

THE HISTORY OF ST PAUL'S CHURCH, PARISH OF SHANKILL, LURGAN, DIOCESE OF DROMORE

Celtic Park had been home to Lurgan Celtic Football Club in the early decades of the last century. Greyhound racing dominated the site for much of the 1930s and 40s. Miss Emile Piche Donnelly bequeathed the site to Shankill Catholic Parish on her death in April 1959.

Fifteen months after work commenced on the site, clergy and local parishioners gathered for the first formal occasion in the life of the new St Paul's Church – for the dedication of its foundation stone.

The foundation stone, still visible to the left of the main entrance doors to St Paul's was blessed and put in place on Thursday 12th September 1963. Dr Eugene O'Doherty, Bishop of Dromore (1944-1975) officiated.

The construction of the new church was begun by Carville and Sons of Warrenpoint. Serious difficulties arose which stalled progress at the site by 1963. A new contractor, Gilbert Ash Ltd was appointed in April 1964 and work resumed on the new church the following month. The architect for St Paul's was Mr Thomas J Ryan of Dublin.

By close of 1965, the new church was complete and ready for use. Its design seemed radical in the mid-1960s and local press declared St Paul's Church to be the 'most modern in Ireland'. St Paul's would become the key landmark in this part of Lurgan traditionally known as 'the head of the plain' bordering Francis Street, Edward Street and the Portadown Road.

Mass began to be celebrated in St Paul's from the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Sunday 19 December 1965. More senior parishioners will associate that Christmas with the opening of the new church. Just two days afterwards, St Paul's welcomed its first bride and groom, Mr Brian Thornbury and Miss Mona McAvoy were married there on Monday 27 December 1965.

With a seating capacity of 850, St Paul's was well suited to meet the needs of the expanding populations within the Shankill and Taghnevan neighborhoods in those years. Once locals got accustomed to their new church, plans were put in place for its solemn dedication.

Sunday 17th April, 1966 was a most memorable day for Lurgan Catholics who turned out, in large numbers, for the solemn dedication of St Paul's. Visiting prelates were received beforehand at St Peter's Church before traveling across town to St Paul's. The crowds gathered on Francis Street conveying the spirit of this very joyous occasion.

Belfast-born Cardinal William Conway was guest of hour for the solemn dedication., accompanied by Shankill Parish Priest, Monsignor James Haughey, Dean Bernard Mooney, Parish Priest of the neighbouring Seagoe Parish. Members of the Order of Malta were on duty and Mr Patrick Byrne, the Cross Bearer lead the way.

Once St Paul's had been dedicated and formally opened, on Sunday 17th April a Solemn Mass was celebrated in the presence of a capacity congregation. The celebrant on that day was Canon James Burke, Deacon Reverend Gerard McCrory, and Deacon Reverend Rory McKee, all three were natives of Lurgan.

Bishop Anthony McFeely of Raphoe, Bishope Eugene O'Doherty of Dromore and Bishop William Filbin of Down and Connor followed by the cross bearer led a lengthy procession to the adjoining St Paul's Secondary School which hosted a reception following the Church's dedication ceremony. Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich celebrated Mass in Irish in St Paul's on Easter Monday 1990.