

Canon Tom Phelan

When the new Church opened, many parishioners feared that the old Church would be demolished but plans were put in place to utilise the building as three additional classrooms. As it adjoined the existing school (Durham Street) this was not a difficult or expensive venture. Those who remember the old Church will remember that false ceilings and walls were erected and a wooden wall divided off the sanctuary creating an office for the Head Teacher, with the vestry becoming a stock room.

A feature of the new Church in Grange Gardens was the introduction of pew (bench) rents, where, for an annual payment, parishioners could have a bench or part of a bench reserved for their use. These benches were at the front of the Church and had name plates on them. These plates were removed in 1955. However, there are still similar plates in the back rows to show where the COLLECTORS should sit.

Canon Garrett, the Parish Priest died 1936 and was succeeded by Canon Thomas Phelan who came from St Teilo's Church in Whitchurch. Under Canon Phelan, the Parish continued to grow and it became a spiritual force within the city. One of his first decisions was to discontinue the practice of some Parishioners endowing stained glass windows in memory of their families, on the grounds that 'they make the Church gloomy'.

However, Canon Phelan would soon have far more serious problems to deal with.

When the Second World War began, the safety of his Church caused Canon Phelan to form a Parish Fire-Fighting group which gathered each evening in the Vestry. Through the efforts of this unit in putting out firebombs which fell on the roof, the Church was saved from destruction and Canon Phelan was always at the forefront giving directions and leading the unit. The top roof to this day is still in place and though some areas of the lower roof have been replaced, the vast majority of it is the original.

After the War, there were signs that all was not well with the fabric of the building. The marble tops of the altar rails began to crack, and the pulpit began to lean ominously to one side and the nave of the Church began to subside. Canon Phelan embarked on a long fundraising campaign and in the summer of 1954 work started on the rebuilding of the foundations of the Church. This work was undertaken by Graham Bros (Builders) of Cardiff and the total cost of the contract was about £14,300. Although the work took almost two years to complete, the Church was never closed for Divine Service, but was divided into two parts by a temporary partition. Whilst repair work was carried out in one section of the Church, the parishioners worshipped in the other.

When the Church pews were brought back to the Church at the completion of the repair work, Canon Phelan decided to bring to an end the system of Pew Rents, which had been in operation for some years. He felt that this was now inappropriate and the ivory name plates which had been a feature of the benches in the Church were removed, all except for the COLLECTOR name plates.



Canon 'Tom' Phelan

Canon Phelan, was 'a fine figure of a man' and a great personality in the District. Most days he could be seen riding his bicycle around the area and many can remember his tales from his days in Ireland. There are many stories about Canon Phelan. One story involved a large statue of St Patrick. This impressive figure of St Patrick stood in the old Church for many years and Canon Phelan felt that its rightful place should be in the new Church. Over night the statue stood in the front room of a house in Durham Street waiting to be moved to its new location. That night there was a crash and the sleeping residents hurried downstairs to find that the statue had disappeared through the floor. It was dusty but undamaged. That day Canon Phelan carried the statue on his back all the way to the new Church where it was placed in the corner by the Sacristy. The statue was larger than life-size, and perhaps this tale is too. But nonetheless the statue stood in the new Church for many years. Rosary beads hung from one of his arms and the occasional hat was often precariously balanced on his hand during Sunday morning Mass!



Pictured above: Fr Michael Mannion, Fr Giacomini and Canon Thomas Phelan (seated)

Canon Phelan succeeded in having a new school built which now stands adjacent to where the old school once stood. He was also proud of his finances and declared from the pulpit how much money St Patrick's had 'loaned' the Archdiocese!

In 1970 having served as Parish Priest for thirty four years he passed away in St Winifred's Hospital on 13th November. His Solemn Requiem Mass was attended by over 100 clergy, parishioners, children, dignitaries and hundreds of people whose lives he had touched. His passing left a gap in the lives of many elderly parishioners who looked forward to his weekly visits. The like of Tom Phelan will not be seen again.