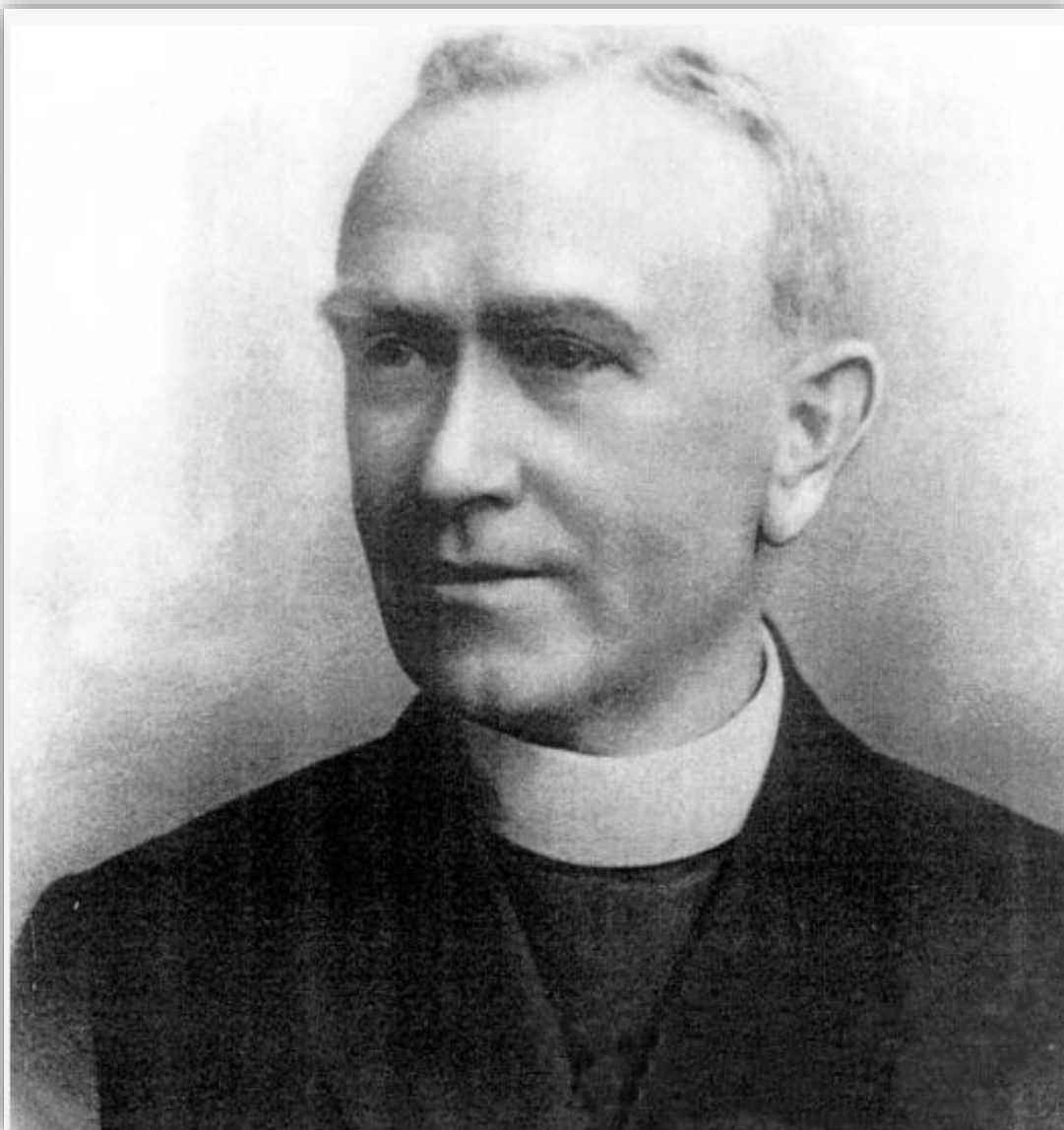


## Father Denis O'Hara



Parish Priest of Kiltimagh 1887-1922

By Emma Maloney

## Contents

<b>Introduction:</b> .....	3
<b>Background to Fr Denis O'Hara:</b> .....	3
<b>What Kiltimagh was like before Fr Denis O'Hara came:</b> .....	4
<b>Kiltimagh Church</b> .....	4
<b>Technical School for Kiltimagh</b> .....	7
<b>St Louis Sisters</b> .....	7
<b>Congested District Board</b> .....	9
<b>Other initiatives Fr Denis O'Hara took on in Kiltimagh</b> .....	9
<b>The Black and Tans in Kiltimagh</b> .....	12
<b>The death of Fr Denis O'Hara</b> .....	13
<b>Sources:</b> .....	14

## Introduction:

For my history CBA, I have decided to do it on Fr Denis O'Hara. I chose this person because the town of Kiltimagh would not be the town it is today only for Fr O'Hara.

