

Peals and Chimes

The bells of St. Mary's Lydiard Tregoze

You have to be intrepid to climb the wooden ladder into St. Mary's bell chamber. I haven't done so for many years but artist in residence Felicity Cormack took up the challenge in 2019, sketching the great bells as well as the churches enthusiastic team of ringers. Not used to the limelight Lydiard's ringers found themselves 'on exhibition' at the church's 'Angels Buckets and Bells' exhibition at Swindon Museum and Art Gallery earlier this year.



Tower Captain at the time Jenny Moore said 'It was fascinating to watch Felicity at work and to see the sketches in charcoal, paint or chinks that she had produced at the end of each evening she was with us'.



Sir John St. John 1st Bart.
d. 1648

This naturally led to more of a discussion about the Lydiard bells. How old were they? What do we know about them? The earliest Lydiard's bells are (no's 2, 3 & 4 in the ring) are dated 1635 and bear the manufacturers name, Roger Purdue of Bristol. They were most probably the gift of Sir John St. John 1st Baronet, who undertook extensive works to enlarge and adorn the church in the 17th Century.

In 1701 the Tenor, (no 6) weighing 11cwt. 2qrs. 20lb, was cast or recast by William and Robert Cor, Bell Founders of Aldbourne and is richly decorated. It bears the names of the then Churchwardens, John Neate and Thomas Pike. Another bell (no 5) is the work of Abraham Ruddell of Gloucester and is dated 1757.

During the latter part of the 19th Century the Tregoze bells must have been showing their age yet this was not addressed when the building was comprehensively restored in 1901. By the late 1920's the situation had significantly worsened.

Bell no 5 was cracked and corroded, the wooden bell wheel ravaged by death watch beetle and the ceiling and floor of the bell chamber rotten, all of which made it too dangerous to ring. Instead, for over thirty years only a single Minute Bell was chimed for Sunday services, latterly by Mrs Large, remembered by former ringer and church organist Malcolm Titcombe as '*a pillar of the church*'.

I was once told that in November 1943, American GI's from the Lydiard Park Hospital Camp (101st Airborne Division) broke into the church and chimed the bell, causing some consternation being the signal for a German invasion. They certainly got into the House, doing some petty damage and inscribing their names in leadwork on the roof. Perhaps it was the mansion's service bell they tolled. We do know that the camp's commanding officer marched the offenders to church on the following Sunday.



Roll on to November 1964 and after several years of church fundraising led by Brian Carne, Vicar of St. Mary's and founder of the Friends of Lydiard Park, £1,700 was raised to restore the bells. They were duly removed to the Whitechapel Foundry where a new cast iron frame was forged, bell no 5 recast and the whole ring tuned to the key of F sharp. In addition a new Treble bell was forged by John Taylor & Co of Loughborough, giving the church a peal of six – as many as it has space for. The new no 6 bears the

inscription: *IN MEMORY OF CANON W. H. WILLETS, LATE RECTOR, AND EDITH HIS WIFE /The Lord preserve thy going out and thy coming in/ 1964*

Restoring the bells had called for a team of ringers and these were soon recruited, spending months practising in Lydiard Millicent Church in readiness for their re-installation at St. Mary's.

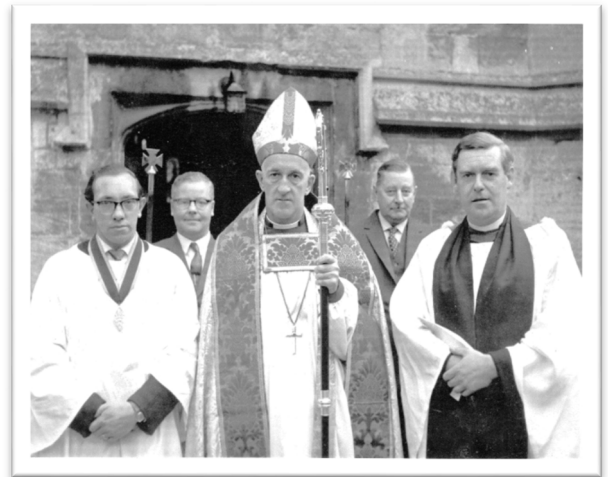
The return of the bells to St. Mary's was celebrated in a service of dedication overseen by the Bishop of Malmesbury which was widely reported in the local press. A congregation of 330 packed the church and a collection of over £100 meant the church reached the total cost of £1,800.



Lydiard Tregoze ringers: Back row L to R: Roland Gough, Roger Hancock, Andrew Blunt, Joe Ricketts, and Malcolm Titcombe. Front row L to R: Bob Hatch and Sidney Bowler. November 1964

Guests included the Mayor and Mayoress of Swindon, members of the St. John family and other local dignitaries. Tea was served afterwards in Lydiard House.

Most surprising to discover was the presence of Lieutenant General K. E. Pletcher, Deputy Surgeon General of the United States Air Force, and his wife. Sadly we can no longer ask Brian Carne why the most senior Medical Service Officer in the US Air Force at the time was in attendance.



The Right Rev. C. L. Bishop, Bishop of Malmesbury (centre), pictured before the dedication of the bells service. L to R: Godfrey Parsons (Lay Reader), Sidney Bowler (Church Warden), Harry Faulkenbridge (Church Warden), and Rev. Brian Carne. 1964.



Lieutenant General K. E. Pletcher, Surgeon General of the United States Airforce d. 2005

An official US military biography states that in 1957 Kenneth Pletcher 'was assigned in the UK as base commander at Royal Air Force Station (of nearby) Burderop Park and commander of 7505th U.S. Air Force Hospital'. Perhaps he had worshipped at St. Mary's during his assignment. Surely this wasn't atonement for the misdemeanours of Lydiard's GI's? It would be fascinating to know.

In 2000 St. Mary's bell ringers joined ringers across the country, pealing loudly to mark 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus Christ and announcing the New Millennium and they have been ringing happily ever since till Covid19 intervened. At the time of writing the bells still peal on Sunday mornings but only three people can be in the tower at any one time and two need to be from the same household. Bell practice is not permitted. Let's hope it isn't too many months before Jenny and her team are free to ring a celebratory peal again.

Article by Sarah Finch-Crisp



Tenor bell (no 6), 1701 with decorative features

Sources

Various newspaper cuttings (1964/ 2000) on Ringing Room notice boards

Conversations with Mr Malcolm Titcombe, former bell ringer and organist at St. Mary's Church

<https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104981/lieutenant-general-kenneth-e-pletcher/>