

THE LOST BELLS OF LONDON (6)

ST. DUNSTAN-IN-THE-EAST

By W. T. COOK

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Of the early history of this church I have no record, beyond that it was enlarged in 1382, and was 'spacious and well endowed'. In Edward VI's time there were 'in the Steaple v greate bells and a saunce bell and also a clock bell'. The church was almost entirely rebuilt in 1633, but was largely destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666.

Sir Christopher Wren was, of course, called in to restore the church; he decided that the walls of the body of the old church were in good enough condition, and so the main part of the church was repaired in 1671; but the old tower, which had been topped with a tall lead-covered spire, was pulled down, and replaced in 1698-99 with the present masterpiece of Wren's creative genius. The 49-foot spire of stone which surmounts the tower stands on four flying-buttress type arches, one rising from behind each pinnacle of the tower. This design may have been inspired by the lantern of old Bow Church, but it was so much larger and fragile-looking that it caused considerable forebodings among so-called "experts", which were communicated to Wren. Shortly after the erection of the spire a hurricane swept over the City, causing damage to many steeples. When Sir Christopher Wren was told of this, he showed his faith in his work by replying, "Dear me, but not St. Dunstan's, I'm quite sure!"

A ring of eight bells, tenor 24 cwt., was cast for St. Dunstan's in the East by Abraham Rudhall in 1702. A newspaper called "The Post Boy" has the following paragraph concerning this event in its issue for July 25th, 1702: 'Whereas, Mr. Abraham Rudhall, of the city of Gloucester, bell founder, was lately employed to cast 8 bells for Parish Church 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 has made them the best peal of bells in all England.'

It is probable that the ringers who first practised on these bells were the ones who, on May 1st, 1713, formed themselves into the Society of Union Scholars. There is no direct evidence for this, but it is suggested by the fact that it was the Union Scholars who rang the first peal on the bells. This was a peal of Grandsire Triples with third's and fifth's place bobs, and was known as "Hick Triples", perhaps because "Hick" was called when a fifth's place bob was to be made. It was rung on September 12th, 1718, and was only the second definitely known to have been rung in London. It was probably conducted by Robert Baldwin. On December 27th, 1718, the same Society rang on these bells a peal of 5120 Union Bob, which is now known as Oxford Treble Bob. This was the first peal of Treble Bob ever rung.

It would appear that, shortly after these two peals were rung, several of the members

left the Union Scholars and joined the London Scholars. The Union Scholars rang no more peals at St. Dunstan's in the East, the next peal there of which we have record being one of Grandsire Triples by the Eastern Scholars in 1734. Later in the same year the Eastern Scholars rang a peal there of Bob Major. Only two other peals are known to have been rung there in the 18th century—Bob Major by the Cumberland Youths in 1752, and Oxford Treble Bob by the College Youths in 1770. It appears that the treble was recast by Richard Phelps in 1718 and the second by Thomas Lester in 1746.

In 1817 it was discovered that the old walls of the body of the church had become unsafe. They were taken down, and the church was rebuilt except for the tower, between 1817 and 1821. The architect was David Laing, who also designed the nearby Customs House. The church was a fine example of early "Gothic Revival". At the same time (1817) the bells were restored, and the first peal after their restoration was one of Grandsire Triples, rung by the Junior Cumberland Society.

Apart from a peal of Treble Bob by the Cumberlands in 1819 and one of Bob Major by the Junior Cumberlands in 1821, I have absolutely no further information about these bells up to the time of their destruction when the church was burnt out in an air-raid in 1941, other than a curious mention in the "Daily Chronicle" of September 2nd, 1901: 'The church of St. Dunstan in the East . . . possesses a bellringer who is able to ring eight bells without assistance and at one time. As the bells range in weight from 6½ cwt. to 24 cwt., it will be seen that Mr. Henry Dix, the bellringer in question, is qualifying himself to be called the Hercules of campanologists. Seated on a bench, Mr. Dix places one bell rope under each foot, one over each arm, one round his neck, one in his mouth, and the remaining two in his hands. Then follows a strange contrast. The man writhes in vast contortions; ropes shake and mix; but away over the City and river float the notes of a soothing hymn.'

As just mentioned, the church was bombed in 1941, only the tower and outer walls remaining. Under the original scheme for reorganizing the City churches, St. Dunstan's was due to be rebuilt. The tower was repaired, and out of money received from the War Damage Commission, a ring of eight bells was provided and hung in the tower. The bells were a fine ring of eight by Taylors, and the tenor weighed about a ton. However, it was originally decreed that the bells should not be rung, as the tower without the support of the rest of the church was thought to be unsafe. Subsequently, it was decided not to rebuild the church, but to leave it as a ruin. The former interior has been laid out as a garden. The new bells, which had in fact been rung occasionally, were taken out and sold.

Bath and Wells Diocesan Association.

PRACTICE MEETING

Saturday, February 10, was the date for the February evening practice meeting of the Ilchester Branch at the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist, Yeovil.

There was little room to spare in the spacious ringing chamber where ringers and friends were welcomed by the tower master, Mr. Tom J. Setter.

A good number of towers was represented with visitors from as far afield as Exeter and Porlock and ringers in every stage were catered for from rounds to Grandsire Caters and Plain Bob Royal on this good-going musical ten (tenor 40½ cwt.) under the direction of the branch ringing master, Mr. Gordon Rendell, and his assistant, Mr. Charles Gratton.

The branch is grateful to the vicar (the Rev. H. A. Andrewes Uthwatt) and the tower master (Mr. T. J. Setter) together with the Yeovil ringers, for their courtesy and kindness in granting permission to use the tower and bells. M. M. L.

East Grinstead and District Guild.

MEETING AT REDHILL

On Saturday, February 10, the Guild met at the recently rehung eight at Redhill, where our host, Mr. West, was waiting to greet us. As a result of the lowering of the bells and retuning, Redhill can now boast a really delightful ring.

After afternoon ringing and a shortened Evensong, tea was taken at the home of Mr. West, where a magnificent spread was already prepared for us. The business meeting was held in the church. There were six apologies for absence and three new members were elected. Arrangements for the A.G.M. were finalised. Members were informed that the April meeting would be at Rotherfield, and no meeting will be held in May. Discussion on the June meeting was postponed until the A.G.M. (Coleman's Hatch, March 10). (After votes of thanks, ringing continued until 8.30.)

Bedfordshire Association.

BIGGLESWADE WIN CONTEST

At the start of the February meeting of the Biggleswade District held at St. Peter's, Arlesey (6) the home band and Biggleswade ringers took part in the first round of the district striking competition knock-out contest, the winners being Biggleswade.

After the tea, held in St. Peter's Hall, the district chairman (Mr. S. H. Ashton) asked members to stand in silence in memory of Mr. A. Murphy of Maulden. The district's good wishes for a speedy recovery were sent to Mr. C. W. Denyer, and visitors were welcomed from as far away as Christchurch, New Zealand. Five new members were elected to the district.

Ringing continued in the evening at All Saints', Clifton (8), and the ringing master (Mr. C. D. Mann) welcomed more visitors to the tower from Buckinghamshire, Surrey and the Bedford District. M. L. M.