

HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE BELLS AND BELLRINGING AT THE Church of St. Giles, Oxford, Oxfordshire

In 2011, the St Giles' bells were retuned by the Whitechapel Bellfoundry, and rehung by Whites of Appleton, at a total cost of £57,000.

The weight of the tenor had previously been underestimated: 22 lbs of metal was removed from it in retuning, after which it weighed 14 – 0 – 01, and its pitch had been lowered by almost half a semitone. The exact pitch of the tenor after retuning is F# minus 40/100 of a semitone (723hz).

BELL	DIAMETER	DATE	FOUNDER	NOTE	WEIGHT: Cwts-Qrs-Lbs
Tenor	3'- 6 9/16"	1632	Ellis Knight	F#	14 - 0 - 01
7th	3'- 2 1/16"	1850	William Taylor	G#	8 - 3 - 06
6th	2'-11 3/16"	1850	William Taylor	A#	8 - 0 - 15
5th	2'- 9 1/16"	1850	William Taylor	B	6 - 2 - 06
4th	2'- 6 13/16"	1850	William Taylor	C#	5 - 1 - 11
3rd	2'- 5 7/16"	1850	William Taylor	D#	5 - 0 - 21
2nd	2'- 3 1/8"	1927	Mears & Stainbank	E#	4 - 1 - 16
Treble	2'- 2 1/2"	1927	Mears & Stainbank	F#	4 - 1 - 04

[Please be careful to read these figures correctly: some computer systems may show the diameter of the tenor as 3 ft, 69/16ths, instead of 3 feet, 6 and 9/16ths inches.]

A variety of *audio clips* of St Giles' bells, both before and after retuning, some based on actual ringing, and some simulated by combining the sounds of the bells recorded individually, are available at : <http://www.oxfordcitybranch.org.uk/tuning.htm>

Details of the *Inscriptions* on the bells, and of their *weights and pitches* before they were retuned in 2011, are shown on the following page.

St Giles' Bells: **Weights and Pitches before retuning in 2011 :**

Treble	Mears & Stainbank, Whitechapel, 1927	F# +53	4 - 2 - 24	(528 lb)
	Venite Exultemus Domino ..[O come, let us sing unto the Lord]			
	D.D. Henricus Wylie Hughes			
Second	Mears & Stainbank, Whitechapel, 1927	E# +13	5 - 0 – 1	(561 lb)
	Te Deum Laudamus		[We praise thee, O God]	
Third	William Taylor, Oxford, 1850	D# +35	5 - 3 - 20	(664 lb)
	Gloria in excelsis		[Glory (to God) in the Highest]	
Fourth	William Taylor, Oxford, 1850	C# +53	6 - 0 - 8	(680 lb)
	Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini			
	[Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord]			
Fifth	William Taylor, Oxford, 1850	B +51	7 - 1 – 26	(838 lb)
	Magnificat anima mea Dominum ait Maria			
	[My soul doth magnify the Lord, saith Mary]			
Sixth	William Taylor, Oxford, 1850	A# +8	8 - 3 - 1	(981 lb)
	Sonitus Ogidii conscendat culmina Coeli			
	[Let the sound of Giles ascend the heights of heaven]			
Seventh	William Taylor, Oxford, 1850	G# +0	9 - 3 – 25	(1111 lb)
	Sum Rosa Pulsata Mundi Katerrina Vocata			
	[I that am struck am a rose of the world, called Katherine]			
Tenor	Ellis Knight I, 1632	F# +11	13 - 0 - 0	(1456 lb)
	FEARE GOD HONAR THE KING 1632			

Pitches (before the retuning in 2011) are shown above as musical notes, followed by more precisely measured differences from standard pitches in 'cents' (100 cents = 1 semitone). The details in this table show that the Treble, 3, 4, 5 were all sharp relative to the pitch of the tenor by between a quarter and a half of a semitone.

Weights before removal from the tower in 2011 are shown above, first in the traditional way in hundredweights, quarters, and pounds, then as weights in pounds, in brackets. Whites of Appleton (Bellhangers) weighed the bells in 2011, after they were removed, and estimate that, before its canons were removed (probably as part of the rehangings in 1850 or 1906), the tenor weight was closer to 15 cwt than 13 cwt (which was probably just an estimate based on its size). Without canons, but before tuning, the tenor weighed 14 – 0 - 22; after tuning, 14 – 0 – 1 (1569 lb - 712 kg).

