

The Bells Of St. Michael's Church, Chagford

The history of the bells and bell ringing at St Michael's dates back to the late 15th century, when the present tower was constructed, as recorded in *The Churchwardens' Accounts of St Michael's Church Chagford 1480-1600* (transcribed by Ethel Lega-Weeks & Francis Mardon Osborne). Initially, the bells would have been rung from what is now the clock room, directly below the belfry, and this would continue to have been the case until the Victorian church reformers brought the ringers down to the base of the tower, in full view of the congregation.

The earliest reference, in 1480, details "the 3 ½ d paid to William Tavener for ringing when it thundered". The following year the same man was paid 4d for the same purpose. In 1492 2d "is paid to John Westecote for ringing the bell", while in 1494 the churchwardens record paying "3s 4d For one wheel for the bell". It would appear that there were four bells by 1496, as we learn of "10d for repairs of the great bell" and "10d paid for the clapper repaired of the third bell". Certainly this was the case by the early 1500's, as noted by the entries in 1503 "3d for the ringers in thunder weather", in 1516 "...for four bell ropes 3s 10d", and in 1527 "To four men for tolling a knell for the soul of Roger Bartlett 4d". (Probably worth making the comparison here that a set of 8 new ropes from John Pritchard of Loughborough cost the Chagford ringers £1231.42 incl. 17½ % VAT, in April 2002!)

The next major development concerning the bells is put in context by Jane Hayter-Hames in *A History of Chagford*, as

....a new set of bells was hung in 1537 when four old bells were sold. This transaction was incredibly costly and required heavy borrowing from members of the parish. At a time when a labourer might earn 2d for a day's work, the churchwardens borrowed £27.10s.9d. from various members of the parish, sold four bells for £39.15s.10d., and spent \$55.11s.7d. on new bell. This money they paid to the auditors of our Lord the Ring. This is the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the suggestion is that the bells might come from a dissolved monastery and were being sold off either b the bishop's auditors or those of the king.

WEIGHTS AND PRICES OF BELLS SOLD IN 1537

The little bell	5 cwt 51 lbs	£4.18s.2d.
Second	8 cwt 18 lbs	£7.5s.0d.
Third	11 ½ cwt	£10.6s.0d.
The great bell	13 cwt 10lbs	£12.0s.0d.

The replacement ring is referred to in the *Inventory of Church Goods* in the reign of Edward VI, 1553, which records "Parish of Chagford with the Chapel of South Tenton, ffyve belles in the churche and one bell in the chapel of Southteyn." A memo of 1554 comments on "...certain bells and the repairing of other necessary things now being manifestly in decay..." Thus it was in the following year that two of the bells were recast (possibly in Exeter), and in 1556, two more likewise, as the churchwardens' make account

Of 30s paid for carriage of two bells to Kerton ["Church Town" = Credition]. Of 15s.4d. paid for the charge of John Perryman, Hemry Smyth and others at the casting of the bells at Kerton...

During the first half of the 16th century the bell ringers had often been paid for ringing upon the eve of the feast of St Katherine, Patron Saint of Tinnars. During the second half of that century, however, the Accession of Queen Elizabeth I (on 17th November) became the occasion most frequently marked by paid ringing, as recorded, for example "in 1590 Paid for bread and drink for the ringers the Queen Majesty's day 6d."

In 1592 a bell was recast here in Chagford, and it seems that the then churchwardens, John Brocke and William Endecott, were both actively involved in the work, being paid for draying stones wood and clay for several days. The whole recasting job inevitably required that victuals be supplied as payment of 17d was made "For bread and drink towards the taking down of the bell and drawing down to the pit..."

The loss of the churchwardens' accounts from 1600 to 1722 denies us knowledge of the ringers' activities during that period. However, we can be fairly certain that they continued to be paid for ringing on all the customary anniversaries, in much the same way as the Drewsteignton ringers were paid, for example, in 1669 "5s.4d. for ringing on May 29th ["Oak Apple Day"], and 11s.5d. on Guy Fawkes Day for bread and beer."

