

BELLS AND WHISTLES

As an illustration of how lively the world of the City churches is today, JEREMY MUSSON reports on a plan to cast a new ring of bells for St Magnus the Martyr

ORANGES and Lemons, say the Bells of St Clements', but what did the Bells of St Magnus the Martyr say? They last spoke in June 1940, when an order was sent out that all church bells should be silent for the duration of the war, and only to be rung in the event of invasion. In 1941, they were removed from the tower and stored in the churchyard, for safekeeping. In the post-war years of austerity and uncertainty, the funds were never found, and in the 1970s, the bells were destroyed. Now, thanks to the energies of a dedicated band of enthusiasts, including Dickon Love and Peter Rumley, a new ring of bells is being recast to be rehung.

Standing close to the Thames, St Magnus the Martyr, on Lower Thames Street, is one of the churches designed by Wren, after the Great Fire. The original church was destroyed, and stood close to the site where the fire began. The neighbouring church of St Margaret, New Fish Street, was also destroyed but not rebuilt, and the two parishes were united. The new church was finished in 1676, and its distinctive tower completed in 1704. The first bells were cast by Richard Phelps, in 1714.

The empty ringing chamber is still approached by a narrow stone spiral staircase, and the hatch in the ceiling still



The church is somewhat mis-named as St Magnus, the Earl of Orkney (left), wasn't martyred for his religious beliefs, but was executed in 1117 in a power struggle with his cousin

hangs, as it has since 1941. The room will be returned to its original use later this year, with a ring of 12 new bells, specially cast at Whitechapel Bell Foundry (itself founded in the mid 16th century). The St Magnus the Martyr Bell Fund has now raised £250,000 of the necessary £280,000, and Father Philip Warner, the priest in charge of the church, hopes that they will be able to hold a baptism of the bells later this year.

As in the early 18th century, generous donations have been made by certain of the City Livery Companies, especially the Plumbers, and the Fishmongers. The City of London Corporation has given £35,000 and £25,000 has come from the Ancient Society of College Youths.

Dr Peter Rumley, liveryman of the Plumbers Company and member of the Ancient Society of College Youths, explains: 'The new bells are to be the first new ring of bells installed in a city church in modern times. The 12 bells have been specially chosen to be a light and easy-going ring, convenient for the training of new bell-ringers to help ensure the bell-ringers of the future.'

When the faculty for new work has been confirmed, the bells are to be cast at the Whitechapel Foundry. Alan Hughes of Whitechapel says: 'We stored the original 10 bells before they were sold for scrap in the 1970s. The original early-18th-century bells were cast by Richard Phelps here at Whitechapel.' The bells are cast in moulds in, as Mr Hughes says, 'much the same process



Wren's St Magnus the Martyr in London

for making a crankshaft for an engine'.

Bell metal is a tin-and-copper alloy, of 22–23% tin and the rest copper. 'This makes a hard metal, and the harder the metal, the better the resonance.'

The casting of the new bells is yet another indication of the surprising revival of fortunes of the City churches under the present Bishop of London, patron of the bells fund, who, on being appointed,

rejected the prevailing orthodoxy that many of the City churches would have to close. Here's an idea of what the bells could say when they go back: 'We are still here, come and join us, say the Bells of St Magnus.'

For more information on the bells, visit www.magnusbells.com

*"We are still here,
come and join us,
say the bells of
St Magnus"*



The Monument and St Magnus' spire