

St Mark Cheltenham Sound Management Policy

1. Background

The sound of church bells is an important and integral part of the Christian Church. Bellringing has been practised for many centuries, forming part of our heritage and proclaiming the message of the church to the local community. The bells are rung for regular services, weddings, special events and half muffled at times of sadness. They are an important part of the evangelistic outreach of the parish Church and hearing the bells reminds people that God loves them, that the Lord Jesus died for them and calls them to be part of his Kingdom.

St Mark is an active community church situated in a densely populated neighbourhood on the west side of Cheltenham. The church congregation is growing and attracts over 200 people to its services on a Sunday.

St Mark's is lucky enough to possess one of the best rings of bells in the county. They have been rung regularly since 1885 and were augmented and restored in 2007. We are proud of them, and privileged to be ringing them and listening to them: they are expensive pieces of equipment!

Bell ringing forms an integral part of worship at St Mark and the bells are rung regularly as an act of worship and as an expression of our evangelistic faith ("To call the faithful, warn the heedless and cheer the sick"). The sound of our bells calls the community to Worship God and come into closer fellowship with him. The bells are usually rung by members of the local community.

St Mark seek to maintain good relationships with all their neighbours and to promote best practice when managing their facilities. We recognise that the sound of bells is not insignificant and that they must be used with sensitivity to those who live within the immediate neighbourhood. With this in mind it was decided to formalise the sound management policy so that neighbours could appreciate how we plan the duration, frequency and regularity of when the bells will be rung.

2. Sound policy considerations

When writing the sound management policy the PCC and ringers took into account the following factors. (In no particular order)

- The requirements of the church as to when the bells would ideally be rung for Worship, weddings, special events and practice. (And others listed below)
- The density and proximity of the housing in the immediate area surrounding the church (over 100 properties within ¼ radial mile)
- The views of the neighbours about when and for how long the bells should be rung

- The views of the church congregation about when the bells should be rung for worship.
- The necessary levels of ringing (practice, worship and other) necessary to maintain interest and enable a band of ringers to train effectively
- The quality of the ringing expected by the public.
- The volume of the bells outside the building

3. Sound policy

Regular ringing.

Practice. In order to reach a high standard of ringing it is important to train regularly and to have regular weekly practices. This helps to maintain the interest of the band, ensure that our ringing meets the standard expected by the general public and enables us to recruit other ringers from the locality (in particular young people)

The bells will usually be rung for practice **once per week for duration of around 1.5 hours**. At present this will usually be on a **Monday evening** (excluding the 4th Monday of the month) between the hours of **7.15pm and 8.45pm**. This is the minimum frequency and duration of practice ringing needed to effectively maintain a band of ringers.

The Bells may be rung for each and every Church **service** to call people to worship. Normally this would be for around 30 minutes or so beforehand. On special occasions this may be extended.

At present the bells will be rung for up to three Sunday services per month, currently the **2nd and 4th Sundays prior to the main morning service with the option to ring on the 3rd Sunday prior to the evening service**, totalling around 2 hours.

Extra requested ringing.

The bells may also be rung:

- By **visiting bands**. Because our bells are of such good quality, visiting bands often wish to ring at St. Mark's. No more than one per month, for around 50 minutes on Saturdays only between the hours of 10.00am and 8.30pm.
- For recruitment workshops and **open days**. No more than one per month.
- For **Quarter Peals**. These are rung to give more "rope time" to ringers, so that their timing and rhythm may improve. They usually mark special anniversaries or events. Usually on Saturdays or Sundays (if the latter, for a service) between the hours of 10.00am and 8.30pm
- For **weddings**, by request of the bride, by means of the formal booking process through the church office. Possible duration around 50 minutes, more commonly around 20 minutes on a Saturday, maximum

20 minutes on a Friday. Ringing for weddings could occur on any weekday, but at present is restricted to Friday and Saturday.

