

## Ellacombe Chimes Bicentenary – 26<sup>th</sup> June 2021



**Tower Captain at St. Mary's, Offwell, John Tristram, will take part in 'Chime Around The World' on 26<sup>th</sup> June to celebrate the bicentenary of the Ellacombe Chimes.**

The sound of bells ringing is deeply rooted in British culture and almost everyone in Britain lives within hearing range of church bells. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century bell ringing became extremely fashionable with the aristocracy as it provided physical exercise and intellectual stimulation. In rural churches, however, bands of ordinary ringers strived to outdo one another in ringing competitions. By the 1800's change ringing became synonymous with '*swearing, smoking and a barrel of beer*'. Some belfries became notorious as the meeting place of the village riff-raff who indulged in 'heavy drinking and riotous behaviour'.

In 1822 the Rector at St. Mary's, Offwell, John Gaius Copleston, tried, unsuccessfully, to dissuade the ringers from celebrating Guy Fawkes night and ringing in the New Year instead. Around the same time Rev. Ellacombe at St. Mary's in Bitton, South Gloucestershire, was having problems with his own 'unruly and drunken ringers'. He was the editor of the bell ringing column of a church periodical called 'Church Bells' and he was not slow to criticise the actions of bell ringers who did not ring exclusively for church services. A particular target was prize ringing where different churches competed for the best ringing, usually accompanied by a social event. He described this as: "*...allowing the bells to be prostituted for the benefits of a publican's pocket.*"

Rev. Ellacombe's solution was to devise an apparatus that enabled one trusted person to ring all the bells of a church. Each of the bells is struck while the bell is static instead of the bells being rotated and on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2021 there will be a worldwide celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the '**Ellacombe Chimes**'. Churches around the world will join '*Chime Around the World*', beginning at Timaru in New Zealand at noon on 25<sup>th</sup> June. Over the next 17 hours, working their way across the world, bells will be chiming at noon local time in each of the major time zones, arriving at their birthplace at Bitton at noon (BST) on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> June.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the apparatus fell out of fashion and few remained in useable condition. Consequently Ellacombe devices were removed from a number of church towers in the UK but in Offwell the Ellacombe Chimes have been restored, in-between lockdowns, by Bell Captain, John Tristram, and Cllr. Clive Whithear. With only one ringer allowed in the bell tower during 2020 John was able to chime the bells to welcome parishioners to the Christmas morning service, and they will chime again to celebrate the anniversary on 26<sup>th</sup> June.

The apparatus looks very Heath Robinson and John Tristram agrees:

*"Well, it was developed by a village blacksmith in 1821. The bells remain down so it's not as rich a sound as full circle ringing, with fewer harmonics which are produced by movement of bells and clapper. It's rather like plucking the strings of a harp. With a skilled operator and more bells more than one can be pulled at a time to give extra notes. It's hard work so the chimes can only be played for a fairly short amount of time.*

*When I became Tower Captain I found several of the pulleys which brought ropes down to the chime frame in the ringing chamber were jammed. The ropes themselves were unserviceable. Some were actually parted, others knotted together, all worn and frayed.*

*I found that tension of the control ropes is very critical. The ropes operate a hammer inside the bell as it hangs down; too vigorous a strike swings the bell so much that it's not in position for the next strike. I need to do some fine tuning for the Ellacombe 200 year anniversary on 26<sup>th</sup> June."*

***An exhibition about the History of Bell Ringing, the Ellacombe Chimes and St. Mary's bell ringers, past and present, can be viewed in St. Mary's Church during June and July 2021***