

THE BELLS OF ST EADBURGHAS CHURCH, BROADWAY

In keeping with such an ancient building as St Eadburgha's, its bells have a good total of years between them. They vary in age from the early 17th century to the early 19th century and are the product of four bellfounders. They are rung from the ground floor and consequently there is a long rope draft. The pews in the ringing area have to be moved aside for every ringing session, which causes slight inconvenience. However, as compensation, this gives the public an excellent view of the mystic art of English bellringing. There are few places where Sunday Evensong ringing concludes with a round of applause from the assembled congregation. (It is a really nice experience!)

Many non-ringers reading this will be unfamiliar with the language associated with bells and English bellringing. This is surprising for English readers, because the Art is some 400 years old and almost wholly confined to England. It is a very significant part of England's heritage. There are approximately 5,500 English churches, cathedrals, minsters, priories and abbeys with towers containing 4 or more bells hung English-style. Wales, Ireland (Northern and Southern) and Scotland have about 200 between them. Those towers outside the British Isles total about 150 and are found where the English have had a profound influence in the past: USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa mainly.

English-hung bells are rung by rope and full wheel, such that the bell swings full-circle from mouth-up to mouth-up, one way and back again. A ringer can feel through the rope when the bell is mouth-up and can control it there, because at that point it becomes largely weightless. With this control the bell can be made to strike more quickly or more slowly as desired, to fit in tidily with the striking of the other bells. It is this refinement that sets English bellringing apart from virtually any other style of ringing in the world. The continentals in particular swing their bells less than full-circle. Because of this they have no control over the timing of the striking whatsoever and it leads to a veritable cacophony of sound (to the English ringer's ear!) when two or more bells are swung together. It is quite impossible to stop even a quarter of a ton of bell in this way, let alone bells weighing tons. The English system can do this, however, and it enables the heaviest bell so hung, the 4 ton tenor bell at Liverpool Cathedral, to be controlled fully by one ringer. Anyone wishing to know more about this utterly fascinating Art, especially the scientific change-ringing part, is advised to obtain a book on the subject: 'Discovering Bells & Bellringing' by John Camp, Shire Publications, is recommended. Alternatively, go along to the practice night of a local church, where the ringers will usually be delighted to explain it further.

The Bells:

There are six bells. Details of their inscriptions, diameters and weights appear on the Gillett & Johnston wall sheet that hangs in a frame near the organ. These details are reproduced below, together with notes about the founders. It is traditional to quote bell

weights in good old-fashioned Imperial units, although the metric laws cause the bellfounders now to quote kilogrammes. Progress beckons, of course; the younger generation never had to chant at school ‘16 ounces, 1 pound, etc’ and consequently they haven’t a clue what hundredweights, quarters and pounds are all about. In view of this, the metric equivalents are quoted. For those who may have forgotten, there are 28 pounds (lb) in a quarter (qtr); 4qtr in a hundredweight (cwt); and 20cwt in a ton. Coincidentally, 1 Imperial ton is about the same as 1 metric tonne (= 1000kg). It is a similar story with the diameters, so both inches and millimetres (not centimetres: dress-making units!) are quoted. In bell parlance, the lightest bell of an English-hung *ring* of bells is always called the *treble*; and the heaviest is always called the *tenor*.

	Weight:		Note	Diameter	
	cwt – qtr – lb	Kg		ins	mm
Treble	5 - 3 - 9	296	C#	31	787
2	6 - 1 - 0	318	B	33	838
3	7 - 0 - 19	364	A	34 $\frac{7}{8}$	879
4	10 - 1 - 18	529	G#	38	965
5	14 - 0 - 9	715	F#	43 $\frac{1}{2}$	1095
Tenor	18 - 1 - 16	934	E	47	1194

The inscriptions are:

Treble: CANTATE DOMINO CANTICVM NOVUM
MATTHEW BAGLEY MADE ME 1778
MR COLEMAN MR DAVIS CHURCHWARDENS

2: T. MEARS OF LONDON FECIT 1812
THOMAS FROST GENTLEMAN & JOHN HIGMAN GRIFFITHS
ATTORNEY AT LAW, CHURCH WARDENS

3 WALTER SAVAGE WILLIAM SHELDON SQRS ANNO DOMINI 1603
WILLIAM HODGES WILLIAM BROOKES CHVRCH WARDENS
S A D W I F P W L W A B H

4 +WALTER + SAVAGE + WILLIAM SHELDON + ESQUIER + 1609+

5 Inscription same as the second

Tenor: RECAST AT GLOUCESTER BY JOHN RUDHALL A.D. 1828
JOHN RUSSELL AND JAMES STOCKFORD CHURCH-WARDENS

The four different bellfounders are: Matthew Bagley (Treble), Thomas Mears (2 & 5), Henry Farmer (3 & 4) and John Rudhall (Tenor).

