

HIGH WYCOMBE CHURCH BELLS.

By R. S. DOWNS.

THE grand old parish church of High Wycombe can boast of one of the finest peals in the county of Buckingham, and the only one composed of ten bells.

When the present nave was erected in 1273, the tower was, as usual at that period, placed in the centre of the building, at the intersection of the transepts. This old tower contained a ring of six bells, which were removed into the present tower at its completion in 1522. There is no record preserved of the weight and inscriptions of these bells, but the completion of the new tower is said to have been celebrated with "piping of organs and ringing of bells." This is the earliest recorded occasion of the bells being rung.

The earliest date at which we have any particulars given respecting the bells, is 1639. According to the returns made in that year at the visitation of Bishop Williams, of Lincoln, we find that they were at that time six in number, exclusive of a Sanctus Bell. With the exception of Wingrave, no other church in this county was returned as possessing a peal of the same extent.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the whole peal was recast by Richard Phelps of Whitechapel. Of the six bells in existence before that period, all except the second were dated, the oldest one having been cast in 1583 and the latest exactly a century later.

The four older bells of this peal were inscribed with pious ejaculations, those on the 2nd and 3rd being in Latin. The other two bells have the names of the Mayors and Churchwardens at the date when they were cast upon them.

The following is a list of the inscriptions upon the bells before their recasting by Phelps:—

Treble.—Praise y^e Lorde, 1620.

2nd.—Sit Nomen Domini Benedictum.

3rd.—Multis Annis Resonet Campana Iohannis, 1583.

4th.—Love God, 1686.

5th.—Martyn Luellyn, Mayr; Robt. Roy, Christr, Weedon, Richd. Piggot, Robt. Bowdrey, Church W's. 1672.

Tenor.—Jno. Pettiphur, Mayr.; Chas. Elliot, Ald.; Jno. Biggs, Thos. Grove, Christr. Lansdell, Sam. Freeman, Robt. Ratliff. C. W. 1683.

In 1711 a clean sweep was made of the bells, it having been determined to have the whole peal recast, and their machinery renewed. Frames, wheels, stocks, etc., all underwent a process of restoration and re-adaptation.

The six old bells were taken down and removed by road to Spade Oak Wharf, Bourne End, whence they were taken by water to London. Five hundredweight of new metal was added, and eight new bells were cast to replace the six old ones.

The cost of these alterations and additions by R. Phelps was £140, exclusive of the expenses incurred by the parochial authorities in taking the bells to Spade Oak Wharf and bringing them back from there to Wycombe.

All the municipal officials from the Mayor and Aldermen down to Beadle, have their names inscribed upon these bells, and so in like manner have the Vicar, Churchwardens, Parish Clerk and Sexton, their names duly recorded.

The inscriptions upon these eight bells were as follow :—

Treble.—Wm. Shrimpton, T. Clerk; Jno. Rose, Serjeant; Wm. Hailey, Beadle: R. P. fec. 1711.

2nd.—Edward Stevens, Clark; Luke Gurney, Sexton; R. Phelps, fec. 1711.

3rd.—Richard Phelps, of Whitechapel, London, made these eight bells, 1711.

4th.—God preserve the Church of England, and our Gracious Queen Ann, R. P. fec. 1711.

5th.—Meseiurs Ben. Hickman, Jos. Pettiphur, Ric. Shrimpton, Hen. Hunt, Aldermen, R. Phelps, fec. 1712.

6th.—Meseiurs John Lane, Tho. Stevens, Geo. Grove Ferd. Shrimpton, Tho. Welles, Aldⁿ. R. P. fec. 1711.

7th.—Hugh Shrimpton, Mayr.; Tho. Russin, Justice; Tho. Wood, T. C. Richd. Allen, Jno. Carter, Bail. R. P. fec. 1711.

Tenor.—Saml. Guise, M.A., Vicar; Nathl. Morgin, Wm. Packer; Saml. Welles, Fra. Williams, C. W.; Richd. Phelps made mee. 1711.

