



The Bells of St Giles
by George White

**If you are interested in joining the Bellringers at St Giles,
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*Front Cover Illustration: St Giles Bellringers 2011.
L-R Nigel Goodenough (from Midhurst), Carole Kirke, Eric Rimmer,
Karin Skanberg, Hilary Major (hidden) and Jill Knight (photo ©
Colin Barker 2011)*

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an article by George White

Much has been written about the history of the church which is a fascinating subject in its own right. However, for the purposes of this article I will touch only briefly on that history where it relates to the bells.

1066 and All That ...

A church in Graffham is recorded in the Domesday Book - almost certainly of Saxon origin and probably built of wood.

Archeological study of the surviving stonework we see today indicates the construction of a late Norman church thought to be built on the site of the earlier Saxon footprint. The Normans being quite good at demolishing anything Saxon left no record of this possibility. It is reasonable to assume that the church at that time had a tower maybe even a bell. However, thanks to the Victorians we simply don't know.

From the Normans to 1480

Little is known about this long period. No doubt Graffham, from being a small settlement clustered around the church, slowly "moved downhill" and became the village we know today.

The church probably would have remained largely as the Normans left it, though the Plantaganets and/or Tudors could well have left their mark. In any event by the 1400's a tower must have been constructed as at about this time the first record of a bell at Graffham appears.

Between 1458 and 1460 a certain J. Daniels, bell founder and vintner, made five bells for Kings College, Cambridge. In addition to his trademarks, they also bore the initials "J.D." and the Royal coat of arms. The sign of royal patronage was clearly worth a great deal because J. Daniels' successor (whose name we know not) continued to use it as well as most of Daniels' inscription moulds. This unnamed founder made about ten bells for Sussex, one of which came to Graffham. It has been marked

in the records as our treble, i.e. the highest pitched bell in the ring. Historically most bells have been inscribed by the founder with his 'mark' and some meaningful legend. Our bell, now sadly melted down and re-cast, bore the inscription "Sancta Katerina Ora Pro Nobis" ("Saint Katherine Pray For Us").

1480 to 1875

Not a lot is known about the building in this period. No doubt, the old church would have been refurbished and added to when funds permitted, until by 1874 it would appear to be not dissimilar to today's construction. There was probably a sizeable entrance porch but no lady chapel.

Three Bells at St Giles

As for the bells, things had moved on and we were now the proud possessors of three bells:

THE TREBLE BELL by J. Daniels' successor.

THE SECOND BELL by Roger Tapsil and Thomas Wakefield, 1621.

From the records it appears that Thomas was not particularly good at his trade and by the time the Graffham bell was cast he was employing or being assisted by a master founder, one Roger Tapsil, hence both names on the bell;

Below: Graffham Church prior to 1875 from the Sharpe Collection



THE THIRD BELL by Bryan Eldridge.

Bryan came from a long line of bell founders dating from the 1560's, at that time operating from a foundry in Wokingham. The business moved to Horsham and finally to Chertsey. It is there that Bryan became the master founder and where our bell was cast. It seems he had a good sense of the value of advertising, the legend on the bell reading, "Bryan Eldridge made mee 1642".

1875 to 1900

St Giles gains a sturdy tower but a bell disappears!

The Victorians arrive on the scene, and, with no irksome restraints, like preservation orders for ancient buildings imposed on them, they promptly knocked down much of the old church and re-built it in 1875. The tower itself was rebuilt in 1885. During the demolition and re-build, the three bells that had graced the old tower were left lying in the church yard and one dark night the Eldridge bell was stolen.

We now get FOUR bells

The plus side to all this re-building work was that we now had a really good strong tower quite capable of taking the weight of more than three bells. The Victorians lost no time in adding to the ring.

They melted down and re-cast the J. Daniels, replaced the stolen Eldridge, added a further bell which became and still is our tenor, and re-incorporated the Tapsil-Wakefield. There were now four serviceable bells in the tower but we had lost two of our ancient bells in the process.

