

CARLISLE CATHEDRAL BELLS

A History

Carlisle Cathedral has a ring of thirteen new bells in the key of E flat cast by John Taylor & Co of Loughborough. Ten bells were hung for the Millennium in 1999 with pound-for-pound funding from the National Heritage Lottery. They were baptised at Evensong on 1 August, 1999 and each was given the name of a northern saint. Two treble bells were added in 2000 and a sharp second bell in 2005. This arrangement allows for light and heavier-weight rings of six and eight bells to be rung and also rings of ten and twelve bells. The total weight of the ring is 5¼ tons and the tenor bell, the heaviest bell, weighs in excess of 1 ton.

There were eight bells in the tower before the rehang. They had been cast at different times in history and did not sound tunefully together. They were known as the 'worst set of Cathedral bells in the country'. However, five of the old bells are of historical importance and are preserved in the tower. They can still be heard ringing. Four of the bells have electromagnetic clappers and serve as the passing and midweek service bells.

The fifth bell can be heard as the clock bell, striking the hours. The metal of the remaining three bells went into the casting of the new bells.

Bells have probably rung out at the Cathedral for 850 years. The earliest record that we have of the bells is 1292 in the Lanercost Chronicle when a great fire swept through the city destroying much of the Cathedral building and the tower, causing the bells to crash to the ground:

'Organ and bells and tuneful choir, but serve to mourn this dreadful fire'.

In 1306, Cardinal Petrus Hispanus visited the Cathedral to excommunicate Robert Bruce who had murdered John Comyn, Lord of Badenoch, at the altar of Greyfriars in Dumfries and *'revested himself and then, with candels light and causing the bells to be roong, they accursed, in terrible wise, Robert Bruce'*.

In the late 1300s, the tower collapsed and was rebuilt by Bishop William de Strickland who furnished it with 'quatuor magnis campanis' or 'four great bells'. One of those bells, named Mary, still hangs in the tower as one of the preserved bells. Mary was cast in about 1401 and rang for 600 years at the Cathedral before she was retired at the Millennium. The bell carries an inscription that translates as: 'I Mary with pure accents sing, second in the chiming ring'. The fate of the other three bells is unknown.

The Cathedral presently has a band of 18 ringers who continue the great tradition of ringing the bells to call worshippers to services and to mark civic and historical events.