In one of the corporation registers is the following account of this recasting, in the handwriting of Alderman Pettipher, whose name was inscribed on the 5th bell, the one now at Wooburn:—

“The taking down of ye old Bells, altering ye Frames, Wheels, Stocks, Clappers, Brasses, carriage from Spade Oke Wharfe to London, all other charge at London, casting the eight new bells, and adding five hundredweight of new mettle; carriage back to Spade Oke Wharfe, Hanging ye new Bells, and all other charges, except carrying ye old Bells to Spade Oke Wharfe, and bringing ye new Bells back from thence, was undertaken and performed by Mr. Richard Phelps of Whitechapell, Lond., Bell-founder for ye sum of one hundred and forty pounds.”

The 5th bell is now the 7th at Wooburn. The peal was, no doubt, cast towards the end of the year 1711, and owing to some accident, or the bell having proved faulty, the 5th had to be recast. This was done early in the following year, and will account for the date on this bell being different from that on the rest of the peal.

From a MS. compiled by the antiquaries, Cole and Browne Willis, between 1730 and 1766, we find High Wycombe given among the churches possessing eight bells, and the weight of the tenor is stated to have been twenty-six hundredweight. The other churches in this county having a peal of eight at that time, were those of Bletchley, Denham, and Newport Pagnell.

Of the above eight, only three are retained in the present peal, viz., 2nd, 3rd, and 6th, now the 5th, 6th, and 9th, respectively. To these were subsequently added the present 7th, in 1756; the 2nd was given by the Earl of Wycombe in 1788; and the 3rd by his brother, Lord Henry Petty, in the same year. Four were recast by Mears, of London, in 1802, which with the three retained from those of 1711, make up the ten now in the tower. Here again we have, besides the donors of the 2nd and

3rd bells, the Vicar, and Churchwardens, both parish and borough, named on the Tenor.

Their inscriptions are as follow :—

Treble.—Thomas Mears of London, Fecit, 1802.

2nd.—The Gift of the Earl of Wycomb, eldest Son of the Marquis of Lansdown. John Briant, Hartford, Fecit 1788. W. Ball, G. Harman, Assistants.

3rd.—The Gift of Lord Henry Petty, second son of the Marquis of Lansdown. John Briant, Hartford, Fecit, 1788. G. Harman, W. Ball, Assistants.

4th.—Recast by Thomas Mears of London, A.D. 1802.

5th.—Edward Stevens, Clark ; Luke Gurney, Sexton. R. Phelp, fec. 1711.

6th.—Richard Phelps of Whitechapel, London, made these eight bells, 1711.

7th.—Aron Wooster, Thos. Walker, Mr. Mead, Churchwardens, Thos. Swain, made me, 1756.

8th.—Recast by Thomas Mears of London, A.D. 1802.

9th.—Meseiurs John Lane, Tho. Stevens, Geo. Grove, Ferd^o. Shrimpton, Tho. Welles, Aldⁿ. R. P. Fec. 1711.

Tenor.—May all whom I shall summon to the Grave the blessings of a well spent life receive. The Revd. James Price, Vicar, Messrs. Richard Barton, Samuel Bates, James Kingston, and Daniel Turner, Church Wardens, W. B. Thos. Mears of London, Fecit, 1802.

Besides the inscription given above, the 3rd bell shows the obverse of a coin with the circumscription "Georgius III., Dei Gratia." The "W. B." on the Tenor means Wycombe Borough.

Upon the east wall of the Belfry there is an old tablet with a gilt frame, which bears the following inscription :—

ALL SAINTS, WYCOMBE, April 8th, 1792.

On the evening of the eighth Instant
was Rung in this Steeple

A Compleat Peal of Grandsire Caters
Consisting of

Five Thousand one Hundred and eleven
Changes

By a Party of the Society of
London College Youths

which they compleated in three hours
forty-two minutes, in that masterly
style for which they are famous.

PERFORMERS.

Mr. John Povey . . . Treble	Mr. James Wooster . . . 6
Mr. John Holdsworth . . . 2	Mr. John Inville . . . 7
Mr. James Lance . . . 3	Mr. Edm ^d . Sylvester . . . 8
Mr. Will ^m . Wilson . . . 4	Mr. Dan ^l . Jenkins . . . 9
Mr. Rich ^d . Wilson . . . 5	Mr. John Lyford . . . Tenor

The Peal call'd by Mr. John Povey.

Mr. James Wooster was probably a Wycombe ringer, who had been selected to fill the place of one of the College Youths.

