The Ringing World

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The Weekly Journal for Church Bell Ringers

St. Margaret's Society celebrates its centenary

Origins and Early History

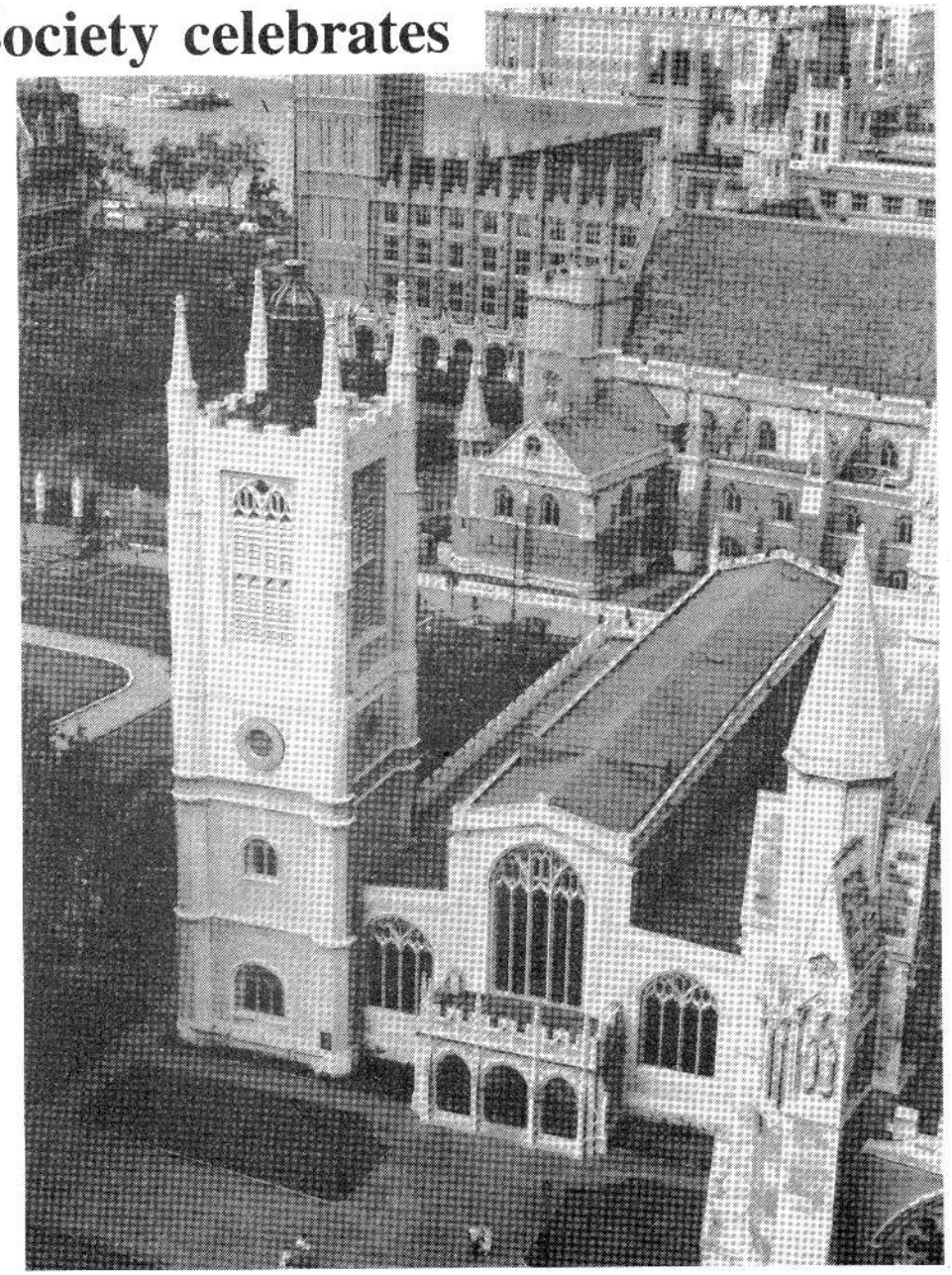
The area around Parliament Square, where the Houses of Parliament and the Abbey now stand, was once a desolate and uncultivated place known as Thorney Island. Mediaeval records claim that on the site of a pagan temple a church was founded by King Lucius in AD184 and dedicated to St. Peter. However the origins of this church are shrouded in some doubt because the mediaeval monks who produced this account had a vested interest in trying to establish the earliest origins of their church of St. Peter and by so doing establish its superiority over St. Paul's. During the 8th and 9th centuries frequent Danish invasions reduced Thorney Island to complete desolation. It was not until King Canute established his place at Westminster that the church and a Benedictine monastery were properly reinstated.

