

Interview with Eileen Bibby

Caretaking St. Mary's and Raising a Family in its Grounds

Eileen Bibby has lived at 1 St Mary's Place since 1946. Her home was previously an almshouse on the site of St. Mary's Church. In this interview, Eileen talks about her life at 1 St Mary's Place and her involvement in St Mary's Hall. Eileen was the caretaker of St Mary's Parish Hall for most of its existence.

Eileen was born in Ballygar, Co. Offaly in 1924. Her father had a butcher's stall in Ballygar and he raised cattle on their farm at home. Before moving to 1 St Mary's Place, Eileen and her husband Billy lived in a flat in the Lewis House on John Street, Kilkenny. This was a lodging house. The army was in Kilkenny at the time and several army families lived there, Eileen and Billy shared a floor with one of them. They had a one-room flat for themselves and their son David who was a baby at the time. When Eileen became pregnant with their second child Avril, they realised that there wasn't enough room for a second cot in the flat and that they would need to find a new place to live. Dean Burrows suggested that they should go to look at 1 St Mary's Place which was vacant at the time. They visited the house to find it in very poor condition and in need extensive work. Billy, who worked for the railway at the time, having examined the house with some of his friends, saw that it could be renovated and made into a home and so they moved in 1946 and it was there that they raised their family.

Photo: The Bibby family and friends around the table in the kitchen window of the Bibby home c.1960. L-R: David Bibby; Billy Bibby; Avril Bibby; Les Doherty; unknown; Grandfather [Tom] Bibby; George Hughes. Courtesy, Eileen Bibby.

Eileen remembers attending services in St Mary's Church. She describes the 7pm service on Sunday evenings. She remembers that all of the Kilkenny College boys would be in attendance, paraded down from the college in their uniforms. Their families would also be in attendance, the church would have been almost full. People would have dressed in their best clothes to attend services in the church. Eileen does not remember much about the services but remembers the monuments that were subsequently moved to the Monuments Room being on the walls. She does not remember the de-consecration of the church.

There was no disagreement about turning St Mary's into a Hall as it was felt that St Canice's Cathedral and St John's Church were sufficient to serve the Church of Ireland community in Kilkenny. The process of renovating St Mary's Church into a Hall took a lot of work, the graveyard was like a wilderness and so the first task was to clear out the site and make it accessible again. Next, the interior of Church had to be cleared out in order for building work to take place. After that volunteers cleaned out the Hall and prepared it for activities such as badminton. Before St Mary's became a Hall, Eileen played badminton with the badminton club in the Diocesan Rooms on William Street. The club moved to St Mary's Hall when it opened.

Photo: William Street Badminton Team taken at the Diocesan Rooms, William Street in the late 1950s – early 1960s. Back L-R: Billy O'Connor, George Strong, unknown, Dick Sewell. Front L-R: Lucy Rothwell (née Smith), Daffney Sewell, Eileen Bibby, Mrs Colhune. Courtesy Eileen Bibby.

One of the main tasks in the renovating of St Mary's was fundraising. Many events were held before and after the opening of the Hall to raise money to pay for the building work. Eileen organised dances in order to raise money for the project, one in 1960 in the Mayfair Ballroom and another in 1963 in the Carlton.

St Mary's Hall opened on 16th April 1964.

Eileen's memories of the Hall are many and varied. She speaks first about meeting people who visited St Mary's to trace their ancestry.

Many people came to St Mary's to research their family history. They would call in to Eileen in order to find out where their ancestors were buried. Eileen would show them around the graveyard and show them where their relatives were buried. Her first point of reference was always a copy of *Memorials of the Dead, St Mary's Kilkenny* compiled by Mrs Madge Buggy and published by Kilkenny Archaeological Society, 1965-66. Eileen would look up the relatives of the visitors in the book which is an alphabetical account of everyone buried in the Graveyard, to the knowledge of the Madge. It also includes a transcription of the headstone inscriptions. Eileen knew exactly where each grave was from showing people around but also because she used to weed kill the graveyard twice a year. Eileen would also unlock the door of the Monuments Room every morning so that visitors could go in and look around.

Her worst experience in the graveyard happened many years ago. She had been in away in hospital for some time and had just come home when Scottish visitors, who used to come every year to visit their ancestor's grave at St Mary's, came to visit again. Eileen had originally shown them where their family grave was, it was right back around at the end of the graveyard. This time when they came to visit, the headstone was gone, it had been stolen. Eileen was very upset as were the Scottish people. No one had been minding the graveyard in her absence and she was greatly disappointed. Overall, Eileen very much enjoyed meeting people and showing them around the graveyard.

Eileen said she was always either at home or in the Hall but that she enjoyed it. Next Eileen went on to speak about the many events and activities that took place in the Hall and her involvement with them.

Every year a party was held for the blind. This would involve music, dancing and tea. All of the 'hobnobs' would be there to help out. People came from all around the county to the event; they would dance with the blind people and give them a really good party.

Prayer meetings and healing ceremonies were held monthly. These services were for anyone who needed healing, she mentions in particular people whose 'nerves were gone' attending the services. The services would involve prayers, singing and the laying of hands.

St Mary's was used every year for Kilkenny Arts Week, since Arts Week began. The Hall would host exhibitions and stalls which included wooden ware, cutlery, china, embroidery and knitwear, photographs, paintings etc. During Arts Week Eileen would spend the whole day in every day in the Hall, from the time she opened it up in the morning until she closed it in the evening time in order to keep a close eye on the place.

Every month the Hall hosted a meeting of the Diocesan Church of Ireland Clergy.

The Girl Guides met at the Hall once a week. Eileen also attended their meetings. Sr. Stanislaus used to take care of the Girl Guides at the time. Eileen comments that she was a lovely person.

Badminton and table tennis were held in the Hall twice weekly not including matches, leagues and tournaments which would take place regularly. Badminton was Eileen's game. Along with playing she would teach younger players how to play and said that if someone wanted to improve she would meet them over in the Hall before class and coach them.

Whist drives took place regularly in the Hall, though Eileen could not say how frequently they took place. There was usually a whist drive at Christmas time with supper. There would be approximately twenty-five tables and a turkey or a set of china as prizes. Miss Anderson of the Castlecomer road would usually supply the turkey, Mrs Sherwood would also donate a prize from her shop, eg. a cooking timer. Eileen would go around and ask local businesses to donate a prize, Pauls and Goods usually gave them something also.

An annual flower show also took place in the Hall. Those with the nicest arrangements won a prize, there was also a children's competition. Mrs Mattheson would be involved in organising this.

Dances were held every month in the Hall, the night the dance was held depended on the band's availability but they were usually held on a Friday night. They mostly got local bands to place to 'give them a turn'.

Irish dancing classes were held in the Hall weekly.

There were jumble sales most weekends. Everyone would bring a bag of clothes and these would have to be sorted by the volunteers. The sales were a means of helping out those who were short of money. The sales were always held on a Friday and there would be queues out the door to get in. Eileen talked about Dean Gash whom she describes as a great man for the poor, he always wanted to help people. She said he was a lovely man and a good worker, someone who also got all the young people working for him.

People would also park in the car park of St Mary's. This was a means of generating funds to repay the loans associated with the renovation of the Hall but also to help with its running costs. It cost £5 to park there for one year. On days when there was an event taking place in the Hall, Eileen would be out in the car park at 8am to help people to park so that cars could get in and out successfully for the day.

St Mary's was used as the base for a film company in the 1960s for the filming of *Lock up your Daughters* (the film went on general release in 1969). Ian Banim who starred in the film parked his caravan right in front of Eileen Bibby's kitchen window and that is where he lived for the duration of filming. Eileen remembers looking out the window and seeing him put his make-up on first thing every morning. St Mary's Hall was used as the dressing rooms and the Masonic Hall was used for cooking. They filmed all around Kilkenny but all of the caravans were parked in St Mary's. Eileen remembers it being really exciting. She and her friends would go around the city to watch the various scenes being shot. Eileen remembers that the cast and crew would come in and out of her kitchen for cups of tea and chats. She had no door facing St Mary's at the time so they would come in and out of the kitchen window. Eileen remained friends with Bill Wesley who was involved in the production of the film. Eileen remembers seeing the film on television a couple of times but that it was not really a success. In particular she remembers a custard fight scene which was filmed in Kytlers Inn.

