

GRANGE CHURCH

By Mary Gallagher

Gränge Church, the third since the Reformation, is situated at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac off the main Limerick-Bruff road in a secluded location with mature landscaping in the immediate surrounds. Dedicated to Saints Patrick and Brigid (Bridget), the foundation stone was laid by Bishop Dr Ryan on 10th July 1837.

The old eighteenth century thatched church had served its usefulness, so Dean McNamara decided to build a replacement church to adequately accommodate a growing congregation. He approached Count de Salis, a nobleman of the Swiss aristocracy, who lived nearby at Lough Gur House, for a plot of ground to add to the graveyard where the old church stood. This request was graciously granted. The old church was razed to the ground, and the congregation assembled for Mass on Sundays at John Purcell's house on Grange Hill, near to where the Fitzgerald and O'Sullivan families now reside.

The design for the new church building was simple and formed a barn shaped appearance, peculiar only to buildings of that period and decade. The parishioners drew the stone and sand – everyone lending a hand to complete the work. They felt that their church was precious, and it was unique in that it was erected by local labour and reflected in a very exceptional way, the faith expression of a simple community. The walls were ready for the roof in 1838, but experts felt that the walls were too high and inclined inwards, so two feet was removed from the height, and the church was then roofed and slated.

Grange Church was later to withstand a most ferocious storm on 6th January 1839, known as “The Night of the Big Wind”. Losing only its metal cross from the roof over the front door, this was subsequently replaced and is still in position today. The church has remained the centre of worship for the district and has become the focal point for the area, now especially that no other amenities remain active in the parish.

Time took its toll, and over the years many minor refurbishments took place. In June 1955, a group of active-minded men in Grange formed themselves into a church improvement committee and did good work in clearing the church



Original altar in Grange Church.

grounds that had already been partly planted.

In the late 1940s, it had been an idea of Canon David O’Riordan to build a new church in Grange, somewhere near the main road. The people of Grange were, however, reluctant to shoulder what they considered an unnecessary burden in those recessionary times, and this resulted in little or nothing being done to the church. By 1959, the church was in bad condition, and major renovations

had to be carried out. New floors were laid, the ceiling and roof timbers were repaired and distempered, and ESB power was laid on with provision for lighting and storage heating. The provision was also made for adequate ventilation, and, finally, a drain was dug around the church to carry away the water that was seeping in.

In 1962, some of the old seating from Bruff Church was presented to Grange Church. Nine new windows were installed between 1963 and 1965. The two nearest the altar, with medallions, were donated by Miss Katy Browne and Richard “Barlow” O’Donnell. The gable window was provided in 1965 by Mrs Rita O’Donnell, NT. In 1979, Limerick County Council decided to provide new and much-needed parking space at the church, on ground made available by Mr Peter Matson, Lough Gur House. For many years, old brass rings could be seen along the wall on the right-hand side of the cul-de-sac leading to the church; these were used for securing horses and ponies, as horse or pony and traps were the usual mode of transport to Mass up to the 1960s.



Mary Carey, former sacristan.

In May 1992, it was decided that the church needed major refurbishment to preserve and restore the beautiful building. Under the direction of Canon Sean Condon, PP and Father Des McAuliffe, CC, a hard working committee set about fund-raising and putting plans in place for this major renovation.

The following text appeared in the *Vale Star* under *Grange Notes* on 22nd February 1996:

Grange Church – At a meeting in Grange on February 15th, it was voted unanimously to begin work on the parish church. It was decided to begin the work on the following features: A – The

church and sacristy roof; B – Ceiling (pine); C – Plaster the two outside walls (sacristy and church east walls) as these are in need of urgent attention; D – Plaster inside sacristy; E – Gutters. It is hoped to commence work in early summer.

In June 1996, the church closed for the first time in living memory. Mass was celebrated each Sunday in the old school-house in Grange. The following text appeared in the *Vale Star* under *Grange Notes* on 25th July 1996:

Grange Church is closed – Grange Church is now closed, and repair work is starting straightaway. Sunday Mass will now be celebrated in the old school at the usual time of 10 o'clock. Thanks to your kind generosity and continued support, the Grange Church Renovation Fund now stands at approximately £77,000. The priority at this stage is to make the church structurally



Illustration by John D Gallagher.

sound and so preserve it for many more years. With this in mind, the following work will be carried out immediately. The Roof: while some timbers in the roof are sound, some will need replacing, some repaired, and all will need to be treated chemically. It will then have to be re-slatted. The East Wall: this wall which is quite damp will have to be plastered. The Ceiling: The ceiling will be quite damaged as a result of working on the roof and will be replaced by a pine ceiling. The Sacristy and Utility room: these rooms at the rear of the church will be plastered inside and outside and re-roofed. General: new guttering, fascia and downpipes will be put in place at this stage. The overall costs of this work should be covered by the money already in the fund. A detailed statement of the cost of all work carried out will be available to all parishioners when this stage is completed.

