



There is little known about the bells in Dedham church prior to 1754 when Thomas Gardiner of Sudbury cast five new bells to make the present peal of eight.

Checking in Church Bells of Essex by Deedes and Walters of 1909 they make reference to the inventory of church goods carried out in September 1552 during the sixth year of the reign of King Edward VI. It mentions *"It V bells weying VI score hundred and one and odd."* Also *"e payde to fathare hasnete & John Smethe for makenge oware chymes and cloke. We payde for mendeng oware belle stokes and bawdukes & wire for ye cloke & chymes & new bell ropes."*

Of the bells in the present ring which are older than 1754. The sixth bell was cast by Robert Burford a London bell founder circa 1410. He probably set up a furnace in the church yard or very close to it and cast the bell on site, a fairly common practice in those days. (Incidentally the tenor bell at neighbouring Ardleigh was also cast by him around the same time). The present 7th bell was cast by John Darbie of Ipswich in 1675 and the tenor bell (number 8) cast by John Thornton of Sudbury in 1717.

Not much is known about ringing at Dedham until we get to 1818 when on Tuesday March 17th the Dedham Company of ringers rang a full peal of 5040 changes of Bob Major, taking them three hours and sixteen minutes. The band was Henry Barker, Treble. Henry Sherman, 2nd. Thomas Chisnall, 3rd. Ebenezar Saunders, 4th. James Parr, 5th. James Saunders, 6th. John Feamner, 7th and Josiah Benneworth, conductor, tenor.

Quite a remarkable achievement for a village band of ringers at that time, however they progressed certainly with the help of the Saunders family because in 1844 six members of the Dedham Society of Change Ringers all called Saunders rang 720 changes of Treble Bob Minor. A further four full peals were rung on the bells namely Bob Major on the 25th January 1843. Oxford Treble Bob Major on 6th December 1843, a further peal of Oxford T.B. On the 27th March 1844 and the last peal to be rung on the bells of Kent Treble Bob Major on 19th March 1845.

Sadly by this time the bells were becoming very difficult to ring because of movement of the tower and bell frame. When bells are rung in the English full circle style they swing from mouth upper most through almost 360 degrees to mouth upper most and back again. The forces on the bell frame are equal to two times the weight of the bell laterally along the frame changing direction with every swing of the bell, and four times its weight downwards. With the Tenor bell weighing almost a ton and a total weight of bells around four tons the forces on the tower were considerable.

Unfortunately Dedham's tower as magnificent as it looks is not the best design for a heavy ring of bells installed close to the top. It has large openings in three of the four walls at ground level, a large west window some 6 metres up from the ground and the entire east side of the tower was open to the church almost up to roof level. Basically it stands on one wall and two legs! The tower started to crack badly from the movement and by 1866 the cracks were so bad that on the advice of Mr J T Micklethwaite, Architect, all ringing was suspended.

The tower remained like this until eventually repaired in 1881/2. Most of the large archway between the church and tower was bricked up in order to strengthen the tower, but this then also started to crack and of course there may well have been possible damage from the Essex earthquake of 1884, as this caused considerable damage to many properties within a fifty mile radius of the epicentre in the Wivenhoe /Great Wigborough area.

A large iron structure was installed lower in the tower in the clock room with girders going up to a frame supporting the beams on which the bell frame rests. Unfortunately who ever was overseeing this project decided to cut through all the frame supporting beams where they enter the walls thus leaving the bell frame free standing on top of the iron frame.

This work being completed in 1896. This did nothing to improve the go of the bells which became so difficult to ring that they stopped using the two larger bells, only ringing the six lighter ones.

Mr Arthur Fuller of Manningtree who was church clerk for Manningtree and Mistley and who died in 1958 was the last known surviving bell ringer to have rung on Dedham Bells before all ringing ceased around 1898.

Since then the bells have been chimed hanging mouth downwards by initially having the bell ropes removed from the wheels and tied to the bell clappers. More recently a set of chiming hammers has been installed under the bells and are worked by pulling the bell ropes allowing them to be heard within the parish as they had been for at least two hundred and fifty years.

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