

THE BELLS OF ST. ALPHONSUS



Bells in Ireland are particularly associated with the advent of Christianity, and St. Patrick is reputed to have given a bell to each bishop he consecrated. The hand-bells of that era are said to have been used by missionaries to gather people round them when they wanted to preach the new faith. The most famous of these bells, which is called St. Patrick's Bell, has survived the ravages of time and was used at the Eucharistic Congress in 1932.

Over the years, bells have changed to a large degree in content, shape and size. Originally made of iron or iron dipped in bronze, preferences changed to copper and tin, occasionally with an infusion of silver to sweeten the tone. The long, narrow appearance of early bells gave way over the years to a shorter, wider shape with thicker metal around the "sound bow" (where the clapper strikes the bell) to give a more melodious note. As time passed, bells were hung over churches and eventually installed in campaniles and bellfries, increasing in size and weight.

At this stage, bell-casting had come to be a trade and, in England, itinerant bands of bell-founders travelled around the countryside casting bells for churches. All the work was done on site, truly a remarkable achievement in enterprise and skill.

Such a band led by William and Roger Perdue, came to Ireland in 1660 and cast bells for St. Patrick's and Christ Church cathedrals in Dublin. Then they moved on to Limerick where William Perdue died. He was buried in St. Mary's Cathedral churchyard and the following epitaph marked his headstone:

"Here lies a bell-founder,
Honest and true,
Until his resurrection
Lies Perdue".

Bells in Ireland suffered under the arid censure of penal laws. Many were destroyed and some, literally went underground, being buried by their keepers in anticipation of a more enlightened era. But dead bells tell no tales and their silence was a sad comment on an intolerant age.

by Finbar Crowe

Some of the "underground" bells were discovered in later years.

It is small wonder then that the prospect of a Catholic church being endowed with a peal of bells by a generous benefactor in the nineteenth century should have been greeted with joy and excitement by worshippers who knew of harsher times.

In the 1870s, John Quin (Quin's of Ellen Street), a wealthy merchant, offered £5,000 to the Redemptorist Fathers for the erection of a tower and bells at Mount St. Alphonsus. At first, the higher echelons of the Order were not disposed to accepting this offer and when this became known in Limerick there was a widespread feeling of disappointment. The people's feelings found expression in a public petition and with the backing of Lord Emly and Dr. George Butler, Bishop of Limerick, approval was finally given.

The architects were Messrs. Goldie and Child of London; the contractor for the tower, Messrs. John Ryan of Waterford, and the contractor for the bells, Messrs. John Murphy and Son of Dublin.

Work began in the spring of 1876. In preparing for the foundation of the tower the soil was excavated to a depth of 15 feet where the solid limestone rock presented a secure foundation that could be relied on. Great rocks, often weighing from one to one and a half tons, were brought from the quarry in Boherbuoy. It often required from four to five men with rollers and crowbars to shift them to enable the masons to set them in their courses. This solid work was continued to a height of 9ft. from the foundation, and for the remaining 6ft. the walls were built over 6ft. in thickness.

On June 18, 1876, the Feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, (to whom the tower was dedicated) the foundation stone was laid by John Quin. Among the distinguished gathering at this event was the journalist and historian Maurice Lenihan J.P. The ceremony ended with the singing of a hymn, specially composed for the occasion by Fr. Hall, C.S.S.R. The chorus was as follows:

"Fair Tower, rise up swiftly,
Spire, haste thee to climb;
Sweet bells ring out quickly
We long for the time
When hearts full of gladness
Shall bound to your chime".

Work ceased in November 1876, the tower walls being 32ft. high, and resumed in the spring of 1877. The tower was completed in 1878, the cross being raised on the spire in September of that year. The cross stands 186ft. above ground level.

