

The Ringing World

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The Weekly Journal for Church Bell Ringers

Trials, tribulations – eventually success at Hoo

Hoo St. Werburgh is situated in North Kent between the River Medway and the River Thames and the 13th century church, dedicated to St. Werburgh, sits on the south side of the village. The city of Rochester is a short distance to the west while the Hoo peninsula stretches away to the east. The wooden shingled spire is marked on the admiralty maps as an old navigational aid and this allows us to fly the White Ensign. Until 18th March 1995, the tower held a heavy going anticlockwise ring of six bells that had never been tuned together as a complete ring.

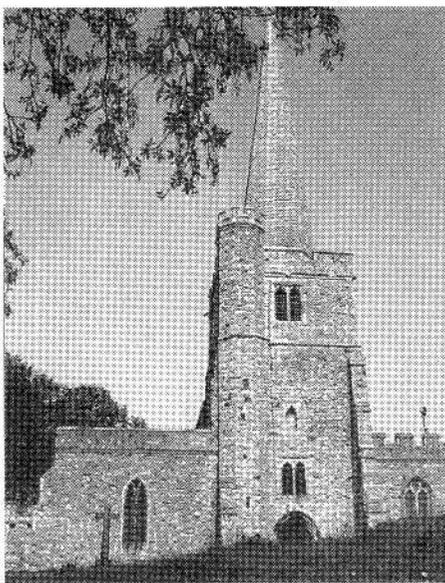
One at a time

We don't know the full history of the original six bells at Hoo, only that they came here one at a time. At least, we assume that they did because they were all cast by different founders in different years. The oldest bell in the tower was cast in 1588, and may have been installed to warn the locals of an impending invasion from the Dutch. Until 1825, there were five bells in the tower, hence the name of the Five Bells Public House, which was officially named in 1784 three years after the previous bell was installed in the tower. During the century after the 'new' treble was added, the bells must have become unringable or at least very hard to ring, as they were rehung with new fittings and quarter turned in 1913. The work was carried out by Alfred Bowell of Ipswich and cost £80.00, plus £4.00 for the bell ropes and £3.00 for the chiming hammers. When this work was carried out, Bowell cut off the canons on each bell. Rumour has it that the Bishop of the day told Bowell that, because he had cut off the canons without permission, he would never work in the Diocese again. However the rumour is very hard to substantiate as Bowell worked in 58 Kentish towns and villages and at least 19 of these contracts were in the Rochester Diocese.

Hard to ring

For as long as anyone can remember, Hoo bells have always been hard to ring. They were a heavy going anticlockwise six on plain gun metal bearings. Difficult to ring well, even with the best of bands and many visitors would fight shy of ringing when told they were anticlockwise.

As far back as 1969, the bellringers considered rehanging the bells and a report from Whitechapel stated that they should at least be rehung with all new fittings and frictional parts. Unfortunately, funds were not available and the parish considered the cost of such a project to be completely out of their reach. Therefore, the proposal was dropped and the bells and fittings continued to



Hoo St. Werburgh, Kent viewed from the West.

deteriorate slowly. The bells became harder to ring as the years went by, and teaching learners on difficult bells was sometimes virtually impossible, although some determined individuals have progressed despite all the odds.

In 1983, the people of High Halstow, a small village about two miles north, heard their bells for the first time in about a hundred years. This was entirely due to the efforts of one man in the village and he proceeded to teach a band of ringers from scratch and several of us from Hoo found ourselves helping with the teaching. This seemed to inspire our local ringers, especially as we realised how easy to ring the new High Halstow bells were compared with ours. Once again, we started to dream of nice, easy to ring, in tune bells.

Committee formed

Five years later, in 1988, after several years of us all saying, "We really must do something about these bells", the restoration committee was formed. Once again, estimates and reports were sought, this time from the two principal bellfounders, Taylors and Whitechapels. Taylors even suggested that we might consider having ten bells in the tower, as there was certainly room for them. However, the Whitechapel report and estimate was accepted and we sat down to work out how much it might cost us. The problem was, that we had to include an unknown inflation rate over an unknown period of time. After much discussion, the final magic figure of £45,000 was arrived at, but this excluded the cost of the proposed new bells, which we hoped might be

donated at a later date. The theory was that if we installed a frame to accommodate eight bells, we could always add the new trebles when funds permitted. After much discussion with parishioners, members of the PCC and other local bellringers, we decided to preserve the traditional link with our past and keep our bells as they have always been – anticlockwise.

