

The Bells of Cold Ashby St. Denys

Seven centuries of bells, ringers and renewal

At the heart of the light six at St Denys is a bell that names itself: Mary, dated 1317. Around it grew a three, then a four, and finally the restored six heard today.

Mary: the bell that names itself

Cold Ashby's most remarkable bell carries a simple Latin declaration: MARIA VOCOR ANO : DNI : M : CCC : XVII - 'I am called Mary, in the year of the Lord 1317.' Thomas North measured it at 29 inches in 1878; today it is the fourth of six, about 4 3/4 cwt.^{1,3,4}

The date is on the bell itself. The traditional attribution to William de Flint comes from its medieval marks, including a seal-like stamp interpreted as his. North and later writers also described impressions of an Edward I penny, though printed accounts disagree over exactly how many coin impressions are present.^{2,6,7}

Peterborough Guild has used a carefully qualified distinction: Mary is the oldest recorded and positively dated bell hung for full-circle ringing. That wording matters, because Dove includes bells assigned earlier approximate dates. Locally she is also known as 'Old Mary'.^{4,5}

Two bells, a Sanctus - and a missing story

The earliest documentary snapshot is the Edward VI inventory of 1552: two bells in the steeple and a Sanctus bell. North also copied an imperfect memorandum recording that the churchwardens, with parish consent, mortgaged a 'great bell' for forty shillings and that it was subsequently sold. The damaged record does not identify that bell sufficiently to reconstruct the ring beyond the inventory's bare count.¹

By 1606 the story becomes physical again. Two bells inscribed NEWCOMBE OF LEICESTER MADE MEE 1606 had joined Mary. North found exactly those three still together in 1878.^{1,3}

The village soundscape

North recorded more than metal. At a death-knell Cold Ashby used three groups of three tolls for a male and three groups of two for a female. On Sundays a bell sounded at 8 a.m.; for Divine Service the tenor was tolled, the bells chimed and the tenor rang as the sermon bell. He even recorded an old provision that every vicar was to supply bell ropes at his own expense.¹

Three become four

A John Taylor bell, cast in 1880 as a memorial to Emily Bateman, was added in front of the medieval bell, making Mary second of four. A historical directory instead says a bell was added in 1883 by the Rev. Gregory Bateman. The surviving bell unquestionably bears 1880; the directory's 1883 statement is preserved rather than edited away.^{3,23}

A Warner bell dated 1899 was also in the tower and is now the treble, but twentieth-century sources continued to describe the full-circle ring as four. Bowell's foundry books provide a firm milestone: on 22 May 1914 Cold Ashby was charged £100 for 'rehabing the four bells'.^{3,8}

A project with three dates

Cold Ashby's transformation from four to six is best understood as a 2002-04 project, not a single-day augmentation. The Parish Council dates the augmentation, tower restoration and conversion of the clock to electric wind to 2002. The National Lottery Heritage Fund awarded £50,000 to the Bellringers of the PCC on 5 June 2003; the new Eijsbouts bell itself is dated 2003; Dove also uses 2003. The Ringing World indexed its major augmentation coverage in 2004 and a first peal since augmentation that year.^{9,10,11,24}

The parish account names Billy Lee and Malcolm and Dawn Jennifer Grant-Innes as donors of the additional bells and records Eayre & Smith rehanging all the bells with new fittings. The six that emerged combined the 1899 Warner bell, the new 2003 Eijsbouts bell and the old four - Taylor 1880, Mary 1317 and the two Newcombes of 1606.^{3,9}

Ringers behind the restoration

The best documented local figure in the augmentation is Paul Reading. The Ringing World index associates him with the 2004 Cold Ashby feature; in 2008 the Peterborough Guild newsletter identifies him as Churchwarden at Cold Ashby and records him organising peals and quarters for the retirement of the Rev. John Tarrent. A 2022 memorial peal states that he had been instrumental in augmenting the bells in 2004.^{11,12,16}

The public record for the 1980s and 1990s is much thinner. One surviving diary records ringing at Cold Ashby during a Peterborough Guild maintenance course on 31 October 1981. Rather than invent a continuous list of local ringers, the gaps should remain visible.²²

By 2008, however, family ringing is clearly documented. Two peals later recorded on a new tower peal board marked the weddings of Tom Reading to Gaby and Peter Reading to Aline; a 2026 Guild account says the bands included members of the Reading and Jacklin families and that Peter and Tom had learned from their father.²⁰

