

Church of St. Sylvester, Malahide

The Church of St. Sylvester, Malahide, was built on a site where a tiny chapel was used for Mass since the early years of the eighteenth century. It was thatched like the cottages beside it.

Old Street, as it is called today, was formally known as "Chapel Street", in reference to the first chapel on the site. It led down to the village square, where St. Sylvester's Well can be seen today.

From 1618 Malahide was part of Swords parish, and some of the older Malahide parishioners remember going to Swords Church to be confirmed.

A map of 1808 shows this first Malahide chapel. It served 968 Catholics, most of whom would have been farm labourers and fishermen. Only one Mass was said on Sundays.

Today's Church was commenced in 1837, and, unusually for a Catholic Church of the time, was designed in the new revised Gothic style, or was perhaps rearranged as such. The classical style we still see in Swords parish church was more favoured by parish priests.

Lord Talbot had an interest in the building as it complemented the Church of St. Andrew, which was built to accommodate the holidaymakers, whom he foresaw the railway would bring.

Rev. James Carey O.P. was the Parish Priest of Swords who took on the task of building the new church in Malahide. It is interesting to note that he first served as a curate in Swords under a Parish Priest, appointed by Archbishop Linegar (1734 - 1757), who, on seeing the very first edition of the famous "Butlers Lives of the Saints" immediately set about having a second one published in Dublin, this time including the feasts of Irish saints, all of who have been omitted from the first edition. This goes a long way to understanding how the name of St. Sylvester was preserved by dedicating the Church to the saint whose name was attributed to the Holy Well.

O'Hanlon's "Lives of the Irish Saints", published in 1875, gives a long account of a St. Sylvester in the Dunganstown area of Co. Wicklow, and whose feast is 10th March. As yet, no evidence is available to link this St. Sylvester to Malahide's Holy Well and parish church. Such an investigation would be an interesting project.

In 1844 the long awaited dedication took place. The then Archbishop of Dublin Dr. Murray officiated. The sermon was preached by the temperance crusader Fr. Theobald Matthew. His gift of oratory drew thousands, and was an accepted "charity sermon", both for funds to build the church and school. The pledge of temperance had to be taken outside afterwards, lest the impression was given that alcohol was evil, as some evangelists made out.

The steeple, which makes an impressive front to the building, is not original, but was added in 1901. The original altar was made of wood. A new marble altar was carved by William Pearse, father of Padraig Pearse, and installed in 1903. From this time we may surmise that the beautiful and elaborate Gothic decoration was painted on the walls. A photograph from that time shows it in great detail, including the gas lit lamp stands either side of the sanctuary. Recent dampproofing revealed some of the rich colours and medieval patterns that covered the walls.

It was in 1941 that Malahide separated from Swords and became a parish again after 400 years.

Malahide church does not face east, as was the earliest custom in Europe, but it does have instead, a north south axis, which was the old Celtic way.

Except for the graves of two priests, whose age and short stay in Malahide would suggest that they were sent to the seaside for reasons of ill health, to which they succumbed, the grounds are not a parish burial place. This is one of a number of losses to our churches, not recovered after emancipation.

The often admired stained glass window over the altar, lit from outside on special occasions, are believed to be French, and depict the great devotion of the time to the Sacred Heart.

The Pastoral Council recognised the need for modern facilities associated with the church to enhance the life of the Parish, both spiritually and socially. After much discussion and investigation Sean Harrington Architects were commissioned in 2007 to design a new centre. The brief was to provide a number of new meeting spaces for a variety of secular parish activities, while maintaining and improving existing church facilities with the addition of a new sacristy, prayer chapel, priest's residence and basement level car-park. Today the culmination of this work is now available to all to enjoy and is a credit to the people of vision who set the project in motion, and to all the parishioners who contributed to the project, in particular to Michael Gaffney for his generosity.