Fundraising started in earnest with a flower festival in the summer of 1988, coincidentally, the first event that David Low our new vicar, attended after moving to the parish. This inaugural event raised a healthy £1,100 and by the end of the year we had raised £2,229. We were very happy with this figure, but the grand total seemed a very long way off.

Rumblings!

It was about this time that we started to hear rumblings from certain people in the parish. "They won't raise that sort of money", they said. "They'll never do it in a hundred years". Fortunately, this only made us more determined to succeed and as time crept on, and the rumblings continued, we became even more dogged. We heard it said that we were taking money away from the parish, even though most of our cash was raised away from the church. Some people said that we should raise money for the church and forget about the bells. I suppose, for many people, it was out of sight, out of mind. The reverse actually proved to be the case, as the restoration project seemed to inspire many others within the church and general fundraising has increased considerably.

Ring beam confusion

The progress of the restoration project was never straightforward. It was quite early on when we enquired about English Heritage. They were apparently causing many problems with other restorations around the country, but we were told that they had not been involved with Hoo Church previously and therefore did not have to be informed about our forthcoming project.

Due to some relatively minor cracking in the tower walls, we were told by Whitechapel that we might need a reinforced concrete ring beam to strengthen the tower. The Diocese informed us that we would need to consult a structural architect and take his advice on the subject. This we did and the report from the architect was very encouraging – we did not need a concrete ring beam. This would save us an estimated £8,000. Sighs of relief all round and we wrote to the Diocese to let them know the good news. Unfortunately, the architect we employed was not recognised by the Diocese and the report on the tower wasted £160 of hard earned money. Back to square one, and we still did not know about the ring beam.

Another, Diocesan approved, architect was found and asked to look over the tower. Two of us conducted him around and his points and

(continued overleaf)

HOO ST. WERBURGH - continued

comments were very encouraging. He said some local stitching would be needed across the cracks, but a ring beam would not be required. Elation once again as the committee celebrated the saving of lots of money. However, when his report finally arrived, we believe he must have had a change of heart as he submitted a belt and braces type report and hedged his bets about the ring beam. The bottom line was that he recommended the ring beam if more bells were to be added, although he knew at the time that we intended to install an eight bell frame. Nevertheless, we now knew that we needed a ring beam and the drawings from Whitechapel were commissioned at a cost of £805.

EH involvement

By this time we had applied for grants from many sympathetic sources and also applied for the faculty from the Diocese, which we were told would cost in the region of £80. Then we found out from the Diocese that Hoo had indeed been involved with EH in the past and that they would have to be informed of our plans. Horror. What would happen now?

Well the first thing that happened was that EH refused to agree with the ring beam idea and suggested that a new socket and anchor system should be used to stitch the cracks. Our architect completely disagreed with this idea and Whitechapel stated that the socket and anchor system was not suitable for this type of building. Stalemate, and the faculty was rejected. In the meantime, EH decided that they wanted to monitor the tower movement with computers and other measuring equipment. This was done over a period of several weeks, to measure tower movement when it was windy and when the bells were rung. The bottom line on tower movement was that it didn't - or at least, the movement was so small that they couldn't agree on how little it moved. The finally agreed figure, was something like 26 microns.

A lively meeting

To solve the ring beam problem, the Diocese suggested a site meeting should be held with all the interested parties attending. They also suggested that we should obtain the opinion of yet another, approved, independent architect. This cost us another £144, but in the end was money well spent. After a lively meeting when unqualified representatives and our structural architect threw abuse at each other, the independent man came to the rescue. His idea was simplicity itself and we cannot understand why it was not suggested before this time. He said that we should bring the bells down to first floor level, just above the clock room floor. This would position them under the offending cracks in the tower, would negate the removal of some struts that EH wanted to keep and do away with the expensive and ugly ring beam. All agreed, but the drawings that we had paid £805 for were now obsolete - well almost, but they could be altered as the main arrangement would remain unchanged. There was only one down side to this suggestion however, the clock mechanism would have to be moved vertically by about 12 feet and autowound as there was no room for it in its then location. After later consultation with the Church horologist, we received estimates in the region of £5,000. Nevertheless, we had saved £2,000-£3,000 but we would have to cover the clock with a new case, renew old louvres and install a sound control system. Money that had not previously been budgeted for.

