

# The city of the heavy fours

by *The Reverend David L. Cawley, AKC, FSA*

Whether or not St. Buryan has the heaviest ring of four in the country, there are in one city three churches whose towers' contents all out-strip it; even though they all share the unenviable distinction of being largely unringable.

Ernest Morris, in *Towers and Bells of Britain* gives the location: "Although *Bristol* possesses more rings of bells than almost any other city in England, yet, strange to say, its Cathedral, which has three towers can boast only of four bells." He wrote in 1955 and things were to change at the Cathedral within three years; the fine ring of eight from the Temple or Holy Cross Church, were hung in the north-west tower; in the central tower, however, the four old bells still remain. A year later the severely war-damaged ring of ten from St. Nicholas Church was taken away and only four bells recast. Across the City, in Portland Square, another noble tower has contained four bells since 1795. Not only do these towers have four bells in common; in each case the bells do not form a recognisable musical sequence; and in each case they hang in frames which anticipate or recall a much larger ring being installed.

"The town on the bridge" - Bristowe anywhere else, but its natives have long added an L to a vowel or vowel-sound ending. There are no fixed rules for this: -a is usually the letter which is enriched by local dialect. So while a Man of Kent might think it a good idea to carry on with Bristowe, a resident of that city would think it a better ideal to call it *Bristol*. It is still the "Town on the Bridge" and on or beside that famous bridge over the River Avon since at least 1150 there has stood a church dedicated to St. Nicholas. A century later, that amazing feat of medieval engineering, the cutting of the new channel of the River Frome, altered the tactical implications of the town's main fortifications and in the parish of St. Nicholas sparked off urban development which the magnificence of its church was to reflect. By 1545 it had the largest population of any Bristol parish; the building itself was a four bayed nave, with a chancel of two bays: below the nave was an extensive crypt (which survives), whilst the chancel was carried on arches which were in fact a part of the old city wall (like the passage

beneath St. John the Baptist in Broad Street on the other side of the old town).<sup>1</sup> At the north-west corner was a tower with a lead-sheathed spire, ring of six bells and also one of the town's curfew bells.

The latter we know to have been 44in. diameter; along with the (then) neighbouring church of St. Werburgh (now in Mina Road, Baptist Mills) St. Nicholas sounded the curfew - St. Werburgh at eight and St. Nicholas at nine. What is particularly interesting is the inscription on this bell:

GEORGIUS CAMPANA BRISTOW AD  
VOLUNTATEM MAIOR  
ET COMMUNIT. REMOVETVR TEMPORE  
WALTERI DARBY  
MAIORIS AD MCCCLXIX

("Bristol's bell George was voluntarily re-cast by the Mayor and Corporation in the time of Walter Darby, Mayor, A.D. 1359").<sup>2</sup>

Inscriptions of this length were uncommon on bells of the period; but Walter Darby certainly did live at the time, diving £10 towards rebuilding St. Werburgh's in 1385. The writer does not know when the bell finally went - it survived subsequent events but had gone by the mid-19th century. What is surprising is its name - for in 1925, whether intentionally or not, Bristol University acquired its own magnificent bell said to be named after the monarch (King George V) or the architect (Sir George Oatley). Perhaps there was a lingering memory of "Bristol's bell George"?

In 1762, population movements and the need to rebuild Bristol Bridge called the whole future of the church into question. Despite the architect's desire to rebuild in a classical manner on a new site, tradition dictated the original style, as understood in the 18th century and the same site, less the chancel, plus some new space at the west. The medieval crypt was retained. Although in the Gothick style, James Bridges' new church was designed on the auditory plan, retaining many fine furnishings from its predecessor. At the west end, a substantial tower was built, carrying a stone spire designed by Thomas Paty.<sup>3</sup> It was completed in 1769. For it Thomas Rudhall cast from the old six a new ring of eight bells equal in splendour to the church they belonged to. It was St. Nicholas' glory to receive in 1809 two trebles to give the city its first

ring of ten. These were cast by Thomas Mears, who five years before had recast the tenor. In 1817 he recast the treble and ninth, the eighth receiving similar treatment in 1856. Then in 1897/78, the whole ring was rehung in a new frame: the front six were entirely refitted and the front three recast by John Taylor & Co. The resulting ring - even after the Redcliffe recasting of 1903 - is recalled by many as being one of superb quality; and not infrequently as "the best in Bristol". So this great church with its fine bells stood on the Bridge which gave the City its name until the night of 24th November 1940, when it was gutted by incendiaries.

