

3,000-7,000 words inc. footnotes, up to 6-7 images

St. Finbarr's Catholic Church, Bantry: a history<sup>1</sup>  
Richard J. Butler  
11 Dec. 2017

St. Finbarr's Catholic Church in Bantry has a long and rich history, and is widely regarded as one of the most important buildings in the town and surrounding area. It has recently undergone an extensive refurbishment, including the complete reconstruction of its historic pipe organ, the installation of a new floor and the repointing of much of the exterior stonework. Within the next decade will be the bicentenary of its construction. The purpose of this article is to offer a history of the church over the past two centuries, with particular focus on developments in the twentieth century. I will also comment on the church's earlier history, about which there is some degree of uncertainty.

The most comprehensive history of St. Finbarr's to date is an article by one of Bantry's most distinguished local historians, Donal Fitzgerald, a copy of which is kept in Bantry Museum.<sup>2</sup> In writing this history I am greatly indebted to his local knowledge and years of painstaking research. There are also some shorter histories – for example in the recent Bantry Historic Town Map, and in the tourist information boards placed around the town.<sup>3</sup> There is also in preparation, and due for publication hopefully in 2018 or 2019, the *Buildings of Ireland* volume for Cork, which will include the most comprehensive architectural history to date of all of Bantry's important buildings.<sup>4</sup>

The early nineteenth century – especially the years before and after Catholic Emancipation (1829) – was a rich period in the building of Catholic churches in Ireland. The history of many of these buildings is somewhat obscure – Bantry is not by any means unusual in this regard – and there are often few if any surviving archival sources. We know that St. Finbarr's replaced a small Catholic chapel on the site of what is now the Presbytery; it seems likely this was built in the late eighteenth century – in the 1770s or 1780s – and it was probably thatched. There is no sign of it on the six-inch Ordnance Survey map for Bantry, drawn in January 1842.<sup>5</sup> A gate pillar survives today. Fitzgerald suggests a construction date of 1784 but also notes a lease of the land by the Catholic Bishop of Cork, the Rev. Francis Moylan (1735-1815, bishop 1787-1815), from the Bantry

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the following for their assistance in researching and writing this article: Hazel Vickery, Michael Millner, Noel O'Mahony, Liz Farrelly, Martin Casey, Tamela Maciel, and Frank Keohane.

<sup>2</sup> Donal Fitzgerald, 'St. Finbarr's Church, Bantry' (6 pp., n.d., copy in Bantry Museum).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Butler, Rhoda Cronin-Allanic, et al., 'Map of Bantry Historic Town' (Cork: Cork County Council, 2017). See also Anon., 'Church of St. Finbarr, Bantry, Co. Cork, Ireland' (2pp., n.d., n.p., copy in Bantry Library).

<sup>4</sup> Frank Keohane, *The Buildings of Ireland: Cork* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, due for publication in 2018 or 2019).

<sup>5</sup> 6" Ordnance Survey map for Bantry, Co. Cork (CK118, drawn Jan. 1842, published July 1845 – available at [www.osi.ie](http://www.osi.ie) [accessed 18 Nov. 2017]).

House family in 1795.<sup>6</sup> Moylan was a prodigious church builder in his diocese and was largely responsible for the building of the Cathedral of St. Mary and St. Anne in Cork, which opened in 1808.<sup>7</sup>

St. Finbarr's Church was likely built sometime between 1824 and 1832. There is little point trying to pin-point an exact date, not least because such a large building would have taken many years to construct and the use of lime mortar would have somewhat limited building activity to the warmer and drier summer months. Bantry's new courthouse and bridewell, for example, also under construction in these years, took more than four years to complete.<sup>8</sup> The building of St. Finbarr's was a drawn-up project over many years. The 1820s and 1830s were a busy time in church building in this diocese, as in the rest of the country. It is sometimes believed locally that the granting of Catholic Emancipation set off a spate of church building but this was not necessarily the case and there was plenty of new churches built in the decades beforehand. In what is now the combined Cork and Ross diocese, there were 7 new churches opened in the 1800s, 4 in the 1810s, 12 in the 1820s, and 19 in the 1830s.<sup>9</sup> For church building on this scale the only comparable period would be the 1950s and 1960s.

The building of St. Finbarr's Church was the work of the Rev. Thomas Barry, who became parish priest of Bantry in 1822 and served until 1847.<sup>10</sup> He came into a parish that had been planning a new church since at least the 1790s. We know this because his predecessor, the Rev. Daniel O'Crowley, thanked Lord Kenmare for a donation of £60 towards the new church in 1796.<sup>11</sup> Fr. O'Crowley was himself a wealthy man who had some connection, perhaps unusually, with Oxford in England – his death, at the age of 76, was noted in *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, which stated that he had been parish priest in Bantry for 'upwards of 36 years' (i.e. since c. 1787).<sup>12</sup> It is unclear if Fr. O'Crowley left money for the building of a new church in his will, but he did give £200 to the parish to build a school for local poor Catholic children. The building of this school and the new church happened in parallel under Fr. Barry's stewardship. *Pigot's Directory* in 1824 noted that:

'A large school house is now erecting, where poor Catholic children will receive education, to defray the expense of building, which, the late Rev. Daniel O'Crowley, parish priest, left by will 200 (pounds), and the Earl of Bantry most liberally presented the land on which it is built.'<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, 'St. Finbarr's Church', p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Tom Hayes (ed.), *Cork and Ross church directory, 2008* (Cork, 2008), 'Churches of the diocese of Cork and Ross'; 'Rev. Francis Moylan, Bishop of Cork', available at <http://corkandross.org/priests/most-rev-francis-moylan> [accessed 18 Nov. 2017]; 'Cathedral of St. Mary (RC)', Dictionary of Irish Architects, available at [www.dia.ie](http://www.dia.ie) [accessed 18 Nov. 2017]; and David Dickson, *Old World colony: Cork and south Munster, 1630-1830* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 480-81.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Butler, 'Cork's courthouses, the landed elite and the Rockite rebellion: architectural responses to agrarian violence, 1820-27', in Kyle Hughes and Donald MacRaild (eds), *Crime, violence, and the Irish in the nineteenth century* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2017), pp. 87-111.

<sup>9</sup> Dates from Hayes, *Cork and Ross church directory*.

<sup>10</sup> 'Rev. Thomas Barry', available at <http://corkandross.org/priests/very-rev-thomas-barry-pp> [accessed 18 Nov. 2017].

