

# Newton Abbot Clock Tower

History and Mystery



The text of a presentation given by

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To the Mid Devon Branch of the Guild of Devonshire Ringers  
via 'Zoom' during the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic

2<sup>nd</sup>. July 2020

# The Ringing World

July 15<sup>th</sup> 1988



This presentation refers to some research done in 1988 and relates to a mystery about the bells of the Clock Tower in Newton Abbot dating back a hundred years to the time of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. It took me a while to find the answer and I eventually wrote an article which was published in the Ringing World, the local press and also a while later in 'Ringing Round Devon'. We will come to that mystery later but I thought it might be useful to explain some of the history of the Town which will give you an idea as to why there is a Tower there without a church and also, as some people may not be aware, there is a church within the town without a tower.

Surprisingly as far as I can tell there is no existing picture of St. Leonard's Chapel as it was prior to being demolished. The only idea of its appearance we have is a drawing which was done from a model that was stored in the new St. Leonard's Church and was said to have been made by the last person to have been baptised in the chapel before its demolition so probably dates to the mid Victorian era. This appears in Trixie Lamb's booklet that was published in 1975 at the time the Tower was refurbished and the bells rehung. This model appears to have disappeared but the Town Museum web site has this photograph from a newspaper of 1908 of Mr. Roberts with the model and a request for further information as to where it might have gone.

Posted by [Museum](#) on Monday, 22 July 2019 in [Uncategorized](#)

• 1 file: E34



This low-resolution photograph taken from a Newspaper article in 1908, shows Mr Roberts aged 91, former [Wolborough](#) Parish Clerk, with a model of St Leonards Tower and Chapel. Mr Roberts said that he had been baptised in the chapel in 1817/18.

**The question is what happen to the model?**



In the Tower there is another model currently in the ringing chamber. This would appear to be the Matchstick Model described on the Museum web site as being made by a Mr. Leonard Ball.

The Chapel was described in the records as being fairly small, 55 ft. long and by 20 ft. wide with a seating capacity for 191 people. It was, by all accounts, fairly low church and quite plain inside which is why it may have survived the Civil War unscathed in spite of the Lord of the Manor of Wolborough then being the parliamentary general, Sir William Waller. There definitely was considerable military activity here around this time for example in 1648 Waller's son in law Sir William Courtenay was joined at Forde House by Col. Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell on their way to lay siege to Dartmouth which was then being held by the Royalists. The other famous event witnessed by the chapel took place a few years later at the start of the Glorious revolution of 1688 when Prince William of Orange was invited to England to take the crown from the Catholic King James II, landing at Brixham on November 6<sup>th</sup>. of that year. He spent his first night in England at a farm house near Stoke Gabriel at Longcombe, which is now made into three cottages but ever since that time has been known as 'Parliament' and his second night was spent at Forde House which was still occupied by the Courtenay family while his army camped on Milber Down above the town. The following day the declaration of Prince William that he was come to preserve the Protestant religion and restore the Laws and liberties of England was read out by his chaplain for the first time in England at the Cross which is how the intersection of the three roads adjacent to the chapel in the centre of the town was known.



### The Third Bell at Newton Abbot Clock Tower

- Inscription

- I WILL BE HEARD ABOVE YOU ALL
- ALTHO. I AM BOTH LIGHT AND  
SMALL
- PACK & CHAPMAN OF LONDON FECIT  
1772



The next significant date in our story of the bells is 1772 because it was in this year that the Whitechapel foundry of Pack and Chapman cast and installed a new ring of six bells in the tower. What I have been unable to find out is how many bells were in the tower prior to this, but bells there undoubtedly were as they were described as ringing out after the declaration of Prince William in 1688. What we also know is that a few years later the new bells were still ringing out on 5<sup>th</sup>. November 1828 as the press reported a meeting in the town, near to the chapel, to draw up a petition against Catholic Emancipation as follows:

