

The Bells of St Laurence, Lighthorne

In 2006 a great deal of work was done to the bells and the bell-tower.

The old ring of 4 bells had not been rung by parishioners for many years and was thought by the ringing community to be “in a not too good condition, the treble having a ‘wormy’ headstock”. The Parochial Church Council decided to restore the bells in September 2004. Shortly afterwards they decided to add two more bells as well.

Local fund-raising took place during 2005-6. Help was obtained from the Coventry Diocesan Guild of Church Bellringers (whose centenary fell in 2007) as well as other charitable bodies and many personal contributions. The new bells were trebles – i.e. higher in pitch than the existing ones. A dozen local people, none of whom had done any full-circle ringing before, volunteered to train to form a ringing band. The successful project resulted in the new ring of 6 bells being dedicated by the Rt. Rev. Colin Bennetts, Bishop of Coventry, on 26 November 2006 and rung by the new band.



The bellhanger, Neil Thomas from the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, looks over the finished job

The work all took place in 2006. In February the original four bells and bell-frame were removed. Then new steel joists and soundproofed flooring were installed in the bellchamber together with a new galvanised steel bellframe with modern fittings, with space left for the two new bells to be added later. The tower roof was also repaired and the lighting in the ringing chamber and bellchamber was replaced. In May the refurbished and re-tuned four bells were re-hung. Then, on 1 September, the two new bells were cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London, overseen by the Rev. John Burrell and two members of the parish. Finally, in November, the bellframe was upgraded and the two finished new bells were hung (see photo on first page). To complete the job, the ringing chamber was re-decorated and refurbished.

The volunteer bellringers had their first meeting in the church on 10 March 2006. Their first ringing practice was in Wellesbourne on 1 April. They then split into two teams and, when the four bells were returned to St Laurence, practice moved back 'home'. By the time of the Harvest Festival, on 15 October, the local band had progressed to the point where they could ring rounds for their first church service. The new band, together with their teachers, rang all six bells for the dedication in November.

Brief History and Details of the Bells

The church was taken down and entirely rebuilt in 1773-4, the stone tower replacing a previous wooden belfry. In 1875-6 the body of the church was rebuilt and enlarged, the earlier tower being left intact.

Lighthorne is known to have had three bells since at least 1552. In 1890 a major refurbishment was carried out for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. The three bells were removed, the original treble bell (now 4), which had been cracked since 1875, was recast, and a new treble bell (now 3) provided. After installing new oak framing for the treble and four complete sets of new bell mountings, the four bells were re-hung. The invoice, from Messrs Llewellyns & James of Bristol, was for £90.

The majority of the 2006 work was carried out by the Whitechapel Foundry of London. The total cost of all the work was about £50,000.

Treble: Whitechapel, London, 2006. 2-2-15 (134kg), 23". 1641Hz (G#–21c). “COVENTRY DIOCESAN GUILD – OF – CHURCH BELLRINGERS – CENTENARY BELL – 2007”

2: Whitechapel, London, 2006. 2-3-1 (140kg), 24". 1473Hz (F#–8c). “2006 – NOW 6 BELLS – TO RING OUT – IN PRAISE OF GOD – REJOICE”

3: Llewellins & James, Bristol, 1890. 2-3-10 (144kg), 26.125". 1317.5Hz (E–1c). “LAUS DEO – W R VERNEY RECTOR – W WILKINS} W LATTIMER} CHURCHWARDENS – 1890”

4: Llewellins & James, Bristol, 1890. 3-1-9 (169kg), 27.375". 1234Hz (D#–15c). “M BAGLEY MADE MEE – I WAS RECAST IN MEMORIE – OF THE QUEENS JUBILEE 1890”. It was recast from a Matthew Bagley of Chipping Norton bell of 1774. This bell in turn had been recast from the earlier treble and had also used the metal of the ancient sanctus bell.

5: Bond & Son, Burford, 1913. 4-1-1 (216kg), 29.125". 1102Hz (C#–11c). “RECAST 1913 TO THE MEMORY OF – WALTER ROBERT VERNEY – RECTOR 1873-1907”. From an earlier Henry Bagley of Chacombe bell of 1679 which was inscribed “H B 1679 THOMAS GREEN AND WILLIAM TOWNSIND CHVRCHWARDENS” and was itself a recast of an earlier mediæval bell.

Tenor: Worcester Foundry, c1410-1420. 5-2-6 (282kg), 31.94", 31.94". 985Hz (B–5c). “[cross] I O H A N N I S [king] P R E C E [queen] D V L C E [king] S O N E T [queen] E T [king] A M E N E” (“John prays for a sweet noise and action?”). This is one of many “Royal Heads” bells, the word-stop symbols representing the heads of Edward III and Queen Philippa.

Bellframe and fittings: The old wooden bellframe appears to have been made locally from reclaimed timber during the 1773-4 rebuilding. After the 1890 extension to the bellframe, the belfry floor had to be strengthened by inserting an additional steel joist in 1935. Two more were added in 1963.

The bellframe still had the original 1890 Llewellyns & James fittings when it was replaced. Part of the wooden frame, complete with a plain bearing in a hinged wooden cover, is on view in the bellchamber. Some oak, reclaimed from the bellchamber, was used to make crosses as memorabilia.

Any remaining canons were removed from the bells and they are now on steel headstocks. They run in ball bearings and use wooden stays and sliders.

Ringing

The first quarter-peal following augmentation (of 1296 Cambridge Surprise Minor) was by a visiting band and was rung on 9 December 2006. The first with a local band member (1320 Mixed Doubles) was on 23 February 2010.

The first peal since augmentation (of 5040 Surprise Minor) was rung half-muffled on 19 January 2008 “in memory of Sir Adam Butler who was instrumental in the success of the project to rehang and augment these bells”.

Practice night is Thursday from 7:15 to 8:45. The tower captain is a member of the Association of Ringing Teachers. A simulator is being installed; one person can now practice on their own with the computer “ringing” the other bells, and fully silent practice should soon be possible.

Written by Mike Rigby in November 2006, updated October 2013. *Additional information from Warwickshire Records Office archives, Chris Pickford and warksbells.co.uk. With thanks to the Rev. John Burrell, Sir Adam Butler, Nelson Watkins and Chris Wild.*

If you live locally and would like to know more about learning to ring with the band, or if you are an experienced bellringer who would like to visit, please contact Sally Dick on 01926-650078.