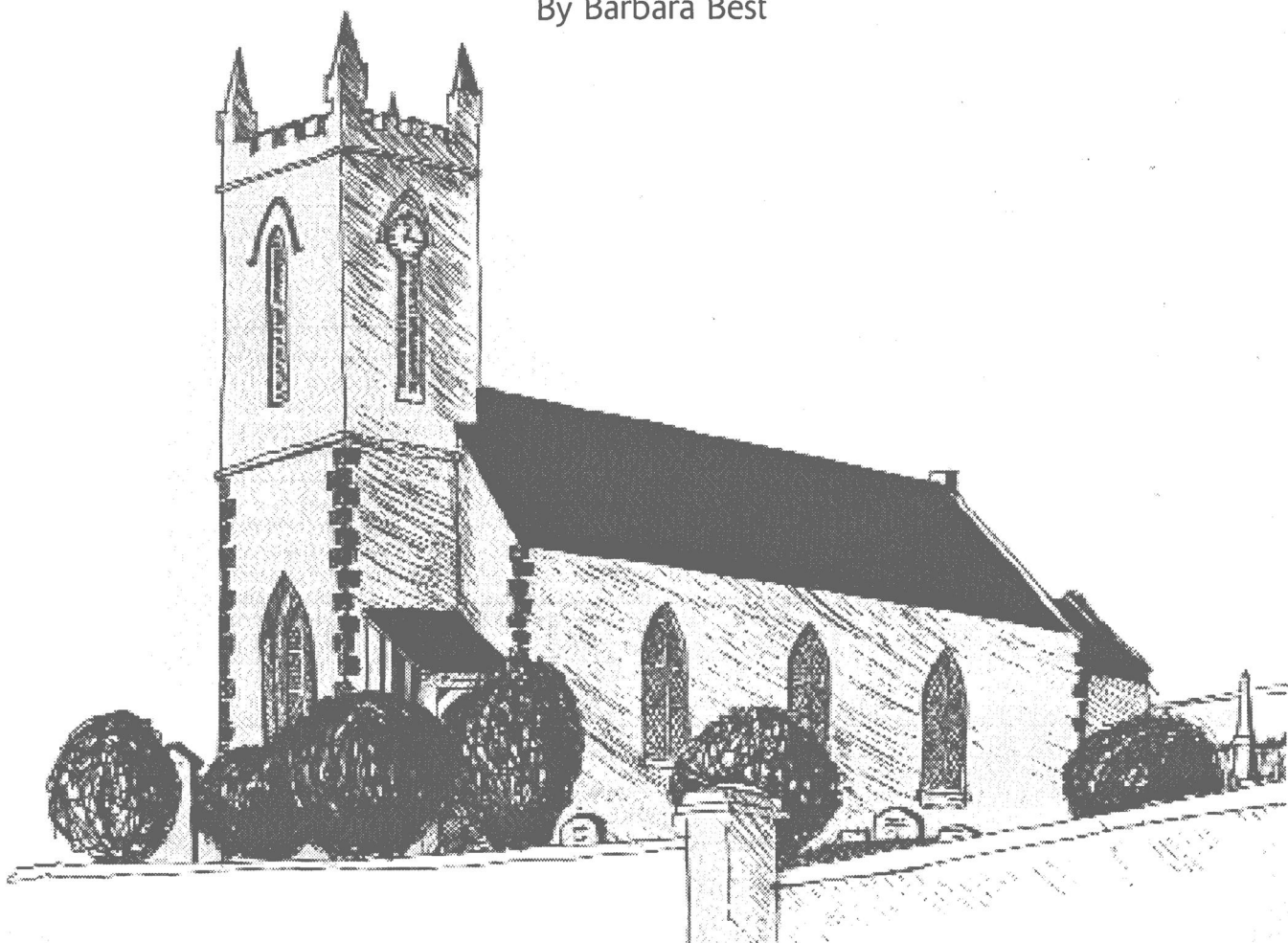


# Acton Parish Church, Poyntzpass

By Barbara Best



*Pen & Ink Drawing of Acton Parish Church by Una Watters.*

**A**cton Parish Church, situated at the entrance to Poyntzpass Village from the Newry side, was built in 1789.

This church was a replacement for the church built in 1684 by Sir Toby Poyntz, on the site now known as "Acton Old Graveyard," just south of Acton village on the Poyntzpass road. The 1684 church may have been a replacement for a much earlier church on the same site.

