

History of Shelagh Chapel (by Sr Dr Una Agnew SSL)

Situated on the ancient ring-fort site of *Lios Droim Gearr*, Shelagh Chapel enjoys a remarkable view of Slieve Gullian and the Cooley Mountains and is clearly visible from the main Castleblaney-Dundalk Road. It has always been called a ‘chapel’, based on the Gaelic *séipéal*, the language spoken by the people of this area until well into the 1840s. The Shelagh section¹ of the parish of Upper Creggan is unique in being in County Louth, Leinster and the Republic of Ireland while the remainder of the parish is in Co Armagh. It is made up of ten, once hotly contested town lands, caught in a tug of ownership between the Norman Bellews of Castletown, Dundalk and the dynasty of Uí Néill, Glasdrummond. The area, finally appropriated by Bellew in 1449, was historically referred to as ‘The Five Towns of the Fewes’; the name ‘Fewes’ derived from *Sliabh Fuaid* (Sliabh Gullion). The ten town lands in question are: Cavananore, Tavnamore, Courtbane, Shelagh, Annavackey, Clonaleenan, Rassan, Shanmullagh, Kilaclessy and Treagh. Ballybinaby was added later in 1870.

Located in the town land of Courtbane, *Shelagh Chapel* owes its origin to its predecessor Penal chapel of the same name, a thatched structure, which, as far back as the 1700s was located on Murtagh/Hanratty land in the townland of Shelagh. This early edifice provided a place of worship for a congregation of 500 worshippers during Penal times. Any replacement chapel would inevitably be called ‘Shelagh’, therefore, the new, solid, stone structure, built on the elevated site in Courtbane retained its earlier name. In Penal times, there were Mass Rocks in the area, notably in Courtbane, Tavanamore and in quarries located in Clarnagh and Drumuckavall.

Chapel and school were always closely connected. The old thatched chapel doubled as a school on weekdays, where a hedge-school master called Paddy Óg McGorman (1800c) and later a Master Conlon, probably from Glasdrummond (1826-1835) taught the local Catholic children.² The stone stile that concealed the original chapel site was located near Owey Murtagh’s lane, a memory held by the late Annie McEnaney’s (1905-1998) whose precise knowledge of the area had been handed down by her mother Mary Moley (b.1883), a family of longstanding residence in the area.

Founding the ‘new’ chapel

Folklore accounts collected and written down in 1937/38 indicate that the building of the present chapel began in 1838. Local people were employed in its construction headed by the Gregory brothers from Clarnagh who enlisted the help of all local able-bodied men. Anyone who owned a cart and horse joined in the heavy work of carting building materials to the top of the hill. The late Eddie Richardson (1903-1887) added that *‘the mason work was given to two brothers called Jenkins of Blackstaff or*

¹Reference to ‘Shelagh area’ of the parish is merely a short-cut to include the eleven town lands that now form this area.

² There were twelve hedge- or cabin-schools listed in Creggan parish in 1826, all of RC denomination. ‘Shila’ or ‘Shela’ is repeatedly mentioned.

Drumcatton, who travelled five miles to work each day. Unfortunately, the almost completed chapel had its roof blown off during the Big Wind of January, 1839 so that it was not completed until 1841. A written account given to the Folklore Commission by John Agnew (1905-1985) relates that *'part of the roof was ripped off and a large stone cross weighing about two hundredweight was carried a distance of 90 feet from the building site along with several huge stones...'*

The new slate-roofed chapel built on a prominent site was a huge improvement on the old thatched edifice where Mass was celebrated in secret. Catholic Emancipation 1829 changed everything for Catholics so that local people were permitted to build churches of which they could be proud. The chapel site on *Lios Droim Gearr* hill had been an old hunting lodge for gentry when Lord Boyne was prominent in the area. The site was donated by Mr James Connolly, a wealthy Catholic landowner whose family came into the possession of a large estate in the townland of Rassan. The original site measured 3 roods and 3 perches (1854), almost a statute acre before the graveyard was added in 1965. It is strange that a ring-fort, generally left undisturbed and believed to be sacred to the fairies, was dug up, first for a chapel and later for a school. It is not surprising that numerous fairy stories around the Chapel Hill remain in local memory.

