

KENT LOOKS AFTER ITS MEDIEVAL BELLS

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the majority of pre-Reformation bells are housed in towers with less than five bells, and that, because for some inexplicable reason, most ringers find no interest in such lesser towers, these bells are more often than not in an unringable condition.

The county of Kent comprises the dioceses of Rochester and Canterbury (less Croydon, plus a small bit of Southwark). The revision of the schedule of bells for preservation gave the admirable opportunity of verifying the state of many mediæval and other rare bells, and of examining some "unknown quantities", bells usually reported as "blank" but hitherto undated, which now find a place in the schedule. This schedule, originally the work of Mr. H. B. Walters, was revised for Kent by Messrs. R. W. M. Clouston and D. L. Cawley. In the majority of cases where bells were found to be in need of attention the opportunity was taken of rendering a report, and it is interesting to see the appreciative letters which have come in, and some of the work has already been carried out, of which the following is a summary:

LYDDEN.—The bell described by Stahl-schmidt as "9½ in., blank" (dia. 27¾ in.) was found to be considerably larger, and we ascribed it to the mid-13th century. It hung in the remains of a larger frame with a half-wheel and had worn clean through its brass bearings into the wood. A pernicious type of Ellacombe hammer was currently in use. All this has gone and the bell has been properly turned and rehung by the Whitechapel Foundry.

WHITFIELD (illustrated). — Dismissed without comment as "blank" by Stahl-schmidt, this bell (18½ in. dia.) must fight it out with that at Coldred (preserved in chancel), and two at Iwade, for the distinction of being Kent's oldest. It hung precariously from a pair of fragile U-bolts, only three of its canons were left and the gear was dilapidated. Such vast canons (the argent is over 7 inches high) did not make rehung easy; and as they had to be preserved, yet were not sound enough to justify supporting the bell on them, special bolts were made to pass through the holes in the shoulder of the bell formerly occupied by the false crown staple (it is interesting to note that there was never one cast into the bell). A new arched steel headstock completed the problem's solution and the bell is now rehung by the Whitechapel Foundry. The bell is ascribed to the late 12th century.

WALMER.—The old church is now in frequent use again, but the blank bell recorded by Stahl-schmidt had been taken by Warners and recast into one for the new eight at the new church. The Joseph Hatch bell of 1635 was still there, its headstock split completely in half. The bell was rehung for swing chiming by Whitechapel.

HUCKINGE.—It was found that the smaller of the two blank bells which Stahl-schmidt recorded in 1887 was recast

by Gillett and Johnston in 1897. The larger was assigned a date c. 1450. The old fittings were found to be in need of repair, and in the circumstances new immediate fittings are at the time of writing being supplied by Whitechapel in time for the departure of the rector, the Rev. Stanley Evans, who is chairman of the K.C.A.

SWINGFIELD.—Not mediæval, but the bell of 34¾ in. is a rare casting by John Wood, of Bishopsgate. Some years ago a new frame was installed locally but the old fittings (including wooden wedges as the only supports to the ironwork) were replaced by modern type gear by Whitechapel last year and the bell quarter-turned on the new local frame. There were once three bells here, all by John Wood.

KINGSTON.—The three bells here were in a shocking state: tenor (c. 1325 by William le Belyetere of Canterbury) cracked circumferentially and probably irreparably; treble with several canons broken or missing and hanging loose, the clapper hanging on a piece of wire; the middle bell unsafely "clocked". The frame was literally dropping to pieces and the floor below was safest where it didn't exist. To the uninscribed treble a mid-15th century date was ascribed. The bells and frame were removed by Messrs. John Taylor and Co.; the tenor is preserved on the first floor of the tower. The 15th and 17th century bells were rehung "dead" and the whole belfry thoroughly overhauled.

The last two cases have involved the practice of welding bells. The first was at **SNARGATE** on Romney Marsh, where the 1673 second by John Hodson became



The bell of Whitfield Church, Kent—probably of 12th century date.

[Photo: Whitechapel Bellfoundry Ltd.]

cracked in the crown. It has in it such a fine array of Charles II coins that recasting was not considered desirable. The White-chapel Foundry dismantled the three bells, and the dates originally assigned by Stahl-schmidt have been reversed. Despite its rough-shaped lettering, the shape of the tenor bell itself supported a date of c. 1325; the treble, with long waist and cabled projecting canons, is now assigned to c. 1280. The middle bell was duly welded by Sound-weld of Cambridge, and the three bells, rehung for swing chiming, were rehallowed in October. At **BROOK**, near Ashford, the mighty Norman tower with priest's room on the first floor, possesses a very early mediæval bell frame of braced-centre-post type. The uninscribed treble was found to be in all other respects identical with the second, by Kebyll of London, c. 1460. These bells have now been dismantled and the tenor (Joseph Hatch, 1616) is in London after welding. The three bells will be rehung in the ancient frame, which presumably held their predecessors, for stationary chiming.

Other hitherto undiscovered ancient bells (many thankfully in good condition) are as follows:—

Pre-1300: Barfreystone, single; Norton, single.

14th-century: Bonnington, single; Eastry, sanctus; Goodnestone-by-Faversham; Kingsdown by Sittingbourne, treble.

15th-century: Bridge, treble and second; Broomfield, treble; Canterbury St. Alphege, fifth; St. Martin, treble; Darenth, treble; Hawkinge Old Church, single; Hinxhill, treble; Hougham, tenor; Lud-desdowne, treble; Newnham, treble and second; New Romney, sanctus; Nurstead, single; Oare, single; Tenterden, sanctus; Tonge, second; East Wickham old church, tenor. At Upchurch, the 4th bell was discovered by Mr. Clouston to bear the rebus of John Harding, c. 1550.

Against this must be set the losses of ancient bells since 1887. Since 1925, the Faculty Jurisdiction Measure has largely prevented this—two in the war (Canterbury: St. George 2nd, and St. Mary Bredin 2nd), one by fire subsequently (Leybourne in 1965). The sale of the ring of five at Boughton Aluph in 1952, and their subsequent destruction, including two mediæval bells (one intact), was quite inexcusable. The other losses (since 1925)—the sanctus at Sundridge and the single bell of Ridley—were both uninscribed bells, but we have no clue now to their age. But between 1887 and 1925 we lost very many more ancient bells, making a total of 30 (20 from Canterbury, 10 from Rochester).

Now we have revised the schedule, and made a good start on restorations, both foundries making admirable contributions. We like to feel that our bells are in good hands, and urge all ringers throughout the country to do their best to see that, in their lesser as well as their greater belfries, things are done "decently and in good order".

D. L. C.