



St Peter & St Paul, Carbrooke

Carbrooke Bells and Bellringing

Introduction

When the bells in Carbrooke church tower ring out on Sunday mornings, it seems hard to believe how much history lies behind them. The small band of ringers are continuing a Village tradition which goes back well over 500 years.

The Village and Church

The Village of Carbrooke used to comprise two parishes, Great Carbrooke (*Carbrooke Magna*) and Little Carbrooke (*Carbrooke Parva*) the latter was also known as West Carbrooke. During the 12th Century, much of the land in Carbrooke was owned by the Clare family, a wealthy and influential family, related to Royalty and many of the noble families in England. They founded sixteen Monasteries and were also great benefactors to the Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem. The Hospitallers, founded in the 11th Century, were an international religious Order who enjoyed the protection of the Pope. Dedicated to caring for the sick, the Order had a colourful and eventful history. It is from this Order that today's St John's Ambulance Association and Brigade evolved, who continue the tradition of caring for the sick and injured.

The connection between Carbrooke and the Hospitallers was forged by Matilda, Countess of Clare and wife of Roger, Earl of Clare. There are two 12th Century tombs in the chancel floor of Carbrooke church which are thought to be those of Matilda and her younger son James.

The first link between the village and the Order was when Countess Matilda gave them the church of Little Carbrooke and sixty acres of land at a place called *Durcote*. The exact date of this gift is not known, but it is believed to be before 1180. Sometime between 1180 and 1185, Henry II gave the Priory of Mynchin at Buckland, in Somerset, to the Order on condition that all the Sisters of the Order (who were spread around a number of nunneries in England) were brought together at Buckland. This was agreed and the nuns from Carbrooke, along with those from elsewhere in the country, moved to Buckland. A field in Carbrooke at the south end of Cuckoo Lane was known as Nun's Hill until quite recently. Perhaps *Durcote* and the nunnery were located in this vicinity?

Henry II was succeeded by his son, who became Richard I (better known as Richard the Lionheart). During his reign, Countess Matilda made a further gift to the Hospitallers of the church of Great Carbrooke "*with its appurtenants and a half of the same village with all its appurtenants*". The appurtenants included tithes, glebe land and the Manor, which extended into Great Carbrooke and included more than half of the village lands. This gift to the Hospitallers was made at Westminster during the fifth year of King Richard's reign. A record of

Carbrooke Bells and Bellringing

the gift survives today, but was made some 241 years later by the Hospitaller Brother John Stillingfleet, when he was compiling a book of Founders and Benefactors of the Order in England¹.

Matilda's gift of the second church and the village lands led to the Hospitallers founding a regional headquarters, known as a Commanderie, in Carbrooke—the only one in Norfolk. The Commanderie was located in what today are fields behind the school and the church. Nothing visible remains above ground now, except for a number of lumps and bumps in the grass. Aerial photographs of the site during a dry summer sometimes show whitened outlines in the ground, where the buildings used to stand. It appears to have been surrounded by a rectangular moat which enclosed an area roughly 150 yards by 90 yards with a 30 foot span of water. The Commanderie closed in 1541, when Henry VIII dissolved the English branch of the Order of the Knights Hospitallers and seized all their property for his Treasury. Both the Commanderie and its lands subsequently ended up in the hands of Court favourites Sir Richard Southwell and Sir Richard Gresham.

As property of the Order, the two Carbrooke churches were exempt from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of the Diocese of Norwich, so that his Archdeacon had no power to visit them. They were not taxed and did not pay any fees to him. The Hospitallers also had the privilege of keeping their churches open during an interdict (when the Pope forbade a person or place the right to enjoy ecclesiastical functions and privileges). When England was laid under an interdict and her people excommunicated during King John's reign, almost all other churches in England were closed and their bells were silent, but the Carbrooke churches remained open and continued services as normal.

It was the responsibility of the Hospitallers, as rector of the Carbrooke Churches, to provide vicars to carry out the parochial duties in the two churches. The privilege of choosing a vicar belonged to the Prior of St John at Clerkenwell, London who was the head of the English branch of the Order. In 1424, following the resignation of the vicar of Little Carbrooke, the two vicarages of Great and Little Carbrooke were consolidated into one. The church of Little Carbrooke must have been in a poor state of repair, as it was pulled down shortly after this². It is thought to have stood on the Watton side of the Ovington Road, between the turning from Drury Lane and the bridge over the river Wissey.

