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The true story of the Québec bell

by Angela Elliott

When Major-General James Wolfe was killed on the Plains of Abraham during the battle to capture Quebec City in 1759, he unwittingly set off a chain of events that still reverberates today.

All Hallows Tottenham has a Sanctus bell reputed to be the garrison bell captured at Québec. Dove's Guide simply said it weighs in at 1cwt, it's Flemish, and has a dedication in Latin on it: 'Sit Nomen Domini Benedictum IH Fecit 1663'. I had to learn more.

Of course, the first references I found backed up the garrison bell story. The British Newspaper Archives has a wealth of articles dating from 1911 mentioning the Québec bell, sparked off by the unveiling of the new Wolfe Memorial and reported initially in the *Daily Telegraph*. At this point it's important to note that before 1911 there is no mention in any archive of it being a garrison bell. We will touch on that later. For now, let's find out how this bell came to hang in All Hallows Tottenham, in North London.

In the eighteenth century, Humphrey Jackson was a renowned, if somewhat infamous chemist. His many inventions are discussed in a 1986 paper entitled *A Pioneering Chemist* by John H Appleby, but for our purposes his Isinglass factory in East Smithfield holds a clue to the bell's provenance. Quite simply, Jackson used it to ring his men into work each morning. In the 1780s/90s Jackson retired to the leafy village of Tottenham whereupon, in 1801, he gave the bell to the church and died that same year. The Vestry Minutes of 5th April 1801 record a letter received from Jackson, gifting them the bell and telling a little of its history. In Jackson's own words "It was taken down at the Siege of Quebec by General Townsend, now Marquis, sent to Lester Bell Foundry, Whitechapel, which supposed it to contain a large portion of silver and was going to be thrown into the furnace for analysis. It was by chance I heard the sound and stepped in and purchased it at the price of £20 without its present furniture." At that time the Whitechapel Foundry was in the hands of Lester, Pack and Chapman. In 1769 Thomas Lester passed away. This gives us a window for the date that Jackson must have purchased the bell, being between 1760 and 1769.

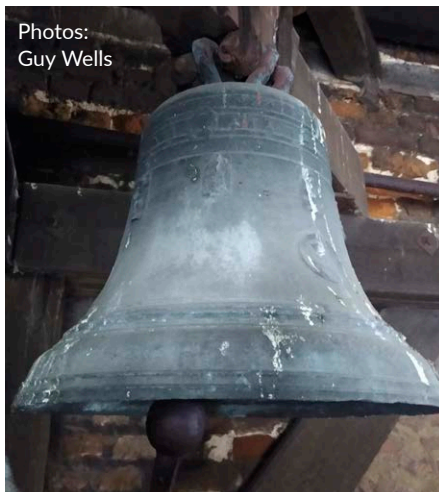
Canada wants its bell back

How come then that the Whitechapel Foundry had the bell? I thought for sure that their records would hold the answer. These were recently deposited at the London Metropolitan Archives. Sad to say, all records for the foundry pre-1837 were destroyed in a fire. Back to the drawing board. A search in the National Archives showed that in 1948 Canada requested the return of the bell. The record for this is held in Lambeth Palace Library. A visit to Lambeth proved that the 1948 request was actually the third time Canada had popped their head over the fence and asked for their bell back.

In 1934 an approach was made by Canada to the Parochial Church Council in Tottenham for the return of the bell in exchange for a new one. Expressing their regret, the PCC declined. The second request came in 1948 from a Mr S W Alexander of the City Press, acting on behalf of Sir James Dunn, Chairman of the Algoma Steel Corporation of Canada, again offering a new bell in exchange for the old. This was again, repulsed. Later the same year the ex-High Commissioner to Canada, Victor Massey, made an approach directly to Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher asking if All Hallows could possibly give the bell to Laval University. Needless to say, this final request was a non-starter, but his comment that it 'came presumably from a Roman Catholic church' gave me pause for thought.

Philip Pearson, church warden at All Hallows, had earlier forwarded me an email from a Jean-François Lozier at the *Musée Canadien de l'Histoire* to the effect that there were no bells in the garrison. Furthermore, exhaustive research into the early configuration of the

Photos:
Guy Wells



garrison and the city of Quebec under the French shows that the garrison used drums to beat the alarm. The only bells in the city were religious bells.