Before the canal was made the low-lying country between Portadown and Newry consisted of bogs and woods that separated the O'Hanlons' lands in Co. Armagh from the Magennnis territory in Co. Down. At some few places it was possible to cross the bog,

hence the names Poyntz pass and Scarva pass. The Pass, now Poyntzpass, formerly known as "Fenwick's Pass", and was an important military position held by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. Led by Lieutenant Charles Poyntz, the position was captured by a few English troops after a fierce encounter. For this brilliant feat of arms, Lieutenant Poyntz was given a grant of 500 acres by James 1 in 1610. This land was part of the forfeited estates of the O'Hanlons, and Charles Poyntz quickly set about the task of securing it. He erected a bawn 100 feet square, a house of brick and lime for his own residence, and twenty-four cottages, which were given to English settlers. He called the place "Acton" after his own native village of Acton, in Gloucestershire.



*Acton House.*

Charles Poyntz and his wife Christina Puleston had a son, Toby, who was knighted in 1666. A stone on

the wall of the church built by Sir Toby, as described by Lewis in 1838, was inscribed as follows:-

*“ THIS CHURCH WAS BUILT  
AT THE SOLE EXPENSE OF Sr. TOBY POYNTZ Knt.,  
THE SON OF Sr. CHARLES POYNTZ Knt. OF ACTON  
anno 1684  
AND DEDICATED TO THE BLESSED AND  
UNDIVIDED TRINITY “*

Sir Toby was buried in a vault under the chancel, in 1685. He was survived by his three children - a son Charles, and two daughters, Sarah and Christine. Charles married Lucy Lucas from Castleshane, Co. Monaghan and had a son Lucas Poyntz who died without issue in 1707. Sarah married Charles Stewart of Ballintoy, Co. Antrim. Christine married Roger Hall of Narrow Water Castle, Warrenpoint.



