

# Wolsey's Bell: ringing at Sherborne in the nineteenth century

by John Eisel

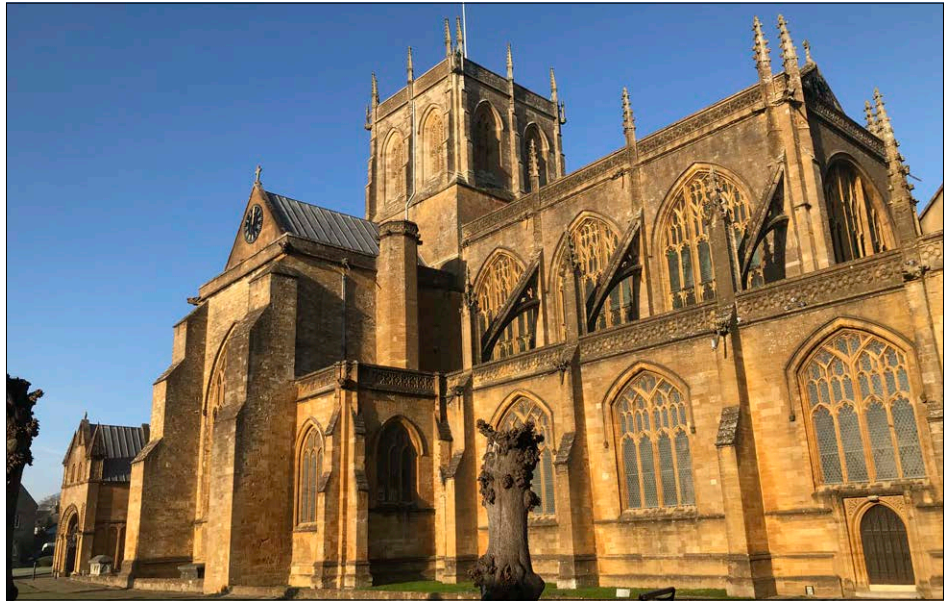
## Part 1

### Introduction

My work on extracting newspaper reports on bells and change ringing, occupying much of my spare time over the last ten years or more, can often add more detail to stories that have already been told, and make those stories worth revisiting. Some recent work on another subject has caused me to collate all the information I have got on the bells at Sherborne Abbey, the heaviest ring of eight bells in the world, and this adds interesting detail to the story. This article concentrates on the history in the nineteenth century, but I have included an introduction, which only skips over the complicated and unresolved history of the ring in the sixteenth century! Here I should mention that many of the newspaper extracts come from the *Western Flying Post; or, Sherborne and Yeovil Mercury*, which had other variations on that title: this was generally known as the *Sherborne Mercury*, and in the interests of conciseness I have used the familiar title.

### Background

In mediaeval times the situation at Sherborne was complicated by the fact that there was a parish church attached to the west end of the Abbey church. This parish church was pulled down after the abbey church was dissolved in 1539, sold, and then bought for the town, and the bells transferred to the central tower of the abbey church. The central tower of the abbey, when rebuilt by the Normans, was almost certainly a lantern tower, but in the fifteenth century the upper stage was rebuilt as a bell-chamber, and the space beneath was ceiled with a stone vault. This was not the most ideal of location for the bells, with the only chamber below the belfry being the unfloored space above the vaulting, so that the bells were rung from the floor of the central tower, and there are still a number of rope-holes visible in the vaulting. Included in this transfer must have been what was initially called the great bell, which is said to have been given to the town of Sherborne by Cardinal Wolsey. In 1513 an English army invaded France, and Tournai was captured on 24 September 1513. The following year Wolsey was made administrator of the diocese, but could never enforce his claim to be bishop of that diocese, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. This background at least makes plausible the statement that he gave bells from Tournai to various places in England, including Sherborne, his connection being that he had been rector of the nearby parish of Limington from 1500 to 1509. Tournai was returned to France in 1518, so the gift, if it happened at all, took place before this, and it has been suggested that it took place about 1515. It was later said that this was the smallest of five bells from Tournai that Wolsey donated to other places, including the cathedrals of



*Sherborne Abbey in the winter sunshine (Photo Ed J Bucknall)*

York, Oxford, Lincoln, and Exeter, and that each was called 'Tom' after the donor: this is demonstrably incorrect (*Dorset County Chronicle*, 8 February 1866). Other accounts state that it was the smallest of seven bells.

There were six bells at Sherborne by 1542, for in that year 1s. 2d. was paid for trussing the sixth bell. This sixth (great) bell was recast in 1557, and there is a suggestion that it was recast again in 1601-2, although the balance of probability is that the entry in the accounts refers to the fourth bell. No record of the inscriptions of these earlier versions of the bell is known to have survived, and the first known inscription, and the first certain mention of Wolsey in connection with the great bell, comes in 1670, when the bell was recast on 20 October in that year by Thomas Purdew of Closworth, a date recorded in his inscription, the first part of which was (and is): 'BY WOLSEYS GIFT I MEASURE TIME FOR ALL'

This bell is said to have weighed more than three tons, although, as will be seen, this was a gross over-estimate.

### The Eighteenth Century

In 1763 the bells were rehung, the payment being recorded in the parish accounts for 1762-3: 'By cash paid Mr. Belby and Mr. Evans for new hanging the six bells and for keeping them in repair for Two years being bound by Bond to perform the same £50.'

Mr. 'Belby' would almost certainly have been Thomas Bilbie of Chewstoke, of the famous family of bellfounders and clockmakers, and Mr. Evans came from Wells, as the following report from the *Sherborne Mercury* of 4 April 1763 shows:

'Mr. GEORGE EVANS, of the City of Wells, Bell-Hanger, has completed new hanging of the Bells here, to the Satisfaction of the Town, so as to

be rung with half the Men as usual. This Peal is thought to be one of the heaviest in England, the Tenor being 65 Hundred. The said George Evans will wait upon any Parish who may have Occasion to have their Bells new hung.'

