

What's up that tower?

Chris Pickford looks at ...

St Nicholas, Chadlington, Oxfordshire

Writing in 1949, Fred Sharpe gave details of Chadlington bells in his book on *The Church Bells of Oxfordshire*. Two of the six bells were cast by Abraham Rudhall I in 1714. Another was recast in 1911 but with the old Rudhall inscription and date 1714 repeated on it. Fred noted that there is no entry for Chadlington in the 1830 Rudhall catalogue. From this he deduced – since that list only mentions complete peals – that the three bells of 1714 did not belong to a complete ring and must, therefore, have been the only Rudhall bells supplied to the tower.

In fact, the Rudhall bells at Chadlington aren't mentioned in any of the other catalogues either. The others, published in 1705, 1715, 1751, 1788 and 1804, contain highly accurate listings of all the bells the Rudhalls ever cast. The three bells would have been mentioned and the total omission of Chadlington suggested a need to look elsewhere to trace their origins. It turned out to be an unexpectedly interesting story which needs to be approached in the telling from the other end.

Along the main road from Oxford to Henley on Thames one passes through a long village with neat pairs of eighteenth cottages lining both sides of the main street. This is Nuneham Courtenay, one of the classic examples of a village and its inhabitants moved bodily by a wealthy landowner seeking to improve the landscape of the parkland round his house. The Dorset village of Milton Abbas is another, perhaps better-known, example.

At Nuneham, Lord Harcourt demolished the old church and cleared the graveyard. The formalities were observed, of course, but although the matter was authorised by faculty it was all done in a rather underhand way. The Bishop and his chancellor were perhaps too easily convinced that Harcourt was acting in a public spirited manner by replacing an old and ruinous church at 'a small distance from where it now stands' since the new one was almost a mile and a half from the relocated village and hardly convenient for the parishioners. Moreover, the new site happened to be ideal for the classical temple Harcourt wished to erect in his park – a church in name, but one without the usual arrangements or furnishings for Anglican worship.

The new village at Nuneham Courtenay was settled in 1760–1 and the church, built to a design by James 'Athenian' Stuart, was completed in 1764. The social consequences of the enforced depopulation of such villages were highlighted in 1770 by the poet and exile Oliver Goldsmith in his work *The Deserted Village*, in which Nuneham Courtenay is featured as the semi-fictional village of 'sweet Auburn'.

The full story of the case was written up by garden historian Mavis Batey as 'Nuneham Courtenay: An Oxfordshire eighteenth century deserted village' in *Oxoniensa* Vol. XXXIII (1968) pp.10–123. In that article, Batey refers to the fate of the bells which were sold to raise money for building the new church – although she states that they were never paid for.

Sharpe knew that Nuneham Courtenay had possessed five bells given by Simon Lord Harcourt. In his description in *Oxfordshire*, he noted an entry from the Rudhall catalogues and quoted a visitation return of 1774 in which the vicar complained bitterly of Lord Harcourt's deceptions in depriving the church of many accustomed furnishings. Of the bells the vicar wrote:

'Good Lord Harcourt sometime past sold a pretty sett of Bells out of the Church consisting of Five. ... [He] got a grant from the late Bishop to sell part of the Bells towards rebuilding the Church, but He was so modest that he takes the whole sett only consisting of five Bells & leaves the Saints' Bell & so greatly deceived the bishop, who expected that he would have hung up a Bell sufficient to call the Parish together, but he did not. As the Saint's Bell can't be heard at the Town so that the Clarke or his Deputy is obliged to advertise the Parishioners of Church time by going up and down the Town with an hand Bell, the like not to be meet with in all England.'

However, it was Mavis Batey who made the connection and first suggested that the Chadlington bells had originally belonged to the old ring of five from Nuneham Courtenay. Her evidence for saying so isn't entirely clear but any doubt can be dispelled thanks to three

pieces of further evidence that have come to light subsequently.

I first became interested when Cyril Wratten allowed me to browse his collection of eighteenth century newspaper articles on bells and ringing – since published in the *Order and Disorder* series – when visiting Bedford on the East Meets West peal tour in 1978. Among them was the following advertisement from *Jackson's Oxford Journal* of 17th, 24th and 31st December 1763.

