

Ellacombe Chimes Bicentenary

SATURDAY 26 JUNE 2021



Bells to chime around the World from New Zealand to Canada

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On the 26 June 2021 a worldwide celebration is planned for the 200th anniversary of Rev Henry Thomas Ellacombe's invention of ringing chimes, focused on St Mary's Church, Bitton, where the 'Ellacombe Chiming Apparatus' was invented and first installed.

Originally devised as a means to outwit a wayward team of bellringers, the chimes allow the ringing of church bells by a single person.

The apparatus was used widely during the nineteenth and early twentieth century and installed in churches throughout the world. Many of these churches have been invited to join in a world wide chiming of bells that is planned to begin in New Zealand and end on the Pacific coast of Canada.



The Bells of St Mary's Church Bitton shown "up". They would be in a "down" position to be chimed.

Starting at noon in New Zealand, over the next 17 hours, working their way across the world, bells will be chiming at noon local time in each of the major time zones, arriving at their birthplace at Bitton, in South Gloucestershire, U.K. at 12:00 BST on Saturday 26th June. The event will then cross the Atlantic and be heard across the Americas finishing in Vancouver, British Columbia.

All forms of chiming, with carillons or full-circle towers will also be participating in this celebration of Rev, Ellacombe's contribution to the world's bellringing heritage, but centered on St Mary's Church, Bitton, where a live streaming of the festivities will be shown as well as a special performance based on the Ellacombe Chimes.

It is a date not to be missed.



The ringing apparatus in the porch of St Mary's Church, Bitton

“In most cases it will be found that peal-ringing on Sundays—morning or evening — leads to the alehouse afterwards.”

What is an Ellacombe Apparatus?

The Ellacombe apparatus is a mechanism devised for performing change ringing on church bells, by striking stationary bells with hammers.

It requires only one person to operate, unlike the traditional method, where the bells are rotated through over 360 degrees (full circle ringing) to sound them and one person is needed for each bell. Instead, the bells are kept static (or "hung dead") and a hammer is struck against the inside of the bell. Each hammer is connected by a rope to a fixed frame in the bell-ringing room. When in use, the ropes are taut and pulling one of the ropes towards the player will strike the hammer against the bell. To enable full circle ringing to also take place in the same tower, the Ellacombe Chimes' ropes must be slackened, to allow the hammers to drop away from the moving bells.

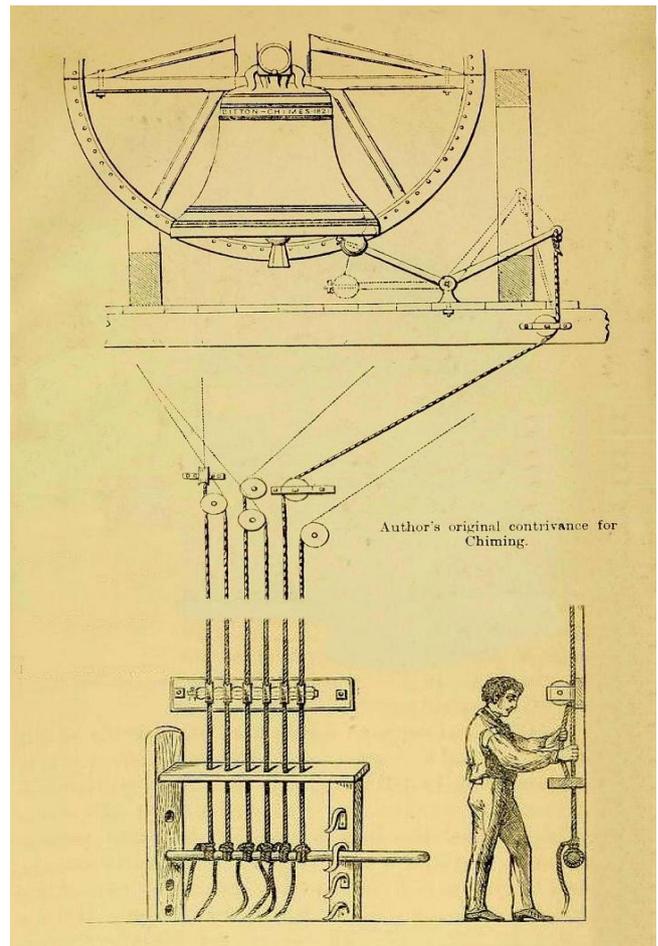
The system was devised by Reverend Henry Thomas Ellacombe of Gloucestershire, who first had such a system installed in Bitton in 1821. He created the system as an alternative to using his local ringers so that he did not have to tolerate the behaviour that he saw as unruly. The Revd. Ellacombe was the editor of the bell ringing column of a church periodical called "Church Bells", and was not slow to criticise the actions of bell ringers who did not ring exclusively for church services. A particular target was "prize ringing", where teams from different churches competed for a prize for the best ringing, usually

