

THE LOST BELLS OF LONDON (2) ST. SEPULCHRE'S, HOLBORN

By W. T. COOK

Unlike so many churches of the City of London, St. Sepulchre's is of interest to the student of church architecture in that, in the first place, it was not totally destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, but only badly damaged, and subsequently restored, so that it preserves its mediæval exterior; and in the second place, it survived almost untouched the bombing of the Second World War. To ringers, its chief interest lies in the fact that some of the earliest change-ringing of which we have any record was performed there; while to the sensation-seeker, there is the gruesome association of "The Bells of Old Bailey" with the public executions that used to take place outside Newgate prison, just opposite.

There was probably a church on this site, just outside Newgate on the line of the Roman road leading to Bath, in Saxon times, dedicated to St. Edmund. Certainly a church was built there (or perhaps rebuilt) in 1178. This was at the time of the Crusades, and the church was dedicated to St. Sepulchre as a result. The church was considerably enlarged in 1450, and the present exterior and tower, though much restored, are basically of this period. One of the church's most interesting features is the three-storey south porch, which was built by Sir John Popham in about 1458. In spite of restoration work, the Perpendicular style tower with its tall pinnacles seems to breathe the spirit of mediæval London.

The first notice I have of any bells (though doubtless the tower contained bells previous to this) dates from the time of the Suppression of the Monasteries, when the nearby Priory of St. Bartholomew was suppressed, its central tower pulled down, and the six bells "in a tune" (according to Stow), the largest of which was reputed to weigh 36 cwt., sold to St. Sepulchre's. (See "R.W." No. 3187, p. 414.) The inventory of Edward VIth (1550) shows for St. Sepulchre's, "Item one greate bell callyd Baynard Castell that servythe the clocke and syxe other belles in one ryng and one santes bell." There is no record of who cast these bells, or when.

Of these bells, J. A. Trollope wrote ("R.W." Sep. 15th, 1939), "These six were a heavy ring, and it was on them that we have the first recorded ringing with the names of the performers. On the 28th November, 1631, a band consisting of men, all of whom had held the office of General in the Society of Cheapside Schollers, rang the bells. The treble was rung single-handed, two men were put to each of the second and third, four to each of the fourth and fifth, and five to the tenor. What was rung is not stated, but almost certainly it was raising, round-ringing and ceasing in peal." Unfortunately, Trollope does not give the names of the band, and I have not as yet studied the records of the Society of Cheapside Schollers. His conjecture as to the nature of the ringing seems highly probable, from what we know of the Ringing Exercise at that period.

It was probably the tenor of this ring of six that was originally used for tolling at the time of executions of prisoners in Newgate. In 1605, Robert Dowe "gave £50 for ringing the greatest bell in the church on the day the condemned prisoners are executed, and for other services for ever concerning such condemned prisoners." This custom was certainly still observed in 1897 (see "Bell News", Jan. 23rd, 1897). In St. Sepulchre's is also preserved a handbell known as the "execution bell", which was perhaps part of Robert Dowe's bequest, and which used to be rung by the watchman outside the condemned cell during the night before the execution, the watchman at the same time reciting a doggerel rhyme.

As already mentioned, St. Sepulchre's was badly damaged, though not totally destroyed, by the Fire of 1666. Almost inevitably, it seems, Sir Christopher Wren had charge of the restoration work. The result is a somewhat curious, though not unpleasing, compromise—a Wren interior in the Classical style, with a Perpendicular exterior. Incidentally, the church is apparently the largest in the City of London, 150 feet long by 62 feet wide.

The extent to which the parishioners in those days valued their bells is shown by the very prompt action, as recorded in the Church accounts, which was taken to restore St. Sepulchre's bells after the Fire, during which some of the bells had been melted. On October 30th, 1666, a bare six weeks after the fire, the Vestry placed an order with Edward Webster, founder, of Whitecross Street (whose name is not otherwise known in connection with bell-founding) to "clear and cleanse the bell metal melted by the fire"; and, this order apparently not having been carried out, on December 13th, 1666, they ordered the bell metal to be delivered to John Hodson, the Bishopsgate founder, for him to cast "three sound and tunable bells". These three were apparently added to the three which had survived the fire, to make a ring of six. Next February, in spite of the expense of repairing the church, the order was placed for the re-roofing and repair of the tower, "and for the making of floors, providing of wheels, and other necessities for the re-hanging of the bells."

Over the following 70 years, the church had to spend a considerable amount on its bells. John Darbie of Ipswich was called in in 1671; he seems from the accounts to have recast some of the bells and augmented them to eight. In 1675 he cast two more bells to make one of the first ever rings of ten, and almost certainly the first on which Caters was practised; but the bells gave constant trouble, James Bartlett recast one of the bells in about 1685; and it seems that shortly afterwards the bells were requiring so much attention that a bellhanger was appointed at a yearly salary! (This may have been, however, what we would nowadays call a steeple-keeper.) The tenor was cracked and recast in 1695. Four years later the ninth was cracked and had to be recast. The College Youths, who were at that time practising frequently at St. Sepulchre's, bore the cost themselves, and in 1701 they contributed towards the cost of recasting the second. In 1712 the seventh

was recast and the whole ring overhauled and rehung. Finally all ten bells were recast by Samuel Knight in 1739, and it is basically this peal which still hangs in the tower. Since then, the treble has been recast in 1807, the sixth in 1804, and the seventh and tenor (weighing 31 cwt. 14 lb.) in 1830, all at the Whitechapel Foundry. The bells were rehung by Mears and Stainbank in 1904. One writer who knew these bells gave it as his opinion that they were "one of the best (rings) in the old style".

(To be continued.)

THE OLD, OLD QUERY

In the Northampton Branch (Peterborough Guild) December Newsletter under the heading "Thought for Today" was the following comment from "Still Learning":—

I wonder why it is that some of our members seem so unwilling to help learners? They appear to adopt the attitude that it is not their problem if people wish to learn to ring, and as long as they keep out of the way at branch meetings, and provided they do not take up too much time on practice night, then they can be tolerated.

Of course, these are only the thoughts of a small minority, but what an impression this minority must create in the minds of those who are struggling to understand the technicalities of the art.

Do these self-centred people really believe that the art can survive if everyone is to adopt this attitude? Bellringing, our Branch and even the Guild relies on a continuous flow of learners. One should cast one's mind back and remember that we all had to be taught, indeed surely we are all still learning. No one will ever "know it all" (even if he thinks he does).

Please, all you experienced ringers, be a little more tolerant and sociable towards those who have less knowledge.

50 YEARS AGO

On Sunday, December 10, 1922, Wilfred Williams rang his first peal, Grandsire Doubles, at Llangatlock. On Sunday, December 10, 1972, he returned to ring the same bell, but this time to London Major, having advanced somewhat in the intervening 50 years.

There was scarcely a "welcome in the hillside" on the part of the weather for the return of the native; it poured with rain all afternoon and evening, and during the peal a thunderstorm passed overhead, threatening to extinguish the light. This coincided quite fortuitously with the arrival of Don Clift!

However, all ended well, and first to congratulate Wilfred was Mr. Sidney D. Edwards, who conducted that first peal. He recalled how they were all inexperienced at the time, and he himself had used 42 silver threepenny-bits to ensure the right number of extents! R. W. P.

Ringers in East Sussex will learn with interest that the Rev. S. Bardell is leaving Maresfield in January after 14 years. It is to be hoped that this nice octave will now be available to visitors. They are a Rud-hall six, with two trebles added.—C. A. B.