

Bearna na Forbacha Worship through the Ages



Foreword

In 2024, Salthill Men's Shed and Community Heritage Group decided to identify a potential heritage project that could be documented and published. Our discussions eventually linked us to Heritage Keepers, who work with schools and communities to enable them to explore their local heritage.

Over the course of January and February 2025, we engaged in a five-part online programme with Heritage Keepers. This assisted us in choosing our project. One of our group, Seamus Hickey, has a long-held interest in Galway church history and had already begun to document his research on the Bearna na Forbacha area. With support and grant aid from Heritage Keepers it was decided to focus on this project which captures the journey from Mass rocks to full parish status for Bearna na Forbacha.

Summary

Religious worship was practiced fervently over the centuries in the Bearna na Forbacha area of Galway. William Larkin's grand jury map of Galway from 1819 shows an early place of worship close to Bearna (see centre pages). The location on the map corresponds to the position of an ivy-covered chapel, the ruins of which are still in existence today. According to oral history, this chapel existed and was in use during the penal era (the most severe laws of which ended in 1778), although Catholic churches that were built from stone were prohibited.

Two of the old tribal families of Galway, the Lynches of Bearna and the Blakes of Furbo were very generous in providing land for churches and providing education for the local children.

Over time and with the requirement for more places of worship, the controversial cleric Fr Peter Daly began a programme in the late 1820s to build three churches in Moycullen, Bushypark and Bearna all dedicated to St James. In 1933 the chapel at Furbo

was constructed under the guidance of Canon Peter Davis, the parish priest of Ragoon. Bearna na Forbacha formed part of Ragoon, and later, Salthill parishes over the years but was eventually designated a parish in its own right in 1972.

Worship through the Ages

As with many similar fishing villages all along the west coast, the beating heart of economics and industry in Bearna was centred on the pier. A focus of settlement, work and entertainment, the pier played a pivotal role in the shaping of the village over the last two centuries. However, on a modest and easily overlooked patch of land just a mile to the east of the pier, another centre of development emerged. It was here, just across the road from the current church, that the village of Bearna got its first church and later its first school. It is difficult to know when an official “place of worship” was first established in Bearna. Many are familiar with the story of St Enda stopping in Bearna to bless the existing well which would, in time, become known as St Enda’s Well (*Tobair Éinne*) on the modern road to the beach at Silver Strand. Enda himself was an Irish prince who went on to become a warrior and a King of Oriel (in Ulster), but after converting to Christianity he forsook it all to establish a monastery on Aran around 484 AD. Another version of the story describes the well springing up in the location where he slept before travelling to Aran.

It is very tempting to accept this story at face value, without question, and think of Bearna’s first brush with Christianity being as early as the fifth century but, sadly, it is quite unlikely to be true. A story like this, however, does have its merits because it quietly establishes two facts that are often lost in the telling.

Firstly, in Pagan times water sources (wells, springs, etc.) were often focal points for divine worship. These sites were often appropriated or “Christianised” through the blessings of a high-

profile missionary or saint. The need for the well in Bearna to be blessed in such a manner could potentially point to an established tradition of organised worship (albeit Pagan) in the Bearna area.

Secondly, the erection of the first recorded “chapel” in Bearna, directly across the road from this well, could lend weight to the notion of this particular location being significant, or at least recognised as a place of religious worship.

After the Reformation, around 1560, all Catholic property had been confiscated so clandestine Mass had to be celebrated either at Mass rocks or thatched cabins called “Mass houses” or “chapels”. The word “church” was now reserved only



Original Chapel in Bearna

for Protestant places of worship. These chapels generally only existed in areas where the enforcement of the penal laws was less severe. The ruins of Bearna's first known chapel are heavily covered in ivy, but still clearly visible from the main road or the road to Silver Strand.