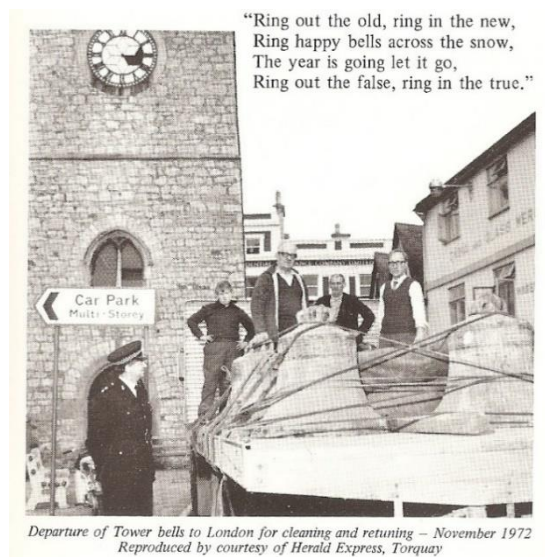
‘The dawn was ushered in by a merry peal of bells and at intervals salutes from the small artillery stationed in the Market Place’

The bells may have still been ringing out in 1828 but the chapel itself was in serious trouble.

In the year previous of 1827 the vicar, The Rev. Robert Bradford, had astonished everyone by saying he refused to take divine service in such a dilapidated building and a movement was formed to rebuild the chapel on a new site. This, it was suggested, would also have the attraction of removing what had become a traffic nuisance. This sounds a bit bizarre in the days of coach and horses but recently I paced out the space that the building would have taken up. The width of the road measures about 75 feet from the edge of the tower to the building on the opposite side which is now occupied by Austin’s department store leaving only about 20 feet remaining for the carriages, horses and wagons. So there was a serious problem. I think the townsfolk took this quite seriously because a public subscription was opened to finance the project and the £2500 pounds required was raised in fairly quick time to enable the building to go ahead. The new church was consecrated in November 1836. In 1834 it had been resolved not to take down the old chapel until the new one was completed and this was duly done by September 1836.



This is the new St. Leonard's Church built on the site of the old Parsonage about 200 yards further up Wolborough Street from the existing building, taken some time in around the late 1970s. It closed as a church in about 1980 and after a few years of being used as an antiques centre has recently been purchased by the Town Council. It is to be branded the Newton Hub and will be home to the Town's Museum and a coffee shop as well as the Town Council Offices. The old chapel was immediately demolished by 1836 but it seems the £2500 raised was not enough to complete the project as there was a shortfall in the finances to pay for the tower to be removed. So there it stayed and remained as part of the Parish of Wolborough until it was sold by the church to the Urban District Council in 1972 when both the tower and the bells were refurbished, the bells being retuned and rehung in a new metal frame by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. By the time it was completed the Urban Council had been superseded by Teignbridge District Council in the 1974 Local Government reorganisation who passed it over to the Town Council to be administered by them. The picture shows the bells being loaded up to go away to Whitechapel in 1972 with some volunteer help from the local bellringers on the truck.



That completes a brief history as to why there is a Tower here without a Church but we are getting a little ahead of ourselves in our mystery story of the bells because the next significant date for them is in 1887. This was the date of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and it was decided that to commemorate the event a public subscription would be raised to augment the six bells in the Clock tower to eight.

In 1986, as we were approaching the centenary of that date, I also became aware that there was an anomaly in dates of the sequence of events around this time.

The new second bell dated 1889



A report of the first peal on the bells dated 1888

teaching a dedication  
coin, which is, it may  
be allegations in the  
Bishop. On arriving  
r (the Rev. J. Weston  
, who expressed their  
e name of the church  
Church Association to  
raising them for their  
have connected with  
al and thankful spirit  
any difficulties and to  
op was attended by  
n, the former of whom  
ritual at St. Peter.  
the congregation is a  
ation is felt at the un-  
culation.  
two members of the  
of Lincoln who sub-  
ion of their Bishop.  
following additional  
ancellor of Lincoln;  
th; Canon. Frederic  
ev. T. Field, rector of  
ur of Barton-on-the-  
ut of the thirty-eight  
Dean, the Archdeacon,  
003.—Glanville.

SMITH'S BELLING & CO. MANUFACTURERS OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS OF BELL METAL  
LEADS, EACH CALLED DIFFERENTLY.

SAMUEL MEADOWS .. .. 1.	JAMES ASHHEAD .. .. 4.
CHARLES PUGH .. .. 2.	JOSEPH H. BRAUN .. .. 5.
HENRY A. ANSELL .. .. 3.	*FREDERICK MARSHALL .. Tenth.

