



Culmination of a Fifty Year Project at Wormshill

by Dickon R. Love

It was 50 years ago that as a 16 year old boy, Michael Nightingale first put 10 shillings into a Post Office savings account entitled the "Wormshill Bell Fund". At that time, the four bells in the tower, a mixture of steel and bronze bells, were all derelict, cracked and useless. Now after 50 years, there are six bells swinging in the tower and Kent has its newest ring.

The village of Wormshill lies about ten miles to the south of the Isle of Sheppey tucked away in the narrow valleys between Sittingbourne and Hollingbourne. Dedicated to St Giles, the church is part of the united benefice of Bredgar (9½cwt six), Milstead (6cwt chime of three), Bicknor (2½cwt steel four) and Frinsted (7¼cwt five). It is a very small but widely spread village, which until recently boasted its own telephone exchange.

The bell restorations in the Wormshill benefice began in 1862 when the neighbouring village of Bicknor purchased a ring of four steel bells from Naylor Vickers & Co., Sheffield. These are still in the tower and were ringable until 1990 when thieves broke into the church and tried to steal them, Lowering two of them to the ground before making their exit, leaving the bells behind. Whether the thieves realised that they had picked the only tower in Kent to have bells *not* made out of valuable bell metal, or whether they were merely disturbed by someone coming up the drive we shall never know. The bells have now been rehung but not yet roped up.

A year after the Bicknor bells were cast, Naylor Vickers offered to replace the treble and tenor of the existing ring of four at Wormshill (probably because they were cracked). It would appear that no payment was made for this work, the donation of the old bell metal being sufficient to meet the costs for two steel bells. Therefore, the sounds coming from the belfries of the two villages, although being rather strange, must have been clearly acceptable. (It is interesting to compare these sounds with those currently emerging from the belfry of another neighbouring village – Tunstall – whose bells sound as irksome as a set of steel bells, but are to be shortly replaced by a brand new ring.

Inscriptions on the old Wormshill Steel and Bronze Four

(from *Stahlschmidt Church Bells of Kent*):

1. NAYLOR VICKERS & CO 1863
2. R PHELPS FECIT 1718
3. THOMAS DVTNALL CHVRCH
WARDEN : R : PHELPS FECIT 1719
4. NAYFOR VICKERS & CO 1863

The ringing of the bronze/steel combination at Wormshill did not last long. By 1885 the tower was deemed unsafe for the bells to be rung properly and so ringing stopped. In the intervening time, the installation fell into a disrepair with the constant clacking of the bells causing



Michael Nightingale of Cromarty, O.B.E., the man behind the vision.

each of them to crack. It appears that the old third was scrapped and replaced with another Naylor Vickers steel bell as there are memories of there being only *one* bronze and *three* steel bells in the tower in the 1940s.

In 1944, some interest was turned towards the renovation of the belfry. Michael Nightingale as a young lad in the parish opened a special Post Office account and invited Albert Hughes from Mears & Stainbank to inspect the tower with a view to replacing the bells with a ring of six. He tells of Mr Hughes' surprise at being met at Sittingbourne Railway Station by such a youth rather than the older member of the Gentry that he might have otherwise expected!

Michael Nightingale of Cromarty, O.B.E. is not only churchwarden at Wormshill, he is also the Patron and Lord of the Manor (as well as being the Lord of the Manor of nearby Bedmonton and Bobbing). In addition to this, he is Chairman of the Churches Committee of the Kent Archaeological Society. Over the 50 years since Mr Hughes' visit, he and the Cromarty Trust, of which he is trustee, have worked to see through the plan to replace the four cracked bells with a ring of six.

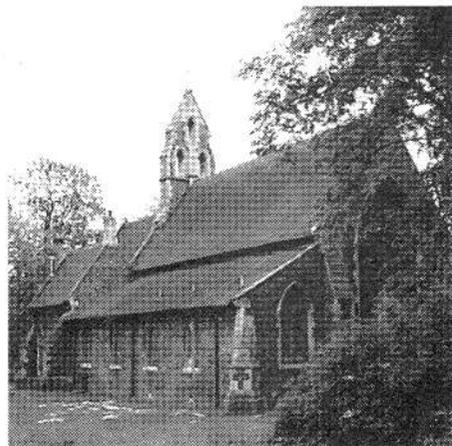
This slow process began with the scrapping of the three steel bells in the 1940s. Forty years later in 1988, the remaining bronze bell (the second) was welded by Soundweld at Lode, near Cambridge. This Wormshill bell was destined to become the tenor of a new ring of six.