Mears & Stainbank, bell founders from Whitechapel, London, carried out the work of casting and hanging the bells. The main benefactors were Frederick Lowten Spinks, who funded the treble and second, and Edith Lascelles who provided for the tenor.

1900 to 1979

Whatever alterations may have been made within the church during this period, nothing encumbered the ringing floor in the tower. In fact, the ringers seemed to have gained some space. In the bell chamber above the ceiling there is good evidence of a sizeable stove pipe that once came up through the ceiling and out of the external north wall of the tower. This indicates the sometime presence on the ringing floor of a really substantial stove, now removed. One can imagine the vicar and congregation hovering around it on a cold, wet Sunday morning.

A Dark Age for the bellringers?

So who were the bellringers during these years? Many towers record their bell ringing activities, mainly on peal boards. These are wall plaques normally made of wood on which is inscribed the date of the event, the number of bells in the tower, the names of who rang which bell, the method rung and the reason for recording the event, e.g. the end of the Great Wars, coronations, induction of a new incumbent, and so on.

Unfortunately, Graffham has no record of ringing during this period. No names of any ringers have come down to us. The record appears to be entirely blank. What we do have though is clear evidence that there was indeed some ringing activity down the years, the evidence comprising one tablet of wood on which has been pasted a simple ringing method and a small oak block used by shorter ringers, possibly children, to enable them to reach the bell rope.

Janie Taylor and *the Ellacombe chiming mechanism*

A further indication that bell ringing had not really flowered since 1900 was the installation of the “Ellacombe chiming mechanism”, which device comprises fixed ropes attached to pivoted clock hammers that are secured close to the mouth of each bell. Pull the rope and the bell chimes. Some of our more mature residents may well remember Janie Taylor diligently applying herself to this machine prior to Sunday service for many years.

1979 to 1986

A fresh start for Graffham bellringing

Following Janie's death in 1979 the Rector, David Grant asked two able-bodied men to climb the vertical ladder to check on the state of the bells and their fittings. One of those inspectors was Trevor Finch who reported back that the bells, etc. were in excellent condition and ready for ringing (top marks must go to the Victorians' engineering expertise).

1979—A band is formed

Trevor, who lived and worked at Lavington Stud, was already a capable bell ringer, and was encouraged by David to form a band and so the next phase in the history of Graffham's bells was about to begin.

Trevor quickly gathered a group keen to learn the art. His enthusiasm was contagious and as the months went by the band grew until by 1981 there were no fewer than twelve budding campanologists. No mean feat!

Four bells good, six bells better?

Amongst this number was Kate Bertram, who soon became absorbed with bell ringing. Kate was in her 70's when she learned to ring, continuing well into her 80's and there was a celebratory ring on her 80th birthday.

It wasn't long before Kate and others were visiting local six bell towers and, of course, it became obvious that whilst four bells made a pleasing sound six bells would be far more melodic.

One dark evening, a meeting was held at Kate's house. There was only one item on the agenda: a proposal to augment our ring to SIX BELLS.

The P.C.C. was approached and to their great credit agreed to the proposal, subject as always to available funds.

We started looking at the structural issues the scheme raised, namely, would two more bells fit into the tower and would the tower accept the additional stress imposed?



1982 Taking Down the Bells

Above and Left: Trevor Finch (L) and Peter Parish remove the old Fourth.

Below: Preparing to load the old Tenor onto the lorry—L-R Gareth Watson, Bill Robinson, Trevor Finch and Peter Parish



The answer was “yes” to the extra bells, although in order to accommodate them two of the existing bells would have to be re-hung at higher level in a new cast iron frame. This would be achieved by the installation of two large steel beams for the frame to sit on.

What about the extra stress? This gets a bit technical but the answer was also “yes” (as proved by thirty years of subsequent ringing!).

Then there was the question of fund-raising. Kate became involved with this issue and we, the band, offered to carry out all the work ourselves.

