

RENEWAL OF KENT EIGHT

The Church of St. George, Benenden, stands on the crest of the central clay ridge of the High Weald, with a view 17 miles southward over the tangled and wooded Wealden landscape towards Hastings. Through or near Benenden ran the narrow forest road down which Harold and the English fyrd marched to their end at Senlac nine centuries ago.

The beauty of the church is largely its setting; a very typical Kentish sandstone church, it stands at the head of one of the largest and finest village greens in the country, which stretches, flanked by trees, down to the main village street. The interior of the church—a Victorian restoration—is perhaps less inspiring, although light, spacious and beautifully kept; probably its best feature is the great west window of the tower, which lights the nave over the ringing gallery.

The sound of bells has been familiar in Benenden since the Middle Ages, when there were four hung in a large detached wooden campanile similar to the one still in use at Brookland. In 1629 they were recast, the tenor weight being recorded as 27 cwt., and later augmented to five; the records suggest, without certain proof, that these were hung for full circle ringing.

In 1672 this campanile was completely destroyed and the church itself gutted by a disastrous fire due to a lightning strike; it was not till 1718 that the great task of repairing the church and building a new west tower had been completed. The following year a new ring of six (tenor about 20 cwt. in E), by Richard Phelps, of Whitechapel, arrived amid general rejoicing. A

year later the founder obligingly replaced an unsatisfactory bell free of charge. In 1753 Lester and Pack recast the cracked tenor into the present bell—a remarkably good one for the period, which has done much to cover up the deficiencies of the rest of the ring. The year 1802 saw the augmentation to eight with two trebles by Thomas Mears I, and the recasting of the fifth in 1819 heralded the emergence of a highly proficient local band; boards in the ringing gallery record four peals of Triples during the winter 1820/1—two of Grand-sire, one of Union and one of Oxford Bob.

Taylor's came on the scene in 1882 to recast the fourth, and in 1923 Alfred Howell recast the sixth, rehung the ring on steel girder headstocks and stiffened the 1802 oak frame with rods and angle-plates. Thus when Mr. Jack Brown, the present tower captain, arrived in Benenden just after the last war he found a very mixed ring, only one bell (the seventh) surviving of the original Phelps six. The tonal deficiencies of the smaller bells were to some extent alleviated by the fine tenor, but the bells were very odd-struck and bad-going in an oak frame that was far from rigid. A good peal band had to work hard to get anything out of them and they were quite unsuitable for the average local band of learners. In addition the frame was severely attacked by death-watch beetle and by 1967 was clearly at the end of the road.

The P.C.C. acted with decision and energy, launching an appeal for funds to repair the tower stonework and rehang the bells, as well as converting the clock (an 1819 Thwaites and Reed) to electric wind. The masons were at work on the tower during 1969/70, and in June last year the last peal was rung on the bells before

removal to Loughborough. Both parishioners and members of the Ashford District of the K.C.A. unstintingly gave their time to provide voluntary labour throughout the job and thus saved the parish a great deal of money.

At Loughborough it was discovered that the treble was cracked. It was duly recast—a contribution of the present generation of bellfounders to the polyglot ring. The tuning-up of the bells—always a bit chancy with a mixed old ring—produced a transformation as dramatic as it is pleasing; a sort of acoustic dog's dinner became a splendid harmonious octave, combining the tonal harmony and singing qualities of a modern ring with the throaty character of older bells.

By Easter this year the bells were installed in their new iron frame—again with the aid of freely given voluntary labour—and duly praised on the try-out night. Much thought and work went into the tower acoustics, both inside and out, and the resulting noise downstairs is not only rewarding but also adjustable to taste.

On May 1 the bells were rededicated by the Lord Bishop of Maidstone, in the presence of a large congregation of parishioners and ringers. In his sermon the Bishop spoke of thankfulness for the fruits of one's labours—a sentiment heartily shared by the congregation, nearly all of whom had contributed something to the fulfilment of the work.

The bells were greatly admired; with a tenor now just over 18 cwt. they are just right both for a local band to ring easily and to make a satisfying noise for visiting peal bands. The work is a credit to the foundry and to a community which cares about its church and its bells.



A print from an old wood engraving that was found hanging in the ringing chamber of St. James' Church, Poole, Dorset, giving details of the bells and the laying of the foundation stone.

OUR CHURCH BELLS

Were placed in the Tower of St. James's Church the 26th of May, and were first rung (opened) on the 14th of June, 1821, when a Silver Cup, value fifteen guineas, was awarded to the best set of ringers, by the Churchwardens; and a peal of twelve musical hand bells to the second best, by Mr. Dobson, the founder.

WEIGHT.

	Cwt.	qrs.	lbs.		Cwt.	qrs.	lbs.
1st Bell	6	1	17	5th Bell	9	0	16
2nd Bell	6	2	7	6th Bell	11	0	3
3rd Bell	6	3	16	7th Bell	13	2	27
4th Bell	7	2	2	8th Bell	19	1	20

MOTTOES.

1st.—“Long live King George the Fourth. 1821.” 2nd.—“Laus Deo, 1821”: Praise be to God. 3rd.—“Deo Adjuvante non Timendum. 1821”: God assisting there is nothing to be feared. 4th.—“Deum Cole, Regem Serva. 1821”: Worship God, preserve the King. 5th.—“Nisi Dominus Frustra. 1821”: Unless the Lord be with us our efforts are in vain. 6th.—“Prosperity to the Town of Poole. 1821.” 7th.—“These Eight Bells were cast at the Foundry of William Dobson, of Downham, Norfolk. 1821.” 8th.—The Reverend Peter William Jolliffe, Minister; Joseph Barter Bloomfield and Robert Slade, Junr., Churchwardens. 1821.”

40,320 Changes may be rung on these bells.

The Corner Stone of the present building was laid the 31st of May, 1819; opened for Divine Service the 23rd of April, 1821.