St Giles' Church, Oxford ----- Bells and Ringing

St Giles' Church is referred to in 1120 as standing outside the walls of Oxford. St Giles is supposed to have protected a wounded deer from hunters, and images of him usually show him accompanied by a deer pierced by an arrow. Many churches dedicated to St Giles are situated just outside city limits, where they could minister particularly to those who resembled the wounded deer – the weak and defenceless, such as lepers and beggars who might not be welcomed into the city. Today, the St Giles congregation continues this tradition by working with the homeless.

Most of the building we see today was built about a century later, starting around 1200, and one of the roof timbers of the chancel has been radiocarbon-dated to 1287. The lower part of the tower (part of the west wall of the church) was built early in the 13th C in Romanesque style, and the tower was completed later that century in Gothic style. The top of the tower was altered late in the 15th C.

Once there was a tower, presumably at least one bell was soon installed, but the first documentary references* to bells do not appear until the 18th C, when there seem to have been four bells. Payments recorded in 1721 covered wood for a bell wheel and for stays (suggesting that the bells were already being swung full circle, as they are today), and for flooring. Items paid for in 1738 included a new gudgeon (axle) for the tenor bell (the heaviest), and 12 stays – perhaps three for each of the four bells, one each for immediate use plus two spares. [*But see page 8 re wording in a 1622 Will]

In 1790, £1 15s was paid for 7 Ringing Days (i.e. five shillings a time). In 1803, one or two of the bells were 'taken down' - presumably to allow replacement of most of the fittings, and followed by rehanging. Lesser repairs and restoration work were carried out on other bells, and there is a reference to 'shifting ye hammer to Third bell' (probably a clock hammer which struck the hours or quarters).

Weights and inscriptions of the old four bells, in hundredweights, quarters and pounds

Treble	6 - 2 - 12	(740 lb)	This bell was made 1605
Second	8 - 1 - 26	(950 lb)	This bell was made 1602
Third	10 - 1 - 0	(1148 lb)	Sum Rosa Pulsata Mundi Katerina Vocata
Tenor	13 - 3 - 0	(1540 lb)	FEARE GOD HONAR THE KINGE 1632

St Catherine was one of the commonest mediaeval dedications of bells, perhaps because St Catherine's symbol, the wheel, appeared similar to a bell wheel; 'rosa mundi' was a conventional epithet frequently applied to female saints.

In 1850, the number of bells was increased to six; the 1632 tenor of the old bells was retained, but the other three were recast, and two new bells were added.

The 1850 casting was done by Taylors, an Oxford firm which later moved to Loughborough, Leics, and survives there today as one of only two active bell-foundries in the British Isles. The breakdown of costs was as follows :

£46	Recasting three bells (including £5 5s for additional metal)
£76	Casting two new bells (including the cost of metal)
£43	New hangings (headstocks, gudgeons, wheels, stays etc) for all six bells
£86	New carpentry – Bell Frames, Beams, Joists, Floor, etc
£251	TOTAL

Almost half of this, about £110, was raised by means of a specially levied parish rate of 3 pence in the pound.

Also in 1850, rules for the conduct of the ringers were drawn up by the Vicar, and printed, prefaced by:

“ Few sounds, if any, strike the English Ear so pleasantly, or come so home to the English heart, as the sound of our CHURCH BELLS. Many and varied are the associations they awaken. The Art of Ringing them (requiring both strength and skill) is a manly exercise, and a thoroughly *English* art. The tones themselves are rich, musical, and majestic; and from a distance fall so softly, and come so sweetly blended with the undulations of the air, that, according to an old rhyme:

“ There is no music played or sung
Like unto Bells when they’re well rung.”

Each Ringer was expected to be a regular attendant at the services of the church, and to ring for quarter of an hour before each of two main services every Sunday.

“The days of ringing according to the usage of the parish, and paid for by the parish, are: The Queen’s Birthday; the Anniversary of her Accession; May 29th [Oak Apple Day – celebrating the restoration of Charles II to the throne]; November 5th [Guy Fawkes Day, celebrating the failure of the 1605 plot to blow up the King and Parliament]; and Christmas Eve. The Bells may also be rung on the Festivals of the Church, and their Eves, and on the occasion of Marriages, and on days of public thanksgiving and Rejoicing, subject to the approbation of the Vicar and Churchwardens, to whom also shall be left the regulation of times of Ringing for Practice, or private Recreation, and the admission of Strangers to the Belfry. “

“If any of the Ringers shall swear, or give the lie to or strike his Brother Ringer, or use any profane, obscene, or abusive language, he shall for every such offence forfeit sixpence, or be expelled the Belfry.”

