

SHERBORNE BELLS

By John Cawood, Tower captain 2019

A considerable amount of interest has been generated by the recent publication of Peter Soole's and Katherine Barker's book: *"The Bells of Sherborne Abbey"*.

In this blog I thought I would explore some of the background and history that surrounds the bells of Sherborne Abbey which actually have their own unique international claim to fame.

Sherborne's heaviest bell, weighing almost two and a half tons, is thought to have been given to the Benedictine monastery by Thomas (Cardinal) Wolsey in 1515. With seven others they make the heaviest ring of 8 in the world hung in the English style of full circle ringing. There are heavier rings of 10 and 12 bells in one or two cathedrals and abroad there are heavier bells hung in rings of variable numbers but not for full circle ringing.

Only in the UK and in some parts of the English speaking world are the bells controlled by a wheel and rope allowing them to swing through 360 degrees. At the top of the swing the bell can be slowed, quickened or even stopped, permitting bells of vastly differing sizes to coordinate their sounding. Elsewhere bells generally only swing through part of a circle, with each bell sounding in its own frequency, giving rise to quite a different sound to that of English church bells.

This English style of bell ringing developed slowly after the Reformation, some areas of the country including Sherborne retaining the earlier continental style of ringing longer than others. With controllable bells, ringing sequences of bell order became possible, from rounds (12345678), through call changes where the order is changed occasionally on command, to method ringing where the order is changed at every bell rotation by a predetermined method.

By the mid-19th century this so-called scientific ringing had become widespread, encouraged by the Victorian clergy hoping to make ringing a more intellectual exercise and to improve the standing of ringers who formerly were considered a rather unruly bunch, known for swearing and drunkenness.



Photo of 1903 bell ringers from Sherborne Museum

Until 1858 there were six bells, including Wolsey's which had already been recast, which were rung from the floor of the Abbey probably with considerable difficulty and little accuracy. Two new bells were then added and all were rehung for full-circle ringing, with a new ringing chamber constructed just under the bells and above the vaulting of the crossing, and by the end of the 19th century regular method ringing was taking place. The photo of 1903 shows the ringers posed with their ropes in the ringing chamber lit by a single gas flame at the end of a long horizontal pipe.

Today we still ring from this chamber, and the new photo shows some of our ringers recreating the original pose. The obvious difference is that it is no longer an all-male activity.



Today's Sherborne bell ringers re-create the 1903 poses ©Andy Waring

Perhaps new ropes and bearings have made the bells a bit easier to ring, but their weight will always constitute a ringing challenge. Our current band numbers about 15 regulars with a few more attending occasionally. We ring each Sunday morning at 8.30 for the 9.30 service and for other services and weddings as required, and practice on Tuesday evenings, usually followed by a pub visit (ringing has always been thirsty work!).

We all ring for a variety of reasons but the common factor is that we enjoy it. So do ringers all over the country and for many it is their chief hobby, enabling them to make friends and ring wherever they might be. Groups of ringers are keen to visit Sherborne and sometimes ring "peals". This is a specific bell ringing term for 5040 changes of order (possible orders of 7 bells with the 8th always in the last place). This takes about four hours at Sherborne and only four such attempts allowed per year. Some ringers are so enthused that they have rung several thousand of these peals. Attempts to ring all the changes of 8 bells have only been successful once taking over 18 hours.

There is now a church which has 16 bells hung for ringing, but local residents will not be able to hear all the possible sequences of those bells as it would take about a million years to complete! Our ringing is much more practical, sometimes we ring quarter peals for about an hour but usually much shorter episodes of only five or ten minutes. If you wish to find out more about us or even come to watch on a practice night contact us via our website, www.sherborneabbeybellringers.com. You never know but you might become an enthusiastic bell ringer yourself!