

# 141 Year Old Church Destroyed By Fire

As reported in the Examiner & Evening Echo on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1962

The 141-year-old parish church of St Michael at Blackrock, Cork, was completely destroyed by a fire which had engulfed the entire church in a matter of minutes from the time the outbreak was first noticed yesterday morning. An experienced fireman described it as the fastest moving fire he had ever seen. The cause of the outbreak had still not been established last night and the only evidence of its origin came from a schoolboy who went to pray while he was yet early for school.



The rapidity at which the flames spread through the building and especially along the roof section has caused some puzzlement because from the time schoolboy Tom Coughlan of Maryville, Ballintemple, first saw smoke issuing from behind the main altar at 9.15 to the arrival of the first section of the Cork Fire Brigade six minutes after getting the call, the body of the church had become an inferno.

## BURNED OUT

All that remained after the firemen abandoned the building at 4.30pm was a mass of burned out woodwork which had been the seats and stout rafter beams of this beloved parish church.



Meanwhile, the parish clergy have made alternative arrangements for the celebration of Mass and reception of the

sacraments. The value of the church as it was, was last night put at about £25,000, but it will cost an infinitely greater sum to replace this historic parish church which was built in 1821.

There was no clear indication last night as to how the fire began. The 8am Mass celebrated by Rev James Cummins CC, had been attended by a small congregation all of whom had left the church at 8.35. Minutes later the priest and the altar boys had left and the church was then unoccupied, two candles used for the celebration of Mass having been extinguished.

## SAW NOTHING

At 9.00am a passer-by whose name was not divulged, slipped in to the church to say a prayer before going to work.

At 9.15am thirteen years old Tom Coughlan of "Maryville" arrived. He was on his way to school in the building behind the church. And being early he went to say his morning prayers.

Afterwards he told our reporter what happened then: "I saw a small bit of smoke coming from behind the altar. Then sparks jumped up into the air and I knew there was a fire. I ran out and told George Brady and we saw Mr Cramer coming in. We told him about it."

George Brady, a ten years old schoolboy of Ballinure, told: "I ran into the church and saw piles of smoke."

Mr Brendan Cramer, a school teacher, said that when the boys told him about the smoke he looked to the main door of the church. He went on: "I saw the main altar blazing. The flames were half way up to the roof. I ran out across the road and called Fr Cummins who telephoned the Brigade."

"When I returned to the church the fire was so bad I could not get inside the doors."



This was at 9.20 and a few minutes later the brigade arrived. One of the

firefighters, who had initially to use breathing apparatus, afterwards said that when they arrived the smoke was so dense that they could hardly see the church.

## A LOST CAUSE

The brigade ran out four hoses drawing water off the mains and from the Lee which is about 200 yards away and booster pumps were used to support the main pump in the church yard. But the cause was a lost one.

Within a very short time the roof collapsed with a hollow roar sending slates and sparks high into the morning air.

The leading unit of the brigade travelled along the Marina by the river

## FACILITIES FOR PARISHIONERS

To facilitate parishioners, arrangements have been made for the following devotions at the chapel of the Ursuline Convent, Blackrock.

To-day – Confessions at 11.30am and 7.30pm

To-morrow – First Friday and Feast of the Purification. Blessing of candles will take place before the 8.30am Mass.

Saturday – Confessions at 11.30am and 7.30pm.

Sunday – Masses at 8.30, 9.30, 11am and 12 noon.

to avoid the main road traffic and had to slow down speed because of the dense smoke filling the air from the burning church which was then a considerable distance away.

When they arrived at the scene they had difficulty in reaching the church because of the impenetrable smoke and even within about eight minutes of first getting the slates were springing from the roof, a clear indication to firemen that there was intense heat and combustion inside the building.

## SLATES BURN HOSE

A further indication of the intense heat was when falling slates actually burned through a length of hose which was running beside the wall of the church. Falling slates also cut through the taut hoseline.



A fire officer with 30 years experience told the 'Examiner' last night that he could never recall a fire that spread as rapidly as this one. "It was actually extraordinary", he commented.

