

16 The Bells

Introduction

Purley has a ring of six bells. For most of the 20th century they were used only sparingly and tolled individually, mainly for funerals but occasionally for other services. For the Millennium the bells were restored and rehung and are now regularly rung by a small band of dedicated bell ringers. To get to them you must climb two steep ladders to the bell chamber which is nearly thirteen foot square with louvres to let out the sound instead of windows.

The bells are arranged in two rows running North-South. The westerly row contains 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th bells with their wheels oriented east-west, the easterly row has two bells, the tenor and the treble, with their wheels oriented north-south.

Originally the ring had been of five bells only, second to tenor, all cast by Elles and Francis Knight in the early 17th century. The oak bell frame was made at the same time but used some second hand timbers believed salvaged from an earlier frame. It consists of heads, cills, king posts and two sets of braces, one of which is morticed to the king post and cills, the other to the heads and cills.

In 1787 the fourth had become cracked and was recast. At the same time a new treble was made to bring the ring up to six bells. To do this an extra pit had to be made in the bell frame. The only space left was directly above the trap door making entry to the bell chamber very difficult. The new frame was poorly designed without a proper side section.

Details of bells pre-1999

<i>Bell</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Diameter</i>	<i>Circumference</i>	<i>Wheel orientation</i>
	<i>Cwt-qr-lb</i>	<i>cm</i>	<i>cm</i>	
Treble	3-2-0	68	120	N-S /W
Second	4-1-0	70	126	E-W /S
Third	5-0-0	73	135	E-W /S
Fourth	5-3-0	77	138	E-W /S
Fifth	6-3-0	86	149	E-W /N
Tenor	8-2-0	92	165	N-S /W

Circumference measured at shoulder, diameter at mouth of bell. Weights are believed to be estimates rather than having the bells weighed

Many of these details changed after the bells were retuned and rehung in 1999

The Treble Bell

The treble bell is inscribed 'THE GIFT OF IOHN GEORGE LIBENROOD of the Parish of PURLEY ESQr. IOHN SHERWOOD: Church Warden : * Thos Janaway fecit: C C ANNO DOMINI 1788 C'. It is a maiden bell cast by Thomas Janaway of Chelsea and was located immediately above the trap door leading from the second stage of the tower.

After 1999 the bell was tuned to F and weighed 3cwt, 2 qtrs and 21 lbs. (185 Kg)



The treble bell [M20034]

The Second Bell

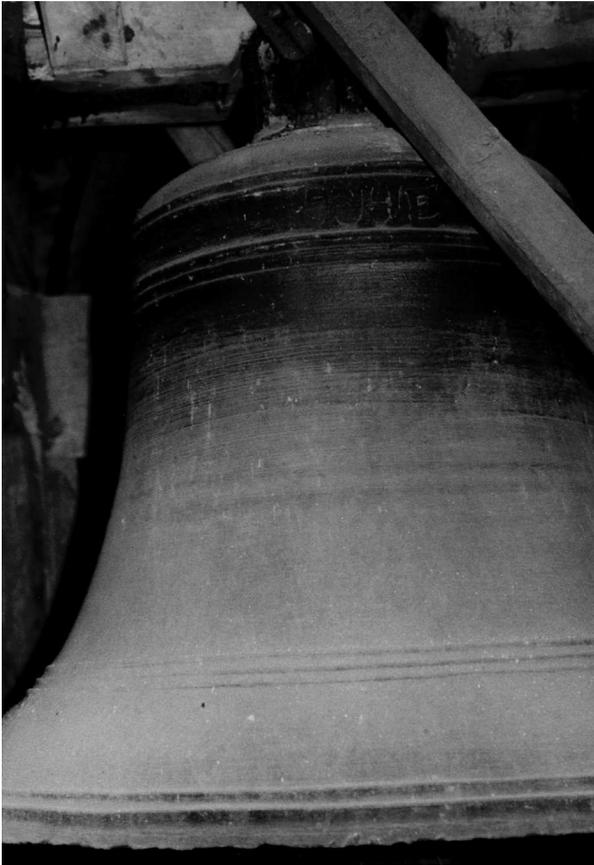
The second bell is inscribed 'PRAYES YE THE LORD X635' It is a maiden bell cast by Ellis Knight of Reading. It was located in the north west corner of the belfry with its wheel to the south

After 1999 it was tuned to E flat and weighed 4 cwt 2 Qtr 3 lb (226 Kg).

