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# THE RINGING WORLD

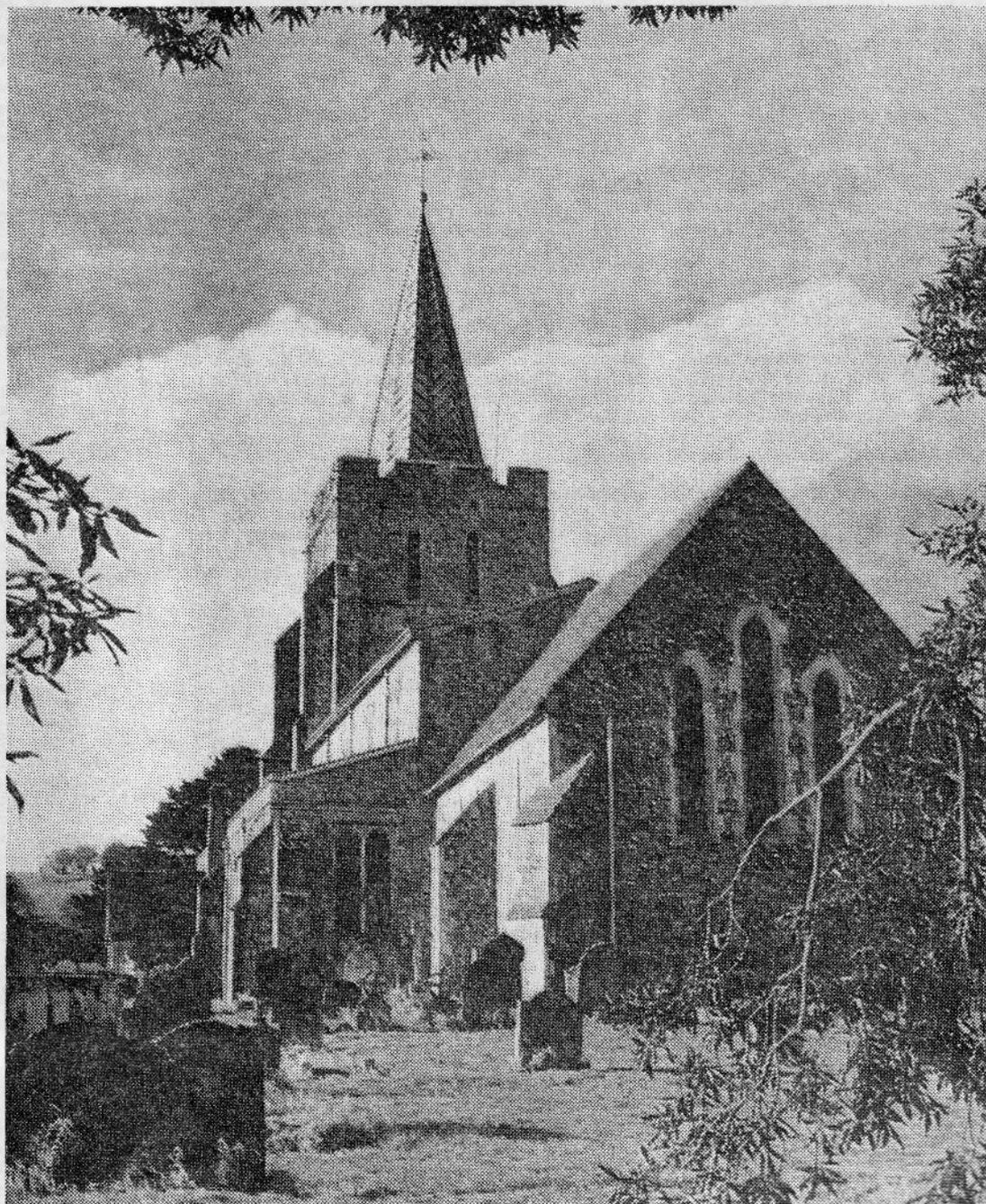
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**St. Mary the  
Virgin,  
Elham,  
Kent**



COVER PICTURE

**St. Mary the Virgin, Elham, Kent**

By DAVID L. CAWLEY, F.S.A. Scot.

