

# ST COLUMBA'S RC CHURCH

## PLAS NEWTON, CHESTER

### A brief history

The Foundation Stone of St Columba's church was laid on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1964. Building work was completed in December the following year, and the church was officially opened on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1966 by the Bishop of Shrewsbury.

The idea of a new church in this area had been taking shape since the late 1950s when housing clearance in the inner parts of Chester and developments in the suburbs made it clear that a new church would be needed. This was to be the third RC church to be built post-war in the Chester outskirts, following St Theresa's in Blacon (1959) and St Clare's in Lache (1960). This site was acquired from the City Council in 1959.

Prior to the opening of the church and setting up of the new parish, this area was served from St Werburgh's Parish in central Chester, and it was the Parish Priest of St Werburgh's, Fr (later Canon) Francis Murphy who was a key figure in the fund raising and commissioning processes – also in the dedication of the church to the Celtic saint, Columba.

Thoughts about the design of the church coincided with the lead-up to the Second Vatican Council, with its profound influences on the church in the modern world, the approach to the liturgy of the Mass, the participation of the laity, etc. Such influences ran alongside new approaches in architecture and building techniques to generate a truly adventurous spirit in church design at that time.



So it was in this spirit of adventure that Canon Murphy and the new Bishop of Shrewsbury, William Grasar, met in the summer of 1962 to discuss the design brief with the architect Francis Prichard. This was the Liverpool firm's first commission in Shrewsbury Diocese, though they had designed fourteen schools and three churches in the Liverpool area. It was a full 12 months before all the design and preparatory work was completed. The firm of Costains were selected as the main contractors in late autumn 1963.



The chosen design has resulted in an impressively airy interior space, in which a congregation of more than 600 people can have a clear view of the altar. In the words of the architects:

*"Constructionally, the Church building consists of structural laminated timber portal frames on a reinforced concrete foundation, with a lightweight timber folded roof which rises to its maximum height of 41ft above the Sanctuary area, surmounted by a pyramidal spire 52ft high.*

*"The whole of this timber work is restrained by a reinforced concrete altar wall in the Sanctuary area, which is ornamentally pierced with small triangular openings glazed in ruby reds, deep blues and purples."*

Laminated cedar wood was used for the four portals, Douglas fir pine linings for the ceilings and Columbian pine boarding for the doors.

Considerable care was taken over the choice of fittings and furniture (including the stained glass, mentioned further below.) It included the work of a number of notable artists and craftsmen:

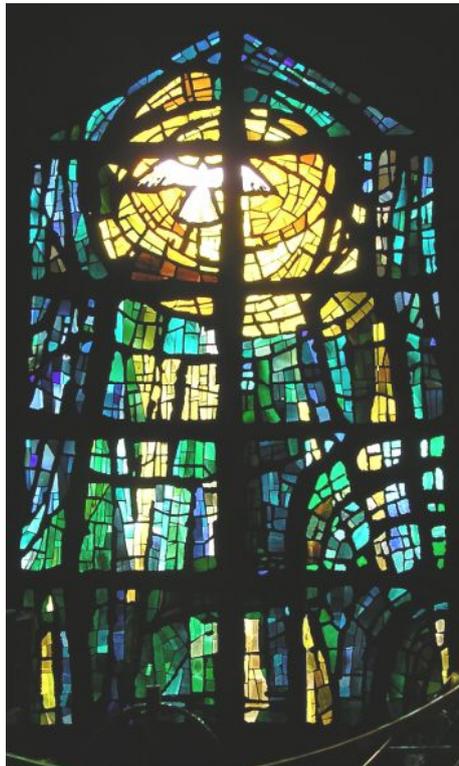
- St Columba figure (currently sited in Rear Porch): carved by Frank Haugh, Co Newry.
- Altar and Font: designed by Ray Carroll of Dublin, made in limestone and marble by Earley Studios, Dublin.
- Tabernacle, Font cover, Sanctuary gates, Baptistry gates: designed by Ray Carroll, made by M H Gill of Dublin.
- Stained glass window in former Baptistry (Front Porch, what is now the bookstall): Designed and made by Hans Unger and Eberhard Schulze of London, employing an innovative system using epoxy resins to fuse the coloured glass pieces to plain glass backing – eliminating the traditional need for lead. The same technique was subsequently used to create stained glass abstract designs for the main windows at St Columba's, but sadly, these had to be replaced in 1987, see below.
- Suspended Cross (originally over the Sanctuary, now relocated to the Hall): designed and made by Bro Benedict Tutty OSB, Glenstal Abbey Co Limerick.