*Acton Old Graveyard.*





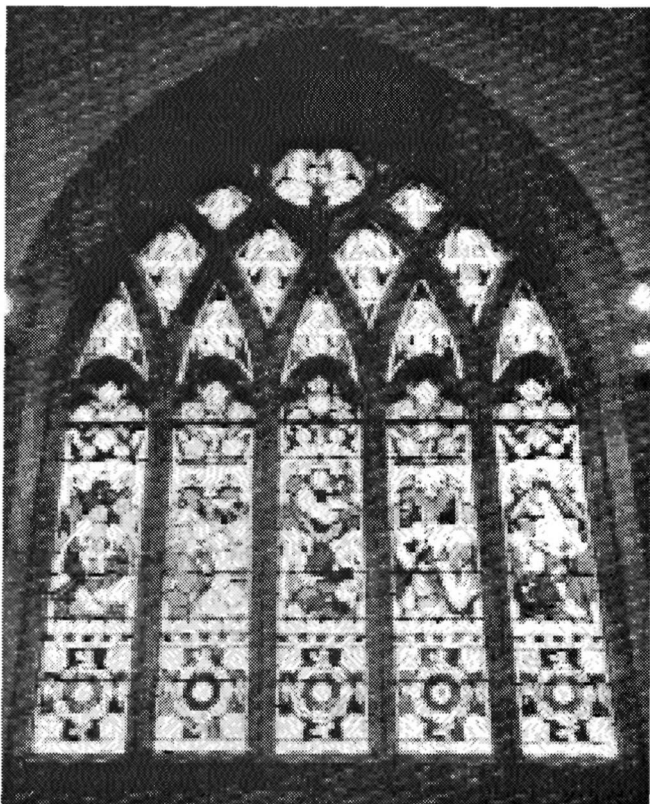
*St Joseph's Poyntzpass.*

Alexander Thomas Stewart seems to have carried a burden of debt with him from Antrim to Armagh because he mortgaged the Acton Estate to Samuel Hanna, a wealthy merchant of Newry. Alexander Thomas was married to a sister of Sir Hugh Hill of Derry, and they had one son also called Alexander Thomas.

Alexander Thomas Stewart jnr. seems to have inherited his father's adventurous spirit as he moved in the circle of a fast-living set in Dublin associating with notorious gamblers and rakes with a reputation for outrageous dares and duels. He also seems to have inherited a mortgaged property on his father's death that led, ultimately, to the Stewart dynasty forfeiting the Acton estate around the turn of the century. This Alexander Thomas Stewart Junior was the last of the Stewarts in Acton. The burden of debt did not stifle his generosity to the poor in the area or curb his building of a new mansion and a parish church at Poyntzpass. In 1792, Alexander Thomas Junior also granted a lease to Father John Maguire, then parish priest of Ballymore, to build a Catholic church at Poyntzpass.

In the 1790's too, Stewart became sympathetic to the cause of the United Irishmen. By 1798 the Governments' security forces would seem to have been closing in on Stewart as he was reported then as living in England. He was arrested on a charge of high treason but released due to insignificant evidence and pressure from Parliament. Following his release from prison, he returned to Ireland where he died from typhus fever in the early 1800s and his Acton property passed to Samuel Hanna.

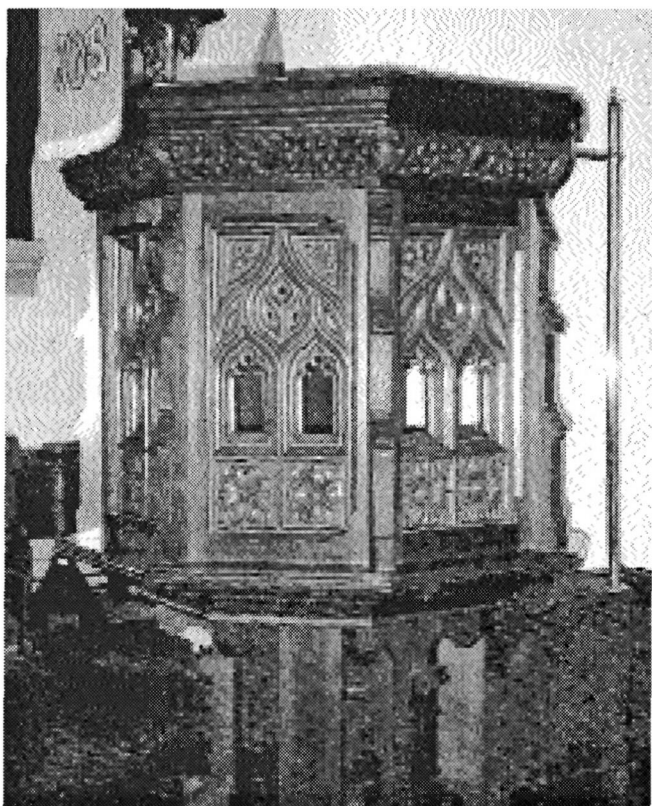
The Parish Church of Acton, built by Alexander Thomas Stewart junior in 1789, was not consecrated until October 1822. This reason for this long delay is not clear. A tower and spire were added between 1825 and 1829, and a side aisle in 1858. The chancel was built in 1890 and a stained glass window was placed in it to the memory of Robert Quin Alexander, J.P. of Acton House. Their children added another window, to the memory of his wife, Gertrude Harriet, in 1907. In 1899 a new vestry was built. The Communion Plate - a chalice, paten and flagon - is inscribed "Acton Church 1792."



