

1956 Golden Jubilee of the 2006 Eight Bells at St Giles', West Bridgford



ST GILES' ring of eight bells was dedicated on Thursday, 22nd March 1956 in a service conducted by the Rector, Canon R. F. Wilkinson. In the picture, the Rector is shown holding one of the red, white and blue sallies and facing Bishop Weller who dedicated the bells.

Jack Weller had an interesting life, earning several headlines in the national newspapers. At this time, he was Rector

of Holme Pierrepont and in his second retirement. After retiring as Bishop of the Falkland Islands in 1946 at the age of 65, he had then served for a number of years as Assistant Bishop of Southwell. He retired, for the third time, in 1958 and moved to Newland, near Malvern, where he was then persuaded to become Assistant Bishop of Worcester.

Church and Tower

ALTHOUGH we are celebrating just fifty years of the present ring of eight bells, there have been bells at St Giles' for several centuries.

The first recorded Rector of St Giles', Luke de Crophill, was instituted on 13th October 1239 and parts of the present church building can be traced to around that time. The tower, in its present form, was not built until the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, it has been suggested that, before that, there was either a small tower built in the Early English style or, perhaps, a gable-bell to remind the faithful in their homes or at work in the fields that the mass was being celebrated at the altar.

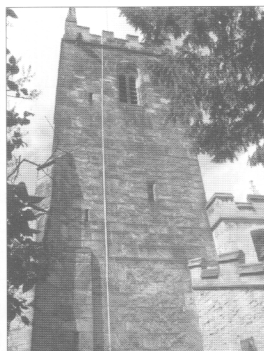
In 1553 the Commissioners of Church Goods reported that there were 'three bells of one accorde, hanging in ye steeple of ye same church.' The bells were rung from the ground floor of the tower and the doorway on the south side of the tower, now

blocked up, was thought to have been built as an entrance for the bellringers.

A gallery once filled up the tower arch — perhaps the singing loft referred to in the church accounts and installed in 1807 — but was removed in the church restoration undertaken in 1871. The scars can still be seen in the ringing chamber today.

In 1844, the church was described as 'a fine ancient edifice with tower and pinnacles which appears to great advantage peeping above the trees which surround it.' This was at a time when West Bridgford was just a small village. Nowadays, visiting ringers would be ill advised to try to find the church by looking out for the tower amidst the surrounding buildings.

In 1904, the upper part of the tower was restored. William Woodsend, builder, was contracted for work 'including removal and refixing of upper part of tower to level of springing line of windows.'



The Ancient Bells

THE THREE BELLS hanging at St Giles' in 1553 were all made locally.

The treble, or lightest bell, weighed $3\frac{3}{4}$ cwt and was the work of John Woolley of Nottingham, made some time between 1524 and 1536. It is thought to have served as the Angelus bell, used in medieval times as a daily call to prayer at sunrise and sunset. It was inscribed *Ave Maria*: this inscription has been preserved and can be seen by the south door of the church.

The other two bells came from the founder of Richard Mellers, one time mayor of Nottingham. One of these bells, cast around 1500 and weighing $5\frac{1}{2}$ cwt has been preserved inside the church. It bears the inscription *Celorum Christe placeat tibi rex sonus iste* (May this sound please Thee, O Christ, King of Heaven).

The book of the churchwardens' accounts from 1759 onwards shows that the three bells were being rung regularly during the second half of the eighteenth century. New bell ropes were a common feature of the accounts, averaging out at about one new rope each year. In 1762, a rope for 'the Great Bell' cost 1s 7d. Similarly, oil for the bells at 6d was a common purchase.

The accounts also record the maintenance and repair work carried out. At the end of 1773, 2s was paid 'to William

Savage for mending the bell wheel' and, shortly afterwards, 1s was paid 'for putting in the bell clapper.' Then, in 1786, John Plowright was paid 6d for 'mending the bell'.

The belfry also received attention. In 1778, 8d was paid for mending the belfry door and chamber floor. Then, in 1802, a lock and key were bought for 2s 8d and 6d paid for the lock to be fitted to the belfry door.

For many years, there was a payment of 3s 6d for a year's ringing. This was often augmented by 1s for ringing on Christmas Day, another 1s for New Year, and 1s 6d for 5th November. (The Book of Common Prayer contained a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from the gunpowder plot until it was removed in 1858 and the bells would have been rung to mark the anniversary.)

