

BELLS AND BELL RINGING AT YELVERTOFT

Four centuries of one remarkable ring - and the people who have kept it sounding

All Saints' Church, Yelvertoft • August 2026

Yelvertoft's bells tell an unusually continuous story. Five bells cast together in 1635 still survive, augmented rather than replaced in 1989. Around them is a documented history of village customs, Guild ringing, restoration, peals and a modern local band whose story includes several ringers with decades-long connections to the tower.

Five bells from 1635

The tower of All Saints predates the surviving bells by centuries: the parish history dates it broadly to the late thirteenth century.³ But the first bell configuration that can be demonstrated from the evidence used here is the one that still defines Yelvertoft - five bells cast in 1635 by Hugh II Watts of Leicester.¹

When Thomas North inspected the church for his Church Bells of Northamptonshire, published in 1878, he found all five. He recorded their diameters as 30, 31½, 33½, 36 and 41 inches and transcribed the inscriptions, including "GOD SAVE THE KING" and the memorable tenor legend "CUM CUM AND PRAIE".⁴ A modern tower record confirms that the five originals remain together today.⁵

North's account also preserves a soundscape of Victorian village life. A bell rang every day at noon. The Pancake Bell sounded on Shrove Tuesday. Death-knells distinguished male and female by their tolling pattern. On Sundays the third and fourth bells sounded at 9 a.m.; for service the tenor was rung, all the bells were chimed, and then the first bell sounded. Midnight peals marked Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.¹

A ring prized by ringers

By the twentieth century the same five were serving organised change ringing. The earliest valid Yelvertoft peal now indexed by Felstead is 5,040 Grandsire Doubles on 6 November 1926.⁹ A 1938 Ringing World notice still advertised Yelvertoft explicitly as a five-bell tower.¹²

In 1950 Percy Amos described the five Watts bells as "very musical" and among the founder's best.⁷ Yelvertoft was also a regular Guilsborough Branch meeting place, and from 1955 W. John Kinchin of Main Street, Yelvertoft, appears in The Ringing World as the Branch secretary.¹⁴

1959: rehanging and a named local band

The parish history records a new bell frame in 1959, alongside renewal of the tower castellation.³ The Ringing World supplies a contemporary marker for the work. On 4 April 1959 Peter L. Westerman, Dawn V. Elson, Robin Wilson, W. John Kinchin and Michael F. Amos rang 5,040 Doubles. The report calls it the "first peal on the bells since rehanging".¹¹

Those names make the post-war story unusually personal. Kinchin was not only a ringer but a Branch organiser. Peter Westerman appears again in the tower's story when a 1986 peal was rung as a retirement compliment after his 47 years at G.E.C., Rugby. Robin Wilson's connection is longer still: a 2003 peal marked his 500th peal and the 50th anniversary of his first ringing on the bell on which he had been taught.¹⁰

From five to six

For more than three and a half centuries Yelvertoft remained a five. In 1989 local ringers added a new treble.³ Cast by Eijsbouts, it weighs 5-0-10, is 30 inches in diameter and is recorded by Dove as sounding D.⁶ Its inscription reads AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM - "To the greater glory of God".⁵

The augmentation was notably conservative: the old five were not broken up. They simply moved back one place and now form bells 2 to 6. The result is a modern six containing an intact seventeenth-century ring.

A different kind of ringing after 1989

The peal record shows what the sixth bell made possible. Before augmentation the tower's indexed peals are Doubles. From 1990 the record moves into Minor and, increasingly, Surprise Minor.⁹ In 2001 All Saints hosted the first peal of Yelvertoft Delight Minor; in 2004 it hosted the first peal of Yelvertoft Treble Bob Minor.¹⁰

The Felstead database currently lists 25 valid peals at Yelvertoft between 1926 and 2023.⁹ They are only one part of the tower's ringing life - ordinary practices, Sunday service ringing and quarter peals are necessarily much more frequent - but the list traces a clear progression from Grandsire and multi-method Doubles to a technically ambitious six-bell repertoire.

