

The Bells of St. Mary's, Hawkesbury

St. Mary's Church, Hawkesbury has always had bells to call the faithful to services from the days when it was the lead church in this area for the Benedictines of Pershore Abbey.

The original oak bell frame, which remains in the Tower, dates from the 14th century and is one of the best-preserved 14th C bell frames in the country. It originally housed five bells but four of them were removed in the past, most probably by the Boteler (or Butler) family who owned the Manor of Hawkesbury following the Reformation. Today only four complete pits remain. The tenor bell is thought to have been around 28 Cwt. which made it probably one of the heaviest rings of five in the country at the time.

In 2015 the Quinquennial Review of the Church identified urgent repairs which needed to be made to the Tower. Funds had already been accumulated for this work but much more money needed to be raised.

In December 2017 a local business man, John Appleby, raised the question of installing a new ring of bells in St Mary's Tower. He was very keen to revive a ring of bells at St. Mary's.

The possible installation of a new ring of bells had been examined by Matthew Higby, a bell engineer, in 2002 and a proposal was made, at that time, to transfer the redundant peal of six bells from St Werburgh's Church in Baptist Mills, Bristol. It would require a new bell frame and fittings sited below the existing bell frame. Unfortunately, the scheme came to nothing because it was found that the St Werburgh's bells were not worth re-siting.

A Diocese meeting was held at St. Mary's Church on 27 February 2018 to discuss the revival of the bells project and discuss the proposed tower repairs. At that time two separate projects were underway - the need for repairs to the church tower costing around £130,000 and the idea of a new set of bells which John Appleby had begun to sponsor.

A structural report on the tower, conducted in March 2018, established that eight bells could be hung safely. As a result, the Parochial Church Council asked Matthew Higby and Co. to provide an estimate for the installation of a ring of eight bells. Although some thought had been given to a combined tower structural repair and a bells project, at that time each project was pursued independently.

Work continued with fundraising by both the PCC and the Friends of St. Mary's, Hawkesbury - the Church fundraising body. There was also a lot of facilitating work during 2018 such as obtaining various licences etc.

On 24 January 2019 the Diocese again met on site to consider the way ahead and at that meeting the Hawkesbury bells project received Diocese approval.

By now it was becoming clear that a new ringing chamber - just above the Vestry - would be required for the bells project. This would have an impact on the Vestry work planned as a part of the tower restructuring project and meant that some parts of the bell installation project had to be combined with the tower repairs. A Faculty giving approval for the tower and bells work was issued on 9 September 2019.

At this time funds were coming in quite well with considerable financial support from John Appleby and a large number of grant bodies and strangely none from the Lottery Heritage Fund which wasn't interested. Mathew Higby and Co. was contracted to install a newly

casted ring of eight bells at St. Mary's Church, Hawkesbury. A momentous time for us all.

Thus started a huge project the like of which had not been seen at Hawkesbury since the 14th century. Close to £300,000 was spent on the joint project to install a new set of bells, build a new ringing chamber, redesign and refurbish the vestry and to make substantial structural repairs to the outside of the Tower. Almost half of the funds were provided by John and Stephanie Appleby and their family for which we will always be grateful.

Matthew Higby and Co. had an arrangement with Emanuele Allanconi in Milan and it was decided to have the Hawkesbury Bells cast there.

Allanconi is a family business which makes use of artisan methods and local raw materials such as clay, hemp, beeswax and horsehair. They believe the true ability of a craftsman is to work with skilled hands, on simple materials, in order to turn them into unique product. Their ethos comes from the awareness that the quality, the uniqueness of the sound and the appearance of an artisan artifact can never be replaced by an industrialised product.

The profiles of the Hawkesbury Bells were developed by Benjamin Kipling of Matthew Higby and Co. and are based on a standard English profile. Matthew Higby and Co. also provided the Bell Metal to Emanuele Allanconi and dictated the exact ratio of constituents, so they had complete control over all aspects of the bell production. Matthew Higby and Co.'s attention to detail shows in what are now, arguably, one of the finest sounding rings of eight bells in the country.

The work started in late 2020 when first moulds were built by Allanconi and it was just as the Covid pandemic started. We were getting regular updates "we are all fine" reports from Milan but the media stories were not good. Milan fared very poorly in the Pandemic but luckily the Allanconi workshop was unaffected and the timescale did not drift unduly. We eagerly lapped up any news of the casting and even received videos of the bell metal being poured.

The new bells - when cast - were shipped back to England without mishap and were found to be very good as cast and did not require a lot of material to be removed in their tuning.

Carrek Ltd of Bath won a competitive tender to undertake the structural work on the outside of the Church Tower, the new Ringing Chamber and the refurbishing of the Vestry, in May 2020. Work on this part of the project started on site in August 2020.

A new bell ringing chamber was built in mid-2020, just above the Vestry at the base of the Church Tower and it was supported by massive oak joists. We don't know what the floor loading would be but after the dedication service we had 24 people in the Chamber at one time to no ill effect. We now regularly have 18 ringers to our Wednesday evening practice.