In 1042 Edward the Confessor became king and he also selected Westminster as his official residence and as part of his plans he gave instructions in 1051 for the demolition of the Anglo-Saxon church of St. Peter and in its place the building of a sacred Abbey which was designed not only to house a significantly increased complement of 70 Benedictine monks but also to provide a suitable venue for the crowning and burial of future kings and queens. By 1064 the Abbey was nearing completion and as it was clearly not intended to serve the needs of the local community, Edward I gave further instructions to the monks to build a parish church specifically for the people of Westminster.

This church was built adjacent to the Abbey and was dedicated to St. Margaret of Antioch. According to legend Margaret was the daughter of a pagan priest who lived in the small town of Antioch. When she converted to Christianity she was thrown out of the family home and became a shepherdess. Olybrius, who was the regional governor, met her and tried without success to persuade her to marry him. Frustrated by her rejection of his advances and her refusal to renounce her new faith, Olybrius gave orders for her to be imprisoned and subjected to physical torture. When this failed to break her spirit or her faith, she was finally condemned to death in AD292. As she faced the executioner's sword she bore witness to the simple truth that the strength of her Lord was made perfect in her woman's weakness.

In 1222 the Church authorities established 20th July as the feast day of St. Margaret of Antioch. However the Westminster parishioners preferred to celebrate St. Margaret's Dedication Day which traditionally fell on the first Sunday in October. This was the annual excuse for a major festival of feasting, music, dancing and drama. The day normally started with a grand parochial feast where unlimited supplies of bread, ale and wine were provided. Garlands of red roses and suitable vestments and cloth borrowed from the Abbey were used to decorate the church. The most popular feature of the day's celebrations was a procession through the streets of the virgins of Westminster suitably escorted by a group of merry minstrels. Along the route a collection was made and the proceeds went towards the maintenance of the church. Sadly the last record of such a procession occurs in the churchwardens' accounts of 1534 and there are no immediate plans for its reinstatement.

Of the first Church there is no trace. The present building is the third St. Margaret's built on this site. It is a magnificent example of the perpendicular style. Building work was started in about 1488 and the rebuilt church was consecrated on 9th April 1523.



St. Margaret's, Westminster, the Parish Church of the House of Commons.

(Continued overleaf)

ST. MARGARET'S SOCIETY–*continued.*

The Tower and Bells

The earliest documentary evidence of the existence of bells at St. Margaret's is the 1475 churchwardens' accounts in which a record is made to the payment of 8 shillings and 6 pence for the ringing of a "knyll with the grete Bell" for the burying of Nicholas Freman. A subsequent entry in 1478 registers the payment of 4 pence for the purchase of a new "Rope to the lytell Belle".

Work on the building of the present tower was undertaken between 1498 and 1523. Three bells and a frame from an earlier west tower were used together with two new bells cast in 1508 by William Smith to establish a new ring of five. Details of this ring are recorded in the 1527 churchwardens' inventory which specifies the weight of the Tenor as 16-0-13.

In 1565 the 2nd was recast and a turret was added to the top of the tower into which a saunce bell was installed. Valentine Trevor recast all the bells in 1592 but these were rejected and instructions were then given in 1593 to Robert Mot of Whitechapel to recast them again and the weight of the new Tenor was 20-0-10. In 1597 Robert Mot returned to recast the 4th bell.

