
The Bells of St Andrew, Alfriston, Sussex

Alfriston Church has a central tower and although that is not unique, there are very few churches where the bells are rung from the floor of the Chancel crossing; less than 20.

There are 6 bells hanging in the tower which was built in about 1360. It is thought that there were only 4 bells in 1543 and by 1724 there were 5. In 1675 the Wardens Presentements say: *'Wee present the church and steple out of repaire, the bells not in good order'*. In 1811 the following note appears in the church registers: *'Mem. Be it remembered by all good men and let it suffice as an instance of generosity worthy of their imitation; that Mr John Ade, Yeoman of Alfriston, did of his own free gift present to the said parish the first bell in the peal of that church, the same having undergone a complete repair this 12th day of December 1811'*. This was probably the current second bell which was bought from Berwick Church.



The tenor bell (heaviest) was cast by William Wodeworde of London in about 1390 and is listed for preservation by the Council for the Care of Churches. It was retuned in 1928.

The fifth was originally a bell cast by John Wood, an itinerant founder, in 1698. It was recast by Mears and Stainbank of the Whitechapel Bell foundry in 1928.

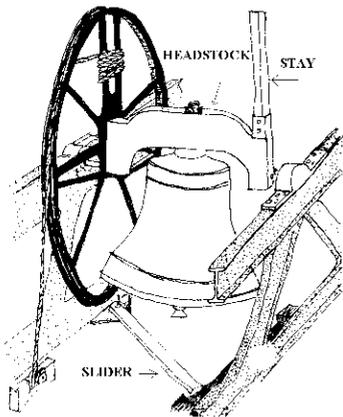
The fourth was cast by Mears and Stainbank in 1928. This replaced a bell cast in 1587 which can be seen under the West Gallery stairs.

The third bell was first recast by T Mears in 1811 and again in 1908 by Mears & Stainbank. The second recasting cost £11 1s 8d plus £1 for additional metal.

The second was originally cast by John Wood in 1698 but was made for Berwick church and was sold to Alfriston in 1811 which gave rise to the couplet: *'The parson was poor and so were the people, So they sold the bell to mend their steeple'*. It was recast in 1928 by Mears & Stainbank.

The Treble was originally cast at Whitechapel by T Mears in 1819 and then was recast in 1955 after an unsuccessful attempt was made locally to weld a broken canon. This is the part of the bell that is used to secure the bell to the headstock.

In 1926 the bells were inspected by Mears & Stainbank who *'submitted in the month of August a very disturbing report'*. The wooden bell frame was replaced with a metal one and *'Easter Day 1928 was rung in by our restored peal'*. The total cost of £471 1s 8d included removal of bells,



fittings and frame; new frame and fittings; re-tuning, re-fitting, re-casting 2 & 5, a new bell (4), re-hanging the bells; men's time, journeys and carriage. The inscriptions on the bells cost 6d per letter; total £5 14s 6d. The money was raised by subscription.

An estimate had been acquired at the same time to hang 2 more bells which would have completed the octave. The extra cost would have been £124 9s 6d. (A similar project nowadays could cost about £80,000)

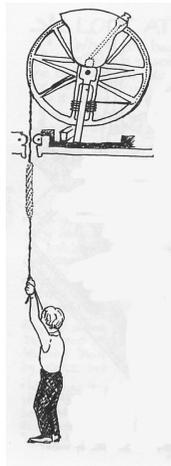
During 1995 it was decided that rope mats were needed to reduce the wear of the ropes as they hit the floor during ringing.

Mats, complete with bell motifs, were worked by the late Jim Anderson, who was a member of the congregation, and these were put to use in 1996.

Change Ringing

The art of change ringing on Church Bells has developed in England over centuries but it has spread to few other parts of the world outside of Great Britain.

To the uninformed, English bells may sound the same as those in other parts of the world, but our style of ringing is much more formalised. Most bells in England are hung so that they can be rung 'full circle'. The bell is bolted to an iron or wooden headstock. The headstock and bell are clamped to a wheel with the bell rope attached. A stay, fitted to the headstock, helps the bell to set upside down by resting against the slider. The slider is fixed at one end and the other end is pushed from side to side by the stay. When the slider has moved to its limit the bell cannot turn any further.



