

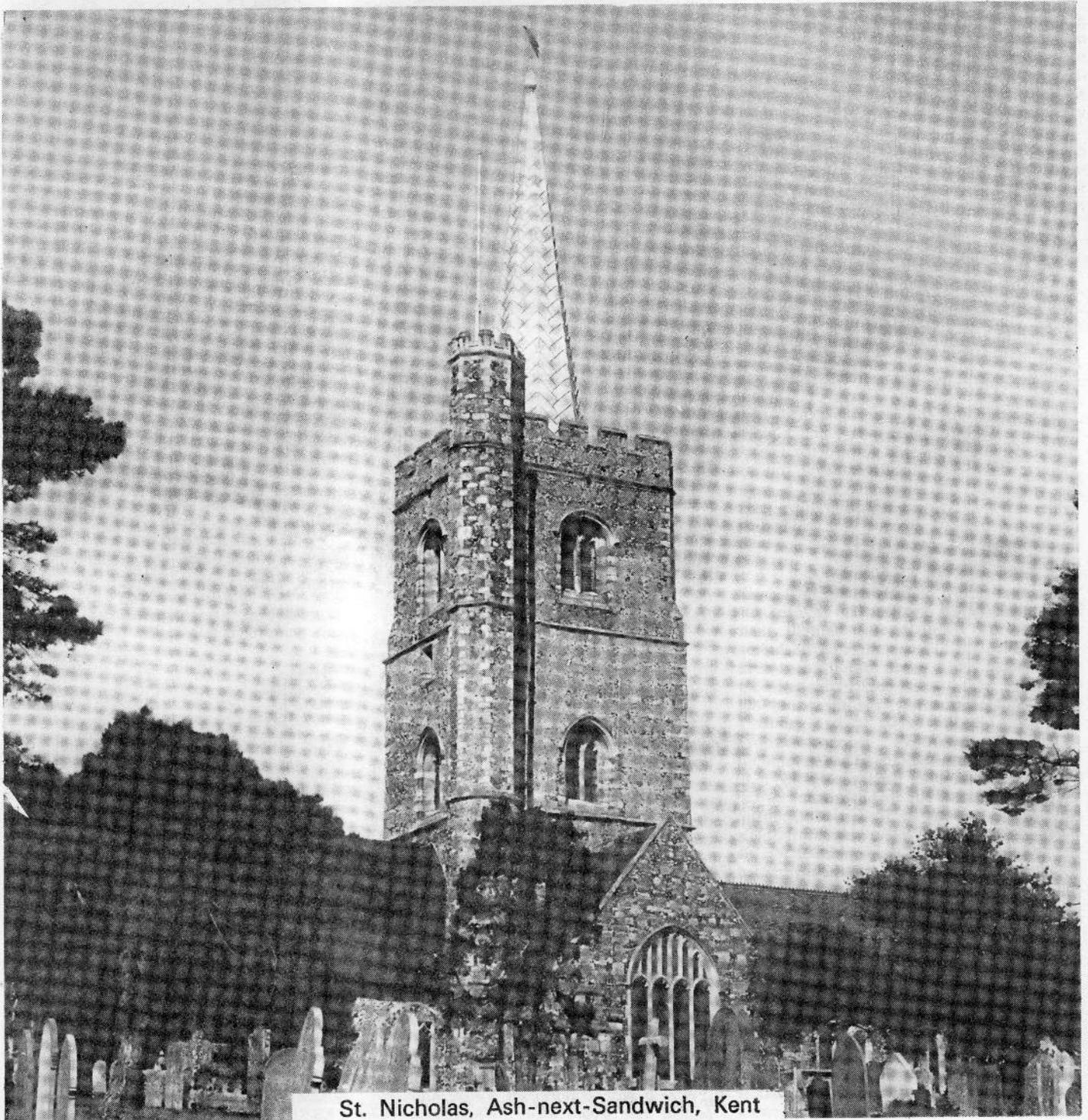
# THE RINGING WORLD

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OF CHURCH BELL RINGERS



St. Nicholas, Ash-next-Sandwich, Kent

**ST. NICHOLAS,  
ASH-NEXT-SANDWICH, KENT**

*"Ash Church with its peaked steeple,  
A bad parson and worse people."*

Whether this is any less true today than it was 200 years ago is for another to say. In either case the couplet is not original, as the parishioners of Cowden could testify.

Ash-next-Sandwich lies on historic ground; Richborough Castle is within its curtilage and in the 2nd century the excellence of the local oysters was being acclaimed in Rome by Juvenal. In 597, on the shore and beneath the castle walls, S. Augustine preached the Gospel to Ethelbert, King of Kent and with two short breaks the Christian tradition is continuous since.

