

WESTMINSTER ABBEY BELLS

IT WOULD APPEAR that at no time has the Abbey possessed a ring of bells cast at one time by one founder. Prior to 1919 there were only six bells as follows:
 Tenor 1738 Richard Phelps and Thomas Lester of Whitechapel.
 5th 1598 Robert Mot of Whitechapel.
 4th 1743 Thomas Lester.
 3rd 1583 Robert Mot.
 2nd 1743 Thomas Lester.
 Treble c 1320 Probably Richard Wymbish of London.

These hung in a very tall timber frame high up in the belfry louveres and when an attempt was made to have them rung for the Armistice in November 1918 the ringers were unable to keep the two largest going and had to be content with chiming them. The timber frame moved alarmingly when the bells were rung.

This led to the 1919 restoration, when the ancient treble, which was undersize and poor in tone, was put into the crypt and replaced and the cracked 2nd recast. Two new bells were added to complete the octave, but these four new bells had to be designed to match the four older bells and it was therefore a compromise. The eight bells were hung in a new steel frame, slightly lower than the old timber structure, but only a matter of a few feet.

The Perkins Legacy has made it possible for a completely new ring of bells to be made and the opportunity has been taken to increase the number to ten. Before the old octave were taken down, however, consideration was given to the structure of the tower and the disposition of the bells within it.

Because of the lofty nave, one does not fully appreciate just how tall the two western towers are, but in the north-west tower the bell frame took its bearing in the walls at a height of 140ft. and, as the bells exert horizontal forces equal to at least 2½ times their weight, it was hardly surprising that tests revealed not only movement in the north-west tower, but that this was being transmitted across the west end to the south-west tower as well.

Although the movement did not reach dangerous proportions, it was evident that some action to reduce this should be taken when installing the new ring of ten, and consequently two major principles were decided upon. The first was to install the bells approximately 30ft. lower in what had been the ringing room, and the second was to make the foundation girders of the bell frame more massive than usual, and very heavily to cross brace them so that they would perform the dual function of forming the foundation of the frame and at the same time a very real stiffening web in the tower.

The plans were agreed and the bells rung for the last time (half-muffled) on February 11, 1971, at the memorial service for Lord Davidson. On March 22 the bell-hangers arrived and began dismantling. Lowering the bells to the ground was not, however, a straight-forward operation, for not only were the trapways in the various floors not in line, but at ground level there are a number of very large monuments. In the centre, and rising to a height of about 25ft. right under the trapway, is the Montagu memorial. To the east of this are the monuments to Lord Howe and Charles J. Fox, and to the south the lower table monument to the 3rd Marquis of Salisbury.

A massive scaffolding was therefore erected to support a platform above the Montagu memorial, and extended eastwards

This article was sent to the R.W. earlier this year and tells the story of the work carried out in 1971.

a distance of 50ft. along the north aisle. The bells were lowered from the belfry by means of an electric chain tackle to this platform, then moved on rollers eastwards and lowered to the ground the last 25ft. by manual tackle. Even then care had to be taken while moving the bells over the nave floor to the west door on a rubber tyred trolley because of the many memorial tablets which are let into the floor.

By early April the six bells which were to be included in the new ring had been returned to Whitechapel and only the old 5th and 7th left in the now silent belfry.

These were cast at Whitechapel by Robert Mot in 1583 and 1598, during the reign of Elizabeth Tudor, and it had been decided to preserve them and hang them stationary in the old bell frame and to sound them electrically for the daily offices.

CLOCK DISMANTLED

Meanwhile the clock mechanism had been dismantled, for this had to be moved to make way for the new frame, and the Abbey staff under the direction of the Clerk of Works, Mr. Andrews, began preparation for the new ringing room in what had been the flag store, and above this the new clock room which forms the sound deadening room between the new belfry and the ringing room. This entailed the removal of a grillage of beams which had once formed the roof of the tower before it was raised to its present level. These were found to be in poor condition where they entered the walls, and they were replaced by steel girders supporting the new timber clock room floor and ringing room ceiling. A new entry had to be made to the new ringing room by lowering very tall stone steps and making a doorway, a short passage along the south window and a flight of nine timber steps up to the floor level.

During this time the casting and tuning of the new ring of ten and the construction of the framework and fittings was under

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and the late Maurice Hodgson

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6030

way at Whitechapel, and by the middle of September work began on the installation of the frame at the new lower level in the tower. Early October saw the new bells arrive at the Abbey, for it was intended that they should be immediately hoisted and the work completed to enable the bells to be rung early in November. However, the Precentor and Supervisor of the belfry intervened and asked that they be left in the Abbey. Hurried arrangements were made for their dedication in the Abbey on November 9, which Her Majesty the Queen graciously consented to attend. The new 7th bell which bears her name was sounded by her using a gold and ebony hammer, and representatives of other bodies and the Perkins family sounded the treble, 2nd and 9th bells with similar silver hammers. Present at this service was a representative gathering of Abbey ringers, the foundry staff and about 500 invited guests.

By the evening of November 12, three days later, the ten bells had been hoisted into the belfry, and the following two weeks saw the completion of their hanging, so that on November 25 a band from the foundry staff were able to test them. As however the doors and trapways were not then complete, the level of sound in the ringing room was very high, but an immense improvement in tone and ease of handling was immediately apparent.

On December 10 the Abbey band assembled to ring them for the first time for a special service for U.N.I.C.E.F. attended by the Duchess of Kent, and on the following day the bells were rung again for the Festival of Carols.

BELL DETAILS

The details of the bells are as follows:
 Tenor.—30 cwt. 1 qr. 15 lb. D.
 REMEMBER JOHN WHITMELL ISABELL HIS
 WIFE AND WILLIAM RUS WHO FIRST GAVE

THIS BELL 1430

NEW CAST IN JULY 1599 AND IN APRIL 1738
 RICHARD PHELPS T: LESTER FECIT

RECAST 1971

WHITECHAPEL BELL FOUNDRY
 LONDON

9th.—19 cwt. 0 qr. 10 lb. E (new bell).

LAETATUS SUM:

FLOREAT CIVITAS FLOREAT SENATUS

1971

8th.—14 cwt. 0 qr. 7 lb. F sharp.

THOMAS LESTER OF LONDON MADE ME
 AND WITH THE REST I WILL AGREE 1745

RECAST 1971

7th.—11 cwt. 2 qr. 4 lb. G (new bell).

ELIZABETH R:

SALVA SIT REGINA, GAUDET COLLEGIUM

1971

6th.—8 cwt. 1 qr. 8 lb. A.

PAX 1919

DEUS CANTICUM NOVUM CANTABO TIBI

RECAST 1971

5th.—6 cwt. 2 qr. 23 lb. B.

THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US

1919

4th.—5 cwt. 2 qr. 20 lb. C sharp.

RUTH 1919

THERE IS NONE OTHER THAT FIGHTETH
 FOR US

RECAST 1971

3rd.—5 cwt. 1 qr. 20 lb. D.

FAITH 1919

THANKS BE TO GOD WHICH GIVETH US
 THE VICTORY

RECAST 1971

2nd.—5 cwt. 0 qr. 26 lb. E (new bell).

RENNIE SIMPSON HAROLD PITSTOW
 JUBENTE SIMPSON, CONJUBENTE PITSTOW,
 JUBILATE AERA.

1971

Treble.—4 cwt. 3 qr. 16 lb. F sharp (new bell).

SACRIST JOCELYN

OMNIA HONESTE ET SECUNDUM ORDINEM

1971

W. A. HUGHES, DOUGLAS HUGHES,

Partners, Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd.