

Frame movement quite frightening

How to get involved

A casual remark from a ringing colleague, suggesting that the tough going 18 cwt. ring of eight at Swanscombe (about 4 miles east of the Dartford Crossing) might be easily sorted out by tightening up the frame led me in by the nose to a major restoration project!

Certainly, the odd frame arrangement carrying this 1904 Whitechapel ring, being a replacement for the original six which were lost due to a lightning fire in 1902, needed extensive tightening up but, as the problems unfolded, the solutions required much more than the wielding of simple spanners.

Frame and foundation nightmares

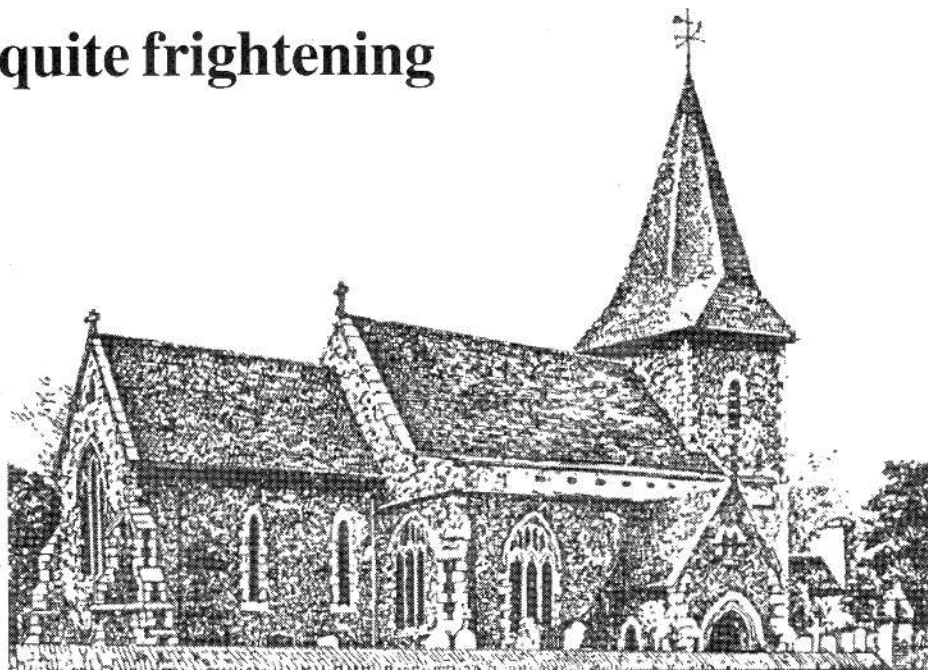
The 1904 frame consists essentially of cast iron frame sections, bolted to an oak grillage, the whole assembly being carried on four rolled steel joists (RSJs), spanning the tower from north to south. The initial inspection had revealed that the RSJs were loose in the tower walls, the oak grillage was inadequately secured to the RSJs and the cast iron frame sections were all moving around on top of the oak grillage when the bells were rung. Not surprisingly, the overall frame/foundation movement was frightening and there was ample evidence of damage to the tower walls as a result of the movement. So severe had the movement been, and so inadequate the fixings, that the entire oak frame and grillage had shifted across the RSJs, with the consequence that the rope drops no longer aligned with the floor mounted pulleys! Rope wore out very quickly as a result.

Exposing one end of the most accessible RSJ, about 10 inches into the north tower wall, revealed that no cleats had been fitted. Cleats (typically angle iron sections bolted to the embedded ends of foundation beams) are vital and permit a much improved fixing; bare ends of RSJs are likely to move because the grout has only a smooth steel surface to which it can adhere.

All eight beam ends had, therefore, to be exposed, drilled and fitted with heavy duty cleats before grouting up with flint and concrete mix. Chalk had been extensively used (this area of north Kent is noted for its chalk pits and chalk escarpments) in 1904 for the grouting exercise, but is far too soft for the purpose; the combination of chalk and the omission of all cleats made excessive frame movement inevitable.

A thorough tightening up of all frame bolts and tensioning rods, plus the installation of 16 x 20mm bolts to secure the oak grillage to the RSJs was duly completed.

The final frame problem to be addressed was the severe RSJ deflection caused by the omission of RSJs in the east/west direction and an absence of any cross bracing. A floor had been constructed in 1904, immediately beneath



SS Peter & Paul, Swanscombe, Kent.

the north/south RSJs preventing the installation of east/west RSJs at a later date. Heavy duty cross bracing was the only practical solution, given the constraints, and was installed between the two central RSJs to reduce the east/west movement.

