

## **Bellframes: replace or repair?**

*This paper is a modified version of a talk given to members of the Suffolk Guild on 30 April 2011. The event included a talk by Shawn Kholucy (a conservation architect who sits on the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings 'Guardian Committee'). The ideas in the paper are to encourage debate. They are my ideas and do not represent the views of the Worcester DAC or Worcester Cathedral.*

*The acronyms comprise: CBC – Church Buildings Council; CCCBR – Central Council of Church Bellringers; DAC – Diocesan Advisory Committee; EH – English Heritage; HLF – Heritage Lottery Fund; PCC – Parochial Church Council; and SPAB – Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.*

One of my colleagues on our DAC said something which made me think about how I understand heritage, conservation and community. She said: “Archaeology is the study of change. No change – no archaeology”.

So before we look at bellframes – things which are only moderately interesting – please bear with me as I walk around this topic and give it some practical perspective. Bellframes are part of something much bigger and should not be looked at in isolation. They have a functional purpose. And they have a context. Some are archaeologically important; only some. What is more important is the practice, heritage, history and archaeology of bellringing. This is something which is alive and dynamic and helps define Englishness. England was described as the “ringing isle” in the sixteenth century. Betjeman wants us to be “summoned by bells”. Bellframes play a part in a bigger story.

Everything we take for granted was once new. In the 1830s William IV almost got involved in the wave of national hysteria which tried to stop the horrible, vile, commercial and relentless progress of the railways. This opposition was emotional and unreasoning antipathy. For the next 20 years letters appeared in *The Times*! Yet 180 years later we are gooey-eyed about steam trains. We lament the passing of the rail network and the terrible actions of Dr Beaching. We conveniently forget how badly the railways were managed. Remember the opposition to what we now call the Industrial Revolution? Things we take for granted in everyday life started somewhere and were normally opposed. What would the Luddites have thought visiting the Ironbridge Gorge Museum today?

History is fashionable. Consider the fantastic range of broadcast documentaries, from family research to *Time Team*, the First World War and Viking sagas. Today industrial heritage, especially conservation railways, is big business. The key point is access and relevance. It's not so much the artefacts but the stories they tell and the knowledge they give us. Heritage is about change. It is not the preserve of a small group of specialists and is not about things in glass cabinets. We all own it.

William Morris, one of the founders of the SPAB, had an idea: he wanted to return to a romantic mediaeval ideal, influenced by Mallory's *La Morte d'Arthur*. Would any of us really like to live in this “romantic” world? Read an account of what it was like to die in battle at

Agincourt or Bosworth. Imagine childbirth in 1350, the lack of sanitation, the plague and a life expectancy of under 40. This is naïve.

It is easy to be romantic about the past in the comfort of our homes and the security of our modern age. However, Morris was also a radical thinker. He supported female suffrage and was one of the first members of the Socialist movement. So Morris, like many of us who are interested in heritage, had to live with a dilemma. He wanted progress and wanted to relive romanticised parts of the past. For example, I find it ironic that some conservationists drive new cars. There are plenty of motor car conservation businesses. They should be preserving their first motor car, not enjoying the luxury of an upgrade. The principle applies to some bell frames. This may be a bit simplistic; however, the dilemma is the point. We are all guilty of this hypocrisy.

As for church buildings, in 1877 Morris did not like the “modern” work of Street, Butterfield, Scott and Loughborough Pearson. Today we regard them as great architects who rebuilt, restored and saved many mediaeval churches. Today we have the Victorian Society. I wonder if Morris would have joined it. I think he would, and Morris was more of a modern thinker than some would have us believe. Some of his ideas, conceived in the 1870s, have received a fundamentalist makeover.

The passage of time distorts our perspective of change. The architectural styles and techniques of 1450 were radically different from those used by the Norman builders of our first great cathedrals. Worcester Cathedral was rebuilt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, replacing a magnificent Norman building. Yet to most eyes it appears to “belong” to the Middle Ages. It belongs to the 14<sup>th</sup> century; it also belongs to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And because of the generosity of English Heritage, our stonemasons are currently replacing stonework. So it also belongs to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Cathedral is not timeless. We conveniently group Norman, Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular as “Gothic”. They are quite separate and I imagine that a master mason church builder at any point in this 400-year period might say the same. The Cathedral was only 200 years old when it was rebuilt by those radical and modern Early English builders. Which cathedral would we rather have now? The Middle Ages are a just collection of “ages”, each century quite different.

Bellringers too often react badly to progress. In the 1920s, the CCCBR was asked to pass a motion against Simpson tuning, over 20 years after Taylor’s had cast and tuned some of their best bells. Some of our community thought it was destroying ringing’s heritage. During the 1920s and 1930s the charismatic Cyril Johnson was regarded as a rogue and charlatan. Today ringers yearn for Gillett and Johnson bells.

There is a pattern. When does something new become something which must be preserved? Conservation does not mean stopping the clock.

Let’s look at bellframes. They are crude pieces of engineering which do a practical job. Bellframes and bells are out of sight, inaccessible and often dangerous. If they are not fit for purpose they should be replaced or sensibly preserved (if archaeologically important). Restoring bell frames without the expert advice of structural engineers, just for the sake of it, is daft. And often not the best thing for making bells safely ringable. Would HLF sponsor a National Museum of Bellframes? Not a big tourist attraction. So for whom are we preserving some of our less important bellframes? Who is making the fuss and why?

EH's and the CBC's project for a national database of bellframes is a really important project and we should all support it. The real subject experts on old bellframes are not from the SPAB or English Heritage, and are not top University or Archaeology specialists. These experts are bellringers. And two sadly no longer with us, Christopher Dalton and Paul Cattermole, have left us research and interpretation which is a major resource for everyone.