On 12 August 1765, a licence was decreed by the Bishop of Exeter to cast the five bells into six. The work was undertaken the following year by Thomas Bilbie of Cullompton. (Chagford's licence was one of 39 such granted to Devon churches during the 18th century, for the purpose of augmenting or replacing their rings of bells – as were those granted to the neighbouring parishes of Drewsteignton, Moreton and Throwleigh, all of whose bells were recast by the Pennington family foundry.) Nearly 200 years later, on 21st October 1864, noted bell historian Rev H T Ellacombe found them pretty much unaltered when he visited Chagford as part of his mammoth survey of *The Church Bells of Devon*.

The Victorian years saw many alterations to Chagford's parish church, including, in 1877, the addition of two treble bells to make a complete octave. These bells, although not bearing any founder's mark, were cast by Taylor's. Nevertheless, it seems that during the latter part of the 19th century, the bells were becoming increasingly harder to ring, and possibly did not sound too good either. Some of the visiting bands of (scientific method) ringers at this time were not overly impressed, as shown by contemporary reports in the *Bell News & Ringers Record*:

Chagford was reached at noon; here some very fair six-scores were rung on the back six, tenor about 19cwt. Although a local bell-hanger [Mr Aggett] resides here, these bells do not go at all well. It is worthy of note that this bell-hanger hangs his bells especially to suit round [i.e. call change/whole pull] ringers, as he says there is more round than half-pull [i.e. scientific/method] ringing in Devon.

The need to recast and rehang the bells had become a priority, and the decision was duly made. The old Parish Magazines of the time record the ongoing saga, beginning in the issue of May 1913 with

The Belfry – an Appeal

The state of the belfry is causing considerable anxiety, and will require much attention in the near future. Messrs. W. Aggett & Son, a firm famous in Devon and beyond, have drawn up a most reasonable estimate for the work needed. In their report they mention that "...the bells at present are in a bad condition, the supporting old oak beams were rotten at the ends that rest on the corbel. The bell frames are worn out. Some of the timbers have been cut about to make room for the bells to swing. The frames are sunk out of level, making manipulation very hard work in peal-ringing. The present peal of eight are discordant, and some of a bad tone. The approximate weight, according to measurement is about 3 ½ tons. This is quite sufficient to make a good peal, and if tuned on Canon Simpson's 5-tone principle, and sand-blasted, it will be a fine musical peal."

In all, 550 guineas were required for the work. John Taylor's Loughborough foundry was entrusted with the task of recasting and tuning to create a perfect octave, whilst Chagford's own bell-hanging firm of W. Aggett & Son provided elm headstocks for the bells, a new oak frame (with one side of cast iron bracing), and undertook the task of hanging the bells in it. (This rehangng was to be the last such job that Mr William Aggett senior did before his death in 1917, although the family business continued until the 1920's, run by two of his sons William and James.) However, the recasting was interrupted by the onset of the First World War – a fact recorded in the inscription on the Tenor bell. (A new inscription was also added to the Treble at this time.) With the bells being rung at ground floor level the ropes were arranged to fall four either side in order to permit a clear passage to and fro the west door.

The rededication service was held on Wednesday 3rd February 1915, a wet and stormy day; but, nevertheless, the church was full for this eagerly anticipated event. A contemporary report noted that "unhappily the war cloud prevented any festivities afterwards, and no ringers were invited from a distance. The occasion was rather that of a family offering their quiet and real thanks to God without any festive element." The following year, the bells were silenced again, this time by the Defence of the Realm Regulations.

