

Britain's only steel four ringing once more

by Dickon R. Love

Steel rings of bells are somewhat of a rarity these days. Nobody casts them, and many churches that do have them don't want them. Those who have rung on steel bells will know how inferior they are to their bronze cousins, and so naturally if there is a thriving band at a tower with a steel ring, they want to replace them with something more pleasurable to ring. Therefore from the historical point of view, it is gratifying to see a hitherto unringable set of steel bells restored to a ringing condition.

The restoration in question was a rather quiet one at the small village of Bicknor in Kent, a few miles south of Sittingbourne. One has to travel down many winding lanes to get there to find a small village green, a red telephone box and a few scattered houses all surrounded by orchards and fields. The church is round a few corners from the green and partly hidden by trees. Although originally built in the 13th or 14th century, St James' Church was principally rebuilt around 1860 supposedly being one of only two churches in the county built using blocks of chalk. It has no electricity, and with the arrangement of the square spire and large round louvres, it has a rather spooky appearance. Owing to the small size of the village, there are only a handful of services a year, with the congregation otherwise attending church in one of the neighbouring villages in the benefice.



St. James' Church, Bicknor.

London Exhibition

At the time of the rebuilding of the church, four bells were cast in Sheffield by Naylor Vickers for the London Exhibition of 1862. These were bought by Bicknor church and hung in a wooden frame for five bells to replace a small bell that used to hang in the old tower, although at what point this happened is unclear. The four bells were certainly in place by the time J. C. L. Stahlschmidt researched his book *Church Bells of Kent*. It is possible that the sale of the existing bell paid for the installation of the four. The bells were given small steel wheels and have no stays or sliders, and owing to the position of the garter hole in the wheel, it does not look as if these bells were intended to be rung full circle in changes.

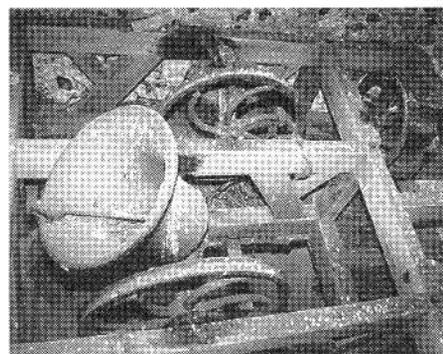
It is interesting to note that the neighbouring church of Wormshill, recently featured in *The Ringing World* following the culmination of a project to install a ring of six, also possessed a couple of steel bells. They were by the same founder, but cast a year later to join two existing bronze bells.

The tenor at Bicknor weighs about 2 or 2½ cwt as estimates vary making them a very light ring of bells. The principal (known) details are as follows:

Treble	14 7/8"	C#
NAYLOR VICKERS & CO SHEFFIELD 1862 No 3222		
2	15 5/8"	A#
NAYLOR VICKERS & CO SHEFFIELD 1862 No 3062		
3	19 1/2"	G#
NAYLOR VICKERS & CO SHEFFIELD 1862 No 3068		
Tenor	20 7/8"	F#
NAYLOR VICKERS & CO SHEFFIELD 1862 No 3143		

The inscriptions are taken from the aforementioned book by J. C. L. Stahlschmidt,

although they are not really very discernible through the rust. The diameters however are *not* taken from this work as Stahlschmidt appears to have had problems reading his rule (A failing that is unfortunately consistent throughout his book!).



The Country's only ring of four steel bells. The third is in the foreground.

Not a true four

A cursory look at the pitches indicate that this is not a true four! It was reported in *The Ringing World* in the late 60s that the bells formed 1, 2, 4, 5 of a five: this is not actually the case as they are 1, 3, 4, 5 of a five. However, it would appear that the empty pit in the frame lies between bells 2 and 3. Inspection of the empty pit together with a lack of rope hole in the belfry floor (which may be contemporary with the bells) indicates that it has always been empty, and thus that Bicknor have always been a four. To complete the five, it would be necessary to move the 2nd into the

(continued overleaf)

Traditional ringing at Braughing

Every year since 1595 it has been the tradition to celebrate "Old Man's Day" on 2nd October. It is a story well documented in the church records which may be seen on request. The story has it that the middle aged widower named Matthew Hall 'died' and was to be buried in Braughing churchyard. However, misfortune fell upon the funeral party as they proceeded on foot down what is known as Fleece Lane; the pall bearers slipped on some wet leaves and dropped the coffin. To the astonishment of all around, noises were heard coming from the coffin. On opening it Matthew was found to be still alive. He recovered from the ordeal and his illness sufficiently well to remarry and raise a family. When he did eventually die his will was published in 1595. In it there were several bequests made, amongst these, that the church bell should be tolled on the anniversary of his death, for this the ringer received the princely sum of 1/- (5p), which, 400 years ago must have been a lot of money.

Last year, the 400th anniversary was marked by a peal attempt, lost through conductor error. It was replaced by a second, successful attempt on 19th December, when a peal of Grandsire Triples was rung.

STEEL FOUR - continued

empty pit and put the new bell in its place. However, there are no plans to augment.

During the 1970s, the lack of ringing and the buildup of jackdaw nests made them unringable, to the extent that members of the church did not really know much of their existence. Then in 1990, vandals ascended the tower and tried to steal the bells, lowering two of them to the ground before they left, leaving the bells behind. We don't know why they didn't finish the job - either they were disturbed or realised rather late that what they were stealing had hardly any value at all. Alternatively, they might have just intended to cause vandalism. The bells (the treble and second) were found by the churchwarden, who then transported them back to his farm where they lay for three years.

