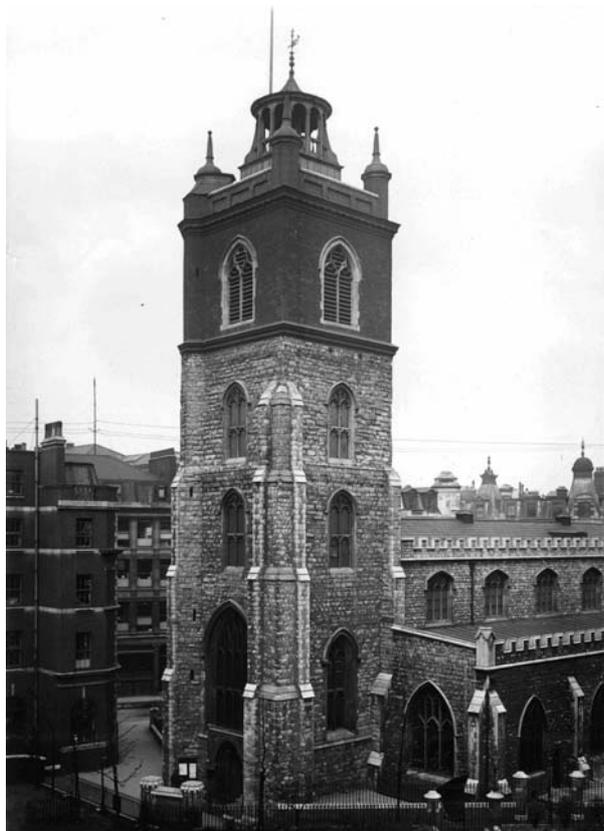


THE BELLS OF ST. GILES' CRIPPLEGATE 1954 - 2004



St. Giles' Cripplegate circa. 1935 – photograph from the ASCY Library

In 1954 a new ring of twelve bells was installed at the church of St. Giles without Cripplegate, to replace those destroyed during the Second World War.

On the night of 24th August, 1940 bombs were dropped on the City of London for the first time, hitting the north door of St. Giles and overturning the statue of John Milton, which in those days stood in the churchyard. Far more serious was the damage sustained, later in the year, on the 29th December. In a single night of incendiary bombing, over 1400 fires were ignited in the City of London. Every street from Moorgate to Aldersgate was destroyed and only the walls of the Guildhall stood. When the conflagration threatened St. Paul's Cathedral, Sir Winston Churchill ordered that every effort should be made to save it, and through the Herculean efforts of the Fire Services, including the St. Paul's Fire Watch and the London Fire Brigade, it survived becoming a symbol of hope in the midst of the Blitz. It was a bad night for the Ancient Society of College Youths (ASCY) in which, not only were lost the bells of St. Giles' Cripplegate, St. Brides' Fleet Street, St. Lawrence Jewry and St. Vedast's Foster Lane but also handbells, Minute Books and other documents stored at the Coffee Pot, where a meeting had been held a week earlier. The fire at St. Giles was so severe that the cement caught alight and all that remained was the shell, the arcade in the chancel, the outside walls and the tower. In the tower remained only the bell frame. The famous 18th century clock was completely destroyed,



A wartime postcard showing what remained of the church after the raid.

four bells melted in the heat and eight fell to the ground where they lay until removed to Whitechapel early in 1949.

The first proposal for recasting and hanging the bells is dated 7 July 1942 at a total cost of £1999 4s 11d. In June 1942 Tobruk fell to the Germans, and in September they entered Stalingrad. Not surprisingly, the bells were left lying at the foot of the tower until the war was over.

The post-war restoration started 3rd December 1948 when the Clerk to the Cripplegate Foundation wrote to Messrs Mears & Stainbank "I am desired by the Vicar and Churchwardens to ask you to remove the eight bells now lying at St. Giles Church Cripplegate for breaking up and melting down". In March 1950 Messrs Mears and Stainbank were invited to meet the War Damage Commission to discuss reinstatement of the bells and frame. They proposed a new ring of 12 bells, with a tenor weighing 35/36 cwts., "of the best possible tonal quality .. accurately tuned on the five-tone harmonic principle", but another three years passed before an order was placed.

By June 1953 the bell frame was "fixed and ready to receive the bells", but the appeal launched earlier in the year had not raised the required £5182. Mr. Albert A Hughes, of Mears and Stainbank, rescued the situation by offering to "go straight away with the job" if paid for metal and materials, waiting "if necessary, a year or two" for the balance. The Vicar and Churchwardens accepted his offer and the bells were cast and installed the following year. The trial ringing took place on Friday 27th August 1954 and "everyone was agreed that the bells were beautiful and the go was perfect". The only criticism was that "the bells are too noisy in the immediate vicinity of the Tower, and also that the acoustics inside cause a certain amount of echo, and the notes are inclined to run into each other. This makes it rather difficult for the ringers to distinguish their own bell in change ringing". The concrete ceiling above the bells was blamed and Mr. Hughes suggested that "an absorbent ceiling be suspended from the two hoisting girders, and also that the boarding to the windows be covered inside with Cabot Quilting". In 2004 rockwool is used instead of Cabot Quilting, while an absorbent ceiling remains on the wish-list.