*Stained glass window in Acton Parish Church.*

Other additions and improvements include:-

- the Chancel tiling, which was presented by the Misses Alexander of Acton House in memory of their brother, Lieutenant Colonel W.F. Alexander, in 1917.



*The Pulpit.*

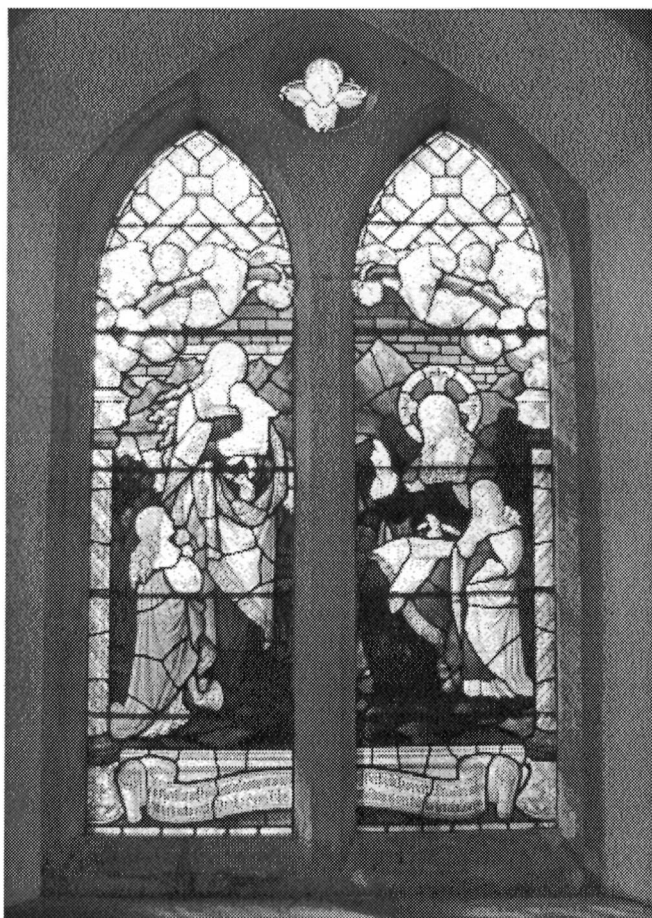
- The carved oak pulpit and prayer desk in 1923, a memorial to those who fell in the 1914 - 1918 war
- the carved oak chancel chair, presented by Mrs. Fred Wiley of Acton in 1923.
- The brass book rest for the Holy Table, presented by the Canon E.A. Nelson and Mrs. Nelson.
- brass Communion rails, presented by William and James Bennet, in memory of their brother the Reverend John F. Bennet, Rector of Tinahely, who died in 1923.
- carved oak chair presented by the Reverend Canon Nelson and Mrs. Nelson in 1944.



*The Lectern.*

- In 1952 a second-hand pipe organ was installed by J.W. Walker & Sons Ltd., Organ Builders of Middlesex, at a cost of £900. Transport and shipping charges - £27.4.8 (for a weight of 1 ton 18cwt. From London Port to Poyntzpass).
- A second hymn board and pair of carved oak flower pedestals made and presented by Mr. Fred Liggett.
- The clock on the tower, dedicated in 1994 to the memory of Mrs. O. M. Best.
- In 1999, a stained glass window depicting the Baptism of Jesus in memory of Don and Margaret Best.

Acton was originally part of the parish of Ballymore, better known as Tandragee, and consisted of nineteen townlands. Until 1921, when they were amalgamated, Acton and Drumbanagher were separate parishes. In 1946 this union was dissolved to enable the Parish of Acton to benefit by a legacy of about £6000, left to it under the will of Mr. J.A. Gilleland J.P., a retired school principal of Poyntzpass. The parishes were re-united in the 1950s.



