

The Church at Pollagh

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It is quite usual for those of us who are curious about our cultural heritage to visit historical sites such as the monastic settlement of Clonmacnoise. But occasionally a rich legacy of a not-so-distant, but very different, past exists in more prosaic places. Such was the case last Easter when a flotilla of boats travelled from Shannon Harbour to Lowtown. The first night of the journey we stayed in the tiny village of Pollagh, Co. Offaly. The weather was glorious and as we tied up one of our fellow travellers suggested that the carvings in the church were worth a look.

The church's external appearance was somewhat puzzling. The plaque set above the doorway proclaimed that it was built in 1907, but its squat shape, continental-looking central tower, small pointed windows and external banding did not conform to the usual Irish ecclesiastical architectural formula of the cruciform or basilican plan favoured at this period. We headed up to the nearby bridge to get an aerial view in the hope of figuring out the ground plan, but this did not provide further enlightenment, as the jumble of slate, lead flashing and circular skylights served to confuse rather than explain.

The chevron

Entering through the central doorway an astonishing sight is revealed. A fan-shaped interior leads the eye towards the altar where the jewel-like splendour of two Harry Clarke stained-glass windows contrasts with the leaping blaze of dark bog yew altar and tabernacle. On inquiring about the unusual architecture we discovered a tale of repressive religious mores, innovative design and excellent taste.

A word with the helpful Parish Priest, Fr Aidan Ryan PP, provided an insight to the enigmatic architecture. The church of St Mary's was built between 1907 and 1910 under the direction of the then Parish Priest, Canon Matthew Columb. The original building was designed in the shape of a chevron, or an inverted V, with the sanctuary at the point. The function of this unusual shape was to achieve segregation of the sexes during church services so that the women, seated in one aisle, were not visible to the men in the other and vice versa. The genesis of this idea sprung from Canon Columb's student travels in France where he saw a church of a similar design.



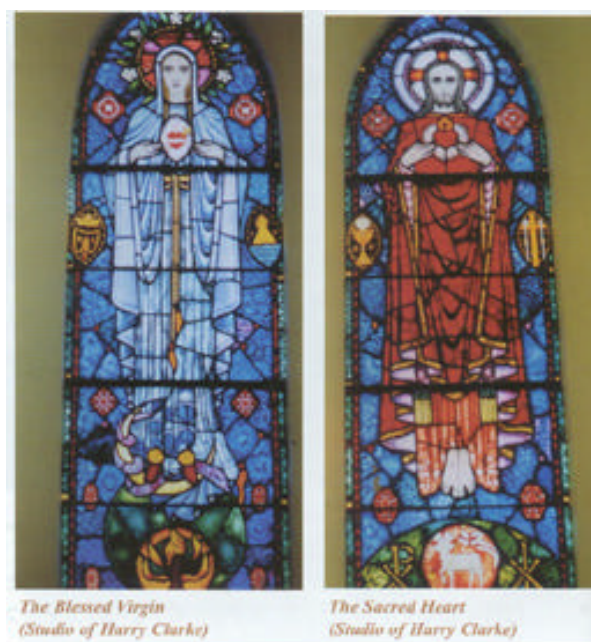
The parishioners soon named St. Mary's the "trouser church" in honour of its shape, but this changed in 1959 when the building was enlarged by bridging the triangular gap between the two aisles; hence the irregular design. It was during the course of the same renovation that the local

yellow Pollagh brick was covered over in favour of the more functional pebble-dashed exterior.

Stained-glass windows

The most dominating feature of the architecture is the glow of the stained-glass windows. The church is very subtly lit by a series of small windows in the west wall, circular skylights, and openings placed high up at clerestory level. The only direct lighting is provided by the two stained-glass windows flanking the altar.

These were procured in 1936 by the studio of Harry Clarke RHA. The windows represent the Blessed Virgin and the Sacred Heart and contain many of the hallmarks of Clarke's innovative approach to this medium. Clarke was renowned for his spectacular use of colour and the juxtaposition of the blue gown, worn by the Virgin, and the contrasting red robes of the Sacred Heart is subtly articulated through the interplay of variants on the colour scheme within the design.



Clarke's education by the Jesuits prompted him to pay meticulous attention to religious symbolism and details such as the band of roses decorating the exposed heart of Mary contrasts with the crown of thorns shown on Christ's heart. Further iconographic details, such as the seven bookmarks dangling from the bible under the Lamb of God, indicate the artist's knowledge of the scriptures and his commitment to include even the smallest references.

In 1931 Harry Clarke died prematurely from tuberculosis. His widow, Margaret Clarke RHA, who was also an artist, became the director of Harry Clarke Stained Glass Limited on her husband's death and continued in this post for the next thirty years. It is most likely that she was responsible for the installation of the stained-glass windows in 1936.



The "new" section of the architecture



View of the altar with both Clarke windows and Michael Casey's altar furniture

Altar furnishings

The second outstanding decorative feature in St. Mary's is the altar furnishings, which are made from bog yew, a kind of Irish ebony. This was extracted from the Bog of Allen and is estimated to be 2,800 years old. The furnishings were crafted by Michael Casey and the students of the Celtic Roots studio in 1991. Michael Casey (born in 1932) originally trained as a carpenter but began carving in the difficult medium of bog woods in the early 1960s. His thirty years

experience is evident in the range of sculptural solutions he brought to bear on the four pieces of sanctuary furniture.

Although the altar, ambo, tabernacle and chair are similar in colour and texture, the sculptor retained a sense of the wild splendour of the original wood in his handling of the medium. The tabernacle, for example, has all the exuberance of untamed flames, while the smooth boat-shaped surface of the altar top contrasts with the writhing image of the crucified Christ depicted on its pedestal. The dark colour and dense format of the bog yew complements the translucent glowing colours of the stained glass.

From the staircases

A gallery runs along the eastern end of the church, accessed by a spiral staircase at each end. Visitors to the church can get a flavour of the blinkered view experienced by the original congregation by positioning themselves next to these staircases.

If we look up the church from the right-hand side we can see only one stained-glass window, that of the Blessed Virgin. She symbolises motherhood and suffering and is an appropriate role model for the females in the congregation.

Standing at the other spiral staircase one can see only the Sacred Heart window. Here, Christ is depicted as the supreme image of obedience and self-sacrifice. He represents a most appropriate role model for the male members of the community.

The wedge-shaped roof installed in 1959 facilitates a more gender-balanced approach and significantly reduces the tunnel vision that was emblematic of 19th century religious practice in Ireland. The unique history of St. Mary's Pullough is part of the social fabric of our past and adds an unexpected dimension to messing about in boats.

All photographs Ó Dr Maebh O'Regan.