The importance of Ruitupiae, and later Sandwich, as the gateway to Europe from Roman until Tudor times has given this corner of Kent an intriguing history. Take, as an example, an imaginary nonagenarian dying in 1255. In that lifetime he might have seen Thomas Becket visiting Agnes, his sister, here, on his way from Gravelines to Canterbury and martyrdom, in 1170. Twenty-eight years later, Richard I walked barefoot through the village, after his release from prison. In 1216 the area was sacked by the French, though a second attempt the next year was heavily repulsed, on St. Bartholomew's Day. Finally, in the year of his death, this imaginary old man could have seen the first elephant in this country walk the village street, on its way to the menagerie in the Tower of London.

About this time the church began to take the shape we recognize today, and later it would dominate the land toward the Isle of Thanet where now the River Stour follows the course of the Wantsum, once a navigable channel. To the east, generations have used this "peaked steeple" for navigating the Goodwin Sands.

**The First Record . . .**

The first record of bells comes in the will of William Omer of Fleet. In 1492 he bequeathed 25 sheep to the church; their value to be used as he directed, including the payment of 12 pence "for the sexton to ring three peals" each year in his memory for ever. Unfortunately, the sheep ran out some years back.

The churchwarden's recount various problems with the bells, and a fair amount of procrastination in their repair. In 1592 they reported the 5th to be broken; at the time the treble was by Robert Mot. Again, by the 2nd decade of the 17th century, bells by Joseph Hatch were the subject of reports to the Archdeacon. In 1616 they admitted "our great bell is lately broken and is not yet mended". This bell was recast by "hennery willner of borden" in 1641. At the time the accounts include the interesting item:

*"more bread and bearre at several time for the ringers and the workmen when the belles were changing and the bellfounder came to see them hanged . . . . 8s. 6d."*

In 1652 there was further expense "about the bell castings", but on this occasion the details suggest that the parish paid the churchwardens of Littlebourne for carry-



This photograph of the ringers of St. Nicholas', Ash-next-Sandwich, was taken last Christmas. Back (l. to r.): Godfrey Foat, David Cave, Rosemary Lines, William Lines, Adrian Rogers, Nigel Wilkinson, Thomas Cave. Centre: Elizabeth Harms, The Rev. James Wild, Mrs. Barbara Wild. Front: Julian Harms, Susan Lines, Elizabeth Cave, Bridget Allen.

ing the bell to the foundry. No items of heavy expenditure appear during the remainder of the century, but frequently the thirst of the ringers needed slaking. Food and drink for those who rang for Charles II's "Crownacon day" cost the exceptional sum of £1 18. 2.

**Ironical Year . . .**

1778 was an ironical year. Whilst George Washington was complaining of the unhygienic smells of Valley Forge, Joseph Bramah, in the country which lost that war, had invented the flushing water-closet. In Paris the revolutionary song "Ca Ira" was first heard in the streets, yet here there was a period of religious revival. Caught by the mood, the parish determined to replace its five bells with a ring of eight. Thomas Swain wrote a detailed proposal in the vestry minute book and Edwin Blake, the local wheelwright, constructed a suitable frame. The following year shows the entry:

*"pd. the Bell founders Blake Jones Fordred Goddon & others for the Bells and Frame etc. . . . . £256. 6. 10."*

but of such bells there is no record, and it was left to Thomas Mears, in 1790, to cast the present ring. Edwin Blake's frame, though of massive proportions, had the inherent weakness of a central space for the fall of clockweights increased by positioning the tenor in one corner. The bells never went well and it was 36 years before the first peal was rung.

**A Morning Ave . . .**

The tradition of ringing a morning Ave at 5, and a curfew at 8 o'clock each evening, lapsed some time after 1864 having been continuous since the Restoration. At least our ringer of the Ave or "Goose Bell", never rang his bell an hour too soon or, if he did, avoided the error of a colleague in the next parish who, realising his mistake, mounted his bicycle and rode about the street ringing a handbell and shouting, "Don't get up".

*It is a pity to finish on a sour note, but to end here would mean failing the bells I*



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*have grown to love. This is no longer anything more than a very ordinary country village, yet if our bells are to continue to ring we have to find £8,000 for rehangng. Reading this paper week by week, I see many appeals for worthy causes beside which we have little claim. Nor can a ring which has always been hard work have made many friends; yet I dare ask those who can to support us. I would be grateful for any donations:— J. D. H. CAVE, GOBERY HOUSE, WINGHAM, CANTERBURY, KENT.*