



OUR PICTURE

BREDGAR'S HISTORIC BELLS RING OUT AGAIN

BY DAVID L. CAWLEY

ABOUT three miles west of the main A.2 trunk road at Sittingbourne and close to the great new motorway which carves its way through some of Kent's loveliest countryside lies the small but historic village of Bredgar. Long known to Kent ringers as having an unringable five, the tower of Bredgar Church has once more come to life with a splendidly restored and augmented ring of six from the Whitechapel Foundry.

The church at Bredgar is dedicated to St. John the Baptist and has a nave with aisles, chancel, south porch and western tower. The fabric as it stands at the present time dates in the main to the 14th century, with the exception of the porch, which is modern, and the lower portion of the western tower, which contains an excellent Norman doorway exhibiting dog-tooth mouldings.

Bredgar was named from the "Broad gore" or clearing in the woods which extensively covered this part of the county in early days, and it is believed, though without much evidence that a church of St. John stood here in Saxon days; in Norman times this probably wooden church was pulled down and a Norman building erected of which the base of the tower is a witness. Then in the great building century there was a great change; a college was founded, and the church was greatly rebuilt. This college, the buildings of which still stand near to the church was founded by one Robert de Bredgar in 1393, and its membership consisted of a chaplain and four scholars, two poor and two clerical.

It was about this time that a tower was built; almost certainly there were bells before this time, but we do know that right down to 1842 a mediæval bell hung in the tower of Bredgar Church. This bell was dedicated to St. John and was probably inscribed "Iohannes Criste care + Dignare pro nobis orare" — a common Kent inscription meaning "O John dear to Christ, deign to pray for us." The dedication was preserved by Mr. Fausset, the antiquary, who wrote in 1757 and 1758. There were probably other bells as well, but of these there is no record; indeed there is silence till the end of the 16th century.

WHITECHAPEL'S LONG INTEREST

In 1579 Robert Mot, of Whitechapel, cast or recast a bell for Bredgar Church and this bell is still in use; formerly the third, it is now the fifth of the augmented ring. There was a lot of bell work done by Mot in the county at about this time, and it is fitting that the Whitechapel Foundry should have preserved its connection with Bredgar when the restoration was accomplished.

The next bell work in the tower gives us a clue to the number of bells there may have been in mediæval times—either three or four. In 1620 John Wilnar, of Borden, a nearby village, cast or recast the then treble of the ring, and in 1634 he recast the third of what by now was definitely a ring of four, and which is now the tenor of the ring. To house these bells a new bell frame was installed in the tower having the four bells each swinging at right angles to her neighbour, with a central pit for letting them up and down. It was then a stout bell frame, and it lasted 300 years and more.

John Wilnar's frame was not destined to remain intact for long. In 1692 Thomas Aldersley, a local benefactor, gave a treble bell, and this was added to by James Bartlett, of Whitechapel—another link with this historic foundry. To accommodate this extra bell the bell which had been the second and was now the third was moved in its frame, and the end member at the head of its pit cut away and the old treble pit was enlarged to take two bells, thus converting a fairly robust four-bell frame into a rather weak one for five bells. Beyond a new headstock for the treble in 1776, no further work seems to have been done

to the bells. But we do know that there were ringers, and that they had a strict code of conduct, for on a board in the ringing room we read:—

"My Friendly ringers
I to you declare
You must pay one penny
Each oath you do swear:
To turn a bell over
It is the same fare.
To ring with your hats on
You must not dare.
MDCCLI"

16th CENTURY CLOCK (?)

By 1842 the tenor had become cracked; it is interesting to note that Mr. Fausset's note on this bell records that the clock struck on it. How old this clock was we do not know, but it was certainly there in 1757 and it was considered by Mr. R. Clouston to date from c. 1650. The bell was taken to Whitechapel, but whether it was recast or whether a discarded bell was substituted for it is a moot point, for the new bell, weighing 11 cwt. 2 qr. 25 lb. and striking note F sharp, had on its waist four obliterated lines of inscription. The rest simply reads "Thomas Mears, Founder, London, 1842."

In 1902 the old clock was discarded and a new one, striking on bells 1, 3 and 5, was installed by Mr. C. E. Homewood, of Upton Court, as a thankoffering from him for the recovery and coronation of King Edward VII. A brass plate on the 18th century screen of the ringers' room records this. Further work was done on the bells in 1921, when the three largest received new timber headstocks of archaic design.

But inevitable dilapidation was setting in; the bells were becoming difficult to ring; the frame was working loose; the treble was loose on its headstock, and the stock of the second was badly split. In addition to this the bells were very far from being tonal, whether a major or minor ring of five and were deeply indented at the strike points. In 1951 they were declared unringable and though they were rung on one or two subsequent occasions they were largely silent, the tenor alone being sounded for services.

