

New Bells for Writtle

The village of Writtle lies just to the west of Chelmsford in Essex. It has a pretty, traditional village green, complete with duck pond, and a beautiful church which dates back to Norman times. It is named in the Domesday Book and was on the main coaching road between London and Norwich; once therefore, being more important than the neighbouring county town of Chelmsford.

Writtle is famous as the birthplace of Robert The Bruce, King of Scotland (of spider fame); for King John's Hunting Lodge and Palace; the Marconi Wireless Telegraphy Company transmitting the first regular broadcast from Writtle in 1922 from *Two Emma Toc* Writtle; for the V Concerts held at nearby Hylands Park and now home to an exceedingly fine ring of ten bells.

The Essex Association of Change Ringers was founded at Writtle on Monday 2 June 1879. In 1884, the Rev Thomas Leslie Papillon, a well-known correspondent to the *Ringing World*, was appointed as vicar of All Saints, Writtle. He was very active in promoting bell ringing at Writtle and was Secretary and Treasurer of the Essex Association from 1886-1900 and Master from 1901-1908

The original church tower housed a peal of five bells dating from the sixteenth century. The first reference to eight bells at Writtle appears in the Churchwarden's Accounts of 1758. In 1787, Robert Patrick of Woodford furnished an estimate for recasting the bells but before he could do so the Tower collapsed in 1800 destroying the ring of eight bells. The Tower was rebuilt in 1802 and Thomas Mears of Whitechapel installed a new bell frame and ring of eight bells in 1811.

Over the last 200 years some of the bells had been recast and they had been re-hung on ball bearings, but essentially the installation had remained the same. They had always been quite difficult to ring, mainly due to the flexibility of the wooden frame. In recent years the general wear and tear of the fixtures and fittings was adding to the difficulty. To overcome these problems a plan was devised to replace the old frame with a new metal one, located slightly lower in the tower. At the same time it was proposed to augment the ring to ten. The tower is very large and could easily accommodate more bells and it was decided that ring should be heavier to provide a richer tone.

At the Belfry AGM on 25 January 2000, members of the tower unanimously agreed to the proposal and a sub-committee was formed, under the chairmanship of Phil Stephens, Tower Captain, to take the work forward. In March 2000, the PCC gave their unanimous support to the proposal and it was agreed that a study should be carried out to check the feasibility of the scheme. Meetings were held with Simon Marks, the Church Architect and David Sloman, the Honorary Diocesan Technical Adviser. Reports were commissioned from Adrian Dempster, Harry Windsor and Jim Taylor from the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers Towers and Belfries Committee on the stability of the tower, dynamics of the tower and tower acoustics and sound management respectively. Formal estimates for the work were commissioned. After due consideration, Eayre & Smith were invited to undertake the project with Taylor's casting the bells.

The findings of the feasibility study were favourable and the report was approved at the PCC meeting on 21 September 2000. An amendment to the feasibility report was presented at the PCC meeting on 29 November 2000, for twelve bells in a thirteen-bell frame, rather than a straight ten as agreed at the September meeting. The twelve would comprise a ring of ten with a 32cwt tenor plus two smaller semi-tone bells, providing a

light ring of eight. The thirteenth pit allowing for future augmentation to a true ring of twelve if so desired.

An Appeal Committee was formed from the ringers. Lord Petre and the then Bishop of Chelmsford, John Perry, agreed to become patrons of the appeal. An appeal leaflet was drawn up, printed and circulated to every household in the village. The Writtle All Saints Bell Appeal was formally launched on 4 March 2001, with a target of £130,000. The launch was a tremendous success. In the few weeks leading up to the launch sponsors for five bells were pledged and another was received on the day. Over 170 people attended and viewed an exhibition, a demonstration of method ringing on handbells and listened to a presentation by Phil Stephens and Bob Smith of Eayre & Smith. On the day we received donations of a further £2,400.