I first found out about Fr Denis O'Hara when I was attending mass in my local church, and I saw a statue of this figure on the wall. I went over to it and saw that the statue was a dedicated to a man called Fr Denis O'Hara.

When I did some research on him, I found out that he was the person who built the church in Kiltimagh. He also was responsible for bringing the Louis Sisters to Kiltimagh and the building of backways in Kiltimagh.

Before Fr O'Hara came to Kiltimagh, the town was very poor and run down. It had no proper roads, church or schools, but when Fr O'Hara came, he transformed it into the town it is today. This is the reason why I chose to do my CBA on Fr Denis O'Hara, to show what he did for the town of Kiltimagh, the impact he had and how we still use the roads and buildings he built to this day.

## Background to Fr Denis O'Hara:

Fr. Denis O'Hara, priest and an activist for the redistribution of land, was born in Cloonacool at the foot of the Ox Mountains, near Tubbercurry, County Sligo. His father was a comfortable farmer. His mother's maiden name was Brennan and she had two brothers, Roger and Peter, who were priests in the Diocese of Achonry. Denis was one of six children, with four brothers, Peter, James, Patrick, Roger, and one sister, Mary. He received his early education at Cloonacool national school and later attended a Latin school attached to St Nathy's cathedral in Ballaghderreen. He entered Maynooth College in 1867 and was ordained in 1872. One of his brothers, Roger also became a priest for the diocese. After ordination, Denis was appointed to the parish of Kiltimagh as a curate, where he remained for two years. In 1875, he was transferred to Curry in Sligo, where he spent another two years, the first nine as curate and the last two as administrator. While Fr O'Hara was in Ballaghderreen, he became deeply involved in the Land League and was a platform speaker at monster meetings in Ballaghderreen, Carracastle and Curry. Fr O'Hara was also very active in the Plan of Campaign.

## What Kiltimagh was like before Fr Denis O'Hara came:

Fr Denis O'Hara was curate of Killedan from 1873 to 1875. He was chosen as the next Bishop of Achonry by the parish priest of the Diocese, but a good thing for Kiltimagh, he was rejected by the Vatican because of his publicised political activities (Plan of Campaign) in trying to help the poor tenants that had nobody to speak for them in the west of Ireland. He was appointed priest of Kiltimagh parish from 1887 to 1922. When he was first appointed, Kiltimagh was referred to as a "forlorn village" and by 1915 it was transformed into a "brisk, busy, well-ordered little town".

Before Fr Denis O'Hara came to Kiltimagh, the town was known as a squalid village. All the streets were made of muck, it was like walking through fields. There was no proper church built only a small wooden one. The schools that were in Kiltimagh were in poor condition and were in great need of revamp. There was no proper piped water available in every house so people would have to use wells to get their water. People used to bring everything through their homes to get to the back, for example, animals or turf. Conditions in Kiltimagh have come a very long way compared to what they were, and this is all thanks to the trojan work Fr Denis O'Hara did in the early days.

## Kiltimagh Church

The original name for the Parish Church of Kiltimagh is Killedan, which comes from the Irish word Cill Liodáin, "the church of Liodáin". Killedan church which was founded by the Franciscans would have been the centre of Christianity in this part of Mayo from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Church of the Holy Family is the main church in Kiltimagh. When Fr O'Hara saw the existing church building and the bad condition it was in, he decided to build a new church. The old church was demolished in 1887 and Fr Denis O' Hara employed William Henry Byrne, from Dublin, to design the new church. The church was built during 1888 and dedicated by Bishop Lyster on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1888. The church cost £3,320 and fund-raising went on for many years to pay off the debt. This was a lot of money at the time for the people of the parish to collect. Fr Denis O'Hara got a lot of support from emigrants of the parish especially in the USA. Fr Cryan at the centenary

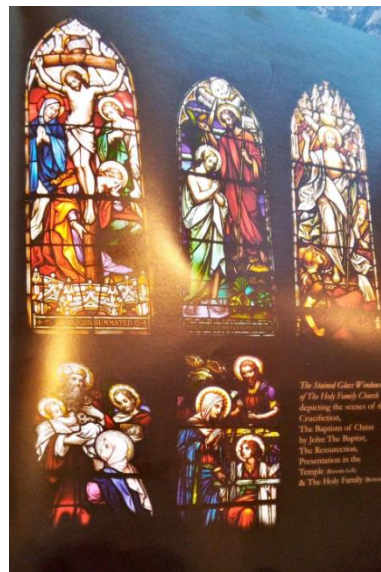
celebrations said "basically the church as it stands today is nearly just the same as it was when designed in 1888".



Canon Gallagher succeeded Fr Denis O'Hara as parish priest and he continued the good work that he did. He revamped the altar and the figures surrounding it. He also got McHughs of Chapel St to paint the inside of the church.

The three masses on Sunday would usually be packed. When going to mass people had to pay a penny if they were under the gallery, 2 pence for the middle back seats and 3 pennies for the seats at the top of the church. The only major addition to the church was in 1914 when the front porch area was added. This was to make more space, a mortuary chapel and a baptistery.

There are over 20 beautiful stained-glass windows in the church. Among them are 15 depicting the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the rosary. Another notable feature of the church is the painting over the sanctuary which was done in the 1930s and has not been touched since.



*The Sacred Glass Windows of The Holy Family Church depicting the scenes of the Nativity, The Baptism of Christ by John The Baptist, The Resurrection, Presentation in the Temple, Ascension & The Holy Family*

Today the church of the Holy Family is a protected structure due to its historical significance. The picture below I took in the church in front of the confessional. It is a sculpture of Fr Denis O'Hara.



## Technical School for Kiltimagh

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1894 the negotiations between Fr Denis O'Hara and the congested Districts Board had been brought to a successful conclusion after a grant of £1000 was given by the board towards the setting up of proposed Technical School in Kiltimagh. This was something that Fr Denis O'Hara had fought hard for, and the work was to begin immediately. Here is a picture showing the technical school.



## St Louis Sisters

Fr Denis O'Hara was responsible for bringing the St Louis Sisters to Kiltimagh on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1897. He believed that they would raise the standard of living of the people of the area. Fr O'Hara travelled to Monaghan on the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1896, unannounced to meet with the head of the Louis order. The reverend mother Xavier in the convent was not too keen on letting any of her sisters move to Mayo - but Fr Denis had a fierce determination and was not easily put off. He said, "I am not leaving until I get nuns for Kiltimagh". After some time, the St Louis Sisters agreed to come to Kiltimagh.

In September 1897 4 sisters and 2 postulants arrived in Kiltimagh by train. Fr Denis joined them on the train in Collooney. At Kiltimagh station Bishop Lister and a number of priests and towns people were there to welcome them. They were brought back to the church where Fr O'Hara introduced them to the people. The town was extremely poor and the people had very little skills. The sisters visited

the people of the parish and gave advice on household management. They then started a school and provided teaching in cookery, needlework, laundry and lacemaking. They opened a secondary school which was the new convent that was built in 1898 and it became a boarding school for girls. Within 4 weeks 80 girls and women were enrolled. The girls could be any age to go to school. Instead of paying they brought in turf to keep the school warm. The school prospered with students winning prizes on a national scale for lace making and proficiency in the Irish language. Gradually throughout the century St Louis Convent Secondary School became famous throughout the country for academic and cultural endeavors. In 1973 boys enrolled in the school for the first time and the boarding school was phased out.

In 1992 the sisters moved out of the convent and into a purpose-built residence in the town called Louisville. In October 2016 the sisters said goodbye to Kiltimagh.

Below is an image of what the convent looked like when it was first built and how it looks today. The following pages from a diary kept by the sisters give us an insight to what was happening at the time in St Louis and backs up the research I have found in relation to the work of the CDB too.





