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BELLS, BELLS, BELLS

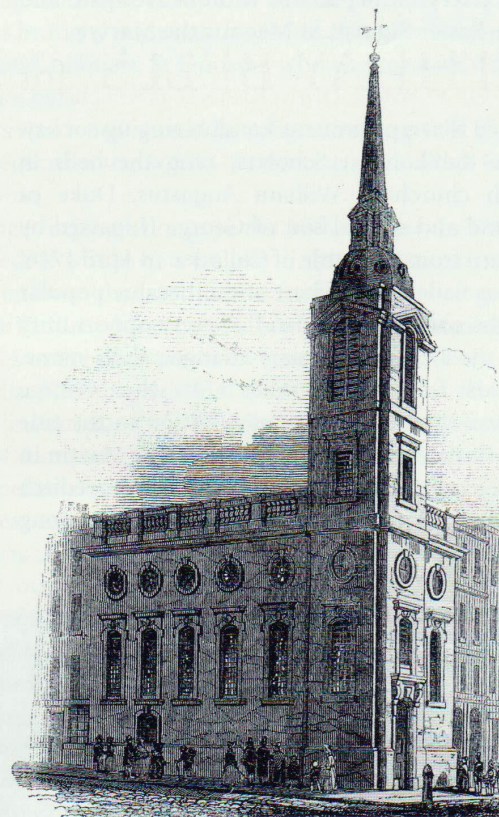
Henry III. Mr Phillips gives an excellent summary of the church until the final entry in the *Greate Booke* in 1734. Unfortunately the church went into decline after that and under the Union of Benefices Act of 1860 it was made redundant and in 1868 demolished for the widening of Gracechurch Street. The parish was merged with **All Hallows Lombard Street** which in turn was demolished in 1937. The land was sold for £24,000 and used to build **St Benet Mile End Road**.

To return to Mr Phillips' interpretation of church accounts: he emphasises the importance of bells. The constant theme running through the accounts is the cost of their bells ...*chimes, clocks, ropes, wire oil clappers and baldrics...this passion for belfreys (sic), bells and bell ringing* (p8). They were proud of their bells: they rang a great peal for Mary Tudor in 1553 as she processed up from the Tower and through the City. Again in the accounts of 1585/6 the passion for bells, or perhaps the necessity of bells, asserts itself again: ...*paid to Master Walter for casting the great bell £9 9s 0d, for carrying the great bell 2s 0d and for mending the hanger of the great bell 5s 6d* (p17). In 1588/9 the bells

On Wednesday 11 March I went to **St Magnus the Martyr** to do my Watch to be greeted by the magnificent sight of the new peal of twelve bells that had been blessed by the Bishop of London the previous week. They occupied the whole of the main aisle in the nave and were awaiting re-hanging in the tower, to be rung to celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

With such magnificent objects above our heads so to speak, as the Friends' office is in the crypt of St Magnus, I began to think about the significance of bells in the history of a parish church and the lives of the parishioners. While doing an interesting trawl in the London Metropolitan Archives, I came across a delightful history of **St Benet Gracechurch Street** called *One Greate Booke of Accounts With Clasps and Bosses* by Harold F Phillips. It was obviously a privately printed book as it seems to have used a Gestetner type process and has no publisher's identity, only the stamp of the London County Council for 1920. It is an interpretation of the church records covering the period of the above mentioned great book from its early stages to the last entry in 24 April 1742 and is quite delightful. I freely attribute most of the information on the church and the importance of its bells to Mr Phillips.

A short history of St Benet's is probably in order because it is one of Wren's vanished churches. According to Mr Phillips the church was originally on the corner of Gracious Street and Fenchurch Street but *Wikipedia*, with an attribution to Cobb¹, gives an alternative origin of the name from a herb or 'grass' market nearby. According to *Wikipedia*, the site of the church is ancient and is referred to in the Charter of Brihtmaer, whereby the church on Gracechurch Street was conveyed to **Christ Church Canterbury** in 1053. The first reference to the dedication to St Benet, or Benedict of Nursia, the founder of Western Monasticism in the sixth century, was in the reign of



St Benet Gracechurch Street from *The Churches of London* by George Godwin and John Britton and engravings by J Le Keux. Book 2, London, C Tilt 1839

were once again a great charge on the parish and in 1640/1 they paid Murford the Smith for a new clapper for the great bell of 37½ lbs weight 24s 9d (p20). Life seemed to have been quiet or at least discreet during the civil war period but for the accounts of 1645/6 they paid the ringers to ring a peal when Prince Rupert was routed (p48).