Presumably one of the ancient bells became cracked or otherwise unusable for in June 1813 the church accounts record that one of the bells was taken down, at a cost of 9s 6d, and for a further 1s transported to Nottingham. Later that year, in

November, 7s was paid for 'the carriage of the new bell from Nottingham &c' and 5s 6d was paid to 'Gill Handley for assisting with the new and old bell'. The new bell itself cost £29 9s 0d. It was cast by J and E Smith of Chesterfield and weighed 5 cwt.



Canon Wilkinson is seen with men from the Loughborough bell foundry when the three bells were removed from the tower.

Knick, Knack and Poof

OVER TIME, the condition of the three bells deteriorated and, in 1933, the parish magazine published an article on weddings, which admitted that 'our ancient bells are so un-joyous in their music that few brides claim the privilege of a wedding peal'. Indeed, it was said that the bells were so out of tune that they were known to residents as 'Knick, Knack and Poof'.

A few years later, in 1937, one might have been forgiven for thinking that matters had improved for the magazine reported 'as part of the Coronation celebrations, it was decided to give West Bridgford a surprise by arranging for a peal of bells to be heard from the church tower. From all that we hear, the surprise was agreeable and pleasant, so much so that we are being urged to make the innovation a permanent thing.' However, the next paragraph told the full story: 'Gramophone records of famous bells are played on an instrument under the belfry inside the church; wires are run through the tower to an amplifier, and thence to loudspeakers affixed to the base of the flagpole on the tower. The reproduction is excellent, and the bells can be heard in all parts of the district.'

It seems that this was seen as the way forward, for the article ended by saying 'it has been suggested that a completely new and modern apparatus be installed as a Coronation gift to the church by the parishioners, and donations (large and small) should be handed in to the clergy or wardens at once. We need the sum of £80 if the peal of bells is to be retained.'

The improvement, however, was short-lived as this reminiscence from the parish magazine in 1954 revealed: 'Some years ago the writer of this article was crossing Trent Bridge on his way to West Bridgford when he heard the sound of bells and at first could not imagine where the sound came from, but then remembered the apparatus in the Church and the loud speakers on our Church Tower and the mystery was solved. They sounded very well at that distance while the whole thing was new, but how different it all became after two or three years' wear. The gramophone, the records and those who heard the distorted noise "groaned and travailed in pain together."'

The recordings were abandoned when the equipment wore out in 1942.

Out With The Old

BY THE 1940s, the bells became derelict with only one of them safe to use – and that only for tolling. The wooden floors had also decayed. Indeed, when the floors were eventually taken down they were found to be utterly decayed with dry rot and beetle: the joiner put his foot through on the first morning.

The bells may well have continued in this condition for many years, if Canon Wilkinson had not been appointed Rector in 1940. Among his many other interests, he had long been a keen bellringer, so it was perhaps natural that he should make an effort to get St Giles' bells ringing again and, if possible, increase the number of bells.

Wartime and other pressing needs caused some delay but, eventually, an open public meeting to discuss the bells was held on Monday, 14th June 1954.

The meeting was told that an anonymous donor had promised £500, which others had increased to £700. A Trust Fund for the restoration of Ancient Bells had agreed to provide another £700. Following other promises, that just left another £300 to be found for repairs to the floors and steps and alterations in the tower.

A Gift Day was held and a was raised.

further £249 was raised. A faculty for the work was granted, and the go-ahead given.



Senior Curate, Rev W R Johnson, greets the bells' arrival



The Ringing Rector

CANON REGINALD FELIX WILKINSON came to St Giles' in 1940, and retired in 1961 because of ill-health. It was said that one of his greatest joys was putting the peal into St Giles'. Fittingly, the bells gave a last, muffled salute at his funeral on 13th April 1963. At that service, the Bishop spoke thus:

'There have been few priests held in greater honour and affection throughout all Nottinghamshire than Reginald Wilkinson. He was born and brought up in East Retford, the son of a country parsonage, I am glad to recall, and apart from one short curacy in

Derby he spent his whole life and ministry in Nottinghamshire. He belonged to us. In a special sense he belonged to you here at St Giles', and it was here that his greatest work was done. His innate wisdom, kindness and humility, and delightful companionship, and his way of identifying himself with the community, endeared him to West Bridgford. But his influence reached far more widely than that – his scholarly knowledge of Church architecture, archaeology and campanology – you have heard quite a lot from this pulpit.'

