

"THE LAST WORD IN EVERY RESPECT...."

The Bells of St. Dunstan-in-the-East, London EC3
by the Rev. D. L. Cawley

The title quotation of this article is preceded in the current edition of The Ringer's Guide by the following accurate words of Mr. R. H. Dove: "The case of St. Dunstan-in-the-East has several unique features, and must surely be without parallel in the history of bellfounding." The purpose of this article is to record the history of the bells of this church, and in particular of the ring of eight cast by Messrs John Taylor & Co. in 1951, which were sold back to the same firm in 1970 after a total of half a day's ringing in the 20 years. Most, if not all, of this ringing, took place in the years 1966-70, during which time the writer of this article arranged ringing at the tower, and has the most reliable facts at hand. He does not seek to justify any of the criticisms levelled at the founders of the bells both for their weight or the height at which they were rehung in the surviving tower; of those levelled at the two other foundries who were reputed to have done everything to prevent the only modern Taylor ringing peal in the City from being rung; of those levelled at the Church Council for selling the bells, and of the "big business" interests which steered the tower conversion scheme through; or of those levelled at himself by at least one well-known ringer who accused him of restricting ringing entirely to suit himself. Whatever the facts, there are usually at least two sides to them, and these lines are written to perpetuate the memory of the most glorious bells the writer has ever heard.

Pre-1666 prints show that St. Dunstan's was a typical 15th century "hall" type church, with castellated aisles, large perpendicular windows, and a substantial west tower crowned with a lofty lead spire. In the Great Fire, the spire caught fire and the tower was shattered. Sir Christopher Wren found it beyond repair, and the church itself badly damaged. The outer walls were apparently firm, and into the shell of the church, Wren inserted classical arcades, leaving the outside of the building little altered, except in one respect. At the west end he replaced the old tower with a new structure of outstanding grace and elegance. "Correct" in the true Gothic sense it certainly is not, but it rivals St. Mary-le-Bow and St. Bride's in elegance, and surely surpasses both for sheer glory.

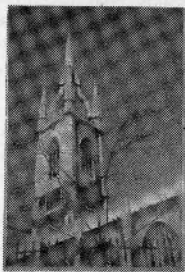
FOUR STAGES

The tower is of four stages; the lowest (now a chapel) originally opening on three sides to Idol Lane, and on the east side to the nave. The first stage formed the ringing chamber (now the vicar's study, with bedroom above); the second contains the clock, and is now also a bedroom; the third was the bell chamber, with observation platform just below the roof. The tower was given four tall pinnacles and from 20 feet beneath these sprang four flying buttresses which in turn carried a "lantern" spire rising to a height of 180ft.

It was a remarkable engineering achievement; Wren had no doubts about it, and when, in 1703, a storm damaged a large number of his churches, the great man drily remarked, "Not St. Dunstan's, I am sure". It is somewhat paradoxical that architects of 250 years later, and after extensive reconstruction, expressed grave doubts about the stability of the tower, especially under ringing conditions. What Wren did miscalculate was the strength of the church walls; in 1817 the entire church, excepting the tower, was demolished and rebuilt in elaborate and attractive perpendicular Gothic by David Laing, architect of the nearby Custom House. It had a fine and scholarly interior, in advance of its date. But again, it was claimed by fire: on the night of May 10th, 1941, St. Dunstan-in-the-East was bombed.

Although a temporary chapel was built, and

ST. DUNSTAN-
IN-THE-EAST,
EC3



larger congregations met in the ruins, and despite elaborate plans for its reconstruction, the body of the church was never rebuilt; today it forms an attractive garden laid out in the ruins. A vicarage for All Hallows-by-the-Tower has been built to the north of, and incorporating, the tower. The latter was restored in the years 1948-53. The spire was carefully dismantled and rebuilt stone-by-stone from tower parapet level; the interior stonework was partially renewed and the stone louvres replaced. Whilst all this was going on, four tons of metal were being melted in the foundry at Loughborough. . . .

FIRST RECORD OF BELLS

The first record of bells is of 1543, when the churchwardens paid what appears to be quite an enormous sum those days, namely "£500 for a change of bells and ye underweight of ye same". Presumably this sum included the value of the old bells, however many there were. The Inventory of Church Goods of King Edward VI records this new ring as being "V Greate bells a saunce and a clock bell"; and it would appear that they remained five, together with a Sanctus bell and a clock bell until their destruction by fire in 1666. Once the tower had been rebuilt in its present form the authorities, like those at St. Bride's and St. Martin-in-the-Fields, agreed with Abraham Rudhall, of Gloucester, for a new ring of eight, and this ring, with a tenor reputed to be 24 cwt., was cast and installed in the tower in 1700. Great praise was lavished on them, not least by Rudhall himself. In 1702 he advertised:

"Whereas Mr. Abraham Rudhall of the City of Gloucester, bellfounder, was lately employed to cast 8 bells for the parish of St. Dunstan's in London. This is to give notice that he has performed his contract to the universal satisfaction of the Gentlemen of the said parish and in the opinion of the ablest judges, he has made them the best peal of bells in all England."