Unfortunately, the boasting about the better 'go' of the bells does not specify exactly how many men would then be needed, but we can be sure that it was a considerable number, as the following entry made by John Alfred Parnell in his MS on 10 February 1815 shows:

'The Heaviest Peal of 6 Bells in England are at the Parish Church at Sherborne, in Dorsetshire, the tenor Bell was measured by Mr. Richard Davis, of Bristol, a Bell Hanger and he pronounces her to be 53 cwt. in the key of B, but the Ringers at Sherborne say she is 60 cwt., and they have 23 men to raise them in the Company.'

### The Nineteenth Century

The above extract from the writings of the Gothic Traveller brings us into the nineteenth century, when the poor state of the central tower of the abbey church was such that the ringing of the bells was curtailed. Indeed, it was probably at about this time, or not long after, that the bells ceased to be rung. In 1828 a report on the state of the tower was commissioned from William Wilkins, a London architect, prompted by a fall of stone from the vaulting of the chancel during divine service. This called attention to the damage to the tower walls, the signs of settling, and bulging in the north wall. He recommended the introduction of cast-iron girders, and it was considered that the ringing of the bells would cause further damage. Another opinion was sought from Edward Thomas Percy, a

local architect, surveyor, and land agent, who proposed that two queen-posted trusses of oak should be installed, to span the tower and support the weight of the bells which would be carried to the outer walls of the tower. He also recommended that the tower be tied together with what was described as an 'iron bandage' such as was recommended by Sir Christopher Wren in 1668 to be used at Salisbury. After much deliberation it was agreed that Percy's scheme should be implemented, and on 8th June 1829 an advert appeared in the *Sherborne Mercury*, asking for tenders for this work to be submitted by 24th June 1829. Plans and specifications were available at the office of JP Melmoth, a local solicitor who, like Percy, was much involved in the affairs of the town. The tender was duly let to local artificers, but it was not until 1830 that a letter in the *Dorset County Chronicle* of 14th October (subsequently copied into the *Sherborne Mercury*) informed the public of the completion of the work, which had been carried out under the supervision of Mr. Percy, beginning:

'SIR, —The inhabitants of Sherborne, and the neighbourhood, and the visitors to our Pack Monday Fair, were much gratified by hearing again our noble and sonorous peal of bells; we confess that to us their music was as cheering and pleasing as the voice of an old and dear friend, who had been long absent, and judging from the cheerful faces and lively expressions of the visitors, they were certainly delighted to hear them again rung on this occasion, their music appeared to enliven the scene, to unite business with pleasure, and render its present dullness more pleasing'

The letter continued by describing the work that had been carried out, and stated that this was paid for with the aid of a loan from Earl Digby, who owned Sherborne Castle, which would be repaid by annual instalments.

It is assumed that after these remedial works the bells continued to be rung. However, it was not too many years before there were more problems with the church in general and the tower in particular. A report on the state of the church was prepared by the well-known London architect RC Carpenter, and was discussed at a public meeting on 13th October 1848. When questioned, Carpenter stated that the tower exhibited various severe fractures, and although he did not think that it was unsafe it was anything but satisfactory, and he recommended that the rebuilding of the tower be contemplated. The state of the piers was such that, while the rebuilding of these should not be the first work to be taken in hand, it must be done at some time, depending on which part of the building work should be commenced on first. On 31st October 1848 there was a meeting of the inhabitants in vestry, to hear Mr Carpenter's report, and make a rate. There was also discussion about the necessity for investigating the state of the tower piers, when it was heard that the cost of inserting supporting timberwork while the investigations were taking place would be as

much as when the piers were being rebuilt, so that there was not really much point in doing this. A vestry meeting was held on 10th April 1849, which received further estimates for the repairs, and this included £820 for the tower piers in the north and south transepts, and the two little arches in the north transept. (*Sherborne Mercury*, 14th April 1849) The restoration of the abbey church began with the nave in the summer of 1849, and was completed in 1851. A meeting in the town hall decided that the church would be opened with two services on 13th August 1851, and the report in the *Sherborne Mercury* of 5th August included the paragraph:

'A conversation then ensued with respect to the services, and it was determined to have two, it being understood that at the morning service, the edifice would be given up to strangers. The Chairman stated as one reason for this that they were £900 in debt, and that they hoped the opening service would reduce it. £800 of this debt had been occasioned by the necessity of having new timbers for the piers, but half that amount would be restored when they could take down and sell the scaffolding. A long discussion [t]hen arose upon the question of appropriating the sittings. Mr. W. Ffooks, in answer to a question, said it would be a considerable time before the transept could be opened, as the tower piers were in so serious a condition, that he fully expected to hear that two of them (the Eastern piers) would have to be rebuilt.'

Work in the transepts and piers was completed by June 1852, when this part of the church was reopened: the two eastern piers were rebuilt, and the other two were partly so. However, the chancel had yet to be restored, and was partitioned off from the rest of the church. Such was the concern of the architect RC Carpenter, that he wrote a letter to the vicar and churchwardens, calling attention to the poor state of the vaulting of the chancel and its aisles, disclaiming any responsibility should any accident occur due to the insecure state of this part of the church, and recommending that on no account should the public be allowed access. It was printed in the *Sherborne Mercury* on 8th June 1852.

There is no information about how this restoration work affected the ringing of the bells. It seems most likely that this was discontinued at the start of the work, possibly before, if the state of the tower was anything to go by, and only recommenced after the piers of the tower had been rebuilt.

