

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Bells of Gloucester Cathedral

by G. Thurlow
1979, Vol. 97, 5-7

© The Society and the Author(s)

The Bells of Gloucester Cathedral*

By GILBERT THURLOW

Presidential Address delivered at the Parliament Room, Gloucester, 24 March 1979

THE ADDRESS took the form of a lecture with slides; it was not read, and cannot be printed with precise verbal accuracy. Broadly, what the lecturer said was this:

The interest of some branches of archaeological study lies in the gradual bridging of vast gaps between the present and the far distant past, whilst in other branches it lies in the unity of spirit along certain lines of activity, joining past and present in a common bond of fellowship.

Church bells provide an example of the latter form of study. Five centuries separate the craftsmen who cast Great Peter, Gloucester Cathedral's bourdon bell, from those who rehung it a few months ago. But across these five centuries stretches a cord of sympathy between the bellfounders and hangers of the 15th century and those of today. Great Peter's recent experiences provide an interesting comparison with and contrast between those who dealt with it about 1450 and their successors in 1977-78. Great Peter was a wonderful achievement. According to the South Kensington Museum authorities, the bell remains as the heaviest example of metal casting surviving in England from the Middle Ages, heavier than the effigy of the Black Prince at Canterbury and that of Edward III in Westminster Abbey, and the casting of such works must have presented problems which we have today outgrown. Thus, the making of the moulds for Great Peter would be less difficult today than formerly. The building up of the 'core', the mould which shapes the inner surface of the bell, would be the same kind of task then as now, but whereas the 'cope' or mould for the outer surface is made today by lining with moulding clay the inner surface of a large cast iron bell-shaped 'bucket' of the right size selected from stock, in 1450 the 'cope' could only be made by first constructing over the 'core' a 'false bell' of moulding clay and then building up the 'cope' over this. The next step would be to lift the heavy and brittle cope up sufficiently to enable the false bell to be removed and thrown away, after which the cope would be lowered again onto the core, and finally the bell metal, an alloy of eleven parts of copper and three of tin, would have to be melted — for Great Peter well over three tons, to allow for wastage — and poured into the space between core and cope. If the cope were lowered out of true, however slightly, one side of the bell would be thicker than the other. This did happen with Great Peter. With the comparatively primitive method of swinging it formerly adopted, this would not be noticeable, but hanging in the modern manner for a bourdon bell, with an arch-shaped headstock so that the bell is now heavily counterbalanced and its centre of gravity is close to the centre on which it swings, much extra work was necessary to stop it swinging unevenly. But all was put right, and craftsmen, ancient and modern, can shake hands over five centuries on a task well completed.

Great Peter is inscribed *Me fecit fieri conventus nomine petri*. Between each word is a shield bearing the arms of Gloucester Abbey; there are also the marks of an unidentified bellfounder.

* For further details of the subject, see G. Thurlow, *The Tower, Bells, and Chimes of Gloucester Cathedral* (1979).

The second way in which the gap between ancient and modern craftsmen has been bridged is in the restoration of the ancient ring of bells. Gloucester Abbey possessed a ring of eight in the diatonic scale in medieval days, for Abbot Parker agreed in 1527 with Thomas Loveday, bell-founder, "to repayre a chyme gong uppon eight belles and uppon two ympnes, that is to say 'Christe Redemptor Omnium' and 'Chorus Novae Ierusalem'." Of these bells there survive the 9th and 10th in the present ring of twelve, inscribed respectively *In Multis Annis Resonet Campana Johannis* and *Sum Rosa Pulsata Mundi Maria Vocata*, and identified by their lettering, founders' marks and mouldings as the work of a London bellfounder, probably Robert Burford (fl. c. 1400) who also cast the old 11th. There also survives the old 4th in the previous ring of ten, inscribed *Sante Petre ora pro nobis I.S.*, cast by John Sturdy of London about 1450. This bell, though not musically good enough to be in the new ring of 12, is still in use, it is hung 'dead', i.e. not swinging, together with the old 3rd, inscribed ROBARTE NEVCOME OF LEICESTER MADE MEE: DOCTER LEWES DANEE 1598 (Danee = Dean), and the old sanctus bell from the redundant church of St. Nicholas (given to the Cathedral by Bishop Guy when he had authority over it under the Measure for closing redundant churches), and preserved as a historic treasure. The St. Nicholas bell is inscribed *IN WORSHEPE OF SEYNTE JON: JON PUTTE ANDE AYLAS HYS WYFE LETMARME BEY HER LYFE*; it is by an unknown founder.