To be SOLD,

A peal of Five Church Bells, as good as new, very tuneable and exceeding fine noted. The Weight of the whole peal, Thirty-five Hundred, Three Quarters, and Five pounds.

For farther particulars enquire of the Printer of this paper.

Of course, this tells us nothing. It doesn't say where the bells were from or where they went. It does, though, indicate that in 1763 there was a ring of bells looking for a new home. The total weight implies a ring of five with a tenor of about 11cwt (which happens to be Sharpe's estimated weight for Chadlington tenor – although since canon removal and retuning the present bell now weighs only 8cwt 3qrs 13lbs). The advertisement awakened my curiosity and later turned out to be very much part of the Chadlington story as we shall see.

The clinching piece of evidence came from a manuscript at the Bodleian Library in which the complete inscriptions of the Chadlington bells are given as they were in 1814. This includes those of the two tenors before their recasting by William Taylor at Oxford in 1846. These were bells of which Sharpe had no knowledge. The details are in a collection of topographical material compiled by Henry Hinton and James Hunt (Bodleian ref: MS. Don. c.91, p.33).

The inscriptions etc. are as follows:

1. Robert & James Wells of Aldbourn Wilts fecit 1796
2. Let us sing merrily A.R. 1714
3. God preserve the Queen A.R. 1714
4. Peace & good neighbourhood A.R. 1714
5. Abraham Rudhall Gloucester, Bell Founder, 1714
6. Dono dedit Simon Bar. de Stanton Harcourt Mag. Brittan. Cancellarius 1714. Sancte bell: James Wells Fecit

These Bells were purchased from Newnham Courtney Com. Oxon. when that church was taken down ...

Bell	Weight (cwt-qr-lb)	Nominal (Hz)	Note	Diameter (inches)	Dated	Founder	Canons
1	4-0-13	1271.3	D#	27½"	2006	Whitechapel Bell Foundry	Flat
2	4-0-24	1136.4	C#	29½"	1714	Abraham I Rudhall	Removed
3	5-0-25	1013.6	B	31⅝"	1714	Abraham I Rudhall	Removed
4	5-1-16	951.0	A#	32¾"	1911	Thomas Bond	Flat
5	6-3-4	850.8	G#	35"	1846	William Taylor	Removed
6	8-3-13	759.7	F#	39½"	1846	William Taylor	Removed
Sanctus					1911	Thomas Bond	

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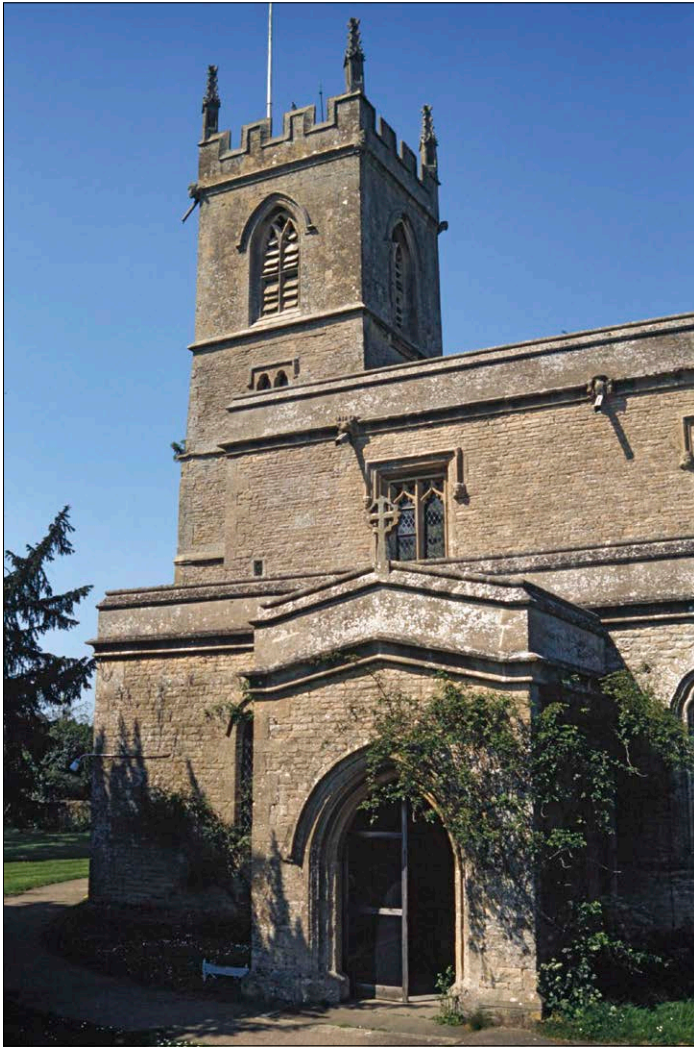
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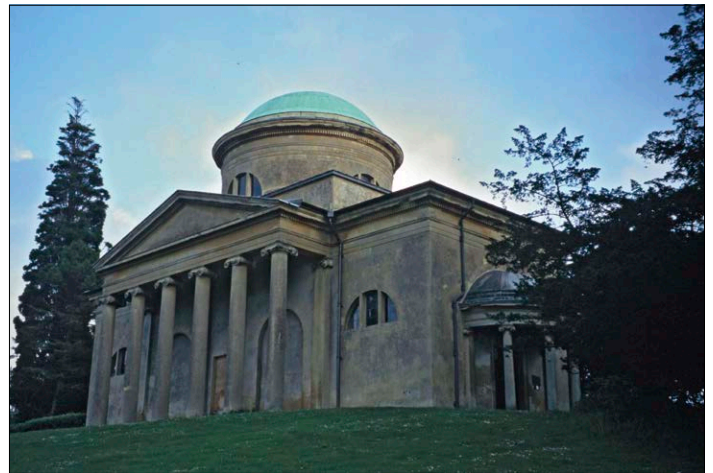
Chadlington church showing the heightened west tower which is also built into the back of the nave. It only held three bells until the five Rudhall bells were installed in 1764

