

Canterbury Cathedral's Musical Tradition

The Bells (Part 1 c.959-1981)

I am greatly indebted to Richard C. Offen who wrote a definitive article 'The Noblest of Bells – The Story of Great Dunstan and the Arundel Tower of Canterbury Cathedral' Richard C. Offen 1981. So, most of this article, in quotes, are his words.

The bells of Canterbury Cathedral have a rich history, resonating through the ages. There was much bell ringing for services and other times of day for the long period the monastic Benedictine Priory of Christ Church existed.

However, certainly bell ringing at Canterbury Cathedral goes back to the 10th century. 'Archbishop Dunstan was appointed in 959 - an office which he held for nearly thirty years. He was very talented, a fine scribe and illuminator, a skilled musician with an excellent voice and a very dextrous metalworker. Bell founding was another of his talents and he is said to have cast bells for Abingdon Abbey as well as Canterbury Cathedral. In view of his association with Canterbury and his canonisation, it is not really surprising that there has been a bell in Canterbury Cathedral dedicated to St. Dunstan for so many centuries.'



Great Dunstan rehung in NW Arundel Tower in 1981

'The first St. Dunstan bell was given by Prior Hathbrand in 1343 and hung, with five others, in the Cathedral's freestanding Campanile, situated on the mound beside the Study Centre of the Lodge. On 23rd May 1383 a great earthquake rocked the South-East of England, causing the fall of the Campanile and the destruction of three of its bells, among them St. Dunstan. Following the tower's reconstruction, the three sound bells plus two new ones were hung.' It is not known whether St. Dunstan was one of them.'

'During the first quarter of the 15th century the SW tower was rebuilt by Archbishop Henry Chichele. Because of Chichele's connections with Oxford, where he was born, the tower was renamed the 'Oxford Tower'. In 1430 Prior Molash for this tower presented a large bell. This great bell was cast in London but had to wait almost 30 years on the floor of the Nave before being dedicated to St. Dunstan in June 1459 and hung in the newly finished Oxford Tower. In 1499 it had to be recast by John Bayle,' (Blessed by Bishop of Ross in 1459) 'but from then on Great Dunstan seems to have been hung on the roof of the Oxford Tower, the position where its successors were for over four hundred years, until 1981.'

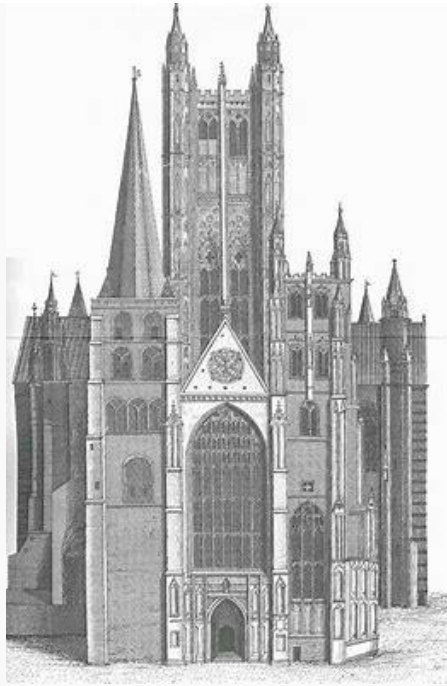


In the early 1540s Henry VIII confiscated all the bells in Morton's central tower, 5 in number weighing over 11 tonnes in weight, that is apart from Bell Harry, given by Prior Henry of Eastry in 1288, which was moved to the roof of Morton's tower to be used as a service and curfew bell.