It may be of some interest to add that the rather stunted appearance of the spire was not due, as is sometimes thought, to a shortage of funds. It was, in fact, insisted on by Mr. Goldie, the architect. A further elongated spire, he felt, would be out of proportion to the tower and would destroy "the character of massiveness and serenity" and make the whole thing "a mere bodkin". One cannot help but feel that the citizens of Limerick would have their own comments to make on his sense of judgement and taste.

On completion of the tower work on installing the bells began. John Murphy had cast them at his Dublin foundry and they arrived in Limerick by rail in March 1878, the cost of carriage being £12. The total weight of the eight bells was 5 tons 8 cwts., the heaviest bell (the tenor) weighing 1 ton 6 cwts.

Prior to this there had been some controversy as to how they should be hung. Mr. Goldie was keen on having them put in a fixed position (not being able to swing) with a machine for playing them. The machine would be wound up like a clock and would play the bells at regular intervals during the day. This machine, he asserted, would have the advantage of being independent of a body of bellringers "who might be difficult to find, and when found, difficult to get together when wanted and costly to pay". Whatever about Mr. Goldie's architectural expertise, there can be little doubt that he knew little about matters campanological. The many years of loyal services given by the McNeices, Guines, Bensons, Hickeys, Mulqueens and many others would testify to that!

John Murphy's plan for the bells to be swung by hand, together with a chiming apparatus for playing tunes on them, was accepted. The total cost of

the bells and their installation was £1,195 (the tower and spire had cost £8,000). Regrettably, John Murphy never saw the completion of his work, as he died 6 weeks before the delivery of the bells.

Before their erection in the tower, they were placed in the church and suspended from a wooden structure in front of the high altar where they were blessed by Dr. Butler on the 25 March 1879. Immediately after the ceremony, the bells were chimed in the church for the first time, the ringers being Michael Hoare, Patrick Punch, John Conway, Thomas O'Connor, M. Naughton, M. Kenneally, under the direction of Mr. Lovedore (a professional) and his son.

After the bells were installed in the tower, a bellringers' class was formed and its members were trained by Mr. Lovedore, who had been specially engaged for this work. Thus was formed, in 1879, the Society of Bellringers of Mount St. Alphonsus.

The ringing of hand-bells was also practised during these early years but not with a great deal of enthusiasm. However, things were soon to change. In 1902, a team of ringers from SS. Augustine and John's Church, Dublin, visited the tower and delighted their audience by playing a beautiful selection of Irish and Scottish airs on hand-bells. This obviously left its mark on the Limerick ringers, for shortly afterwards

they reorganised their own hand-bell class. Under the direction of Fr. John Creagh, and imbued with his enthusiasm, they were soon entertaining at local concerts (Fr. Creagh, who had, in 1904, preached some controversial sermons on the Limerick Jewish Community, left the City in 1906 to assist in founding the first Redemptorist mission on the Philippine Islands).

In 1903, the Silver Jubilee of the tower, Fr. McNamara, the rector of Mt. St. Alphonsus, presented the ringers with a magnificent set of hand-bells, 50 in all, supplied by Messrs. Warner of London. On the day of the presentation, the ringers proudly paraded around the city, playing a selection of airs at the following venues: Bank Place (opposite the first Redemptorist House), St. John's Temperance Rooms, St. Michael's Temperance Hall, the Treaty Stone, the O'Connell Monument and opposite the Redemptorist Church. By that time, the ringers were appearing in uniform and made frequent appearances at charity concerts in the city. At Christmas time, they gave musical performances in the Workhouse. They also appeared at various venues throughout the country. In 1906, they performed nightly at the main hall of the Munster-Connaught Exhibition. As a result of this performance, they were presented with a

beautiful music stand by the Mayor, Alderman Michael Joyce M.P.

On December 22 of that year, the ringers were invited to St. Mary's Cathedral to peal those famed bells that had been silent for over thirty years. They rang these again at midnight on Christmas Eve and returned to Mt. St. Alphonsus to peal the bells at 4.30 a.m. for the 5 o'clock High Mass on Christmas morning. Perhaps some of the children who claimed to have heard sleigh bells in those days were not, as was often supposed, suffering from Yule-tide fits of imagination!

