

CITY OF BELLS

A town without a peal of bells can hardly be called a city. On this count it can be said that Limerick more than meets the test. For almost 600 years, bells have been ringing out over the city. The sound of these bells has enhanced the life of Limerick, providing a long and tangible link with the past and a pleasant attraction for citizens and visitors today. And this contribution is not unappreciated:

The city of Limerick is fortunate in having two excellent peals of bells within its confines. Whether you hear their mellifluous notes sweeping over the Shannon on a summer's morning or echoing through the frosty streets on a winter's night, their spell is still enchanting, their rich cadence unmistakable . . . Not only in their melodic pealing have they brought joy and comfort, but they have bestowed on the citizens a sense of pride and identity that has enriched their lives.

Thus Finbar Crowe has described the bells of St. Mary's Cathedral and Mount St. Alphonsus. His pride is not misplaced. But too many of us take these bells for granted, as if they were just another background noise in the city's babble. We seldom pause to savour their sound, or to reflect on the dedication of the unseen men and women who maintain this long tradition of bellringing.

Limerick is fortunate, also, in the location of these bells. St. Mary's, situated as it is, on the highest point of King's Island, provides a perfect eminence for the ringing of its bells over the old city, while Mount St. Alphonsus, built high above Henry Street, is an ideal setting for the pealing of its bells over Newtown Pery.

The earliest reference to bells in the records of St. Mary's Cathedral tells us that John Budston, who was Bailiff of Limerick in 1401, presented four bells to the cathedral. Another benefactor was to repeat this gesture, when mayor William Yorke bestowed a gift of six bells in 1673. Yorke's bells were cast on site by the renowned bell-founders, William and Roger

Perdue. While engaged in this work, William died and was buried in the churchyard. The following inscription was cut on his memorial:

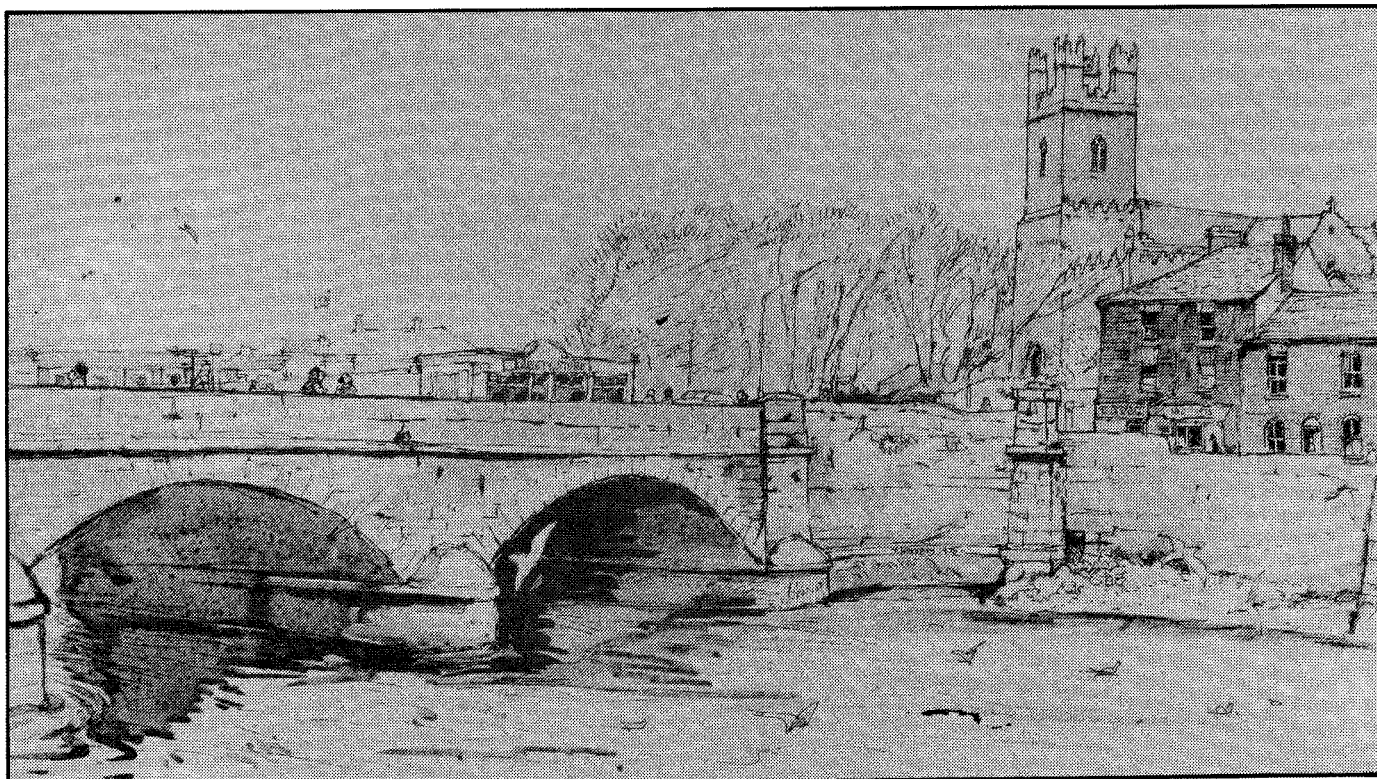
*Here lies a bell-founder,
Honest and true,
Until the Resurrection
Lies Perdue.*

Over the centuries, as these bells wore out, they were replaced and extra ones added. Given their long history, it is not surprising that echoes of the bells of St. Mary's have found their way into Limerick literature, and some of our best poets have written about their chimes and the legends that have grown around them.

The bells of Mount St. Alphonsus came, of course, much later. John Murphy cast the eight bells in his Dublin foundry, and they were rung for the first time on 25 March, 1879. In 1947, these bells, which has given such good service for nearly seventy years, were recast into a peal of eleven bells by John Taylor and Co., the well-known English bellfounders of Loughborough, and began a renewed life on well-lubricated ball-bearings.

Over the decades, the bellringers of St. Mary's and Mount St. Alphonsus have achieved an impressive record in national and Munster competitions. It is not generally known that these ringers have forged among themselves a generous spirit of democracy and ecumenism, in and outside their respective churches. They regularly exchange their bellringing duties, and have also achieved a natural harmony in their social lives. This year presented another welcome opportunity for the coming together of the city's campanologists in celebration, when the Limerick Corporation's new Civic Centre, built in the shadow of St. Mary's Cathedral, was officially opened.

Long may the spirit of democracy and ecumenism prevail among the bellringers of Limerick, and long may their bells ring out over the city!



Mathew Bridge and St. Mary's Cathedral.