



HISTORY IN OUR CHURCH TOWERS

PENNANT REPRINTS N^o 7

BACKWELL

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HISTORY IN OUR CHURCH TOWERS

If you were asked what was the oldest working mechanical installation in your parish, I doubt you would have a ready answer. If I said that many churches provide a weekly reminder perhaps that would give you a clue. I refer, of course, to the bells of our parish churches which sound week by week. In the villages served by "PENNANT" each has its peal of bells - 8 at both Backwell and Wraxall and 6 at Nailsea (Holy Trinity) and Tickenham respectively.

The bells of our individual parishes were considered almost as important as the scale of the tower in terms of local prestige; the more money that could be found, the more impressive and elaborate the tower, and in the same way the heavier the peals of bells - parish rivalry and oneupmanship is by no means confined to the 20th century! Bells served both an ecclesiastical and a civil purpose, and as the church in those days wore both hats very firmly, before the days of local government as we know it there was never any argument between church and parish when money raising decisions had to be made. If the church annual vestry meeting decided that

money had to be found for the bells (or anything else) a rate was levied on the inhabitants and that was that. Villages on the whole had much good will towards their bells, especially after the Reformation, when the nation had broken with Rome, and "special dates" to remind people that the King and the Church of England were now the dominating forces in the life of the country were marked from the belfry on a regular basis.

Thus the entries in the churchwardens' accounts at Backwell ran true to form from the earliest records of the 17th century; always on November 5th the ringers were paid to celebrate the failure of Guy Fawkes and his fellow Catholic supporters to blow up the Houses of Parliament eg. "Spent upon ye ringers ye 5th November 1698 - 12/6d"; on Oakapple Day May 29th the bells were always rung to celebrate the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. St George's day, April 23rd, was also commemorated, so we find that in the days of scant other communication, state and national occasions gained a regular place in the calendar when the bells were sounded over the parish as a matter of course.

As far as ringing the bells for church services (such as there were), this was neither expected nor sought, and it was not really until the influence of the Oxford Movement in the 19th century that the clergy were encouraged to seek a closer connection with their ringers; before this the ringers' reputation for belligerence, drunkenness and a total disregard for ecclesiastical authority was hard to break, many holding the view that what was rung in the tower, and when, was irrelevant to any except those taking part in the performance. Happily those times are long past, and in most cases today ringers and clergy work well together in the service of the church.

Almost all bells bear inscriptions and founders marks which take forms ranging from initials, through crosses crowns and

emblems of every conceivable kind as well as including a wide variety of texts.

Mediaeval founders too were quite uninhibited when it came to advertising their products, and were not averse to running down their competitors in the inscriptions they placed on their bells in an age when the laws of libel were almost non-existent. Backwell bells include an interesting example as we shall see later.

Of the eight bells in the tower two were almost certainly cast in the 15th cent. The fourth has obviously never been tuned as it bears an abundance of chisel marks and chips around the lip which eventually produced the right sound to conform with the scale of notes for the rest. The significance of the change from Roman Catholicism is reflected in its inscription. These were sensitive times as the young Church of England flexed its muscles, and parishes, some reluctantly, kept a wary eye open and took their cue from the King, Henry VIII. Latin inscriptions, usually invocations to the Saints, were no longer welcome - in their place founders trod carefully producing rather bland inscriptions neither supportive of Rome nor offending the church their paymaster. Thus the crudely and poorly spelt early English inscription on the fourth bell skilfully avoided offence to anyone! The founder's initials "H.G." are generally attributed to the work of the Bristol founder Henry Gefferies who with his father Thomas was active in the city during the period 1508 - 1555.

The fifth bell is definitely pre-reformation, but the modern founders had the good sense to include the old inscription when the bell was recast in 1901, and the old Roman Catholic invocation to the Saints is stated in bold Lombardic capitals: "Sce Luca ora pro nobis" (Saint Luke pray for us). Founders' marks on the waist include a sailing ship, a crown, and a Maltese Cross somewhat embellished. The ship emblem can be found on various bells in our area, and its design is not

dissimilar to the one which appears on the Bristol coat of arms. Dating individual bells is not easy, but the opinion of ringing archivists suggests that it was founded in the city by John Gosselin who operated circa 1430 - 1480.

The churchwardens' accounts show close attention to the monetary needs of both bells and ringers throughout the 18th century. Major work was undertaken in 1758 when the decision was taken to recast the two heaviest bells of the then ring of five which weighed 19 and 14 cwts respectively. (ie 976kg and 713kg). The work was given to William Evans of Chepstow and the bells were hauled to Bristol and despatched across the Severn by boat. The work was completed in a relatively short time, and within a year the wardens had paid George Nott a contemporary Bristol bell-hanger £45.0.0d "for casting two bells and hanging according to agreement, and £2.11.0d for addition of metal", so presumably Evans portion of the settlement was included. It was the inscription though, on the fourth bell of the old five, which reminds us that advertising was not invented by ITV!

"Bilby and Boosh may come and see
What Evans and Nott have done by me 1758"

Thus runs the couplet. Thomas Bilbie and John Bush ran the famous Chew Stoke foundry at that time and obviously Evans was not going to miss a chance to emphasise his success at obtaining a contract in the heart of rival territory! The spelling was a secondary consideration!

A new bell making the peal up to six was cast by Thomas Mears of London in 1820 but not until recent times (1938) were two more bells added by Taylors of Loughborough to complete the fine octave which Backwell possesses today.

"Ringing the changes" is very much a part of our everyday speech today, but those of us who take part in this most English of pastimes are well aware that the skills we employ and the sounds we make are part of our history and heritage - a fitting tribute to the bell founders of sometimes three, four or even five hundred years ago and still serving as the voice of the parish, marking events both local and national and a constant weekly reminder on Sundays to those in earshot that here at least is one day in the week that is, or should be, different to the rest.

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