## Congested District Board

In February 1895 the chief secretary Mr. Morley appointed Fr O'Hara to the Congested Districts Board. By going on the board Fr O'Hara was accordingly instrumental in improving hygiene, living conditions and farming methods of his parishioners by getting for them the grants available for the improvement of their farms and houses.

The Congested Districts were mainly the areas of those counties bordering on the sea in the Northwest and Southwest of Ireland as they were considered the poorest areas of the country.

The jobs of the board were:

- To add and develop agriculture, forestry, the breeding of livestock and poultry, weaving, fishing and any other suitable industries.
- To purchase land and distribute it among the tenants.
- To undertake improvements for example giving grants for better farm buildings to be built or to introduce better animal breeds.

## Other initiatives Fr Denis O'Hara took on in Kiltimagh

It was not just the church and the convent that Fr Denis O'Hara set up for the town of Kiltimagh, although they are what he is most famous for. He also brought the railway station to the town. This was really important, as the basic necessities, were transported by train such as sugar, flour, newspapers and even films for the local cinema. Unfortunately, the station closed to passenger traffic in 1963 and goods traffic ended in 1975. The station has since been changed into a museum showing local history and culture. Here is an image showing the railway when it was in full use.



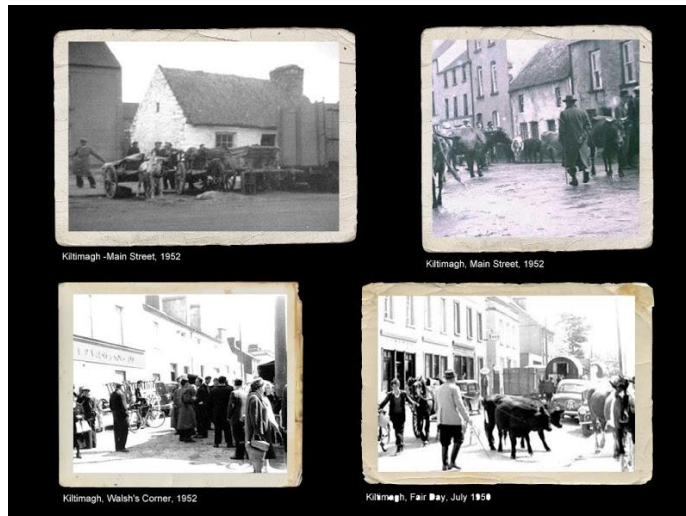
Fr Denis O'Hara was responsible for the two parochial houses which are still in very good condition today. He built 6 new national schools in the parish. Although he was able to get some grants for the projects through his involvement in the Congested Districts Board they only paid for a small amount of the cost. He organised a lot of fundraising events which were very successful.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1919 Fr O'Hara announced his plans for building a cottage hospital. The people of Kiltimagh did not have to pay anything for it as Fr O'Hara got a full government grant. This was another great building for Kiltimagh. Here is an image below of the cottage hospital.



On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1911 it was decided by Fr O'Hara that there would be a woollen mill built in Kiltimagh. The Yorkshire Woollen Industrialist Mr Tanker was happy with the plans Fr O'Hara showed to him and he decided to invest £7000 in the project. Again, this was another huge addition to the town.

Fr O'Hara was responsible for the building of the backways that were added to all streets except James' St. At the time people used to bring everything through their houses to get to the back, this included livestock that were being brought to the fair day or when they were bought at the fair. Before the roads were built behind these houses were just fields. These backways were a huge step forward for the people of Kiltimagh. Below I have added a picture which shows the animals' on the streets of Kiltimagh.



Fr O'Hara encouraged farmers to remove the dunghill from the front of their houses and plant flowers instead. He introduced the Spanish donkey and the Rhode Island red hen for the benefit of the farmer. Out in the country, he oversaw great drainage schemes and the building of mills on the rivers. As he was a member of the Congested District Board, he got approval for grants to bring water to peoples' houses. Before this people would have gotten their water from wells.

In 1908, Fr Denis O'Hara set up a committee for the improvement of Kiltimagh. It was made up of the principal merchants in the town. They succeeded in having piped water available to every house in the town, a town park, football pitches and a handball court. He was also responsible for the setting up of the Bank of Ireland in the town, which is no longer in the town today. He also oversaw the introduction of gas lamps on the streets. Below is a picture that I took of a gas lamp which can still be seen at the museum.