<sup>11</sup> *Hibernian Chronicle*, 15 Aug. 1796, cited in Rev. James Coombes, 'Catholic churches of the nineteenth century: some newspaper sources', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 80:231 (Jan.-June 1975), pp. 1-12, at p. 7. Despite exhaustive searches in the *Hibernian Chronicle*, it has not been possible to locate this original article and there appears to be no mention of Bantry in the issue for 15 Aug. 1796. It may be that there is a typo in Coombes' article.

<sup>12</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 1 Feb. 1823.

<sup>13</sup> J. Pigot, *Pigot & Co's city of Dublin and Hibernian provincial directory of Ireland* (London: J. Pigot, 1824).

It is unclear whether this school was the building that once stood in front of St. Finbarr's, and was demolished in the early twentieth century. It seems that the school was complete by 1824, when Fr. Barry wrote to the government asking for money to purchase books. He stated that the school had been established 'primarily' on funds bequeathed by his predecessor Fr. O'Crowley, and that the salaries of the school master and mistress were 'paid from the half penny collection at the Chapel door'. Reluctant to accept donations of books from Protestant evangelical societies, which he claimed were operating a 'proselytizing scheme', he asked Dublin Castle for funds. His request was rejected.<sup>14</sup>

With the new school finished, Fr. Barry turned to the building of a new church. Construction probably began around 1825, and it seems likely that the site (if indeed it was the same land as where the school was built) was granted by Lord Bantry.<sup>15</sup> This original building, as shown on the six-inch Ordnance Survey of January 1842, was a simple hall structure without the wings or 'transepts' (a term used here for convenience) that were added later. It was a single large space with round-headed windows across the entirety of both the east and west walls. The church, built of slate stone from the nearby quarry in the townlands of Seskin and Carrignagat, was oriented almost north-south and dug into the steep hill behind.<sup>16</sup> The tradition of having the altar to the east was ignored – instead it was placed to the south, where it remains today. The floor was in early years probably little more than straw on wooden boards, and there were probably not any pews or seats.<sup>17</sup>

It would appear that the ambitious scale of the building was more than the local population could afford to complete, and the church remained unfinished for many years. During these years, Bantry's Catholic population were also required to pay what was called 'tithes' – local taxes – for the upkeep of the Church of Ireland. This double burden naturally caused some resentment and there were large-scale protests against paying tithes in the 1830s – a period known as the 'Tithe War'. Fr. Barry was involved in these protests, and at a large and boisterous 'anti-Tithe' meeting held in Skibbereen in July 1832 he appears in an article in the *Cork Mercantile Chronicle*, by which time St. Finbarr's was clearly not yet complete:

'The Rev. Thomas Barry, P. P., in seconding [an anti-Tithe] resolution, announced himself as a mountaineer from Bantry, and was received with a *cead mille failthe* [sic], which was sufficient to affright all the proctors in the kingdom from their propriety. He assured them that the schoolmaster, in his peripatetic lectures, had not neglected the mountains and the vallies of the West. . . . He was proud to be able to say, that he was the first in the western district who commenced the present constitutional struggle against the Tithe system; and in doing so, had incurred the foulest calumnies and the grossest misrepresentations. Nothing less than a charge of rebellion had been brought against him and the Clergymen of his district. . . .

---

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Thomas Barry, et al., 'Petition of the superintending committee of the Bantry Poor School, County Cork to Richard Wellesley', dated 1824 (National Archives of Ireland, CSORP/1824/1571).

<sup>15</sup> David Dickson notes that it was standard practice for Protestant gentry in Munster to give sites free-of-charge for Catholic churches from the 1780s onwards – see Dickson, *Old World colony*, p. 481.

<sup>16</sup> George Wilkinson, *Practical geology and ancient architecture of Ireland* (London: John Murray, 1845), pp. 175-79.

<sup>17</sup> As was common in rural Irish Catholic churches in the eighteenth century – see Rolf Loeber, Andrew Carpenter, Hugh Campbell, Livia Hurley, John Montague, and Ellen Rowley (eds), *Art and architecture of Ireland: volume IV: architecture 1600-2000* (Dublin, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 290. See also anon., 'Church of St. Finbarr', p. 1.

But (continued the Rev. Gentleman) if rebellion is to be interpreted according to the definition of those disinterested loyalists, I am satisfied to plead guilty to the charge. If to assist the people in their peaceful and constitutional efforts for the removal of grievances to hear the insolence of power in defence of the poor man's rights, invariably to inculcate on the minds of my flock the most unhesitating obedience to the laws, and at the same time, to raise my voice boldly and fearlessly against injustice and oppression. If these constitute the crime of rebellion, then do I rejoice in acknowledging the justice of the charge. [*tremendous cheering.*] If, however, rebellion is to be taken in its ordinary acceptation, then do I roll back the calumny on the heads of my interested slanderers, and give them in their immediate neighbourhood the most unqualified negative which the language is capable of supplying [*loud cheering.*] –

It is for this purpose I have come here to-day, to tell those who had the audacity to make the charge, that if rebellion or disturbance of any kind should hereafter arise in the country, it is to their unfounded calumnies – to their daring and unprovoked attacks on the Priesthood and the people, that the cause may be traced. . . .

But let us be serious – I have often cause to be so. Some time since I commenced building a chapel in Bantry, which, owing to the poverty and privation of the people, I have been unable to finish, although thousands are extorted from them for the Parson and the Proctor – the Churchwarden applied to me for Church rates – I desired him to look at the Chapel, and there he would find my answer: he begged of me not to give bad example by refusing to pay, and I told him, that I was well convinced that the example which I gave in this instance was particularly edifying. – (*great laughter and much cheering.*) – The proctor came next, and threatened me with distraint for the amount of tithes with which he charged me, and which I must do him the justice to say he never previously demanded. I told him to commence as soon as he pleased; and so gratified did I feel at the honour which he intended for me, that I was resolved to make a holyday day for him (*laughter and cheers.*) It was also intimated to a gentleman who took a prominent part in our proceedings at Bantry . . . In conclusion he stated that the priests would not swerve from the people – that thro' weal and woe – through evil report and through good report – they would continue identified with them in feeling and in principle. – The Rev. Gentleman sat down amidst the most enthusiastic cheering'.<sup>18</sup>