The Church of Great Carbrooke, dedicated to St Peter & St Paul, still stands today and dominates the village with its imposing 99 foot high tower. The tower dates from 15th Century, when the church was extensively enlarged. Research³ has identified the work of 3 medieval Norfolk architects. The tower, north porch and nave all have a special basecourse running around them which marks the work of one architect, who also worked at Norwich St Giles, Blickling and Barton Turf during the first half of the 15th Century. It seems probable that the tower was built sometime between 1424 and 1450.

The Bells

In 1552, during the reign of Edward VI, Commissioners were sent out to collect inventories of church goods, including details of their bells. This was the first comprehensive survey for which records have survived. In these returns Carbrooke had four bells which were listed as weighing 6, 8, 10 and 12 cwt respectively. This is the earliest written record of bells in Carbrooke.

Today there are six bells in the tower. They are known to the bellringers by numbers, where 1 is the lightest bell (known as the treble as it has the highest note) and 6 is the heaviest bell (known as the tenor since it has the lowest note).

The Carbrooke bells are hung in a solid wooden bell frame, which was originally designed for 4 bells, subsequently adapted for 5 and then later 6 bells. It was installed sometime during 1626 to replace an older bell frame, as noted by the entry in the 1627 Churchwardens Accounts which reads "*We have payd and layd out in chardges for the sayd town towarde the building of the bell frames and other chardges allowed by the inhabitants the sum of xv li xvijs vjd*"⁴ (£15 18s 6d)

The bells are attached to a wooden headstock which is in turn attached to a wooden wheel. A rope is tied to the wheel, runs round the rim and hangs down into the ringing chamber where the ringers stand to operate the bell.

Treble

The treble is the "youngest" of the six bells and was added in 1914 to increase the ring of 5 bells to 6. Cast by John Warner and Sons of London, it weighs approximately 4 cwt and was hung by the local bellhangers, Messrs F Day and Sons of Eye, who also rehung the remaining bells at the same time (at a cost of £18 18s 10d)⁵. The cost of the bell itself and the rehung was paid for by voluntary subscription, most of which was raised locally.

A service to dedicate the bells was held on Thursday 10th December 1914. About £20 of the total cost was still outstanding at this time and the collection at the service went towards clearing the debt. The service was conducted by the Rev. R. W. Pitt, Rector of Saxlingham.

Following the service 720 changes of Bob Minor was rung on the bells by H. J. Day (Eye), F. Day (Eye), W. Fisher (Watton), A. Macro (Thetford), W. Adcock (Euston), T. Fitzjohn (Thetford, Conductor). A further 720 changes of Oxford Treble Bob Minor was also rung by H.J. Day (Eye), Rev R.W Pitt (Saxlingham), T. Fitzjohn (Thetford), F. Day (Eye), F. Brunning (Eye), Wm Steele (Saxlingham, Conductor). Local ringers and the authorities pronounced the workmanship and materials to be of the best, and the go of them to be perfect⁶.

The treble is inscribed "*Thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle. A R Godfrey MA Vicar PS18v39 Matthew Berry Alfred J Tolman Churchwardens*" and "*Day hung us*" with the number 383 on the crown.

The Norwich Diocesan Association of Ringers annual report for 1914 notes "the ring of five at Carbrooke has been augmented to six by the addition of a new treble, and all hung in new fittings in a strengthened frame"

2nd and 3rd Bells

These bells were cast by Robert Gurney of Bury in 1669. The 2nd weighs approximately 4 cwt and the 3rd between 4.5 - 5 cwt. They are both inscribed "RG 1669" and contain the foundry mark of Robert Gurney as depicted in Fig 1⁷. Although the Churchwardens Accounts for 1669 are still in existence, there is no mention of any expenditure by them for the bells. It is thought likely that they were cast from the 12 cwt bell mentioned in the 1552 returns, increasing the bells from a ring of 4 to a ring of 5 and using the surplus bell metal to subsidise the cost⁸. Change ringing was growing in popularity during the 17th Century and the number of bells was probably increased to better support this.



