

Bells and ringers in Glasbury prior to 1838 *by Colin A Lewis*



St Peter's Church, Glasbury on Wye, Powys, currently home to a ring of eight, the back six initially cast in 1838 by Jefferies and Price of Bristol (Alison Alcock)

Part One

In this two-part article we will look at the history of the churches at Glasbury, their bells and Henry Williams, the Glasbury bellfounder.

Location

Glasbury is located in the Welsh Marches in the Wye valley between the Black Mountains and the Radnorshire uplands. The parish was subdivided in 1882 into St Peter's Glasbury

on the right of the River Wye and All Saints,

on the left of that river. The parish formerly extended from Capel-y-ffin on the south side of the Black Mountains to The Begwns uplands north of the Wye. **Churches**

The Parish Church prior to subdivision was dedicated to St Peter after the Norman conqueror of the region (Bernard de Neumarché) gave the church and manor to the Abbey of St Peter's in Gloucester in

1088. The church was on a raised mound



Great flood of 3rd–4th December 1960. View overlooking St Peter's Church (1838) on the 1665 site, high above the flood plain.

Inset: the triangular platform on which the Norman church once stood completely encircled in flood water. (Marion Griffiths)

The same thing happened during floods in 2020 and 2021

on the flood plain of the Wye near Glasbury castle and village and may have originated as a monastic site and bishopric founded by St Cynidr, one of the sixth-century Celtic saints. Little is known of St Peter's except that in 1660 it had the remains of a steeple, graveyard, doors, windows, seats, and lofts. No known depiction of this church exists.

Flooding in the seventeenth century, probably combined with lack of maintenance during the Cromwellian Commonwealth Period (1649–60), led to the abandonment of the flood-plain church in 1660 following the Restoration of the Monarchy in that year. A new church, also dedicated to St Peter, sited above the flood plain to the south of the River Wye, was built between 1660 and 1664 on land donated by Sir Henry Williams (1635-66) of Gwernyfed, the local landowner.

The donated site was located approximately midway between the villages of Glasbury and Aberllynfi (which is now known as Three Cocks after the village hostelry), each of which had its own church. Sir Henry may have intended the new church to replace both previous churches thereby saving clerical manpower and other expenses. The new Restoration church was consecrated on 29th June (St Peter's Day) 1665 and, like the former Parish Church of Glasbury, was dedicated to St Peter.

A very small depiction of the Restoration church exists on an estate map of 1750 while in 1870 Jane Williams wrote that it consisted of 'a chancel, a nave, and a low square tower, having a sloping pyramidal roof covered ... with tiles and surmounted by a weather-vane ... etc.'

By the 1820s, due to an increase in the population of the area as economic activity expanded, with an increase in the wool trade, iron founding, building of a tram road from the canal basin in Brecon in the Usk valley to the head of navigation of the Wye at Hay, and so on, the Restoration church proved too small to cater for the needs of the parish. Consequently, a new and larger church was built to replace the smaller edifice, which no longer exists. The new church, also dedicated to St Peter, was opened in 1838 complete with a ring of six bells cast by Jefferies and Price of Bristol. This is the present Parish Church of Glasbury St Peter's, located beside the main A438 road. The history of those bells, and the ringing thereof, has already been told (Lewis, 2015)

Since 1883, however, the former parochial area north of the Wye has been served by a far less impressive and smaller church consecrated in that year and dedicated to All Saints. This divisive church was built largely to satisfy the family who then owned the essentially agricultural Maesllwch estate. All Saints has a single small swing-chiming bell of little interest. **Bells**

Nothing is known of any bells associated with the pre-Norman church. As with other Celtic saints, Cynidr may have had his own handbell but there is no record of it. Neither is there any record of any bell in the pre-Norman church. In 1300, however, the then Archbishop of Canterbury in his Ut parochiani ordered



Henry Williams' flower pattern on the second bell at nearby Clyro. Williams may have been responsible for recasting at Glasbury in the early 18th century

that every church should possess '*campanae magnae cum cordis suis*'. Whether the clergy and people of Glasbury obeyed the instruction is unknown.

During the short reign of the Tudor King, Edward VI (1547–53) the Book of Common Prayer was published. The Preface to that Book as issued under Queen Elizabeth I stipulated that, unless there were certain reasons to do otherwise, a bell should be tolled '*a convenient time before [a service] begins that the people may come to hear God's Word*'. Consequently, it is almost certain that one or more bells existed in the Parish Church in Glasbury by, and probably before, the end of the sixteenth century.

