

Bell being removed for restoration

The restoration of the bells at St Peter’s Church in Ruthin, north Wales, has brought an intriguing bellringing tradition back to the Medieval town.

The eight bells at Grade I listed St Peter’s Church have been restored thanks to a £96,300 National Lottery Heritage Fund grant. Alongside the return of Sunday ringing, the church is reinstating a town tradition that harks back hundreds of years.

Keeping the curfew

During the Middle Ages, Ruthin’s residents had good reason to know the time. Peter Furniss, bellringer and member of the project’s Bell Restoration Committee, explains: “At that time, a curfew bell was rung daily by hand. Its purpose was to warn residents that they must be indoors by 8pm, when the town’s gates closed, otherwise they could be arrested.”

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> Stephen Barlow, Head of Engagement for The National Lottery Heritage Fund in Wales

The current set of bells in the church, which date from the mid-1800s, had deteriorated so badly that they could only be rung once a week in this way. Peter says that has changed: “We’ve not only been able to restore the bells, but add an electronic mechanism to the tenor bell so it chimes automatically at 8pm every day. This is keeping the tradition alive for local people and restoring the heritage of Ruthin – though of course we won’t be throwing anyone in jail anymore!”



The restored bells

Ringing again after the coronavirus

Bellringing has currently ceased across the UK due to the introduction of social distancing measures designed to slow down the transmission of COVID-19. The historic parallel of the curfew bell being brought back now hasn’t escaped Peter: “Thanks to its electronic mechanism, the curfew bell continues to sound – it’s a strange coincidence that it has made a return as local people are being asked to once again restrict their movements.”

As to when all eight bells will be heard again, Peter feels optimistic: “We’re currently training a new band of ringers – now on hold, but we will continue when we can. Bellringing has been around for hundreds of years, through tumultuous times including great fires, revolutions and world wars – when it was also restricted. With the support of our new recruits, Ruthin’s bells will ring out again.”

Opening up bellringing

Beyond restoring the bells, the project works have enabled more people to try their hand at bellringing. The belfry and Ringing Room have been refurbished, with modern fittings and design techniques introduced to make the bells much easier to handle. 19 new trainees aged from 18 to 70 have been taking part in weekly training sessions. Together they’ll be returning regular bellringing to Ruthin, which has been absent since the 1970s.

Church visitors can read about the bells’ restoration and discover the important role they played throughout Ruthin’s history in a new exhibition. When bellringing is taking place, the ringers and bells will be visible through a video installation.



Smelting at Loughborough Bellfoundry

Keeping historic traditions thriving

We asked Stephen Barlow, Head of Engagement for The National Lottery Heritage Fund in Wales, why he thought the project was important: “Traditions and customs like these form a key part of local people’s identity and can foster great pride in the heritage that’s on their doorsteps. This rewarding hobby will bring new people into the church and enable them to learn a new skill, keeping old traditions alive and thriving for many more years to come.”

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Local schoolchildren have been learning about the bells, which has included visiting the church and Loughborough Bellfoundry where they went for repair. The winner of a school competition to name the fifth bell – badly cracked before its restoration – chose ‘Lottie’ in recognition of National Lottery players’ support.



700-year-old St Margaret's Church, Ipswich





Learning the ropes at All Saints Thirkleby