Figure 1

4th Bell

The fourth bell is the oldest in the tower. It is thought to have been cast by Richard Brasyer I of Norwich and date from around 1449⁸. Weighing approximately 6 cwt, it's inscription reads "Hac in conclave Gabriel nunc pange suave" (in consort, Gabriel sings sweetly now) and contains the large Ermine Brasyer Shield as depicted in Fig 2⁷. This bell is probably the 6 cwt bell mentioned in the 1552 return of church goods.



Figure 2

5th Bell

The fifth bell is the second oldest in the tower. The quality of casting is much poorer than that of the fourth bell and there are errors in the latin inscription so although it appears to have been cast at the foundry of Richard Brasyer II of Norwich, he probably did not cast it himself. It is thought to date from around 1488⁸. It weighs between 7.75 - 8 cwt and is inscribed "Petrus ad eterne ducat nos pascia vite" (may Peter lead us to the pastures of eternal life) as well as having the large Ermine Brasyer shield depicted in Fig 2. This bell is probably the 8 cwt bell mentioned in the 1552 return.

Tenor

The tenor was cast by Edward Tooke of Norwich in 1678. Weighing between 10 - 10.5 cwt it is inscribed "Edw: Tooke made me 1678". The Church Visitors reports of April and October 1678 note "the great bell riven"⁹ so this bell appears to be a replacement for an older tenor. If so, it was probably recast from the cracked bell, although the Churchwardens Accounts for that year do not mention any expenditure on the bells. The older tenor was probably the 10 cwt bell mentioned in the 1552 returns.

Tower and Bell Frame Maintenance

Financial records, mostly in the form of Churchwardens accounts are the only surviving records today of work that was done to the church, tower and bells. The first record of maintenance to the bells is dated 25 January 1743 when William Sandcraft was paid "for mending of the Bells £2 and paid at the same time for beer 3d"¹⁰ In 1791 some work was done to the Church and steeple by William Colier and John Murrell Junior costing £11 15s 3d and in 1793 Ingleton charged £3 for work done to the "4th bell," (which is now the 5th bell, following the addition of the treble in 1914).

On 15 December 1801 there was a "Bill from Thomas Smith for work and stuff to bell wheels 14s 5d."¹⁰ Later, on 30 March 1804 James Leggat's bill was paid "for ironwork for stocks and bells etc. £1 1s 7d"¹⁰

Sometime between 1804 and 1813 the bells apparently became unringable, requiring major repair work to be undertaken, evidenced by John Dewley's £30 bill for repairing the bells (paid on 26 December 1813) and the Blacksmiths bill for the bells of £8 1s 4d (paid on 11 January 1814). Following this work, the Carbrooke bells were reopened on 18th December 1813 by the Shipdham, Caston and Deopham Ringers, who were paid £4 for their efforts¹⁰.

In 1826 the tower was re roofed with lead resulting in John Pitts Bill "for lead etc to new roof of steeple £108 12s 3d" (comprised of £143 4s 1d less the value of old lead £34 11s 10d). In 1847 a new floor was put in the church tower, indicated by J. W. Lacy's Bill for £37 4s 5d paid on 31st December of that year¹⁰

By 1848 some work was needed to repair the bell frame so at a Vestry Meeting on 15 June that year Mr Dewing (Churchwarden) proposed a rate of 2d in the £ "for the repair of the frame work of the bells". This proposition was seconded by Mr Chapman and was carried unanimously¹¹. The repair work was subsequently undertaken, as evidenced by a bill paid on 20 February 1849 for £41 17s 6d for Repairs of Belfry & rehang bells as per F. Coker's estimate viz:

Deal & Oak Timber	13 10 00
Labour, nails & Carpenter's work	11 10 00
Iron work	4 7 6
Re hang Bells	12 10 00

No further maintenance is recorded until 1866, when Mr Murrell was paid 1s 2d for "oil for bells etc."

In 1889 a payment of £11 12s was made to Sharp on 23 April "for repairs to Church and Steeple" and in 1894 Mr Murrell was paid £1 6s 6d for repairing the belfry window.

A long gap then occurs in the records until after the second world war. The absence of entries for maintenance does not necessarily mean that no maintenance was done, just that—as happens today—no record of it was kept.