accompanied by a social event. An example was in 1875, when he weighed in with a diatribe against a ringing competition at Slapton in Devon, when he wrote, "We blame the Vicar and churchwardens for allowing the bells to be so prostituted for the benefits of a publican's pocket...".

However, in reality, it required very advanced and rare expertise for one person to ring changes, which most churches did not have, and it alienated bell ringers from the church. The sound of a chime was a feeble substitute for the rich sound of swinging bells, and the apparatus fell out of

fashion. Consequently, the apparatus was removed from many towers, leaving holes in the ceiling and often frames without ropes.

In towers where the apparatus remains in working order, it is often still used to play simple call change sequences, hymn tunes and carols at Christmas. The apparatus is also used when insufficient full circle ringers are available, or where it is no longer permitted or viable to swing the bells. There are known to be over 400 Ellacombe chimes in working order in the UK and at least 40 in the other parts of the world.



Rev HT Ellacombe's original designs for the chimes at St Mary's Church in Bitton

New Zealand will start the ring around the World



Timaru
Basilica
New
Zealand

The Sacred Heart Basilica or Timaru Basilica, in New Zealand, is a Roman Catholic church in Timaru, New Zealand. Its great size and beauty make it one of the most important historic buildings in the South Canterbury region. The

Basilica's twin towers and copper cupola are highly visible features of the Timaru skyline. The church was completed in 1911.

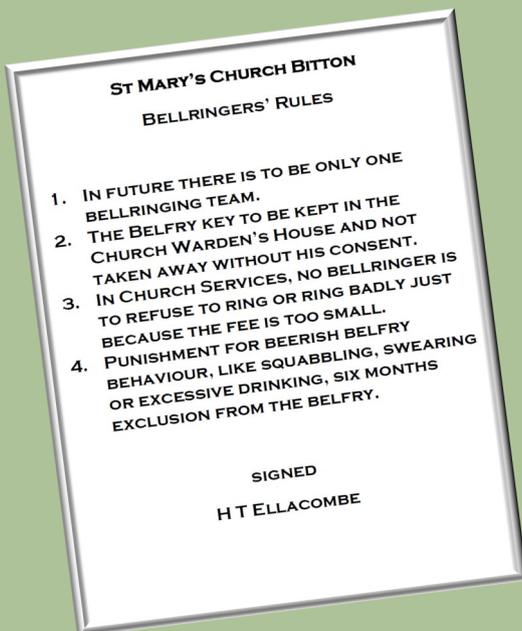
The north east tower houses a ring of scale C bells. They were cast by the celebrated English firm of John Warner & Sons, at a cost of £1000. The heaviest, Nicholas, weighs nearly a tonne. They were installed in July 1914. Originally, they were played every hour, until complaints were received from the nurses' home; night nurses, trying to sleep during the day, were being kept awake. One hymn played was *Faith of Our Fathers*, at

that time a very popular Catholic hymn (by Father Faber). The bells can be rung using an Ellacombe apparatus but were at one time rung by an electric keyboard, although this proved unsatisfactory.

The Basilica will ring its Ellacombe apparatus at 12 noon—1 a.m. in Bitton—on 26 June.

Other churches and towers have signed-up for participation across the world making this a global celebration and what promises to be a joyous and fun-filled event.

The Bellringers of Bitton



bells for any reason they chose or for whoever might pay. He was critical of their drunkenness, lewdness, brawling and the fact that they seldom attended the church services. *"I used to see them on a Sunday, waiting in the churchyard till the service was over ; and then, almost before every person had left the holy place, they would strike out a merry peal."*

It took him some years to gain full control of the Bellringers, and of the keys to the bellchamber. The installation of the chiming apparatus was a significant step in imposing discipline. The Bellringers Rules, first imposed in the 1820s, were revised later and by 1848 extended to 29 separate clauses.

