

History of the early Church

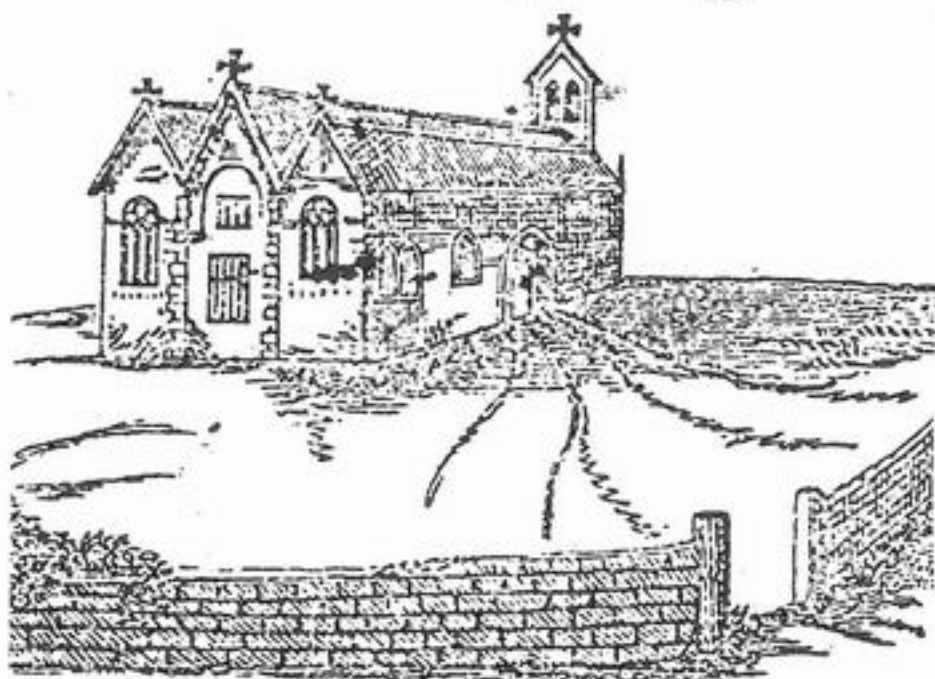
By Dolly Stewart

Undoubtedly, Christianity was introduced into Ireland long before the coming of St. Patrick. It has been contended that the first missionaries from the Asiatic Churches were probably disciples of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, who was a pupil of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, in turn a pupil of Ignatius, an immediate disciple of St. John. This opinion is corroborated by the agreement of many of the practices of the early Christians in Ireland, particularly with respect to the Tonsure and the time of celebrating Easter. In support of this theory, the Venerable Bede, writing in the 8th century, stated:

In 661, a conference was held at Whitby to determine whether the celebration of Easter, the Tonsure, and other rites should be continued after the ancient discipline of the British and Irish Churches, or the Roman Rites adopted by the Anglo-Saxon Church. Wilfrid in the interests of Rome contended for the latter but Colman, Bishop of Lindisfern, an Irishman educated among the Culdees at Hy, supported the former. 'The Easter I keep,' said Colman, 'I received from my elders who sent me Bishop hither; the which all our forefathers, men beloved of God, are known to have kept after the same manner and that the same may not seem to any contemptible or worthy to be rejected, it is the same which St. John the Evangelist and the Churches over which he presided observed.'

It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that these early missionaries and disciples of Irenaeus in all probability founded a church in Limerick, as one of the principal towns of Ireland but whether they dedicated it to St. John, much as we would like to think so, will probably never be ascertained. From the death of St. Patrick to the invasion of the English,

St Johns Limerick



Dineley's 1680 drawing of St. John's Church. The present Church of Ireland building occupies the site.

Ireland was ravaged by fierce incursions of the Danes and other northern barbarians and the cruel hostilities which they carried on from the 8th to the 11th century, left the country destitute of literature which might have thrown so much light on the propagators of the Gospel in our island.

St. John's Church has stood for centuries at one of the busiest entrances to the town — St. John's Gate. Here, visiting dignitaries of Church and State were met and conveyed into the town with all pomp and splendour of each succeeding generation and here at the last of the Sieges the unwelcome visitors were met with sword and stick, stone and

bottle, in one of the closest battles fought for the freedom of our city.