TO RAILWAY LOVERS the mention of the name Elham will conjure up nostalgic memories of Kent's most attractive—alas, erstwhile—branch line. To the lover of bells it will recall a rather heavy-going eight, rung from behind the organ. To the lover of churches it will bring memories of what John Betjeman, perhaps rightly, called "the most beautiful parish church in Kent".

Set in the heart of a most attractive village, this great building would impress, seen within or without. It consists of a long nave, flanked by aisles, chancel, north and south porches and a lofty western tower, flanked with a stair turret and surmounted by a leaded spire. Set in a large and well-kept churchyard, it represents a compact and pleasing building, to which all the great building centuries have contributed, not least our own.

The original church would seem to have been on the site of the present nave. There was undoubtedly a church here in Saxon times, and from early days Elham was important enough to give its name to a rural deanery. The church was apparently of two cells, which the Normans retained when they heightened the walls to give the nucleus of the present centre-plan. Of this Norman nave very little remains, but what does remain is an interesting object-lesson in mediæval building. When the present aisles were added in the Early English period the side walls of the nave were not removed; they were simply pierced for the present arches, and the remaining portions were cased with stone, thus giving massive square pillars, supporting severe but well-proportioned arches into each aisle. A little later a lighter and loftier arch was placed in the east wall, and the chancel entirely rebuilt, structurally as we see it today. It is not clear whether a tower existed before this time.

In the period of the little town's greatest prosperity, the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the windows of the aisles were reconstructed in the prevailing Early Perpendicular style; later, the present tower was built, with its glorious arch (alas, blocked by a fine, but over-large, organ case); and, unusual for Kent, a clerestory was raised over the square-piered nave arches, thus giving added light and beauty inside and increased height and dignity outside. The present porches were also constructed at this time, that on the north being surmounted by a parvise. Before the 16th century had begun, Elham was dominated as it is today by the present splendid building.

The most recent development took place in the present century under the guidance of the noted church architect, Mr. F. C. Eden. The results cannot fail to impress; here is no fussy overloading but a beautifying which is the result of a sensitive appreciation of the development of the building. The nave, with its side aisles, is simple, uncluttered and very light; the 18th century text-boards have been cleaned and allowed to remain, and the upper clerestory walls have been whitened. Such simplicity is a most successful foil to the chancel, which has been sumptuously furnished with Renaissance-style fittings which blend exquisitely with the Gothic sanctuary. The church possesses, in a side chapel, a fine continental mediæval reredos, probably unique in Kent. "The glory of the latter

house shall be greater than of the former," said the prophet, and his dream has come true.

For this splendid church, splendid bells were doubtless given; the Edwardian inventory records in 1552 five "Grete Belles". The further details of the bells are not known, but the subsequent history of the tower is woven up with two other parishes, St. Alphege, Seasalter, and St. Mary the Virgin, Sandwich (see articles on Seasalter, R.W., 1969, and "Sandwich—Town of Silent Towers", R.W., 1967, by the writer of this article).

Let us go first to Seasalter, where in 1562 the "parishoners complain that their Bells are fctolen away and conveyed to Mr. Lynche's at Sandwich". The bells never returned, and Simon Lynch, who was Mayor of Sandwich at the time, was generous in many ways towards St. Mary's—and no doubt had good cause to be generous with any spare bells he "came by"—being churchwarden at the same time as this "conveyance". But despite the plans which men make, whereas in 1562 Sandwich boasted three mighty central towers at its three great churches, a hundred years later only one stood. St. Peter's was rebuilt in 1667, six years after the storm which brought both it and St. Mary's tower down. St. Mary's had, only 11 years before the disaster of 1661, placed additional stresses and strains on its tower—a fact which was unfortunate for Sandwich but was beneficial to Elham: here is the story.