- Pews : Frank Kenny, Dublin.

The running and maintenance of St Columba's has not been trouble-free, and over the years some significant and expensive work has been necessary to keep it in worthy order - and also to meet new requirements, such as those under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Key works have included:

- Modifications to roof and spire: (Parish Priest Fr John Warnock) In 1973 work became necessary to counter leakage problems, which entailed replacing the roof felting, replacing the glazed side of the spire with solid siding and installing a false ceiling at the interior base of the spire.
- Replacing the main glazed curtain walls: (Parish Priest Fr John Lennon) By 1986 twin problems had become evident - the timber mullions were starting to rot at the base, and the fused stained glass panels were de-laminating to a serious extent. Expert advice indicated that replacement of stained glass in similar fashion would be impossibly expensive, so remedial work was organised in two stages, firstly, removal of all glass and frames and installation of new heavy-duty aluminium frames with clear double-glazing (work done in 1987), to be followed by the installation of stained glass panels fixed internally when suitable designs could be tracked down. The windows we currently see, depicting St Columba and the four Evangelists, were installed in 1991.
- Modifications to organ loft and installation of pipe organ: (Parish Priest Fr John Lennon) In 1995 the opportunity arose to acquire a pipe organ from a closing church in Winsford. Though the instrument was nearly 100 years older than St Columba's church, expert appraisal indicated that it would be a very worthwhile acquisition (since the church had until that point relied on a very inadequate harmonium). Structural modifications to the choir loft were undertaken and the organ refurbished prior to installation. Though the organ is limited and unconventional by modern standards it sounds well and has been used for a number of recitals.
- New lighting systems: (Parish Priest Fr Russell Cooke) In 2000 the original pendant lighting systems were replaced with the current arrangement of wall mounted lighting - both more efficient and easier to maintain.



*"Holy Spirit Descending"  
Surviving original stained glass by  
Unger & Schulze*

- Modifications to Sacristy area and creation of Iona Chapel: (Parish Priest Fr Russell Cooke) The original design incorporated a small enclosed garden, developed as a Grotto, built against the reverse side of the main altar wall. In 2003 a scheme was devised to improve a number of facilities at the rear of the church. The scheme included roofing over the

Grotto area, thus providing a new enclosed space now known as the Iona Chapel. This is used for weekday Masses. The 2003 scheme also included elements to meet disability requirements - gently ramped approaches to the front doors and new toilet arrangements.

- Modifications to external tile cladding: (Parish Priest Fr Russell Cooke) In 2008 it was decided that a solution must be found to the perennial problem of vandal damage to the clay tiles on both side walls of the church. The clay tiles extended right down to ground level, making them vulnerable to deliberate damage or thoughtless damage (e.g. footballs). The solution that we

now see entailed replacing the lower courses of tiles with panels and through-coloured render. These, thankfully, have remained

free of vandal damage.

## Church Hall

From the early days of the parish there was always an intention to build a Parish Hall whenever resources would allow. The opportunity came about in 1977 when the Manpower Services Commission was able to help certain community building projects through the Job Creation Scheme. This meant that a church hall that was also available for community functions could be built with labour funded by the Commission. The church would fund the building materials. On this understanding, a Parish Building Committee was formed, LAG Prichard & Partners were again engaged as architects, and a foreman was recruited to supervise the building labour. The Hall was completed and officially opened on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1978 by Bishop William Gasar.

Since 1978, the Hall has been in active use for an encouraging mix of Parish and Diocesan activities and community social and educational programmes.

*Prepared for Chester Civic Trust Heritage Open Days,  
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