

Our church has got its voice back!!

For several months up to March 2019, our church bell had to remain silent, due to safety issues caused by nearly 140 years of wear and tear on the apparatus holding the bell in place. Work has now been completed to rectify this, and our bell can be heard again!

This work is part of the ongoing history of our parish, and we have recorded it in words and pictures, adding to the information about the bell which is in our History of Saints Mary and Michael written by Bill Bamber in 1994 (2nd edition 2008). From this History the following extract from Fr Hickey's Journal tells us about the original purchase of the bell:

“Soon afterwards [soon after February 1859], the congregation expressed the wish for a bell to be hung in the church tower so that it could be rung as a Passing Bell announcing the death and interment of friends and relatives. Mr James Carr organised collections in Garstang and the neighbourhood and in a short time £95 was raised. A bell was purchased from Murphy's of Dublin. It weighed 10 ½ cwt with a further hundredweight of balancing weights etc, and cost £7/18/6 (£7.92) per hundredweight; the total, including loft and frame, was £105/10/6 (£105.55). On Sunday, 7th September [1859], it was solemnly blessed by the Bishop who preached both morning and afternoon. Collections from the congregations covered the balance of the cost.”

The original bell was cast in Ireland, by J Murphy Founders of Dublin. However, although the information quoted above records the bell as having been purchased in 1859, the current bell has 'J Murphy Founder Dublin **1881**' cast on it, which suggests that what we have now is not the original bell. We have been trying to find out further details, and recently very interesting information has been brought to our attention which suggests what must have happened. In the book, 'Our Country Churches & Chapels,' by Anthony Hewitson, published in 1872, there is a section about St Mary & St Michael's church, which includes the following in a description of the tower: *“In front of the tower (**which contains one bell, and it is cracked**), ...’* From this it is probably safe to assume that the original, subsequently cracked bell of 1859 was replaced in 1881 with the bell which we have today, from the same foundry in Dublin. As yet we have no details of this second purchase but are still looking!

Sadly, the John Murphy Foundry is no longer in operation, but the accompanying article from The Ringing World journal issued in 2002 gives some fascinating information on bells cast in some of the Dublin foundries.

The recent refurbishment work has been carried out by Lancashire Clockmakers of Padiham, Burnley. It took some three days altogether: an initial day to remove the bell from the bell frame on which it is mounted, to assess the problem and the work required, and to measure for any parts requiring replacing; followed by two days a week later to position the new bearings and replaced fittings and to re-hang the bell.

Of particular concern were the bearings which held the bell in place – just! These bearings are what are assumed to be the original plain brass bearings inset into the wooden bell

frame, and in which rested the gudgeons (pins) attached via the headstock to the bell. Over the years, with grit getting into the lubricating grease in the original open bearings, the action of ringing the bell had caused the soft brass metal mountings to become very worn, one of them being worn completely through!

Work done included:

initially the bell being raised (by block and tackle suspended from the ceiling beams) from the wooden bell frame and lowered onto the bottom rails to enable assessment of all parts;

the removal of all worn metal fittings, to be examined, and measured and replaced if necessary;

the provision of new, modern, sealed bearings which were fitted to the headstock and to the bell frame (the bell is hung from the headstock by large iron shanks called canons which are cast into the top of the bell itself). These modern bearings require no maintenance as dust and grit are unable to get into the sealed units, and they should enable many years of secure ringing;

the tightening of the bolts attaching the counter balance weights to the headstock;

the dismantling and examination of the wheel which carries the bell rope to the bell - this was found to be sound enough to be retained and reused, and will be treated against woodworm etc;

the metal strapwork holding in place the counter balance weights at the top of the bell and the metal bracing struts fastening the headstock to the wheel have been constructed by the Garstang firm of Austin Walmsley Ltd, Welding Fabricators and Blacksmiths, several generations of whose family have worshipped in the church. Other metalwork was constructed by Lancashire Clockmakers.

Related information:

The headstock is constructed of elm, a wood used extensively for this purpose as it is very hard, with a fine, close grain, which can exceed that of oak. Elm wood is very durable and weather-resistant, and the interlocking grain means it doesn't split easily.

The bell frame is constructed of oak, with a substantial central post on each side, called a king post, to which the bearings holding the bell are attached. The whole bell frame is supported and stabilised to the walls of the tower by a further oak framework.

The old, replaced parts have been retained in the belfry, together with an old bell clapper which may be from the original bell.

Matthew Warburton, the proprietor of the bell refurbishment company, and his associate Len, worked meticulously and professionally, overcoming technical issues along the way.

They were very happy for photographs to be taken during the process, and very patient in answering questions!

Frank Worthington, in addition to putting new lighting and other electrical installation on the spiral staircase and in the tower rooms including the belfry, kindly took the trouble to clean out the belfry and stairs before the workmen came - they said they had never seen such a clean belfry! Bill Bateson, who does so much work for the parish, also assisted Matthew and Len in their work on the bell.

This information is illustrated with several photographs which show some of the work done as well as some of the new, replacement pieces. All the photographs taken will be added to the parish archive.

Information collated and published to parish website by Elizabeth Horn and Henry Lamoury.