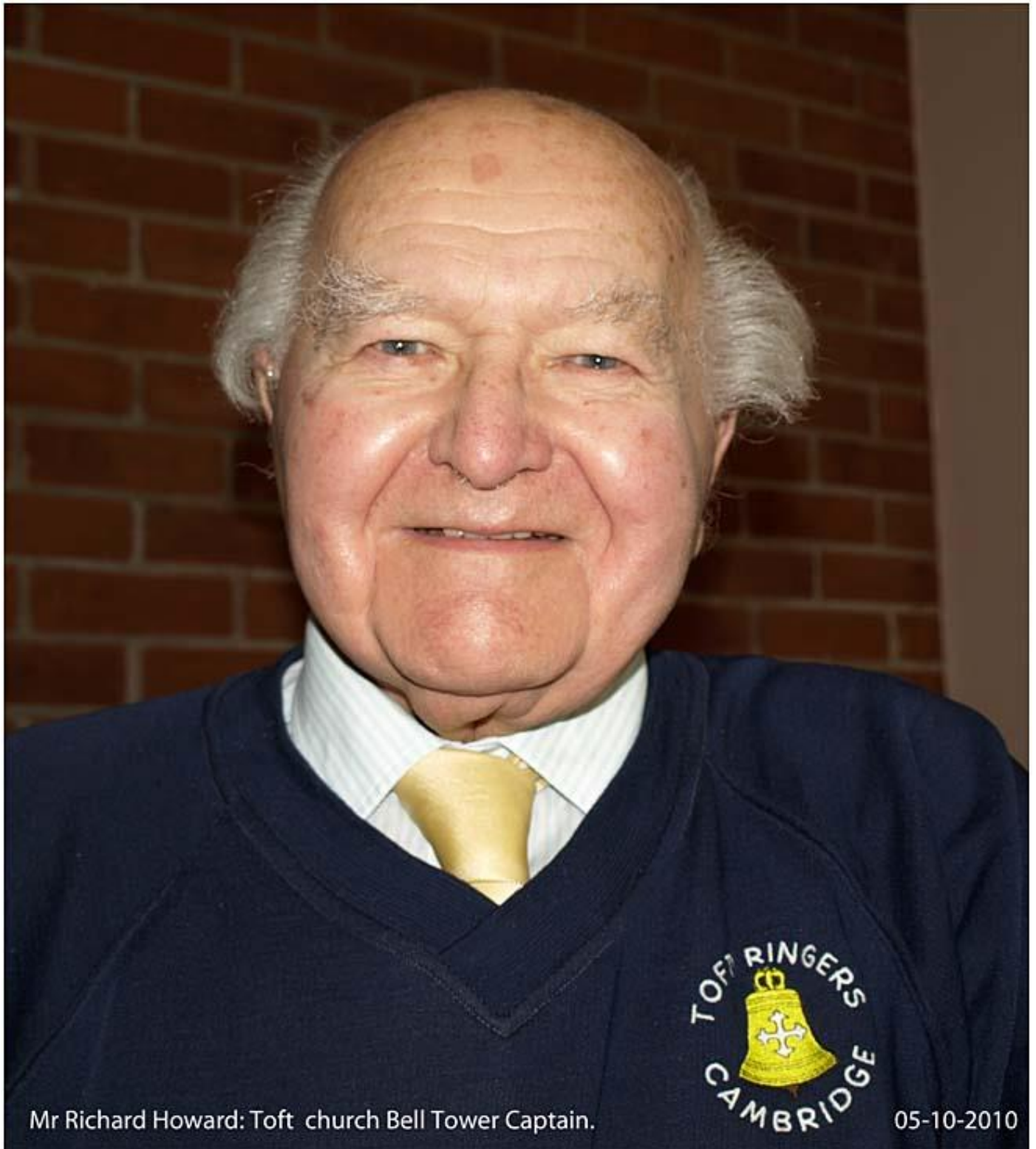


# Toft Bells and the Bell Tower of Saint Andrew's

By Richard Howard, Tower Captain



We have a very fine ring of six bells in Toft but up until 1999 there were only three bells in the tower. It was then, in 1999, that we added two bells, thus making it a ring of five. We also had the mechanism completely restored. This was done with the aid of many benefactors so that our tower could give good account of itself on

the 31st December 1999 when we joined other towers throughout the country ringing in the New Millennium 2000. A sixth bell was added in 2001, making it what we have now, a ring of six. Some of the bells are very old and it is interesting to know what was happening in the world at the time when each one was cast. The following account attempts to do this.

