

The low-lying flatlands which form the valley of the Kentish Stour east of Canterbury contain many tiny villages and hamlets with such delightful names as Marshside, Pluck's Gutter, etc., and many fine rings of bells, such as Ash, Chislet, Wingham and others which will be well known to Kent ringers.

Lying close to the diverging valleys of the Great and Little Stour are the united parishes of Stourmouth, Elmstone and Preston-by-Wingham. Of these, Stourmouth and Elmstone churches have but three bells each, but for 250 years there has been a ring of five at St. Mildred's, Preston. Alas, for nearly a quarter of that time these bells have been silent and unringed owing to the decayed state of the frame in which they hung. On Wednesday, January 18th, the silence of over 60 years was broken, and the bells rededicated by the Ven. Alexander Sargent, Archdeacon of Canterbury.

Interest in bells has never been entirely lacking in recent years in the "Three Parishes," for in 1960 the derelict ring of three bells at Elmstone was completely restored by the Whitechapel foundry, though lack of funds precluded their being rehung for full swing ringing. The story of the restoration of the bells of Preston is one of vision and great courage, for the village is one of the smallest in this part of Kent.

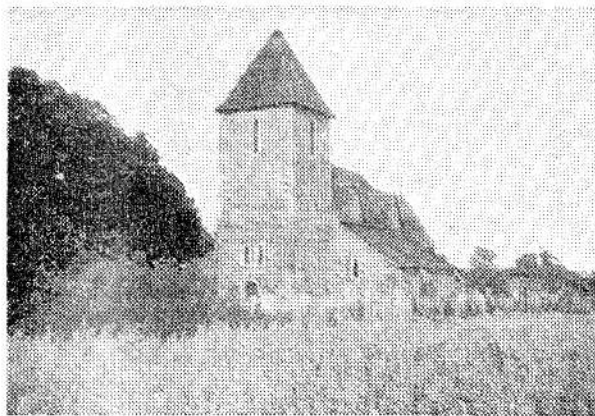
There are no records of the bells that hung in the church in the Middle Ages, but one may safely assume that the church probably possessed bells at an early date. The church itself is Early English in its original style, but was much enlarged at a later date, as the fine moulded Perpendicular arches of the south aisle show, in marked contrast to the stumpy pillars of the earlier north aisle. The tower itself is low and massive, capped by a plain tiled pyramid spire, and is pierced by single lancet windows.

MADE A RING OF FIVE

We do know that by 1700 at least there was in this tower a ring of four bells, though no record survives of their weights or inscriptions. As the present ring of five was cast from their metal, it may be calculated that the tenor of this ring weighed about 12 to 14 cwt. Perhaps some of the bells were survivors of the mediæval ring, or cast by the celebrated founder Joseph Hatch. In 1712 it was decided to have them recast and made into five, and the bells were taken down and sent to the Whitechapel foundry, then owned by Mr. Richard Phelps. While they were away the frame in which they hung was altered to take five bells, and the new bells were duly hung in it.

There is no record of any major restoration after this. As may be expected in a small country parish, the churchwardens were always buying new bell ropes, as they required the old ones for use on their farms! No doubt many minor repairs were carried out. When the writer of this article saw the bells first in 1963, he noted several patchings on the fittings appeared to be of the 19th century type.

No doubt ringings became fewer as the years went on. We have no record of any peal on the bells, but we do know that in 1905 the bells were rung by a band from nearby Wickhambreaux, one of whom is still alive. This is probably the last time that the bells were rung. By 1963 they had become derelict,



the tower dangerous, the frame rotten and the fittings had largely rotted away, the bells being sounded by clacking. Estimates were taken before this, and a plan to have them altered to a chime was fortunately not proceeded with.

A RESTORATION

In 1965 the Rev. C. T. Spurling became Rector of the Three Parishes and determined to have something done about the bells at Preston. When he was Vicar of Otham his son, a ringer, had put the three bells in order and trained ringers. Hopes soon crystallised into action, and shortly before Easter the bells were removed to the foundry from which they had first come. The frame, fittings and upper tower floor were all removed and placed in the churchyard for disposal. After removal, the tenor was found to be cracked in the crown, and was recast later in the year. Meanwhile at Preston money was being raised so that the bells could return as soon as possible. Early in December they were returned, having been cleaned, tuned and quarter-turned, and were rehung in a new cast iron and steel frame with new fittings throughout by Mr. Harry Parkes, of Messrs. Mears and Stainbank.

