

The things I get myself into!

After my moderate success as a bellhanger in 2005 at St Agatha's Portsmouth, I found myself in demand again although on a similar matter. I had received a phone call from the Rev Peter Sutton, Vicar of St Faith Lee-on-the-Solent. I remember Peter from the days when he was a Curate at Alverstoke in the late 80's. He was part of a team of what I regard as a golden age at Alverstoke, with Norman Chatfield (Now Tower Secretary at Bishops Waltham) as Rector and Andy Davis (Vicar of Bishops Waltham now at Holy Trinity Gosport (that's another story)) also as Curate.

Peter's problem was that the rope on the bell at St Faith's Church had broken. He said that it had broken a couple of years before and that it was a very difficult thing to put right, and wondered if I would be able to help do the job properly. We arranged a site meeting where we could assess the problem.

The situation at St Faith's is that the bell hangs from a fixed wooden headstock in a bellcot. The rope is fixed to a "Clocking Hammer" and falls through a tube beneath the bell and passes over two pulleys then through the roof space into the church. The rope had broken somewhere between the bell and the church ceiling.



Looking back out through the access to the roof space as the cherry picker left me there

Peter had hired a "Cherry Picker" to get access to the bell and the roof space. When I arrived I was taken up in the cherry picker to the louver at the east end of the church. The original bell hung just inside when the church was originally built but was removed several years ago after decades of silence. The old fittings are still in place. I had to be careful because these old fittings made it even more difficult to gain access.

Once in the roof space (armed with two rechargeable torches) we had to make our way along to the west end of the church. There were regular cross braces to step over, 21 in all... I likened it to hurdling although I doubt whether you would jump over as many as 21 hurdles in a race! Eventually we reached the wall at the west end, where we found the problem.



The first few of the 21 hurdles I had to cross

The rope joins to a steel cable in the roof space and then passes over a steel pulley then through a pipe almost 3' long before it passes over the second pulley before going up the last tube to the clapper. We found that the cable had broken where it passes over the upper pulley which I found to have seized. Sadly it was impossible to free the pulley because it was out of arms reach. Although I did try to free it with penetrating oil and agitating it with a long screwdriver, but it was no use.



Up there fitting the new cable to the clapper

We went to a yacht chandler where we acquired a new cable and some shackles, and then it was up on the cherry picker again to fit the new cable to the bell. It was windy and there was a threat of a heavy shower, but we had to get the job done quickly because the light was beginning to fade. It was difficult removing the old shackle with 60 years of rust on it and the platform was moving a lot in the wind! With the new cable connected and fed the end down the lead tube we made our decent and hoped that I would be able to pick up the other end from below.

Then it was round to the east end of the church again and through the louver window and a quick dash over the 21 hurdles. By reaching up the pipe I was able to grab the cable but I was unable to thread it through the seized pulley, which was just as well because there would be less friction on the cable. I threaded the cable over the second pulley and re-connected the rope with a new shackle, just as the light was fading fast on the rechargeable torch.

I made my way back to the louver in the dark because the torch was dead by then. I was collected at the louver by the operator and taken down for the last time. Peter went back up and re-fitted the louvers and then we went into the church and tried the bell out. To our delight it worked perfectly.

Peter had also asked me to check up on the condition of the headstock while I was up there to see whether the years had taken their toll. I found that there were the early signs of wet rot on the top of the headstock, although it was not immediately dangerous I recommended that the should get it changed within the next 5 years or so. I had also taken the opportunity of measuring the diameter and height of the bell and copied the inscription.

Peter also took me down to see the old bell which was stored in the boiler room. I was a little disappointed because it was smaller than I had imagined and had no inscription at all, not even a date!

To conclude I recommended that when the bell was re-hung on a new headstock it should be fitted with an electro trigger hammer like the one that was fitted to the bell at St Agatha's Portsmouth because of the "Heath Robinson" way that it was roped. Peter asked me if I wanted any payment for my services, to which I replied "Are you kidding? I would have paid for the experience of the ride on the cherry picker alone!"