New Year's Eve has always been, and still is, a special occasion for bellringers. Tennyson in his poem *In Memoriam* hauntingly catches the mood:

"Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light,
The year is dying in the night,
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die".

The ringers at Mt. St. Alphonsus had, since the beginning adhered to the traditional custom, "ring out the old, ring in the new". However, in 1916, there was a break with the past. On December 31, the bells remained silent in deference to the wishes of the Rector, Fr. O'Laverty: "It would be better not to ring the bells for the New Year this time. It is such a sad world now that rejoicings seem out of place". And no one could deny that it was a sad



An interior view of Mount St. Alphonsus.

and troubled time for Ireland and Europe. In March 1917, Fr. O'Laverty died. A muffled peal was rung during his funeral procession, adding a sad touch of irony to his New Year's Eve request.

The members of the Bellingers' Society always took great pride in decorating the tower on religious feast days and festive occasions, and the building, festooned with flags and bunting, added a colourful dimension to many a great occasion. In 1918, a set of flags was presented to the tower by the Limerick Porkbutchers' Society, and a set of larch poles was donated by Hugh McMahon of St. Alphonsus Street. The flags were hoisted up on these poles (projecting from the tower) under the supervision of Captain James Reynolds of the **Erin Go Bragh**. However, these preparations hardly matched the efforts of a previous celebration. In 1893, to mark the Silver Jubilee of the Holy Family Confraternity, all available flags were borrowed

from the local boat clubs. The flags were floated from the cross surmounting the spire, the halliards supporting them being first dropped over an arm of the cross with the aid of a kite flown by John Walsh one of the secretaries of the Confraternity.

Visitors, particularly fellow-ringers, were always made welcome at the tower and with the close proximity of the New Barracks (now Sarsfield Barracks) it was only natural that, from time to time, some members of the British regiments stationed there would show an interest in an art so widely practised in their own country. (England has long been the home of bellringing - there are reputed to be 40,000 ringers there at present). One such person was Company Sergeant-Major Wallis of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He rang on a number of occasions with the ringers and took a keen interest in the activities at the tower. On the eve of his departure from Limerick in 1918, he was presented

with a silver mounted walking stick in appreciation of his contribution.

If there had been little cause for rejoicing in 1916, then 1920 evoked a similar sombre mood. In October, the bells were muted as they tolled for the Solemn Requiem Mass for Terence McSweeney, Lord Mayor of Cork and for all who had died for Ireland. On New Year's Eve, the bells were silent, the city being under curfew.

The year 1921 brought mayoral grief nearer to home. As the remains of George Clancy, Mayor of Limerick, Councillor Michael O'Callaghan, an ex-Mayor, and Joseph O'Donoghue, left St. John's Cathedral, the Solemn sad notes of the muffled bells once more descended on the city, the ringers later joining in the funeral procession.

