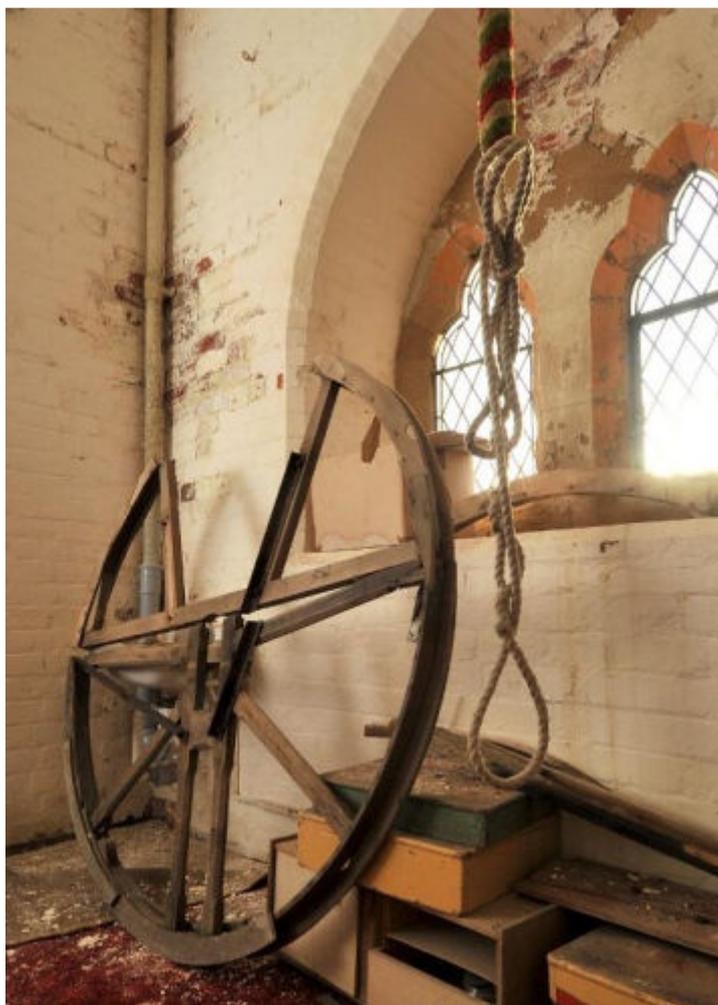


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# HISTORIC BELL RESTORATION PROJECT AT BARROW CHURCH

AS the clock hits midnight tonight, Big Ben will ring out across London and from televisions around the country. But in Barrow, a fundraising committee hopes that by New Year's Eve next year, a traditional melody of church bells will once again be a familiar noise in the town. David Pickthall reports.



SILENCED: Inside the bell tower at St James' Church.

The fund-raising effort requires £81,500 to be raised to restore the bells to their original glory

JOE RILEY REF: 50028308B002

FOR years, St James' Church was the only church in Barrow with bells that could be rung in the full-circle, traditional English style.

But the eight Victorian bells have not been safe to ring in that way for 12 years.

The timber frame and metal fittings deteriorated to the point where they could not withstand the forces of the bells ringing.

Which is understandable when you consider they were installed high in the tower in 1877, open to some of the strongest, salt-laden winds and storms in the UK.

The heaviest bell weighs 800kg, or 126 stone.

And the bells, when fully swung, produce downward forces of four times their weight and sideways forces of twice their weight.



Initial enquiries to restore the bells in the late 1990s were put on hold as more pressing concerns for the future of the church had to be tackled.

The congregation successfully fought the threat of closure and the Grade II listed building has undergone significant restoration work in the past 12 years.

All the while, the bells were mothballed. But now the church's future is secure, the congregation has embarked on a project to restore the bells.

It won't come cheap. The church's project steering committee has calculated it will cost over £80,000.

But the ambitious aim is to remove the bells, rid them of corrosion and scale, re-tune them to modern standards and re-fit them into a new, purpose-designed galvanised frame built into the tower – but around 10 to 15 feet lower, with new clappers, wheels and fittings.

