

## Tone still distinctly mediæval

A rehanging project with a difference culminated on Sunday, 28 June, with a service of thanksgiving at Iwade. Iwade is a small parish just to the west of Sittingbourne in north Kent, through which runs the only road to Sheerness, which means non-stop traffic, mostly heavy lorries, roaring past the 12th century church.

About six months ago the convenor of the KCACR Bell Restoration Committee, Peter Romney, was approached by the Vicar of Iwade to enquire what could be done to get the bells in working order again. Peter inspected the installation and after some discussion said that the KCACR could remove the bells from the tower and rehang them in due course after new clappers and headstocks had been fitted.

This all sounds like any other restoration job that one reads about in the Comic on a fairly regular basis. However, Iwade has just two bells, hung for chiming. What sets them apart is the fact that they are almost certainly (*pace* George Elphick and Stahlschmidt) the oldest pair of bells in the country, having been cast by an unknown founder sometime during the latter part of the 12th or early 13th century. They are both very long and narrow – almost cylindrical – with enormous canons, and no markings or inscriptions of any sort. It is not known when they were last rehung, but it was probably during the middle of the last century, when wheels and very crude fittings

were installed. The clappers were a sort of baldric construction attached to cast-in iron staples and linked by a curious collection of wrought-iron loops. The clappers were too short and were striking the bells well above the sound-bow (well, the rims, which would seem to approximate to the sound-bow on a modern bell). It was for this latter reason that chiming had ceased some ten years ago since it was felt that continued use might possibly crack the bells.

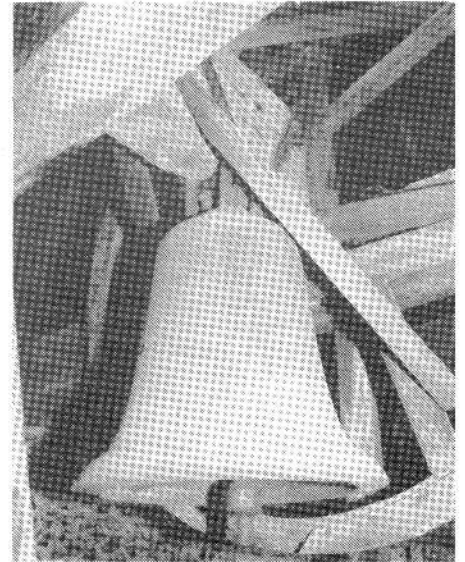
A programme of repair and restoration work on the church having been initiated, it was decided that the bells really ought to be put back into safe working order. Thus it was that the KCACR heavy mob found themselves at Iwade early on the morning of 4 April with the usual paraphernalia of spanners, lifting tackle, lighting and hard hats (several of the volunteer gang have somewhat receding hair-lines, and hard hats are more than usually essential for safety). Photography over, the dismantling was soon under way, and by mid-day the two ancient bells were safely on the floor of the tower – who knows when they had last been down? A local firm transported them to Whitechapel, where new headstocks, clappers and ball-bearings were fitted and the cast-in clapper staples removed. In early April they returned to Iwade for the rehang.

Before lifting the bells back into the tower much time was spent getting the bearer beams

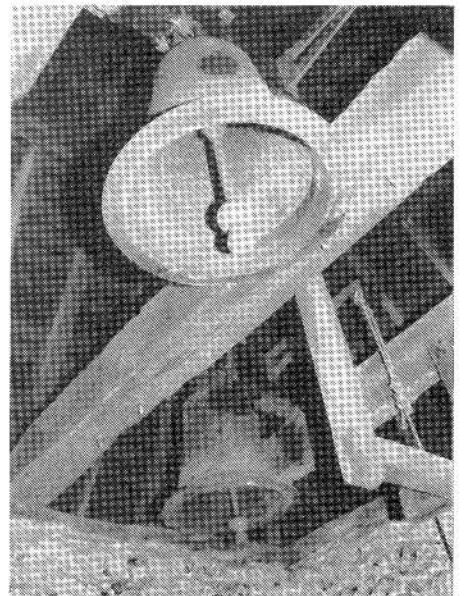


The church at Iwade

photo Dickon Love



The lighter of the two mediæval bells at Iwade prior to rehanging.



The two bells back in action.

photo Dickon Love

ready for the new bearing plates – this involved cutting 2" x 10" x 3/4" slots in the ancient oak beams. This is an interesting exercise when standing with one foot on a ladder and the other on any odd bit of masonry or timber that seems handy, about 20 feet above the floor and under the glare of the halogen lamps on a warm day. Most of the team slogged on, but one member of the party decided in the middle of the proceedings that he needed a loo, and realised that the pub

(Continued overleaf)

## Further fun at Fittleworth – a ten-day marathon

June 26th – July 6th 1992

As suggested last year (see report in R.W., p. 898, September 1991), Bill Butler's special bellringing course at Fittleworth has now been extended to ten days; probably the longest course run anywhere. This makes it possible for the participants to get in two whole Saturdays while still only taking one week of their annual holiday.

The numbers on this course are strictly limited, maximum ten, and this year consisted of only six students, ranging from the rabbit who had been sent with orders not to come home until he had mastered rounds and call-changes, via the granny who writes out her methods like knitting patterns and unravels when called upon to dodge, up to the one who rings in Lichfield Cathedral and had come to gather expertise in Grandsire.

Although this wide variation in skills probably made the course much harder on the tutor than those where everyone in the group is studying the same thing, it did make it more like a normal group in any 6-bell tower.

