

St Albans Cathedral

New bells

Brief

History

The earliest known record of the St Albans Cathedral bells goes back to the Book of Benefactors, which records that "Lywolf, a noble of this shire, together with his wife gave two big bells at the time of Abbot Paul." This reminds us that Saxons contributed to Abbot Paul of Caen's Norman Abbey, and also that Saxon women owned their own property - a right that was later abolished by the Normans.

The Norman tower was completed in 1088, much of it from recycled Roman bricks from the remains of Verulamium. It is the masterpiece of Robert the Mason, whose work was amply rewarded by Abbot Paul, who had himself given some bells in 1077; these were then added to and some were re-cast. The names of these later bells with probable dates of casting are St Mary (1214), St Amphibal (1260), St Catherine (1260), St Alban (1260) and St John (1451). Another of the Abbey bells - Gabriel - is now in the City Clock Tower. In 1698 only four of the old bells remained in the Belfry. In 1699 these were re-cast into six and in 1731 added to, forming a peal of eight. In 1827 the bells became silent, until the 1870 restoration. Four new bells were subsequently added, making it the only peal of 12 bells in the diocese - the work was completed in time for the Silver Jubilee of King George V on 6th May 1935. The Sanctus Bell (1290), still in use in the 1960s, was used by the Grammar School during the 300 years it was located in the Cathedral Lady Chapel. In addition there is a Service Bell (1884) called Edmund, named after Lord Grimthorpe.

The 12 bells in use until April 2010 dated from 1699 (Tenor, 11th, 8th and 7th), 1758 (10th), 1901 (6th and 5th) and the remainder from 1935.

The reasons for a new peal

The fund established to upgrade the Cathedral bells was started over four decades ago with a large bequest from bell ringer Reginald Ewer. The current proposals being implemented are relatively recent, with the scheme having been developed over the last two to three years.

The Cathedral has never had a matched ring of twelve bells. The current ring in D was created in 1935 by adding four bells to the existing eight; they do not work as a complete instrument as well as they should. The installation has deteriorated slowly over time. The increased movement in the frame and deteriorating of the fittings has meant the bells have become more difficult to ring, and so teaching new ringers is extremely difficult. Improving the quality of the bells and the conditions for bell ringing will be an important incentive in the drive for new recruits. The project will ensure that St Albans Cathedral has a bell ringing facility that will at least match those of other cathedrals and a platform for bell ringing for many centuries to come.

In addition to casting the new bells, the Cathedral is taking the opportunity to make some health and safety improvements in the Tower, principally installing fully comprehensive emergency lighting in the main stairway, ensuring the doors fit and close properly, and installing a new fire detection system in the Belfry. Furthermore, some remedial works to the Tower roof and in the Belfry will be undertaken while contractors are on site.

The project

An outline summary of the project is as follows:

- Dismantle the 12 existing bells, fittings and upper steel bell-frame
- Dispose of the fittings and old steel framework as scrap
- Sell the four smallest bells
- Design and construct a steel bell-frame to house the eight larger bells, to become static chime bells for the carillon and the clock, in the SE quadrant of the Belfry to stand on the belfry floor
- Install a new electronic control box for the carillon, to replace the existing mechanical linkage system
- Cast a new ring of 13 bells in the key of E and to 1920s Gillet & Johnston profiles – these will be slightly smaller and lighter than the current ring
- Provide completely new change ringing fittings for the 13 bells
- Renovate and refurbish as necessary the existing timber bell-frame
- Construct and install new steel bell frame to support five of the new 13 change ringing bells to be built up from the base of the existing timber frame to replace the previous upper steel bell-frame
- Make up all new fastenings for replacing the existing fastenings within the timber bell-frame, as well as new pit end bracings to replace those removed in 1935.
- Install the new ring of 13 bells – five into the new upper steel bell-frame and eight into the existing timber bell-frame.

Timetable

The casting of the 13 new bells began in January 2010, undertaken by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, in London. Work has just started to undertake the preliminary health and safety measures in the Tower, and to clear the Belfry of extraneous material and of the cladding supporting the framework structure.

The Whitechapel Bell Foundry will now come on site to remove four of the existing bells and move the other eight within the Belfry, to become the static bells for the Carillon. Repair work will then be done to the bell-frames and other electrical and building work will take place.

At the end of July 2010 the 13 new bells are due on site. They will remain in the Nave North Aisle over the summer, and featured in an exhibition that will be open to the public.

There will be a consecration service conducted by the Bishop of St Albans on 4th September. The new bells will then be hoisted into the Belfry, with the intention that they should be ringing by Christmas 2010.

The new bells

All the new bells have been sponsored through the generous donations of individuals and groups. Each bell is inscribed with the sponsor's personal notice or motto, including some with family crests. Furthermore, each bell has been named by the Cathedral, with the largest bell, the Tenor, being named Alban, and the rest being given Apostles' names, as follows:

Alban	:	Albanus	Tenor bell
Peter	:	Petrus	11 th
James	:	Iacobus	10 th
Andrew	:	Andreas	9 th
John	:	Ioannes	8 th
Jude	:	Iudas	7 th
Simon	:	Simon Zelotes	6 th
Matthew	:	Matthaeus	5 th
Matthias	:	Mathias	4 th
Bartholomew	:	Bartholomaeus	3 rd
James Son of Alphaeus	:	Iacobus Alphaei	2 nd
Thomas	:	Thomas	Treble
Philip	:	Philippus	Sharp 2 nd

Bell sponsors

Sponsors	Bell
Mr Richard and Canon Susan Walduck	Tenor
Mr and Mrs Edward Wootton & Mrs Judith Howard DL	11 th
Anonymous	10 th
Bob and Mary Hardy & David and Liz Hodgskin	9 th
The Wixamtree Trust	8 th
St Albans Cathedral Society of Change Ringers	7 th
Hertford County Association of Change Ringers	6 th
Mr William Tudor John	5 th
Mr and Mrs Michael Wentworth-Stanley	4 th
Mr and Mrs Kenneth Minton	3 rd
Mr and Mrs Paul Cherry	2 nd
Mr and Mrs Howard Guard	Treble
Edward and Jill Hackford and family	Sharp 2 nd