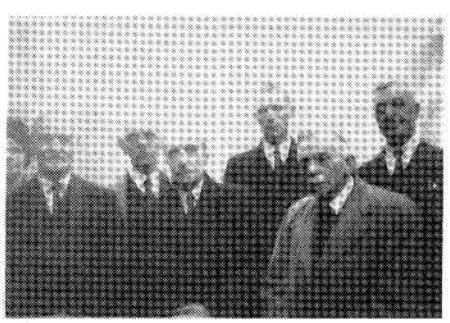
The ring was augmented to six bells in 1650 when Michael Darbie was paid £47 and 10 shillings for the recasting of one of the bells and the addition of a new bell. In May 1670 donations from Mr Roane and the Vestry resulted in the subsequent augmentation to eight bells with John Darbie of Ipswich casting the two additional bells.

On receipt of a grant from Parliament, the tower was heightened and the upper three stages of the tower were rebuilt by John James in the Gothic style between 1735-1737.

Having just cast a ring of twelve bells for Southwark and a ring of ten for St. Sepulchre's, Newgate, Samuel Knight was instructed in 1739 to recast the bells of St. Margaret's. Knight cast the front four bells but then died leaving his colleague and successor Robert Catlin to cast the back four and complete the task.

In 1761 the ring was increased to ten by Lester & Pack who cast two new Trebles and recast the Tenor. Subsequent work on the bells included the recasting of the 8th by Thomas Janaway in 1773 and the 9th by Thomas Mears in 1834.

In May 1939 Gillett & Johnston were awarded the contract to restore the bells. The work required the recasting of the front four, the 6th and the Tenor and included the re-hanging of all the bells on new metal headstocks and ball bearings and the strengthening of the oak frame. This major project was completed in April 1940 and resulted in the present ring of ten bells in the key of D major with the Tenor weighing 26-0-26.



Some of the St. Margaret's band who rang at St. Botolph's Bishopsgate for the Lord Mayor's procession of 1946.

The Ringing Tradition

Due to the strong links between St. Margaret's and the royal palace at Whitehall, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the ringers were required to ring the bells whenever royalty arrived or left the palace, as well as for all royal birthdays, coronations and funerals. The payment of ringing fees constituted a significant source of revenue for the church and as a result the churchwardens' accounts include a detailed record of all payments for ringing for a varied range of historic events. An unusual entry in the 1548 accounts records the payment by the churchwardens to the King's Amner of a fine of 2 shillings and 4 pence when the ringers failed to ring on 2nd July for the King's departure from Whitehall.

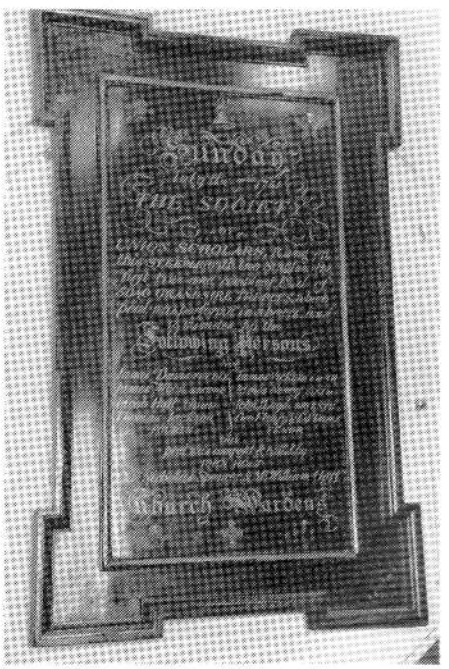
By the start of the seventeenth century St. Margaret's was becoming more than just the church of the parish in which the Houses of Parliament were situated. The religious changes of the 16th century were now being challenged by a House of Commons which was becoming very Puritan in mood. The House strongly disapproved of the use of wafer-bread at the Abbey Communion service and preferred to take the common bread still offered at St. Margaret's. A motion was passed in the House for all its members to take communion in St. Margaret's on Palm Sunday 17th April 1614. The defaulters were noted and compulsory attendance became a test of conformity and a means of detecting those members of the House with Papist sympathies. So began a close association between St. Margaret's and the House of Commons. Even in the twentieth century, the church is still referred to as "the Parish Church of the House of Commons" and each month when Parliament is sitting, MPs of all political parties still come together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist at St. Margaret's. Not surprisingly this relationship through the centuries has also prompted the bells to ring for parliamentary events. In 1605, as soon as Guy Fawkes' plot was discovered instructions were sent out for the bells to be rung. Similar instructions were given for the bells to ring when Charles I accepted the Petition of Right in 1628, the passing of the Triennial Act in 1651 and the installation of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector in 1653. The tradition to ring for all major parliamentary and state occasions is still maintained. These include State Visits, the State Opening of Parliament by the Sovereign and the election of the Speaker to the House of Commons.

