



St Patrick's Belfast

FOUNDED 1815

Notes on The History and Architecture of St Patrick's Parish, Belfast



Taken from an original text by Fr Michael Sheehan to whom we give our thanks for his permission to use his research.

Introduction:

The present church is an imposing edifice, rendered in sandstone and in the Romanesque style. Its treasury boasts artefacts of international significance, chief among them a relic of St Patrick's arm, enshrined in a priceless medieval silver reliquary. It also has a triptych altarpiece entitled 'Madonna of the Lakes' painted by Sir John Lavery, himself a celebrated son of the parish.

ORIGINS:

The ancient parish of Shankill comprised the entirety of modern-day Belfast. Its first early Christian church was situated in the disused cemetery on what is now the Shankill Road. In the 1306 taxation of Pope Nicholas, raised to fund the Crusades, it is titled 'The White Church of Shankill'. Later it appears that the church became redundant but its title and functions were transferred to a church built close to the ford across the Lagan River and the Norman castle. The Terrier of 1615 lists church property confiscated at the Reformation and names this church, 'St Patrick's Church of the White Ford'.

English Protestant settlers, who acquired the church, rebuilt it in 1812 renaming it in honour of St George, the patron saint of England. Catholics reclaimed the ancient title for the church built in Donegall Street by dedicating it to St Patrick, patron saint of Ireland.

The foundation stone of the current church was laid by Bishop Patrick Dorrian on 18th of April, 1875. During his ministry as the Bishop of Down and Connor (1865-85) twenty six new churches were built. St. Patrick's was built in the Romanesque style of different coloured sandstone. Bishop Dorrian was buried beneath the sanctuary behind the priest's chair, marked out by a thin line of red marble. In the left transept, adjacent to St. Joseph's Columbarium, is his memorial, rendered in sandstone and alabaster, and it bears the arms of the Diocese of Down and Connor.

A CHURCH WITHIN A CHURCH:

A previous church, built on this site in 1815, no longer sufficed for the increasing congregation. To accommodate them during the construction of a new and larger church, Messrs Collins Brothers of Portadown commenced building the new church around the old. It was then demolished in August, 1876 and the entire fabric of the new church was speedily completed for blessing on 12th of August 1877 by the Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Daniel McGettigan of Armagh. A two-ton bell, cast by Thomas Sheridan of Dublin, had already been placed into the 180 feet high (54 metre) spire. Thomas Heanvey, the architect of the splendid new church, had been a former associate of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and like him did not brook delays.

Inside the church, ten beautiful arches of red sandstone, supported by slender rose and grey Dumfries granite pillars separate the nave from each aisle. Three further arches separate the sanctuary from the nave. As the eye traces the orbit of the 50 feet (15 metre) high centre arch, it comes to rest on the pitch pine ceiling.

REREDOS AND ALTARS:

Behind the altar versus populum, made of Portland stone and installed in 1997, stands the original high altar with its reredos of Caen stone, relieved by Cork red and Galway green marble columns. The reredos together with its sculptures was the work of O'Neill and Pearse of Dublin as was the Portland stone statue of St. Patrick outside in the tympanum over the main front doors.

REFURBISHMENT AFTER THE 1995 FIRE:

After a catastrophic fire on 12th of October, 1995, every effort was made to restore the church to its original state by the then Administrator, Very Rev David White, and his project manager, Mr Oliver Magill. To repair the reredos and its tabernacle, old sketches and photographs were consulted. After a long, costly and painstaking restoration project, the church was reopened by Bishop Patrick Walsh on 5th of October, 1997.

SHRINE OF MARY AND BAPTISTERY:

Left of the sanctuary is the modern shrine of Our Lady of Comfort, designed and cast in bronze by sculptor, Mr Chris Ryan of Howth, in 1997. Mary's Son is held out to us as Saviour while a lady, representing the parish, seeks patronage. On the right is the baptistry whose font commemorates, on seven of its eight sides, the grace giving sacraments established by Christ. An aumbry adjacent to the font contains the Holy Oils used in the administration of the Sacraments.

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS:

To beautify the church stained glass windows were added over time. High in the apse seven windows depict the Lord Jesus with his saints in glory. A rose window in the Shrine of Mary represents the Magi visiting Bethlehem while in the baptistry another rose window portrays Jesus revealing the love of his Sacred Heart for all people to St Margaret Mary Alacoque. Four windows in the left transept, reinstalled from St Kevin's Church in North Queen Street before its demolition, represent the Holy Trinity. The original windows in the right transept were destroyed as a result of an explosion during the recent years of sectarian conflict, but the six windows now installed illustrate the life and apostolate of St Patrick. It is noteworthy how often Mary the Mother of God is depicted, under different titles in the remaining stained glass windows of the nave.

NAVE SHRINES:

A shrine on the right is dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua; there is a first class relic of the saint in the reliquary on the left side of the statue. The triptych altarpiece on the left of the nave was presented in 1917 by the renowned painter Sir John Lavery, in memory of his baptism in the previous St. Patrick's Church on 26th of March, 1856. His second wife, Hazel Trudeau was the model for the Madonna while St. Patrick and St. Brigid were modelled by his daughter Eileen and step-daughter Helen respectively. All of Lavery's letters to the then Administrator, Fr O'Neill, are preserved in the parish archive. They give great detail of the original setting of this work including the side altar and furnishings commissioned from the great architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens. The original setting was sadly

lost in reordering works carried out in the 1960s and 70s and all that remains of Lutyens' fine work is triptych frame, adorned with Celtic knotwork.

