

St. Swithun's is one of Worcester's ancient parishes, but the church was extensively remodelled in early Georgian times. There is mediaeval masonry in the nave and the core of the tower is of C15th date, but the appearance of the building is a mix of the classical and C18 Gothick styles. The remodelling was undertaken by Thomas and Edward Woodward of Chipping Campden in 1734-6, and the tower has Gothic details like the one at Blockley rebuilt by Thomas Woodward the elder in 1725-7. The Church was closed for regular worship in the 1970s but since 1977 it has been in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust (formerly the Redundant Churches Fund).

The tower is in four stages with a balustrated parapet and crocketed pinnacles. The main entrance to the church is through the west door of the tower. Above is the first floor ringing room, then the old chime room (now containing the bells) and the old bell chamber (still containing the old bellframe) at the level of the louvres. Access to all levels of the tower is by spiral stair in the north east corner.

## The present bells

The ring of six bells is in the key of F natural (713Hz or F plus 36 cents)

<i>Bell</i>	<i>Inscription</i>
1.	✠ IESVS ( <i>fleur-de-lis border</i> ) BEE ( <i>border</i> ) OVR ( <i>border</i> ) GOOD ( <i>border</i> ) SPEED ( <i>border</i> ) 1654 ( <i>border</i> ) / ( <i>John Martin's large heart-shaped mark</i> )
2.	✠ SOLI ( <i>fleur-de-lis border</i> ) DEO ( <i>border</i> ) GLORIA ( <i>border</i> ) PAX ( <i>border</i> ) HOMINIBVS 1654 ( <i>border</i> ) / ( <i>John Martin's large heart-shaped mark</i> )
3.	( <i>Cross</i> ) IOHANNES ( <i>King</i> ) CRISTI ( <i>Queen</i> ) CARE ( <i>King</i> ) ME ( <i>Queen</i> ) SALVE ( <i>King</i> ) SEMPER ( <i>King</i> ) CLARE
4.	( <i>Cross</i> ) AVE ( <i>King</i> ) MARIA ( <i>Queen</i> ) GRACIA ( <i>Queen</i> ) PLENA ( <i>Queen</i> ) DOMINVS ( <i>King</i> ) TECVM
5.	( <i>Cross</i> ) IESVS ( <i>King</i> ) NAZARENVS ( <i>Queen</i> ) REX (( <i>King</i> ) IVDERVM ( <i>Queen</i> ) FILI ( <i>King</i> ) DEI ( <i>Queen</i> ) MISERERE ( <i>King</i> ) MEI
6.	( <i>Fleur-de-lis border all round</i> ) / + MAS SOLLEY OF HIMDLIP GAVE THIS BELL THEOPHILVS ALLYE MAIOR THOMAS HACKETT IOHN LACY 1654 / ( <i>arabesque border all round</i> ) / CHVRCH WARDENS EDWARD BEARDMORE CLARCK AND REGISTER ( <i>fleur-de-lis border</i> ) ( <i>John Martin's large heart-shaped mark</i> )

<i>Bell</i>	<i>Founder and date</i>	<i>Diameter</i>	<i>Hz</i>	<i>Note</i>	<i>Cwt.</i>	<i>Qrs.</i>	<i>Lbs.</i>
1.	John Martin, 1654	31¾	1200	D	6	2	24
2.	John Martin, 1654	32⅝	1068	C	6	2	10

<i>Bell</i>	<i>Founder and date</i>	<i>Diameter</i>	<i>Hz</i>	<i>Note</i>	<i>Cwt.</i>	<i>Qrs.</i>	<i>Lbs.</i>
3.	Worcester foundry, c.1420	32 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub>	952	Bb	6	0	6
4.	Worcester foundry, c.1420	35 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	898	A	8	0	12
5.	Worcester foundry, c.1420	39 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	801	G	10	2	17
6.	John Martin, 1654	44 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub>	713	F	13	0	21

The bells form the oldest surviving ring of six, having been as they are now since 1654. They are of two dates and by two different founders, the three older bells all being examples of the “Royal heads” bells cast in Worcester in about 1420 and the others cast nearby by John Martin the elder in 1654. Not only is the ring of remarkable antiquity, it is most unusual in possessing three mediaeval bells of one period and founder.

The bells now hang in a Taylor cast-iron and steel “lowside” frame (*Bellframes* type 8.3.A.h) installed in 1972-3, complete with modern ringing fittings – cast-iron stocks, fixed steel gudgeons, ball bearings, traditional wheels, stays and sliders etc.

The old bellframe remains *in situ* above the new frame. The frame is of C17 type, consisting of sills, braces and long heads (*Bellframes* type 6.A) and arranged with the four largest bells swinging in parallel pits north-south and the trebles east-west to the north of them towards the west side of the tower (i.e. a mirror image of *Bellframes* layout 6.16). The rope-circle was anti-clockwise.

Careful examination by Christopher Dalton and Dr. John Eisel in 1994 has provided an interpretation of the history of the frame and evidence of dating. Their findings are that although the frame was probably rebuilt when the tower was remodelled in 1734-6 a great deal of timber was reused. Study of the clearance grooves and bearing indents in the reused timbers show that as built in the early C17 the frame originally had four parallel pits. A transverse pit with an outer truss was added for an additional bell and then modified to accommodate two bells when the ring became six in 1654. There is evidence that the extra pit only held one bell initially and then another was squeezed in. When the frame was reconstructed the braces were cut down by about fifteen inches, reducing the height of the frame which had originally been very tall.