Despite Covid, the work proceeded well. However, we had a small delay to the work on the Ringing Chamber when the Diocese refused to countenance a hatch entry point in the floor, for Health and Safety reasons. We needed to hurriedly establish whether the existing spiral stairway could be useable with a doorway cut into it at the height of the Ringing Chamber.

It was fortunate that the spiral met the Ringing Chamber at the required level on the right side of the stairs - we had visions of it being on the opposite side of the spiral. The Chancellor quickly authorised a faculty (it may be a Diocesan record) and the architect and the masons got to work just as rapidly. The new doorway was, incidentally, more or less cost-neutral, and is a much more elegant solution that does not project into the ringing chamber. Altogether a win, but it did give us a few jitters at the time. The new stone doorway now looks as if it has always been there and is an excellent monument to the expertise and capability of Carrek Ltd.'s stone masons.

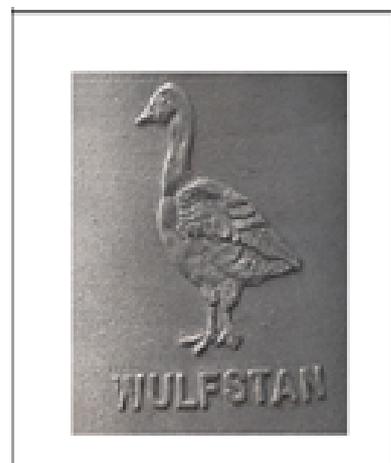
Carrek completed their work in early March 2021 and the Tower was clear for the bell installation to start.

The Hawkesbury bells are all named after saints similar to the one depicted on the image below which shows St Wulfstan. St. Wulfstan (day 19th January), is the local saint for Hawkesbury because he was the senior priest here in the 11th century.

The new bells are a tuned ring of 8 held within a galvanised steel frame installed below the old 14th century bell frame.

The bells were tuned at Matthew Higby and co.'s workshop in Radstock where they have a lathe that can accommodate the bells. They were tuned to Simpson tuning and the final details are shown below.

Bell	Weight (cwt-qtr-lb)	Diameter (Inches)	Note
Treble	3-1-21	24.21	G
2	3-2-4	24.96	F#
3	3-3-2	26.38	E
4	4-0-26	27.87	D
5	5-1-18	30.47	C
6	6-1-19	32.4	B
7	8-2-5	35.87	A
Tenor	11-3-23	40.25	G



The bell frame was constructed and assembled in Matthew Higby and Co.'s workshop and was then disassembled and sent off to Cardiff to be Galvanised. The whole thing weighed in at over four tons. Luckily, we had access to loading equipment and temporary storage which was a great help in managing access to the Church.

The bells were firstly placed in the Nave of the Church where they were decorated with flowers before we held a blessing service – unfortunately Covid rules applied and numbers had to be restricted.



Once the blessing service was over, we held an open house for the community to view the bells for the last time they will be on the ground for many, many years. We had hundreds of visitors from all over the area. In particular we hosted the local CE primary school for a morning and told them all about the bells and how they worked. We then gave them some hand bells and a hide mallet so that they could make some noise. They had the time of their lives.

Then the real work started – getting 4 tons of frame and the bells up to the top of the tower. However, Matthew Higby and Co.'s engineers made it look easy (mind that new glass screen!). They made an amazing job of getting the frame and the bells squeezed into the Bell Chamber - it is tight up at the top of the Tower.

The bells were installed and operational during July 2021 but then the Wait, because we were not allowed to ring the bells - other than to test them and for practice -until they had been dedicated. The dedication service was conducted with a packed church on 10th September in the presence of the Right Reverend Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester.

At the end of the Nave the Bishop dedicated the newly built Vestry, the refurbished Church Tower and the new set of bells. The Bells were then formally handed over to the Tower Captain of St. Mary's.

The bell ringer's prayer was recited and the Hawkesbury Bellringers rang out the first "official" rounds of bell ringing.

When the Bishop and the Priest had returned to the Chancel, the top two classes from The Hawkesbury Primary School emerged from their pews to stand at the front of the Church and sang Two Sticks and an Apple. This is the very first printed version of the well-known Oranges and Lemons nursery rhyme from a children's book of 1744.

The Children sang both eloquently and tunefully - it was wonderful to see and hear - and ended to extensive applause.

The Bishop gave a very interesting sermon on the theme of bells and bellringing which was as appropriate as it was engaging.

The Choir sang the Anthem - Let all the world in every corner sing - which was followed by the intercession and the last hymn - Lord, for the years your love has kept. For such a small number of choristers the Church Choir has an amazing presence. Well done to them and to Ben the Director.

The Service was followed by a series of change ringing by an invited band of Bellringers who had all helped us with the Hawkesbury Bells and in training our bell ringers.



Bishop of Gloucester Rachel Treweek with Reverend Richard Thomson and the Church Wardens, Mrs Linda Fairney and Sir Ian Macfadyen KCVO

