

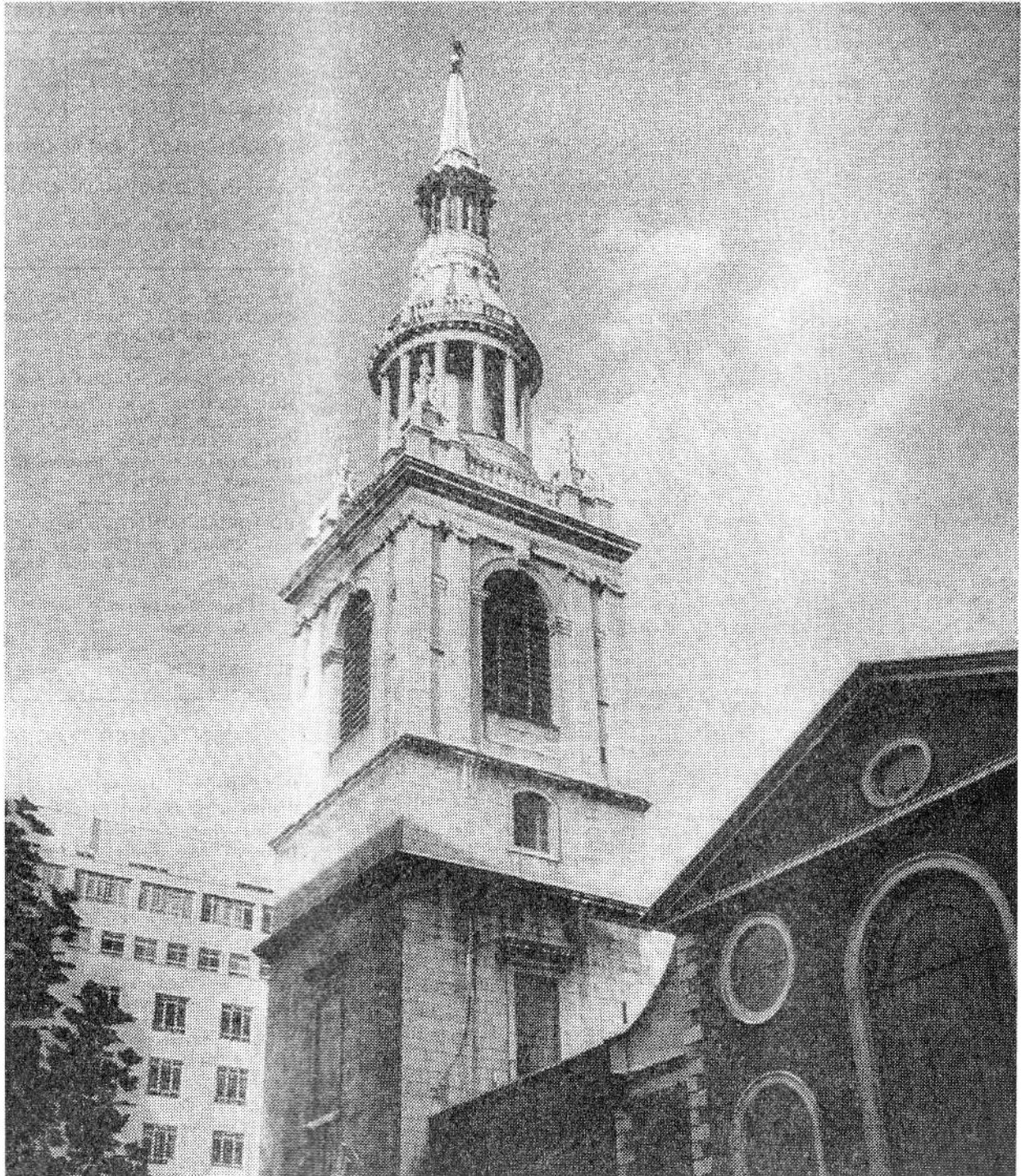
# THE RINGING WORLD

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE CENTRAL COUNCIL OF CHURCH BELL RINGERS

No. 2950. Vol. LXIII

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1967

9d.



**The Church of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, E.C.**

## OUR PICTURE

## The Church of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, E.C.

BY WILLIAM T. COOK

AMONG the pealable rings of England it is almost certain that none is more famous throughout the world than "Bow Bells," the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London. They play their part in the legend of Dick Whittington, "thrice Lord Mayor of London," who is said to have heard them from Highgate in 1375, and to have been inspired by their sound to return to London; and there is the old tradition that to be a true "Cockney" one must have been born within the sound of Bow Bells. In more recent years, the sound of Bow Bells, or at any rate of the back ten as they existed before 1933, became extremely well known through the recording made by a band of the College Youths, which was for so long used as the "interval signal" on the Home Service of the B.B.C.

