

RW article about GSM

The first mention of a church on the site of the current one dates back to 1205. From 1342 the patronage of the church passed from the crown to the university and from 1352 the church became known as The University Church of Saint Mary the Great, often shortened to Great St Mary's (GSM).

The present building of Late Perpendicular style was constructed between 1478 and 1519, with the tower finished later, in 1608.

In the Middle Ages it became an official gathering place for meetings and debates for Cambridge University. The practice of University Sermons continues today and dates back to at least 1300. Various leading philosophers of the English Reformation preached here, notably Erasmus.

Originally, bells were hung in a wooden structure in the churchyard until being moved into the tower in 1515. The 'void' floor between the current ringing room and bell chamber is of great historic significance, being a near complete sixteenth century bell chamber floor.

A ring of 10 was installed in 1723 to replace an earlier, lighter, ring of eight. The bells were augmented to twelve and the tenor replaced in 1770. Since then several bells were replaced by different founders. In 1952 these bells were retuned and rehung, clockwise for the first time.

In 2009 to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the founding of the University a new ring was installed. Cast by Taylors, Eayre and Smith and made possible by a donation from Martin Faulkes, the new ring of 12 bells are in the key of D with a tenor weighing 24-1-1. There is a flat 6th, providing a lighter ring of eight.

The innovative frame design has all the bells apart from the tenor orientated to swing in the stiffer East-West direction, informed by previous analysis and computer modelling to improve handling predictability of the bells.

The galvanized steel frame is not built into the walls in the conventional way, with new features introduced into frame design, derived from sound civil engineering methods for modern structures. 'Cintec' anchors were used for fixing the frame to the porous masonry and 'Tension Control Bolts' were used for connecting the frame components together.

The first tower clock at GSM was installed in 1577. The clock dial on the west front of the church tower is dated 1679. It was not until 1793 when the third clock was made for GSM that, reputedly, William Crotch, a brilliant young organist, helped compose the famous Cambridge Quarters. These Quarters were copied for the Great Clock at Westminster and are now more commonly referred to as the Westminster Chimes. The original clock bells have been retained and, to this day, the clock continues to use them.

A Sanctus (priest's) bell, also retained, was cast in 1607 and inscribed Warrin, thought to be churchwarden John Warren at whose instance the work was done. Candidates for casting the bell are Richard Holdfield, Matthew Norris and, most likely, his son Tobias Norris.

The Society of Cambridge Youths is responsible for ringing GSM bells for Parish and University services. Re-founded in 1724 it is arguably the second oldest bell ringing society with a continuous ringing history. The University Bellringer, under one title or another, has been responsible for ensuring that the bells are rung to mark university events since at least the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The current Society, and its predecessor, has a long and distinguished history, with many ringing achievements dating back to the early seventeenth century.

The Revd Samuel Scattergood entered Trinity College, Cambridge in 1662 and is generally identified as 'Mr S.S.', the contributor of seventeen 'Peals composed at CAMBRIDGE', to Stedman's 1677 book 'Campanalogia'.

The Revd Charles Mason joined the Cambridge Youths in 1725. Three notebooks of his on ringing survive, containing many innovative compositional experiments.

John Bowtell a well-known local benefactor and enthusiastic bell ringer at GSM, rang the tenor to 6000 Oxford Treble Bob Royal, taking 4h 15m, in 1790 despite someone putting sand in the tenor bearings.

In May 1777 a handbell peal of bob major was rung by ringers with a close association with the Cambridge Youths. This may have been the second ever double-handed handbell peal.

To this day the Society's ringers continue to break new ground, with many achievements as a band and individually. The first peal of spliced cinques and maximus was rung at GSM in 1990, an idea explored by Mason 250 years earlier, and in 2012 the Society rang the first peal on a new plan called Particles.