Things were now moving on and once again we found ourselves on track, even though we had spent a lot of money getting nowhere.

One more obstacle

There now seemed to be only one obstacle to overcome. The old third bell, the Gyles Reve dated 1588, is listed for preservation by the Council for the Care of Churches. However, as the bell had previously had its canons removed by Alfred Howell in 1913, we argued that it was not in its original condition and should be tuned in harmony with the rest of the ring. Another meeting was called at Whitechapel to be attended by members of the DAC, The Council for the Care of Churches and ourselves. It was to be explained to the assembly all the possible alternatives to tuning or part tuning of the bell and its position within the ring. The meeting was held and all agreed that the bell could be tuned properly although it should be monitored and photographed.

Finally, everything was in order for us to proceed and the faculty was granted, costing us £637 instead of the £80 promised.

Still things did not go completely according to plan. The new frame was not fully completed by the suppliers and we had to finish the job ourselves. The free of charge galvanising ended up costing us over £800 although subsequent work was done for nothing. We still have an, as yet unknown bill coming from the Diocese which will be added to the parish share. This amounts to



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approximately 11% of the total money raised for the project. They are in effect penalising us for raising money which will go to the parish.

Great support

Over the past eight years we have organised boot fayres, wine and wisdom evenings, coffee mornings, car rallies, jumble sales, sponsored events and much, much more. Everyone has helped. Bellringers, both local and district, parishioners, PCC members and a great many locals and ex locals now living away from Hoo. We have had financial help from countless sources with donations ranging from a few pence pocket money to £8,000. We have received practical help from local and not so local equipment. Many people have given up their days, weekends and evenings to weld, build, clear, paint and just to offer some sheer brute strength when it was needed. This project could not possibly have been completed without so many volunteers and willing helpers. And, as we had hoped, when the majority of the money had been raised, the two new bells were donated making the ring complete.

The bells were installed in the tower on 31st July last year and the test ring took place on 16th August, five months to the day after the faculty was granted.

On the insistence of EH, the original oak frame was retained in the old belfry, but now contains a 5 cwt dumb bell, for teaching purposes.

The well attended dedication service was held on Saturday 4th November 1995. Our vicar, David Low rededicated the old six bells and dedicated the two new Trebles. Following the service, an enormous bellringers' tea was laid on by the local ladies, supplemented by wine to wash it down.

Practice nights are on Mondays at 7.30 pm and all are welcome.

ARTHUR D. VIDGEON.

Details of the Bells.

Tenor - 15-3-6 in E₂. 3'11 1/2"

THOMAS GARDINER MADE ME. SUDBURY SUFFOLK 1738

7th - 13-1-04 in F. 3'7 1/2"

Wm CHAPMAN OF LONDON FECIT 1781 SAMUEL SMITH & THOMAS WICKENS CH. WARDENS.

6th - 10-1-11 in G. 3'3 1/2"

WILLIAM HATCH MADE ME 1641 HC HC CW

5th - 7-1-02 in A₂. 3'0 1/2"

GYLES REVE BELL-FOUNDER 1588 BY ME

4th - 7-1-18 in B₂. 2'10 1/2"

JOHN HODSON MADE ME 1662

WILLIAM COSENS JOHN PEETT CHURCHWARDENS. WH

3rd - 5-2-27 in C. 2'8 1/2"

T. MEARS OF LONDON FECIT 1825

GEORGE PEARCE & JOHN GRAVES

CHURCHWARDENS

2nd - 6-0-02 in D. 2'6 1/2"

DONATED BY NORMAN VIDGEON IN MEMORY OF HIS FATHER AND BROTHER, THOMAS AND ROBERT, FARMERS. 1995

Treble - 5-2-23 in E₂. 2'5 1/2"

DONATED BY THE TOWER CAPTAIN ALLAN VIDGEON AND HIS WIFE JESSIE. DAVID LOW - VICAR. LEN SMITH ROGER CARPENTER CHURCHWARDENS 1995

Dumbo - 5-0-0 in B₂. 2'10" (The same profile as the Hodson) 'Cast' by a local company. (No inscription yet).

But was he a ringer?

(From A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire lad*)

Say, for what were hop fields meant,
Or why was Burton built on Trent?
Many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse -
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.