

**An Investigation into the history of
the Bells
at St. Mary the Virgin Church
Stoneleigh**



By Pam Baker and Sheila Woolf

Stoneleigh Church Bells

The Church Belfry has 6 Bells

The **Treble** cast in 1962 by John Taylor of Loughborough at 3½ cwt.

The **2nd** cast in 1752 by Thomas Eayre at 4¾ cwt.

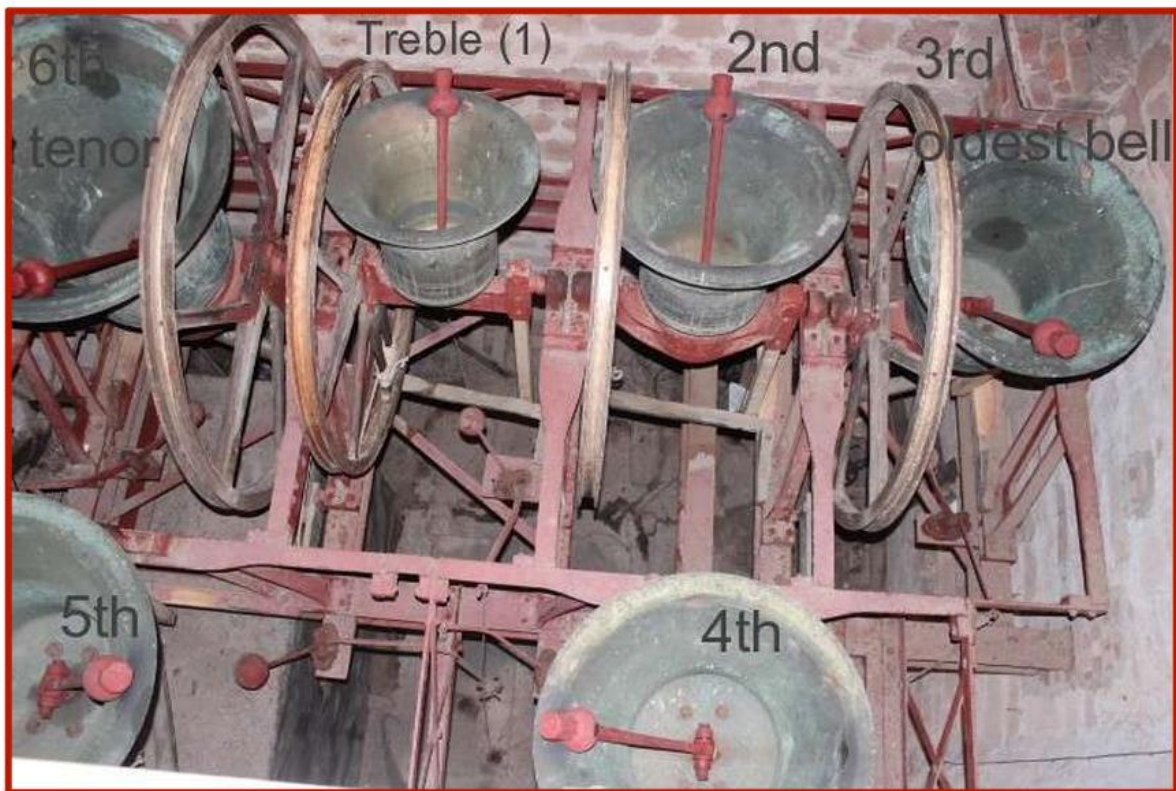
The **3rd** is the oldest, a rare 1530 bell cast by John Woolley weighing 5¾ cwt.

The **4th** cast in 1632 by Hugh Watts weighing 6 cwt.

The **5th** cast in 1792 by John Briant weighing 8 cwt.

The **Tenor** cast in 1632 by Hugh Watts weighing 10¼ cwt. or over ½ a ton.

The bells are numbered from the highest note Treble 1st to the lowest note Tenor 6th.



The bells in chronological order of casting

1530 The 3rd Bell

1632 The Tenor Bell

1632 The 4th Bell

1752 The 2nd Bell

1792 The 5th Bell

1962 The Treble Bell

1530 The 3rd Bell

The 3rd is the oldest, a rare 1530 bell cast by John Woolley weighing 5¾ cwt.

The oldest bell, cast in or around the year 1530, is of particular interest. It has the initials "R K" on the waist of the bell and these are presumed to be those of Richard Kidderminster, abbot of Winchcombe, who held office from 1488 to 1525 and died in 1531. It is also presumed that this bell was cast by John Woolley (sometimes spelled Wolley). He had been a servant in the foundry of Richard Seliok, Long Row, Nottingham, up to 1524 but was a bell founder in his own right in the 1530s, retiring in 1539-40; bells made by him are not common. Richard Kidderminster (1488-1531) was a man of affairs, a trusted servant of Henry VIII and Wolsey, as well as a truly religious man, a scholar, and an able administrator.