The Wycombe bells have sometimes been made to sing a political tune. Thus, on May 17, 1832, when the news reached the town that all opposition to the Reform Bill had been withdrawn, the bells were rung all day by way of congratulation to the Government of Lord Melbourne. On the following day, when the Archdeacon of Buckingham, the Ven. Justly Hill, held his Visitation at Wycombe, the ringers refused to pay him the accustomed compliment, because the Bishop of Oxford had voted against the Reform Bill. Of late years the bells have had the honour of welcoming to the town the Queen and the Heir-Apparent upon more than one occasion.

The bells were occasionally used for purposes in no way connected with the church, as the following extract from the Borough Records will show:—

“Feb. 6th, 1672. Henry Shepherd was discharged and ousted as a Burgess of High Wycombe for misbehaviour and being uncivil to several gentlemen, especially on the 3rd instant, at the Catherine Wheel; and in token whereof it is ordered that the Great Bell be rung out according to custom in testimony of his misdemeanours, and for his disfranchisement.”

Many of the following interesting items in reference to the bells have been gathered from the old churchwardens' accounts. It is greatly to be regretted that most of the earlier volumes of these records have been destroyed. It is to such memorials of the past that we must refer for the elucidation of many religious and social customs of our forefathers. The parochial accounts of other places have proved to be a rich storehouse of varied and curious information, and doubtless those of Wycombe, had they been preserved, would, upon examination, have yielded much useful and interesting matter upon this and other branches of local history.

The following accounts of repairs to the bells occur:—

1760.	Richd. Stevens for mending the clapper of the Great Bell	£00	5	0
1764.	Thos. Weller for work to ye bells	00	01	00
	Paid Mr. Veary for work done to the Great Bell	00	03	00
1766.	Wm. Mead for work about ye bells	0	15	11½
	Thos. Wingrove for Carpenter's Work to the Bells and Chimes, etc.	05	18	03
	John Wootton, his bill for ropes	01	02	11
1798.	Beer for ringers changing the ropes	00	05	02
1821.	William Brown, moiety of Bill for Bell rope	1	3	4
1827-8.	On a loose paper between these years— expended on Organ and Bells	29	9	0
1829.	John Youens, for bell ropes	6	0	0

The Curfew Bell had been rung from time immemorial till within living memory. It was discontinued not quite forty years ago. The bell used for this purpose was not, as usual, the Great Bell, but the 9th.

In going through the records for the last 120 years, I find that the successive ringers of the Curfew, or eight o'clock evening bell, were as follow, with the amount of the annual payment on that behalf, and the date of their appointment:—

Joseph Allen, 1764, £1 5s.
Edward Hearn, 1766, £1 5s.
Thomas Phillips, 1770, £1 5s. Died or resigned at the end of the same year, when
William Stanworth, 1770, was appointed "at the finishing," and received 1s. for his services in completing the year commenced by his predecessor.
Robert Youens, 1807, £1 6s. He remained steeple-keeper until his death in 1824.
Edward Burnham, 1813, £1 10s.
James Lacey.
William East, 1821, £2.
Richard Russell, 1831, £2
Robert Youens.

The Curfew Bell was generally rung by the sexton, who was formerly provided with an official robe.

1760.	Pd. Ed. Hearn for his suit of clothes	£00	16	10½
1763.	Making Sexton's coat	00	03	00
1766.	Jos. Child, making Hearn's coat	00	03	00

He resided in one of the cottages southward of the church, and probably had his house furnished by the

churchwardens, which may, perhaps, explain the following otherwise inexplicable entry:—

1778. Bedstead and Bolster £01 05 00

Edward Burnham was the last who resided in the churchyard cottage.

It was not an uncommon circumstance for the ringer of the curfew to be provided with sleeping accommodation within the church, as the following, relating to Favorsham, shows—22 Hen. VIII.—

“Imprimis, the Sexton or his sufficient deputy shall lye in the church steeple; and at eight o'clock every nighte shall ryng the Curfewe by the space of a quarter of an hour, with such belle as of old tyme hath been accustomed.”

In former times, too, the churchwardens were accustomed to provide the ringer of the four o'clock morning bell with an alarm clock to awaken him to his duty at the proper hour. It is related of the above-named James Lacey that after raising the bell and ringing it a few minutes he would pull it off and allow it to ring down by itself, regardless of any mishap that might be caused by the rope, and he used to make it his boast that he could reach his home, near the Wheel Inn, and get into bed again before the bell had run down.

