
FEATURE ARTICLE

The Memorial Bell

By Kay Sanderson

The marble tablet in St Mary's Church is the most visible memorial to the men lost in the Great War, but it is not East Ilsley's only memorial to them. The principal war memorial is seen by few, but heard by many. It is the third bell in the church tower, and it bears the initials of the 21 men named on the tablet.

As the Newbury Weekly News reported on 8 May 1919:

A meeting was held at the Old School on Monday evening for the purpose of affording discussion as to the form the village war memorial should take. About 50 parishioners attended, and the Rector presided. Five proposals were put to the meeting, and a show of hands taken on each. They were (1) a village hall, (2) a recreation ground, (3) a stained glass window, (4) a new bell in the church tower, (5) a memorial cross. Each proposal was discussed separately. The show of hands resulted in a majority in favour of the new bell. A committee composed of the Rector, Messrs. Field, Hibbert and Goddard, Mesdames Eagles and H. Pearce, and Miss E. Lowe were appointed to consider ways and means of raising the necessary money. It is understood that a marble tablet is to be placed in the church with the names and regiments of the 20 (sic) men, natives of the parish, who have rendered the supreme sacrifice. There is also a proposal to erect a tablet in the village chapel.

The money for the new bell seems to have been raised without much difficulty, but - as the NWN told its readers in April 1920 - there was an unforeseen problem:

The parishioners of East Ilsley decided some months ago at a public meeting that part of their War Memorial should be a sixth bell to complete the present ancient ring of five. The money required for this, about £70, has already been subscribed within the parish. But both firms who were asked for a report and an estimate have pronounced the existing bells unsafe. Before they can be rung again, and certainly before a new bell can be added, the whole peal must be re-hung in a new metal frame. It would be waste of money to attempt to patch the old material. The estimate for this is £330. The War Memorial Committee feel that this work ought to be undertaken. The bells carry one back through several centuries of national history. The treble was cast in 1589, the year after the defeat of the great Armada, and bears the appropriate inscription "Prayse ye the Lord". Another bears apparently the date 1619, while the great Tenor, weighing nine cwt, was cast in the year 1625 (the accession year of Charles I) and was the gift of the Rector of the Parish, the famous Dr Richard Wightwick, the co-founder of Pembroke College, Oxford.

An appeal is being issued by the Rector, Rev. Canon Whitham, and the Memorial Committee. Out of a population of 470, East Ilsley contributed 122 men for service in the Navy and Army, of whom 22 (sic) were killed.

But undaunted, the villagers rose to the occasion. After a series of fund-raising events there was enough money not only to meet the costs of the new bell-frame, but for two more smaller bells to complete a full octave. The first peal on the new ring of eight bells was rung on 23 December 1922, and hundreds more peals have been rung since.



Photos by Dave Morris