

The Church Bells of Balsham

Introduction and early history

Balsham Church has a pleasant sounding and historic ring of bells. The oldest bell is over 450 years old, and the youngest was cast in 1988. In that year, the bells were completely overhauled, and re-hung in a new steel frame, and the newest bell was added. (That also has its roots in the 16th century, as will be explained later.) This and the following articles are adapted from the programme for the 1988 flower festival, written by the then rector, Bill Girard, and the guide to the tower and bells, which is available in the Church.

Our old bell frame, not yet dated but perhaps from the late 1400s, was built for four bells. The 1552 inventory says there were four bells here and also a clock bell (nothing left of the clock!). One of those four bells is the present No. 5, cast by John Tonne, either a Frenchman or trained in French methods who began in Sussex and moved c.1536 to nearby Thaxted in Essex. He had no settled base and was an 'itinerant' so he probably cast the bell in the Churchyard, or even inside (at nearby Hadstock when the Church was re-floored three bell casting pits were found in the floor). This bell has on it the inscription: *Intonat decelis vox Campana Michaelis*. This means 'The voice of Michael sounds from the Tower'. This was surely one of the Bells mentioned in the inventory.

1609 augmentation to five bells

In the previous section, we learned that there were four bells at Balsham at the time of the 1552 inventory. In 1609 it was decided to melt down three of the heavy bells into a lighter four and so make five in all. To fit in the bells the frame had to be 'adjusted' and this is clearly recognisable. Richard Holdfield of Cambridge did this work and three of his four bells remain. Numbered according to the present ring, they bear his name and have inscriptions:

No. 3. God Save our King. 1609.

No. 4. God save thi Church. 1609.

Georg Wolard Iohn Lense William Tailer

No. 6. "Non sono subamina muroutrom sed subirua viventium. 1609.

I do not sound for the souls of the dead but for the ears of the living.,

The text on the 6th was used by Holdfield (Little St. Mary, Cambridge and Little Stukeley) and others elsewhere and testifies to Puritan sentiment, that could not then be too openly expressed, against prayers for the dead. Perhaps William Tailer, Churchwarden and also a member of a Puritan sect "The Family of Love" had something to do with it. The words "subamina muroutrom" were furthermore deliberately reversed, and should read "animabus mortuorum", and likewise "subirua" should read "auribus".

In 1774 the then treble bell by Holdfield (the present 2nd) was cracked by too vigorous ringing on May Day. The Churchwardens went to Pack and Chapman who ran the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and bought a bell "off the shelf" as can be seen because the inscription on this 1774 bell was not cast into the bell but incised with die stamps. It reads: K. Prescott Rector H. Lagden & T. Purkis CH Wardens 1774.

The Twentieth century

After the augmentation of 1609, mentioned in the previous section, the next time that our bells received any attention was in about 1905, when new fittings were provided. However, gradually over the years they became derelict and the bells were not been properly rung between the mid 1960s and 1988, when they were re-hung. At that time it was necessary to provide a completely new frame and all ringing fittings using only, from the past, the Bells themselves, and a sixth bell was added. This cost £26,000.

The bells are now tuned to international pitch in the key of F major and the notes and weights are:

1, Treble	D	4cwt	3qtr	21lb
2,	C	4cwt	3qtr	11lb
3,	B	6cwt	0qtr	6lb
4,	A	8cwt	1qtr	25lb
5,	G	11cwt 2qtr		5lb
6, Tenor	F	13cwt 0qtr		14lb

A detachment of Royal Engineers from Waterbeach removed the bells, which were then taken to Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London by Balsham Buildings. They also brought them, and the new bell and fittings, back in due course, and they were installed in a new frame by Trevor Bailey of Whitechapel Bell Foundry and Bill Girard, the Rector. Balsham Buildings also cut the end off one of the clapper flights, to rectify an error, which led to the clapper hitting the bell frame.



No 5 returning in 1988

The new installation was inaugurated by the Bishop of Ely at a special service in September 1988. A band of ringers was then formed, and first rang for service at Christmas that year. Even if there have not always been enough ringers for all six bells, bells have been rung for just about every Sunday morning service, and many others, since then.

The new bell



Bill Girard with the new treble

In the previous section we learned that a new bell was added during the 1988 re-hanging. This commemorates two outstanding men, John Houghton and Thomas Sutton (who are also depicted in the Chancel East window).

John Houghton (d.1535) was the last Prior of the London Charterhouse Monastery. It had a reputation for integrity and its Prior was a man of outstanding character and influence. Because he refused to accept the changes under King Henry VIII he was specially marked out for execution. He was hanged, drawn and quartered, suffering his barbaric fate with great fortitude, praying for his executioners. His arm was nailed to the Monastery gatehouse as an example to others. The Monastery was dissolved and so the property came into the hands of the Crown.

Thomas Sutton (d.1611) bought it 75 years later. For twenty-five years he served Queen Elizabeth I as Master-General and Surveyor of Ordnance for Berwick and the North. The Balsham Manor lands he leased in 1575 and bought in 1601. Here he had a residence and in 1602 his wife died and was buried.

A man of enterprise and wealth, as early as the 1590s he had determined to set up a Charitable Foundation. Just before he died he transferred the Charterhouse site and many other of his properties (including Balsham lands) to his new Foundation of a School and Alms House. He included the right, still exercised, to appoint a priest at Balsham, where many Rectors since have been Carthusians. But his bequest for a sixth bell remained unfulfilled. It was just on 400 years since his work began at Balsham that the sixth bell first rang.

These fine men who lived through such turbulent times are linked together through the Charterhouse and are remembered through the inscription on the new bell:

JOHN HOUGHTON MDXXXV
THOMAS SUTTON MDCXI
PER MORTEM UTERQUE AD VITAM AETERNAM FIDE PERDUCTUS
IN PIAM MEMORIAM

*Through death faith led both to eternal life
In pious remembrance*

In fact, Bill Girard had intended a further line in the inscription, after their names:

MORITURUS ILLE EXITIUM HIC INITIUM CONSPECTUS

About to die, the one saw ending the other beginning

...but, in his own words he 'saw what he expected to see' when he checked the proof from the bell foundry, and failed to notice the omission.