A church has certainly been in existence on this site since early Norman times. The great historian of London, Stow, who wrote in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, records that "in the year 1100 . . . the roof was blown off in a mighty tempest, in which several people were killed." Part of the original crypt of the 11th century, built of Roman bricks, still survives to form one of the oldest parochial buildings in London. The name of the church is probably derived from the arches of this crypt, which also gave their name to the Ecclesiastical Court of Arches, which was first held in Bow Church in 1172.

## THREE TOWERS

Ever since the Middle Ages, St. Mary-le-Bow has been one of the largest and finest of City churches. The present tower is the third belonging to the church. The first, the Norman tower, collapsed in 1271. As Stow says: "A great part of the steeple fell down and slew many people, men and women." It was replaced by what appears from old illustrations to have been a very fine tower, which was not completed until 1512. This tower had at the corners four stone lanterns, with a fifth held aloft between them on flying buttresses built of Caen stone. These lanterns were intended to be glazed and lighted at night for the convenience of travellers.

The earliest record of a bell at Bow is in a regulation of 1362, in which Bow Church was appointed as one of the City churches where the Curfew should be rung. There is some evidence that the bell used for this purpose was cast in 1334. The Curfew was originally rung at 8 o'clock, but in 1496 the time was changed to 9 o'clock. In addition to the evening Curfew there was a morning bell rung at 5.45 a.m. each day in accordance with the will of John Downe or Donne, who died in 1472. He also left two tenements in Hoster Lane (now Bow Lane) "for the maintenance of the great bell."

## A KNELL FOR DONOR

At the time of Edward VI Bow Church possessed "fyve greate belles and two Sanctus Bells." One of these bells, the great bell, was given by William Copland, a tailor and king's merchant, who was churchwarden in 1515, with the direction that it should be used as the Curfew. This bell was first rung as a knell for the death of its donor. These bells were added to from time to time until, by 1652 or 1653, we find one Peter Mundy, in an essay of "Change Ringing," referring to "the 12 bells of Bow whereof 10 bee rung and 2 tolled."

These bells were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. The tower was not badly damaged, and over £500 was spent on an attempt to restore it. But when rebuilding was seen to be inevitable, it was decided to emphasise the importance of the church by building the present magnificent steeple to the design of Sir Christopher Wren and bringing it forward to Cheapside (the old tower apparently stood back from the street) with a

vestibule between it and the church. Wren intended the new tower, which cost nearly £7,400, to carry twelve bells, but only eight were placed there at first. These were ordered in 1677 from John and Christopher Hodson. Christopher Hodson was the son of John, the famous London bellfounder, and in 1677 he set up in business at St. Mary Cray, Kent. In 1680 he cast Great Tom of Oxford. Part of the inscription on the present tenor of Bow bells reads: "Recast 1669," repeating the inscription on the 1933 tenor, but this is evidently incorrect. The tenor of the 1677 ring weighed "upwards of 52 Hundred Weight."

## FIRST PEAL 1731

The first peal on these bells was one of Bob Triples, rung by the College Youths on Tuesday, January 12th, 1731. Eleven men were needed, three on the tenor and two on the seventh; it was called from the seventh bell by John Cundell. On Monday, February 11th, 1734, the College Youths rang 5,040 Bob Major in four hours and three minutes, again with eleven men. This peal was called by Benjamin Annable from the sixth, and was the heaviest peal of Major that had been rung. Indeed, if the tenor weight of 52 cwt. is correct, it was unbeaten until the peal in 1911 mentioned below.

In 1738 the tenor was recast by Richard Phelps and Thomas Lester. This fine bell, which lasted until 1933, when it was found to be cracked, weighed 53½ cwt. The other seven bells were recast in 1762 by Lester and Pack, and two trebles were added to make a ring of ten. The new bells were rung for the first time on June 4th, 1762, the 25th birthday of George III. The first peal on the ten bells was 5,363 Grandsire Caters rung by the College Youths on April 14th, 1765, in 3 hours and 51 minutes, and called from the treble by William Underwood. For this peal three men were needed on the tenor and two on the ninth.

