



History of Church bells, bell casting & bell ringing

by Geoffrey Poole

This will be presented as several articles, possibly in the magazine and also on our web site.

No original research is claimed and the information has been gathered from various sources and some of these are referenced at the end of this article and my due thanks to those responsible.

I hope you find it interesting and a distraction in these trying times.

We can take this opportunity to thank the bells ringers of St. Luke's in particular for their dedication over many years to keeping alive this long tradition of bell ringing. Many parishes no longer enjoy this privilege.

Apparently the first recorded use of church bells was in Italy in the 5th century and at a similar period in Britain as mentioned by Bede.

At a parish level they marked the time of day, in addition to calling people to worship, rang out the Angelus the thrice daily devotion in the Western Church summoning monks and layfolk to set times for daily prayers. At one time they sounded the curfew – a reminder at bedtime to douse the open fire in the interest of safety. When a death occurred they were rung three times slowly and after a pause another three times, this was done twice more for a man and once more for a woman then followed by a series of slow rings recording the age of the deceased. I'm tempted to wonder how they might work out how to cover all the other orientations.

Since their introduction some 3500 to 4000 years ago in China, bells managed to become an important part of religion and religious ceremonies all around the world. They are the oldest and loudest musical instrument. Their ability to carry information across large distances was viewed as an excellent tool of communication between religious priest and their congregations. For that purposes, many types of bells were crafted over the millennia, from small and private religious bells to the large bells that were hung in the highest church towers of our history. The biggest bells where a sign of prestige.

After the creation of first metal bells in Ancient China, they become more and more used in religious ceremonies. That tradition was passed on to Hindu and Buddhist religions where bells were accepted and tightly integrated into their ceremonies. In Hindu temples bells



were placed at the entrance of the building, or above the doors into the inner sanctum. Devotees rung those bells as a part of their prayers that they wanted to reach their deity. In Buddhism, bells were perceived as representation of the offering to the Buddha's and bodhisattvas that had the purpose of accumulating positive karma. Sounds of the bells were also viewed as the representation of wisdom, peace, patience and cure of confusion. In Japan, Buddhist bells were integral part of all their temples, sometimes requiring the strength of 20 monks to be operated (one enormous bronze bell reached weight of 30 tons and could be heard from the distance of 48 kilometers. Japanese Shinto temples also used bells (usually shaped as zodiac animals), but they were rung by visitors who prayed for good fortune.

Christianity came in contact with the bells during the last stages of life in Ancient Egypt. Their bells were used in ceremonies that celebrated the god Osiris, but were usually made as a flat gong.

Judging by the writings in bible, Moses studied priesthood in Egypt and introduced bells into the Jewish religion.

After Roman Empire fell, the tradition of bell use in religion resurfaced in European Christianity. There, knowledge of Bell founding was created in Italy. Under the leadership of the bishop of Nola, Palanius, creation of bells and their infusion into Christian ceremonies started to spread across the lands and receive popularity not only because of their ability to gather faithful to religious ceremonies, but also as an excellent alarm in times of danger. During the next few centuries, Christian monks from Italy brought the knowledge of bells across continental Europe. Official acknowledgment of bells in Christian ceremonies happened in 604 by Pope Sabinian who later established a ceremony of blessing.

Bells reached England from 650 to 750, until they were eventually extremely popularized by the ceremony of Saint Bede. He introduced ringing of bells at funerals. During following centuries, metallurgy and architecture suddenly went through large transformation, and under the centuries of Renaissance, bells in Christian churches all across Europe started to become larger and louder. By the height of Gothic architectural period, churches received massive bell towers and bells that were decorated with intricate designs.



Bells are certainly the loudest musical instruments and can be heard from many miles away over land or sea. A true Cockney is someone who is born within the sound of Bow Bells – which can be heard as far away as Hackney, six miles away.

The bell can be the largest or the smallest of musical instruments and to many the sound of ringing church bells is quintessentially English. We also have Big Ben, The Lutine Bell, school bells and ship's bells.



Great Bell. The main bell, officially known as the Great Bell but better known as Big Ben, is the largest bell in the tower and part of the Great Clock of Westminster. It sounds an E-natural.

The original bell was a 16 ton (16.3-tonne) hour bell, cast on 6 August 1856 in Stockton-

on-Tees by John Warner & Sons.

The present bell weighs more than 13 tonnes.

Big Ben is the nickname for the Great Bell of the striking clock at the north end of the Palace



of Westminster in London and is usually extended to refer to both the clock and the clock tower. The official name of the tower in which Big Ben is located was originally the Clock Tower, but it was renamed Elizabeth Tower in 2012 to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Elizabeth II.

The tower was designed by Augustus Pugin in a neo-Gothic style. When completed in 1859, its clock was the largest and most accurate four-faced striking and chiming clock in the world.

Great Paul in St Paul's cathedral is bigger and weighs 17 tons and Great George in Liverpool Cathedral weighs 15 tons and is tuned to Db.

We have bells in our nursery rhymes – “Oranges and Lemons rang the Bells of St Clements”; we have bells in our idioms: “Go like the Clappers”, “Ring the Changes” as well as having “Pells of laughter”.



We also have bells throughout English history – from the Anglo-Saxon curfew bell introduced by Alfred the Great to Churchill's Second World War Decree that all church bells should be silenced so that their ringing could be reserved to warn of enemy invasion.

Bells were first authorised for use in Christian churches as mentioned above in around 400AD and by about 600 AD they had become common in the monasteries of Europe. Bede reports on them in England at around that time. The earliest English ring of church bells appeared in the 11th Century.

Let's hope that a special peal can be arranged in the future when the current pandemic has subsided.

Some of the references used in researching this article;

Wikipedia, Geoffrey R Sharpe- Historic English Churches, worshipful company of turners, compelling truth.org., extracts and articles taken from various sources.

The next part of this article will deal with the bell making/casting.

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