

## RATHFARNHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY



*The Ruins of the Mass House*



*The font from the Mass House outside the Church of the Annunciation in Rathfarnham, just across the road*

## PENAL HOUSE – MASS HOUSE

We know that there was a Christian community in Rathfarnham since the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. We also know that there were other places of Christian worship in the Rathfarnham area, going back to earlier times. We will talk about the Penal House of 1697 and the Mass House of 1730, one hundred yards on the far side of the road from the present Church, “The Church of the Annunciation”. Screened from the main road (Willbrook Road) hidden by a thick layer of bushes and trees it sits about forty paces in from the road; Mass was said in the Penal House from 1697 until 1730 when a Mass House was built on the present site of the parish priest’s house.

The Penal House was approached by a path (hidden lane) from the direction of Templeogue then crossing the Owendoher River. The first parish priest was Fr. Timothy (Thady) Kelly; born 1654, ordained in 1677 at Downpatrick, Co. Down by Bishop Daniel McKee, of Down & Connor. He was parish priest of Rathfarnham and Tallaght, residing in Firhouse in 1697 with a family named Talbott (Miss Eleanor Talbott and Mr. Henry Talbott). Other priests in the area lodged in the houses of Adam Talbott, from Belfast, Barnaby Rely (Reilly) of Finnin and Peirse Archibold of Knocklyon. Other Penal houses in the area were in Ballinascorney, Balliman, Killinarden and Jobstown all close by. Fr Kelly resided in Oldcourt in 1704.

The parish history seems to jump forward to 1730 when a new Mass House was built. The parish priest was Fr. Nicholas Gibbons but on reading Fr. Antony Gaughan’s book, “The Archbishops, Bishops and Priests” of the seventeenth Century, a parish priest called Fr. Anthony Bryan (Brien) was parish priest in Rathfarnham in 1704. He was born in 1666 and ordained in 1690 in Olmutz in Monrovia. In 1717 Fr. Anthony was convicted of celebrating Mass and preaching outside his own parish church and was sentenced to be kept in jail until transported in 1718.

The story is that in 1717 a Spaniard called John Garcia set about infiltrating the Catholic community in the city, posing as a priest and staying in the Franciscan Friary of Adam & Eve on Merchants Quay. John Garcia was a “Priest catcher” and when the time was right he handed over the information to the authorities in Dublin castle and several houses were raided and Archbishop Edmund Byrne and six priests (including Fr. Anthony) were taken in custody. The trial in November 1718 set the Archbishop free but others (including Fr. Anthony) were

## **HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE**

sentenced to transportation. We do not know if the sentences were ever carried out because at Christmas that year England went to war with Spain and all ships were requisitioned for the war effort.

With the ever increasing toleration of Catholics, priests were then able to celebrate Mass. The likes of John Garcia realised their days were numbered and he left Ireland in 1723. Seven years later in 1730 the Mass House in Rathfarnham was built by Fr. Gibbons.

**Tony Duffy & Deirdre Keegan**