The dating of this original chapel is difficult but it is situated in the exact location of the 1819 map. The Catholic Church was severely proscribed in the 17th and 18th centuries, so documentary records are very uncommon and no title documents are present in the diocesan archive. This is not unusual as the lands upon which these buildings were constructed tended to remain the property of the landowner. Under the penal laws these landowners would have all been Protestant, as Catholics were prohibited from owning land. But a Protestant landlord might permit the construction of a chapel for their Catholic tenants, or a Catholic branch of their own family. Structures like these were prohibited from containing architecturally distinctive features or ornamentation, and many were just small thatched sheds with movable altars. The simplicity of these structures and the absence of architectural or decorative features also make dating them almost impossible. We can't even be sure if this stone structure was the first on this site or if it might have been preceded by a simpler stone (or even wooden) building, or indeed by a simple exposed Mass rock.

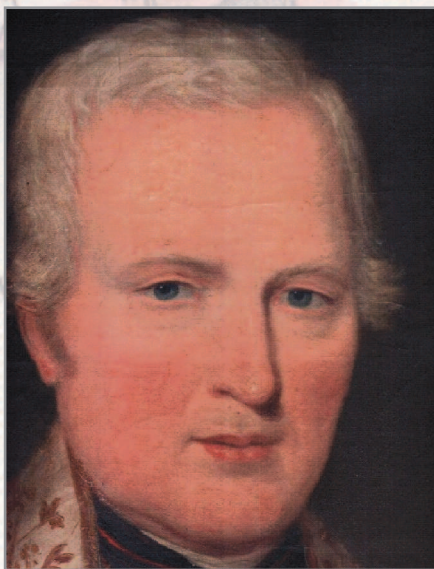
However, a couple of tantalising clues do exist. Under the Registration Act of 1704, on 11th July every priest had to be registered and find two securities of £50 to ensure he was of "good behaviour". The priest would also give assurances that he would not leave the county where he was registered. In total 1,089 priests registered under the Act, including Fr P. Hubane who registered himself as "Popish priest of Rahoon West Liberties" at the general quarter sessions of the peace held at the Tholsel of Galway. At that point there was no reference to any church or

chapel structures in either Rahoon or Bearna. During this period Bearna was part of Rahoon parish, and a priest would come from St Nicholas' Church in Galway city (the Parish church for Rahoon) to hear confessions on Saturdays and before Mass on Sundays. Locals would likely have been compelled to travel to Galway to attend weekly Masses.

Additional records show that on 4th June 1833, 200 adults were confirmed by Bishop George Browne in the chapel of Bearna, and that this was the first visit by a bishop in over 50 years. This reference indicates the existence of a chapel on this site since at least the early 1780s, and implies it was significant enough to warrant a visit by a bishop. Coupled with the details relating to the Registration Act, it is tempting to point to this first chapel in Bearna appearing, or being first recorded, during the period between 1704 and the early 1780s.

Other references to the ruins of this chapel that we see today include Lewis in his "Topographical Dictionary of Ireland" (1813), who described it as "a small thatched building" and a further description in the 1842 Ordinance Survey described it as "old" and "not ruined". The Ordinance Survey of 1913-15 finally recorded this chapel as unroofed and "in ruins".

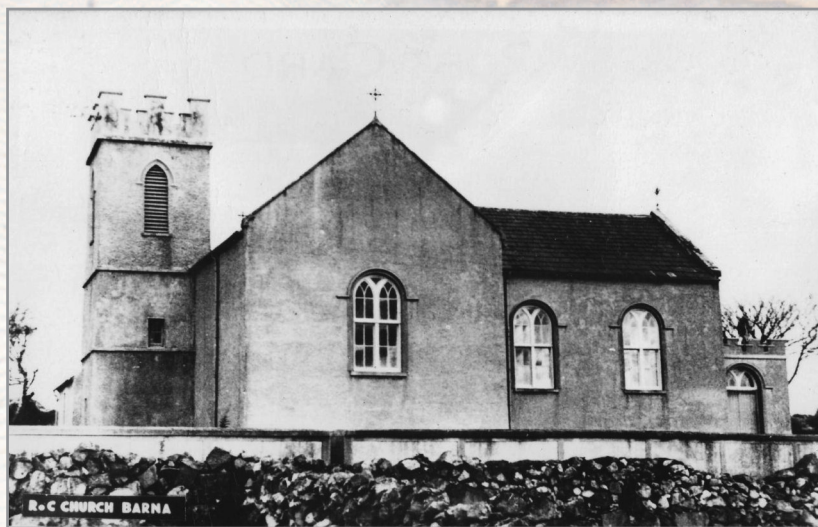
We know that the Lynch family were patrons of the subsequent church, but it is tempting to consider whether the Lynch family patronage might have extended back to this