Whilst the last sentence was a "stock phrase" of Rudhall's, many older ringers who rang peals on the old eight have sung their praises. If they were anything like their successors, they must have been magnificent. Despite Rudhall's boast, four of his bells were recast within 50 years: the treble in 1718 by Richard Phelps and the second in 1746 by Thomas Lester, both at Whitechapel; while in 1750 the sixth and the seventh were recast by Robert Catlin of Holborn. Records of peals on the bells are numerous, though there is no record of the reasons for the recastings; it may have been fair wear and tear, or perhaps it was due to "clocking" for services or to the presence of crown cracks due to cast-in crown staples.

The rebuilding operations in the church during 1817 did not affect the bells, but they were quarter-turned, entirely refitted and rehung in a new two-tier cast-iron frame by Messrs. Mears & Stainbank in 1904. Ringers have recalled that the bells were not easy to ring, probably due to the tower sway; even the new bells required care in handling them, partly from this cause and partly from the long draught of rope, an affliction common to many City towers. When the church was bombed the tower was gutted. Three of the bells, including the tenor, fell to the ground, and

the rest were cracked. The tower was subsequently cleared of its bells which were broken up and buried in the ruins. About 78 cwt. of their metal was later recovered. The details and approximate notes and weights of this ring were:

Treble	29in.	4 1/2 cwt.	D
	Richard Phelps Whitechapel, 1718		
Second	31in.	5 1/2 cwt.	C-sharp
	Thomas Lester, Whitechapel, 1746		
Third	33in.	6 3/4 cwt.	B
	Abraham Rudhall I, Gloucester, 1700		
Fourth	36 1/2 in.	8 1/2 cwt.	A
	Abraham Rudhall I, Gloucester, 1700		
Fifth	39in.	10cwt.	G-sharp
	Abraham Rudhall I, Gloucester, 1700		
Sixth	41in.	12 1/4 cwt.	F-sharp
	Robert Catlin, Holborn, 1750		
Seventh	45in.	15 1/2 cwt.	E
	Robert Catlin, Holborn, 1750		
Tenor	50 1/2 in.	22cwt.	D
	Abraham Rudhall I, Gloucester, 1700		

A note about the inscriptions will be found later.

Services continued, both in the ruins and the temporary chapel. The aged and energetic "Master Parson" in the form of the Rev. A. G. B. West, the last Rector of St. Dunstan's, summoned the congregation first by handbell, and later with the use of a small 17th century bell which is now preserved in the crypt of the united church of All Hallows.

STORY OF THE NEW RING

Now began the extraordinary story of the new ring. Once work on the tower was well advanced, the shattered bells were delivered to John Taylor & Co. for recasting. Most of the post-war restorations were carried out by Mears & Stainbank, though the first (the heavy chime of 18 at All Hallows) was the work of Messrs. Taylor, as also was the single 15 cwt. ringing bell replacing the lamented 12 at St. Bride's. In 1966, the writer discovered in the parish chest an old file of papers relating to St. Dunstan's bells, and it appears that the first correspondence was with Messrs. Gillett & Johnston. Mears & Stainbank were also involved, and specifically stated that the weight of the ring should be reduced and the ring lowered in the tower. However, the late Thomas H. Taffender was then in charge at St. Dunstan's, and it seems that, not only was he determined that the ring should be nearly the same weight as the previous one, but that it should be a Taylor ring, and that it should be the finest that could be dreamed of. His wishes were granted, but spatial considerations demanded that the bells should be hung only very slightly lower than they had been previously. It would be interesting to corroborate this with statements from the papers; but they mysteriously "disappeared" whilst in the custody of the then Vicar of All Hallows, and the present archivist there has been unable to trace them.

The reconstructed spire, new concrete roof, and all new floors were in position in May 1953, and a plaque on one of the pinnacles records its completion. The bells were hung in that year, leaving only the vaulted ceiling of the ground floor to be replaced. The work was carried out under the direction of the late Sir Herbert Baker.