The story of the rebirth of Bredgar bells begins in 1960, when Mr. Randal Clouston, of the Central Council for the Care of Churches, visited and reported on the bells at Bredgar. His report is a fascinating document, much drawn on for use in this article, and the upshot of it was that the bells were unringable and required rechanging in a new frame. In 1965 Messrs. Mears and Stainbank reported the same thing.

A RINGING VICAR

But in the intervening years things had been happening. First a fete held by Miss Hooker, one of the two arch-fund-raisers (the other being Mrs. Bowring), raised the first £100 in 1961. Then in 1963 the Rev. Stanley Evans became Vicar. A keen ringer, he first rose to the task of reheating and in part reroofing his church, and then to the job of rechanging his silent bells. It was decided in view of their tonal qualities to tune the four trebles to a major key, and to break the tenor up and cast two trebles from its metal. The heating was paid for by 1965, and in November of the same year the debt on the roof was cleared. The bells could now come first.

Of the money, £300 was most generously given by the Barron Bell Trust, and £30 by the Kent County Association. The total, including clock work, was some £2,250, of which £1,800 has already been collected by such devious means as a Festival of Saints, St. John the Baptist Fairs, coffee mornings and evenings, wine and cheese parties, an auction of antiques and a picture gallery with wine and fork lun-

cheon, not to mention the common or garden jumble sales, together with various legacies and a collection of £35 at the dedication. Donations will still be gratefully received and acknowledged by the Rev. Stanley Evans The Vicarage, Bredgar, Sittingbourne, Kent.

In April 1967, the bells were removed to Whitechapel and the old frame was taken down and placed in the churchyard. Meanwhile the young would-be ringers of Bredgar were receiving instruction from their Vicar, Terry Barton and others at nearby Tunstall. In August the bells were returned to the church and gleefully tried out by a number of local and invited ringers in the presence of Mr. Harry Parkes, bellhanger, who was much complimented on the excellent job.

THE GREAT DAY

And so to Bredgar's great day. On Saturday, September 16th, a large congregation of visitors and villagers crowded St. John's for the great moment when its bells would peal forth again. The service was that of Evensong, and after the third collect the choir and clergy filed down the church for the great event. The Rev. L. Wilkinson, the Rural Dean, solemnly dedicated the bells to be used only and ever to the glory of God and then with a great burst of joy the bells were raised in peal. A short touch of Bob Minor was rung and the choir returned to the singing of Stanford's setting of Psalm 150. The Rural Dean then preached, his theme being the bells as messengers. After the service there was general ringing till 8 p.m., and two bumper teas were laid on one for non-ringers and one for ringers, at the latter of which Mr. P. A. Corby, general secretary of the Kent County Association, thanked Stanley Evans and congratulated him on making this day possible.

THE BELLS

Treble (3 cwt. 3 qr. 1 lb. in F): Alleluia Alleluia. We two trebles were cast from the old tenor. Thomas Mears 1842. Mears, 1967, London.

Second (4-0-27, D): Glory be to God on High. Stanley Munro Evans, Vicar. Francis Tooze, Eric Turville, Churchwardens. Mears, 1967, London.

Third (4 3-20, C): The Gift of Thomas Aldersley Gentleman, 1692. Iacobvs Bartlett me fecit.

Fourth (5-3-22, B): John Wilnar made me, 1620.

Fifth (7-1-22, A): Robert Mot made me, MDLXXXIX.

Tenor (9-2-6, G): John Wilnar, 1634.

So Bredgar bells ring out today. They sound out and as they do they tell of the courage and devotion of Stanley Evans; of the skill and craftsmanship of their makers; of the zeal and enthusiasm of those who ring them; and they ring, as they were dedicated, always and only to the glory of God.

SALISBURY DIOCESAN GUILD

Litton Cheney church was tastefully decorated for Harvest Festival when the Dorchester Branch held a quarterly meeting there on October 7th. In the unavoidable absence of the Rector, the Guild service was conducted by the Branch chairman, the Rev. C. E. C. Brinkworth. Ringing on the eight bells took place during the afternoon and evening under the direction of the Ringing Master, Mr. E. H. Amey. Tea was provided in the Church Hut by Mr. and Mrs. E. G. Fry and helpers, and the company of 25 included visitors from Wimborne and Swanage as well as ringers from seven towers in the Branch. Subject to confirmation, evening practices will be held at Charminster, November 4th; Preston, November 18th; St. Peter's, Dorchester, December 2nd; Upwey, December 16th; Abbotshbury, December 30th; and Puddletown, January 27th. The next meeting (annual) will be held at Cattistock on January 13th.