Besides the paid ringing for formal occasions St. Margaret's has always attracted a fair share of unofficial ringing. In 1671 the frequent ringing of the new ring of eight bells by a very enthusiastic band managed to attract a formal complaint from the local inhabitants. As a result a ban was imposed on the ringing of the bells before seven in the morning and after nine at night. Tragedy developed in 1674 when Charles Jones, a boy of fourteen, was dragged up by one of the ropes and killed. The subsequent enquiry decided that the keeper of the bells had been negligent in the proper performance of his duties as he had left unsupervised a number of boys to ring a knell. He failed to give a satisfactory explanation for his absence and was dismissed.

No record survives of any peal on the orginal ring of eight. The first peal recorded on the Knight/Catlin bells was rung by the Ancient Society of College Youths on 23rd January 1742. It was a peal of 5040 Plain Bob Major conducted by Richard Spicer and rung in 3 hrs. 18 mins. This was closely followed on 12th February 1742 by a peal of 5040 Double Bob Major by members of the Eastern Scholars. From that time until the present a total of 227 peals have been rung, some of them being of more than passing interest.

On 22nd January 1751 the College Youths rang and Benjamin Annable called the first peal of 5040 Reverse Bob Major. Also in 1751 on 7th July John Holt called for the first time his "Original" composition of 5040 Grandsire Triples. The band were members of the Union Scholars and Holt, thinking it beyond the capability of any man to call the peal and ring at the same time, sat in the middle of the ringing chamber and called it from a manuscript. A large and very ornate peal board recording this performance still hangs in the ringing chamber.

On 5th March 1761 George Meakins called the first peal on the ten bells which was 5040 changes of Grandsire Caters and rung by the College Youths. The longest peal on the bells during the eighteenth century was 6000 changes of Plain Bob Major rung by the Union Scholars on 9th July 1749 composed and conducted by John Holt.



The peal board recording the 1751 peal of Grandsire Triples rung to Holt's "Original" composition.

In 1805 the Westminster Youths rang 6011 changes of Grandsire Caters, which length was beaten on 20th November 1814 by the Junior Society of Cumberland Youths, who rang 6101 changes of Grandsire Caters. However the current record is held by ringers of the Royal Cumberland Society who on 13th October 1877 rang a John Nelms composition consisting of 8099 changes of Grandsire Caters in 5 hrs. and 20 mins.

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Established in 1824

ST. MARGARET'S SOCIETY
–continued from p.726.

The Centenary Period 1894-1994

An entry in the Parish Magazine of May 1889 reports a meeting of the St. Margaret's ringers at which it was unanimously decided to form a new Association. A subscription became payable the proceeds of which were to finance the payment of a properly qualified instructor. A subsequent entry in the October 1891 Parish Magazine announced the recent completion of long-needed repairs in the belfry and the reinstatement of regular weekly practices on Tuesday evenings and Sunday evensong ringing. The Hon Secretary of the band Mr. Harland-Oxley went on to make an appeal for "youths and young men fond of health-giving exercises" to volunteer "so that these fine bells may be rung in a satisfactory manner". This initiative resulted in the formal foundation of the St. Margaret's Society of Change Ringers in 1894 which rang its first peal at St. Margaret's on Monday 10th September 1894 in 3 hrs. 20 mins. William Baron Senior (the Master) rang the Treble whilst Frederick J Pitts (one of the Stewards) called a John Nelms composition of 5040 changes of Grandsire Caters from the 9th. The Society's illuminated peal book records the 61 peals rung by the Society from its formation to 22nd June 1912. Most of these were peals of Stedman Caters at St. Margaret's. Towards the end of this period James E. Davis and his pupil William ("Bill") Hewitt became regular members of the band. However in 1911 problems developed and Davis was left to pick up the pieces and take over. In 1914 he was called up to serve in the Army and during the First World War he handed over responsibility to Bill Hewitt who went on to look after ringing at St. Margaret's until his death in 1964. It was then that Jack Euston took over the mantle. His close association and dedicated service to St. Margaret's will always be remembered with great affection by not only the present band but also the whole ringing community including many of the guest ringers and veterans whom he warmly welcomed and encouraged. In recognition of his dedicated service to St. Margaret's he was awarded the MBE in the 1986 New Year's Honours List.