Fr. Barry's relationship with the British establishment (and with the Church of Ireland) was clearly quite strained in these years, and as noted above, his request for funds to purchase books had been turned down in the early 1820s. Despite this he succeeded in being granted a loan from government in April 1836 for the 'completion of [the] Roman Catholic Chapel at Bantry'.<sup>19</sup> The public works scheme that he applied to was set up in 1817 to provide employment for the poor following the economic depression and partial famines that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>20</sup> Fr. Barry was loaned £600 at 5% interest, which was repaid in full by 1841. As contemporary writers state that the total cost of the church was between £2,500 and £3,000, this was clearly a minor sum but it must have been all that was required to bring the building

---

<sup>18</sup> *Cork Mercantile Chronicle*, 9 July 1832, p. 4, cited in Coombes, 'Catholic churches of the nineteenth century: some newspaper sources', p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Loan no. 86, granted 25 April 1836. See *An account of loans advanced . . . for public works . . . since 1800*, House of Commons papers (H.C.) 1847 (718), liv, pp. 28-29. As noted by Coombes, many churches in the county benefitted from loans of this kind – see Coombes, 'Catholic churches of the nineteenth century: some newspaper sources', p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Public Works Loan Act, 1817 (57 Geo. III, c. 34). See also M. W. Flinn, 'The Poor Employment Act of 1817', *Economic History Review* 14:1 (1961), pp. 82-92; and Ruth Heard, 'Public works in Ireland, 1800-1831' (M.A. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1977).

project to completion.<sup>21</sup> It would appear that building work was complete by 1839.<sup>22</sup> A series of travellers and historians commented on the church and compared it to nearby buildings around the time that it was completed:

‘on an eminence at the eastern extremity is a large R. C. chapel, erected at an expense of £2,500.’

- Samuel Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* (1837).<sup>23</sup>

‘[The Church of Ireland church] is a modern, but exceedingly plain building, with a belfry; but in rather a vitiated taste. It stands in a low situation near the water. The [Catholic] chapel, a new structure, occupies a better site on the hill side. It is an oblong building about 120 feet long, by 50 broad, and was erected under the superintendence of the Rev. T. Barry, the parish priest, at a cost of nearly £3,000. It is lit by seven round headed windows, at each side, and covered by a richly stuccoed trussed table ceiling. Galleries are excluded altogether. With the exception of the new Roman catholic church of Buttevant, there is no other superior country chapel in the county.’

- John Windele, *Historical and descriptive notices of the city of Cork and its vicinity* (1839).<sup>24</sup>

‘The town is most picturesquely situated, climbing up a wooded hill, with numbers of neat cottages here and there, an ugly [Church of Ireland] church with an air of pretension, and a large grave Roman Catholic chapel the highest point of the place.’

- William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Irish sketch-book, 1842* (1843).<sup>25</sup>

‘The [Church of Ireland] parish church is an elegant Gothic structure, having a lofty tower, adorned with pinnacles: it is situated on the bank of the river, at the western extremity of the town; and the Roman Catholic chapel on an eminence at the eastern.’

- Isaac Slater, *Slater’s national commercial directory* (1846).<sup>26</sup>

It is also from this time that we find the earliest surviving illustration of St. Finbarr’s (Figs. 1 and 2) – by Thomas Creswick (1811-1869) and/or Henry Wallis (1804-1890), and published in volume two of Leitch Ritchie, *Ireland picturesque and romantic* (1838).<sup>27</sup> This shows a hall structure with a bell-tower, a pitched roof, eight round-headed windows on the east wall and a small sacristy to the rear. The church is nested in the drumlins that surround the town with Whiddy Island, Sugar Loaf and Hungry Hill in the distance.

---

<sup>21</sup> Figures from Samuel Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* (2 vols., London, 1837), 1:186 (£2,500); and John Windele, *Historical and descriptive notices of the city of Cork and its vicinity; Gougaun Barra, Glengariff, and Killarney* (Cork, 1839), p. 261 (‘nearly £3,000’).

<sup>22</sup> Windele, *Historical and descriptive notices*, p. 261.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, 1:186.

<sup>24</sup> Windele, *Historical and descriptive notices*, p. 261.

<sup>25</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Irish sketch-book, 1842* (1st pub. London, 1843; New York, 1911), p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Slater (ed.), *Slater’s national commercial directory of Ireland* (Manchester, 1846), p. 156

<sup>27</sup> Leitch Ritchie, *Ireland picturesque and romantic* (2 vols., London, 1837-38), 2:256. The same illustration appears in Mr. & Mrs. Samuel Carter Hall, *Ireland: its scenery, character, &c.* (3 vols., London, 1814-43), 1:143-44. The attribution comes from a surviving copy in the National Library of Ireland, Prints and Drawings collection, ET A80.





BANTRY BAY.

CORN

Fig. 1. Thomas Creswick (1811-1869) and/or Henry Wallis (1804-1890), view of Bantry (c. 1838). From Leitch Ritchie, *Ireland picturesque and romantic* (2 vols., London, 1837-38), 2:256.



Fig. 2. Thomas Creswick (1811-1869) and/or Henry Wallis (1804-1890), view of Bantry (c. 1838): detail. From Leitch Ritchie, *Ireland picturesque and romantic* (2 vols., London, 1837-38), 2:256.

The architecture of St. Finbarr's has much in common with other Catholic churches built in the county in these years: the old St. Michael's in Blackrock (c. 1819-24, since demolished and replaced), the Ursuline Convent in Blackrock (c. 1824-25), the Cathedral of St. Patrick, Skibbereen (c. 1826), and the Catholic churches in Dunmanway (c. 1834), Kinsale (c. 1834), and Millstreet (c. 1835). All were designed by the same man: Rev. Michael Augustine Riordan (1783-1848).<sup>28</sup> He adopted a severe Palladian classical style in his buildings with a pediment and bell-tower over the main entrance. Some of his churches are more ornate than others – depending presumably on the local funds available at the time. Bantry is certainly at the plainer end of the spectrum.