- For **funerals**, by means of booking through the PCC. Possible duration around 50 minutes, more commonly around 20 minutes on a Saturday, maximum 20 minutes on a Friday. Ringing for funeral could occur on any weekday, but at present is restricted to Friday and Saturday.
- To mark **National events and tragedies**. These may be on any day of the year. (e.g. St. George's Day, or Remembrance Day Nov. 11th.) In exceptional circumstances the bells may be rung with minimal notice to mark significant national events, for example the death of a monarch. This will be in the evenings, between 7 and 8.30pm.
- For special practice on Saturday evenings, no more than two per year, between the hours of 7.00pm and 8.30pm only.
- For **Peal attempts**. (3 hours) These are by special request only to the PCC. These are always rung to celebrate major Christian festivals (for example Christmas and Easter) and have a minimum of 2 months' notice. They will be rung on Saturdays, Sundays or in the place of a practice evening. They will always be rung between the hours of 10am and 8.30pm. No more than two per year will be rung.
- From time to time it may be necessary raise the bells ready for ringing (for example prior to a wedding). The bells will be raised individually, at a reasonable time of day, the time taken usually being around 10 minutes. This is the only time notice will not be given.
- The bells will also be rung for Worship to mark Good Friday, usually for a duration of 50 minutes.

Additional information

No ringing during working hours is currently permitted unless for exceptional circumstances. The only exceptions to this are weekday weddings, funerals or for essential maintenance, (for example contractors working on bells or decibel meter readings being taken). Due notice will be given should either of these planned events occur.

No more than one unit of ringing will usually be allowed on any one day with the exception of multiple weddings on Friday or Saturday. With the exception of the practice night or Friday wedding, the bells will not normally be rung on weekday evenings.

No more than two Saturdays in any month may have ringing taking place during them, the only exception being where multiple wedding parties have requested ringing.

The PCC reserve the right to ring the bells for a lesser duration and frequency for each of the units stated here. Ringing can be cancelled with no notice period.

It should be noted that this frequency and duration of ringing is very significantly less than almost every other tower within Cheltenham District and is considered to be the bare minimum necessary to maintain a band of ringers. Many towers in the area permit at least twice this frequency and duration of ringing.

The ringers and Rector will work together to ensure that due consideration is given to neighbours when planning ringing.

4. Quality

We understand that those living in close proximity to the church do not wish to endure poor quality ringing. There are times when the quality of ringing may be poorer, for example when training new recruits; however the Tower Captain and Rector reserve the right to stop any ringing where the quality falls beneath that which the public can reasonably expect.

5. Reservations

The PCC reserve the right to alter this policy without consultation, but with due consideration given to neighbours of the church.

6. Sound control system.

St Mark possesses a significant sound control system installed in 2010 (replacing an older, less effective one) that enables the ringers to promote the best ringing while significantly reducing the volume of the bells outside the building during practice. This system consists of a series of opening hatches in the louvres of the tower, which are bricked up with high-density sound blocks. This means that when the shutters are open a limited level of well-blended and mellow sound is allowed out. When they are closed the sound must leave through the openings in the top of the spire, significantly reducing the volume of the bells around the church. For professional Db meter readings of both old and new systems see the appendices.

The sound management system shutters will always be **fully closed** during practice ringing, ringing by visiting bands and during maintenance or preparation ringing.

It will be **partially opened** (front of building only) when the bells are rung for weddings, special services and peals.

It will be **fully open** when the bells are rung for worship on Sunday, Good Friday and during Christian festivals.

It is the responsibility of whoever is running the ringing to ensure that shutter hatches are set correctly. A procedure will be placed next to the controls on the ringing room wall.

7. Communications.

We will gladly arrange times for local people to come and inspect the bells and the bell chamber, and to see for themselves the enjoyment of ringing and discuss this role of the Church's ministry.

St Mark PCC regard communication with neighbours as to when the bells will be rung as imperative to successful relations. With this in mind notices of all ringing are published:

1. On the ringers own website www.stmarkschelt.co.uk usually 4 weeks in advance, often with more notice.
2. On the church website. Regular ringing 4 weeks in advance (subject to confirmation) and special ringing usually 6 weeks in advance.

Special ringing such as peal attempts and festival ringing is also published in the church newsletter and, at times if felt necessary, in writing to neighbours.

8. Complaints Procedure

Should any neighbour wish to complain about the bells the complaint will initially be dealt with by the Rector on an informal basis who will inform the PCC and tower captain. They will record the complainant's name, address and details of the complaint, together with any remedial action taken in the complaints log (currently held by the tower captain).