The speed at which the fire spread through the roof section seemed to indicate that there might have been a short circuit in that region, but there appeared to be definite evidence that the origin was behind the main altar. The only electrical fitting behind the altar, however, was an extension used at Christmas time for the Crib.

#### FIREMEN'S TASK

In one brief hour this church which had served its people so well was no more. But that hour was full of danger for those who fought to control the blaze.

Two of these were firemen Denis O'Brien and Jim Lenihan. Theirs was the perilous task of standing exposed in the doorway of the church, manning a hose as huge hunks of flaming wood crashed to the ground all around them.

Another two were Garda squad car men Michael Meaney and Andrew Scannell.



**They had raced to the scene from the Bridewell and arrived at the same time as the fire brigade.**

Dodging flying slates, they ran along the side of the church and at the road met former Gas Company employee, Denis Carey, of Sunnynook. He told them the church was heated by gas and after a hurried consultation, they acted.

The two Gardai broke open the door of the Sacristy and Mr Carey groped through the smoke to turn off the main and duplicate taps.

Shortly afterwards Mr Tom Desmond of Grange Park, Douglas, arrived and removed the gas meters themselves.

#### VESTMENTS SAVED

Towards the end of the fire, volunteers formed a partial chain gang to remove articles of value, including vestments, from the damaged Sacristy. These were brought into the school building.

The school itself was in grave danger for a time and only strenuous efforts by the brigade saved it from destruction. The gap between the rear of the church and the gable of the school is only a few yards and sparks were continually landing on the roof. Stored between the buildings was a 100 gallon oil tank, used to central heat the school. This was fortunately not affected.

A feature of the church itself was its magnificent polished mahogany ceiling. It was this, however, which caught fire so quickly after being licked by the flames from the altar. Also destroyed was the wooden gallery and the organ.

#### PRIESTS RESCUE

##### BLESSED SACRAMENT

The ciborium and Blessed Sacrament were rescued from the Tabernacle in the church, near the height of the blaze by the Curate, Rev Fr J Cummins and the Chaplain of the nearby Ursuline Convent, Rev Fr M O'Brien.

Wearing firemen's helmets, they dashed into the church through the sacristy entrance at a time when the roof was about to cave in.

Accompanied by Mr William Crowley, of the Fire Brigade, they forced their way through flames and smoke to the main altar. None of them was injured.

#### HISTORY OF

##### THE CHURCH IN BLACKROCK

**The present parish of Blackrock was in the last century, party of St Finbarr's (South).**

A growth in the population during the first two decades of the last century created problems with regards to church accommodation.

The Co-adjutor Bishop of Cork, Dr Florence McCarthy (died 1810) estimated in 1808 that in the Ring of Blackrock there were 309 houses containing 1,610 inhabitants.

The problem of erecting a church in Blackrock was undertaken by Dean Collins, parish priest of St Finbarr's (South) for the years 1811 to 1829.

#### 1819 CEREMONY

A contemporary record states that the foundation stone of St Michael's, Blackrock was laid on June 17, 1819 and prominent at the ceremony were William Beamish of Beaumont, William Crawford and Charles Barrington. Further developments in Blackrock at that period was the transfer of the Ursuline Community from what is now the South Presentation Convent to the estate formerly known as Pleasant Fields, Blackrock.

The house thus acquired had been the residence of a well-known Cork jeweller by the name of Theulon. The chapel in the Ursuline Convent was designed and built by Bro. Michael Riordan, of the Presentation Brothers, who had been an architect in secular life. He too, was the architect of the new church in Blackrock and also of the parish churches in Bantry, Dunmanway and Kinsale.



#### DEAN LYONS CHAPLAIN

Dean Florence Lyons, a member of the well-known mercantile family was appointed chaplain to Blackrock and he also had pastoral responsibility for the area of Blackrock. He was followed by Fr William Scannell, but Blackrock was not erected into a distinct parish until February 1848, the famine year, when Fr Alexander O'Mahony was appointed the first parish priest. He died a year later.

Other parish priests who were associated with Blackrock during the last century were Canon Coughlan, who had been president of the old seminary where Christian College now stands in Caroline Place; Canon Browne and Canon James O'Mahony.

