

RE ST. MICHAEL MICHAELCHURCH ESCLEY

RESTORATION OF THE BELLS

I considered this Petition in January and directed that a Faculty issue for the work proposed, with the exception of tuning of the bells, which although proposed by the founder had not been considered by the DAC. For some reason not entirely clear to me my decision was interpreted as a request for further information. The DAC now say that they recommend tuning 'to improve the musical relationship' of the bells as indicated by the founder, and the DBA says that he has no objection. I find it a little troubling that the DAC, having originally ignored the issue, proceeds simply on the basis that if an old thing can be 'improved' by being modernized, it should be: but as I am evidently asked to do so I have considered the matter again, in the light of the DAC's comments, the DBA's analysis, the bellfounder's report, and other material available to me.

My decision remains that the work can proceed, excluding the tuning of the bells. My reasons are as follows.

1. Tuning bells is irreversible. In the case of a complete ring by a single founder as yet untuned, the tuning destroys an artifact: that is to say the original sound of the bells. We do not have many sounds preserved from before the days of sound recordings and those that survive are a valuable part of our heritage. At Michealchurch Escley the ring appears to be untouched, save for the loss of the canons on the third and the crack in the tenor. The former makes no difference to the sound of the bells and the latter is to be repaired by welding, which again will not materially alter the original sound. If the bells are then restored for ringing the sound they make will be the same as when they were installed in 1732. That is something to be valued and (subject to what is said in paragraph 3 below) to be proud of.
2. Tuning is also a matter of taste and fashion. The present conventions of tuning in general depend on our views as to temperament; and the present conventions of the tuning of individual bells derive from work done in the period after about 1890. There is no 'right' or 'wrong': that is why the bellfounder's figures are merely a comparison with 'modern harmonically tuned bells', not with anything said to be 'correct'. And it is to be noted that what the bellfounder says is that the tuning is 'distinctly old style'. That is not necessarily a criticism.
3. I would certainly not rule out tuning if a case were made out, particularly if it were shown that the bells sounded so bad that the mission of the Church was affected (including if there were a disinclination for ringers to want to ring them), or a feeling that they let the church down in some way. But there is no suggestion of that here. Indeed it is not apparent whether the parish even realise that they have an early-eighteenth century sound that they propose to destroy.
4. It is of course right that of all eighteenth-century bells those of the Rudhall foundry are amongst the most frequently encountered today. But even in the 1970s it was noted that complete Rudhall peals were becoming rather rare; and the Diocese has lost one complete ARII ring since then by the recasting of the

tenor at Allensmore (and tuning of the others) in 2003. The Diocesan Bells advisor has provided a helpful list, and it appears that the bells at Churchstoke, Tyberton and Winforton are comparable, though the conclusion is drawn from deduction rather than inspection. Old Radnor are much heavier, and I suspect that Chelmarsh may have had some tuning as it looks as though they went to the foundry in 1894. Winforton are now hung as a chime so their full sound cannot be heard. But the mere fact of there being other examples is not of itself a justification for retuning; it would be a matter to take into account if the case were being made on other grounds.

5. Again, the mere fact that the bells are not listed for preservation is not a reason for not preserving their sound where the work is not shown to be necessary. It is again a factor that would be taken into account if the case for change was being made. But all that is really being said is that the bellfounder can modernise the sound; although it is not said that there is anything horrible about the historic sound the bells currently have.
6. Because it is irreversible tuning of a complete old ring is a serious matter, not merely to be accepted 'on the nod' where a complete old ring is concerned. Where a good case is made there may need to be a balance struck between the asserted needs of the present and the desirability of preserving the past. But where no case is made at all, there can be no reason to destroy the heritage.

If the petitioners are not satisfied by this decision, they may apply for the matter to be decided after an oral hearing; in that case it may be appropriate to have an initial directions hearing in order to ascertain what if any evidence, whether expert or otherwise, would assist.

MO
Dep Ch
30 May 2014