

Interview with George Sherwood:

The Renovation of St. Mary's Church and Parish Hall in the 1950's and 1960's

This account is based on three interviews carried out with George Sherwood between October 2012 and January 2013. A former parishioner of the Church of Ireland parish of St Mary's, George was volunteer project manager of the work to renovate St Mary's Church into a parish hall in the 1950s and 1960s. In these interviews he focuses on the initial plans for renovation, the fundraising project to finance it and the official opening day of St. Mary's Hall.

1947 was the year of the big frost and during that big frost the boiler and the pipes of St Mary's froze and would be very expensive to replace. The situation was worsened by a storm which occurred sometime later and badly damaged the roof of the Church, leading to water flowing down its interior walls, creating a very dangerous situation. The Church had not been in use for many years and so initially, the parish urged the Board of Works to take it over but they would not do so unless the roof was removed. This was the general policy of the Board of Works at the time.

George Sherwood became involved in St Mary's initially as a parishioner having returned from serving with the Royal Air Force in 1953. He had worked as a radar engineer in the Royal Air Force and set up an electrical business when he came home. His premises backed on to the grounds of St Mary's, so naturally when anything went wrong or when any help was needed in the Church, people would call on George. After the storm, parishioners phoned him to tell him about the storm damage and it was at this point that he took a serious interest in St Mary's and decided to have the repairs there seen to. So the storm was really the impetus both for the renovation of St Mary's and also for George getting involved in the St Mary's Project.

It was decided around this time by the Parish Vestry that there were already enough churches in the locality and that, given the declined and declining Church of Ireland population, St Mary's should be made into a parish hall. Turning the Church into a hall was a pioneering task and perhaps the first of its kind in Ireland but George remembers that it just seemed like the obvious thing to do at the time. There was a need for a place where youngsters could go to keep them occupied. And so George and Dean Gash set about putting plan of action together. They thought it would be an easy thing to do at first but it wasn't, it was difficult. Dean John Gash was the Dean of St Mary's at the time and he decided to contact an architect in Dublin. The architect came down from Dublin to Kilkenny and into St Mary's Church. He said that because of the exceptional height of the Church, there was no way it could be made into a parish hall, that you couldn't heat it as a Church and so you certainly couldn't heat it as a parish hall, so nothing could be done. The ceiling was beautiful but no-one could see it, it was so high.

The Dean asked George what should be done and he suggested that a parish meeting be called to discuss making the Church into a hall. At the meeting the assembled crowd was asked if they were in favour of turning the Church into a parish hall and by a show of hands they indicated that they were, as they had no hall. The show of hands was not sufficient for George who felt that people's personal commitment was needed, a commitment beyond the showing of hands and so he set about approaching people personally. Money was scarce at the time and he was worried that if people just put up their hands that would not equate to a commitment to help to pay for it, to fundraise, as they had no money to do the job.

The first person George approached was the captain of the Badminton Club, William O'Connor. He asked for his personal support for the project. Mr O'Connor said he would support the hall under the following conditions: The club needed a space that was sufficiently high for the playing of badminton and that was sufficiently wide and long to fit a court but also to allow for running back beyond the lines of the court. He said that the hall they were currently using in William Street was too small with no space beyond the lines of the court. George knew that the hall was more than sufficiently high and long and wide for their purposes and so he told Mr O'Connor that their requirements would be

met but that they must promise to support him, to fundraise and have their wives run coffee mornings, they needed money. Mr O'Connor agreed and George had his first volunteer.

Next George visited Francis Lipsith at Kilkenny College. Mr Lipsith had been involved in putting on dramas and that sort of thing so George decided to ask him for *his* support for the hall. He said he would support it on the following conditions: He needed a decent size stage and he needed a place for the performers to get dressed and changed. George said that this could all be provided in exchange for help in raising money and a commitment to support the hall and Mr Lipsith agreed. Next George visited Mr Groves who was the Master of the Model School in Kilkenny and who ran the table tennis club and he asked him for his support. Mr Groves said he would offer support under the following conditions: That the club needed a room of their own and that the room would to be sufficiently big for table tennis tables and for players to be able to run back when playing. George said that this could all be provided in exchange for his help and support to fundraise, Mr Groves agreed. George then went to Mrs Anderson who lived on the Castlecomer Road. The Andersons were great church people; they went to church every week and wore hats in church always until their deaths. Mrs Anderson was an influential lady; her husband had been a cleric of the Church of Ireland. She offered her support on the condition that the monuments would be moved from the Church walls as she knew a lot of the families associated with them and it would be too hard for her to see the monuments up on the wall with other activities taking place there. This was agreed and that's how the Monuments Room came about. They decided to remove the monuments and put them in a Monuments Room - another job to be done, to remove the monuments and build a room for them.