Up to this point there has been no mention of how the bells were actually rung, but in the middle of the nineteenth century there is definite information on this. The vicar of Sherborne, the Revd Edward Harston, published a pamphlet on the bells, part of which was copied into the *Dorset County Chronicle* on 8th February 1866: 'The tower contained a peal of six bells up to the year of the restoration of the church, 1858, besides the Sanctus bell, and a strangely discordant fire

bell, shaped somewhat like a pear. The bells were rung from the floor of the church in the rude style known as 'dead rope pulling.' There were no stays, and each rope swayed about with an uncontrolled fall of more than sixty feet. This clumsy method required twenty-one men as ringers and pullers. Cardinal Wolsey's bell employed six, the lady bell five, and the rest of the peal in proportion. The bells rose and fell in quick and almost undistinguishable succession. But being rarely raised above 'stock-level,' it is allowed by all that they gave forth a sweetness of tone that would have altogether charmed the ear, but for the imperfection of the fourth bell (since recast). The labour of ringing was great, and physical strength was more regarded in the choice of a ringer than higher qualifications. The captain of the company was a singer at the Wesleyan meeting-house.'

A revised set of rules for these ringers were drawn up in January 1856, by the vicar, the Revd Edward Harston, and the two churchwardens: the date of the earlier version is not known. Here it should be mentioned that in dead-rope 'pulling' the bell was roped in such a way that the bell could only be pulled at what was effectively the backstroke, and there was no handstroke. Actually, bells can be swung very high using dead-rope ringing, but there is not the control at both strokes that is required for change ringing and it would be easy to overturn bells being rung vigorously in this way. In view of the weight of the bells, and the labour of ringing them, it seems most likely that the wheels at Sherborne were of complete form: for dead rope ringing the rope would be secured to the twin spokes and the hole through the sole of the wheel would be at the twelve o'clock position and not in the position usual today. (We have an example of such a wheel, dating from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, hung on the ringing chamber wall at All Saints', Hereford.) To convert such a wheel to provide a hand stroke, all that is needed is for the rope to be tied to the wheel at the usual position of the garter hole, or a bobbin to be fixed here (or, of course, to make the usual garter hole!). The use of a rope for producing the hand-stroke pull was mentioned by Duckworth in 1668 in *Tintinnaloga*, in the section on bell-hanging. In his description, which relates to a three-quarter wheel where the rope would be tied to the main, almost vertical, spoke, in his advice on adjusting the rope so that there were equal pulls on both strokes, he first advises levelling the bell on its stock by suitable packing, then going on to say:

'but sometimes the fault of the stroke is in the Sally, which you may remedy, by tying the Fillet (or little Cord about the rim of the Wheel, which causeth the dancing of the Rope) nearer, or farther off the main Spoke; nearer makes a short stroke, farther off the Spoke, a long one.'

This a poetic way of describing the handstroke! This gives the origin of the term 'fillet hole' as an alternative to 'garter hole'.

(To be continued)



# Wolsey's Bell: ringing at Sherborne in the nineteenth century

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## Part 2

We left the story of Sherborne bells in 1852, after the piers of the central tower had been rebuilt, and ringing had been resumed, and rounded out that first part by a description of how the bells were rung at this period. As will be seen, it was not only the tower which needed attention, but also the bells and their fittings.

### The need for restoration of the bells, and the augmentation of the ring

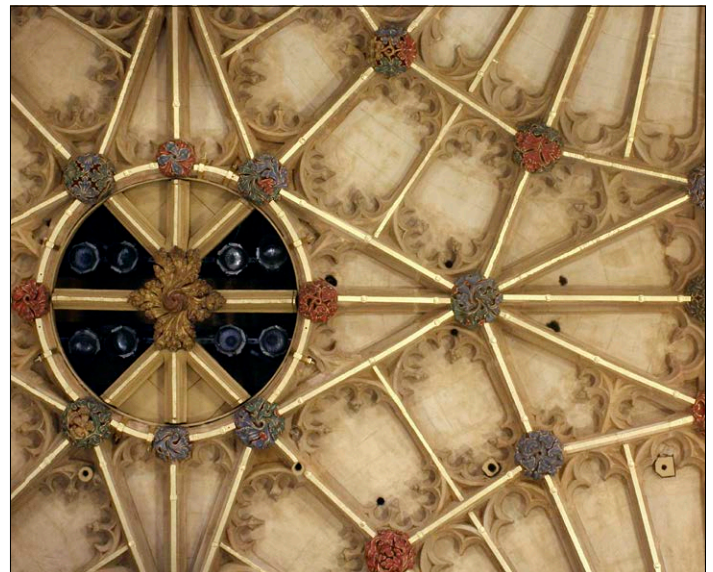
One of the customary days of ringing at Sherborne was for the anniversary of the coronation of the monarch, and on 28th June 1855 this took place as usual, beginning at five o'clock in the morning, but the ringers were alarmed by a crash above, 'and fearing danger, very quickly took to their heels, leaving the ropes in full swing', as the report in the *Southern Times* put it. There must have been mayhem in the church, with the ropes thrashing about! Investigation showed that the third bell had fallen, breaking the wheel, but fortunately it had lodged in the frame, otherwise it could have fallen 16 feet to the top of the vaulting and then through into the body of the church. Luckily the bell was not damaged and the fittings were repaired locally, but this incident was a warning that the installation needed attention.

In 1856 G D Wingfield inherited the property of his bachelor uncle, the Earl of Digby, and as a memorial to his uncle decided to pay for the restoration of the chancel of the church. He also added the name Digby to his surname, becoming George Digby Wingfield Digby. As the restoration progressed, under the direction of Mr Slater, the successor to Mr Carpenter, who had died on 27th March 1855 at the relatively young age of 42, it was decided that this generosity should be marked in some tangible form, and at a meeting in the town hall on 8th February 1858 the vicar and churchwardens recommended that two new bells be added to the ring, which, after some discussion, was agreed. A committee of twelve was appointed to report to the parishioners on the subject, and a subscription list was immediately opened.