The night of the bombing also saw three other Bristol rings crash to the ground, never to be restored (St. Mary-le-Port, St. Peter and St. Andrew, Clifton), whilst the devastated Temple Church miraculously escaped serious tower damage. Early the following year, Mr. John Fidler of Taylor came to supervise the lowering of the Temple bells, the damaged St. Nicholas ring and what was left of St. Peter's. At St. Nicholas it was discovered that the ninth had crashed and broken, that the fittings of the bells were largely destroyed except the cast iron 1898 headstocks of the front six; the massive ten bell frame was little damaged, though the tower was completely gutted. Another loss was the great 18th century clock which had been altered to show seconds on the dial - a feature reputed unique in European turret clocks. The bells were stored in the ruins pending a decision as to the future of the church. Their particulars, as later received at Loughborough, were as follows:

Treble	28 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	6-2-11
RECAST BY JOHN TAYLOR AND CO. LOUGHBOROUGH * 1897 * (grape border below)		
2nd	30 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	6-2-22
The same		
3rd	33 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	7-3-27
WHEN YOU US RING WE'LL SWEETLY SING (ornament) T (bell) R 1764 (ornament) (grape border below) (T) RECAST 1897		
4th	34 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	7-1-20
FEAR GOD HONOUR THE KING (ornament) T (bell) R 1764 (orn.)		
5th	36 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	8-2-22
PEACE & GOOD NEIGHBOUR HOOD T (bell) R 1764 (orn.)		
6th	39 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	10-2-13
WE WERE ALL CAST AT GLOUCESTER BY THOS RUDHALL 1764 (orn.)		
7th	42 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	13-2-00
PROSPERITY TO THIS PARISH T (bell) R 1764 (orn.)		
8th	48 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	20-0-00

No cast inscription, but on the waist, incised:

7 MARK, 14V: Hearken unto me every one of you!  
J BARTLETT & W. K. WAIT,  
CHURCHWARDENS, 1856



During 1986 the band pictured above rang the longest peal of Bristol Surprise Maximus yet rung. The peal was rung at All Saints, Worcester on 11th October 1986. Left to right: David Brown, Martin Whiteley, Jim Belshaw, Stephanie Pattenden, Chris Wulkau, Paul Mounsey, John Eisel, George Campling, Mark Regan, Chris Kippin, John Loveless and David House.

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9th (smashed in pieces, was c 51") 24-0-00  
 Tenor 58 3/4" C-sharp 35-2-00  
 THOMAS MEARS OF LONDON FECIT 1804.  
 (Loop/lozenge border)<sup>4</sup>

It appears that in the period after the war, the metal of the broken ninth was gradually stolen, only about 3 cwt. ever being recovered. Ellacombe<sup>5</sup> records this as the eighth and vice-versa, giving the inscription as

ABRAHAMMEREDITHCHURCHWARDEN  
 1817

whilst another authority adds to this

T. MEARS OF LONDON FECIT

from the same source we learn that the two trebles recast in 1897 were originally inscribed:

Treble:  
 ABRAHAMMEREDITHC.H. WARDEN 1817  
 T. MEARS OF LONDON FECIT:

2nd:  
 JAMESWILLIAM ATTWOODWILLIAM  
 HASSELL  
 CHURCHWARDENS 1809.  
 THOMASMEARS OF LONDON FECIT

Despite the vigorous efforts of the last rector, Canon Stancomb, who held regular services in the relatively undamaged crypt, it was clear on his death in 1955 that St. Nicholas was not to be reinstated as a parish church. A suggestion was made to lower the walls and make a garden in the space. Wiser counsels were to prevail.