During the twentieth century the population of St. Margaret's parish has steadily declined predominantly due to the increasing number of offices and the disappearance of many shops and private houses. In 1972 it became necessary to abolish the geographical parish by Act of Parliament.

The provisions of the Westminster Abbey & St. Margaret's Act protected the "customary rights of the Members or officers of either House of Parliament in relation to St. Margaret's and transferred its control to the Dean and Chapter of the Abbey who are also now responsible for the appointment of the Rector which is made or renewed annually by and from amongst the Westminster Abbey Canons.

In 1984 a major restoration of the church started and the final phase ended in June 1992 with the complete renovation of the Tower. The project was made possible by funds raised by the Speaker's Appeal and the combined enthusiasm and efforts of Bernard Weatherill, who was then the Speaker of the House of Commons, and Peter Foster, the church architect.



The former Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill, receives some elementary handbell instruction from Brian Wylde.

All ringing at St. Margaret's is now subject to the prior approval of the Dean, Rector and Chapter. During the 1990's the bells have continued to ring out for both parliamentary and major state occasions and there is now a regular practice between 1745-1900 on the first Monday of each month (excluding Bank Holidays).

Recent highlights include the ringing of a quarter peal of 1293 Stedman Caters on 1st January 1993 at Westminster Abbey and the establishment of the Society's Dinner which is held annually in the imposing surroundings of the Jerusalem Chamber. The most recent peal on the bells was a peal of 5100 Stedman Caters which was rung on 8th October 1993 for the wedding of Viscount Linley and the Hon. Serena Stanhope.



Jack Euston (right) pictured with Ted Peett.

As 1994 marks the centenary of the formation of the St. Margaret's Society the Dean and Chapter have granted special permission for four peal attempts during 1994 and invitations have been extended to four societies with close ringing connections at St. Margaret's. In addition over the Patronal Festival weekend (23/24th July) the St. Margaret's band will attempt to ring eight quarter peals in eight different methods with eight different conductors on the eight ringable towers in the City of Westminster. A touch of Stedman Caters will also feature on the Bells on Sunday section of the Radio 4 Morning Has Broken Programme on Sunday 24th July. A Centenary Garden Party is also scheduled for July and the Annual Dinner will again be held in October.

Further details of the Centenary Programme and general ringing arrangements are available from the Secretary of the Belfry, c/o 72 The Drive Mansions, Fulham, London SW6 5JH.

The ten bells of St. Margaret's.

Treble	F sharp Lester & Pack of London Fecit 1761 Recast by Gillett & Johnston, 1939	5-2-8
2nd	E All as No. 1	5-3-26
3rd	D S*K*1739 Recast by Gillett & Johnston, 1939	6-2-8
4th	C sharp All as No. 3	6-3-8
5th	B S*K*1739	7-3-24
6th	A Robert Catlin Fecit 1739 Recast by Gillett & Johnston, 1939	9-1-9
7th	G Robert Catlin Fecit 1739	11-1-13
8th	F sharp Mr Thos. Hatch & George Stubbs Esqr Church Wardens 1773 T. Janaway Fecit	12-0-27
9th	E Thomas Mears of London Founders 1834 James Webber D.D, Minister St Margaret's William Forty & Robert Bryan Churchwardens	14-1-19
Tenor	D Dr Thos. Wilson, Minister Saml Peirson & Wm Ielfe, Churchwardens 1761 Lester & Pack of London Fecit 1761 Recast by Gillett & Johnston, 1939	26-0-26



St. Margaret's Society Dinners held in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey are always grand affairs. On this occasion the guest list included Enoch Powell.