The projected cost of the renovation was £186,000. The committee set about raising this substantial amount of money using various methods of fundraising. One of the most successful ventures was that of “sponsoring a slate”, where each person who donated £10 had their names recorded. Subsequently, a book of names of all those who subscribed was compiled by Miriam Gallagher and remains *in situ* in the church.

The following notice appeared in the *Vale Star* under *Grange Notes* in October 1996:

Grange Church – The Renovation Fund Committee wishes to say a very sincere ‘thank you’ to all who supported and helped with their recent very successful Boot Sale/Mini Auction and a special word of thanks to all who donated the various items, it was greatly appreciated and again thanks to all. It was a great day socially and financially. It brought in £4,000 (approximately).

The refurbishment commenced in 1996 and was completed the following year. The building works were carried out by Nash Builders. The Sisters of Mercy in Limerick donated the altar and marble for the ambo and seat. “Ambo” is an ancient term from the twelfth century, gradually superseded by the terms “pulpit” and “lectern”. After many years of disuse, the old baptismal font was brought into service again. Many of the older generation who had been baptised in it were delighted to see it being used again.

Thanks mainly to the generosity of the parishioners, the opening and dedication of the church by Bishop

Donal Murray, Limerick, took place on the 27th April 1997.

Encased in the altar is a brief history of Grange and its parishioners written by Miriam Gallagher – to be read, who knows when, by a future generation when this fine old building will have yielded yet again to the passage of time.

The church and its grounds are now meticulously cared for by Helen O’Dwyer and Sean Madden respectively. Helen has been a dedicated sacristan for over 35 years, having replaced the late Mary Carey, who in turn had replaced Margaret Keating, who resided in the house by the church entrance gates at the turn of the twentieth century. The graveyard has won several awards from the Environmental Section of Limerick City and County Council. Prior to Sean



Sean Madden, caretaker of graveyard at Grange Church at present.



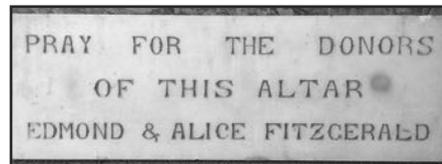
Helen O’Dwyer, sacristan at Grange Church at present.



At the opening and rededication of Grange Church, April 1997 L-R John Clifford MLCC, Angela Clancy Troy, Cala Putt and Pat O'Connell.

taking over, his brother, Donal, worked tirelessly over many years to bring this lovely old graveyard to its present pristine condition. There are four priests buried there:

Fr John Shinnors – ordained 1765, died 1782; Fr Michael Moriarty – died 1897 and Fr Michael Connolly – died 1962. Also Fr Joseph Shinnors – born 11-11-1917, died 07-04-1997, who joined the Irish Army as chaplain in 1948 and served with the UN Mission in the Congo - during the ambush at Niemba where nine Irish soldiers died, Fr Shinnors administered the last rites to some of the soldiers.



Plaque to altar donors.

Also numbered among the reposed are the Caherguillamore Volunteers (IRA) and some of the old merchant princes of Limerick.

In more recent times, under the auspices of Canon James Costello, PP, and Fr Joe Foley, CC, a plot of ground was secured from Patrick O'Sullivan, Lough Gur House, for a further extension to the cemetery. A grant received from Limerick City and County Council paid for most of this project, with the shortfall being made up from parish funds.

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In the Limerick County Development Plan 2010-2016: Volume 3 – Record of Protected Structures, Grange Roman Catholic Church including surrounding graveyard and the boundary thereof, comprising the curtilage, is listed. Registration No 452 and Reference No F/N32(44) refer.



Church Renovation Committee members in 1997 L-R Andy and Miriam Gallagher, Pat Fitzgerald, Ged Shinnors, Leo Carmody, Patsy Madden, Nora Brosnan, Connie Brosnan and Charlie Bourke.