



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about CHURCH BELLS and BELL RINGING

There is nothing quite like the sound of church bells.

Most of our church towers were erected with the specific purpose of housing bells high above the rooftops so their sound could be heard over a wide area, calling people to worship or, sometimes, to celebrate a special occasion.

Church bells come in many different sizes, the larger giving a deeper tone. Of Hundred Parishes churches, Saffron Walden has most bells with 12, the largest weighing over a ton. Some bells are extremely old: Great Waltham, Little Hallingbury, Little Hornead, Strethall and Westmill each have one dating from the 14th century.

Most bells hang in church towers and are not usually on show. Some can be seen if hanging in a bellcote, as shown here at Birchanger.

Wimbish parish church is unusual in having no bell tower, spire or bellcote. Its tower was deemed unsafe and pulled down in 1883. Two bells from the tower now stand on the floor in the nave and another, cast in the 16th century, 'hangs' outside in the churchyard.



In Great Chishill, the church bells were re-hung in 2022 and a new one added, not a small undertaking. If you would like to read an account of this community project, please see the following website. The description runs over 6 pages with lots of photos:

<http://www.greatchishill.org.uk/subpages/Bells1.html>

At least three churches in The Hundred Parishes have a “Sanctus bell”, suspended from the outside of the spire. Hinxton and Ickleton, just a mile apart, each have a Sanctus bell; the other is at Wethersfield. The one shown here is at Ickleton. Sanctus bells were once used to tell people outside the church that a significant part of the service had been reached.



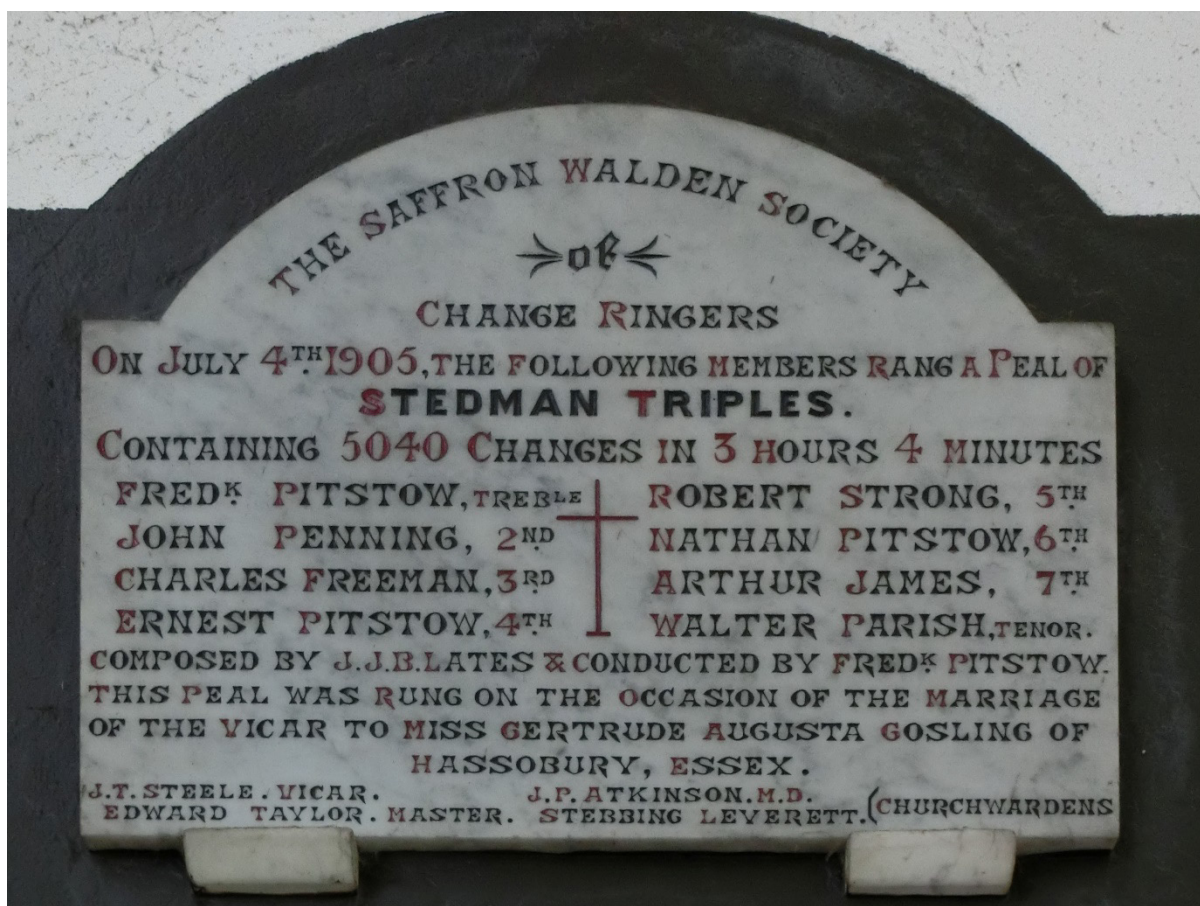
These days, few churches have enough ringers to exercise the bells regularly. When a group does come together, each bell is rung by a separate person, pulling gently but firmly on a bell rope from below. A practised team of bell ringers can create a wonderful sound as the bells are swung in a predetermined sequence. The simplest sequence is to ring the lightest bell first and so on through to the heaviest, producing a round of descending notes. Most church towers have the bells hung in a clockwise fashion although there are exceptions including St Mary’s in Stansted Mountfitchet where the bell-ringers assemble in an anti-clockwise configuration.

The round of descending notes may be repeated many times or, on the conductor’s instruction, the sequence may be changed by swapping two bells. This practice of “change ringing” is a peculiarly English tradition whereby the bells swing virtually through a full circle to be held upside down at the top of the circle waiting to be released and struck again at the appropriate time. In Europe the swing is much less. Many of our churches can no longer muster a full team of bell-ringers. Some bells are rung by visiting teams while a few churches have installed a mechanical system for striking the bells.

There are many possible sequences for ringing a given number of bells: for eight bells the number of different sequences is 40,320 (calculated as: $8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$, also known as the factorial of 8 or 8!). An experienced team will sometimes attempt to ring a continuous set of changing sequences. Long ago it was decided that anything over 5,000 changes of sequence would be termed a “peal”.

A peal typically takes around 3 hours so requires organization and great concentration and stamina. Peals are not attempted very often, but when successfully achieved they may be recorded in the church on a “peal board” giving the bell-ringers’ names and the title of the change sequence or “method” that was used. Methods have what appear to be rather fanciful names, often including the place where the sequence was first successfully completed.

The splendid peal boards in the entrance to Saffron Walden’s parish church include such wondrous names as “Stedman Cinques” and “Superlative Surprise Major”. One of these peal boards is shown on the next page. It tells us that “this peal was rung on the occasion of the marriage of the vicar to Miss Gertrude Augusta Gosling of Hassobury, Essex”. Hassobury was the manor house in the parish of Farnham.



A hundred years ago, Stansted Mountfitchet was renowned for its dedicated team of bell-ringers, some of whom participated in more than one hundred peals.

In 2022, fourteen peals were completed in the whole of the Hundred Parishes: six at Much Hadham, two each at Ickleton and Saffron Walden, and one each at Great Amwell, Great Bardfield, Hempstead and Standon.

Should anybody be interested in delving further into this interesting world, you will find an in-depth article at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Change_ringing and a mass of information at <https://bb.ringingworld.co.uk/>.

If you would like to try for yourself, please approach your local church or ringing association – search for Change Ringers on the internet.

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.