Bells and fittings

Given the serious frame/foundation movement, unguided ropes, 90-year-old plain bearings, work out pulleys and clappers in need of complete refurbishment one had to marvel that tower captain Geoff Sayer had managed to keep a local band going over many years. Geoff, together with the Rector (Tim Mercer), local band members and other parishioners provided the necessary labour for the project. Whites of Appleton were entrusted with the supply of new pulleys, refurbished wrought iron clappers and new double row, self aligning bearings for the 7th and tenor.

The bells are a pleasant, melodious octave predating the modern tuning era and were cast with Doncaster type canons; rehangings of the 7th and tenor has permitted quarter turning of these bells during the restoration work.

No chance, Smithy....

Work started in the tower on 24.10.94 (discussions having duly taken place with the church architect and Peter Romney of the KCA bell restoration sub-committee earlier in the year) and soon the chit-chat during coffee breaks got round to whether we would complete the task in time for Christmas ringing. As the hidden problems unfolded, the scope of the work increasing as a result, one sensed as the time passed by that one's workmates were thinking

that Smithy had more chance of winning the National Lottery than of ringing Swanscombe's bells for midnight service on Christmas Eve! However, battling on undaunted and putting in long hours of work, we made it by a whisker – Tim and his congregation were delighted to hear their bells again, ringing out before the service.

Celebrations

Tidying up in the tower continued throughout January and an enthusiastic group of ringers plus parishioners met at the church on 30.1.95 to celebrate Tim's first ten years of Ministry in the Parish, and to mark the completion of Phase 1 of the bell restoration project.

General ringing was followed by an enjoyable quarter peal of Grandsire Triples, thought to be the first quarter peal on the bells for about 30 years. Finally we moved across to the church hall for presentations, sherry and a buffet. The quarter peal ringers were loudly applauded as they entered the hall and responded by presenting Tim with a framed record of the quarter peal just accomplished. (Yes, we could have lost the quarter peal, but it's good to up the stakes sometimes!)

The final phase

Rehangings of the front six bells, will, hopefully, be completed during 1995, helped by generous grants from The Kent County Association of Change Ringers and others. In the meantime the bells are now a relatively easy-going, pleasant sounding octave which should assist the task of teaching new recruits. Frame movement is no longer detectable in the N-S direction and is within acceptable limits in the E-W direction.

(continued overleaf)

Handbell ringing in the Chester DG South Branch

In 1940 I had learned to handle a bell, achieved my ropesight and it was "all systems go!" when Winston Churchill stopped all tower bell ringing except as a warning of attack by paratroops or coastal invasion. At Oxford, undaunted, we turned to the intricacies of change ringing on handbells, and to me the challenges of coursing pairs and place notation were just as intriguing. Unfortunately, after joining the Army, I did very little for the next 40 years or so. I did ring 7/8 to Bob Major in 1943 (my first peal) and again at Goostrey in 1966, but there it stayed till 1983.

My old friend Hector Bennett, to whom I owe my initiation to the mysteries of campanology, had a set of 13 handbells which I remember him buying second-hand for the princely sum of £30 in 1938. During his frequent visits to Goostrey we used to have the occasional "thrash-about" on the light eight which he carried about in an old attache case, wrapped in carpet felt! One evening, after attending a ringing meeting (in the Crewe Branch as it was then called) we were in the Crown at Goostrey, imbibing his favourite tippie of barley wine and gold label (two of those and his stammer completely disappeared!) when he asked me what I would do with a set of handbells if I had any, to which I replied that I would make sure that they were rung regularly.

I thought no more of it until the sad day in 1982 of Hector's funeral in Shrewsbury when his brother Norman informed me that he had left his handbells to me. Immediately my mind turned back to that alcoholic evening in the Crown! Thus I inherited a fine set of 12 handbells size 15 in C with a sharp second, and I immediately set about honouring the statement I had made to Hector. Eventually, I had them retuned and releathered (for about ten times their original cost!) and now the bells rest in their own special box.

Shortly after taking possession of the bells, I rang my first handbell peal of Minor with Brian Harris and Ken Lewis (to whom these handbells were already familiar). This was my 50th peal for the Chester Guild and was to have been Bob Major with Bill Dowse who had to join the police reinforcements during the Warrington newspaper riots. Later, with the help of David Friend, I rang 7/8 to Kent Major – my first in the method in hand.

But the important job was to start a regular band. Fortunately, Goostrey has been blest for many years with a number of good keen ringers and so I was able to form a useful nucleus with Mike Hodge, David Young and myself, occasionally joined by David's wife, Gillian.

SWANSCOMBE—continued.

