

Restoration at Cowden, Kent

*Cowden church, crooked steeple,
Lying priest, deceitful people.*

Thus goes the local doggerel, but please forget the second line, as it is no longer true (if ever it was!). The first line, however, is as true today as it was when the rhyme was made up, despite the following story...

Yes, yet another tale of restoration and rededication and yes, something special and a little different. Cowden is a small village of 650 people on the Kent and Sussex borders. Our Church of St Mary Magdalene is a slightly unusual case because it stands in Kent, but is included in the Chichester Diocese, as our sister churches (Hammerwood and Holtye) are in Sussex. The church, which is Grade II* Listed, dates back to 1300 and the tower and spire are constructed of massive oak timbers, the outside of the spire being shingled with oak. Ringing was stopped in 1972 because it was thought to be causing damage to the tower. The recommended solution was to re-hang the bells lower down in the tower. This also meant that the clock mechanism had to be moved up. Funding was not forthcoming at that time, so an Ellacombe was installed.

In 1996, Hilary Bayvey heard that the Millennium Commission, in conjunction with the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, were providing funds to enable unringable bells to be re-hung. Hilary, a Peshurst ringer who had moved to the village five years previously, thought 'why not see if it is possible to get the bells ringing full circle again in Cowden?' After much deliberation, and in the knowledge that we would get considerable voluntary help from the Kent County Association (KCACR), our Churchwarden, Dione Corbett, made the big decision to try again. Whilst our bells were unringable, we had other problems too. On inspection by the architect, structural engineer and laser engineer, the tower was found to be structurally unsound due to beetle infestation. The cost to repair this and re-shingle the spire was £287,000. We were fortunate in getting a substantial grant from English Heritage, (and another grant from Sussex Historic Churches) towards this sum. In fact the main structure of the tower had been very badly damaged by the beetle and according to the architect the spire was held in place by 'cobwebs and the grace of God'. Consequently our church was shrouded in scaffolding from outside to inside in a way which was designed to support the spire while the infested woodwork was removed and new timbers inserted.

Despite all this we did not forget the bells. The estimated total cost was £60,000. Unfortunately, due to the delays, we were too late to get funding for the restoration from the Millennium Commission, but we had a generous £10,000 donation from the late Lawrence Fowler, who used to ring at Brasted. In the hope that we would be successful in our application for Landfill Tax Credits, we placed an order with Whitechapel Bell Foundry in time to have the bells ringing for the local millennium celebrations. We have a ring of six bells, the two oldest of which are listed. One of these was cast in 1410 and the other in 1584. We were not permitted to retune these bells which in any case sound pretty good. Instead the other four were tuned to them. It is a light ring, the tenor weighing 7-2-15. Of course, with no ringing for 28 years, there was no band of ringers so ...

(continued opposite)



Peter Romney, KCACR Bell Restoration Convenor and Peter White from Whitechapel.

DETAILS OF THE BELLS

Bell	Weight	Diameter	Date	Founder and Inscription
Tenor	7-2-15	3'-0 1/4"	1635	Recast by John Warner & Sons, London, 1911
5th	6-1-17	2'-8 1/2"	1584	1584 Unknown itinerant founder Anno DM 1584
4th	5-0-6	2'-6 1/4"	1410	Robert Burford, London Johannes Est Nomen Ejus
3rd	3-3-7	2'-4"	1791	Thomas Mears, London, 1791
2nd	3-2-20	2'-3 1/2"	1654	Recast by John Warner & Sons, London, 1911
Treble	3-1-23	2'-1 3/4"	1911	John Warner & Sons, London, 1911 In Memoriam Edward VII Anno Domini MCMXL

COWDEN – *continued*

A little over two years ago, Catherine Lewis, the Training Convenor for the KCACR, and Brian Jeffrey, Tower Captain of Edenbridge, and with help from Bob Sherlock, Tower Captain of Brasted, took on seven local volunteers, five of whom have stayed. The band come from a very mixed background – Frank, a local artist, and Sue his wife, a special needs teacher, Jenny, our musical lady, Jill, a very keen horticulturalist and Pam, a retired nurse. Then, last year, what luck – a ringer, Caroline Levy-Cooper (now our Tower Captain) moved into the village, and then another ringer, Clive Lumsden, came to Cowden, so that with the originator of the project there are eight of us altogether. By coincidence, Caroline and Clive had both had a break of around 25 years and were keen to start ringing again. Caroline had learnt to ring in Betchworth, Surrey where she was taught by Bernard Hawkins, who was at that time the Tower Captain at St Michael's, Betchworth. Clive rang as a teenager at St. Saviour's Church in Bacup, Lancashire. He has had to get used to the different terminology used down here. The Tower Captain there at the time was Jack Bracewell, who also taught Clive to ring handbells, though Clive didn't admit how much he enjoyed ringing these at the time. Neither of these two ex-ringers realised how much they were needed in Cowden! After our critical training in the basics of bell handling we were 'farmed out' to other towers in the district (Chiddingstone, and Withyham). After a few months Catherine arranged a weekly practice at St. Stephen's, Hammerwood, one of our sister churches, until we had our own bells. Brian Jeffrey is still keeping an eye on us during practices and on Sundays. One of our ringers, Mrs Jill Wright, is the present owner of Waystrode Manor, where a previous owner, Richard Still, in the 18th century became lost and was guided home by the bells. He died in 1726 and in his will gave 20 shillings a year for the great bell to be rung at 5 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock in the evening from Michaelmas to Ladyday for ever. This was carried out, albeit only once a day, by the late Ernest Ladd as recently as between the two world wars.