Conducted by JOSEPH HENRY BRAUN.

Messrs. Dwyer, Smith, and Marshall hail from Bentley, the seat of one of the local  
congregations. —First 1910.

NEWTON ABBOT, DEVON.—THE ST. SIDWELL'S  
SOCIETY, AND THE DEVONSHIRE GUILD.  
On Saturday, June 30, 1888, in Two Hours and Fifty-Two Minutes,  
AT ST. LEONARD'S CHURCH,  
A PEAL OF GRANDSIRE TRIPLES, 3040 CHANGES;  
HOLT'S ORIGINAL. Tenth of 640.

WILLIAM STOCKER .. .. 1.	JAMES MOSE .. .. 5.
EDWIN SHEPHERD .. .. 2.	STEPHEN DREWERY .. .. 6.
RICHARD FRENCH .. .. 3.	PERKINS SHEPHERD .. .. 7.
FRANK DAVEY .. .. 4.	THOMAS J. LANE .. Tenth.

Conducted by RICHARD FRENCH.

This is the first peal on the bells, which have been suspended since six to eight in  
commemoration of Her Majesty's Jubilee.

ROMFORD, ESSEX.—THE SOCIETY OF ROYAL CUMBER-  
LAND YOUTHS AND THE ESSEX ASSOCIATION.  
On Saturday, June 30, 1888, in Three Hours and Four Minutes,  
AT THE CHURCH OF ST. ROMANUS.

On the right are the details of the first peal on the bells taken from the Bell News, dated June 30<sup>th</sup> 1888, but you can see from the photo on the left the date on the bell, which is actually the new second indicates that they were not cast until 1889; this obviously being an impossibility. I confirmed with Whitechapel who had the details in their records that the casting was definitely not done until 1889 and no one either locally or within the ringing fraternity could tell me what had actually happened. I thought the best approach would be to look through back issues of the local newspaper which in Victorian times was called the East and South Devon Advertiser (now the Mid Devon Advertiser) and I spent the next few months trawling through the back issues of 1887/88/89. The bulk of the items in the local press were much the same as you read today such as traffic, housing, law & order, although health & hygiene which we take for granted today was being actively promoted by the local Sanitary Board. There was also a piece on the Tower as to whether it should be raised to the ground to create even more space in the centre of the town which is an idea which still crops up from time to time today. Eventually I came across a report of a public meeting on March 10<sup>th</sup> 1887 to create a 'Jubilee Committee' to arrange the celebrations of the event due to take place on June 20<sup>th</sup> 1887. In the end they reported well after the event in October that three new bells (not two) were to be supplied to the Tower by Messrs Gillett and Co. of Croyden together one of their patent carillon machines for playing tunes on the bells. The story is obviously becoming more complicated.

Continuing reports in the paper indicated that Gilletts had three attempts to cast the Bells. The first was completed by Christmas 1887 but deemed so unsatisfactory by the towns people that they agreed to recast the bells and provide heavier clappers for the ringing bells and rectify the working of the carillon. This additional work and the recast bells were installed by March 24<sup>th</sup>.1888 but it was again reported that one of the bells does not harmonise with the rest and it is impossible to hear the two new bells when being rung in peal.

Report from the Bell News of April 14<sup>th</sup>. 1888

*'The Bell News and Ringers' Record.*

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The Hon. Sec. reported that he had during the afternoon paid a visit to Hornchurch with some members of the Association, and the band met with a hospitable reception, for the Vicar, who provided tea in the schoolroom, was desirous of as many remaining as could. Upon visiting the tower, the bells were found to be a grand ring of six, but stood sadly in need of overhauling. It was to be hoped that the authorities would as a result of the visit of the band, as representing the Association, take the matter in hand.

