

# Toll tales as Saint John's Cathedral rings in the new

■ Adeste Fidelis, Ave Maria and many more will sound as majestic in Limerick as any other city in the world thanks to the new bells installed in the revitalised cathedral, writes **Gerard Fitzgibbon**

**P**AT Clarke, a man who talks with his hands, is standing at the bottom of the bell tower in St John's Cathedral, looking straight up. "I was up there this morning," he says in a thick Derry brogue. "You can be sure I won't be going back up there this afternoon."

Over 110 feet above - that's more than 33 of a European man's metres, a height far scarier than its sounds - and up step after step of dusty stone and rickety timber, Daan Vandebussche is whizzing through steel slabs with an angle grinder.

The work to hoist and fix 10 new bronze bells, weighing from 100 to 1,300kg each, as well as remounting the four existing ones, is supposed to be labourious, groggy and slow. Not so for the three Belgians from clockomatic company from Holsbeek, who say they'll have it done in four days. "They don't mess around," says Kieran Loughran, parish clerk and man of understatement.

The new bells at St John's, which were cast in the famous Royal Eijsbouts foundry and cost more than €100,000, are as elegant and modern as you'll find anywhere in Europe today. In that sense, Adeste fidelis and Ave Maria will now sound as majestic in Limerick as any other city in the world. A nice thought, when you consider the almost decrepit state St John's was in a decade ago, with water leaks, rotting wood and algae, like tangerine graffiti, along its spire.

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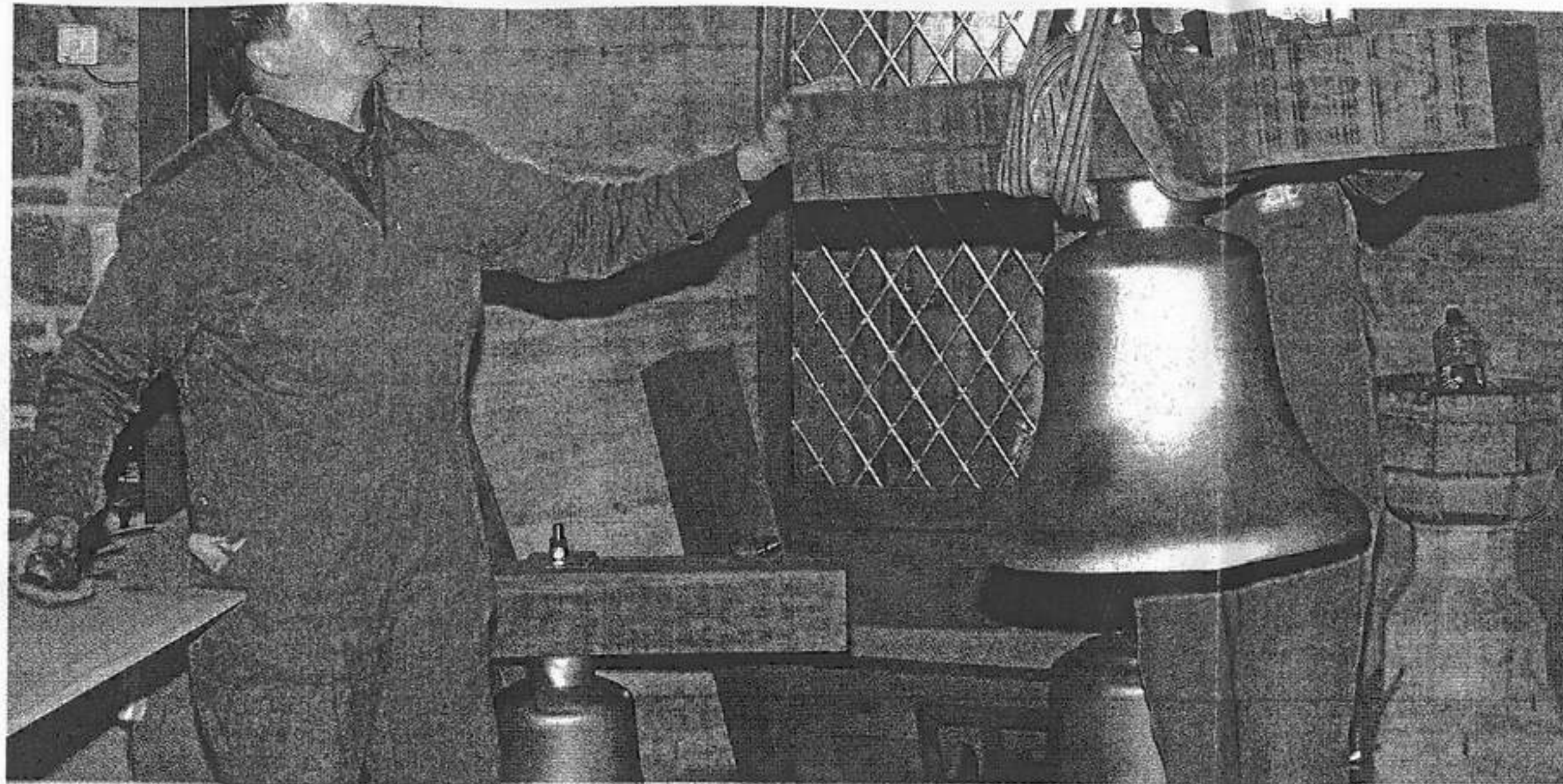
"Aye, it's beautiful. The floor; the seats; the atmosphere. It's totally different," says Pat, an old electrical engineer who works with clockomatic on their Irish projects. When he started, he was getting 48 Belgian francs to the pound. By the time he was fitting the bells in Derry Cathedral, he was getting 63. The man isn't a product of his environment, but vice versa, clearly.