Payments received for ringing, including forfeits, were to be divided equally among the Ringers once a quarter.

“Upon repeated breach of the foregoing Rules, or for other great misbehaviour, the Vicar may remove the Ringer so offending from his place, and he and the Churchwardens may appoint a fresh Ringer in his place. “

Seven ringers signed in 1850 to confirm ‘We accept the Office of Ringer for the parish of St Giles subject to the foregoing Rules’ - one ringer for each of the six bells, plus one additional deputy. Presumably, in return for their regular ringing on Sundays, Church Festivals, and the other Ringing Days specified above, they received a worthwhile payment (probably comparable to an ordinary labourer’s hourly rate), which they may have counted on as a significant part of their income; but the prestige of holding an official position in the church was probably also important to them. It is interesting that, as well as practice, some ‘ringing for private Recreation’ was also anticipated - and presumably neither of these would have been paid for.

Up to this time, most bands of ringers would have rung only ‘call changes’ (ringing the same change repeatedly, until an instruction was called out - probably based on cards visible to one or more of the ringers). However, Oxford, after London, Norwich, and Cambridge, was one of the earliest centres at which modern-style change-ringing was practiced (changing at every stroke, on the basis of ‘methods’ held in the memory), following its development during the 16th/17th centuries.

The Oxford Society of Change Ringers, based on Oxford Cathedral, had been formed by 1734 (and celebrated its 275th Anniversary in 2009); and it seems most likely that it was their members who rang in the first recorded change-ringing performances at St Giles from 1853 onwards, as none of the names recorded in those performances were the same as the names recorded either in 1850 or in 1887 as ringers at St Giles.

The maximum number of different changes possible on six bells is 720, and ringing this 'extent' without any repetitions takes just under half an hour. Details of at least 38 such performances on St Giles' bells were published in local newspapers from 1860 onwards, and there are boards displayed in the ringing chamber recording three of these 720's, which were rung: in 1901 in memory of 'the late beloved Queen Victoria'; also in 1901 in memory of her eldest daughter the Empress Frederick of Germany (Princess Royal of England); and in 1925 on the death of Queen Alexandra.

The following inscription appeared on a plate fixed to the headstock of the tenor bell: " St Giles Oxford, This oak frame was constructed for eight bells and the six existing bells were re-hung by Messrs F White & Son of Appleton, Berks. October 1906 " , followed by the names of the Vicar and Church Wardens.

Records of the shorter 'touches' rung for Sunday service were kept for a number of years in the mid-1920's, when methods rung with 5 or 6 bells changing included Stedman Doubles, Oxford Treble Bob Minor, and Double Court Minor. The existence of a capable and progressing band no doubt played in a part in the eventual decision to fulfil the hope expressed at the time of the rehung in 1906, and to augment the number of bells to eight. The 'canons' on the tenor and 7th (metal loops on top of the bell, cast as part of the bell) were cut off, so that the bells could be hung on smaller wheels and in a more compact arrangement, and so that two new treble bells could be fitted into a metal extension of the frame at the same level.

A separate 'saunce' (sanctus) bell, intended for ringing on its own for minor services, is said to have been removed and given to the Radcliffe Infirmary, on the opposite side of Woodstock Road, which was built in the 1870's; the bell was hung in a bell-cote on the roof of the former chapel there. [Source: V Bennett, former Tower Captain at St Giles, quoted on p. 294 of Fred Sharpe's *Church Bells of Oxfordshire*, 1949-1953.] The bell-cote is to be rebuilt (2014), and the bell will be reinstalled.

Two new bells, cast by Mears and Stainbank of Whitechapel, were eventually installed, and dedicated on Sunday 10 July 1927. On each of the Sundays following the dedication in 1927, there was an attendance of over 12 ringers, ringing mainly Grandsire and Stedman Triples. The first full peal on the new eight, 5040 changes of Grandsire Triples (the full extent possible on seven changing bells, with the tenor 'covering' behind), was rung five months later, on 15 December 1927, in 3 hours and 1 minute, entirely by members of St Giles's own band. Methods in which all eight bells change ('Major') were gradually introduced, and it is recorded that Cambridge Surprise Major, a fairly advanced eight-bell method, was rung for the first time in Oxford at the St Giles practice on 30 April 1928. Between 1927 and the rehung in late 2011, 33 full peals of at least 5000 changes were rung on the eight bells at St Giles, and just over 400 quarter peals of about 1260 changes (which take 40-45 minutes, so can be arranged in place of normal Sunday service ringing).