It is often stated that the 'transepts' (the wings to the east and west) were added in 1846, during the early years of the Great Famine.<sup>29</sup> However, as with the initial building project, it appears that this was the start rather than the end date, and that construction went on for a much longer time period, both during and after the Famine. Indeed, it cannot have escaped notice that the church was expanded in the very years that its congregation dramatically shrank with the catastrophe of the Famine. Fr. Barry, shortly before he left Bantry, applied for a second government loan in 1846 for the 'enlargement of [the] Roman Catholic chapel at Bantry'. The sum

<sup>28</sup> 'Rev. Michael Augustine Riordan', Dictionary of Irish Architects, available at [www.dia.ie](http://www.dia.ie) [accessed 18 Nov. 2017]. His name has been spelled in a variety of different ways – that used here is the most common in existing literature, but see: 'Michael Augustus O'Riordan' (Dickson, *Old world colony*, pp. 480-81), 'Michael Augustine Riordan' (Coombes, 'Catholic churches of the nineteenth century', p. 4; and National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, *An introduction to the architectural heritage of West Cork* (Dublin, 2011), p. 51); and 'Michael Austin Riordan' (Tony McNamara, *Portrait of Cork* (Cork, 1981), p. 158). Maurice Craig's suggestion that the brothers James and George Richard Pain designed these churches is without any proof – see Maurice Craig, *The architecture of Ireland from the earliest times to 1880* (London, 1982), p. 262.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzgerald, 'St. Finbarr's Church', p. 2.



of £600, again with 5% interest, was granted in March 1846.<sup>30</sup> In 1846 and 1847 many hundreds of public-works loans were granted by government in an attempt to provide employment and relief for the victims of the Famine. For St. Finbarr's in Bantry this meant that several of the large round-headed windows and parts of the nave walls near the altar were taken down to open up the church for the addition of the 'transepts'. With such a large wooden truss roof in situ – covered with a rich (and heavy) stucco ceiling – we should not underestimate how technically difficult this process would have been. It would appear that as late as February 1854 the project was still not complete when 'the Committee for Completing the Parish Church of Bantry' advertised for tenders from builders in the local newspapers.<sup>31</sup> In April that year another advertisement from the same Committee noted 'plastering and stucco work to be done according to specification', again asking for tenders to be submitted to Fr. Barry's replacement as parish priest, the Rev. (later Canon) George Sheehan.<sup>32</sup> And in November, Sheehan launched an appeal for funds from people in Cork to help complete and fund schools and churches in the Bantry parish:

'The Three Chapels in the Parish [Bantry, Kealkill, Coomhola] were nearly in ruins – whilst vast and populous districts were without schools. Some efforts have been made to remedy this state of things; but a great deal yet remains to be accomplished. A large sum has been contributed by the Parishioners, and expended in repairing and completing Three Chapels and establishing Schools.'<sup>33</sup>

On the completion of the 'transepts', it appears that little further work was undertaken for several years. Photographs in the Lawrence Collection show both the exterior and interior of St. Finbarr's later in the nineteenth century (Figs. 3 and 4).<sup>34</sup> These are a valuable record that show the church before its many twentieth-century alterations – not least the empty niches on the façade (since filled with statues – see below), the bell-tower with its obelisks and Greek Ionic columns (since removed and rebuilt), the rich classical stucco ceiling with its deep covings (replaced), and the Composite order altar backdrop framing three paintings (replaced).

---

<sup>30</sup> Loan no. 367, granted 23 March 1846. See *An account of loans advanced . . . for public works . . . since 1800*, H.C. 1847 (718), liv, pp. 40-41.

<sup>31</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 8 Feb. 1854.

<sup>32</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 3 April 1854.

<sup>33</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 8 Nov. 1854. Significant donations were received from Lord Kenmare (£50), Sheehan himself (£10) and James and Denis Cotter of Bantry (£6).

<sup>34</sup> National Library of Ireland, Lawrence Photograph Collection, L\_ROY\_11043-44 and others (n.d., c. 1880).





Fig. 3. St. Finbarr's Catholic Church, Bantry, exterior, late nineteenth-century photograph (National Library of Ireland, Lawrence Photograph Collection). From: <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000316353>



Fig. 4. St. Finbarr's Catholic Church, Bantry, interior, late nineteenth-century photograph (National Library of Ireland, Lawrence Photograph Collection). From: <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000316354>

We next pick up the history of St. Finbarr's in the 1880s when some repairs and redecorating of the church were carried out by the then parish priest, the Rev. W. W. O'Grady.<sup>35</sup> In 1895, tenders were requested for 'tiling the church'.<sup>36</sup> Around these years the first stained glass was installed in the church – the two windows to the south on either side of the altar, by the Munich firm of Franz Mayer & Co., who designed glass for a huge number of Irish Catholic churches in the late nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Then, in 1910, William Martin Murphy (1845-1919) donated funds for two more stained-glass windows in the 'transepts'.<sup>38</sup> These were designed by Earley & Co. of Dublin and were installed by 1914. The east window contains the inscription 'To the glory of God. Erected by William Martin Murphy in memory of his parents Denis William and Mary Anne Murphy. Interred in the adjoining churchyard. R.I.P.', and the west window: 'To the glory of God. Erected by William Martin Murphy in memory of his wife, Mary Julia and his sons Denis and James. R.I.P.'. At a mass in Christmas 1914 the Rev. Canon Daniel Coholan (1858-1952), the auxiliary Bishop of Cork, made them the subject of a sermon. It must be remembered that World War One was underway by this time, and also that Murphy's reputation had been shattered by his principal role in the bitter Dublin 'Lock-Out' strike of 1913-14. Fr. Coholan did not mention either matter in his sermon but instead spoke about, according to the *Southern Star*:

'the very beautiful stained glass windows which were erected in the church by the munificence of a distinguished Bantry man . . . , and [he] explained to the congregation the reference and significance of the pictures. The windows, being large gabled windows of the transepts, gave ample scope for the resource of an artist, and Mr. Early [sic], of Dublin, availed of the order given him by Mr. Murphy to produce two splendid examples of what Irish artists can do. The windows being of great height, it was found convenient to have a two-fold scene presented in each, the upper and principal group of figures showing a scene from Our Lord's life; the under group showing a scene from the life of St. Finbarr, who is patron of the church.'<sup>39</sup>

Of later twentieth-century developments, the key periods were the 1930s, the 1940s, the 1960s, and the 1990s. First, in 1934, two large statues by the renowned Cork sculptor Séamus Murphy (1907-1975) were installed in the niches on the main façade. They are St. Finbarr and St. Ita, both carved from Cork limestone.<sup>40</sup> Then, in 1944, the interior of the church was completely reconstructed following the partial collapse of the plaster ceiling. In the *Southern Star* for 21 Oct. 1944 it was reported:

'St. Finbarr's Church will have to undergo extensive alterations following a somewhat sudden collapse of portion of the ceiling. At first it was though[t] that the breach was of a minor character, but danger threatened to such an extent that all services therein had to be abandoned towards the end of last week. The Masses on last Sunday were celebrated in the Convent School and will continue to be celebrated there until further notice. On week mornings the Masses will be in the Convent Chapel where Confessions will also be heard until further notice. St. Finbarr's Church is regarded as a masterpiece of its kind. Its ornamental ceiling is believed to be unsurpassed. The main portion of the building was

---

<sup>35</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 19 June 1883.

