

Drumkeerin Catholic Church: Dedicated 1870.

The building of Drumkeerin Catholic Church, Diocese of Kilmore, commenced in early 1864 after a site in the townland of Lugmeen was granted by the landlord William Johnston of Oakfield House, Kinlough to the parish priest Rev. Brian Keaney. Fr. Keaney, a native of Glenfarne had been appointed to Inishmagrath Parish in 1853. He had already built St. Colmcille's Church, Newbridge. In giving the site the landlord stipulated that the church could not be used for any purpose other than for religious services and that he or his agent would be entitled to enter and inspect the building. This stipulation stemmed from the fact that over the years churches had been used for political meetings and sometimes in the hours of darkness by secret societies.

Two years after the building began Fr. Keaney died and was buried in Aughalochy graveyard. He was succeeded by Rev. John Maguire of Castlemoyle near Manorhamilton who ministered for a very short time in the parish.

It would appear that significant progress was made in the first two years after the acquisition of the site as is evidenced by a letter published in the Anglo-Celt newspaper in July 1866 by Fr. Maguire. In an appeal for funds, he stated that the church was 'about being finished' and that he would be grateful for donations which could be sent to him or to his curates Revs. Edward Sheridan or Cormac Mac Sharry.

However, less than a year later a letter by Fr. Maguire's successor, Fr. James McPartland indicates that the building was far from finished. He invited tenders from 'competent persons for the erection of a new Roman Catholic Church in Drumkeerin according to plans and specifications' in his

possession. The name of the architect who drew up the plans is not given by Fr. McPartland. The identity of the contractor is known however. He was Patrick Morris of Union Place Sligo, one of the best known builders in Connacht. Buildings, for which he was the main contractor include, the Courthouse, Sligo, the Catholic Church, Clifden and the Convent Chapel in Castlebar.

By the summer of 1868 a parish committee, tasked with the raising of funds, had been established. It consisted of over forty members, and the total collected by them amounted to £441. This was supplemented by substantial subscriptions from the following individuals; Bishop Conaty, Rev. Patrick Daly, Newbridge, Rev. Luke Smith C.C. Drumkeerin, Rev. John Maguire, Rev. James McGourty, Dr. John Brady, member of parliament for Co. Leitrim, Jeremiah Browne, sub-inspector of Drumkeerin constabulary, Thomas Nash M.D. Grouselodge, William Palmer, solicitor, plus a bequest of £50 by the late Rev. Brian Keaney. These sums in all totalled £246.

According to local tradition, stones for the erection were freestones cut and dressed by local men. However McPartland in an appeal for donations from natives of the parish in America, Australia and elsewhere wrote in August 1868 that 'for the common building stones we must go six miles; for the sand and lime further'. The foundation stone of Drumkeerin Church has the date 1869 and it was in this year that Fr. McPartland donated £100 of his own money towards the rapidly rising cost

Although the church was not fully finished and almost certainly lacked seating, it was decided to have the official

dedication on Sunday, 2 October, 1870. The day was bright and sunny and from an early hour the approach roads to the village were thronged with people many of whom walked long distances from neighbouring parishes. At 11 am the proceedings began with the formal procession of fourteen priests led by Rev. John Maguire, Glenfarne and Rev. James McPartland. Almost all of the priests came from the surrounding parishes including from the diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise. The cross was carried by Rev. Peter McCann C.C. Killargue and two bishops, Dr. Nicholas Conaty, head of the diocese and Dr. John Brady, bishop of Perth, Western Australia, were the last to take up their positions at the altar. The dedication of the church was then performed by Dr. Conaty assisted by Rev. P. Sheridan, Drumshanbo and Rev. P. Cooke C.C. Drumkeerin. This was followed by High Mass celebrated by Rev. John O'Connor P.P. Kinlough. The sacred music 'was admirably and efficiently rendered by a select choir of good voices'.

At the conclusion of the Mass, Rev. John Maguire ascended the pulpit to deliver the sermon and in the course of a lengthy address, he told the congregation; 'you can now adore your Creator in temples of the choicest structure instead of those benighted caverns in which you were wont to offer the pleasing sacrifice to the Most High'. He appealed to the congregation to give generously to the collection which would shortly be taken up, acknowledging at the same time that the people had made great sacrifices already in ensuring that 'the church they now stood in was second to none in the diocese of Kilmore'. Fr. Maguire was reputed to be one of the foremost pulpit orators of his time and among

other dedication sermons which he delivered was that of Dromahaire Church in 1889.

The first contributors to the collection were Fr. McPartland and Bishop Conaty who donated £100 and £10 respectively. These were followed by Dr. Brady and the clergy whose contributions ranged from £3 to £1. Finally the members of the congregation made their donations. The names and townlands of the contributors were noted and were later published in the local press. Most households paid £1 though there were quite a few who paid considerably more. Many contributions came from outside the parish including substantial sums from Manorhamilton, Killargue, Dromahaire Drumshanbo, Dowra and from as far away as Killeshandra

The two final events of the ceremony were the imparting of the Papal blessing by Dr. Conaty and the celebration of benediction by Dr. Brady. The latter had no familial connection with Inishmagrath nor had he ever ministered in the parish. He became, however, a close friend and confidant of Dr. Conaty after he returned to Australia. While in Perth he was in close contact with Irish convicts and he also made the acquaintance of Richard Robert Madden the famous historian and biographer of the United Irishmen whose mother was Elizabeth Forde from Corry, Drumkeerin a direct descendant of the former ruling family of Inishmagrath.