RELIQUARIES:

The church holds a large collection of relics of saints, most notably two relics of St Patrick. The priceless silver reliquary which holds the arm relic of the national patron was fashioned in the 14th Century and is presently on loan to the Ulster Museum. Meanwhile, the silver reliquary, fashioned in 1645, containing the jaw bone of St. Patrick, is on loan to the Down County Museum in Downpatrick.

PARISH TREASURY:

The parish treasury boasts artefacts of international significance, chief among them a relic of St Patrick's arm, enshrined in a priceless medieval silver reliquary. It also has a triptych altarpiece entitled 'Madonna of the Lakes' painted by Sir John Lavery, himself a celebrated son of the parish.

THE ARM SHRINE OF ST. PATRICK:

The traditional belief regarding this shrine is that it dates back to the discovery of the relics of Sts. Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille in the Benedictine Cathedral of Downpatrick in 1186. The story is familiar to everyone how some doubt having existed as to the exact whereabouts of the burial-place of these three saints and how in answer to prayer, the precise spot in the cathedral was revealed to Malachy III, Bishop of Down. In conjunction with John de Courcy, the bishop made application to Rome to have the bodies removed to some more fitting place in the cathedral, and such permission having been granted, a special legate, Cardinal Vivian, was sent over to Down to superintend the removal of the relics. The ceremony was carried out with great pomp, some of the relics were enshrined and placed on the high altar and some brought back to Rome. One of the enshrined relics was a bone from the arm of the national apostle. When Edward Bruce invaded Ireland he plundered the Cathedral of Down and the shrine was carried off in 1316.

Nothing further is heard of the shrine for some centuries, when it is found in the possession of the Magennis family of Iveagh, some of whom were Abbots and Bishops of Down. About 1710, one of this family married George Russell, of Rathmullan, County Down, and brought the relic with her. Rose Russell, their daughter, married Rowland Savage of the Ards and thus the shrine came into the possession of the Savages. The head of this family having become a Protestant and having changed his name to Nugent, did not care to have this shrine in his possession and handed it over to Rev. Teggart, parish priest of Portaferry. Fr Teggart having died in 1765, the shrine came into the possession of the McHenry family of Caristown in the Upper Ards in whose custody it remained until it was handed over to Dr Denvir, Bishop of Down and Connor. It has remained in the custody of the Bishop of Down and Connor since 1840.

The shrine is of silver and is a representation of the arm and hand of an ecclesiastical dignitary covered with an embroidered sleeve and a jewelled glove. It was originally decorated around the wrist and also at the elbow with a large number of precious stones whose colour and size added greatly to the beauty of the shrine and enhanced the skill of the workmanship. It measures just over one foot in length but unfortunately does not contain any date or inscription. The base of the shrine contains the letters IHS which are of some assistance towards dating it, as this sacred monogram does not seem to have come into use until the beginning of the 15th Century.

The presence of this sacred monogram of early 15th Century origin need not necessarily conflict with the above-mentioned tradition of the enshrining of the relic in the presence of John de Courcy and the Cardinal Legate Vivian. The inscription could easily have been incised on the shrine at a later date. Jewelled gloves are characteristic marks of ecclesiastical dignitaries in the Norman period. There is no ornamental decorative Celtic scroll-work such as we would expect about the period, and we are induced to conclude tentatively that the shrine is of English workmanship, and made around Downpatrick about 1200.

When the Shrine was opened by Dr Denvir, bishop of the diocese, in 1856, it contained no relic, but merely a piece of yew wood almost a foot long, with an aperture sufficiently large to receive the wrist bone of a human arm. This was smeared over at both ends with, apparently, wax seals which had been impressed on the inner wooden receptacle, possibly to keep the bone in position. The relic which the shrine had contained had apparently been worn away through constant use. It was customary for the keeper of the relic to pour water through the elbow termination of the shrine, which, touching the relic passing through, flowed out at the fingers and was used as a cure for various diseases. Indeed, one of the reasons why Col. Nugent did not wish to retain possession of the relic was on account of the numbers of people who came from all parts of the country seeking cures. The oaths might be taken by touching it in cases where disputes were being settled outside the courts of law.

In conclusion, it must be added that the shrine contains at present a genuine relic of St. Patrick. When Cardinal Vivian returned to Rome in 1186 he brought back to Pope Urban III some of the relics of St. Patrick, which were preserved in the Church of St. Mark in Rome. Dr Denvir made application for one of these, and Dr Dorrian had it inserted in the shrine, with the seal of the Cardinal Protector of the Church confirming the donation placed on the outside of the shrine.

The inscription is as follows:

Reliquae de Brachio St. Patritii Episcopi Iberniae Apostoli desumptae de Mandato Emi viri Petri S. R
Eclae. Cardinalis de Silvestri Titularis S. Marci de Urbe

At present, the relic is preserved in the parish treasury while the priceless reliquary is on loan to and can be viewed at the Ulster Museum. On occasions of high solemnity, the two are reunited for veneration in the church.