If a complaint is received formally in writing it will be passed to the Rector who will deal with the complaint. The complainant's name, address and details of the complaint, together with any remedial action taken, will be recorded in the complaints log (currently held by the tower captain). The PCC will respond in writing to the complainant.

9. Historical information.

The bells at St Mark have been rung regularly since 1885, with some periods of reduced frequency during the 1930's and 1980's. During the 1970's, bricks were placed in the louvers to reduce the volume of the bells outside the building. Following this Db meter readings were taken (see appendices)

In 2003 regular ringing resumed with a fixed pattern and policy identical to that above with the exception of the 3rd Sunday and 2nd Monday being silent. No additional sound control measures were implemented. Following a request from one local resident, the practice night was moved to slightly earlier in the evening. (Previously 7.30-9.00pm)

In 2007, when the bells were restored, additional sound control measures were installed allowing for variable volumes outside the building. At the request of the then architect, these were not as substantial as the ringers had originally requested. However, the volume of the bells was reduced outside

the building when compared to pre-restoration. Ringing continued at the same frequency and duration as before.

In Autumn 2008, the ringers and PCC decided to add a necessary additional practice night (2nd Monday) and an additional option of ringing in the evening of the 3rd Sunday. This was to accommodate the training of local residents to ring the bells. This policy has remained unchanged since then. At the time of this change, the information was widely disseminated to local residents. No complaints were received at the time.

In March 2010, the PCC installed an upgraded sound management system. This policy and the frequency and duration of ringing remained unchanged, save for a slight reduction in the frequency of practices during the works.

Simon Ridley
May 2010

Policy approved by the PCC

Appendices.

1.0 Db Meter readings taken in 1974.

At the church gate 70dB

At the East end (altar end) outside 58dB

At Mrs. Williams front gate (church neighbour) 62dB

In the ringing room 86dB (*This reading is now redundant*)

On the balcony 60dB (*This reading is now redundant*)

Outside at the east end without the bells ringing 38dB

1.1 Report of sound measurements before and after the additional sound control measures in 2010.

INSERT HERE

- 1.2 Report by Alan Strickland, DAC bells advisor prior to commencement of additional sound control measures in 2010.

St. Mark's Church

Cheltenham

Installation of bell sound control system

Review of Proposals for

Gloucester DAC and the PCC of St. Mark's Church

Alan R. Strickland
DAC Bell Advisor
17th March 2010

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to examine proposals for the installation of a sound control system at St. Mark's church, reviewing the need for the proposed extra controls, examining current problems with complaints, ways of addressing the issues, looking at the existing means of sound control and making recommendations.

I have compiled this report and made recommendations in good faith as voluntary bells advisor to the Gloucester DAC and no liability can be accepted in respect of its contents and opinions expressed therein. The report is provided to support and advise only.

The report is based on information provided by the PCC, Mr Simon Ridley, estimates from John Taylor & Co, talking to local residents, site visits to examine existing and proposed systems and listening to the sound of the bells from the immediate vicinity. The time spent by Mr. Simon Ridley in providing access and background information is appreciated.

It is understood the scheme has the support of the Vicar and PCC

Nothing within this report should be construed as approval or permissions to carry out any works. Normal faculty rules must be followed.

The sound of church bells is an important part of the Christian Church. Bellringing has been practised for many centuries, forming part of our heritage and proclaiming the message of the church to the local community. The bells are rung for regular services, weddings and special events and half muffled at times of sadness and the introduction of sound control may result in these tasks no longer being adequately fulfilled in delivering their message to the local area. When introducing sound control, careful planning is necessary to ensure that when a scheme of sound management is installed the purpose of the bells is still effectively maintained.

The degree of sound control required should be relative to the problems being experienced, it is therefore necessary to examine all the issues and ways of addressing the problems before installing sound control.

2. Summary of Report

This report examines the proposals for the installation of sound control at St. Mark's, to establish appropriate levels of external sound for practice, visitors, peal and quarter peals yet ensuring suitable open sound levels are maintained. The prime function being to secure the open ringing of the bells as part of the long term mission of the church.

To understand the background and problems with complaints, the main body of the report examines, environmental issues, complaints and ways of minimising problems, justified complaints and ways of addressing them, methods of sound control, sound control for St Mark's, current arrangements and the proposed scheme.