About the year 1194 Donatus O'Brien founded the Chapter of St. Mary's Cathedral and, under the Foundation Deed, he established the Canons on whom he bestowed the benefices for their maintenance. He gave to the Archdeacon "*The Church of St. John, below the city of Limerick, with all its appurtenances.*" This, I think, we may take as the first definite proof obtainable of the existence of St. John's Parish Church.

By Myler FitzHenry's Inquisition (1201), St. John's appears as one of their eight churches in Limerick. From this time onwards, right down the ages we get continuing proof of the



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existence of a Church of St. John.

A curious and most informative will of Martin Arthur, made AD 1376 concludes as follows:

"In the name of God, Amen, I, the aforesaid Martin, bequeath my soul to God, the Blessed Virgin and all the saints; my body to be buried in the Church of the Preaching Friars in Limerick. I also bequeath to the Cathedral of St. Mary's, Limerick, for forgotten tithes 20.0 Marks. Item Church of John Baptist, 1.0 Mark."

This will shows that by the year 1376 the number of churches in Limerick had increased to nine.

Henry VIII and Ireland

Early in the 16th century events were taking place which were to have far-reaching effects on all religious establishments in Ireland.

Henry VIII had determined to throw off all allegiance to Rome and proclaim himself Supreme Head of the Church

in his dominions. To this end it was necessary to suppress the Religious Orders and spoil Abbeys and Monasteries of all their valuables and confiscate revenues whenever possible. Entire parishes were appropriated and granted to the King, who in turn granted them to laymen who were supposed to endow a living for the Vicar in the parish.

One such friend of the King, Edmund Sexten, a merchant of Limerick, was in the year 1543 granted for life the Fee Farm Rent of the City of Limerick. Later it will be seen how even the descendants of these self-seeking scoundrels tried to impose on both the government of the time and the unfortunate people whose lands had been appropriated.

The appropriations marked the close of the old state of things in Ireland and paved the path of the Reformation Movement.

Detailed surveys of Ireland were made during the reign of Elizabeth. The library of Trinity College contains

a M.S. map in colours on vellum, of the City of Limerick, without name or date, but there is little doubt that it was executed during her reign as the castle is named the "Queen's Castle," and from its similarity to other maps of that period. This map shows the following religious edifices in the city; St. Mary's Cathedral, the Churches of St. Moghin (Munchin), St. Nicholas, St. Michael and St. John. Church revenues were greatly impoverished during the later part part of Elizabeth's reign, but small as they were care was taken "that none of the Irishry be preferred to any living." The same exclusiveness was ratified by the Charter granted to Limerick by Elizabeth in 1583, in which a clause was inserted that "no Irishman should be promoted to any dignity or ecclesiastical benefice in the Cathedral of Limerick without licence of the Lord Deputy." At that time Limerick was reduced to "the poorest city under Her Highness."

Charles I, on his accession, was much disturbed by rumours of spiritual



A pleasant view of the interior of the Protestant Church of St. John the Baptist in St. John's Square. The church was handed over to Limerick Corporation in 1975, and is now in a ruinous condition.

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destitution in Ireland. Reports from time to time showed matters going from bad to worse, and finally he gave instructions for a regal visitation of Ireland.

* The commission sat in Limerick from the 28th to the 30th July, 1615. It reported seven Vicars-choral attached to St. Mary's Cathedral, one of whom was a Richard Manneringe, curate of St. John's. * St. John's itself was recorded as being inappropriate, farmed by Edmond Sexten. This in effect meant that the rectorial, if not the entire tithes of the Parish were in the possession of laymen. That these tithes were rigorously collected by the Church wardens is shown by the following:

"Peter Peacock, 1671 AC, for one skill and sixpence, demanded for John Sowden, priest of John's Parish, had taken from him by Arthur Smith and Thomas Magher, Wardens, a pair of shoes worth four skill and 9d., demanded a pair of shoes worth two skill sixpence.

"Richard Pearse had taken from him for said priest's maintenance (called poundage money), a brass mortar and pestle.

"1677: Nicholas Grible, for thee skill and sixpence demanded for the repairing of the worship house called St. John's had taken from him two pewter dishes worth nine shillings."