Meanwhile, the bells had not been forgotten, but after inspection by Mr. Paul Taylor in 1957, it was discovered that of the surviving nine, only the tenor was relatively undamaged: the three Taylor trebles and the seventh were intact but toneless, the others badly cracked. In view of the future of the church and the limited availability of war damage money, it was agreed to reinstate four only, the third and sixth of the 10 to be used as a clock quarter chime; the tenor as an hour bell; and a fourth bell in G for the curfew. The headstocks of the treble, 6th and 7th with new gudgeons and original bearings were used for the three smaller; the tenor received a new iron ringing headstock. No other fittings were required other than clock hammers. The fact that the third bell is in G rather than G-sharp and that the treble is the size and weight only of a chiming bell (and hangs in the original treble pit of 10) makes this a bizarre set of four, excellent though the bells are in themselves. As if this was not enough, the wonderfully restored church and City museum, which was opened on 22nd October 1973, required an air conditioner of phenomenal size. This was duly located in the ringing room and continues to the clock room, whilst a "fire-escape" type stairway passes through the pits of the former 8th and 9th bells. It is significant that

at present the museum has church artifacts of all kinds on display - except bells! The clock was restored to the original pattern dial, with second-hand, but with synchronous motor and sounds ding-dong quarters and hour, whilst the mechanism switches on the curfew for 7 1/2 minutes after the striking of 9.00 p.m. It is worth hearing, if only to recall what has been and what might have been if only a ring of ten of the quality of the present four had been installed.

Peal details will be supplied in due course, but one thing seems clear: the bells will never be heard on Welsh Back again as they once were until a terrible November night in 1940.

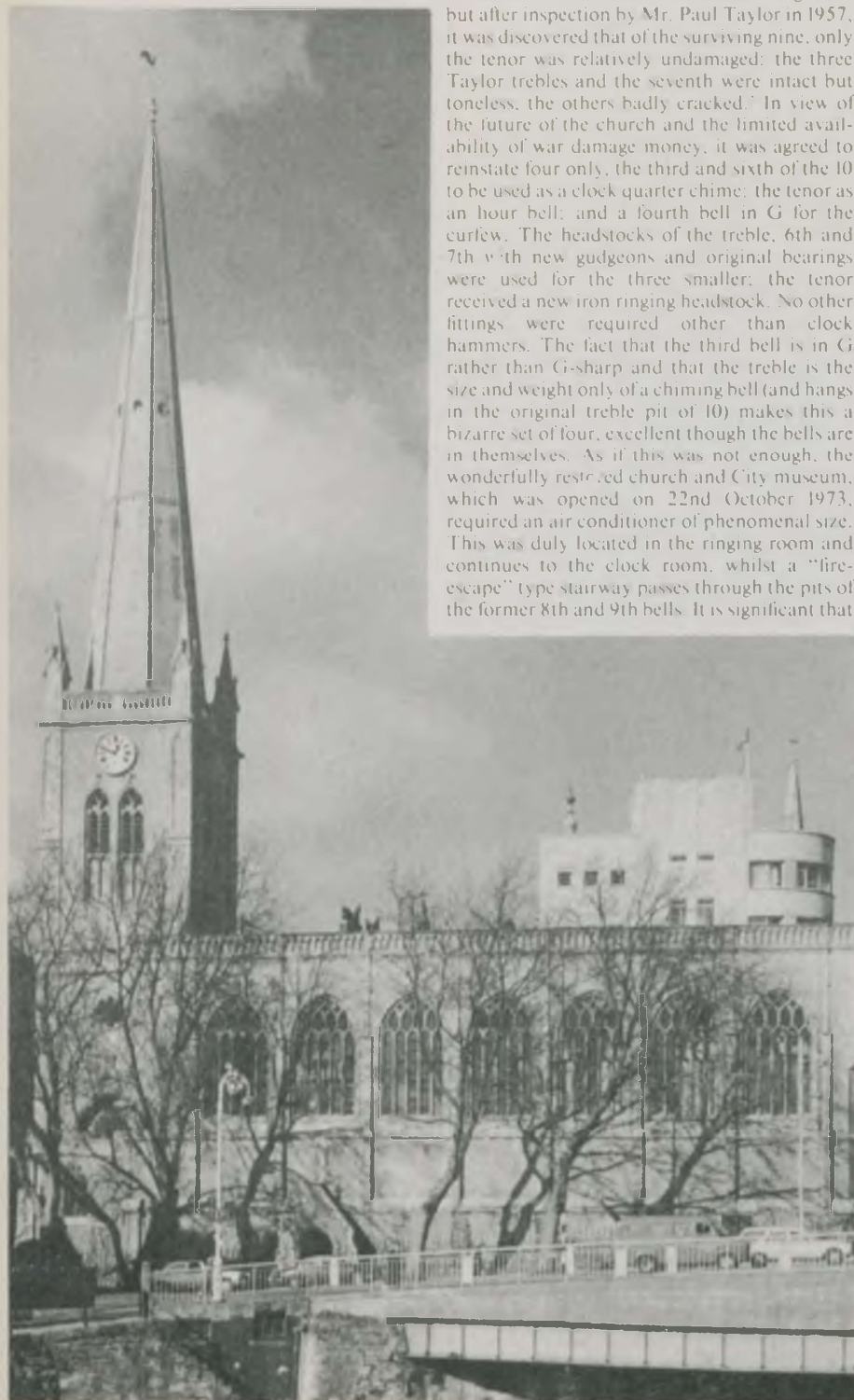
**St. Nicholas Church & City Museum Bells**