There was also the matter of the re-hanging of the other bells, and on 25th June 1858 a vestry meeting considered various matters relating to the abbey and its environs. One of these was the question of putting the bells into what was described as 'efficient order', reported in the *Sherborne Mercury* on 29th June 1858 in the following terms:

'The third subject included in the notice was the putting the bells in an efficient state. The belfry had been inspected by a person sent from the foundry of Mr Mears, and it had been reported that the bells wanted re-hanging, and to have a floor for ringing them placed above the tower vaulting, with stays provided for them, also that the 4th bell, which was flawed required recasting, the whole of which Mr. Digby was willing to undertake. The charge for recasting the 4th bell was stated to be £48 6s and for re-hanging the six bells £82 17s 4d. It was proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously, "that the warmest thanks of the vestry be tendered to Mr. Digby for his kind and liberal offer to put the bells in an efficient state, and that he be informed that the parish gratefully accepts the offer."'

After this meeting the order would have been placed with Whitechapel, both for the re-hanging and for the two new bells. However, time was very short and a grand reopening of the abbey had been arranged to take place on 18th August 1858, and while the intention may have been for the bells to have been ready for this occasion, this did not happen. The contract was given to G Mears & Co of Whitechapel, and workmen were sent down to Sherborne to rehang the bells so that they could be rung full-circle, and to add two pits to the frame for the new bells. However, things did not go to plan, and the bells were not ready for the reopening. On 5th August 1858 the *Dorset County Chronicle*, in reporting on the restoration of the abbey, stated that



*Sherborne Abbey Crossing Vaulting with rope holes from before the 15th century, when the ringing chamber was raised (see part 1) – (Photo Andy Waring)*

'Within the tower Messrs. Mears's workmen are labouring hard in the accomplishment of their difficult task of unharnessing and re-hanging the fine peal of bells, in time for the celebration of the reopening. The work, however, is one of so much difficulty that they state that more assistance is required, in order to ensure the bells being ready against the 18th. The two new bells to complete the octave are being cast at Messrs. Mears' foundry, London, where also the fourth bell is being recast.'

The recast fourth bell arrived in Sherborne on Monday, 16th August 1858, and was escorted to the abbey with much ceremony, but as none of the reports of the festivities mention the bells being rung it does not appear to have been hung in time for the re-opening service two days later. (*Southern Times*, 21st August 1858) The two new trebles arrived a fortnight later, and again were escorted to the abbey with much ceremony, the waggon on which they were being conveyed stopping for a short while at the toll gate on the Yeovil road for a photograph of the group to be taken by Mr. Thomas Geake, a local photographer and upholsterer. They were soon hung, and were rung for the first time on 10 September 1858, being reported thus in the *Sherborne Mercury* of Tuesday 14th September 1858:

'**Sherborne.**—The fine peal of eight bells is now completed, and on Friday last they sent forth their welcome sound from the tower of our glorious church. Several improvements have been made in hanging the bells. On the day above mentioned, 13 ringers from Castle Cary and Ditchat ascended the tower, and rang the first few peals. The peals were, however, of short duration, as the friction of the new ropes took off some of the skin of the men's fingers.'

### Disaster!

Alas, the happy state of affairs detailed above did not last long. On Sunday 30th November 1858 the tenor bell cracked while being rung for service. The report in the *Southern Times* on 4th December 1858, in regretting this occurrence, stated that the bell could formerly be heard at a distance of about ten miles if the wind was in the right direction, and claimed that its weight was about 3 tons 6 cwt. It was estimated that it would cost about £200 for the necessary recasting. Such was the interest in this event that reports of the cracking of Wolsey's bell appeared in newspapers across the country. Despite the catastrophe

the bells continued to be rung, with the seventh (Lady Bell) as tenor, and the band made some progress: on 4th January 1859 the *Sherborne Mercury* reported:

‘The ringers have made good progress in the art of scientific bell-ringing, and during Christmas-tide have rung some very steady and good peals. We are glad to find that they have begun to ring changes, and have no doubt that in the course of time the Sherborne ringers will earn themselves much credit for their skill.’

In this context the ‘scientific bell-ringing’ is likely to refer to the bells being rung full-circle, and not to the change ringing, which is rather more likely to have been of call-changes and not half-pull ringing.

Meanwhile, the cracking of the great bell caused comment in the local press. An article on this, headed ‘Church Matters’, appeared in the *Sherborne Journal*, and although I don’t have access to this particular newspaper, we can deduce what was said from the response to it. It appears that the article criticised the new mode of hanging the bells so that they were rung with the mouths upwards, blaming this for the cracking of the great bell, saying that ‘light bells may bear this mode of treatment, but to try it on a bell said to weigh 60,000 [sic] lbs. was exceedingly stupid.’ A rejoinder to this was written by ‘AN ADMIRER OF A GOOD PEAL’, but the editor of the *Sherborne Journal* refused to publish it, and it appeared in both the *Dorset County Chronicle* (16th December 1858) and *Sherborne Mercury* (21st December 1858) instead. In this the writer rebutted the claims about the altered method of hanging, stating that this was the usual way for scientific ringing, and quoting the ring at Bow church, where the heavier tenor had been rung to a peal of Stedman Caters. There the matter rested.