The Sandwich folk seem to have been dissatisfied with their St. Mary's bells; there were only three, and in addition the tenor was cracked. In 1639 the churchwardens were empowered to make a contract with John Wilnor, of Borden in Kent, either to recast the tenor for £16 or to recast the heavy three into a proportionate ring of five for £32. They agreed to the latter course, and in 1640, the statutory term of a year and a day having been satisfactorily concluded, we read: "Paid Henry Wilnor for the use of the widow of John Wilnor for casting of our five bells and hanging them . . . £32.0.0". They even went in for a striking clock. Mr. Thomas Barrett being paid 23s. 8d. for making it to strike on the fourth; the Dutch population of the town paid half of this. So the ringers of St. Mary's, Sandwich, rang their bells ("joye bells", the record runs), and 11 years later the tower collapsed into the church, bringing down the arcades of both aisles. Repairs, including a roof which is a very forest of timber, were so expensive that the tower could never go back.

At this period, the five "grete belles" of Elham appear to have been worn out; and hearing of the misfortunes of the people of Sandwich, the Elham wardens took horse thither and came back with five virtually new bells. The old five were disposed of, and as late as 1758 Mr. Bryan Faussett, the antiquary, could note at Elham "Five bells, all made by John Wilnor in ye year 1659". Now Wilnor died in 1640; the Sandwich bells were probably his last ring. So, allowing Mr. Faussett to have read 1659 for 1639, we may assume that the five Sandwich bells rang at Elham from 1662 until they were replaced by a new ring in 1763. This very heavy peal weighed: Treble, 8 cwt. 1 qr. 22 lb.; 2nd, 8 cwt. 2 qr. 13 lb.; 3rd, 12 cwt. 0 qr. 7 lb.; 4th, 15 cwt. 0 qr. 6 lb.; Tenor, 20 cwt. 0 qr. 14 lb.

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In the latter year, the vogue for change-ringing being well-established in Kent, Elham experienced yet another of the beautifications which have graced its church. Thomas Lester and Thomas Pack, of White-chapel, were ordered to produce one of their popular "musical" rings of bells, and they were hung in the tower by John Potter, whose name appears on the fifth. From the evidence of timber still existing in the spire supports, it would seem that part of the old frame was re-used, a common practice of the time. The dates on the tenor and third bells were incised upon them, indicating perhaps that the bells were a "stock" ring. They were a popular ring, the first peal being rung on May 23rd, 1772, 5040 Grandsire Triples. Tuned in the key of F, they weighed as follows:—

Treble.—4 cwt. 2 qr. 2 lb.  
Second.—4 cwt. 2 qr. 18 lb.  
Third.—5 cwt. 3 qr. 8 lb.  
Fourth.—6 cwt. 2 qr. 11 lb.  
Fifth.—7 cwt. 0 qr. 11 lb.  
Sixth.—7 cwt. 3 qr. 24 lb.  
Seventh.—10½ cwt. approx.  
Tenor.—15 cwt. 2 qr. 11 lb.

All seems to have gone well until 1809, when the seventh was recast by Thomas Mears, weighing 11 cwt. 3 qr. 27 lb. Further work became necessary as the century progressed, and in 1887 the bells were taken down, the fourth, sixth and tenor quarter-turned, and all rehung with all the fittings (excepting the clappers) renewed, in a new oak frame by John Warner and Sons. Later, during the present century, a ringing gallery was constructed and the rope draught lessened. But the bells were becoming difficult to ring and by 1960 it was known that two of them were cracked.

In 1969 the writer visited the tower, and recommended recasting the cracked bells (he found that, in addition, the second was cracked), tuning the remainder and rehanging in all new fittings, in the present splendid frame, which was to be strengthened by the insertion of 26 tie-rods, as those supplied by Warners in 1887 were too far from the pit centres to be effective. Both firms of bellfounders were asked to tender  
(Continued on next page)