HT Ellacombe's rules are still displayed in the ringing chamber.

Ellacombe described his experiences with bellringers in his book *Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers*, published some years after his first encounter with the Bitton bellringing teams when he arrived in the parish as curate in 1817.

He already had a dim view of men who rang bells, from previous experience, but he was nonetheless appalled by the situation at Bitton. The bellringers possessed the only key to the ringing chamber and at one point there were two rival teams of ringers who would ring a peal of



The Bitton Hand Bell Ringers in 1910, on the occasion of the Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary. Both Henry Thomas and his son Canon H N Ellacombe (seated second from right), who succeeded his father as vicar, were interested in all types of bellringing.

The bi-centenary of the Ellacombe Chimes is being organised jointly by St Mary's church and the Bitton Parish History Group.

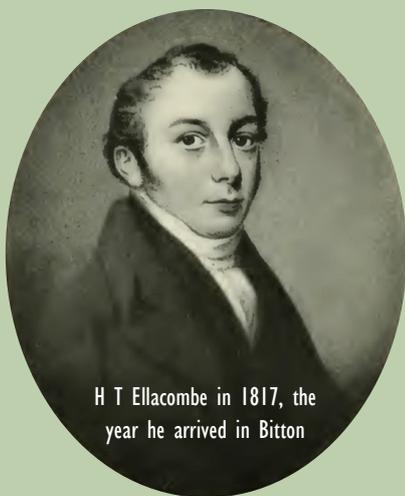
This ancient church, on a site which dates back to Roman times, is a grade I listed building and sits at the heart of the village it serves. In addition to its regularly worshipping congregation it is developing a wider role as a centre for the community. It attracts visitors from around the world. www.stmarysbitton.org.uk

Bitton Parish History Group aims to keep alive the rich local history of Bitton and the surrounding villages www.bittonhistory.org.uk



Photo: Becky Feather

Rev Henry Thomas Ellacombe 1790-1885



H T Ellacombe in 1817, the year he arrived in Bitton

The Rev Henry Thomas Ellacombe arrived as the Curate (later Vicar) of St Mary's Bitton in 1817 and soon set about improving and modernising the church. Ellacombe had previously worked as an engineer for Marc Kingdom Brunel and was responsible for his engineering works at the Chatham dockyard during the Napoleonic Wars which had just ended.

The parish, at the time, was very large, in parts quite lawless, and the church in a state of disrepair. Over the period of his incumbency, extensive works were undertaken to St Mary's Church, which owes much of its current layout to him. Ellacombe was extremely energetic as a parish priest, building three other churches in the district challenging the influence of chapels, particularly in the large mining areas of the parish. He promoted schooling and better welfare.

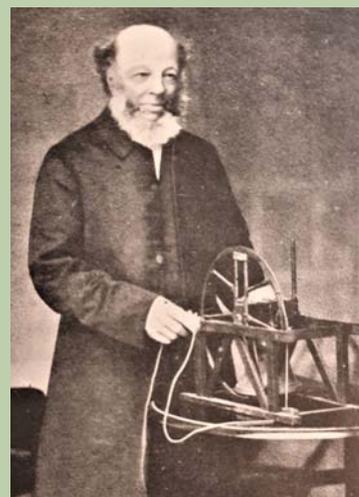
His interests were wide and varied. He was an antiquarian and a horticulturalist, whose *History of the Parish of Bitton* provides both a guide to local history and the fauna of the area.

But it is his mechanical engineering knowledge (he invented a printing press and constructed his own pocket watch) that links most closely to his appreciation of church bellringing and its mechanisms.

As a result he is recognised as possibly the first scholarly campanologist. His *Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers*, first published in 1849, drew on his

experience of reforming bellringing at Bitton.

He left Bitton in 1850 to take up a post in Devon, where his family came from, and was succeeded by his son, H N Ellacombe, who is also celebrated as a horticulturalist, and was vicar until his death in 1916.



H T Ellacombe in later years demonstrating the correct hanging of a bell

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