Eileen said that the Hall was a full-time job. When an event was due to take place in the Hall, she would spend the day before cleaning it and putting out trestle tables which were stored under the stage. She said she often left it at 3am the night before an event. Her husband Billy would sometimes help her but he worked a lot at night time for CIE. The parish committee would also help. The committee included George Sherwood and Daffney Sewell who lived next door to Eileen. Daffney was married to Dick Sewell, she worked in Goods and was Eileen's badminton partner. The Hall committee changed throughout the years, gained members and lost members. One of Eileen's jobs was to collect all of the money from her events in the Hall and to take it to Miss Connie Ray in Poe and Kiely's. Connie would then tally up the Hall accounts and lodge the money. Eileen loved running events in the Hall and was sad when she had to stop due to ill-health and changing circumstances.

Eileen says that St Mary's was a great place to raise children, there were always children in the house and around, skating around the kitchen tables on roller skates and running around the place. The children played around the graveyard. Eileen added a new St Mary's facing door to her house in the 1960s for convenience, there had been none there previously, people would hop in and out of the kitchen window rather go around to the front door.

The O'Keefe's lived over their shop behind Eileen's house, they had a hardware shop. Eileen remembers tough times after the war, and recounts how baby's bottle teethes were so scarce that Eileen and Mrs O'Keefe would share them for their babies and run over to each other's houses after each feed.

Eileen doesn't ever remember there being a shortage of jobs in Kilkenny, everyone always seemed to have work, in the shops, the railway or Smithwick's Brewery.

Eileen would meet her friends every Friday night for a drink in the Carmel Hotel. They used to go to all of the Rugby events in Kilkenny and follow the Kilkenny Rugby Club. Eileen tried to start up ladies' rugby in Kilkenny in the 1960s but it did not take on. Eileen loves all sport and follows rugby, soccer, tennis and hurling.

I asked Eileen if she had ever been made to feel different in Kilkenny because she was a member of the Church of Ireland. Eileen said she hadn't and that most of her friends were Catholic. The only thing that would happen was that sometimes, when her children were outside playing some passing children might shout in: 'Proddy Proddy on the Wall / Half a loaf would feed you all.' Eileen said that she is a Christian and as such tried to live a Christian life and help everyone, regardless of their faith. Eileen believes that St Mary's really helped people. The jumble sales really helped people; you could get a good garment for tuppence. People had a lot of children in those times and not much money. When Eileen became ill in the late 1980s she had to stop her activities in the Hall. Soon there were not enough activities being held there and so it made no difference to Eileen when it was bought by the Borough Council.

Eileen's first husband, Billy was a member of the Kilkenny Masonic Order, whose rooms was on the second floor of St Mary's Hall. Eileen used to cook for the dinners that they would host in the rooms and set up the tables. She would roast meat there from about 2pm in the afternoon on the day of an event. Eileen talked about the good work that the Freemasons did for people in need in Kilkenny, sometimes even paying for people's children to go to university. When Billy died, they also offered to help Eileen. They collect money at every meeting for people in need.

Billy's brother, Bobby had left Kilkenny when he was 18 years old and went to the North of Ireland where he worked for the Fire Service and then later joined the Royal Air Force. Subsequently he lived in Birmingham with his wife who died around the same time as Billy. Eileen and Bobby married in 1990 while on a trip to London to see Eileen's old friend Bill Wesley. Bill suggested out of the blue that Eileen and Bobby get married and a couple of days later they married in a registry office in London with only the Wesley family present. Bill filmed the event and they later had a party in a nearby hotel with all of their bingo friends.

Eileen said that when Dean Gash left St Mary's he asked her to take care of the Hall for him and she said of course she would and has enjoyed doing so ever since. Eileen now attends services at St Canice's Cathedral and talked about the tradition of having drinks in St Canice's Deanery every Christmas Eve.

This is one of a series of interviews with people associated with St. Mary's co-ordinated by the Kilkenny Heritage Office and funded by Kilkenny Borough Council. The interviews are part of an on-going programme of conservation and development works being undertaken by the Local Authority in St. Mary's.