### Toft: St Andrew's church tower

After the execution of Charles I in 1649, when Puritanism ran high, the church fell foul of the great destruction and the reforming Bishop of Ely sent William Dowsing to root out objects of superstition. Among the items reported as having been destroyed (for which he received 6s.8d. i.e.33p.) was a bell marked: **Orate pro anima Sanctae Katherinae** (Pray for the soul of Saint Katherine).

The Tower collapsed in 1890 and was rebuilt in 1894. It housed three bells hung in a wooden frame. We still have the same three bells, including the one supposed to have been destroyed, and the same wooden frame. In 1999 we added two additional bells and in 2001 another, making a ring of six bells.

The bells are tuned to the key of A (893Hz). Bells 3, 4, 5 and 6 have Canons, while the old oak frame which was installed in the late 19th century by Whites of Appleton supports bells 2, 5 and the Tenor bell 6. A steel frame was introduced in 1999 to support bells 3 and 4 and a steel rider-frame was added in 2001 to support the Treble bell 1.





1st December 1998: Toft bells ready for removal to the foundry

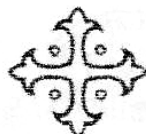
## Bell 1

### The Treble

Cast on 18th January 2001 at the bell-foundry of John Taylor, Loughborough. Weight 3 hundredweight, 24 pounds (163.3 Kg); Diameter 2' 0". The casting of this bell was made possible by a generous bequest in the will of the late John Vince, a resident of Toft and a bell ringer of considerable ability.

The year 2001 witnessed the first paying passenger to go into outer space. Dennis Tito set off from Kazakhstan for a holiday aboard the International Space Station. It cost him £14,000,000.

The bell bears a decorative vine-leaf border, the Bell-Founders mark, a cross associated with this church

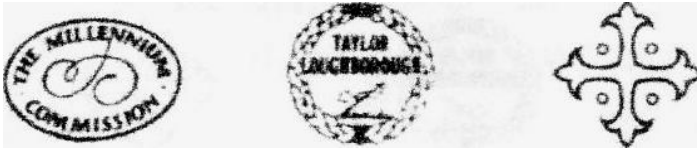


and an inscription: JOHN VINCE 1935 – 1999.

## Bell 2

Cast on 7th January 1999 at the bell-foundry of John Taylor, Loughborough. Weight 3 hundredweight, 2 quarters (177.8 Kg); Diameter 2' 1½".

The bell bears the mark of the Millennium Commission, the bell-founders mark, a cross associated with this church



and an inscription: RICHARD HOWARD CHURCHWARDEN 1971-73 AND 1981-96

The Millennium Commission and others funded the casting of this bell, together with the restoration of the whole installation, in time to ring in the new Millennium at midnight on 31st December 1999. Dedicated to Richard Howard, who served on the Parish Council and as a Churchwarden in Toft.

By the year 1999, the exploration of space had been progressing for over 40 years. Notably, in 1957, the Russians achieved the first unmanned orbit of the Earth and in 1961 Yuri Gagarin piloted the first manned orbit of the Earth. In 1969 the Americans landed men on the Moon and Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the Moon.

10th Sept 1998: the bell purchased from Hardwick sits on the foundry floor at Loughborough, awaiting the other three bells due to arrive there on 1st December 1998. This bell was eventually hung as bell no. 3.



### Bell 3

Cast in 1797 during the reign of George III at the bell-foundry of Robert Taylor, St Neots. Weight 4 hundredweight, 1 quarter, 12 pounds (221.3 Kg) Diameter 2' 3"

The bell was purchased from our neighbouring parish of Hardwick. It is dedicated to Peter Whittet. The Whittet estate, acquired about 1740, included land in Hardwick and Toft until the inclosures, about 1812, when it was broken up. Peter served as a churchwarden in Hardwick. Two other bells were cast at the same time also bearing the same dedication, possibly a gift from Peter. One hangs in St Mary's Hardwick for tolling, the other in a stylish tower, in the open, at Bar Hill Church.