Bishop George Browne

period. They married into the original O'Halloran chieftain family and so were established there since long before the plantations. As well as being a wealthy and powerful family, the Lynches were also staunch Catholics, and although Bearna House (the seat of the Lynches) was not constructed until c.1775, the "Lynches of Bearna" are recorded back to the late 1600s. The house was built beside an O'Halloran towerhouse. It is also difficult to envisage a stone-built chapel being constructed for a small fishing village during this period without the influence and/or support of a family like the Lynches. This might also explain the presence of the chapel in this location along a boundary wall of their family estate, as opposed to an area of established settlement closer to the pier. As mentioned above, the proximity to St Enda's well may also have been the influential factor.

Upon Catholic emancipation in 1829, most of these types of chapels were either abandoned or repurposed to make way for the building of new churches. The Schedule of Church Property



Church Built in Bearna by Fr Peter Daly

(dated 23/01/1942) records, in reference to the old church on the site of the current modern church, that the old thatched chapel was abandoned before the building of the “new” church (St James’). However, it should be noted that the classification of being “abandoned” does not necessarily mean it fell out of use. This classification was sometimes applied to strengthen the case for the need for a new church.

Prior to the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1829 it would appear that the chapel began serving a dual purpose, as it was now also described as a “private schoolhouse supported by local families”. The Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry (1826) referred to classes for boys being held by a Michael McDonogh (receiving two pence a week per student) in the village chapel. The chapel building continued in use as a schoolhouse for boys until the construction of a boys’ school in 1846.

Although it was classed as a “boys’ school”, records show girls were also in attendance. Catholic and Protestant returns differ on the exact number of students, but between 30 and 40 boys and four or five girls were attending the school at this time. The original boys’ school building remains to this day, converted into a private residence visible across the road from the current church and beside the handball alley.

An exclusively “girls” school was also run by the “Misses Lynch” in a room of their home in Bearna House. The Lynch sisters were the sole patrons and conductors of this school, so tuition was provided without charge. Once again the student numbers differed in the Catholic and Protestant returns but between 15 and 25 girls were attending this school at the time. All of the students and teachers in both schools were Catholic.

In the late 1820s and 1830s Fr Peter Daly, parish priest of Ragoon parish, began a programme of works that resulted in the building of three churches in Bushy Park, Moycullen and Bearna respectively. All three are dedicated to St James. This “new”

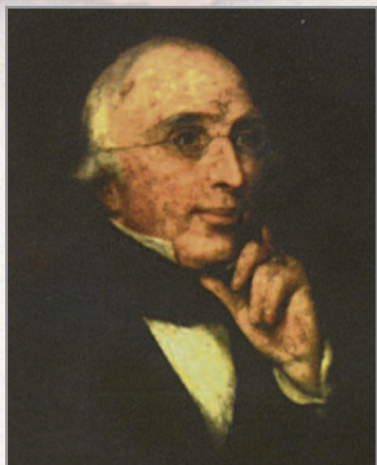
church in Bearna was built on what is now the western end of the car park of the current church. The land was given by the Lynch family, who also funded the building of the church and the Lynch family vault in the church grounds. The church grounds were contained within the lands of their estate, as was common practice at the time. The first Mass in the newly constructed church was celebrated on 5th January 1840.