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**OPENING OF BELLS AT NEWTON ABBOTT, DEVON.**

The St. Sidwell's branch of the Devonshire Guild visited Newton Abbott on Easter Monday, at the special request of the jubilee committee of that town, to try the bells of St. Leonard's, they having been augmented from six to eight by the addition of two new trebles. The old six, tenor about 9 cwt. in G sharp, are a splendid little ring from the Whitechapel Foundry, in 1772, but unfortunately the new bells do not correspond with them in the least. The go of them is perfect, but only the back six are heard in the belfry, and very faintly outside, giving any person the impression that a bad struck six are being rung. No doubt this will be rectified. There is also an odd bell hung only for the carillon. This carillon has been placed in the tower, and the bells augmented and rehung, as a memorial of the Queen's Jubilee, the whole of which has been carried out by

Messrs. Gillett and Co., of Croydon. The band who were accompanied by ringing friends from Exeter, partook of lunch at the Ship Hotel, after which a move was made to the tower, and a 504 of Grandsire Triples was rung. The ringing-room was then cleared and an attempt was made for a peal, but a false part-end turning up at the third 500, the conductor brought the bells round. The ringing sounded very unpleasant, owing to not hearing two of the bells, and as it was no pleasure to ring the eight, some well struck Stedman and Grandsire Doubles were rung on the back six. At 5 p.m. between twenty and thirty sat down to dinner, including Mr. Batchelor, of Plymouth, who up to this time found himself "out of the hunt" at Torquay, but was soon in again, the "course-ends rolling up splendidly," and although they had several change-courses, it was eventually brought to a close by Mr. Pope, Hon. Sec. to the jubilee committee, thanking the band for coming there that day, and in return Mr. Ferris Shepherd, on behalf of his brother-ringers, thanked the committee for their hearty reception. The following took part in the ringing during the day: Messrs. Stocker, Davey, Mundy, Binfield, Bastin, Rudge, Caryle, Moss, Lake, Kelly, Hodge, Carter, E. and F. Shepherd, and Messrs. Batchelor and Richards, of Plymouth.

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**THE CHESTER DIOCESAN GUILD.**

On Sunday, April 1st, eight members of the above Guild rang at the parish church, Daresbury, a 720 of Bob Minor, for each of the services during the day, viz.: at 8 a.m., 10.30 a.m., 3 p.m..

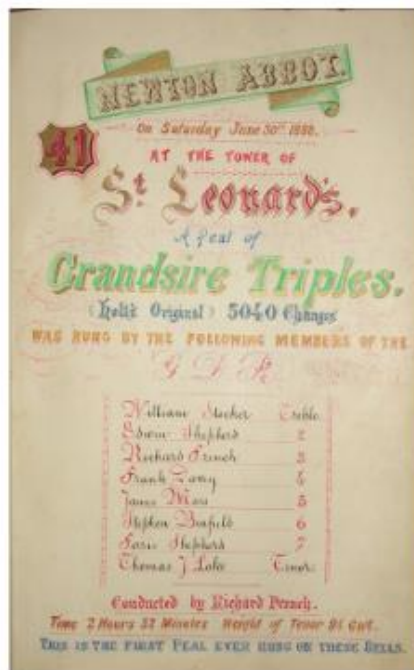
This is the report in the Bell News of April 14<sup>th</sup>.1888 (then the weekly newspaper for Bellringers) of the opening of the bells and whilst the ringers seemed to have a most enjoyable day as far as the bells were concerned they were no better than before.

As the installation was still not satisfactory a third attempt by Gillets was completed by mid June and the results of this was reported in the local paper on June 16<sup>th</sup> as follows. This is a precis:-

*The carillon which has created so much dissatisfaction on account of several bells being out of tune has been reconstructed by substituting new bells. The carillon was submitted for trial before the committee when the whole of the tunes were played through. The committee, whilst admitting that there had been a great deal of improvement, did not feel altogether satisfied and before giving a final decision the Exeter Guild of Ringers will test the bells.*



Peal details from  
the first Guild peal  
Book



This is a report of the same peal we saw earlier but this time from the Guild of Devonshire Ringers first peal book confirming that The Exeter ringers did visit on June 30<sup>th</sup>. A successful peal was rung and recorded as the first on the bells, this, as reported previously, in spite of the installation still being regarded as substandard. There then continued some fairly acrimonious discussion in the newspaper over the next few weeks on the competency of the Jubilee Committee and some fairly witty and sarcastic comments from the professional letter writers to the press. Things then went very quiet for six months whilst the Advertiser reported on other important events such as the opening of the telephone trunk line from Newton Abbot to Torquay, the Whitechapel Murders and the funeral of the Earl of Devon. After six months silence on the subject a report appeared in the Advertiser in the New year which I reproduce from my ringing World article as it sums up the whole unfortunate incident in such a way that the readers are left in no doubt that the Editor is jolly glad it has been brought to a conclusion.