Canon Wilkinson is shown holding the rope of the second bell in the new ring of eight

The New Bells

AS A FIRST STEP to creating a ring of eight bells, St Giles' bought the five bells from Perlethorpe Church in Thoresby Park, where they were no longer needed. Two of these were hung as the third and fourth bells of the eight. The other three, together with two of the original three bells from St Giles' were melted down by the bellfounders, John Taylor and Co of Loughborough and used to cast six new bells.

The tower is just ten feet square so, to fit the bells in, they are hung with one layer of four bells above another. Even so, the bells had to be quite small, with the largest, the tenor bell, weighing only 9½ cwt and the smallest just 3 cwt.

The new bells are all inscribed 'John Taylor & Co, Founders, Loughborough 1955'. Other inscriptions are:

1. 'To the Glory of God, in memory of George and Sarah Crampton, the gift of their daughter, Dorothy Rosa.'
2. 'To the Glory of God in Grateful memory of Grace Cobbin, the gift of her children Alec and Dora.'
5. 'To the Glory of God in memory of William Crampton, the gift of his wife, Ethel.'
6. 'Canon R F Wilkinson MA FSA, Rector.'
- 'To the Glory of God in memory of a beloved wife, Grace Cobbin, the gift of Henry Robert Cobbin.'
8. 'In thanksgiving, the gift of Beatrice Eccleshall.'
- 'To the Glory of God, part of the cost of this peal of bells was given by the Barron Bell Trust. Emma Barron, Founder, H W Eldred, K C Walrond, E R Pennell, Trustees.'

The First Tower Captain

NO ACCOUNT of the early days of ringing on the eight bells at St Giles' would be complete without mention of Wilf Ratcliffe. The parish magazine printed this tribute to him in 1972 under the heading 'Fifty years a bellringer'.

'We offer our congratulations to Mr Wilfred Ratcliffe, the tower captain at St Giles', who has recently completed fifty years as a bellringer. He first learnt to ring as a young man at St Mary's, Greasley, and for many years walked several times a week the one and a half miles across the fields from his home in Giltbrook, to ring there. It was not always just a pleasant country stroll, since the path lay across a field where a bull was often kept and it was frequently Wilf's task to shepherd Sunday School children safely across.

In 1947 he and his sisters came to live in West Bridgford, but he still continued ringing at Greasley for a year or so until he was sure that the local band was in capable hands. Then for a time he helped out at Lenton, but when the eight bells were installed in St Giles' in 1955 he became a founder member of

our own band and he has been its most stalwart member ever since.

Being an experienced ringer, he was soon asked to take on responsibilities. In particular the responsibility of teaching people to handle a bell fell largely on his shoulders, and according to his own records he has since then taught well over a hundred people. Another of his jobs has been to look after the bells and their fittings, but whilst most tower keepers would have been content to do just that, Wilf has devoted his care and attention to the whole tower from the foot of the stairs to the top of the flag pole, and our carpeted stairs and ringers' gallery are the envy of many other towers in the district.

Perhaps Wilf's greatest contribution, however, is the example he has set over many years of coming out faithfully and cheerfully, Sunday by Sunday and week by week, to carry out his duties both as a ringer and as a loyal member of the Church.'



THE BELLRINGERS marked Wilf's fifty years as a bellringer with a surprise tea, attended by over fifty people.

The photograph shows some of those who attended. Wilf Ratcliffe is standing left of centre with his youngest pupil at the time, Helen Rising, in front of him. The Rector, Canon Worwood is on the far right. The bellringers' minute book

recorded: 'Our thanks go to Patrick Beacroft who quietly organised the celebration. Wilf imagined he was opening the tower to a band of visitors. By a careful piece of work by his sisters, Wilf arrived in his best suit. This was the only way to ensure that such a modest servant of the tower would not get the chance to refuse the tribute we wished to give him.'

The Next Fifty Years

OVER THE LAST FIFTY YEARS, as at most towers, there have been times when the band of ringers has been very strong and active and other times when it has been less so.

At present, we are pleased to report that the band is benefiting from an influx of experienced ringers, who are aiding the development of the others. There

are few Sundays or practice nights when the full eight bells cannot be heard and there is also a steady stream of learners of all ages, and more are always welcome.

The bells continue to be in good condition and, not long ago, a new carpet was fitted in the ringing chamber. So we look forward with optimism to the next fifty years of ringing at St Giles'.