Even without the final sentence explicitly stating that the bells came from Nuneham, the inscriptions tell the story – showing that they were a complete ring of five given by Lord Harcourt and cast by Abraham Rudhall I, 1714, with a treble added by Wells in 1796. The manuscript also notes the former sanctus bell (recast by Bond in 1911) cast by James Wells at some date between 1800 and 1814.

Knowing the date of sale and having definite evidence that the bells were not originally cast for Chadlington it remained only to establish when they were installed. The vicar at the time of these investigations, the Revd A. C. Sparling, kindly searched the churchwardens' accounts and found entries showing that the bells were bought and hung in 1764 – and the old Chadlington ones taken to London in 1768. The key entries are these:

1764	John Barnes paid towards the bells	£25 0s. 0d.
	James Izard expenses for fetching the bells and hanging of them	£22 15s. 8d.
1768	paid for the carriage of the old bells from Ensham to London	£1 4s. 8d.
	paid William Taylor for 5 bell ropes	£0 17s. 0d.

It looks as though Lord Harcourt did get paid for the old bells, at least in part (and not as Batey stated). The payment for five ropes in 1768 isn't really relevant to the story of the transfer except that it probably confirms that the treble of six was a later addition. As to Chadlington's previous bells, the visitation records show that in 1761 there were '2 bells broke' and in 1763 '3 cracked bells' – so the *Oxford Journal* advertisement must have appeared just when the parish was in search of replacements.



The new church at Nuneham Courtenay, 1764 – a classical temple in the park. It was not designed for bells although the similar and slightly earlier church at Stratfield Saye (Hants) has a ring of five in its central dome.

So, the interest here is that an apparently ordinary ring of six – the bells themselves of no great rarity or importance – has an unexpectedly fascinating history. Today, we are accustomed to thinking of bells being moved from tower to tower as commonplace, yet it was surprisingly unusual in the past. Here we have a definite instance.

To bring the story up to date, Bond of Burford recast the fourth of the six and the sanctus bell in 1911. In 1933 the same firm rehung the six with new fittings (Bond's typical RSJ stocks and plain bearings) in a new cast iron frame. Lastly, in 2006 Whites of Appleton again rehung the bells with new fittings in the Bond frame. At the same time the Wells treble was recast at Whitechapel and the other bells all returned.

What's up that tower? An early instance of a transferred ringing peal, uncovered through a series of chance discoveries in the archives.



One of Abraham Rudhall's 1714 bells at Chadlington from Lord Harcourt's Nuneham Courtenay peal (the second of the present six)



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