

## Chiming bells at Compton in the nineteenth century

When the covid restrictions started in March 2020 the bellringers were unable to continue with their custom of group change ringing. It was not safe to gather together, so a tradition from the past was revived instead. Rather than have the tower fall silent, they have been taking it in turns to chime for services. The current ring of six bells was not installed at Compton until the end of 1995, so the sound that parishioners have been hearing in the last fifteen months is one that has been very familiar in the past.

Chiming at Compton dates back to at least the mid sixteenth century but let's move forward a bit and meet William Hooker, who was born in the village in 1802. He was a blacksmith, working the busy forge that stood at the front of his cottage in The Street. In 1832, the year of his marriage, William became the parish clerk. This was an official position within the church; he arranged baptisms and communions, acted as sexton, led the responses at services and last but not least, he chimed the bells.



*Compton church looking west by Edward Hassell, 1830.*

Two of the three bells that William chimed or rang are still in place today. Cast in the seventeenth century, they are now rung as the five and the tenor. William's occupation would have given him very strong arms and it must have required little effort to chime more than one bell at a time, if it were necessary.

The bells were chimed at ground floor level. Edward Hassell's fine painting of the nave, dated 1830, shows a west gallery (where the musicians performed) and an entrance to the ringing space. This was at the foot of the tower and nowadays, the organ occupies this spot. William lived until 1864 and he must have chimed in there for many years. It was not a random affair; as we shall see, there were precise reasons for the way in which the bells were sounded.

Later in the nineteenth century, the rector, Hugh Gillet, noted in detail the customs of his ringers. On Sundays, ringing began at 8am when two bells were chimed eighteen times. Later, for 'divine service', three bells were chimed for fifteen minutes, followed by five minute's tolling on the largest bell. 'Fifty strokes on the big bell' marked vestry meetings and ringing also took place at the end of a wedding service.

The 'passing bell' sounded all too often. In Compton the smallest bell was tolled for a child under the age of ten. Otherwise, the large bell was tolled once for each year of the deceased's age, preceded by a chiming ritual. Six chimes were sounded for females, with a pause after every second chime and nine for males, rung in three groups of three – the nine tailors. These poignant rituals took place between 8.30am and 9am the morning after a person had died. Before funerals, a bell was tolled for half an hour.

In the following years, the bells at Compton became increasingly unstable. Sadly, chiming and ringing at the church ceased altogether for many decades in the twentieth century. Let us hope that today's 'silence' is of a much shorter duration and that ringers everywhere will soon be able to return to their towers.

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