Even as late as 1711, these tithes were still being forcibly collected.

"James Slater hath taken from him by John Blood, church warden, so called, for ye maintenance of William Twigg, priest of St. John's parish, for the demand of three shillings, a dressed young skin worth £00-3-00."

In 1615 we find the grandson of Edmond Sexten presenting a petition to the Lord Deputy of Chichester. He would not glaze at his own expense a house which he had obtained either by fraud or spoilation and thought to have the expense defrayed by a levy on the parishioners.

"Petition of Edmond Sexten to the Lord Chichester, declaring that when the rectory of St. John's, in the suburbs of Limerike, is appropriated unto St. Mary's House, the wch. your petr. houldeth fro. his Matie. by Letters Patents, the gable window in the frount whereof is to be glassed, that yr Lr. may be pleased to give your opinion whether yr. petr. as psone ought to glass the same, or the parishioners. And wherein

wch. your Petr. tenants dwellinge uppo, the mances of that Church are to be contributory with your Petr. in repatio. of the Chancel or with peshoners for repatio of the church."

The answer he received was as follows, and emphasised by a post-script would indicate that those in authority had very little sympathy with this gentleman who wanted to enjoy his possessions free of cost, as parson, although he was not in Holy Orders, but to compel the people to discharge the expenses of repairs.

"The gable of the chancel is to be reprd. and mayntayned be whole pish. The syd windowes, if any there be, are to be reprd and matned. by the dwell. oppo. the psones glebe, are to contribut. with the psone for repation of the chancell and are not to be charged with the boddy of the church." — Thos. Dublin, Canc.

"I am of the same opinion with the Lo. Chancellor, and so it was ordered in the Royall Visition of Cahsell in my psence" — Myler Cashellensis.

Nor soon did the parishioners of St. John's forget the cupidity of Edmond Sexten. On 3rd March, 1630 he died and was buried in St. Mary's Church. On the 23rd June in the same year, being midsummer, St. John the Baptists, and all Sextenss tenements in St. Francis' Abbey, were wholly burned between the hours of 2 a.m. and daylight with the exception of "the house wherein Robert Coyne lyvd." The recorder of the incident states "he never heard before that any pt. of Link. was ever burnt (to man's memorie) on the lyke night of St. John's."

In 1680 Dyneley visited Limerick during the course of his celebrated tour. He made very detailed sketches of all important church buildings. His sketch of St. John's shows the church as having two side aisles with east windows, having gothic tracery. The central gable had a plain rectangular window, with shafts, set in the arch of the older one. In the north wall were a double light, with pointed heads, a single lancet, and a pointed door; there was a double bell chamber on the east gable.

In that same year the pavement was made outside St. John's Gate for a market place and for some inexplicable reason the bells were removed from the east to the west of the church.

Rebuilding

In 1763 the Church underwent

extensive repairs and indeed from this date until it was almost completely rebuilt in 1852 continuous alterations were going on, without, however, much change in the original fabric. In 1763 £500 was raised by voluntary contributions of the parishioners and by the sale of new pews. The church was considerably enlarged and decorated and what a reporter of the times called a "neat organ" was installed.

By 1843 further renovations were necessary, this time undertaken with the aid of a grant from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners of £185/19s/3d.

New parish church

In 1837 the Rev. John Elmes, BA, was inducted into the vicarage of St. John's, and for 31 years thereafter laboured incessantly for the benefit of his parish. Despite continuous repairs his church was in a sad state and by 1851 it was decided that it must be rebuilt. In June, 1852 the present church was built. It was handed over to the Limerick Corporation in 1975. It was then in pristine condition. Today it is a ruin.

Mrs. Gladys Tapling

In 1951 Mrs. Gladys Tapling, of Wiverhowe, Essex, a daughter of Canon Frederick Langbridge, one time rector of St. John's, wrote a letter to the "Times" complaining that the literary works of her father were often attributed to other authors.

She was particularly grieved by a claim in a BBC programme that the couplet: "Two men look out through the same bars, one sees the wind, the other the stars," was the work of Robert Louis Stephenson.

The most notable work of the popular Rector of St. John's was his dialogue of "The Only Way," one of Sir Martin Harvey's most successful plays.

This renowned parishioner is dealt with elsewhere in this book.