THE BELLS OF ST MARY'S

Photo: Jackie Burge

The three most noticeable parts of St Mary's Church, Pilton are **the tower**, clearly visible over the Alms Houses at the top of Pilton Street *(right)*, **the bells** which ring out across the village every Tuesday evening* and Sunday morning and for festivals, weddings and funerals and, when it is working properly, **the clock**. This is their story.

The 'John and Ann' (left) at Barnstaple Quay, August 1852
(reproduced by kind permission of The North Devon Athenaeum)

Although the Benedictine Priory Church in Pilton was founded in the 10th Century, the present tower was built (or, more likely, re-built) in the 1270s. This followed dedication of the Church by Bishop Bronescombe of Exeter in 1259.

Bells have played an important part in the history of both the English church and the community for centuries. Their first mention in English history is ascribed to the Venerable Bede in 680 AD. The early bells were small, but from the 8th Century they became larger and heavier, the maximum being reached during the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries.

The earliest recorded bell in England, at Claughton near Lancaster, dates from 1296. Bells were not recorded in Pilton until 1553 when there were five. These increased to six in 1712 and the current eight in 1854. We don't know exactly what happened to the 16th Century bells, which could have shared the fate of many bells in the English Civil War (1642-46) and been melted down for cannon or shot.

The original tower (which like that of St Peter's Church, Barnstaple was squat with a spire) was partially demolished in 1646. That was also a bad year for Pilton because the plague came. Parish records show the names of 290 persons who died during the epidemic. Church records also suggest that the bells could still be rung in the 50 years until the tower was rebuilt as it is today in 1696. Three of the bells cast in 1712 by Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester are still rung today *(see table, above right)*.

In 1853 three of the old bells were taken to Loughborough by sea to be re-cast by John Taylor & Sons and two new ones were made. They were brought back to Barnstaple Quay from Loughborough via Bristol by the sailing smack 'John & Ann' *(see lithograph below)*, an event reported in the North Devon Journal in April 1854. The two new bells were added at the personal expense of Robert Chichester of Hall. The total cost of the rest of the work, presumably raised by the Parish, was £158, equivalent to about £40,000 at today's prices. The peal of eight bells was re-hung in 1901 and then overhauled in 1947 and again in 1970. A large part of the cost of the last of these repairs, £2,740 (about £20,000 today), was raised by the ringers themselves.

There was a superstition that the sweetness of a bell's sound depended on the amount of silver that could be mixed with the bell metal – a form of bronze with 3:1 ratio of copper to tin. Our forefathers threw all kinds of silver articles and treasures into the cauldron of molten metal. Unfortunately, silver has an adverse effect of deadening the sound. Details of the eight Pilton bells are shown below.

Bell	Cast by	Date	Wgt (kg)	Note
8th (Tenor)	Abraham Rudhall	1712	1196	D
7th	Abraham Rudhall	1712	864	E
6th	John Taylor & Sons	1853	604	F#
5th	Abraham Rudhall	1712	597	G
4th	John Taylor & Sons	1853	390	A
3rd	John Taylor & Sons	1853	349	B
2nd	John Taylor & Sons	1853	323	C#
1st (Treble)	John Taylor & Sons	1853	321	D

The ringing chamber, half way up the tower, is full of photographs of ringers dating back over 100 years together with certificates awarded in ringing festivals and competitions around the West Country. The earliest *(left)* shows the Pilton Guild, winners of 3rd prize in the Whit Monday Ringing Festival at Barnstaple Parish Church in May 1904.

The Bell Chamber of St Mary's Church photographed by Len Abbott

Below and right are some of the current band of Pilton Bell Ringers in the Ringing Chamber.

SOME CURRENT RINGERS : Back row (l to r) Adrian Pope, Ron Kenwood, Jim Petherick, Frances Kenwood, Michael Snell, Yvonne Gray and Geoffrey Smith. Front Row (l to r) Reg Yeo, Jean Woolley, Margaret Carlow.

Over the centuries the bells have been rung to celebrate restoration of peace with France (1704) , repeal of the Salt Tax (1733), recovery of the King's health (George III in 1788), Lord Nelson's victory at Trafalgar (1805) and the first stone laid for the North Devon Infirmary (1824).

Images based on photos by Jackie Burge

The Pilton bells can also be rung as a carillon by fixing them in position and using hand ropes to strike the notes - great for playing carols at Christmas.

The church clock, made by Richard Webber of Pilton in 1713, is unusual as it has no face and the time is told by the hourly striking. Sadly the original chime mechanism now works only intermittently and needs rebuilding.

The clock movement itself was reconstructed by Inkennan Rogers in 1925, but was retired from service about 25 years ago and replaced with an atomic clock. The clock bell is separate from the peal of eight and weighs 5 hundredweight and 2 quarters (280 kg). It was moved to the pinnacle on the NE angle of the tower *(left)* in 1845.

Among the many peals of North Devon, pride of place must go to Pilton, the sweetness of its tone being well known. Indeed there is a framed poem on the tower wall extolling both the bells and the men who rang them. However, a simple, two-line saying, date unknown, summarises the Pilton bells:

Hark to the Pilton bells, how they do quiver,
Better than Barum bells down by the river.

We agree! Say no more! Just listen!

Martin Haddrill
with enormous thanks to Reginald Norman (left) (1908-1984) for his story of church bells 'BELLS – SECULAR AND SACRED' and Margaret Reed for 'PILTON Its Past and Its People'

Thanks also to Len Abbott and Jackie Burge for their photos.

* Bell practice is from 7.30 to 9.00pm almost every Tuesday evening. Come along if you want to learn.