

DID YOU KNOW? February 2013

About the Little Ark of Kilbaha? Or why many Irish Catholics call their place of worship a *chapel* (rather than a *church*)?

The answer lies deep in Irish history, beginning with the Reformation. As the English gained control of an area, Catholic churches were taken away and given to a Protestant minister. Laws were passed that forbade, under heavy penalties, the celebration of Mass (and much more). As you know, people then began to celebrate Mass in the open air, in remote and lonely places. (Many of these places still retain names formed from the Irish word for the Mass, *Aifreann*, such as the mountain in Waterford called Knockanaffrinn – the hill of the Mass.)

As the Penal Laws were relaxed, Catholics began to build little places of worship, usually in some out-of-the-way place. However, some landlords refused to lease a bit of land for these humble buildings, so people built a little wooden shed (called a *scallan*, from the Irish word *scathlán* – a shield) to shelter the priest while he celebrated. This structure was then wheeled from place to place as needed.

The Little Ark was one such building, built in 1852 in the village of Carrigaholt, in the Loop Head area of County Clare. The local landlords had tried to prevent Mass being celebrated. The priest obtained two houses from families who were emigrating, in an attempt to create a chapel, but he was evicted and the buildings torn down.

The very next Sunday, he celebrated Mass on a board laid across the axles of two carts on the beach. Even with a makeshift shelter over it, this proved unworkable in winter. So, Fr. Meehan asked the village carpenter in Carrigaholt for help. The result was like a tiny shed with windows, supported on four wheels.

This Ark was taken in triumphal procession to Kilbaha, where it was placed on the shore between the low and high water marks – a kind of no-man's-land. For the next five years, the Ark served the purposes of a church. In 1857, a site for a church was secured and the Ark brought onto the property, where a small house was erected to house it.

Fr. Meehan died in 1878, and is now buried a few yards from his little Ark.