Rebuilding a band

The bells' modern history includes another revival. In 2019 the Guild announced that practice ringing had resumed at Cold Ashby after 'many years of absence', with new village ringers sharing Monday practice with Welford. By 2020 those learners were reported competent on both Cold Ashby's six and Welford's eight.^{13,14}

The names begin to reappear in local records. Rhyan Murphy, described in Village Link as one of the Cold Ashby ringers, tolled the tenor half-muffled for the Duke of Edinburgh in April 2021. The same issue records Liz Reading with Cold Ashby in a virtual memorial quarter and her invitation for new learners.¹⁵

A 2023 Coronation quarter at Cold Ashby included Liz Reading and Howard Murphy and was Howard's first quarter. Guild records later identify Fiona Barclay with Cold

Ashby for her first covering. Howard Murphy also made a small 3D-printed bell-frame 'spider' commemorating the augmentation story.^{17, 18}

A living tower again

In 2025 Cold Ashby rang 19 quarter peals, according to the Guild. A September peal, organised by Paul Mason, included three family members in memory of Paul Reading fifteen years after his death. Murray Coleman made a new peal board for the two 2008 wedding peals, with lettering by Howard and Vicky Murphy. During Christmas 2025 Peter and Tom Reading returned to the bells with three grandchildren - a multi-generation continuation of the same local ringing story.²⁰

Modern performance reports also name a wider circle around the tower: Anthea Hiams, Jenny Ball, Steve Millington, David Westerman, Alistair Donaldson, Murray Coleman, Helen Camps, David G. Seymour and others. Their presence shows how a small village tower can be sustained by both local ringers and the wider Guilsborough Branch network.¹⁹

The story is still moving. BellBoard lists Cold Ashby ringing repeatedly in 2026, while the Branch continues to advertise regular practices. Mary, once the treble of three, is now the fourth of a light six - still turning full circle more than seven centuries after her date was cast into the bronze.^{3, 21}

Cold Ashby in brief

- 1317** Mary cast.
- 1552** Two tower bells + Sanctus recorded.
- 1606** Two Newcombe bells; ring of three.
- 1880 / 1883** Taylor memorial bell / published addition date.
- 1914** Howell rehangs four.
- 2002-04** Restoration and augmentation to six.
- 2019** Regular practice re-established.
- 2025** 19 quarters; memorial peal and family return.
- 2026** Active performances continue.

References

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4. Dove's Guide for Church Bell Ringers, individual-bell data: Cold Ashby 1317 bell, 4th of 6, 29 in., about 4 3/4 cwt, C-sharp; and augmentation project data, 2003, Eayre & Smith, four to six. [\[online\]](#)
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13. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, March 2019: technical inspection notes and announcement that practice ringing had resumed at Cold Ashby after many years of absence, sharing Monday evenings with Welford. [\[online\]](#)
14. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, March 2020: the re-established Cold Ashby practice, assisted by Welford, and progress of new village ringers. [\[online\]](#)
15. Village Link, issue 105 (2021), 'Cold Ashby News - Bell Ringers Honour the Duke of Edinburgh': Rhyen Murphy tolling the tenor; Liz Reading's account of Cold Ashby and a virtual memorial quarter. [\[online\]](#)
16. BellBoard / Peterborough Diocesan Guild, 10 April 2022, 5040 Surprise Minor at Cold Ashby, rung remembering Paul Reading and stating that he was instrumental in augmenting the bells in 2004. [\[online\]](#)
17. BellBoard / Peterborough Diocesan Guild, 8 May 2023, 1260 Doubles at Cold Ashby for the Coronation; band includes Liz Reading and Howard Murphy, with Howard's first quarter peal. [\[online\]](#)
18. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, September 2024: firsts including Fiona Barclay (Cold Ashby), first covering; and Guilsborough Branch material associated with the Cold Ashby memorial 'spider'. [\[online\]](#)
19. BellBoard / Peterborough Diocesan Guild, 2025 performances at Cold Ashby, including quarters on 13 and 22 April and 20 July, demonstrating active modern ringing and naming participating ringers. [\[online\]](#)
20. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, January 2026: 19 Cold Ashby quarter peals in 2025; September memorial peal; 2008 Reading-family wedding peals; new peal board; Reading-family ringing at Christmas; Murray Coleman, Howard and Vicky Murphy credited for the board and lettering. [\[online\]](#)
21. BellBoard, 2026 weekly listings: repeated Cold Ashby performances, including 1260 Grandsire Doubles (14 February), Mixed Doubles and Plain Bob Minor in March, and 552 Cambridge Surprise Minor (9 May). [\[online\]](#)
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