There is also a sanctus bell, kept in the tower but unhung. The bell is as follows:

### *Inscription*

JOHN WALDEN RICHARD BROOKE CHVRCH WARDENS 1720

<i>Bell</i>	<i>Founder and date</i>	<i>Diameter</i>	<i>Note</i>	<i>Cwt.</i>	<i>Qrs.</i>	<i>Lbs.</i>
1.	Abraham Rudhall II, 1720	16 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	E	0	3	2

Its canons were removed in 1973.

## History

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In 1552 St. Swithun's had a set of four bells (three of which remain), plus a clock bell and a little bell or Sanctus. The inventory refers to "iiij belles in the frame and j bell for the clocke & j litle bell".

Evidence from the old bellframe suggests that the four bells were probably augmented to five in the early C17th, and then to six in 1654. Unfortunately, no documentary evidence for this period has survived among the parish records.

There are minor references to repairs to the tower and bells in the Churchwardens presentments:

1699 - Steeple in need of repairs [two items]

26 November 1719 - Wee present our Bell wheels to be out of repair, but have been some time past & are now in repaireing, all other things belonging to Our Church are in good & Sufficient repair, 26 Nov 1719.

As already noted, the core of the tower is of C15th date although extensive remodelling and partial rebuilding took place in 1734-6. This must have involved some work on the bells, and the likelihood is that the framework was reconstructed from old timbers at that time.

An accident in the belfry was reported in *The Worcester Journal*, on Thursday 8 January 1749/50:

Last Monday Evening as some Persons were ringing at St. Swithen's, in this City, a Bell over-set, and one Hooper, a Journeyman Hatter, going up to put the Bell in Order, fell down through the Loft amongst the rest of the Ringers, and was most terribly bruised: He was immediately carried to our Infirmary, where the utmost Care is taken of him, and there is a Probability of his Recovery.

The next major event in the history of the bells was the rehangings by John Taylor & Co of Loughborough in 1872. Taylors removed the canons from three of the bells (those of the third were off already) and rehung all six with new fittings. The work was completed in May 1872.

By 1966 the fittings were in need of attention, and a group of boys from the King's School cleaned up the belfry and carried out repairs under the supervision of Paul Cattermole. The work involved the replacement of the treble headstock and the provision of new ironwork, plus general tightening of bolts and repainting of the metalwork.

At that time, before rehang in 1972-3, the bells were hung in their old anti-clockwise timber frame (as described above) and with Taylor fittings dating from 1872. The fittings included wooden stocks, hoop gudgeons, plain bearings in iron carriages with lift-out lids, traditional wheels, stays, sliders, iron wheel stays etc. The treble and second bells still has their canons, but those of the other bells had been removed (those of the third before 1872). The three bells of 1654 had been quarter turned in 1872 and the others eighth-turned. The fifth, chipped inside, was the only bell to have been tuned. Before the 1972-3 rehang the sanctus bell was unhung and without fittings. It stood on the west window in the ringing room.

However, a full rehang was really required and in 1972-3 this took place – again under the leadership of Paul Cattermole, and with much of the work in the tower being undertaken by boys from the school. The bells were removed from the tower and sent to Loughborough on 29 March 1972. The tenor – previously reputed to weigh 16 cwt – was found to weigh 13-1-8 when delivered at the foundry.

The bells with their new frame and fittings left Loughborough on 11 December 1972 and they were blessed in the church on 19 December 1972. On completion of the rehang they were rededicated by the Dean of Gloucester, Very. Rev. Gilbert Thurlow, at 6.30pm evensong on Sunday 25 Feb 1973. The service was reported in the *Ringling World* on 20 April 1973 (p.319) along with an account of the restoration work.

Although the church has been closed for worship since the mid-1970s, the bells remain in good condition and frequent ringing is permitted.

The *clock* is now housed in the ringing room. It shows the time on a plain circular dial on the west face of the tower, but also on an elaborate classical pedimented dial above the east front of the chancel. The present clock is by Smith of Derby, 1932 – a two-train flatbed movement with original auto-winding system. The blessing and formal starting of the new electrically-wound clock, replacing a 300-year-old clock, was reported in the *Ringling World* on 25 November 1932 (p.771). The ceremony took place on Thursday 10 November.

The clock and chimes have an extensive history. There was a clock here in 1552 when the Edwardian Inventory mentions “j bell for the clocke”, i.e. a separate bell for the clock. Preserved in the tower, although in very poor condition, is an early C17 clock in a fieldgate frame as well as a long-disused chime barrel. Since the restoration of the bells in 1972-3 the old clock has been stored on its side in the intermediate chamber as there was insufficient headroom for it to be left in its original position. The chime barrel – in an upright frame – remains *in situ* in the middle of the room.

In *The Rambler in Worcestershire* Vol.1 (1848), John Noake relates a story concerning the chimes, culled from Chambers' history of the City. He states (p.55):

“... About half a century ago, as I gather from Chamber's history, a set of chimes (the only one in the city) was presented to this church by a revolutionary churchwarden, who caused it to play “Britons, strike home!” his colleague, however insisted on its playing “God save the King;” and matters were at length settled so that the tunes should be played alternately. The chimes, however, detesting party dispute, soon fell into a mode of playing so that it was difficult to recognise whether the tunes were revolutionary or loyal. Within the last few years they have made abortive attempts at Derby, Hanover, and sundry other old tunes, but now they rest from all their labours, the expense of winding up having been a double bar to their music ...”

*Visited:* CJP 21 January 1969;  
CJP and Nicholas Cronin, 22 May 1970