Wartime postcard showing the view of St. Giles' from London Wall.

In January 1955 Alan Ainsworth attended ringing at Cripplegate on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting of the Society of Royal Cumberland Youths, at which he rang the treble and 9th, noting in his tower records "Good tone and go." A year later Michael Moreton moved to London. He remembers the tower surrounded by rubble, and ringing the bells while local youths fired air gun pellets at the windows, showering the band with fragments of glass.

The first peal was not rung until February 1960 a year before the restoration of the Church, and three years before work commenced on the residential complex we know as the Barbican. It was 5040 Stedman Cinques by the ASCY, composed and conducted by John Chilcott, rung as a Golden Wedding compliment to Mr. & Mrs. A A Hughes. Another 45 peals were rung between 1960 and 1974, but no more for 19 years because the bells were considered too loud.

In December 1993 the Steeplekeeper, Brian Diserens, prepared a proposal for repairs to the bells and improvements to the Ringing Chamber. Two years later this was incorporated in a more ambitious proposal, which added improvements to the sound control and even considered moving the Ringing Chamber upstairs to the Clock Room. In October 1995 a meeting took place between tower officials, ASCY Officers and the Rector of St. Giles' to discuss the proposal. It was agreed to share the costs 50/50 between the parish and the Society and to tender for work immediately, with completion planned for 1997. Hayward Mills were awarded the contract for work on the bells and the ASCY Senior Steward progressed a specification for the sound control. Before work could commence, approval was required from the Diocese of London, The City of London Corporation and English Heritage. Consent was not received until February 1997. Work finally commenced on 20th April 1998. The water tank remains in the corner of the Ringing Chamber, and the rope draft was not reduced by a move to the Clock Room but the circle was improved and the go of the bells enhanced by removing pulleys and reducing the "draw". The sound control was improved enormously and since the work was completed 29 peals have been rung.

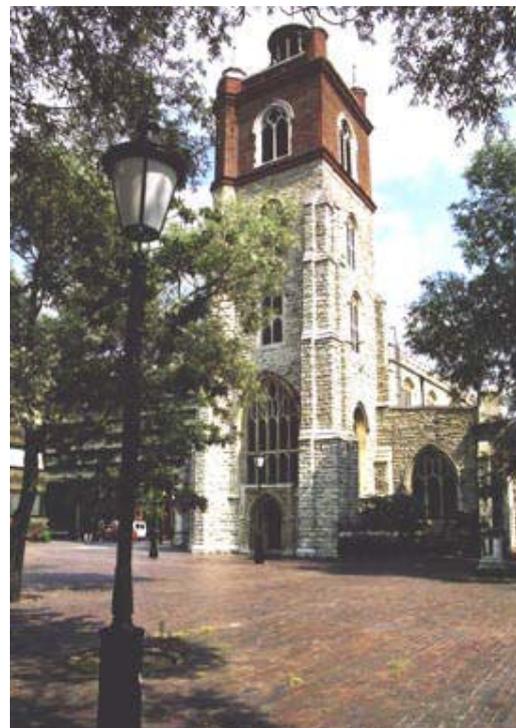
Five years later the remaining 50-year-old clappers and pulleys needed urgent attention. Whites of Appleton were invited to inspect the installation, their recommendations were accepted and the ASCY voted to



The bells in 2002 before rockwool was nailed to the inside of boarding over the louvres in 2003.

pay for the works from its Bell Restoration Fund. In February 2004 four ASCY members, Messrs. John Taylor, David Baverstock, Martin Cansdale and Jim Hardy, assisted Graham Clifton from Whites to lift all twelve bells, to check and re-grease their bearings, to fit re-bushed clappers and finally to tighten, as necessary, all other ringing fittings leaving the bells "true-striking" and "in good order for full circle ringing".

Fifty years on the bells still go well and sound magnificent. Regular practices are held by the Ancient Society of College Youths and the Middlesex CA. Ringing for the Parish Eucharist, from 9.30am to 10.00am on the first Sunday of each month, has been restarted and visiting ringers are always welcome.



St. Giles now.

*Gwen Rogers - May 2004
Tower Secretary - St. Giles' Cripplegate*

With thanks to the Whitechapel Bell Foundry for permission to quote from correspondence in their archives.