Several of the more capable and enthusiastic St Giles ringers have regularly taken part in the activities of the Oxford Society (OS) – though ringing both at the Cathedral and at St Giles on a Sunday morning has usually required either leaving the Cathedral early or arriving late at St Giles. And several have held important offices either in the OS or in the Oxford Diocesan Guild (ODG), to which St Giles' tower is affiliated. Rev C C (later Canon) Inge, Vicar of St Giles, although not a ringer, was elected as the first Chairman of the City Branch of the ODG in 1922. Vic Bennett held office in the OS as Master, Treasurer or Secretary for a total of 25 years between 1911 and his death in 1954. J R (Dick) Chaundy was Treasurer of the OS from 1954 to 1974, and later its President for 3 years. W G E (Bill) Collett was President of the OS from 1946 to 1967, and also Chairman of the City Branch of the ODG from 1933 to 1964. Phil Walker was Secretary of the OS from 1951 to 1974 and President 1978-80, and also Chairman of City Branch of the ODG 1964-1973, Editor of the Annual Report 1955-73, and Librarian from 1973 until his death in 1997.

In 1959, a 7-week dispute in the printing industry gave Phil Walker the opportunity to undertake a major renovation of the ringing chamber, cleaning and painting the walls and fitting the lower part of the walls with matchboarding, and laying linoleum, while Norman and Garvin Reeves improved the entrance doorway and fitted a new door.

In 1968, repairs to the stonework of the tower became necessary because of long-standing water penetration from the tower roof. Ringing was suspended, and it was decided to engage the local bellhangers, Whites of Appleton, to do necessary work on the bells, although, because of the position of the organ below the tower, it was felt that it would be too difficult and expensive to remove the bells from the tower. Steel girders were inserted to give better support for the bell-frame, the bells were rehung, now on ball-bearings, a new trap door to the bell chamber was constructed, and the tower clock was moved up out of the ringing chamber onto a new intermediate floor, creating more space and allowing a better arrangement of the bell-ropes in the ringing chamber. This work cost £10,000. In 1981, the headstock and bearings of the seventh bell were replaced, at a cost of about £450.

Since the 1968 rehanging, St Giles bells have been rung regularly before Sunday morning and evening services, and for weekly practices on Thursdays. We are now the only tower in the city centre which has regular ringing on Sundays not only for morning services but also for evening services, almost every week of the year. During the 1980's, several Surprise Major methods were rung frequently at practices, and also in quarter peals rung before services, by bands made up largely or entirely of St Giles ringers. Since then, however, the standard of achievement has declined. So has the number of regular ringers, and there have been a few occasions each year when we have had to cancel service ringing because not enough ringers have been available, mostly during the summer holiday periods, but unfortunately also at the church's major festivals at Christmas and Easter, which have become increasingly popular times for people including ringers to go away from home on holidays or visits. This decline has probably been partly the result of social changes which have affected recruitment: fewer people regularly attend church; there are fewer families resident in the parish, as formerly residential buildings have been taken over for student accommodation and university offices etc.

Also, the St Giles congregation has now become more of a 'gathered congregation', with most members travelling from further away, and less able or willing to spend additional hours on church premises; and examination pressures and concerns about children's safety outside their homes have made it harder to recruit children - there were in fact none at all of the traditional type of teenage recruits during the twenty years up to 2009, and also fewer recruits who were young adults without children.

However, some part in the decline must also have been the result of the bells having gradually become more difficult to ring, with what had for some time been some quite severe 'odd-struckness' and 'heavy going'. This - together with the much greater average age of most recruits - has clearly made it much harder for those without previous experience to progress towards standard seven- and eight-bell methods. Improvements in the quality and numbers of the bells and the standard of ringing at some other local towers (notably at St Mary Magdalen and at St Thomas's, both improved during the last 30 years or so from average or poor sixes to very good light tens) also seems to have made St Giles seem less attractive, by comparison, to people who have already learnt to ring and have newly moved into the area.

