Barkley East Bells and the British Empire

Next time you prepare to ring, think of the British Empire and be thankful. Barkley East is a small market town on the plateaued of South Africa, located on a great plain above the Kraai River, 1800 metres above sea level, at the base of the rugged Drakensberg of the Eastern Cape. The town, laid out on a grid iron plan, is typical of many in the former British Empire.

The town was founded in December 1874, when the Governor of the Cape, Sir Harry Barkly, proclaimed its establishment to serve the needs of the developing farming community of this beautiful area. The surrounding area had already been surveyed, between 1860 and 1868, by the Dublin-born surveyor, Joseph Millard Orpen (1828-1923). Orpen had divided the area into farms. A portion of one of these, Rockypark, was purchased as the site of the town. On it the Dutch Reformed community built a church, which became the focus of the nascent town.

The present population of Barkley East is hard to determine, since major low-cost housing estates have been built by the government in recent years to accommodate the poorest members of the local community. Their inhabitants are essentially Black, whereas those of the estates in the older residential areas are mainly White. Coloured. The population of the formal town, as opposed to the new townships, is probably not more than 4,000.

The present Dutch Reformed Church, with its sandstone tower and clock, is located beside the town square, opposite the Municipal Offices. The church was designed by Kallenbach and Reynolds, architects of Johannesburg and Pretoria, and built in 1906. It is a fine building, of dressed stone, and the interior sports large wooden beams and a beautiful ceiling. There are about 400 members of this church.

A few blocks away, hidden in a residential area, is the much smaller and simpler Anglican church of St Stephen. The larger Gereformeerde Kerk is located nearby. Further from the town centre, and also in the older residential area, is St Francis Xavier Catholic R.C. church. Near the High School, also in a residential area, is the more modern Methodist Church with its fine little tower. Barkly and its bells typifies many of the smaller towns of the former Empire.

In the tower of the Dutch Reformed Church is one bell that is used both as a clock bell and to call the congregation to worship. The bell hangs from a wooden headstock fitted with a pull arm and carries the lettering:

J WARRNER & SONS LONDON 1880.

The bell is 22" in diameter at the mouth. A clock that is still in use (and wound by a former policeman) was made by J. F. WEULE of BOCKENEM and carries the date 1907. Bockenem is a small town south east of Hannover, in Germany. The clock was supplied by E. HARMS & SIGEN in the Cape Town area. The bell's words 'Bell and clock imported'. They were: the clock from Germany and the bell from London. The date of the bell suggests that it was already in use in the earlier DRC in Barkly East, that predated the existing building.

The Anglican church boasts a bell cast by Taylors of Loughborough in 1925. This bell, of 18½", at the mouth, has been skirted but not otherwise tuned. It hangs from a simple metal headstock, with a pull arm, in a little detached panoply of four metal columns with a metal roof and concrete base, near the chancel end of the church.

The Gereformeerde Kerk, which is an off-shoot of the Church of England, also has a bell cast by MEARS & STAINBANK; LONDON 1899. This bell hangs from a simple metal headstock with a pull arm. The bell is 20" in diameter. St Francis Xavier’s church possesses the most interesting and beautiful of the bells of Barkly. In its steel lattice-work tower is a beautiful silver painted bell with, on one side and at midwaist, a statue of The Virgin and Child. Below the statue are the words:

ZI-KA-WEI T-S-W CHANGHAI/No 2 1940.

On the opposite side of the bell is a lovely stone statue of Joseph and the Child with, below it, lettering in Chinese script. The bell is 580mm in diameter at the mouth and is long waisted but of fine tone. This is the first European-style bell cast in China that the writer has seen.

The Methodist church, in spite of its tower, has no bells. The new churches in the township post date the days of the Empire and hence do not concern us here. Outside the former Market Hall, which is now the Public Library, is a bell of 10½" at the mouth, with no lettering or founder's marks. This bell appears to be a sand casting. The curator of the local museum believes that it was a gift from Queen Victoria on her Jubilee, and was sounded to open the market. Where it cast is unknown, but it may well be an English bell.

About an hour’s drive from Barkly is the small town of Dordrecht, with another fine Dutch Reformed Church, built in 1883. In the tower is a clock chime of three bells, each of which carries the proud lettering:

CAST BY GILLET & BLAND & CO CROYDON 1883.

The smallest bell is of 2½", at the mouth, the second of 25½" and the third, which hangs above the clock frame, is much larger. Painted on the waist of each bell is a diamond shape enclosing the letters WD, and under the diamond are the words EAST LONDON No 28. The clock is by Gillett and Bland and is dated 1883. Presumably bells and clock were shipped by sea from London to the port of East London.

Barkly East and Dordrecht are, today, sleepy little towns that are in marked economic decline. Between the 1880s and early 1900s they were at their hey-days, as high wool prices boosted the economy of the surrounding grazing regions. Between them they provided important markets for bells, and so made it possible for more bell founders to exist in Britain than would otherwise have been the case. It also meant that, because of the extent of the market, bells could be produced and sold at lower costs than would otherwise have been the case, enabling a greater increase in the number of ringing bells in Britain than might otherwise have occurred. Barkly East, Dordrecht and many of the other little towns of the former British Empire, have thus played their role in the development of the English art of bell ringing.

Finn and His Peal Boards

Naturally Harold Rogers was pleased to see the first three Finn peal boards, 3rd May, 2002, front cover. The boards in one and two were organised by him and written and illuminated by a professional sign-writer who lived at Ashill, Norfolk. He is no longer with us and soon after producing these boards his hands became shaky and he had to retire. I believe the first contact with him was via his advertisement in The Ringing World.

The three peals recorded are all for significant events and were conducted by me. About the Old Church, for example, it was the first on the bells in this tower and commemorated the quincentenary of the birth of St Thomas More, whose statue is outside the church on the river side.

St. Mary, Clapham Common, is a fairly rare peal tower and the two monogrammed boards were for special occasions. The left hand one of Siedman Tripes in 1973 was for the wedding of H.R.H. Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips. The matching right hand one, Cambridge Surise Major in 1977 was for the Silver Jubilee of H.M. Queen Elizabeth II.

Isleworth

HAROLD ROGERS