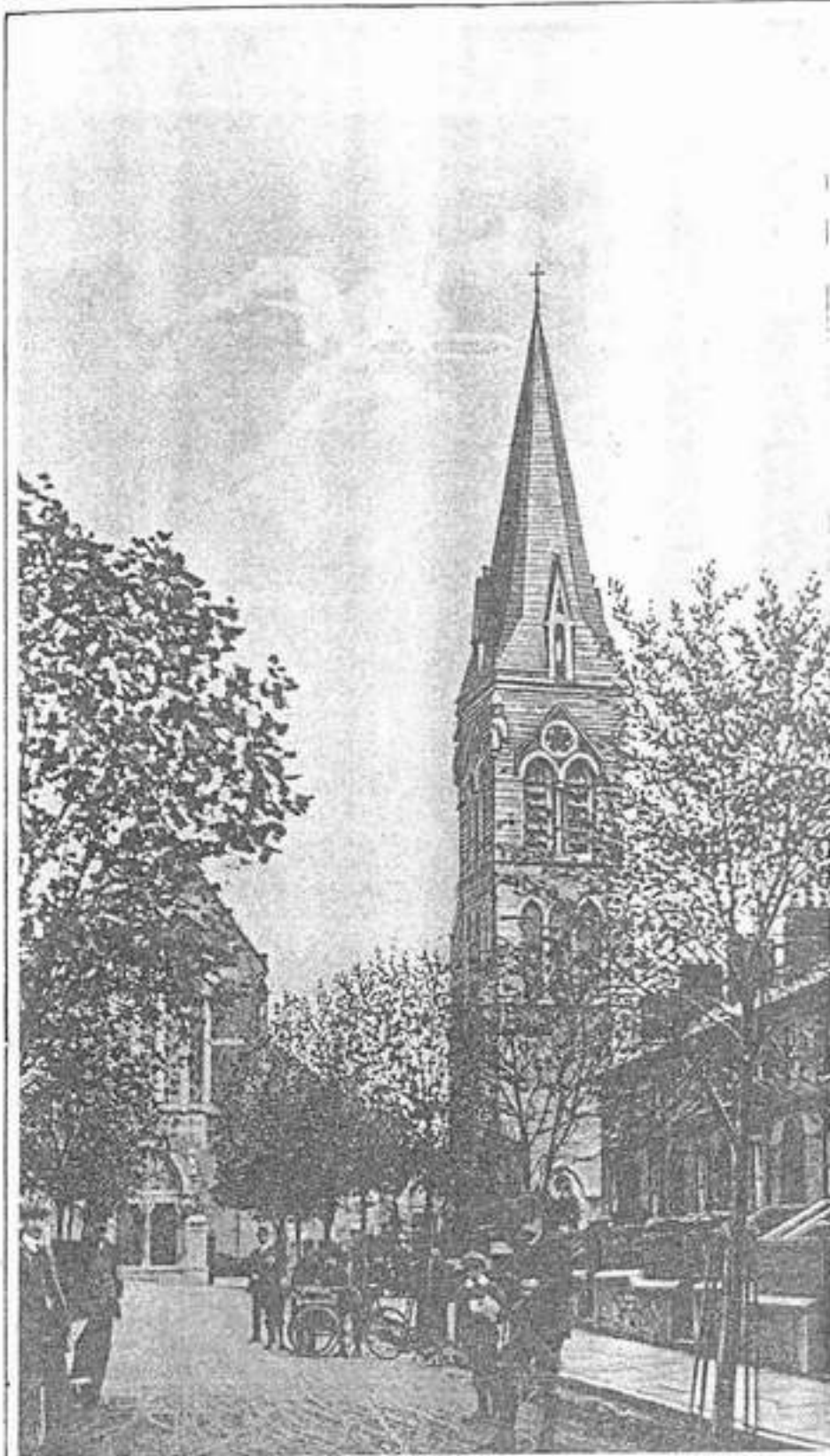
On December 5 of that year, President de Valera arrived on a visit to Limerick, during which he was conferred with the Freedom of the City. He was expected to visit the Redemptorist community on the following day but news arrived early that morning that a peace treaty had been signed in London and de Valera left for Dublin on the first available train, at 8.50 a.m. The national flag of Sinn Fein, which had been presented to the tower by the Rector, to be flown for the President's visit was, on the Rector's instructions, to be flown on all future occasions. Nationalism, as well as the sound of bells, was in the air.

The bells and ringers throughout the following years continued to discharge their duty, a duty summed up in a metrical translation of an ancient Latin verse:

"I mourn the dead and dying
I break the lightning's power
I chide your slothful lying
When comes the Sabbath hour
My voice the winds obey
And peace I chime away".

On week nights, the hymns were chimed for the Confraternity meetings, and on weekends the bells pealed forth for Mass and devotions.

