

Ring In The New? The Bells of St Sampson's: The Story so Far and a Plea For Help to Bring Them Home.

Who doesn't love the sound of church bells? Wherever you grew up, wherever you live now, for most of us they are part of the fabric of our lives. For centuries church bells have rung out to mark personal, local and national events. It is very sad that St Sampson's bells have been silent for so long.

But hopefully not for much longer! Can you help bring them home?

We need to raise £25,000. As soon as the money is raised we can instruct the bellfounders, where they are currently stored, to bring the bells back and they will chime out across the parish once again.

So what is the story of our parish bells?

As church bells go, ours are relatively old, and they are listed as "**worthy of preservation**".

The four oldest bells were made/cast in **1698** by Exeter bellfounders John Pennington and John Stadler, maybe in the churchyard, which was common practice. There was probably a fifth bell, but this was replaced in 1831 by the current fifth and largest bell, the tenor, cast by William Pannell and his son Charles, of Cullompton.

The bells of 1698 probably replaced much older ones.

In 1684 Sampson Manaton died and in his will left £10 to the Churchwardens of South Hill to be paid to them within one month after they "new cast those three bells & make them fine". It looks as if there were already at least three bells at St Sampson's before 1684 – and Sampson Manaton didn't think much of them.

Originally church bells were handbells, used by early missionaries like St Sampson to call people to worship. By the late 900s most churches had hanging bells of some sort and wheel mounted bells became widespread by the late 1500s. Ringing 'changes', like the type of bellringing we know today, was taking place by the mid 1600s so Sampson Manaton probably wanted his church at South Hill to follow the fashion.

Sampson's instruction to "new cast those bells" suggests that the old bells were to be melted down and made into new ones. If this was so, **our existing bells retain something of the originals which were there in the 1500s.**

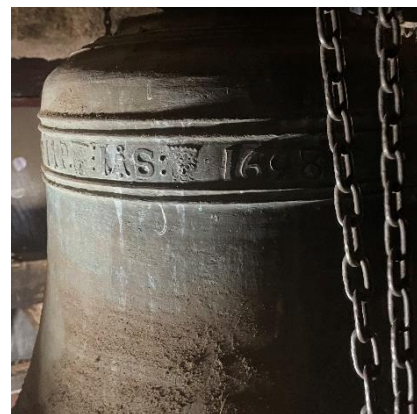
Sampson Manaton's will and the five bells give clues to stories of the parish, which needs more investigation. Each bell has an inscription recording the names of the churchwardens/priest at the time and/or those who contributed towards the cost of the bells.

The four 1698 Pennington bells

- When I you call then follow me all (the smallest bell 27" weighing 3 ¼ cwt)
- Adam Wills Warden - John Luger (28" bell weighing 3 ¾ cwt)
- George Matthew – Stephen Trehane – John Welke (29" bell weighing 4 cwt)
- Samson Grills – Adam ChWarden – Will Dicken (33" bell weighing 5 ¾ cwt)

The 1831 Pannell bell

- Revd. E Budge – James Sowden Warden (the tenor bell , 36" diameter and weighing 7 ½ cwt – it only just fitted down the tower when the bells were removed).



We know a little about some of these men (all men!) from the parish and other records, but it would be good to find out more. Help can be given to anyone interested in doing some research.

We haven't been able to find anything about bellringers at St Sampson's. Any information would be very helpful. The late Charles Harding of Brookfield, South Hill, organist at St Sampson's, used to chime one of the bells until about 2010, when the PCC was advised that the bell frame was unsafe, but we don't know when they were last rung properly. Taylors the Bellfounders told us that "the relatively small amount of clapper wear on the bells suggests that they have not been rung a great deal since 1831 and given their current condition, they have probably not been rung for a number of decades".

This suggestion is given weight by a wonderful 1958 article in a bellringing journal, 'The Ringing World' headed "**Examine Unringable Bells**". Tells of an expedition to St Sampson's by six bellringers from Truro and London who persuaded the then Churchwardens, Mr Brock and Mr Brent, to allow them access to the previously forbidden bell chamber, following the retirement of the previous Rector, Mr Marsh. **Mr Marsh had apparently refused to allow the bells to be rung because he thought them unsafe.** The intrepid bellringers carried out an inspection, did a bit of oiling of metal parts and installed new bell ropes. They **pronounced the bells safe** and proceeded to ring "a perfect six-score of Grandsire Doubles". The article goes on to say that "one or two curious villagers made their way to the tower, and one of the churchwardens told us that this was the first time his sixteen year old daughter had heard the bells". After that exciting event, we suspect that the bells remained largely or completely silent for many years.

Was the sixteen year old, Hilda Brent or one of Mr Brock's daughters? Does anyone have any memories or other information to add to all this?

So why were the bells taken down and what happens next?

Advice from specialists from two different bell foundries was clear. The bell frame was dangerously rotten, the bell metal in the four oldest bells was too thin to be safely tuned without cracking and even if it was attempted "the bells are so far out of tune with modern expectation that sympathetic corrective tuning would not be possible". In other words, they would sound awful. This was very disappointing, but the advice was clear. The bells could never be rung again and a decision had to be made.

In December 2020 the PCC reluctantly agreed to accept expert advice that the best solution was to remove the bells from the tower, have them properly conserved and restored by bellfounders Taylors of Loughborough, fitted with new headstocks, and rehung for stationary electronic chiming.



Thanks to local fundraising and grant funding £4800 was raised, enough to begin the process, and in **November 2023**, with the help of a great team of volunteers, the bells were brought down, and we waved them off to Loughborough on the back of a flatbed truck.

It is time to bring them back and we need your help again. The cost will be £25,000. So far nearly £3,000 has been raised. Can you help us to raise the remaining £22,000? We are applying for grants but need match funding. Can you organise a fundraiser or give a donation. Cash or cheque to Judith Ayers (or any congregation member of St Sampson's) or follow this link; [St Sampson's Historic bells - JustGiving](#).

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Sources for the above information:

Transcripts of parish records in Miranda Lawrance-Owen's possession

The National Archives

'The Church Bells of Cornwall', Dunkin, 1878

'The Ringing World' 10th October 1958

'A Short History of English Church Bells and Bell Ringing', Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, March 2017

Reports by Taylors & Nicholsons in possession of the PCC