

The Bells & Chimes of Great St Mary's

There have been bells at Great St Mary's from at least 1303 and they rang to call everyone to Church services; to open the town Corn market; to toll for births, marriages and deaths; and to announce the start of University meetings and lectures. They rang out for great events like royal coronations and victories in battles; but also tolled every evening to remind local people to cover over the fires in their hearths for the night and this continued until the outbreak of the Second World War. And because the tower was not completed until 1608, the bells were hung on temporary frames, located both inside and outside the church door, and in the church yard by the market, where the ringers stood using long ropes.

The belfry was completed in 1596 with four bells. However, now there are thirteen new bells, all cast in 2009 as part of the 800th anniversary of Cambridge University. You can find the belfry when you walk up the stairs of the tower, and you will be able to see all these bells in the bellchamber. There has been a clock on Great St Mary's above the door since 1577, when there were very few public clocks. What is even more distinctive about Great St Mary's is the noise made by the chimes. The tune of the chimes is known as the 'Cambridge Quarters' and has become very famous because it was copied for the 'Westminster Chimes' of Big Ben at the Houses of Parliament. Not everyone knows that our Cambridge chimes were the first bongs!