Fr Michael Lennon PP oversaw the building of both Crossmaglen and Shelagh churches. He was a great champion of the people and worked indefatigably to get Famine Relief for the people during the troubled years of his administration: 1829-1871. It was Fr Rafferty, his successor, who built the school beside the chapel to cater for the education needs of the Catholic community. This addition has not been in the donor Connolly's plan, nevertheless, Shelagh School or *Scoil Siolach* was built, only a few meters from the chapel and for 82 unbroken years provided for the education and sacramental formation of the locality with over 100 pupils on roll during the 1950s. Then in 1963 the present Scoil Bhríde was opened, back in its original town land of Shelagh.

Lios Droim Gearr, (Lisdrumgir), the original name of the Chapel Hill, is an authentic ring fort, a fact reinforced by an aerial photograph of chapel and school was taken during the winter snow of 1957. When Shelagh Old School was demolished, plans were afoot to annex a portion of land, purchased from Packie Duffy's adjacent farm, to construct a graveyard around the chapel for about 350 family graves. The old turnstile entrance was removed but part of the original outer ring fort ditch still forms part of the chapel enclosure today. The first burials took place in 1965. The old cart-house that once housed the priest's horse during Mass was recently demolished to extend the car-park.

Histories of the Parish and of Shelagh

The most comprehensive history of Upper Creggan parish comes from the pen of Fr Lawrence Murray (1883-41), Founder of *Colaiste Bríde, Rann Na Feirste* and brother of Canon Henry Murray, PP of this parish from 1947 to 1960. His invaluable

research includes the earliest maps of the area and a 1766 census of the parish showing a sizeable number of Protestant families living here: Bailies, McCulloughs, Dickies, Bradfords, Johnsons etc... He was fortunate to have copied records that were later destroyed in the Customs House burning of 1922. While other parish historians tend to stop at the Border, Fr Larry, from Carlingford, treated the Armagh and Louth sections as a whole. With the passage of time, the 39 Protestant and Presbyterian families that existed in the 'Five Towns' in 1766, had either disappeared or died out. Their names can to be found today on tombstones in Kane graveyard, near Kilcurry, a place made famous by the Irish poem: *Úr Chnoc Chéin Mhic Cáinte*. The local history of this area was given its first significant injection of interest with the publication of GAA history in: *Naomh Malachi and the Shelagh Story* (ed. Art Agnew, 1994) which also contained a history of the schools and chapel. A further step was taken with Shelagh Old School Reunion in 1997 when a souvenir booklet *Shelagh School 1881-1963 past pupils' reunion Saturday August 23rd 1997* (ed. John Fee, Shanmullagh) was published. More recently, a commemorative booklet: *Shelagh Chapel: a Commemorative Record*, (U. Agnew, 2013) featuring an updated history of Shelagh Chapel, was produced on the occasion of the chapel's 175th anniversary. An adaptation of this article was also published in County Louth Archaeological Journal, Vol XXVIII, No 1, 2013.

The New Belfry and Murphy Bell

From photographic records, it appears that in the early 1900s, Shelagh Chapel underwent a major renovation. An old 1910 photograph taken by Tommy Agnew, Belfast (1883-1944) pictures the chapel as it appeared in 1900 with its original square belfry. The current granite belfry closed up the original windswept entrance, which is now relocated on the more sheltered south-facing wall. These renovations were made while Canon Patrick Sheeran was PP, 1909 -1932. The work was carried out by Patrick Quinn of Clarnagh under the supervision of John McGuinness, a building contractor from Dundalk, who was later involved in the building of Glasdrummond Chapel. The Mourne granite blocks brought from a quarry near Newry were drawn by Owen McGeeney, Moybane (Mobane) and the mason employed was Patrick Rushe from Clonalig.