During 1797 Napoleon Bonaparte, as a General, defeated the Austrians during the Revolutionary Wars. Commodore Horatio Nelson defeated the Spanish Fleet off Cape St Vincent and in the same year lost his right arm at Santa Cruz. John Adams was inaugurated as President of the United States of America.

The bell bears the inscription: ROBERT TAYLOR ST NEOTS FOUNDER 1797  
PETER WHITTET CHURCHWARDEN



**Bell 3: 'Peter Whittet churchwarden'**

Before the bell was hung in Saint Andrew's church it stood inverted as a collection pot to raise money for the restoration and conservation of the bells (see photograph).



#### **Bell 4**

Cast in 1666 during the reign of Charles II, probably at Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, where Graye had his foundry. Weight 4 hundredweight, 3 quarters, 2 pounds (242.2 Kg); Diameter 2' 5".

During the year 1665 the Great Plague of London resulted in the death of 68,595 people. Two-thirds of the population of 460,000 fled from the city.

The Great Fire of London in 1666 virtually destroyed the city. St Paul's Cathedral fell victim to this devastation and 200,000 people were made homeless. The site in Pudding Lane where it started is marked by a monument designed by Sir Christopher Wren.

Samuel Pepys the diarist lived throughout both events and wrote extensively about his experiences and involvement.

In 1666, of Isaac Newton it is said that the fall of an apple from a tree suggested to him the law of gravitation. Also, by using his calculus, he measured the orbit of the *Moon*. France and Holland declared war against England.

The bell carries one inscription: CHRISTOPHER GRAYE MADE ME 1666



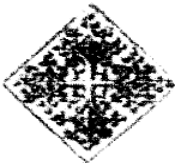
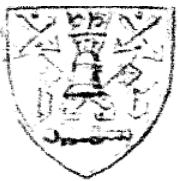
### Bell 5

Cast, *circa* 1470-1498, by Reignold Chyrch at his foundry in Bury St Edmunds during the reign of Edward IV. Weight 5 hundredweight, 3 quarters, 9 pounds (296.2 Kg); Diameter 2' 7½".

