

THE STORY OF THE CHILD OKEFORD BELLS by L. L. J.

A series of 6 articles originally printed in *The Hill* in 1969

Part 1: May

*"..... How sweet the sound of village bells
Now loud as welcomes! faint, now, as farewells"*

Thomas Hood

The bells of our village church, heard through the warmth of a summer Sunday, augmenting countless other country sounds, or perhaps swelling and fading through the darkness of a blustery winter's night have a haunting appeal which few can fail to appreciate. They are there, part and parcel of our life, 'summoning good people all to church', announcing occasions happy, important and sometimes, alas, sad, but always tunefully.

Does one ever stop to think why they are there or how they came there? Or are they perhaps taken a little too much for granted? Speaking to our verger one Sunday I was attracted by an unusual badge he wore on the lapel of his coat. It was in the shape of a cross formed by four bells, each bearing an initial - S,D,G,R. Curious I asked the significance and found the letters stood for Salisbury Diocesan Guild of Ringers; he was, of course, one of that small band of devoted workers which gives us the music of the bells so regularly and expertly.

But more of the ringers anon, for this chance enquiry set me off on what proved a fascinating and exciting search into the history of the Child Okeford bells.

There were, of course, bells in the old tower long before the present peal was installed but apparently they were neglected and seldom used; one was cracked, the other two dangerously thin. And so it comes that in March 1887 we find the parish fathers printing and publishing a four-page handbill; I have a copy before me as I write. It declares that Child Okeford intends to have a new peal of church bells to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign. The cost was to be £400 but it is characteristic of such estimates that this figure was considerably exceeded before the reckoning was made.

The handbill ends with a stirring call to action:

"Let us all pull together, make a united effort and show future generations that when the Jubilee of Queen Victoria took place the men and women of Childe Okeford were proud of their Queen, proud of their parish, and not afraid to spend money in a good cause."

Truly they were prophetic words for in just over a year Child Okeford's new bells were echoing round Harnbledon Hill to everyone's delight, But much happened in between, as I hope to show in the next issue.

Part 2: June

*"What is a church? - Our honest sexton tells,
'Tis a tall building with a tower and bells."*

It is March 1887 and Child Okeford has determined to install a new peal of bells in the church tower to commemorate the fiftieth year of Queen Victoria's reign.

Although detailed records are not available there is no doubt that matters moved through the usual parochial channels. H, Syndercombe Bower Esq. of Fontmell Parva, one of the church wardens, appears to have been responsible for obtaining estimates for the work. No doubt he and his brother warden, a Mr. Rossiter, the Rector (the Revd.J.G. Brymer) and other church officers met in solemn conclave and discussed ways and means at some length for it is not until December 1887 that an estimate was at last received from The Whitechapel Bell Foundry, London.

This document is a fascinating example of business transactions in those days. It is beautifully inscribed on a strong legal paper in copperplate handwriting with many flourishes and embellishments; the ink is almost as black today as when it was put to the paper over eighty years ago.

The Foundry had sent a representative from London to inspect the tower and the first two pages of the estimate consist of his findings and recommendations. Of the three existing bells one was cracked and the other two of insufficient thickness; these, he suggested, should be recast and others added. There was room in the Bell Chamber for a peal of six bells with a Tenor in E of 18 cwt.

Mention is also made of a chiming apparatus which would enable one person to chime the whole peal; the cost would be £4 per bell. A less expensive form of gear at £2. 10. 0. per bell consisted of a rope fixed to the tail of each bell hammer. Despite an assurance that the latter gear had been satisfactorily fixed at Marnhull, Child Okeford, prompted no doubt by a sense of superiority, chose the more expensive type!

All this preamble is followed by a concise and explicit estimate of the charges. The following is a brief summary:

"Six bells ranging from a Tenor of 18 cwts to a Treble of 6 cwts	
65 cwts @ 7 guineas per cwt	£481.8.6
Less allowance for the old bells	<u>£160.2.6</u>
	£321. 6.0
Six sets of fittings (clappers, wheels, gunmetal bearings, ropes, etc.)	£ 61.10.0
Taking down old bells erecting new ones on English Oak framework, carriage, etc.	<u>£115. 0.0</u>
	£497. 16.0

It is interesting to note that this estimate was subject to variation as the charge would be based on the actual weight of the new peal after erection and tuning.

The mind boggles at the thought of this estimate translated into today's prices, with a devalued pound, purchase tax, S.E.T., road haulage charges, etc. However, even in those days the raising of such a sum must have presented a formidable task, yet more than half the amount was soon forthcoming. Says a local paper of the day "Subscriptions (for the work) were most liberally offered by the Rector, the surrounding gentry, farmers, etc."