Why is there a Winchcombe connection with Stoneleigh? Winchcombe was a Benedictine foundation, dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539, and had been at one time the capital of Mercia; Richard Kidderminster was its penultimate abbot, having resigned in 1525. The third bell at Stoneleigh was, it seems, cast just 5 years later by Woolley, bell-founder at Winchcombe.

A document at Stratford Record Office – DR 18/3/47/1a – notes:

“lands bought by Sir Thomas Leigh formerly belonging to Stoneleigh Abbey, Kenilworth Priory, Coombe Abbey, Pipewell Abbey, Winchcombe Abbey, Evesham Abbey, Hailes Abbey and the Knights Hospitaller...”

We do not know whether Stoneleigh Church possessed any pre-Dissolution bells, but we do know that the church at Stoneleigh Abbey, which Sir Thomas Leigh bought in 1561, had been pretty well stripped by then of everything. It is not impossible that Sir Thomas Leigh, in true post-Dissolution country-squire style, bought the bells of Winchcombe Abbey. Teams of men were employed to strip the assets from the monasteries at this time. Sir Thomas and family worshipped at the church in Stoneleigh ... why not present it with a bell – the Woolley one from Winchcombe?

The inscription on the bell is interesting:

Michaele te pulsante Winchelcumbern a fetente demone tu libera

The most plausible translation for this odd Latin seems to be:

Michael, as you strike, free Winchcombe from the stinking evil spirit

Indeed in the church porch, the translation is given as:

Michael, when you ring, deliver Winchcombe from the foul demon



The bell itself is given the name Michael. It was not unusual to give a bell a name – other examples in England are Gabriel, Tom, Paul and Peter. Perhaps we are seeing the traditional opposition between Michael and the Devil, here. With its exhortation to “free Winchcombe from the stinking evil spirit” we see a typical pre-Reformation sentiment.

This bell weighs five and three-quarters hundredweight, is the third bell in the peal and is tuned to the note “C”. It was recorded at Stoneleigh in the earliest church register as the 1st of the peal.

1632 The Tenor and The 4th Bells

The Tenor cast in 1632 by Hugh Watts weighing 10¼ cwt. or over ½ a ton

Two bells certainly came originally from the foundry of Hugh Watts – and possibly a third. Watts came from a family of bell-founders, and his son, also called Hugh, continued in the work at Leicester Bell Foundry. Hugh Senior became Mayor of Leicester in 1634. Watts bells are admired for the beauty of their tone.

The first of these bells, from 1632, has an inscription which reads:

Jesu Nazarenus Rex Judeorum fili Dei Miserere mei 1632

translated as

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, Son of God, have mercy upon me

This is Watts' favourite inscription, known as a Watts Nazarene as there were so many cast at Leicester with this inscription. Some documentation relating to this bell mentions an inscribed date 1626, which perhaps commemorates the inheritance as head of the Leigh family of Thomas Leigh, later to be created the first Baron Leigh by King Charles I in 1643. Thomas' grandfather, Sir Thomas 1st Baronet Leigh, had died on 1 February 1625, wishing, as stated in his Will, to be buried alongside his mother Dame Alice at Stoneleigh Church.



This is the heaviest of the bells, weighing 10 hundredweight 2 quarters and 14 pounds.

The tenor bell is the sixth in the peal and is tuned to the note of "G".

The Bell Ropes tied to the wheels with the Tenor at the back

The 4th cast in 1632 by Hugh Watts weighing 6 cwt 15lbs

The other bell from 1632 has an identical inscription.

It weighs 6 hundredweight 15 pounds and is the fourth in the peal.

It is tuned to the note of "B".

Two bells with this inscription but with the date 1626 were recorded in the earliest church register.



The 4th Bell

1752 The 2nd Bell

The 2nd cast in 1752 by Thomas Eayre at 4³/₄ cwt.

The second bell, cast in 1752, is the work of Thomas Eayre, a Kettering bell founder and clockmaker. The bell is tuned to the note of “D”

There is some confusion about whether the “Rex Judorum” inscription at Stoneleigh is on this bell or the tenor, cast by Watts. Eayre of Kettering was a great admirer of Watts, who had hailed from nearby Leicester. Eayre often inscribed his bells with Watts’ favourite inscription, and it seems he set himself to copy Watts’ bells. When Eayre recast a bell at St Margaret’s Leicester he actually put on it:

*“Hugh Watts of Leicester the foremost in his art cast the 6 largest bells 1633.
T Eayre Kettering recast this 1739.”*

It seems therefore that there is a closer relationship between the 1752 bell and the 1632 bells than previously realised. In addition, Eayre worked for the Isham family of Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire, who were related to the Leighs of Stoneleigh.