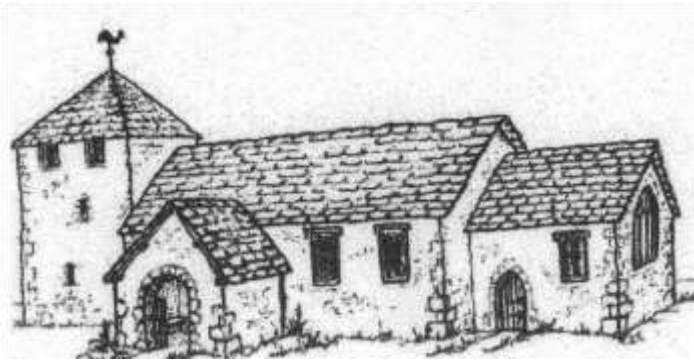
Alexander Griffith, a local man who had been educated at the University of Oxford and was a Royalist and Vicar of Glasbury, was ejected from his living on 7th June 1650 by the Cromwellians. In 1660, as a result of the Restoration of the Monarchy and the Royal Declaration for the Re-establishment of Church Discipline, Griffith was reinstated as Vicar of Glasbury. Later in that year he, Sir Henry Williams of Gwernyfed (the main local landowner) and almost 100 other petitioners sent a letter to the Bishop of St David's in whose diocese Glasbury was then located. They stated that:

The p'ish Church of Glasbury by ye late inundations and violent floods of the river Wye is in a most im'inent and inevitable danger to be utterlie demolished and destroyed (the one halfe of the steeple being already undermined and fallen into the river), the churchyard wall (well nigh) to the very Church door, consumed and washed away, the graves opened, and the bones carried away, so that unless some speedie course be taken, all the materials of the s'd Church, as timber, iron barrs, windows, free stones, lofts, seates and doors, w'ch amounteth to a great sum of money, will be utterlie lost and taken away, the next or second flood, by the violence of the s'd river.

The writers then petitioned the Bishop to

'impower and co'mand the Church Wardens ... to draw down the rest of the s'd church ... that the materials may be secured and kept safe towards the building of another' [church]. The petition was granted.

The omission of bells from the list of materials the 1660 petitioners sought to save does not mean that they did not exist or had not done so. Part of the steeple had already fallen and if it had housed bells, they may have also fallen and even been damaged or destroyed. Presumably,



*Depiction by Dr Margaret Gill, based on a variety of sources, of
St Peter's, the new Parish Church of Glasbury, consecrated in 1665*

(From Lewis, 2012)

the bell-metal and undamaged bells would already have been salvaged and stored before the petition was written. There is, however, no record of how many bells had existed in the old steeple or whether they were removed to the new Restoration church. **Bells of the Restoration Church**

The Archdeacons' Visitation Assessments of Churchwardens' Presentments as relating to bells, now held in the National Library of Wales, have been transcribed by Margaret Gill (Table One). The earliest surviving record, from 1704, states 'bell ropes to be in decay'. There is no known record of whether bells existed in the Restoration Church prior to that year, although a Consistory Court deposition of June 1685 suggests that there were and that they may have been rung. In 1714, as Table One shows, there were four bells in the Restoration Church. Nothing is known of the ringers or ringing of those bells.

Visitation Presentments relating to bells in the Restoration Church

Year	Presentment
1704	'bell ropes to be in decay'.
1705	'ropes to the bells...to be wanting'.
1708	'one bell crackd'.
1711	'one of ye bells to be crackt and out of order'.
1712	'one of the bells ...to be crackt'.
1712	'one of the bells...to be out of repaire'.
1713	'one of the bells ...to be cracked'. 1713 'one of the bells...out of repaire'.
1714	'one of the bells to be cracked'
Oct 1714	'Two of the bells cracked and the other two out of repaire'.
1715	'two of the bells to be cracked and the others to want re]pairing'
1716	'the bell to be out of order'.
1716	'the bells to be out of repaire'.
1718	'bells to be out of repaire'.
1718	'bells to be out of repaire'.
1784	'one of the Bells to have been broke'.
1785	'one of the bells to be cracked'.
1785	'one of the bells out of repair'.
1786	'the Bells to be under an Injunction'.
1787	'a Bell to be cracked'.
1787	'one of the Bells to be cracked'.
1788	'one Bell to be out of repair'.
1789	'one Bell to be out of Repair'.
1828	'The bells and bell-frame are in good condition'.

The absence of records relating to bells between 1718 and 1784 suggests that the cracked bells were recast in or shortly after 1718. Recasting may have been undertaken by Henry Williams, a bellfounder known to have cast bells for churches within or adjacent to the Gwernyfed Estate from 1677 until and including 1719. For at least the latter part of his life, Williams had his abode and foundry near Pipton, in Aberllynfi, within the Parish of Glasbury. He had earlier lived elsewhere, including adjacent Llowes parish.

In part two we will look more in depth at Henry Williams, the Glasbury bellfounder, and the Rudhall ring of bells through to the current ring of bells by Jeffries and Price of 1838.



