

People like US

The Bellringers of St. Mary's

CIARAN RYAN

“Do not touch the ropes please.” It is a friendly warning, and pretty much the first words that I hear after negotiating windy and narrow stone steps that lead me up the tower of Limerick’s oldest building in use.

Here, on a dark Monday night, nine people are gathered for their weekly practice at St. Mary’s Cathedral. These are bellringers, the people that create a major part of Limerick city’s soundscape every Sunday morning.

As Limerick Life watches some of the bellringers negotiate long ropes that are attached to bells that can weigh more than a tonne with relative ease, Mike Pomeroy explains what is unfolding.

“There’s quite a lot involved in trying to ring a bell. Even trying to control it to within a millisecond, which we need to be able to do for good striking, gets very complex. To be able to control a bell like that and understand the things we do to change the tune, we need to practise.”

Mr Pomeroy has been the bell-master at St. Mary’s for over 20 years, having learnt how to ring bells as a child in Somerset, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

Caherdavin native Kieron Brislane also followed in the family tradition, starting when he was just 11 in 1969. “My dad was a bellringer, and my grandfather was a bellringer, and it was naturally assumed that I would be. One day, Dad said ‘in a month’s time, you’ll learn to ring,’ and I’ve been here ever since,” Kieron explains.

According to Mike, it can take anywhere from three months to a year to be fully trained up, and ready to take part. “You are controlling the balance of something that is very heavy to very defined distances. Unlike a musical instrument like a piano, you don’t get an instantaneous response. There’s a dwell from the time you pull the bell to when it sounds. You almost have to predict where you have to pull to be in the right place. Once you can do it, it’s an incredibly rewarding hobby.”

Gerry O’Shea started bellringing in 1999



Bellringing inside St. Mary's Cathedral

and believes that one does not necessarily need to be musically minded to make a good bellringer.

“From my point of view, you really need hand-eye coordination because controlling the rope is so important. Once you can control the rope and control the bell, then you can do what you want.”

As the ringers practice, I am led up another narrow stairs where bellringer Pat Mulcahy points out the eight bells. From there, it is another short climb up to the top of the cathedral, which gives an unparalleled view of the city.

Pat is originally from nearby St. Mary’s Place, visible from the top of the tower. Indeed, you

could throw a stone from where we are standing and it could hit St. Mary’s Church.

Despite sharing same name, the congregation of both houses of worship did not tend to mingle. A theological and social divide existed, as Pat recalled a childhood fascination with the bells of a cathedral he did not visit.

However, the tradition of bellringing in the city has played a somewhat unheralded – yet, significant – role in the development of cross-faith relationships.

Mike Pomeroy believes that ringers from the Roman Catholic Mount St. Alphonsus (the Redemptorist Church) and the Church of Ireland cathedral have been bellringing

together since as far back as the 1930s.

“When I first came to Limerick in 1979, I came here and then I went up to the Redemptorists so I had thirty friends immediately. I used to ring with them on the Sunday night. There were three or four of them that helped us when we nearly closed here because we had such low numbers,” Mike recalls.

This bond is evident to this very day. Those of different faiths ring bells at St. Mary’s Cathedral on a Sunday morning, before making their way to Mount St. Alphonsus. Gerry O’Shea “grew up under the sound of the Redemptorist bells” on O’Connell Avenue, and is one of the cohort that rings bells in both Mount St. Alphonsus and St. Mary’s.



Christy Pratt, originally from St. Joseph's Street, was a bellringer as a teenager at Mount St. Alphonsus. It was at a time when the church had the best ringers in the land, winning numerous All Irelands.

"St Joseph's Street and Wolfe Stone Street supplied nearly all the bellringers in Mount St. Alphonsus. It used to run through families; you had the Hickeys, the Bensons and the Crowes."

After a long hiatus, Christy returned to bellringing. "I had been here a few times on and off over the years but I started coming here in 1999. I'm part and parcel of the fabric here now, and these are probably some of my closest friends now."

Bellringing has been a passport of sorts for the Limerick ringers. They have attended churches around the world and have been welcomed in by local bellringers. Adrienne Barron started bellringing when she was in boarding school in Dublin in the 1960s, and later was a bellringer in Cork. She has been part of the Limerick team for twenty years. "You'll always meet a similar like-minded bunch of friends when you are ringing" she says.

The welcoming group of bellringers are always open to new recruits, according to Kieron Brislane.

"We don't tend to get young people anymore. It's all people like Gerry and Pat who have

reached a period in life when the kids are grown up and they're getting out in the evening again and looking for a new challenge."

However, 18-year-old Craig Copley Brown is bucking that trend somewhat. "I've a family involvement in the cathedral for 220 odd years. We have been parishioners here but none of us have been bellringers"

St. Mary's youngest bellringer says that his friends gradually saw the benefit of the task that he has been carrying out since 2015. "You get all the Quasimodo jokes starting off, but when you tell them and show them what you're doing, they realise it is something quite difficult and that we're carrying out a job for the church."

Limerick Life was granted a unique look inside the 12th century cathedral

While there are now television monitors downstairs that stream the bellringers in action to the congregation, the techniques are no more sophisticated than in the past. They are still ringing bells that are hundreds of years old.

Before I leave, and with echoes of calls such as '2-5' in the background, I ask Kieron Brislane what keeps him coming back after almost 50 years.

"I'm not good at too many things but I'm good at this. You don't know when you're going to get a good ring going, just like you don't know when your football team are going to win well or lose badly. Every now and then, we hit it right and there's nothing better."