Next George was approached by a senior member of Kilkenny Archaeological Society and she said "George, you're making a monuments room, that's great. I've been worried about St Mary's Hall." She wanted all of the monuments from St Mary's and from the other disused/closed churches in Kilkenny to be housed in the Monuments Room and offered George an alternative space for table tennis etc. George was unable to agree to this as he had made promises to so many people that he felt he couldn't let them down.

Next the ladies of the parish came to George and said to him that he had been so generous in providing spaces for so many people but that no provision had yet been made for them. And so he asked them what they wanted. They said they wanted a quiet room where they could meet up and watch what was going on in the hall and so he fixed them up with a lovely room but told them that he needed their help and support to fundraise and make it happen.

George said that the process was all about bargaining and giving people what they wanted and he remarked on the tremendous good will that was shown in the parish towards the project. Many parishioners made large donations including Lord Ormonde; others supported the hall in kind by making the fixtures and fittings of the hall e.g. the metal light brackets on the wall were all made by parish volunteers and the ladies of the parish worked very hard. One lady made the lamp shades for the Mason's dining hall, another made all of the red curtains for the stage and the windows – according to George, you could write a book on all of the work the ladies did.

However, in George's view, the project would simply not have happened without the involvement of the Masonic Order in Kilkenny. At the time the Masonic Order owned the building which now houses Rinuccini's Restaurant on The Parade and they had plans for its renovation as it had fallen badly into disrepair. George said that it would have been easier to demolish it as they had never done any work on the building from the time they moved into it. However, on this occasion they had planned to spend quite a lot of money on it as it needed complete restoration. George along with Dean Gash approached the Masonic Order with a proposal for them to sell their existing lodge, give the proceeds of the sale to St Mary's and move in there. They could not sell the space at St Mary's directly to the Masonic Order as it was not allowed to sell Church property in this way at the time. The Order said that they would come and look at the plans for St Mary's. George drafted rough drawings of the planned renovation and when the Order liked them, he approached a local architect to draw up proper plans. The plans held many attractions for the Masonic Order. A second floor

would be built in St Mary's with rooms for the exclusive use of the Order. The existing Masonic Lodge had been on three floors; St Mary's would provide them with all of their rooms on one floor, allowing room for a large dining hall to hold events. They would have their own private entrance to the building and free private car parking. The Masonic Order was very pleased with these plans, many of the Masons were parishioners in St Mary's and so were already well disposed to helping save the building and developing the hall. They agreed to the plan on the condition that they would not be run in to debt by it, that their money be spent sensibly and not lavishly. George then went to a solicitor to draw up the lease, the details of which included provision for the Masonic Order to have the use of the space for as long as they would exist in Kilkenny with a proviso that the building could not be sold off for commercial purposes. And so, the Lodge on The Parade was sold, the money was invested in St Mary's and the work began. The renovation of the building and the addition of a second floor was vital to the St Mary's Hall Project; the whole project would not have been viable without the second floor as the place could not be heated as it was, so this was the secret to the success of the project – George would not have undertaken the project without this agreement falling into place.

George became volunteer project manager of St Mary's and received great help and support from Mrs Eileen Bibby. Edward Houlihan was the builder and he was excellent, a most agreeable and hardworking man, according to George. He and George got on very well, George would get an idea and pass it on to Edward and they would figure out together how to realise it. Edward was ably assisted by his nephew John Byrne.

