

Canterbury Cathedral's Musical Tradition

The Bells Part 2

1981 saw the beginning of a new chapter in the history of bells at Canterbury Cathedral. A new ring of 14, with each bell sponsored by an organization or individuals, were to be named, these included Mary, Augustine, Ethelbert, Lanfranc, Alphege, Anselm, Ernulf and Thomas. The smallest bell, the Extra Treble named Simon, weighs just over 5 cwt, while the largest, the Tenor named Trinity, weighs over 34 cwt. The rim of each of these bell shows a pattern of Canterbury bells, interspersed with Canterbury crosses.

They were all cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry for the Oxford Tower, and Bell Harry was rehung on the top of the central tower.



Bell Harry on top of Central Tower in its metal cage

Great Dunstan weighing over 62 cwt (the largest bell in Kent) was moved and rehung in the vacant Arundel Tower, with it was decided to hang five of the previous 12 bells, to be used as a clock chime. The chime from Gregorian Chant, we hear today, was composed by F.J.O. Helmore, Precentor, in 1897.

‘A generous donation from The Anglia Building Society made this whole scheme possible and work commenced on installing floors and the bell frames. At the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, the clock chime and Great Dunstan were cleaned and tuned.’

In the Arundel Tower, ‘the clock chime was hung dead and Dunstan was hung to be slow swung automatically by an electric motor. Although the clock mechanism was also moved into this tower, the clock face remained in the old position on the South-West tower. Canterbury Cathedral could then boast 21 actual ringing bells.

THE BELLS

In this Tower - the "OXFORD" Tower

THE RINGING BELLS

recast at the Whitechapel Foundry in 1981

		cwt	qrs	lbs	Kgs
Extra Treble	Simon	5	2	5	282
Treble	Crundale	6	0	2	306
Second	Alphege	6	2	2	332
Third	Thomas	6	2	20	340
Fourth	Mary	7	0	12	362
Fifth	Ethelbert	7	3	16	402
Sixth	Anselm	8	0	12	413
Flat Sixth	Ernulf	8	1	16	427
Seventh	Blaise	8	3	24	456
Eighth	John	10	3	26	559
Ninth	Lanfranc	15	0	8	767
Tenth	Gabriel	17	3	16	911
Eleventh	Augustine	24	2	10	1252
Tenor	Trinity	34	3	4	1771

In the "ARUNDEL" Tower opposite

THE CLOCK CHIME

	cast	cwt	qrs	lbs	Kgs
Treble	1802	6	3	0	344
Second	1855	6	3	4	345
Third	1726	7	3	21	404
Fourth	1726	8	1	24	431
Tenor	1855	9	2	2	484

Great Dunstan	1762	62	2	9	3185
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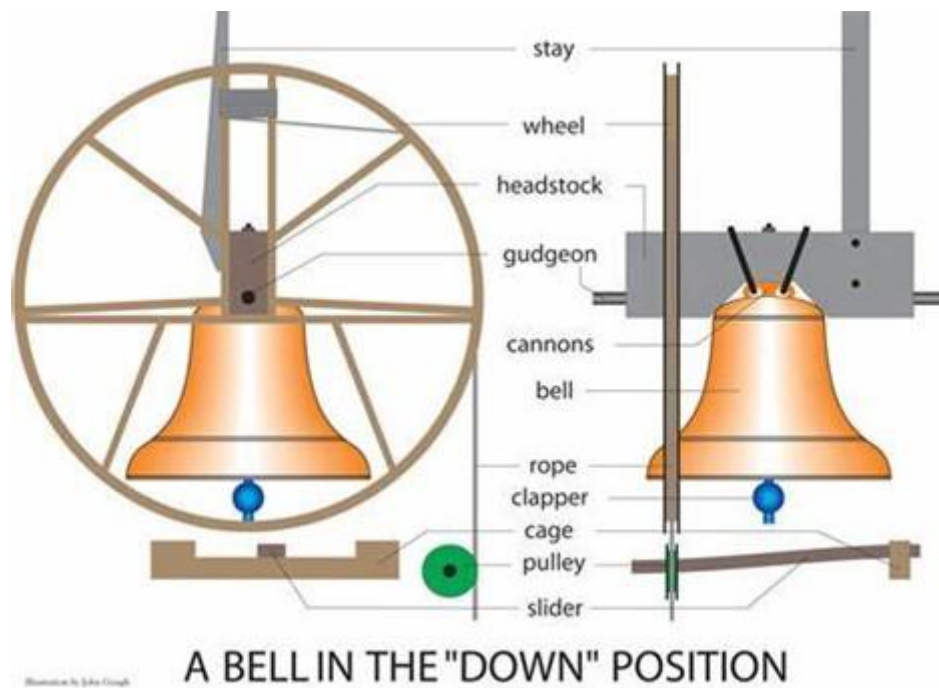
In the "BELL HARRY" (Central) Tower