The Third Bell

The third bell is inscribed 'PRAYES YE THE LORD X629' It was cast by Ellis Knight of Reading and is located in the west row (centre north) of the belfry with its wheel to the south.

After 1999 it was tuned to D flat and weighed 4 cwt 2 qtr 9 lbs (229 Kg)



The second bell [M20035]



The Third bell [m20031]



*The ringing
wheel of the
fourth bell
[M20032]*

The Fourth Bell

The fourth bell is inscribed 'PRAYES YE THE LORD X627' It is a square shouldered bell cast by Ellis Knight of Reading. It was located in the west row (centre south) of the belfry with its wheel to the south.

After 1999 it was tuned to C and weighed 5 cwt 0 qtr 5 lbs (252 Kg)



The fourth bell [M20032]



The fifth bell [M00105]

The Fifth Bell

The fifth bell is inscribed 'THIS BELL WAS RECAST ANNO DOMINI 1787 JOHN SHERWOOD Churchwarden ::: Thomas Janaway fecit *' It was recast by Thomas Janaway of Chelsea and was probably the replacement for the bell reported by the churchwardens as cracked in 1731. It has lost its canons. It was located in the south-west corner of the belfry with its wheel to the north.

After 1999 it was tuned to B flat and weighed 5 cwt 3 qtr 16 lb (295 Kg)

The Tenor Bell

The tenor is inscribed 'LORD GRANDESONN X629 O-S' It is a square shouldered bell cast by Ellis Knight of Reading. Lord Grandison was probably the donor of this bell. It was located in the south-east corner of the belfry with its wheel to the west. It was tuned to A.

After 1999 it was tuned to A flat and weighed 8 cwt 1 qtr 27 lb (424 Kg)



The tenor bell [M00104]

The Bell Founders

Ellis and Frances Knight were two brothers from a family of bell founders who worked in Reading from the mid 16th Century until around 1710. It is said that the Knight family first became involved in bell-founding at Reading in 1518, but the earliest member traced is William, operating from the 1560s. William's descendants ran the foundry until Samuel transferred operations, firstly to Arundel in 1709, and thence to Holborn in 1730. He died in 1739. Two other early bell-founders of the town, John Sanders and Joseph Carter are also listed, the second of whom moved to Whitechapel Foundry in 1606.

Thomas Janaway operated a bell foundry in a shed in the grounds of Stanley House in Little Chelsea, but protests against industry in the area forced the site to be sold in 1823. He learned his bell founding skills at the Whitechapel Foundry where he worked under Thomas Lester. He had set up on his own by 1759 and died in 1788

The Whitechapel bell foundry is by far the most famous bell foundry in the world and was responsible for both Big Ben and the Liberty Bell. It was established in Whitechapel in 1570 but has roots going back to at least 1420. As well as making and recasting almost every type of bell they also make all the fittings. The present building dates from 1670, their earlier building having been destroyed in the Great Fire of London.

Later History

The bells were regarded as unsafe to ring in the early 1900s when the then rector refused to allow them rung for the wedding of Mrs Fullerton's daughter. They had apparently been restored by around 1920 as Purley had become members of the Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers and several certificates of membership survive from the 1920s. The last time anyone remembers them being rung for services is just before the Second World War, but even then they were prone to come loose from their mountings. It was of course forbidden to ring them for most of the war period.

In 1965 there was a proposal by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry to build a new bell frame and re-tune the bells which were said to be very much out of tune. The bells were inspected by William Hughes representing the foundry in July 1965. He found them sound but not of good tonal quality or well in tune. They were indented where the clappers had struck and he recommended new ones should be fitted. The 18th century fittings were in a decayed and derelict condition. The early 17th century bell frame was poorly made and badly infested. An estimate was made of £1487 to put things to rights but the PCC took no action.

