

Campaniste or Bellhanger - M. Perrin-Morel

M Perrin-Morel Bell hangers look after the maintenance repair and restoration of bell installations and monumental clocks, mainly in churches, abbeys, cathedrals and monasteries

Rawdon What changes have you noticed in the business over the years?

M Perrin-Morel Well, on the engineering side, bell ringing first changed over from manual systems to a phase of electrical bell-ringing, where the bells were driven by electric motors. Nowadays, we use electronic control, for example, all the peals are programmed from a control panel where one can pre-programme peals required during the day or throughout the year. We can set the peals daily and annually, so it is possible to change the programming if the client would like. As an example of this, GIECH, for instance, hopes to implement a synchronised peal of all the bells in France in 2015 to ring at the same time on the 8th of May to commemorate 1945 and the end of the Second World War.

These engineering changes have led to a professionalisation of the bell hangers' trade. It's changed from being a craft -cum-DIY skill to being a properly structured trade requiring far more detailed organisation and an improved grasp of the skills involved. This professionalisation has involved, in particular, the grouping together of installation companies into the GIECH Group. In turn, this has allowed us to work on the preparation of Standards and on the implementation of the training needed to qualify our operators. These are the main changes the business has seen over recent years.

Rawdon So, today, the business ranges from that of the electronics expert, to people working at height, steeplejacks as we say in English, people working at heights...

M Perrin-Morel Yes

Rawdon Roped workers at height, in fact,

M Perrin-Morel Yes

Rawdon Like a climber but....

M Perrin-Morel Yes.... Well... One has to be able to climb up high within the buildings to where the bells are installed. Not all the equipment

needed to operate the bells is easy to access either, so there are safety issues.

This is another one of the recent changes in the business. These days, we are much more concerned with the safety of the installations and of our operators. This was not always the case before, what with old wooden ladders, ageing floorboards and the near total absence of any safety arrangements for those involved, including the bell-hangers working on the installation.

In France, in particular, the regulations for working at height are quite restrictive, we also have a problem with cleanliness since some of the work takes place in surroundings polluted by bird droppings. We also work in areas that are open to the elements. Given the severity of the weather, the wind and, in particular, the rain in Brittany, this means that our working conditions are not always easy.

The installations in Brittany are relatively well maintained. The clients are quite concerned with the condition of their buildings and the state of their installations, so they have made frequent investments in religious property over recent decades to keep it in good condition.

Rawdon How many bells are there in your area of operations and what sort are they? As far of you know, of course.

M Perrin-Morel I can't really say. I think that there are more than 10,000 bells in Brittany and the Pays de Loire that are currently in service. In these installations, we find a wide range of equipment because, in fact, the level of electrification and the nature of the equipment varies with the installation and its age. Accordingly, we have quite a mixed bag overall.

Rawdon Is electrification the rule nowadays or are there still some older bells that are rung manually

M Perrin-Morel Mainly, we find manual systems in chapels ... well, that's what we find quite often in Brittany. Many chapels have manual bell systems. Within churches and larger buildings, and churches in towns, there are practically no manual systems left. They have all been changed over to electrical or electronic systems over the last 50 years.

Rawdon Talking about tuning the bells ... how is that done? What work is involved? It seems to me that this rather something done in a workshop than something one might do on site

M Perrin-Morel Well, that's where we ally ourselves with another skill, that of the bell founder. This trade is complementary to that of the bell hanger since it is the bell hangers who survey the installation on site, noting the dimension of the bells, for example their diameter and thickness, as well as the original manufacturing details, such as the bells' founders and the period. Next, they make a recording

of the bells and then, armed with all this information, the founder will be able to prepare an acoustic analysis that may then be used to establish the acoustic features of the bells, showing their profiles and notes. Then they can see if all the bells are in tune with one another. On the basis of all this, they can then decide whether to modify the tuning of the bells in order to harmonise the peal better with the other bells installed in the church.

Rawdon There we are, Mr Perrin- Morel. Thank you very much for having granted me your valuable time to talk about your work. I have found it fascinating. It's good to be here in central Brittany, north of Quintin, on a day when it is not raining. Super. Thank you very much.

