

THE BELLS OF ST. PETER'S

By "BEORCHAM"

Whether the bells will be restored to St. Peter's Church tower in time for the Easter services is uncertain at the moment of writing, but this is an appropriate time to tell the story of the bells and pay tribute to the faithful team of ringers who, with characteristic enthusiasm, have recently kept in training by participating in the practices of their colleagues at St. Mary's, Northchurch.

For hundreds of years—certainly since 1553, the year of the earliest documentary evidence—bells have called the parishioners of Berkhamsted to worship. The bells have also reported history in music, adding their own comments to the triumphs and sorrows of a changing world. There have been peals of triumph from the time of the Spanish Armada's rout to recent victories that are still fresh in the memory; there have been

muffled peals to mark the passing of a score of monarchs and countless local worthies.

But four centuries—the most we can safely claim for Berkhamsted—is not a long period in the history of bells. In remote antiquity, long before the birth of Christ, cymbals and hand-bells were used in religious ceremonies. Did not Aaron and other Jewish high priests wear golden bells attached to their vestments? Historians tell us, too, that the Greeks employed bells in camps and garrisons, and that Romans rang bells to announce the hour of bathing.

Superstitious Beliefs

The origin of bells in Christian churches is uncertain, but evidence is available that they were introduced to Western Christendom by the 6th century, if not earlier.

That bells had the power to disperse storms and pestilence, drive away enemies, and extinguish fires, was a widespread belief in mediaeval days. Ancient records of old St. Paul's, London, mention "ringing the hallowed belle in great tempestes or lightninges."

Incidentally, it may not be widely known that until the beginning of the 18th century, bells were tolled for those passing out of the world, to give parishioners an opportunity of praying for the dying. It was only within the last two centuries that the custom of tolling after death, not before, became general.

The late Mr. R. A. Norris' scholarly book tells us that the first reference to bells in St. Peter's Church appears under the date 1553, when there were three "bells" in the "steple," ranging from the "great bell" of 18 cwt. to the "lest bell" of 6 cwt. At some period unknown, the number of bells was increased from three to six. In 1838, to commemorate Queen Victoria's accession in the previous year, the number was further increased to eight, the old peal being recast with the addition of new metal.

The Same Firm!

The work of recasting the bells just over a century ago was entrusted to the famous Whitechapel foundry of Messrs. Mears and Stainbank, a firm which was established in 1529 and was recently entrusted with the work of recasting and retuning the present peal. The bells will again be hung on the frame erected in the tower more than 100 years ago. The timber came from the Haresfoot estate, and vestry records show that the cost of the carpenter's work (£90) was considered excessive. The churchwardens demanded an inquiry into the accounts, with results that appear to be unknown. Previously the ringing loft was a gallery between the tower arches, above the present choir stalls. This gallery—it was also the musicians' gallery—was taken down in 1820 and the present ringing chamber fitted. Tradition has it that it was once an

armoury where pikes, muskets and swords belonging to the parish were stored.

Accounts books contain many references to the bells and bellringers. The most interesting entries are probably those concerning the merry peals rung at the time of the restoration of the monarchy, when the ringers received a new set of bell-ropes and a gift of 10s. each. Another entry of the same period records the receipt of 18s. from the "Scholmaster for ringing the six o'clock bell three years."

Mr. Norris' book reproduces the following inventory from the ringing chamber:

GT. BERKAMPSTEAD PEAL OF BELLS T. Mears Fecit, 1838.

Approx. Inches		Cwt.	qr.	lb.
46½	Tenor	17	2	24
41	VII	11	3	37
38	VI	9	1	20
36	V	8	2	21
33½	IV	7	0	20
32	III	7	0	6
30	II	5	1	19
29	Treble	5	3	1
		Cwt.		0 26

The little "ting-tang" bell still in daily use does not, of course, form part of the regular peal. It was purchased in 1851, and was probably the successor of a similar bell referred to in the Easter accounts of 1766, when £4 10s. (and 9s. carriage) was paid for a new saints' bell.

Embarrassing Moments

On two occasions the ringing of the bells of St. Peter's has been the cause of some embarrassment.

The late Mr. G. H. Whybrow, in his "History of Berkhamsted Common," recalls that at the end of the lawsuit which followed the attempted enclosure of the Common in 1866, the church bells of Berkhamsted rang out in "what was obviously a peal of triumph—without the permission of the rector, who at once disclaimed any responsibility. Apparently it was merely a case of

'They went and told the sexton,
And the sexton toll'd the bell,'

and correspondence in the county Press shows that some of the local residents strongly disapproved of such a public expression of their elation. Colonel Algernon Smith Dorrien, when he heard that Lord Brownlow regarded the bell-ringing as a personal matter, wrote to him to explain that it simply expressed the people's pleasure that the 'Common was open again.' Lord Brownlow's reply was admirable. He wrote: 'I cannot say how pleased and grateful I am with your kind and friendly letter... I should indeed have been grieved if the friendly feeling between my neighbours and myself had been disturbed...'

The Invasion Warning

On another occasion St. Peter's had the dubious distinction of being one of the few churches (perhaps the only

one) to sound an "invasion warning." It will be recalled that at the time of Dunkirk the ringing of church bells was forbidden, save to give warning of the presence of enemy troops in the district. On a beautifully sunny day in July, 1940, the parishioners of Berkhamsted were surprised and possibly a little startled to hear the bells toll the dreaded warning. What happened was that an Observer Corps unit had detected some objects in the sky which looked suspiciously like parachutists. Appropriate action was taken, and the bell was tolled before it was ascertained that the suspicious objects in the sky were puffs of smoke from rocket signals fired experimentally at Brock's works, near Hemel Hempstead!

The bells of St. Peter's have once again been silenced, but this time for purely practical and domestic reasons. For some years the peal had been unsatisfactory, but in a few weeks' time, thanks to the generosity of the parishioners, there will be a peal to do credit to the expert work of an enthusiastic team of ringers, captained by Mr. Herbert Porrett and consisting of Mr. S. T. Chappell, Mr. F. Leach, Mr. P. Pocock, Mr. L. Mitchell, Mr. P. Mitchell, Mrs. E. Savory, Miss L. R. Wells, Miss Joan Rogers, and Miss Olive Martin.

A Holy Office

To conclude, it may be appropriate to quote the preface to a register of bellringers commenced at Easter, 1874, and signed by the then rector, the Rev. J. W. Cobb: "The Belfry is part of the Church, and is consecrated to the service of Almighty God. The bells are instruments of sacred music and should be to the parish at large what the organ is to the congregation assembled in church. They should toll forth the praises of God and awaken solemn thoughts in the hearts of all who hear them. The office, therefore, of Ringer is a holy office, and should ever be performed in a reverent manner."

REX CINEMA CAFÉ

Luncheons —
PARTIES CA

Hours 9 a.m.
to 6 p.m.

139 HIGH STREET

Luncheons —

Proprietress: D. COATES

For Wedding
and
Birthday Cakes

AND CONFECTIONER

Speciality:

VIENNA BREAD & ROLLS
made from an old
Viennese Recipe

T, BERKHAMSTED

Deliveries Daily

trical—For Home, Factory,
Halls & Institutions

ER INSTALLATIONS
— RADIO
WATER SOFTENERS

and estimates submitted.

Electrical Contractors'
satisfactory service.

LARKE LTD.

GENERAL ENGINEERS
BERKHAMSTED

160