By April 2001, pledges to sponsor seven of the twelve bells had been received. This, together with some other very generous donations, brought the total raised to just over £40,000.

Fundraising continued, the main aim being to keep the project in the minds of the community and to appeal to as diverse an audience as possible. Events included two Teddy Bear Parachuting days and a Teddy Bear Aerial Runway, a Balloon Race, Tower Tours, three Barn Dances, a Coffee Morning, three Quiz Nights, a Handbell Concert, a concert by the Essex Police Band (one of our ringers is a member) and a nationally advertised Open Day of all 31 Towers in the South East District of the Essex Association supported by over 80 ringers.

Immediately after the first Quiz Night in September 2001, two further donors came forward to sponsor the 8th and 9th bells!

In October 2001, the Executive Committee of the Essex Association of Change Ringers, which was founded at Writtle in June 1879, agreed to grant us £12,800 for the 10th bell in its 125th anniversary year. Later that month the Diocesan Advisory Committee met and approved the first stage of the Faculty application. With four conditions: the old bells should be sold rather than used in the casting of the new bells, the church clock movement should be relocated, preferably lower in the tower to provide easy access for maintenance; part of the existing bell frame should be repositioned on the clock room floor; the old windlass should be preserved; a record of old bells should be included in the inscriptions on the new bells and we were to consult further with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and English Heritage. We were disappointed to hear that both SPAB and EH were unhappy about our proposal to replace the old bell frame and some protracted negotiations took place. In the end it was agreed that the old bell frame should be raised to a point just below the tower roof. Here it would be available for historians to study if need be and it allowed room for the new bell frame beneath.

Fundraising continued throughout 2002. In June 2002 the Appeal passed the magic £100,000. We were conscious that it was difficult to apply for grants without the full faculty. However it did not stop us applying to the Chelmsford Borough Council Jubilee Community Fund and we were delighted when on 29 November 2002, we heard that our application for a grant had been successful and that we had been awarded £21,000 for the new tenor bell. That news meant that we had achieved our target of £130,000. However we now needed to raise an additional £10,000 to cover the cost of lifting and securing the old bell frame under the tower roof in order to meet the concerns raised by English Heritage.

It was not until November 2003 that we received the really good news that the Faculty had been granted. This meant that the order for the new bells could at last be placed with Taylor's of Loughborough. A milestone in the life of All Saints, Writtle!

Suddenly after a period of relative inactivity it was all go! Site meetings took place with the Church Architect, Planning Supervisor and Eayre & Smith; method statements and health and safety statements were drawn up; confirmation was received that there were no bats in the belfry! The old installation was faithfully recorded for posterity; the clock was temporarily removed and staged payments agreed with Eayre & Smith and cash flows drawn up.

A salvage company was contacted about disposal of the old wood and steel supporting beams and specifications for new steel ladders to access the tower were drawn up. Protective and safety clothing was ordered, and a pallet truck and scaffold boards were acquired.

Work began in earnest on 2 January 2004, the day after the 160th and last peal on the old bells (RW 2004 p84), when the bells and fittings were removed under the expert supervision of Adrian Semken from Coggeshall. They were delivered to Whitechapel Bell Foundry later that month by Heavyhaul (Chelmsford) Ltd, free of charge, for eventual delivery to their new home in Seattle. The old bell frame was lifted up to the tower roof and secured by the end of January. During February the old belfry floor and wood and steel supporting beams and staircases were removed. Pockets were cut into the walls for the new bell frame. In March the new metal frame was delivered and installed and during April the lengthy process of grouting the frame in place was completed.

Meanwhile the new inscriptions for the bells were agreed and a schedule of castings received from Taylor's. For the castings of two bells or more coach trips were arranged for donors and parishioners. In all over 100 people travelled to Loughborough to witness the momentous occasions throughout January, February and March.

