was not executed, but a variation of the arrangement can be appreciated in the architects’ 1866 enlargement of St Mark’s church in Armagh city where the absentee rector of Carrickmacross, Dr Thomas Romney Robinson was based as director of the nearby Observatory.

DESIGN & MATERIALS

“ The new church was built on a well chosen site upon a rising ground...from

a design furnished by William Slater of 4 Regent Street, London. It is very simple in its character, in what may be called the early Irish style, consisting only of a nave and apse, the latter vaulted and roofed with stone; the western end is pierced by circular window with a large arch, whereby the church, should the congregation increase, might be easily enlarged. There are four plain arched windows on the north and south and three in the apse itself, the material is the common green stone of the district with quoins and cut stone of the pinkish free stone used in the construction of Lough Fea House and which is found near Carrickmacross. There is a small bellcote surmounted by a cross, and another over the chancel arch.”

“ Slater’s design for Ardragh is relatively simple. A short, four-bay gabled hall with a bell cote over the gable front and a polygonal apse at the east end with an ashlar roof, perfectly formed like a miniature baptistery. The four drop arched lancets of the nave are framed between off-set buttresses which continue around the chancel. The stonework throughout is of exceptional quality with small squared blocks of rock-faced limestone, quarried locally at Carrickalim, contrasted with the pink hues of the freestone from Lough Fea demesne. When the carpenter George Thomson wrote to Evelyn Shirley on May 16th 1866, about Ardragh, he explained some of the difficulties in obtaining the materials for the building:

The stones from the rubble quarry will not chop or dress for the outside in a proper way but we have found another quarry about half way between Corvalley and Carrickmaclim that we hope will do well. We are getting some good stones in the free stone quarry but a great deal of rubbish in proportion. The tenants is very backward in carting the stones from both quarrys...’
(PRONI, Shirely Papers D/3531/E/1)

“ The sandstone was carved into sloping ashlar blocks to roof the chancel and the small lean-to porch on the west front, and decoratively to provide the corbels of the eaves course. A curiosity is the treatment of the west gable with a pronounced round-headed arch which reflected the optimistic provision by the patron for the future enlargement of the nave if required – in effect so as to become a chancel arch. Within this is a round window with plate tracery of the plainest possible kind: four circles pieced through to form the shape of a cross with smaller circles in between. The bell cote is hung with the ancient bell from the old church of Magheross, presented by the Rev. Dr. Robinson. To the side, a tall chimney stack projects above the eaves in the north west corner of the nave – an elegant stone cylinder with moulded bands that once served a stove located in the body of the church.

THE INTERIOR

“ The Church interior is correspondingly simple and relatively unadorned, the functional qualities of the design embodied in the arched brace roof of the nave, carried on small moulded corbels with a plain plaster or parquetry between the rafters – an uncomplicated and expressive structure contrasting with the solid pink blocks of sandstone roofing the apse. The windows and doors are now set against plain rendered walls, formed with alternate blocks of pink and buff coloured sandstone to express vibrant surrounds. Originally the interior was very much enhanced by locally produced alabaster, mined from a quarry on the Shirley estate leased to Mr. Carruthers from Carlisle. In March 1868 Gordon explained that 14cwt of blue and red alabaster was being cut to line the apse. The material was worked by the well known Dublin decorating firm of Henry Sibthorpe & Son, but unfortunately this has since been removed. The chancel arch is formed with polished alabaster shafts supporting capitals of Lough Fea stone. Slater’s designs for the furniture survive, these include the oak communion tablet, once adorned with embroidered Utrecht Velvet and the Reading desk: a solid rectangular block of blue alabaster decorated by Sibthorpes with two panels of shamrock diaper-work, divided by an engaged alabaster shaft with stiff leaf capitals and all set between a moulded Caen stone base and lectern. The octagonal Baptismal font, another example of Sibthorpe’s work, is also carved from Caen stone, a pale limestone from north west France contrasting with alabaster inlay and shafts of polished Connemara marble. The chancel floor is covered with Minton tiles displaying the impressive Shirley quarterings. The series of stained glass windows are all early works by the London firm of John Richard Clayton (1827-1913) and Alfred Bell (1832-1895), who also produced windows for Kilmore Cathedral.