Chris Pickford's book is the first and most important reference point. Every DAC advisor should have a copy. Our community has many subject experts: John Eisel, George Dawson, David Cawley and David Briant, to mention a few. They give us perspective and understanding to help us decide what is best for the church and the community.

If frames are recorded and interpreted, their story can be made available to a wider interested public. And we will all be better informed and able to make better decisions. We are all to blame for making bells and bellringing an exclusive little club, occasionally plagued by petty squabbles.

Conservation architectural practice is also business. It's how many of my friends make their living. So the interest to preserve can also be motivated by commerce. My friends in English Heritage are paid to be interested in old things. The bellfounders and bellhangers are conservation practitioners too. It is their business and they make a living out of it. However, some preservation-based schemes can be too expensive for a parish and the volunteers who raise the money. Is this fair?

There is a financial motive for everyone except bellringers. We are volunteer practitioners, sometimes dismissed as amateurs. This is not fair. "Amateur" means "one who loves, is fond of or has a taste for". "Amateur" does not mean we are not experts. The Church of England survives on its "amateur" volunteer community. Over 70% of the money needed to fund the repair and maintenance of our churches is raised by community volunteers. We have no commercial interest at all. The amenity groups are important, but their influence can be out of proportion and unrealistic.

So what happens when the future of a bellframe becomes an issue?

First, all church planning decisions are decided in law and not by the emotional advocacy of conservation groups, the CBC, DACs or bellringers. The 1991 Faculty Measure is a good thing. The Ecclesiastical Exemption is important and we should do everything in our power, collectively, to keep it. However, we ringers have to wake up and work more smartly with the Church of England, the CBC, the amenity group and our customers – the community. The CBC is making great efforts for DAC bell advisors to share practice and work better together.

Some will know this already. This is how the process should work.

A DAC recommends a scheme to the Chancellor. The Chancellor's decision is based on the evidence presented. The DAC will have helped the PCC (the customer) devise and present its plan. The amenity groups – the SPAB, Georgian Group, Victorian Society, CBC – should all be consulted where appropriate, but these groups are advisory and not regulatory; they cannot tell you what to do. The PCC should work with its church architect to plan the project, and with the preferred suppliers. Bellringers should work with everyone and we should all start in the same place.

There is a world of difference between advice and opinion. That's one good reason why the faculty process requires a Statement of Significance and a Statement of Need. It is so important to get this right. It allows everyone to put their case. If someone thinks a bellframe is an issue the case has to put factually, both for and against. Emotional appeals – whether for or against – do not work. The historical and archaeological context is critical. And so is the future. What are the changes for?

There are other considerations.

“Form or function.” Are the aesthetics of what is being considered more or less important than practical matters. An example is Norman Foster's “wibbly wobbly” Millennium Bridge over the Thames by St Paul's Cathedral. The function is simply “it's a bridge”, the form is “Foster's design”. In this case it all went wrong and cost even more money to put right. There are examples of this concerning recent repairs of bellframes

“Fact versus significance.” That something is “old” does not make it “significant”. Why preserve rubbish? Why preserve things of which we have many better examples? We should only keep what is archaeologically or historically important. This is another pressing reason for a national archaeological record of all our bellframes. The content of this survey must also include interpretation and an index.

“Need and want.” What is needed to make a bellframe ringable may be quite different from what others want for that frame. There are many shades of opinion and degree of what comprises a “restoration”.

Why is the project happening in the first place? Before we all debate “how”, have we agreed “what” and “why”? Is there really a case to augment or put in new bells? What is the context? New projects should represent the best of modern work combined with old work where appropriate. The purpose is often lost in the desire to preserve everything. Preservation is not conservation.

Is a preservation-based scheme really contributing to our future heritage? Do the proposed repairs destroy the archaeology?

I would ask the amenity groups to have a better understand of bellringing and its important part in our heritage. And I ask bellringers to have a better understanding of the amenity groups and their important role in conserving our heritage.

The recent hearing at Malvern Priory could easily have become a benchmark for things not to happen at all. So everyone would lose out, including conservation practitioners. However, by getting everyone together a practical and affordable solution was quickly found. Everyone is happy. The message here is that we have to work together. We can share differences and find solutions.

Bellframes are only seriously important to a handful of people: bells and frames are just wood and metal. They don't score highly on an international scale of heritage sites or artefacts. I'm not sure that many bellframes or bells are at risk. The SPAB over-exaggerate the threat and bellringers over-exaggerate the impact. Fortunately the SPAB have an experienced bellringer, Peter Rumley, on their Board of Guardians.

Our churches are not timeless. We need more Church of England and community in churches. They evolve. They tell a story. Bellringing is part of that story. Change is important. Because of change we have archaeology.

Mark Regan

Bibliography and recommended reading:

Cattermole, P. (2005) *Church Bells of Norfolk*. The Golden Bell Press 2005

Cooper, T (ed). *Ecclesiology Today* July 2008 issue 40. Our Parish Churches: some reflections on the passage of time

Cooper, T. (2004) *How do we keep our parish churches?* London, London, The Ecclesiology Society.

Dalton, C. (2000). *Bells and belfries of Dorset*, Ullingswick, Upper Court Press.

Hewitt, C. (1982) *Church Carpentry*. Woking, Phillimore

Heyman, J. (1997). *The Stone Skeleton*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

MacCarthy F, (1994) *William Morris: A life for our time*. London. Faber and Faber.

Mortimer, Ian. (2009). *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century*. London, Viking.

Mynors, C. (2006). *Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Monuments*. London. Sweet and Maxwell.

Pickford, C. (1993) *Bellframes: a practical guide to inspection and recording*. Bedford, published by the author.