At that time, three bells, cast by Whitechapel in 1963, were acquired from the church of St Gregory the Great in Canterbury. Although the church is now redundant, the building is still used as the "St Gregory Centre" just outside the City walls near *Northgate*. Since St Gregory's has now bell tower, the three bells used to hang and be chimed from a bell-cote at one end of the church – the three empty spaces being clearly visible.

Later in 1988, the newly welded Wormshill bell was hung by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and the Kent County Association as the tenor in a new steel frame for a ring of six. The three Canterbury Bells were then hung as bells 1,2 and three of the six ... and this is how matters remained for seven years. After over a hundred years, there were now four bells again swinging in the belfry, and still they were unorthodox (being 1,2,3,6 of a six). Although the church does not have a clock, it did at least have the facility to play the Cambridge Chimes!

The first peal of the four bells was rung on 2nd December, 1989 by a band from the London Country Association ringing four minimus methods. This was followed by another peal, this time of Reverse Canterbury on 16th August, 1991. This latter peal was specially arranged for a ringer who had not previously rung one before and was a little nervous at the prospect of standing up and ringing a bell for three hours. Since a peal at Wormshill was only going to last two hours, he figured that he might be able to survive this without fainting or freaking out – which he did. The third and last peal on the four was on 8th January, 1995 lasting only 1hr 57mins.

(Continued overleaf)



St Gregory the Great, Canterbury – the front three Wormshill bells used to hang in the bellcote.

WORMSHILL - continued

The search for two more bells continued. Consistent with his interest in matters of conservation, Michael Nightingale was very keen to find and rescue two older bells rather than cast a brand new pair. Together with the author, Michael searched for suitable bells both within and outside Kent. The Diocese of Canterbury offered Michael the two small bells from the redundant church at Leysdown on the Isle of Sheppey. Unfortunately these proved too small for the purpose, but were retained in Wormshill in case it was decided to recast them at a later stage.

As time went on, the prospect of finding two ideal bells became more and more remote, and it seemed more and more likely that the only way to complete the project was to have the foundry cast one or more new bells. But then by chance, a ring of three became available from West Bretton in the Diocese of Wakefield, South Yorkshire. Of these three, the treble and second were considered suitable to fill the empty Wormshill pits, with the West Bretton tenor being an optional alternative to the Wormshill tenor. These three bells were all cast by John Sellars of York in 1731 and have the distinction of being the last ring of bells he ever cast, for he died one month later.

The West Bretton bells were thus purchased and brought down to Kent. In order for the bells to accurately fit the existing ring it was decided to have the second tuned at Loughborough by John Taylor & Co., with the fittings constructed by Eyre and Smith. Also, since Nightingale was keen to retain the original Wormshill tenor, the West Bretton tenor has been kept in case anything untoward happens to the recently welded bell. The Kent County Association then hung the West Bretton treble and second in the Wormshill fourth and fifth pits on 13th May, and a band from Hythe provided Wormshill with its first ever six bell ringing at a try-out.

The details of his new ring of six are now as follows:

Bell	Weight	Inscription
Treble	1-0-9	MEARS AND STAINBANK WHITECHAPEL 1963
2	1-1-27	MEARS & STAINBANK WHITECHAPEL 1963
3	2-0-2	MEARS & STAINBANK WHITECHAPEL 1963
4	2-1-0	EX DONO GULIELMI WENTWORTH BARONETTI (The Gift of Sir William Wentworth, Baronet) [John Sellars, 1731]
5	2-1-7	EX DONO GULIELMI WENTWORTH BARONETTI (The Gift of Sir William Wentworth, Baronet) [John Sellars, 1731]
Tenor	3-1-15	R PHELPS FECIT 1718

At 3-1-15, Wormshill has the second lightest tenor bell in Kent (the distinction of the lightest going to the tenor of the Whitechapel eight at St Alphege, Whitstable at 3-1-13, although the pseudo-ringable Bicknor has a 2½wt tenor). However, the total weight of 12-1-20 does mean that of all towers with six more more bells, Wormshill has the lightest ring overall.