### The recasting of Wolsey’s Bell

It was not until nearly four years later that a report in the *Sherborne Mercury* on 11th November 1862 stated that it was proposed to raise a fund to pay for the recasting of the great bell, with the aim of having it recast and hung in time for the coming of age of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales a year later (9th November 1863). Things then went quiet, and it did not happen, and it was not until 1864 that things began to move again. On 28th January 1864 the Abbey choir gave a concert, the proceeds of about £10 being given in aid of recasting the great bell, but a second concert with the same object a week later was only thinly attended. Things really got going in May 1864, when the vicar and churchwardens took the matter up, a move welcomed by the editor of the *Dorset County Chronicle* on 19th May 1864. In the same issue an advert appeared, appealing for donations towards this object, ‘to complete a work of which the foundation has been already laid by sundry willing contributions both from rich and poor.’ It was stated that £200 was needed, and that G D Wingfield Digby of Sherborne Castle had donated £50. An appeal for donations was made in the parish magazine for May 1864, and occasional lists of donations were published in the local press. However, it was not until 30th March 1865 that the churchwardens called a vestry meeting to obtain the consent of the parishioners for the great bell to be taken down to be recast, for which enough money had been raised. A resolution that the churchwardens were to be authorised to spend a maximum of £25 on re-hanging the bell, repairing the belfry, providing ropes, and carrying out necessary repairs, was carried unanimously.

The contract for recasting the great bell was given to John Warner and Sons, and on 4th September 1865 Henry Boswell, the firm’s foreman bellhanger, successfully lowered the bell in the presence of a large audience. This was a considerable job, as it was necessary to move the treble, second, fifth and sixth bells to enable the bell to be lowered to the ground via the bell-hole in the centre of the vaulting. It was drawn through the streets in procession to the station, accompanied by the band of the 7th Dorset Rifle Volunteers which marched in front, playing ‘Oh dear! What can the matter be,’ but before the goods-shed was reached the small carriage on which the bell was placed gave way, and it took many hours’ work to get the bell onto its railway truck. The report in the *Sherborne Mercury* of 12th September said that, on weighing, the bell was found to turn the scales at 2-tons 8 1/4 cwt., not the expected three tons, while the report in the *Poole & Dorset Herald* two days later, said that it weighed 51 cwt., which presumably included the weight of the fittings. The transport of the bell to London must

have been much facilitated by the addition of Sherborne to the railway network, being a station on the Salisbury and Yeovil Railway, a route which was opened in stages in 1859 and 1860: Sherborne station had opened on 7th May 1860. This railway joined up two major networks, and made for much easier access to other parts of the country.

The recast bell arrived back at Sherborne station on St John the Evangelist’s Day, 27th December 1865, where it remained until 2nd January 1866, the day appointed for its dedication. At noon the bell, which had been placed on a truck and decorated, was drawn from the station to the Abbey Church accompanied by the ringers and a large company of volunteers, with the rifle band leading the way. There it remained until three o’clock, when there was evensong, followed by a sermon preached by the bishop, who then dedicated the bell. It was slowly drawn to a position under the tower, while the hymn ‘Lift it gently to the steeple’ was sung. After being lifted a few feet and struck three times, the benediction was proclaimed by the bishop from the altar. After the end of the service, most of the congregation remained to watch the bell being drawn up into the tower: gently it was, as it took an hour and three-quarters to raise it to the intermediate chamber in the tower, where it remained until the next day. Inevitably there was a lot of work to do in re-hanging the bell and get the other bells back into position, which was carried out under the direction of Henry Boswell, but this only took a week, and on Tuesday 16th January 1866 the *Sherborne Mercury* reported:

‘Wolsey’s Bell was rung in a peal, for the first time since it has been re-cast, on Tuesday. The ringers are highly pleased with its tone, and speak confidently of it for the future.’

This work was successful, and an editorial note in *Church Bells* on 10 March 1877, responding to a correspondent, stated:

‘H. Stimpson: this correspondent thinks that Mr. Day of Eye, bell-hanger, has done a job ‘without precedent’— he having lately hung the tenor at Beccles, which weighs 28 cwt. and can be raised by one man, and rises true. We know several heavier bells which ‘RISE TRUE.’ To mention only one:— In January 1866, the recast tenor at Sherborne, weighing over 46 cwt., was hung by Mr. Henry Boswell. He raised her by himself, and she rose true.’

There seems to have been some sort of backlash against this recasting, and the following (unfounded) malicious report appeared in the *Sherborne Mercury* on 20 February 1866:

‘WOLSEY’S BELL.—We regret to learn, upon good authority, that this bell, which was lately recast, is cracked, whether in hanging or since we are not informed.’

No response to this has so far been traced, and so it was treated with the contempt that it deserved.

(To be continued)



The 1883 renovations showing the partly demolished Town Hall in the foreground



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## Part 3

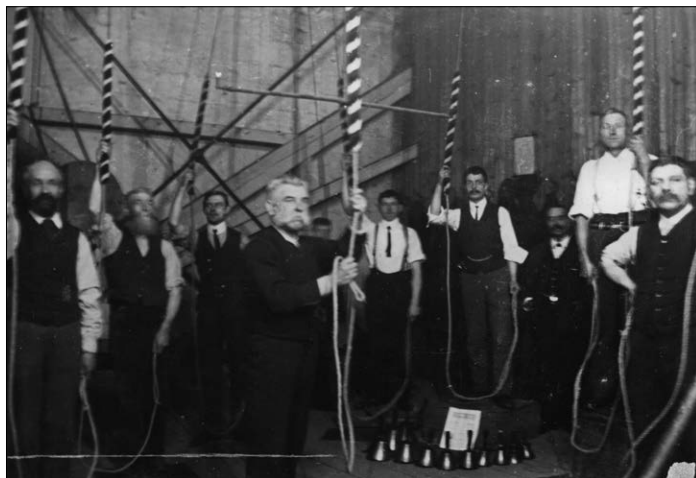
At the end of Part 2 we left the story of Sherborne at the point when Wolsey's Bell had been recast and rehung in the tower. However, a few years later ringing was disrupted by yet more structural problems.

