

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL BLAKE MUSEUM



THE BELLS OF ST MARY'S CHURCH



No 5 bell, G. Cast 1634, and recast 1899

No medieval bell survives in St Mary's, but quite a lot is known about them, mostly through the records kept by the churchwardens then. A document of 1318 records how money was raised in the town for a new bell. It was collected from the parishioners and visitors and the sale of a collection of hardware, pots and pans, etc. The medieval churchwardens' accounts of St Mary's show there were three bells in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Great, Second, and Little. One was near the north porch and two were in the tower. There were frequent payments for new baldricks, (the leather tackle by which bell clappers

were suspended), and bell ropes. In Elizabethan times they possibly increased to four or five.

In the Borough archives, at the Somerset Archives at Taunton, is a report of an inquest in April 1717 into the death of a youth, John Harding, who was knocked and killed by a bell in the tower.

The bell chamber contains eight bells, all of exceedingly good tone, The earliest is 1617 and in 1745 the bells were augmented to 8. They were refurbished in 1899 with the installation of an iron H frame, also, 2 bells were then recast. The following are the inscriptions on each bell : —

First (or treble): Note D "*Glory to God in the highest. Cast by T. Bayley, 1745. Recast by John Taylor & Co Loughborough, 1899*"

Second: Note C# "*On earth peace, good-will towards men. T.B., 1745.*"

Third: Note B, "*1650, N.C.*"

Fourth: Note A, "*W.P., G.P., H.A. Anno Domini, 1617.*"

Fifth: Note G, "*Sanctae Maria. Anno Domini 1634. Recast 1899, in the mayoralty of Thomas Good Esquire, Henry Bircham MA, Vicar. H.C Salmon, Francis Brice JP, FJC Parsons JP, E. H. Hooper, Wardens*"

Sixth: Note F# "*From lightning and tempest, good Lord deliver us. A.K., 1721.*"

Seventh: Note E "*William Brethwen, William Bryant, churchwardens. A.E. 1721.*"

Eighth Note D: "*Recast by subscriptions obtained in 1867. Taylor, and Co., Founders,*"

*Loughborough, 1868. John B. Hammill,
Mayor.*

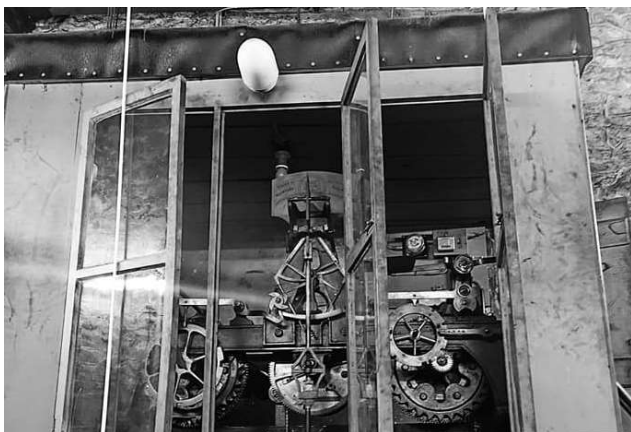
*I call the living: mourn the dead;
I tell how days and years are fled;
For joy, for grief, for prayer and praise,
My tuneful voice to heaven I raise."*

(Also a representation of the Borough
arms.)

All the bells were re-fitted and re-hung in 1879, by Mr. Luxton, of Winkleigh, at a cost of £80. This was done again in 1979, when the bells were cleaned and re-hung with ball-bearings.

The ringing was once performed from the ground floor, in the west porch until 1981, when the present ringing chamber was constructed and the tower archway glazed, allowing a stunning view of the Nave and Chancel. A new access door was made to the spiral staircase of the tower. The work was done by Mansfield Hucker & Co Ltd. of Bridgwater, and completed in November of that year.

Behind the wooden louvres in the four belfry windows there remains some of the original window tracery, of the same character as the west window.



The Clock, installed by G & W Cope, 1869

The church had a clock in medieval times, of which nothing is known. The present clock was made by Messrs. G. and W. Cope, of Nottingham, in 1869. The clock was fitted with all the latest improvements, the escapement being what is known as the double three-legged gravity. It struck the

quarters (the Westminster) as well as the hours, but this is now silenced. It has a compensating pendulum, eight feet long, with a sweep of three feet, and weighing 5 cwt. The weights are three in number, and are much heavier than the pendulum. The clock-dial is fixed at the top of the tower, and faces direct east, the hands, one of which measures 3 feet 6 inches, being moved by rods connected with the works below. The white face is about 24 feet in circumference, was originally illuminated by night, until midnight. Many years since, there was a one-handed dial facing south, for the benefit of the Vicar, the vicarage being in St. Mary-street. Traces of the aperture in the tower may still be seen. The clock was once wound weekly, by hand, but it is now done automatically by electricity.



Early C19 Chime barrel

The clock floor contains the barrel-driven machinery which once played the chimes: "Home, sweet home" being struck out on the bells above, three times in each twelve hours—at one, five, and nine o'clock. It originally played an old and now forgotten hymn tune, and at one time it was decided to alter the tune to "The Bluebells of Scotland," but that intention was never carried out, and ultimately the chimes were altered to "Home, sweet Home." It is not known when these chimes were placed in the tower, but the machinery is very old and

probably dates from the early C19. The machinery was wound up daily. Later, an Ellacombe Carillon was fitted, where simple tunes could be played manually by one person. This was used into the early 1980s.



The Ellacombe carrillon

Change ringing

Change ringing had its origins somewhere about the beginning of the seventeenth century, beginning with single-change peals (where only a single pair of bells changed at a time) then cross-peals (which is what are rung today). By the 1660s it had developed to such an extent that the first text, titled *Tintinnalogia: or, The Art of Ringing*, was written by Richard Duckworth, and published by Fabian Stedman in 1668.

It probably began in Bridgwater in the Mid C18, following the augmentation of the bells between 1721 and 1745.

Bells are rung for the Sunday services, weddings, and major events like Remembrance Day, St George's Day, Royal events, The Battle of Trafalgar, The Town Carol service, Light up a Life service, Heritage Open Days, Quayside Festival and Bridgwater Carnival Day.

Bell practice for St Mary's ringers is every Monday evening, at 7.00 pm, except for Bank Holidays. A group of U3A ringers also practice here.

In 2009 the library of the Bath and Wells Association of Change Ringers was housed in the Clock room of the Tower.

In 2016 a project began to augment the bells to 13 by removing the bell frame, and the existing 8 bells, re-model and re-install it to house all the bells on one level and have repairs carried out on our existing bells at the same time. The heaviest bell is 25cwt, (1250kg approx), and having a lighter ring of bells will make it easier to teach new recruits and to future-proof ringing in St Mary's. Fund-raising is on-going for this.

In 2019 the Sedgemoor Ringing Centre at St Mary's became the nominated training tower for the Bridgwater branch and surrounding area. It was the first in Somerset.

For further details, please see <https://www.stmarysbells.org.uk/p/welcome.html>

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Marcia Randle for the black & white photographs, which are part of an extensive series of the spire and bells she took in 2019. She is a member of the Bridgwater Photographic Society

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Version 1: 07/ 06 / 2019