E.H. Lingen Barker, in his *Warwickshire Churches* of 1890, states that on this bell there is the inscription:

T.Eayre – Fecit: Ex Dono Johanes Hudson Generosi De Stoneigh 1752

which can be translated as:

T. Eayre made this, through the generous gift of John Hudson of Stoneleigh, 1752

(There was a John Hudson, who died in 1754, who was “Park Keeper to the Right Honourable Edward Lord Leigh” according to the burial register.)

Another Latin inscription follows:

Voce mea viva depello cuncta nociva

Which may be translated as:

By my living voice I drive out all that is harmful



1792 The 5th Bell

The 5th cast in 1792 by John Briant weighing 8 cwt.

1792 – ringing the changes!

Another bell believed to have originated in the Watts foundry in the 1630s was once the fourth in the peal, and once had the inscription:

Saxonice O Kenelme Martir Xpj Nos defende ne malignj senciamus Jacula

which can be translated as

O Kenelm, Saxon Martyr of Christ, defend us lest we feel the darts of the evil one.

The church porch translation reads:

O Kenelm, Saxon Martyr of Christ, guard us against the torches of the evil one.

This refers to St Kenelm. A Saxon martyr, who was killed in the Clent Hills on the order of his sister, and his body buried. When the monks of Winchcombe retrieved the body and carried it back to their abbey, the bells sounded “without the hand of man.” According to the 12th century writer William of Malmesbury “there was no place in England to which more pilgrims travelled than to Winchcombe on St Kenelm’s Feast Day” (July 17th). So, again, there would seem to be a suggestion that the bell venerates a pre-Reformation “hero.”

Two of our bells, therefore once had a connection with Winchcombe. Maybe the staunchly-Protestant Elizabethan Sir Thomas Leigh, chosen as Lord Mayor of London in 1558 partly for his opposition to the erstwhile Catholic adherents of Queen Mary, may simply have re-used a bell – the 1530 one - from Winchcombe for his newly-acquired church at Stoneleigh, without consideration for its having once been associated with pre-Reformation England.

In 1632, Stuart rule was firmly Anglo-Catholic, and the Leigh family of Stoneleigh were strong supporters of the Crown. The “Kenelm” bell in the church at Stoneleigh echoed, in its inscription, Catholic sentiment. Further, the new vicar of Stoneleigh, arriving in 1632, was Edward Maunsell, who was also a chaplain to King Charles I. His arrival coincided with a new Coventry and Lichfield Diocesan incumbent, Richard Wright, and so it is possible that a new regime was beginning in churches throughout the diocese – an anti-Puritan one.

Perhaps this is why, some eleven years later, Cromwell’s soldiers came to Stoneleigh and disrupted Maunsell’s Sunday service, finally retreating to the hillside from which they fired on the church below. It is perhaps no coincidence that Stoneleigh’s parish registers began in 1633, possibly suggesting a “new broom”.

The “Saxonice O Kenelme Martir” inscription was recorded by the vicar on a page in the earliest church register, noting that it also had the “Jesu Nazareus Rex Judeorum fili Dei Miserere mei” inscription, attributed to Watts.

However, all was to change in 1792 when this bell was re-cast, by another notable bell founder, John Briant of Hertford. He was responsible for a great many bells throughout Hertfordshire, as well as being a noted clockmaker.

The Leigh family at this time had connections with the county of Hertford and this may explain their choice of founder. One source has it being inscribed:

Dilexi domine decorum domus tuae,
which may be translated as
Lord I have delighted in the glory of your house

Why this old bell was re-cast is hard to say. The date, 1792, coincided with a period when the Hon. Mary Leigh was responding to the village's needs, building a new workhouse and providing money to celebrate victory at the battle of the Nile, for example. It may have been that she agreed to have one of Stoneleigh's bells re-cast. The churchwardens of the day were evidently proud of their new bell as their names, along with the maker, are inscribed on it:

J. Judd and J. Simpson C Wardens J Briant fecit 1792

In other words, J. Briant made the bell (or re-made it!) and the two churchwardens wished to have their names upon it!

The bell, which is now the fifth in the peal, weighs almost eight hundredweight and is tuned to the note of "A".



1962 The Treble Bell

The Treble cast in 1962 by John Taylor of Loughborough at 3½ cwt.

The sixth bell, the treble, cast in 1962, was by John Taylor of Loughborough, now UK Bell Foundries Limited, who claim to be the largest bell foundry in the world. The largest bell in Britain, the “Great Paul” of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, was cast at the foundry in 1881.

The Stoneleigh Treble bell is inscribed in memory of local farmer and long-time churchwarden Frank Ernest Grimes who had died the previous year, and a subscription had been set up for its purchase.

As the Treble, this new bell became the 1st in the 6 bell peal. It is tuned to the note of “E”, the highest note in the peal.



The Treble Bell before installation



The Treble, on the left, in the Belfry