Treble	28 3/4" in C-sharp (note of 3rd in ten) "ST STEPHEN" "PROSPERITY TO THE PARISH" (QUOTATION FROM A ST NICHOLAS BELL CAST IN 1764) PARISHES OF ST NICHOLAS WITH ST LEONARD AND ALL SAINTS UNITED WITH ST STEPHEN DEC. 9TH 1958. RECTOR, REV. S. M. F. WOODHOUSE, M.A. CHURCHWARDENS S. W. G. SIMS R. J. DYMOND	4-1-17
2nd	36 1/2" in G-sharp (note & weight of 6th in ten) "ALL SAINTS" "PEACE AND GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD" (QUOTATION FROM A ST NICHOLAS BELL CAST IN 1764) CHAPEL OF EASE WITHIN THE PARISH ORDER IN COUNCIL OF DEC. 9TH 1958	8-3-36
3rd	39" in G (semitone sharp of 7th in ten) "ST NICHOLAS" (CURFEW BELL) IN MEMORY OF BRISTOLIAN JOHN MORTIMER DUNCAN STANCOMB M.B.E., M.A., R.D. BELOVED VICAR AND THE LAST INCUMBENT OF ST NICHOLAS WITH ST LEONARD 1928-1955 "LOVE ONE ANOTHER WITH A PURE HEART, FERVENTLY" CHURCHWARDENS - ST NICHOLAS W. MORTON 1945-1959 C. E. BYRT 1952-1959 CHURCHWARDENS - ST LEONARD'S R. J. DYMOND 1948-1959 A. T. STONE 1958-1959 SENIOR VESTRYMAN F. P. BARRON	11-0-21
Tenor	55" in C-sharp "ST LEONARD" "FEAR GOD HONOUR THE KING" (INSCRIPTION ON A ST NICHOLAS BELL CAST IN 1784) PARISH OF ST LEONARD UNITED WITH ST NICHOLAS PARISH 1788 FOUR BELLS CAST FROM ST NICHOLAS PEAL OF TEN BELLS DAMAGED BY ENEMY ACTION NOV. 20TH 1940 (Opposite, on all four bells) JOHN TAYLOR & CO. BELL FOUNDERS LOUGHBOROUGH 1960	29-3-22

**NOTES**

1. *The Churches of Britain*, Bryan Little 1978.
2. *Bristol Times & Mirror*, 1877.
3. Little, *St. Nicholas Church & City Museum*, 1980.
4. Loughborough Foundry records.
5. Ellacombe, *Church Bells of Gloucestershire*.
6. *Bristol Times & Mirror*.
7. Mr. P. L. Taylor's MSS.

(in the next issue, St. Paul's, Portland Square)



Bristol St. Nicholas Church and City Museum (4, 30 cwt)