The Curfew is still rung at Chesham during the winter months, commencing on the Sunday next after Michaelmas Day (Sept. 29), or on that festival if it falls on a Sunday, and continuing till the Saturday preceding the 10th of March.

Another interesting custom was also kept up in Wycombe—the ringing of an early morning bell at four a.m. This was doubtless a relic of former days when “early to bed and early to rise” was more generally practised than at present, and people were accustomed to assemble in the church for Mass before beginning their daily labour. A similar custom is still kept up in Normandy.

This four o'clock morning bell was pretty general in England. From Bridge's “Northamptonshire” we find that a bell was rung at four a.m. at Byfield, and at eight p.m., for which the clerk received 20s., paid him by the Rector. The four o'clock bell was also rung formerly at Newcastle, and one is still rung at six a.m., except on Sundays and holidays. Land was left at Mapouder, in

Dorsetshire, "to find a man to ring the morning bell and Curfew throughout the year;" and at Ibberton, in the same county, £1 a-year was left "for ringing the morning bell." (Hutchin's "Dorset," II., 267, 422.)

These examples plainly show that the custom was one of widespread observance, and not merely a local affair. This matutinal bell was rung in London, but at a different hour, as appears from the will of Mr. Donne, mercer and citizen, who left two tenements in Hosier (now Bow) Lane, to provide for the ringing of the Tenor Bell of Bow Church, at six a.m. as well as at eight p.m.

It appears that the four o'clock morning bell was discontinued in Wycombe before the Curfew. Both bells were rung by the same person, and the double duty was included in the single payment, as shown, among other instances, by—

1823. Paid East for 8 o'clock bell (two years)	£4	0	0
1824. Ditto, for 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock bell	2	0	0

The four o'clock morning bell was discontinued in 1836, the Curfew in 1853.

Another ancient custom has been continued at Wycombe to our own day—the ringing of the Pancake Bell, as it is familiarly called, on Shrove Tuesday. The original design of this bell was to summon the people to confession before entering on the solemn season of Lent; but the occasion was afterwards converted into a regular carnival for games and merriment, especially cock-fighting and cock-throwing. When people had ceased to do well they quickly learned to do evil.

Cock-throwing formerly took place every Shrove Tuesday in the churchyard at Wycombe, and on the waste piece of ground beyond, now converted into Castle Street.

An entry, in 1774, when Ralph Spicer was churchwarden, shows that the authorities disapproved of this cruel diversion, and endeavoured to put it down—

Feb. 14. Paid Daniel Pearce for crying down the Cocks being throw'd at in the churchyard, &c., on Shrove Tuesday	£00	00	02
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The Pancake Bell is rung in some places at noon, not at eleven a.m. as in Wycombe. The custom is not so

generally observed as formerly. In Poor Robin, for 1684, we find

“But, hark! I hear the Pancake-bell,
And fritters make a gallant smell.”

The Wycombites showed themselves very loyal with their bells. There are entries regularly every year, on June 4th and September 29th during the reign of George III., being the King's birthday, and the Coronation Day of the King and the Queen Consort, 14s. being the sum paid to the ringers on each occasion. These dates subsequently gave place to January 29th and July 19th, the Accession and Coronation Days of George IV., the remuneration to the ringers being increased to £1 1s. on each occasion. Royal days are now discontinued, as there are no funds to pay the ringers.

The 5th of November was likewise duly remembered, the same sums being paid the ringers as on the royal days. On November 5th, 1772, 1s. extra was allowed them for beer.

Nelson's victory over the French at the battle of the Nile, in August, 1798, was the occasion of great rejoicings in Wycombe, and the bells were rung for two days, for which £1 8s. is charged in the accounts for that year.

The ringers in 1770 were Messrs. Phillips, Brown, Wooster, Doney, Hearn, Wicheloe, Stanworth, and Bowles—there being then but eight bells in the peal. There may have been one or two more ringers at that time, but, if so, I have not been able to discover their names.

There is only one occasion mentioned in the parochial accounts when the bells were rung for a Confirmation, viz., May 20th, 1770. But in most instances the amounts only of the disbursements are entered, no specification of the several items being given, so it is not always possible to identify the occasions with certainty.

