

The tower of All Saints' Church contains possibly the heaviest set of five bells in existence. Over the centuries the bells have been responsible for causing the tower to become unstable, and there have also been long periods of time when it was considered too dangerous to ring them!

The earliest recorded bell is the former 2nd, cast in Glastonbury in 1607 by Richard Perdue and bearing the Royal Arms of James 1st. The casting and transportation to East Pennard probably gave rise to the legend *'that the great bells of East Pennard had come from Glastonbury Abbey'*.

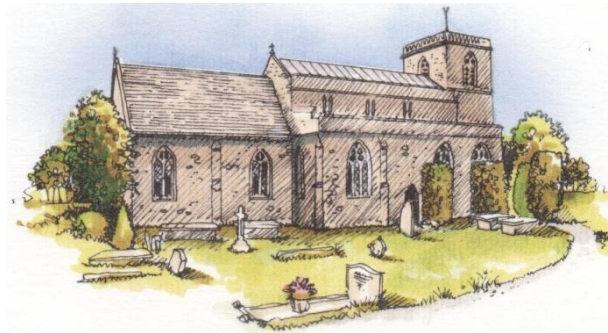
In 1649 the 1st and 3rd bells of the present ring were added, cast by Robert Austin of Compton Dundon. The old tenor 3rd bears the inscription *'At thy departure I shall sound and ring to bring thee into ground'*.

In 1740 two large bells by Thomas Bilbie of Chewstoke were added. The 4th which weighed one ton was cast on 12th July and the 27cwt tenor bell on 26th July. They were so big that a new tower doorway had to be created under the west window of the tower which had its tracery removed and its sill raised. The existing three bells and their frame were raised to the very top of the tower enabling a new large two bell frame to be constructed underneath.

The three bell frame is preserved at the top of the tower and has been dated at about 1560 so there must have been previous unrecorded bells hanging from it. The tower turret clock was built by a local man Thomas Higdon and installed below the bell frame in 1788.

The bells we hear today have been ringing out since 1740. They needed eight men to ring and were very challenging to pull with their 18th century fittings. The diarist John Cannon records that -

'Thus was our long United knot of Ringers entirely broke and dispersed which had continued in a true and perfect band of Amity and unfeigned friendship many years. For Nathaniel Withers died a little before this my departure having contracted a violent strain or bruise in ringing East Pennard 4th bell by himself it having been the custom for 5 of us to ring the said Bells singly notwithstanding the ponderosity of them that it was commonly 8 mens' labour to ring them'.



In 1893 the bells were re-hung by Llewellyn & James of Bristol for £114. This work included the removal of the canons from the front of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd bells which caused the 2nd, already dented by the striking clock hammer, to crack over the crown. Also installed at this time was

an Ellacombe chiming apparatus which cost £5 and allowed one person to sound all the bells by means of small ropes and hammers.

By 1911 the tower was in a dangerous state because the oak bell frames had become unstable and the heavy bells were causing the frames to vibrate against the walls. A tower survey by the diocesan architect F. Bligh-Bond in 1911 stated -

'I find the tower in a general state of unsoundness. Numerous fissures and the lower part of the tower becoming more marked as they extend upwards towards the bell chamber where all the walls are fissured and shaken. The top stage of the tower is so weak that I suggest the ringing of the bells should cease. They are too large for the tower and must have put a great strain on the walls for a long time past.'

Ringling stopped in the Spring of 1911 at the same time as the Reverend Walter Joyce resigned after some controversy, and many parishioners wrongly blamed him for the silencing of the bells.

21 years later in 1932 the Rector Reverend Wright drew up restoration plans for the bells and tower clock whereby Frederick Blevins, an ecclesiastical builder and mason from Ditcheat, quoted £175 -

'for dismantling the oak bell frames, Strengthening of the same and reassembling 3 feet lower in the tower.'

An estimate of £137 was obtained from Mears & Stainbank of London for retuning plus the addition of new fittings and canon retaining headstocks for the 4th and 5th bells. The cracked 2nd was to be sent to Barimar & Co of London for welding, but in the event the bells were not sent away and languished until 1948 when a further quote of £1,000 was obtained from Gillet and Johnson of Croydon, at the request of the Reverend Roynon, to re-hang the bells in a metal bell frame. However this work was not embarked upon either, although the clock face was renovated.



Finally in 1970, after almost 60 years of silence, the bells were rung experimentally and at great risk in their old frames. There was considerable interest, and sufficient money was raised for a



complete restoration of the bells including the installation of a new metal frame which was situated lower in the tower next to the clock. A second sound deadening floor was added below the bell chamber, and the cracked 2nd bell was recast – an action considered nowadays to be a desecration by modern standards of heritage conservation. The Royal arms of James 1st were reproduced on it and the bell was renamed the Memorial bell. The canons were removed from the 4th and 5th reducing the weight of the 4th to 19cwt and the tenor to 25cwt.

This work was carried out by J. Taylor and Co of Loughborough at a total cost of £3,000, and the set was rededicated by the Bishop of Bath and Wells in April 1972 enabling the bells of East Pennard to be once again heard in all their glory.



£1

THE BELLS

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

EAST PENNARD