Work continued on the church for a further 20 years or so. The tower was added in 1886 and then in 1898 what was described as 'repointing part of the outdoor masonry including the tower' and the finishing of the interior plastering. This work was carried out under the direction of Scott and Son, Architects, Drogheda. Even into the 20th

century other essential work took place including in 1918 'alterations, additions and improvements' under the supervision of architect J.J. McDonnell. Then in 1933 the church was re-roofed.

The provision of seating for the new church was largely done by members of the Corristine family of Killadiskert townland with the occasional assistance of journeyman tradesmen. Thomas Corristine, a full time carpenter was the main tradesman. He was married to Bridget Carrigan of Shass. He may have been assisted by his father, William, who was also a carpenter and who was aged 72 in 1870. William died in 1884.

Before the present church was built the people worshipped in the Bog Chapel in Carrowlaur which was located off the old road which linked Drumkeerin with Dowra. A branch of the old road now no longer used, joined the Drumshanbo road at Grouselodge. Erected in 1770, the Bog Chapel was T-shaped with transept 60 feet by 20 feet and nave 45 feet by 14 feet. It was a thatched building and on its demolition the stones were conveyed a short distance away to be used in the building of Kilmore national school. Another church, Kilbride predates the Bog Chapel. Unlike the latter, part of the ruin still survives. Although it was probably used for mass, it was never roofed. Up to the present time its adjoining graveyard is occasionally used as a burial ground for natives of the parish. Victims of the drowning in Lough Allen in 1831 are buried in Kilbride. Its name, Cill Bríde, the Church of Bridget may have influenced the decision to dedicate the present Church to St. Bridget as well.

Four other churches in Inishmagrath were built in the nineteenth century. Apart from Newbridge Catholic Church, already mentioned, the present Church of Ireland in Sheena townland replaced an old structure in 1829. The rector's residence built in 1816 was in Derrinwillan Glebe townland. In 1838 the Methodist Church in the village, now fast becoming a ruin, was officially consecrated. The Methodist ministers resided in the house in main street owned by Mary O'Rourke. The fourth church was the old Catholic Church in Tarmon built in 1834 by one of Inishmagrath's most famous priests, Fr. Thomas Maguire, who ministered in the parish from 1825 to 1835.

Seven years after the dedication of the present church a young priest, Fr. John Rogan, aged 23 was buried within its walls in the women's aisle. He was one of five students ordained early in 1877 without completing their course in Theology in St. Patrick's College, Cavan. This unusual decision was taken apparently because of a shortage of priests in the diocese. According to family tradition however Fr. Rogan's ordination was brought forward because he was terminally ill with T.B. His ordination took place on 18 February 1877 in the chapel of St. Patrick's College, Cavan just three months before he died (15 May). The tablet over his grave was erected by his sister Mrs. Bridget Dolan, wife of Francis Dolan, shopkeeper, Drumkeerin. She herself died in 1929.

Fr. James McPartland died on the 20 March 1886 and was also buried inside the church in a grave close to the altar of the Blessed Virgin. A native of Greagnaslieve he was born in 1818, the son of Owen McPartland and Betty McGauran. She was a first cousin of Dr. James McGauran, a native of

Moneensauran, Glangevlin who was appointed bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise in 1815.

In the latter years of his life McPartland was heavily involved in the provision of relief for impoverished families. He was chairman of the Drumkeerin Relief Committee a cross religion organisation whose membership included Rev. A. Smollen, Church of Ireland minister, John Palmer, Drumkeel and Robert Holmes. At a meeting in his own house in February 1880 it was decided to send a request to the Mansion House Relief fund which had been set up the previous month in Dublin for a hundred blankets and clothing for the 15% of children in the area who had to be kept at home from school for lack of clothes. McPartland also supported the Land League but he did not take an active role in its establishment in Drumkeerin in May 1880. He was however among a huge crowd, numbering about 5000, of league supporters who assembled in the old fair green a couple of months later.

Bishops Finnegan of Kilmore and Woodlock of Ardagh attended the month' mind for Fr. McPartland on 12 May, 1886. The sermon was preached by Fr. Patrick McMorrow P.P. Killargue who was also a native of Inishmagrath. According to McMorrow, Drumkeerin Church had cost £4,000 of which Fr. McPartland had contributed in all £400.

For part of his time in Drumkeerin Fr. McPartland lodged in a house belonging to the Buchanan family in the village. He was reputed to be a very fine singer and linguist who took a special interest in educational matters. He was survived by his nephew James McPartland of Liskellew. His successor was

Rev. James Dolan, a native of Manorhamilton and a former president of St. Patrick's College, Cavan.

Prin Duignan, September 2020