Forge Cottage, Aberllynfi, in which Henry Williams, the Glasbury

Bellfounder, lived in his latter days. This house, photographed by Jack Pettican in the mid-Twentieth Century, is now merely a ruin. His foundry, unseen, was to the right of the house (From Lewis, 2012)

encompassing something that open soon after a few finer details have been was either intrinsically artistic as an image, confirmed. The winner of each category recorded the bell as a device in a notable and receives a £50 Amazon voucher, with two cultural setting or made a link to the bell in a runners up receiving a £25 voucher each. powerfully evocative and immediate way. In To see the gallery and instructions on the nature of a competition, therefore, John has uploading your images when the next category made the following selection from the entries opens, go to <https://ccabr.org.uk/competition/>. and would like to thank all entrants who

VICKI CHAPMAN

sent such interesting and varied pictures for

CCCBR Public Relations Officer selection.

Runner up: 'Warwick Poppy Bell' (Phil Hope)

elusive images of the

Runner up: 'Carved bell in Bath stone (David Towell)'

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The founder's mark of Henry Williams on a bell he cast for Mansell Gamage, near Hereford, in 1693 (From Lewis, 2012)

of the Norman and Restoration churches in Glasbury and their bells. Part two will look more in depth at Henry Williams, the Glasbury bellfounder, through to the Rudhall

St Peter's Glasbury, opened in 1838, has an octave with bells by two different founders, Jefferies and Price of Bristol and Mears and Stainbank of Whitechapel (Claire Alexander)

**Part Two: Henry Williams
the Glasbury Bellfounder,
and new bells at Glasbury**

Last week's article looked at the history

likely that if Henry Williams recast the existing four bells, which may well have come from the old Parish Church on the flood plain, he did so into a ring of five. He had done the

which suggests that he worked almost to the end of his life. Browne Willis, an antiquarian, reported Clyro, during the first half of the eighteenth century

that there were five bells at Glasbury, so it is

same at Clyro in 1708 and intended doing the same at Llowes that same year. The second bell at Clyro carries the telling inscription: 'OF VS FOUR MADE FIVE'.

Change-ringing became increasingly popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Minimus with the tenor covering was written by Phillip Powell of Brecon in his 'Commonplace Book' [diary] in 1633-4. The first book on it was *Tintinnalogia*, published in 1668 and written by Richard Duckworth who was then Vice-Principal of Brasenose College, Oxford. This book emphasised the ringing of Doubles, which requires five bells.

Young men from the Glasbury area, including Alexander Griffith who was Vicar of Glasbury before 1650 and after 1660, were students at Oxford in the seventeenth century. As students, they would have been aware of change ringing or even practitioners influenced by Duckworth and his book. Thus, it is not surprising that more affluent members of society in the Glasbury area by the early 1700s, wanted rings of five bells on which to practice their art.

The affluent included the Howarths of Cabalva who, with Lloney residents, paid for at least one bell to be recast at Clyro; two Howarths who were among the failed plotters at Llowes; and possibly Charles Lloyd of Maesllwch in Glasbury and previously of Crickadarn, named in a deposition of 1685 as

ring of bells and the current ring which was cast as a six by Jefferies and Price in 1838. Henry Williams the Glasbury Bellfounder

Henry Williams may have been the member of the landlord family of Gwernyfed who matriculated at the University of Oxford in 1651, although the evidence is unclear. Assuming that he was, he was probably born in 1635 or 1636. Another possibility is that he was the son of the matriculant and that he and his father both cast bells under the name of Henry Williams between 1677 and the end of 1719. In 1715–19 at least twelve bells are known to have been cast by a Henry Williams, some of which, as at Madley and Llanlleonfel, display poor workmanship or poor shape, as may be expected from an elderly craftsman of diminishing powers.

Williams died on 8th March 1722. In 1720 the Church Wardens of Glasbury had taken a case against him for non-payment of church rates and he was threatened with excommunication for non-appearance: perhaps he did not have sufficient funds to pay at that time or perhaps he was getting forgetful. In 1721 the Church Wardens of Winforton paid him for work he had done on their bells,



Glasbury vicar and ringers, 2014 (l-r) – back: Revd David Thomas, C Phillips, Alison Alcock, Ieuan Phillips, Alec Edwards, Colin Lewis; front: John Royds, Brian Collins (Tower Captain) Jim Coates and Margaret Gill (From Lewis 2015)

drinking in the Parish Church in Glasbury. Gill suggests that Lloyd and his colleagues may have previously rung the bells in that church, although they may have had some other reason for being there. The Howarths and Charles Lloyd were family relatives, albeit a generation apart.

Henry Williams cast (or recast) a number of bells for Crickadarn in addition to those he recast for Clyro. The old bell frame at Crickadarn was modified to accommodate four full-circle ringing bells. The frame at Clyro was modified and also augmented to carry five full-circle ringing bells.