During 2009, the parish obtained a report on the bells from Whites of Appleton, who recommended rehangng the bells, to make them easier to handle; and retuning, in order both to improve harmonic quality of individual bells, and to bring the intervals between the pitches of different bells closer to standard. The best way to improve the tuning of all eight bells required some retuning of the tenor, which had never been tuned (although its canons were removed in 1927, so that it was no longer in exactly the same state as it had been immediately after it was cast in 1632). In order to tune or retune the bells, using a lathe to remove carefully calculated amounts of metal from various levels inside the bell, they had to be removed from the tower, and sent away to the Whitechapel Foundry in London. The whole project required a 'Faculty' to be granted by the Diocesan authorities, who were at first reluctant to agree to the tuning of the tenor, but did eventually agree.

The cost of the work done by Whites amounted to about £37,000, plus another £10,000 for building work and scaffolding to allow the bells to be removed and returned through one of the bell chamber windows, and all of this plus VAT at 20%. Most fortunately, we were offered a single major donation by one of our ringers which covered about half of the total cost. The other major sources from which contributions were received were individual current and former ringers at St Giles, other individual members of the parish, and the local bellringers' organisations (the Oxford Diocesan Guild and its Oxford City Branch, and the Oxford Society). The bells were removed from the tower in August 2011, and returned at the beginning of November, and so were able to be rung for the first time after retuning just before the open-air Remembrance Day service which took place outside in St Giles' Street.

We hope that our ringing will improve on the retuned and rehung bells, and will continue to play a part in the life of the whole of the local community, and to remind hearers of the existence of an active church here at St Giles. We are keen to attract new recruits, both complete novices (not necessarily already members of the St Giles congregation), and ringers taught elsewhere who have moved into Oxford.

NOTES and ADDENDA :

1. A large part of the text above is closely based on ‘Bells and Bellringing ...’ published in 1984, by Philip Walker, former Tower Captain at St Giles]
2. Foremen and Captains of the St Giles Ringers :

Alfred Fox	1892 - 1920	[QP In Memoriam, 12 May 1928]
W G E (Bill) Collett	1922 -	
Vic Bennett	1954	Died 23 Sept 1954
Phil Walker	1954 - 1981	
Dermot Roaf	1981 - 2010	
John Pusey	2010 -	

3. Part of the inscription on the treble bell, cast in 1927, indicates that it was given by Mr H W Hughes; and this is also commemorated by a tablet in the ringing chamber. A quarter peal was rung for Mr Hughes’s birthday on Mon 21 May 1928.

[Brian White, of Whites of Appleton bellhangers, has told us that Mr Hughes (of the once well-known grocery firm of Grimbly Hughes, formerly on Cornmarket), had first offered a donation to Cumnor Parish Church, to allow augmentation of their then six bells to eight; but that his offer was turned down, apparently because the local ringers at Cumnor did not like the prospect that augmentation would lead to increased numbers of requests for visits to their tower by other ringers - perhaps especially from their more ambitious neighbours in Appleton !]

4. According an email received in Jan 2014 from Steve Newport of Worthing :

‘ In the book "British Popular Customs Present and Past" by Thomas F. Thiselton-Dyer (1900) he records (text slightly paraphrased) :

“In the Will of William Handy [or Hendy?] dated 10th March 1622 he bequeathed to parish of St Giles forty pounds on condition that in the morning at five o'clock they rang one peel with all the bells, at 8 or 9 they should go to service and read all the service with Litany and Communion as it was in the Cathedral Church. After this there was a sermon in which he had thanks offered to God for conversion from the Roman Catholic faith. “ ’

Comments by JGP:

This seems to be the only indication so far traced of how many bells there were at St Giles before the 18th century. I don’t think the wording ‘all the bells’ would have been used unless there were already more than two: i.e. in 1622 there were probably either 3 or 4 bells; and the present tenor (now the oldest bell in the tower), whose inscription indicates that it was cast in 1632, may therefore have been a replacement of an earlier bell which cracked or was considered unsatisfactory.

Today, by a ‘peal’, ringers would usually mean about three hours of continuous ringing - long enough to ring the ‘extent’ of all the possible changes on seven bells - and there would have been just enough time for that between 5 am and 8 am. However, this length of ringing seems unlikely: in earlier centuries, the word ‘peal’ was often used for much shorter ringing performances.

