

English bells ring the changes in France

Valentine Low

Church bells ringing out across the countryside is one of the most evocative sounds in English life. It is a call to worship, the sound of celebration, the bringer of historic news.

Now they are ringing the changes across the Channel. For the first time in history, in a reversal of a tradition that goes back hundreds of years, English church bells have been heard in a village church in southwest France.

A group of expats living in the region have installed bells in their local church, which have now been rung to mark the devastating fire at Notre Dame in Paris.

The new bells, ten of them, have been hung at St George's Anglican church at Vernet-les-Bains near Perpignan, which was built in 1912 with donations from Britons including Rudyard Kipling and Queen Victoria's youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice. It fell into disrepair in the 1980s but the local council, with the help of Britons living near by, restored the building and then launched a project to raise money for France's first English ring of bells.

Jeff Ladd, from Leeds, who has a home in the village and led the effort to have the bells installed, said: "It's

very exciting to have the first ring of bells in France. The locals have been very supportive; the council owns the church and sees the bells as a way of encouraging tourism, as well as strengthening the links between the French and British residents in the village."

While churches in France have bells just as English churches do, they are hung and used differently.

Robert Lewis, editor of *Ring World*, said that bells on the Continent were either fixed, or swing chimes. That means they face with the bell's mouth downwards, and are swung through a limited arc.

English bells, in contrast, are hung for full-circle ringing. That means that when they are at rest their mouth is pointing upwards, nearly at the vertical. When the rope is pulled the bell swings through nearly 360 degrees, and comes to rest with the mouth upwards. When it is pulled again, it swings back the other way. "The bong is very much



A group of expats have now brought the unique sound to a church in southwest France

louder than the bong you get from swing chiming or static chiming," Mr Lewis said.

Continental churches also do not go in for change-ringing. "Their sounding of bells is generally much more random," Mr Lewis said. "Whereas change-ringing is very precise and sequenced." The art of full-circle change-

ringing, which developed in England in the late 16th century, involves ringing to set patterns — known as methods — without repetition of any changes; 5,000 changes or more is a peal and usually takes about three hours.

The first quarter peal of 1,296 changes was rung at Vernet-les-Bains in solidarity after the Paris fire on April

15. The £115,000 project, which was supported by donations and sponsorship, involved the bells being cast at Taylor's Bell Foundry in Loughborough, Leicestershire, transported to France then hung and tuned.

Mr Ladd said: "We have two English ringers living in Vernet. We plan to train the locals, both French and English, to

ring, and we plan to partner with a local school. They are a very light ring of bells, but they sound wonderful."

He said a number of rings of bells had been installed abroad in recent years, including a ring of eight at St George's Anglican Memorial Church in Ypres, Belgium. "But France is completely new territory," Mr Ladd added.