Upon construction of St James' church there was also the necessity to acquire suitable ornamentation to reflect the status of the church and its benefactors. Due to the modesty of the original chapel it is unlikely that many items of significance were transferred between the buildings beyond the most basic of ecclesiastical scripts and wares. But a family like the Lynches and a highly motivated priest like Fr Daly would not have simply produced an "empty" building. An account remains from St Nicholas' Pro Cathedral in Galway city, which was in the midst of a course of repairs, detailing how the high altar, as well as the Corinthian columns that stood either side of it, were removed and purchased by Fr Daly who "had them erected in a new chapel which he got built in Bearna". This first altar was wooden and it was later replaced by a marble altar. Unfortunately the fate of the original altar is unknown. Fr Daly also sourced many other items of statuary, the stations of the cross, a large plaster crucifix, etc. But whether these were all acquired together or collected over time is unknown.

This new church was built of thick masonry with narrow Gothic windows and had a stone floor made of flagstones brought from Miltown Malbay in Co. Clare. The steep pitched roof was clad in Bangor slates. It was a T-shaped structure, rather than cruciform, with a small sacristy attached to the top "arm" of the T. The sacristy was placed behind the sanctuary and on the north side a small porch was built containing a baptismal font. Later additions included a gallery at the eastern side of the

nave, reached by timber stairs, and an entrance porch. At a later date a wooden floor was also laid over the existing flagstones. Several of the original flagstones are now reset around the base of the Lynch family vault in the car park, and the original stone water fountains from the entrance to this church have been preserved and incorporated into the walls at the entrances to the current church. There were no architectural features or decor of any particular merit in the interior, but this “plainness” was a feature of many pre-famine churches and reflected a preference for simplicity and intimacy in places of worship. At a later stage a bell tower was added at the western end (as seen in the photographs), but the date of this addition is uncertain. The bell tower was of a markedly slender construction compared to the robust architecture of the original church. Three large wrought-iron crosses stood at the peaks of the north, south and eastern gables.

The sanctuary contained many features that were later redesigned and incorporated into the modern church. The central pedestal of the altar was incorporated into the altar of



Fr Peter Daly

the modern church, and the altar stone on top was relocated for use as an outdoor altar in the Bearna graveyard. Above the altar hung a pre-famine wooden cross with a plaster figure, acquired by Fr Daly for this church. This cross was put into storage upon completion of the modern church but was restored in recent years and now hangs inside the front door of the church. The statue of the Sacred Heart was placed in the present church, while the statue of Our Lady is now situated in Bearna National School. The original tabernacle was a freestanding piece on the altar and elements of this were incorporated into the modern tabernacle behind the current altar.

While Fr Peter Daly is recorded as being the parish priest for Bearna from 1840-1868, his busy schedule and extensive duties would likely have prohibited him from celebrating Mass in Bearna church regularly, so various curates would have done so in his place. Fr John Dooley, a curate from Ragoon parish, was the first regular priest assigned to Bearna. A native of Cloughanover, Headford, Co. Galway, he was ordained in the Galway Pro Cathedral in 1864 and served in Ragoon parish from 1868 until his untimely death at the age of just 33 in 1871. He was “greatly admired and respected by all” according to his obituary from “The Galway Vindicator” (10th May 1871), and the sudden nature of his death (and perhaps also the significance of his age) sent shock waves throughout Galway. The obituary also stated that after high Mass in the Pro Cathedral:

...he will be conveyed for interment in the parish church at Bearna. It will be his consolation to sleep beneath the roof of a church which his own zeal has contributed most to raise and to beautify.

Being buried within a church is a relatively rare tribute and is generally reserved for those of high status, rank or longevity, but this account would seem to suggest that this honour was bestowed on Fr Dooley. A plaque of white marble on a black

background, recording his death and burial, was mounted on the western gable wall halfway between the altar and the southern wall of the old church. This plaque was transferred to the modern church and can be seen inside the front door.

