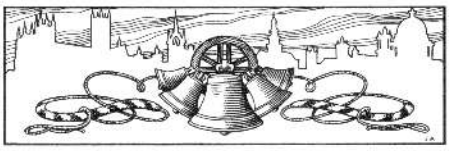
The Ringing World

No. 4513 October 24, 1997 £1.10
Also by subscription £38.00 per year

The Weekly Journal for Church Bell Ringers



Staplehurst: Kent's newest ring of ten



All Saints, Staplehurst, Kent

There are a number of good reasons for living in Staplehurst. It is situated amidst beautiful countryside in the Weald of Kent; it is small enough (just) to retain its village character but is large enough to be a vibrant community; and being situated on the main railway line between London and Paris it is also a good bet for commuters to the English capital whilst being only 20 minutes' drive from the County town of Maidstone. For ringers there is now another attraction in Staplehurst – Kent's newest ring of ten which were dedicated on Easter Day.

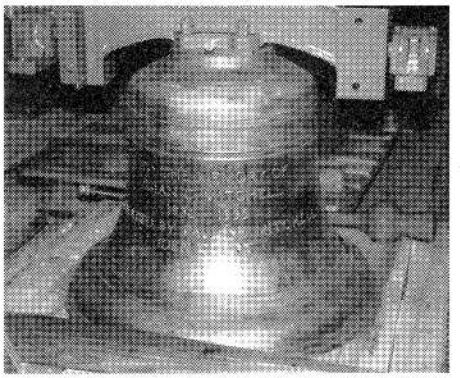
The earliest records of settlement in Staplehurst date from the 8th century, so a Christian community has been living on the site – a ridge of Paludina limestone rising some fifty feet above the flat Weald – since at least that date. Although the exact date of its foundation is not known there has been a church here since the 11th century. The present structure is predominantly of Kentish ragstone and most of it dates from the mid-1400s. The six-buttressed tower at the west end of the church has five stages: the ground floor – the main entrance to the church; the ringing chamber; the clock chamber containing the clock by Thwaites and Reed of Croydon (1888); the bell chamber; and the roof of timber with lead cladding.

There was formerly a shingle spire, which blew down in a gale in 1673. Still to be found in the bell chamber is the timber trusswork that supported the spire and that was to cause so many problems during the restoration. These massive oak beams included dragon beams at the corners which suggest that the spire overhung the walls to a certain extent, and that the present battlements were only constructed after the collapse of the spire.

The bells

There was originally a ring of five bells in the tower. These were partly recast at Whitechapel Foundry by Mears & Stainbank and completely rehung in a new (but not very well designed) oak frame in 1885. The old fourth cast by Joseph Hatch of Ulcombe in 1605 was retained and together they formed a new ring of eight. An old local tradition states that at the rehanging some scandal was caused by two horses from the manor being brought into the church to haul the bells up into the bell chamber by walking up the aisle harnessed to the hoisting rope, but practical considerations make this unlikely. A special service of dedication was conducted by the Bishop of Hereford, who was connected with the patronage of the living by being a quondam fellow of St John's College Cambridge, on St Mark's Day 1885.

The eight bells were rehung by Alfred Bowell of Ipswich in 1930 with partly new fittings and, apart from routine maintenance, nothing more was done for half a century. However, by the 1980s the bells were becoming increasingly difficult to ring, and it became clear that this 'good old-fashioned country eight' were in need of major restoration. The bearings were worn out. The frame was not well designed, it was propped up on emergency steel beams, was rotten in places and had too much movement. The bells were, unsurprisingly, hard to ring and it was very difficult to teach learners. Almost exactly five years ago, in 1992, a restoration appeal was launched to enable the bells to be rehung in a new steel frame with all new fittings.



The second bell at Staplehurst, donated by Mrs Pauline Mitchell

By mid 1995 restoration was still no more than a twinkle in the eye of the ringers and an embryonic sub-committee. For a start there was no formal decision from the PCC and worse still there was little money and the imminent imposition of VAT would add thousands more to what was needed.

The restoration begins

If the project was to be realised it was essential to move fast. The ringers felt that they must have faith that the work would take place – with a record 40 ringers on the books it was unlikely that there would again be such a good time to undertake such a large project. The business case had to go before the PCC within three weeks. There was much activity by the Bell Restoration Sub-Committee in obtaining estimates and putting together plans and details.

The Friends of All Saints was established as a registered charity and immediately committed themselves to raising one third of the cost, and a detailed proposal was placed before the Council. The PCC backed the scheme and

(continued overleaf)

Mrs Alexander lives?

by John Hawes

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate.
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.