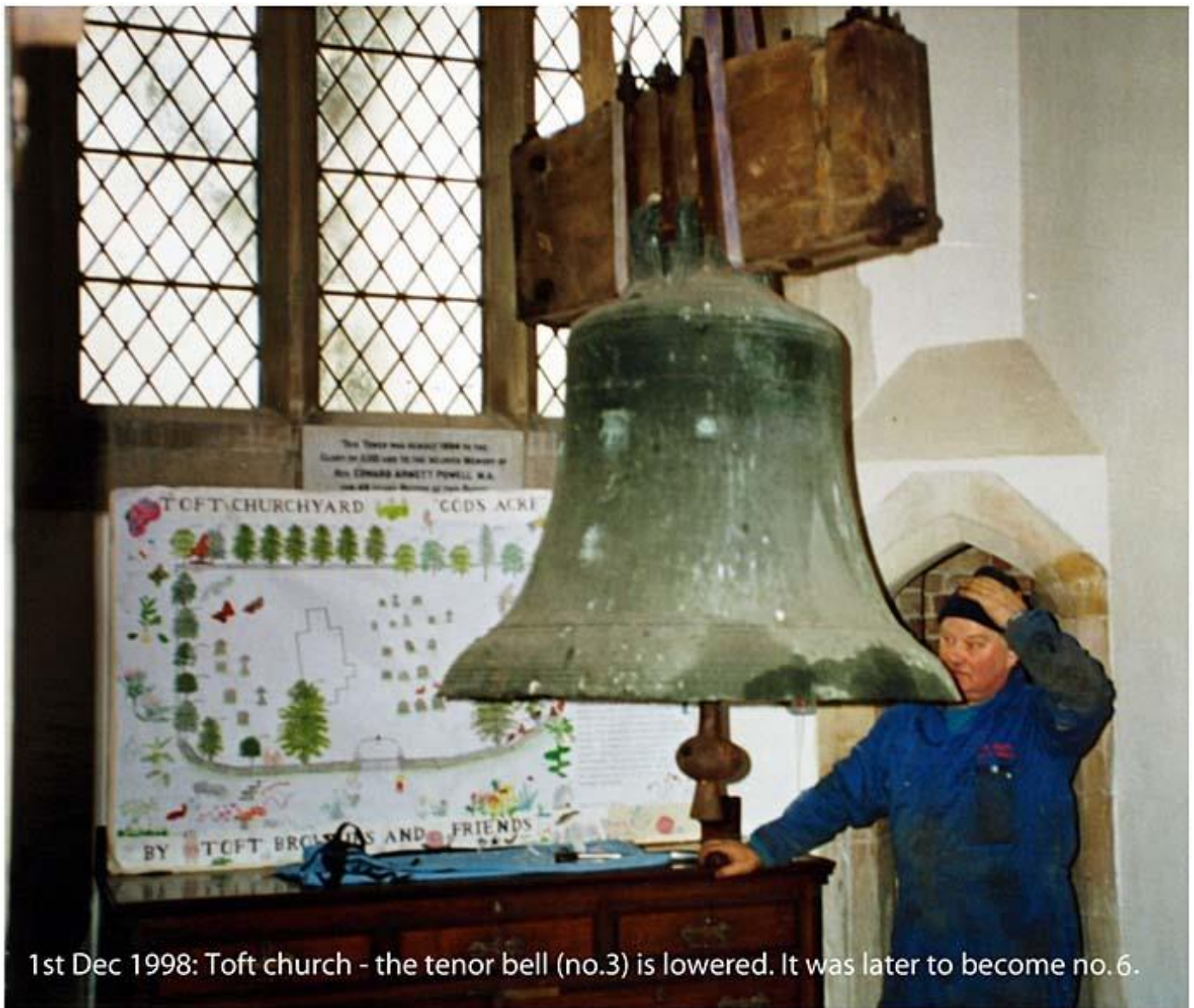
Edward IV became king of England in 1461 with his defeat of Henry VI in the War of the Roses, only to lose his crown when Henry was restored to the throne in 1470. But Edward again defeated Henry at Tewkesbury and regained the throne in 1471. In 1476, William Caxton set up his printing press at Westminster. In 1478 he printed and published Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and went on to print around 100 other books. A shield appears on the shoulder of the bell three times. It carries the motif of a coronet and crossed arrows, the emblem of St Edmund, whilst the S and the cross identify it as being cast in the foundry at Bury St Edmunds.



It carries an inscription: **Sancta · Katerina · Ora · Pro · Nobis** (Saint Katherine, pray for us). It is perhaps no mere coincidence that in 1473, Saint Catharine's College was founded in Cambridge, during an era of great devotion to the saint.



**'Sancta Katerina' returns to Toft 1 Mar 1999**



1st Dec 1998: Toft church - the tenor bell (no.3) is lowered. It was later to become no. 6.

## Bell 6

### The Tenor

Cast, *circa* 1523-1538, by Thomas Lawrence London, during the reign of King Henry VIII. Weight 8 hundredweight, 3 quarters, 2 pounds (445.4 Kg); Diameter 2' 11½".

