



Saint Laserian's Cathedral



**A BEACON OF CONTINUITY
IN THE HEART OF CARLOW**

OLD LEIGHLIN, CO. CARLOW, SOUTH EAST IRELAND, R93N598

Introduction

People have gathered and worshipped in St Laserian's Cathedral for over 800 years. And just as people do, the cathedral has aged, changed and gathered memories over its long life.

This booklet explains how the cathedral came to be, why it appears as it does today and who has associated with it over the centuries. Occasionally, the story is shrouded in the fog of myth; at other times, facts are clear – sometimes painfully so.

**Over the centuries, the cathedral
has been a beacon of continuity as
Carlow and the wider world changed.**

1400 years ago, Old Leighlin was a major ecclesiastical centre; today, it's a quiet rural village in the heart of Ireland. During all this time, St Laserian's has been a quiet witness to many profound changes. But what has not changed is the welcome it extends to everyone and the message of hope it asks them to hear.



Exterior of the cathedral.

Of immense historical significance is the synod held here in c. 630 which led to the Irish church adopting the Roman calendar in defining the date of Easter. So please take a little time to learn more about this fascinating, inspiring, mystifying and much-loved cathedral.

St Laserian's Cathedral

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE OVER NINE CENTURIES

Replacing an earlier building destroyed by fire around 1060, St Laserian's Cathedral was built by Donatus, Bishop of Leighlin, from 1158 to 1185.



The chancel of St Laserian's Cathedral with view of the O'Brien East Window.

At that time, a monastic settlement had existed here for around 500 years. However, monastic control of the church was replaced by the diocesan system in 1111, a structure which still prevails today. Originally one of Leinster's five dioceses, Leighlin now forms part of the Anglican Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory.

Much else has changed over the past 800 years. Haphazard alternations means that while every intervening century's architecture is represented here, no part of the cathedral is now symmetrical.

In the c. 17th century, the clumsily constructed buttress built to support the south wall also partially blocked one of the chancel windows. Elsewhere, the south transept has disappeared, the north transept has fallen into ruins and many archways and windows have been filled in and altered.

St Laserian's oldest section is believed to be its nave. As its north and south walls are windowless, the nave depends solely on skylights, plus the south and west door windows, for illumination.

Later, the 18m tower and transepts were added by Matthew Sanders, Bishop of Leighlin from 1527 to 1549. Victorian writers Samuel and Anna Carter Hall were not impressed, sourly commenting that the tower *'...has a mean sort of slated spire on top; which from its pygmy size, and general unsuitableness to the building... has the worst possible effect'*.

While a common feature within cathedrals, it is a mystery why the adjacent chapel, variously known as the Lady Chapel, Chapter Room and Synod Hall is so large.

Today the dividing wall between it and the chancel is heated by rooftop solar panels installed during restoration work in 2014. This is helping to keep damp, a persistent problem in the cathedral, at bay.



Many features of the cathedral have been altered over the centuries. These include this archway which has apparently been reduced in size.

The East Window

A TIMELESS MEMORIAL TO A MUCH-LOVED MOTHER

One of the most striking and inspiring features of St Laserian's Cathedral is the beautiful East Window. Despite its timeless appearance, the window is a twentieth century addition. Installed in the mid-1930s by her son Edward Cliffe Vigors, the window commemorates Mary Louisa Vigors (1850-1933). The regard in which Mary Louisa was held by her son is made clear by the window's quality.

It was created by artist Catherine O'Brien (1881-1963), one of the most highly regarded stained glass artists working in Ireland during the twentieth century.

It depicts St Laserian (bottom right panel), along with national saints St Patrick and St Brigid, local saints St Moling, St Fiach and St Canice and the apostolic saints, John and Paul. O'Brien is believed to have

added a charming personal touch by using her children as models for the cherubs in the triangular panels.



Catherine O'Brien (1881-1963) who created the East Window in the mid-1930s and managed the renowned stained-glass studio, An Túr Gloine, in the 1940s.

Baptismal Fonts

ONE ROUGH AND ONE READY

Carved from a single block of polished limestone and still showing chisel marks left by its makers, the chancel's baptismal font is integral to the building itself. As can be clearly seen, no attempt was made to decorate it and it appears to have never been finished. Behind the font hangs the tapestry *The Tree of Life*, by the Wexford artist Terry Dunne.

A local tale says that if the font is ever taken outside, it will make its way back in. How this will happen isn't clear – but the cathedral's second font needed the help of a crane.

Similar to one in St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, this completed 14th century font was relocated after St Mary's in Gowran, Co Kilkenny, closed in the 1970s. The practical rather than liturgical reason for the font's current location is that the crane hoisting it could not reach any further. However, this spot has proved a very appropriate place to welcome new members of St Laserian's congregation.