The conclusion and recommendations in parts 4 and 5 support the proposal for the installation of a suitable sound control scheme, however the need to have accurate sound readings before and after works is identified.

After listening to the bells externally and talking to local people, I did not feel the sound of the bells for service ringing was excessive. It is therefore suggested the sound control system should be designed to ensure the external sound levels for practices etc. should be closely controlled and for service ringing, with the new sound shutters in the fully open position, should be at similar levels to those currently enjoyed.

3. Main Report

a. The Sound of Bells and Environmental Issues

The majority of people enjoy the sound of bells however the sound is no longer considered as part of life by all and may result in complaints and actions by people living close to the church.

The argument often put forward that the bells have been there for many centuries and therefore there is an automatic right to ring them whether local people like it or not is an argument that cannot any longer be used. Under the 1990 Environmental Protection Act, the local authority has an obligation to investigate any complaints, and may take enforcement action if felt appropriate. This may result in very restrictive conditions and even a complete cessation of all bellringing at the tower.

The Incumbent and PCC therefore need to be made aware of possible problems quickly so they may take reasonable steps to resolve the problems before they develop.

b. Complaints.

Complaints are an increasing problem, but the number of complaints in comparison to people who enjoy the sound of bells is very small and therefore care must be taken not to over react. Often complaints can be resolved working with the complainant and involving them. A detailed written record of all complaints, conversations and actions should be maintained for future reference.

Attempts to work with the person complaining at St. Mark's have not been successful. It is understood that no formal written complaint has been made to the Incumbent or to Environmental Health, however verbal complaints and notes pinned to the tower door continue.

c. Minimising Complaints.

To minimise complaints it is essential that an effective "Ringling Management Plan" should be followed. This demonstrates that a responsible approach to ringing is in place and reduces complaints. The measures to achieve this being:- Providing times and dates of regular ringing to local people through newsletters, notices etc; not ringing outside advertised hours and times; providing details of wedding ringing and visiting bands; avoiding

poor quality ringing; teaching learners on tied bells. From my discussions with Simon all these issues are very effectively addressed at St. Mark's, but has not resolved the complaint problem.

The general public may not be experts but they can certainly tell the difference between good and bad ringing; this is sometimes as a result of the bellringers not being able to effectively hear the bells in the ringing chamber. This does not appear to be a problem at St. Mark's and the quality of ringing is maintained by the tower captain.

d. A Justified Complaint.

Where a responsible "Ringing Management Plan" is in place other reasons for the complaints need to be considered:-

Bells sound accompanied by annoying rattling/knocking

This is normally caused by worn fittings, however at St. Mark's the fittings are new and well maintained, therefore this is not a contributory factor.

Ringing resuming after a period of silence

When the bells were rehung this was with the full support of the local community who were kept informed of the works and invited into the tower.

Bells sound harsh and with some louder than others.

The bells are hung on different levels and there is a degree of variance which may be improved by rationalising the existing sound control, however the sound externally at St. Mark's is not unpleasant and this is not a significant problem.

Too noisy

Problems are usually close to the immediate area of the church. St. Mark's is situated on a mound and surrounded by urban housing. After listening to the bells (with the shutters open) outside the church from all sides and walking around the adjacent streets the sound did not appear to be excessive, even immediately in front of the church. The sound from each side is not equal but again I would not consider to be excessive. Whilst walking around the area I took the opportunity of talking to a number of residents who all were quite happy with the sound of the bells when rung open for services and religious ceremonies, although a couple of people did say they would prefer not to hear bells on practice nights. Below the church towards the main Cheltenham to Gloucester road the bells could not be heard as they were more than drowned out by the traffic noise.

e. Sound Control at St. Mark's

Responsible sound control is required in an urban position like St Mark's, however whilst increasing the sound control for practice ringing, visiting bands, quarter peals etc. it is essential that open ringing is maintained for services, weddings etc. There is always a risk that local people may get used to the severely restricted sound to the extent that they may then demand the same level for service ringing. Whilst only one person is currently complaining, it needs to be remembered that in

this type of area housing occupants change and other complainants may appear in the future.

f. Methods of Sound Control

Sound control methods need to be designed to meet the particular needs of a church. St. Mark's has the addition of a substantial octagonal spire with openings spaced at different levels on each face which must also be taken into account.

