

The bells of Saint Mary's are now 300 years old

BY JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

THE wonderful peal of bells which can be heard within a four-mile radius of Limerick city on Sundays has often been referred to as the finest in Ireland.

The 18-strong St. Mary's Cathedral Society of Change-Ringers are justifiably proud of their reputation, which is known throughout the home countries, as well as in such far off places as Australia and New Zealand.

The bells were first hung in 1673, when a certain wealthy citizen, John Budstone, gave them as a gift to St. Mary's Cathedral.

After 300 years they have lost none of their charm and appeal.

Surprising

"It is really surprising the number of people who come here to listen to and see the bells," said Mr. George Bingham, who joined the society in 1920, and who is now the longest serving member.

The eight bells—the heaviest of which weighs 24 cwt and has a diameter of 19" across the mouth—were recast in 1906. The combined weight of all eight is 89½ cwt.

St. Mary's are members of the Irish Association of Change Ringers and annexed the All-Ireland trophy (Murphy Cup) five times.

They are one of the few to have won the trophy three years in succession.

What qualifications are needed to become a bell ringer?

I asked tower captain, Mr. V. R. McCormack, who joined in 1939, and later spent ten years in the tower in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

"Dedication and plenty of hard work," he replied.

When questioned about the recruiting system, Mr. McCormack mentioned that there was a high drop-out rate amongst beginners, and he estimated that about one out of every three stayed on.

Father to son

Mr. Bingham chimed in: "The job is usually handed down from father to son, as a glance at our membership book will indicate."

The Brislane, Marsden, Smith, O'Neill and Talbot families are well represented. Another long-serving member was the late Mr. T. A. Brislane. His son, B. A. Brislane, and grandson, K. E. Brislane, are carrying on the family tradition.

Another son, Derek, was home on holidays from America recently and helped in the ringing of the bells.

The newest recruits are 12-year-old Pat Empey, Philip Shirell (13), Michael Howes (11) and the Condell twins, Jeffrey and Lee, grandchildren of Mrs. Frances Condell, former Mayor of Limerick.

Colin Marsden (14) and Keith O'Neill are also comparative newcomers.

Colin, a pupil at Villiers School, experienced little difficulty in getting into the swing of things, and is, according to Mr. McCormack, one of their most dedicated members.

Mr. McCormack said there was a much more enthusiastic approach now than there was 15 years ago, and attributed this to the introduction of change ringing.

Permutations

I was intrigued to learn from him that the bells had a possible 40,320 permutations, which would take 18 hours to complete non-stop.

He continued: "Because of transfers in employment, etc., there is always the danger that we will lose some of the old brigade, and that is why we are particularly anxious to welcome youngsters into our ranks."

The tower captain also referred to former colleague, Mr. Cyril Galbraith, now a bell ringer in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, and to Mr. Alma Fitt, who, although retired since 1920, is always available to lend advice.

How long does it take before a newcomer can consider himself to be an accomplished bell ringer? I asked sound engineer, Mr. Tom Marsden.

"That depends really," he said. "With the proper training and concentration it is possible to be broken in after about eight weeks."

Mr. Brian Brislane, who joined in 1942 on his late father's recommendation, had this to say:

"I have rung the bells in Cork, Doneraile, Waterford, Bandon and Kilkenny, but I



Pat Empey, one of St. Mary's best recruits, is pictured ringing bells.

wouldn't swap them for my own."

He reminded me that St. Mary's were one of the first bells in Ireland to have their own bearings.

Changes

Mr. George Bingham, secretary of the society for 15 years, said: "I have seen some changes in my time, but none as dramatic as the one that has come about in the last few years. Tom O'Grady joined about the year 1920 and I never thought that I would see the day when membership would reach the 20 mark."

A few of the older ringers told me that the late 'forties, followed by a sudden increase in interest a few years ago.

"There is one tower where the bells have been idle for several decades and I think it is a great shame," said Mr. McCormack.

St. Mary's Society of Ringers are optimistic about their future.

"Bells will always have a particular appeal and I witnessed when our tower was rung on Sunday and Monday last, and I think it is a quick reply when you hear his view."

So next time you hear a noble peal of St. Mary's bells, spare a thought for the Cathedral's Society of Change Ringers.

Bring and

Buy

The Voluntary of St. Mary's Hospital will hold a book and gift sale on Tuesday, 23rd, at St. John's, 23rd, at 7 p.m., and gifts will be sold in advance at the hospital.