Disaster for the bells struck, of course, with the Great Fire (pp42/3). The accounts of 1666/7 state that the church received for old iron £2 9s 6d, for three tons of lead £26 0s 0d and dust of bell metal £1 16s 6d. With the loss of the bells, ordinary parish life became very difficult. Expenses in the parish continued however, in 1674/5 they paid to have the *Great Booke* tasselled and bound (p45). St Benet was one of the churches rebuilt by Wren's office and there is a note in the accounts of 1683/4 of a payment of 41s 0d paid for waiting for Sir Christopher Wren to view the church. In 1686 the church was re-opened and the importance of the bells asserted itself once again: the accounts for 1685/6 paid 8s 8d for hanging the bell. To quote Mr Phillips ...*in speaking of the prevailing mania for bells we are in no way overstating the case* (p47), for in 1693/4 the parish paid £102 18s 0d for a new bell. The great bell was a major source of parish revenue, for the accounts of 1696/7 record attendance at a meeting

... *that the great bell may not be rung for another parish without paying double 7s 0d* (p48). The importance of the bells continued and 20 years later in the accounts of 1716/7 a sum is ...*paid to Mr Jones to new hanging of the great bell £10 0s 0d*.

Church bells have always been the factor that united the church and its parishioners. There were bells for feast days, celebration, marriage, victory, curfew and danger but, most importantly, the

funeral knells were the means of uniting each individual to their fellows.

The lines of John Donne² in *Meditation XVII* come to mind: *No man is an island, entire of itself...Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

Sources

One Greate Booke of Accounts With Clasps and Bosses
Harold F Phillips, nd.

Wikipedia St Benet Gracechurch Street

Notes

1 Gerald Cobb, *London City Churches*, B T Batsford Ltd, London, 1977, p19

2 Dean of St Paul's 1621-1631

BIRTHDAY BELLS for the 40th anniversary of the Churches Conservation Trust

Birthday Bells were heard across England on Saturday 21 February when over 70 churches rang for the Birthday Bells Appeal, the start of the nationwide, year long 40th birthday celebrations of the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT), based in West Smithfield. The charity cares for 340 of England's historic churches no longer required for regular worship. www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Ancient bells can also boom on your mobile! The 110 year old bells at St John the Baptist Avon Dassett, Warwickshire, were rung for the first time in 30 years that Saturday. The CCT recorded the bells to create a unique ring tone for mobile phones. The bells are able to ring following a CCT-funded £700,000 restoration of the bell tower. Ring tone download details are on their website.

Some churches that Friends will be familiar with include St Mary Higham, Kent. Set on the edge of the Kent marshes, the church was the inspiration for the opening chapter of Dickens' *Great Expectations* and visited on the 2008 Chairman's outing. This church needs plastering, redecoration and improved electrics. Then the local community hopes to hold events that celebrate its links to Dickens.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Churches Conservation Trust website. At the top is a navigation bar with links: Home, The Trust, Visit Churches, Events, Conservation, Communities, Learning, Support us, and Contact us. Below the navigation bar is a search box. The main content area features a large announcement titled "12 Churches' print collection". The text states: "The Churches Conservation Trust is very pleased to announce that the acclaimed artist Gerard Stamp has painted a series of twelve watercolours celebrating the outstanding historic churches in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust over the past 40 years. Signed limited edition prints of the watercolours are now available to purchase." To the right of the text is a watercolour illustration of a church interior. Below the main announcement is a "Latest news" section with a link to "The Trust's 40th birthday present" dated 31 March 2009. At the bottom of the page is a grid of links categorized under "Support us", "Conservation", "Communities", and "40th anniversary celebrations".