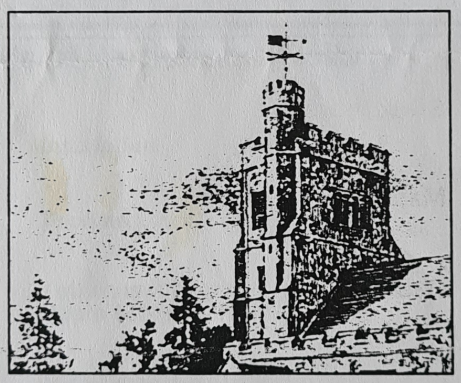
For Dickon

A visit to.....St John the Baptist, Harrietsham

by Rosemary Hart

The first feeling experienced by any visitor arriving at St John the Baptist Harrietsham is probably one of relief at having found it! The name of the village, like the location of the church, is elusive. First spelled Harigeardedhamme (Herigeared's water meadow), shortened to Hariardesham in the Domesday Book, and finally truncated to mere "Harrietsham", it has seemingly confused map-makers who, for the last few hundred years have tended to ignore its existence. Saxton's map of 1575 typically jumps from Lenham to Hollingbourne with ne'er a nod in our direction, even though hamlets such as Wychling are given full recognition, and the national press has been known to pass us off as Hollingbourne. However since the railway - with the village's own station - arrived in the last century and since , in 1926 the long village street (the original turnpike road) was bisected by the A20, Harrietsham has been well and truly "on the map".



So where's the church? Like hundreds of English country churches it is now far removed from the village it serves, and this one remains tucked in the shelter of the North Downs. The village may have shifted but the church, being stone-built, has stayed on-site since its inception. A small church certainly stood here in Saxon times and the tower still exists - a sturdy, square flint and tufa building, retaining its steep stairs and large upper room in which the priest would have lived, including in his duties the tending of twelve dedication lights - one of which was for St Welcume, a local saint. History does not relate whether there was a bell to call the Saxon inhabitants of Hariardesham to prayer - or did no bells sound out over the water meadows for another 500 years? However, the church was thoroughly done over by the visiting Normans and, more than trebled in size, now has architectural features of all periods up to the late 15th century.

The date of most importance to bell-ringers, however, must be 9th September 1497 when, in his will, Richard Stede of Stede Court, left 20 shillings *Campanile ibidem denore faciend* - "to the bell-tower there to be built anew". Very shortly there arose the fine Perpendicular tower we have today, complete with stairway, ringing chamber and belfry and, presumably, bells. We know nothing of Harrietsham ringing activities, however, until 1742 when Thomas Lester of Whitechapel cast a ring of eight for the tower. The oak bell frame is inscribed 1742 and was undoubtedly made by Robert Bottle, a member of a family of builders who have lived in the village for many generations and, indeed, still live in East Street.

Certainly the bells would have been well exercised as soon as they were installed, being situated in the middle of James Barham territory! The peal ringing in those days was, to put it mildly, robustly competitive, and as soon as the Harrietsham bells were made up to eight there would have been plenty of ringers waiting to try their skills. With the Lenham Band on one side and the Leeds Youths on the other there was no lack of stimulating example! Between 1744 and 1799 the Leeds Youths alone rang 11 recorded "peals" (sic) at Harrietsham, two of which were over 1000 changes and only one of 4050 changes. Among the few peal boards here a large one of 1794 commemorates four of the Barham peals and is remarkable for it style and, despite the ravages of time, its legibility.

We do not know whether the bells were rung at that time from the ringing chamber, where the 1794 peal board is sited, or from the ground, but certainly the ringers did move downstairs as there were until recently guides at 17 feet above the floor level. Why they chose to handle 42 feet rather than 17 feet of bell rope, with all the attendant disadvantages of a long draught, is a mystery. However, it has been suggested that - the ringers of those days being a notoriously rowdy, intemperate and irreligious lot, the Rector ordered them downstairs where he could keep an eye on them. However, the ringers were moved back "upstairs" in 1926 when the large organ was removed from the Stede chapel and rebuilt in the base of the tower, squeezing out the ringers and by filching the light from the west window making the church very gloomy. At the same time the bells were retuned at Whitechapel and rehung in a newly-strengthened frame. In 1992 the bells celebrated their quarter-millennium. It would be good to think that they had been rung continuously during that period but sadly the silence imposed by the war put paid to that.

Afterwards there did not seem to be a team, or even a ringer except for Jim Crump - our verger, sexton, grave-digger, tortoise-stove-stoker and tenor man.

At this point Alex Waddington came over from Egerton once a week and trained up an entirely new band, most of us teenagers. On 21st July 1952 the St John the Baptist Society of Bellringers, Harrietsham, was formed. Mark Couchman was our first captain, followed briefly by Mary Tapley. There commenced a period of intense belfry activity, with weekly handbell practices and many visits to local towers - usually by bicycle! During the mid-1950s Harrietsham supplied over half the members of the (then newly formed) Maidstone Grammar School Society of Bellringers.

In 1955 John and Enid Betts arrived in Harrietsham. John was soon drawn into the belfry and promptly installed as tower captain. Over his forty years in this capacity he has trained about 80 ringers - mostly young ones who have grown up and moved on - kept us ringers in order and kept the bells ringing for Sunday services. A tower captain posses many talents, but John's great unsung talent is his ability to locate, collect and sell on scrap metal, to the welcome augmentation of belfry funds!

Thankfully, since their major overhaul in 1926 the bells have had a fairly trouble-free passage. In 1952 the third bell cracked (a somewhat distressing sound when we pulled off one Sunday morning) and after much fund-raising by the new band was recast by Mears and Stainbank later that year. Of the original Thomas Lester bells the treble, fourth, fifth and seventh remain, the others having been recast between 1885 and 1952. We have been lucky to get by with minor repairs, maintenance and new ropes. Hopefully the eight will give us and our visitors many more trouble-free years of pleasurable ringing. Planned residential development means that the church's days of geographical isolation will soon be over and it will again be surrounded by a multitude of homes and parishioners. Hopefully the current fashion for complaining about the Noise of Bells will not prevail among the new citizens of Harrietsham. Indeed we hope that some of them will be so inspired by our beautiful ringing that they will feel moved to come and swell our ranks!

Details of Harrietsham Bells

Bell	*Weight*	*Inscription*	*Note*
Treble	4-0-4	Thomas Lester made me 1742	G
2	4-0-8	You cannot be merry without me Mears & Stainbank 1926	F sharp
3	4-2-22	Mears & Stainbank 1952	E
4	5-3-16	Thomas Lester made me 1742	D
5	6-1-1	Thomas Lester made me 1742	C
6	6-2-6	Mears & Stainbank 1926	B
7	8-2-8	Thomas Lester made us all & Robert Bottle hanged us all in 1742	A
Tenor	12-2-12	Recast by John Warner & Sons 1885 James Knight Alexr Bottle Churchwardens Thomas Lester made us all I to the church ye living call & to ye grave I Summon all	G