A full peal has been requested by the Rector, following completion of this final phase and no doubt there will be another joyful celebration at that time. Despite the problems it has been a truly rewarding experience to be involved with this project and your correspondent has learnt, the hard way, to be very wary of fellow ringers who start off a conversation along the lines "I think it only needs a bit of tightening up!"

D. PAUL SMITH.

Tatsfield.

Swanscombe, Kent. 30 Jan, 1260 Grandsire Triples (from Holt's Original): Dickon Love 1, Deborah Blagden 2, David Dearnley 3, Stephen Coaker 4, Rhian Bagshaw 5, Paul Smith (C) 6, John Keeler 7, Thomas Barlow 8. To celebrate Revd Tim Mercer's ten years of Ministry in this Parish and to mark the completion of Phase 1 of the bell restoration project.



The Chester DG South Branch handbell peal band: 1-2 William F. Gibbons, 3-4 John R. Scott, 5-6 Michael C. E. Hodge, 7-8 David N. Young, 9-10 Frank R. Morton.

Our main efforts were devoted to ringing short touches and plain courses, and I have a notable(?) recording of a course of DNCBM – with a pretty rocky last lead!

Apart from a peal of Plain Bob Major on 30th April 1984, in which David Young and Eric Hotine rang their first peals in hand (Ken Lewis conducted it and kept us right – it took us 2½ hours!) serious peal ringing did not start until June 1985, when, with the much appreciated aid of Ken Lewis as our conductor, guide and teacher, peals of Plain and Treble Bob Major were scored by Mike Hodge, David Young and myself, and on 17th June 1986, Ken steered us through our first peal of Oxford Major.

During this period, Gillian had to give up ringing, but nevertheless we managed a number of peals of Minor. We felt that it was an exceptionally long way to drag Ken from Altrincham to Goostrey for Major, so we began to look nearer home for reinforcements. We did not have to look far, because in the '70s there had been an active minor handbell band under the leadership of Frank Morton*, who readily agreed to join us, and on 8th October 1987, he conducted his first handbell peal of Major with us.

From then on, peal attempts have been made more or less every week, and soon peals of Plain Bob Major were being rung regularly. With the aid of Ken Lewis, Plain Bob Royal was rung on 28th April 1988, and on 15th June 1989 we rang the first peal of Kent Major in hand for the South Branch, followed on 4th January 1991 by the first of Plain Bob Royal with the aid of John Scott but it was not until 21st June 1991 that Oxford Major was scored for the Branch. There was then a long gap before Kent Royal was achieved in hand for the Branch on 22nd February 1994, but after another success, two peals in this method were lost. So far Oxford Royal has eluded us and with the aid of Geoff Edwards, Maximus has revealed problems ahead.

Over the years, the full Royal band has not always been able to meet, and as a result, some notable achievements have resulted on lower numbers, five minor methods and Double Bob Major being examples. Ringing speed has also improved, 5088 Kent Major being rung recently in 2 hours 3 minutes.

My records of handbell peals which we have rung – two or more members of St. Luke's, Goostrey band taking part – go back to 1966 and to date (17th January 1995) I have recorded 159 for the Chester Guild.

What of the future? Grandsire, Stedman and of course Surprise are waiting to be tackled. However, it is doubtful whether I shall ever reach these dizzy heights since I am now well past my "sell-by" date! But we can still keep trying!

BILL GIBBONS

*See *The Chester Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers – The First Hundred Years – 1887-1987* p.40. Copies are still available from A. R. Mays, 38 Dowson Road, Hyde, Stockport SK14 1JS.

Celebrations at Bromham

At a recent wedding in Kempston we discovered that Wednesday 11th January would be the 80th birthday of Mrs. Kath Jeffries of Bromham. There and then we decided that a peal must be rung to mark the occasion. To those who know anything about ringing in and around Bedfordshire it will come as no surprise to learn that a band was quickly assembled, there being many willing volunteers who wanted to take part.

On the day the band duly arranged to leave work in good time to ensure they were not late for the 5.30 meet. Kath's husband, Eddie arrived with the key, gave us firm and precise instructions which included the command that we must all adjourn to the "Broadway" for refreshments after completing the peal.

After ringing an enjoyable peal of Grandsire Triples we duly arrived at Wingfield Road to wish Kath a happy birthday and present her with details of the peal. As usual the Jeffries' refreshments looked more like a feast and as usual everyone had an enjoyable evening.

All too soon it was time to bid our farewells and make for home, but we would like to repeat our good wishes to Kath, thank her for all her friendship in the past and look forward to many more celebrations in the future.

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