

The History Bit

Pre 1500 – If churches had bells at all, they had up to 3 which were chimed, usually by clergy but not always. Most bells were in monasteries and used to call monks to prayer or breakfast.

Bells had all sorts of functions besides calling people to prayer. They were used to pass on news, to warn of storms, invasions, fires, threats to livestock, working times during harvests and for apprentices whose day ended when the third bell rang. The approach of dignitaries, strangers and probably also tax collectors, were heralded so everyone had time to hide things. Curfews were rung which often kept people indoors at night.

1536 Henry VIII started what came to be known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries. A lot of bells were lost and melted down and a few rescued and put into local churches.

1558 Queen Elizabeth I, a Protestant Queen took over from Mary Tudor – a Catholic. Bells had become associated with Mary so Elizabeth targeted bells in local churches in revenge.

1580s – 1640 During this time landowners took care of the bells as far as possible and at the same time full circle ringing was developed and chiming bells fell out of favour.

1637 of the Ancient Society of College Youths in the City of London was formed. They rang bells in all the major churches in the City. But just as ringing life was getting back to normal.....

1642 The Civil War broke out between Royalists and Parliamentarians. These wars continued through the death of Charles I in 1649 until the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. During this upheaval, in 1646 there was a Parliamentary Ordinance prohibiting the ringing of bells for Church purposes.

1660 onwards. Landowners and the landed gentry reclaimed their bells, refurbished them for the new full circle ringing and bellringing became fashionable with ringing clubs and groups competing against each other as a social activity. The clubs were noted for their drinking, partying, and other bad behaviour and were fined and in rare cases excommunicated!

The separation into a social activity meant that villagers had the chance of earning extra money by ringing for weddings and funerals – a useful source of extra cash. So, everybody learnt to ring from an early age. Ringers still charge for ringing at weddings.

1668 The first book on ringing was published by Fabian Stedman (who has what we call a method named after him)

1800s The formation of the Guilds in the 19th century helped improve the standard of ringing, the behaviour of ringers and the relationship between ringers and the clergy. We are part of the Winchester and Portsmouth Guild of Church Bell Ringers.

Ringers are still separate from the Clergy though less often threatened with excommunication and sacking for bad behaviour and church attendance is not a requirement for ringers.

1900s Bellringing was not banned during WW1 but many ringers were called up and killed and churches fell silent. In WW2 ringing was banned unless to warn of an actual invasion, though an exception was made for the victory at El Alamein. For the most part they were rung again for the first time in 1945.

A ringer from Dummer who also rang at Winchester Cathedral is commemorated on the Lych Gate. His name was Royston Bishop. He died of his wounds on 16th November 1916 age 25 years.

Ringing also stopped during the lockdown in 2020

The Winchester and Portsmouth Diocesan Guild
of Church Bell Ringers Founded 1879

