

A Potted History of Coronation Ringing in Cambridge

When the bells at Great St Mary's ring out on 6th May it may be the first time that a King Charles has been so honoured on his coronation day. Though there are records of the anniversaries of the coronations of monarchs being marked by bells in Cambridge from Elizabeth I's reign, it is not until James II in 1685 that we can be certain that bells rang on the day itself.

Even amidst the general celebrations that surrounded the restoration of the monarchy after the collapse of Cromwell's commonwealth, there is no record that the ringers at Great St Mary's were paid to ring for Charles II's coronation day in 1661. Generally, if the ringers were not paid, the bells were not rung.

Even taking account of the patchy survival of records, it would seem that, in Cambridge, coronation days and their anniversaries only became consistently marked with bells when William and Mary came to the throne in 1689.

It is understandable that the coronation and its anniversaries became a more significant event with that change of monarch. It was effectively a military coup. As James II had fled rather than died there was no clear accession day for the new monarchs, though the proclamation was made in Cambridge on 18th February and the university paid for several churches to ring their bells that day. In the vice-chancellor's accounts for that year is:

'A Bill of Things Expended Upon The Proclamation of King Wm & Q. Mary - Given ye Ringers of St Mary's 10s, of St Andrews 3s, of St Edwards 5s, Trinity 4s'

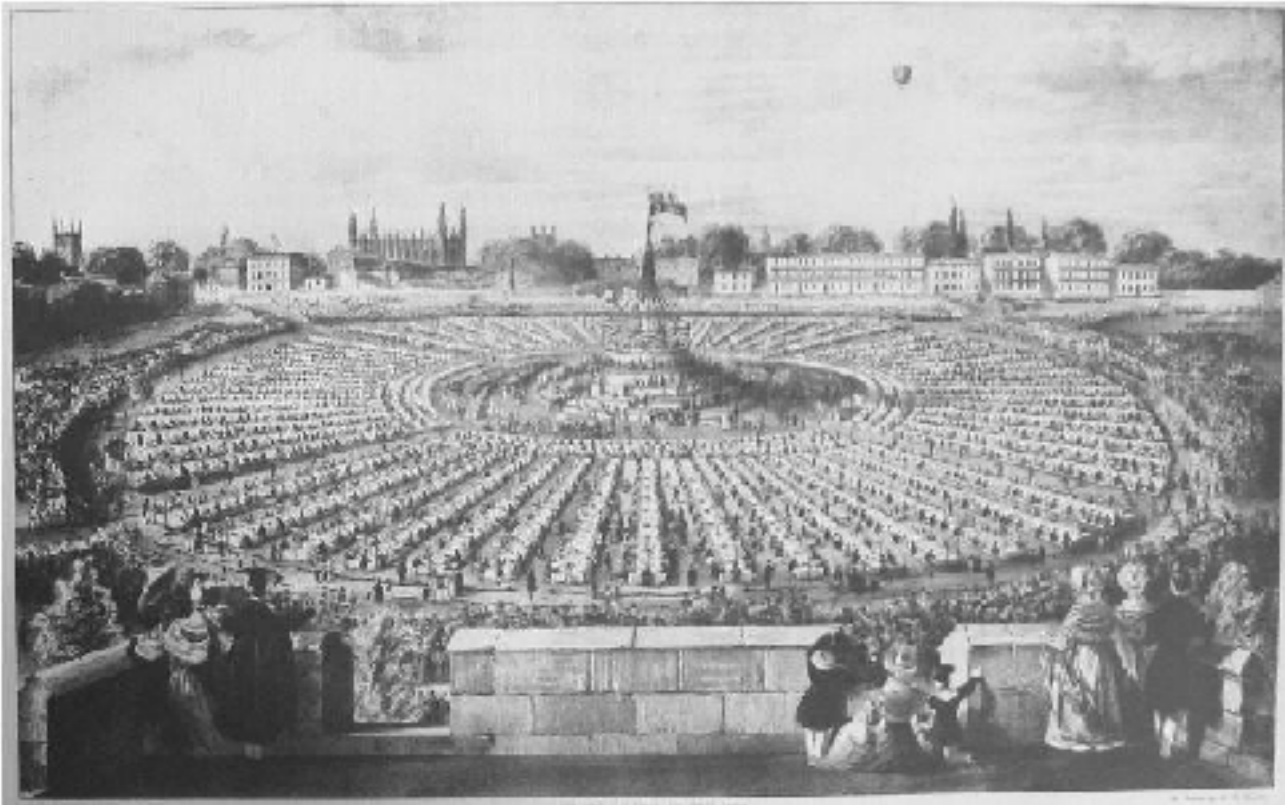
However, it was the coronation ceremony on 11th April 1689 that represented the conclusive legitimisation of the new regime. Again the bells at various churches were rung, though this time it was the parishes that paid their ringers, probably in beer rather than cash. Records of payments survive for Great St Mary's, All Saints, Holy Trinity, St Bene't's, St Botolph's, and Great St Andrew's.