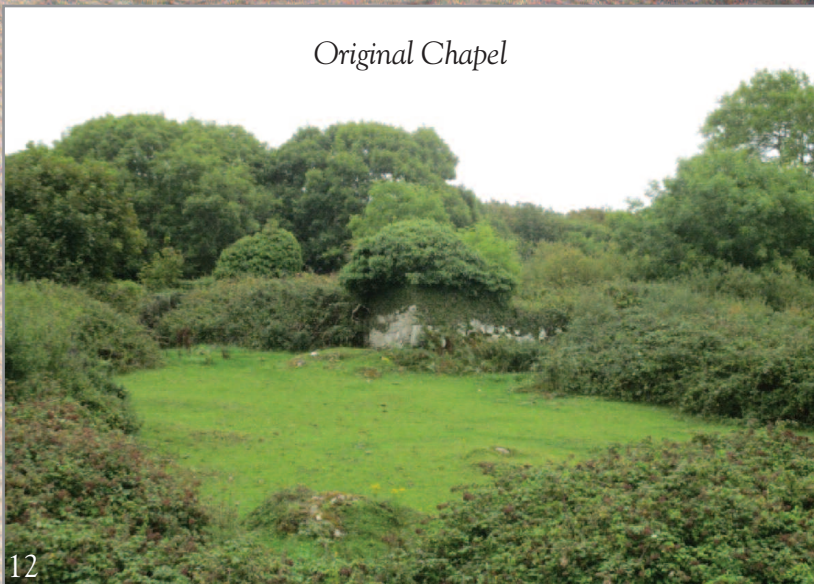
Given that Fr Dooley died so early in the history of the church, if he was indeed interred within the building it would almost certainly have been under the original slab floor. The later addition of the wooden floor would likely have necessitated the erection of the plaque to commemorate him and possibly indicate the position of his final resting place. It should be noted, however, that in the course of the demolition of this building and clearing of the site, no record or mention was made of the discovery of any grave markers or human remains on or under the slab floors. It is also possible, given that the site was “levelled” rather than excavated, that a subtle grave cut may have been missed. The official church records for the diocese do not record an alternative location for Fr Dooley’s final resting place so it remains somewhat enigmatic.

Given the tragedy associated with Fr Dooley’s story, it would be remiss not to mention the tragedy of another priest in the Bearna na Forbacha area – that of Fr Griffin who came to the parish of Ragoon in 1918 and was assigned to Bearna na Forbacha. He was a popular priest who started a lending library





Original Chapel





A section of Larkin's Map of Galway, 1819
showing the area of Bearna and Furbo



Lynch's Mausoleum

in Bearna, ran feiseanna and organised currach racing. He spent most of his time on visitation and helping people through difficult times, and was aware that his actions and movements were being reported to British authorities in Dublin.

Fr Griffin's story is well known and well documented elsewhere. Suffice it to say, on the night of Sunday 14th November 1920 he got a "sick call" which appeared to be genuine, from which he never returned. His murder by the Black and Tans was covered up by colluding military and RIC forces.

Outside the church at the eastern end, the Lynch vault was erected. It was surrounded by a wrought-iron railing and had yew trees at the four corners. Incorporated into the Lynch family crest are three oyster shells representing St James and the Camino Pilgrimage Walk. Six members of the Lynch family are interred here.

Betsy	d. 8/03/1857	Blanche	d. 18/05/1908
Nicholas	d. 22/11/1862	Marcus D.L.	d. 6/11/1916
Arthur	d. 25/06/1892	Margaret M.	d. 27/04/1930

Another Galway “tribal” family of old, the Blakes, were landlords in the Furbo area since the 1600s and descendants of Richard Caddell Blake (Sheriff of Galway 1306). They had a family mausoleum built in c.1860 where four members of the family were laid to rest. When the mausoleum was built the family laid aside a piece of ground and some funds for the building of a chapel. In 1933 the chapel was built by Canon Peter Davis, the parish priest of Rahoon. This chapel would go on to become Furbo church, Réalt na Mara.

In June 1934 a meeting of residents in Salthill met and debated the necessity of building a church to cater to the religious needs of approximately 300 families. A site (known as Monksfield) was donated free of charge by the Christian Brothers and it was blessed on 17th December 1934. The first sod was turned by Monsignor Considine, and the foundation stone was laid by Bishop Doherty on 16th June 1935. The first Mass was celebrated there on 23rd August 1936 and the church was dedicated to Christ the King. In the late 1960s two large



Salthill Church as it looks today

extensions on either side of the nave gave the Salthill church its current square-like format.