Once more, enter Major-General Wolfe. If you remember at the top of this article, Wolfe has just died attempting to take Québec. His successor was General George Townsend and on 18th September 1759 Québec surrendered to him. In Britain the bells rang throughout the land. This was a great victory. In Québec, to the victor go the spoils. J Armiger Trollope in his hand-written treatise, *London Ringers and Ringing in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, states that 'when Québec was captured from the French in 1759, Colonel Williamson did not wait to make a claim for the bells of the Cathedral but took them down and sent them to England to a lady named Jane Williamson'. Trollope references the Chatham Papers of the two Pitts. It is to this record (*PRO 30/866*) that I go next.

On 21st June 1760 Jane Williamson writes to the Earl of Chatham, William Pitt the Elder, from her home in Woolwich stating that 'Colonel Williamson has sent to me the Bells of the Cathedral Church of Quebec, and if they will be acceptable as a Monument of that important Conquest I beg leave to have the Honor of presenting them to you.' Colonel Williamson was in charge of artillery, now serving under General Townsend. Note the date, June 1760. In October of 1759 the British fleet departed the St Lawrence River, fearful of being iced in over winter. One of those ships, Royal William, carried the body of Major-General Wolfe back to England. That ship or another in the fleet, it seems, also carried the bells of Québec Cathedral back to Colonel Williamson's wife in Woolwich.

Where does all this leave us?

Firstly, there was no garrison bell in Quebec so we can rule that out. All spurious post 1911 newspaper mentions of 'drunken sailors' and 'junk yards' and it being from a 'garrison' can also be ruled as newspapers doing what newspapers do best: talk a good game. (*Ed: Noted ...*)

Bells were 'captured' from the Cathedral and sent to England. This much is fact. The Cathedral was razed to the ground by fire. Jane Williamson offered the bells to Pitt the Elder, but we have no record of his reply, and as there is only one bell reputed to be from Québec in the UK, we may safely assume that the rest were melted down at some point.

Just when I thought my research had gone as far as it could, I received an email from the former rector of the Basilica Cathedral, Msgr Denis Bélanger. I had forgotten I'd emailed him. He had the journal of L'abbé Jean-Félix Récher, the rector at the time of the siege in 1759. Furthermore, there were other references that might interest me, and so I pored through the journal and there, in black and white was a description of the destruction of Québec from the French point of view. Page on page relays the horror of the invasion, with houses

fire-bombed and lives lost. Eventually I found a reference to the bells. "...some flame or spark, thrown by the wind on the pavilions placed at the top of the bell tower to serve as signals during the siege, and where everything, including three bells, were melted down..." This wasn't what I was hoping for. Three bells destroyed? How could this be when I clearly had two independent references to the bells being removed and taken to England? I read the entirety of the journal. It ends when General Wolfe dies and Québec falls. There is nothing of the aftermath. There is nothing of what happens to the good Abbé Jean-Félix Récher.

At least now I knew there were three bells in the Cathedral, but could Récher be correct in saying they were 'melted' by the fire? Well, it would seem that he was largely reporting gossip. So-and-so's house burned down. So-and-so died today. You can imagine him being faced with an endless stream of terrified parishioners. Blessings appear on every page. Yes, he was in the thick of it, but the day by day reports come from all quarters of the city. He couldn't possibly have been everywhere all at once. Much of it must have been reported to him by others. Surely though, he'd know if his bells had been melted by the fire? This was his centre of activity after all.

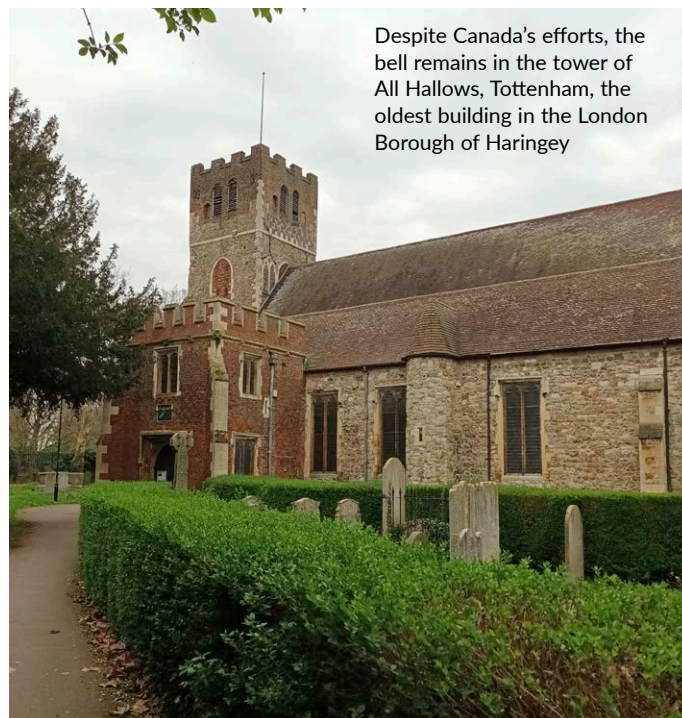
How to pin this mystery down?