<sup>36</sup> *Skibbereen Eagle*, 8 June 1895.

<sup>37</sup> The exact date is uncertain. The south-east window has the name of the firm in the bottom left and bottom right.

<sup>38</sup> Fitzgerald, 'St. Finbarr's Church', p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Southern Star*, 2 Jan. 1915. The same article also appears in the *Cork Examiner*, 29 Dec. 1914.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Murray (ed.), *Séamus Murphy (1907-1975) Sculptor* (Cork and Kinsale: Crawford Art Gallery & Gandon Editions, 2007), pp. 70-73.

erected in 1826, the two wings being added twenty years later. While extensive alterations will doubtless have to be made, many old parishioners hope that some of the exquisite ornaments adjoining the present system will be allowed remain.<sup>41</sup>

These parishioners must have been somewhat disappointed by the reconstruction that followed, which fundamentally changed the appearance of the interior and saw the removal of almost all of the original neo-Classical ornamentations. The plaster ceiling, with its wooden trusses, was completely removed and in its place reinforced concrete parabolic arches were installed, with inclined protruding supports. The profile of these arches is even more pronounced in the narrower ‘transepts’. Considering the shortage of building materials in Ireland during ‘the Emergency’, the scale of this rebuilding project is interesting in its own right. The altar was also completely rebuilt with hollow wooden fluted pilasters supporting an entablature inscribed with the words ‘HOLY HOLY HOLY’ and a heavy bracketed cornice and segmental-arch pediment above.

With the church deemed unsafe for services, construction work proceeded quite quickly. In December 1944 tenders were invited from builders for ‘the removal and reconstruction of the Roof and Ceiling of St. Finbarr’s Church’, according to architectural drawings that already been finalised. The parish priest of the time who oversaw the work was the Rev. Timothy Canon O’Sullivan.<sup>42</sup> Then, in late January 1945, a ‘public meeting was held in the Convent School’ to suggest ways of raising the funds for the project and a ‘Church Construction Committee’ was formed.<sup>43</sup> Construction work went on during 1945 and 1946, at a cost of £14,300. Remarkably for such austere years, a total of £13,400 had already been raised by the summer of 1946.<sup>44</sup> To put these figures in some context, the new Catholic church at Dromore near Bantry, built in 1954-55, cost a total of £17,000.<sup>45</sup>

The architect responsible for the reconstruction of the interior of St. Finbarr’s was James Rupert Boyd Barrett (1904-1976) of Cork. He was a prolific church architect in the post-war period, designing around half of the new Catholic churches in the Cork and Ross diocese in the 1950s-60s, as well as extending the Cathedral in 1964-67.<sup>46</sup> Boyd Barrett was made Knight Commander of the Order of St. Sylvester by Pope John XXIII in 1963 for his services to the church and he maintained a close friendship with Bishop, Dr Cornelius Lucey (1902-82, bishop 1952-80).<sup>47</sup> There are prototypes – not widely known locally – for his use of distinctive parabolic arches in the new Church of the Holy Cross at Glanworth in Cork that he designed and built in 1941-44, and in his reconstruction of Inchigeelagh Catholic church, also in 1944.<sup>48</sup> The former is remarkably similar to Bantry only on a smaller scale, while in the latter Boyd Barrett uses Gothic concrete arches to match that church’s architectural style. In later years he used similar motifs in his new churches at Gurranebraher (built 1953-55) – in a pronounced and dramatic Gothic style – and at his Church of the Descent of the Holy Ghost, Dennehy’s Cross (built 1957-60) – more

---

<sup>41</sup> *Southern Star*, 21 Oct. 1944.

<sup>42</sup> *Irish Independent*, 18 Dec. 1944.

<sup>43</sup> *Southern Star*, 10 Feb. 1945.

<sup>44</sup> *Southern Star*, 3 Aug. 1946.

<sup>45</sup> *Southern Star*, 7 May 1955.

<sup>46</sup> He designed new churches at Gurranebraher (1953-55), Ballypnehane (1953-56), Dennehy’s Cross (1957-60), Mayfield (1959-62), Caheragh (1960-63), Blackrock (1962-64), and Togher (1971-72). For the Cathedral, see Anon., ‘The planned reconstruction’, *The Fold* (May 1963), pp. 23-26.

<sup>47</sup> *Irish Press*, 4 April 1963.

<sup>48</sup> For Glanworth, see *Irish Builder* 83 (7 June 1941), p. 286; *ibid.* 86 (2 Dec. 1944), p. 492; for Inchigeelagh, see *Irish Builder* 86, 22 April 1944, p. 171.

akin to Bantry with shallower rounded arches.<sup>49</sup> In these years Boyd Barrett was engaged in further work in Bantry when he oversaw the expansion and reconstruction of the County Hospital (c. 1955-61).<sup>50</sup> He may also have been responsible for the reconstruction of the bell-tower of St. Finbarr's, which appears to have been undertaken in the early 1960s.<sup>51</sup>

Boyd Barrett's reinforced concrete arches slotted into the gaps between the original large round-headed windows of the church. At the time they had only plain glass, except for the four windows in the 'transepts' as discussed above. The next major change to the appearance of the church – and one that is certainly more widely celebrated and less controversial than the 1940s work – was the installation of ten stained-glass windows by Harry Clarke Studios, Dublin, in 1967. They serve as a memorial to many local families and organisations and were instigated by the Rev. Hugh Canon O'Neill (c. 1891-1971, parish priest of Bantry 1962-67).<sup>52</sup> A series of over 100 letters, drawings and sketches survives in the Harry Clarke Studios archive in Trinity College Dublin that document the history of this aspect of the church's history.<sup>53</sup>

In May 1966, Fr. O'Neill wrote to Harry Clarke Studios seeking an initial estimate for ten windows. It would appear that he was spurred on by seeing their work at All Saints, Drimoleague, where a large stained-glass window was installed in sections between 1956 and 1962:

