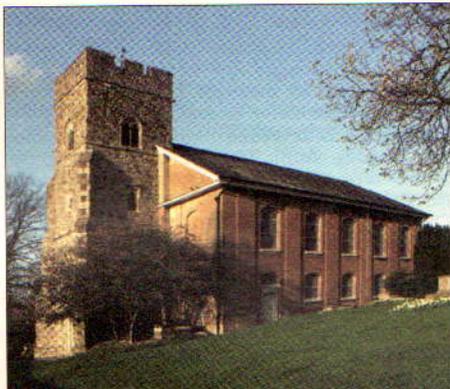


Rochester's "New" 8 – 30 years of silence ends by Neil Jones



St. Margaret's, Rochester (photo: Neil Jones)

On Sunday 26th March, the bells of St. Margaret's, Rochester, were rededicated by The Venerable Peter Lock, Archdeacon of Rochester. It marked the culmination of a very long project to get the bells ringing again.

The church of St. Margaret of Antioch is about half a mile south of Rochester Cathedral, and looks down on the east bank of the River Medway from its vantage point at the edge of the valley. Indeed, the church is quite a noticeable landmark for many looking across the river towards Rochester, particularly for rail travellers.

The site of the church dates back to at least 1272, and a Saxon burial ground indicates that worship at this site probably went back even further. However, the tower is now the oldest part of the current church, dating from around 1458. The main body of the church was rebuilt and dates from 1824.

The tower had an anti-clockwise ring of 5 bells in it from as early as 1552; and by 1790 a treble was added to bring the total to 6. Just over 100 years passed until the bells were augmented again, being made an 8 in 1896. The first peal, Grandsire Triples, was rung on the bells in February of the following year. The two extra trebles were supported in a metal frame above the existing wooden frame, and this was perhaps a contributing factor to the events leading to the long silence. By the 1960s, the bells were getting difficult to ring, and after a peal of Plain Bob Major in May 1973, the 13th peal in the tower, the bells had the wheels removed and were deemed to be unringable. In 1974 all ringing was stopped.

A long silence followed, and fund-raising began for repairs to enable the bells to be rung. There were a number of problems to rectify. These included the point where the roof of the nave joined the tower, as well as the problems with the construction of the bell frame. As with any restoration project, the cost of repair did not keep track with the fund-raising. Something had to be done, and by 2003, the parish, led by the enthusiasm of a parishioner and chairman of the Parish Buildings Development Group, Alan Moss, had decided to pull out the stops and push for the restoration and rehang of the bells. By this stage, they had the unenviable task of raising almost £70,000 to enable this dream to be realised.

In 2005, the target was achieved, and on 3rd September the Kent County Association of Change Ringers hit squad (Bell Restoration Team) moved in under the supervision of

Brian Butcher. With help from local ringers and parishioners, the bells were lowered and the frame removed. Later in the week, Messrs R Swain and Sons, a local haulage company, kindly offered to transport the bells to the Whitechapel Bell Foundry for retuning and repair.

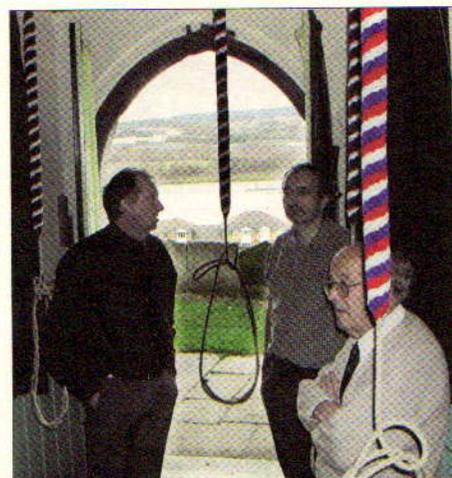
Early in 2006, work began in the tower to prepare for the installation of a new steel frame for the 8 bells. Though they had previously been hung on two levels, with the removal of the wooden frame it was possible to fit all 8 bells on to one level. It was also decided no longer to ring from the existing ringing chamber, but to ring from the ground floor. On 6th February, the bells returned to the church and Peter Scott of Whitechapel, assisted by local ringers began rehangng them in the new frame. They were rehung clockwise, with all new fittings, and were ready for testing on 15th February. Canon-retaining headstocks were fitted to the 6th and 7th. The verdict of the ringers at the test ring was that the bells were very good.