### Instability of the tower

With the recasting of Wolsey's bell in 1866 and its rehanging in January 1867, ringing on the full octave must have continued, although nothing seems to have been reported in the local press, and this may well have had an untoward effect on the tower. Although it had been underpinned by the two eastern piers being rebuilt, and the other two partly so, nothing had been done to its superstructure, which had suffered over the years because of the instability of its support, and from alterations to the eastern arch when the vaulting had been installed in the fifteenth century. In 1883 the state of the tower was causing concern, and the vicar, the Revd W H Lyon, first conferred with the churchwardens and then obtained a report from Mr R H Carpenter, the son of the former architect and a partner in the firm of Carpenter and Ingelow. The vestry decided to obtain another report from Mr Carpenter, which, rather optimistically, estimated the cost of repair to be about £1,300. It decided that the work should be carried out, and to call a public meeting, which took place in the Town Hall on 18th October 1883. The vicar had also consulted with Mr John Digby, who gave a donation of £300 towards the work, and the meeting appointed a committee to look after the restoration of the tower. A subscription list was also opened during the meeting, which, with Mr Digby's £300, totalled £508 16s. A decision was also made that no contract should be accepted for the work until the scaffolding had been erected (summarised from the *Poole Telegram*, 26 Oct 1883). Mr John Digby was the nephew of Mr G D Wingfield Digby; the latter had died on 7th May 1883, and his nephew succeeded to his estates, and continued his uncle's philanthropic work.

Things then began to happen, and on 13th November 1883 it was announced in the *Dorset County Chronicle* that the contract for the scaffolding, sent in by Mr A[lexander]. Betten, had been accepted. Once this had been put up it gave Mr Carpenter the opportunity to do a stone-by-stone survey of the tower, and prepare a full report of what needed to be done to stabilise it, communicated to the Restoration Committee on 22nd February and reported in full in the *Dorset County Chronicle* on 6th March 1884. A shorter version appeared in both the *Blandford and Wimborne Telegram* and *Poole Telegram* on Friday 7th March 1884, under a Sherborne heading:

'THE ABBEY CHURCH TOWER RESTORATION.—A meeting of the committee was held at the Vicarage last Friday week. The vicar presided. The



Sherborne Abbey ringers in 1903 (Photo courtesy Andy Waring)

architect, Mr. R. H. Carpenter, attended and produced the plans of the proposed restoration. It appeared to be absolutely necessary that the east side of the tower should be taken out and rebuilt. The architect was pressed to give an estimate of the cost of the restoration, but said he was unable to give a correct idea off hand. It was decided to submit a proper specification to three or four local builders and invite tenders, but not to throw the work open to competition. It was thought that some of the stones of the old Town Hall could be worked into the restoration, and it was arranged to ask for the first offer of the stonework.

It is thought that it will cost £2,000 to restore the tower, and an extra sum for re-hanging the bells. The amount already collected is a little over £900, a good part of which has been spent in the erection of the scaffolding.'

Another meeting of the Restoration Committee on 1st April 1884 heard that the firm of architects had asked for tenders from local builders, but only two had responded. The cheapest was that of Mr Betten, who had put up the scaffolding, and his tender (reported later as being of £2,202 4s 9d) was accepted. At that time subscriptions amounting to £999 10s had been made or promised, but the total cost, including scaffolding, rebuilding and repairing the stonework of the tower, and rehanging the bells, was likely to be not less than £4,000, so £3,000 more would be needed. Mr Betten wasted no time in beginning the work, and on 8th April 1884 obtained permission from the Local Board to stop the road on the south side of the abbey at such times as he might be hoisting or lowering material for the work.

Work began on the east face of the tower, which was the elevation in the worst condition, and this was dismantled down to the panelled arch that had replaced the Norman work when the vaulted ceiling was introduced. On 15th May 1884 a foundation stone was laid at the north-east corner with much ceremony, and then the scheme, which included building a relieving arch to carry the weight of the elevation out to the rebuilt piers, could begin. On 17th July 1884 the *Dorset*

*County Chronicle* reported that the east side had already been rebuilt as far as the belfry windows, and that 'the old and new stone is being artistically blended. What is done is well done.' Subscriptions also continued to come in but on 28th August 1884 the same paper reported that they amounted to £1,760, and that at least another £2,000 would be required. Money continued to be a concern, and on 20th November 1884 the Restoration Committee appealed in the *Dorset County Chronicle* for more funds. A statement of accounts showed that subscriptions paid and promised then amounted to £1,929 10s 6d, while cash actually received amounted to £1,355 14s 6d, of which by that time £924 13s 7d had been spent.



The Revd W H Lyon and the recast 7th bell in 1903 (Photo Andy Waring)

The appeal reported that the east side of the tower had been rebuilt, and some work had been done to the north and south walls of the tower. On 25th December (yes, the date is correct!) it was reported that Mr Digby had increased his contribution to £500 and that the subscription list was then up to £2,161, but that at least £1,600 more was needed. On three sides of the tower (north, south, and west) there was a gallery, flanked on the inside by Norman columns, and on the outside by the external wall, which had been a source of weakness. At that time work on filling this with solid masonry was underway, and the north side had already been completed.

While this work was being carried out on the tower the bells were silent, and on 2nd January 1885 the *Poole Telegram* reported that ‘The merry ring of the Abbey bells, on account of the tower restoration, was for the first time, probably, in a generation, not heard on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas morning.’ This implies that, despite the failing state of the tower, the bells were rung for Christmas, 1883. (It is possible, however, that they had just been chimed.)