This will reduce the slight sway of the tower when the bells swing, such is their force, and make the bells easier and safer to ring.

It will also stop the bells 'shouting' very loudly in the immediate vicinity – meaning less noise for neighbours, but with a sound still audible over Barrow – and provide better protection from the weather.

Andrew Pollock, one of only a handful of resident bell ringers at the church still living in Barrow, described it as a great shame that Barrow's only bell tower capable of ringing in the traditional full-circle has laid dormant for so long.

Over the past decade, it has only been possible to chime a single bell for some services, weddings and funerals.

In the past when fully active, the bells have rung out for Royal Coronations and Jubilees and celebrations for peace at the end of world wars.

But despite the hiatus, the fund-raising committee would love to have the bells restored in time for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

They accept that may not be possible, but say there is a chance of making it in time for the London summer Olympics.



OUT OF PRACTICE: Bell ringer Andrew Pollock with one of the bell ropes in need of restoration at St James' Church, Barrow JOE RILEY REF: 50028308B001



SILENCED: Inside the bell tower at St James' Church. The fund-raising effort requires £81,500 to be raised to restore the bells to their original glory  
JOE RILEY REF: 50028308B002

Mr Pollock, the committee correspondent for the project, said there may be other good reasons to ring the bells, such as welcoming in the New Year, or celebrating the summer carnival and Keswick to Barrow Walk.

He said: "The bells themselves, they are a key part of the development of Barrow.

"The church was built for the shipyard and ironworks side of things, so all that area and estate needed a large church to support all the extra people in Hindpool.

"They originally had a single bell and they went to the community to raise money to put more bells in, back in 1877.

"There is a historic value to it and it seems a great pity the bells have not been able to ring for the past 12 years. There is a great number of things for them to be rung for."

The committee's bell restoration fund bank account stands at almost £15,000.

Former naval architect Dennis Ellisdon, who learned to ring at St James' 50 years ago, has already donated £5,000, but has offered to donate a further sum of around £20,000.

Kind volunteer labour will contribute nearly £12,000.

With other grants the committee hopes to receive pencilled in, Mr Pollock believed the amount required is now around £13,500 from the £81,500 target.

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AS PART of the fund-raising effort, committee member Andrew Pollock is doing a sponsored 135-mile swim for the bell restoration (and also for a replacement minibus for the 17th Barrow Scout Group).

He is around 35 miles into it and intends to finish in time for the 135th anniversary of the St James' Church bells on St James' Day next year.

To do so, he has been swimming a daily average of almost 30 lengths at Park Leisure Centre in Barrow since October 7 and is due to finish on July 25.

He has seven months and around 100 miles to go.

Visit [www.andy-jo.talktalk.net/SwimFitChallenge.html](http://www.andy-jo.talktalk.net/SwimFitChallenge.html) for sponsorship details.

It will soon be possible to donate to the bell restoration fund online.

In the meantime, cheques can be sent to St James PCC Treasurer, Allan Johnson, 13 Rawlinson Street, Barrow, Cumbria, LA14 TDU.

Aside from restoring the bell tower to its former glory, Mr Pollock said the project will also allow people to learn a skill.

There is a small team of former ringers available to form a new band and teach new recruits – but anyone is welcome to get involved.

The new band will ring the bells to announce Sunday services and hold a regular midweek evening practice.

Mr Pollock took up bell ringing more than 20 years ago and has been hooked ever since.

He says it does not take long to reach the level of ability to ring for services and can be very satisfying to feel you have contributed to the ambience at a couple's wedding.

He said: "Bell ringing is more than something to celebrate, it's also a great way of getting people together, of any age, to do it as a hobby as well.

"For example, I'm a ringer and if I'm going to another town on business, I might go to the local tower if it's their practice night.

"You're always welcome and you've got some instant friends wherever you go in the country.

"And it's good for the community, because it's sort of reassuring to hear them."