Our first task was to provide working drawings to prove the scheme’s viability. We contacted the two remaining foundries – Whitechapel and Loughborough – for estimates and the P.C.C. chose Loughborough.

1982—Refurbishment begins

The first phase of our project was the refurbishment and tuning of the existing bells, the supply of new wheels, cast iron headstocks, etc., and the supply of a cast iron frame.

On being given the “green light” the team swung into action! An order was placed with the foundry in Loughborough, then the bells were dismantled, removed from the tower and delivered to the foundry.

Meanwhile in Graffham, two steel beams were installed above the existing ring. The photos in the centre of the magazine show something of the major effort involved in all this work.

Peter Parish joins the team ...

At the outset of the project, Peter Parish (Church Warden) was parachuted in by the P.C.C. to keep a beady eye on what we were doing to the church.

Peter soon became an enthusiastic member of the team and was a useful conduit to us on the deliberations re. bells at P.C.C. meetings. We gave Peter the honorary title of Clerk of Works.



1982 The bells are sent to Loughborough

Above: Waiting to load the old Fourth, 1982; L-R Trevor Finch, George White, Kate Bertram, Gareth Watson, Christian Budd, David Mozley, Harriet Mozley and Margaret Mozley.



Left: The four bells of 1982 await transportation to Loughborough

Sanctus

Our first problem hit us when the foundry checked the Wakefield bell for its tonal quality and musical note to see if it was suitable for inclusion in the ring. It wasn't. In fact, it was distinctly out of tune and its tonal quality was delicately described as "sounding like an old bucket being hit with a hammer". It is possible to re-tune a bell and improve its musical quality by removing metal from its inner face but you cannot do that to an ancient bell. It is not allowed.

The Wakefield was, therefore, retired out of the ring. Had we lost the last of our ancient bells? No. It was brought home, hoisted back into the tower and hung stationary, ready to be chimed as a sanctus bell.

Fortunately, the remaining three Victorian bells were deemed acceptable for inclusion in the proposed ring and a new bell was ordered to replace the Wakefield.

Even though we, the ringers, were providing all the labour, thus making a substantial saving on the overall costs, replacing the Wakefield knocked a big hole in the P.C.C.'s budget.

However, we weren't too down-hearted and the first phase of the scheme moved forward at a rate of knots.

Below: Return of the Bells June, 1982.

*L-R. Bill Robinson, Peter Parish, Christian Budd, Rev David Grant, Ben White, Trevor Finch, Antony Elstone and George White
AND THE BELLS : Left - the new bell replacing the Wakefield; Centre - Wakefield (now Sanctus). Right - the refurbished Fourth Bell. The new frame for the bells is shown on the right of the picture.*



Four bells and a new frame

The time arrived for the return trip to Loughborough to collect our bells and all the fittings.

When the bells were collected from the foundry we had to raise everything into the bell chamber, then assist the foundry's bell hanger with the installation. We also had to fix a new rope guide in the tower ready to accommodate two extra ropes.

This first phase was completed in June 1982, giving us four ringing bells with room to increase the ring to six in the future.

1984 —Two New Bells for St Giles

But we encounter financial problems ...

Our second problem then engulfed us: we ran out of money!

The second phase of the project had always been to install two new bells "when funds were available", but that phrase was the note of doom ringing in the ears of our little band of apprentice bell hangers. It seemed that our dream of a six bell ring for Graffham might well remain just that – a dream.

With Graffham's support, we achieve our goal ...

Fund raising now began in earnest. Concerts were organised in the church, coffee mornings proliferated and donations poured in, and the village showed great generosity, however we still had not reached our target. Then out of the blue it was announced that sufficient funds were available for an order to be placed. The source of much of this funding has only very recently come to light in an intriguing way.

Right: Peter Parish ascends the belfry, 1984.