*Stained glass window in Acton Parish Church.*

### ACTON PARISH CHURCH - PERPETUAL CURATES

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1789 - 1793 | Rev. John Creery  |
| 1793 - 1797 | Rev. Alexander Macauley   |
| 1797 - 1799 | Rev. Richard Dodds  |
| 1799 - 1824 | Rev. Henry Ashe - who with his brother, the Reverend Isaac Ashe, opened a school in Tandragee in 1789. "He discharged faithfully the duties of the parish of Acton for 25 years." |
| 1824 - 1833 | Rev. Savage Hall  |
| 1833 - 1858 | Rev. Jonathan Lovett Darby  |
| 1858 - 1868 | Rev. John Henry King  |

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| 1868 - | Rev. John Phillips Bushe - also the first incumbent after Disestablishment in 1870. |
|--------|---|

### INCUMBENTS

- |             |                                  |
|-------------|----------------------------------|
| 1873 - 1885 | Rev. Paul Lyster Jamesom         |
| 1885 - 1895 | Rev. Charles Frederick Archer    |
| 1895 - 1921 | Rev. William Frederick Johnson   |
| 1921 - 1946 | Rev. Canon Ernest A. Nelson      |
| 1946 - 1951 | Rev. James Andrew O'Brien Rogers |
| 1951 - 1958 | Rev. Dr. Michael C. Casella      |
| 1958 - 1963 | Rev. George Long                 |
| 1963 - 1975 | Rev. Canon Arthur Parkinson      |
| 1975 - 1989 | Rev. Canon Frank Noel            |
| 1989 - 1994 | Rev. Dr. John Clyde              |
| 1994 - 1997 | Rev. Maurice Harvey              |
| 1997 -      | Rev. Canon Michael Barton        |

Alexander Thomas Stewart and his son of the same name, between them, were largely responsible for the building of Ballyargan Chapel, (1769), St. Joseph's Church in Poyntzpass, (1790's), Acton House, (1790), and Acton Parish Church (1789).

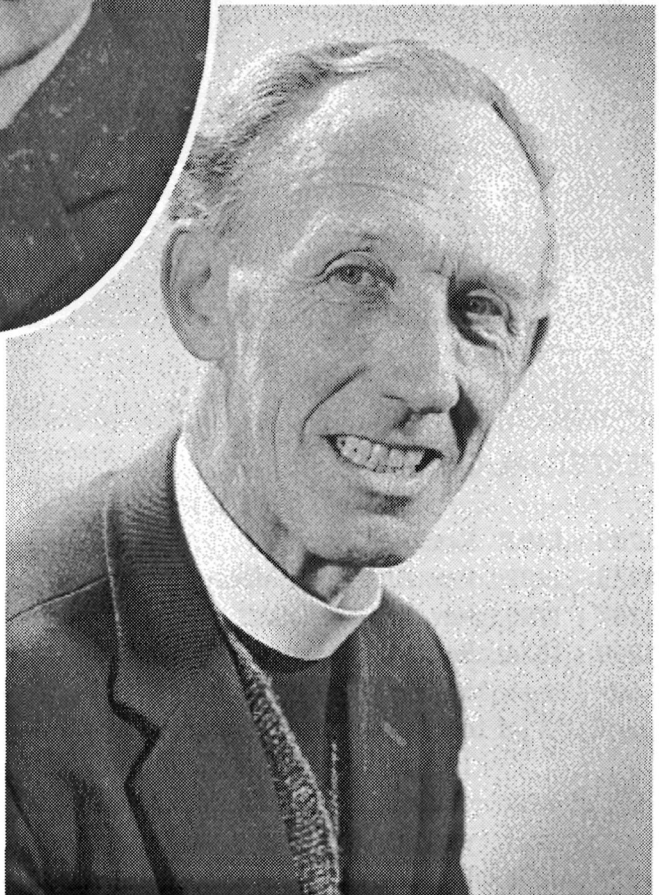
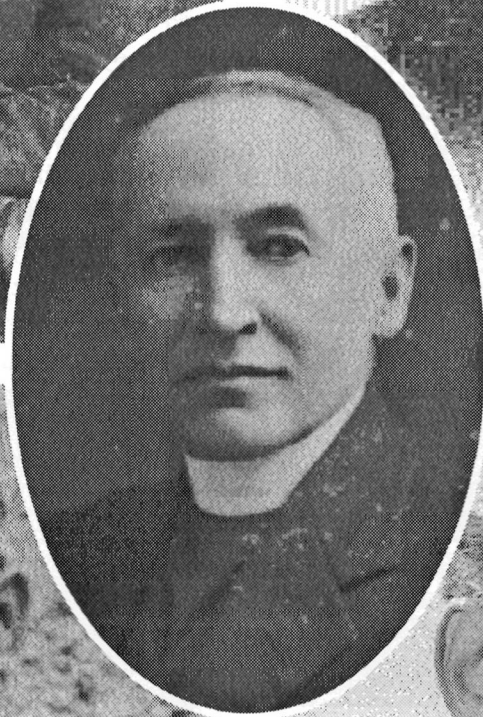