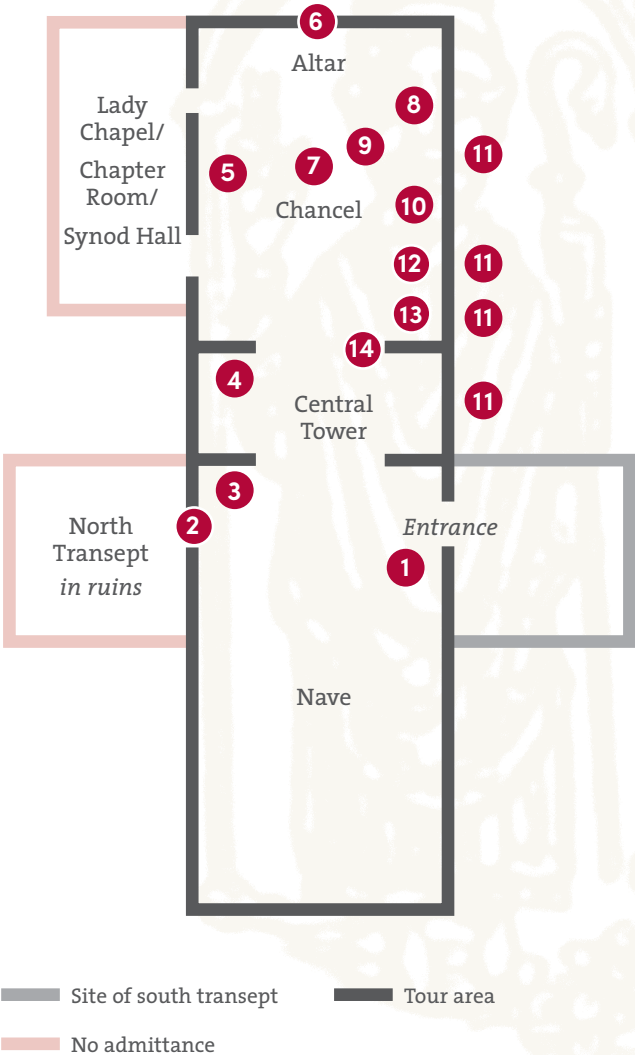
The original unfinished font.



The 14th century font transferred from Gowran, Co Kilkenny in the 1970s.

A Guide to St Laserian's

You enter the cathedral from the south side through to the nave. The tour starts on your left...



- 1 **Gowran Font:** It has strong carvings of foliage on the top and base with blind or closed fluting, often described as Ossory fluting.
- 2 **North Transept:** Now in ruins, notice the entrance archway that has been reduced in size.
- 3 **O'Brin and Kavanagh Altar Tomb:** Dating from the 16th century this tomb is not as it seems and may have been moved to hide some Catholic imagery.
- 4 **Baptismal Font:** Standing in the chancel and made of local limestone, this font is integral to the building.
- 5 **Pulpit:** A fine example of early 20th century carving.
- 6 **East Window:** This window features panels of Irish saints including Laserian, Patrick, Brigid and Fiacre.
- 7 **Cross Slabs:** Down the centre of the Chancel are a series of cross slabs, many believed to be to former Bishops of Leighlin.
- 8 **Sedilia:** The unique four-bay sedilia is a graceful insertion in the south wall with well-worked trefoiled heads.
- 9 **Lectern:** A striking embellishment of the cathedral is the splendidly executed, oak lectern.
- 10 **The Bishop's Throne:** A fine example of 19th century carving.
- 11 **South Windows:** Each of the windows along the south wall are different, three are Gothic in style but there are material variations in the embellishments. The window under the tower is of Victorian origin.
- 12 **Vigors Family, Burgage, Leighlinbridge:** The Vigors history is interwoven with the cathedral, with many memorials to the family throughout the building.
- 13 **Organ:** The Harrison and Harrison is a small version of the organ built by the company for many of the big cathedrals including Westminster Cathedral.
- 14 **Icon of St Laserian**

Sedilia and Bishop's Throne

EXQUISITELY CARVED IN STONE AND OAK

An ancient feature of places of worship located beside the altar, sedilia are carved seats for clergy. Early examples exist in Rome's catacombs and the four sedilia in St Laserian's are among the oldest in Ireland. Adding to their significance is the fact that sedilia are usually seen in sets of three. The fourth raised seat was possibly reserved for the Bishop of Leighlin who would today sit on the adjacent carved oak throne. The throne's memorial plate commemorates Colonel Philip Doyne Vigors (1825-1903) who retired to Carlow following a successful army career. Energetic and blunt, Vigors was a powerful figure in the county, serving as a Justice of the Peace and High Sheriff of Carlow in 1894. He was also the driving force behind the Association for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead which created an invaluable record of church and churchyard inscriptions and memorials across Ireland.



Oak Throne in St Laserian's Cathedral.



Monastic head adorning the sedilia.

