

The Tower Bell

by Ray Frank

A little history of how the bell evolved might be of interest. According to the encyclopedia, bells are classified as idiophones – instruments in which resonant solid material vibrates to produce a sound. They vibrate primarily at the rim.

Bells were known in China before 200 BC and in Egypt, India, Greece, Rome and other ancient cultures. From earliest times they were used as signaling devices and as ritual objects.

When the process of casting metal evolved, bells were cast of bronze. The casting of bells, however declined in late antiquity. About AD 800 the casting process resurfaced, making possible the manufacture of large tuned bells. Fine cast bells are made of a bronze alloy called bell metal, which typically consists of four parts copper and one part tin.

The use of bells in churches spread through Europe in the 6th to 11th centuries, and were first used in Eastern Christian churches in the 9th century. In the 10th century, gifts of church bells to the churches became very common. A tower bell was befitting for a king to bestow upon the people of a deserving town; to deprive a town of its' bell was the worst of punishments.

Church Bells were used in a number of ways in England. An old writer briefly states their uses:

To call the fold to church in time,
 We Chime
When joy and mirth are on the wing,
 We Ring
When we lament a departed soul,
 We toll

In many places, the bell rang early in the morning to awaken the people of a parish. This was called the **Gabriel Bell**.

All the church services during the day were announced by the church bell:

There was a **Sermon Bell**
 a **Pardon Bell**
 a **Pudding Bell**
 a **Holy Bell**

In some places the bell rang to announce that someone was being baptized. The bell was rung for a moment of daily reverence and was called the **Angelus Bell**.

The custom of ringing a joyous peal of the bell on Christmas morning has been for ages a feature of the Christmas celebration.

There was an old belief in England that when Christ was born the devil died, and for an hour before midnight on Christmas Eve the church bell was rung.

The Church bell not only called the people to the various church services but also rang for different parts of the service. It reminded people of the different days in the church year and the anniversaries that were to be remembered, announced the hours of the day, and told of the important things that happened in the community.

The Tower Bell of First Church Baldwin is made of cast steel and was cast in 1871 by Vickers Sons, Ltd., Sheffield, England, and bears the royal crest of Queen Victoria. We understand the reason for importing an English bell was economic. While the Americans made excellent bronze bells, they had not yet mastered the use of steel, which was much less costly. Our bell weighs approximately 1,100 pounds and is rung manually by a pull rope.

Our church bell was installed in the tower when the church was built in 1871-1872 and has summoned parishioners to church since then. It has also been a source of pleasure for the residents of Baldwin. During the painting of the outside of the sanctuary in May of 1980, a fire broke out and traveled up through the walls, belfry, steeple and roof, causing extensive damage. The bell was removed from the tower and placed on the front lawn of the church. After the tower was restored to its' present beauty, the bell was returned to the tower.

Unfortunately, on the morning of Sunday, February 18, 1990, when the bell was being rung, a thump was heard as the clapper, made of iron, broke from its' fastening and plummeted to the first tower landing. The clapper was retrieved and the broken piece was unbolted from the bell.

Fortunately, one of our parishioners, Al Hooper, a master pattern maker, was instrumental in making a new clapper, so that once again our historic bell could resonate throughout the neighborhood calling friends and members of our church to service.

Having the bell rung before the service begins, as well as at the end of the service, has been a long time tradition. It is particularly nice to see the young children participate in this custom.