Matthew Bagley was part of the third generation of the famous Bagley bellfounding dynasty that originated with Henry in about 1630 at Chacombe in Northants. The later members operated in locations additional to Chacombe, almost itinerating in some cases, and the exact dates and even locations are difficult to establish. It is thought Matthew was founding in Chipping Norton or Witney when he cast St Eadburgha's bell.. There were three Matthew Bagleys in all; this one is the second. He is not to be confused with the first Matthew Bagley, who ultimately operated a bellfoundry in Evesham from 1687 until his premature death there in 1690.

Thomas Mears had his bellfoundry in Whitechapel Road, London (now the Whitechapel Bell Foundry). Like Matthew Bagley above, this Thomas (there were two; this is the second) was a third generation member of a bellfounding family. In 1829 he purchased John Rudhalls's Gloucester bellfounding business (see below).

Henry Farmer is a little-known founder and bells by him are rare. He cast about 30 bells in all, of which most were supplied to churches locally, but the location of his foundry has never been established accurately. "Church Bells of Gloucestershire" (Mary Bliss/Fred Sharpe, 1986) suggests the spread of Farmer's bells points to his operation being based in the North Gloucestershire/Evesham area. More recent evidence points to his foundry being in Evesham, pre-dating that of Matthew Bagley I (see above). St Eadburgha's sanctus bell was probably cast by Farmer, too. This bell, dated 1608, still exists, but now hangs in the New Church (St Michael's)

John Rudhall was the last generation of the famous Gloucester bellfounding family, who cast bells there from 1684 to 1835. He sold up the founding business to Thomas Mears II of Whitechapel in 1829 (see above), although bells carrying John's name continued to be produced until his death. Rudhall bells are considered to very good, even by modern standards, although John's are not quite so consistent. The tenor at St Eadburgha's is a decent bell, but this may be due to some retuning by Gillett & Johnston

History:

The framed Gillett & Johnston wall sheet mentioned earlier shows that the whole ring was completely rehung by them in 1928. The old frame was replaced with a new 'H' section, single-tier, cast-iron and steel bellframe. The bells were provided with new fittings throughout. Somewhat unusually for the period, the bells were allowed to retain their canons and consequently they are all fitted with canon-retaining headstocks. All the bells swing on ball-bearings. The old clappers are displayed on the wall in the NW corner of the church and the peal board alongside records the first peal on the bells after this rehang.

An inspection of the tower walls internally reveals that the bells have not always been rung from the ground floor, as there is evidence on the N face of a blocked up doorway. Lower down, just above the arch crown, there are faced-over beam-end holes, too. The floor of this ringing room disappeared in about 1916, when renovations inside the church required it to be taken down temporarily. However, the Great War caused the completion of the renovation work to be delayed; and when it came to replacing the floor, it was decided to leave it down and block up the holes. It was not until the 1970's that decent rope guides were fitted. Until then, poor rope handlers came only once!

Hints and tips for visiting ringers:

St Eadburgha's bells have an unfair reputation for not ringing easily. Visiting ringers come and apparently many have difficulty with them. Yes, the rope draft is long, but not excessively so; yes, the 3rd can be naughty and will go up wrong if not checked sufficiently; yes, the bells are a bit odd-struck and this needs some compensation. These aspects might worry inexperienced ringers a little, but in general they hardly constitute the stuff of hard ringing. With the advent of ball-bearings, bells have become more nimble. They are now quicker moving and are more 'chuckable'; and virtually all ringers are used to this now. But St Eadburgha's bells aren't nimble; in fact, they are reluctant to do much more than plod. The aforementioned peal board confirms the longevity of the trait: 5040 Bob Minor in 3hrs-25mins, which is slow for a newly-rehung 18cwt six on ball-bearings. In the light of modern expectations of 'go', visitors could easily equate sluggishness with difficulty. The slow speed is caused by the Gillett & Johnston canon-retaining headstocks – just take a look at the photograph in the G&J wall sheet to see their size. They are so large, tall and therefore heavy that they tend to counterbalance the bells. This results in slow turning. Additionally, the bells have fairly large wheels, so everything conspires against quick ringing; and there's not much you can do about it. The suspicion is that visitors think they can! A request to 'Keep them up together' should always be heeded. However, should you comply with a cry to 'Push them along a bit', good luck to you; you will need it, especially with Minor. The tenor ringer in particular will find him/herself with lots of tail-end in hand at the backstroke cuts and probably at the top of the sally for the handstroke ones. Give yourselves (and the bells) a chance; just throttle back and let them roll along at their speed. In actual fact they go quite well (the installation is in excellent condition); they rise up to the balance on their own – if you give them time. They are quite a majestic old bunch and they can sound majestic, too, if they are struck well.

St Eadburgha's Church is not redundant, but is a church in the parish of Broadway. Evensong is held in St Eadburgha's from Easter Sunday to Harvest Festival on the first Sunday in October. This lovely building relies heavily on donations and other such income for its continued existence. Please consider making a generous donation for the pleasure your band has derived from ringing here.