In a book called *La Ville de Québec sous le Régime Français* by Pierre-George Roy, published in 1930 by *des Archives du Gouvernement de la Province de Québec* I found the icing on the cake: an entire chapter on the bells of Quebec from its naissance as a city to the siege. "The abbé de Latour writes in his memoirs about the life of M. De Laval that in 1648 Mr. de Montmagny gave to the parish of Quebec a hundred-pound bell placed in the bell tower... Robert Hache donated in 1650 a bell weighing a thousand pounds; she arrived in 1651." These dates are too early for our bell dated 1663, but they indicate that there were bells in the cathedral.

The chapter continues with a quote from the correspondence of l'abbé Latour "At the end of the year 1664 Monsieur Bishop made the blessing of the first three bells of Canada which until then had only had a few clochettes; these bells were cast in the country." These three bells were cast by one Jean Hamonnet. Remember, our bell has "Fecit IH 1663" on it. Is that "I" really a "J"? It must be said that J and I at this time were interchangeable.

At this point I'm going to list the bells I know for sure were in the Cathedral of Québec pre-1759, referring to Cathedral financial records via the above publication by Pierre-George Roy:

- 1648 – M. de Montmagny gives a bell weighing 100 pounds to the parish of Quebec.
- 1651 – Robert Hache donated a bell.
- 1663 – Damours, Churchwarden 19th November 1663 pays for three bells cast in Quebec by Jean Hamonnet
- 1716 – Pierre La Tour, master founder, casts a bell weighing 1800 pounds for Quebec.
- 1757 – L'abbé Jean-Félix Récher, in his *Journal de 1757*, notes paying for a bell weighing 1758 pounds for Quebec.



Despite Canada's efforts, the bell remains in the tower of All Hallows, Tottenham, the oldest building in the London Borough of Haringey

From this we can see that Québec Cathedral had at least seven bells, possibly more. Three were 'melted' in the fire and four or more found their way by ship to Mrs Williamson.

I am grateful to Guy Wells for ascending the tower at All Hallows Tottenham to inspect and photograph the bell. He uncovered the following:

- Starting at the top, there's a circle of ornate floral motif embossing.
- Below this is the inscription:
 ♣ I ♣ H ♣ FECIT 1663 ♣ SIT NOMEN DOMINI
 BENEDICTVM
 The ♣ is a place holder for an emblem, which could be a Fleur-de-lis or some other emblem. The bells could well indicate that this is one of the three bells that Jean Hamonnet cast for the Cathedral in 1663, as noted above.
- Below the inscription is a series of figures circumscribing the bell, with another emblem aligned with the one above.
- Below this emblem is an ornate cross with fleur-de-lis.
- On the opposite side to the cross, there is a figure of mother & child.
- 90 degrees to this, i.e. between the cross and mother & child, is a regal figure with crown and sceptre. This could well be King Louis XIV, as he gave money for the Cathedral and the country we now call Canada was then ruled by the French.

Further information on the figures on the bell will be added once we have determined whether to take it down for further inspection or simply clean the bird poo off it in situ.

For now, the photos on the previous page give an idea of the promise of this bell once clean.

The oldest bell in Canada is dated 1666 and originally it hung in the Beauport parish chapel built circa 1662. Although Beauport is in Québec we know this isn't our bell because they gave it to the Musée du Québec in 1949.

I believe we can prove that the All Hallows, Tottenham Sanctus bell once hung in the Cathedral of Québec and is one of the three bells cast by Jean Hamonnet and paid for by the churchwarden Damours on 19th November 1663.

It isn't a garrison bell, and two drunken sailors did not make off with it. That's fiction. The rest, as they say, is history.

Acknowledgements:

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