On the strength of this offer of support the estimate was accepted and the work put in hand early in 1888. And no one could have expected the speed with which the order would be executed!

Part 3: July

*" Those evening bells
How many a tale their music tells."*

Thomas Moore

Early in January 1888 Child Okeford church officials finally placed an order with the Whitechapel Bell Foundry for a new peal of six bells. All they could do now was to sit back and wait for the happy time when their plans became reality.

Sit back, did I say? Hardly had they time to settle in their chairs. The casting, tuning and hanging of bells must have been as stream-lined as conditions permitted in those days for the work was completed before the end of April!

The local newspaper does not appear to have considered the speedy work noteworthy for it tersely comments "... the order for casting the bells was given to a firm in Whitechapel at the beginning of the year... The work was expeditiously and satisfactorily carried out by the end of April, when the Bishop, having been consulted, nominated the 11th May as the day he would dedicate the bells to God's service."

Three short months only - and the pattern makers had planned, the furnaces had glowed, the molten metal had run into the moulds, workmen had scrambled about our church tower on their wooden scaffolding, lowering and lifting the heavy bells by what would now be regarded as primitive pulleys; horses had clip-clopped through the Child Okeford lanes drawing their heavy loads of bell metal and good English Oak - three short months only to provide that wonderful new peal of bells and the only comment was "the work has been expeditiously and satisfactorily carried out". That reporter might have worked up a little enthusiasm for what we future generations (as that first handbill called us) now look on as a small miracle.

Perhaps one should recall that industry of those days did not suffer prolonged stoppages, wildcat or otherwise; and it might be a satisfactory reflection that, in the event, only the bells went on strike.

The dedication ceremony must have been a moving and inspiring event. My information is gleaned from a yellow press-cutting almost a column long, which shows in the top margin the word "EXPRESS". I wonder which Express it was - London, Salisbury, Dorchester? (Certainly it was not the Daily Express for that had still to be founded).

It is safe to assume that May 11th, 1888 was a fine day for the cutting, headed "Child Okeford's New Bells" gives an account of the "slow procession to the church of the choir, with about 18 of the local clergy, with the Bishop in the centre". We can picture the long line of men and boys in their cassocks and white surplices, the clergy with perhaps a touch of colour here and there in their hoods and stoles, and the gold braid of the Bishop's cope and mitre glinting in the sun as the procession made its dignified way to the church gates, Then the picturesque and ancient ceremony of the Bishop knocking three times on the large west doors with the butt of his crosier and the doors being duly opened by the churchwardens.

The procession passed into the church, which was "full to repletion" to the singing of a hymn. There follows an almost verbatim report of the Bishop's sermon, long and solemn as befitted the occasion, and the report ends with a note that the collection amounted to £11. 14. 0, and that the names of the Rector, the Revd. J.G. Brymer, and the churchwardens are inscribed on the bells with the words "To the Glory of God".

How those bells must have sent their joyous message ringing round the village and along the length of Hambledon as the solemn dedication ended. The good workers of Whitechapel had done their task well - but it was not the end of their association with the Child Okeford Bells.

Part 4: August

"Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky!"

Tennyson

Last month we left the congregation streaming from church after the consecration service with the new bells merrily ringing their first peals. It was May 11th 1888. One cannot help but wonder whether Churchwarden H. Syndercombe Bower, seated in his carriage as his horses trotted him back to Fontmell Parva, took a thoughtful look at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry's account. For, with their customary promptness, this had been dispatched to him a fortnight previously.

Dated April 27th it is an enlightening document; followers of these articles will remember the original estimate (subject to variation) was £497. 16. 0. Their final account was for £501. 9.4., but this included an extra £24 for the chiming apparatus so actually the account was about £20 less than the estimate. The difference was in the charge for the bells themselves which, being slightly lighter than anticipated, were £300.19.0. against the estimated figure of £321. 6. 0.

The account must have presented a heavy burden for the church authorities to meet. I wonder if they derived any comfort from the comparison of their own three-and-a-quarter tons of bells with the 16 tons of "Great Paul" the heaviest bell in England, which had been cast and hung in St. Paul's Cathedral a year or two earlier? Or the 12 tons of Big Ben, another contemporary, whose clapper alone weighs 6 cwt. Fortunately, local generosity was equal to the demand and the receipt, dated 5th July 1888 is signed over a mauve penny stamp showing the young Queen Victoria whose fiftieth year of reign the bells commemorated.