On 20th February 1885 the *Bridport News* reported that the Restoration Committee had decided to continue the work, but about £1,500 was still needed. Then, at a vestry meeting on 7th April 1885, it was stated that £1,000 was needed, not including the bells, but the work was proceeding in the faith that they would get the money (*Southern Times*, 10th April 1885). One fund-raising event was a three-day bazaar in July 1885, set up in the form of an Alpine village, which raised about £250, bringing the sum raised to about £3,000 towards the estimated total cost of £3,740. In a letter to the *Southern Times* of 31st July 1885, churchwarden E H Dorling stated that in view of a possible deficit of about £700 the committee needed to consider carefully whether it could advise the vicar and churchwardens to take the responsibility of giving Warners the order for the bells. He said that, if so, the order should be given quickly to take advantage of the platforms used by the contractors, otherwise large beams would have to be hauled up inside the church, with possible damage to the vaulted ceiling. This implies that the frame and supporting timbers would be introduced via the belfry openings.

### Warner’s proposals for rehangng the bells

Although I have so far been unable to trace a relevant newspaper report, Warners were subsequently commissioned to rehang the bells in a new frame, their report having stated that the condition of the bells was simply wretched. It was estimated that something between £350 and £400 was needed. The decision was made to rehang the existing ring in a new frame, although Warners offered the alternative of adding another bell and omitting the Wolsey bell from the ring, to be used for special occasions only. Meanwhile, the work on the tower continued in tandem, during which a relieving arch was built in the west elevation of the tower, to take the strain from masonry which had been disturbed by settlement in the piers, the north and south faces repaired, and a new parapet and the pinnacles built. The latter were proportioned from those of Milton Abbas, but kept more in line with what was described as ‘Sherborne detail.’ Both the work on the bells and the restoration of the tower come to a successful conclusion at about the same time. The work of rehangng of the bells was completed on 4th December



*Wolsey’s great bell returns from a further recasting in 1934 (Photo Daily Mirror, courtesy Andy Waring)*

1885, and was reported on in the *Poole Telegram* a week later, under a Sherborne heading:

‘THE Abbey Bells were rung last Friday evening by the Sherborne ringers, the work of re-hanging having been completed the same afternoon. All was found to be in perfect order, and the new frame was so rigid that no perceptible vibration was experienced.’

On the same day the Sherborne ringers agreed to a new set of rules for the conduct of the ringers and arrangements for ringing and chiming the bells, which were printed; the 20th and final rule stated that a copy of the rules should be framed and fixed in the ringing chamber.

Thanksgiving services for the completion of the work took place in the abbey on 9th December 1885, reported at length in the *Dorset County Chronicle* on 11 December 1885. Another version appeared in the *Southern Times* on the same date, which said: ‘In the afternoon, the belfry was occupied by a “Society of the College Youths,” who rang a number of peals in excellent style.’

There was, of course, rather more to it than that, and a long report of the visit appeared in *Bell News* on 12th December 1885. Nine members of the College Youths set off from Waterloo station at nine o’clock on the thanksgiving day, arriving at Sherborne three hours later. Dinner was provided after a walk around Sherborne, and then a tour around the Abbey, and the report went on to say:

‘The tower is massive and squatty, and the journey to the belfry may be what some people would call dangerous, it being necessary to make a circuit of the roof of the south transept. The top of the tower is reached by a circular iron staircase among the bells, and the ringing chamber is such as will not allow the slightest ray of daylight to penetrate.’

The service followed, prior to which the local ringers rang rounds on the bells, and after which, when the many visitors had withdrawn from the tower, an attempt was made for Holt’s Original, which had to be abandoned after 1204 changes had been rung in 50 minutes. It was said that all but the seventh bell went well, but the seventh was not satisfactory, ‘she being a long-waisted bell, and great credit is due to Mr Hayes for the very manful manner in which he endeavoured to ring it for the peal.’ Other touches rung included six courses of Stedman Triples and three leads of Treble Bob. After tea the ringers returned to London, aside from Mr F E Dawe, who had started a little earlier for Devonshire.

In *Bell News* there was a report by another correspondent, which pointed out that the four largest bells were hung with Goslin’s patent stocks, using Goslin’s bearings. Problems with the ‘go’ of the seventh bell because of its shape were touched on, and it was pointed out that there was plenty of space for freely passing round the frame, and that when the bells were rung there was hardly any movement in it. It should be mentioned that the new frame was installed slightly higher in the tower than its predecessor, and that the layout was (and is) essentially one of four parallel pits, with a pair of bells on either side, those pairs swinging mouth-to-mouth. This layout was used in the



*Removal of the 7th bell in 1903 (Photo courtesy Andy Waring)*

eighteenth century, and became standard in the nineteenth, but did not reduce stress on the tower as might have been thought, no study having then been done on the interaction of bell forces until E H Lewis’s pioneering analysis in the twentieth century. In the Sherborne case, there are actually five parallel pits, the central pit containing the fire bell and the sanctus bell.

A newly-rehung ring of bells has an attraction for ringers who want to try them out, and on 2nd January 1886 a party from St Sidwell’s, Exeter, *en route* for Beaminster, stopped at Sherborne, where they rang a touch of Grandsire Triples, with two men on the tenor. The report in *Bell News* on 9th January 1886 stated that the seventh was found to ‘go rather hard, as had been expected’. This indicates that the information on the ‘go’ of the bells had spread fairly rapidly.

On 27 December 1902 notice was given in *Bell News* that a peal of Grandsire Triples was to be attempted at Sherborne on New Year’s Day, 1903, going on to say: ‘No peal has been scored on these bells yet, as the 7th is almost unpealable, being so falsely struck; if on account of this it is found impossible to proceed with the peal, it is proposed to make the attempt at Yeovil (six miles away from Sherborne), on the back eight of the fine ring of ten, tenor about 45 cwt. in C.’