Bearna na Forbacha remained a part of Rahoon parish until 1952, when Salthill became a parish and Bearna na Forbacha became part of the parish of Salthill. The priest's house was built beside the Bearna church in 1956-57 for £8,000 and Fr Patrick Eaton was the first resident.

On 15th of August 1957, on the Feast of the Assumption, approximately 500 people took part in a procession at Bearna in honour of Our Lady's Queenship. This was the first diocese in Ireland where the solemn enthronement of Our Lady under this title had taken place.

A statue of Mary Immaculate Queen of the Universe was carried by members of the Bearna Presidium of the Legion of Mary, wearing blue sashes. Members of the FCA from the area formed a guard of honour. First communicants from Bearna and Furbo carried coloured flowers and banners in honour of Our Lady's royalty. During the procession the rosary was recited in Irish, and Irish hymns were sung. A group of Catholic boy scouts from Limerick who were camping in the area also took part in the procession. On arrival at the church the statue was blessed



Bearna church opened in 1977

by the Rev. K. Burke CC and a sermon on the Queenship of our Lady was preached by the Very Rev. F. Heneghan (parish priest of St Nicholas' Pro Cathedral). The act of consecration was recited by the whole congregation and after benediction of the most blessed sacrament, the statue was carried from the sanctuary to the shrine specially prepared for it.

Between 1971 and 1979 the population of Bearna grew from 1,734 to 2,965 (a 71% increase), and structural engineers declared the church to be in a poor state of repair. Added to this, in 1972 Bearna na Forbacha became a parish in its own right with Fr Patrick Tully, the curate of St Joseph's, installed as its first parish priest. The need now arose for a new church to reflect the new parish and to accommodate the growing population.

Initially a site within the village was proposed but quickly dismissed, before the existing site was put forward. This was also dismissed initially as being too small until an additional two acres of land abutting the existing grounds were acquired. A planning application was submitted in July 1975 for a 6,000 sq. ft church, twice the size of the existing building. Although initially refused, permission was finally given on appeal in February 1976. A budget of £80,000 eventually grew to between £100,000 and



Forbacha church as it is today

£110,000. The church was designed by Peter Murphy of S.J. Kelly Architects and was opened on 6th March 1977 by Bishop Eamonn Casey, with retired Bishop Dr Michael Browne in attendance. This new church was now known as the Church of Mary Immaculate Queen.

The design concept behind this new church was based on simplicity of form and materials, and a desire to incorporate the natural environment and views. Eschewing the traditional walls and stained glass, the main structure expressed a simple geometric “wedge” form and the southern “wall” of the building was made up of a continuous series of clear glass windows.

As mentioned previously, efforts were made to try to incorporate as many elements as possible from the old church into the modern church. The altar had to be redesigned to conform to directives from Vatican 2, but there was not enough marble recovered from the old altar to complete a free-standing altar and ambo (pulpit), and a perfect match could not be sourced to add to it. So old marble was used wherever possible and new marble, quarried locally, completed the pieces. A baptistery area was located beside the modern sanctuary and near the pulpit. Originally this consisted of a movable teak font, and was also used as a mortuary area, but this font was later replaced by a fixed marble font matching the altar and pulpit. A small shrine chapel to Mary Immaculate Queen was incorporated in the north wall.

The paintings of the stations of the cross from the old church were cleaned, reframed and mounted across the eastern gable in the form of a frieze. More recently they were re-hung so the stations begin close to the baptismal font and progress anti-clockwise around the church. As mentioned earlier, the large wooden and plaster cross which hung over the altar in the old church was recovered and restored, and now hangs inside the main door of the church.

Only one item is known to have survived from the original stone chapel – a statue of Our Lady that Fr Daly did not transfer to his new church in the 1840s. It was cared for by generations of the Conneely family of Freeport until it was presented to the church in 2014. This statue now stands in pride of place on a pedestal to the left of the altar.