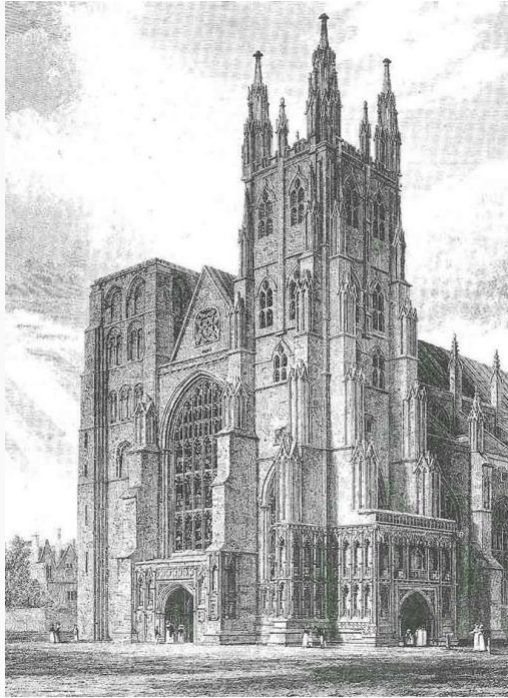
Great Dunstan itself was recast in 1663 when found cracked, and again in 1684. Sometime during the 1750's Great Dunstan again became cracked. This time the cause of the crack being the use of a hammer to toll the bell! In 1758 an attempt was made to solder the bell, but to no avail. The soldering not having been successful, Great Dunstan was again recast in 1762.

The North-West tower of the Cathedral 'was first built in about 1170 by the first Norman Archbishop, Lanfranc, who was rebuilding the entire Cathedral following the disastrous fire of 1067 which had razed the building to the ground. The tower seems to have remained vacant until 1316 when Prior Henry of Eastrы rebuilt the upper storey and supplied a lead covered steeple surmounted by a weather cock. After this addition the tower became known as the 'Cock Steeple'. (In 1288) Prior Henry supplied four bells, one of which was used to summon Chapter; this bell was later transferred to the central tower and, because of the name of its donor, became known as 'Bell Harry'.' The current Bell Harry was recast by Joseph Hatch of Ulcombe in 1635 and weighs 8 cwt.



'In about 1440 work started on rebuilding the central tower. This work necessitated the removal of the five bells given by Archbishop Arundel. This ring of five bells was moved to the 'Cock Steeple' which then became known as the 'Arundel Steeple'. The ring, augmented to six, with many re-castings, remained in use until the beginning of the 18th century. In 1703 the tower was struck by lightning, rendering it unsafe, so the spire was removed in 1705 and by 1718 four of the bells were reported as cracked. In 1726 the bells were taken down and a new ring of eight created from the metal. However, this new ring bells were hung in the Oxford Tower.

The Arundel Tower remained in a derelict condition for just over a hundred years. By 1824 some concern was being shown about its condition and a London architect was called in to prepare a report upon it. This architect stated the tower was capable and worthy of restoration. However, the Dean and Chapter decided to pull down the old tower and rebuild it from the foundations.'



‘To do this an Act of Parliament was obtained, by which the Dean and Chapter were empowered to raise £20,000 by mortgage on their estates, with the power to raise a further £5,000 if required; the money to be paid off in 40 yearly instalments. The new tower was designed and executed by the Cathedral Surveyor, Mr George Austin, who built an exact replica of the Oxford Tower, thus making the Cathedral's West front symmetrical. The new tower was not supplied with a ring of bells and remained empty for the next 150 years.’



I have also consulted Wikipedia, Canterbury Cathedral website, and read two further articles 'Canterbury Bells' – Canterbury Historical & Archaeological Society 2025, 'The Bells of Canterbury Cathedral' written in 'The Ringing World' by Nicholas J Davies F.S.A. Scot. in December 1993. Nick Davies died in May 2006.

From the days when he learned to ring while a scholar at King's School, Canterbury in the 1950s up until very shortly before his death after a determined battle with cancer, Nick was, to say the least, an enthusiast for bells. For many years he served as Bells Adviser to the Diocesan Advisory Committee; he was Chairman of the Kent County Association of Change Ringers from 1990 to 1993; he served on the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers for many years and was particularly devoted to the bells of Romney Marsh where he lived.

Nick was also a Member of the Canterbury Cathedral Company. His wife, Brenda Davies, has said that he would be delighted that some of his words are being used in this description of the history of the bells of the Cathedral.

John Shirland (February 2025)