

A Brief History of the Hand Bells & Ringing in Wragby

By Ann Harris.

In 2005 Jim Sutherland, our then Tower Captain, asked if any of the Wragby Bell Ringers were interested in hand bell ringing, Pauline Cooper & I (Ann Harris) said we were, so Jim asked the late Mr Vaughan Evans of Grantham if he would restore the hand bells which had been lying in a cupboard in the Church tower for many years. We then advertised in the Parish magazine and ten people responded. At this time six people responded namely - Elaine Eccles, Christine Brackenbury, Bob Clark, Joan Robinson, Pauline Cooper and myself Ann Harris.

Unfortunately none of us knew anything about hand bells and few could read music, but undeterred we carried on although we had no teacher. Then we discovered that the music for 12 bells is written in the Key of C and our bells are in the Key of F. After some trial and errors the bells were relabelled putting them into the Key of C and eventually we made some progress. Also one or two people visited us when we were practising and gave useful advice.

The 13 bells we found were not really a set, but were adequate for change ringing. Having relabelled them we could now play them. 8 of the bells were cast by Robert Wells of Albourne in Wiltshire. He started manufacturing hand bells in 1755 and was joined by his son, Robert in 1775, who carried on the business until 1798. Both Roberts marked their bells with R.W. on the inside. Mr. Evans said that this mark could be found inside 4 of the bells. The other 5 bells were cast by Warner of London 1850 - 1924. The whole set of bells has been worked on by Warner. All 3 bells had the bell size in Roman numerals on the shaft of their clapper put there by Warners.

At the end of January 2010 the bells were taken by Bob Bailey to Taylors of Loughborough to be refurbished. They were returned in March 2010. Bell 13 has been recast.

Notes on the Discovered Hand Bells at All Saints Wragby.

By Vaughan P Evans

The Bells

Set of thirteen hand bells in the key of F - tenor size 19F

- Eight of the bells (16B flat, 14D, 13E, 12F, 11G, 10A, 9B flat and 8C) were cast by Robert Wells of Aldbourne, Wiltshire.
- Five of the bells (19F, 18G, 17A, 15C and 7D) were cast by Warner of London.

All bells have been fitted with Warner clappers, handles and caps that show the Warner stamps.

Historical Notes

Robert Wells (d1781) started manufacturing Hand bells in 1755. He was joined by his son Robert Wells junior in 1775 who carried on the business until 1798, Robert junior's son, James Wells, joined in 1790 until 1820. Both Roberts marked their bells with raised letters RW on the inside of the bell - *this mark can be found inside 11G to 8C*. They cast in iron staples inside the head of their bells but these staples were snapped off when the bells were to be tuned and made into musical hand bells. Lots of their small bells were used for agricultural purposes with an iron clapper suspended from the cast iron staple. The eight Well's bells in this set all have all the cast in iron staples snapped off.

Robert Wells was the first hand bell founder to number his castings, he cast sets of three octaves which he numbered 1C (high) to 22C (low). How he came by these numbers is not certain, he either numbered his smallest bell 1 and went down to 22 or, because his largest bell was 22 inches in circumference he numbered it 22 and went up. Robert's system of numbering bell castings is still used by the present British Hand bell Manufacturers. As the range of bells available has increased downwards so have the numbers to 32G, as bells have gone upwards - the next octave is numbered 07D to 01C, the next 007D to 001C and some even 0007D - 0004G.

Warner London - made Hand bells from 1850 to 1924.

The whole set has been worked on by Warner's, they all have Warner clappers - Warner's filed the bell size in Roman numerals on the shaft of their clappers, as can be seen in all thirteen bells. I suspect Warner's tuned Robert Wells 15C to B flat, possibly because it was already sounding below C and took the Well's 9B down to B flat to match, adding a new Warner 15C and Warner 19F - 18G and 17A to the bottom and a 7D to the top to make the set into thirteen bells for simple tune ringing.

Change Ringing

- Two Peals of Six 19F to 140 (heavy) and 12F to 7D (light)
- Peal of Eight 18F to 12F
- Peal of Ten 18F to 10A
- Peal of Twelve 19F to 8C

Tune Ringing

Lots of music is published for twelve bells, in numerical and staff notation, which can be rung on this set of Hand bells without the need of accidental notes e.g. F#, C#, etc...