

Musbury Heritage – The Bells, The Bells!...

This is an opportune time to write about the bells of St Michael's, as we will soon be hearing more of them. No, not the pleasant sound of Sunday services, weddings and practice evenings, but the voices of those fundraising. Some of you may have heard that the bells need repair. It is likely to be a very expensive exercise! No doubt others will be telling you more about this in the future, but I hope the following may serve to remind us all of the part the bells have played in village life and the history of our Parish Church.

To make the deadline for this publication, I haven't been able to fully research the history of the bells, but have based this on information currently held in Musbury Heritage's library and data sources. A more complete history will appear on the website in due course.



The Bell Chamber



The Tenor Bell

History of the Bells

Why do churches have towers? There is no definitive answer as the towers served multiple purposes. In the early days, churches had to defend themselves and towers were more difficult to attack. They also made a good place of refuge. Being tall they created a visible landmark on the landscape and were also seen as a symbol of the church's power and authority.

By the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries) church towers provided a place for bells to call people to worship, mark the hours of the day and signal village events such as baptisms, marriages and burials. The tower provided sturdy support for heavy bells and raised them, so their sound covered long distances. Later in the Middle Ages, they would also offer a place for a clock, providing the community with a reliable time-keeping aid.

St Michael's early history is unclear. It has been built in different eras with many additions and alterations. The oldest known existing part of St Michael's is the tower, which has been dated as 1420, making it likely that its original purpose was to house bells.

The earliest mention of the bells stated “In 1553 there were at Musbury ? (3) belles yn the tower there”. These 3 bells were melted down in 1785 and a peal of five was cast by Thomas Bilbie III of Cullompton. Later in 1896 a sixth bell, the treble was added. This was the gift of Major F E Lock of Mountfield House, to his sister’s memory. The bells were also re-hung at this time by Mr Harry Stokes of Woodbury in a massive oak frame. Before this, the bells had been considered unsafe to ring and a fund-raising collection was required for the repair works to go ahead.

The bells are inscribed as follows: -

Treble	1896	‘Wears and Stainbank Whitechapel Foundry, London. The gift of F.E. Locke to a sister’s memory’
Second	1785	‘When I call, follow all. Mr WA and Mr JR wardens. TB fecit 1785’
Third	1785	‘When I call, follow all. Mr WA and Mr JR wardens. TB fecit 1785’
Fourth	1785	‘Mr William Anning and Mr John Read Churchwardens. Thomas Bilbie fecit Cullompton’
Fifth	1785	‘We were three cast into five. Thomas Bilbie of Cullompton Mr R and Mr JR Ch. W. 1785’
Tenor	1785	‘I to the church the living call, and to the grave do summon all. Mr. William Anning and Mr. John Read, Churchwardens, 1785.’

There are varying reports regarding the weight of the tenor (largest) bell. A recent survey has estimated it as 11¼cwt, the bell-hanger (Harry Stokes, 1896) recorded 13cwt and in a newspaper report about the dedication of the bells in November 1896, it is stated to be 14cwt.

Apart from new ropes, there are no recorded changes since then.

The Bellringers

The practice of bell ringing is steeped in history. For many centuries, apart from practising their art, they have enjoyed a very social time with ringer’s suppers and visiting other local churches. There was even a time when they had a fairly riotous reputation and their practice evenings were more like party-time!

I’m sure our Musbury ringers were (and are) a very sober and restrained group. Indeed, for a long time, the problem was finding willing volunteers and the bells were more likely rung by visiting teams from neighbouring parish churches. Some of the lack of enthusiasm in the 19th century can be explained by the following article from Pulman’s Weekly News of 30 April 1878.

MUSBURY – The church clock has now been put in repair, and a correspondent asks how it is that the bells have not been rung recently. He adds that the ringers were getting on well with their practice and frequently cheered the parishioners by their joyous peals. He hopes that an effort will be made to induce the ringers to return to their posts and urges them not to be afraid of the “parson” though he may threaten them with judicial proceedings if they enter the belfry without his permission. He says that he is confident there is plenty of pluck

in the parish to withstand clerical interference and that the ringers will be supported. [The bells are the property of the parish and not that of the parson, who has no more control over them than any other ratepayer.]

In the 19th century, there are many reports of the annual bell ringers' suppers, which were attended by large numbers, far more than there were ringers. They appear to have been a good excuse to make merry!

There were also plenty of visiting teams who came to ring our bells. Shortly after the re-hanging of 1896 the Dalwood ringers came and rang some 'Grandsire double changes', which would have been impossible before the restoration. This tradition continues today.

The Devon Guild of Ringers had many losses as a result of the World Wars. At a memorial service in 1919, they honoured the death of Alfred William Cearley, whose story can be found on the Musbury Heritage website.



The above is a lovely picture of the bell ringers from the early 1950s. Front row L-R: Gordon Newbery, Elsie Pike (later Lyne), Dennis Pomeroy, Ethel Pike (later Fowler), Fred Segismund ('Freddy the German'). Back row L-R: Fred Wakely, Ernest Arnold (captain). They don't look too riotous to me!

Today we have an enthusiastic team of bell ringers under the leadership of Michael Ellis the Tower Master. Perhaps they may reintroduce the Ringer's Annual Supper and invite us to their party?!..

Martin Minter / martin@musburyheritage.co.uk / 553325

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