The report and proposal signed by a Mr Sharpe was hotly contested by Geoffrey Dodd of the Winchester and Portsmouth Diocesan Guild of Bell Ringers. He reported that on 12th May 1965 he and a team of ringers inspected the bells, made minor adjustments and rang a plain course of Bob Major (60 changes); then 120 changes of Grandsire Doubles; finishing up with a plain course of Cambridge Surprise Minor. He offered to bring a team to Purley to ring a full peal taking two and three quarter hours, to demonstrate that the bearings were sound and not square as the report had suggested. His estimate was that the cost of re-hanging would be only £850.

Next year, 1966, a suggestion was made by J A Unwin to install electronic bells with a loud speaker and a tape recorder. An alternative scheme was for the bells to have electronically operated clappers, to turn the ring into what would amount to a carillon. Neither idea was taken up.

The tower and bells were inspected again in 1978 by Stanley Scott for the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers. He noted that the oak bell frame probably dates from the 17th century and had been cut away severely in several places to allow bell clearance. Only the fifth bell was ringable and that only partially. Also there was evidence of woodworm and beetle infestation. The amount of work that would need to be done to restore the bells to full working order was so great that it was not felt practical to go ahead, especially as money was urgently needed for the new extension.

The matter was reconsidered in 1986 but essentially the same conclusion was reached although it was also pointed out that removal of the bells was by now virtually impossible since the font had been relocated on the ground floor of the tower and the clock mechanism also provided an effective barrier. Thus the suggestion to remove and sell the bells was not a practical proposition.

The Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers

In the 1920s and 1930s there were bell ringers at Purley who joined the Guild and for many years their certificates were mounted on the south wall of the tower.

In 1963 Eunice Wark and a visiting group from the Reading branch of the Guild came to ring the bells and in 1978 Stanley Scott made a report on the state of the bells for the Guild which indicated the woodwork was so dilapidated that ringing was not possible and Purley was listed as the only un-ringable peal in the Reading area.

Len Palfrey, the captain of the ringers at Pangbourne encouraged parishioners from Purley to learn the art of change ringing, just in case the Purley bells could be restored

Ringling in the Millennium

When it came to see what the church would do to celebrate the millennium the idea of restoring the bells to working order was reconsidered. The old doubts and the reasons had not gone away but this time there a determination not to be put off by minor difficulties. Consultants were brought in who came up with a scheme to rehang the bells in the space occupied by the clock mechanism and move the font a few feet eastwards into the nave.

In 1997 churchwardens Jackie Benstead and David Jordan (both of whom had joined the Pangbourne team) invited tenders for the work. The estimate came in at £30K and as the PCC were already faced with a bill for £80K just to do the work ordered from the previous two quinquennial inspections it was a very brave decision to combine the two jobs into one big project. With help from the Oxford Guild and the Manifold Trust as well as local donations, sufficient funds became available and the work could start. Builders Boshers of Cholsey did the structural work on the tower and the Whitechapel Foundry did the work on the bells and the part of the bill for the tower and bells work came to £36,040

The bells were taken away to the foundry at Whitechapel to be refurbished and a new bell frame of steel constructed in the middle chamber. The condition of the old frame was much worse than originally feared but as it had a preservation order on it, not a lot could be done with it.

A team of bell ringers was recruited who practiced with the band at Pangbourne. The new team under the leadership of bell captain Simon Robertson were ready to ring in the new year.. Once the work was completed it was possible to try out the new bells and everyone was very pleased with the tone and quality of the sound. In order not to discomfort the neighbours too much the vents in the towers were partly restricted in order to confine the sound.

In the new frame all the bells swing East/West. They are arranged in a 3 x 2 rectangular layout as follows:-



Finally Health and Safety required that gates be provided to stop anyone entering the tower whilst the ringers were in action. Previously the tower had been protected by an oak screen, but this had been removed when the font was moved into the tower a few years earlier. A pair of wrought iron gates was gifted to the church.

All was ready to ring in the New Year at both midnight on the 31st December 1999 and at noon on January 1st 2000.

The new bells have proved an irresistible magnet for bell ringers all over the country who have been queuing up to have a go at ringing at Purley which none had been able to check off on their ringing lists before.



One of the wooden 'ringing' wheels which provide the leverage for rotating the bells [M00107]

One of the Whitechapel workers dealing with the fourth bell in the base of the tower during the 1999 refurbishment of the bell frame [M00101]

