

THE BELLS OF ROCK HARBOR

Community of Jesus' Church of the Transfiguration installs 10 Whitechapel bells



Neil Thomas, a British bell hanger from England's Whitechapel Bell Foundry, installed 10 bells at the Community of Jesus' Church of the Transfiguration at Rock Harbor.

"You make it once and when the bell is taken out (the mold) is broken up."

— Neil Thomas



By Doreen Leggett

ORLEANS — England's Neil Thomas stood atop the 100-foot bell tower at the Community of Jesus and looked across Rock Harbor toward the distant Provincetown Monument.

Just below him were 10 Whitechapel bells he had just installed and which will soon ring out across the bay and the town.

"The sound of English change ringing will waft across the land," he said. "It's very evocative."

The bells were installed earlier this week at the community's Church of the Transfiguration. They cost upward of \$65,000 for the largest ones, and are



The church will take a gradual approach to introduce the full program of bell ringing, such as for calls to worship, the marking of time and other events.

Staff photos by Barry Donahue

part of the church's multi-million dollar building project, which includes elaborate frescoes.

The ringing of church bells also "very much fits in with the traditions of the Cape," said the church's Belinda Schmitt.

In respect of that local history, two of the bells are named for Orleans and Eastham where the first church bells in the county were installed in 1695. The remaining bells are named for the churches spoken of in the Book of the Revelation.

Whitechapel bells have an even richer history. Thomas said the foundry was built in London in 1570 and is the oldest manufacturing business in England.

The company builds its bells "of loam, clay and goat hair that is made into sort of a mud pie" and then thrown, similar to pottery, said Thomas.

"You make it once and when the bell is taken out (the mold) is broken up," he added.

Some of the company's most famous bells are Big Ben and the Liberty Bell.

"We won't talk about that one," he said laughingly of America's famous cracked icon. "Not one of our better ones."

The art of changing ringing isn't as old as the company, but its history stretches back to the 1600s.

Thomas not only set up the bells, which range from 60 to 2,500 pounds, he teaches change ringing.

The first he is paid to do — he is one of only 10 in the world — the second is more of an avocation.

Change-ringing requires a team of bell ringers who, after much practice, learn to ring the bell in patterns.

"You can't just give someone a rope and say ring this," he says. "You'll end up in all sorts of muddles."

Thomas started ringing when he was 14 and moved to a different town where he saw changing ringing at church.

"And I stood there watching and they got me up there and I haven't stopped ringing since," he said, adding that was 30 years ago.

The bronze bells are first positioned upside down by bell ringers who stand about 50 feet below. Depending on how fast or how slow they pull the rope, the bells will move past each other — Thomas says it's like country line dancing for

bells — and make a choreographed sound, with notes ranging up and down the scale.

"It just sounds fantastic," he says. "It's a large scale musical instrument."

In England people go on change ringing tours and the movement is beginning to catch on in the United States. There are 50 sets across the country, the oldest being in Boston which was installed in 1740, and demand for them is growing.

The church at Rock Harbor will take a gradual approach to introduce the full program of ringing, which includes calls to worship, the marking of time and other events.

Contributing writer Doreen Leggett can be reached at 508-887-3224 or caped1@hotmail.com