Just around the corner, Mears & Stainbank were hanging the new musical light eight at St. Olave, Hart Street. It seemed that London would have two new rings within a year. St. Olave's have never looked back; but, when St. Dunstan's were tried out, whether in peal or singly the writer does not know, the architect and other authorities were apparently so alarmed at the amount of movement in the tower that the bells were condemned not to ring again, either until the church should be rebuilt, or the tower buttressed.

INSCRIPTIONS

The new ring of bells was interesting in its composition and layout. For details of the weights,

(Continued overleaf)

ST. DUNSTAN-IN-THE-EAST—continued etc., the writer is indebted to their founders; he himself verified the inscriptions:

Treble	29in.	5-2-8	E-flat
WM STRENGFELLOW D. D. RECT: I. SHARP			
S: KING CH:W: R: PHELPS MADE ME			
(border of 14 fleurs-de-lys)/(waist) (T)/RECAST 1951			
Second	30in.	5-3-1	D
T. LISTER MADE ME 1740			
(border, 28 rosettes)/(waist) (T)/RECAST 1951			
Third	31½in.	6-2-11	C
GOD PROSPER THE CHVRCH OF ENGLAND A:R 1700			
(2 bells; 6 fleurs-de-lys)/(waist) (T)/RECAST 1951			
Fourth	34in.	7-2-17	B-flat
PEACE AND GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD A:R 1700			
(16 rosettes)/(waist) (T)/RECAST 1951			
Fifth	37in.	9-2-7	A-flat
GOD SAVE THE KING AND THE CHVRCH A (bell) R			
(19 fleurs-de-lys)/(waist) (T)/RECAST 1951			
Sixth	39in.	11-0-13	G
ROBERT CATLIN FECIT 1715			
(40 rosettes)/(waist) (T)/RECAST 1951			
Seventh	43in.	14-1-17	F
THE REV. EDMUND BATEMAN, RECTOR.			
JOHN SMITH, JOHN WILLIS, CHURCHWARDENS.			
R. CATLIN. /1750/ (waist) (T) RECAST 1951			
Tenor	48½in.	21-0-14	E-flat
MR WM STRONGFELLOW. . . RECTOR 1700 A:R (bell)			
(50 fleurs-de-lys) /MR PETER: DELAMOTTE:			
MR THO SHERLEY CHVRCHWARDENS (40 fleurs-de-lys) /waist) SPIRITUS SANCTUS A PATRE ET FILIO			
SUA VITER SONANS AD SALUTEM / REFOUNDED			
1951 BY TAYLOR, LOUGHBORO. / ARTHUR G. B.			
WEST — RECTOR /			
F. CLYDE JEA VONS			
E. CLEVELAND STEVENS CHURCHWARDENS			

The above inscriptions were by no means facsimiles of what was there before, largely due to the broken condition in which the bells were delivered to Loughborough, and brave efforts were made to reproduce the style of the former lettering where it was lacking. The border ornaments were new and gave dignity to the bells' appearance. Bad mistakes were made on the second ("Lister" for "Lester", and 1740 for 1746), and on the sixth, where the date 1715 should read 1750. Some of the old lettering and stamps could be and were reproduced. The inscriptions on the waist are, of course, new. The letter (T) indicates the Loughborough foundry mark; an oblique stroke denotes a fresh line of inscription. Each bell had its pattern number upon the crown.

The layout and roping of the bells was interesting. The founders took great pains to throw the minimum possible stresses upon the tower when the bells were rung in rounds; thus the bells swinging mouth-to-mouth (1-2 and 5-6) were roped on the same side of their wheels respectively; the tenor was hung along the north wall, and was roped unopposed with the seventh. Even so, the tower sway was considerable.

From time to time the ULSCR would visit the church and ring the bells up singly, with a very watchful verger from All Hallows present. Latterly, this seems to have been an annual event; but the bells were not rung as an eight. However, in 1965, the writer and John Pladdys, fascinated by the tower and spire, and having heard many legends about its bells, being themselves new to London, trod where (no doubt) angels would fear to tread. In January, 1966, they performed the annual single-bell ringing. The bells went well enough, though the clappers were stiff—and, it turned out, the verger was soon retiring! By Easter, good contact had been established with the authorities.

GENERALLY OVERHAULED

During such spare time as the summer term afforded, the bells were generally overhauled, the gear painted and the clappers stripped down and refixed so that they did not stand upright in the bells when they were up! At this time one of the nominal churchwardens appeared and declared that, if the bells were rung, the tower would most

certainly fall down. This gentleman, more through misunderstanding than through deliberate action, was more to be held in account for the loss of the bells which bore his predecessors' names, than any other, and was secretary of the Steering Committee which finally cleared their sale. Eventually, the vicar consented to a "try-out" of the bells in the presence of Mr. Brian Threlfall of the CC Towers and Bells committee.