*Left: The Second bell.
"A Gift from a friend in
memory of a friend.
1984"*

"A gift from a friend"

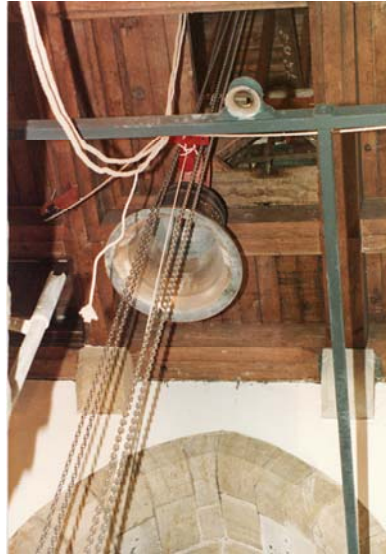
In the Graffham Archives a sealed envelope had been deposited carrying the legend "to be opened only after the death of Mrs Loring". Following Eddy Loring's death in August, 2008 this envelope was found to contain correspondence from Mrs Loring to Kate and Colin Bertram. During her lifetime Eddy wished to remain the anonymous donor of one of the bells and, with the Bertrams' help, donated her money in their name. In 1993, Colin added a note to the effect that Kate made a handsome donation towards the cast iron headstocks. The contents of the envelope go some way to explaining the ambiguous engraving on the Second bell.

In due course back we went to Loughborough to pick up our two new bells and in 1984, phase two was complete. **The band had done it!**

Our new peal is too loud!

Ironically following the completion of this major undertaking, an unforeseen problem emerged. Our new peal of six sounded wonderful outside but was too loud in the church. The conductor of the ring literally had to shout to be heard.

What to do? The answer was the construction of a false ceiling. Back came the team and up went the scaffolding. The ceiling you now see was constructed in 1985 and is all our own work! The centre panel in the ceiling is designed to be removable and it is through there that the bells come and go when necessary.



Above: Raising the bells in 1984. Left- George White with the new Second. Right- the Second ascends to the belfry

1986—Present

Over the years since the completion of this major project there have been inevitable changes to the bell ringing team. When Trevor Finch, the founder of the initial band left, Tim Johnson was briefly Tower Captain, followed by myself. Hilary Major joined the team in 1986 and is the “sole survivor” of that period. Hilary became first the Secretary, then the Tower Captain after me. Hilary has been a major force in raising awareness of bell-ringing in the village and recruiting new ringers.

So What is Bell Ringing All About?

Space simply won't permit a detailed description of the intricacies of ringing in this article. If you would like an answer to this question then talk to some of the members of today's band.

You might notice a gleam in the eye and a slight shortness of breath when they describe the highs and lows and the seemingly frustrating difficulty of mastering a bell. They undoubtedly will then talk of the excitement and buzz when things go well, the

absolute teamwork required to achieve all this and, of course, the amazing camaraderie that ensues.

They will also mention two stalwarts, Mike and Brenda Etherington from Pulborough, who have been helping out in Graffham in recent years. Mike is a master of the art and one of the best teachers of the skills we have in West Sussex.

So, on Tuesday night switch off the television, turn off the computer, put down that book and come along and learn to ring! Once you cross the threshold of the church you will be greeted like a long lost brother or sister. You will be taken under Mike's wing and introduced to the amazing art of bell ringing. Then of course, you can go down to the pub with your fellow bell-ringers, another PLUS for BELLRINGING!

**George White
December 2011**

A Postscript

Apart from maintenance, Graffham bellringers have had little structural work to do over the last two decades and have been able to concentrate on perfecting their art, although one piece of work which the current team deemed necessary was a wooden platform spanning the tower at the level of the two higher bells, to allow easier and safer access for maintenance. It was made by Mike Etherington with the help of Eric Rimmer and Alison Davidson, the bell maintenance team.

References & Acknowledgements

Sussex Bells and Belfries by George P Elphick

A Church Near You website www.achurchnearyou.com

Right: Bellringers 2011

*Eric Rimmer and Alison
Davidson muffle the
bells*





*Top: St Giles Church, Graffham
Bottom: The Third Bell ringing*