Most of you will recognise the infamous verse from Mrs Alexander's dreadful hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', although it has not appeared in any mainstream hymn books for many years. The demise of this verse began in 1906, when it was omitted from the English Hymnal at the insistence of Percy Dearmer, the editor of that wonderful book, then vicar of my parish church. The non-appearance of this verse caused quite a storm in some circles at the time, but gradually it disappeared from all mainstream books, with the exception of the standard version of

(continued on p1071)

The Successful Ringing Master

by David Potter

That well known statement that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration has a wonderful element of truth in it, and I am sure that the Ringing Masters of all the successful teams of ringers in the country would agree with its sentiment.

Those who have produced success in any aspect of life know that hard work is invariably one of the key elements to that success. Specific skills play their part, but determination invariably is a far more important ingredient.

In writing this article I hope to give encouragement and support to those who are embarking on the task of teaching a new team of ringers for the Millennium. Much of it is plain common sense, but I hope it will be of some help.

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Inside this issue: More ringing for the Princess of Wales … Italian ringing restricted … Complaints advice

STAPLEHURST – *continued*

agreed to fund a third of the cost with the Ringers obtaining the remaining third from grants and donations. Thus an order was placed with the Whitechapel Foundry for a brand new frame and bell fittings by the then VAT deadline of September 1995.

The parish may have moved fast but ecclesiastical bureaucracy grinds more slowly. The application for a Faculty was fraught with problems. The Diocesan Archaeologist paid a site visit and found medieval timbers and a floor under the bells which may or may not be in-situ medieval. The old bells and frame had to be removed so that the experts could have a look at the floor before the Diocese and the Foundry could agree on what could be put in their place.

Eventually Saturday 18th May 1996 was fixed as removal day. On the preceding Tuesday the local band rang a final quarter-peal of Stedman Triples on the bells. But perhaps the most poignant moment was two days later at the Ascension Day High Mass when, immediately following administration of the Sacrament, the bells were rung down in peal for the last time.

So the great day arrived at last. The removal was to be carried out by the Kent County Association Bell Restoration team, with local assistance. Insurance requirements limited the number of the local band who were able to help, but by the time the KCA team arrived with their block and tackle, the removal of wheels, stays, sliders, braces and bearing box covers was all but complete. Because of its relative position to the hatch, the first bell to be removed was the seventh (cast as it happens by Joseph Hatch!). By the time its lip came into view a crowd had gathered in the nave.

Several hours later only the tenor was left; we always feared it might be a problem since at its widest point the bell is larger than the hatch opening, but the KCA gang remained confident. But by the time it was wedged securely between the clock room and ringing chamber even Brian 'Red Leader' Butcher appeared to have doubts. Then for no apparent reason it just slipped through, amid gasps of relief from the audience. Clearly the Lord was on our side! In the week that followed the local band were fully occupied dismantling and lowering the old frame, and subsequent Thursday 'practice' nights were taken up with routine maintenance and odd jobs in the ringing room.

The way was now clear for Diocese and Foundry to consider what could be done next. In the end the frame proposed by Whitechapel had to be redesigned and put lower in the tower. Expensive drawings on the medieval timbers had to be commissioned. Fortunately the timbers were judged not to be in-situ and could be moved but with the condition that they be re-used in the scheme. Because the frame was now lower the clock floor also had to be lowered, and it was here that the beams were re-used.

Fund-raising

Meanwhile the Friends of All Saints had been organising many enjoyable events and their portion of the money grew steadily. One of the most encouraging aspects of the project was the way in which the whole village became involved in the fund-raising events which had been organised. This is even more remarkable bearing in mind that at the same we managed to raise £3,000 to enable Samantha Whatmore, a young partially sighted parishioner, to participate in a transatlantic voyage aboard the TS Astrid. Sam's dad, Colin, did in fact play a key role in the subsequent re-installation of the bells, despite (at that time) being a non-ringer. Generous grants from the KCACR and the Colyer Ferguson Trust swelled the ringers' contribution and it became clear that engineering was going to be more of a challenge than money. The new bell frame was designed to hold ten bells to allow for future augmentation but it seemed an impossibility that two additional bells could be afforded. However a very generous donation from Mrs Pauline Mitchell in memory of her late husband, supplemented by money from the ringers, enabled two new trebles to be cast by the Whitechapel Foundry in late 1996.

