

Elizabeth Watkins on battle for the belfries

Herefordshire's bells ringing out an SOS

IF YOU like the sound of church bells — particularly those in Herefordshire — make sure you stay in the county on Saturday, May 19.

Ancient bells will be pealing out in villages all over the place, and each will be carrying the same message — please help to save us.

Bellringers in the Hereford Diocese are concerned about the state of their church bells and they will be ringing out an SOS almost county wide.

About 90 churches in the diocese have three bells or more and 500 local people give up a great deal of their spare time to keep them ringing. Like everything else, the maintenance of bell towers and the replacement of bells is an expensive business, and in each case they are the responsibility of the village church.

But because bellringers enjoy ringing them so much they are prepared to pull their weight financially as well as physically to keep the county's heritage alive.

Established in 1886, the Hereford Diocesan Guild of Bellringers has a long-standing policy of giving small grants to help with bell tower repairs — and last year donated £1,000 to churches for this purpose.

Now they want to give even more. They have registered their bell restoration fund as a charity and on May 19 fund raising starts in earnest.

On that day two of Herefordshire's leading ringers, Michael Powell, of Kentchurch Close, Hereford, who is guild ringing master, and Norman Mattingley, of Windover, Hollybush Lane, Much Birch, immediate past master and acting secretary, plan to walk their feet off in aid of bells.

Their marathon walk will take them from Hereford to Ross-on-Wye then to Ledbury and back again to Hereford. Church bells will peal them on the way all along the 40-mile route. Their aim is to raise money — buy a ticket and guess how long it will take to walk the trip. There are cash rewards for the winners.

And the bells will be playing their part, too. There will be open ringing in 11 bell towers along the route. It will cost 10p for a pull on the ropes and anyone is invited to have a go.

As a result bells will be sounding out loud and clear from the churches of Bridstow, Ross, Weston-under-Penyard, Much Marcle, Ledbury, Tarrington, Stoke Edith, Weston Beggard, Withington, Lagwardine and St Nicholas Church, Hereford.

To complement this, sponsored quarter peals will be rung at Kingstone, Fownhope, Clodoch and in the Ledbury and Kington district with 1,260 changes in each tower.

One person hoping for enthusiastic Herefordshire support is Pat Gilbert of 12, Church View, Much Dewchurch. He has been an active bell ringer for six years, following a family tradition.

Mr Gilbert believes that the ban on bell ringing during the war devastated Herefordshire's church



The bells of St Michael and All Angels Church, Kingsland, returned to the parish a few weeks ago after a four-month absence for re-tuning. They should be ringing out again within a few weeks (see page 9).

bells. Because they were unused they became rusted and dilapidated and ropes rotted.

"At the rate we are going now it will take a life-time to catch up with full repairs and then it will be time to start again," says Mr Gilbert.

Constant maintenance is vital, particularly of bearings and wooden headstocks. The latter are made of elm — the favourite meal of woodworm!

Bell chambers are exposed to the elements and the wooden frames shrink and expand with the weather.

"Even in a modern installation of 20 years or so the steeple keeper should be spending a couple of hours each month oiling the bits and pieces and tightening up nuts," said Mr Gilbert.

Last year the diocesan bellrings gave £250 to the church at Ross, £250 to Kington, £250 to Stoke Lacy, £250 to Rushbury, £25 to Presteigne and £16 to Leominster.

Now they are prepared to pay 10 per cent of repair costs and this year they know St Weonard's Church tower needs a new frame, Kingsland a new frame and bells augmented to eight, and at Kimbolton the bells need retuning and new fittings.

At present their income is modest. Tower affiliation fees are 25p a bell each year and an annual membership fee of 35p for each person.

Repair costs can be high. A new bell of up to two cwt with fitting can cost a church up to £3,000. New ropes cost anything from £30 to £40.

Some repairs take up to three years. And Mr Gilbert says it has been known for inflation to put £2,000 on a repair job in 12 months.

More bellringers are needed, too. It takes 19 ringers at each church to give a full service for a ring of six. People still make requests for bells to be rung at weddings and funerals — and willing ringers usually charge a modest £1 a bell.

Youngsters are showing a keen interest in campanology and more women are volunteering their services. No musical talent is needed, but a little weight is useful — it does help to keep your feet on the ground.

But top priority at present is money. If bells in the Hereford Diocese are to ring out for posterity they must be kept in good order.

And if the financial help is not forthcoming village churches may one day have to do what modern churches have accepted — fall back on tape recordings, or "canned" church bells.

This would be anathema to local church bellringers and they are determined it will not happen.

They are prepared to turn some of their boundless energy to money raising and look for backing from the public. Anyone interested in supporting the marathon walk on May 19 should inquire at their local church or get in touch with Mr Gilbert at Much Dewchurch.