In order to achieve the object of the exercise, namely to ascertain the safety of the tower, rather than to provide a field-day for tower-grabbers, great secrecy was involved. An invited band rang London's finest eight for the first time in January, 1967, 16 years after they were cast. Mr. Threlfall reported that although the tower rocked considerably, and favoured an eventual "buttressing" scheme (part of an Order-in-Council made in 1961 when the remains of the church were finally made available for purchase), nevertheless it was not unsafe for ringing. One point which everyone appreciated was that it would never be possible to ring during "office hours"; the site is heavily built up—and even then, extra sound-proofing was desirable.

The bells were rung on several occasions during 1967 and 1968, each of about half-an-hour's duration; several ringers rang there and appreciated the bells, but ringing was so limited, both in frequency and duration, that no public advertisement was given. The largest gathering was at the ULSCR 1967 agm, when permission was given only at the last minute, and news of the ringing was available only two hours beforehand. The writer had three applications for visiting bands, all of which were passed on from the vicar to the churchwardens mentioned before, and were turned down without reason. After ringing on St. Dunstan's day, 1968, the churchwarden again approached the vicar to have ringing stopped. This time it was stopped, almost for good.

STEERING COMMITTEE FORMED

Early in 1970, a steering committee was formed, for the building of a new vicarage in the north-west corner of the ruins, including the three lower stages of the tower, with a chapel in its ground floor. A decision to sell the bells was made in February, but the writer was not approached until June, and then only "regretfully to inform you that the disposal of the bells will be necessary". The writer at once approached the vicar, and in fairness to the latter it must be said that he tried unsuccessfully to sell the bells as a ringing peal to the USA, having many contacts there. The Whitechapel Foundry was approached for a valuation, but it was considered too high by the American customers at a time of financial stringency. The foundry had to decline to store

them for more than two months owing to rebuilding work there. Messrs. Taylor were also approached and offered to take the bells and frame for £2,500.

"Panic stations" then ceased, for it was thought by all concerned (including Taylor's) that the bells would be intact and available for sale elsewhere. D-day was on November 29th, 1970, and on the evening of 28th permission was granted for a short ring in order for the bells to be recorded. They were never rung again.

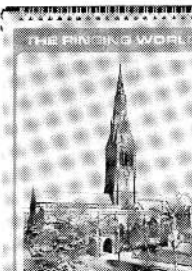
Fate had two more twists to play. The first was in the form of a vehicle which bumped into Taylor's truck and knocked the fifth bell off it; the headstock snapped and the bell cracked. Then the tenor was found to be too large to go through the elegant moulded ceiling of the ground floor, which had been built subsequent to the bells' installation and without regard to their size. The hole was circular, and the tenor would not even go through sideways. It was broken up in the tower.

It is easy, as Mr. Dove has observed so rightly, to be wise after the event, and the total lack of communication between architect and those who had cast and hung so splendid a ring of bells must ever remain as a warning to those contemplating similar exercises. Bell founders do know their job, as most of England's other bells testify; and it is sad that professional expertise and amateur enthusiasm were so totally annulled by official disregard and ecclesiastical disinterest.

In 1972, the bells (or what is left of them) were shipped to a private winery in Stirling, California, there to be hung in three towers as a chime. The record of them as they now exist (less the tenor and plus a treble with two recast) is given below. The best tribute to them and their predecessors of 1700 must be in the memory of those who rang them and heard them, and who agreed that, in every respect, they were "The Last Word".

The Bells at Stirling Winery, California, USA

Treble	27½in.	4-3-14	
Cast from the metal of St. Dunstan's former tenor. 1972			
Second	28½in.	5-1-10	E
St. Dunstan's treble, recast a semitone sharp. 1972			
Third	30in.	5-3-1	D
St. Dunstan's second. 1951			
Fourth	31½in.	6-2-11	C
St. Dunstan's third. 1951			
Fifth	34in.	7-2-17	B-flat
St. Dunstan's fourth. 1951			
Sixth	36in.	8-2-17	A
St. Dunstan's broken fifth, recast a semitone sharp. 1972			
Seventh	39in.	11-0-13	G
St. Dunstan's sixth. 1951			
Tenor	43in.	14-1-17	F
St. Dunstan's seventh. 1951			



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