“ The windows are by Clayton and Bell of London. Those for the southern and northern sides are simply dispersed with roses, acorns and shamrocks. The three eastern chancel windows though now rather faded, are pictorial works depicting subjects popular in nineteenth century stained glass art: our Lord in the three character of ‘The True Vine’, ‘The Good Shepherd’ and ‘The Light of the Word’. The circular window in the east end, the life of St Patrick, his call, his consecration, his preaching to the Irish chiefs & explaining by means of the shamrock the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, and his foundation of the church of Armagh. In the centre is the sacred monogram I.H.C.

“ The plate of silver consisting of flagon, chalice and paten and latter dish bears the following inscription: ‘Dedicated to the service of God, in the church

of St Patrick of Ardragh by Mary Elizabeth, the wife of Evelyn Philip Shirley, the founder'. The bell now fixed in this church is an ancient one, it formerly hung in the tower of the old church of Magheross and was presented to St. Patrick's by the Rev. Dr. Robinson Vicar, and the churchwardens of Carrickmacross... (PRONI, Shirley Papers D/3531/E/1)

“ When Evelyn Philip Shirely died of an apoplectic fit in 1882 at Ettington Park, the principal family seat in Warwickshire, he was buried in the family crypt there and not as may have been intended at Ardragh. The large crypt beneath the chancel at Ardragh remains empty having never been used by any members of the Shirley family.

PARISH RECORDS

As the books were completed these were forwarded to the Four Courts in Dublin where they were destroyed in 1922. Unfortunately no local copies were made and most of the early information about the parish has been lost.

ARDRAGH CLERGY

Ardragh's first Perceptual Curate was the Rev. Patrick Hastings who was appointed in 1868. He was born in 1835 in county Limerick, the son of a farmer, and entered Trinity College Dublin on the 2nd July 1855. He was awarded a BA and Divinity Testemonium in 1860. He was ordained Deacon in the Diocese of Cork in 1861 but he first served as the Curate of Carnteel in Armagh Diocese for a year where he was priested before moving to be curate of Creggan (Armagh) from 1862 to 1864. It is not known where he was from then until his nomination by E.P. Shirley to be Perpetual Curate of St. Patrick's. He resigned on the 29th February 1872 according to the Diocesan Registry and he died that same year. On the 24th August he married Kate Reynett in Tempo Parish Church. She was the daughter of William Francis Reynett and army officer from Clabby, Co. Tyrone.

Mr Hastings was followed by Alexander Hurst Ross who was instituted on the 17th May 1872 according to the Diocesan Registry. He had been born on the 2nd August 1830 at Drumbrain, Co. Monaghan where his father, the Rev Richard Ross was the Presbyterian Minister. He had gone to Trinity College and was awarded a B.A. In 1859. He was ordained deacon in 1860, and priested in 1861 in Armagh Diocese. He moved to Clogher as Curate of Aghabog in 1860 and stayed there twelve years before coming to Ardragh. He resigned on the 2nd May 1881 and moved to England where he served in a

number of curacies. He later returned to Ireland and was buried at Ballykelly, C. Derry on the 19th August 1923.

On Mr Ross's departure the Parish of Ardragh was no longer deemed to be viable and instead of being linked to its mother church in Carrickmacross it was united with Magheraclone. This coincided with the arrival on the 17th November 1881 of the Rev Charles Joseph Hill Tardy.

It remained with Magheraclone until in 1976 it, and Magheraclone were grouped with Carrickmacross.

LEGAL STATUS

St. Patrick's Church is a protected structure, Reference number 011380.

REFERENCES

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A catalogue of the Bradshaw Collection of Irish books in the University Library Cambridge (1916), II, 1011; illus. in *Clergy of Clogher* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2006), Part 1, 17