To reduce any external harshness of individual bells and reduce the intensity of the bell upper partials a continuous barrier around the bells to the height of the upturned lips of the bells is a method often used. The barrier being formed by the walls, the lower sections of the bell chamber windows being blocked, with other low level holes being filled and the upper part of the windows either remaining permanently open or fitted with opening panels. This is the basis of the scheme currently being proposed by the parish. Alternatively schemes for churches with open spires with open high level outlets may find a good level of sound control can be achieved by completely blocking the windows and allowing the sound to distribute via the spire outlets.

g. Existing Layout at St. Mark's

The five 1884 Taylor bells were augmented to 8 bells in 2007 and rehung in a new 2 tier frame. The frame was installed with the lower section mounted in the old ringing room and the original open gallery converted into the ringing area. At the time the bells were rehung proposals to modify the existing sound control arrangements were not taken up.

The original sound control appears to consist of partial blocking of the lower part of the windows with brickwork. It is assumed these were local measures as the brickwork does not appear to be effectively tied and many bricks are mounted in a stack arrangement. Boarding above the brickwork is in place with sliding shutters which is more recent. At the base of each window a clock spindle exits to the four dials.

The three narrow slit windows which were in the original ringing room and are now adjacent to the middle of the lower frame do not have any sound control. There are gaps around the clock spindles and a small high level door opening on to the parapet is now in very poor condition. A basic ceiling at high level separates the base of the spire from the top of the tower. An external staircase leads as high as the old ringing room and also provides access to the gallery. Good quality well fitting doors are provided at each level.

h. Proposed scheme

The parish have consulted John Taylor & Company and they have proposed the following works:-

Removal of all old blockwork and timber boarding from the bell chamber windows, installation of supporting cills and galvanised steel framework allowing for the effective boxing in of the four clock spindles, new blockwork and upper insulated panels with opening sound doors controlled

from the ringing area. The three small windows in the old ringing room to be infilled with 100mm blockwork.

Also suggested if further sound control was required were proposals to include boxing in around the perimeter guttering and the installation of a T&G floor to the underside of the existing floor joists at the base of the spire.

4. Conclusions

From the above it is clear that a system of sound control is necessary to minimise problems with complaints when bells are rung for practice, quarter peals etc. The proposals would certainly reduce the external sound by the use of better materials and blocking sound gaps. The removal of the existing poor quality brickwork, blocking the old windows and around clock spindles will be more effective than the present system by providing a continuous barrier around the bells/frame. What effect this will have on the sound level externally when the sound doors are opened for service ringing is not clear. I suggest that the level of sound outside the church when the new sound doors are fully open should not be at a level significantly lower than currently experienced.

The levels of sound can only be accurately measured with suitable test equipment. To appreciate the effects of any works it is essential that measurements should be taken at various locations before any works take place with sound doors open and closed and during/after the work. The areas of the windows that can be opened would need to be carefully considered if current sound levels are to be maintained. The changes may also effect the level of sound in the ringing area.

Where sound doors are used to control external sound levels it is essential that ease of operation from the ringing area is included (as proposed) to ensure they are used and not left permanently closed. The present temporary system requires climbing around the lower frame, and whilst the current regime allows for this, in the future, when new ringers come along this regime may not be adhered to and could result in the shutters being permanently left closed. It is important that an easily accessible system giving variable control of the sound doors from the ringing area is included.

I suggest the extra proposals to board the spire base and box in the guttering should not be considered until the effect of the other works has been measured.

5. Recommendations:-

- 1) The existing "Ringing Management Plan" should be maintained as good practice.**
- 2) All complaints should continue to be investigated and detailed records of conversations etc. maintained.**
- 3) Accurate measurements of sound around the area should be taken and recorded before and after any works with shutters open and closed. This record may be required in any defence against any future formal complaints.**
- 4) Control of the sound doors should be from the ringing area and allow individual variable adjustment.**
- 5) Open sound levels should be maintained to current levels to ensure the bells may continue to be heard in the immediate area. This will require sound measurements being taken before and during the works.**
- 6) Materials, fixing methods etc. should be approved by the church architect**

Alan R. Strickland
DAC Bell Advisor
18th March 2010