Since Wormshill is situated so deeply in the North Downs of Kent, getting ringing established is going to be difficult, but efforts to teach a local band are currently being discussed. Michael Nightingale has made it known that he is very keen for the bells to be rung, and will make them just as available to visiting bands as he did when they were still a four.



St Giles', Wormshill.

The first peal was rung soon after the augmentation was complete. The original intention was to ring a peal of a new Surprise Minor method as the first peal and name it "Cromarty" after Michael Nightingale and the Cromarty Trust that so generously provided funding for the project. Unfortunately, the person providing the line had mistaken the place notation, and the peal that was rung later proved to have been rung and named before. Thus, it turned out that the first peal was actually *Brunsworth Surprise Minor* - one to keep the historians of the future bemused! The details of the Brunsworth peal are as follows:

**KENT COUNTY ASSOCIATION
WORMSHILL, Kent**

At the Church of St Giles, Tenor: 3-1-15 in E.
On Wednesday 7th June, 1995 in 2hrs 11mins
5040 Brunsworth Surprise Minor

1. D. Paul Smith
2. Clare J. Larter
3. Philip H. Larter
4. Andrew Blacklock
5. Mark P. Gilham
6. Dickon R. Love (C)

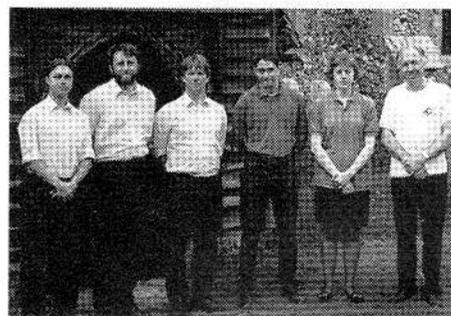
The first peal on the augmented ring, the ring of six bells and installation were given by Michael Nightingale of Cromarty, O.B.E. and the Cromarty Trust. The method rung was originally to have been called Cromarty.

Shortly it is hoped to ring another peal at Wormshill including an extant named Cromarty. In the mean time, there is to be a service of dedication at Wormshill Church on Sunday, 8th October at which the Rt Revd David Say, former Bishop of Rochester will dedicate and name the bells as follows:

Treble	Mary
2	Magdalen
3	Gregory
4	Mirren
5	Regulus
Tenor	Giles

A peal was recently rung at Low Bentham, North Yorkshire, to mark the completion by Kevin M. Price of 25 years as tower captain. Most of these years have been spent in teaching boys from the boarding school next door to the Church. The Bentham School Society was founded in 1964 under the late Stanley Anderton who ran it until 1970 when Kevin took over. Numbers have come and gone through the years, as is expected with a School situation but there have been a few high spots, and news of a number of former

There is still some more work to be done on the installation to improve matters. In particular, the volume of the bells in the (ground floor) ringing chamber is to be reduced as they are still rather loud. It might have taken 51 years, but Michael Nightingale and the Wormshill parishioners are pleased that at least the sounds from the belfry have been transformed from a mausoleum of cracked bronze and steel to a lantern of Whitechapel and York.



The band who rang in the first peal. (L-R); Dickon Love (C), Mark Gilham, Andrew Blacklock, Philip Larter, Clare Larter, Paul Smith.

pupils who have gone on to remain as ringers in their home towers.

After a short lapse in activities, the Society came back to life again earlier this year when a new band started, including some local residents, and practices re-commenced on a regular basis, usually Tuesday but occasionally Wednesday. Tim Flitcroft makes the journey from Carlisle each week to help with tuition and run the practice when Kevin cannot make it. At the School Garden Fete on 8th July, the bells were rung for 30 minutes as part of the proceedings, the ringing team receiving a good "write-up" in the programme. It was the first time in the tower's history that we have been "on show" to parents, some of whom visited the tower during the afternoon.

During the School holidays, the locals have visited other towers to keep their ringing up to scratch and are hoping to embark on tower maintenance in the near future.

The tower is affiliated to the Yorkshire Association and hopes to be able to play an active part in that Association as time and distance permit.

L.B.

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