However, in 1946 it became obvious that the peal of bells, which had given such splendid service since 1879, were badly in need of overhauling. Having been examined by experts, it was decided to send the bells to John Taylor and Co., Loughborough, the renowned English bellfounders. Here the 8 bells were melted down and recast into a peal of 11 bells, made up of 10 swinging bells and one fixed bell. The old bell frame, made of oak, was also discarded and a new steel frame was installed. The bells would now swing on well-lubricated ball-bearings, keeping vibrations to a minimum. The bells were discharged to Liverpool, on the S.S. **Lanahrone** (Limerick Steamship Co.), in June 1947, and the new set (weighing approx. 5 tons - tenor 21 cwts.) returned on her sister ship, "S.S. **Kilfenora**", in November of



Mount St. Alphonsus, circa. 1910.

that year. Mr. F. Harold, a bell-hanger from Taylor's, supervised the installation of the bells.

Prior to this event, the bells were consecrated in the church by Dr. O'Neill, Bishop of Limerick. During the course of this ceremony, each bell was washed in holy water and then anointed with holy oil. The Redemptorist College Choir, which sang psalms during the ceremony, was accompanied by Stanley Bowyer, the well known

organist.

The new bells rang out for the first time on December 20th, 1947, the ringers being Liam Benson, Paddy Benson, Michael Morgan, John Blake, Michael Hickey, Joe Cleary, Tom Cleary, Gus Smith, William Cooke, Jack Butler, with David Benson conducting.

In 1952, the ringers of Mt. St. Alphonsus first entered bellringing competitions and, in that year, carried off the Southern District and All-Ireland

Championships. Other honours were to follow, including 15 Southern District Championships and 10 All-Ireland Championships, a record unsurpassed in Irish bellringing.

A three-in-a-row (All-Irelands) was achieved in the years '80, '81 and '82, a feat matched only by the St. Mary's Cathedral ringers, in '49, '50 and '51.

On October 1, 1979, the bells pealed out to welcome Pope John Paul II to Limerick. Due to many of the members being at Greenpark, ringers from St. Mary's Cathedral, in an ecumenical gesture that permeates bellringing in the city, came to the rescue and assisted the depleted band at Mt. St. Alphonsus.

In 1981, Dean (now Bishop) Walton Empey requested that there be an ecumenical ring at his consecration as Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe. Four ringers each from Mt. St. Alphonsus and St. Mary's rang the Cathedral bells on that historic occasion.