The rededication was arranged for Mothering Sunday, at the conclusion of the family eucharist. Needless to say, the church was full when the time came. After Archdeacon Lock and the Vicar, the Revd. Gary Colville, processed to the tower to the accompaniment of the carol "Ding Dong Merrily on High", the Archdeacon first wished everybody a Merry Christmas, before going on to dedicate the bells. The bells were then rung for a few minutes by some of the local ringers who had been involved in rehangng, assisted by ringers from the Cathedral. This was duly applauded by the congregation. After the conclusion of the service, there was a little more ringing before a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples was embarked upon, to conclude the events.

The final part of the celebration of the end of the long silence occurred on Easter Day when, at the invitation of the Vicar, a full peal was rung. Many people popped into the church to listen during the course of the peal, and more interest in the project was generated in the neighbourhood as a result. This was the first peal in the tower for over 30 years, the first peal of spliced, and the 14th peal on the bells.

Now all that St. Margaret's needs is its own band of ringers. The ringers of Rochester Cathedral are currently helping to ring for services at the church, and a group of local ringers from various towers have been organised to train a band at St. Margaret's. Hopefully, within a few months, a local band will be able to fully enjoy this delightful 'new' ring of 8 in Medway.

Obviously, many ringers will be keen to visit over the next few months. However, after such a long silence, we need to gradually set a pattern of ringing that will also establish good relations with the neighbours, particularly as St. Margaret's is in the middle of a residential area of Rochester, and there is a home for the elderly just across the road. Although the bells have had a peal and a quarter peal rung on them in the past few weeks, visits by outside bands will probably need to be restricted over the next few months as the local residents get used to the sound of the bells. We hope that prospective visitors will be mindful of this.



Brian Butcher, convener of the KCACR Bell Restoration Fund (left), Neil Jones (centre), and Peter Romney, Diocesan Adviser for Bells (right) (photo: Frank Lewis)

KENT C.A.

ROCHESTER, Kent, St Margaret

Sun Apr 16 2006 2h41 (9)

5024 Spliced S Major

(8m: 736 London; 640 each Cambridge, Pudsey, Superlative; 608 each Bristol, Rutland; 576 each Lincolnshire, Yorkshire; 132 com, atw)

Comp. N R Aspland

- 1 Neil W Jones
- 2 Diana R Wraight
- 3 Phillip R J Barnes
- 4 David J Dearnley
- 5 Steven J Haynes
- 6 Thomas M Barlow
- 7 John B Keeler (C)
- 8 Canon David W Grimwood

Rung to celebrate Easter.

First peal on the bells following restoration.

Rochester, Kent. (S Margaret). 26 March, 1260 Grandsire Triples: Frank Lewis 1, Malcolm Smith 2, Anita Perryman 3, Arthur Vidgeon 4, Alan Driver 5, Brian Butcher 6, Neil Jones (C) 7, Phil Stott 8. 1st Quarter on the refurbished bells following their rededication by the Ven. Peter Lock, Archdeacon of Rochester on Mothering Sunday.

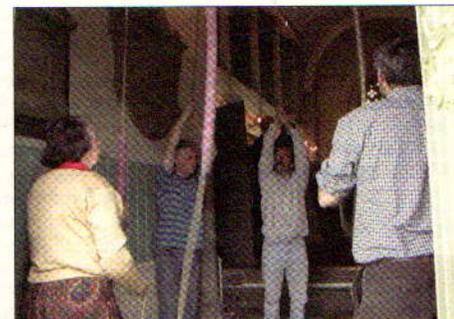
Details of the Bells

(With acknowledgement to Dickon Love)

St. Margaret of Antioch, Rochester, Kent.

Bell	Weight	Cast	Founder
1	3-2-21	1896	John Taylor & Co.
2	4-0-24	1896	John Taylor & Co.
3	3-3-18	1790	Thomas Mears I
4	4-1-21	1884	John Warner & Sons
5	5-1-20	1790	Thomas Mears I
6	6-1-3	1621	Joseph Hatch
7	8-0-11	1624	Joseph Hatch
8	9-2-8	1884	John Warner & Sons

Bells retuned in 2005 to the Key of G^b by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry.



Rochester Cathedral ringers Carla Boys-Stones, Steve Fitton, Peter Cornell and Neil Jones ring after the rededication (photo: Frank Lewis)