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Editor: Robert Lewis

St. Michael's, Star Street, Paddington *by Christopher Dalton*

One of the more unlikely bell installations I came across, when I was going round London towers in the mid-1960s, was the one at St Michael and All Angels' church, Star Street, Paddington. The church had been badly damaged by bombing some 25 years before, but much of it – apart from the roof – had survived, including the extraordinary, somewhat German-looking, tower with its projecting clock-face and slate-covered spire. The foundation stone had been laid in 1860 and the designer was one Rhode (or Rodhe) Hawkins. He seems not to have been a prolific church architect but he did a smallish church on Holmwood Common in Surrey (with one small bell) and a large and prominent church in Exeter – another St Michael's (with one 26 cwt. Taylor bell of 1867).

An Extraordinary Tower

At Star Street, Hawkins's slender red brick tower was oblong on plan, unbuttressed except by what was left of the church, and with walls just 1 ft. 10 in. thick at belfry level. Into this improbable receptacle John Warner & Sons had shoe-horned a moderately heavy ring of eight bells, dated 1861 and tuned to the key of E. By all accounts these bells had been well used in their time, despite cramped and ill-ventilated ringing conditions and tower-sway on a par with Leamington Roman Catholic church. Indeed, four peals were rung on the bells including, amazingly, one of Superlative in February 1905.

How the Bells were hung

The bells were hung four-on-four, all swinging the same way so as to take advantage of the shape of the belfry, in fairly massive oak frames. The lightest three and the fifth hung above and the rest below. Little appeared to have changed since Warners first installed the bells. The elm stocks were clearly original and still had strap-type gudgeons. But some renewals, including the plain bearings, had taken place in 1912 when the ring was rehung by Warners, as reported in *The Ringing World* at the time. The tenor was published as weighing 19 cwt. 2 qr. 14 lb. but this turned out to be an exaggeration: its net weight when received by Taylors in 1967 was 18 cwt. 1 qr. 4 lb. The lightest four bells had Warners' favourite angular canons and the heaviest four the dwarf canons designed by Lord Grimthorpe and first used at Doncaster parish church.



St. Michael's, Star Street, Paddington pictured in 1966



(Founded by John S Goldsmith)

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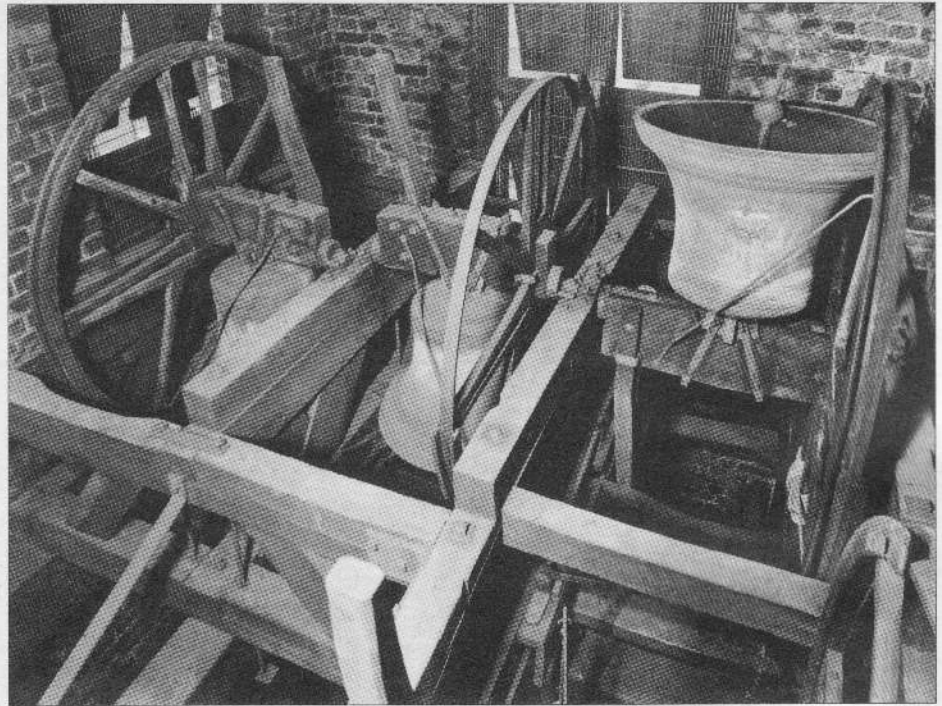
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The treble, second and third (up)

The tone and tuning were probably as good as any of the big three foundries active in the mid-Victorian period were producing. In my younger days Warners always got rather a bad press and indeed a lot of their rings have bitten the dust (Hawley and Immanuel, Streatham, to name but two) or been exported (St Mary Magdalene, Enfield). But Dalston can still be enjoyed and, further afield, rings like Walmer in Kent and Scorton in Lancashire.

Decline between the Wars

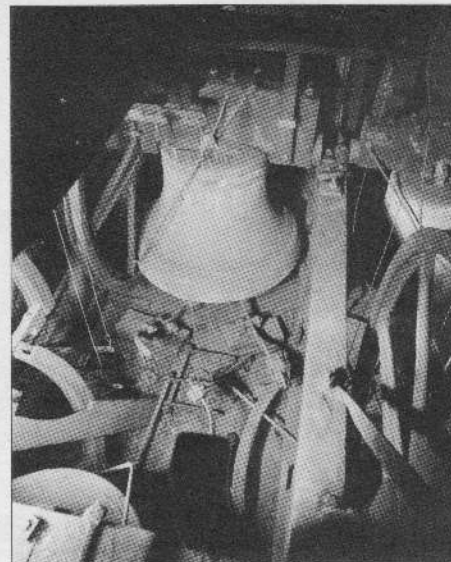
Anyway, at Star Street the bells had gone into decline between the two World Wars. When that redoubtable directory compiler and tower grabber Ronald Dove paid the tower a visit with five others during a heatwave in 1933, they had to bring their own ropes but it was only lack of manpower that prevented them from ringing all eight. I remember him recounting the story that the churchwarden at the time had asked the ringers not to start until he had had a chance to move his car away from underneath the tower. Not long after that, Taylors installed an

Ellacombe chiming apparatus, and by the time I first climbed up the tower in September 1966 most of the wheels were in a sorry state and only that on the third was still intact. Also some damage had been caused by a minor fire in one corner of the tower.

Demolition in 1967

Eventually the church, or what was left of it, was demolished, depriving Paddington of one of its more idiosyncratic buildings and the ringing exercise of a not terribly useful ring of bells. Then – as now, I suspect – there was no ready market for a heavy ring of eight, least of all one with old-style tuning. In the event the metal was acquired by the Revd Tony Clayton to provide a light ring of eight bells at Tooting Graveney. It was a melancholy if dramatic experience to be present on the morning of 1st May 1967, when the demolition contractors were literally throwing the bells out of the tower onto what had been the church floor, inevitably smashing at least one of them in the process.

CHRISTOPHER DALTON



The tenor

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