Despite the swills of dust and stone that have battered him every day of his many years in the "sound industry", Pat is always smartly dressed. Today that means baby blue shirt, tie and navy jacket. He's a persevering sort, a trait he likes to see in his work. "When I was

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only a pup, back in 1949, we fitted the tannoy system in a church in Derry. Those speakers are still there today."

In those Irish towns and cities that have them, the Cathedral is welded to a community's sense of self. Just knowing it's there comforts one third of our national spirit, just like the local



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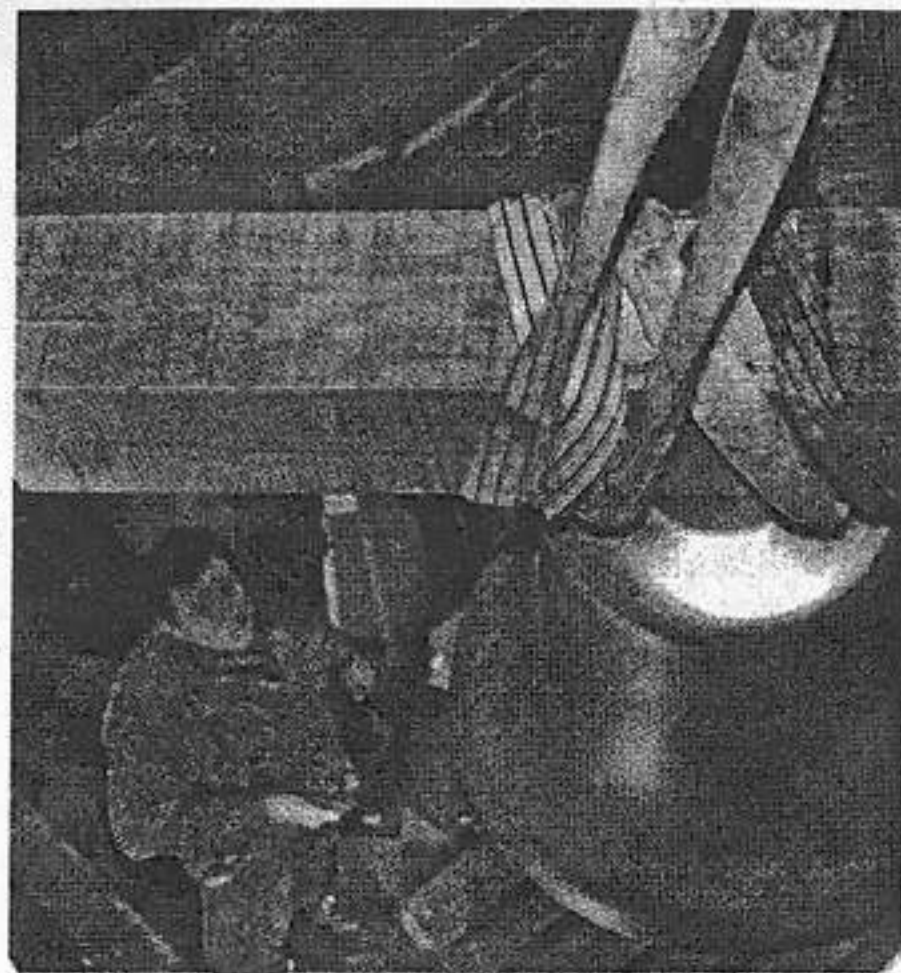
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Built between 1856 and 1859 using local limestone, St John's Cathedral has withstood 150 years of torment from wind and rain. By 1998, this was all starting to show. Water seeping in from the roof had caused interior plaster to stain and crack, and calcium deposits dotted the walls. The spire's cross had to be taken down for safety reasons, such was its poor condition.

A two year restoration project, spearheaded by former church administrator Fr Denis Mullane and costing over €4.5 million, took place between August 2001 and June 2003. What started as delicate repairs ending up reshaping the design, atmosphere and spirit of the entire Cathedral and its grounds. With glass sanctuaries and deep marble, St John's came to reflect grace, beauty and power once more.

But one thing they didn't do, it seems, was make the bell tower a little more user friendly. "We were in Letterkenny, Derry and Cobh. This is the most difficult one in Ireland, for sure," says Dirk, who would know. "You have to pull up quite a weight; there are new beams, new strikers."

Dirk, Rony and Daan have installed bells from China to Manila. They worked in the famous Cathedral de Santa Maria de la Sede in Seville. They refurbished and refixed the bells in Lourdes prior to last year's 150th



**Clockwise from top: Rony Bongrerts and Dirk Mys from Belgium installing the new bells in St John's. The experts make sure everything is in place before the bells are mounted. Dirk Mys from Belgium watching one of the bells being hoisted up to the bell tower**

PICTURES: ADRIAN BUTLER

anniversary celebrations.

"But you think this looks hard? Here, the bell stays still. In Villareal the bell swings all they way around. Seventy-two of them," says Rony, swishing his hand 360 degrees for effect.

From above, you can still hear the sharp buzz of cutting metal drift down the tower. There are four bells already in place at the top since the restoration works, and the new carillon of ten have been specifically forged to match their pitch. But for that to work, each bell has to be mounted on a cross-beam of French oak, hoisted via chain winch to the very top and then fixed to a galvanised steel frame. Surely that's worth a look.

On the climb to the top are three floors of timber walkways, like outcroppings set higher and higher on your way to the peak. Each one has a hole right in the middle, through which each of the bells is winched up.

On the first floor there's a few

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luxuries. Only a short climb from the ground, it has all the rations of a religious base camp. There are boxes of old hand-painted Christmas banners, children's story books and 'Melodies of Ireland' by Fr Tom Browne (volume 10, if you must know). All are covered in dust, and getting dirtier by the minute.

From there up the space gets tighter, the dust thicker and the light more scarce. If his English was any better, Daan might complain. "We all do the steel work, the lifting, the fixing. We take turns," says Dirk. "To stay up the

top all day... too hard. Too hard."

But this is all still the easy part. In two days' time, they'll have to cut away the timber platforms, brace the winch and haul up the two richly decorated and murderously heavy ceremonial bells. "The big bells? 1,200 kilos. Or is it 1,300?" wonders Rony, in no particular hurry to find out.

But technology being what it is, the thunderous sound of the full carillon will be operated from a tiny white control module in the sacristy. After being refreshed and made new, it's fitting that the voice of St John's Cathedral will be electronically controlled and modern.

At the push of a small button, a wedding march or the Angelus or 'As I Kneel' will ring out over the rooftops of the city. "They'll be programmed to play Ave Maria, or maybe the Fatima Ave in October, or Silent Night in December," says Pat, with childish glee. "And if they're not, I'll programme them in myself."