Throughout the reign those same churches marked the anniversary of the coronation each year. That continued after Anne came to the throne in 1701, but celebration of the accession day (in her case 8th March) was now also restored as an annual event.

Anne, like Charles II and James II, deliberately chose for her coronation to be held on St George's Day as a symbolic strengthening of the link between monarch and country. That had back-fired somewhat on James II. As he became more and more unpopular some of the churches had continued to pay their ringers on 23rd April but deliberately (and uniquely to this period) noted in their accounts that it was to mark the saint's day and not his coronation.

We get another glimpse of the relative popularity of monarchs when George I succeeded Anne in 1715. Yes, the bells at many Cambridge churches were rung for George's coronation and its anniversaries but the authorities at Holy Trinity and St Botolph's were clearly not that enamoured with the Hanoverians. Their bells continued to mark the coronation anniversary of Anne until George II came to the throne in 1727.

Ringling on coronation days and their anniversaries continued to be part of the annual tradition at several churches until Victoria came to the throne in 1837. The Cambridge Chronicle's report on local celebrations of her coronation day in June 1838 began, *'Thursday last was a day to be long remembered by the inhabitants of Cambridge. Ere many of them had raised their heads from their downy pillows, the ringing of bells and the "cannons' roar" apprised them of the unusual nature of the day...'* However, it was the celebratory meal for 15,000, held on Parker's Piece, that made the greatest impact..



Parker's Piece 1838 Coronation Feast

As Victoria's reign continued it was increasingly the case that Great St Mary's bells alone were heard at such celebrations and on their anniversaries. At many other town churches the bells were falling into disrepair.

1859 saw a major reorganisation of how bellringing was paid for in Cambridge, triggered by the Anniversary Days Observance Act of that year which repealed the requirement for churches to mark notable events, including restoration of the monarchy on 29th May and the king's escape from gunpowder treason on 5th November. The town corporation took on the responsibility of marking the coronation each year and the five shilling rewards in beer that the ringers had been used to receiving from the parish were now replaced by two guinea payments in cash from the borough treasurer. A similar annual payment was made for celebrating the accession, though on those occasions an additional matching payment was made by the university.

The annual coronation day payments did not survive the First World War and the last occasion on which Great St Mary's rang for such an anniversary was in 1915. Thereafter, the bells were only heard on coronation day itself, though the tradition of ringing on each anniversary of the monarch's accession still continues.

Of course, there was no coronation for Edward VIII. It was planned for 12 May 1937 but he had abdicated before it could take place. The national planning was not wasted. The bells at Great St Mary's rang that day for George VI instead. No doubt they would also have rung for Queen Elizabeth II's coronation on 2nd June 1953. Unfortunately the bells were at Loughborough foundry awaiting re-hanging and did not return until the next year. A quarter peal was rung at Great St Andrew's by the University Guild but otherwise the bells in the town centre seem to have been silent.

When the bells at Great St Mary's ring out on 6th May this year, therefore, it will be eighty-six years since they last did so for a coronation. On this occasion, though, the ringers will no doubt have to pay for their own beer.