EAST & SOUTH DEVON ADVERTISER.  
FEBRUARY 23RD 1889  
OUR JUBILEE MEMORIAL

We are pleased to state that all arrangements, as far as the bells and carillon are concerned, connected with our Jubilee Memorial have been satisfactorily concluded. As our readers are aware the bells erected by Gillett & Co. did not give satisfaction, either to the committee or the townspeople; acting therefore on suggestions made to them the committee entered into communication with the founders of the original six bells, Messrs. Mears & Stainbank of London. The result of these negotiations was that Mears & Stainbank undertook to put up two new bells to be in tone and harmonise with the old peal. This in the opinion of the committee has been satisfactorily carried out. Instead of nine bells as hitherto there are now only eight, and in consequence many of the old tunes on the barrels will be discontinued. The difficulty of matching the bells exactly was no easy task when it is taken into consideration that the peal in the tower were cast more than 100 years since. The work, however, accomplished by Mears & Stainbank is considered eminently satisfactory and we believe nothing remains for the committee but to settle up their accounts and otherwise complete the task they have now had in hand for more than two years.



A peal was rung to mark the centenary which was published in the same edition of the R.W. as the article and the mystery is solved but as I think it had nearly been forgotten again I was very happy to bring it to people's attention once more.



NEWTON ABBOT, Devon,  
S Leonard's Tower  
Wed June 22 1988 2h33 (8)  
**5088 St. Leonard's Tower S.**  
**Major**  
Comp. Sir A P Heywood  
1 Nicola J Crichton  
2 Simon K Gleanfield  
3 Mary E Mears  
4 Peter L Bill  
5 Robert D S Brown  
6 Terry R Hampton  
7 Philip Stevens  
8 Michael E C Mears (C)  
To mark the centenary of the  
first peal in the tower on 30th  
June, 1888.  
First peal in the method.  
**St. Leonard's Tower S.**  
**Major:**  
-56-14-56-38.14-  
34.58.34-14.58  
lh: 18. (L)

In addition to my thanks given in the article on the right in 1988 I should also like to thank Mike Mears for providing the picture from the first Guild Peal Book and Chris Pickford for not only providing details of the Gillett bells but also for directing me to the recent addition in the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers Library web site enabling me to access the Bell News on line.

My thanks go to staff of *The Mid Devon Advertiser*, The Whitechapel Bellfoundry, Canon Felstead, Preb. John Scott and Bill Cook all of whom provided information which helped fit the pieces of the jigsaw together and of course to Gillett and Johnston for providing details of the 1887 bells. Presumably all this took place in the early days of the bellfounding side of their business and before they had become so renowned for producing such excellent peals of bells as the eight at Kingsteignton, which is also situated within the town of Newton Abbot, and is one of the finest examples of their 20th Century bellfounding art. I also find it interesting to note how quickly events are forgotten, even those which caused an incredible storm in the locality at the time. The peal of 1888, and likewise the next one 14 years later in 1902, are both recorded as the first peal on the bells, though I suppose in a way both are correct as the two trebles are different in each case. And what of the fate of the Carillon machine? Apparently it was in use until 1913 when it was sent to be cleaned and subsequently disappeared in the troubled years of the first war. If the barrels were melted down and incorporated into the war effort the scribes of the local press would probably have said it would be performing a much more useful function than in its former state.

The final word can rest with the inscriptions on the new bells themselves which were taken from a poem by Tennyson on the passing of the old year, and which seems to be appropriate comment on the whole episode. The inscription on the first two Gillett bells being incorporated on the new Mears treble and that on the discarded third, a flat 2nd hung dead, inscribed onto the new second.

Treble "Ring out the old, ring in the new"  
"Ring out the false, ring in the true"  
2nd "Ring in the common love of good"

Peter Bill

Wolborough Street

Newton Abbot

July 2020