Rehanging and cleaning

In 1993 after enquiries by the author, he, together with the churchwarden and the churchwarden's son, spent an afternoon rehanging the front two bells. However, the problems with the jackdaw nests remained, and the pulleys were also found to be in a bad condition. Otherwise, the bells were found to be undamaged, and after a little grease, they all turned quite smoothly.

Things were left for another two years during which time attempts were made to clear the tower of rubbish and secure the louvres against another onslaught of feathered

pollutants. Once everything was cleared, the author was asked to return to complete the job. This was duly done and a set of ropes were given and put on. As an experiment, the ropes for two of the bells were tied to the wheels to allow greater control over ringing them full circle. This was partly successful, although more adjustment will be needed if they are to handle in a proper full-circle manner.

The first service ringing

The first ringing for over a decade took place on Sunday 1st October for the Harvest Festival. Seeing the church full of villagers together with the lighted paraffin lamps and the hand-pumped organ certainly gave one the feeling that things have probably changed very little here in the last hundred years. The villagers were thrilled to hear the bells being rung, most of whom had said that they had never heard them all rung for a service before.

Bicknor obviously has no ringers, and indeed hardly requires anyone with great expertise in the art, however for this occasion, ringers came from neighbouring Bredgar and Tunstall (the Tunstall bells at that time either lying variously intact or as ingots on a bellfoundry floor!). The back three chimed quite well, although attempts to ring them up ended in a rather undignified clatter of sound. The treble was not so easy to ring as the clapper was still misbehaving in the bell. However, everyone was surprised at how well they sounded, and were not particularly bad considering that they were made of steel.

Taming the swing-chime

It might ultimately be possible to ring changes on the bells only if the positioning of the rope on the wheel is improved and the clappers haven't been allowed to seize up. Any ringer who would attempt to do this would have to be very capable indeed. The main other problem is the small size of the wheel, however there are no plans to replace them and enlarge their diameter. Obviously they have never been pealed or quartered, and are unlikely ever to be.

It is satisfying to know that a tower formerly consigned to the "unringable" bracket has now been restored to the "ringable" (or "pseudo-ringable!") as another addition to the Swale District. It is also good to know that the bells can be easily swung by the local congregation for services, so that their sound may carry across the orchards to all the houses and farmsteads round about. It is also good to know that a unique ring of bells is being preserved and cared for as an example of a quirk in the history of bellfounding in this country.

N.U.T.S. celebrate Gold

One of the hitherto unreported casualties of the Second World War was the death of the National Union of Tower Snatchers (the N.U.T.S.). Its last summer holiday outing (66 towers and 400 miles cycling over the hills and dales of Somerset and Devon in 10 days), ably arranged by Reg Darvill, was fully reported on pages 531/2 of the RW 1939.

However, despite the untimely death of the organisation which the War caused, some of the N.U.T.S. are still alive and ringing. Some Golden Wedding celebrations on 9th December 1995 bear witness to the fact.

Wally Hunt of Twyford, Berks, met Harold Smith of Melksham, Wilts on the 1939 tour and, at a tower-snatching outing on Easter Monday 1940, Wally introduced his sister Elsie to Harold.

This introduction resulted in a later engagement which was to last for 4½ years. Harold had been called up into the army early in the War and in May 1942 was posted abroad to an unknown destination. This turned out to be India and Burma.

Here were two people who welcomed the news of the atomic bomb and the end of the war which would also end their 3½ years of separation. As soon as Elsie knew that Harold was on a troopship heading home she had Banns of Marriage published. On the 8th December 1945, eight days after Harold disembarked at Liverpool, the couple were married at St Mary the Virgin church, Twyford, Berks by another participant of the 1939 N.U.T.S. tour, the late Rev K. C. Davis.

A quarter-peal was arranged at Twyford to celebrate the Golden Wedding anniversary and Harold intended to call it but was laid low by bronchitis on the day. Sue Davenport took his rope at short notice and the quarter was rung in good style with Elsie and her brother in the band.

Good wishes for the future go to Harold and Elsie from the rest of the band. W.H.

Twyford, Berks. 9 Dec, 1260 Grandsire Triples: Pam Elliston 1, Joyce Vernon 2, Elsie Smith 3, Sue Davenport 4, W Hunt 5, M Dane 6, K Davenport (C) 7, K Vernon 8. For the Golden Wedding Anniversary of Harold and Elsie Smith.

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By paying for the cost of refurbishment of one of the existing bells, perhaps with its fittings, or for the refurbishment of the 17th century bell, or some other item such as the new bellframe, or the recasting of the 2nd bell. Bellhangers' charges, transport etc. will also add to the costs as detailed below. The fittings can be marked with a commemorative plaque to perpetuate the memory of a relative or an event in your life.

Any help with any item would be most appreciated.

Bells	Refurbishment	Fittings
Treble (smallest)	£478	£2,082
3rd	£478	£2,082
4th	£478	£2,082
5th	£478	£2,082
Tenor (largest)	£478	£2,091
2nd	Recasting £2,000	£2,082
New fittings for 2nd bell		
Chiming bell, Refurbishment	£278	
Bellframe	£4,650	
Installing all the above, including bellhangers, builders, & electrical work		
		£3,055

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