So Child Okeford settled down with its new bells. They would welcome the seasons as the years passed; no doubt they tolled for the passing of good Queen Victoria, rejoiced at great national events such as the relief of Mafeking, the ending of the Boer War, the coronation of Edward VII. And among the records of that time we come across another document relating to the bells from our old friends the Bell Foundry. It is a bill addressed to the Rector, the Revd. J.G. Brymer, Child Okeford Rectory, Shillingstone. Dated June 29th 1907, it is for lifting the bells, adjusting the gudgeons, setting the bells level in the headstock and several other technical items to a total cost of £18.12. 0. Evidently Child Okeford was in the Foundry's good books for there was a 10% discount from this bill. Good settlers as ever, the Church holds a receipt dated 27th August 1907 written over a red penny stamp showing Edward VII in all his bearded glory.

The treasurer of that day has added to the foot of the bill an item "smith, £2. 12. 0.". Whether a payment to a Mr. Smith or for some work done by the local blacksmith is not known, but a pencilled annotation in the margin will bring a sympathetic shake of the head from today's treasurer:

Foundry	16.	15.	0.
Smith	<u>2.</u>	<u>12.</u>	<u>0.</u>
	19.	7.	0.
Subscriptions	<u>19.</u>	<u>4.</u>	<u>0.</u>
Deficit	<u>3.</u>	<u>0.</u>	<u>0.</u>

Information about our bells is sadly lacking during the next half century and we can only assume they were put to full and good use. For instance, they must have welcomed the end of World War 1 in 1918 and marked such events as the passing of Edward VII, the coronation of George V and later of his son, George VI.

And we can feel for the village when church bells were silenced in 1939. Sadly enough they were silenced for longer than the duration of World War 2 and it must have been getting on for 1950 before Dr. R.M. Taylor, the Rector, prevailed on local men to form a team and get the bells ringing again.

But there is one last document worthy of note in the archives of the bells. This is a neatly printed card, dated June 2nd 1953 when the team rang "a quarter peal of 1,260 Grandsire Doubles" to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The team was:

C. Pike,	Treble	J. Foote,	3	A. Hart,	5
A. Dunn,	2	G. Eagle,	4	W.Trevitt,	Tenor
Conducted by		A. Hart			

What, one may well ask, is a quarter peal of 1,260 Grandsire Doubles? We have traced the story of our bells and it is now time we met the present team of ringers; perhaps they will explain.

Part 5: September

"The bells they sound so clear,.. A happy noise to hear"

A.E.Houseman

The indebtedness of the village to its team of bell ringers should, in all fairness, be acknowledged occasionally - a thought which sent me (in some temerity, I confess) to watch our keen and volunteer ringers practicing on a recent Thursday evening. It had been one of those hot, cloudless days in mid-August and it was pleasant to enter the cool church to watch and listen to the experts at their practice. I went with one question - about that 'quarter peal of 1,260 Grandsire Doubles' - and left with sufficient material to fill a further five articles.

One surprising fact emerged very soon; the present team has some two hundred years of bell ringing between them. The four senior members can claim 184 years; Messrs, A. Dunn (66), G. Eagle (40), C. Pike (40) and L. Ridout (38). Then the more recent members, Messrs, Gerald and Roger Ridout, Miss Susan Ridout, with the Rector as 'twelfth man' who stands in in emergencies, can add quite a few years between them. Also on the strength but not at present ringing are Miss Judy Wareham, now in the W.R.N.S., and Mrs H. Tuffin, whose father was captain of the Child Okeford bells for many years. A more recent captain was Mr. A, Hart whose death in 1967 was a sad loss to the team.

To that two hundred years of bell ringing should be added another 50, the length of service which can be claimed by Mr. Dennis of Shroton who has been, and still is, closely connected with the Child Okeford bells. It was he who taught several of the present ringers the art of campanology (a rather grand word for bell-ringing from the Italian 'campana', a bell, which, incidentally, gives us such names as 'campanula' a bell-shaped flower and 'campanero' a bird with a call like the note of a church bell). Mr. Dennis surprised me with the fact that during his years of bell ringing he has taught some 150 other ringers. Plainly, bell ringing is an art which, like any other pursuit, has to be learnt and practiced; but all the team stressed the pleasure derived from putting their knowledge to practical use once the intricacies have been mastered.

Practice over we gathered round the font and I put my query to them; and here I have to confess that the ringers had a hard task in explaining to me the meaning of that 'quarter peal of 1,260 Grandsire Doubles'. The nearest I can get to a simple explanation is that pealing the bells is akin to a mathematical permutation, where the order in which a ringer rings his bell is continually changed. They confounded me with terms such as 'single dodging' and 'double dodging'; they explained how the ringers go 'hunting'; and, rather in desperation I think, they produced a large board filled with many rows of changing numbers such as:

1	2	3	4	5	6	
2	1	3	4	5	6	
2	1	4	3	5	6	etc

which might be transposed for the piano as

E	D	C	B	A	G	
D	E	C	B	A	G	
D	E	B	C	A	G	etc

Here and there the board is marked with "Bob" or "Single". I gathered it is the conductor's duty to "call" the bobs and singles and keep the ringers on the proper course of changes.