'As my funds are limited, I would be content to have a figure of one saint, about six feet or life size, in the centre of each window, and the remainder filled in with stained glass without much detail. . . . There is a window of larger dimension over the main door of the church, but as that is obscured by the organ, it would be pointless to have anything there but plain cathedral glass. But that is a point that we could consider afterwards. . . . I was looking at some of your work in Drimoleague recently, and that reminded me that perhaps you could do this job for me here in Bantry. . . . As I said my funds are limited [but I would like] a good plain job of good quality that would be worthy of this grand old Georgian Church here in Bantry.'<sup>54</sup>

He was pleased with the estimate they returned to him and asked for work to go ahead as soon as possible, noting 'I would like to see them installed before I die and remember that I am 75 years and may get the call any time'.<sup>55</sup> He arranged for artists from the Studios to visit Bantry to inspect and measure the windows, asking them to report to 'Mr. Spillane's shop, . . . the nearest sweet shop to the Chapel Gate', where 'Mr. Tom Spillane will meet [you and] have the extension ladder ready in the Church Grounds, and will personally tend on [you] whilst doing the measurements'.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Anon., 'The Great Ten Years in Caheragh', *The Fold* (June 1963), pp. 27-30.

<sup>50</sup> *Irish Builder* 97 (26 Mar. 1955), pp. 320, 328; *ibid.* 103 (4 Mar. 1961), p. 170.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzgerald, 'St. Finbarr's Church', p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> See obituary in *Southern Star*, 7 Aug. 1971.

<sup>53</sup> Correspondence, drawings and sketches relating to Bantry Catholic church, 1966-67 (Trinity College Dublin archives, Harry Clarke Studios collection (hereafter 'TCD, HCSC'), MSS 6089/1/1-103).

<sup>54</sup> Hugh O'Neill to Harry Clarke Studios, 7 May 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/8). For Drimoleague's glass, see Richard J. Butler, 'All Saints, Drimoleague, and Catholic visual culture under Bishop Cornelius Lucey in Cork, 1952-9', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 120 (2015), pp. 79-97; and Richard J. Butler, 'All Saints, Drimoleague: clarifications and new discoveries', *ibid.* 121 (2016), pp. 141-43.

<sup>55</sup> Hugh O'Neill to William Dowling [hereafter O'Neill to Dowling], 13 June 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/9).

<sup>56</sup> O'Neill to Dowling, 17 June 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/10).



The choice of the ten saints was, he made clear, based in large part on his own personal preferences, and while he admitted that he had ‘no reliable knowledge of some of the saints’, he requested St. Patrick to be ‘depicted as a strong beardless middle-aged man, and not the stereotyped bearded figure’ (though as executed he appears with a beard – Fig. 5).<sup>57</sup> To ascertain the most historically correct Irish-language names for the saints Fr. O’Neill corresponded with the noted historian and intellectual, Fr. John Ryan, S.J., of University College Dublin.<sup>58</sup> By October 1966 the drawings were at an advanced stage, and Fr. O’Neill commented that he thought them ‘beautiful and artistic and fully up to your traditional standard’ and that he had ‘showed [them] to [Bishop] Lucey when he was here last week, and he was very pleased with [them].’<sup>59</sup>

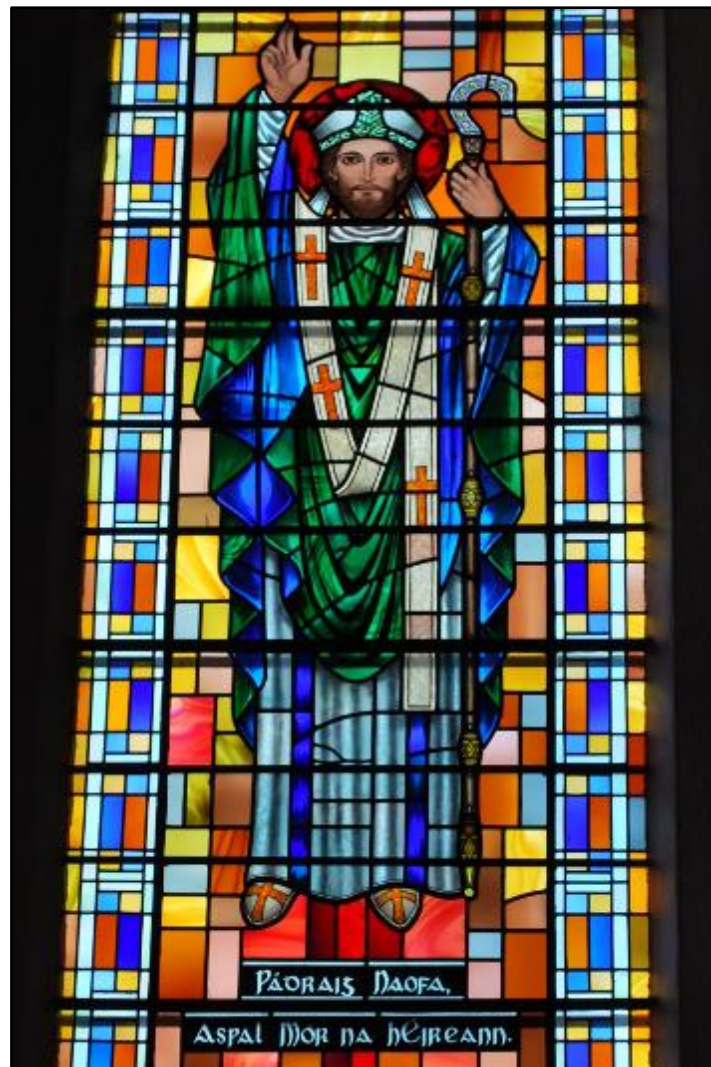


Fig. 5. St. Finbarr’s Catholic Church, Bantry, stained-glass window of St. Patrick, by Harry Clarke Studios, Dublin, 1966-67 (photograph by author).

<sup>57</sup> O’Neill to Dowling, 13 June 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/9).

<sup>58</sup> See for example O’Neill to Dowling, 13 June 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/9); O’Neill to Dowling, 8 Sept. 1966 (ibid., MS 6089/1/11); and John Ryan to William Dowling, 12 Oct. 1966 (ibid., MS 6089/1/12).

<sup>59</sup> O’Neill to Dowling, 17 Oct. 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/13).