The O'Brin and Kavanagh Altar-Tomb

THE CATHEDRAL'S CRYPTIC CRYPT

The altar-tomb of William O'Brin who died in 1549 and his wife Margaret Kavanagh is not as it seems.

Normally this would be a dignified memorial to people of high standing. Experts are therefore puzzled why the name is unfinished and there is not enough room for the shield. The front also seems to show a random depiction of the vaulted ceiling overhead.

On the reverse, a carving of a very Catholic image – the sacred heart – faces the wall. Perhaps this was deliberately hidden from view; alternatively, the entire tomb may have been rotated to conceal images offensive to the Reformation's anti-idolatry principles. It's even possible that it was only an exercise and never intended to be a finished piece of work.

With its many anomalies, the tomb is one of the cathedral's most mysterious features – and one which may never be fully explained.



The front of the O'Brin and Kavanagh Altar-Tomb, believed to be a sampler.

St Laserian's - a narrative of change

16th CENTURY

The tower was added in the 16th century and is 18 metres high. Its current bell was cast in Dublin and installed in 1955.

Two 16th century Bishops of Leighlin, Matthew Sanders and Thomas Field, are buried directly in front of the altar. The 'cruel, avaricious' Bishop Robert Travers who presided between Sanders' and Field's terms was denied this honour.



A rough plaster which covered the walls of the chancel was removed in 1926 to reveal the stone which is such a striking feature of the cathedral's interior.

The cathedral was re-roofed in 1974.

21st CENTURY



Solar panelling was installed in 2014 to help heat the building in a more environmentally positive way.

Much of the charm and character of St Laserian's Cathedral is explained by numerous architectural interventions and augmentations made over the centuries. Some were more carefully considered than others; but they all indicate how countless generations have cherished the building and wished to preserve and enhance it.

The west wall had to be supported by a massive buttress in the 17th century which completely obscured one of the three lancets of the windows.

17th
CENTURY



20th
CENTURY

The north transept is now in ruins and the south transept has disappeared. An extensive archaeological survey would be required to answer the many questions about the building.



THE
PRESENT
DAY

The Vigors Family

COMMEMORATED THROUGH THE CENTURIES

The cathedral overflows with memorials to the Vigors family. They arrived in Old Leighlin after Urban Vigors (1636-1716), son of a Huguenot refugee, married Carlow woman Bridget Tench. Urban climbed the social ladder and a 1718 floor monument commemorates 'Urban Vigors, High Sheriff, Co Carlow'.

Numerous members of the Vigors family, whose association with the area stretches back centuries, are commemorated inside St Laserian's Cathedral. Outside, near the south door, a simpler monument gives no real hint of the colourful life it marks.

Timothy Ashmead Vigors (1921-2003) was a renowned bloodstock agent and instrumental in the rise of the Coolmore Stud in County Tipperary. But as a teenager, he had been a Battle of Britain pilot and once shot down a German aircraft while



Tim Vigors sold the Coolmore Stud in 1974 but remained actively involved in the world of horse racing.

[Image: The Irish Bloodstock Agency BBA Ireland Ltd.]

wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown. He was later shot down himself in Malaya and evaded capture by the Japanese though severely wounded.

After the war, he founded a photographic agency, a successful private aviation business and also inherited the Coolmore Stud.

St Laserian's Well

A CONTINUING SOURCE OF SOLACE

Also known as St Molaise's Well, a holy well dedicated to St Laserian is located approx. 250m west of the cathedral.

Like many such wells, this may have been considered sacred in pre-Christian times; today it is still venerated, with objects and mementoes continually left by faithful visitors. Strips of cloth are also tied to a nearby tree, another common practice near holy wells.



The well's ancient granite cross predates the well's early twentieth century renovation.

The site is also said to be the location of the Eó Rossa, one of the five sacred trees of Ireland. Having power over destruction and rebirth, this yew was reputedly cut down by St Laserian with some of its wood given to St Moling to roof his oratory.

On St Laserian's Feast Day, April 18th, both the Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic communities regularly attend the celebration to honour Laserian, the first Bishop of Leighlin, with a procession from the cathedral to the holy well. The event is probably among only two still undertaken in the country.



Despite rainwater gathering, the well is not a reliable source of water now.



Hanging strips of cloth are still a common sight at holy wells in Ireland and Britain.

Location

St Laserian's Cathedral is located 3.5km west of Leighlinbridge, Co Carlow on the L3037. **R93N598**



St Laserian's Trail

St Laserian's Cathedral in Old Leighlin makes a perfect start to this trail which meanders through the heart of County Carlow for some 69km featuring 16 attractions.

For information visit trails.carlowtourism.com

T: 059 913 0411 E: info@carlowtourism.com

Opening Times

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Ar dTodhchail
Tuaithe
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An Roinn Forbartha
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Department of Rural and
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COMAIRLE CONTAR
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For more information and details on accommodation options visit
www.carlowtourism.com