Not much has been done for the improvement of the bells of late years, and the sixth of the present peal is very badly cracked across the crown and down to the waist. The bell has been in the same condition for a great numbers of years. The late parish clerk, Mr. John Youens, remembered it being so above fifty years ago.

The Treble was re-hung by Mears and Stainbank in February, 1885, and new ropes have just recently been added.

There is apparently no record of the date when the first set of chimes was added, and the earliest mention of them I have met with is in 1766, when they were repaired by Thomas Wingrove, of Wycombe. The following extracts from the Parochial Records relate to these old chimes:—

1767. Richard Carter his Bill for looking the Clock and Chimes	£01 00 00
1770. Edward Hearn for sweeping the Church & looking after ye Chimes	02 08 00
1770. Whitwell for repairing the Chimes	01 13 00

In 1790 Mr. R. Harman, of Wycombe, erected a new set of chimes at the expense of Lord Lansdown. The tunes were the same as those of the celebrated chimes of St. Giles' Church, Cripplegate, London, which were also constructed by Mr. Harman, viz.:—

Sunday.—Salisbury or Easter Hymn.

Monday.—Hymn of Eve.

Tuesday.—Staughton.

Wednesday.—Horsley.

Thursday.—Sicilian Mariners' Hymn.

Friday.—Britons, Strike Home!

Saturday.—Bermondsey.

The old clock, which dated from about the year 1730, at length became worn out and unable any longer to point the hour and mark the time. Accordingly, in the early part of 1876, a movement was set on foot for raising funds for the purpose of providing a new one. This was brought to successful issue in December of the same year. During the early part of 1877 a new set of chimes were put in by Messrs. Gillett and Bland, of Croydon, who had been also the contractors for the clock. The cost of the whole was above £500.

The tunes which the chimes play are as follow, with the names of the gentlemen who gave them:—

Sunday.—Easter Hymn (Rev. R. Chilton).

Monday.—Rousseau's Dream (Mr. J. O. Griffiths, Q.C.).

Tuesday.—O rest in the Lord! (Mr. S. Parker).

Wednesday.—Sicilian Mariners' Hymn (Mr. F. Wheeler).

Thursday.—Blue Bells of Scotland (Mr. B. Lucas).

Friday.—Last Rose of Summer (Mr. W. V. Baines).

Saturday.—Home, Sweet Home (Mr. A. Vernon).

The following observations, communicated to the Editor by Mr. E. J. Payne, M.A., Recorder of Wycombe, will form an interesting addition to the foregoing paper:—

“Originally (*i.e.*, before 1620), I believe there were only five bells. I conclude thus because there was an old inn in Paul’s Row (indeed, the house still exists) called ‘The Five Bells.’ A 6th (the ‘Praise the Lord’ bell) seems to have been added in 1620.

“There were chimes in the time of Mr. Cordell, about 1685. This is proved by a return made by him, in which he mentions the clock with the ‘moon-dial inwards to the church,’ which you, perhaps, remember as existing before the restoration, and the clock-dial and sun-dial outside. The moon-dial was very curious, having, if you remember, not only the gilt sphere representing the moon, which revolved in the middle of the dial and showed the progress of the lunation, but figures denoting the twenty-four hours of the day and night. It had only one pointer, and was fixed in a square frame which stood hatchment fashion, as if hung up by one corner.

“The nature of the alterations made in 1802 was as follows:—The peal of ten, which had existed since 1788, appears to have been found too heavy, and by the advice of Mears the Tenor was removed (the old 9th made the Tenor), the necessary alterations (*i.e.*, new bells cast as 4th and 8th) made in the middle of the peal, and an entirely new Treble. When the 9th was recast to form the new Tenor, it was considerably increased in weight (from 17 cwt. to between 22 cwt. and 23 cwt.) Mears sold the 7th bell to the Wooburn people instead of taking it away. The effect of this change was to lighten the peal by about twelve cwt., and to change the pitch from D to E.

“There was a ringing society at Wycombe in the early part of the century, of which Mr. Ball, whose name appears on the 2nd and 3rd bells, was the leading member.

“The biggest bell in olden times in the county, was the Great Bell of Missenden Abbey, which weighed 50 cwts. (more than twice that of the Wycombe Tenor).”