February 2000 saw Peter Romney, KCACR Bell Restoration Convenor, and his team lower the bells, which were collected by Whitechapel Bell Foundry. Six church bells strapped onto the back of an open lorry is quite a rare sight, did anybody spot it? We did not get funding from the Landfill Tax Credits either, but have had help from the Colyer-Fergusson Charitable Trust, the Manifold Trust, the Barron Bell Trust, the KCACR, the Open Churches Trust and the Sharpe Trust. Also, by kind permission of Mrs Jill Wright, Waystrode Manor Garden was open one Sunday afternoon in June on behalf of the bell restoration fund. Many ringers attended this event and enjoyed having a go at Walter Dobbie's Jubilee Peal. This Jubilee Peal was cast by Walter Dobbie to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. He was a school teacher at the time and was involved in several after-school clubs. With a lot of help from the schoolchildren, he cast six mini bells, the tenor weighing approximately 12½ lbs. The bells were hung in a mild steel frame and had ropes specially made by Peter Minchin. Funds were also raised by having an excellent Flower Festival in the church, with all the arrangements having a bell theme, together with an art exhibition. Small amounts have been collected with Scrabble afternoons and Whist drives, and we have had some very generous donations, an extremely generous loan, to say nothing of the voluntary work done by Peter Romney and other members of the KCACR. Peter worked alongside Whitechapel Bell Foundry to re-build the frame and to re-hang the bells, saving us a huge amount



Church of St Mary Magdalene, Cowden, Kent.

of money. As before, the frame was built in such a way as to avoid touching the West wall. Had it done so, ringing would not be possible. Due to this the structure needs to be monitored in one year's time, and ringing has to be restricted to limited periods only. Certainly we have not been given the go-ahead to ring peals (not that the Cowden band are up to this quite yet!).

The trial ring took place on 10th July when several touches of Bob Minor were rung. During this measurements were taken by the laser engineer. These seemed to satisfy the structural engineer and architect that all was well, or at least as well as could be expected now that the frame had been lowered. Despite being a ground floor ring, with a medium to long draft and a little movement, the bells handle very well.

Unfortunately we were unable to ring the bells, as had been hoped, for our Millennium Street Party on 24th June, but they were rung for the Patronal Festival, when the church became 700 years old and a special Songs of Praise service was held in celebration. The church looked as magnificent as it did at the time of the aforementioned Flower Festival in July. Since then the bells have been rung for weekly practices and two Sundays a month.

On Sunday 24th September the church tower and bells were rededicated by the Archdeacon of Horsham, The Venerable William Filby. The service was an eventful one, having to include Harvest Festival, the dedication of a memorial

plaque, the admission of a new churchwarden as well as the rededication. The Archdeacon was still on crutches following a bad fall, and strangely enough the churchwarden for Hammerwood who was admitted at the service was also on crutches! Once the treble rope had been handed to Hilary (rather than the Tower Captain in this case, because Hilary has worked so hard since 1996 to get the project underway), the new Cowden band rang rounds while the Archdeacon and Rector made their way back to the chancel. We were particularly proud of ourselves as we all managed to set our bells when the shout 'Stand' was heard (yes, shout, because at the moment there is no sound insulation!). After the service the bell-ringers invited the congregation for a glass of wine and then rang again for a short time before lowering the bells. The Archdeacon was extremely friendly and outgoing and spoke to us at the end of the service, saying how impressed he was that we had all set our bells at the appropriate time. We laughed and told him that he was not the only one who was impressed, as we were all very nervous about this and could not believe that we had done it.

HILARY BAVEY

CAROLINE LEVY-COOPER



Collection of Principles, 3rd edition

Principles are possibly the most varied group of methods. The plain courses of all methods are divided into equal parts called leads and the bells are either hunt bells or working bells. Each of the hunt bells does the same work in every lead and all the working bells do the same work in the plain course (the work of the method). Principles are methods with no hunt bells so all the bells are working bells and all do the work of the method. The principles which have been rung the length of their leads varies considerably from two changes (Original) to 42 changes (Isis Major) with corresponding variety in the complexity of their blue lines. One principle even has an odd number of changes in the lead!

The Collection of Principles contains (almost) all principles rung at Minor and higher stages (Lynx Maximus rung recently in Spliced will have to wait for the 4th edition!). The new edition retains the earlier format for each principle of a diagram, earliest extant composition rung to a peal (extent for Minor), details of first performance (or early performances if the compositions used for the earliest performances are not known). The comprehensive index includes entries for names, places and societies.

New principles are rung infrequently and there have only been 15 completely new principles rung in the past ten years. If you are looking for something different to ring then this Collection is an excellent place to start.

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