Other noteworthy peals rung in the 18th century are the first of Royal on the bells—5,040 Oxford Treble Bob, rung on December 23rd, 1782, in 4 hours and 15 minutes, with Samuel Mugeridge and William Lyford on the tenor, conducted by John Povey from the fourth; and the first on the bells rung by ten men only—5,111 Grandsire Caters on February 19th, 1787, in 3 hours and 52 minutes. Povey was again the conductor, on the fourth, and Phillip Pilgrim rang the tenor. Both these peals were rung by College Youths.

## TWELVE BELLS SINCE 1881

In September, 1819, the steeple was repaired and strengthened with iron ties. In October, 1881, two trebles were added to make a ring of twelve and the first peal on the twelve bells, 5,004 Stedman Cinques, was rung by the College Youths on Easter Monday, April 7th, 1890, in 4 hours and 5 minutes, conducted by James Pettit. The bells were rehung by Messrs. Gillett and Johnston in 1901. The first peal of Maximus in the tower was 5,088 Kent Treble Bob, rung on Saturday, January 9th, 1907, in four hours and one minute, in which W. T. Cockerill rang the tenor and conducted. This peal was commemorated by a dinner, and a marble tablet was erected in the belfry. On Saturday, January 14th, 1911, 5,088 London Surprise Major was rung on the back eight bells in four hours; H. R. Newton called the peal from the tenor. The longest peal on the bells was 7,392 Cambridge Surprise Maximus, rung on December 12th, 1925, by a band of the Middlesex County Association, with William Pye on the tenor.

In 1933 all the bells except the fourth, fifth, ninth and eleventh were recast by Gillett and Johnston Ltd., and the bells were hung in a new frame, the cost of this restoration being

defrayed by Mr. Gordon Selfridge. The new tenor weighed 54 cwt. On May 11th, 1941, these bells were destroyed as a result of enemy action, and the church and tower were severely damaged. Some of the original bell metal was, however, salvaged, and the present bells were cast by Messrs. Mears and Stainbank in 1956. The recasting and ceremony of naming the present tenor ("Bow") and second ("Fabian") were carried out in the presence of the then Lord Mayor of London, Sir Cuthbert Ackroyd, and the Master of the Ancient Society of College Youths, John S. Mason.

## PRINCE PHILIP AT OPENING

Unfortunately, it was discovered shortly afterwards that the steeple was unsafe as a result of war damage, and it had to be partly taken down and rebuilt. It was several years before the funds necessary for this operation could be raised and the work completed, so that it was not until December 20th, 1961, that the new bells, having at last been hung in the tower, were dedicated by the Bishop of London in the presence of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The tenor of the present ring weighs 41 cwt. 3 qr. 21 lb. The bells are named (from treble to tenor): Katherine, Fabian, Christopher, Margaret, Mildred, Faith, Augustine, John, Timothy, Pancras, Cuthbert and Bow, and each bell has inscribed on it a text from the Psalms, the initial letters of which form an acrostic spelling "D. Whittington." The first peal on the present bells, 5,007 Stedman Cinques, was rung on November 9th, 1963.

Cover picture by Christopher Dalton.

## AMBRIDGE RINGERS' BAD EXAMPLE

## Strong Protest to "Radio Times"

Mr. Edgar C. Shepherd, convener of the Literature and Press Committee of the Central Council, has written to the Editor of the "Radio Times" protesting about the picture of Ambridge bellringers in "The Borchester Echo." His letter reads:—

Dear Sir.—I write to draw attention to the absurd and misleading depiction of the Ambridge bellringers in the issue of "The Borchester Echo" of October 13th. No ringers of ability would adopt such postures or handle bell ropes in the manner shown; and to conceive that Bob Major can be rung on four bells is as ridiculous as to imagine that Schubert's celebrated Octet can be played by a string quartette.

The ringing of bells forms an important part of our church work and is therefore entitled to be treated, if not always too solemnly, at least with accuracy. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers has a committee of experts ready and willing to advise the B.B.C. (or anyone else) on all aspects of the art of ringing.

Another protest comes from Mr. E. J. Holloway, of Crewe:—

Dear Sir.—I would suggest that some competent ringing instructors be sent to "Ambridge" to instruct their local ringers how to handle bell ropes properly and safely.

We ringers know, of course, that "Ambridge" and the somewhat queer characters found therein are really non-existent, but the general public might think all ringers are slovenly and careless.

## BACK NUMBERS

We carry a substantial quantity of back numbers from 1950. Price 9d. per copy plus postage, for recent years (1960-67). Other 1s. 6d. plus postage.