There are many different peals which have enchanting names such as Cambridge Surprise, Reverse Canterbury Pleasure, Plain Bob Cinques, Stedman Triples, Superlative Surprise, The complete peal of Grandsire Doubles with which we were concerned has 5,040 changes and takes 3½ hours to ring; the quarter peal rung for the Coronation took an hour or so.

I left this kindly band of workers blinded with science but full of admiration for their expertise and the way in which they give so much of their time for our benefit and pleasure. To anyone interested in the subject I would recommend a novel by Dorothy Sayers called "The Nine Tailors" which, in addition to being a gripping whodunit, manages to include a mass of interesting information on campanology.

It was intended to complete these articles this month but I have received several interesting letters and enquiries which should be answered; accordingly, I have begged space in the next issue for a final postscript to the series.

May I conclude this month with an appeal on behalf of the Child Okeford Team. New members are urgently needed to carry on this good work. Anyone interested in learning to ring should contact Mr. L. Rideout or any member of the team; teachers are ready and anxious to show newcomers the ropes, if you will pardon an unintentional pun. Practices are held on alternate Thursday evenings at the church and the team, all of which are voluntary workers and are affiliated to the Salisbury Diocesan Guild of Ringers, visit other churches to ring, have an annual dinner in the village and promote other social activities.

Part 6: October

The interest shown in the articles on the history of our present peal of bells has been gratifying; this final article will try to answer a few queries and pass on items of interest received.

How the bells were brought to Child Okeford.

This query really arose from a discussion with the Rector. It had been assumed they came by rail from London and were collected from a G.W.R. or Southern Railway station by horse and dray. But it was suggested they could have come by water to Poole Harbour and thence by road. There was only one way to settle the matter - ask the bell makers. A letter was sent to Whitechapel and within a couple of days a reply was received which, for its interest and conciseness, suggested that receiving enquiries about how they conducted their business nearly a hundred years ago was an everyday affair.

".. On referring to our daybook in 1888, this includes the words 'carriage and all charges'. If the bells were sent by sea to Poole and then by road, we would expect to see an entry covering freightage and dock dues in addition to carriage. We therefore think it unlikely they went the way you suggest but that they went the more conventional way, "

(The promptness and brevity of their letter was rather staggering until one noticed the letter heading: "Whitechapel Bell Foundry Ltd, (A. D. 1570)" What is an eighty-year-old query to a four-hundred-year-old firm)

The Chimer

A query was received as to what happened to the chiming apparatus fitted with the bells which enabled one person to chime the whole peal. After some investigation it was found that the bells were re-hung in 1928 and the firm that undertook the work employed two local craftsmen, Mr. J. Jackson (for many years captain of the Child Okeford bells) and his son, Ron Jackson. It was at this time that the chimer wires and hammers were disconnected although the six playing handles are still in the wall of the clockroom in the tower.

A family team

A reader comments on the fact that the present team includes four of one family (Mr. L.Ridout and his sons and daughter). This apparently is no record; for several years in the early thirties the Okeford Fitzpaine team consisted of members of one family only - Mr.Ridout Senior

Tunes on the Bells

More than one enquiry about playing tunes on the bells. This is, of course, possible and with the chimer would have been an easy if mechanical, method. Mr. Dennis, of Shroton, demonstrated on the handbells using only six. "Now the day is over" for instance requires only five consecutive bells - G down to C - but our bells are tuned from C down to E which makes tune playing a more complicated problem. No suitable hymn has come to mind so far but no doubt the team is open to suggestions.

The fascination of the bells

The sound of church bells has a greater appeal than is sometimes realised by we who are lucky enough to hear them regularly. The latest report of the Salisbury Diocesan Guild of Ringers records details of some 128 churches in the diocese with the number, pitch and weight of the bells of each and with the names of hundreds of ringers.

Ample proof of how lucky our village is was found in a largish parish church not so many miles away where, under three ropes by the west door, a small notice was hanging which read:

BELL RINGING
123 Left to right
or (if more ambitious)
2123

And here we take a regretful farewell to the story of our bells. It has been an exciting and engrossing experience delving into the history of the bells and the tower and if the articles have quickened interest in them and a new appreciation of the team of ringers they have at least fulfilled their original intention. Since each started with what was hoped were apt quotations it is fitting to end with one.

"Start at the beginning" said the King severely "and go on until you get to the end. Then stop".

