

THE BELLS 1055 - 1874

By W. L. Exton

The earliest date of a church in Southwell is not known but certainly one existed prior to the building of the present Minster early in the 12th Century, and it certainly contained some bells. Confirmation of this comes from the fact that Kinsius who was Archbishop of York gave two bells to the Collegiate Church in Southwell some five years before his death in 1060.

Whether these bells along with any others were transferred to the new building about 1115 or whether they were melted down and made into new bells is not known, for it is almost 400 years before any further reference to the bells is found.

At the Visitation on 2 October 1475, John Bull, one of the Vicars Choral is the subject of complaint, and the first peal for matins is mentioned. At the same visitation a complaint is made that the Priest whose duty it is to take the Services for the week does not arrive in the choir until after the bell has finished ringing.

Further complaints appear concerning the bells on subsequent visitations, the ringing of the Curfew in 1483, the bells for Matins in 1503, the Vicar Choral and the Chantry Priests for not being in their houses before the Curfew in 1506, and that the Sacrist does not have the bells rung properly, and does not look after them in 1519.

Other early references occur in the Wills proved at Southwell Probate Court — for example, Richard Worsley, Chantry Priest, in his will dated 20 January 1490 left amongst his legacies 9d. to the choristers, money for the bells, and bread and beer for the choir and ringers at his funeral. Robert Batenanson of Southwell in his will dated 23 June 1512, wished to be buried in Booth's Chape! and to have the Great Bell rung for an hour at his passing, and for another hour at his dirge, and a peal at his funeral.

There is still no reference which gives any idea of the number or weight of the bells, and it is not until tragedy strikes in 1711 that mention is made of the fact that there were eight bells, and from subsequent information it is fair to assume that the tenor bell was about 30 cwt. and the total weight something in excess of 5 tons.

It was in the evening of 5 November 1711, when a very violent thunderstorm passed over Southwell, that fire broke in the South West tower. This burnt the tower, the roofs of the nave and transepts, and melted the bells. The petition to Queen Anne for help to repair the damage states that eight bells were destroyed.

How the money for the repair was raised is not recorded but evidently it did not take very long for on 1 May 1712, Thomas Clay of Leicester signed an agreement with the Chapter, "to recast, renew, and make good, and to put into as good condition as before the late dreadful fire all the mettle of the old bells that was found remaining amongst the ruins, the bells to be well tuned, well toned and pleasant sounded." Clay's bells cost £371.14s.11d Presumably it was at this time that the massive timber frame in which some of the present bells hang was provided, for the

subsequent cost of recasting the bells some years later was considerably less.

Evidently Clay's bells were not considered very satisfactory because on 25 January 1719 many of the inhabitants of Southwell signed an agreement to contribute sums of money towards recasting the bells.

The new bells were made by Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester and his agreement for recasting them was dated April 1721. He undertook after the eight bells were delivered to him at Budely (now Bewdley) in Worcestershire, to melt them down and make a new peal "that shall be in the judgement of any three or more understanding and judicious persons in musick, as good and tuneable and have as sweet and harmonious notes or tones as the bells at Newark," which were lately cast by the said Abraham Rudhall, the whole to cost £100.

In due course the old bells went to Bewdley and thence down the Severn to Gloucester, were recast *and* returned to Bewdley and eventually put up in the Minster.

On 25 August 1721 Rudhall wrote giving weights and notes of the new bells and recommended that they be hung by one Francis Wrigley of Manchester, "he being as I believe ye skillfullest Person in England in ye Business."

Wrigley did hang the bells, and the Chapter paid 10/- for sending a messenger to Manchester to bring him. The total cost of the work including the recasting amounted to £170. 17. 67.

In 1815 Mr. Ingleman the Clerk of the Works reported upon the state of the Collegiate Church at Southwell and estimated the expense of repairing the same. He mentioned that the 4th and 5th bells want recasting and estimated the cost as £85. 5. 0. From their inscriptions it would appear that they were recast by T. Mears of London in 1819. The second bell was also recast this time by C. & G. Mears of London in 1849.

Apart from these recastings and the later rehangings on ball bearings these same bells remained in service until 1960. They were hung in an anti-clockwise circle and were rung from a gallery suspended around the four walls of the tower. In this respect they were almost unique, the only other such peal and ringing gallery being at Merton College, Oxford.

Two additional bells cast by John Taylor of Loughborough were added to the tower in 1897. These were given by Mr. Starkey of Norwood and were hung dead (i.e. not for ringing). They were added to enable the chimes of the chime drum to be altered to include the National Anthem. It then played —

1. Innocents, or Conquering Kings their Titles Take;
2. Southwell, or Jerusalem my happy home;
3. The National Anthem.

The bells did not leave the tower again until 1960 when they and the chiming bells were removed to Messrs. J. Taylor & Co. at Loughborough. They were subsequently recast and augmented to become the first peal of twelve bells in the diocese. (There are actually 13 bells, a flat 6th being included to make a light ring of ten). The original inscriptions placed on

the bells by Abraham Rudhall were replaced on the new bells with the added inscription, "By the generosity of Sir Stuart Goodwin our bells were reconstructed and augmented in 1961."

The bells were re-hung in the old timber frame with additional metal framework added, and as such are the only anti-clockwise peal of twelve bells in the world. Not only is this unique but it also makes them so much more difficult to ring well.

At the same time the ringing gallery was removed and a new floor inserted across the tower. For some years this floor has caused considerable concern to the ringers as the dip in the centre has become more pronounced, and it is a matter of great regret that at the present time one of the finest peals of twelve bells for their weight in the country cannot be rung.

Note: Subsequently this unfortunate development was corrected by inserting steel beams above the unsafe floor and building a new floor for the Ringing Chamber. Thus the timber seen from below whilst standing in the crossing is not load-bearing and is in fact a false **ceiling**.