The bells are rehung

After much frustration a local builder was appointed to undertake the necessary structural works. And so, in December 1996 and January 1997, it all took place. The frame and the bells were finally installed. Much support came from the Church and the village and some tremendously talented people gave unstintingly of their time. Several marriages were strained: 'you're not going up that tower *again* are you?' was heard in many households. Ringing took place for the first time on 28th January and, although ancillary works in the tower were still underway, the ringers' enthusiasm meant that service and practice ringing resumed at once, albeit not on all ten until the rededication.

Staplehurst Church was packed for the service of rededication and thanksgiving on Easter Day, performed appropriately by Reverend Brian Barnes, Rector of Staplehurst, who has been unwavering in his support of the project. Fittingly, three of the hymns were those used at the original dedication service in 1885, and the design of the front cover of the Order of Service was also based on that of 1885. On the following day the bells were available for those attending the Kent County Association AGM and around 50 people availed themselves of the opportunity. A few days later we were honoured to have the Clerical Guild as our first visitors.

The first quarter on the rehung and augmented bells was on 10th May 1997 when a completely local band rang 1259 Grandsire Caters as a compliment to Valerie Wallis who had been awarded an MBE at Buckingham Palace the previous day for her long service to the YMCA. Since then a further seven have been rung, including one half-muffled for the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales.

The future

Such is the enthusiasm at Staplehurst that we now have around 40 ringers in our band, ranging in age from eight to 90, and our practice nights sometimes resemble a District Meeting! Our range of expertise is therefore rather wide, and most of the ringers have limited experience of 10-bell ringing. Nevertheless we can normally manage Grandsire Caters for Sunday service and we will be attempting a local band peal at the end of October. We hope we will be successful. One thing is certain, however; thanks to the enthusiasm of the ringers and the support of the people of the village – and indeed beyond – the future of ringing at Staplehurst is assured for many years to come.

ROY BARCLAY

Details of Staplehurst bells

Bell	Weight	Inscription	Cast	Note
Treble	5 – 0 – 05	To the memory of Brian C. Mitchell 1932-1995 Donated by Pauline Mitchell, Iden Court	Whitechapel 1996	G
2	5 – 0 – 27	Dedicated to the people of Staplehurst and in memory of Brian C. Mitchell, B. Barnes Rector	Whitechapel 1996	F
3	5 – 1 – 25	PRAISE TO GOD THE ETERNAL FATHER G. F. Reyner, STP Rector	Mears & Stainbank 1885	E flat
4	5 – 3 – 19	PRAISE TO GOD THE ETERNAL SON J. H. C. McGill, Curate	Mears & Stainbank 1885	D
5	6 – 2 – 08	PRAISE TO GOD THE ETERNAL SPIRIT John Nunn William Wickings, Churchwardens	Mears & Stainbank 1885	C
6	7 – 1 – 26	GOD BLESS THE CHURCH This bell is in place of one cast in 1748	Mears & Stainbank 1885	B flat
7	8 – 2 – 25	GOD BLESS THE QUEEN This bell is in place of one cast in 1663	Mears & Stainbank 1885	A flat
8	11 – 0 – 13	GOD BLESS STAPLEHURST This bell is in place of one cast in 1594	Mears & Stainbank 1885	G
9	13 – 3 – 19	Henry Turner CW, William Wolless, CW 1605 JOSEPH HATCH MADE ME TS	Joseph Hatch 1605	F
Tenor	19 – 2 – 07	ThisTenor was in place of one cast in 1649 and the 6th 5th 4th 3rd 2nd & Treble bells were cast by Mears & Stainbank in 1885 DONA DEI DEO	Mears & Stainbank 1885	E flat

The Ringing World

Penmark House, Woodbridge Meadows, Guildford GU1 1BL (Registered Office)

The official Journal of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers

(Founded by J. S. Goldsmith in 1911, proprietor and editor until his death in 1942)

Editor: Tina Stoecklin

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50 Cramhurst Lane, Witley, Godalming, Surrey GU8 5QZ. (01428-682790)
Registered in England Co. Number 1722963
Registered as a Charity in London under No. 287182

POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES:
From January 1st, 1997

One copy, 3 months	**£11.00**
One copy, 6 months	**£20.50**
One copy, 12 months	**£38.00**
Two copies to same address	**£73.00**

(Additional copies **£33.00** each per annum)

Overseas

Surface/European inc. Eire mail	**£47.50**
Air Mail	**£63.50**

Single copies overseas will be posted every two weeks unless a supplement of £20 per year has been paid.

Remittances, payable to *The Ringing World*, should be addressed to *The Ringing World Ltd.*, Penmark House,Woodbridge Meadows, Guildford GU1 1BL
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RW Web Pages: http://www.luna.co.uk/~ringingw