The recast and re-hung peal weighs 69 cwt and 13 lbs (the former weights are in parentheses)

Treble	4 cwt	0 qtrs	27 lbs	(5-0-04)	<i>Hear me when I call</i> Rev. H.G. Hames, Rector J. Hooper, Churchwarden 1877
2	4 cwt	2 qtrs	1 lb	(6-2-0)	Rev. H.G. Hames, Rector J. Hooper, Churchwarden 1877

3	5 cwt	0 qtrs	9 lbs	(6-2-10)	Thomas Bilbie, Cullompton, fecit 1766
4	6 cwt	1 qtr	22 lbs	(6-3-16)	<i>God preserve the Church and King</i> T. Bilbie, fecit 1766
5	7 cwt	3 qtrs	5 lbs	(7-3-4)	Mr. J.C. and Mr. J.E. Churchwardens Thomas fecit 1766
6	9 cwt	3 qtrs	6 lbs	(8-1-21)	Mr. John Coniam and Mr. John Ellis Churchwardens T. B. fecit 1766
7	13 cwt	1 qtr	8 lbs	(11-1-7)	Mr. John Hooper and Mr. John Wills John Sarrell, W.S. Sidesmen 1766 T. B. fecit 1766
Tenor	18 cwt	0 qtrs	22 lbs	(16-2-7)	<i>I to the Church the living call and to the grave do summon all</i> Mr. Joshua Hayter, Rector Mr. Coniam and Mr. Ellis, Churchwardens 1766 This peal was being recast when the Great European war broke out, 1914. C.G. Hayter-Hames, T. Amery, Churchwardens

Tower Captain during the early part of the 20th century was John Osborne, who was succeeded (in the 1930's) by William Sharland. After the Second World war, Mr Sharland moved away from the village, and Percy Rice (who had learnt his ringing at Gidleigh, with his brothers Jack & Jim) was subsequently elected as Tower captain, a role he faithfully carried out for over thirty years. That same year, 1946, the bells were rehung, by Taylor's, on new roller bearings (presumably replacing younger Mr Aggett's patent self-aligning bearings), at a cost of £287, the work being completed in time for the bells to ring out for the wedding of Miss Chadwick, the then Rector's daughter.

In 1961, as part of the Septcentenary of the dedication of the church, a new ringers' gallery was built at first floor level, thus allowing a choir vestry to be created in the base of the tower. The existing rope layout remained the same however. This, coupled with an excessive rope length without rope guides, made the bells rather difficult to handle.

In 1980 further refurbishment of the bells and gear was carried out by Arthur Fidler, and a specially made carved oak table and a clock were installed in the ringing chamber in memory of Percy Rice, Tower Captain for 33 years, and who had died the previous year. The Tower Captaincy passed to his daughter, Julia Endacott, who continued to train new recruits to the art and ensured that the bells were regularly rung through to the new millennium...but only just.

On 28th January 2000, the bells were once more silenced when the church architect, Allen Van Der Steen, reported substantial decay to the ends of the five oak foundation beams below the bell frame. An inspection the following week with Prebendary John G M Scott (the then Exeter Diocesan Bell Advisor) and Stephen Rogers (structural engineer), ascertained that the decay was caused by wet rot – no great surprise with the tower's porous granite being soaked by year upon year's wet winters. As a result of the decay, the frame had sagged somewhat – though the frame and the gear were still in fair condition. Rather ironically, the bells themselves had been well-maintained and the ring itself was in excellent condition. Over the course of 11 months, an appeal raised the £50,000 necessary to undertake the tricky task of inserting three hot-dipped galvanised RSJ's into the tower beneath the oak foundation beams. Fund-raising activities included a bell-ringers' concert in the Jubilee hall followed the next day by a sponsored abseil down the tower by several of the ringers (assisted by members of 42 Commando Royal Marines). The work on the tower was completed in time for the bells to ring for Christmas.

A large bequest to the church enabled considerable reordering to the west end of the church, the work taking place during 2006-07. This created a large gallery, giving the ringers considerably more space in the ringing chamber. Also included in the reordering work was the installation of a new granite floor with under floor heating. Coupled with the piping of the rainwater from the tower roof, this dried out the tower...to such an extent that the ropes dried out, too, and became dangerously unmanageable. Thus, in 2008, the ringers began to raise further funds to enable several of the ropes to be rerouted with new and additional pulley blocks installed, and a new rope guide to be fitted to give a proper ringing circle - all of which was aimed to improve the handling of the bells (especially of help to new and less-experienced ringers) and sight-lines for the ringers. The bells were only out of use for one week while Nicholson's undertook the work.