The new belfry warranted a new chapel bell. Money was collected from each household, with a £100 donation from James Connolly, Rasan. The bell was cast in the famous J. Murphy and Sons in Thomas St., Dublin: a foundry renowned for its tenor bells, one of which graces the belfry of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin and another in 1875, St Patrick Cathedral, Melbourne. The crown, harp and shamrock, Murphy trademark logo is clearly visible on the Shelagh bell along with the date of construction 1895. When the handsome bell arrived, it was thought to be 'too good for Shelagh', and should go to Crossmaglen instead. A meeting was called presided over by Fr Rafferty PP (1871-1887) who suggested making the exchange. James Connolly of Rasan intervened saying if the bell went to Cross he would withdraw his donation. No exchange was made. It was Canon McGeeney (1887-1909) who completed the installation. The sound of Shelagh chapel bell, for many years, could

be heard as far distant as Inniskeen.

It is only in recent times (2011) that access to the bell has been made possible thanks to the high-tech equipment of local businessman Eamon McAleenan (Shelagh). Some close-up photos were taken and the bell itself measured accurately by John Rogers; its diameter: 35 ins. and height: 30 ins. This data was recorded for the first time thanks to photographer Mr. Jimmy Maguire, late of Kilkenny and currently of Dundalk and the whole operation ably organized by Eamon Laverty.

North and South: Troubled Times

One of the peculiarities that characterised the Shelagh part of the parish came with the Border in 1921. The division between North and South affected everyday life since it separated the Shelagh area from the Parish Church in Crossmaglen. Baptism required two separate modes of transport; one to travel to the Border and the other to be met at the Border. Crossing the Border by car was forbidden and could result in immediate confiscation and impounding of the vehicle. Only priest and doctor could cross the border freely. Smuggling, if only for a loaf of white bread was part of everyday life. Later, the astute management of two economies, became, understandably, a way of life. But the parish held together as a unit as is witnessed by the manner in which all areas contributed to clearing the parish debt on St Brigid's Glasdrummond, through Sales of Work and other activities held during the late 1940s and early 50s.

Later still came a period referred to as 'the Troubles', a difficult time for the parish. By supporting so many Shelagh families (1973-1992) dealing with imprisonments, shootings, and other atrocities, the memory of Fr Donal Sweeney will live on in the parish annals. His name will be remembered especially for his work with Shelagh Youth Club which showcased local talent in 'The Tops of the Town' competitions and also promoted athleticism in the form of extensive marathon running.

Benefactors

Shelagh chapel has been blessed with many generous benefactors especially the aforementioned James Connolly, donor of the site, with the addition of £100 towards the magnificent J Murphy bell (1895). The quality marble altar along with the baptismal font were donated by Peter and Michael Brady, ancestors of the Brady families, Courtbane and New York while the brass sanctuary lamp was provided by Johnny Brannigan, relative of the Woods family, Clonaleenan. More recently, Jimmy Finn generously donated seating, flooring, electronic bell chimes and stained glass windows. To the Fee/Laverty families we owe the out-door altar and statue of the Sacred Heart to whom the chapel is dedicated. Mick Daly's and son Paul's memory is assured by the Celtic Cross at the graveyard entrance. Over the years, since its foundation, benefactors, too numerous to mention, have endowed the chapel with their services freely given as well as with furnishings and additions tastefully chosen. The **chapel choirs** continue to bring harmony and beauty to the celebration of Eucharist; a success made possible only by a long local musical tradition, and a strong commitment to faith. Sextons John and Katey Sherry, Peadar Hoey and

family, Bernie and Tom Wills have over years dedicated hours to the day to day care and upkeep of the chapel. Words are inadequate to describe their selfless commitment.

To celebrate its 175th jubilee year (2013), no expense was spared to ensure that the décor and infrastructure of Shelagh Chapel was maintained to the highest standard. Credit for much of the recent improvements is due to the artistic and administrative capabilities of Frs. Mc Keever PP, Fr King and Fr McKinney, assisted by members of the local Naomh Malachi, GAA club and local benefactors. Together they have ensured the future of a church that has a long and noble history. Shelagh chapel has come a long way from its original Penal thatched structure to being one of the most handsome churches in the diocese of Armagh.