

## Gt. Brickhill Bell Project

Great Brickhill's bell rehang project began in October 2009 after the need was recognised more than twenty years earlier. Hugh Butler, the tower captain at that time, first obtained estimates for the job in 1991, but did not receive support, and the opportunity for a Millennium Bell Fund grant was missed. However, in 1999, the new "Project St. Mary's 2000" plan and fund raising for the church restoration was launched, and the church bell project was included in the plan after cracks appeared in the apex of the chancel cross arch. The cracks were deemed to have originated from movement caused by the instability of the flimsy wooden bell frame and its supporting timbers, and we were required to stop ringing the Tenor and No.5 bells. Since then, we have been restricted to ringing Minimus (4 bells) and Singles (3 bells) on the light four bells, with the last ring of all six being in 2000, half-muffled for the funeral of Val Hartwell, one of our ringers and a Parish Councillor who did much for the benefit of the Parish.



**History:** Great Brickhill bell tower was built in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, and bells have probably been rung there for more than 700 years. The earliest documentation of the bells was in 1637, the same year as the foundation in London of the Ancient Society of College Youths, when there were five bells in the tower, and sill timbers of that old bell frame remained supporting the later frame, although the bells have been recast several times. Three of four lower primary supporting timbers probably date back to the construction of the tower in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

The six existing bells were cast in 1789 by William and Thomas Mears at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, but the No. 2 bell was recast in 1840, probably because it sustained damage. A clue to the reason for the damage is in A.H.Cocks book of 1897, "Church Bells of Buckinghamshire", in which he wrote, "All the stays are *double*, made of two pieces of wood, one on each side of the stock, crooked, so as to meet, and form one perfectly invulnerable stay, capable of allowing the canons of the bell to break, without themselves receiving the slightest injury!". It may be that the canons were broken in that way in 1840, necessitating the recast.

Until the bells were sent to Appleton by Whites on 30<sup>th</sup> October, the weights of the bells were only estimated, but after removal of the headstocks, the bells have been weighed as:

Tenor	14cwt - 1qtr - 20lb
5 <sup>th</sup>	10cwt - 1qtr - 14lb
4 <sup>th</sup>	8cwt - 2qtr - 02lb
3 <sup>rd</sup>	7cwt - 2qtr - 16lb
2 <sup>nd</sup>	5cwt - 2qtr - 10lb
Treble	5cwt - 2qtr - 10lb

There is also the smaller Sanctus bell, the predecessor of which was probably destroyed during Cromwell's Commonwealth when puritans believed that service bells were implements of Popery, and Parliamentary troops were garrisoned in the village. The Sanctus bell, which is the earliest known bell cast by George Chandler of Drayton Parslow, was replaced in 1681 after the restoration of the monarchy, and will be rehung on the bell frame above the main bells.

The bell frame and its supports were constructed in three layers:

- The main frame holding the bells was the top layer constructed in 1789, but the timbers were of such flimsy dimensions that in 1896 they had to be braced with steel brackets and tie rods by Mears and Stainbank of Whitechapel. Under instruction of the Revd. M. Nepean, the bells received new headstocks and fittings, and the Whitechapel Sales Day Book shows a charge of £101-15s-0p for the work.
- That frame stood on the bottom sills of the old five bell frame dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Century and recorded in 1637, but those timbers were very rotten and worm eaten, and can no longer support the frame, which rocks on its foundations when the bells are rung. That movement stresses the tower walls, and may have contributed to the cracks, although they may have been caused by old subsidence.



The 1789 frame sat on sills of the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Century five-bell frame, supported by older primary timbers.

- The old sills stood on five parallel primary support timbers which took the full weight of the bells, frame and other timbers. The ends of those timbers were rotted and shored up in the 1920's, but the resultant dislocation probably initiated the instability of the frame and the cracks in the tower walls. English Heritage requires that three of those timbers are to be preserved, and they may have to be hung in the Tower under the new ringing room ceiling after the new bell frame has been installed.

Records show that in the Parish, "A piece of land 1 acre 3 poles called the Bell Rope Piece lets for £2/10 per annum which sum is applied in buying bell ropes for the church and paying the ringers." It is not known when ownership was transferred, but that land is now farmed by Michael Turner, whose tractor has loaded the bells for transporting to Appleton.



Whites bell hanger lowering through the new trapdoor



The tenor's a tight fit going out.

**The Project**, which includes augmentation to eight bells, repairing the Tower walls and complete refurbishment of the ringing room with hardwood benches and panelling, was restarted in 2004. The fund raising target of £130,000 plus the cost of tower wall repairs was achieved early this year after, in addition to Project St. Mary 2000 fund raising, the old redundant Baptist Chapel site in the village was sold, managed by the Parish Council, which awarded a community grant of £58,000 for the village bell project from some of the proceeds. A Landfill Tax grant of £20,000 has been awarded by WREN through Bucks Historic Churches Trust, and other grants are from the Oxford Bell Fund, the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers' Restoration Fund, the Sharpe Trust and Allchurches Trust, the remainder being raised by the Church and parishioners. Our thanks go to the funds and all those benefactors and parishioners who have contributed and worked on fundraising events to finance the project.

The project is being directed by architects Caroe & Partners, and is being undertaken by bell hangers and builders, Whites of Appleton, whose expertise has resulted in the refurbishment of many rings of bells in England, including St. Paul's Cathedral. The first step was to cut a trapdoor in the ringing room floor and remove the ceiling to lower the bells. The old redundant clock case was removed to make room for eight ropes. During week ending 30<sup>th</sup> October, the bells and all the wooden frames and supports were removed by Whites of Appleton. The frame supports will be replaced by an interlocked grillage of steel girders anchored into the walls to brace the tower, and a new eight-bell cast iron bell frame will be constructed.



A relieved bell tower captain, David Middleton, seeing his charges depart.

On 30<sup>th</sup> October, two new small bells were cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, where our existing six bells were cast, bringing our ring of bells to eight, and those will be tuned at the foundry with our six larger bells, where they were cast. The Treble and Sanctus bells have hair-line cracks, which are to be welded by Soundweld of Suffolk. The eight bells will be returned to Appleton, where the new supporting grillage of interlocking steel girders and the new cast iron bell frame is being constructed by Whites of Appleton who will provide new fittings and fit the bells into the new bell frame assembly for testing.



Villagers, ringers and bell hangers with bells ready to go.



Whitechapel casting the new No.2 bell.

After the Tower walls have been repaired, the steel girder grillage will be anchored into the walls, bracing and strengthening the tower, and the bells will be rehung in the new frame ready for ringing. The ringing room is to be refurbished, and the project is scheduled to be completed in April/May 2010 to create a very fine 14cwt ring of eight bells for the Parish, within the North Buckinghamshire Branch of the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers.



The Gt. Brickhill bell ringers at the Millennium: Fiona Middleton, Jeremy Hopkinson, Brian Simpson, Michael Clements, John Griffiths, Anthony Middleton, Hugh Butler (Bell Captain), Jonathan Pritchard, Robin Dawson, Butch Baker, Janet Shepherd, and David Middleton. Missing are Val Hartwell and Andrew Howell.



The Great Brickhill band of bell ringers on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2009 for the last ring before the bells and tower are refurbished. Diane Richardson, Andrew Howell, Janet Oakes, David Middleton (Bell Captain), Caroline Whitelegge and Butch Baker.