On 14 May, the sun shone and local school children turned out as the new bells and fittings were delivered and placed in the Church. Ten of the bells were placed in a line down the centre aisle of the church and the two tenors were positioned in the Choir Vestry at the base of the tower. We had to remove the West door to get the tenor in! All part of the plan! On 16 May, a Hallowing Service took place, a truly memorable and moving event for all that attended. On the following day, Stephen Colley from Eayre & Smith, ably assisted by a team of volunteers, started the task of hauling the bells up into the tower. By the end of the first day, five bells were installed and by 19 May all were installed together with their fittings. The new access ladders and belfry floor were also installed.

Stephen commissioned the bells and a test ring took place on the evening of 27 May. The scene was therefore set for the Dedication and Thanksgiving Service on Saturday 5 June.

For those interested in statistics, 24 pockets were cut in the tower walls; 20 bags of cement and three and a half tons of ballast were used; 9½ tons of new bell frame and seven tons of new bells were hoisted up into the tower. Between 2 January and 5 June 2004, volunteer work at the church involved over 1,500 man hours and the consumption of about 1,000 cups of tea! Oh yes, we did consume a few pints of beer as well, but that was during the evening planning meetings in the Wheatsheaf. The bell

appeal committee consisting of Phil Stephens, Roger Bailey, Andrew Brewster, Christina Fleckney and David Simms met on over 35 occasions.

The new bells are heavier, providing a richer more mellow tone. The note of the tenor is D and it weighs 31½ cwt. The twelve bells provide us with several combinations that may be rung together, the main two being a ring of ten in the key of D major and a lighter ring of eight in the key of A major. The project has rewarded Writtle with bells that are much easier to control, easier to learn on and a ring of bells that provide a gloriously rich sound on a par with the best in the country.

The people of Writtle were very involved in this project right from the start. They have helped with and taken part in a variety of fund raising events, they have donated money, and individuals and families within the village have sponsored nine of the bells.

The Dedication Service was held on Saturday 5 June 2004 with David Loman, Venerable Archdeacon of Southend leading the Service and the following day the Essex Association celebrated its 125th anniversary at Writtle with a lunch and service.

Phase 2: the Sound Lantern

More and more these days, churches are fitting sound control systems to enable the volume of the bells to be reduced during practice sessions, or for secular ringing activities such as visiting bands or peal ringing. We propose to install such a system and to investigate the installation of a Sound Lantern to provide a more uniform, all-round, sound.

Until the work on the sound control system is complete there will be no peals, other than two a year involving local ringers. Visitors are, however, most welcome; we practice on Tuesdays 7.30 – 9.00pm and ring on Sundays at 10.00am for a 10.45am service. Quarter peals are also rung on the first and third Sunday for evening services.

First Peal

On Sunday 12 September 2004, we rang the first quarter peal (RW 2004 p1005) and successfully completed the first peal on the bells on Saturday 4 December 2004.

Essex Association

Writtle, Essex

All Saints

Saturday, 4 December 2004 in 3h 23m (31-2-12 cwt)

5040 Plain Bob Royal - Composed by: H A Tucker

- 1 Christina D A Fleckney
- 2 Carol Brown
- 3 Christopher G Newton
- 4 Andrew P Brewster
- 5 Peter Brisley
- 6 Christopher G English
- 7 Philip E Stephens
- 8 Stephen J Nash
- 9 Robert B Smith
- 10 James L Towler (C)

First peal on the bells.

First on 10: 4, 5 and 6.

First Royal: 7.

1800th Peal: 10.

EACR 125th anniversary peal.

Our grateful thanks go to those mentioned above as well as those who helped with voluntary labour

A DVD of the whole project from the removal of the old bells, raising of the old frame, casting of the new bells, arrival and installation of the new frame and bells to the Dedication Service has been recorded. It lasts 1½ hours and is priced at £13.50 inc p&p and is available from Andrew Brewster, 9 Chancery Place, The Green, Writtle, Essex CM1 3DY. Cheques should be made payable to the *Writtle All Saints Bell Appeal*.