

Ringling at Wheatley

(A transcript of a booklet produced by Ian O'Reilly c.1967)

THE OLD CHAPEL

Old records show that there was a chapel at Wheatley by 1427, although it may have been built earlier than this date. This Chapel, which stood on the site behind the War Memorial in the High Street, contained two bells. An inventory made in 1552 notes that 'there was never taken inventory afor of thys chapel' and includes the entry 'Item 2 small belles'. Richard Rawlinson also made a note of these: 'Here are two bells'.

The Wheatley Churchwardens' Accounts show yearly payments of two shillings and six pence for 'Ringling the Midnight Peal' and the bell ropes were regularly replaced at a cost of six shillings.

NEW CHURCH AND BELLS

The Chapel was demolished in 1785 to make way for a new church, the bequest of Thomas Sims of Denton. John Briant, the Hertford Bellfounder, cast a bell weighing approximately 10 cwt for the new church in 1793; and the following year, cast four lighter bells to complete the ring of five. Briant was casting bells between 1782 and 1825, and local examples of his work are at Adderbury, Banbury, Cuddesdon, St Andrew's Old Headington and St Ebbe's in Oxford.

The Churchwardens' Accounts for this period mention the 'Four Ringling Days':

29th of May, King Charles' Restoration

4th of June, King's Birthday

25th of October, King's Coronation

5th of November, Gunpowder Plot.

These ringling days earned the ringers one pound annually, (i.e. a shilling per ringer for each day). Royal events were also marked by the bells; in 1821 the ringers received two shillings for 'Tolling the bell for the Queen' and five shillings for 'Ringling a dumb (i.e. muffled) peal for the Queen'. The next year was happier - ringling for the King's coronation - only to be followed in 1830 by 'ringling and toling the bell for the King.' It was about this time that the payments to the ringers were discontinued, and presumably the parishioners of Wheatley missed the bells, for in the minutes of a Vestry Meeting held in 1844 read: 'It was resolved that the one pound a year which was formerly paid to the ringers for the four Ringling Days be restored to the Churchwardens' Accounts'.

The new Church did not meet with general approval, however, as its design was considered to be unsatisfactory, Contemporary references of this kind:

'A large chapel, dedicated to St Mary ...with diminutive chancel, great round-headed windows and hipped roof of slate; in fact, having nothing to distinguish it in outward appearance from a meeting-house'.

'A deplorable specimen of the worst period of Church Building'.

In 1855, therefore, the Vicar of Wheatley, The Revd. Edward Elton, applied for a faculty to take down the existing church. This was a bare year after the creation of Wheatley as a separate ecclesiastical parish, having previously been in the parish of Cuddesdon. In spite of lack of support from the Vestry, Elton, with the support of the Bishop, raised the money for a new church, mainly in small sums from members of the University.

THE PRESENT CHURCH

The new church was designed by George Edmund Street, the Diocesan Architect, who also designed the Law Courts in London. It was built on a new site above the village because, as he reported: 'The present Church is built on clay, and shows consequently many settlements'. He proposed to build a tower on the new church 'sufficiently lofty to contain the bells, and forming a portion of a design which at some future day it is hoped may be completed.'

The present Church was consecrated on June 10th 1857, and at this time the tower (without spire) contained the five bells which had been removed from the old building. On January 15 1862, however, the vicar dismissed the ringers and Churchwarden for 'bad behaviour'. The exact nature of their misbehaviour is unspecified, but ringers and drink were closely associated at this period, and many clergy waged a perpetual war with their ringers. In Launton, near Bicester, the entrance to the Ringing Chamber is via an external iron ladder. This was to prevent ringers from taking barrels of beer into the tower! By 1879, however, either the ringers had been reprimanded or a new band had taken their place, for a Vestry Minute Book records a resolution for the 'completion of the peal of bells by the addition of a sixth bell, an object which has long been desired by the parishioners generally'. The new bell, which weighed 4cwt 1qr 17lbs, was ordered through Mr Frederick White, the Besselsleigh bellhanger, and was cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London by

Mears and Stainbank. This completed the ring of six bells which now hangs in the church tower. The building had already been completed with the addition of the spire in 1868.

The inscriptions on the bells are as follows:

Treble MEARS & STAINBANK, FOUNDERS, LONDON
"PRAISE GOD IN HIS SANCTUARY" PS 150.
EDWARD ELTON, VICAR.
GEORGE ROSE
CHARLES BUSHNELL CHURCHWARDENS.1879
Second J.BRIANT HERTFORD. FECIT. 1794
Third JOHN BRIANT HERTFORD. FECIT, 1794 (mis-spelt) Fourth
 J.BRIANT HERTFORD. FECIT. 1794
Fifth J.BRIANT HERTFORD. FECIT. 1794
 GLORIA DEI IN EXCELSIS
Tenor JOHN BRIANT OF HERTFORD. FECIT. 1793.
 GLORIA DEI IN EXCELSIS

The most recent addition to the bells is a sanctus or saunce which is separate from the ring of six. This bell, weighing only 20lbs, originally hung in the church at Troitsa (North Russia) and was removed in June 1919. It bears a Russian inscription which translated means: 'Made in the factory of Clovyanishmik at Taroslav'. The bell was mentioned in an article on the ringers which appeared in the Oxford Times in 1968.

In 1964, the bells were re-hung on ball bearings by Messrs. White (Bell-hangers) of Appleton, Berkshire. Mr Frank White is the grandson of Frederick White who hung the treble bell in 1879.

Many country towers have ringers with outstanding records of service, and Wheatley is no exception. Mr W. E. Sheldon learnt to ring here in 1903 and was a member of the band until 1965, for many years as Captain of the Ringers. Mr W. Ladbrook joined the ringers in 1937 when he moved from Thame.

The present band was started by Mr K. E. White, and a glance at the photograph will show how predominantly young the ringers are. Many of them are members of the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bellringers. There have always been two members of the Lady Spender-Churchill

College ringing at Wheatley, and these have included girls from Birmingham, London, Porlock, Paington, Lyme Regis and Eastbourne.

Although the ringers no longer hold an annual dinner at the King's Arms, they do often join with other local ringers for practises and tours; ringers from Wheatley have rung at Manchester and Guildford Cathedrals, Bath and Buckfast Abbeys, and many parish churches all over the country. They find ringing a worthwhile and enjoyable pastime as well as a useful service to the church.

We hope that you will come up and see us one practice night as we ring bells which form part of the inheritance of old Wheatley.

Books to Read

- The Nine Taylors - Dorothy Sayers' best-selling murder story set against a background of bellringing
- Discovering Bells and Bellringing by John Camp (Shire Publications) - an inexpensive introduction to the art and history of church bellringing.
- Church Bells of Oxfordshire by Frederick Sharpe, available in Oxford Reference Library, Local History Section.