The Vicar and one of the Church Wardens of Llowes prevented Williams from recasting their bells, fearing that would result in a tax on their parish, by making a deposition to the Consistory Court for the Archdeanery of Brecon. The Court upheld their case. Llowes and Clyro are the next two churches in the Wye valley downstream of Glasbury. There is also a suspicion that Williams may have been involved in the creation of rings of five elsewhere, as possibly at Llanbedr Ystrad Yw near Crickhowell.

The entry for 1784: ‘one of the bells to have been broken’, is indicative that after 60 or 70 years it was not unusual for eighteenth-century bells by some founders to crack. Williams’ bells, like those of other founders of that period, were liable to crack, especially at or near their crowns due to expansion through rusting of the iron crown staples inserted into the bell metal at or near the crown of the bell during casting.

The purpose of a crown staple is to hold the clapper of a bell so that, when the bell is swung, the clapper moves, hits the bell and makes it vibrate and consequently sound. Bell metal, being a mixture mainly of copper and tin, does not rust and expand appreciably, whereas iron does. Consequently, bells with iron crown staples tend to crack at or near their crowns.

From 1784 until 1789 the bells were reported as broken, cracked, out of repair, while in 1786 ‘*the bells to be under an Injunction*’. The terms of the Injunction were not specified but presumably meant that the bells should not be rung. Against that background, it is not hard to imagine why in 1792/3 a new ring of six bells was cast for St Peter’s by John Rudhall of Gloucester. **The Rudhall bells**

By the 1790s only one major bellfounder appears to have been in operation in the southern Wales, Bristol, Severn valley area: John Rudhall. The Rudhall family were bellfounders from at least 1684 and their foundry was in Gloucester. They cast many excellent bells until the last founder in the family, John, died in 1835 ‘*in his 75th year*’. After that, the foundry was operated for some time by Mears of London. It is thus not surprising that Glasbury went to John Rudhall for a new ring of bells after those probably cast by Henry Williams began to suffer from cracks.

Rudhall cast six bells for St Peter's Glasbury in 1792/3. They were hung in the Restoration Church in a wooden frame of typical Gloucester type, for full-circle ringing. An unpublished sentence in the manuscript for a paper by Jonathan Williams (1858) describes them as '*most musical bells ... whose melodious tones, reverberating by the opposite hills & floating on the current of the Wye, produce a most pleasing effect*'. Subsequent events suggest that not everyone shared the author's opinion!



The stalwarts who, on 2nd September 1911, rang the first peal by the local band on Glasbury bells, were probably unaware that the bells hung in a wooden frame that was already over one hundred years old. The ringers (in shirtsleeves) were John Vizor, A G Arnold, Leonard Lewis (C), J P Hyett, Edgar Jones, Thomas Turner. The reserves (front left & right) were Edward Pugh and Thomas Vaughan. Unfortunately the identities of each ringer are unknown (From Lewis, 2015)



Clyro has a ring of five originally cast by Henry Williams in 1708 from four older bells. The old oak frame was modified for bells 1-4 and a new extension added for the tenor. Warners recast 1, 3 and 5 in 1887

John Rudhall's bells are generally regarded as inferior to other bells by his Rudhall predecessors. Nothing is known of the ringers or ringing of those bells.

1838 and a new church with a new ring of bells

In 1838 as a new building was being completed to replace the Restoration church, which had become too small to accommodate the increased population of the area, the Rudhall bells were part exchanged for a new ring of six bells by Jefferies and Price of Bristol.

Why the Rudhall bells were discarded is unclear. They may have been damaged during removal from the tower of the Restoration Church prior to being rehung in the new building. There may even have been fears, based on past experience, that the Rudhall bells might soon crack and that it would be wise to obtain new bells for the new church.

The wooden bell-frame of typical Gloucester construction installed to accommodate the Rudhall bells, was apparently salvaged and re-used in the 1838 church, which, like its predecessors, was also dedicated to St Peter. This frame, modified to accommodate two trebles dedicated in 1905, survived until replaced by a new steel frame during the millennium bell restoration completed in June 1999.

The history of the Jefferies and Price bells and the ringing thereof has already been told (Lewis, 2015).

Summary

There were probably at least four bells in old St Peter's, the stonebuilt church on the floodplain near Glasbury village, but there is no direct evidence of them. They may have been rehung in the Restoration Church of 1665 located above the flood plain. At least four bells existed in that church by 1714, and may have been cast by Henry Williams. Five or more bells may have existed some years later. These bells were subsequently replaced by Rudhall in 1792/3. When the new church was completed in 1838, a new ring of six was installed by Jefferies and Price. *Suggested reading*

Dawson, M.L., 1918 'Notes on the history of Glasbury', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, XVIII.

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