A lightning strike on the tower in the early 1950's caused some cracks to appear in the masonry inside the tower, which stopped all ringing for a number of years on safety grounds. In the mid 1970's the tower was inspected and a structural survey of the tower was undertaken by Professor Jacques Heyman from the Department of Engineering at the University of Cambridge. His report concluded that subject to a considerable amount of remedial work being undertaken on the fabric of the tower, it could be made safe and the bells made ringable again. The remedial work recommended by Professor Heyman was put in hand in 1979, under the supervision of church architect Andrew Anderson, at a cost of approximately £16,000.

On the afternoon of Thursday 6th November 1980 a ringing test was carried out in the presence of an inspecting party. They found "a degree of oscillation in the tower structure" but "the inspecting party were able to confirm that the bells could be rung with safety"¹². One of the ringers present was schoolboy Stephen Theobald, who was allowed the afternoon off school in order to participate in the test. He still has the letter that his headmaster, Philip Poel, wrote back in reply to the request for his assistance (see Annex 1). Following this test, ringing was able to recommence at Carbrooke.

On 15th October 1992 a further inspection was undertaken by Professor Heyman and a test ring was carried out, with the bell captain and three ringers ringing rounds on the four heaviest bells. They were able to confirm the "degree of oscillation of the tower structure" but noted that the sway was in fact small and well below any level that might cause concern, concluding that the bells may be rung with safety.

Bell Rope Acre

When bells are rung regularly, the bell ropes (made of hemp) are subject to a lot of wear. The worn parts are repaired as much as they can be (usually by the bellringers) but eventually need to be replaced. The 17th Century Carbrooke ringers were fortunate in that the rent for a local field, known as Bellrope Acre, was set at a stone of hemp a year to provide the means for repairing the bell ropes.

The first mention of this rent is in 1688 with the entry "*mor du from Will Godhard on ston of Hemp*" recorded in the Churchwardens Accounts for that year⁴, when William Goddard apparently failed to pay his rent on time. In 1716 the Church Terrier¹³ (a document recording church lands and property) contains the entry "*there is an acre of land called the Bell roap acre now in the use of Henry Womode who pays yearly a stone of hemp towards repairing the Bell roaps*".

By 1694 the responsibility for paying the rent had passed to the Lord of the Manor and by 1703 there was the option of paying either a stone of hemp or the cash equivalent (set at 4 shillings). Sir Robert Claydon, the Lord of the Manor at the time, seemed to find this more convenient. From 1721 through to 1755 the Lord of the Manor appears not to have paid any dues towards bell ropes, after which it ceases to be a regular entry in the Churchwarden's Accounts. There are a couple of further entries recording a contribution by the Lord or Lady of the Manor towards the cost of bell ropes. The last recorded payment was in 1882 when Mr Grigson, then Lord of

Carbrooke Bells and Bellringing

From 1814 the ringers appear to have been paid for ringing on four state occasions each year. These were 29th May (Oak Apple Day, which became the first English Bank Holiday in 1879), the 4th June (birthday of the Sovereign—King George III), the 22nd September (Coronation Day of King George III) and 5th November (Gunpowder Treason). For each of these occasions the fee was 5 shillings (one shilling per bell) which the ringers seem to have received in beer, as the money was paid to the landlady of the local Inn, Mrs Elizabeth Nobbs. These payments continued until 1826, then intermittently until 1835, recording payments to Wright Harvey, the new landlord of the local Inn. The last payment was on 10th October 1838 for the passing bell on the death of King William IV.

From 1838 until 1850 payments for ringing appear to have stopped. This is followed by a period of major maintenance of the bell frame and rehangings the bells in 1849. After this work, the payments to the bellringers for the four state occasions resume again. The dates however have changed, to reflect the new Sovereign, Queen Victoria. The bells were now rung on May 24th (Queen Victoria's birthday), on May 29th (Oak Apple Day), on June 28th (Queen Victoria's Coronation Day—she was crowned in 1838) and on 5th November (Gunpowder Treason). The Churchwardens Accounts record that the ringers were paid £1 a year for these four state occasions, which still works out at one shilling a bell.

On 16th April 1862 the ringers were paid 2 shillings for tolling the bell for Prince Albert's funeral and on 10th March 1863 they were paid £1 for ringing for the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales. The last recorded payment to the ringers for these state occasions was in 1873. This ties in with the growth in the temperance movement, which frowned on drinking in general and would probably have led to disapproval of church money being spent on beer for the bellringers.