William Dowling of Harry Clarke Studios, in correspondence with Fr. Ryan, commented on his firm's approach to the design:

'Heretofore, when making stained-glass windows of the ancient Irish saints we have adopted a more or less traditional approach which has meant that those who were bishops have been shown dressed in canonicals of comparatively modern style. In this series of windows of the Irish saints we are anxious to design something less hackneyed but not too archaic, because we want to preserve a little artistic licence for purposes of colour and design. We . . . would like to have your advice about the clothing and attributes of the saints, as, for instance, whether it would be better to show St. Patrick with a book of the Gospels and a bell rather than holding a Shamrock. I am sure, however, a snake should be shown at his feet.'<sup>60</sup>

Fitzgerald comments that the use of a rich blue in so many of the windows was because of Fr. O'Neill's personal devotion to Mary.<sup>61</sup> He was very pleased with the windows when he went to see them in Dublin in November 1966, writing to Dowling that:

'I am not an expert in these matters, but [the windows] seem really splendid and should form a wonderful colour scheme when all are erected. . . . Your colours, especially dark and light blue are really wonderful, and with the almost all gold Madonna and St. Patrick, the whole result should be a thing of joy and glory for ever. . . . [They] will be a lasting monument in our fine old church, and will be a further tribute to your famous firm.'<sup>62</sup>

The final choice of saints reflected both local customs and Fr. O'Neill's family history. Raised in a wealthy Kinsale family, he dedicated the window showing St. Brigid on the west wall to his parents, and also included in the east 'transept' the figure of St. Eiltín, a Kinsale saint ('*Naom Eiltín Cionn tSáile*').<sup>63</sup> Clockwise, from the north-east corner, we find St. Fachtna, St. Mocomogue (paid for by the local Boys' School), St. Finbarr (paid for by the local Old IRA Committee), St. Patrick (in honour of Martin Canon Murphy, parish priest of Bantry between 1918 and 1930), St. Eiltín, St. Íde, Mary (paid for by the Sisters of Mercy), St. Brigid (dedicated to Fr. O'Neill's parents), St. Gobnait (to Jeremiah Lucey, Bantry), and St. Cainir (paid for by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul).<sup>64</sup>

A huge amount of local fundraising was undertaken to cover the total cost of around £7,100.<sup>65</sup> The politics of the time – the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising – was never far from view and the local Old IRA Committee organised events throughout 1967 and 1968 to pay for a 'memorial window' to 'the patriots who died for Irish Freedom in 1916 and thereafter'.<sup>66</sup> Fr. O'Neill initially suggested the idea and at a 'large meeting' after mass one Sunday in January

---

<sup>60</sup> William Dowling to John Ryan, 20 Oct. 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/14). The final design shows St. Patrick holding neither a Bible nor a shamrock, and there is no snake.

<sup>61</sup> Fitzgerald, 'St. Finbarr's Church', p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> O'Neill to Dowling, 8 Nov. 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/17).

<sup>63</sup> See obituary in *Southern Star*, 7 Aug. 1971.

<sup>64</sup> See O'Neill to Dowling, 16 Feb. 1967 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/19/2); and anon. [Dowling], 'The English translation of donor's inscriptions in new windows, parish church, Bantry', 21 July 1967 (*ibid.*, MS 6089/1/26).

<sup>65</sup> O'Neill to Dowling, 13 June 1966 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/9); O'Neill to Dowling, 10 Dec. 1967 (*ibid.*, MS 6089/1/29).

<sup>66</sup> *Southern Star*, 8 April 1967.

1967 in the courthouse, a Memorial Committee was established under R. P. Keyes.<sup>67</sup> By October around half of the required sum had been raised.<sup>68</sup> The Committee organised a ‘celebrity concert’ in the Boys’ Club in April 1968, which featured Jean Cousins (soprano) from the Collins Musical Society, John Bennett (tenor), Patricia Downing (accompanist), and the Ardellis Céilí Band.<sup>69</sup> In March 1969, the Cullinane Troups of Irish Dancers performed at the same venue.<sup>70</sup>

The installation of the windows started in June 1967.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, Fr. O’Neill received news that he was being moved to the Bandon parish around this time, but continued to visit Bantry to see the result of his work and wrote to Dowling that ‘before I actually saw them myself, I got many glowing accounts of them from Bantry folk’.<sup>72</sup> On his passing a few years later in 1971 there were motions of condolence from the Bantry Commissioners.<sup>73</sup>



Fig. 6. St. Finbarr’s Catholic Church, Bantry, stained-glass window of St. Cainir, detail showing the monastery on Scatterry Island in the Shannon Estuary, associated with the life of St. Cainir, by Harry Clarke Studios, Dublin, 1966-67 (photograph by author).

The ten windows are striking examples of Irish stained glass of the 1960s. Each window, 20 feet by 5 feet, is composed of a larger than life-size portrait of a saint above a smaller image

---

<sup>67</sup> *Southern Star*, 4 Feb. 1967.

<sup>68</sup> *Southern Star*, 14 Oct. 1967.

<sup>69</sup> *Southern Star*, 6 April 1968; *ibid.* 13 April 1968.

<sup>70</sup> *Southern Star*, 29 Mar. 1969.

<sup>71</sup> O’Neill to Dowling, 22 May 1967 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/23).

<sup>72</sup> O’Neill to Dowling, 31 July 1967 (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/23).

<sup>73</sup> *Southern Star*, 7 Aug. 1971.

associated with their life and at the bottom a dedication (in most cases).<sup>74</sup> Again clockwise from the north-east corner, St. Fachtna appears above a simple stone gabled chapel typical of early medieval Ireland (to represent his ancient monastery); St. Mocomogue a dove of peace; St. Finbarr the coat-of-arms of the Diocese of Cork and Ross; St. Patrick the Paschal fire lit on the hill of Slane, surrounded by shamrocks; St. Eilín a book and a torch; St. Íde a geometrical triangle to represent the Holy Trinity; Mary, the lamb of God standing on a rock, from which flow four rivers representing the Gospels; St. Brigid a wooden church and a plaited rush cross; St. Gobnait a bee-hive cell modelled on those on Skellig Michael; and St. Cainir the round tower and monastery on Scattery Island in the Shannon Estuary with flames symbolising the Catholic faith (Fig. 6).<sup>75</sup>

