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Squire's bells to be restored

The four bells of Lord Barnard's 1722 Church of St. Giles at Shipbourne near Tonbridge, Kent were cracked and some were broken and unusable when the church came close to collapse 150 years later. But that did not prevent the villagers rising up in wrath when their new squire proposed to replace it with something more comfortable. They lost, and eventually came to love their new church. It was much praised on completion for its traditional English design featuring a sturdy square stone tower containing a ring of six bells.

The dispute of 1875-79 with Shipbourne's new squire, Edward Cazalet, is being recalled now that the six bells are about to be taken down for refurbishment. Cast in part from the four old bells, one dating back to 1593, the present bells are something of a curiosity,



St. Giles' Church at Shipbourne where six bells installed by an organ builder 140 years ago have to be refurbished.

having been supplied by the same firm that built the organ, T. C. Lewis & Co. of Brixton. Tower captain Tony Harris understands that the only other set of T. C. Lewis bells is at a church in Lincolnshire.

Mr. Cazalet was 43 and rich from his family's business in Russia when he arrived in 1871 to take up the life of an English country gentleman. He built the new St. Giles for £10,000. His wife paid for the bells and his mother-in-law gave the organ.

Edward Cazalet, whose purchase of the Fairlawne Estate included most of Shipbourne village, was a man of his times, a vigorous Victorian, an innovator and a relentless improver. Not all his ideas were successful: carbide gas lighting which he installed at Fairlawne and in his new church never worked properly and long before mains electricity came to the village in the 1930s the big house had its own generator and the church had reverted to oil lamps.

In providing a new church, Mr. Cazalet changed the face of Shipbourne. He pulled down the Elizabethan smithy to make a new carriage turn for the church. Away went the ancient Bull Inn, venue for manor courts and tithe dinners, to be replaced with the uninspiringly named New Inn - now The Chaser.

Until about 30 years ago the inn stayed closed on Sundays in deference to the proximity to the church and its ownership by the patron of the living.

One wall of the once-handsome Italianate Barnard church was bulging and the graceful tower, cracked from top to bottom, rested on a timber crutch when the squire determined to do away with it. But even as his architects demonstrated that the church was dangerous, gloomy and damp the people declared that they loved it and gave ground reluctantly.

A feature of the new bell tower was a keyboard enabling a single ringer to handle all six bells, the largest of which, the tenor, weighs more than half a ton. This apparatus, long derelict, will be removed when the Whitechapel Foundry restores the bells.

When Shipbourne's bells come down after Christmas it will be the first time they have been out of use - apart from the war years when ringing was reserved as a warning of invasion.

Parishioners and friends of St. Giles are busy raising money to pay for the work. Everyone living within hearing of the bells has been asked to contribute. The bells, though in poor condition, are still rung regularly. Their restoration will be celebrated with a "St. Giles quarter peal" - a variation on St. Nicholas Bob Doubles.

The St. Giles ringers and friends in the Kent County Association of Change Ringers have contributed generously to the bell appeal. They will also save some £6,500 on the £19,826 bill by lowering the bells and transporting them to the Whitechapel Foundry.

FRANK CHAPMAN.