Although there are no regular entries for the ringers in the Churchwardens Accounts until 1896, entries for bell ropes suggest that ringing was still continuing. This is further reinforced by an entry in *The Bell News and Ringers Record* publication in 1885 which records that on August 3rd of that year at Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Carbrooke 120 of Old Doubles was rung on the bells by G. Moy, 1; A. Neal, 2; P. Sadler (conductor), 3; M. Jarvis, 4; E. Eagling, 5.

It was also around this time that George Newson, who learned to ring in Carbrooke, went to London where he became a well-known ringer and Master of *The Royal Cumberland Society of Ringers*¹⁵. There is an entry in the Churchwardens Accounts dated 4th April 1888 "Geo. Newson after Bell ropes 3 shillings", which may be the same George Newson. He is known to have died in 1896.

In December 1914, the ring of 5 bells was augmented to 6 with the addition of the treble, and the full support of the vicar at the time, Mr Godfrey. From then until 1927 the bells were rung regularly every Sunday morning and evening. In 1927 a new vicar took over who was not so interested in bells or bellringing and the bells ceased to be rung quite so frequently. In addition to Sunday services, the bells were rung for the Jubilee, the Coronation and also every Easter, Whitsun, Harvest Thanksgiving and Christmas time¹⁶.

Bell ringing was stopped during the Second World War from 13th June 1940 until 1st June 1943. When it subsequently resumed, a young Carbrooke man, Albert Dixon, had his interest in bell ringing sparked on hearing the Carbrooke bells rung for the VJ Day celebrations. Chatting to the bellringers afterwards, they suggested that perhaps he could get a group of youngsters together to learn to ring, since the current band of ringers were all getting on a bit by then. This he did and in October 1945 he and approximately 10 others started ringing. A few subsequently dropped out but the rest continued. Normal practice night for bellringers was on a Tuesday evening, but there used to be a Thursday night practice for younger and less experienced ringers. During 1946 and 1947 members of this band rang 7 Peals in Carbrooke, the only Peals ever recorded on the Carbrooke bells. Albert Dixon rang in five of these Peals, each one on a different bell. The only bell he didn't ring in a Peal was the treble, as he reckoned ringing it for a peal would have sent him to sleep!

When ringing resumed in 1945, a Bellringers Supper sponsored by the Vicar was arranged, which became an annual event. The first of these took place in the Rectory but it proved to be a bit on the small side so subsequent suppers took place in the Bull Hotel in Watton. There was also an annual ringers outing at Whitsun, to a different tower each year. This was arranged by Leslie Houghton from Watton, who worked as a sales rep. He would arrange the visits while he was travelling out and about with his job.

The suppers and outings stopped during the 1950's when a lightning strike on the tower prevented ringing at Carbrooke for a number of years. The only ringing permitted during this time was chiming the 2nd bell for church services.

Ringing for Sunday services did not resume in Carbrooke until the 1980's. The tower was not considered safe enough to ring any more Peals, unfortunately but a number of Quarter Peals were able to be rung.

****(look up references in Ringing World back issues in NDA Library at Wymondham—contact Haydn Charles for access)*

Today it is hard to believe that at least two of the current bells in the church tower were being rung for Carbrooke church services before Christopher Columbus sailed for America! Later on it is quite probable that they were rung to celebrate the Coronation of King Henry VIII and still later for Queen Elizabeth I. It helps to illustrate the long tradition of bellringing in Carbrooke that the ringers today are continuing!

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⁸Conversation with Paul Cattermole, NDA Bell Advisor to Bell Restoration Fund

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¹¹NRO PD 124/34 Churchwardens Vestry Book 1842–1959

¹²The Ringing World, 12th December 1980

¹³NRO DN/TER/42/3 Carbrooke Church Terriers 1706–1955

¹⁴NRO TA 805 Carbrooke Tithe Commutation Agreement field reference No. 254

¹⁵Bell News and Ringers Record, Nov 21 1914 p399

¹⁶Conversation with Mr Albert Dixon, Carbrooke bellringer between 1945-1955, (currently living in Shipdham)