Bell Harry	1835	8	0	0	407
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All the bells were blessed and baptised by Archbishop Runcie on the 19th July 1981. The opening ceremony was on 15th November. After chiming three o'clock, Dunstan was set swinging for ten minutes to herald the arrival of the Archbishop, who, in front of guests from The Anglia Building Society, John Smith and Sons, of Derby and the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, dedicated a plaque commemorating the work. Following this the bells of many towers throughout Great Britain rang out to celebrate the completion of this great work of restoration.' (1)

As a postscript to this section Simon Lockwood, the Canterbury Ringers' Secretary, tells me, "Traditionally, bell metal is recycled whenever a ring of bells is recast, and therefore it is interesting (but not unproven!) to think that the current bells still have something of the original bells first put into the Cathedral soon after its founding!"

Change ringing in the English Style



Developed since the 17th century, change ringing is a way of ringing bells at a steady rhythm. Ringing 'rounds' is when the bells follow each other from Treble to Tenor. However, in change ringing the order in which the bells ring changes constantly and no two should be identical. There are many methods of change ringing, and some have curious names such as 'Kent Treble Bob Major' or 'Marvin the Paranoid Android Minor'. Canterbury's 14 bells enable a ring of twelve with two semitones, which allow for ringing on ten, eight or six bells while still remaining in tune.



Change ringing in the ringing chamber of the Oxford Tower



Swinging/Ringing bells but at St. Mary's, Wendover, not Canterbury Cathedral

Visitors typically don't have access to the bells or the bell-ringing chamber, but special open days occasionally grant supervised access.

Then, of course each weekday at 11 a.m. the bell of HMS Canterbury is rung when a member of the Regimental Association of the Queen's Own Buffs, 'Turns the Page' in a 'Book of Life' in The Warriors' (Buffs) Chapel. Inscribed in the Books of Life are the names of those Buffs who fell in the Great War (WW1) (5688), WW2 (1313) and other conflicts.

'The official adoption of the (Buffs) Chapel by the regiment was marked by the establishment of an endowment fund in the twentieth century that was eventually entrusted to the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral in 1948.

The first to 'turn the page' was Private J. H. Stone on 14th June 1926, in the presence of the Dean, the Very Reverend G. K. A. Bell, and the Canterbury Depot Commander, Major J. V. R. Jackson imitated a ritual which is still carried on to this day but now the honour falls on a member of the Regimental Association.' (2)

The bell itself stands below the model of HMS Canterbury (1744) given by Post Captain Graham Edwards RN (10th December 1936). The bell itself of HMS Canterbury (1916-1933) and presented to the Cathedral by the Admiralty on 3rd June 1934 is kept well polished!

'In November 1940, a 16 year old boy soldier, Sidney Pulman of The Buffs, earned the praise of the Regiment for his courage and bearing during an air attack on Canterbury Cathedral. On that wartime morning, young Sidney was stick orderly of the day and it was his duty to Turn the Page. Having marched through the streets of Canterbury, as was the tradition, Sidney stood in front of the Book of Life ready to Turn the Page at 11am. As Sidney was about to Turn the Page, a German aircraft

attacked Canterbury and a bomb shattered The Buffs memorial window, covering Sidney with glass splinters.

He was unmoved and continued to carry out his duty calmly and quietly with great reverence demonstrating courage and resolve way beyond his tender years. When the late King George VI visited Canterbury in 1946, Sidney Pulman was chosen to “Turn the Page” in front of his King in recognition of his heroism six years previously.’
(3)



I am indebted to Wikipedia, Canterbury Cathedral website. ‘The Noblest of Bells – Story of Great Dunstan and the Arundel Tower of Canterbury Cathedral’ Richard Offen 1981’ (Quote 1) Friends of the Buffs Royal East Kent Regiment website (Quote 2 & 3).

John Shirland (February 2025)