

Westminster Abbey Bells – Royal Wedding 29 April 2011

Notes on ringing for the Royal Wedding and on the Abbey's ringers and bells

Wedding 29 April

The Abbey's ten bells will be rung prior to the wedding for up to half an hour, as principal guests, Royalty and the bridal party arrive.

At conclusion of the service a full peal of 5,040 changes will be rung that will take in excess of three hours. Full peals are rung on the Abbey's bells only for significant occasions. The ringers do this without a break and need to concentrate throughout.

In change ringing the sequence in which the bells sound alters continually. No sequence is repeated. The peal commences and concludes with 'rounds', which is the ringing of the bells in order from the highest to the lowest note. A rhythmical and flowing effect is the objective.

The changes to be rung are determined by ringing methods (similar to scripts or scores) which the ringers commit to memory. The Royal Wedding peal will combine two methods, London and Bristol, resulting in a peal of Spliced Surprise Royal performed under the direction of the conductor, David Hilling.

The conductor, while ringing one of the bells, announces frequently which method is to be followed. He also provides other instructions to achieve the peal length of 5,040 changes.

Abbey Ringers

Members are elected to the Westminster Abbey Company of Ringers, a voluntary group, and are able bell ringers. They come from all professions and past members of the Company have included a train driver, a school teacher and a medical consultant. The current membership includes architects, bankers, civil servants, a lawyer, IT workers, a supply chain manager and management consultants.

The members are privileged to be ringers at Westminster Abbey and look forward to contributing to the tapestry of the Royal Wedding.

Abbey Bells

The information on the Abbey's web site at www.westminster-abbey.org/our-history/abbey-bells is helpful.

Edward The Confessor's Abbey was consecrated in 1065. There are records of Abbey bell castings in 1230 and 1231.

At the behest of King Henry III, the gradual demolition of Edward The Confessor's Abbey and rebuilding in the Gothic style commenced in 1245. This started at the east end. It wasn't until 1745 (500 years later!) that King Henry III's Abbey was completed with the construction of the glorious west towers.

In 1971 ten bells were cast for the Abbey by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry of London. The smallest (treble) with the highest note weighs 5 cwt (250kg) and the heaviest (tenor) with the deepest note weighs 30 cwt (1,500 kg).

In the 17th century the English art of change ringing was developed where, with rope and wheel, bells could be turned full circle which allowed the timing of the strike to be controlled. This enabled 'changes' or sequences to be rung to a predetermined pattern or method.

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