

## THE LOST BELLS OF LONDON (3)

### ST. MAGNUS THE MARTYR, LOWER THAMES STREET

By W. T. COOK

Unlike those of the two previous towers treated of in this series (St. Bride's, Fleet Street, and St. Sepulchre's, Holborn), the bells of St. Magnus the Martyr do not seem to have been used for any major developments in the art of change ringing. Nevertheless, the tower was always a very popular one, and it is probable that the bells were rung more often overall than those of the other two churches.

The church is mentioned in a document of 1067, but I have no other information about its early history. In Stow's time (end of the 16th century) there were "vj belles commonly used to be ronge, v belonging to the chyme and a clock bell and a saunce bell." The church stands close to the Monument which commemorates the Great Fire of London, 1666, and it was hard by there, just across the road in Pudding Lane, that the fire started. St. Magnus was, of course, one of the churches that were destroyed by the fire; and it was one of the 50 or more City churches that were rebuilt to the designs of Sir Christopher Wren. Its spacious interior is one of the best of its type; T. S. Eliot, in his poem "The Waste Land" (1922), describes it in the lines:

"... where the walls

Of Magnus Martyr hold

Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white  
and gold."

Eliot comments, in his notes to the poem, "The interior of St. Magnus is to my mind one of the finest among Wren's interiors."

The main body of the church was completed in 1676, but the tower of the old church was originally allowed to remain, and was not demolished until 1705, when it was replaced with the present steeple, a unique Wren design, consisting of a four-storey tower surmounted by an octagonal lantern, above which in its turn is a lead-covered "cupola and spiry turret," rising to a total height of 185 feet. From the second storey, northwards over Lower Thames Street, projects an ornate clock. Originally the tower rose from the western facade of the church, but in about 1760 it was altered, the west wall of the church being moved back to leave the tower projecting from it. Arches on the other three sides of the tower provided passage for the footway over Old London Bridge, which was a little to the east of the present bridge.

It was apparently not until 1714 that the church was again provided with a ring of bells. In that year Richard Phelps of Whitechapel cast a ring, probably of eight bells, which were augmented almost immediately afterwards to a ring of ten; or it may be that the ten were all cast at the same time. It is difficult to tell, because the second of the ten was recast by Robert Catlin in 1748, and the treble by Thomas Mears in 1843. The other bells all bear the date 1714, except the tenor, which was cracked (by clocking, according

to the Rev. H. T. Ellacombe), and recast by Mears in 1831 (22½ cwt. in E flat). On none of the recast bells is the original inscription reproduced.

The first peal on the bells was 5088 Grandsire Caters rung by the College Youths on February 15, 1725. This was the second peal rung by the College Youths (if we except the possible peal in 1690 at St. Sepulchre's), and was composed and conducted by Benjamin Annable; this was apparently his first peal as conductor. In the College Youths' peal book appears the following footnote to the peal: "The Eight biggest Bells were made in the year 17—, and the two trebles in 17— by Mr. Richard Phelps in White Chappel, the two trebles were given to the parish by the Eastern Youths and British Scholars." Beyond the fact that there are six-bell methods named after these two Societies, nothing is known of them. It must be presumed that St. Magnus was one of the towers where they practised.

#### REPEAT PERFORMANCE

The College Youths again rang a peal of Grandsire Caters at St. Magnus on October 17, 1726, this being one of the few peals in which Annable repeated a previous performance (it was, however, a different composition). The Eastern Scholars visited the tower in 1734 and rang 6012 Grandsire Caters. The first peal of Royal on the bells was rung by the "Junior" College Youths on June 5, 1759 (Oxford Treble Bob), conducted by George Meakins. The "Ancient" branch of the Society went there on December 28, 1761, and rang a 5040 of Plain Bob Royal. Eight weeks later the "Juniors" returned and rang what seems to have been the first peal of Double Grandsire Caters. There was another "Junior" College Youths' peal there on November 6, 1764 (5094 Grandsire Caters), and further peals of Oxford Treble Bob Royal in 1795 and 1797, and Grandsire Caters in 1796, all by the College Youths.

The next peal here of which I have any note was 5079 Stedman Caters on November 3, 1853, the first in the method on the bells. This was also a College Youths' peal, conducted by William Cooter. A footnote to this peal on the board that was erected to commemorate it stated that it was upwards of 40 years since a peal had last been rung on the bells, so probably one was rung in the early part of the 19th century. Two years later a peal of Grandsire Caters was rung in what would even now be reckoned the remarkably fast time of 2 hours 52 minutes. There seems to have been a gap of over 30 years until the next peal, after which a steady succession of peals on the bells is recorded. We know that by this time and up to the year 1939, the tower was a regular meeting place for College Youths' practices. Notable among more recent peals are a London County Association name peal (Thomas) of 5086 Stedman Caters in 1905, and 5040 Middlesex Surprise Royal by the Middlesex County Association in 1922, conducted by William Pye; also a peal of 5120 Kent Treble Bob Royal on May 19, 1900, to celebrate the relief of Mafeking.

Some of the bells were rehung and the rest overhauled by Mears and Stainbank in 1917. Shortly after the start of the Second World War the bells were taken down from the tower as a measure of safety, and, I understand, stored in a railway arch, where they remain to this day. The roof and ceiling of the church were damaged in an air-raid in 1940, but, somewhat ironically, the tower remained intact.

I am told that the reason given for these bells still not having been rehung since the war is lack of funds, in view of the amount that had to be spent on restoration of the main body of the church. It seemed, a couple or so of years ago, that something might be stirring, but I have heard nothing since. From the purely practical point of view there is a need for a ring of ten in the City, and it seems a shame that nothing so far has been done towards the restoration of this fine ring of bells. Perhaps the example of the Cumberland Youths' action at Shoreditch and Spitalfields will inspire some other Society to make the necessary effort to restore the bells of St. Magnus to their proper place before it is too late; I believe there would be no insuperable difficulties, although getting the bells rung regularly for Sunday services might prove to be more of a challenge. Is it too much to hope that this challenge may soon be met?

#### OLD DIARY

About 40 years ago a diary became available for 1697-1708 of one Thomas Like from the Clun Lands, who used to take his stock to Knighton Market. The diary is part of the Stange Library and was transcribed by Mrs. Coltman Rogers and published in Radnorshire.

Thomas Like lived at Whitcot Keyes, near Clun, and was a bellringer and choirman at the parish church. In one entry in April, 1697, he refers to "We Clun ringers" ringing at Leominster, where they were met by the Ludlow ringers, and in September, 1699, he noted that "We began to learn to sing psalms at Clun."

He had some legal training, for on June 30, 1699, he noted "I had three shillings for writing a deed and bond for Evan and the son of Richard Parry, it being a deed for the purchase of a house in Clun of Richard Bason."

#### Bath and Wells Diocesan Association.

##### YOUNG PEOPLE ATTENDED

On January 6 the Ilchester Branch held their first practice meeting of 1973 at Haselbury Plucknett, by kind permission of the Rev. J. M. C. Yates (Vicar).

There was a good attendance and it was gratifying to see a good percentage of young people, which augurs well for the future of the Branch and ringing in general.

The delightful light six (6½ cwt) were put to good use in a large variety of methods, under the direction of the ringing master and his assistant, Messrs. Gordon Rendell and Charles Gratton. M. M. L.

Members of Leicester Cathedral Society who rang the peal in honour of the 85th birthday of Mr. Shirley Burton wish to thank Mr. Martin Major for being available at the commencement of the peal as the 13th man.