Each of the bells cast or recast in 1978 by the Whitechapel bell foundry provides material for future archaeologists. The treble bell bears a facsimile of the signature of Frederick Sharpe, F.S.A., President of the Central Council of Church Bellringers 1958-63; the 2nd was given by Gloucester & Bristol Diocesan Ringers' Association in its Centenary Year 1978; the 3rd, in memory of David Harries 1938-1977, bears the name of the Ringers' Central Council President from 1963 to 1968 (giver of this lecture); the 4th, given by Albert Estcourt, Mayor of Gloucester 1898, was recast as the gift of Margaret Coppen-Gardner 1978; the inscription on the 5th briefly summarizes the whole story of the recent restoration; the 6th was given by the Friends of Gloucester Cathedral to mark the 26th year of service of their Hon. Secretary, Anne Butt, M.B.E.; the 7th cast by John Rudhall of Gloucester 1810, was recast in memory of Burella Taylor, Principal of Gloucestershire College of Education 1945-56; the 8th is an original John Rudhall bell of 1810; the 9th and 10th have already been described; the 11th, medieval and recast in 1621, has its medieval inscription (to Gabriel, it having been the sanctus) reproduced in facsimile but inside out, i.e. backwards with all letters reversed and recessed instead of in relief; the tenor, cast by Abel Rudhall in 1736, bears the name of Daniel Newcombe, then Dean.

The old bellframe, dated 1632, was beyond repair and unable to continue to take the strain imposed by English full-circle ringing, though part of it has been preserved in the belfry, to take the three bells hung 'dead' as described above, as an example of early bell hanging methods. With its large vertical corner posts and its oak pegs it is a fine piece of work of its period, but as with other early Gloucestershire structural woodwork, such as Upleadon church tower, insufficient use is made of angle braces to give it the lateral strength to bear sufficiently the horizontal forces set up in full-circle ringing, in which at each swing a bell presses its supports sideways with twice its weight, and downwards with four times its weight.

The new bellframe, an excellent Whitechapel design of 1978, given by the Langtree Trust, stands on the original floor joists, contemporary with the tower, and dating from about 1450. The eleven joists, each about fifteen inches square, span the tower from north to south; each joist has 2-inch square rebates in its top corners, and the new floorboards, two inches thick, have been screwed to the rebates, enabling the top of each joist to be seen, and any future deterioration detected. This is important; neglect of the tower roof by previous generations enabled water to seep through onto the joists, and impose a considerable amount of rot, and this had to be made good by carefully gouging it out, and filling the resulting voids with Epoxy resin. Each joist is supported a third of its length from either end by a brace descending at an angle of 45 degrees to a

supporting corbel in the wall and strengthened by a sub-brace connecting it to the end of the joist.

The old chiming barrel was left here, as an interesting piece of 'industrial-musical-archaeology', when it was replaced by electrically operated chiming hammers in 1979. Its date presumably corresponds with the beginning of the replacement of the Plainsong chimes with later tunes. These were written by Stephen Jeffries, organist of Gloucester Cathedral 1682-1710, William Hayes, conductor of the Three Choirs Festivals in Gloucester from 1757 to 1763, Dr. John Stephens, conductor of the 1766 Gloucester Music Festival, and John Malchair, instrumentalist at the Three Choirs Festivals 1759-75. Today the chimes play the Easter Hymn 'Easter Song' (Cologne 1623) on Sundays, the former Plainsong tunes, 'Chorus novae Jerusalem' on Mondays, and 'Christe redemptor omnium' on Fridays, and the later tunes on the other days of the week, all at 8 a.m., 1 p.m. and 5 p.m.

The history of change ringing in Gloucester Cathedral is apparently shorter than in many other towers, probably because of the shockingly uncomfortable conditions in which ringing took place before a ringing chamber was contrived some years ago. The first long Peal recorded to have been rung here was on 22 September 1820, 5040 changes of Grandsire Triples, but recently long Peals have become more frequent, and in recent years the rule was adopted of having four such Peals a year. Ringing customs here include ringing the twelve bells forty-five minutes before the Sunday morning and afternoon services, swinging Great Peter from ten to five minutes before these and similarly before daily Evensong, and chiming the otherwise unused old 4th — that by John Sturdy of London *c.* 1450 — for five minutes up to the start of all statutory services. Thus these features of the archaeological study of Gloucester Cathedral come to life, and through modern technology undreamed of in the 15th century these voices from the past — by far the oldest voices of any kind sounding today directly in their natural state and without any indirect reproduction — unite the arts of the past with those of today.