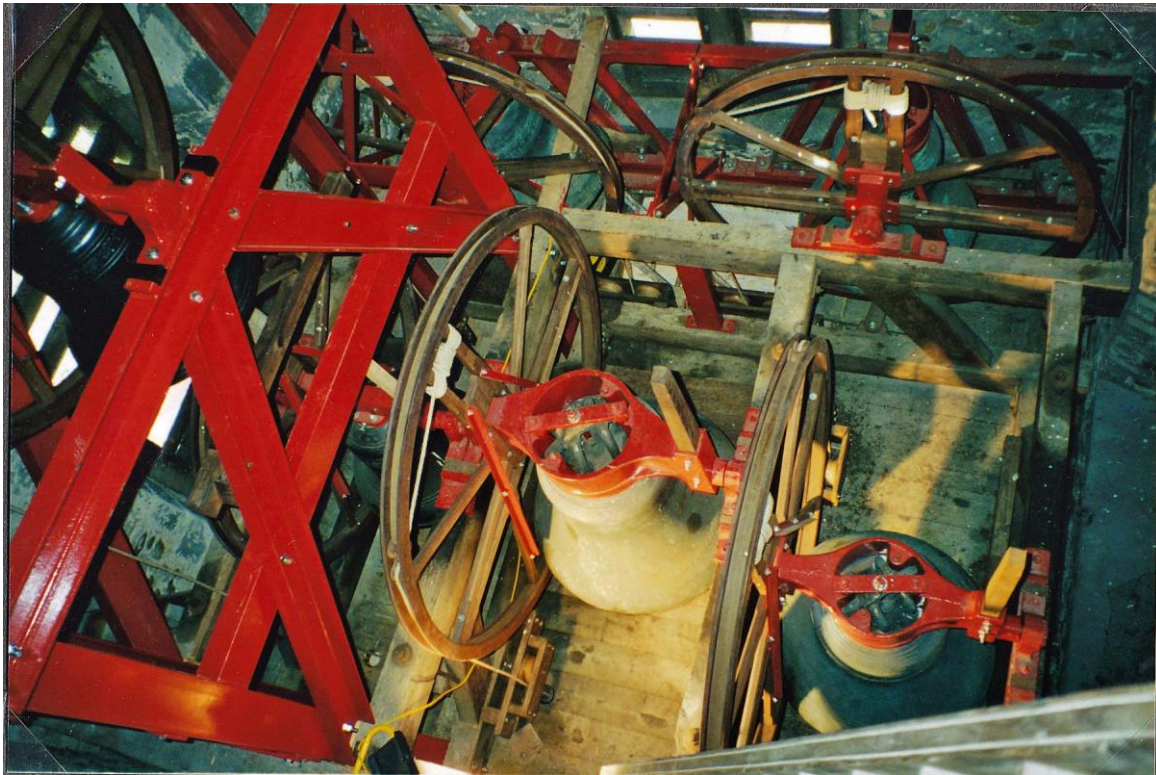
Henry VIII is probably best known for having had six wives, of whom two were divorced and two executed. In 1533 Henry declared himself Supreme Head of the English church and broke off relations with Rome. The oldest register in Toft dates from this period.

1525 saw the publication of the translation by William Tyndale of *The New Testament*. In 1533 Thomas Cranmer was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury. In the same year, the coronation of Anne Boleyn took place and again in the same year she gave birth to the future Queen Elizabeth I. Anne was executed in 1536.

There appears on the bell a Gridiron, handle downwards, being the emblem of Thomas Lawrence, also two coins and a Fleur-de-lis in an inverted shield.



Toft bells return, 1st March 1999



All six bells in place

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**Ring Out, Wild Bells**

(based on an interview with Richard Howard, recorded on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2010, in his 90<sup>th</sup> year, by Michael McCarthy. To hear the full interview, go to [link])

### **Toft bell-ringing in the present day**

Richard Howard was in the vanguard of what we might call the modern era of Toft bell-ringing. Until the relatively recent intervention of Richard, his wife Joan and Ann Mitchell, Toft bells had remained unrung for some 25 years. The key event which launched the new era was the release from incarceration as a political hostage in 1991 of Terry Waite. Throughout the country, church bells were rung in thanksgiving for his deliverance from a dreadful ordeal that had lasted 1760 days. Richard Howard, Joan Howard and Ann Mitchell, all untrained in the art, simply tolled the bells (i.e. swung them from side to side without taking them through their full 360°) as Toft's contribution to the national thanksgiving. Letters which later passed between Richard and Terry Waite in 1998 and 1999 testify to Waite's gratitude to the many who had kept him in mind during his darkest days.

After this initial event, Doris Llewellyn (now deceased, at that time of Preston Close) also became interested in bell-ringing. And so the four pioneers took a course in ringing and were also given tuition by Marina Warner of Barton. Soon this team became competent bell-ringers and their numbers were increased by others who became interested. At its height, the Toft bell-ringing practice team could number 10 ringers. Now, sadly, that number has been reduced to a handful and those still ringing have joined forces with ringers at Little Eversden. Richard sincerely hopes that new, young Toft recruits might be encouraged.