*The Sundial, Acton Parish Church.*

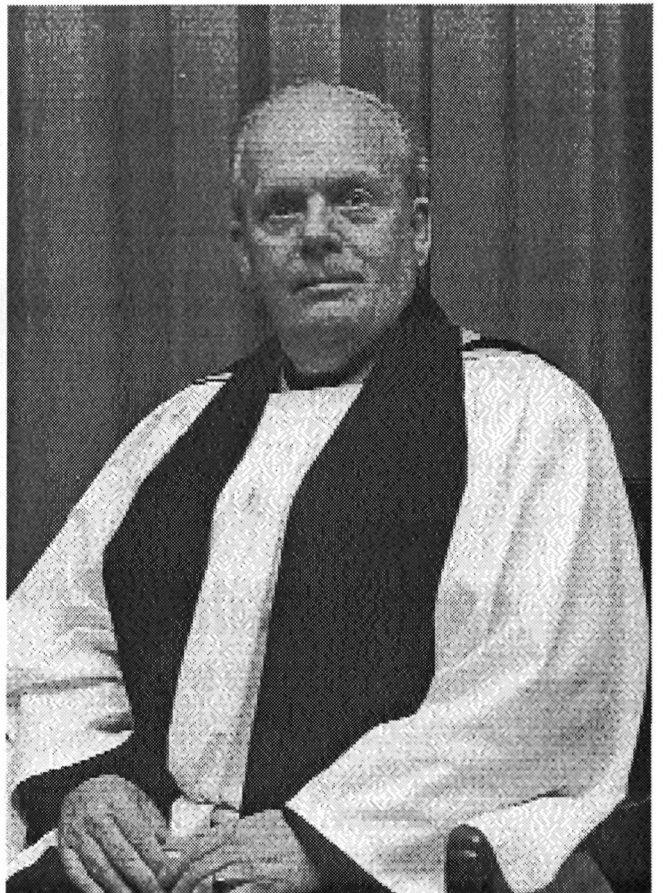
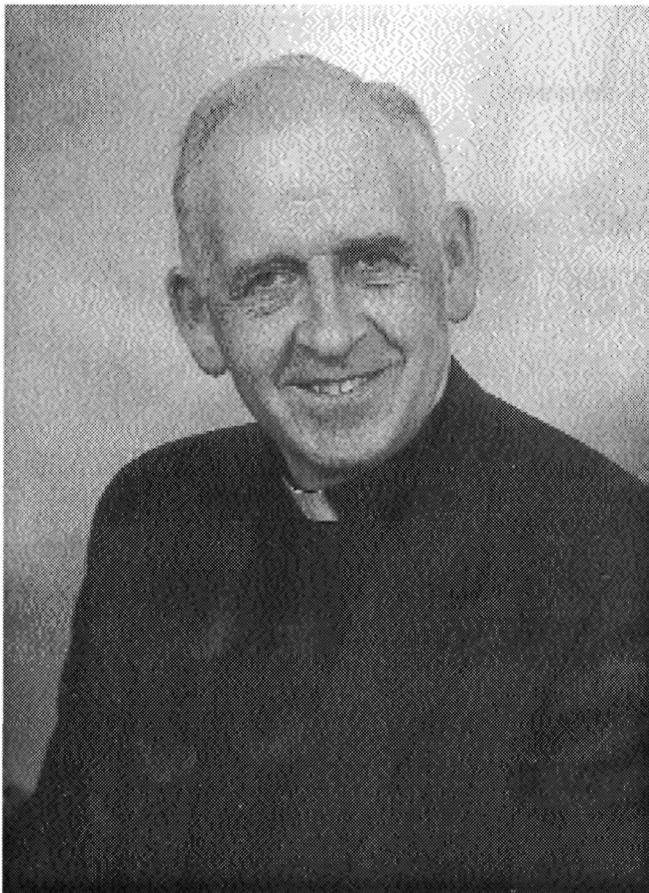
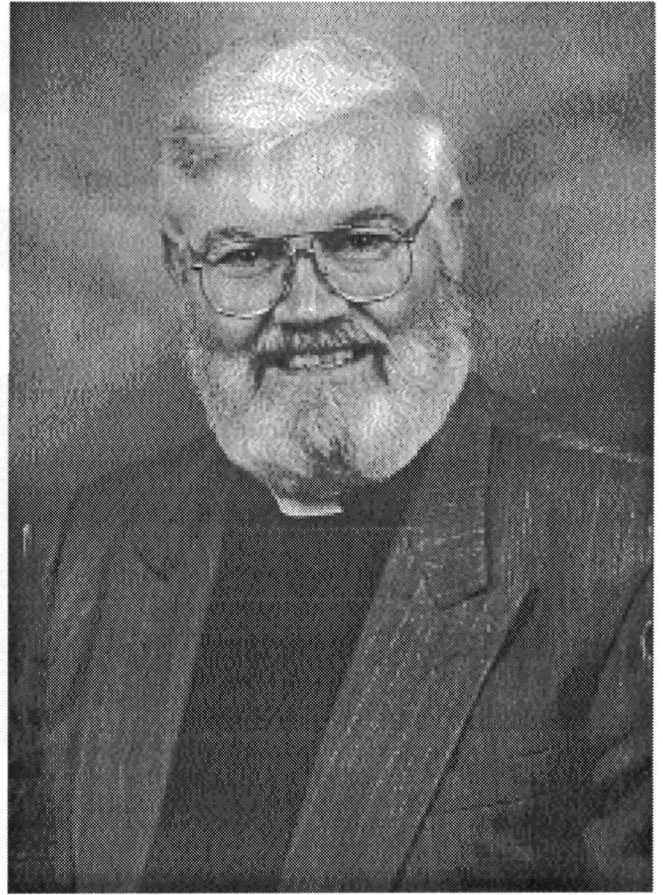
The three churches have another link as each has a sundial made by Thomas McCreesh, schoolmaster at Poyntzpass. The sundial at Ballyargan, dated 1826, is inscribed :-

#### *Memto Mori*

*' Years following years steal something every day  
At last they steal us from ourselves away  
This plainly shows to foolish man  
That this short life is but a span.'*



*Clockwise from top left: Rev C.F. Archer, Rev W.F. Johnson, Rev E.A. Nelson, Rev G. Long, Rev A.N. Parkinson*



*Clockwise from top left: Rev Canon F. Noel, Rev Dr. J. Clyde, Rev M. Harvey,  
Rev Canon M. Barton.*