

RESTORATION OF THE MINSTER BELLS



On the wall of the ringing chamber, high in the tower of the Minster church, hangs a grainy black and white photograph of the bell ringers taken in 1927, among them a Mr F Ashworth. His daughter, Kathleen Rosalie Ashworth, left a legacy to the Minster church, expressing the wish that her gift be used for care of the bells and belfry, as 'my father was a keen bell ringer and I used to love hearing the sound of the bells carrying across the fields'. The present day Minster bell ringers are delighted to be honouring her wish, and have raised extra funds to supplement her legacy so that all necessary work can be carried out to ensure the future of the bells for the next hundred years.

The history of bell ringing at the Minster goes back several hundred years, and the eight bells themselves, tuned in the key of D major, are of historic interest. The largest bell, known as the 'tenor', weighs 24cwt, or a ton and a quarter, and has a diameter of over four feet; this giant was cast at the Gloucester foundry of Abel Rudhall in 1737.



The other seven bells, ranging in weight from 18cwt down to 7cwt,

were cast in 1881 by John Warner and Sons, whose other notable bells include the clock chime at the Houses of Parliament. Bell metal is a hard bronze alloy with a higher than usual tin content, giving a ratio of around 4:1 of copper to tin; the extra tin increases the rigidity of the metal, and makes it more resonant.

Miss Ashworth's legacy was timely, as work to the bells was long overdue. It is nearly 60 years since the bells were last rehung, and the whole installation had developed a number of problems affecting the balance of the bells and clappers, and the way the bells are struck. One consequence of this has been that for many years the task of 'raising' the bells, i.e. pulling them gradually up from their safe, resting, position to the upright position ready for ringing, has been very difficult, and necessitated someone actually going up to the belfry, clambering around among the bells and manually moving the clappers from one side of the bell to the other – and even the clappers are very heavy. This has meant that the bells have usually been left in the raised position, which is far from ideal for safety reasons. In addition, several of the bells had become 'odd struck', meaning that the interval between the pulling of the rope and the bell actually sounding is inconsistent, and needs constant adjustment by the ringer.

To remedy this situation, the bells have been removed from the tower – a difficult operation in itself and taken to the workshop of local bell engineers Matthew Higby and Co, in Holcombe. There, new components will be cast which will attach the bells to the frame, and new and more aerodynamic clappers fabricated which will make the striking of the bells



much easier to control. While the belfry is empty, the frame from which the bells hang will be stripped down and recoated with protective enamel paint. When the bells return, some repositioning will be carried out to make them a better fit into the very constricted

space of the belfry, and new wheels will be installed. Finally, a complete set of new ropes will be fitted. This work will cost in the region of £50,000.

The current Minster bell ringers carry on an ancient tradition, and the bells continue to play an important part in the life of the church and of the town. The joyful sound of the bells announces a wedding as the bride and groom leave the church, and calls people to worship on Sundays. In recent years the bells have been rung as a farewell to the town's regiment departing for Afghanistan, and again in celebration of its return. For more solemn occasions such as funerals and memorial services, leather pads are attached to one side of the clapper, muffling the sound of every other strike, and this produces a beautiful and very moving sound which adds enormously to the sense of atmosphere. Muffles are always used on Remembrance Sunday.

The work to the bells will be complete by the summer, and once they are reinstalled the bells should be much easier to ring. Tower Captain Heather McCombie would be pleased to hear from anyone who would like to learn this ancient skill, as more bell ringers are always needed.



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