Of very recent history, there were significant refurbishments in the 1980s under the Rev. Donal Canon O'Callaghan (d. 2003), including a new carpet and gas heating system.<sup>76</sup> In 1993, part of this new heating system failed starting a fire that was – thankfully – quickly spotted by ‘two local altar boys’. ‘Nevertheless’, the *Southern Star* commented, ‘considerable damage was done to the right nave [i.e. wing] and aisle’.<sup>77</sup> Worst affected was the William Martin Murphy stained-glass window in the west wing, according to the *Southern Star* in March 1993:

‘A confessional caught fire and ruined a magnificent stained glass window overhead. . . . The fire caused large areas of the window to fall out and what remained was badly charred and discoloured. The intensity of the heat caused all of the solder joints in the window to melt and the hot solder ran down the window. After the fire the church was in a sorry state, blackened throughout by the billowing smoke. . . . Abbey Stained Glass Studios from Dublin [carried] out the repairs. . . . Each glass was individually cleaned and the areas missing had to be recreated. . . . [Now, ] it seems impossible to identify the replaced parts of this window. It is now completely restored and sparkling’.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> For the dimensions of the glass, see anon., elevation, plan and section drawings, n.d. (TCD, HCSC, MS 6089/1/80).

<sup>75</sup> For more detailed descriptions, see anon. [Dowling], description of stained glass windows for St. Finbarr's Church, Bantry, n.d. [TCD, HSCS, MS 6089/1/16]; and anon. [Dowling], ‘Parish Church, Bantry, Co. Cork: explanatory notes on the new windows’, 20 July 1967 (ibid., MS 6089/1/24-25).

<sup>76</sup> Fitzgerald, ‘St. Finbarr's Church’, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> *Southern Star*, 16 Jan. 1993.

<sup>78</sup> *Southern Star*, 27 Mar. 1993.



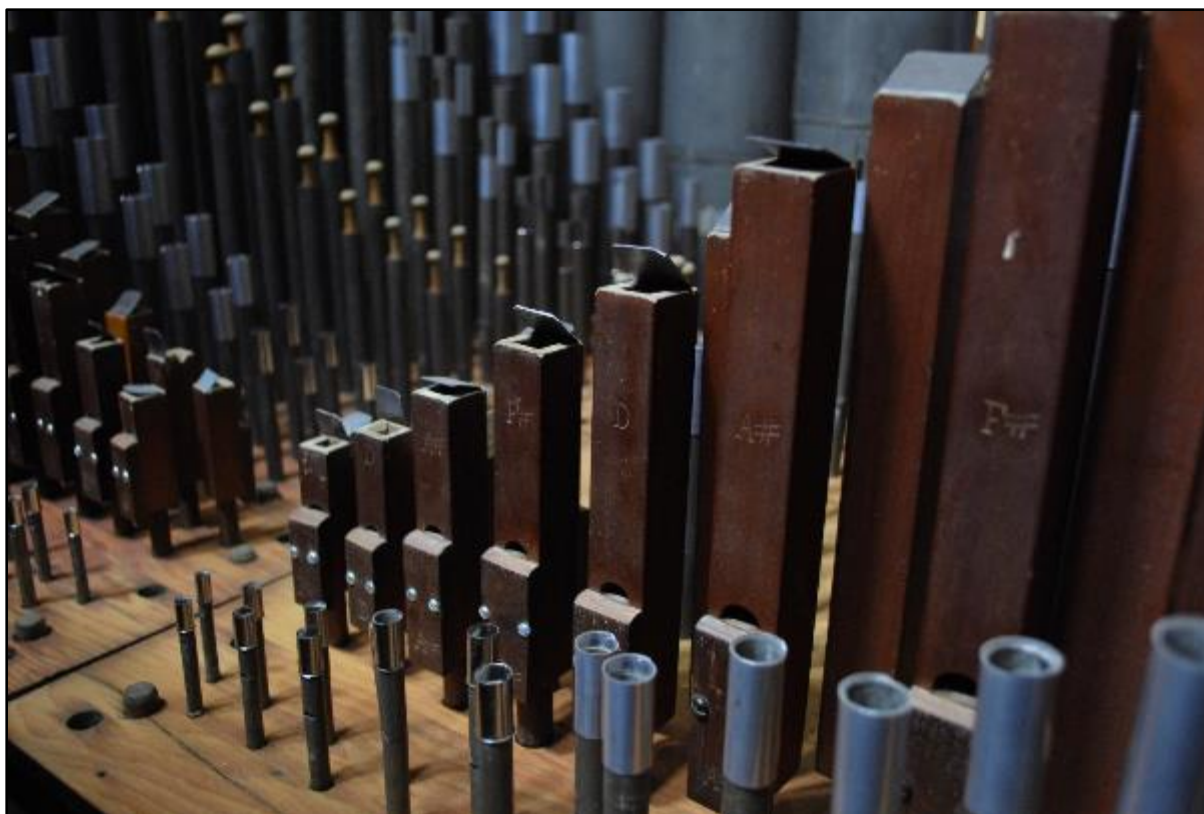


Fig. 7. St. Finbarr's Catholic Church, Bantry, pipe organ by T. W. Magahy of Cork, c. 1900, some of the c. 750 pipes. Those pictures are attached to the Great Organ stops (photograph by author).

Finally, in 2006 and 2007, the pipe organ – built around 1900 by T. W. Magahy of Cork – was extensively refurbished and entirely reconstructed. The work was done by Kenneth Jones and Associates of Bray, Co. Wicklow (Fig. 7).<sup>79</sup> This was followed by an extensive refurbishment of the interior and exterior of the church in 2009-10 by Murnane and O'Shea Builders.<sup>80</sup> This work included a new tiled floor, the reconstruction of the wooden pews, the installation of a new painting behind the altar, painting and decoration throughout, the repointing of exterior stonework, and adding a copper cap to the exterior string course at the springing level of the windows. On the closure of the Sisters of Mercy Convent around the same time, a large Calvary scene was presented to the church by the Sisters. It is believed that it was originally built in Munich.

This article is an outline of almost two centuries of history of St. Finbarr's Church. Following such extensive recent work, it is now in excellent condition as it heads towards its bicentenary.

---

<sup>79</sup> Kenneth Jones, 'Report on the pipe organ of St. Finbarr's Church, Bantry, Co. Cork', 7 Sept. 2005 (copy in possession of the author).

<sup>80</sup> *Southern Star*, 18 July 2009; anon., 'Church of St. Finbarr', p. 1.