While showing me around the St Mary's site on our first meeting, George talks me through the main features of the work that was carried out. The building of the Monuments Room was one of the first tasks. The purpose of this room was to store the monuments that had been removed from the Church in order to protect them, included among them were the monuments of many notable Kilkenny families. To George's knowledge, this may have been the first room of its kind in Ireland. Featured in the Monuments Room are two large plaques on the wall in white marble which were part of the Despard Monument. The Evans family monument is also there. The Evans founded and endowed an asylum for 'decayed' servants, and orphans home and school on John's Street.¹ The room also features a stone slab put into the floor in 1963 to commemorate Dean Gash for all of his hard work. In addition to the monuments, the room holds the wooden panels that were taken from the Church organ indicating that it had been a gift from the [Kilkenny] Corporation under Ralph Gore Esq. The organ was broken up by vandals. ¹ Quote from Evan's Monument.

The Rothe Monument is also there, George points out the entrance stone. This is located to the left of the entrance to the Monuments Room toward the middle of the floor. The stone was found while the Monuments Room was being renovated in 1961. The workmen dug down to see what was beneath the stone and then put ladders down to find a small vault. The workmen initially refused to go down into the vault but George went down the ladders and into the vault where he saw a number coffins. The coffins were smaller than usual and were covered in leather which George later found out was the custom at the time for wealthy people. The coffins had brass studs (like an upholstered chair) all around the sides; studs also formed a cruciform across the top of the coffins. The studs formed the year of the burial which was c.1642 across the top of one of the coffins. One of them had been broken in to. The floor of the monuments room is about 15-18 inches lower than the remaining church floor. Other churches such as St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny; St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin and Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin also have lowered floors.

The door from the Monuments Room leads into the stage of the main hall, the wall partitioning the hall and the Monuments Room was built in the 1960s. The Monuments Room acted as the dressing room which honoured George's promise to Francis Lipsith that there would be a place for the performers to change (it was a bit cold but heat was not part of the bargain!). There were screens put in the room and the performers could access toilet facilities just outside. It also came in useful for many types of occasions in the hall, for example it was where Santa Clause would prepare to meet the children in the hall at Christmas time.

George had wanted to raise the monuments up higher on the walls and to build a walkway around them but there was not sufficient money to do so. The window in the Monuments Room is to the north. The original entrance to the Monuments Room from the outside had been filled in before George's time but the outline of the original arch remained. A new entrance was built during the renovations in keeping with this archway. The plaque at the apex of the archway was taken from the graveyard. From the inside, the outline of the original doorway can be seen. This doorway was later filled in and used as a cupboard for prayer books. Originally, the Church had side aisles which were gone before George's time. The archways that led from the main body of the Church into the side aisles were filled in with stone. The three windows which now exist on the north side of the building were built in the 1960s following the outline of the original arches. George decided to break down the arches to create windows. Work on this began when George asked a contractor to break a hole out of the archway. The Town Clerk whose office overlooked the church phoned the Dean to tell him that George was breaking a big hole through the wall! Originally there had been three archways. The windows allowed for light to get into the building without disturbing the original structure. The upstairs windows were installed in the same style. The heraldry monuments lined up at the entrance of the Church possibly came from the side aisles of the Church originally. The current hall has the original Church doors and skirting board. The mirror at the entrance was a gift from Miss Carrie Tallis of High Street.

The downstairs of the hall has a ladies and gents toilet – George commented that the location of the windows and that of the toilets didn't work very well but it was the best they could do. There is also a kitchen downstairs which has trays in the cupboard instead of drawers to minimize breakages. There was a big debate over what height the windows in the hall should be and it was decided that they should be quite high to prevent children play-acting and possibly breaking the windows. The stage is a fine size with a stairs to the back right leading down to the door to the Monuments Room. Under the stage there is a storage area with rails to store trestle tables which would have been used for serving tea and sandwiches at badminton matches or other events. There were occasional plays put on in the hall and the children would always put on a play at Christmas time. The roof was so distractingly high that people rarely noticed the width and height of the room, which was plentiful for badminton.

In those days (1960s), there were magazines that would tell you how to fix an engine or repair or build different things. George bought a magazine which showed you how to build a sprung floor and they used these instructions to build the floor of the hall which was built by a local carpenter with modifications. It was said to be the best badminton hall in the south, the sprung floor meant that your legs wouldn't be tired after playing on it. It was also a great floor for dancing and was a known destination for dances, known as socials, which would have taken place there monthly.