## The Black and Tans in Kiltimagh

On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1921, mass was interrupted when Fr Denis O'Hara gravely announced to the congregation that British soldiers were surrounding the church. He asked all to remain calm, assuring them that all would be well. Members of both Sinn Fein and the volunteers were attending mass, and it was hoped to capture these. As the congregation left the church the soldiers were waiting with their machine-guns. Constable O'Dowd stood by the door to point out any known activists to the military. As Fr O'Hara passed Constable O'Dowd he said in a low voice, "If ever you had a blind eye, have it now". Constable O'Dowd failed to spot any activists. Before the young men had left the church, the girls had given them their hats and coats to them, and with the crowd pressing around, the change was not discovered. Among these wanted in the congregation were the McHugh brothers.

Kiltimagh became the latest town in Kiltimagh to be terrorised by the Black and Tans for what really were minor offenses. It all started when a few Black and Tan officers came to meet Mr. Ormsby of Ballinamore. When they arrived, local youths started jeering at them and shouting slogans. A few days later, the soldiers came back and rounded thirty people, some men, a teacher, shop keepers/assistants and tortured them. When Fr O'Hara heard about this he went to the military headquarters in Claremorris and complained to the officer in command.

The next day, two Scottish Fusiliers came to Kiltimagh and asked where Fr O'Hara's house was. Two nights later, a lorry with soldiers came into town. A nun in the convent heard them shouting and then the lorry stopping. The Black and Tans coming through the town at night was not unusual. So, she was not surprised when she heard them firing a rifle as they often did this. The presbytery was opposite the convent so Fr O'Hara heard the voices too. Fr O'Hara heard the tramp of feet in the drive coming to his door. They started banging on his door and shouted, "Come out you bloody old priest, and we will put a bullet through you". Fr O'Hara hurried downstairs and went out by the back door and hid in the hay in the stable. He stayed there until a bullet was fired through the hall door and the soldiers' went back to the lorry. A report was sent to Claremorris. Two soldiers were sent to enquire and a guard to guard the house.

Below is a picture of the parochial house that Fr O' Hara lived in and is still the parochial house today.



## The death of Fr Denis O'Hara

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1922, Fr Denis O'Hara died. He was ordained in 1872, and his missionary life was marked by the level of good he did for the people, particularly of Achonry Diocese. This characteristic led to his appointment as a Commissioner of the Congested Districts Board in 1896. He took an active part in the land agitation, and in the work of providing measures for the relief of the small landholders in the congested districts of Connaught. This work did not stop him giving his full commitment to the people of his parish. When in Kiltimagh he successfully completed, a revamp of the town which was "then largely a ruined hamlet of thatched hovels". He founded the convent and schools, which he placed in the charge of the Sisters, of St Louis, from Monaghan, which became one of the leading girls' schools in Ireland. He was responsible for the Spinning Factory and Railway station both of which put Kiltimagh on a completely different level to what it was.

I think it is only fair to say that Kiltimagh would not be the town it is today only for the monumental work of Fr Denis O'Hara and I think it shows the importance of the work he carried out that it is still evident today throughout the town.

## How his work still lives on

The significance of the many projects undertaken by Fr Denis O'Hara can still be seen throughout the parish today. The Church of the Holy Family has been well maintained and is currently undergoing renovations to preserve the windows at a cost of nearly three quarters of a million euros.

St Louis Community School and St Aidan's National school play a key role in education and are still winning national awards.

The Irish Spinners factory now an enterprise unit, the railway station is now a museum, all backways in the town have recently been retarred, the cottage hospital now owned by the HSE is used for speech therapy and other services.

As a result Fr Denis O'Hara will never be forgotten in Kiltimagh and is seen as a very important historical person. His image was recently included in a mural that painted in the center of the town.



## Sources:

- I used the Kiltimagh website - <https://kiltimagh.ie/fr-denis-ohara/>
- I used the Kiltimagh Our Life and Times book
- I used the Kiltimagh 4 book
- Church of the Holy Family Kiltimagh is another book I used for information and also the picture of the stained glass windows.
- I got copies of letters from my grand aunt that had information on the arrival of the Nuns and information on the building of the convent.
- I visited the church to get photos of the statue of Fr O'Hara and also the museum in Kiltimagh to get the picture of the gas lamp.