



SAINT
MICHAEL'S
CHURCH
Enniskillen





(Sketch of front of Catholic Church
from 1803 by Miss Creden, drawn for Trimble 1880)

Old Church

Welcome to St Michael's Catholic Church, Enniskillen. The parish belongs to the Diocese of Clogher. There has been a Catholic church on this site, on the island town of Enniskillen, for over 200 years. The original church was erected in 1803 and parishioners worshipped there for 65 years. Unlike the present church, it was situated on the western half of the site, quite a distance from the main street and at a much lower level. The old church, an oblong building, believed to be 75ft long and 45ft wide, was remembered as having a simple castellated front and three sets of double doors. There were three entrances into the church, the centre one being the main one used by parishioners. There was a date stone above the door with 1803 carved on it. A strong iron railing divided the church grounds from the street.

In Trimble's book (1919), the old church is described as having steps down from the main street, through a chapel yard shaded by lovely chestnut trees. He describes the old building as having a clay floor covered in Cornagrade gravel. There was no seating for the congregation so they had to stand. It was noted that some 'knelt reverently in the chapel yard'. The church was totally devoid of ornament. After the church was renovated in 1820 Lord Belmore presented the Parish Priest, Fr Sheils, with a beautiful inlaid crucifix. Lord Belmore had this piece commissioned whilst in Bethlehem during his visit to the Holy Land.

In 1825 extensive repairs were carried out on the church following a severe storm. During these renovations galleries were extended around three sides of the church to accommodate the growing congregation. In 1868 an incident occurred during a service when the galleries became unstable, injuring several members of the congregation. Consequently the church was deemed no longer fit for use.



St Michael's Church 1875

The foundation stone for the present church was laid by Most Rev. Dr Donnelly on 15th August 1870. On the 17th March 1875 the church was dedicated to the service of God under the invocation of St Michael the Archangel. This was led by The Most Rev. Dr Donnelly, Lord Bishop of Clogher, who celebrated a Pontifical Mass to mark the official opening of the church. When the church opened for worship there was only a temporary wooden altar and pulpit and only the nave area of the church was seated. It was not until 1882-84 that the High Altar and Stations of the Cross were erected.

Rich in history and ornately adorned St Michael's Church is highly rated as an example of French Gothic Revival architecture. The cost of building the new church was £12,000, the money being raised mostly by donations from the parishioners. The architect of St Michael's was John O'Neill of Messrs, O'Neill and Byrne, Dublin and Belfast. The initial contractor was James Hughes, however the building was completed by James Harvey and the carvings were by Purdy of London. O'Neill had previously built St Peter's Church in Belfast (now a Cathedral) and St Patrick's Church, Downpatrick. Two fatal accidents occurred prior to the completion of the Church, when an apprentice plasterer and a labourer (Bernard Hynes 10th March 1873) fell to their death. The choice of St Michael as patron of the church was especially fitting when one considers the long tradition of Enniskillen as a fortification, both in the times of the Maguires and as a garrison town. Enniskillen is one of the few towns in the whole of Ireland where Catholics succeeded in having a church situated on the main street. There was determined and prolonged opposition to the building of the church, so much so that the walls had to be guarded nightly when it was being built. The church had to be built from the inside out resulting in the west wall of the church needing reinforcement in later years.

The exterior of the church is most impressive when seen from a southern aspect, where its imposing dimensions can be appreciated and its great bulk and massive proportions dominate the skyline. The sloping contour of the ground necessitated over forty feet of underbuilding below the apse. The church is 160ft long and 61ft wide and the height to the top of the cross on the gable is 85ft. Frank Rogers, Clogher Records (2004) considers it to be one of the highest roofs on any church in Ireland.





S. ALPHONSUS





Hugh Dixon, in the Architectural Heritage Society publication of Historic Buildings, refers to the church, as viewed from Wellington Road, and equates the building to the hull of a ship

'... grey, dominating and massive, the great length of the nave with thirteen bays of French Gothic windows and a single, steeply pitched roof of

banded tiles with cast iron cresting.' The geographical orientation of St Michael's is north-south, with the entrance through the north door. The extremely high ceiling is supported by stout round pillars on the inside.



Between 1885-1909 the altars in the side chapels were erected, the aisles seated and the old organ replaced. In 1898 the pine ceiling was erected.

In 1921 the wall of the church, on the west side, showed signs of weakness and massive flying buttresses were built to reinforce it and to give it permanent stability. The walk beneath the buttresses provides one of the most exciting spatial experiences to be had in the town. This area can be accessed from the main street through the gate at the side of the church. The builder in 1921 was James Harvey, Enniskillen. During this period the sacristies, a baptistery and a vestibule were also added.



There are three central double doorways leading to the nave of the church and two side doors giving entrance to the aisles. The doors, built in 1876, are elaborately moulded, carved and enriched by shafts of polished Newry granite. The tympanum of the central doorway has a sculpture representing the Last Judgement; this was a common distinctive feature on French Gothic churches. High above this is a figure of St Michael the Archangel. This occupies the central pier between two windows, safe-guarding the church and parishioners within.

Apart from the splendour of the building itself, one of the most outstanding features of St Michael's Church is the beautiful stained glass windows erected c1895 by Mayor and Co. Munich. The rich and vibrant colours of the windows can only be seen in full splendour when the sun is shining through. The church also houses four magnificent paintings on the blind arches on the east side of the church, three by Charles Russell and one by Michael Healy. These paintings are highly regarded by scholars.

In 1972, following the Second Vatican Council (1962), the Sanctuary of the church was modified and a new altar, set out from the main High Altar, allowed the priest to face the people whilst celebrating Mass.





Between 1991 -1996 the erection of the spire and belfry and a complete refurbishment of the church took place, including the removal of the altar rails, the pulpit and the gallery was extended. A new Blessed Sacrament Chapel was erected. The new Tabernacle was carved by Michael Hoy, local master craftsman, who worked on the re-ordering of the church in the mid-1990s. The old stone from the side altars and from the pulpit

was identified for re-use where possible. It was a French limestone called Caen Stone, very soft, almost chalk like, and excellent for carving. This refurbishment took place under the stewardship of Monsignor Sean Cahill in conjunction with the architects McCormick, Tracey, Mullarkey, Derry.

On the 26th June 2012 a very significant and historic event took place in St Michael's Church, when Queen Elizabeth II attended a service of thanksgiving in St Macartin's Cathedral and then crossed the road to St Michael's Church accompanied by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The Queen and Duke were on a Diamond Jubilee visit to Northern Ireland. This was a groundbreaking first visit by the Queen to a Catholic church in either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. The Catholic Primate, Cardinal Seán Brady, the Lord Bishop of Clogher, The Most Reverend Dr Liam MacDaid along with Rt Rev Monsignor



Peter O'Reilly, PP, VG, officially welcomed the Queen. To commemorate such a significant event, a painting was commissioned by Rt. Rev. Monsignor Peter O'Reilly. This painting, by Belfast born artist Hector McDonnell, now hangs in the Fermanagh County Museum. Monsignor O'Reilly and the Dean of St Macartin's, the Very Rev Kenny Hall, co-operated to deliver the historic cross-community event.

St Michael's Church is a living community of Faith in the heart of the town, a place of welcome, outreach and sanctuary. It is open 365 days a year and everyone is welcome to visit. As we celebrate 140 years of prayer and service, we would like to thank all of those who have made St Michael's Church special.





This booklet is intended as a practical guide to be used while walking around the church. We hope that your tour of the church will be deeply rewarding, and don't forget to pray!

<http://www.saintmichaels-parish.com>

The text for this brochure can be made available
in different languages.



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