### **Why become a bell-ringer?**

Richard gains two immense sources of joy and benefit from ringing the bells. Not least is the sheer physical exercise and exertion of heaving the ropes and moving the massive weights of the great bells. But there is also, for him, a good deal of mental satisfaction, the satisfaction of the trained observer. The art of ringing complex sequences of bells that create the lovely English traditional methods depends greatly upon the ringer's ability to observe the other ringers and to synchronise with them so that the melodies flow without interruption or overlap. The bell doesn't ring immediately when you pull the rope; the bell only rings when it has nearly completed its 360 degrees of turning, so ringers have to synchronise precisely with one another. Richard also takes great pleasure in the job of Tower Captain. The Tower Captain finds ringers whenever needed, keeps watch on the mechanical serviceability of the bells, above all keeping an eye on the stay – the long piece of wood made to break if the bell is swung too hard and not checked. The captain makes sure wood is available to replace a broken stay, a not infrequent event during training sessions.

### **The bells and their social function**

The bells were originally rung to call the people to prayer, a function they still fulfil. They probably also served as a time-keeper for people in ancient days. Occasions for ringing church bells nowadays include national expressions of thanksgiving, wars, coronations and other momentous events, but the main reason nowadays is for weddings and, still, for calling the people to prayer. Toft bells ring the New Year in at

midnight each year, and visiting teams frequently come from all over the country at various times in between to ring our bells.



Photograph copyright Michael McCarthy © 2010

### **The home of the bells – Saint Andrew's church tower**

When, 45 years ago, Richard Howard first moved in to Toft and was doing up his house and garden, he went to buy sand and gravel from Mr Gauge of Bourn. Talking to old Mr Gauge and revealing he was from Toft, Gauge told Richard he had been standing on that same spot one day in 1890 when he saw a great cloud of dust emanating from Toft: it was Toft church tower collapsing! The tower had been undergoing some sort of renovation – builders were there when it collapsed. The tower was originally wood, and there exists a picture of a stone tower dated 1743. Toft bells, which the tower houses, are some of the oldest in Cambridgeshire. They were cast in foundries (e.g. Bury St Edmunds, St Neots, Loughborough) and bear inscriptions as described in Richard Howard's history of the bells (above). But one bell was a special surprise for Richard himself. Whilst overseeing the casting and commissioning of Bell 2, Richard became concerned that the foundry seemed not to heed the urgency of deciding upon an inscription. Unbeknown to Richard, it had been

decided to dedicate the bell to him! The inscription honours Richard's service to Saint Andrew's church and will, we hope, remain for many generations. Richard reports that he asked the bell-maker: 'How long does a bell last?' To which the bell-maker replied: 'We don't know any that have worn out yet!'



**Richard Howard climbs the bell tower, 2001**  
2010

Photograph © Ann Mitchell

25 years of remaining unringed ended when Richard and the team took over. The 2000 Millennium year was approaching and funding became available for projects the length and breadth of the country. Toft applied for a grant to augment its three bells to four, but the grant-funding body were reluctant, saying they would much rather an application to augment to five or six. The decision was made to go to five, for which a 50% grant from the Millennium fund was obtained, which, along with other funding, meant that only £1500 had to be found out of the village coffers to meet the total bill, which exceeded £40,000.



Photograph copyright Michael McCarthy © 2010

### **Coda: A poem for our bells**

Bells have been ringing in Toft for half a millennium. Their impassive maws have reverberated with the joys and sorrows of generations of Toft's inhabitants, the great upheavals of political and social revolutions, the steady, quiet rhythms of Toft life over the centuries, outliving the brief lives of those who have rung them and the thousands of Toft residents who have heard their notes drift across the fields and meadows that surround our village. So we say to our bells, in Tennyson's stirring words:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
 The flying cloud, the frosty light;  
 The year is dying in the night;  
 Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
 Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
 The year is going, let him go;  
 Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,

For those that here we see no more,  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.

(Alfred Tennyson, 1809-1892)

**To hear Toft bells ringing in the New Year in 2010, click here** [audio icon and link to Mike's audio file]

***Toft Bells and the Bell Tower*** was compiled by Michael McCarthy



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Toft villagers' trip to the Loughborough bell foundry, 7 January 1999

Photograph © Ann Mitchell 2010





**Champagne to celebrate the ringing-in of the new millennium** © Ann Mitchell  
2010