People in the modern story

Several post-1950 ringers can be identified from public records without relying on oral recollection. W. John Kinchin's Branch secretaryship and 1959 peal place him at the heart of the post-war period; a 2023 memorial peal records that he was born in Yelvertoft.^{14,19} Peter L. Westerman rang in the 1959 peal and remained sufficiently associated with the tower for the 1986 retirement peal to be dedicated to him.^{11,10}

Robin Wilson provides perhaps the strongest thread of continuity. He rang in the 1959 peal; the 2003 record says that his first ringing on his teaching bell had occurred fifty years earlier; a 2018 Guild report calls Robin a previous Branch steward; and in May 2024 he was again ringing at Yelvertoft in a practice-night touch of Robin Surprise Minor held to welcome his great-granddaughter Robyn Tucker.^{10,17,18}

David Westerman appears in the 1986 and 1999 Yelvertoft peal records, was elected in 2012 as a Peterborough Diocesan Guild representative to the Central Council, and is a frequent conductor in recent Yelvertoft performances.^{10,15,18} Nick Hiams is documented in the 2014 Guild newsletter as a returned ringer whose work was valuable in creating the local ringing website, and he too appears in recent Yelvertoft performances.^{16,18}

A working tower, not a museum

The 2014 Guild newsletter called the Yelvertoft band “well established” and recorded it extending its Friday practice to support ringing at Lilbourne.¹⁶ In 2018, a branch maintenance report described the Yelvertoft bells as having good tonal qualities; it also recorded frame painting and rope renewal as practical maintenance concerns, while Lucy Sendall of Yelvertoft achieved her first quarter peal.¹⁷

Current Benefice information lists Friday practice from 7.30 to 9.00 p.m. and Sunday service ringing from 10.45 to 11.15 a.m.⁴ Recent 2024 performances name Anthea Hiams, Liz Reading, Nick Hiams, Mike Price, Alistair Donaldson, Kelvin Broad, David Seymour, Robin Wilson and David Westerman among those ringing at All Saints.¹⁸

That is the essential point about Yelvertoft. The bells are historically exceptional, but their significance is not confined to age. The same five pieces of seventeenth-century bell metal that North inspected in the nineteenth century remain at the centre of an active ringing culture. The addition of one bell in 1989 did not erase the old ring; it gave it a new musical life.

At a glance

- 1635** — Five Hugh II Watts bells cast.
- 1878** — North records five bells and village ringing customs.
- 1926** — Earliest Felstead-listed peal at Yelvertoft.
- 1955** — W. J. Kinchin becomes Guilsborough Branch secretary.
- 1959** — New frame / rehanging; first peal afterwards on 4 April.
- 1989** — Eijsbouts treble added; five become six.
- 2001** — First peal of Yelvertoft Delight Minor.
- 2004** — First peal of Yelvertoft Treble Bob Minor.
- 2014** — Guild describes a well-established Yelvertoft band.
- 2026** — Six bells; regular Friday practice and Sunday service ringing.

References

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2. North, *ibid.*, founder chapter on Hugh Watts II.
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4. Benefice Bells of Crick, Yelvertoft and Lilbourne, “Yelvertoft”, accessed 25 Aug 2026.
5. Benefice Bells, “Inscriptions on the bells at Yelvertoft”, accessed 25 Aug 2026.
6. Dove's Guide for Church Bell Ringers, Yelvertoft treble record, accessed 25 Aug 2026.
7. *The Ringing World*, 2 Jun 1950, Percy Amos, “Bells of Rugby and District”.
8. *The Ringing World*, 12 Nov 1926, p. 709.
9. CCCBR Felstead Database, Yelvertoft peal list, accessed 25 Aug 2026.
10. Peterborough Diocesan Guild, Yelvertoft tower performance records.
11. *The Ringing World*, 17 Apr 1959, p. 249.
12. *The Ringing World*, 25 Mar 1938, p. 201.
13. *The Ringing World*, Mar-Apr 1950 Guilsborough Branch notices.
14. *The Ringing World*, 21 Jan 1955, p. 46; subsequent Guilsborough Branch notices.
15. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, Sept 2012, pp. 30-31.
16. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, Mar 2014, pp. 13-14.
17. Peterborough Diocesan Guild Newsletter, Mar 2018, pp. 13, 15.
18. BellBoard / Peterborough Diocesan Guild, Yelvertoft performance reports, 2024.
19. Peterborough Diocesan Guild, Yelvertoft peal report, 28 Jan 2023.