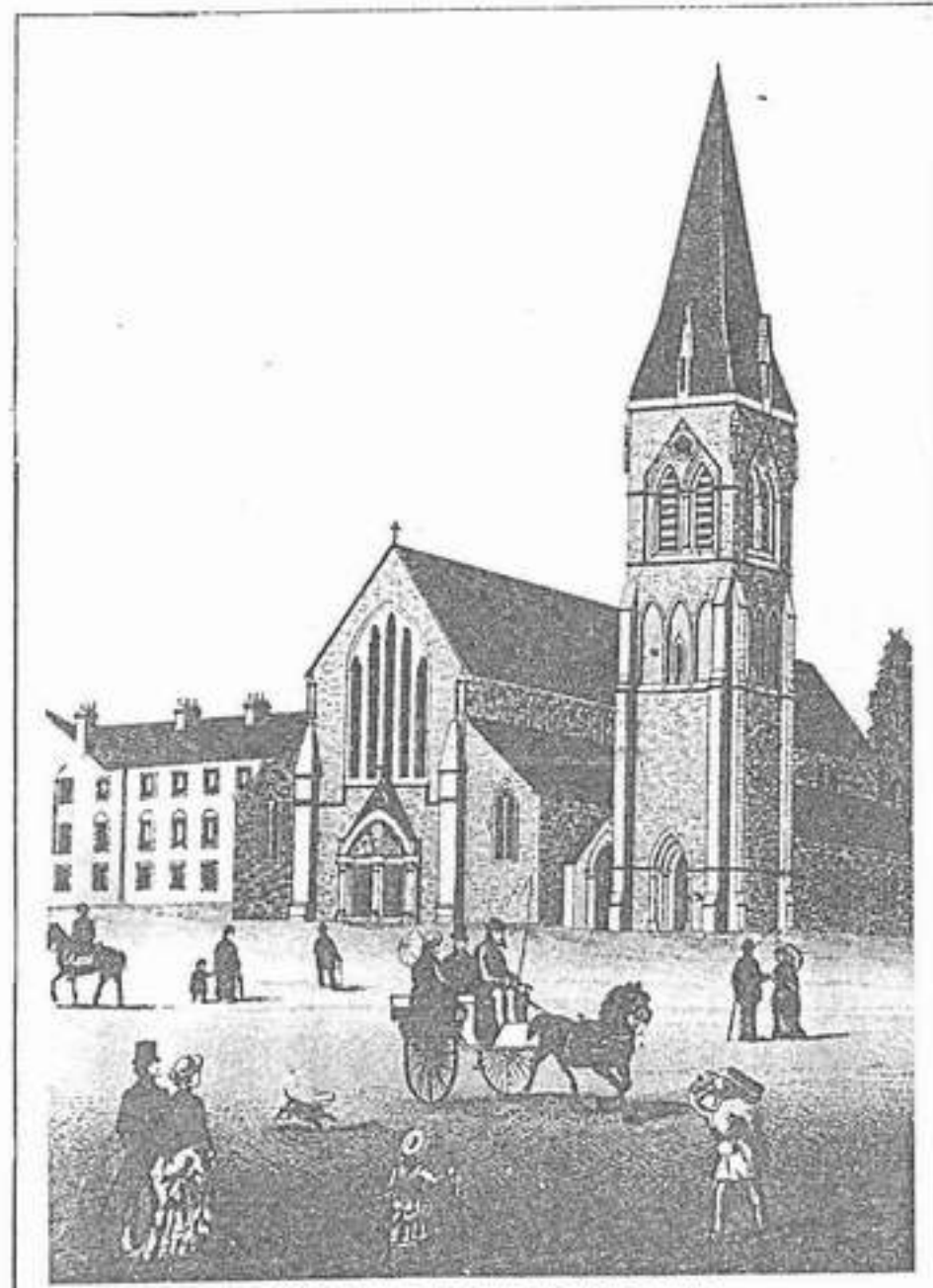
Many devoted ringers (and families) have given outstanding service to the tower in the past 104 years. Two ringers deserve special mention. Daniel McNeice (at one time an Alderman in the Corporation) joined the tower in 1884 and, in those early years, was the mainstay of the Society. He retired from active ringing in 1945, after 61 years of devoted service. David Benson took up ringing in 1904. He was particularly noted as a perfectionist, and his enthusiasm and interest inspired many a younger ringer. He served the bells faithfully for 66 years, receiving a Papal award, in 1963, for recognition of his dedication.

In 1977, six ringers have received **Bene Merenti** medals from the Vatican, in recognition of their contributions. The recipients were: Liam Benson, Paddy Benson (sons of David Benson), Jack Butler, Patrick Hanley, Hugh O'Brien and Liam Hickey. All have given over 30 years' service to the tower and are still active ringers.

It is to be hoped that they and their fellow-ringers will continue the fine old tradition of bellringing at Mt. St. Alphonsus, recording in their melodious peals the joys and sorrows of the passing years; reminding us, too, of the generosity and vision of John Quin whose munificence had bequeathed such a musical monument to our city.

The last word must be left to Tenynson, with the wish that the bells of Mt. St. Alphonsus, together with all other bells, will contribute to fulfilling, not only his aspirations, but those of all good bell-lovers everywhere:

"Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand,
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be".



An 1880 picture of Mount St. Alphonsus.