

THE BELLS OF ST MARY'S

BRIAN O'REGAN

The 1534 Act of Supremacy passed by Parliament paved the way for Henry VIII to dissolve the monasteries in England, Wales and Ireland starting in 1536. The Cistercian Order of Biddlesden Abbey in Buckinghamshire held out for two years before being removed and not long after, the old abbey was acquired by Sir Edmund Peckham, soon to be Lord of the Manor of Denham. This is where the story of The Bells of St Mary's begins, for around this time Edmund's son Sir Robert (whose heart is interred in the church) gave the Abbey's five large bells to Denham.



These bells rang out in Denham until 1683 when they were “run into eight” according to A.H Cocks, (quoting 1755 Browne Willis book) in his voluminous *The Church Bells of Buckinghamshire* published in 1894. The five bells were melted down and recast into eight bells. St Mary's was the first church in Buckinghamshire to have a ring of eight. The frame supporting the bells and wheels was wooden and remained for 264 years until replaced by cast iron and steel in 1947.

As you pause in the porch, it may reassure you to know that the 4½ tons of bells as well as the ringing mechanism are so solidly supported. It was not always so! In 1947 it was discovered that the old timber frame was seriously affected by dry-rot and the fourth bell found to be cracked. One of the churchwardens, Major Roger Hill Way, very generously paid for the new framework, the recast of the cracked bell and rehangng, at an estimated cost of £1,200 (£50,000 in today's money). At this time, the bells were rung from the porch, and it was not until the organ loft was created in the late 1970's that the ringers moved upstairs.

So, how old are our bells? Well, the answer is not straightforward; the original five bells from Biddlesden Abbey were described by Browne Willis as “very heavy”, so although recast in 1683 by James Bartlett, we might assume that this material went into bells four to eight totalling 3½ tons. The Tenor bell was recast in 1875 and bells one, two and three were recast as per the table below. Certainly, we have three bells which were cast in 1683 and are still ringing merrily on high. On 9th May 1773, following the recasting of No. 3 and with the other seven bells of the James Bartlett 1683 vintage, The Society of College Youths from London rang a “compleat peal” of 5040 Bob Major in 3 hours and 16 minutes. That is called Change Ringing, but the art and mystery of bell-ringing is a story for another day!

The table describes the eight bells of St Mary's which were re-hung in 1948. Bells one (Treble) and two are by brothers Charles and George Mears. Charles died in 1855 but George continued the foundry and cast the 13½ ton Great Bell ("Big Ben") of Westminster in 1858. His name "George Mears of Whitechapel" is included in the inscription.

The Bells of St Mary's today

No.	Note	Inscription	Weight cwt qtr lbs
1	E flat	C. & G. Mears Founders London	5 1 10
2	D	C. & G. Mears Founders London	5 2 20
3	C	Pack & Chapman of London Fecit 1772	7 0 6
4	B flat	James Bartlett Made Me 1683 Recast 1947	8 2 6
5	A flat	James Bartlett Made Me 1683	9 3 12
6	G	James Bartlett Made Me 1683	12 1 0
7	F	James Bartlett Made Me 1683	16 3 5
8	E flat	Recast by John Warner & Sons London 1875	22 2 6

Note: 1 cwt=112 lbs; 1 qtr=28 lbs

Each of the bells are mounted under a headstock, which is attached to a grooved wooden wheel. The bell rope is wrapped around the wheel, one end tied securely to a wheel spoke and the other dropping through the floor to the bell-ringers loft. In their safe position the bells hang downwards, but when the ringers start their work, each bell is pulled into the upright position. It is delicately held here by a wooden stay attached to the headstock, which engages a wooden slider to prevent the bell continuing to turn more than one revolution. You may think it would be prudent to make the stay and slider with steel. If a bell is pulled too vigorously and then abruptly stopped by steel, the energy will be dissipated through

the bell, frame and ultimately the tower itself. Not good! Better for a replaceable wooden part to break. When the bell rope is pulled it rotates the wooden wheel and attached bell, causing the clapper inside the bell to strike and make the beautiful sound we hear. The bell rotates just over one revolution before being stopped by the stay coming against the slider.

The rotation of the wheel causes the rope to return to the starting position but on the other side of the wheel - ready for the next pull.

There is more to our bells than meets the eye or rings in the ear. So, this Christmas as you walk along Village Road to church listening to the quintessentially English sound of The Bells of St Mary's, look up and think of the bell ringers and the history that is in the belfry. Maybe you should thank Henry VIII for setting in motion the journey of the Biddlesden bells to Denham.



Thanks to Andrew Simson, Bell Tower Captain, for giving me his time and knowledge when I visited the belfry.

"The sound of the bells will be heard when he (Aaron) enters the Holy Place before the Lord". (Exodus 28:35).

For more information on bells see www.whittingsociety.org.uk