

The Bells of St Mary Redcliffe

The bells of St Mary Redcliffe are one of the finest rings in the world. This is the heaviest ring of bells in any parish church in Britain and the sixth heaviest in the country when you include Cathedrals, Abbeys etc, with the tenor (the heaviest bell) weighing just over 2 ½ tons. People travel from all over the country to ring these bells.

The inscription on the tenor bell sums up the purpose of all church bells:

“COME WHEN I CALL TO SERVE GOD ALL”

The present ring of 12 bells was installed in the tower in 1903, and has been rung regularly almost every Sunday since. The oldest bell is the eleventh, which was cast in 1622 by Purdue and weighs 25 cwt. It has been rung in this place of worship for over 350 years. The newest bell was recast in 1969.

Since the ring of twelve was installed, two more bells were added (an extra treble and a flat sixth) so that a true diatonic scale can be rung without using the heaviest bells. This is useful for teaching people to ring methods, and on those occasions when only a few ringers are available.

Now our new eighth bell has been added (weighing just over three quarters of a ton). It replaces the previous eighth bell, which has become our new sanctus bell, rung to mark the consecration of the bread and wine at the Eucharist. The new bell was cast during 2012 when the nation celebrated Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee, so it is inscribed to commemorate the Jubilee and bears the Royal Arms on one side (the Queen gave permission that all bells cast by Taylors during the Diamond Jubilee year could have the Royal Arms on them). On the other side of the bell the Taylors badge appears and the words “Te Deum”.

The Te Deum is an ancient hymn of joy and thanksgiving in praise to God, used regularly at Matins. It and was often called the Ambrosian Hymn because of its traditional association with St Ambrose. It probably dates from the 4th century and is generally now accredited to Nicetas, Bishop of Remesiana.

“Te Deum laudamas: te Dominum confitemur

Te aeternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur.....”

Which can be translated as:

“We praise thee O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord

All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting.....”

St Mary Redcliffe’s bells are normally rung twice every Sunday, before the 9.30am and the 6.30pm services. A single tolled bell is used to summon worshippers to weekday communion services.

The bells are also used for special services, such as weddings, funerals, memorial services, civic services, liturgical seasonal services and festivals (such as Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Easter etc). They are also rung to commemorate important national and other occasions (for instance, in 2007 a full peal was rung to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1707).

Any ringers visiting Bristol are welcome to come to our tower. Please contact the Ringing Master Tony Bulteel tel: 0117 924 5494 mobile 07702 836742. Practice night is Thursday.

The public can visit the tower, ringing chamber and bells on special open days, such as Doors Open Day in September see www.bristoldoorsopenday.org or by appointment with the ringers.

English bell ringing is unique to this country. The bells at St Mary Redcliffe help teach new generations of ringers to ensure this fine tradition remains alive and engaged in its purpose of calling of people to the worship of God. There is a weekly ringing practice, which facilitates the recruitment and training of new ringers and the development of the skills of existing ringers and also allows visiting ringers to experience these magnificent bells.

The bells also facilitate public education about English bell ringing and church bells. On occasions pre booked organised parties make visits to the ringing chamber to see ringing in action and small groups can be given tours of the bellchamber (visits are conducted under strictly supervised conditions, in limited number groups led by expert leaders). At special events, like Doors Open Day, it is possible for members of the public to have particular access to the bells and ringing – in controlled, limited numbers, visits to the tower and through live image links, to screens at ground floor level (the latter facilitating access for all).

The **St Mary Redcliffe Guild of Bellringers** was founded in 1948 and was formed to foster the spirit of fellowship amongst the church's ringers "in order that they shall ring the bells for Sunday services and special occasions".

These notes are by Cecile Gillard