Before change ringing can start the bells have to be rung into the 'UP' position, with the mouth of the bell pointing upwards. The rope is pulled and the bell turns through a full circle. The next time the rope is pulled the bell returns through the circle in the opposite direction. The bell must be kept from going 'over the top' otherwise the rope will wrap itself round the wheel and the ringer will be pulled upwards as is often depicted in cartoons and comedy sketches. Each time the bell swings round the clapper swings and strikes a note on the side of the bell.

One ringer is needed for each bell and the first step is to learn to control it. The amount of time this takes varies a great deal; but there are

odd ones that take to it like a duck to water.

The next stage is learning to ring in Rounds – that is, ringing the bells in order, from the treble (the smallest and highest sounding bell) down to the tenor (the heaviest and deepest toned bell).

After that we start to ring ‘changes’. This involves changing the order that the bells sound in, following a pattern or ‘method’.

This specialised exercise started many years ago. It used to be the province of men and they accompanied their ringing with drinking large quantities of ale. Indeed they had quite a reputation in those days! (Some would suggest that this is still an important part of ringing; although it is no longer done in the tower).

Some ringing methods have been known for many years – you may have read *The Nine Tailors* by Dorothy L Sayers and recall the peal that included Lord Peter Wimsey. They rang Kent Treble Bob Major. We are still ringing methods that were invented in the 17th century.

There are simple methods, those that you hear at Alfriston on a Sunday, or there are more complicated methods such as you would hear from Westminster Abbey at a Royal event. They, of course, have ten bells whilst we have just six.

Why do we ring bells?

This is a question that is asked of all bellringers at regular intervals. Not surprisingly the most frequently heard answer is, quite simply, ‘for the Glory of God’. We ring for Sunday service all over the country.

We also ring for special services whenever possible, such as Ascension Day, and we can be asked to ring for Weddings, Christenings and Funerals. We ring to celebrate special events, such as the ending of hostilities in a conflict or ordination to the priesthood.

Sometimes we ring quarter peals. These can last for about forty minutes and usually comprise 1260 changes; that means that each bell sounds 1260 times. Some of us have even rung full peals that last for nearly three hours. In order to achieve this we need to practise hard. As well as meeting every week at our own church we range far and wide visiting other churches, always being made very welcome. Day visits that include five or six towers are not uncommon and residential courses are run all over the country to improve our ringing.

You do not need to be strong, musical or brainy to learn to ring, although a sense of rhythm helps, - you only need to practice one night a week and ring for service on Sunday.

We are always learning and helping others to learn. We love our ringing. We are hooked on it and there is always something more we can achieve. We hope that we give both pleasure and joy to those who hear us and, in a restless world, a reminder of the place of the Church in our lives.

BELL	INSCRIPTION	DIAM	WEIGHT (cwt-q-lb)	WEIGHT (kgs)	NOTE	DATE	FOUNDER
6	WOX AVGVSTINI SONAT IN AVRO DEI	36 ¹ / ₈ "	8-2-10	436	A	c1400	William Wodeward, London
5	SOLI DEO GLORIA PAX HOMENBUS IN IOH ACION W 1696 G W / SEMPER AD COELESTIA / MARCHANT PEARSON VICAR / EDWARD CHENEVIX AUSTIN LEIGH / HUGH JOHN WOODHAMS / CHURCH WARDENS / HARRY WOOD CAPT: OF RINGERS EXCHURCHWAR- DEN / RECAST A. D. 1928	33 ¹ / ₂ "	6-2- 6	333	B	1696 Recast 1928	Mears & Stainbank, Whitechapel, London
4	M & S LONDON 1928 / SEMPER AD COELES- TIA / THIS BELL REPLACES THE ORIGINAL CAST IN 1587 AND PRESERVED IN THE CHURCH	32"	6-2- 5	332	C#	1928	
3	MEARS & STAINBANK LONDON / THOS: MEARS FECIT 1811 / REFUSIT 1908 / IN OMN. TERR. EXIT SONUS	29 ³ / ₈ "	5-0- 3	255	D	1811 1908	
2	DEO QUEMADMODUM 1698 / RECAST A. D. 1928	27 ¹ / ₈ "	4-0-25	215	E	1698/1928	
1	T.MEARS OF LONDON FECIT 1819 / I ADE / RECAST 1955	25 ³ / ₄ "	3-2-12	183	F#	1819/1955	