The attempt for a peal at Sherborne ended in failure when a shift occurred just after the first quarter had been rung, and the bells were brought round after 55 minutes, which was claimed as the longest touch on the bells, and ‘believed to be the first change-ringing on them for twenty years, when the College Youths attempted a peal.’ The method was not stated, but would have been Grandsire Triples, and while the tenor was rung single-handed, there were two ringers on the seventh bell. A decision was made not to make another attempt, particularly as some of the band were keen to hear the bells at Yeovil, and a brake was hired to drive them there, where several touches were rung, and tea taken, concluding what was described as a most enjoyable meeting.

In the early 1900s, details of rings of eight or more bells were collected by the Central Council and published in instalments in *Bell News*. Details for Sherborne appeared in the issue of 30th July 1904, and this reported that the bells went well, and that clocking was permitted. It was also stated that there was no half-pull or Sunday ringing, which gives background to the claim quoted above, but practices took place on a Tuesday in winter. These details had been collected some while previous to publication, as they ignore the fact that the third and seventh bells, previously cast in 1652 and 1653 respectively, had been recast by Warners in 1903.

However, it was not too long after that that the first peal on the bells at Sherborne was rung, which was one of Grandsire Triples on 4th March 1905, when Holt’s ten-part composition was rung by a band of members of the Salisbury Diocesan Guild. Charles W Goodenough rang the seventh bell, and he evidently lived up to his name! Only one name was given against the tenor bell. Rather surprisingly, when this peal was published in *Bell News* on 18th March 1905 no other comment was made. However, after the Dorchester branch met at Sherborne on 29th April 1905 a reference was made to the peal in the report of the quarterly business meeting that appeared in *Bell News* on 20th May 1905, when the Secretary ‘alluded to the recent peal on the Abbey bells, and added it went to disprove the unfounded reports which had been circulated in the diocese that the bells were unringable, the verdict of the ringers being that the go of the bells was excellent.’ A similar report appeared in *Church Bells* on 26th May 1905. Nothing was said about the odd-struckness of the seventh bell, which must have been rectified when the bell was recast in 1903.

**Conclusion**

This is a convenient place at which to leave the story of the bells at Sherborne. However, while the problems with hanging etc. were sorted out in the twentieth century, the fine frame installed by Warners still remains.

**Sources and acknowledgments.**

The two photos in Part 2 were used in the 2018 booklet on the bells, that of the vaulting being credited to Zoe Barker, and that of the scaffolding-shrouded tower credited to Sherborne School.

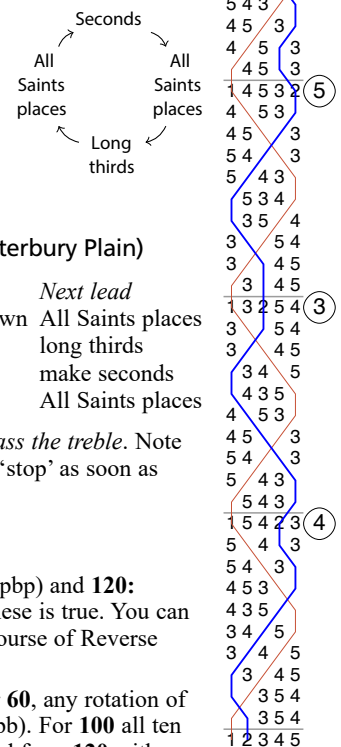
Thanks to Chris Pickford for a discussion of, and information on, Sir Christopher Wren’s work at Salisbury. As is evident, this article is based on contemporary newspaper reports, which gives a perspective

from the public viewpoint: further detail could no doubt be added from the parish archives. I have consulted W B Wildman’s transcript of the early parish accounts, published in the *Proceedings* of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society in 1904 and 1906, the latter being reprinted as one of the repaginated offprints which form the various sections of Canon Raven’s *The Church Bells of Dorset*. I have also consulted *The Bells of Sherborne Abbey* by Soole and Barker (2018), and *The Church Bells of Dorset Part II* (2001) by Christopher Dalton, as well as searching *Church Bells* and *Bell News*. So far no trace of the photograph taken by Thomas Geake in 1858 has been found, and it has not been used in any of the literature: should anyone know of a copy, I would be very pleased to hear.

**Doubles of the month  
February – All Saints Place Doubles**

We introduced All Saints last week. You can see the plain course alongside, and the bob is the same as a plain lead in Reverse Canterbury.

The plain course includes a piece of work we are calling **All Saints places**: lie, make fourths, lie again. If you ring by a circle of work, note that the All Saints Places piece of work happens twice. Try to ring by where you pass the treble to avoid confusion over where you are in the order of work, particularly in touches.



**What to do at a call  
(All Saints Bob a.k.a. Reverse Canterbury Plain)**

Pass	At a plain lead	At a bob	Next lead
4-5	All Saints places	3-4 places down	All Saints places
3-4	All Saints places	long fifths	long thirds
2-3	long thirds	3-4 places up	make seconds
1-2	make seconds	unaffected	All Saints places

The first column shows where you *pass the treble*. Note that if you meet it in 1-2 or 2-3, you ‘stop’ as soon as you’ve crossed it.

**More touch callings**

Last week we gave the basic **60** (bpbpbp) and **120**: pppb × 3. Any rotation of either of these is true. You can also ring bbbb (the same as a plain course of Reverse Canterbury) to practise the ‘bobs’.

There are lots more true touches. For **60**, any rotation of ppb × 2 or pbb × 2 is true (e.g. bpbpbp). For **100** all ten rotations of pbbbp ppppb are true. And for a **120** with nine calls rather than three, all four rotations of bbbp × 3 are true.

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