

Barrow Bells, St James Church

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To help us ring out the praises for church bells this year, today's spotlight shines on [‘Barrow Bells’ at St James Church, Barrow-in-Furness](#).

We talk to Andrew Pollock, St James’s Tower Captain, who tells us about the rich history of the church's bells and what we can expect at St James this September.



© J Andrew Pollock 2014 - Restored bell, St James Church, Barrow-in-Furness

Tell us about the history of the bells at St James Church

St James the Great, Barrow-in-Furness may not be as old as many bell ringing towers in the UK, but the ambitions of an industrial town in the Victorian era are clear from the scale of the handsome church, with elegant stone spire that was built on elevated ground near the growing steelwork community.



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Young ringers and NW Evening Mail reporter at St James Church, Barrow-in-Furness, © J Andrew Pollock 2014

Barrow was once a sleepy little fishing village of a few hundred people, until the discovery of rich deposits of haematite changed its fortunes and it grew into a major industrial town. Our church was built to service the growing workforce of the new steelworks, jute works, railway and emerging shipyard. This era of growth was very important for the church. To this day, the church has a very fine sounding William Hill organ from St James' Palace in London – the very same organ that played at Queen Victoria & Prince Albert's wedding.

Between 1869 and 1877 the church had a single 15cwt (762kg) Mears and Stainbank bell gifted by visionaries Dukes of Devonshire and Buccleuch, Lord Frederick Cavendish, Sir James Ramsden, and Henry William Schneider.

In 1877 the community raised £747 11s 2d for John Warner & Sons to recast the single bell and add another 7 bells to create a ring of 8 bells. The inaugural peal was rung on the bells on St James' day 25th July 1877.

Unfortunately, during the Second World War, a large parachute land mine exploded nearby and blew out all the windows of the church, with the exception of our WW1 memorial window which was protected by the main entrance doors. The main roof of the church was heavily damaged in the bombing, collapsing inwards on top of the bells and splintering the joists of the intermediate floor in the tower.

Additionally, years of pollution from the steelworks had severely corroded the bells; rainwater and saltwater spray direct from the Irish Sea also corroded all the ironwork fittings holding bells and frame together, and the wood of the wheels became weathered, soft and fragile. When the church was saved from closure by a major Lottery funded grant around the millennium, the bells were declared unsafe to ring.

However, between 2008 and 2014 a restoration project was launched to return the bells to their former glory. We managed to preserve the original bells with their inscriptions but fitted them to a new frame, now lower in the tower to protect from the weather. They sound fabulous and look very impressive, especially now it is possible to safely see them ring just a couple of metres beneath your feet from the old belfry.

Why do you feel the church bells are important to your local community?

The preservation of bells cast hundreds of years ago (our bells are 139 years old) with their inscriptions and timeless sound is an important responsibility to maintain our heritage for future generations.



(c) 2013 J Andrew Pollock

Alan Dewar – Volunteer with bell at St James Church, Barrow-in-Furness, © J Andrew Pollock 2014

Bells are also very dynamic, and need to be swung and heard to truly appreciate them. The sound of English style church bells is most often used for announcing a church service, but is often associated with special occasions such as a weddings and baptisms, or a poignant reminder of the life of someone dear to us at a funeral. Bells reach out emotionally or even spiritually to many people in church and surrounding community.

For the bell-ringers inside the tower, the bells are a captivating mix of a 400 year old tradition with modern life, values and friendships. Ringers are welcomed in towers all across the UK when visiting on holidays, visiting family and friends, or moving to a new house in a new town or village.

Mental and physical skill is needed rather than strength to ring the bells that are several times our own weight (children as young as 10 or 11 can manage to ring bells). It is very much a team activity that is both a challenge and a lot of fun.

What can Heritage Open Days visitors get excited about this September?

Join us to see and hear the bells up to half the weight of your car swing full circle – watch on TV downstairs or take part in a guided tour and climb the 101 spiral steps to see them swing just a few metres away beneath your feet!

Learn about how bells have been rung for hundreds of years, and have a try yourself with the help and tuition from an experienced ringer.

Pick up a leaflet, look at the original tower record book from 1877, watch the videos, and read the display panels to discover more about the history of the bells and restoration project that brought them back to life.

Try your hand at ringing hand bells or splicing a rope, enjoy light refreshments, or pick up a souvenir item made from part of the old wooden bell frame/wheel/stay/slider.

[St James will open on Saturday and Sunday for Heritage Open Day, with a special quarter peal being rung on Thursday evening. For full details click here.](#)

Discover more...

- *This is just one of the treasures we're excited about this Heritage Open Days. [Click here to find more bell events ringing near you on our searchable directory.](#)*
- *[Find out more about the bell ringing theme for this year's festival on our news page](#)*
- *For more information on 'Barrow Bells' at St James Church, please visit www.barrowbells.org.uk*