On 26th June 1982 the church was privileged to play host to a unique event. Claude Masurel, the co-founder of the Order of Mary Immaculate Queen of the Universe, was ordained in Bearna church by William Barden O.P., Archbishop of Isfahan of the Latins. The Messengers of Mary Immaculate Queen of the Universe were founded in 1955 by Père Claude and Clemence Ledoux in France to spread the message of the Queenship of Mary. In 1957 the old church in Bearna was presented with a statue of Mary by Lucy Corbett, the Chief Messenger in Ireland, thus becoming the first shrine to Mary Immaculate Queen outside of France. Other Messengers from all over the world came to witness the ordination.

Appendix

Priests serving Bearna na Forbacha Church

Bearna na Forbacha was originally part of Rahoon parish:

Fr Peter Daly	1840-1868
Fr John Dooley Adm.	1868-1871
Fr Redmond McDonagh	1871-1875
Fr John Carolan	1875-1881
Fr Patrick Lally	1881-1918
Fr Michael Griffin	1918-1920
Fr Peter Davis	1920-1943
Fr Patrick Glynn	1943-1975

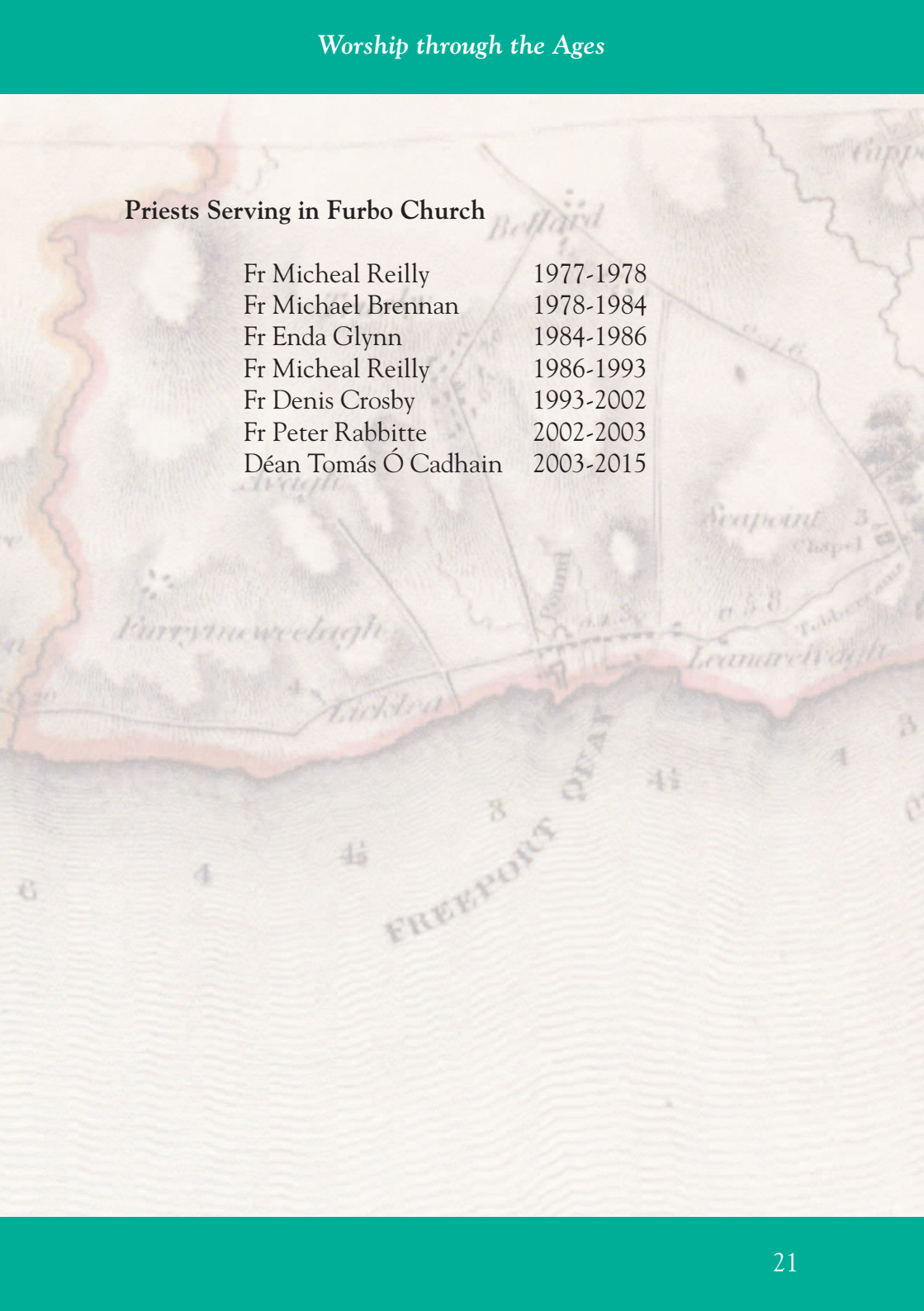
In 1952 Salthill became a parish and Bearna na Forbacha was part of that Parish:

Fr J.J. Hyland	1952-1965
Fr Michael Spelman	1965-1972

In 1972 Bearna na Forbacha became a parish in its own right:

Fr Patrick Tully	1972-1988
Fr Leo Morahan	1988-2000
Fr John D. Ó Catháin	2000-2010
Fr Frank Lee	2010-2012
Fr Des Forde	2012-2016
Fr Michael Brennan	2016-present

Priests Serving in Furbo Church



Fr Micheal Reilly	1977-1978
Fr Michael Brennan	1978-1984
Fr Enda Glynn	1984-1986
Fr Micheal Reilly	1986-1993
Fr Denis Crosby	1993-2002
Fr Peter Rabbitte	2002-2003
Déan Tomás Ó Cadhain	2003-2015

Native priests from Bearna

Bearna has been proud to have several native priests over the years:

Fr Nicholas Fagan of Freeport. Born in 1880, he was ordained on 22nd June 1902 in Maynooth.

Fr Nicholas Donnelly. Born in 1888, he was ordained on 24th June 1915 in Maynooth.

Fr Seán Concannon (of the Vincentian order). Born in 1938, he was ordained in 1971 and said his first Mass in Bearna.

Fr Conor Cunningham. Born in 1970, he was ordained by Bishop James McLoughlin in Bearna on 18th June 1995.

Galway and Kilmacduagh and Apostolic Administrators of Kilfenora

1831–1844	George Browne, previously parish priest of Athlone.
1844–1855	Laurence O'Donnell.
1856–1883	John McEvilly. Appointed Bishop of Kilmacduagh and Apostolic Administrator of Kilfenora 1866.
1883	Pope Leo XIII joined the diocese of Kilmacduagh to Galway and made the Bishop of Galway Apostolic Administrator of Kilfenora <i>in perpetuum</i> .
1883–1887	Thomas Carr. Previously Vice President of St Patrick's College Maynooth. Transferred to Melbourne in 1886.
1887–1908	Francis McCormack. Transferred from Achonry. Retired due to ill health and died in 1909.
1909–1923	Thomas Ó Dea. Transferred from Clonfert.
1923–1936	Thomas Ó Doherty. Transferred from Clonfert.
1937–1976	Michael Browne. Previously Professor of Moral Theology at St Patrick's College Maynooth. Retired in 1976 and died on 22 nd February 1980.
1976–1992	Eamonn Casey. Transferred from Kerry. Resigned on 6 th May 1992.
1993–2005	James McLoughlin. Previously parish priest in Galway Cathedral. Died on 25 th November 2005.
2005–2016	Martin Drennan. Previously Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin. Retired in 2016.
2017–2022	Brendan Kelly. Transferred from Achonry. Retired in 2022.
2022–present	Michael Duignan. Also Bishop of Clonfert.

Acknowledgments

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The Diocesan Offices of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora

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Bearna agus na Forbacha - A Local History

Bearna na Forbacha Parish

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