On January 18th a goodly congregation assembled in the church for the dedication. Amongst the many ringers present were Mr. B. J. Luck (chairman, Canterbury District) and Mr. K. I. Davis (District secretary). After the bidding and the singing of the second hymn the procession made its way to the tower, and the Archdeacon blessed and hallowed the bells, charging the Rector to see "that they be ever and only used in God's service and to His glory." As the procession re-formed the bells were rung in rounds, and the band included 84-year-old Mr. Sidney Walter, of Wickhambreaux, the last surviving ringer to have rung in the tower in 1905.

In his sermon the Archdeacon commended all those who had worked hard to make this service possible, and addressed himself particularly to those who heard the bells and their message of "Come." He said that the Church was going through a particularly difficult period, and that not everyone would respond to the message of the bells, but it was their own personal witness which counted.

A collection was taken towards the bells fund during the singing of the Ringers' Hymn, and the service ended with prayers and the Blessing. After the service many members had their first ring at Preston.

THE BELLS

Treble (3½ cwt. in D): R. Phelps
 Fee: 1712. Robert Wyborne
 Gent: Benefactor
 Second (4½ cwt. in C): Richard Phelps made me. 1712.
 Third (5 cwt. in B): Richard Phelps made me. 1712.
 Fourth (6½ cwt. in A): Richard Phelps made me. 1712.
 Tenor (7 cwt. 3 qr. 21 lb. in G): Richard Phelps made me. 1712.
 Mr. John Harrison William Lvckit Chvchwardens. Recast 1966. Mears, London.
 The five bells tuned, quarter-turned and rehung and the tenor bell recast, with new fittings and frame for six bells 1966/67 by Mears and Stainbank.

Donations for the Preston Bells Fund will be thankfully received by the Rev. C. Terence Spurling, The Rectory, Elmstone, Wingham, Canterbury, Kent, and gratefully acknowledged.

D. L. C.

[Photo by N. Spurling.]

MR. R. KINGSLEY MASON'S 300 PEALS

Mr. Kingsley Mason, of Knighton, Leicester, rang his 300th peal, Wigston Surprise Major, at Shepshed, Leicestershire, on Christmas Eve. Details:

Surprise Maximus 6.—Cambridge 4, Lambeth, Yorkshire.

Cinques 1.—Stedman,

Surprise Royal 52 (conducted 14).—Albanian 2 (1), Anstev, Asfordby, Belgrave, Blaby, Cambridge 9 (4), Diseworth, Elmsthorpe, Foston, Glenfield, Hemington, Horninghold, Ibstock, Jacobstowe, Lincolnshire 3 (2), Lindsey, London 2, New Cambridge, Noseley Pudsey 2 (2), Solihull, Swindon 2, Woodstock, Wye, Yorkshire 14 (5).

Royal 9.—Plain Bob 5, Little Bob 3, Kent T.B. 1.

Caters 9.—Grandire 6, Stedman 3.

Surprise Major 163 (46).—Aldenharn 4, Ashted (1), Belgrave, Bristol, Cambridge 17 (2), Chiltern, Claybrooke, Ealing (1), Enderby, Gainsborough 2, Haselbeck (1), Helmingham, Hitchin, Ipswich, Johannesburg, Kendal, Kenninghall, Langley (1), Llanfair P.G., Lindum, Lincolnshire 16 (7), London 24 (3), Mancetter, New Cambridge 3 (1), Pudsey 6 (4), Quedgeley (1), Rutland 7 (3), Southwell 2 (1), Stand (1), Superlative 11 (2), Tring (1), Turramurra, Uxbridge (1), Vancouver, Warwickshire 2, Watford (1), Wembley, Whitwick, Wigston, Wychwood, Yorkshire 29 (14) Zurich.

Spliced Surprise Major 8.—3 methods, 4 methods, 6 methods, 9 methods, 11 methods, 14 methods, 15 methods, 17 methods.

Major 14.—Plain Bob 7, Hereward Bob, Loughborough College Bob, Ogden College Bob, Double Norwich C.B. 3, Kent T.B.

Triples 9.—Grandire 2, Stedman 7.

Surprise Major 18.—Beverly, Cambridge 5, Durham, London, Westminster, York, 7 methods 7, 15 methods.

Minor 14.—Plain Bob 4, 2 methods, 4 methods, 5 methods, 7 methods, 9 methods 2, 10 methods, 12 methods, Oxford T.B., Warwick Delight.

Doubles 5.—One each of 2, 5, 21, 31 and 32 methods

Total 300 (conducted 60).

CHURCH CLOCKS

NEW ELECTRIC OR HAND-WOUND INSTALLATIONS—ALL TYPES OF REPAIRS

EXISTING HAND-WOUND CLOCKS CONVERTED TO ELECTRIC DRIVE

Inspections & Estimates Free

Smith & Sons
 CLOCKS

JOHN SMITH & SONS - DERBY