To lessen the shock to the local population, the practical sessions had been spread as far afield as practicable, extending across Sussex into Surrey and Hampshire. This caused some navigational problems, especially the day one car-load got lost hunting for the church in the village, when it was snugly hidden in the forest. As there are three different courses run at the same time at Fittleworth, it might be a

### IWADE –continued

opposite the church was open. "Well," he said some time later, "you can't really make use of the facilities without buying anything, can you?" Eventually the chief engineer pronounced all chiselling to be A.O.K. and we set about raising the bells.

Now when we had lowered them we'd removed the headstocks first, but because the new headstocks had been fitted by the foundry, and we didn't want to disturb their careful fitting, we decided to lift the bells complete with stocks. After over an hour's futile struggle we realised that no way were we going to get them back through the trapdoor in one piece. Once this blindingly obvious fact became apparent we removed the stocks and both bells were up in no time at all. The actual hanging then proceeded quite briskly, and by 4 p.m. both bells were back *in situ*. Lack of time prevented the completion of the work that day, but two of us went back a day or two later to tidy-up and fix the ropes. The first extent on the bells (both changes) took place and all was complete. The "go" is admirable although the tone is still distinctly mediæval.

At the Festival Evensong held as a thanksgiving for the restoration work so far completed on the church, someone mentioned to the Vicar: "They should be OK for 100 years now, but don't expect us to come back to repair them next time". We suddenly felt very small. These bells had probably been there when Magna Carta was signed; they'd certainly been through the Reformation and every other major event of English history since. Close to the church is a row of Victorian cottages, the nearest of which sports a satellite dish – about 50 feet from the oldest pair of bells in the country. Do the owners realise how much history is at the bottom of their garden? I doubt it.

FRANK LEWIS



Fittleworth 1992.

good thing if one of them in future is on map and compass reading, so that we can combine operations!

The practical sessions, sometimes five in a day, included 6-, 8- and even 10-bell towers, to cater for all standards. In the 8-bell towers the students learning Triples methods were given more time, while those content with Doubles and Minor rang rounds and call-changes and tried their hand at plain hunting on seven, on as many different bells at time permitted, and were given extra turns at the 6-bell towers. As we went to 24 towers for these sessions, everyone rang a lot of different bells during the ten days, especially as there was an optional extra, visiting nearby towers to join their weekly practice night.

On both Sundays we rang with the Fittleworth band before attending service, and we also had one of our practical sessions there. Wednesday was the official "day off", but by evening five of us were suffering withdrawal symptoms so piled into a car and dashed off to find a tower to practise at!

In all we rang at 28 different towers. The sheer numbers of visits meant living life in the fast lane for the whole course. It was a normal sight to see the bellringers swallowing the last mouthful on the way to the kitchen with the dirty dishes and laying tables at a run before sprinting for the car park. Some days there was no time to get back for lunch, so we took a picnic and ate in the churchyard before dashing to the nearest pub for a pint and use-of-the-facilities. Sometimes the pint led to a desperate search for more facilities later on!

We were accompanied by teams of kind volunteer helpers, and often the local person who let us into the tower stayed on to ring with us, too. We were exceedingly grateful to all of them.

Occasionally one of the helpers realised that they were actually grabbing a tower, and on such occasions a few minutes were allocated at the end of the session for the helpers to ring something special on their own while the class stood and watched in awesome wonder.

Things that stick in the memory: the day we met an anti-clockwise ring of rather difficult bells; after ringing some absolutely disastrous rounds, a voice asked pathetically: "Isn't the hour over yet?". Then there was the tower where the well-built member of the class thought it might be easier to reverse down the steep spiral stairs, and got stuck! The small tower where one person actually found themselves pulling their neighbour's sally by mistake. The leaning tower, where everyone

felt a compulsion to lean sideways like the walls, although the ropes were hanging straight. The helper who couldn't wait to reach the next "facilities" and popped discreetly behind a tombstone. There was an immediate peal of thunder overhead, which we interpreted as the soul of the departed complaining.

We drank the bar dry of beer twice, developed leg-muscles like mountain goats, and enjoyed every minute.

What was our progress like? Well, we all got certificates on the last night. I'm not telling what mine said, but one ringer progressed from rabbit 1 to rabbit 2. One got a certificate to say they had rung the tenor bell in 25 towers. The highest accolade was the ringer who passed the "Pre-Don Test".

The "Pre-Don Test" is a Fittleworth secret, and if you want to find out what it is, you'd better sign-up quickly for next year's course!

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### Pooh

I note, with interest, the photo of Pooh on page 765 of *The Ringing World*. This photo was taken during a peal attempt. This attempt took place on a ground floor ring and I was fortunate enough to overhear some of the conversations through the curtain between the ringing room and the nave. Roo and Piglet were on the front two but were having difficulty in controlling the bells as they were so small and weedy. Pooh kept missing dodges because he is too thick to remember the blue line, Tigger was bouncing all round the ringing room singing a song about how wonderful tiggers are while Kanga kept going on about how pale little Roo looked and suggesting that they should stop. Rabbit, whose daft idea the peal had been in the first place, said nothing. Owl, the conductor, was making little effort to keep the ringing right but kept explaining how false course heads were extracted in between references to the usefulness of the in and out of course for the composer. Eeyore, who was ringing next to the curtain, kept moaning about how bad the ringing was, that it had been going on too long, and "wasn't it time to go to the pub?"

After a bit the peal came round after a fashion and they all went off to see Christopher Robin to see if they should count it.

A word of warning. If you get a letter from a Rabbit asking for the use of your bells, say no.

A.J.B.