

“The Bells of Saint Mary’s”

1917 popular song later recorded by Bing Crosby

Whilst we wait for the promised bells to ring out once more to signal the end of the terrible pestilence currently surrounding us I thought that the chequered history of one particular ring of bells might be of interest? These are those of the church of **St. Mary The Virgin, Much Cowarne..**

For the past 500 years the story of the Much Cowarne bells was tied in with, and affected by the condition of the church and especially the tower. The first evidence of bells is from a Visitation of 1553 during the brief reign of Edward VI which criticised the structure of the building and reported that the church had five bells of different sizes. A buttress on the tower has a date of 1557 so perhaps notice was taken of these comments? The continued existence and possible replacement of the bells around 1710 is through inclusion in a printed list in chronological order of manufactured bells by the bellfounder, Abraham Rudhall Snr. of Gloucester. In 1733 the treble bell became cracked and was re-cast. The Vestry Minutes record this event and also the recurring expenditure of 2/0d (13.5p) for replacement bell ropes. The tower was again repaired in 1791. At this time the church had a wooden shingled spire and it was this which was struck by lightning in January 1840 with devastating results. The nave and roof were destroyed and the peal of bells were fused together.

A subscription by local well wishers raised only £347/18s out of an estimated repair cost of £3,000 so it was not until 1845 that the treble, second and tenor bells were able to be re-cast and inscribed with the names of the Vicar, Curate and the two Churchwardens. Repairs continued over the next thirty years and it was in 1878 when the newly located Colonel Bourne of Cowarne Court came to the rescue joined by Mr. and Mrs. Higgins of the neighbouring Moreton Jeffries estate. This, together with contributions collected from parishioners enabled the 3rd, 4th and 5th bells to be re-cast. The full peal of bells was once again capable of being rung but it was the condition of the tower in 1903 which stopped them once more. The Vicar also reported that the tenor bell had been accidentally cracked by the Clerk when tolling for a funeral! Colonel Bourne paid for the repair to the tower and in 1913 a Churchwarden proposed that *“the bells be restored and re-cast”*. Sadly, four events prevented this from happening – an adverse report by the Church Architects on the state of the tower; the start of the First World War; the death of Colonel Bourne in 1915 and the subsequent sale of the Estate in 1921. It appears that full circle ringing was not possible from this date and bells were only occasionally chimed.

It was not until an inspection and Report by the Hereford Diocesan Bells Advisor in 2005 stated that *“a major restoration project will be needed to get the bells ringing again”* that a project was initiated in September 2006 to achieve this aim. This had been greatly aided seven years previously by a generous grant from English Heritage which enabled a complete structural overhaul of the tower to take place. The six bells were removed from the tower and sent to Messrs. Taylor of Loughborough to be re-cast, re-tuned and returned which took over two years with the new peal being blessed and dedicated by the Bishop of Hereford at a special ceremony in October 2009. During the intervening period a team of local bell-ringers had been recruited and trained and continue to give pleasure both locally and at churches further afield.

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