The Ladies Room, known as the View Room, is to the left of the stage and is partitioned from the main hall by windows, so that, as promised, the ladies could sit and watch what was going on. There, the ladies of the parish would meet and knit and play cards. They could move their chairs over to the window to watch the badminton or whatever else was going on in the hall. The room is lit by a window, the ceiling was lowered to make it warmer and the floor was carpeted. Each section of the building had its own meter to control the expense of heating the place. The ladies who occupied the room were the wives of the men involved in the parish for example William O'Connor who was the captain of the badminton club - his wife was a strong member of the ladies club. The wife of Mr Lipsith, Master of Kilkenny College was also a strong member.

The door leading from the Ladies Room upstairs is an original and very beautiful door. Upstairs from the Ladies Room is very well lit by an east facing window and the original green paint of the building remains. George had hoped that they would be able to turn this into a reading room or a tea room at some stage, he had hoped to build a stairs from the ladies room leading up to it but alas there was no money to do so.

The rooms of the Masonic Order upstairs include offices, a kitchen and a dining hall. The dining hall features a spectacular original window which has red velvet curtains; the room is also painted red.

There is a piano in the room. The Masonic Order offices feature pictures on the walls of Masonic events. The collection includes a picture of a gathering of the Masonic Order in Waterford in 1910. The room also features a book cabinet. The Masonic Rooms were very successful, according to George it was among the finest Masonic Lodges in the country because of the large main room. St Canice's Vestry owned the hall but St Mary's appointed their own committee for the running of it. George was a trustee of the Hall. The committee mostly comprised of the sons and daughters of the parishioners. The whole endeavour had been funded by the parish fundraising committee, the proceeds from the sale of the Masonic Lodge and the Corporation made a generous subscription towards the repair of the roof of the Monuments Room. There was a great sense of excitement and celebration when the hall opened. The day the hall was officially opened was a much anticipated event, partially because some people thought they would never see it. The date was fixed for 16th April 1964. It was arranged that the Town Clerk and the Corporation would walk in procession from Town Hall and meet the Clergy and St Mary's Committee at the gates of St Mary's. The procession from the gates was led by George and proceeded into the hall. There was a huge turnout of people, the hall was packed and some people had to be turned away. The Hall was blessed by Dr McAddoo, Bishop of Ossory and there were speeches made by members of the clergy and corporation. George was presented with a gold watch by Dean Gash. The watch was inscribed: *To George Sherwood in appreciation of all his hard work for St Mary's Hall, Kilkenny. 16th April 1964.* When the watch was presented, the assembled crowd sang, 'For he's a jolly good fellow'. This was followed by a reception of tea, coffee, sandwiches and scones.

Photo: Church of Ireland Gazette, 24th April 1964. Announcing the opening ceremony of St. Mary's as a Parish Hall. Courtesy, George Sherwood.

In his interviews, George reflected on the level of public support and good will for St Mary's Hall. He felt that Mrs Bibby and Mrs Sewell should be singled out for the hard work that they did. They did Trojan work being in such close proximity to the Hall, (Mrs Sewell lived beside Mrs Bibby on the grounds of St Mary's). For example, someone might leave a coat or a handbag behind in the hall and they would go back for it and Mrs Bibby would let them in. If a light was left on in the Hall, Mrs Bibby would turn it off etc. If George wanted to leave a message for someone, he would leave it with Mrs Bibby. Mrs Bibby cleaned the hall and kept it in good shape, she was its caretaker. The hall entered a new phase in its history when it was purchased by Kilkenny Local Authorities in 2009. George was pleased that it was purchased as it was unsustainable as a parish hall. In recent years, social activities have been taking place in hotels where there is more comfort and also a bar and so halls like St Mary's are not used as frequently as they were. He would very much like to see St Mary's become a museum as this would ensure its protection and preservation for another generation.

This is one of a series of interviews with people associated with St. Mary's co-ordinated by the Kilkenny Heritage Office and funded by Kilkenny Borough Council. The interviews are part of an on-going programme of conservation and development works being undertaken by the Local Authority in St. Mary's.